

# The Maelstrom

A UFO novel by

Amelia S. Rodgers and E. Straker, with material by our beta, Nancy Hickman ©2010.

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This novel is **NOT** canon, as Stanley Brisby might put it, it isn't UFO liturgy. This novel is a sequel to my revised Silk Wood Manor stories, makes references to my other work in the Shado Library (, , the , , etc.) and characters and events established in my older UFO stories such as . This isn't a stand alone story.

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are characters created by Sir Arthur Canon Doyle. Some material comes from *The Complete Book of UFO* by Chris Bentley. *2001: A Space Odyssey* is a film by Stanley Kubrick.

*My deepest gratitude to Janet and to Neil for their time and generous assistance, which made the story so much better and added to the pleasure of writing it.*

To our Mom and "Shrew" with gratitude and love from her two greedy children. "Buy us that, Mommy!" Special thanks to Deborah for her support of my writing. What Algernon tells Jeremy comes from her advice to me on feedback. In addition, Hannah's former occupation as a librarian (established in my previous story) is my tribute to her. To the late Ed Bishop, who inspired me.

Finally, this work is my loving gift to my writing partner, mentor and husband 'ED,' (using the nom de plume E. Straker) for helping me find the courage within me and teaching me to grab it with both hands.

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## Chapter One: A Man of Death

Ed found himself longing to go home. Traveling to Seoul, South Korea had reminded him of the culture shock he had experienced after traveling to England from the States to be General Henderson's adjutant and eventually his replacement. The adjustment to their way of life, the way the people acted toward one another demoralized him. Culture shock surprisingly had the power to wound, and although he had assumed it would never again be that much of a problem to adapt since travel was part of military life, that had proved not to be the truth. Although all SHADO installations continued to run strictly on military lines, the Seoul H.Q. reminded him more of a campus full of students than a top-secret base designed to guard the world against alien invasion. It had bothered him to the extent of making his displeasure known. It hadn't taken them long to adjust to his sharper style and his quicker pace. Not that they weren't professional, or less skilled than the team of operatives back home at his H.Q. It was just that perhaps the beauty of the country and its traditions and history had influenced them to adapt to the crisis in a very different way, he reasoned. They were all working toward the same goal.

Still, he imagined that Alec was having a more difficult time coping with a famous temperamental director filming scenes from his eagerly awaited science fiction film at Harlington-Straker Studios. Alec also had the responsibility of telling over a hundred people at Silk Wood Manor that their lives were about to be changed drastically with a stroke of a Commander's fountain pen.

He looked over at two people rapidly conversing in Korean near him, totally immersed in their topic. He knew he was included as the subject of their conversation, as he had picked up a smattering of Korean while he was there by listening via earphones to language tapes before he slept at night. Something about their tone of conversation troubled him. Fortunately, Dr. Park Li Kim, a petite scientist in SHADO's Seoul H.Q. came into the Sejong 1 cockpit and offered him a smile, one of many she had offered him during his stay in South Korea. He didn't return it. She moved like some legendary nightingale in an effort to enchant him.

*Fortunately, he thought, I've become immune to enchantment.*

The flight suit didn't leave much of what it concealed to the imagination, clinging as it did to his sleek body like silver sweat. He'd noticed her examining that body on their first meeting with a look interpreted as being motivated by anything but duty. He'd gotten used to it. Sometimes he even used his startling good looks to his professional advantage as Alec too often took pleasure in telling him.

*Damn, he really missed Alec. Why had he insisted on coming out here alone? Why had he volunteered for this mission?*

"Can I get you something to drink, Commander?" she cooed.

*Any moment now, she'll lay an egg, he thought with irritation. I'm not about to share her coop.*

"I'll take coffee, light, double sweet."

*It was an order. Alec would have known it instantly. This woman did not.*

"Living in England so long I would have taken you to be a tea man."

*God forbid. I always associated tea with being sick.*

"You speak English very well; I believe I told you that earlier." Again, he did not smile.

Perhaps she expected him to respond to her beauty as Freeman had. She was in for a big disappointment, he thought. It was the weapon her father had developed that interested him.

He had to admit that although he wasn't by any means a man ignorant enough to have contempt for a different race, the fact that Asians surrounded him disturbed him on a level the recently deceased Dr. Jackson had once told him remained buried deep in his subconscious. Nearly a year as a prisoner of war had done it, scarred him in a way no pill could totally heal. SHADO had Asian operatives, and functioned superbly in Asian countries. The aliens knew no race hatred, save human. On the other hand, he was not there as some damn diplomat. On top of all that, he felt physically rotten and had since he'd arrived there. Maybe some reaction to all the injections he'd had to protect him against the region's diseases. Despite the restorative effects of the virus Marjorie Jenkins had forced into his body, which had ironically preserved his youth, he felt old and tired. His mouth still tasted funny from the liberal use he'd made of the bathroom sink in his hotel suite. It was a stomach bug all right.

*Yes, getting back to England will be a cool drink of water, he thought. I need something to take my mind off my problems for a while. Maybe I should see how Alec is doing.*

Ed smiled inwardly at that idea. He had almost raised his hand to establish that communication when she spoke.

"Commander, may I speak freely?"

"I'd prefer it." he replied.

She said something in her native language to the two men, and they offered bows and disappeared. She settled down in the ergonomic co-pilot seat beside him, close enough to smell her no doubt costly perfume. He did a quick scan of the instrument panel, made a minor adjustment to the speed of the aircraft. The Sejong 1 was a spectacular beauty, and all his or at least all SHADO's and at last he'd had the pleasure of being at her controls. He couldn't remember the last time he felt so comfortable in an aircraft even a raptor would envy. He could easily see why Alec, a decorated veteran of air combat, had fallen in love with her.

*In addition, knowing the Australian as he did, probably the woman beside him as well, Ed thought wryly.*

"My country and your country have waged war and my father is sensitive to it. Perhaps that makes you..." she was saying.

"Uncomfortable? The only thing that makes me uncomfortable is the air of secrecy I've come up against when going over this aircraft's design with you and the other scientists as if I myself was an alien."

*Well, I suppose when you've only had to deal with people lover Alec my style would make me seem alien, Ed reasoned. He'd been called worse, and sometimes by Alec, he chuckled to himself.*

"My father whom you met earlier, our team's senior physicist, had a bad experience with Americans during the war. My father is often reluctant to do business with any American, but he fears the aliens and he too understands duty. Alec said to us that duty was all-important to you. Here we embrace duty, but also one another."

"I was a P.O.W. for a little more than a year during the Vietnam conflict and suffered badly at Asian hands, but that's neither here nor there. Neither you nor your father or his team are to consider me American."

*I've taken the gloves off, now here's the part where I throw them in the vaporizer.*

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Look, you are to just consider me your Commander-in-Chief. I don't think I can be any more precise. "

"Commander, quite frankly, I admire you. I had hoped that you and I could come to be

friends before you left."

"Because of Colonel Freeman's laidback approach? I'm not Colonel Freeman."

*That wins me the understatement trophy of the year.*

"I must admit I was surprised that Alec was not returning for the final stage of the Sejong 1 project."

*In other words she's thinking I got stuck with Straker the sourpuss. Alec would appreciate this, he thought. For once, a female besides his cat prefers him to me. When I get back, he won't let me live this down.*

"He is carrying out some personal business for me. Something he's far better suited for than I am. What do you calculate is our ETA to Southern England?" he asked unnecessarily to change the subject.

"A little over an hour." He noted with some pleasure that her smile was growing dimmer, like a bulb that had started to burn out all too soon. The computer interrupted him.

**Secure audio transmission detected. Origin: SHADO control. Colonel Alec Freeman.**

*Alec at last.*

He reached for the earpiece gratefully and fitted it over his ear.

"Straker." he answered distinctly.

"Thank God I reached you Ed! Some of our systems have gone out, but our secure lines seem okay so far. Ed, listen we're under attack at H.Q. and taking a pounding! The structure is holding up so far-

"What? Say again?"

"Ed, we're under direct attack, you've **got** to get out here faster with the new weapon. A UFO got past Moonbase's defenses. Carlin took fire in Sky 1 and had to bail out. The studio's been hit-

Alec's voice drowned out in a series of beeps, chimes, and a burst of static.

**Transmission lost.**

Ed's heart stopped when Alec's words did and he pulled out the earpiece. His blood thundered in his ears.

"Tell your father to get in here now."

"He is resting, he is elderly-

"That was an order!"

She rose swiftly. He noted she'd even forgotten her charming little cultural bow. Ed turned his attention back to flying the Sejong 1. In seconds, her father came in with her. He said something in Korean to her. Ed checked his seatbelt harness and picked up speed. He'd long ago left behind Mach 5 and was still climbing, but so was the nausea in his stomach.

*I've picked up some damn bug for sure but God knows what Alec and my people are going through right now.*

"My father wishes to know-

Ed ignored her, and addressed him directly but part of his attention remained on the panel.

"You've been less than honest with me, sir. Right now, I don't care what your reasons are. I know you speak English. This aircraft is capable of hyperdrive in theory. I know it responds to voice commands." Ed said. The man frowned.

"Commander, as I explained to Alec Freeman, we were to continue the hyperdrive testing-" As Ed knew from Alec's written brief on him, the man spoke perfect English but had

chosen not to reveal it. Ed put the aircraft on automatic pilot. He turned around completely in his pivoting seat to face them.

"SHADO is under attack and I need to be there. I want you to give me your personal code to access the advanced Sejong computer system commands. NOW." Ed snapped. Irrked that the man had changed them at his own whim, he had little choice but to make it a command. The man didn't seem to respect his rank at all.

*The ugliest of Americans. So be it.*

"Or what?" the scientist asked him with open contempt.

"Father!" she said in terror. She looked toward Ed, frozen.

Ed suddenly had a Glock in his hand, taken from a secret compartment in his seat. He noticed her shocked expression, she had not even seen him move to produce it, but the blue, yellow, and green marksmanship medal he was entitled to wear on his uniform wasn't just for decoration. His expertise with weapons too was terrifying, he imagined. The truth was this mission exhausted him. He was tired of them all. He longed to go home.

"You see, Daughter? I warned you of the treachery of Americans. You were supposed to be a man of intellect, Commander or so your friend Alec told us but perhaps you are a tyrant like rumor has it. You can and will be broken."

"You were supposed to be a man I could trust, Sir," Ed countered with equal contempt, deceptively calmer now.

"I'm a man of peace but you are not. You clearly think you speak louder than I do with that gun. Do you intend to shoot all of us to get what you want, Commander? Do you really think that you will escape? You will puncture this aircraft and there will be an explosive decompression."

"I have more flying hours logged than South Korea has temples. Decompression is preventable and it would be easy enough to go to individual oxygen systems and drop altitude to correct cabin pressure were your fears justified. Certainly, it won't happen aboard this aircraft. I know most of the security and safety measures that have been built into her; I helped design the damn thing. Now, arguing with you is costing me precious seconds that I don't have the luxury to waste now. Believe me, I will shoot you and attempt to completely utilize this aircraft's special abilities on my own. My life and the lives of the team aboard this aircraft mean nothing right now. I cannot and will not let the aliens destroy SHADO and the Earth. Dr. Park, please convince your father to do as I say. I will not hesitate to shoot any or all of you, believe me. Make your decision. You have exactly ten seconds."

She exchanged a burst of Korean with her father.

"Alec Freeman is a man of life. You are a man of death. I do not understand why he is loyal to an American bastard as cold as you are. I will give you what you crave; American, and we both know that is power", the man told him. He spoke in Korean and a ceiling panel hissed down, revealing concealed controls. It looked like something Kubrick had left over from 2001: A Space Odyssey. He vaguely wondered why Stanley Kubrick came to mind considering the tense situation he found himself in, but pushed the thought aside.

"You can now address the computer directly in English," the woman said. Her dainty smile and daintier manners were history.

"Commander Ed Straker Code Alpha Aegis Directive One. Identify and input new commands." By sheer will power, his voice remained steady. He didn't relish the idea of shooting any of them. He slid the Glock into a concealed pouch on his suit.

*If SHADO and Alec had been blasted to hell, it wouldn't matter. I know Alec. He isn't a*

*man who scares easily. I heard raw fear in his voice just now. Hang on, Alec.*

**Voice print identification positive. Commander Edward Straker. Initiating advanced Alpha Aegis Directive One confirmation procedures. Please comply.**

Ed pressed his palm then his eyes against the optical scanner that unfolded into place with a buzzing sound, and waited as a light pierced his retina. He offered the machine a drop of his blood from a quick and painless prick of his finger with a needle ejected upward, and then it issued a hiss of spray to stop his bleeding. A very expensive styptic pencil, he thought. The whole process took about ten seconds. The scanner pulled back inside its compartment like a satisfied but reclusive tortoise.

**Retina, voice, palm and fingerprints and DNA scans positive, Commander. Awaiting further orders.**

*At least the computer was still being cooperative, Ed reasoned. As for himself, he figured he'd single handedly started the Korean War all over again. On the other hand, was that the Vietnam War? It didn't matter which now, did it?*

"Commence with hyperspace protocols in ten seconds, then accelerate to maximum speed maintaining present course." he ordered.

**Acknowledged, Commander. Initiating countdown. Ten, nine -**

The computer obediently counted off for him like it watched Sesame Street in its spare time.

He looked at the older man. Her father looked beaten now. Bullies often did after you called their bluff. He'd learned that as a kid and later as an adult, and still had the scars to prove it. All that was important was surviving. *How much longer could he survive with these people? He needed to get home!*

"Get yourself and your father back there and the rest of the team into helmets and harness. This has only been done in theory so none of us really knows what to expect." Ed was already snapping his own helmet into place. It would protect his face and deliver life giving oxygen to him should he need it. Other emergency equipment too, like the helmets, was fitted into the rear of the seats. Not an inch of space aboard the aircraft had been wasted. He'd insisted on it.

**-Seven-**

The computer droned on, oblivious to the little drama being performed.

She gave his order to her other team members in Korean. Her father took one last lingering look at Ed and then he disappeared behind the cockpit door, which closed pneumatically and locked. Ed checked the panel then shot her a questioning look as she donned a helmet and strapped herself in beside him in the co-pilot seat. Did she really plan to join him?

"You sure you want to be sealed into a cockpit with a man of death?" he asked her sardonically.

**-Six, five-**

"I know what to expect. I also know all there is to know about the weapon you intend to use on the attacking UFO. You'll need me, Commander." She seemed self-satisfied. That enraged him. He was through with these bastards. Even if it meant his end.

**-Four, three-**

"No, you have it all **wrong**. You need *me*, since I'm the only one aboard who knows how to fly this baby or have you forgotten there hasn't been a qualified enough pilot on your team since Alec Freeman left? Better brace yourself."

She'd lost her smug expression quick enough all right.

**One. Initiating Hyperdrive speed. Hyperdrive velocity achieved, Commander. Awaiting further orders.**

Ed looked at the screen. Mach 5 was about as speedy as a child's pedal car on a racetrack at that point. The Sejong 1 was now moving at a speed unheard of except as a theory in the bowels of SHADO computer banks. One of the thrills of his younger days had been testing various jet aircraft at Andrews Air Force Base, a standard requirement before entering astronaut training. So going on a test flight wasn't unfamiliar to him nevertheless, nothing matched this! My God, nothing came close! He had wanted the Sejong 1 to be an aircraft that he could use against UFOs, equipped with the new weapon, a huge breakthrough for SHADO. Instead, they'd handed him a beauty just at home in Earth's atmosphere as it was in deep space. He had asked their scientific team for a single star, and they'd given him the whole damn universe! Yet right now, he didn't have time to be ecstatic. The cockpit started rattling like some supersonic serpent's tail. There was a high-pitched whine. He felt a liquid trickle from both ears. He tore off his helmet. His fingertips reached up to touch one ear and came away bloodied. He couldn't help but think it was an omen of misfortune even though he wasn't a superstitious man.

"We can't remain at this speed for long! " she cried.

"We won't have to. ETA England five minutes." Ed responded beneath his mask of calm.

"This aircraft was supposed to remain a secret! It will be seen by British civilians," she reminded him.

"No doubt that's also true of the UFO by now. That's the beauty of having a film studio as a cover. Just another one of those spectacular productions out of Harlington-Straker Studios." He sounded crazed, even to himself.

"My father was right! You will get us all killed." she accused.

"Maybe. It's a chance I have to take," he replied firmly.

Then suddenly the computer chimed a warning and spoke in its deceptive feminine tone.

**UFO on positive track. UFO identification commencing, Commander. Identification negative. Category unknown. Awaiting further orders.**

"Initiate manual control. I'm blasting this one out of the sky myself."

**Acknowledged. Good shooting, Commander.**

Suddenly, the menacing dot that was the UFO loomed larger on the computer assisted radar screen. Ed flipped open the transparent box that would give him access to the lethal pearl in the oyster, and put on his helmet. With fingers bloodied from touching his ear, he manually locked the weapon in on the target. Then he had it on multi-dimensional visual display and his heart froze. It truly was like no UFO he'd ever seen before. More than anything else, it resembled an insect with a metallic carapace, about to lash out with its tail of pure fire. As if it knew his name, prey turned on predator, adjusted course and came for his jugular. Ed realized he had no time to say a prayer to any observing Deity. He fired. The stream of blue crystalline brilliance that matched the color of his narrowed eyes shot out from the Sejong 1 and sought a modern day dragon.

*How do you do, dragon? Not pleased to meet you. Consider me St. George.*

The resulting explosion almost blinded him in spite of the helmet's protective visor and he shielded his eyes instinctively, throwing up his hands against it.

**UFO destroyed. Good work, Commander. Awaiting further orders.**

*He'd done it! By God, he'd done it! He and the others were freed! I hope you appreciate*

*the amenities in hell you alien bastards! He was in agony. He was about to pass out. No, he couldn't pass out. No!*

She was shaking him roughly. Damn her, she was actually touching him; her scarlet painted nails were digging into his skin. He almost vomited again simply from the revulsion of her touch. She made him feel filthy just from breathing the same air as she was.

**Secure audio transmission detected, Commander. Origin : SHADO Control.  
Awaiting further orders.**

"Stop it, stop it!" He weakly pushed her arms away, feeling filthy, sick, and violated.

"Commander, you're getting a direct transmission from SHADO!"

"You take your hands off me, you filthy slant eyed-"

She unclipped his helmet, jerked it away from him, and thrust the earpiece at him and finally he understood. He jammed it in his ear smearing his blood around. He was still bleeding from his ear, increasingly losing enough blood to make him feel faint.

*Christ, he was on fire and his head was coming apart.*

"Straker." he said wearily. The voice that replied lent him strength. It always had. So why was it confusing him? What was happening to him? He fought to stay alert.

"Ed! I never was so glad to see anything pop out like that since the very first Sheila I bedded took off her brassiere." Ed could hear the laughter out of command center following Alec's ribald comment, and he realized Alec had purposely chosen to be unprofessional to provide much needed relief and boost morale after the hell they had to have gone through at H.Q. "You did it, Ed! We're standing by with the underground hangar. It's still intact. Sending you coordinates now. Sit back and let the computer do the parking and yeah I know that's not your style but relax and enjoy your success for once."

"Alec." Ed continued to savor the sound of his friend's voice as he activated the new coordinates. "Thank God you're alive. How badly were we hit? What are the damage reports looking like?"

"Still coming in, Ed. It's like trying to quiet a whole nursery full of bawling babies. SHADO is intact, just got thrown around a bit, some minor injuries and I grew more grey hairs but we lost some good people up top when studio C blew from the direct hit. Five civilians who worked for the studio and two of our people. It hit us so quickly they can't have known what was happening. I've already contacted their next of kin and you know how I feel about that part of my job. Ed, I'm sorry, there's something I need to-"

"What the hell *was* that thing, Alec? Have they come up with some sort of new technology again? I guessed the months of quiet meant we were in for it. I doubt I left much for our scientists to take apart for study so we could know in more detail what we were up against, but frankly I don't care for a change and the Sejong 1 performed admirably. I heard you mention Peter Carlin had gone down. How is he, Alec?" he asked with genuine concern which made a lie of his hard ass reputation, he realized. However, he hadn't taken on the job to be popular.

Alec's mind was still on his friend and Commander.

"Ed, I've switched to your private line in the office so we can speak freely. The Sejong 1 performed admirably? Are you kidding? What about you? Where's the praise for the Bostonian pilot who flew here just in time to save us? You know our Peter. Pissing mad and grounded with a dislocated shoulder, multiple bruises, and a broken leg. The mobiles located him; he's being brought by air medical transport back to Mayland Hospital with a SHADO issued bar of soap to wash out his mouth as punishment for all the fanciful terms he was using when they

had to move him. Captain Nancy Nelson in Sky 4 was keeping the UFO busy until the cavalry arrived and believe me, your instincts about her were right; she's proved to be one of our best new pilots. "

"Good, good. Alec, I don't feel too well, haven't for the whole time I've been in South Korea. I think you had better break out my usual bed in Mayland. Claire's going to be mad as hell at me for getting so sick but I bought something extra special from South Korea for her and it ought to shut her up."

"Damn it, Ed, could you get out of a situation for once with no more serious an injury than a hangnail? Our medical teams are obviously overworked right now, but if I have to, I'll sling that skinny carcass of yours over my shoulder and get you to the intensive care unit myself. Can you hold together until you touch down and see my handsome face?"

"The prospect of seeing your face again scares me more than the UFO did but what choice do I have? How did the Silk Wood business go?" he added and tried to sound like he cared.

"Not at all like I expected. Jay Noland's impatiently tucked away at a hotel waiting for you, and he says he has a surprise for you in store, he's anxious to see you again. Ed, I'm afraid I have some more bad news to pass on to you. It concerns you directly."

"Save it Alec, right now I feel like I'm going to cough up some more of a week's worth of green tea, and raw fish. Make my bed, fill a hot water bottle, and put the coffee on for me. You know how I take it. I'm coming home at last. Ed over and out."

-o-o-o-

"How are you going to tell him, Sir?" Keith Ford asked gravely when Alec had broken the connection. He'd followed Alec into Ed's office like an obedient dog trotting after a master.

"I don't know Keith, God help me. How do you tell a man something when you know it will break his heart?" Alec sighed.

Ford nodded numbly.

## Chapter Two: The White Orchid

"You're trying to tell me he actually believed he was aboard a spaceship flying in hyperspace?" Alec looked stunned. "The studio is filming a science fiction movie right now, and the name of it is **Hyperspace**, if Ed somehow got that confused in his mind with the mission aboard the Sejong 1, that would explain it."

"I spoke to Dr. Park and her father about the Commander's behavior during his month there. At first, she believed Straker was just joking about it, and then she realized he was serious. Of course, by then she began to suspect something was wrong, but he refused to see any of their physicians before he boarded Sejong 1, and once aboard he became increasingly hostile toward her and her father. I'm guessing the Commander was hallucinating for a long time, maybe even from the moment he touched down in Seoul. She said that he didn't seem to know where he was, but he still could function normally. The Commander may have been thinking he was back in Vietnam as a prisoner, seeing all those Asian faces around him. He's still hallucinating. Colonel, the treatments with the antibiotic that saved his life when he was injured by that cat of yours don't seem to be helping this time at all. I'm barely managing to keep his temperature down." Schroeder said. "That's what I came to see you about."

"I just don't understand it. Ed sounded tired when I got through to him on the Sejong 1, and he admitted he felt sick, but malaria again?" Alec sighed. "I should have expected something like this. For the Commander to admit he needed a bed should have telegraphed to me how seriously ill he actually was. He was affected with malaria and God knows what other tropical diseases during that year he was a P.O.W. He rarely spoke about it to me but once he admitted he could never get completely dry in that climate, he was filthy all the time and in his worse moments, he prayed to die but something in him kept him going. Can you imagine Ed wanting to surrender to death? The Commander is the most bloody-minded individual I know. The whole concept of 'can't do it' is foreign to him. He always tells me if it's necessary Alec, then it's possible. When he finally was rescued due to his own efforts I saw him completely by a quirk of fate in Thailand, it was the first time I ever laid eyes on him. He was horrifyingly thin, had his shattered shoulder wired together like it was some macabre sculpture and he was on the verge of giving up his hold on life, he just didn't want to fight anymore. I think if Henderson hadn't recognized the potential he had, I don't think the Commander would be alive and with us today. At least that old bastard Henderson did that much for him. "

"I didn't realize you'd met him that far back, had made that kind of connection with him. I knew that he was a P.O.W. through his medical records of course. Malaria can incubate for several years before it strikes again. We have treatments for it of course, but the Commander's difficulties with antibiotics make an individual treatment plan for him a more serious matter. I'm guessing he may even have been bitten by a mosquito without realizing it. Tell me more about it, if you don't mind, Colonel?" Alec looked a little uncomfortable at revealing more details of his friend's past to even the senior SHADO medic but after a pause, nodded.

"I went to see a close mate of mine, Roger Hastings, who had gone down in his plane, I'd heard the Americans had picked him up and taken him to their base hospital in Thailand. Before I got there, he'd died from his injuries. Therefore, I walked in on Straker instead of him. I'd been around a lot of Americans before, colorful people, liked them well enough but Ed seemed to be some strange category Yank I'd never heard of like he was some exotic white orchid plucked out of a hothouse. I'd gotten obsessed with him, God knows why, maybe because it was so clear that he needed a friend. Over time, we got close and found we had

things in common. Later of course, he personally sought me out, stole me from the RAF, and asked me to join SHADO. He's been a pain in the rear ever since."

Schroeder smiled.

"Seeing the way you two behave together, knowing your loyalty to one another that's hard to believe, although your fights with him have become legendary around here. I've often thought you always were almost like a second father to him. Of course I'd never say that in front of the Commander."

"Ed as my son?" Alec chuckled. "Well it could work. He drives me crazy enough to be my kid. Besides, I'm not likely to be a father at my advanced age. I think the idea would appeal to him, but damned if I'd tell him that to his face either!"

Schroeder chuckled. Like most of the medical and other personnel in SHADO, he liked Alec.

"Colonel, I always thought you were the one person in SHADO he couldn't intimidate. You never seem to be scared of him. Maybe that's why he sought you out."

"Not scared of Straker? Don't be so sure of that!" Alec exclaimed and Schroeder chuckled. The Australian grew somber again. "Doctor, how serious is it? Isn't there anything we can do?"

"The only possibility is something that I thought I better discuss with you beforehand. He still is affected by the virus that Jenkins put in his body. It saved his life before. Frankly, the report on it still makes me think that I am reading a science fiction novel and not a SHADO file. I know you state that the Commander, yourself, and Dr. Swanson all died, and then were revived by the virus but as a physician I find it hard to believe. I want to try stopping his heart another time."

"For Christ's sake, Schroeder, what if the virus doesn't work again? Why the hell was he infected by the malaria if this so-called miraculous virus is in all our bodies? He could actually die this time!"

"I can't answer your questions without studying further test results, but Colonel I can promise you, without treatment he *will* die, or at the very least have brain damage from the high fever. He's already dangerously dehydrated now, and blood was coming from his ears for a long time although I found no reason why it should be. Our initial analysis of the blood surprisingly revealed that it wasn't the Commander's. It was almost as if infectious biological matter had been sloughed off. It became inert shortly after the bleeding stopped, as if something had killed it. Whatever it was, it didn't help Straker's condition. We're barely keeping him alive. He's been calling for you and sadly Dr. Swanson as well."

Alec frowned, he'd forgotten Claire in all the frenzied activity. "Poor Dr. Swanson, I haven't spoken to her for hours. How is she now?"

"Not much of a change, I'm afraid. When that UFO hit the studio, we were momentarily thrown into darkness, and the whole structure shook like jelly. Dr. Swanson had been about to administer the amnesia drug to Clifford. Apparently, she injected herself by accident when she was knocked over, an immense dose. We didn't know what to expect. There was nothing we could do once emergency power came on. She seems to have forgotten most of her medical training. She's been reduced psychologically to a childlike state or so our psych division's report theorizes. Like I said, we just don't know for certain..."

*Just when she was making a real difference in the SHADO medical center and especially in Ed's life, Alec thought in miserably.* "Have you explained to her that we just can't allow her to leave SHADO right now?"

"She seems to understand that at least but she isn't the most critical problem on our hands. Colonel, you need to make an immediate decision about the Commander."

"I understand I don't have any choice, let's proceed, Doctor. How will you do it?" Alec asked nervously.

"He won't feel any pain I assure you. We'll sedate him first, and then inject him with a drug that will cease cardiac function. Then-"

"Then we *pray*," Alec said. "I want to see him first."

"Colonel, I think he won't recognize you." Schroeder warned Alec.

"I was so busy with the job of getting H.Q. back to normal that I hardly had time to spend with him when they brought him in. I want to see him before you do anything to him," Alec insisted.

"All right Colonel. Maybe it'll actually do him some good on a level we still don't yet understand. Oh, I'm afraid I'd forgotten to give you this. We had to take all his belongings when we admitted him to medical center. I have his wristwatch and other of his personal items too, Colonel. Everything's been cleared by our security people." The SHADO physician took a small black velvet box out of his pocket. "This was found in his suitcase." Alec accepted it and flipped it open. He frowned.

A diamond, emerald, and pearl ring set in an antique setting, sparkled brilliantly. On the inside of the ring, a message had been engraved:

**TO C FROM E. WYMM?**

"He told me he'd gotten her something special from South Korea. God knows when he had the time to do it on that self-imposed murderous work schedule of his. It looks like he was planning to propose to her. Now she hardly even knows he exists," Alec added.

"I asked Dr. Park about it and she said the Commander had found it in a catalogue he'd requested, bought it, had it sized and engraved and asked one of her assistants to pick up the package for him and he collected it just before the Sejong 1 took to the air. The curious thing is he was somehow still mentally aware enough to do all that, while the malaria was raging in his body. WYMM?" Schroeder asked curiously.

"Will you marry me?" Alec said sadly. Alec slipped the ring box into the inside pocket of his blue Nehru jacket. "All right Doctor, let's go see the Commander".

Schroeder handed Alec the Commander's Certina Swiss wristwatch as they walked together and Alec put it almost reverently around his own right wrist, touching the cold silver metal band gingerly as if it was Ed himself and could bring the Ed he knew back to him. In gloomy silence, the two men moved down the corridor to the intensive care unit.

## Chapter Three: Man and Myth

So there the legendary Sir Edward the glorious knight was, on a quest with his loyal squire Alexander again, and thus he would either be victorious or die trying to destroy the damn beast. Being a knight meant upholding the values of , , and in the same way he lifted his jeweled sword. His name was known all over the kingdom, he traveled proudly on his war horse Aegis, under his banner which displayed gold arrows, and a horse galloping at full speed, and he'd made his choice of being a knight a long time ago. Besides, he was modest and noble and of pure heart, good and chivalrous, and might once more succeed, if only that damnable dragon agreed to die, and die beautifully. The beast had other ideas. It was that last part that made his life so difficult.

"It almost got you then Sir Edward, for the love of God let me do this slaying, go and seek safety while there still is time!" his Squire cried.

"You have your orders, Alexander! Stand aside!" he commanded. Other less worthy knights who cowered in fear of the dragon were standing a few feet away muttering to themselves nervously, for his anger was legendary. One word of displeasure from him could turn them to stone, his squire knew.

"Then for God's sake at least let wine pass your lips, you have not eaten or taken drink in days!"

"If those men do not eat then neither will I. Besides, as you very well know, I do not touch the grape. I see no purpose in losing my reason to carouse after my victories in the way you do. I quest for the purpose of protecting the weak, serving my God and kingdom, protecting my Lady Claire and restoring the peace. I will accept a little water from the stream if it pleases you." He smiled.

"Why am I cursed by being born to serve you, Sir?"

In truth, the squire felt it a privilege for such a simple man as he. He knew Sir Edward to be a man of destiny, a man who held great power, and yet a man of high morals who never made an unfair judgment or used his power unwisely. He had never failed in a quest, nor had he shown fear. His accomplishments were many. His legend spread far and wide. Sir Edward had the body and face and stride of an angel! He had given up a throne for a just cause. How could he not feel anything but privileged to serve this man? The one thing he feared was not death. It was being cut off from this extraordinary man, whom in his most secret heart, he needed to serve. To imagine not working in this man's shadow made him ill.

He looked up at Sir Edward who seemed amused and he could guess why.

Sir Edward chuckled with affection for Alexander, always knowing exactly what his squire was thinking. They'd served together so long they could read one another's minds, or so they liked to imagine.

"Is it a curse?" he asked mildly, with the beguiling smile his squire knew so well. It had bedazzled maidens all over the Kingdom, and they beckoned him to their beds. Sir Edward was noble and pure, and had given his heart to Lady Claire, the one woman who knew his soul as well as the legend he hid behind to hide his terrible loneliness.

"I had always believed my addiction to women was a curse indeed, forced on me by some devils present when my heathen mother gave birth. Then I was doomed by my miserable fate to serve you. It is the most unjust of curses!"

"Why then, Alexander, do you not leave my side? What more do you need to live on but your fine looks and your wine and your many women?" Sir Edward laughed. His laughter was

a rich sound, as rich as his voice, the squire thought.

"Alas that is the most terrible part of the curse! I am drawn to you in some enchantment! I cry to the heavens to give me the strength to leave you, but in the end, I cannot go! "

"That is loyalty," he said to the squire quietly.

"No, that is madness!" Alexander cried, but he broke out into one of his infectious grins.

Sir Edward rested his long fingers upon Alexander's shoulder with great fondness.

"I keep telling you, Alexander. I may have left my throne to quest, I may have sacrificed my right to wear a crown to serve a higher purpose. To you alone I am equal. To you alone I am loyal. To you alone I share my failures. Why do you persist in pretending to forget that?"

"Why do you persist in pretending you do not enjoy my pretending?" his squire chuckled.

"Ah! You damnable rogue! Give me my cup!" he chuckled, and the squire laughed and obeyed. He filled it, handed the golden Grail to Sir Edward, and took his sword so he could drink. Sir Edward brought it gratefully to his lips, as his throat was as parched as his armor was heavy. Suddenly he dropped the goblet, and swayed, cheeks drained of color. The sky and earth had changed places and his vision dimmed. His mouth became a long, thin line of irritation to mask pain and fear.

"Edward!" Alexander cried.

"Silence!. Do not attend to me while the men watch. I do not want them to see my many weaknesses."

"Fool. Even marble cracks." Alexander told him.

"What? Say again?" Hadn't they once been his chosen Lady Claire's words? His damned useless head was pounding again, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. Oh, why could he not remember? Reluctantly, he put on his helmet and lifted his shield.

"Sir Edward! The dragon!" Alexander warned him.

He turned just in time to see it trudge sleepily out of its cave, and the ground shook when it struck its long greenish yellow tail down in a show of temper. He thought fast. It began to come closer again and he imagined it was sneering at his resolve. Okay. It was clear he needed to think faster. That thing had eaten an entire village full of fair maidens, and his treasured Lady Claire was next on the menu.

The dragon snarled, clearly wanting to devour him too. That would clear its palate so it could flambé his bride Lady Claire, for dessert.

"Edward!"

The knight's expression grew distant, and then he suddenly smiled. He gave an order to Alexander then began to take off his helmet and armor with Alexander's assistance until all he wore was a simple tunic and leggings. His silver hair was tossed by the wind and he seemed to have stepped out of a vision. He was myth and man, legend incarnate.

"By God, have you taken leave of your senses?" his squire protested.

"The only way I can slaughter this evil beast is by being armed with my faith. God is over my household, and I am His sworn servant. A man of the Church told me that and his advice is never to be questioned, nor is his talent to raise my weary spirits with song. Give me my sword, but you take my armor and raise my banner as my brother. Listen to me, good men! If God takes my soul, then my last command is to honor and obey my faithful squire Alexander of the bloodline Freeman as Knight, leader and King! Will you do this? *WILL YOU DO THIS?*" he exclaimed in his distinctive voice.

"But Sir Edward! His youth is long spent and he is poor and not of pure blood! Why not choose me?" one man cried. "I am younger and fitter than he!" Sir Edward seemed to recall

the man's name was Paul, a page of the bloodline Foster. He'd always been rash, vain about his looks and the first one to show contempt for things he didn't bother to try to understand. Maybe he'd make a good snack for the creature. No, there had to be a certain amount of respect even for a dragon. He wanted it to die, not have indigestion.

"Fool! I take an oath that I will spill your blood now if you do not swear to do what I say!" Sir Edward shouted in fury.

To the very last man save for Paul, they agreed to it and cheered him on, chanting his name in unison if it were a magical spell.

"Do not do this deed, old friend." Alexander wept. "How shall I live if you die?"

"You are more worthy, commoner or not, to sit on the throne I will inherit, and bear that banner than I, and you have always been, gentle and wise Alexander. Pray for my soul should I fail in my duty."

"God grant for once that your rash will to make me your successor is not done. Hurry, Edward, may God guide your hand and protect you from harm."

He embraced the tearful squire and picked up his sword. He raised it and it caught the midday sunlight and gleamed like a weapon forged in the heavens. He turned, and rushed the beast. Caught unawares, it stopped, stunned. It stuck out its horrible head and prepared to breathe fire. It was far too late. Sir Edward thrust his sword through its heart. It shook in its death throes then slammed to the ground. He could hear the other knights roar their approval behind him, and he smiled humbly and slowly turned to acknowledge them. He noted with pleasure that Paul was scowling and contemptuous. Alexander came and knelt before him joyfully, bowing low.

"Truly there is no other knight as gallant and worthy as you. You are the legendary Sir Edward George, born of the bloodline Straker, guardian who strikes! You have earned the right to wear a crown and be celebrated in word and ballad."

"Rogue, stop that infernal bowing-" he chuckled.

Then he screamed in agony as the beast's final breath immolated him.

-o-o-o-

"No, no. No, no. I can't be dead. I killed it! I killed it!" Ed thrashed in pain under the chilled covers of his bed. His arms were strapped down to prevent injury, and he had IV lines going in both of them. A nasal cannula had been placed in his nostrils. His silver fringe of hair was flattened to his forehead with sweat. It was crushing Alec's spirit to see him like that.

"Ed, it's all right. Ed, you're safe at SHADO. I'm here. Alec. Look at me. Come on, Ed".

"I made you a knight. It's all right now. It's all right. You're safe. The kingdom's safe." The Commander's eyes were unusually widened with strain and unfocused. Alec wasn't even sure if Ed could see or hear him.

"Kingdom?" Schroeder muttered.

"Damn it could we have some privacy here?" Alec snapped at the SHADO physician then regretted it.

"Colonel, I have to do it soon, his fever is dangerously high. Go out, I'll go and get you as soon as it's done."

"If you think I'm leaving his side for one moment, you're a fool. Get Virginia Lake on the phone. Tell the Colonel I want her here immediately to assume command. I know where my place is and always has been, and it's at his side. That's an order."

Schroeder sighed, picked up the telephone.

Alec reached out for Ed's hand and held it tightly. It was a rock of ice.

"Come on, Ed. You can fight this thing."

Ed gasped for breath a while, shuddered to the tips of his fingers. He turned his head from one side to the other, eyes glassy and full of terror. He spoke to himself and Alec strained to hear each word.

"I'm so tired and hungry. They won't let me sleep. I'm so cold and wet, and I'm lying in my own waste. They shot Tank with an AK47, I'm covered with his blood. At least he's free. Why won't they just let me die? I can't stand the pain anymore. So much pain, they come and beat me every day. Why can't I die? I'm finished. I know you told me that some of the men have taken their own lives. You say it's a sin before God. Why? WHY? Where is God in *this* place? The insects crawl all over me. I can't get clean. I don't even have enough strength left to kill myself. Please let me die. I'm going crazy here. I've told them everything I knew, I'm so sorry, I broke the code of conduct. The bastards put me in that hole and started covering me with dirt, burying me alive. Tank betrayed my trust and revealed I battled claustrophobia caused by the incident on the airbase. They tricked him into telling them, they lied, fed him decent food, and said he could go home, your friend Drummer heard every word of it. My God, my God, I can't stand it, I couldn't help it. I just want to go home. Please take me home. No one talks to me or touches me anymore. I'm so lonely here. Hannah would hold me, give me decent food to eat, why doesn't she come? Where is she, Angel? Where is Mother? Did Dad stop her from coming for me? I just want to go home, please take me home, Angel. Please."

Alec blinked back tears he didn't want Schroeder or anyone else to see. He might hate the priest but at least Ed had someone to talk to, even if Angel hadn't been physically present in the shoebox that passed for Ed's cell in the camp.

"Damn it, Ed, you have to listen to me. I have to do this. You're suffering; the doctor can't help you anymore. Our only chance is to see if stopping your heart works. Can you hear me, Ed? Try to understand. You aren't a prisoner in the camp anymore. You're safe at SHADO. "

"Alec-?" Ed muttered wearily.

"YES! Ed, can you understand me?"

"I'm burning up. What's happened to me? Did the aliens hit us? Alec? Alec? No, no, don't shoot him! Tank, you son of a bitch, how could you do that to me! Don't let them shoot my friend Alec! I'll tell the yellow bastards anything they want me to! NO! NO!" Ed screamed.

"Alec, oh God, no, oh God, Alec, I'm so sorry. Oh God, what have I done?"

"Schroeder, put him to sleep. I can't stand to see him suffering like this!"

"Colonel Lake says she'll get here as soon as possible. You're doing the right thing."

Schroeder prepared a hypo from a surgical tray and injected its contents into one of Ed's IV lines. Ed appeared weaker. Seeing Ed that way was a thorn in his heart.

"I've got to get to him, don't you understand, SHADO's under attack, I've got to get to,-and I'm so tired. Where's Alec? Alec?"

"Ed, I'm right here. Feel my hand."

Ed smiled weakly into space.

"Alec. Thank God. I knew you'd come back. Stay with me tonight, all right? Don't go- I'm so tired. No, I can't allow myself to sleep, the aliens-."

"Don't fight it, Ed. Just rest. That's it." Alec stroked his hand.

"Don't let me die this way, Alec. Don't let the aliens have me, my life's been a shambles since Mary allowed a stranger to steal my son, you know that. You understood. I drew comfort from it. Don't let- me die too-Alec-" Ed's voice trailed off.

"All right Colonel. He's sedated." Schroeder said. "I have the second shot ready to

administer."

"You're sure he's asleep and won't suffer?" The Australian was still holding Ed's hand tightly.

"Positive."

"All right. Do it."

Alec watched as the doctor injected the second drug into the Commander's IV line. He looked up at the medical telemetry screen. After a few seconds, the cardiac readout showed flat line, after it had beeped once in protest as if it thought the decision to kill Ed Straker was wrong, but Alec felt as if it was his own heart that had stopped.

"He's gone, Colonel." Schroeder said grimly.

"How long do you estimate it will take before he recovers?" Alec said, stricken even though he'd seen it happen before.

"I have no way of knowing, Colonel. This is beyond anything I ever studied in medical school."

Alec sat there, still holding Ed's now limp and motionless hand. He kept vigil.

Minutes went by. An hour. Hours. No response.

Schroeder tried to find some words of comfort for the grieving Australian, found he had none. Quietly, he turned off the medical telemetry machines and he went out.

Commander Ed Straker remained dead in the fresh silence.

Alec Freeman began to realize with mounting horror he may have uselessly murdered him.

## Chapter Four: The Little Boy Lost

Hannah Noland looked up in puzzlement at her son from her motorized wheelchair.

"What are you hiding from me, what is bothering you, my little one?"

He chuckled at his mother.

"Why do you always think something is bothering me? Why do you still treat me as if I was back in grade school? I finally own the law firm, you know. I am starting to think the cataract operation I paid so much for didn't do your vision any good."

"You are still my son. You are my boy just as surely as if you'd come from my womb. I used to dream of nothing but seeing my parents, getting married and starting a family. Auschwitz put an end to all that."

"Hush, Mama, that was a long time ago." he said. He nervously looked at the telephone.

"You have been staring at that telephone all day. Pah! Come and have some breakfast with me, don't ever let food go to waste. After what I went through, I forbid it. Sit down, sit down sit down."

"Yes Mama." he told her resignedly, but didn't move a muscle.

"Why is it you won't tell me what's going on? You say we are on a vacation, you bring me to England, and we stay in this fancy hotel, you keep telling me you have a surprise for me, but you say nothing else."

"I hoped Ed would call and not his friend. Nevertheless, he sent his friend to Silk Wood Manor, and his friend carried out his decision. He didn't even give me a chance to explain. It was an amazing thing he finally decided, to turn over ownership of the estate and manor to the people who worked there, to pay them for all the years they worked there and weren't given their due. He just doesn't understand the situation. They called me earlier this morning while you slept. They do not want to own anything. They simply want to serve a heir as they have done for generations. If they do not accept his offer, that beautiful place will go to the National Trust, and for what? It should be lived in, not made into some historical exhibit. Why can't he see that? Has he changed so much that he can't understand simple people anymore Mama? Has he become some lofty executive not all in touch with the people that work for him like Larry became? I was looking forward to meeting him after so many years, and all I get is excuses from Alec. I know when I am being lied to. "

"Will you not tell me what is going on, who are this Ed and Alec you are talking about? You are not defending a client in front of a jury in Boston; you are speaking to your mother."

"I wanted it to be a surprise for you. I know I did wrong, Mama, in going along with what Larry wanted." Jay claimed.

Hannah rapidly cursed in German and in Hebrew and in Russian. He chuckled at her.

"Such unladylike words you use in front of me!"

"I have no use for you as a son anymore if you do not tell me what is going on!"

"All right, okay. Do you remember Edward, the little boy who used to stay with us so often, the one I used to bring taffy candy to, the one you always tried to fatten up with your cooking behind his mother's back?"

"Oh that darling little boy! I always felt so sorry for him. He was such a wunderkind, Jacob. I was sure he would grow to be someone important. I heard rumors about his family in the neighborhood, you know. Back then, everyone knew everyone. There were few secrets. His father was a terrible, terrible man. He hung himself after trying to kill the boy, you know. He went to fight a war and he came back crazy in his head and drank too much. I never found

out all of what had happened. One day I read in the paper that Edward had gone off to war too, and was captured. They tortured people, Jacob. They must have tortured him too, tortured him to death. I did not care for his mother, how could she stand by and let his father do such terrible things to him even though a wife must obey her husband in all things before God? But her heart must have been broken to lose that little boy. God forgive me but I loved him, sometimes I think I love him more than I love you because you are so independent and do not like me to fuss over you, and he did. He would always ask me for hugs, he would cling to me all the time, he would study my tattoo and I asked myself did his mother never hold him? He craved love and touch. He loved to read, he read everything he could get his hands on, and asked me about it all afterwards. He had such amazing daydreams, Jacob. He said one day people would explore the universe and he would be a part of it. Children that age do not understand the Holocaust so well, but he did, Jacob! He was one of a kind, that dear little boy and now he is lost. I am alive only by the grace of my faith and the whims of my God, and he is dead these many years. It is a terrible thing."

"Mama, he is not dead. He and others were rescued by the American Marines. He was badly hurt, but they saved his life. He was in the United States Air Force, they promoted him to colonel when he came back home. I discovered he's been living in England all these years, he retired after being in a car crash, became a movie executive, and owns his own studio. Larry left his mother's estate, Silk Wood Manor, to him when he died. He should have inherited it a long time ago but Larry didn't want that, and I never questioned it. Mama, I spoke on the phone to his close friend. I was going to bring you to him, to surprise you. He doesn't even know you're still alive. Now I don't know if he even cares to see you."

"Little Edward is alive? Alive! Oh, I can't believe it! When will I see him? Where is he? Oh, I must cook a roast for him and sew myself a new dress so that I look my best for him! Jacob, when will we see him? When? Where?"

"Did you not listen to me? I don't know that he even wants to see us."

"Oh you have a cabbage for a brain. "She chuckled. "He loved me; he even secretly called me his second Mama sometimes. He talked to me about you, how you'd sneak him candy, and how you'd defend people even if they were penniless and he admired you so. He will see us, I am sure of it, or my name isn't Hannah Noland."

He grinned at her.

"It *isn't*, you foolish old woman."

"May God forgive you for your insolence." she chuckled merrily.

## Chapter Five: The Little Boy Found

"Colonel, the body will decompose. I can't allow that to happen, it would contaminate medical center. I must ask you to be reasonable." Schroeder cautioned him.

"The only thing that would kill Ed for certain is if you conducted a post mortem and embalmed his body. I've already given orders for him not to be taken off the IV fluids, and I haven't any intention of changing that. I won't allow myself to think we've genuinely lost him. I need faith. Did you know the Commander is a man who genuinely believes in God?" Alec looked at the physician from where Alec sat in Ed's office chair. Several folders were open on his desk, a cigar lie lit in the ashtray although Alec hadn't smoked for years and neither had Ed. He'd done it with the patch and Ed had done it on will power alone. A full glass of whiskey was in front of him too, and Schroeder guessed it was one of many he'd made disappear. The man's liver was incredible. Freeman's drinking habits would have killed any other man. Yet Schroeder ruled out alcoholism. Like Straker, Freeman was an enigma.

"That isn't something that would have come up in any conversation we've ever had. I heard things in there that I shouldn't have heard, I realize that. It happens in my profession. "

"Does it surprise you that Ed was hallucinating about being captured?"

"I've read articles on post-traumatic stress syndrome; I know what war is like. I know the inhumanity to their own species that humans are capable of producing. I have heard the Commander remind us all that we are at war with the aliens. I have seen civilian bodies emptied of their organs. So I understand. Believe me, Colonel; nothing of what I heard will get out."

"Don't be ridiculous. Rumors and news get out and around in SHADO just as rapidly as they do in the outside world. People are already whispering about me being in command, and guessing that Ed is dead. Now, I have a lot of work to do. Ed's old friend Jay Noland keeps calling and I don't know what to tell him. The people who ran the estate Ed's mother left him are actually still saying they don't want to inherit it. I don't understand it. I have that damn director in my hair, telling me he refuses to work with us further if we can't keep the paparazzi off his back after we sank millions of pounds in his damn movie. I have Duval's assistants on my back demanding to know what exactly I am doing with the IAC funding. On top of all that, we're still making repairs up top and down here, still trying to get back to normal after the UFO hit us and left us in splinters. You've got other sick people, Schroeder; go see them for Christ's sake. We could use Carlin back again, go work on him!"

"The Captain is nowhere near being healthy enough to return to duty right now and he knows it. Colonel, I know how much you cared about Commander -"

"Care, doctor. Don't use past tense with me. I saw Ed come back from the dead. I saw that, and things you wouldn't believe in that alternative universe, or void, or existence that Sir Peregrine Falcon calls the Between. I'm alive even though I was shot in the heart. You read the report I filed. Read it again. I don't have time to listen to your concerns right now. Ed's coming back, you wait and see."

Schroeder privately thought old man Falcon was nothing less than a con artist, but didn't make it known. Remarkably, even Straker seemed to trust him and nobody questioned Straker. Except of course, for Alec.

"I hope that is more than just what you want to believe because you think you killed him. I remind you he would have died anyway, and it was my decision not yours to stop his heart. I'll give you another hour, no more, and then I have to take action myself. I have to follow

rules too, Colonel."

"Get out." Alec said, hitting the door switch. Schroeder sighed and went through the doors. Alec gathered up folders, and then angrily threw them down again. He drank the rest of the whiskey then jumped up for a refill. He sat down again and then noticed Ed's green ball. He lifted it up with sadness. How often had he seen Ed play with that thing? Claire had privately referred to it as Edward's favorite toy. The buzzer sounded and he grabbed a phone and set it down.

"What the hell is it now, Keith?" he demanded.

"Sorry Sir, but you still have calls on the line. Mr. Malone again, the IAC and Dr. Swanson are waiting to see you." Keith Ford said.

"Tell Virginia Lake to use her womanly charms on the IAC and delay them, tell Malone I'll call him as soon as I can, and I'll see Dr. Swanson now. "

"She's outside the office."

"Thank you Keith."

"Sir, is it true-"

Alec knew what Keith was going to ask, Keith knew how sick Ed had been. *Was Straker really dead?* He slammed down the phone and hit the door switch again.

"I'm sorry, Alec. I know you're really busy." Claire Swanson said quietly. He found it was difficult to look at her. It brought the reality of Ed's death slamming right back into his face.

"It's all right. What did you want?" Alec asked gruffly.

"I don't know where to go and I'd like to get some sleep in a real bed for a change. You said I lived at one time with that Englishman, from the House of Lords?"

"Sir Peregrine Falcon. He's retired from that work now, has been for a while. He's out of the country with Algernon Fisher on some business, I had Lieutenant Ford try to reach him, but he couldn't manage it. Don't worry; we'll get you a hotel room or something. Ed would never forgive me if I didn't make sure-" Alec frowned. "Never mind. Just be patient. I know SHADO isn't the most comfortable place to sleep. Ed never complained about it, but then he practically lives here, the old workaholic."

"Can I sit down?"

"Sorry, sure. I apologize for the mess. I didn't really realize how much of Ed's job is just this damned paperwork. I don't know how he manages it. An authorization for this, a signature for that, approval of this-sit down, sit down."

"Ed. That's Commander Straker you're talking about, right? I'm trying to get it all straight in my head. So much to try to understand, and take in. You and the Commander work together here."

"Ed went through a lot of trouble to track me down, I was his first recruit, I'm proud to say. I've been at SHADO ever since."

"Alec, there's something I wanted to ask you. I've started to hear things about him." Claire told him nervously.

"About you and Ed having a close relationship?"

"Did we? "

"Yeah. I understand you don't remember him too well." Alec took another long swig of the whiskey. He extinguished the cigar in its tray when she seemed to wince at the smell.

"Sorry. I'll put the fan on for you; it'll clear up in a minute."

"You didn't go into any details."

"Why should I?"

"Because I want to try and remember as much as I can. They tell me I am a doctor. I just can't imagine it. I feel so lost."

"Didn't Schroeder say you were accidentally shot up with the amnesia drug? We usually use it on civilians who are exposed to the organization so that security remains tight. Don't worry about it. Nobody's ever had the amount you had. Our boffins didn't know what would happen. It's a miracle you can still string words together. If we have to, we'll retrain you in psychology. You were taking courses in psychology, you'd said to me it would help you treat Ed's post-traumatic stress syndrome and claustrophobia."

"I was the Commander's doctor?"

"More than that. You were his damn lover for God's sake!" exploded Alec, fed up with his pretense, and angered by his grief.

"I was what?" Claire was startled.

"God damn you! You should have been with Ed, but you cooped yourself up in the medical center when he left. You were the one who told me Ed wasn't as resilient as he pretended to be. You're the one who preached to me about being more open about my friendship with him! Why the hell ask me about it? What difference does it make to you? I probably killed him, don't you understand that? He was my cobbler! You're getting a new beginning, why do you have to worry? That virus in your system we briefed you about will keep you young and beautiful indefinitely. That new operative that didn't work out, the one you were going to give the drug to, Clifford. Were you attracted to him? Is that the real reason you ignored Ed and stayed here?"

"Alec, please, I just don't know. I don't remember Clifford or any of it. I have these dreams, I fell asleep in the lounge, and I kept having these weird dreams and feelings I couldn't understand. Please Alec, try to understand I think of you as my only friend here, the rest of them are so patronizing to me, and just professional. I thought that you might be the only one who really cared about what had happened to me."

"I cared? I cared? Ed Straker had allowed himself to *love* you! Do you have any idea what courage that took after all the other people hurt him when he opened up his heart? Name any hell you like and Ed's been through it! What the bloody blazes do you know about true caring? If by some miracle he wakes up, I have to break his heart and tell him that the woman he shared a bed with doesn't even know him anymore. How the hell do I do that? He had finally decided to marry you, you damn fool woman!" Alec took the velvet box out of his inside pocket and threw it across the room. "There! Look at the inscription! See for yourself."

"Alec, please. Please." she cried. "You're being unfair."

"Unfair? Everything's about you and your problems, isn't it? Oh just get out of here, all right? Throw the damn box in the vaporizer. It doesn't make any difference anymore, his heart's going to be broken again now if he survives and I have to be the one to do it." Alec slammed the door switch. Claire jumped up, was about to go out, but bent and picked up the box.

"At least I know someone cared for me", she stammered, and disappeared out the door. Alec stared at it.

"Christ. You fool idiot. Now you've done it, you went and upset her. Ed would *kill* you," he muttered to himself. Then the phone rang again and he stopped caring. A trickle of some fluid traveled down his neck from his ears. He grabbed a tissue from inside his jacket, and wiped it off. Blood. Something told him not to report to the medical center, although he felt a little odd. He scowled at ignoring protocol, but then figured getting SHADO back into shape

while Ed was ill was his priority. He sighed and plowed through his work.

Claire just walked for several minutes and got lost, not for the first time either. She didn't feel confident about asking anyone for directions and she didn't want anyone to see her crying. Finally, she found a secluded corner of the restaurant, and opened the little box. They were all staring at her and she closed the box, got up again, darted out, and started wandering around holding it tightly in her hand. It felt comforting to her. Without thinking about it, she reached the medical center doors, shoved the box in her pocket, and stepped inside. The medical center was busy with activity from the aftermath of the attack, and she was about to leave when someone tapped her on the shoulder.

"Hey, Dr. Swanson, great to see you walking around again. I heard a rumor you got hurt badly when they hit the studio. You okay?" a guard on duty said with a smile.

"I'm-uh-yes, I'm okay." she lied again. It felt so natural.

*Is that the kind of person I am? Do I lie that easily?*

"Straker's inside here, you want to go check in on him? Alec told me to make sure nobody gets in and Schroeder was pretty teed off about it, but you probably want to take a look at him, right? Listen to me, talking to you as if you don't know a thing. All those tests I had to pass to work at this crazy place have turned my brain to mush. Go on in!" The guard sounded American, and looked very young to her. She nodded, and he followed her inside.

"I'm uh-sorry-I don't remember your name," she admitted.

"Oh don't worry about that, half the time doing this gig I don't know my own name myself." he laughed. "It's Dennis. Claire, I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but old man Straker is a pretty lucky person having a beautiful girl like you hanging around him. The grapevine has it that-

"Do you know the code to open this door?" she interrupted him uncomfortably. "I've forgotten it-" Under his steady admiring gaze she felt naked.

"Sure! Here, I'll punch it in for you. There you go. See you later. "

"Tha-thank you."

It was cool inside. She stood shaking for several minutes then drawing closer to the bed, she gasped. It was unmistakably him; he was even more striking looking in person. When she had seen his photograph, the thought had passed through her mind that he was one of the most beautiful men she had ever seen but she hadn't wanted to admit that to Alec.

*Beautiful may be an odd thing to call a man, but it fits him. Oh pins and needles, it is him. Alec says we were lovers. How could someone that looks like him love a woman as plain as me? Why does he look dead? Did Alec say he was dead? Then why just leave him here like this? My God, he's tied down! He would hate that! I'll get those things off. There. What am I thinking? I don't remember anything. What does that mean? What's happening to me? Ed Straker. No, that isn't right. Edward. Yes. He looks more like an Edward to me. Even his name is beautiful. Edward Straker. So full of strength and purpose and determination and resolve. I like saying his name, sounds almost like a melody. Edward. My God, Edward, what have they done to you in this awful place?*

She found herself settling in a chair beside him. She found she hated the smells in there but couldn't help but be drawn to him. Hesitatingly, she touched his throat.

*Here. Carotid artery. Strong, steady pulse. What the hell does that mean? Steady. Why did Alec say he might be dead? Oh, he's so cold, like ice! I have to get this sheet off him. Why he's naked-how in the world could they do this to him, it's so cruel! Stupid people. Always treat patients as if they aren't human, just diseases, and have no feelings. The broken arm in*

room 345, the liver cancer in 225, the heart case in 582. What in the world am I saying? I'm so confused. There. I took these godforsaken things off you, Edward. There must be blankets for you in here somewhere.

She stood up and started to search in the cabinets.

*Oh good, here and its electric. What were they doing to you? Poor thing, freezing to death. Here. There. I'll tuck you in. That's better. Look at your hair. My God, what am I doing? I don't remember us at all. Were we a couple? Your IV fluids need to be replaced soon. Is Schroeder handling your case? Oh, stop it! How can I be thinking things I don't know about? That box. Alec said Edward was going to ask me to marry him. Why can't I remember? Was I really attracted to that other man? Clifford, that was the name Alec mentioned. I saw his photograph too. I felt nothing. When I looked at yours-my God, your intense eyes. Your slender body, your delicate bones, your perfect mouth, your long slender fingers, your high cheekbones your tiny fine fringe of eyelashes. You look almost supernaturally beautiful to me. But you'd be cross at me if I said that to you, wouldn't you be? How do I know that? Why do I think that?*

She leaned over from her chair and lovingly stroked his hair. It felt so soft. It was longer than it had been in the photo she'd studied of him.

*You'd be so upset to be seen like this, I wish I had your comb and I could fix your silver hair, it always looks sleek as silk. You're such a perfectionist. It's your strength and your weakness at the same time, you know. Just listen to me. I don't know what the hell I am talking about! I feel so all alone. No. Not true. I did. I did before. I don't anymore. At almost the moment I saw you here, I felt as if I'd come home. As if right here at your side is where I belonged. Then why is he accusing me of not caring that you went away? They said you'd been out of the country, and that you'd come back on a new aircraft with a new weapon and had saved all of us. Why would anyone ever want to leave you? Pins and needles, they'd have to be blind as a whole cave full of bats to not know you had feelings and needed to be cherished and loved. Just look at you. I wonder what you're like. I've heard some things that you're a tyrant, and you scare people and throw your weight around. What do they expect out of you? You have a difficult job for crying out loud, how else are you supposed to let off steam? You're protecting the world from aliens. Aliens! Right here, oh my God, they really are out there, and they go after us, and this place is SHADO, and fights them. Was I really a part of all this? Damn it, why did this have to happen to me? Will I never ever truly remember you? Was I finally really loved by someone as special as you and I don't remember it? I was privileged enough to be your lover and I have no memory of it! God, that's so sad. How can I be held responsible by your friend Alec for breaking your heart? I can't stand it. Would you blame me too?*

She took the box out of her pocket. Opening it, she let out a little cry. She read the inscription over and over again.

"It's so beautiful. The ring is beautiful like you. Oh Edward. If I only could remember just a single moment I spent with you. I'd give up everything else in the world to remember just that." she wept. Slowly she slipped the ring on.

"It fits. Of course! Of course I'll be your wife. Oh Edward, I'm so sorry. I'm so terribly sorry."

He moaned softly and started to move. She jumped up in shock, the box fell to the floor and she reached for the telephone.

"What-the-hell? Where am I? My head is killing me. Where's Alec?" A woman was

standing there, but he was having trouble focusing.

"Oh! I'll get him. I will. Oh damn I don't know the direct number anymore!" Claire grabbed the ring box.

"I'm naked. What the hell's going on here? *You*. Nurse. Get my clothes! NOW." Ed attempted to get up and moaned, went white and fell back against the pillow again. "That was I would definitely categorize *that* move as a mistake. I just gave you an order, damn it. Get these IV's out of me now or I'll do it myself. Christ, you're utterly useless aren't you? Where does Alec hire these idiots from anyway? Where the hell *is* Alec? Get me Colonel Freeman immediately."

"Stop it! I don't know what to do Edward, don't you understand? Oh God, I wish I was dead."

"Jesus Christ, is that you, Claire? What the hell are you talking about? Come over here sweetheart, I can't see you too well. I know, I know, I got myself hurt again. Help me up. No, wait, don't go!"

"I don't know what's going on; I don't know what to do!"

She disappeared out the door, her ears bleeding.

Alec Freeman exhaustingly had finally put the last folder in the OUT box on Ed's desk when the phone rang again. For a moment he considered pulling his gun out and shooting it and then himself, and then sanity prevailed but not by much. He grabbed the telephone like he really meant to squeeze its little electronic throat tighter and tighter until it burst.

"Freeman. Yeah yeah, Keith, I know. Who is trying to get through to me now? The aliens? Well tell them I'm not home and to leave me a message after the beep. If it's Schroeder tell him to go screw himself with a thermometer. If it's that Noland guy tell him I'm going to ram his law books up his habeas corpus if he calls the studio one more time. If it's that Duval -"

"Alec!" Keith said with elation in his voice, forgetting the protocol of properly addressing senior rank while on duty then he went back to conventional formality. "It's *Commander Straker* on the line for you, Sir."

"Well, you just tell Straker for me that - **COMMANDER STRAKER?** "

He heard Ford chuckle. Then there was a brief electronic blip and a distinctive voice he faithfully loved and on the odd rare occasion hated with every fiber of his being but never for long came on line.

"Alec, I'm still in the medical center with Schroeder on my back, poking me in crevices I didn't even know existed. I think you might have to do some major fence mending for me. I somehow got seriously ill out in South Korea and thought I was back in Vietnam. I even thought I was on some spaceship at some point. That damn over the budget film we're shooting up top was why, I guess. The so-called genius director is an authentic pain in the ass as you well know. They compare him in the press to Stanley Kubrick. I personally would compare him to bubonic plague. Oh, and I think I insulted your girlfriend du jour. Dr. Park or Kim I think her name is. The strangest thing was, I even was dreaming I was a knight fighting a dragon and you were my squire. I didn't do so well at defeating it. I got fried. If Dr. Jackson were still alive he'd have a field day with all this nonsense. What the hell happened to Claire? Why did she run off on me like that? That woman baffles me sometimes. I need some answers, Alec. Alec, are you even listening to me? Alec?"

Ed's office chair was empty.

## Chapter Six: You Fight Monsters!

"Are you sure I need to be in that damn thing Doctor?" Ed looked at Schroeder resentfully. He knew fully well that the medical personnel were the only immediate ones outside the IAC who could issue orders he had to follow. Privately he was grateful for it, as even he had to admit to himself, he'd been more than a little unsteady attempting to stand on two legs. He'd had time to shower and do his toilet and dress even though it seemed so painfully slower than his usual pace. To his annoyance, he was still experiencing some blurry vision, which he didn't mention to the doctor. So he felt, well, as if he was back from the dead, he thought wryly in spite of resenting being an invalid. Schroeder guessed what he was thinking.

"Commander, you came back from the dead only hours ago, which I still have trouble accepting and yet there you are in front of me, with no ill effects save a lingering weakness which I don't believe is any cause for alarm provided it goes away after some rest and relaxation. Your attitude tells me the experience hasn't mellowed you any."

Ed reluctantly grinned at that, and as he'd expected, Alec was merrily leaning against the wall, arms crossed, enjoying it all with a grin as wide as Buckingham Palace.

"Very well, doctor but only until I'm strong enough to stand on my own two feet. I'll want to look over the medical report you did on me before you add it to my personal file."

"I'd like you to take at least two weeks off to make sure you recover fully, but Colonel Freeman tells me that getting you to actually do it would take a miracle and he told me we don't yet have the money from the IAC to take a trip to Lourdes. So I'll settle for a week's worth of rest."

"A weekend," Ed bellowed, hiding amusement at Alec's advice to the physician.

"A *week*, Ed. You even think about work and I'll have you back in medical center trussed up like a holiday goose before you know it, Tiny Tim. Now get your skinny Bostonian behind into that chair. Doctor, thanks, and uh, I think I owe you an apology for the way I behaved toward you." Alec said with a chuckle.

"Don't give it a second thought, Colonel. Now get out of here, some of us actually do work for a living around here, you know." Schroeder smiled. Alec took the wheelchair handles, returning the smile.

Ed got into the chair with what even for him might have been described as a pout, and the two of them wheeled down a corridor at the end of which an older but no less lovely or no less curvier Virginia Lake waited. She smiled encouragingly at him as he approached the lift. He gave her a curt nod, privately uneasy at seeming weak and vulnerable before her or any other human being on earth.

"You look terrific for a dead man, Commander," she assured him with that Lauren Bacall voice of hers. Yes, he'd noticed her credentials as well as her curves, he admitted to himself wryly. Lake's sexuality was about as subtle as a cat at the Westminster dog show.

"Thank you, I *think*. Incidentally I did want to thank you for filling in for Alec at such short notice."

"It isn't a problem at all, Christmas shopping is boring. Before you even ask, I thought I'd assure you that I'll keep you posted on UFO activity at least once a day while you go on your sick leave, Commander."

"Good, good." Ed responded.

"Watch the paperwork Virginia, it's a killer," Alec warned.

Alec pushed Ed's wheelchair, chuckled and waved at her as they moved away. Virginia gave Alec a parting laugh that made him wish he had her under a sprig of mistletoe. Hell, a whole bush of the stuff.

Ed had the sudden feeling Alec had coached Virginia to reassure him, and she didn't mean a syllable of it but he decided to let it go for the moment, and work on recovering.

"Speaking of apologies Alec, how did you fare with the Korean science team before they boarded their flight home? I felt ashamed to be a reminder of hate toward them. As soon as I'm well enough, I'll fly out and make my apologies in person. Their country is still divided even now and they didn't need a sick Bostonian to remind them of the war..."

"They understood and were all too happy to accept your apologies. Dr. Park was very impressed with how we do things around here, and her father also understood what had happened when I explained how ill you were. They were honored to work with you, they think of you like a hero out of a legend. She was especially amused at your hallucination about hyperspace, she joked she didn't seem to think the IAC would fund that advanced a research project. I guess they have their own financial headaches with the IAC too," the Australian chuckled. "She really understands we all have a common enemy, the aliens," Alec added. Ed smiled, much relieved.

He rolled with Alec's assistance into the lift and Alec operated the control that would take them up to the studio level.

"Alec, fill me in on our current status - Oh, hello, Miss Holland. How are you?" he asked abstractly when they reached his studio office. Ealand was off on holiday leave.

"Relieved to see you in one piece!" his current executive assistant told him. "Oh that director fellow wanted to meet with you; he feels you should double the security on the set."

"For the amount of money the studio is paying him he can go hire his own private goons to protect him. Doesn't he have a home here and a home in Switzerland?" Ed asked with perfect contempt.

"So Daily Mirror and Hello says," she told him with an annoyingly perky smile.

"Tell him I'm permanently unavailable, Miss Holland. See you later, I'm about to go on a forced holiday." Ed said, and then his mouth pulled into his patented thin line of disgust. She grinned at him and winked at Alec.

When Alec had managed to sign out a car from the studio pool that could store the wheelchair in its boot, Ed settled in the front and reluctantly allowed Alec to take the driver's seat. Alec gave him a worried look, knowing he was putting up a courageous act. He was devastated about Claire's situation to put it mildly. Alec had finally told him what happened. Professionally he'd assured Ed that SHADO was fully functional. Not so professionally, he wondered what medical procedures Schroeder might use to heal a Commander's broken heart.

"Alec, I'm not thinking what you think I'm thinking," he lied. "I'm tough. I'll survive losing Swanson."

"Bullshit. I saw the ring you bought her."

He saw fresh pain touch Ed's aristocratic features and changed the subject quickly.

"Ed, that old friend of yours Jay Noland, he's been calling you for days. How about if I agree to see him for a breakfast get together at his hotel?" Alec suggested. "He's staying at the Triumph, it's a newer establishment but it easily competes with Claridges and the Connaught. It also is discreet about its clients so we shouldn't have any security problems. Algernon recommended it to me; he says he prefers it to the others."

"Fine. As long as their restaurant serves anything but raw fish, Alec. "Ed chuckled

without true mirth. "My stomach didn't approve of it after a while and quite frankly I don't think I could even look at rice for at least a year or two or three."

"It's a great breakfast spot, and we can get a secluded table where we aren't bothered if Noland doesn't mind."

"How does steak and eggs sound, Alec?"

"Maybe for *me*, Ed. Porridge and a glass of milk and a digestive biscuit for you if you're lucky," Alec suggested, with a grin at Ed's sour expression and he picked up the car telephone to ask Miss Holland for the number of the hotel. After Miss Holland had connected him, a brief conversation with Noland seemed to indicate the young man was delighted and looked forward to seeing them all as soon as possible.

Ed was still giving Alec a menacing scowl for the porridge comment but he found his voice again. "I can hardly believe I'll be seeing Jay again. As you know, I knew him when I was still in grade school in Boston. With his partner Lawrence Malone dead, he's now head of the firm he worked for, and he deserves it. My guess is he still does pro bono work. He's always been something of a champion for the poor and downtrodden. I guess I'm just a little reluctant to see him because he went along with Malone's insistence that I not be told about my mother's estate, not that I had any plan to claim it. That reminds me Alec. What exactly happened with Silk Wood Manor?"

Alec kept his eyes on the road as he responded.

"I spoke with a Mr. Valentine, the butler who served your mother and Malone and Valentine's their spokesman for the entire staff. I had the understanding he's one of the few that have served at that place the longest. Well, I explained to him that you'd decided to turn over the estate to the personnel there, and make sure that everyone was paid in full for the work they'd done over the years. He graciously accepted the check for their pay, but after a brief meeting with them he told me that none of them wanted to own the manor and everything in it. Valentine told me in a cut crystal accent that it simply wasn't done. I told them it would provide for them and their descendants for many years even with the enormous cost it takes to keep a place like that going, but he simply wasn't interested and he made it clear most of the staff shared his opinion, they didn't think it proper. The one thing he said he feared, and I quote him now but I'll never match his fancy accent, 'For the National Trust to take Silk Wood Manor would be unthinkable for everyone involved.' End quote. He's like our Algernon Fisher on steroids."

"Just a casualty of another war being waged, Alec. The class war," sighed Ed. "It's one of the few things I don't like about England, and it's still alive back in Boston as well."

"Ed, about Claire - she just needs a little more time."

Ed shook his head.

"Time?" he said in disgust. "What does time have to offer me now except for more pain?"

Alec sighed, waved away the valet and parked the car himself once he had reached the hotel. Alec wheeled a freshly scowling Ed up the ramp leading to the hotel. The door attendant gave them all a respectful welcome and cheerfully opened the double doors for them. Ed still was brooding.

"It takes time to change, and time to accept change. Lately I've felt like I'm swept up in some damn maelstrom of change, without being given a single moment to really think about the significance of what's happened to me," Ed said quietly.

Alec stared at him.

"It isn't at all like you to give up like this, Ed."

Ed sullenly didn't respond. That wasn't him at all. Alec realized he needed to grow his nails longer just so he could chew them. People asked him why he drank. From now on he'd just point to Ed.

Alec was somberly pushing the chair through the crowded lobby. Ed produced his pair of gold aviator sunglasses from an interior pocket of his spotless cream Nehru jacket, and slipped them on. Alec had stepped up to a young woman and had given her Noland's name. She smiled and directed them toward a table. The restaurant wasn't as crowded as Ed had expected, and he found himself enjoying the ambiance, the din of many conversations and above all that, the mouthwatering scents of food. Genuine British and American food, not the Korean fare he'd politely consumed abroad. All part of diplomacy. He didn't handle diplomacy all that well. He gladly left it to Alec.

"Say, Ed?" Alec said, after studying his surroundings, especially the females in short skirts.

"Hmm?" Ed was now attempting to search over the heads of people to see if he could detect Noland but being at wheelchair height made it too bothersome. He had to admit the prospect of meeting Noland again after so many years made him a little nervous and he didn't enjoy nervous.

"Look around you. You're still getting the eye from the women. This free time away from the studio has already started to do you a world of good, Mr. Famous Film Exec."

Ed raised a fair eyebrow at the ribbing and Alec was enjoying it until suddenly the Commander reached back and smacked the Australian's hand on the wheelchair handgrips as hard as he could as Alec guided the wheelchair down the aisle. Ed had surprising striking strength for seeming like such a delicate man to opponents who made unwise assumptions concerning his ability to defend himself. Some of them were now deceased. Alec had to tell himself he was lucky Ed hadn't aimed for his- *no don't go there, Freeman. Didn't your stepmother always tell you that?* He grinned to himself.

"OW," Alec protested in a melodramatic fashion to amuse Ed. "That *hurt*."

"It was supposed to," Ed replied with a barely perceptible grin. Suddenly a man approached and towered over him. Alec stepped forward protectively but Ed raised a commanding hand to stop him. It had to be Noland.

"ED! Ed Straker! Ed, I can't believe it. It's you. It really is you! I didn't think you'd actually come. I recognized you and Alec from photographs. How do you do Mr. Freeman? Please sit down! Sit down. Oh, listen to me asking you to sit down. Ed, how did you get injured? I didn't hear anything about you being in any kind of an accident, and I was very careful to keep track of you once I found out you were alive."

Alec relaxed and Ed shrugged and slipped his sunglasses back into an inside jacket pocket.

"I'm fine, Jay, the wheelchair's temporary, slight mishap. You haven't changed all that much, it's a pleasure to see you again." They shook hands.

"Call me Alec. I like this guy already, Ed. Anything that shakes my business partner out of his starched shirt, or in his case a starched Nehru is all right by me." Alec chuckled. He was thinking only Ed would call being dead and nearly being slit open for inspection via a Y-cut a slight mishap.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Alec. He wasn't always this formal you know. He used to be a cute little inquisitive boy."

Alec suddenly was a jukebox someone had put a bunch of quarters in.

*Oh Christ, thought Ed. I should have expected this.*

"Oh, I'm really going to like *you!*" Alec said as Ed expected he would. Ed sat stiffly in his chair, steeling himself for the ordeal that was coming. "Tell me everything you remember Jay, hell, it's hard to even believe he *was* a kid once!"

Jay laughed.

Ed gave a smile that made a mockery of the illumination from the chandeliers. It was time to make a countermove in Alec's little chess game.

"Jay, are you familiar with British law yet?" Ed asked with his usual deceptive innocence. Now it was the Australian's turn to steel himself. He knew that tone. Boy, did he know that tone. He still had mental scars from back when he hadn't known that tone.

Noland frowned uneasily, almost looked scared for no reason Alec could think of. "Not as much as I'd like. This really is more of a vacation for me than anything else. Why?"

He pushed the leather bound breakfast menus toward them as if they were a shield. Alec buried his nose in one still hoping to escape being killed by his commanding officer, which he knew was coming. Alec Freeman's last meal. He made a mental note to make it an expensive one.

Ed had disappointingly noticed a woman's pink sweater draped over the lawyer's chair, and waited impatiently for Noland to explain. He'd hoped their reunion would be private. Perhaps the garment belonged to his girlfriend or wife. He couldn't recall Noland ever dating but then he'd only been in grade school while he'd known him. Surviving the horrors of grade school had been his priority back then, not keeping track of Jay Noland's love life.

"I was just wondering how much prison time I would have to do for murder." Ed lifted one of the gold butter knives from the table and studied it then allowed his finger to gently slide down the serrated edge. Ed then looked meaningfully at his second-in-command. He dropped the knife upon the table so that its tip pointed directly toward Alec. *Yank takes Australian. Checkmate.*

Noland chuckled while Alec dramatically gulped and wondered if he could order an emergency single malt whisky. *Hell, this calls for a full bottle. No, make that a whole pub.*

Jay suddenly stood up and he smiled.

"Here comes the surprise for Ed that I mentioned to you, Mr. Freeman."

"Call me Alec and if Ed gets away with homicide bury me somewhere near a decent public house," chuckled Alec. Ed made the familiar steeple of his fingers, curious as to what Noland was talking about. He didn't care much for surprises, and more than a little of his faith in the man had been lost after the Malone business. He picked up a spoon impatiently and studied his warped reflection in it, feeling as if it mirrored his insides well at that moment.

Alec was saying something to Noland but Ed was not listening at that point.

There was a new sadness in his friend Alec almost felt he could reach out and touch.

Ed caught the Australian's compassionate glance and scowled fiercely at him because he identified it.

*Pity. Pity benefited neither giver nor receiver. He especially hated pity when directed toward him. Pity of having a marriage crumble over an untrue accusation you couldn't even deny, pity of having to secretly grieve in front of the grave of your son who'd been laid in the earth with another man's name because his mother wouldn't allow you to come to his funeral. Pity.*

Jay was still laughing.

"All right, Alec. I promise. Now allow me to introduce someone that tests my patience

just as much as you appear to test his. Here she comes, and please compliment her on her dress, she was very cross when she realized there wasn't time to sew a new one by hand to impress Ed, and she complained half the morning about the one I hastily bought her from the hotel's boutique. Mother still believes in making her own clothes, you see," he said as if he was confessing that she had body odor.

A painfully tiny old woman was zipping her way up the aisle in a modern looking motorized wheelchair that put Ed's elderly wheezing wheelchair to shame. Jacob went, met and hugged her then sat down as she wheeled slowly up toward their table.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! I see I am late again coming from the ladies', but you see Jacob says at my age without this expensive toy he bought me to get around in, I am slower than a whole sea full of tortoises, you know. Pah! Did we order breakfast? I am famished. I wonder how much just this tassel in this menu cost. Such waste! No, do not stand. Who is this man, Jacob?" she asked, looking at Alec. "I feel as if I know him, as if I have seen him somewhere, in a dream. He was very disturbed then, he lost something. No, that is not right. He lost *someone*. Yes. Jacob, you promised that I would see my precious Edward. Where is he, or were you playing an evil joke on your poor Mama?"

Before anyone could react, Ed had risen up from his wheelchair and stepped in front of her with the impassive mask of the Commander of SHADO. He reached down without any hesitation for her arm and he pushed her sleeve up roughly so that the number tattoo he remembered which proved she had escaped death in Auschwitz was revealed. His azure eyes widened, and then his whole demeanor changed as he sat in the wheelchair again. She was smiling at him.

*A maelstrom of change, he had said. Here was even more change, but this change lifted his heart.*

"Hannah it *is* you," Ed said softly and every word clearly took tremendous effort to say. "It really is *you*. You aren't dead."

"Jacob, stop staring at him in that manner! He was not hurting me or being rude. My Edward just needed to be sure it was me! Always he needed to be sure! So serious! Little one, oh little one. Child. Look at you, handsome, all grown, a man. I did not recognize you! Pah! How could I forget those glorious eyes? I asked myself always why do you live, when so many others have gone to their God. Why do you linger and take up space? Why did you live, when so many others were piled up, their bones piled up like so much cordwood to throw upon a fire? This and much more my old eyes have seen. Now they finally see my little one, my dearest little Edward. *This* is why my God allowed me to live, to see you again. Look at you! So tall now but always so thin! Pah! Do you not eat? In a wheelchair, oh! Jacob we must feed him until he is strong and well!"

Noland chuckled at her, more comfortable now. Ed's rash but necessary act had shocked him.

"I forgot in all the excitement to give him the taffy I brought all the way from Boston for him, I left it in our suite. Nothing has changed, Mama. Nothing. You would choose him as a son over me, you insolent old battle-axe but very little else in my career has given me so much pleasure than to see this look upon your face, sweet Mama."

"But what is this I see in your face my Edward? You too have faced monsters like the Nazis, my dearest. I see it plainly in your beautiful eyes. The eyes, they do not lie. *You fight monsters!* What is this I see?"

"I..." Ed muttered.

"Mama, what on earth are you talking about now?" Noland asked. "This isn't another one of those so called visions of yours again?"

"Ed, I think we better order," Alec was saying, sensing something was very wrong. Ed was as pale as the starched linen napkins. "Ed?"

"...I ...I waited for you for so long in that awful place. Have you finally come to take me home, Hannah?" Ed plaintively said to her, sounding like the lost child he had been all those years ago. Suddenly his eyes rolled back in his head and he fell from the chair, his body convulsing in seizure, blood streaming from his ears.

Hannah screamed.

Alec ignored her, was at his side in an instant, and stayed there until Ed pulled out of it a minute or two later, obviously dazed and semi-conscious.

Noland watched with a curious expression on his face. Neither Hannah nor Alec noticed it. Alec was already calling for a Mayland Hospital airlift.

## Chapter Seven: Treasure Lost

"All right. All *right!*" Ed slammed his hand down flat on his SHADO office desk, grim faced, his deserted and detested wheelchair nearby. "I know that look, Alec. So spit it out."

"You might finally need a drink." Alec said, going and getting a whiskey. He dropped into his usual seat with the glass filled to the brim and downed most of it in a single gulp like it was only lemonade.

Several hours before, Ed had come around and waved off a politely concerned Jay Noland and a hysterical Hannah, and had come to long enough to allow Alec to whisk him away in a Mayland Hospital air ambulance. The Nolands believed he was still at the hospital, and were waiting anxiously at their suite in the Triumph. Characteristically he had refused to stay in the hospital, and had moodily escaped into his office, insisting on privacy. Within minutes, Alec had come into the office, ignoring his friend's warning scowl. Ed noted the continuing absence of Claire with a heavy heart and Alec had explained in more depth what had happened to her, salt in a wound that Ed had barely begun to try to heal. Ed took a cleansing breath.

"Just tell me, Alec," he said, a bit quieter. It was the utter defeat in his voice that froze Alec to the core.

"You're *dying*. Really dying. The alien virus is gone, and there's some kind of new superbug in its place attacking your major organs and your brain. Schroeder says he can't even begin to think of a way to try to treat it, but he believes that it isn't communicable to others otherwise the Sejong team would be infected. The idea of stopping your heart is impossible now. It wouldn't save you."

Somehow, from somewhere, Ed managed a wan smile and shrugged.

"I'd grown tired of eternal youth anyway, Alec. We have to prepare for a seamless transition for you to assume my duty-"

"Ed, it's happening to the *three* of us. You, me, and Claire Swanson. We're all dying prematurely. The new tests Schroeder ordered showed it."

Ed shot straight up from his seat, mood abruptly changed.

"What the hell does Schroeder mean when he says he can't-"

"Ed, you're already showing signs of it, you've been suffering the most. You're wide open to any damn infection that's out there, he thinks that's why you were so hard hit with the malaria. Your immune system seems to be decaying. Anything Schroeder did would just prolong your suffering. He seems to think stress hormones trigger the process, speed it up, cause more hallucinations. I told him I didn't think you wanted to be kept on any machines. I found that out the hard way, remember? That damn nightmare with Norcross, when I almost believed you were brain dead. Anyway, he says this virus intensifies emotion, short circuits the processes of the brain. He suggested we all try to remain as calm as possible. He actually said that with a straight face after he condemns all three of us to death. Doctors!"

"Where's Claire, Alec? Does she know? How is she taking it?"

"We cleared her. Her memory decayed further, Ed. She's decided to go back to San Francisco for the time that she has left. We dreamed up an improbable cover story for her and in her current state of mind, she bought it."

Ed looked positively stricken and then the legendary frost obscured what Alec knew was absolute heartbreak. Ed summoned up anger to cloud it over further.

"She might have come and seen me before she ran off like that, damn it! Why does she

think running away is always the solution-" Ed's office door had hissed open in the start of his statement, and he stopped and stared at the offender accusingly.

"I'm sorry, I can understand why you might think I had run away." Claire said quietly, stepping through the doors.

"Well, *did* you run away?" Ed demanded, summoning up the icy façade again like a favorite blanket, but Alec saw the patched over holes on it.

Claire stepped up to the desk. "Not yet Commander. I am so sorry I can't remember our life together. " She said tearfully. "I think it best if I just go away."

Ed pulled another new authoritative mask across fresh pain and tried to be reasonable. He didn't want to be reasonable.

"Now, now, tears won't solve anything. We all need to think of what we want to do with the time we have left. I need to turn everything over to Colonel Lake. She'll make a fine replacement for me. I have complete confidence in her." That part at least was true, Ed thought. Thank God, he could count on Lake.

"Virginia already knows, and she's saddened of course but ready to take command and she deserves it. " Alec said.

Something in Claire broke.

"God damn the two of you, you're dying, you're both scared out of your minds , and you still talk about it like it wasn't any more serious than a paper cut, don't you dare tell me a paper cut really hurts, Commander!"

She looked stunned that she had raised her voice at this impossibly handsome man that she realized had shared her bed. How could she know them that well? If only the lightning flashes of memory would turn into a full storm.

"I wouldn't dream of it," Ed said, wincing at the word Commander coming from her lips. She had always lovingly called him Edward. "Why did you think that I'd say that? Is your memory returning?" Ed asked without much hope.

"No, SHADO and other memories have become dimmer; the doctors said that would progress. I know I'm dying too but I'm numb to it somehow. All I get now- I don't know-hunches, I guess. It was one of those. I can't control them."

"One of the many factors I looked at when considering your suitability to join SHADO was your medical skill and your unusually high ESP rating. I was hoping it would-" he shrugged.

"Would what?" she asked, working diligently on avoiding his steady gaze.

*It would have brought you back to me my darling, no matter what. In the past, you wouldn't have needed to ask me, Claire. Now you find it difficult to look me in the eyes. Part of me longs to take you into the Beyond to get you back. Even if it healed you, what would I have to offer you as a husband? I'm an invalid now. I'm dying, and so are you. Nothing matters much to me anymore. Nothing. I've lost you and I'll lose Alec soon. I'll lose my job. I'll lose the self-control I took pride in, nothing-nothing-nothing..*

"Nothing. I understand. Well, good bye and good luck Dr. Swanson," he replied.

She approached a frosty Ed and pressed something into his hand.

Ed opened his hand. He didn't need to. It was the ring. It was new acid splashed in his heart.

"No. Please keep it." he told her.

He thrust it back at her.

"Thank you. I will. Commander?" she said softly, studying him, knowing she wouldn't see

him again.

It took all his dwindling will power to reply.

"Yes?" he replied curtly, aware of Alec watching him, knowing what he was feeling.

"Please take care of yourself."

She vanished through the door.

Ed sat in a long and painful silence that Alec reluctantly broke.

"Ed, listen, at least she'll be safe. Our San Francisco branch will keep an eye on her. I'll see to it."

"Thank you Alec," Ed responded, memorizing the way she'd walked out of the door and the scent she preferred, Tresor by Guerlain.

*Treasure. Now he'd lost his. To say farewell was what he needed to do. He closed his heart for good and forced himself to look at his friend whom he also treasured. Maybe more, yes, more. He still had Alec.*

"You've still got me," Alec added helplessly.

Ed had to smile at Alec's intuition.

"That's been my burden, rogue."

"Huh?"

Alec saw Ed's eyes unexpectedly fill with tears. Ed pivoted away from him in the chair, covered his face briefly, and then sat looking moodily at the wall, utterly ashamed.

*Oh damn you, calm down, and pull yourself together. Don't force him to watch you like this.*

"Alec, I need to be alone for a while." Alec heard the *'please'* that Ed omitted from that sentence. He made himself deaf to it. He had to. If nothing else Claire had made him see that he shouldn't allow Ed to isolate himself. Alec had always protected Ed's pride, she knew. She'd taught him that sometimes pride was less important than the needs of body and soul. He chose his words carefully.

"Ed, the only time I've seen you try to hide your tears like that was at your son's gravesite. It didn't make me think less of you then and it sure doesn't make me think less of you now. There's not a thing on earth that would make me think less of you. However, think carefully about this new emotional you. You don't want to ruin your reputation as a cold hearted son of a bitch in one afternoon," Alec said. Ed took a deep breath and looked at Alec fondly.

"Colonel Freeman?" Ed said quietly, with enormous dignity, wiping tears away roughly with the back of his hand.

"I know. *Shut up,*" Alec said with a grin. Ed nodded.

"Let's not allow fear of what's going to happen to poison the time we have left. Whatever is happening is painless so far and at least we should be grateful for that. If I'm careful about my stress levels I may not lose control or hallucinate again," Ed insisted. "It may have only happened because of the unexpected shock of Hannah being alive."

"I seem to remember Laurence Malone, and you not liking him very much as a kid. Jay seems nice enough I suppose; I wonder why he would work for that breed of a man."

"Because at the time Boston had distaste for Jews, and even though Noland had the intellect of everyone in Massachusetts combined, he couldn't get a job even as a law clerk after he'd graduated and passed the bar. Class war again."

"More like old fashioned hate. Jay doesn't seem the type to betray your mother by allowing Malone to hide it from you," Alec pointed out.

"I'm still puzzled by that. I've asked Ford to look into it for me, run a G6 on Noland. Maybe I've been too hard on him. Malone was the only one who offered him a job and Jay worked himself up through the ranks to become senior partner. Maybe it was loyalty, after all. At any rate, I think I'll go see what it would have been like to be Lord of a manor and ask Hannah and Jay to come along. Alec, you drive, and I can get some sleep, then when you're tired, I'll take over. Stop giving me that mother hen look." Ed narrowed his eyes at Alec and picked up the phone. He asked Ford to have the car they had used earlier brought to the studio entrance.

"Yes, Sir." Ford replied.

"Lieutenant?"

"Sir?"

"Take the week off after you wrap up that report on Jacob Noland for me, Keith. That's an order. You deserve it. Goodbye."

"Goodbye. Sir."

Ed hung up.

"So finally its Keith. huh? He's been in SHADO as long as I have and you've never used his Christian name in all that time." Alec grinned, hiding how touched he was at his friend's gesture.

"I didn't know he was Christian," Ed replied deadpan.

Alec chuckled, and recalled that so many personnel undeservingly considered Ed to be about as funny as a corpse. In truth, he was a warm, sentimental, yet fiercely private man and had a boyish wit that often surfaced depending on his mood. He also was a desperately lonely man after losing both his wife and his son. Claire Swanson had somehow finally changed all that, and now she was gone.

"Very funny, Ed. Explain yourself," the Australian was saying.

"Maybe I wanted to give him something to remember me by. He's a good man, one of our best, Alec. I've been hard on him over the years, maybe because I admired him, saw a little of myself in him. I see now that I've been somewhat unfair to him." Ed said.

"That's putting it mildly, Ed."

Ed chuckled, gave his slight nod of agreement.

"You go on ahead and start the car Alec. I need to collect something from my studio office up top," Ed said. "Won't be a moment." Ed rose.

"Hell *no* you can forget escaping from me, you deceitful conniving Bostonian upper class white Anglo Saxon bastard. Get in the chair *now*."

Ed chuckled a little at Alec seeing through his need to escape, and obeyed. Ed then seemed bone deep in thought. Did a light finally flicker in those eyes of his?

"Alec, there's somewhere I want to go before we check out Silk Wood Manor," he said mysteriously.

Oh oh, thought the Australian.

Keith Ford watched Straker and Freeman go out of command center toward the lift exit. He took off his ungainly earphones, (*Christ couldn't they have gotten him those lightweight models by now? Was money that tight?*) switched off their frequency from the console, let them rest around his neck like a piece of jewelry. He moved over to where Colonel Lake was heading toward Straker's office and she smiled as she entered and stood by *the* seat but didn't take it. He guessed it was all a show for morale.

*Well, bugger that. Alec E. Freeman was dying, and how the bloody hell was he supposed*

*to carry on with his best friend dying. And the Commander- all right then. Ed. Yes, damn it. Ed was his friend too. Ed had proved it.*

*He'd just said **Keith**, not **Ford!** Where is that report? **Ford!** I want a cure for cancer, I want it yesterday and make fifty copies when that's finished, and print them on authentic Egyptian papyrus and in sixty shades of mauve and tied with feathers plucked from a dodo bird and have them on my desk in ten seconds arranged in alphabetical order, stapled with porcupine quills from porcupines you captured barehanded yourself! Well, what are you waiting for, **Ford?**' (all right, so Alec often invited Keith to late suppers at Alec's Chelsea flat and they always made those kinds of over the top jokes about Ed's impossible demands over thick steaks and jacket potatoes the size of soccer balls, coffee or tea, and the best whisky money could buy. He'd laughed his fool head off until one day Straker had menacingly bent over his station the next day when he'd returned to work and announced in a casual manner that Alec's flat was naturally always bugged for reasons of security and Ed always personally checked the transcripts and Ford had suddenly remembered Sunday school lessons at the good old C of E and prayed Straker was just joking... but Straker never joked, or did he?)*

*No. He'd said **Keith**. Ford had waited for that honor for years. Now it had happened.*

*With all his heart, he wished it hadn't.*

*Ed Straker had done it to say goodbye.*

*His friends were dying.*

It was like the day his grandfather had died before ever seeing him become a BBC journalist. His grandfather worshipped the BBC. He'd lived by the BBC. He took tea with the BBC. Nevertheless, he'd died from some bizarre illness Ford had never heard of. Therefore, he'd never seen his only grandson achieve that dream. His grandmother's attitude at the funeral was proper, unemotional and dignified.

*Bugger that!*

Nor had his grandfather ever seen Ford shake the hand of a strange, somber American ex-colonel with unreadable, stony blue eyes and agree to begin a new life he never would have considered living. It was a hell of a lot more fulfilling a ride than the reporter business had been. A million times more frightening, all right, but he felt his beloved grandfather was looking down at him with pride and that was better than any promotion he might ask for.

"Something on your mind, Lieutenant? Maybe finally a promotion after all these years? I'll make sure that you get one," Lake was saying.

*ESP already? The job called for ESP and Ed Straker had established that fact.* Ford waited for the doors to seal.

"No Ma'am. Besides, I never put in for one, not my style. It's just that I've just said a last goodbye to the Commander. I had to say farewell. I have the feeling I won't ever see him again, not alive, anyway. All these years when we thought we'd really lost him, he pulled through somehow and he's pulled us through with him. Now it seems inevitable it will end. It's hard to see someone else in that chair ma'am, no offence."

"None taken." The truth of it was clear in her voice.

*They shared a brief how are we going to survive this latest disaster look. Why didn't he have the backbone to ask her if she'd care to have a drink with him after hours in Straker's honor? Right, Keith, stand there, humiliate yourself and watch her reject you like a handbag she'd tired of carrying.*

"I'd better go home, get working on the G6 report Straker wants. Goodnight, Colonel."

"Goodnight, Lieutenant."

She waited until Keith was gone, and locked the doors and pretended his words hadn't touched her heart. She dropped into *the* chair, lifted Ed's glass ball that she imagined still bore the warmth of his hands on it, how often had she imagined in her most intimate of fantasies the warmth of those hands on her body? The way he'd expressed concern for her after the X-50 injection. God, if she had a man like that at home she never would need an electric fire - the way he playfully stole her coffee, the assurance that he did appreciate what she brought to the job. Hating herself, she unprofessionally burst into tears. The thought of losing the gallant Commander was unthinkable enough. Now Alec, with whom she'd shared a flirtation then a mutual satisfying affair with, which had turned into a friendship, was going to die.

Alec? Alec die? How could someone that full of life die? Even Claire. A woman who undoubtedly by some trick of Satan had captured the Commander's heart and how she had envied her (like most women in SHADO and some of the men too) but whatever finally brought Ed lasting happiness was all right by her. She'd seen a slight but definite increase in the number of Ed's magnetic smiles after Claire had moved into his hotel suite. One day he'd disappeared into his office with Claire after lunch, and Lake had caught him humming. Lake had nearly spit with envy.

Ed. She'd seen him react after she told him that young woman had come out of her ten year coma. She'd seen him react after she had aged terribly and died. She'd walked with him so at least he wouldn't walk alone. Alec would have personally killed her for entertaining the idea of doing anything less while he was away on a mission Ed had sent him on. She would have helped him do it. *God*. That had been the closest she'd been to ever actually seeing Ed come apart. It was briefly in his eyes when he'd looked at the bench the way he had. Seeing that stoic façade start to break was like finding out there was no Father Christmas.

Suffering like that. She'd tried to stop him. God. Of course, he'd pulled himself together afterwards but she told herself she'd never forget it. Now she'd probably be choosing a memorial wreath for him soon. Why didn't I just show up at his door and tell him my body was there for him to take without any strings attached? Now I'll never have that chance.

*Goodbye, Ed. Goodbye Alec. Goodbye, Claire.*

She set down the ball reluctantly and picked up a file labeled SHADO damages report 94703. She finally had command. She would have traded it without hesitation for a miracle that might save three people she cared for.

## Chapter Eight: The Undead

"I don't understand, Ed. Why this sudden change of plans? Stop being so mysterious, damn it."

"I told you. I need some information from an expert, Alec."

"What expert?" Alec muttered.

"Turn right there." Ed raised a hand to indicate a dirt road that the Australian hadn't expected would be there, even with the car's headlights on full he could hardly see anything. Alec had been driving for several hours, and Ed had switched off the car's GPS unit. Ed was being enigmatic, more than usual, but his mood seemed to have improved to some degree. Alec thought he knew England, but wasn't quite sure where he was anymore. It seemed impossible to him that anything would live with comfort in that desolate area unless it crawled, stung, bit or flew. The dense forest was dotted with old trees, thickets full of wicked looking thorns and low branches, and the infamous fog made their progress even more difficult. Ed seemed to have memorized the surroundings, and was patiently waiting for Alec to reach his chosen destination. Ed clearly knew where he was going. Alec just as clearly didn't.

"Ed, where the hell are we going? You promised the Nolands that we'd pick them up and treat them to a formal dinner at Silk Wood Manor. We'll be late."

"I realize that, Alec. Hannah won't mind."

"What about her son?"

Ed's expression drew dark again.

"I'm not all that ashamed to say I don't very much care about his reaction, Alec. Did you catch the way he treats Hannah? I think he smothers her. He treats her as if she is still a victim. I can't help but think she'd be better off without him; she would be able to follow her own pursuits."

"Ed, you've got to admit you do have legit reasons for disliking Noland no matter how much of a decent person he might be. He denied you what was rightfully yours for years."

"What good is the inheritance and the estate to me now, Alec? Neither of us have any future. At least I've done the right thing. I've seen that those people were properly reimbursed for their years of loyal service. They need to be reasonable and allow the National Trust to look after the property. I'm only agreeing to see the manor and land because of the way my mother describes it in her diary. Malone didn't seem to find any beauty in it and my mother always did. All Malone probably saw in it was real estate he could profit from selling off. Besides, seeing and experiencing life in a traditional English country manor out of an Agatha Christie novel will be a treat for Hannah. All right Alec, stop here and park the car. No Alec, no wheelchair for the time being, it would only slow me down on this terrain."

"You've got to be joking. We're visiting a shack in the middle of nowhere?"

"A shack, no, try to think of it as a refuge from civilization and its numerous woes. Come on, Alec." Ed smiled.

Alec looked heavenward, unconvinced.

"Are you armed too, Alec, or is that a stupid question?" Ed suddenly asked.

"Are we going into battle?" Alec patted his hip meaningfully.

"Battle? No. Just a precaution."

Alec gave his companion a puzzled look. The ground, twigs, and rocks crunched audibly under their feet as they made their way toward the shack. Its door creaked open and a male figure inspected the two of them. Alec Freeman's face turned the color of stale dough. Ed had

a mischievous crescent of a smile on his face.

"Good evening, Dr. Jackson. Please forgive our unexpected intrusion into your privacy. May we come in?" Ed asked crisply.

"I'm long past taking orders from SHADO, so I appreciate small courtesies such as yours, Commander. Please do come in. You look pale, Colonel Freeman," the doctor said, examining his expression. "You will forgive this observation, but time's passage hasn't been kind to your face, Colonel," he told Alec.

As always, the psychiatrist spoke in a slow, studied manner, stretching his syllables with a European accent that always reminded Ed of screen vampires. Alec now looked like a victim of one, Ed noticed.

"You're supposed to be dead!"

"Disappointed, Colonel Freeman?" Jackson asked without needing to.

"Quite frankly yes, but I'm not surprised," the Australian admitted. "You always did give me the impression you belonged with the undead."

Jackson only appeared amused.

Ed grinned widely at Alec's candor. He'd always admired it.

"Sit down and make yourselves comfortable." Jackson said in a pastiche of being the perfect host. It sounded weird coming from him as if Martha Stewart was crossed in a laboratory with Bela Lugosi, thought Alec. The place seemed sparsely furnished in early Gothic. On the other hand, maybe dead Gothic was more appropriate but Alec had another far more pressing question.

"Who or what the hell did we bury months ago, Ed?"

"Something out of our special effects department, Alec!" Ed revealed with that damn lilt in his voice. Ed was plainly enjoying his second-in-command's discomfort, Alec noticed.

"What?" Alec growled.

"It convinced everyone sufficiently enough to provide Jackson with freedom from his friends who weren't happy to see a not so cold war fade into history and a defector such as Jackson go unpunished," Ed continued. "Their president may be kissing babies and giving speeches like a politician, but the KGB has a long memory. General Henderson plucked Doctor Jackson, aka Doctor Zradowski, from his native Poland with the assurance that he'd become an English citizen if he came to work for our side. There are still operatives out there who would like to spit on Jackson's grave. Now they can, without harm done to Jackson. I arranged it; I felt Jackson had first served General Henderson, then SHADO sufficiently enough for me to make sure he was safe. Our SHADO intelligence reports showed his old friends were searching for him with the intent to assassinate him. His skills were invaluable to us, and even now that he is retired, they still may be. That's exactly why I came here, Jackson."

"I expected you would eventually get to a reason why you invaded my privacy Commander, but since I owe my life to you, I shall serve you in any way I can. Please sit down, gentlemen. Vodka? Still no, Commander? It is good to know some things never change. Coffee then. Double sweet and light, yes? Certainly, Colonel Freeman will no doubt quench his thirst with something stronger?"

"I'll pass, it's probably poisoned," Freeman told him, which merited a macabre grin from the doctor, who then turned toward Ed with open interest.

"You haven't changed in your behavior Commander, nor have you changed physically. Lieutenant Ford briefed me about the bug you were infected with, a virus of alien origin,

preserving your youth. Extraordinary. You look like a man no more than forty years of age and you must be in your late sixties, early seventies now."

"Ford knew about Jackson?" Alec looked stunned. It clearly was his day for being stunned. Ed nodded curtly then ignored him.

"A newer bug is now killing me.," admitted Ed, accepting the coffee cup.

"How unfortunate. I wondered if you were seriously ill, from your pallor and weight. I'm assuming the medical division was unable to cure your condition? "

"My condition, which Colonel Freeman and physician Claire Swanson also are suffering from, is not exactly why I'm here." Ed told Jackson about the fate of Dr. Swanson and Jackson tilted his head thoughtfully as he took it in, interested.

"She was injected by accident with that much of the amnesia drug and she survived? How intriguing. I would have expected irreversible brain damage on a wide scale would be the result," Jackson hissed, like a serpent scenting out an unsuspecting rodent for lunch. Freeman scowled at him in disgust. Ed wore a sphinx-like mask and revealed nothing as Jackson studied his body language, the only clue that might reveal Ed's private feelings.

"That's all that she or anyone else is to you, right Jackson? Just another laboratory specimen. I never trusted you and I see my instincts were correct. You see people as chess pieces to manipulate, not flesh and blood humans. You might as well be on the side of the aliens. Ed is emotionally involved with Claire-," Alec snapped.

"That's *enough*, Alec." Ed said with an expression that would have melted a polar cap.

Ed clearly hadn't wanted to reveal that, but Alec guessed Jackson wouldn't be surprised.

*The eyes and ears of the world, Ed had said about Jackson once. Jackson hadn't changed. Ed might trust him but damned if I will ever go that far, Alec thought.*

"So you finally had allowed yourself some female companionship again, Commander. Excellent. I approve. The woman undoubtedly must be unique to have merited your interest. Unfortunate that the woman too is dying." Jackson didn't sound to Alec like he felt it was unfortunate, but the psychiatrist added, "Why have you come to me?"

"You are a trained physician, interrogator, and psychiatrist. You used hypnosis and drugs before to get results. I was hoping Dr. Swanson would respond to hypnosis. The doctors have said her memory loss will increase with time, and time is running out so anything you could suggest-"

"Commander no, I am afraid that if the SHADO psychological and medical conclusions were so disappointing then nothing I personally could do would help."

Alec realized Ed obviously had hoped for something more positive when his expression went blank. Angry with Jackson and aware this had been a last desperate act on Ed's part, he didn't stay silent.

"He saves your neck and comes all the way out here to ask you for help, Jackson! I could have told you asking Jackson for anything would be a waste of time, Ed. He may not be dead, but considering his clinical attitude, he might as well be. I'm sorry, Ed," Alec replied.

Straker still showed nothing of what he had to be feeling. The last door had locked behind him. He set the coffee down without sampling it.

"Thank you for your time, Doctor. Come on Alec, let's go."

## Chapter Nine: Two Studies in Scarlet

They'd been sharing an uneasy silence for some time. Ed was beside Alec in the car, and the Commander was still shivering from walking to and from Jackson's flat in the cold night. Ed had always been thin, Alec reflected, but now the Commander looked like he could effortlessly slip through a grating. Alec had punched in the number of the Triumph hotel on his secure cell and spoke to Noland using his Bluetooth earpiece, telling him that studio business had been taken care of, now they were headed back to the hotel to pick them up. Noland was so irked he'd been speaking loud enough for Ed to hear, but the words were not distinct enough for him to understand. Alec finally tore off his earpiece, disgusted. He was feeling an irritation that seemed to be mounting.

"I take it he got tired of waiting?" Ed muttered.

"Rude bastard," Alec said, looking at Ed for a moment, and then he returned his attention to the foggy road. "Ed, for God's sake you're still shaking. I'll turn up the car's heater."

"I'll be fine, Alec."

"Going to see Jackson was a mistake, I might have spared you that. Besides, when did you start keeping secrets from me?"

"Jackson being secretly alive didn't involve you."

"But it involved Ford?" Alec said, a rare edge to his voice.

"I needed Ford to carry out my instructions. Someone besides me had to arrange everything once I discovered Jackson was at risk," Ed explained.

"Okay," Alec said bluntly. "I'm sure you had your reasons. You always do."

"Alec, I didn't do it with the intention of leaving you out," Ed responded to his friend's hurt feelings. Alec still didn't seem convinced.

"What would you have done if I hadn't guessed you were hoping to escape with that remark about needing something from your studio office?"

"I would have finally succeeded in giving you the slip. You always were able to read me, Alec." Ed offered him a grateful smile, hoping he'd return it. He paid the Commander with silence. Ed tried to think of something else to say but the Australian beat him to it.

"Did it ever occur to you that I need you with me to face this damn thing that's killing us both? That I couldn't do it alone?" Alec spat out.

"I won't do it again, Alec," Ed responded seriously. "I'm here now. I feel the same way you do."

"I suppose you have to be you dying or not, Commander," Alec replied coldly. "Nothing's changed. SHADO always comes first with you, doesn't it?"

"Damn it, SHADO is a part of my past now, Alec. I was forced to accept this maelstrom of change, and stand aside. That doesn't mean I've stopped thinking of you as my friend. You've always been loyal to SHADO and especially to me Alec. I'm sorry that it means you'll die along with me. If there's anything I can do--"

"Don't talk about it, Commander."

"We *should* talk about it. We need to decide what we want to do with the remaining time we have. Is there anything you've always wanted to do before you died, Alec?" Ed said softly.

"I never looked that far ahead. I've lived my life out just waking up and looking forward to the day and what it might bring. You're the type that sets an agenda and sticks to it."

"We made a good team."

"Good team? What do we really know about one another after all these years, Ed? You

hiding this Jackson thing behind your back, not telling your second-in-command, maybe you don't trust me as much as I like to think. "

"Alec, I-"

"No, Commander. You trusted Keith. You even showed more affection for that old woman than you ever showed to me."

"For God's sake Alec, that isn't true!" Ed was genuinely shocked.

"Do you still blame me for the breakup of your marriage? For the loss of your son?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I was the one who introduced you to Mary, remember? I made the wrong choice. I killed your son. You kept quiet about it, thinking you could spare my feelings! Did you really think I would never find out? Then you found Claire Swanson, and our friendship stopped being important to you. Is this your punishment for your son's death?"

"Alec, you're not making any sense!" Ed snapped his fingers in sudden understanding. "The virus is affecting your thinking. Alec, pull over. I better drive."

"I should never have allowed myself to get involved with you. I never could bring myself to resign. I shouldn't have allowed you to talk me out of it. I will finally take the amnesia drug and formally resign. I won't be a burden to anyone let alone my commanding officer."

"Alec Freeman, if you resign now, no, if you leave me, I won't fight to live for one more second," Ed responded, sounding genuinely more and more desperate. "With Claire out of my life, I need you more now than ever. Alec, no matter what, I've needed you, please believe that. I've respected you, and I've gotten more pleasure from our friendship than I could ever express. Look, you keep complaining about my living at that hotel after my house was taken. I'll move in with you again if you let me. You always seemed to enjoy my cooking and God knows you need someone to do housekeeping for you! Look Alec, this Jackson business had *nothing* to do with how I feel about you, I never blamed you for what happened to John. I genuinely wanted to spare you pain. I know I should have told you, but I admit I was dealing with my own grief at the time. I just couldn't."

"Are you sure you want to be stuck with me?" Alec asked, tentatively, studying Ed's face for any deceit. There was none to find.

"Absolutely. What would I do without my best friend and companion?" Ed smiled, relieved. "My Boswell."

"You're making us sound like Holmes and Watson, Ed."

"When did you have time in that busy love life of yours to read any Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Alec?"

"You make it sound like I never read, Ed. I'm not an intellectual bookworm like you but I do read for pleasure. I suppose you preferred Holmes to Watson?"

"Are you joking, Alec? Dr. John Watson had the real brains in that team. Without him, Holmes would be a drug addicted nobody. Watson made Holmes look better than he actually was. Elementary, my dear Freeman. You've always done the same for me."

Alec finally smiled.

"I want a raise in pay, Sherlock Holmes."

"I'll arrange it, John Watson." Ed chuckled, relaxing again. "Anything else?"

"If we live together again, you'll have to allow me to sleep late and put up with my cat."

"Now that's completely out of the question, Alec. That cat of yours never- *LOOK OUT, ALEC!*"

Ahead, nearly invisible in the fog, an old man had stumbled unexpectedly through some

bushes, and now stood directly in the path of their car, frozen. Alec desperately turned the car to avoid hitting him, and lost control with a loud screech of the tires as the car wildly spun across the road in an arc. It stopped when it smacked into a tree.

The elderly man swore, hurried awkwardly to the demolished car. Inside, their faces smeared with scarlet streaks, Straker and Freeman laid limp, unconscious. Smoke billowed ominously from the front of the car.

"Oh my Good Lord what have I done, hear me, oh my Lord. Grant Thy servant Stanley Mitchell Brisby your strength and guide my hand. I accept Thy will, but don't make me responsible for the death of innocents. Show Thy mercy, I beg Thee. Punish me further if that is Thy will, but don't let *them* die! "

With difficulty, the small figure grasped a large rock and smashed in one of the car's door windows after several attempts to do so. He reached in through the jagged gap and unlocked the door. He struggled with the harness around one man, but it wouldn't budge. Desperately he drew out a knife he always carried, it had been a gift from his mate Quentin Cross. He slashed the harness and pulled first one, and then another, to a place of safety. One of them was a mere wisp of a man, who hardly seemed heavier than a child. There was something vaguely familiar about him. After he used one man's cell to get help, he stood near them, catching his breath, feeling his heart pound. He threw himself across them protectively when the car exploded. He again bent his head in prayer.

"Oh Lord, by your grace these men will live. Without your Presence, I would not have had the courage to try to save them. Perhaps You will have the mercy to save a tired old man's soul?"

One of the men moaned faintly. Blood streamed scarlet from a nasty gash on his forehead. The old man tore his soiled shirtsleeve into a bandage and pressed it against the wound, speaking softly to him.

"It is going to be okay my son, an ambulance is coming. I am with you, and I am, well, I was Right Reverend Brisby. The Church took my parish away from me when I started drinking. Since when did serving God become only a path for teetotalers? Oh listen to me pitying myself when two of God's children are hurt. I was never worthy enough to wear the collar-"

The other stranger's eyes unexpectedly fluttered open. His eyes were brilliantly blue but seemed unfocused.

"--Alec? My God, no, Alec! No, no, Alec!" he moaned, seeing the man next to him.

"There, there now, my son it only looks dreadful. Your friend is breathing, wait- That voice! Unmistakable. Could it be, or is it just the ravings of a grief stricken, drunken old man who lost his wife? Q-Tip! No other man on this planet speaks with that melodious voice. It must be you, praise God! We praise you Thy God, Infinite in Your miracles! Listen to me now, Q- Tip my son, your friend there is alive! Rest, rest-just rest. Try and sleep." The reverend held his hand tightly. Ed didn't seem to feel it but clearly, he was in emotional and physical agony.

"My God, the pain, I can't stand it-Alec no don't leave me, I've lost Claire, and now you? No, no-" his eyes closed abruptly after another gasp. He went frighteningly still.

"Praise be to God, I hear the ambulance! Perhaps after all it will be all three of us who are saved."

Again he bowed his head in thanks.

## Chapter Ten: Temper at The Triumph

"I tell you again, something is wrong, Jacob." Hannah insisted. "Edward is a gentleman, he would not make us wait this long unless something was terribly wrong."

"The only thing wrong is the rude way he keeps us waiting. I know he used to be your beloved little boy, but he's become a rich man used to getting his way. He has no regard anymore for you and me or the common people. We've both been forgotten by the all-important movie executive. I'm becoming sick of him. Nobody treats me this way and gets away with it," Jay told Hannah. They sat across from one another in the hotel restaurant over coffee and dessert. Jay scowled at his Rolex wristwatch. She had never heard that tone come from him before.

"That is not what I saw in his face." Hannah insisted.

"Look, people change. Life goes on. People aren't like the way you imagine them to be. You've been living in the past. This is a modern world."

"So in this modern world of yours a son does not listen to his mother?"

"You know, let's look at things the way they are, not the way you would like them to be. I think it is high time you and I stopped thinking of ourselves as mother and son."

"So our pretense means nothing to you now?" Hannah demanded indignantly.

"Look, you went through a hell I can't even imagine, I'm a Jew, I have a heritage, yeah I get it, all right? I represented survivors of the Holocaust back when I met you. I only kept up the pretense that we were family because that is what you seemed to want and need at the time." He shrugged.

"Pretense. I see. Perhaps I see clearly now for the first time. So you wish me to leave, is that it? Have I ever stopped you from living your life as you wanted to?"

"Hannah, in all honesty, every time I would bring a girlfriend or a client into the house we share, you would want to know all about them. You intimidated them. You were overbearing. You show off your tattoo and make them uneasy. You wanted to be in control. The psychologist said-"

"What can a man who does not see into my heart know about me? All he knows is what is between the pages of a book. I am more than Hannah Noland, old woman, survivor of the Holocaust!"

"Stop getting yourself riled up like this. You know what the doctor I hired said about your heart-"

"Enough about my heart! Pah! I am stronger than you are and will outlive you! I think this is about Edward, yes? He inherits what is rightfully his. The passing years have not touched him. He is rich and he is important and successful. You envy him everything. I favor him and you are secretly jealous of him, Jacob! *That* is what this really is about, isn't it?"

"That's absurd and you know it," Jay claimed unconvincingly. "Keep your voice down for Christ's sake, don't make a scene."

"A scene now I am making? You are wrong. I will show you what a true scene is!"

Hannah suddenly swept her plate of Sacher Torte and her coffee cup off the table. It fell with a loud crash to the floor. Heads turned. The waiter came running quickly up to the table.

"I will take care of this and freshen your coffee Madame, don't worry."

"Keep your swill! Your torte is overpriced and so bad a starving dog would not stop for a crumb, the coffee is weak and tastes like bathwater. I have had enough of this hotel. I am

going! I will find Edward and his friend Alec by myself!"

Hannah jumped from a chair she seemed to have forgotten she was supposed to need, grabbed her purse and sweater, snatched Jay's jacket off the back of his chair and marched down the aisle. Jay was so startled that he sat for several seconds with the waiter staring down at him. People were staring and some were chuckling. Some even applauded.

"Would you like me to bring your bill now, Sir, or are you still -"

"She took my smartphone!" Jay exclaimed. "That old woman just stole my jacket and my smartphone was in it! Everything's on my smartphone!" Noland sounded like he'd lost his virginity again.

"I should hope she at least left you your wallet, because someone has to pay for all this damage," the waiter hissed back at him, the very soul of compassion for a troubled customer.

Jay Noland scowled, blessedly found his wallet and handed the waiter his platinum credit card. It took several minutes to process the price of their meals and pay for damages, during which he ordered that Hannah's wheelchair be brought to their suite. Finally, he himself was able to go to the suite, and found it empty. The lobby too was empty of one angry old woman. The concierge informed Noland calmly that a woman who resembled her had disappeared into the cold British night in a taxi. Noland's reaction was a stark contrast to that one might expect of a calm, calculating Boston lawyer with a difficult client and consisted of repeatedly saying a single word with four letters.

In the meantime, Hannah Noland was seated in what she believed to be a real English taxi, wearing Jay's jacket over her sweater to protect her from the cold, and she had the biggest grin on her face. At last, she was going to have a real adventure and help Edward and his nice friend Alec too. She was struggling with the controls of Jay's smartphone and the driver said he would adjust it for her. He slipped it into his pocket and she forgot about it. Hannah found him very handsome.

"Repeat that address please, Ma'am?" the driver told her.

"Silk Wood Manor."

The driver chuckled.

"Of course. I understand finally someone has inherited the manor that actually lives up to its grace and grandeur?"

"Yes. An old and dear acquaintance of mine, Edward Straker." she said with pride.

"You can count on me, Ma'am. I will get you there safely, my dear, and in time for tea and real homemade Sacher Torte, not the inedible kind made by cooks who couldn't even spell torte even if it was their family name." he winked.

She didn't question how he knew what she had eaten or what she had said. Hannah giggled like a girl.

"Finally someone who knows what value and courtesy and service truly means. I am Hannah Noland- no, I was born Hannah *Safra*. What is your name please?"

"Peregrine, Ma'am, but everyone calls me Perry."

"How long will it take us to get there, Perry? I am concerned about my Edward's health."

"Just leave that to me!"

Perry, better known to England as the eccentric Sir Peregrine Falcon, formerly of the House of Lords, just smiled. Even if an cab driver with the knowledge had been given that flea speck of info, and had known where it was, it would have taken him over two hours to get there. Perry got Hannah to her destination in five minutes. He knew a shortcut. Through the Between.

## Chapter Eleven: **Impatient Patient**

"**S-t-r-a-k-e-r**, Ed, damn it! Where is Ed Straker?"

Alec Freeman had finally located his now ragged and blood stained clothes after being released, but he had multiple bruises, a broken arm, a forehead gash that had required a painful stitching, and a short temper growing shorter. Right Reverend Stanley Mitchell Brisby, better known as Angel, stood meekly beside him admiring his genuine Australian temper tantrum. Alec had to explain to hospital security what he and Ed were doing armed with illegal weapons which thankfully hadn't been accidentally fired during their accident, but a flash of his Aegis identification card and a hastily made telephone call to New Scotland Yard confirming their identity to hospital security had thankfully settled the matter. He'd arranged for their wrecked car to be towed away. Now he was at the nurses' station in the casualty ward.

"When was this man brought in?" the casualty nurse at the desk inquired calmly. She was used to boxing Australian kangaroos and other unhappy species.

"Several hours ago, at the same time as I was. For God's sake you have to find him!"

"Don't fret Sir, I see a Straker on my screen now, it appears that he may have been returned to X ray after a struggle with medical personnel. He suffered broken ribs, numerous cuts and bruises that needed attending to and a possible strained wrist, I fear. He became argumentative and they had to sedate him. Are you a relative of the patient? Only relatives are allowed to see patients, you know."

"Come on Mr. Freeman, I know my way around the place, I often served as chaplain here back in the day. I'll find Q-tip." Angel tugged on Alec's battered clothes in an attempt to pull him. Alec looked down at him. Angel hardly came up to his chest.

"*You*. Stanley Mitchell Brisby you said your name is?"

"I'm better known as Angel as I explained to you several times, son," he replied patiently.

"What the devil were you doing on that road at that hour and why do you keep calling Ed Q-Tip? Wait a minute. Angel. Now I know where I heard that name. Ed mentioned an Angel. He was hallucinating being back in the prisoner of war camp after his RF4-C Phantom went down. You're the alcoholic vet I mentioned to him, aren't you? Lost your wife or something."

"We'd finalized our divorce Alec, and the next thing I knew, she'd died. We'd been married thirty years, lived together longer than that. I just wasn't the same man, Alec. I was forced to resign from my parish because I took to the bottle, there was nothing else I could do. Lost my wife and my faith too, you see."

"You saved both our lives, that's all I care about at the moment. But how did you get out there?"

"Bunch of bloody youths gave me a lift, then stranded me out in the middle of nowhere as a lark. I'd had too much of the tippie, didn't know what was happening to me. Didn't care either, I'm ashamed to say. Come on, I know where X-Ray is."

"I'm bringing Ed to Mayland the first chance I get. That's his regular hospital. You're the priest that was supposed to lead the men in an escape attempt, and you got cold feet at the last moment and appointed Ed to do it instead. You nearly got him killed, you know. He has no medal for what he did but you have." Alec scowled.

Angel only nodded meekly.

"Q-tip always had a *real* guardian angel to protect him. He's a glorious soul amongst glorious souls. I admit it all, Alec and I'm ashamed. I wouldn't have gotten my medal if Q-tip hadn't insisted on it. He was the man that took the four bullets I was supposed to take. I was

better at holding a prayer book than a gun back then, better at leading my church's choir than a team of commandos, but thank the Lord I still had my knife. Those youths took my wallet, not that it had that much in it. Cupcake, bless her soul, she always said I was hopeless with money."

"Why do you call Ed Q-Tip, for heaven's sake?" Alec was finding it harder and harder to hate the guy.

"I only knew your friend from his words for months on end; he'd communicate with me with the tap code through the cell walls like all the men did. I only saw him in person twice before the escape, and he always looked like a Q-Tip to me. Appallingly lean, with a shock of white hair. They broke him because Andrew Bell, his copilot aboard his Phantom which was shot down, gave him away. Tank is what Ed called him because he had a body like one. Miserable traitor is what I call him, Lord forgive me for it but Q-Tip, your Ed, he never would have been broken if Tank hadn't told the Vietnamese that Q-Tip had been claustrophobic after an incident he was involved in at some airbase. I never did find out from Q-Tip what had happened to him."

"They broke everyone who was captured. Try and convince Ed of that, though. Look, frankly I don't understand why Ed covered up your cowardice and cleared the way to put a medal on your chest, but like I said, you saved our arses, and you're ex-RAF too, and you sound like a fellow Aussie. As for the drinking Ed would want you to stop it-" *Oh listen to me lecturing him about booze, Alec thought sourly.* His heart suddenly lifted.

Someone was yelling in a voice so loud that it toppled Big Ben. Alec grinned happily.

"*And I'm telling YOU, I am leaving this hospital, NOW.*" the voice thundered as they passed a room in the hallway they were heading down. They stopped, relieved.

"Only *one* man has *that* voice, Alec lad," Angel said in appreciation. "Like manuka honey mixed with steel," he added with a chuckle.

"Only one very stupid, bloody minded accident prone man named Straker and he hates being in hospital." Alec grinned.

"**Sir, SIR,** your X-ray shows you may also have a sprained wrist from being combative with staff and I haven't finished with your-" a female voice sputtered like a dying automobile engine.

A bandaged, disheveled, but somehow still aristocratic looking Ed Straker shot out of an examination room like a missile, looking impatient and wearing a cotton gown and a chest brace and not much else, much to Alec's amusement. A security guard two times Ed's size followed and glowered at him, but Straker glowered right back at him, not at all intimidated in the least. Alec watched his Commander assume a kata stance and he winced. The guard backed off when he saw Alec, remembering their Aegis security clearance or maybe it was the idea that Straker was injured, in that situation, and yet seemed to be more than ready for another fight that had made the guard think twice. Anyone else would have looked like an escapee from an asylum. Ed looked like he had mentored Bruce Lee. It was all in the attitude, Alec decided. A nurse followed him out, looking like she wanted to add to his injuries and damage him further. Then Ed bellowed at her again and she faded into the spotless linoleum like floor cleaner. Ed often had that reaction on people, Alec observed in amusement.

"*Oh,* but I'm finished with *YOU. ALEC!* Alec, thank God, they wouldn't tell me where you were when I came to so I introduced them to my martial arts skill and the bastards knocked me out again when I tried to escape to find you. Thank God you're all right! Who is that you're with?"

"I never knew you had such shapely legs, Ed," Alec said playfully.

Angel put a hand over his mouth to prevent himself from breaking into a guffaw. He liked this Alec. This Alec was just what Q-Tip needed. Q-Tip always had been too serious. Besides, Q-Tip did have nice legs. Compared to an emu's, at least.

"Very funny, Alec, now find out what these idiots did with my clothes and property. Who is this?" Ed repeated and pointed at Angel.

"Sir, if you insist on leaving hospital against medical advice, I'll get your discharge papers. At least let me finish applying your wrist cast." The nurse found her voice again.

Alec, always the ladies' man, rescued her.

"Ed, for heavens' sake let her do it and then I'll get us both the hell out of here," promised Alec.

"All right, all right." Ed complained as he entered the examination room again and sat on a bed gratefully. Alec and Angel tried to follow.

"Sir, I'm afraid they can't come in unless--"

"*Fine! I'm going,*" Ed announced, rising from his bed and frowning at the pain of that exertion. Angel examined him carefully and diagnosed him faster than Schroeder ever had.

"All right, they can come in. Please lie down sir, and try not to move."

"Sister, trying to get him to be sensible is like trying to knock down a jet with a martini olive." Alec said, watching Ed get progressively paler in an attempt to remain stoic. The more badly Ed was hurt, somehow Ed always pretended more insistently that nothing had hurt him. The attitude Ed Straker gave off was designed to make even an atom bomb reconsider falling on him, but it was all a sham.

*No wonder Ed keeps me close by. I'm the only one besides Claire that knows that tough façade of his has all the staying power of a snowman in Arizona.*

"*Damn it, that really hurts!*" Ed yelped.

He actually allowed himself to yelp? Maybe Angel was right about all that rubbish about miracles. No, Alec decided. He'd described Ed as angelic. Ford would have had cardiac arrest and a stroke if he heard that description. Ed as an angel? One with steel wings maybe. Halo of barbed wire. Armed with nuclear missiles.

"I *did* warn you not to move, Mr. Straker." The nurse was obviously taking advantage of Ed's weakened state. Angel took that moment to take over. Alec watched his advanced Straker expertise with shock.

"Even the dear Lord would have trouble getting Q-Tip to obey. Sister, I know this man as well as I know my Book of Common Prayer. He could have a spear through his chest and he wouldn't complain. Ask the doctor to issue an okay for some extra morphine for him. Otherwise he'll eventually pass out, sure as posies sprout on a spring day and Mr. Freeman can't carry him with a broken arm, and the good Lord built me far too small for that sort of thing."

Alec looked at Angel with growing appreciation.

The nurse smiled and went out. Ed was staring in a state of shock at Angel. Alec suddenly remembered his reaction to Hannah and started to worry but Ed seemed to be all right.

"I don't believe this! Only one man calls me Q-Tip and gets away with it. Stanley Mitchell Brisby! Angel! Where's Frances? What the blazes happened to you? I've seen dead skunks that looked and smelled better than you do right now. Wait a damn minute; what the hell were you doing out there? That was *you* out there, walking in the middle of the road! You nearly got us kill--"

Ed frowned and then concealed it, remembering he was dying anyway, Alec sensed. "It's so good to see you," he admitted. Ed actually smiled.

Oh fine, Ed *really* likes this guy. Any minute now, Alec thought, he would be out of SHADO and on the dole, stuck in a council flat.

"I'd hug you Q-Tip, but that would hurt your ribs like the thorns on Cupcake's roses. God's guidance led me to you."

Ed stared. He looked at Alec in *that* way and he didn't even have to say report.

"Bunch of kids gave him a ride, robbed him and then dropped him in the middle of nowhere," Alec said angrily.

"Do you recall what they looked like?" Ed asked, still wincing from insisting on moving. He hoped whomever he'd hit felt worse than he did. He doubted it.

"Afraid not, son. They all looked the same to me. Piercings, tattoos and wild hair colors, all the same they are children of the Lord God," Angel said. "I don't want to add to your pain, Q-Tip but I divorced Frances at her insistence. Then I found out only weeks later she'd died and gone to her God."

Ed looked disbelievingly at the priest.

"I'm so sorry, Angel. I truly am. I never would think that you and Frances would ever divorce. It doesn't make any sense."

"She just saw God in one color, son and I saw Him in Technicolor. She said there was only one God and one way to praise Him. Insisted on it. I should be thankful for the years we did have-" Angel lost his composure and sobbed.

Alec reluctantly patted him on the back. After all, he *was* Australian.

"He's the vet I mentioned to you. Drinking himself to death," Alec reminded Ed. Ed blinked. Then that old spirit came back into Ed's eyes.

*Thank God, Alec thought. Bloody hell, a half hour of hearing this reverend fellow talk and I already sound like him. God help me. There, I just did it again. I have to get away from him before he has me back in church.*

"He'll be coming with us, Alec. Oh, damn it, Alec! Hannah and Jay. I forgot all about them. Get in touch with them, would you, Alec? Explain what happened to us." Ed did sound like his old self, but still looked pale and exhausted.

"He always makes me do the dirty work, Angel," Alec complained.

Ed rolled his eyes at his friend and sat on the edge of the examination bed. Alec reflected he had eaten guinea hens with more meat on the bone than Ed exhibited in that gown.

"That's why we are Australians, Alec. We do dirty work better than anyone else," Angel boasted. Alec nodded.

"Fair dinkum." Alec grinned. Angel grinned back at him. Ed watched them fondly. Angel had often told him whenever one door closes, another opens. Seeing them together, his hand was at least back on the doorknob.

"Strine," Ed threatened, familiar with the labyrinth of Australian, English and even RAF slang from knowing his second in command too many years to count. "Don't start that again. Speak American English, Alec."

"What did you say, Guv?" Alec joked in an accent as thick as a plank.

Ed narrowed his eyes at him dangerously. It was the same disciplinary technique that he had previously used on Johnny. Alec was clearly immune to it too.

"The doctor has ordered an additional dose of morphine for you, Mr. Straker," the nurse announced breezily when she came back.

Why did Alec think she would have preferred he'd ordered cyanide? At least one woman wasn't tossed on her behind by Ed's strategic smile. Damn, Alec hated him at times. At least his cat Ivy loved him exclusively. Maybe. Ed was again being Ed, and he enjoyed it. The whining wasn't that of a dying man, Alec smiled to himself.

"Fine, fine, just start the paperwork so that I can get out of here. Angel, pull yourself together, find my clothes if they aren't already in ribbons and my cell phone if it isn't rubbish and bring them to me. Alec, go with him and hire another car. "

"Right away, Ed."

"Alec?" Ed added tentatively, as his arm was swabbed with alcohol. Alec stopped in the middle of charging out like a pachyderm in heat.

"Hmmm?"

"I'm so glad you're all right. OW!" Ed yelled as the nurse injected him with a wicked looking needle. He looked accusingly at her for a moment, then his eyes went traveling without a visa in two directions, he grabbed the bed railing and started to tune out as the drug took hold of him.

"I'd lie down if I was you, sir," the three nurses told him haughtily.

"Right, right," Ed mumbled reluctantly and did so but on his own schedule, Alec noted. After a minute or so, his eyes closed. Okay *now* he looked angelic, thought Alec. She only looked triumphant. Alec had the feeling she'd like to hang Ed's head as a trophy on her wall. Alec grinned happily again and he and Angel went out.

The nurse still looked satisfied, nodded to the security guard as his signal to leave. She glanced at a sleeping, innocent looking Ed again and sighed. She caught herself drooling like a patient on the geriatric ward over the man, no question about it. Gorgeous was the only term to use to describe this patient, those eyes, that hair, those lips, that body.

"Merciful heavens. Your face could turn winter into spring. If only I was younger and wasn't happily married, love." She smiled.

Ed's spectacular eyes shot open. Locked on hers like heat seeking missiles. Her jaw dropped halfway to Beijing and stayed there for the weekend.

"I can't say I envy your husband," he muttered weakly. His eyes closed and it looked like they'd stay that way.

She found herself laughing aloud.

## Chapter Twelve: Man of Spun Sugar

Later when all three had gone out, Ed complaining about a burned and useless cell phone and the sad shape his bloodied clothes were in, a puzzled looking doctor came up to the nurse, who had recovered from her encounter with Straker and was entering information into the computer.

"Rose, did we just discharge a Freeman and Straker? The collision victims who came in with Reverend Brisby?"

"I thought that might be our Angel, but he's let himself go to rot since his missus died, yes him, poor soul and he smelled to me like he'd bathed in whisky. They've just gone, so yes. The Aussie paid all costs in full for himself and his American with cash from our teller machine, you don't see that every day at St. Swithin's."

"There was an anomaly in their blood work I'm concerned about, did they list their personal physician?"

"No and neither of them said much at all. Ed Straker was a handful, I can tell you I wouldn't have myself a cry if I never saw him again," she lied.

"You mean the Ed Straker?" a gay male nurse near her interjected. "The Yank? The film studio fellow? God, what a walking dream he is! I saw him in person once at a dinner for ChildFlight, and it was like the Audubon Society spotting a dodo bird. He's very stern and reclusive but what a corker! He's all spun sugar, you always get to care for the best looking ones, Rosie."

The nurse laughed. "His X ray is still in his chart, you can pin it up on your wall if you fancy him that much, Jeremy."

"Yes, well, enough of that kind of nonsense both of you, I won't have it." The doctor cleared his throat. "Well, see if you can ring his film studio and have him go to his physician and see what those cells were doing. I can tell you I've not seen anything like that before."

"Right away, Doctor."

-0-0-0-

About an hour after Ed and his companions had been discharged from the hospital, Keith Ford had settled in at his flat, and was studying his computer screen as Jay Noland's information came up, and he scowled. He was about to ring Ed when his secure cell rang and he noted the caller's identity. He smiled.

"Hello Phil."

"Keith, at last, I've been trying to get through to you all evening!"

"I've only just come home and I have a G6 due for the Commander, so unless this is an emergency-"

Phillip Dexter was an engineer and a computer technician. He was a friendly African-American colleague with a face full of dark hair but nary a strand on top who worked mostly in the medical center but sometimes in Mayland Hospital. Keith had been one of his mentors at SHADO and they had become friends. Phil had met his wife Gloria while he was vacationing in England. He had decided to settle in England and start a family, then his life was shattered when his wife's sister had been involved in a UFO attack. Phil was fun, diligent, and loyal, but a bit eccentric. He fancied himself a photographer, a new hobby that proved useful now that he and his missus had an active toddler. He primarily collected fountain pens, a hobby which had turned into something of a mania for him.

"You remember I told you I suspected someone had pinched my new John Lennon

Edition Montblanc? I suspected Dr. Louis Evans from our psych department, that deceitful, self-righteous flea rump of a man, so I secretly set up a camera in medical center and put out a Dunhill Sentryman as bait. It was my missus Gloria who gave me the idea really; she uses it on the au pair that watches over our sprog Davy when we have the odd night out. Well, it is a bit embarrassing, but it seems the missus had nipped my pen to use at her workplace and didn't tell me. I wasn't able to go collect the film until earlier this evening. When that UFO hit us, I had forgotten all about my camera but today I went and collected my equipment. I played the film. Keith, you've got to tell Straker about all this."

"Why?"

"It involves Claire, his lady friend. Keith, she didn't inject herself with that drug by accident when the UFO hit us. David Clifford attacked her with it. He'd secretly exchanged the vial containing the amnesia drug for one with water, and that's what she injected him with. Then the bastard attacked her with a syringe full of the real drug. It was all captured on my film."

"Bloody hell! Phil, listen, where are you?"

"Home, just got off work from my other job, and I'm feeding the sprog while the missus is at work. I'm due to pick Gloria up in about an hour."

"No! Stay there, I'm going to have a security detail come and guard you, and for God's sake don't let anything happen to that film."

"Keith, Straker's probably going to be on my back for this, not exactly in the SHADO rule book to secretly film your colleagues over the possible theft of a pen."

"Believe me Phil, that's the last thing the Commander will concern himself over with a SHADO traitor running around free. Ringing off now."

Ford wasted no time, rang HQ, spoke with Lake and had a security team dispatched to his friend's flat. After that, he dialed Straker's private number. He got an acerbic voicemail message. He tried Alec's and blessedly got a live response. Freeman listened to the story with growing anger.

"Great job, Keith. The Commander and I were injured in a smash up, no, calm down nothing serious. We're at his hotel now, he needed a rest, a shower and a change of clothes. I'll tell him when he's done changing. Have you reported this to Colonel Lake?"

"She just ordered the special team out to collect Clifford. Straker did give me an order to take a week off which I decided not to take advantage of. I wanted to ask how you were feeling."

"I don't seem to be having as bad a time with my health as Ed is," The Australian colonel chuckled. "Don't go all formal on me Keith."

"I don't seem to be able to get used to the idea of you and the Commander going off and dying on me," he admitted.

Alec was silent for eternities on end. Then Ford could hear Ed's unmistakable voice, Alec explaining everything to Ed, and then Ed himself was on the line.

"Report."

When Ed Straker used *that* tone, it meant that the only choice you had was no choice at all. Ford reported. It was Ed's turn to be silent for a moment.

"Excellent work Ford, and my compliments to Lieutenant Phillip Dexter. I had my doubts when Colonel Freeman suggested SHADO training Dexter after his wife's sister lost her life in that UFO incident, but both he and that pen collection of his seem to be living a charmed life. Tell Colonel Lake I want David Clifford brought in alive. I want to have a little personal

conversation with Clifford after our psychological division finishes with him."

Ford reflected that Straker had the gift of saying one thing but clearly communicating another. Had Ford been so forward as to guess Ed's real intent, it might mean the Commander personally intended to rip David Clifford apart with his bare hands and take his time doing it. Alec always had a tendency to suggest that Ed really was a pussycat at heart, and his ferocity was only from the pressures of his job. That didn't mean Ford would be inclined to find out just how sharp his claws were. The phrase '*so you think it's difficult*' was burned into his brain now.

"That will be all for now, Ford. Oh wait, Ford."

"Sir?"

Angel stood in the bedroom of the hotel suite Ed had been occupying as his temporary home, had been there a long time and apparently had heard everything. The Anglican priest was carrying a huge black leather suitcase and a brown leather bag, with a Louis Vuitton logo all over it. Ed remembered it had been a typically lavish gift from Alec on the unwanted occasion of Ed's last birthday. Ed, as Alec knew, wasn't a man to dangle initials around unless they were his own, but he'd finally accepted it for its fine quality. Besides, it *was* from Alec.

"I'm alive, and so is Alec. We intend to stay that way. Goodbye, Ford." Ed smiled and handed the cell back.

"You keep shocking that poor soul like that Ed, and he'll die before we do," grinned Alec. "I take it you don't consider Reverend Brisby here a security problem?"

Ed looked like Alec had asked him if the earth is round.

"I'm familiar with top-level secrecy, son. I serve God, and you can't get any more top level than that. Besides, parishioners always told me all their secrets in confidence, too." The cleric reminded Alec indignantly. Ed flashed a smile at Angel and Alec chuckled. Angel was studying them.

"I knew it, Alec lad. I knew you and Q-Tip weren't well. As for all the rest of it, I guessed Q-tip, who had once flown recon for his country and took four bullets in the shoulder like they were bee stings and could shoot a single white hair off my head from fifty yards away without ruining my parting, wasn't about to settle for being a film studio executive when he finally retired."

"Never mind about all that. Why did you pack all my things ? "

"You're moving into Silk Wood Manor, of course."

"And how the hell do *you* know about Silk Wood Manor?" growled Ed. Alec added the diminutive priest at the top of the list of people immune to Ed's ferocity. The list currently only had his, Claire's and now Angel's name on it. he thought with amusement. He noticed Angel spoke as if he was speaking to a misbehaving child to Ed. He mentally took notes.

"Q tip lad, it was in the newspaper and I used to come some evenings as a younger man and give a service in the chapel there. Not while your mother stayed there, mind you, but after Mr. Malone went to his God, for His wisdom is great and divine. Colin, that's the butler, and the sweetest of lads he is, confirmed the news. By the way, there were things none of us there could figure out about Malone's partner Jay Noland, they came up constantly during my discussions with staff."

"Angel, now listen, I have no intention of-" Ed started to say, but Alec's cell phone rang.

## Chapter Thirteen: Amen!

Alec took the call. Ed could make out Jay Noland's voice, and he sighed. Just when he was feeling a little better.

"It's for you, Ed." Alec grinned.

"What a surprise," Ed replied. Alec chuckled at Ed as the Commander took the cell as if it was a pair of razor sharp scissors and he was all thumbs "Straker. Look Jay; we were in a... she what? What? When? Silk Wood Manor? How the devil did she get from the city to the countryside that quick? Yeah, I know. The eighth Wonder of the World, that's my Hannah. She always has been. Took what? I see. Eighty pounds for the china she broke? Sounds like her. All right, all right, all right. Yes, tell him I'm coming now. Ah, I see. I did wonder. Yes. Yeah, Alec told me about him. All right. All right. Look Jay, I-" Ed winced. Noland had hung up.

"Hannah Safra escaped," Ed said wryly. "Ran out on him and it's about time she did."

"Hannah *Safra*? Jay's mother? But I thought they were-"

"Alec, while I was waiting for you two to get back to me, I borrowed a cell phone from that sadistic nurse and did a little digging of my own. I still have important friends in Boston who are familiar with Noland's history. I unfortunately needed to wake them up prematurely." Ed paused and grinned at Alec.

Alec chuckled knowingly. Ed was a morning person, so much so that English roosters committed suicide from frustration, and the Commander often tortured Alec with that same annoying habit.

"Hannah was never Jay Noland's mother. When he met her, she was suffering from having been a prisoner in a concentration camp. At first, she really believed he was her son, later she came to grasp reality, but he didn't seem to mind, and he moved her into his house after she got her library job. She's been there ever since. Jay just told me they had a quarrel, and Hannah just up and smashed a bunch of expensive china designed especially for the Triumph, insulted the food, took his smartphone, and was last seen speeding away from the scene of her crime in a taxi. Only that's not possible since she was at the Triumph, and it seems the taxi driver got her there in minutes all the way to where Silk Wood is located in the Cotswolds and that's with luck and light traffic at least a two hour drive from London. She's at Silk Wood Manor now. Apparently, Colin Valentine, that fellow you described to me, took her in, and fed her then called Jay Noland to tell him where she was. When Jay showed up, Valentine refused to let him see Hannah, and insisted on seeing me. I really should go and handle the Clifford business, but I owe it to that woman to make sure she is all right. She has more guts in that tiny frame of hers than all the armed forces of the world possess combined. It shouldn't take me long. Alec, you go and handle Clifford for..."

"No. I'm not leaving you," Alec said. He was surprised at the enormous pleasure that NO gave him. Ed on the other hand looked like he'd been hit by an anvil. Or two. Possibly three.

"Did you just say no to me? Must I remind you that you *can't* say no to me?" The question was put forth in the proverbial icy tones of the Commander.

"Must I remind *you* that you no longer can order me around since Virginia is in charge? Besides, my place is at your side, Sherlock."

Ed stared down thoughtfully at the pattern of swirling leaves on the Aubusson rug in his hotel bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. Then he chuckled softly.

"So it's like that now, John Watson?" Ed said with fond amusement in every syllable.

"Damned straight it's like that, Sherlock Holmes."

"I've no blessed idea what you two good souls are talking about, but I can tell you I've no love for that Jay Noland fellow you mentioned, God forgive me, and show me His mercy."

"What do you mean, Angel?" Ed said. He found he was really enjoying having the eccentric cleric around.

"I told you. Noland. He was often at Silk Wood Manor, walking around and demanding and getting appraisals for this and that as if *he* expected to inherit the place. Everybody told me confidentially they wished he'd up and die. May the good Lord forgive me, I did too. He doesn't have blood in his veins, Q-tip. He has ashes. If the good lad Colin is keeping him away from this woman you speak of, then there's a good reason, trust me."

Suddenly Noland's words came back to Ed. *Oh, listen to me asking you to sit down. Ed, how did you get injured? I didn't hear anything about you being in any kind of an accident, and I was very careful to keep track of you once I found out you were alive--*

*Oh? How long, Ed thought. How long had Noland known he was alive? Why had he suddenly brought Hannah to England with the idea of surprising her about it? Why hadn't she known before? They lived together, why hadn't he told her long before this? Unless he was waiting. Waiting for Lawrence Malone to die. Waiting to set up the whole situation. Waiting until I did what he expected I'd do, refuse the inheritance that was rightfully mine. Wait until he suggested that he, Noland, could take his place at the manor, thereby solving everything. Maybe Lawrence Malone wasn't at the heart of this matter. In addition, maybe Noland's so called affection for Hannah was based on how much he could get from her death, after all, she was in ill health after Auschwitz. It was a miracle she'd survived at all. She'd been given drugs against her will, and that was the least of what had happened to her.*

Ed scowled in fury. Alec had seen taipan snakes in Australia that were less deadly than his friend looked at that moment.

"Ed, you all right?" Alec asked. *That was a dumb question. Was Ed ever all right?*

"Alec, Angel, we're going out to Silk Wood Manor. I have a lot of questions I want to ask Jay Malone. I'll fill you all in once we get started."

"Good Q-tip, that fool needs the tip of a boot pointed at his behind, if you ask me and sometimes the Lord speaks through me when there's rough things to be said." Angel was quiet for a while and then he spoke again. "Do you know Q-tip, I asked myself over and over why I'd lost Frances? The truth was plain. I'd lost her a good long time ago and I didn't want to look at it like that, didn't want to look truth in the face. I'd lost my job, my church, and I feared God had turned His back on me altogether when I lost her. I'm beginning to think God actually was saying the only way I could be found is by being lost. I think God chose those poor youths to be my personal guardian angels, and they put me exactly where the both of you would need me. For the first time, I feel like I'm back where I belong, even if I have no church and no wife." Angel smiled. "I've finally been reborn and stepped out of the ashes."

Ed shot him a affectionate look as they walked toward the car.

"I used to have a carving of a raptor on my wall, Angel. You know I like most birds. Being just as fond of mythology as I am, you'll be familiar with the legend associated with a phoenix. I always admired the way you saw holiness in everything and everyone no matter what their belief was. You never needed a church around you to preach, or save a soul, Angel. You never have. Besides, if I'm right, an old lady with a heart the size of London is going to need all the spiritual help she can get if she finds out that the foster son she loves has no heart at all. That falls right in your department," Ed said firmly.

Angel beamed.

"A soul to polish again. It would be my pleasure, Q-Tip."

Alec took the heavier suitcase from Angel and walked alongside Ed. Ed previously had not looked this alive, this determined.

*And, he thought to himself, he still needs me. I'm needed.*

As if able to read Alec's thoughts, Ed smiled brilliantly at Alec, laid a fond hand on his shoulder. Alec was beginning more and more to reconsider this miracle business.

"Don't worry, Alec. I'm putting my demise on the back burner. I don't have time to die right now. I'm too damn busy at the moment."

"Amen," Angel said. "Glory halleluiah, praise God," he added happily.

"Amen," Alec said quietly, from the heart.

## Chapter Fourteen: No Apple In The Worm

"Would you like another cup of tea, Mr. Noland?"

"It wouldn't take much for me to review the laws regarding kidnapping in England, Valentine."

"Your employer Mr. Malone contributed several books to the library, Sir. You are free to search them. I have no doubt you'll find whatever information you may want in them. However, since you were here last, we made good use of some of Mr. Straker's money and added a newer computer system to the media room Mr. Malone created. Shall I set it up for you?"

"I assure you, after I fill Ed in, you will be out of a job. Hannah would want to see me. You have no right to keep her hidden away from me like this."

"My dear Mr. Noland, I am merely doing what I was told. Hannah is a fine, sensible human being. She came here and asked for shelter from you, and as she is a friend of Mr. Straker's, I am of course following her wishes. Are you most certain you would not like another cup of-?"

Noland slammed down the emptied blue and white china cup on the oaken table as his answer and it burst into several pieces. It had cost several pounds.

"How fortunate it is that we have several more of those cups, sir," Valentine said dryly and moved out of the drawing room in as dignified a manner he could manage after gathering up the pieces of the cup.

Valentine gloomily entered the kitchen area where he ran into Sir Peregrine Falcon who grinned at him.

"Cols old chum, is that man still trying your prized butler's patience?" Perry asked with his usual glee.

"Allow me to respond thusly, Perry. I wish that I was a different breed of soul than I actually am, and thereby could use Mr. Noland's dead body to polish the furniture with."

Perry laughed heartily.

"I'd help you murder him. There's no apple in that worm. I see that he murdered the Wedgwood," Perry said, watching Valentine toss the pieces in a dustbin with a ghastly expression on his lined face. "Oh dear. Such a lovely piece too."

"Yes and I fear for the rest of the drawing room, Perry. I must admit, it was frightfully clever of you to bring Hannah here. She is a charming woman. I would like to discuss her merits with you further, but I believe you have something to show me. Let's take tea and biscuits in the library. I take it you are getting better these days at assuming human shapes? You know I often do not approve of what you do but in this case I admire you."

"Oh, but my dear Cols, it was quite amusing to be a taxi driver! I was even a male nurse briefly at St. Swithin's Hospital. I'm afraid Edward's and Alec's blood test results went missing, so let's hope the dear boy doesn't catch hell for what were my sins." Perry didn't seem to be caring very much, Colin noted.

Perry took a folder out of his waistcoat as if it were a treasure map he hoped was genuine.

Colin Valentine took it gingerly into his white gloved hands.

Perry inspected Colin Valentine as he had for what he guessed had been ages, but then considering his nature, ages didn't have much meaning for Perry. Valentine had an ample amount of ginger colored, wavy hair, which was the only feature that escaped his mania for neatness. He was tall and thin, and looked elegant in his butler's traditional garb. His long,

almost feminine fingers always seemed to be encased in the spotless white gloves.

Valentine inspected the sheets of paper that had been in the envelope with his blue-grey eyes.

"Yes oh yes. Absolutely, Perry. There is no mistaking these results, I'm afraid. The question remains now, what else am I to do?"

"The others know?"

"Oh mercy yes, Perry. They have been waiting for this for a very long time. Awaiting his decision is a terrifying thing for them. For all of us. Tell me again, Perry. Tell me of your Edward Straker," Colin asked in an urgent manner.

"I would have very much liked for him to be my son after encountering him at the Rock Bottom, as he showed kindness while none was showed to him. His friend is a thicker branch cut from the same tree." Perry smiled. "I absolutely believe he will make the right decision for all of us. Alec Freeman's involvement is a different matter," he chuckled. "He's a storm while Ed is a calculated bolt of lightning. Not a pair to trifle with, goodness oh my no. Add the wise, witty and wonderful Right Reverend Brisby and you have a splendid trio."

"I met Alec Freeman finally. I got the rather strange sensation from him that he felt awkward around me. I actually wanted him to like me since he is Straker's closest friend. Is it possible he will, in time? Alec Freeman is responsible for the injury which made your friend Reginald Devon handicapped, is he not?" Valentine walked with Perry until they reached the immense library, which gleamed and smelled of leather, brandy and fresh flowers.

"Shot his gun hand clear off, and mind you that was a second before his own heart stopped beating. You're keeping something from me, Cols. That isn't at all like you."

"You know the discipline that I live my life by, Perry. It isn't for me to shape and guide other lives the way you do."

"This is a different world, Cols!"

"You chose the life you lead now. I think it actually improved you." Valentine chuckled.

"You haven't laughed since we all, well, you know." Perry said darkly. Then he added with a smile, "It is good to see."

"Perry, I have had precious little to laugh about, which you very well know. Let me fetch tea, and then I will tell you."

"It is unpleasant, what you have to tell me." Perry needed no answer. Valentine looked at him with eyes more wild than they were blue.

"Freeman changed Regs, Perry. The truth is, a man does not change to that extent unless he already harbors darkness in his essence."

Perry sighed pitifully and nodded assent.

"You don't do what Regs did in MI6 without it touching your soul. I knew Regs hadn't taken the injury in his stride, as he wanted me to think. Thinking he could trick me was already a sign something dark was consuming him. Forget that delicious tea of yours, Cols. Just tell me."

"I saw it in one of my visions. What Alec Freeman did was not wholly responsible for the dimming of Devon's light, Perry. It goes a long way back, all the way back to you discovering that lovely American woman you became so fond of, Claire Swanson."

Perry looked startlingly lost. Colin took a protective step nearer him.

"How anything could destroy her when she had been touched by the Beyond still frightens me as it must have been truly evil. She's utterly lost to me, and most tragically to Edward."

"To Edward?" Valentine said in surprise, then he nodded. "Oh yes, I had forgotten. I thought I saw pain no medicine could heal in his eyes when I saw his photograph."

"They were lovers, Cols and you know what that means."

"I see that I have unreasonably thought ill of you, my oldest and dearest friend. I will hesitate no more. Reginald Devon told you he was going to San Francisco to see a specialist in prosthesis, did he not? He went to San Francisco but he lied about his intentions. You once told me it was difficult to convince him that he was not meant for the American woman, because he loved her. Perry, he loved her because he couldn't have her. Had she been easy to possess, a woman without conscience, he wouldn't be interested in her at all."

"Mercy, oh mercy, Cols. He's gone for her, hasn't he? She is there, isn't she? He's gone to claim what he thinks is owed him after the tragedy."

"He believes she is dying, but his own heart is already dead." Valentine explained.

"Cols fetch me a whiskey straightaway. I may faint, I fear."

Perry sat down heavily on a nearby mahogany chair. Colin knew Perry was prone to fainting.

The doorbell rang. Valentine sighed.

"Edward," Perry said. "Go and take care of it. Go, by the Goddess I will be all right."

"May your Goddess grant that this night ends in Her light." Valentine said.

Perry watched him leave the library and disappear out the door. He wondered, as he had many times, whether anyone could have guessed that Colin Valentine was not quite a butler. He smiled somewhat.

"For that matter, neither am I what I appear to be," he muttered to himself with irony. He remembered Devon and scowled fiercely. He started to take out his cell with the intention of calling Algernon Fisher, his close friend who had been high on the echelon of the Metropolitan Police before his lover and partner George Fisher had recently been killed by a pair of criminals. However, his cell rang first, startling him.

"Hullo?"

"Sit tight Pers old fellow, I'm on the way."

"Algernon my good boy, do try to warn me when you practice your peculiar version of ESP." Perry chuckled. "I want you to call your contacts in the States and have Reginald Devon picked up immediately. It's important, Algernon."

"I had a feeling Devon had turned, Pers. San Francisco hardly seemed the kind of place he'd visit, even for medical reasons. He isn't fond of the States. I didn't think our sweet Claire was safe, not even with Ed's people so I've asked them to contact me as soon as possible. ESP isn't anything I inherited from you, Pers. It's the intuition of a cop."

"Call it anything you like, but just get Devon and make sure Claire is all right then get here!" Perry said and rang off.

Algernon Fisher, occupied at the moment with driving to Silk Wood Manor, briefly patted a gun he wasn't supposed to be carrying around according to her Majesty's laws. Something occurred to him and he pulled out something from underneath the seat of the car on the driver's side, with one hand still on the wheel. It was a police light, complete with siren. He stuck it through the open window after switching it on and put it on the roof of the car and it whined its pleasing sound. Pleasing to his old detective inspector's ears, at any rate and he could zip past evening traffic now over the speed limit unless he ran into a real Met police car. It was going to be a night to remember.

## Chapter Fifteen: The Flower Unplucked

"Reginald, there's something I have to explain to you," Claire said cautiously.

"What might that be?" He smiled his plastic smile.

"I don't want anyone in my life, I don't feel the same way you do about me. I'm sorry, but I want you to go now and not come back."

"Claire, I understand that we won't have a long time together. Your illness doesn't bother me."

"You don't understand what I'm trying to say." She'd been trying to explain ever since the Englishman had unexpectedly shown up at the clinic looking for her. He'd been there day after day. Something about him bothered her. It was almost like some inner part of her was trying to warn her he wasn't to be trusted.

"Then for heaven's sake just tell me."

"I have. God knows I have. I told you what my life is like. They told me I have an illness that will eventually kill me. That I was in a laboratory accident so secret I can't talk about it. They have compensated me for the accident; I have more money now than I know what to do with. At first, it was fun to buy things for patients and staff at the clinic I was told I worked at. To see their faces when I gave them things they never dreamed of owning. It brought me a little happiness, Reginald. Then I met you, and I finally allowed myself to have a visitor. But Reginald, I told you I sometimes have these hunches, these visions or whatever you want to call them. I've been told by the government people that it's part of my illness, that I'm just sick. I don't believe that. Sometimes I think my visions are more real than anything else that's happening to me."

*I can't believe this stupid bitch really believes all that, but I'm good at giving her what she needs.*

"Sweetheart, I've been trying to tell you, you need me in your life. Why on earth would you want to be alone like this when we could be together?"

*Sweetheart. The man I hear in my dreams calls me that. Why can't I see his face? Why do I only hear his voice? Why am I sure he gave me my ring?*

*Sweetheart, I have to go and personally handle this business in South Korea. The H.Q. out there has incorporated alien technology from a downed UFO into the Sejong 1. It's a huge breakthrough. A more powerful weapon than we ever thought possible to defeat the aliens is in the making. We've waited for this a long time. This really could be it.*

"Claire, are you even listening to me?" he said impatiently.

"I'm sorry, Reginald, what were you saying?"

"That ring. You're always playing with it. I haven't told you this before, but I think it's evil."

Devon fancied she was the superstitious type so the evil bit might do the job. You played with the cards you held and if not, you cheated to win. Winning was all that mattered. Lately he'd been losing, and he despised losing. He wouldn't lose this time. It had taken a while to find her, and he'd broken her down, gained her trust. Now he'd take what he had come for.

"What? Now you're being silly. Reginald, it was a present. It's special to me. They told me someone died in the accident. I couldn't see his body because nothing was left in the fire that destroyed the laboratory. I hear his voice sometimes."

"Claire, I'm sorry. You know that I was in British Intelligence at one time."

"You told me. Sometimes I think about going to England, I dream about it. I was told I

have to stay away from England, and they don't allow me to travel. They watch me all the time. They don't really like it when I leave the hotel. They never really explained why."

"That man, that man you hear in your dreams, he's the one who infected you."

"No Reginald. I know that isn't true," Claire said firmly.

"You keep having visions of him giving you that ring, hearing his voice, because your mind can't accept that it was him who tried to kill you in the accident."

Claire took off the ring and examined it lovingly.

*To C, WYMM She never remembered what the letters meant. But wearing it had felt so right. Was what this man seated in front of her was saying, was it really the truth? No, she told herself. Reginald wants me, but I can't let myself be loved by a man I don't love. Oh God, where are you? I hear you in my dreams. I feel such utter loneliness when I think of you. The strangest thing of all is sometimes I feel that you feel it too. That you lived a life filled with such emptiness. That you always have, because you felt it was expected of you. You can't be the way Reginald says you are, can you? Of course not. I heard it in your voice. You'd fight against evil until you had nothing left and then you'd fight it even more.*

She slipped the ring back on with new resolve.

Devon stared at her. *Stupid twit.*

"You have to open your eyes. I'm sure what you want to go on believing is what feels best to you. But you're a doctor..."

"I quit the practice. I was never supposed to go into medicine. I just did that because my father..."

*Was a surgeon. My God. Am I finally remembering something from my childhood? But he wasn't my father. That other man...*

"You remember your father?"

"Reginald, what's wrong?"

"I'm disappointed in you. I thought you had courage. I admired it. Claire, I never loved anyone until I saw you."

*Perry brought you in, just another of his band of rats he claimed he was ordained to look after like some cosmic Pied Piper. The way he sought out Straker when he was down and out. What right did Straker have to be the only one that possessed you like some bloom only he could pluck? What's Perry really but an odd old man, one I never should have listened to. What did it get me? I'm flesh and blood. I'm not like him. Now I've lost my job, some say even my nerve. I'm supposed to go on being the perfect English gentleman. Not now. Straker could have gone after you. What was there to prevent it? He didn't, Claire. He didn't think he had the right to interfere with what you'd chosen to do. He tossed you away like last week's newspaper. He and that damned Freeman. That's all over, Claire. In this life, you take what you want, you don't wait in the queue of fate until someone shoves a damn bowl of stale soup at you and you're expected to survive on it. No. Not now. I'm half a man now like this. When Freeman blew my bloody hand off, what was left of my manners went with it. Tonight you'll be in my bed, Swanson. I'm going to find out if you live up to the fantasies I used to have of you. Tonight you're mine to pluck. Straker and Freeman can't do a thing about it. It was easy to convince the SHADO security team that I just wanted to make sure you were all right. Utter fools.*

"Don't, Reginald."

"Claire, there's no way you could be remembering your father."

"Why?"

"That's what I am trying to tell you. I came out here because I love you. Those people have been telling you lies. That memory of a voice is what they programmed you with. I'm the only one you can trust. More importantly than that, I need you, Claire."

*Claire, before you came into my life I never allowed myself to feel anything for any woman. I haven't felt alive like this for far too long. I've fallen in love with you.*

"He finally realized he loved me, that he still could love, and it frightened him, he'd been torn apart by his past, by wounds that he couldn't heal. Why can't I remember his face? Oh Reginald, this is what's really killing me. Not the illness. It's his absence that is driving me closer toward my grave. Reginald, you have special training in these kind of things. Get me out of here and to England without them knowing. Help me find him, please."

Reginald jumped up in rage. She never had been frightened of him in the short time she'd known him. She was now.

"Damn you, why do you keep whining about Strak-"

"You *KNOW* him. Needles and pins, you *KNOW* who he is! Tell me his name, Reginald! For God's sake, tell me his name!"

He walked over to her and attempted to pull her close.

"Oh no, don't. Don't. *NO! Don't! Don't you touch me!*"

Her repulsion hardened him. Fine. if she wanted it that way.

"Scream again and I'll break your neck."

"Then do it. Do it, do it, do it because I'd rather be dead than to have a human being as cold as you are touch me."

"I'm cold? Really? Oh bloody really? What about him? You're right, you know. I know him. Shall I go to him and show him your dead body? Because I will, oh yes I will. He'll never know what I did. He thinks I'm a gentleman, the way Perry does. He'll blame himself. He's always had that guilt complex of his. He'll blame himself. He's good at carrying crosses. Is that what you want?"

"You'll kill me anyway, Reginald."

"I will if you fight me."

"Not this way, please. Take me to the bedroom. If you have to do this, take me to the bedroom, let me at least pretend this isn't rape."

He laughed, lifted her and carried her to the bedroom, and threw her down. She squeezed her eyes shut as he tore off her clothes, and she tried to be brave but sobbed in broken gasps. When she summoned up her courage and determinedly opened them, he was unzipping his pants.

"Please, at least tell me his name." Claire was surprised at how unafraid she sounded. It must have been someone else's courage filling her, not hers.

*I know you hate guns, sweetheart. That's why Alec's giving you this, and Alec doesn't give relics from his RAF days to just anyone. Courage just means being scared as hell Claire, but spitting in the face of fear and doing what you must do anyway. You reach for something deep inside you, and you hold on to it with both hands. No matter how deeply it might be buried, I assure you, it's there. If you never look for it, you'll never find it and once you have it, it becomes stronger than your fear.*

*I'm looking for it, now darling. I may not remember your face but I always have you right here in my heart, she thought.*

"It won't do you any good now. My God, you're so freakishly beautiful. That stuff inside you, it's made you more beautiful than I remember you were when I saw you for the first

time." he was saying.

"Reginald, do what you want but I need to know his name." she insisted. "Tell me!"

"It's Ed Straker." he snarled.

"Edward." she repeated and embraced the sound of it. "Edward." she said lovingly, and felt at peace. She could hear his voice again.

*...the fundamentals of self-defense Claire. Therefore, Alec and I figured maybe you'd have better luck with this when you have to mean business. It's one of Alec's for luck.*

It had been a dagger, one of the biggest she'd ever seen in her life. It made a chef's knife look like it came from a child's tea party set. Finally, she remembered. When she had returned to San Francisco, she never understood why she had blindly walked into a sporting goods store one day, and purchased one like it. She had forgotten about it. It had been Edward Straker. He had taught her. He had taught her how to hold it, and how to keep it at the ready. He had shown her where she was supposed to attack to do the most damage in the least amount of time, which had been what he'd said was what counted. A physician knew how to heal. She was really beginning to remember his words more clearly now. His face still was a lost memory. *It doesn't matter. I know his name now. Edward.*

Reginald was already tearing off his y-fronts and he tossed them on the floor.

"God, you're so hot," Reginald whispered, taking in her nude body like it was an illicit drug and he was the biggest addict. He was spreading her legs apart, shaking in his need for her, already erect.

None of it meant anything to her now. All her fear had gone.

"I'm so sorry for you, Reginald Devon. I truly am. But this body belongs to Edward Straker, not you," she said quietly. He stared at her.

*A physician needs to know how to heal but a physician in SHADO also needs to know how to kill,* she heard his voice telling her.

She reached behind her pillow, gripped the knife she'd bought and drove it up with all of her strength into his chest.

"-- you bitch--" he croaked.

He painted her with his blood but she didn't feel it. Her eyes were emptier than his now as she allowed the sudden pain and darkness to take her. Finally she had found peace.

## Chapter Sixteen: **Deus Est Super Domo**

When Ed had finally entered the great hall of Silk Wood Manor, with Alec Freeman and Stanley Brisby behind him, he reflected that it was like a newly ordained Bishop entering his cathedral. However the faces of the believers weren't fixed on a cleric in the middle of a soul-stirring sermon, they were fixed on him. There were too many to count, all attired in what might have been actors in costumes awaiting their cue to take the stage. He felt like he was in a BBC Victorian drama and he'd just made his entrance as the young master assuming his father's role as lord of the manor. One elderly lady in particular, which Colin had identified as Chloe Montgomery, seemed agitated, her eyes almost vacant. The expressions on the rest of their faces reminded him of something, and it took him a while to remember. The failure to remember alarmed him. He had to admit he was exhausted, but the prospect of turning in, however wonderful it seemed, was not for him. He had explained to Alec about his conclusions regarding Jay Noland in the car, and Alec had shared his rage. Then it came to him. They looked like children lit up with the excitement of Christmas morning. They embarrassed him further by spontaneously applauding him a minute after he'd come in. Alec had grinned at him without mercy all through what seemed to him an endless ordeal. Reluctantly, they had obeyed Valentine's call to disperse and disappeared back to their various responsibilities around the manor. Ed admired a Christmas tree in the middle of the great hall that seemed to be as tall as the Thames was long, and it was decorated with antique ornaments, a chain of popcorn, candy canes, silver bells and twinkling lights. At the very top of it was a sparkling gold star. He caught Alec grinning at him and he quickly pretended to have no interest in it at all.

Valentine had guided Ed and his companions into the main drawing room. He had said he would fetch Hannah but she was asleep, unharmed, and he explained that Noland was asleep in one of the guest bedrooms after nearly emptying a bottle of whisky. Ed said it could wait until the morning. Valentine had nodded, assured him again that he hadn't allowed Noland anywhere near Hannah, had no intention of doing so and gone out saying he'd be back shortly with some refreshments. Angel had excitedly excused himself, anxious to go see the chapel, so Straker and Freeman were alone. A fireplace with a mahogany mantle draped with a garland of fresh holly and berries displayed various sizes of Meissen ginger jars, Royal Doulton figurines, and porcelain Halcyon Days boxes. The fire blazed and crackled, adding to the coziness and warmth of the room. The night was deep, candles blazed in their silver candlestick holders in competition with the chandelier and made the room glow. Ed noticed not one suggestion of even the tiniest speck of dust, then caught his reflection curiously inspecting him back in a gleaming gold mirror mounted over the mantel. Various pillows embroidered in satin threads and edged with fringe added more color to the scene, which he already found surreal. The only sound was the faint ticking of the crystal and brass mantle clock under its crystal dome. Ed was slowly moving around, admiring the fine art that seemed to be everywhere (*my God was that an authentic Turner?*) and stopped when he came to a gilt framed oil painting of a galloping horse, with gold arrows in the background which he particularly admired. He guessed it might be from a coat of arms. He had owned some plaques like it back when he'd had his house. He didn't miss it now. The hotel suited him, he told himself, but he'd missed living with Alec and then later being with Claire. Alec didn't care at all for that moneyed atmosphere and looked nervous. The thought of a nervous Alec amused him. Ed peered closer at the painting to hide his own nervousness and was shocked. **STRAKER**, it read in small but elaborate gold

letters that looked like Alec the mouse had painted them by dipping his tail in oils. The youth he had given his pet mouse to often e-mailed him about its exploits. What the hell? His mother made and embroidered exquisite clothes to sell, she didn't paint. Had she ordered it? Had she dreamed of him returning home from the war and coming to see it? Had she sat on that very same leather wing chair and read the letter about how the government regretted to inform her that her son... Suddenly he hated the manor and was grateful for Alec 's question.

"How are you going to handle Noland, Ed?" Alec asked, breaking the stilted silence when he saw *that* look appear on the Commander's face. Claire wasn't the only one with ESP when it concerned Straker. Alec had it first and he remembered she'd playfully called it *Edward Straker Perception* so he'd adopted that name for it too. Ed surprised him by hiding his grief without success and grinning.

"I expect the G6 that Ford does on him will tell me what I've already guessed, Alec. From there, I think Noland will tell me himself."

"Really Ed?" Alec grinned.

Ed became animated, playful.

"Look around you, Alec! If this isn't the proverbial drawing room where the police inspector gathers the suspects, gives motives and tells just how the murder was done, then even more dramatically identifies the murderer, then I don't know what is. Besides, I don't want Noland to suspect I'm on to him. If I tell you what I'm planning, he's bound to see it displayed like a gaudy Harlington-Straker marquee in your face, you don't know how to tell a lie." He teased.

"I'm not sure whether that's a compliment or not, considering my line of work," replied Alec. Ed chuckled.

He smiled at Valentine when he came in, and the butler handed him fresh coffee and a selection of sandwiches on a silver tray and set it down on a butler's table.

"Smells good. " Ed took an eager sip of the coffee and his eyes widened. "Tastes even better." He chuckled. Alec was inspecting a mug of ale Valentine had set down before him suspiciously.

"I took the liberty of bringing Right Reverend Brisby a meal and coffee as well, but he declined. He said he wants to pray so I left the meal with him. A chapel is a bit out of place as a place to dine I suppose, but I am a lot more worried about his empty stomach than I am his soul. Alec Freeman told me how you like your coffee, Sir. May I recommend the ham sandwich, Sir? Your late mother told me on more than one occasion that it was a favorite of yours and we still get in the special brown mustard all the way from Boston, as it was also a favorite of Mr. Malone's. It is so good to see you again, Mr. Freeman."

"We were delayed longer than we expected as well, we were in an accident," Alec said between grateful swigs of ale that strangely enough tasted like his favorite brand. *What had the damn stuck up butler done? Run a G6 on him?*

"Yes, I noted your injuries. Most unfortunate."

Ed had accepted a sandwich the size of the Thames as had Alec, and took a bite. He found he was starving. He swallowed one half of the sandwich down without mercy, not sparing even a single doomed crumb, than spoke with a hint of sadness that only Alec could pick up.

"Mr. Valentine, did you know my mother well?"

"Your mother was a delightful person, sir. She loved Silk Wood Manor, and she and Mr. Malone had been looking forward to having you come here one day. Of course, we had gotten

the shocking news that your plane had gone down overseas. We all believed you had not survived. I am afraid when your mother got the official letter from the American military; she chose not to hold on to the sanctity of life. Sir, as a butler, I am trained to be observant of my employer's needs. Mr. Freeman would remind you that Silk Wood Manor has a full time doctor on the premises. You still appear to be in some physical discomfort."

"No, Mr. Valentine, I'm fine."

"Don't you believe it," Alec said, finishing his own sandwich and greedily examining what was left of Ed's.

"Alec," Ed said as a warning. Alec wasn't sure if it was the threat to his sandwich or the personal truth about him in the presence of a stranger that Ed objected to. The Australian ignored him anyway. He noted happily he was getting better at ignoring Straker's moods. Angel was a good teacher.

"Mr. Valentine, do you know who painted that oil painting, if I may inquire?" Ed inquired, hoping to slip past Alec's all-knowing gaze and knowing he had about the same odds of succeeding as a balloon hoping to court a porcupine. That was one of Angel's phrases, he recalled. Angel's phrases, his silly puns and that incredible singing of his had gotten him through Vietnam if not undamaged then at least semi-sane. Or maybe Alec would question that last part. Yeah, damn it, he would. He'd be wise to.

Valentine had smiled at him. Something about his gentle smile reminded Ed of Claire and he pushed that thought to the furthest regions he could conjure up on such short notice.

"Sir, that painting and everything in this manor and the surrounding structures and land are *yours*. You may certainly ask. That is part of the Straker family coat of arms. The painting was commissioned by your mother, and painted by Lady Violet Westbury, a most talented local artist. A horse depicted in full gallop, and gold arrows representing your ancestors willingness to defend God and the Crown. The Straker motto is 'Deus Est Super Domo!'"

"Roughly translated as God is over my house?" the Commander said, looking astonished. "The meaning is a little imprecise, perhaps it means my household is ruled by God. Angel will certainly enjoy this." He added with a chuckle.

All Alec was thinking is how much he hated learning what little Latin he remembered. That, and Claire telling him in response to his envy of Ed's intellect if there really was a Akashic library, Edward not only had its library card in his wallet, it was up to date and not one book was overdue. Thank God for the Internet. Damned esoteric terms. At least Alec had beat the Commander in chess games they'd played together. Okay, so maybe only to a draw, but a man needed something to feed his ego. Feed. He looked at Ed's leftovers again. Not wise to push your luck like that, Freeman.

"The horse always at full gallop certainly sounds like him," Alec said. Ed turned toward Alec and gifted him one of those rare heartfelt smiles of his that had a shorter life than a soap bubble. Then he went back to looking thoughtful. He also was hiding pain. You didn't need to suffer through university to know that, Alec realized.

"What did you have in mind regarding Mr. Straker's condition, Valentine?" Alec asked and earned himself a frown from Ed.

"I have some rudimentary training in first aid. Mr. Malone insisted on it, with your mother's delicate health. I was thinking perhaps a little morphine, Sir. We have a doctor on the premises, Chloe Montgomery. I could get it from her office. I would ordinarily suggest sherry, but I am aware Mr. Straker wisely does not drink."

"Rudimentary training, my nuts roasted in that fireplace, Cols. You could do brain surgery

were it required of you. Modesty has always been your ruin!" a voice said. "Happy Christmas to you all!"

Everyone turned around in shock as Peregrine Falcon marched into the drawing room through a door concealed with a lavish tapestry depicting a foxhunt.

"I believe you know Perry," Valentine said without surprise as Perry shut the door behind him, still chuckling. "I'll be available later if I am needed." The butler left the room.

"Perry, for God's sake, we've been trying to reach you, where the hell have you been?" Alec yelled. "Claire was-

"Alec, this place isn't secure," Ed reminded him.

"No Edward my lad, security here is tighter than a drum. A mania of its previous dotty owner Bentrige, so don't worry. As for our dearest Claire-" Perry sighed. Ed stared at him with hidden terror, waiting. "I'm afraid Reginald's gotten at her." Perry finally admitted.

Ed shot up, hunger and pain forgotten.

"What the hell do you mean?"

"He told me he'd gone to San Francisco for medical treatment. I wanted to believe the best of Regs. I'm sorry. What happened to dearest Claire just made the way easier for him. He's wanted her for a long time. Algernon's got some of his friends out there keeping an eye on her for me and I should be hearing from them any moment now."

"That filthy-" Ed began, and then put his hand to his forehead with a grimace. Alec caught him a second before he fell but Ed did not lose consciousness.

"Stop it, Alec, stop fussing, I'm fine, I'm all right, but believe me, if Devon's hurt her *he* won't be-"

Alec's cell phone rang, and once he'd assured himself that Ed was all right, he accepted the call. His expression, already dark at this reminder that Ed's days were growing shorter, grew darker and graver still as he listened. He spoke a few words, and then hung up after thanking Ford.

"Virginia found David Clifford, the team was hoping to take him alive, but he killed one of them and they had to return fire. He's dead. Ford finished with the G6 and confirmed that Noland knew you were alive for much longer than he admitted he did. Ford also says that Malone's firm didn't trust or like Noland. There are only a few original members of Malone's company still alive, and all three of them even put forward the idea that Noland hadn't been Malone's first choice to take his place. They cooperated fully, and it's clear now that Jay Noland has been living out a lie. Even the newer members who work there have said Noland isn't the saint that he makes himself out to be."

"I don't know how I'm going to tell poor Hannah. She'll have to know the truth. At the very least, she'll be safer with us-"

Alec interrupted Ed.

"Ed, Ford said it appears Noland's been living the good life off Hannah's money. Apparently, when she was released from the camp, she inherited her late father's fortune. He had secretly fled with the help of some friends to the United States, became a citizen, and continued to work in the jewelry trade. When he died, he left her his estate, which Noland stole from her. Hannah may not have even known about that or that her father had been alive."

"Noland seems to have committed more than his share of the seven deadly sins," Ed said, and sank down wearily on a chair, considerably paler. "My God, what a bastard!"

Alec moved to his side. Perry was putting away his own cell and shook his head.

"I don't think God has anything to do with it, Edward my boy. I think Jay Noland left God far behind him and graduated to a far more appealing God, and it's called money. I often would come to Silk Wood Manor as a younger man and find Noland here. I think you might want to make sure Hannah is medically all right. I was the driver who brought her here. I just got a call from Algernon. They think Claire killed Reginald when he tried to rape her," Perry said sadly.

"What?" Ed said, startled. Alec nodded and so did Perry.

"Yeah, Ford told me the same thing, Ed. He says that our team was keeping an eye on her and was aware that she was friendly with Reginald Devon before the UFO attack, so since Reginald Devon was aware of SHADO and a associate of yours, they didn't stop him from secretly seeing her. But earlier today they had a funny feeling about him so they went up to check on her. Both she and Devon were nude and he had a knife in his chest with her prints on it, and the receipt for the purchase of the knife was in her hotel desk drawer. They think he attempted to rape her, but before he could do anything to her, she killed him. Her medical examination showed no evidence that he'd penetrated her. She's in a fugue state, and Algernon confirmed they'd moved her to our San Francisco division. They've tried everything they know of but she's unresponsive."

"Edward, I blame myself. I didn't want to think what had happened had changed Regs in any way, but it had. When he expressed the wish to go to San Francisco, I didn't even dream that he intended to take what he must have felt was his. He didn't feel he had anything to lose. He felt the world owed him a favor, that he was far past worrying about the nicety of the situation, or still possessing morals. He lost more than a limb when Alec shot him, Edward. He lost his humanity, I'm afraid." Perry wept.

"Blaming yourself won't bring Claire back, Perry. I'd like to see her, Alec. I want to bring her back home to die. I never should have allowed her to go," Ed said sorrowfully.

"Your training must have been what saved her from Devon, Ed. Comfort yourself at least with that," Alec pleaded. He was still terrified that Ed might relapse from the stress.

"Comfort? What comfort? Yes, yes, she was saved from that bastard raping her, Alec. But she still doesn't even know who-

"Straker!"

It was Jay Noland.

## Chapter Seventeen: Justice is Served In The Drawing Room, Sir

"Finally you show up."

"Yes, as I attempted to tell you, Alec and I were in an accident," Ed said firmly. He'd stood up as Noland had entered the room, hiding his exhaustion.

"These people of yours won't tell me where Hannah is. I've been treated horribly by them."

"Have you?" Ed said. Alec looked at him with anticipation. He knew that tone. He knew that expression too. That look of innocence. It troubled him that he knew Ed was concealing pain, and lack of sleep but he wanted to watch Ed crush Noland into the antique burgundy and gold carpet.

"I was following Hannah's request, Mr. Noland, as you well know," Colin Valentine said from behind him. Noland jumped and then stared at the butler.

"Thank you Mr. Valentine," Ed said.

"I've gone and checked on Angel, sir. He is fast asleep on a pew in the chapel, snoring rather loudly. Happily, his tray was empty, I couldn't even locate a single crumb. I took the liberty of fetching a pillow and blankets for him, then I left. Is there anything else, sir?"

"Ed, I've never been treated as badly as this cretin has treated me, and I demand you order him to make an apology to me."

"You're not in a position to demand anything from me, Jay," Ed said. His voice was terrifyingly cold.

"Ed, you don't understand-"

"Does Hannah know her father left her an inheritance?"

"How the hell-" Noland went white.

"I didn't think so," Ed continued. "Perhaps you'd like to explain why?"

"Ed, I told you about her going off like that! Making a scene, worrying me that way, it should be clear she's becoming senile. She was in no shape to handle sums like that. I was handling her finances for her. She's old and agreed that I should be her conservator a long time ago. Ask her!"

"She didn't give me any indication that she was senile, Mr. Noland," Perry said in a deceptively civil tone. Ed nodded at him. Perry brought something out of his pocket and held it out like a parent offering a sweet to quiet a misbehaving child. It was Noland's smartphone.

"How did you get that? Hannah took it by mistake. It's mine." Noland grabbed it with visible relief before Alec could.

"Is it indeed? How did I get it? Let me see, I am so forgetful these days, comes with old age you see. Now I remember. The dear lady Hannah gave it to me for safekeeping." Perry said.

"You seem pretty upset about having lost it, Noland," Alec pointed out. "What's on it that's so valuable?"

"You're Ed's business partner, you know the amount of information it takes to keep a company running smoothly. There's info on my caseloads. Important telephone numbers, financial info, passwords, that kind of thing," Noland said.

Ed crossed his arms, listening.

"I have a good friend, Algernon Fisher. He's been thinking about getting a gadget like that for a while now. Fortunately I own one, and I decided to download all your information into

my phone's memory card so that I can demonstrate to Algernon that he really must get one. He should have the info by now, I transmitted it to him at headquarters. They are such clever gadgets, they'd be so helpful to a detective-inspector like Algernon is, wouldn't you agree?" Perry said happily.

Alec chuckled while Ed's eyes widened momentarily at Perry's words, then he flashed a grateful smile for an instant. Noland looked like he'd have a stroke right there and then at the words detective inspector, as Perry intended.

"You did WHAT? You had no right, no right at all to do that, you insolent interfering little-"

"Now see here, I won't have a distinguished guest like Sir Peregrine insulted in any way. If you find some fault with the way you've been treated by me, fine. I won't tolerate disrespect to any guest," Colin Valentine said in a sharp tone that made Alec like him more. Noland shot him a deadly look.

Ed decided to add his own festive touch to Noland's winter holiday nightmare.

"I'm actually glad you're here, Jay," Ed exclaimed unexpectedly.

Alec grinned and thought here it comes. When it became necessary, Ed Straker could out act any performer on the Harlington-Straker Studio stages, Alec knew.

Noland didn't see the change in Ed's demeanor coming. He tried to change his tone.

"Ed, for God's sake this English idiot has no idea of the seriousness of what he's done."

"I've finally had the chance to take a look at the manor and I'm very impressed!" Ed said, pretending not to hear Noland.

Noland had managed to calm down quite a bit.

"Yes, the manor. Uh, I actually wanted to talk to you about it. Ed, I think it would be a shame if it were turned over to the National Trust. I was thinking I could retire, move here with Hannah and look after it for you. Hannah deserves a luxury home like this after the way she's lived, don't you agree? That way someone could run this place, someone that you trusted. It would be the perfect solution for you."

It didn't surprise Alec that Ed was right about Noland.

"Now there's an idea," Ed said thoughtfully, tapping a finger against his lip as if genuinely considering it. Colin Valentine noticeably frowned. Perry however was grinning, as was Alec.

"Yes, Jay. I certainly agree with you about Hannah living here. However, I wouldn't dream of taking you away from your law firm. No, I couldn't bring myself to do it," Ed exclaimed.

"Ed, believe me I-"

"You see Jay, I've made my decision. I've decided to *accept* Silk Wood Manor, the land, property, assets, furniture, and artwork, everything, all of it. Certainly, there is more than enough room for Hannah and Alec and Angel to live here with me. I'm afraid you'll have to go back to Boston empty handed."

"Wha-wha-" Jay was stammering.

"You might add not before he has to pay for the Wedgewood cup he shattered," Perry suggested to Ed.

Noland's shock quickly became rage.

Colin Valentine smiled with delight. Alec raised an eyebrow at him. Maybe he had been too quick to judge the butler. He finally seemed human to Alec.

"You haven't seen the last of me, Ed," Noland spat the words out at him.

"I should expect not, Mr. Noland as I intend to see that justice is finally served. I did a

little digging into your background. I think you schemed to take Lawrence Malone's law firm after he died. You needed Malone out of the way, didn't you Jay? You hoped to have all of this. You made up that story about Malone not telling me about my inheritance, how difficult it was to be loyal to him by not telling me. When you found out I was still alive, it was a nuisance, but you soon figured out I wouldn't want to claim the estate because of painful memories. Lucky for you, I didn't have your kind of greed so you only decided to tell Hannah about me when you thought the time was right. So you dreamed everything up and you already had Hannah with her father's fortune just waiting for you to snatch up. She made it so easy for you, the pitiful victim of the Holocaust, and the brilliant young lawyer making a sacrifice by taking her in. I imagine that show of charity brought you new clients, didn't it? You couldn't buy that kind of favorable publicity in Boston. Finally you figured I'd just jump at the chance of letting you have Silk Wood Manor, hand it to you on a silver platter for old time's sake. Who else have you cheated out of their fortune like this, Jay? Is it all spelled out on that smartphone of yours? Is that why you were so shocked when Hannah took it?"

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about, Ed!"

"Oh, come now dear boy. I think you absolutely know what Mr. Straker's talking about. Your little game has come to a dead end. I do know Algernon Fisher, and while he is retired, he has many contacts in New Scotland Yard and the Metropolitan Police, Interpol and even the FBI in the States. If there's any skeleton to be found in your closet, he'll find it," Perry said sharply.

Noland pointed at Perry.

"That man stole my smartphone. He could have put anything on it without me knowing. I'm legally Hannah's conservator. You'll have to fight me in court to keep her here. I can point out to them you'd like to get her fortune too. You've got no witnesses, Ed. I'm going to walk out of here, and you can't stop me. I can tie you up in court for months. I can question your right to the inheritance. I can make sure all this gets in the papers. Who do you think Hannah will believe when all of this nonsense, these idiotic accusations come out in court and I prove you wrong one by one?"

*"I will believe Edward!"*

## Chapter Eighteen: A Hero Lost

Noland spun around.

"Hannah-"

"**NO!** I do not want to hear another word from you! I called you son! I trusted you! I wanted a family! I longed for a family! All this time I had a father, my Papa survived, he survived! You did not tell me this! You are nothing to me now, nothing! Filthy bastard! I believed your lies, all of them. I was such a fool!" Hannah stepped up to him and slapped him across the face as hard as she could. Noland took a step toward her but found himself confronting an angry Alec Freeman on one side and an even angrier Ed Straker on the other. He backed away.

"I've had more than enough of you, old woman. As for you, Ed, if you try anything, try to ruin my reputation, I'll see you in court," Noland said, and walked out.

Hannah collapsed in Perry's arms, sobbing.

"Can't we stop that filthy man from simply leaving like that?" Valentine asked with disgust.

"If we lay a finger on him, he will use it against us, Cols," Perry said.

"We have a long legal fight ahead of us, but one way or another; I'll see that he pays for what he did to Hannah. Perry, I hope that Algernon can find us something solid to work with. Noland's right. He can try to make it look like we conspired together to frame him," Ed pointed out. "I hardly need that kind of publicity. Those paparazzi imbeciles will eat it all up. We're looking at a nightmare of a situation here."

"The bastard can use every trick in the book, Ed, but we'll get him," Alec vowed. Ed sat down, and made a steeple of his fingers, his eyes narrowed. "Ed, you've got to get some sleep. Virginia will take care of that studio matter for you, you know that."

"Alec, I have so little time left to me now. I just can't. I have far too much on my mind. I need to be certain that Virginia has no further problems with Clifford's friends because I doubt he acted alone. I also need to bring Claire home, where she belongs. I can't think about sleep now, Alec."

"Ed, for the love of God-" but Hannah interrupted Alec.

"Edward, my little Edward, is it true? Would you take a foolish old woman into your new home?"

"I certainly won't allow Noland to hurt you any further even if it means giving up my privacy and I'll see to it that you have a home here for however long you want to stay. I'm afraid I'm seriously ill, Hannah. I won't live long enough to handle the manor, I may not even be alive to see justice done when it comes to Noland. I don't want to give you any further grief, but I have to be honest about it. I'm going to die soon."

Ed sounded fragile to Alec, more fragile than he had ever seen the Commander appear and a growing panic rose up in him. Hannah had burst into tears.

"Oh my poor child. I knew something was terribly wrong! Oh that I must hear you say this now that I have found you again. My beloved little lost child." Hannah sobbed.

"Damn you Ed! " Alec finally shouted. "Don't just accept it like that! I refuse to believe that nonsense! Do you hear me? Too many of us look up to you and count on your strength! Too many of us need you! Damn it, I need you. What's happened to that bloody mindedness of yours, Ed? "

"Alec." Ed said, infinitely weary. "Don't do this. It won't change anything. Sit next to me."

"I think I should go and call Algernon to inquire further about our Claire. Excuse me." Perry said misty-eyed, and swiftly went out of the drawing room.

"Sir." Colin Valentine said but Ed motioned him away. "Take Hannah, would you? See that she and Angel have everything they need. I need to speak with my friend privately for a while."

"Yes, Sir. After you are finished, and before you sleep, I need to tell you something. I'm afraid it is very important or I would not bring it up now. It may change any immediate decisions you make regarding your fate and the manor."

"Idiot! Didn't you hear what he said? Get out of here!" Alec shouted at Valentine. Ed put a hand on Alec's shoulder as he sat beside the Commander.

"I'll see you later, Mr. Valentine." Ed told him.

"Yes Sir."

Valentine left with a sobbing Hannah.

"What am I going to do with you, Alec?" Ed sounded depressed.

"Why are you just giving up like this, Ed?"

"I'm so damn tired, Alec. I'm tired, defeated and at the moment I'm past caring if anyone knows it. Virginia will handle everything for me. I've just got to hang on until I see Claire and bring her here and then I'm going to help you get ready for what's coming. I intend for the two of us to go out like the officers we are. We'll face death with grace, dignity, and courage." Ed's tone was ragged with private grief he rarely revealed.

"Why the blazes have I put up with you for so long Ed? You filthy Yank. You're coming apart at the seams and I have to watch it. You're being human for a change, and every second I have to watch it happen is tearing me apart. "

"Do you recall how we met, Alec? The air base hospital in Thailand. I was a major and because of my POW status, they bumped me up to Lieutenant Colonel and later to full Colonel. They brought me a telegraph from Laurence Malone saying my mother had just died, my shoulder and life were blown to hell and I figured I would never fly again and living just didn't interest me anymore. Your friend, I don't recall his name had recently died and they'd put me in his ward."

"Roger Hastings was his name. I sometimes wonder if he didn't send you to me as a mischievous punishment for breaking our oath to one another?"

"What do you mean, Alec?"

"I guess that's why we got so attached to one another, you at your lowest point, me losing my best mate like that. Roger and I had promised one another we'd do everything together, including die together. I was so close to him we might have been carried in the same womb. His plane went down. They'd shot him into a bloody mess and he never recovered from his injuries. I'd let him down, broke my oath to him. I might have put a gun to my head that day but there you were, a perfectly groomed skeleton sitting in hospital, misery in your eyes. I'd never seen a sicker looking man in my life. You were looking at all the dust motes coming down from the window. I attached myself to you, I suppose. I should have gotten the hell out of that room before you ever spoke a word to me, you bloody minded bastard," Alec said quietly.

"How many years have you wanted to tell me that?" Ed smiled. "Did I intimidate you all that much back then, Alec?"

"Don't get in your head that I've ever been scared of you, Ed."

"Oh no, I wouldn't think of it, Alec. By the way, as I was your senior officer, don't you

think that ought to be Ed, *Sir?*"

Alec made a vulgar suggestion to Ed that was physically impossible for him to carry out. Ed grinned at him fondly.

"You never had any manners, Alec. No sense of decorum at all. That's one of the things I always liked about you. That last bit though, I'm not that talented, although I hate to disappoint you. Even if I could somehow twist myself into the proper position to do to myself what you want me to, I'd probably just get permanently stuck that way. The undertaker would have a hell of a time fitting me into my coffin not to mention fitting me into my dress blues. Incidentally, Alec, should I be so rude as to die before you do, make sure they bury you right beside me. I'm so used to you giving me a hard time that I'd probably be miserable without you being somewhere nearby to tell me how wrong I am about everything. You'd have to threaten to resign and leave me now and then, too. It used to be the one thing over the many, many years I've had the privilege of knowing you and calling you my friend that ever really frightened me, those times when you stood in front of me in anger and told me you intended to leave my side but I've gotten used to that too. Now I have no last minute argument left to make that will insure that you stay with me until they close my eyes and put me in a shroud," Ed admitted brokenly. He looked away from Alec and shut his eyes tightly, covering his face with his good hand. He shook his head slightly as if denying he'd even spoken the words aloud. Alec had to force himself to watch Ed's grief. He wasn't sure how he even managed a reply.

"Damn it, Ed. Damn it, did you have to say that *now?* *Did you?* I am such an *idiot*. Why did you have to be so damn proud, and wait all these years to tell me that you needed me, tell me what I already suspected was true? For God's sake, shut up Ed, *Sir*. Don't you see that you're all I have now too? Why the hell do you think I drink the way I do and leave a trail of women behind me? You're not the only person who can feel loneliness. Damned if I'll ever leave your side again, Ed. To hell with reality. To hell with facing facts. I won't allow you to die! Do you *HEAR* me? You've always ordered me around, damn you now for once the tables are turned." Tears were trickling slowly down Ed's cheeks. Ed took a handkerchief from inside his black Nehru jacket with his uninjured hand, wiped his own face in that impossibly dignified manner of his and gave it to Alec to use.

"I suppose I'm stuck with you then, Alec. Are those tears I see? Here I always thought you were a carefree and brave, if a trifle oversexed, and mind you I was gracious enough to overlook *that* tiny flaw-- second in command I could depend on, Alec." Ed said softly, raising his head slowly and studying his friend's weathered features with heartfelt affection. Alec thought he saw gratitude too in the impossibly blue eyes he knew so well.

"Keep that up and I'll personally kill you right now and put you in that coffin stark naked myself." Alec threatened, wiping his tears away.

"You probably just want to take pictures of my handsome face so you could make a profit from selling them to your ex-girlfriends. That reminds me, how many ex-girlfriends do you have now? I've lost count." Ed playfully pretended to be counting on his fingers and having a difficult time doing it.

*They'd always used humor to lighten their burdens, Alec thought. We're two of a kind. Two old war horses. Only when he dies, a real hero will be lost. The world should mourn him for his years of dedication and service, but they won't, and he really wouldn't want that anyway. My God, how can this really be happening to us? What will our death be like?*

"Are you scared of dying, Ed?" Alec suddenly asked him.

Ed was silent for a moment.

"Would you think less of me if I said I was, Alec?" he replied quietly.

"You're getting old and forgetful, Commander. I told you already Ed, *nothing* could make me think less of you. You've always been a hero to me."

"I'm no hero, Alec," Ed said firmly, meaning every word. Alec only laughed, startling him.

"I figured you'd say that. Any real hero would. If you weren't one, you wouldn't deny it."

Ed rolled his eyes as an inadequate response.

Alec smiled at him.

"You always have to give me a hard time, don't you, Alec? I always had to fight you for everything, every inch of the way. Look, after I have that talk with Valentine, after I see what it is he wants, I'll go to bed and grab some sleep. I'll even accept that morphine if it's still available. My wrist and chest are beginning to hurt like hell."

"No more of this giving up and talking about dying, Ed. Let's pretend just for today that nothing is wrong with you and go on from there." Alec urged Ed. The Commander sighed, nodded.

"All right. Come on. Help me up. Let's go see what Valentine wants so bad that it can't wait until morning." Ed chuckled.

"Ed."

"What now?"

"If you die before me-"

"You'll kill me?" Ed finished for his friend with a knowing smile. Alec chuckled and nodded at him, and carefully helped him stand up. Ed leaned on him heavily, and they walked out of the room in silent defiance of what was to come.

Neither of them had even guessed that an elderly woman had been concealing herself behind the door Perry had come out of, secretly listening to every word the two men said. Had Colin Valentine seen her, he would have identified her as being Dr. Chloe Montgomery.

## Chapter Nineteen: **Breath of a Dragon**

"All right, Mr. Valentine. What is it that can't wait? Make it fast. I think the events of the previous day are beginning to catch up with me."

"You might want to sit down, Edward," Perry said. Valentine stood beside him, clearly nervous.

"Why is that?" Ed stayed on his feet. Alec was getting more and more worried about him, he could see it on the Australian's face. The men were all sitting on stone benches situated deep in the garden despite the cold weather, and the day was crisp and splendid. That Silk Wood Manor was as beautiful as his mother had written in her diary was not to be denied. Why couldn't he pretend to be Lord of The Manor for the last days he'd ever walk on earth? *Why?*

*Because a Lord needed a Lady.*

*If only Claire were here to see this. To smell the flowers. To watch the falling snow blanket the sky. Everyone I love I destroy, Ed thought. I'm responsible for what happened to her too. No, I can't think that way it won't change anything. So quiet here. It shouldn't be this quiet at Christmas time. There should be merriment. The ringing of bells. So peaceful. Claire would love it here. Claire and her belief in romance, soul mates and fairy tales. I miss you, darling sweetheart. I'm thinking of you. I love you. I'll die loving you.*

"You never have once asked me about my ability to change into different forms. How I achieve it," Perry started to explain.

Ed gave a curt wave of dismissal, obviously not in the mood for any discussion. He drew his mouth into his taut line of disapproval, which was so familiar to Alec. His tone was dark when he finally spoke.

"Perry, a long time ago I sat and told a lot of dignitaries that we lived in an age where science fiction was becoming fact. I've seen the bodies of UFO attack victims. Men, women, children. I've seen enough of what once seemed unthinkable for a thousand lifetimes. There isn't much left that would surprise me. How you do what you do is your business. Sometimes in my job it pays not to ask questions."

"Suppose I told you that-"

"I long ago assumed Mr. Valentine can do the same thing. Is that what you're trying to tell me, Perry? Save the detailed explanations for later. Excuse the expression but I'm dead on my feet," Ed looked wryly at Alec, who just frowned. Ed did look like death to him, with his classic good looks he looked like a tragic masterpiece of art. Alec had always thought of him as a breed apart, or some statue sculpted far too perfectly to exist. Now that perfection was fading, dimming.

*Dying. A hero lost.*

"Sir, we are all refugees here. We too are victims of a slow, deliberate genocide. You must understand that. You must trust us. At least give us time to-" Valentine was saying.

Ed was pinching the bridge of his nose, and Alec knew that meant the Commander was having one of his customary migraines. Ed let his hand fall.

"Mr. Valentine, I can't say that I understand where you're going with all this talk about refugees. I get that all of you don't want your lives here to be disrupted. I've done all I can to make up for the way you were treated by that -"

The Commander's impatient sentence was cut off by what was unmistakably the peeling of a bell. The chapel bell. Ed frowned. That was no bell of glad tidings. It had sounded like a

death knell to him.

"What the hell does Angel think he's playing at?" complained Alec, thinking along the same lines as Ed.

Ed's eyes narrowed. He sniffed the air urgently like some silver bloodhound. Horror widened his eyes.

"Oh my God. FIRE!" he cried.

They ran as fast back toward the manor as they could, but already the smoke and flying embers and ash surrounded them. What had been a snowy sky moments ago had turned to swirls of menacing grey, and their ears were mercilessly bombarded by screams and the crackling and roaring of flames. Perry had his cell out, yelling for emergency services and the fire brigade to get there as soon as possible. Alec reached the main building first and saw that Hannah was in a line using the garden hose to fight the flames, while others handed down buckets of water but they were tackling an impossible job. Angel and others were helping terrified people out, but a good many of them were mindlessly carrying mirrors, paintings, furniture, and books, in an effort to save them from the flames. It was a nightmare. Ed was aghast at their actions.

"NO! For God's sake don't! Save yourselves! NO! That's an order, do you hear me?" Ed yelled, horrified. "Valentine, can't you get through to these people of yours?"

"Sir, those antiques are worth thousands, millions of pounds-" he hesitated.

"Let them burn! Save the people, for God's sake! Have you lost your mind? Do you really think I'm the same kind of man as Noland is? Help *them*, damn it!" Ed snapped.

"You heard him! Run! Run!" Valentine exclaimed and then ran toward the manor before Ed could stop him.

Ed desperately looked around for Alec and saw that he was helping carry a body out of the servants' quarters with two people next to him, who were sobbing. It was clear the flames had claimed several victims. The breath of the dragon. Fire. It had killed him in the hallucination and now it was becoming all too nightmarishly real. Already it was becoming increasingly difficult to breathe. Ed joined the line of people passing buckets, but he was grimacing because of his injured hand and ribs and he began coughing badly and needed to break away. Perry was about to stop him, but he realized it was useless, knowing Ed's flawed personality, his mania to serve others without much regard for himself. Some frantic minutes went by and the heat, smoke, and flames were rising out of control. Ed was back again offering help of any kind to anyone who needed it. People were screaming and sobbing. Burning embers were carried away on the air like deadly dandelion seeds that replanted fire elsewhere.

"Edward, the fire brigade and ambulances are on their way!" Perry yelled to be heard over the chaos.

"We need that doctor of yours you mentioned, damn it. Where is she?" Ed was coughing continuously now; his usually vibrant voice reduced to an alarming rasp.

"It was she, Chloe Montgomery who started the fire," Valentine said, having appeared out of nowhere and now he was offering Ed a silver goblet of cold water. Ed couldn't afford to refuse as each breath he took grew more painful.

"My God, why?" he demanded, after a long gulp. It was liquid heaven, but he wouldn't allow himself to finish it. He handed it to Perry, who accepted it gratefully and sipped it as if he was having high tea with Her Majesty.

"I suppose she felt it better that the rest of us die now, rather than have us hunted down again like helpless animals are hunted and slaughtered for their furs. She felt it better for all of

us to end our fight for survival. I'm afraid she overheard you and Alec talking about accepting your deaths. She was never the strongest among us. She forgot we would not allow you or yours to die, Commander," Colin Valentine said. "She saw you as threatening our home. We are not exactly immortal in these bodies. It is only through coming here to be together that we survived, Commander."

Ed looked as if he was about to collapse, and yet he was straining to hear each word. He stared at Valentine. "What the hell are you talking about, Valentine? *Commander*? Perry, how much have you told-?"

"Edward, you and Alec must come with me. There is no time to lose now." Valentine had abandoned formality and was taking Ed's arm as gently as he could, but Ed grimaced and pulled away from him in a quick jerk that made him go whiter with new pain.

"What the hell do you think you are you doing?" he demanded. "Take your hands off me."

"Ed," Alec yelled from a few yards away, "Did you see where Angel went?"

"We'll discuss this later, Perry." Ed snapped, and headed toward Alec. The servants' quarters were skeletons now but his thoughts were solely focused on finding the priest. Ed stopped, relieved as Angel once again appeared from behind Alec, lovingly carrying a statue of the Blessed Mother Mary.

"I just couldn't let Her be destroyed, Alec. The Virgin was always Frances' favorite. Sorry if I gave you a bit of a scare. What a terrible thing! How could anyone willingly destroy a place as old and beautiful as this and kill other human beings in the process?" Angel too was yelling to be heard over the thundering of the flames. Alec was shaking his head at Angel, with a tired grin. He watched Angel go over to the rising number of dead bodies, and the reverend set the statue down in their midst and began to bless them. A group of people who had survived, in varying states of shock and exhaustion and fear, gathered around him for comfort. Even the statue of the Virgin seemed exhausted to Alec. Alec turned toward where Ed had been stumbling blindly around in the smoke filled air, and thought he saw the Commander fall, and then scramble to lift himself up with that damned pride of his, probably hoping he hadn't been seen, Alec thought. Alec broke into a run to help, but halfway to where he'd thought he'd last seen Ed, he suddenly wasn't there anymore.

"ED!" Alec exclaimed.

Finally, he saw Ed again moving in the grey mist unsteadily and he was shaking his head firmly. Alec sagged with relief.

"I'm all right, Alec! Did we get everyone out?" Ed cried with what little was left of his voice. He heard the distinct sound of an ambulance siren, and slumped against a wall without knowing where he was. "Thank God," he muttered, coughing, panic rising in him.

"**ED!** We have to get out of here!"

Ed was really choking now, and began to stumble about to find Alec, but he was still practically blinded by the smoke and ash. He was headed right for stables that had been converted into a garage, and it was aflame.

"**ED! LOOK OUT!**" Alec screamed hoarsely.

Ed stared into grayness without comprehension, too overcome by the smoke to understand the imminent danger and he turned slightly. A large wood and stone beam that was twice his height had been loosened by the immense heat. The beam toppled, struck him and he fell pinned mercilessly under its weight. Alec heard his terrible screams of pain and ran toward him, adrenalin pumping throughout his body. The beam was lit with stray flames that had

escaped being extinguished in the fall. Ed was in the process of being burned to death. Alec was desperately trying to grip it where it still was intact and not burning, but it was nearly impossible. He removed his jacket and struck at it fiercely to douse the remaining trickles of flame that clung to it with some success. He seemed to be unaware of the pain it was causing in his broken arm.

"No Alec, get away, I'm finished, I'm done for, just get out of here!" Ed gasped. It was beyond Alec's comprehension that Ed even could still speak. His face was bloodied in patches, ash streaked, body blistered reddened and raw. Most of his clothing was ripped and blackened. It was as if the fire had sucked away all his color except for his blue eyes. Ed moaned as Alec struggled to free him.

Desperation grew in Alec.

"I -- can't move--it--bloody hell -- someone **HELP ME!**"

"Alec just **go**, damn it. Get out of here! Go and **live! GO!** That's an **order!**" A battered Ed yelled and then he screamed again as crawling licks of flame reached his face. A helpless Alec beat flames once again away with the jacket until they died out. Alec gripped the beam, yelled in pain without being conscious of it and began to make headway purely on adrenaline that was all he had left. Perry and Colin were at last freed from helping others and hurried over, Angel swiftly trotting behind them and together they helped him finally free a badly injured Ed. Ed was pulled out safely, but his face was still blanketed by grey ash and red, raw blisters. His normally pristine silver hair disheveled, his bloodied features almost unidentifiable except for the torture-filled blue eyes. He jerked and screamed in agony one final time, and then went still. Alec didn't seem to be aware that he too was burned, and that undoubtedly he had worsened his own injuries in his desperate effort to help his friend. Medical personnel and firefighting teams were beginning to cover the grounds. Two medics knelt and bent down over a motionless Ed and one fitted him with an oxygen mask. They did a quick exam and one shook his head firmly and snapped the lead to the mask off then removed then discarded the mask itself.

"This one's already gone, I'm afraid. First, second and third degree burns, chest crushed in if you ask me, vitals nil, legs smashed, probably massive internal bleeding. That he even survived that long while being burned shows the kind of will power he had to have had."

"Gone? Gone where? What the hell are you talking about? Don't you know who that is? That's Ed Straker damn it, now get him to hospital! No damn you, why are you covering his face like that? He can't breathe that way, you bloody moron!" Alec yelled.

"Alec, Q-Tip has gone to his heavenly Father and finally is at peace." Angel wept. Hannah was sobbing next to him. Alec ignored them.

"Sir, sir, no sir, you need to come with us. You've been badly burnt and probably are suffering from smoke inhalation and shock. You need treatment straightaway."

"For God's sake do something, he's badly hurt! His name is Ed, he is my commanding off- he's my best friend, don't you understand?" Alec yelled.

"Sir, I regret to tell you your friend has died. You're in shock. Now let us treat you. Help me get him secured on the trolley, will you, Andrew? Good man. Think we'll have to put him in dreamland. Here we go now, one two three that's it."

"Help him, you idiots! No! *ED!* Damn it, Ed! *ED!*"

"Alec dear, don't worry," Perry said gently. "Let them take you. We'll look after Edward for you."

Alec was going to reply but he felt a brief sharp sensation, and something that smelled of

rubber was being put into position over his face against his will, then he knew nothing else.

Certain that the two medics had gone, and after making sure no one else was looking in their direction, Perry lifted Ed up with enormous reverence into his arms. Followed by Valentine, he walked some distance away until all of them disappeared into a mist. Angel led Hannah away to safety, stroking her face tenderly, the touch sustaining both of them. She was shaking and clinging tightly to him now, the way she had clung to the Americans who had finally freed her from the nightmare of Auschwitz.

The sky over what remained of Silk Wood Manor sparkled and glimmered with fresh falling snowflakes. Snow covered the wounds that the fire had created, like a soft toy offered to comfort a frightened child.

## Chapter Twenty: **Cheerio**

Algernon Fisher had gotten the call from Perry and had instantly turned the car around. Jay Noland's face was burned into his head now, and he had Perry's description of the car Noland had hired. So it was an easy bit of business to find himself a patch of greenery to hide his car behind and wait. The news of Silk Wood Manor becoming a pile of ash was a shock filed away neatly for him to consider at some future point in time. Right now he was just what he had been, a cop determined to get his criminal. This one was special. Not that the rest of them hadn't been, especially the man he had loved, Detective-Inspector George Fisher of the CID, shot in cold blood while working undercover at the dilapidated Rock Bottom cafe, which he'd heard now was up for sale. Algernon believed in the system, bringing them in, testifying at the old Bailey. He'd seen his share of criminals go behind bars, and he'd seen his share of criminals freed to roam around London. All criminals in the end got the thirst for another go at it, and usually he would just be patient and wait until he got them on the third, sometimes fourth offense. It took patience. He had all the patience in the world. Noland had played a mean game against the old woman Hannah. Algernon had never had the pleasure of meeting a woman blessed with that kind of courage. He knew that he wanted that opportunity, maybe it would rub off on him. Courage had never come easily to him and that was truer after George's murder. Ah there it was, and going a good ten, even fifteen over the 60 mile speed limit. Algernon soon was catching up with the white Austin-Healey without breaking a sweat. Serviceable car, he supposed, but not a creative choice in his opinion. Of course not everyone was a butler for the honorable Sir Peregrine Falcon, not everyone had the privilege of driving a Rolls Royce, sparkling like a diamond and clean enough to eat off of. But then Perry collected cars like some people collected porcelain figurines. He collected people, too. Otherwise Algernon Fisher never would have met Perry or the creatures he transformed himself into. For example, the animals. The falcon, the skunk, the deer, that mouse Commander Straker had christened Alec. Not to mention Commander Straker, that gay nurse, the taxi driver, and once even the prime minister herself. Pers had finally gotten better at being other people. Practice was all it took.

The siren was going now, and finally Jay Noland stopped the car and waited. He had a mile long smile on his face as Algernon walked up to him.

"Good morning, officer! Have I done something wrong?" Noland said cheerily.

"Speeding. American, are you?"

"Jewish-American. I'm Jewish. Keep that in mind. I know my rights. Here's my business card, I'm a lawyer. I suppose you call it a barrister? A solicitor?"

"To me, you're just trouble. Let me see your identification card and wallet, please."

"Certainly if you insist. Look, I'm really in a hurry, I have to get to Heathrow as soon as I can. I'll pay the fine or whatever it is you need."

"Do you have a passport?"

"Of course. Here you are."

"All of this seems to be in order."

"If there's some problem I can call the American consulate. I have friends in the American consulate," Noland said meaningfully.

"And I'm Sir Winston Churchill. Step out of the car, please."

"Now wait a minute. I'm an American. From Boston. I'm not one of you damn people."

"That sounds like you have a problem with people who aren't American. Now, that isn't

polite I ask myself, is it?"

"All right, I've had enough of this. What's your name?"

"I told you. Detective-Inspector Winston Churchill. Now get out of the car," Algernon said impatiently.

"I want to make a call. "

"Now sir, normally I have a cheery disposition, but you see, Americans that come to our obviously superior country for holiday and assume that because they are American, they don't have to obey our laws and follow the rules, now that really troubles me. Puts me off my cream bun and my mug of tea with milk. Please step out of the car, sir. Step out into the sunshine, smell that fresh Cotswold air."

Jay Noland stepped out of the car. He studied the police officer and Algernon studied him back without expression and patted him down.

"You're wearing a gun. I thought British police officers didn't carry guns."

"Most of them don't, sir. I do."

"Look, if you are going to write me a damn ticket for speeding, than do it. I told you, I have to get to Heathrow."

"Ticket? Oh no, sir. I'm arresting officer, barrister if you like, magistrate all in one. I find you guilty of speeding, being unacceptably rude and annoying, and causing the whole world grief."

"You have to be crazy!" Noland laughed. Algernon casually took his pistol out of the holster and took off the safety.

"Wait a minute, what the hell are you doing?"

"Carrying out your death sentence, sSir."

"You're *insane*. You're really insane." Noland looked like he was about to sick up the dinner and whisky he'd had a few hours earlier.

"I'm actually Algernon Fisher. I call myself friend to the good Ed Straker and I work exclusively for Sir Peregrine Falcon. Pers tells me that you're likely going to be a pest to Mr. Straker regarding Hannah Safra. Make a bloody mess of things. He's a very private person, Straker is. We can't have that happen, sir."

"No, please, what do you want? There has to be something you want! I make a lot of money. You can have all of it. Here, keep my wallet, my Rolex watch, it's probably worth more money than you'd make in a lifetime. Just let me go. I won't bother Straker! I won't bother anybody," Noland pleaded, shaking now. Algernon knocked him down.

"Sir, that isn't a bribe, is it? Oh dear me. I do so hate people who try to bribe me. Sir, your trousers are wet and there's a nasty stench in the air. Did we have an accident? Not feeling all that cocky and sure of ourselves now, are we?"

" Just let me go. Please. I'm begging you. Don't do this! PLEASE! What the hell do you want from me?"

" What do I want? I want you out of the good and decent Commander Straker's life for good. Goodbye, Mr. Noland. Or as some of us like to say here in England, cheerio."

It took one bullet deposited neatly into the brain. No use wasting ammo, as George always said.

## Chapter Twenty-One: **Tabula Rasa**

They'd told her she had lived in England. They'd even given her a notebook full of information that she had been instructed to put into a special vaporizer as soon as she was done with it. These people of SHADO were so security conscious that they didn't use the usual shredders. All those names, color photos. She studied the one labeled Alec Freeman. Rugged and determined looking, even handsome in his own way in spite of the pockmarked face and the weathered skin, with that sweep of dark brown hair, the friendly blue eyes, a wide smile, she imagined it to be the look of a man who loved life and knew life loved him. There was Peregrine Falcon, some government official in England, he looked like her idea of a wizard with his long curly white hair tied back with a leather cord and the small beady dark eyes of an albino raven. She was told she had lived with him once, and an ex-policeman Algernon Fisher who now was Perry's butler. She liked his picture too, very clean-cut, blue eyes, ash blond hair to frame his features, a polite smile. Reliable looking, she'd thought. The hardest photo to look at had been Reginald Devon's. They had explained to her that she had killed him in self-defense. It should have revolted her but somehow it didn't. Perhaps it was the various medications she'd been given. They'd even told her they were using a drug that was in a testing process. She'd actually come out of the fugue state after having it administered to her they'd said. She had been bleeding from the ears and they hadn't explained it. It had finally stopped. But they told her there was so much to look forward to, and they told her she was safe. This SHADO was such an unbelievable organization. Headquarters all over the world, even on the moon, the founding headquarters in England, and she had been in the medical division of SHADO's San Francisco branch. They had told her she was a doctor who had been planning to branch out as a psychologist, but that too had eventually disappeared from her mind because of the drug she'd been given against her will. They'd even showed her a film that had been sent to them, taken from a small security camera. The sound hadn't been all that good, but it had gone through some sort of computer process and she had watched it carefully. They explained that the man who had attacked her was SHADO technician David Clifford, while she was doing some sort of routine amnesia procedure on him. The drug had wiped out her memory, and had continued to impair her memory all the way up to her being assaulted by her former friend Reginald Devon. She had been told repeatedly she was lucky to still have any brain function at all. She had watched the man Clifford take a syringe and take blood from her arm and then she watched him inject the blood into his own arm. He had been about to kill her when the building she had been in was hit by what seemed like an earthquake, he'd had a look of panic and he had fled, but they assured her he was dead now.

She was going through the photographs again in her mind, in an effort to see if any memories of the people came back to her. They'd been amused at her impressions of the photos. But in the end she had to disappoint them, and tell them they had no real special significance for her.

*Except one.*

The photograph of a strikingly handsome man in his forties or early fifties wearing what looked to her like a white priest's collar under a perfectly tailored button less black suit had been labeled **Straker**. He was facing the camera, and clearly aware of being photographed. He wasn't enjoying it, judging by the long slit of impatience his mouth had formed. He appeared to be thin. He had remarkably large, clear blue eyes and a scattering of lines all over his face that didn't detract from his striking good looks in the least bit. At first she had been curious enough

to ask if he used blue contact lenses to enhance his looks, surely that wasn't a natural color? But it was they'd assured her. He had a strong nose that fit the dominant features of his face perfectly. His cheekbones were prominent. His skin was very fair. His lips were perfectly shaped and very pink, even held tightly together the way they were, she could still see that. The chin had a suggestion of a cleft. His fine, beautifully groomed hair might have been either silver or blond, she couldn't decide which because of the way the photograph had been lit. He wore bangs extending down the sides of his face until their width diminished in size. The hair then curled slightly backward and rested in points at the very bottom of each ear. It looked exactly like the kind of style you'd see on a Roman senator. They were amused by her observation and suggested Caligula to her but hadn't explained why. She had the feeling that some of them didn't like Straker very much. For some reason, that had angered her, but she chose to keep her anger to herself. He was a beautiful man. She didn't dare tell them that. It might have suggested she thought him less than masculine. How could anyone in his or her right mind suggest that this man was anything less than an alpha male. He exuded sexuality. If that had been sunlight coming from him, you'd be sunburned for months. His whole expression said fool around with me and that's the very last thing you'll do on earth. Yet the eyes concealed sensitivity. He had an air of arrogance and command about him, she could very easily picture him in his uniform with gold braid on his shoulder boards and medals on his chest. Command. An air of command-now she remembered what had been said-

*...you know, now that I work in medical center I hope you don't expect me to be like the people you work for that run around wildly doing whatever you say even when you haven't even said it yet. That damn air of command of yours ,it doesn't scare me one iota. I'm your equal, Edward.*

*...Absolutely. Now go and get me a fresh cup of coffee.*

*...All right. Hey! Stop that!*

He'd laughed at her. Or had he? Are they taking me to this man? They told me that's what they're doing. They said they got a top level Aegis video transmission that they were able to confirm as coming from Straker. That he had ordered me to be debriefed and brought back to England at once. Because, even with all that strength, that arrogance, the élan so apparent in that face of his, I saw something else. Something in the deepest most private part of him that I'm sure he does all he can to conceal, lest he be hurt again. It's there all right, in those sensitive eyes. You can see it if you look hard enough. Pain. Loneliness. Longing. He looked like a brilliant child expected to exceed, but a child no one had bothered to hold.

Are you waiting for me, Edward? You know what the funny thing is? I feel like I've loved you forever. If I don't see you soon we will both die. I'm coming, Edward.

## Chapter Twenty-Two: Breakfast Is Swerved

Ed blinked a few times, stretched, glad that the all too familiar nightmare he'd had of being captured and experimented on by aliens was over. His hand shot up and out slowly from underneath the covers and searched on the nightstand for the hotel digital alarm clock. He always awoke long before the alarm went off but it was just after noon. He stopped, stared at his hand, which rested on the clock face. *There should be a brace on my wrist, he thought. I'm not in pain. What's going on here? For that matter why was I underneath the covers? I don't like the blankets drawn up to my neck like that. I always sleep with them at the waist, I suppose it has something to do with the damn claustrophobia. Christ, this is an electric blanket. I'm not at the hotel at all. Where the hell am I?*

A voice he knew startled him.

"You know, one of these days you're going to give me cardiac arrest considering all the times I've sat next to you after you've been shot or stabbed or what have you just wondering if I'd ever see your ugly face again or whether I'd actually have to dig up that eulogy I wrote chock full of lies about what a terrific guy you were to work with, and how much we'd all miss you at SHADO. This is a perfect example of your lack of gratitude for my loyalty. I had second degree burns, smoke inhalation, I tore several muscles, re-broke my arm, you name it I had it and all because I tried to save your ungrateful skinny arse," Alec Freeman complained with a smile.

"Alec, believe me, I have no idea what you're talking about-" Ed sat straight up in bed and pushed the ivory silk bedspread away from him and after that the tan electric blanket. He saw he was wearing a white silk pajama top that had pulled down enough during sleep to reveal sparse hair upon a lissome chest, hair that looked like it was no more substantial than dew on a snowdrop. He was in a four-poster bed intricately carved from oak, with brocade curtains hanging all around it. Two were tied back with silken cords accented with a heavy gold tassel. The brick and marble fireplace in the room was crackling and blazing. Ed wondered why seeing the flames made him more than a little uneasy.

He saw Alec Freeman sitting nonchalantly nearby on a burgundy leather wing chair, wearing a blue silk robe over matching pajamas, from which chest hair as dark as oak was peeking out, in clear contrast to his own. Black velvet slippers dangled casually from Alec's toes as he sat, legs crossed. A small piecrust table was beside him, with empty plates, silverware and a matching sterling silver vase full of rosebuds. Ed could smell egg on a damask napkin that had fallen near the bed and it made the Commander realize he was unbelievably hungry. Then it hit him and the blood drained from his face.

"What?" Ed searched his palms and the top of his hands, ran his fingers nervously over his face feeling for blisters. All he discovered was a good deal of beard. No pain. No trace from that agony at all. He'd burned! *God help him he never wanted to go through that hell again-he could smell his own flesh burning-screaming, screaming--*

"Beginning to come back to you, is it Ed?" Alec was enjoying every moment of it. For one thing, he'd never seen Ed unshaven. Not surprisingly, he still looked every inch the Commander.

"I died. I got crushed and burned to death. My God, I really died. The fire. Wait. I shouldn't feel this good if I died like that. Why do I feel this good? Alec why do *you* look that good? Alec, report!"

"A SHADO report? Oh, not this time, Ed. I want to watch your face when you hear

everything. I will tell you that Jay Noland was shot dead by Algernon Fisher..." Alec enjoyed watching Ed's eyes widen at that juicy dollop of news, but was that a trace of a relieved smile he'd seen for a second? Alec went on, "and repairs on Silk Wood Manor are nearly complete, and at this very moment you're in the master bedroom of a hidden cottage on your property that nobody was allowed to enter, except your mother, Lawrence Malone, and Colin. He told me she read in that bed you're in now, kept her diary in that bed and finally died in that bed. Angel was here alone praying over you earlier and he swears he heard and saw a woman in here, but you know Angel and how he believes in well, angels. Hannah, Angel and I have been taking turns watching over you. Peter Carlin recovered enough to fly out from Heathrow this morning to retrieve Claire from our San Francisco branch, they thought the Aegis directive to release her came from you, but it was actually Perry imitating you well enough to trick them. She finally came out of the fugue state you'll be glad to know, and is well enough to travel. She was given some experimental drug not very different in chemical composition to X-50 or so one of their medics tells me. Whatever it was, it worked. She should be here tomorrow. That film that Phil Dexter secretly taped of David Clifford showed that he took some of Claire's blood after he attacked her with the amnesia drug."

"Clifford would have easy access to our medical records, he undoubtedly craved the life prolonging bacteria in her blood." Ed's heart had been doing the one minute mile when he heard Alec say Claire was coming home, and he figured Perry had been behind it. He knew Perry had a special fondness for her. He wondered if Carlin had taken SHADO aircraft. *All right, Straker. Admit it. That would be one example of a lack of discipline on Peter's part which you'd ignore. Besides, he told himself, discipline was Lake's problem now.*

"Good Morning, Commander. I trust you slept well?" Colin Valentine pushed a butler's cart full of food into the bedroom and Ed felt like one of Pavlov's hungriest dogs. "I have some breakfast for you. I am afraid we still not have been able to restore the electricity for long; the power was cut off in the fire and it keeps going out. I am told they are working on restoring it. Please do not tell me you are not eating anything as Alec tells me you are prone to do when under stress. You haven't eaten for eight days. You needed your sleep. Fortunately, I was able to use Perry's kitchen to provide everyone with food. Alec especially had a healthy appetite." He chuckled.

"Eight days? All right! You have a hell of a lot of explaining to do, Mr. Valentine. Start at the beginning."

"I would go easy on him, Ed. He healed us completely and saved both our lives and he'll do the same for Claire," Alec said, casually inspecting the food on the tray Colin brought with the intention of stealing some of Ed's breakfast. Colin smiled at him and poured more coffee for Alec into his mug.

"Alec, be quiet. All right, Valentine, I'm waiting."

"Commander, you must eat. The transference always makes the host hungry. Besides, as good as you may feel, you will still remain a little weak and dizzy for a while as you were the most badly infected, if I must use that distressing and inaccurate term."

"What transference?" Ed said, confused.

"Commander, the closest word in your language for what happened to you is transference. The bacteria that Marjorie Jenkins injected you with was not lethal, which you already know. It was actually a race that we call Maelstrom. Maelstrom also means, depending on the way you say it, a joining of minds for a particular purpose. Maelstrom. I was told by Alec that is also a word in your language, one which you recently used. That doesn't surprise

me."

"What?" Ed heard himself say. Alec smiled at him, remembering his remarks in the Triumph's restaurant as Ed clearly did as well.

"In the attempt to adjust to your body at the time Marjorie Jenkins attacked you, my people needed to change form more rapidly than they normally do. At first, some Maelstrom were able to adjust, but that process was slowly harming you and some of them died with no self-awareness left. In human bodies, dead Maelstrom would appear as nothing more than light to excessive bleeding from the ears. When you traveled to South Korea and suffered that relapse of malaria due to your immune system failing, even more died. They had no means to survive, and although they attempted to communicate with you, you only experienced it as a series of strange hallucinations. The hallucination aboard the Sejong 1 of being surrounded by your captors in the prisoner of war camp, was a result of what had happened not only to you but to them. It represented the Maelstrom feeling imprisoned inside you, tortured, fighting to survive in strange surroundings as you had, but you were again unable to understand them. After that, you had the hallucination of slaying the dragon, which again was an attempt to communicate that they wished to make you aware of the mutual need to slay the aliens you were familiar with, and your sovereignty in the matter. By then, they became aware of Alec being in your Maelstrom, we understand such close bonds of friendship. In your hallucination he assisted you as your squire because they hoped that would be familiar to you. Commander, they wanted to communicate, and unconsciously, so did you. Yes, Commander, I now have the memory of your hallucinations. Please allow me to finish. You made some progress. However, your brain and body was not prepared for the struggle going on inside it so in the hallucination you imagined you killed the beast, which represented the aliens. You still died. You and they had failed. You became even more ill, which meant that Maelstrom surviving in you had again changed, but this time in a way that was affecting all of your senses and was threatening your and their sanity. Try to imagine having your mind overwhelmed with millions and millions of sounds, Commander and trying to tell one from the other on a daily basis and find sense in it and somehow know that doing so was vital for your survival. That was what was happening to your brain. You gradually lost control, your emotions were confused. It is why you were so quick to despair, all your psychological defenses were gone. That will continue to some extent, do not be troubled about it. Once you are part of a Maelstrom you are never the same."

Ed and Alec exchanged glances. Alec nodded. Ed was quiet for a while then finally he addressed Valentine when he could manage to keep the fear out of his voice.

"You're talking about me being infected with *aliens*. Not an alien virus. *Aliens*."

"Sir, yes I am not originally human, I myself am part of Maelstrom and I traveled to Earth with others who wished to learn about your world. You see, those of our home world assume many forms in our long life spans to survive and learn, many times we have traveled to your Earth, and often we stay. Once, there was a human Colin Valentine, just as there once was a human Peregrine Falcon. Usually permanent transference only occurs when a human host body is ready, and normally at their death and with their assent but we have accepted living bodies too. The man whose body you see joined us willingly, his essence, what our friend Angel would call the soul, that alone remained so he is a part of my Maelstrom and I can adjust my appearance, as does Perry, so that we appear differently. Unlike the aliens you have fought, we do not simply steal bodies to occupy. That would be unthinkable to us. Until those aliens you fought came to our planet and used us in experiments to stave off the death of their species, we never even knew such hatred existed. The idea that these callous 'aliens' were out

there and wanted our bodies disturbed us as it disturbed you. We were truly victims; we faced mass genocide at their hands in the way humans such as Hannah Safra faced Hitler's final solution merely because she was considered impure. With no way to defeat them at first, for we are not naturally a violent species, more came to Earth once we learned their technology and SHADO's existence through our assailant's thoughts. We are naturally telepathic as you may have guessed, can project thoughts and we can manipulate matter for our own purposes. That UFO which crashed in Korea was intentionally planted by Maelstrom. Aboard that spacecraft was the technology which Maelstrom developed, and hoped your SHADO would use. They did, to build the Sejong 1 and its weapon. The ship that you destroyed, was one of several with which we hoped to defend ourselves, it was stolen from us by the aliens. The day your body died as a result of the fire, I removed Maelstrom that remained in you and sped up your healing process. Like those in Alec, and which had transferred to Claire, the surviving Maelstrom were self-aware. They have now transferred to me and to Perry. Both of us are aliens, yes. I sense that it frightens you. Commander, if you wish to take us prisoner, to expose us, we will not fight you. But I beg of you, Sir. Silk Wood Manor has sheltered many of us and kept us safe. When we take any form for this long, it is more difficult to go back although we can change our appearance easily. We will die if that is your choice. Commander, I know that Earth's safety has to be your priority. We would gladly continue to offer you the technology if you protect us. That technology remains in we Maelstrom. Please let us live. We are one way you can defeat the enemy and still lead a full life, Sir . Many of us have been working here, on a world that is not our own, but in these new bodies we have found some peace, some happiness, some fulfillment. We could not believe it when Perry told us he had found you, and we were elated when finally the previous human Bentrige, who sold this place to Lawrence Malone, left. He had treated us horribly and we could not complain to the authorities, lest our secret be revealed. Alec came at last and I knew he too carried Maelstrom, so I had to think of some way to get you to stay. I fear that your SHADO would imprison us, experiment on us as the Nazis did to the victims of the Holocaust. We will cooperate with you Commander, but we want to remain free. Is that not a concept you understand? You yourself have been a prisoner. Imprisoned by the enemy, but if I may say so, you also have imprisoned yourself."

Straker stared at him, but found he could not deny the words. He'd always had respect for the truth. Finally he found he could respond, knowing Alec's eyes were on him.

"God help me. Aliens. I guess part of me knew it. Perry being able to change his form at will like that. I think I didn't want to ask many questions because the answers I might get were too frightening to think about. For years the word alien only meant one thing to me, and now, now all this time I've been carrying them inside me the same way a mother carries a child. Now, I've been shown kindness from whom I normally would have considered a deadly enemy. You saved our lives."

"If Colin hadn't finally gotten to you after your injuries killed you, you'd be facing a post mortem. You literally had a maelstrom going on inside you in more ways than one," Alec told him.

"Sir. I beg of you. Our lives, our destinies are in your hands. As soon as your Claire arrives here, we will remove Maelstrom from her, try to cure her and perhaps her memory may return. After that, it is up to you. Now you see why it was so important that Claire be brought back to you at once? Perry had been around you the longest, you see. He had taken your form once before. It was a simple matter to learn the Aegis security codes and procedures he needed to know to convince them that he was you to have Claire brought back immediately."

"It's a good thing he's on our side, Ed," Alec smiled.

"Claire's very different than most humans, Mr. Valentine." Ed said thoughtfully.

"May I ask that you call me Colin?"

"Colin, then. There's something I still don't understand. Claire's different, as I said. Perry took her in, he knew that. That place he calls The Beyond, is that also technology from your world?"

"No. That came from the real Sir Peregrine Falcon. Perry's transference into the man included gaining his arcane knowledge, which had led him to search for worlds within worlds. He was a student of metaphysics, he wrote several bestselling books on the subject. He spent a lot of time researching in esoteric fields after he turned his back on his career and English society. He believed that ghosts and magic were real. He easily changed forms from finally finding the Beyond and experimenting with it for good. And then he discovered us, befriended us and allowed the Maelstrom to meld with him when his human body grew weak. I am proud to say Perry as a result is far more mercurial than I prefer that he be. He doesn't follow many of our rules, Commander. Certainly not yours and definitely not mine. I can tell you this, he is genuinely fond of humans. He is fond of Claire, and genuinely fond of you and Alec. I often would ask him to tell me about you, from the time he discovered you at The Rock Bottom and the moment we learned who would inherit Silk Wood Manor. However, please tell me why you say Claire is different."

"Well for one thing he loves her,." offered up Alec.

"Alec," Ed said in a tone like a scythe.

"Did Perry ever tell you about Ed's temper, Colin? Yeah, I didn't think so. He left all the really bad stuff out."

"Alec!" Ed said in exasperation.

Colin chuckled.

"Please continue, Commander," he said.

"She has a high amount of extra sensory perception and empathy. We tested her. She in particular had it in dealing with me. A heightened intuition. It may have been easier for her to bond with Maelstrom."

"That is possible, as some humans have more psychic ability than others, making transference easier. Commander, you were in love with her. She bonded with you and she eventually had sexual relations with you. At that time, you formed a deep bond with her. When Maelstrom choose to mate, we mate for life and although you wouldn't have been conscious of it, in allowing yourself intimacy with her, you did as we do. We do not place much emphasis on gender. It is an individual choice made usually at the time of choosing a mate. I know from reading books about your wildlife that many animal species mate with the same partner for life. Few humans do. You have."

"What are you saying?" Ed asked. Alec could tell he didn't need to ask, that the reality of the whole situation was sinking in.

"You cannot be separated from her for much longer. You must be with her as soon as possible after she comes here and we collect the last of the Maelstrom within her. Any other course of action will threaten your life," Colin cautioned him. "You will get more and more ill and finally die."

"You'll really die, Ed. You need to be with Claire as soon as she gets here."

"It isn't that easy, Alec! You just don't understand. She doesn't even remember me and there's no guarantee Colin's procedure will cure her. I had hoped her heightened senses and her

empathic tendencies would keep us... listen, I need some air."

Alec had been drinking coffee and now he jumped up, agitated.

"Ed don't do that! Ed, you're not fully recovered yet!" Alec warned but he didn't have time to stop the Commander's stubborn progress.

Alec watched Ed rise out of the bed, try to take a few steps and then he desperately attempted to grab a bed post when the overwhelming dizziness hit him, but only grabbed the curtain which ripped off. That caused him to lose his balance, and fall sideways onto the butler's cart, which set the food flying in several directions but it mostly landed on him. Somehow, in spite of all that, he maintained his dignity as he repeatedly tried to rise from his position on the floor without success. Alec bit his lip as he set his mug down on the fireplace mantel.

Valentine stood there patiently. Alec was still desperately trying not to laugh, because Ed had been trying to get to his feet like a colt that had just been born. A bit of strawberry preserves had found its way to his hair. Alec gave up and started laughing. Ed noticed Angel had been in the room and had heard all of it. Perry was there too.

"Are you quite all right, Commander Straker? I did mention to Alec that you'd be slowest in recovering with spells of dizziness and weakness since you were entered by the Maelstrom first," Colin was saying. "Your brain won't send the proper signals to your body for quite a while. The nerve synapses have to heal. You'll be quite clumsy and weak like this for some time, I'm afraid."

"Colin, would you do something for me?" Ed asked, climbing back into bed with Perry's help. Alec was laughing too much at that point to assist him. He imagined it was Alec unconsciously letting go of the hell they'd both endured, so he'd decided to join in it and put aside his shock for the time being.

"I will assist you if that would please you."

"If this recovery takes as long as you say it may, I may need help. A lot of help. As for my request, it involves Alec."

Alec gulped and considered running for it. Angel stepped near him to protect him. Ed was glad to see they seemed to have become friends or at the very least, allies.

"Yes?" Colin replied, with a slight chuckle.

"Kill him for me. First, bring me breakfast, would you? I'm going to need nourishment to get through this recovery period."

"Don't you want to take a shower first, Q-Tip?"

"No, Angel. I *like* looking like this." Ed replied. The priest just chuckled, enjoying the rarity of Ed's disheveled appearance as much as Alec was. Once that sight had been tragic, back in the hell hole of the camp, Angel thought, now it represented life. Angel looked at Alec, and smiled.

Alec relished the Commander's reaction, all right. Ed had always been impeccable for all the years he'd known him. Even a single thread loose or a straying strand of his silver hair bothered Ed. *Ed is all right now, he'll live, thank God. I don't like what I saw in his eyes when he looked at the fireplace. He may have told the doctors in the submarine log entry 'claustrophobia negative' but we know better, don't we, Ed? After what happened to him has he developed a fear of fire? Out of the frying pan--*

Angel had been speaking in his prominent Australian accent, which had taken Alec a lot of time to drop after he'd moved to England, but Angel being around him was making it difficult to not sound like the son of the Outback Alec actually was. Alec had grown up on a

sheep station and had cultivated a definite hatred for the woolly creatures.

"Praise be to the Lord. I think you're going to need a lot of my spiritual help to cope with this." Angel chuckled. "As for Colin murdering Alec, Colin isn't violent and I can understand the thought, but you'll need Alec to help you cope, too."

Ed noticed Angel had simply accepted the fact that the two men were aliens, but then Angel's quiet acceptance of everyone had always been inspirational. That doesn't make things any easier for me, Ed thought.

"I do not wish to put you under any more pressure than is necessary, but my people who remain have lost loved ones and would like some positive news. There are only seven of us now in live human bodies now although we each contain many other Maelstrom who fled from our world. Some burned in the fire when their human bodies did. They were unable to survive. They had lived for far too long in their new human bodies and it was too late to seek substitutes so they perished. Whether there are more of us in hiding, I do not know. We can feel fear while in human bodies. We are not at all that immortal, Commander."

"Colin, trust me, I know. You have my sincere sympathy for the loss of your people. I just need more time to think before I make any decision."

"Whatever happens, Commander, you at least gave us here at Silk Wood Manor some hope."

"You gave it to Alec and me as well, Colin."

"What would you like for breakfast, sir?"

"He just loves green tea, raw fish and rice," Alec said.

Ed narrowed his eyes at Alec, and his expression clearly suggested Alec's life expectancy was about to be shortened. *All this is a shock. I need time and more information to make the right decision, Ed thought. Does Colin know even now what I am thinking? My God, telepathic, able to project thoughts. This goes far beyond Croxley, God rest his soul.*

Colin peered at Ed. Ed's expression changed.

"Two organic eggs, sunny side up. Whole wheat toast, slice of ham, small orange juice, large coffee light with two sugars, Tiptree little scarlet strawberry preserves, *The Times* and *Boston Globe* newspapers and a vial of slow acting poison for Alec," Ed said crisply. "Oh, and put it all on Alec's tab."

Alec and Angel were laughing.

"Perry, shouldn't we reconsider wanting to stay with these crazy humans," Colin wondered with a smile.

"That would mean we would be leading a very dull life indeed, Cols old boy," Perry cackled.

Hannah Safra chose that moment to enter and saw with delight that Ed was finally awake and looking well. Like a well-meaning but overzealous dog pouncing happily on its master, she dashed across to the bed, threw her arms around Ed, and joyfully smooched him.

"You are so distinguished-looking with that beard, little Edward. But it scratches me. It will have to go!"

Ed turned more crimson than Alec's robe. "Hannah stop it!" he scolded her mildly, eliciting laughter and grins.

"Oh no, little dear one, you are still my little Edward. You forget that I knew you when you could hardly reach my apron strings even on your tiptoes. Do not pretend you do not enjoy it. Pah! You are filthy, go and wash! This is not like you! Have you been playing with your food?"

"Playing with my--?" He reached up and wiped preserves off his hair, looking solemnly at it as if it was blood. She produced a handkerchief from a pocket of her gingham dress and wiped his hand off roughly. "Oh. That. No. I accidentally knocked over the cart, my breakfast was swerved," he chuckled, but he leaned toward her and returned the kiss on her cheek.

"I'm taking Cols to my manor to fetch some food for Mr. Straker and some of the staff is coming with me to help us. Would you like to accompany me, Hannah?" Perry asked, offering her his arm.

"Of course, of course, I will cook for everyone and I will show you all what real Sacher Torte tastes like. You bathe and shave and rest Edward, my dear one, we shall be back soon!"

## Chapter Twenty-Three: A Lonely Duty

When all of them had left, Ed indicated with that familiar inclination of his head that Alec should stay.

"What do you make of all this, Alec?" he said, pensive.

"You mean whether we can trust them all or not? Ed, all I can tell you is I saw you burn to death. I saw them bring you back. If these aliens wanted to wipe SHADO and the rest of us out they had plenty of opportunity and firepower to do it. Of course, we all had to convince the police that the man the medics pronounced dead was one of the other men who worked at Silk Wood Manor, not you. I explained to them that in the chaos of the event, with the extent of my injuries, I mistook him for you. The investigation team from the fire brigade and the local police concluded that Chloe had started the fire. Colin explained that she had never been the strongest, and with the prospect of an American taking over Silk Wood Manor thereby again rocking all these people's fragile foundations, she went crazy and did it. Colin told me her human body was old and despite his and her medical knowledge she had become senile and they couldn't cure her or transfer her, she'd been in that body too long," Alec explained. "Besides, my gut tells me we can trust them. Ford's G6 didn't show any inconsistencies in their backgrounds, but with Perry around to make little changes in their birth documentation and paperwork, I didn't expect any. By the way, during the time you were healing he impersonated you, and hid you in his manor. Colin came for me. When I was released from hospital the doctors were astounded at how fast I was recovering." He grinned.

"What about Algernon and his itchy trigger finger? There will have to be a murder investigation and no doubt I'll be questioned, being one of the suspects that saw him last. I have to admit he made everything a little simpler for us..."

"Well, I took the liberty of asking Virginia to invoke the Aegis security clearance and get New Scotland Yard and Boston off his back and to get Reginald Devon back to be quietly buried back here in England. Algernon will find out soon enough, because in his haste to protect your privacy, he left a print. Being that sloppy isn't like him at all but Perry tells me since George Fisher died, Algernon just hasn't been the same man. I just asked Virginia to take care of things for you."

"Oh you did?" Ed replied testily.

Alec grinned.

"Yes I did, Commander, or would you really have preferred having a murder investigation land right on your doorstep? Just think of all the publicity. What was it you said once to me? You were about to be thrown to the press? You would have been thrown to the Boston police authorities as well as the Yard and your beloved paparazzi as well. It seems Jay Noland made it pretty well known back in Boston that he was going to England supposedly to reunite Hannah with the head of Harlington-Straker Studios. He enjoyed nothing better than to throw a lot of important names around to make himself look good. As for his law office, nobody mourned for long or bothered to send a wreath to his funeral. It seems the murder investigation showed that not only did the entire law office staff hate his guts, but that there were countless clients of his that he swindled and they too would have liked to see him get what was coming to him. His murder is going to end up as a cold case, and if it doesn't, there's always Aegis to the rescue."

"The power of the Aegis security clearance wasn't created to cover up messes of this kind, Alec. I ought to know. I came up with the concept, I fought for it so that SHADO

wouldn't be hampered by any other organization or power poking their nose into our business when we needed to work freely. We needed to be able to work anywhere, anytime, on short notice, answerable to no authority."

"Oh, be reasonable Ed. How else would we explain all the bodies piling up? Reginald Devon. Jacob Noland. Half the staff of Silk Wood Manor needed to be buried. Besides, this isn't your problem to worry about. Virginia's in command now."

Ed sighed. "How is Lake holding up?"

Alec grinned. "She had her first official meeting as SHADO commander in chief with the IAC this morning, and told me about it. I thought only Peter Carlin and I knew that many swear words."

Ed finally permitted himself to curve his mouth into a thin smile.

"Poor Virginia. A baptism of fire, not unlike what we survived. All right, but tell her I suggest the regulations regarding the use of Aegis be tightened. I'll want a word with Algernon Fisher as soon as he can get out here. I don't need anyone taking care of my problems like that without seeking my approval first. We will find someone to get Hannah's financial..."

"Ed, relax we took care of it. It seems Jay Noland left a will. Guess who he left his money to besides the law firm?"

"I don't like playing guessing games, Alec."

"Hannah Safra is now a very wealthy woman."

"**What?** Why?"

"He had someone draw up his will in his own firm, Ed. He wanted to boast about it. Making sure a victim of the Holocaust would be taken care of in her declining years. He used that line every time he took on a client. Naturally he didn't mention that as her conservator he managed her late father's fortune without her even knowing her father had been alive. She thought all her family had been slaughtered by the Nazis. He didn't count on dying before she did. Perry is pulling strings to get her visa extended so we can get her situated right here at Silk Wood Manor and she's thinking of applying for British citizenship. I asked her if she wanted to fly out with me for Noland's cremation and get the rest of her things. She told me no, that she never wanted to be contaminated by anything to do with him again. You'll be glad to know that Angel took her to his personal physician just as a precaution. Her heart is just fine. She's in splendid health for a woman of her age. Noland undoubtedly was trying to play head games with her, suggesting she had to be cautious. She didn't need that wheelchair, and she certainly didn't need him. The death of Jacob Noland seems to have rejuvenated her."

"She's always been an extraordinary woman, Alec. Maybe I should thank Algernon for getting rid of Noland instead of condemning him for it." He pinched the bridge of his nose wearily. "Alec, do you think you could find me a couple of aspirin in this place?"

"Ed, are you really okay?" then he realized how stupid that was and his expression said just that. Ed just smiled at him.

"I seem to be. It's nothing a couple of aspirin won't fix. I'm tired, I just don't seem to be able to concentrate all that well."

"Colin explained..."

"About the physical repercussions of losing my bond with the Maelstrom, yes, yes. I still don't like feeling so weak."

"Ed."

"Quit looking at me like that, Alec. I'm fine. I desperately need a shave and a shower. No electricity? I hope this place at least has a bathroom that still works."

"The beard really does make you look distinguished, Commander."

"It itches like hell, and makes me look and feel grubby."

"Ed, the fire... there were a lot of casualties. The origin of the fire was in the servants' quarters. That was demolished."

"Did we manage to keep this all out of the papers... damn I see from your expression that we didn't. Dear God, those poor people that stood there and applauded me for what I'd done, more than half of them must have died, and died horribly. Alec, I will-"

Alec had ignored Ed and grabbed his mug from the fireplace mantel.

"Shut up for one second and drink the rest of my coffee. It's going to take some time before Colin gets back here with some food for you. You look like you really need it, Holmes."

"Thanks, Watson. "

"Ed, what do you remember about the fire?"

"I hardly want to remember anything Alec, but I have a memory of telling you to go away while you were trying to free me. I think part of me was grateful that death would come quickly instead of the infernal waiting for death to come. Of course, now that Colin reversed it, we should put worrying about it behind us." Ed took a sip of the coffee to please his friend and tried to conceal that it was cold and black without sugar, not to his taste. "Why do you ask?"

"I watched you burn to death."

"A lot of people at SHADO and the IAC would like for that death to have been final, Alec," Ed managed a twisted smile.

"I'm not one of them. I've never been one of them. I want you to understand that, Ed." Alec told him forcefully.

"I'm really sorry you had to see that happen to me, Alec. I was foolish, I tried to..."

"Believe me, I know you by now. You took it all on your shoulders, thought you were responsible for everything. I know. Hannah came in here, looked at you, and saw the sensitive boy you had once been. I think of all of us, she has the clearest vision."

Ed pressed his lips together, not knowing what to say. He looked at the floor. Alec was silent. When he finally raised his eyes again, he found Alec looking at him in a manner which could be described as nothing other than serene.

"Claire's coming home, and Colin will try to get her memory back for you. And if it doesn't come back, you'll still have her, we'll handle that together. You have to stay here and guard these people, Ed. You know very well that the new members of the IAC under Duval will want to take these aliens apart piece by piece to get their hands on the advanced knowledge they have, and force SHADO to do it. You've spent your life being dedicated to protecting the Earth, and doing it to the point where you lost everything that held meaning for you. Guarding the Maelstrom is the first opportunity we've had to really have a way to put an end to the aliens we've been fighting. The surviving Maelstrom deserve a chance to live in peace, Ed. So do you. You belong right here at Silk Wood Manor. Virginia told me once you said you'd made your choice a long time ago. Maybe it was the wrong choice. Have you ever considered that?"

"You're talking about me still leaving SHADO, actually retiring?"

"Well, we *are* old men. I spoke to Virginia. I think it best that she and the rest of them keep believing we'll all die eventually. We can't risk telling them the truth even though that's going to be difficult."

"Alec, somehow the Maelstrom technology has to be given to SHADO. I'll still need a contact there to make sure that it is."

"Virginia agreed to keep us on as an unofficial senior advisors, so we'll have access to SHADO whenever we need it."

"I can't say I will enjoy having to tell Virginia Lake a lie."

"You wouldn't have put Virginia in that chair unless she was tough enough to handle it. You know that."

"And when we don't die, Alec? What then?"

"Schroeder said he had no idea when we'd die or how the virus worked only that stress was a factor in it. We could live for an indefinite time. The important thing is convincing him nothing's changed. Look, we'll discuss all this later, when Claire's back and you're stronger."

"Alec, I just don't know. To walk away from my decision to take SHADO on after Henderson's accident-"

"You won't be walking away, Ed. By doing this, you'll make sure that for once, the bad guys don't win. The only thing is, you'll be able to live your own life in the process, like Colin said. There's no need for more sacrifice, Ed. No need to carry a cross. You know when I walked into hospital in Thailand, I didn't guess that it would give me a reason to live even though I felt I'd let Roger down. You. You've made it clear to me that you need to be taken care of, Ed. I'm the man to do it. Claire knew what she was talking about."

"Damn it, Alec..."

"Shut up. I'll get you that aspirin and I'll draw your bath. You won't be able to manage without me unless you want more of that food in that bleach job of yours." Alec grinned. He saw Ed fight the inclination to smile.

"Oh, just go get me the bloody aspirin," Ed complained. "Don't think I don't know you're enjoying this, Alec!" Ed reluctantly set the empty mug on the floor.

"Coffee cold, huh. You always did get cranky when your coffee was cold. All that caffeine, cream and sugar can't be good for you, you know, a man of your advanced years."

"Alec E. Freeman! Get out of here!"

"All right, all right, I'm going." Alec put his hand on the doorknob thoughtfully, looking concernedly at Ed, seeing him prostrate on the ground, putting Alec first, insisting that he go and live. Hearing his screams. Seeing the flames devour his friend. Seeing them cover him with a sheet. Ed Straker gone in agony, gone horribly, not in an act of heroism other than putting Alec's needs before his, not with dignity. A man whom people frequently said had no heart, in actuality had the biggest heart of them all. It all came back to him. Damn it, he'd always cared for the man. It was about time he made that clear. Ed needed him more than ever now. Tears rose to his eyes.

Ed's shoulders had slumped and a forlorn look crossed his features as if he believed Alec had already gone, deserted him. Alec squared his shoulders and marched back to Ed, startling him.

Ed looked at Alec. Clearly he had made some sort of important decision.

"Alec, I thought I told you-" Ed began wearily.

Alec bent over, enfolded the frail man in his arms, and embraced him.

"I think the world of you Ed, you know. Don't worry. I'm staying with you from now on, Commander; I won't allow you to be alone anymore. Yes, Virginia's in command but *you're* my Commander, and more importantly, my best friend. I'll be back soon, Ed. Try and get some rest." The Australian then marched out of the room.

Ed sat there numbly, stunned, overcome with shock so severe that he feared fainting. It was the battle of Jericho and with the blast of Alec's horn; the walls had come tumbling down.

The closest bodily contact he had ever made with Alec, his oldest and dearest friend, the only man he freely trusted, had been no more than a handshake. He still felt the warmth of the man, remembered the smell of him, the powerful touch, evocative of a baby bear cub being held by a grizzly and God help anything or anyone that came between them. He sat there, taking it all in. Allowing himself to feel it.

*The hell of Vietnam, having to face losing, being broken. His wife. His son. Claire. Almost losing Alec. Facing death. Being burnt. The isolation. The denial. The guilt and pain. The fear. Fear! Seeing Hannah, and feeling safer when he hadn't even known he could still feel such fear, once the fear of a boy, now the fear of a man. Now this. Knowing that small action had taken tremendous guts on Alec's part. He'd done it for himself, of course. But he did it for me. For me. He's always known me. What do I have to offer him or anyone now, with no rank to speak of? Me. As I was. As I am. Not the Commander. The Commander all too willing to hide his humanity under the mantle of rank. To keep the world at arm's length. Penance. As cloistered as a nun or priest might choose to be. Didn't Angel have the hardest job of all? To save men's souls. To teach them a simple faith in a world that made a mockery of anything it didn't understand. Yet he sought solace in Frances' bed, believing that love and even sex served his God. He still saved souls. He saved mine. Alec, he knew all this time that I still had a soul. Is there enough strength left in me to do this? Claire may never come back, not the Claire I knew. I still have Alec. He's showed his faith in me a million times.*

*The wrong choice. Wrong? Nothing I would have done would have prevented my losing a woman I once loved, nothing. Johnny. What had Claire said? That even marble could crack. That John would have been the first to forgive me of a sin that didn't even exist except in my head. That Mary had been all so obedient, obedient to her mother, to her father, to Rutland, her new husband. Obedient to everyone but me but all too eager to set the blame for my son's death at my feet. Johnny wouldn't want you to grieve, Claire had said. She stroked my cheek and told me he'd want me to choose life. Can I be happy for once, Claire? Can I choose life? I never handled loneliness well. You taught me to forgive myself. You'd want me to go on. Life too is duty, he thought. Living is a lonely duty when love is absent from your life. Hadn't he wanted to escape? Hadn't the real person who would be glad if the fire had actually ended his life been him? Alec wanted him to live. How could he exist without SHADO? How had he existed **with** it? So many years! To think that some of them envied him! Or hated him! Thought him without feelings, without desire. Bloodless, hollow, cold, a machine. No one could hate him as much as he hated himself. So what if he was considered a cold hearted bastard? Hadn't the job demanded that role? Claire told me why punish yourself like that? How can your suffering serve SHADO? Does it make you less perfect? What rubbish! For God's sake, Edward! Show me one person who would dare call you any less of a leader because for once you allowed yourself to live, maybe even love again and I'll tear their guts out bare handed!*

He had chuckled, he couldn't help it. She was as protective of him, of his feelings, as Alec was. She stood up to him, as he did. Once he had regretted taking her to bed. Then he couldn't imagine her out of it. Worse of all, he had been in love. He wanted to give to her what Mary had stripped away from his son, his only son. His name.

*Had John gone to his grave thinking that his father didn't love him? No! NO! No. She and Rutland could think what they wanted, and did. He knew the truth of it. He'd loved his son and his son had loved him. Maybe in death finally Mary knew it. Maybe his son could still hear him. Your name is Straker, not Rutland, John. Your name is Straker. Straker.*

*Claire Straker. She had always said to him that Edward, not Ed , sounded right. The sound of his name to her was just as complex and rich as the man she loved. Then he had come to know that Claire Straker sounded just as right to him. That had frightened him. It was like natives that thought if you took their photograph, you'd take their soul. He'd learned a harsh lesson with Mary and then with the reporter. If you loved, if you hoped, if you dreamed, if you lusted, if you dared, if you cried out, they would take your soul. He hadn't wanted that again. She'd said she would die for him, and he'd tried to deflect it, and it had cost her her life. She'd become his. He hers. He'd felt complete. He'd accused her of running, yet he wanted to run from the truth of knowing he loved her.*

*Hannah came in here, looked at you, and saw the sensitive boy you had once been. I think of all of us, she has the clearest vision.*

Alec had said it. He'd never really let Alec in. He'd bolted his door. He should have known that one day Alec, never a man to give up easily on anyone, especially him, would use the right key.

He suddenly wrapped his arms around himself, mindful that for many years after the divorce it was the only touch he'd permitted himself to feel. The reporter. He'd let his guard down for a minute, and Josephine Frasier had drawn blood. A man's world she had said.

*My God! What good was a man's world in which you could attain everything you wanted except a lasting love?*

He felt himself trembling with the pain of it, the truth of it. He hated his weakness.

He longed to again blend his body with Claire's and lose himself to her, to match her cries of lust with his until he knew nothing else but the keen pleasures of the body, then to allow their exhaustion and their shared joy to lull them to sleep, her hands wrapped around him as if they had been a part of his flesh . La petit mort, she had teased him. He'd countered her, saying it seemed more accurate to say that sex represented life, not death, not even a little one. Sex in love to him meant a celebration of life. She'd taken his hand, kissed it, said seriously to him that if there was any death involved at all, it was the death of his loneliness. He'd smiled, and reached for her again hungrily, joking that he wasn't sure, and he needed to test her theory further and she'd laughed. He'd long forgotten what happiness felt like. But not on that night. He'd seen and remembered wickedly enjoying the envious look on Virginia's face when he'd gone into the office the next morning, humming.

. On that night, he'd allowed himself to consider proposing to Claire, but it had frightened him so much he had gone on the mission in South Korea to test the Sejong I. Now that she was lost to him, he knew better than to hope or to think she would remember him no matter what Colin did. The pain of it overwhelmed him.

"Claire," he said aloud. "Claire." Did he think she would answer him?

He wanted to shout for Alec, to hide his agonies in their easy banter, in their bond, in the work that lie ahead. Just another choice to make, one he couldn't even imagine refusing. To shut it all out. He found he couldn't. All he felt was grief. There was nothing left to hide him without his work, nothing left to him now. Quietly, and for once without condemning himself for it, he wept. The sound of it was lost in the crackling and snapping of the flames, flames which had sucked away his life, and he imagined in his primordial distress they were back again to mock him. Exhausted, trembling , he pulled the covers to his chin. Sleep mercifully overtook him.

Alec happily marched in, humming ,with a tray containing water and an aspirin bottle, carrying a wicker basket full of bath toiletries, an electric razor and towels on his arm. He

stopped.

He knew Ed's sleep habits from living with him. He knew how much the Commander prided himself on his legendary self-control. Now look at him. It was clear he'd been weeping. He slept, and it occurred to Alec Ed was uncharacteristically holding the soft blanket to himself for comfort. He remembered what Claire had said once. It was as if he was so stoic that not even in bed would he allow himself total comfort preferring the covers to stay rigidly at his waist. He generally slept with his arms around himself, in the rare times he even permitted himself to sleep. Now he clung to them, perhaps, Alec thought, as if he needed at least one thing that would not hurt him, would not change, wouldn't betray him. Claire had pointed out to Alec that Ed often touched objects like that green ball of his or a pen or the slide rule, toying with objects, always some tactile connection to compensate for his self-imposed isolation. He folded his arms, unconsciously craving touch, intimacy, longing for it but that after Mary he would sooner chew his own leg off than admit it or try to fill the jagged hole the Rutland bitch had made in him. Claire and her damn psychological insights. Damn woman.

*Oh stop it, he told himself. She didn't ask for what happened to her. She loved Ed enough to risk his wrath for telling you off. This isn't about her. It's about you. You don't know whether or not you made the right choice, breaking through that discipline of his, slashing through his walls. Now look at him. Was this really a good thing, violating his personal space? His pride? He was, after all, American. Intensely private, almost more English than some English. Didn't you put your needs before his? Couldn't this act be considered cruel? What the hell have you done, Freeman? Bloody idiot. Some friend you are.*

Shaken by that thought, he turned and headed out, and then at the door, he unthinkingly threw the tray across the room in a fit of self-loathing.

*Oh right. Some friend you are is right. Hadn't Claire said that the Commander's pride didn't matter if Ed was suffering inside? You made the decision, Freeman. Don't run away from it now, or he might just die for good this time. Angel had said to him the one thing he feared was that Q-Tip would one day not die by his own hand, but from a broken heart. He couldn't get the image of a charred Ed being covered by a sheet out of his head. Some part of him always feared Ed Straker would throw himself into something, true to form, sacrifice himself in one last act to defy the aliens, and leave him behind the way he had left Roger behind. He'd be buried at Arlington, God knows he'd deserve it, body laid out in blues with more decorations than you'd see on a Christmas tree, but what good is a dead hero to anyone? What inspiration could be inspired by a stilled voice? That voice, and your expertise with it. You'd be surprised, Ed. You'd be surprised at how many people would grieve for you as much as I would.*

"WHAT? What?" Ed had awoken from the sound of the crash and cried out, startled. "Oh. Thank God. I was dreaming something horrible had happened to Claire and she died. It's only you, Alec. What's happened?"

He watched Alec pick up the mess.

"Sorry Ed, you must have had a nightmare, no surprise there after what you've been through. Dropped the tray, I was clumsy, I'm afraid. I'll get you more water in a paper cup from the bathroom, and you swallow the aspirin and go back to sleep. Colin isn't here yet."

"No, I need to be presentable, help me up, will you Alec? I'll shave and shower and change."

"Will you need me to scrub your back, Sir Edward?" Alec asked playfully. Ed looked

thoughtfully at him, remembering the hallucination about the squire.

"Did you bring me a razor, Alec?"

"I have your own electric razor for you from your suitcase."

"Damn it."

"What's wrong?"

"I was hoping for a regular razor. Killing you with an electric razor will be difficult."

Alec laughed.

Ed smiled at him with open affection and Alec realized he'd done the right thing.

## Chapter Twenty-Four: **The Murderer Smells Roses**

Algernon Fisher headed back to Silk Wood Manor the next day after several hours of tracking down groceries at Waitrose at Colin's request (God the queues!) when he got the call. He hung up with his brain buzzing like a disturbed worker bee. Bloody hell! No less a personage than Sir Charles Westbury had summoned him. It was undoubtedly about his deceased lover, Detective Inspector George Fisher. There had been some talk in the CID of creating a special award for bravery when undercover, and naming it the Fisher. Westbury no doubt would give him his sympathy but say George shouldn't be singled out, sorry old man and all that. Then there was the money involved, in the current economy money was tighter than a virgin's - well, one could only guess. It was well known in his circles Westbury had no respect for gays, and despised Algernon in the short time they'd been together. Well, he better go and get it over with. Maybe there was even a slim chance he'd offer him a decent drink. Westbury's personal assistant had given him an address to jot down. Westbury House! The great man apparently was home for the holidays. Algernon had been junior to a senior Westbury when both men were doing nothing much more exciting than holding back the hordes expecting to get a glimpse of her Majesty's hats. He remembered Regs hated the monarchy. He, Algernon, saw the impracticality of the thing, but he loved the pomp and circumstance much as Pers did he realized, had loved it since he was only a lad. He'd get it all over with and then he could go to see how his Perry was faring.

Algernon had quickly delivered the groceries and heard from Colin that Ed had been very surprised to have a small team of Harlington-Straker Studios technicians, electricians and carpenters who all were SHADO operatives take time off their Christmas holiday and show up to help finish repairing Silk Wood Manor. The idea of helping Ed and Alec out had blossomed from Major Louis Graham, SHADO's master of all trades after hearing that Straker and Freeman were dying and as a result had resigned from SHADO. Like Ford, Graham hadn't seen any point of putting in for promotion. Graham and his team had corrected the faults in the antiquated electrical system, preventing the electric from blowing out every five minutes as it had been after the inferno. He'd been doing extensive work, bringing all the buildings up to code. Algernon had wanted to personally thank him, but now this Westbury business probably meant he'd miss meeting him that day. Oh well. Silk Wood Manor was well on the way to being restored to normal, Straker was feeling a little stronger and about to start a new life and that's what was important.

Westbury and most of his CID friends didn't understand why Algernon would toss his badge away for a life as an eccentric Lord's butler. Sometimes Algernon didn't quite know himself. Maybe it had to do with the fact that people like the very dead Jacob Noland could help cold-blooded killers be free to walk the streets and he'd sickened of it. He'd thought hunting down people like that was behind him. Now, after Noland, he wasn't sure. He wondered what George would say about him shooting Noland dead in cold blood. Noland had used Hannah, even his own Jewish religion for his own purposes. George would say he deserved a medal for it. George had liked and admired Ed when the two worked together at the Rock Bottom, so he'd understand Noland needed to be stopped, there was too much at risk. But what Algernon had done, didn't that make him the same as the killers he'd once brought to justice? Damn!

Suddenly for Algernon, England in December was just a little bit colder.

The butler, Benjamin Long, whom he knew and liked from their days with the late Ivor

Spencer greeted Algernon warmly, took his coat and hat and escorted him to the library. He was soon back with a glass of whisky, which Algernon declined. The butler left, and Algernon looked around. The only place he'd seen more books than the leather bound, gold etched, marble swirled- paged examples around him, had been in the British Library. Westbury had got a promotion, Algernon remembered he'd married into a titled family. Algernon reflected he'd hardly managed to warm his behind in the leather wing chair when the butler returned.

"He'll see you now, sir."

"You have any idea what this is about?" he asked, knowing it was futile to ask.

"Please go in, sir. He doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Algernon went in. Westbury looked to him like a toy stuffed pig dressed in Savile Row pinstripes.

"Sit down, Adams."

Algernon remained standing.

"Sir, my name is now legally Fisher." Algernon corrected him with a definite edge in his voice. "I had a civil partnership with George Fisher, and presented with a choice, I proudly took on his name."

Westbury had not liked gays in the past and obviously still had as much love for queers as he had hair, he thought.

"Quite, quite. I have called you here to..."

"I understand about the award. Now if there isn't anything else, Sir-"

"I haven't called you about any silly award. A Jewish American tourist has gone and gotten himself killed, and it seems he had some stature in Boston, so their bloody police department is making a fuss. It may look like a robbery that went sour, but it certainly is murder. I want you to handle it."

"Me? Sir, I remind you I am retired." Inwardly, Algernon roared at the irony of it all. He was an elephant being asked to clean up its own shit!

"Do you take me for a bloody fool, Adams, or Fisher or whatever it is you're calling yourself these days? They said George Fisher may have been one of the best the CID had but I am told you are the second best. Someone has pulled strings to get you back on your old salary and with your old rank and you owe it to England to stop playing at this masquerade of yours, serving Sir Peregrine Falcon his bloody tea, and go back to being the policeman you are. Do I make myself clear?"

"Sir, with all respect, they must have someone else in the CID to look into this."

"They do. I'm looking at him."

"Then he's saying no. Happy Christmas, Sir." Algernon turned to go.

"Why *did* you murder Jacob Noland?"

Algernon froze. He knew. They knew. He'd have to find someone for Pers. Pers would be all alone, fragile and wouldn't last long without someone to look after him. Suddenly he swallowed fear and it didn't go down easily.

"I don't know what..."

"Oh bloody hell, Adams! They found a single print. Yours, of course. One error. It takes a single error. They always said in lectures I attended that murderers, no matter how clever they might fancy themselves to be, always make one error, often more. Find their error, and you'd solve the case. I gave you every bloody chance to tell me, to confess, Adams. The only reason you're still standing there and not rotting in H.M.'s prison is because someone upstairs is shielding a queer and damned if I like it but that's that. Some high-level security rot I never

heard of. Aegis something, military clearance, hush hush. Even God has no authority if someone or something is covered under the bloody thing, I'm told. You're a morally repugnant bastard..."

"Oh, get off your damn pedestal, you make me sick! I'm repugnant? What about you, Westbury? Seems to me when we were working the streets you used to drink on duty, and when you'd had more than your ample gut would take, you'd find civilians with a bad attitude after committing a minor offense and beat them until their mothers wouldn't recognize them and I had to look the other way or I'd get the boot. You hated me, but couldn't do anything about it. So don't give me any lectures on morality! You have a grand estate, and fancy paintings you don't even understand on your wall. When's the last time you left that chair to do anything for Queen and country but take a bloody shit and claim it didn't smell because you had more money than the rest of us poor working class sods?"

Westbury jumped up in his chair, enraged.

"I'd prefer to see filth like you behind bars, but I've been given my instructions. My sister Lady Westbury is waiting for you. You are to drive her to Silk Wood Manor; she has insisted on going there with you, as her usual driver is ill. You had better damn well see that nothing happens to her. Now get out of here."

"Gladly."

Algernon slammed the door behind him and found he was confronting the butler. He fought to stop shaking.

*Cocky idiot! Too damned sure of yourself. You left a bloody print behind like some amateur. George would be ashamed to know you. God, I need a drink! Nevertheless, I have no intention of staying here one more minute than I need to.*

"How in God's name can you stand working for that man?" Algernon demanded to know as the two of them walked to the great hall of Westbury House.

"What's that old quotation attributed to Lady Hillingdon, close your eyes and think of England?"

Algernon broke out in laughter. He knew most of it was relief that he wasn't really going to have to face imprisonment for murder, or abandoning a dependant Perry. Straker again, he thought. Straker the good shepherd took excellent care of his flock. A favor for a favor. "Good man. By my balls, Ben, you're right."

"I've got bills to pay like everyone else especially with a missus who has to be surgically removed from Harrods on a weekly basis. It is so good to see you again. We've come a long way from ironing newspapers, haven't we, Al?"

"I could ask Pers if he'd take you on, because I don't think you'll be able to look at yourself without gagging if you work for Westbury much longer."

"Things aren't all that desperate right now, but do keep me in mind. Besides, I work for his sister Violet, not him, I'd do anything for her and I often let that curmudgeon know it. Come on, I will introduce you to Lady Westbury. She's probably out in her garden."

"Why on earth does she want *me*, why not get a temp to drive her wherever she wants to go?"

"Because she heard that Right Reverend Stanley Mitchell Brisby is there, and Lady Westbury was best friends with the late Frances Brisby. Lady Westbury has been desperately trying to find that priest for months."

"Is Lady Westbury just as charming as her brother?"

Benjamin Long chuckled and remained silent. Obviously, from his tone Algernon had

assumed that anyone related to Sir Charles Westbury had to be as repulsive as Charles was. He was in for a bit of a shock, Benjamin Long thought.

"Why don't you judge for yourself?" a sweet voice, tinged with amusement, said from behind him.

Algernon turned to see a woman standing there inspecting his flanks as if he were a thoroughbred, and he had a fleeting regret that he had been born a man who preferred men in his bed.

"Lady Violet Westbury, this is Algernon Fisher, an old friend of mine."

"How do you do? Shall we go?" she exclaimed. "We'll use Charles' Rolls, Benjamin. Please fetch it from the garage for us."

"With great pleasure, Lady Westbury."

-o-o-o-

"I apologize for how that may have sounded." Algernon told her once they were out on the road and he was driving. He caught a strong whiff of her rose perfume, prominent because she had chosen to sit next to him. A jabot of white lace in which a pearl necklace rested showed from underneath her pink cashmere twin set. She had on a white ankle-length pleated skirt, and pink court shoes with a bag that matched. Pearls dotted her ears. She wore an amethyst the size of a doorknob on one finger. In his perfectly normal off the peg suit Algernon felt dowdy. She was toying with her seat harness as if she wanted to escape from the Rolls. Seen close up, some of her beauty was illusion, but he could not deny her essential loveliness. She smiled.

"Oh, but now you've made me regret admiring you for speaking your mind. Nobody likes Charles but Charles, but nobody has the temerity to say so aloud." She chuckled. "Poor Charles is dying of a cancer one doesn't talk about in our circles, and he isn't even getting that right. He's my cross to bear, I suppose."

He grinned. She was nothing like her brother at all; she seemed to have a wicked streak. He found he liked her.

"I take it back then. May I be even more impudent? "

"Please do, you're terribly refreshing."

"You're a very beautiful woman, Lady Westbury."

"Distressing, isn't it? Trick of nature and the art of makeup at my age. I am terrified of cosmetic surgery, but Charles isn't, you see. Every woman wants to hear she is beautiful, but one longs for the right man to say it. I am past fifty, Algernon, one of those ridiculous spinsters who have turned down every proposal of marriage I've gotten and Charles doesn't understand me at all. I am afraid every one of my suitors wanted to marry Westbury House and not me. Since it seems to be my time for pitying myself, I shall add that I have never taken the time to learn how to drive; I am a coward, plain and simple. Painting portraits in oils, shopping and charity work are the most risky things I do in life. Do you know Right Reverend Brisby?"

"I know of him through Sir Peregrine Falcon, who knows everyone in England, down to the last pigeon in St. James Park."

She chuckled.

"Absolutely true. Oh God yes, I absolutely adore Perry but Charles fails to agree with me about him. As for Stanley, he was my parish priest when I was a girl. You couldn't find a better servant of God than Angel. His Frances and I got on wonderfully, I met her through the church jumble sale, and we found we shared a love of God and roses. She talked to me about divorcing Stanley. Tell me Algernon, you're a man of the world, how do you tell a man

something when you know it will break his heart?"

Algernon turned his eyes away from the road in puzzlement for a minute after he'd stopped when the light turned red, and the Rolls jerked, and there was a definite cry of glass and metal as the car behind him smashed right into his.

"Bloody hell! Are you all right Lady Westbury?"

"I don't know!" she was clinging to him but seemed to be savoring the novelty of it. He imagined her private life was very dull.

"Stay put." Gently he broke off from her arm and went to face the other driver, who had pulled over and was waiting for Algernon nervously. "You idiot, what the hell did you think you were doing? Where'd you get your license, Hamley's? You just ran into an ex-policeman."

"I'm sorry, don't worry, I've got suitable insurance. Is the woman all right? Good heavens, it's Lady Westbury! It is Lady Westbury isn't it?" he looked dazzled.

"None of your business, just give me your insurance information. I'm going to make sure you never drive again after this. Take a damn bus in future, you'd be doing your patriotic bit for England. One nutter off the already crowded roads."

"Wait a minute, it was just an accident! You haven't any right to speak to me like that!" the man said, heart plainly sinking.

"You haven't the right to drive without any bloody consideration for anyone else but yourself!" Algernon yelled at him.

"I've had a horrid day, all right? I just was forced to resign from my job at St Swithin's Hospital after working for ten years straight and cherishing every minute of it. Told I couldn't work there. And for what? For two medical charts that went missing, and of course they whisper behind my back, Jeremy Lyons is the thief, it had to be the ward queer, of course. They were just looking for an excuse, right. Do you know what it's like to be hated just because you aren't like everyone else?" he said, sobbing now.

Algernon stared at him. Lady Westbury had ignored Algernon's caution, gotten out of the car and had been listening to it all.

"As a matter of fact I do. I too am gay and I wouldn't want it any other way, so don't let it ruin your day. Unfortunately there are always people who criticize any view that doesn't correlate with their own," Algernon replied firmly.

"That means a lot to me, sir," he said, still shaking. "I'm sorry."

"You poor dear man, you must have had a terrible fright. Look no harm done, we're both fine," She assured him.

"You're Lady Westbury. I've admired your charity work for so long. I never met a Lady before. I'm so sorry for what's happened. I'm so embarrassed, coming apart like this over a job," he mumbled.

"I won't have it, do you hear? I'll buy tea after I take care of some private business and we'll settle this mishap. You'll come with us, and mind you I never tolerate the word 'no' at all. I shall have your car picked up for you. The Westbury fortune should be good for something besides Charles camouflaging that repulsive face of his with a doctor's scalpel." She took a jeweled Blackberry out of her purse and gave orders.

"Lady Westbury, he just wrecked your brother's car." Algernon pointed out.

"A wonderful mess, isn't it? Let's hope that brightens Charles' day when he hears about it." The woman told Algernon haughtily and Algernon chuckled.

## Chapter Twenty-Five: Confetti Check Not A-OK

Ed Straker was not a happy man. For one thing, after a late breakfast served by Hannah he had gone to SHADO to collect his personal belongings and retire but he had to see the doctor. For another, he reluctantly had borrowed an antique Malacca cane from Perry, because he was still unsteady on his feet, but refused to use a wheelchair. Alec had reluctantly allowed Ed to drive Perry's racing green Bentley Arnage alone. Then Perry had shocked him by giving him the Bentley for Christmas. Ed had to admit he hadn't objected all that long, she was a beautiful car.

Schroeder had insisted on poking him and fussing over him because he'd heard about the fire. He'd pronounced the Commander's lungs sound, and since he did not know Straker actually died in the fire, he hadn't questioned the state of his health much further than that. When finally allowed to leave, Ed offered the doctor a practiced studio exec smile, commended him on his years of service, shook his hand and started to go out. Schroeder had stopped him and told him Commander Lake was expecting him in the restaurant. He'd frowned, but shrugged and headed there, half hoping it wasn't an emergency, odd place for Lake to choose for a last minute meeting. Judging from the doctor's calm expression when he'd said it, it didn't seem important. Plus he hadn't liked the smug look on Schroeder's face when he'd showed up in civilian clothes. Oh, Ed's espresso tinted tweed suit and matching trousers were tailored superbly, and his black leather brogues gleamed, his cobalt cashmere vest impeccable, but still it had been something of a shock to see him without his familiar Nehru. Ed decided to ignore it, as his outfit had been given to him by his new staff as a Christmas gift. Colin had gotten all his measurements from Alec. Nothing, he mused with a touch of humor, was sacred. Hannah had stopped him from getting a haircut, protesting that he looked so much more distinguished with slightly longer hair. So that morning he had combed it in the old style, parted on the left, and brushed back with a little gel borrowed from Alec. He was wearing a Bay rum fragrance given to him by Hannah. He headed toward the restaurant, giving an occasional nod to startled passerby who rarely saw him without a jumpsuit or his Nehru and his customary Roman style en brosse cut and as he went by they had the expression of cardinals seeing the Pope in a mini skirt.

He hated surprises. He loathed them. Yet when he walked through the restaurant doors he got a loud "Happy Retirement Commander!" yelled by senior and other staff in his ear, he was handed a glass of non-alcoholic champagne and developed confetti dandruff when handfuls of it were thrown over him. The restaurant was festively decorated, balloons had been inflated, a radio was playing some pop tune and a large cake sat waiting for him on a table. He refused to smile. Virginia Lake took that opportunity to have an excuse for daintily kissing him on the cheek. He figured she'd been planning that move for years. He stared until she produced a satisfying enough look of guilt. He found a table and got rid of his glass. Getting rid of his snarl would take longer.

"How are you, Ed?" she said, a little nervously.

"This your idea, or Alec's?" he said in irritation and discreetly flicked off a pile of confetti that had been clinging to his arm. She hid a grin.

"Mine, I'm afraid. When Major Graham and his people went to help you out this morning, he mentioned what we were planning to Alec. Alec was aghast at the idea and said you'd hate a surprise retirement party."

"Graham should have paid more attention to Alec. Who paid for all this nonsense?"

"Not the IAC, if that's what you're thinking Ed, I did. Have some cake!"

"Colonel Lake," he began in the familiar harsh tone that drew blood. She had steeled herself for it.

"*Commander* Lake now. You're going to have a piece of cake, and like it. That's an order."

"Remind me why I'm leaving you in command?" he growled, feeling as festive as a funeral. The others began to back away in small groups, fearful that they'd be the object of his wrath. Some furtively grabbed their hunks of cake and muttered something about work, and escaped. Even the braver attendees of the party celebrated a little quieter. Ed was staring at a composed Virginia Lake, who was handing him a fork and the large slice of cake she'd cut for him and set on a colorful paper plate. She sighed seeing his expression.

"Alec warned me not to do this, I suppose I should have known you would be this way. At least bring Alec a piece of cake." She thrust it at him. Reluctantly he accepted it with one hand.

"Hannah Safra, whom I've taken on as our new chef, has already fed Alec Freeman and me enough cake to fill a bakery. I think I've put on two pounds overnight." He looked down at the cake slice as if it might bite him, not the other way around.

"A whole two pounds! I thought there was something different about you." She chuckled.

"Besides the outfit?" he replied moodily. "My staff seems to feel when in Rome..."

"Very attractive, I must say." She smiled. "How are you feeling, Commander?"

"I'm fine. I take it you're managing all right?"

"I'm managing just fine." She smiled at him.

"Yes, yes. Well, I'm off, Ford was good enough to gather my things for me while I had my final medical exam and put them in my new car. I'll be available if you need me. Good luck, Commander."

"Oh Ed, there is one thing." She frowned.

"What now?" he said, resenting her frequent use of his first name without a good reason to do so.

"Ed, there are things I should know. Your... well... When you..."

"Die? It's an easy enough word to say, Commander. Don't be frightened of it, that's my problem. Goodbye, Commander. Enjoy the party," He told her coldly.

He shoved the plate at her, and walked away.

Virginia Lake watched him depart with a sad look on her face. Keith Ford came up to her practically on tiptoes. She turned to him, smiled.

"I..."

"Yes?"

"I'm all done with the G6 for the Commander-well, I meant- "

"Believe me, don't apologize. I wanted command but not this way. What was you wanted to say?"

Keith Ford could almost hear his late grandfather muttering encouragement in his ear. *Well, go on lad, spit it out, she's just a mere girl, she isn't bloody Queen Elizabeth, get on with it!*

"I'm on official holiday now, wondered if you'd like to grab a bite to eat with me later. Not here, understand. Somewhere posh, your choice. None of my family are alive, and you know how it is when you don't have family at Christmas time. We could have a drink, and remember Commander- remember Ed Straker. I was on his first team of recruits you know."

She looked at him, a bit stunned. Keith? Keith Ford was making a play for her? She felt herself smiling, a real smile, not the illusionary one.

"I know. I'd like that, Lieutenant... Keith. I'd like it very much. I'd like to hear about Ed, the way he was back then."

"That's settled then. Uh-"

"I'll ring you soon." She chuckled. He smiled.

"Commander?"

"Yes?" She wondered when hearing his title would finally stop tearing her apart. Keith's smile helped.

"Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas to you too."

Keith Ford strolled away in the clouds with his grandfather in his ear. *Well done!*

-o-o-o-

Safe in the privacy of the elegant Bentley, Ed Straker knew how she must feel in response to his harsh words. Having to lie to her wasn't something he relished, doing it so soon had confirmed the unpleasantness. Now all he could give her as a coating for the bitter pill of believing he would die was the fact he trusted her to run his SHADO. Still, he drove back to Silk Wood Manor in regret.

## Chapter Twenty-Six: Letter for an Angel

"Alec, you could have warned me about that damn party," Ed complained, walking into the library in the cottage. He was carrying his Louis Vuitton bag over his shoulder and tapping the cane angrily on the marble floor. Alec grinned at him, envious of his Burberry model looks as always. Alec was seated at a desk with untidy piles of paper on it. He too was in casual clothing, a blue v-necked sweater over a faded checked shirt, Blundstone boots and jeans. He looked like he'd found his niche.

"You wouldn't have gone and you know it. I see from your expression it didn't go well. I did call Virginia and warn her, but she insisted on going ahead with it. Did your exam go all right?"

"It went fine. What exactly are you doing at *my* desk, Alec?" Ed pointed at a stately mahogany desk with burnished brass hardware which he'd admired and had been planning to claim.

"Claiming it for kangaroos, Her Majesty and koala bears. You already have a desk in your bedroom. It belonged to your mother. So forget this one."

"You're talking about that garish secretary in my bedroom? I have no intention of working at that pink and gold French provincial nightmare."

"Did it ever occur to you I was your second-in-command and I never had my own office? I didn't even have a desk?" he said in irritation.

"This was a problem for you, Alec?" Ed chuckled, feeling better by the minute.

"I borrowed your desk, I borrowed Schroeder's desk. I didn't have a desk. Tyrant!"

"Fine, fine, stop moping, you can have that desk. Colin can find me something more suitable from the manor, I'm sure. What's all this mess, Alec?"

"Just paperwork," Alec replied, secretly content he'd managed to manipulate Ed's mood. Ed had no clue.

"You're looking at properties? You considering buying real estate, Alec?" Ed picked up a newspaper with several descriptions of buildings circled in green ink. Privately he was enjoying Alec's secret assurance that he'd lifted his Commander's spirits. Alec was comfortably predictable. Ed concealed a grin. He did feel better.

"Well, my pension turned out to be considerably more than I thought it would be, and Angel finally went and put his house on sale, and claimed the joint bank account he had with Frances, and Hannah wants in, so we thought we'd look for something all together."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, remember you mentioning if there was anything I'd like to do before I died?"

"Of course. Alec, the **Rock Bottom** is up for sale. Did you see this advert?" Ed tapped the paper with a pen he had snatched up.

"Yeah. Decent price too. I just thought it might upset you if Angel and I chose it."

"Chose it for what?"

"A public house."

"You're considering owning your own pub?" Ed chuckled. "I should have known. Alec, if that place suits you, then go for it. It's going to need a lot of work. Central heating for one thing. I distinctly remember freezing to death there. Even the roaches wore mittens in that place. Why didn't you come to me?"

"Do you know how much it costs to keep up a manor the size of this one, Ed?" Alec had the lubricious tone of an accountant down pat.

"I did look at the paperwork Colin put together for me, yes," Ed admitted dryly. He set the pen on the desk holder.

"Angel, Hannah and I are going to pool our money and buy a pub to help cover costs of running it. We'll be paying our share of the rent here, too," Alec exclaimed happily. Ed stormed on his parade.

"No, you won't. I inherited a goodly sum from my mother and Lawrence Malone, as well as my own SHADO and my Air Force pension. If you want to contribute to the repairs, or the food supply, that's fine. Other than that, no. Since you intend to steal my desk, I think this will be more than appropriate as my Christmas gift to you." Ed opened his bag and took out his paperweight green ball, and set it on the desk. "Looks good there," he said thoughtfully. Alec was shaking his head firmly.

"Ed, absolutely not, you've had that thing on your desk for all the years you were Commander of SHADO, and I know damn well how sentimental you are about things like that, for God's sake you kept the chain that came off your attaché case when you were injured in the accident with Henderson..."

"I still have it packed away, yes, yes guilty as charged. Considering the paperweight, Alec, I made my choice a long time ago. A whole five minutes ago. It stays there. You tell me how much you need from me for this venture of yours, Alec, and you make me a full partner."

"But Ed..."

"No more objections, Alec. Keep the ball there. It'll bring you good luck. I want you and Hannah and Angel to count me in on this pub business."

"I guess you'll hound us unless we do." Alec smiled.

"Elementary, my dear Freeman." Ed smiled.

The buzzer sounded and Ed went over to the intercom. He flipped a switch. Originally summoning a servant had been done with a system of bells, all labeled with the rooms they came from. Ed had updated it with an electronic system but had kept the bells.

"Straker. What is it, Colin? Has Hannah gone overboard again with those calorie laden strudels of hers?"

He heard the alien chuckle.

"No sir. You have visitors in the main house, sir. Algernon Fisher, Jeremy Lyons and Lady Violet Westbury. They are in the library at present, I took the liberty of bringing them tea. Shall I tell them you'll see them?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Thanks, Colin."

"Of course, sir."

"Lady Violet Westbury?" Alec said, looking startled and carnal all at once. Ed narrowed his eyes, lost in thought.

"The name sounds familiar to me for some reason. Oh!" Ed snapped his fingers. "The woman who painted the Straker coat of arms."

"You've met her, Ed. At the film festival we took part in to benefit Childflight. I was ill and couldn't stand in for you that night." Alec didn't add that he had feigned illness to get Ed away from SHADO for a change.

"Good cause, but those personal appearances always give me a headache. Publicity again, Alec! To quote Hannah, pah! Do you have any idea how many reporters Colin has turned away, all trying to do a story on me and Silk Wood Manor? And don't you dare tell me to just do it and the GPA will syndicate it and keep the press off my back. I don't want to repeat the headache of Lois Lane wannabe aka Josephine Fraser. Come on, Alec. I need moral support."

"Of course, sir," Alec stood up and replied, copying Colin's blue blooded tones. Ed responded by swatting him with the newspaper.

"Ow! That hurt!" Alec complained and Ed chuckled at him.

In unison they said, "it was supposed to."

They smiled at one another.

"Happy Christmas, Ed Straker."

"Happy Christmas, Alec Freeman. Come on, help me get rid of the visitors. Claire will be here soon. Captain Carlin called me on my cell as I was driving back and told me he'd landed safely at our air base."

"Good. You like art. You may actually enjoy meeting Lady Westbury again."

"Not if she's anything like her brother Charles," Ed replied.

"What do you want for Christmas, Ed?"

"Claire." Ed smiled. "She'll be here in oh, about three hours. The longest hours of my life."

Alec nodded and forced out a grin. He didn't want to think about the possibility she'd still treat Ed as a stranger.

Briskly the two of them walked the distance from the cottage to the spacious garden, and then up to the oak door which led into the main building. Ed met Colin in the great hall, and Alec noticed Ed was nervously tapping his long fingers on the gold handle of his Malacca cane. The doctors at SHADO in San Francisco had pronounced her ready to return to England, but had said she hadn't responded to the photographs as much as they had hoped she would. At least she seemed to have responded the longest to Ed's. Now Carlin brought her back. Ed naturally would have been reluctant to use SHADO aircraft but Alec had pointed out Claire still was one of the medical center staff until she formally resigned, and therefore a legitimate passenger. Virginia had agreed to it as well.

"All right. All right," Ed said irritably. "The Christian awaits the lions."

Alec grinned at him, and followed him into the library.

"Oh my GOD! You're Ed Straker!"

The exclamation had come from a rosy-cheeked, slightly plump young man that Ed calculated was in his early thirties, with longish brown curls and hazel eyes. He had on white jeans, white shirt and white shoes, and wore a green sweater. He'd jumped up from his seat, spilling most of his tea in his porcelain saucer. He fell way out of the lion category.

"Yes, I know," Ed replied, looking like he'd rather jump out the nearby stained glass window than admit it. "Have we met before?"

"No, I couldn't even get near you! You're the head of Harlington-Straker Studios! I saved up and went to your film festival to fund ChildFlight and covered it for my blog. I live alone and have a blog on the Internet as a sort of hobby. I was hoping to interview you for my blog. Oh my God, you're really gorgeous!"

Alec and Algernon chuckled while Ed remained staring at the young man like he was a stain he'd found on his trousers. Lady Westbury smiled, as did Colin.

"If anyone cares, I'm Alec Freeman." Alec held out a hand to the man. Jeremy ignored it and hugged Alec, who chuckled.

"Alec! Glad to meet you. You're his partner! I didn't see you there that night, I'm Jeremy Lyons."

"Had flu." Alec grinned.

"You may want to ask this fellow just what he's doing on my property, Alec."

"That's my doing, I'm afraid. How do you do, Mr. Straker. I'm Lady Violet Westbury, and I have some business to conduct here. It is a pleasure to meet you. I'm afraid this young man accidentally collided with my vehicle, and he was in need of a friend, so I asked Algernon to allow him to come with us." She extended her hand. Ed moodily ignored it, and Alec quickly took it, and kissed it.

She smiled at Alec. "Is he always that rude?"

"Always. It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Lady Westbury." Alec grinned.

"You have a wonderfully rugged face. I should like to paint you one day."

"I hate to break you two up but what exactly is this business you mentioned earlier, Westbury?"

"It's Violet."

"I'm waiting," Ed reminded her.

"Dear me, you do rather remind me of Charles. Yet there's sensitivity in your eyes. Actually I've been searching like mad for Right Reverend Stanley Brisby. He's usually called Angel."

"He isn't here at the moment, he's in the process of moving house. What did you want him for? You *can* sit down, Lyons. First, stop staring at me like that for God's sake," Ed added, irritated. Jeremy fell into a seat as though hit by a double-decker bus.

"He won't eat you alive, don't worry." Alec told Jeremy, chuckling.

"He's civilized. He'll probably kill you first." Algernon grinned. Jeremy gulped noticeably. Alec laughed at Algernon.

"I asked you a question," Ed said to the woman.

"I'm quite efficient at dealing with bothersome people like you, so stop trying to bully me, Mr. Straker. I have a letter from Frances Brisby for Angel. I was to give it to him after she died, those were her instructions." Violet snapped open her purse and produced a handwritten envelope that smelled faintly of roses.

"Do you know its contents?" Ed asked.

"No but I can guess what she said. I was Frances' best friend and confidante."

"Is this the only letter you have from her?" Ed inquired.

"Yes. STOP! How dare you?" she yelled unladylike, as Ed reached for the envelope, snatched it and held it firmly.

"He isn't going to read this unless I do first. You try to tell him anything she said without my permission and you'll answer to me. I have no intention of ever having him upset again. Colin, you might want to refresh her tea, she looks a bit peaked. Alec, you stay here. As for you, Mr. Lyons, if you print a word of any of this, you'll find yourself involved in a costly lawsuit."

"As if I need more problems after getting sacked for stealing two bloody patient's charts at St. Swithin's," he sighed. Ed had turned to go out, now he pivoted on a heel like he was doing a dance move, and he studied Jeremy carefully.

"Let me guess. The files were those on myself and Alec Freeman, weren't they?"

"Yes, but I'm telling you, Mr. Straker, I didn't do it!"

"I believe you. I'll see that you are cleared, Lyons. You'll get your job back."

"Thanks but no thanks I won't work anywhere that doesn't want me. Pity for my patients, but I do have my pride, you know. I'm gay and they didn't want me round, but before this had no way of kicking me out, you see."

"You're a doctor?" Ed asked.

Jeremy had watched his face, expecting dismay or some negative reaction at the word gay. Straker only looked thoughtful. And a thousand times more handsome in person than in his photographs. Oh stop dreaming, Jeremy, he told himself.

"No. Nurse Practitioner. Why?"

"Agree to give up your blog, give me a copy of your c.v. sign some contracts Alec will draw up and you'll work here if you want the job and I decide to hire you. You'll live here on the premises, look after myself and my guests and staff and have your own clinic. Food will be provided. I'll double whatever you were paid after a month if you work out well for us. You'll have to pass a tough security check. Interested?"

"Interested! Interested he asks? This is bloody wonderful! Yes! Yes!"

Ed gave him a swift measured grin, and went out, his cane tapping on the marble floor to the rhythm of his steps with more grace than Fred Astaire.

"So he does have a heart, your arrogant little Ed Straker?" Lady Westbury said in wonder.

"One as big as England. And what he said about Angel is true. They were prisoners of war and relied on one another to survive," Alec told her.

"I assume you are all staying for supper?" Colin smiled.

Ed Straker left the manor and went to his private cottage, let himself in, went upstairs to his bedroom, took an ivory letter opener from his mother's pink and gold French Provincial secretary desk which he loathed, chose the burgundy leather chair and sat on it. He sliced open the envelope, unfolded the letter and scanned it quickly, as was his habit with SHADO reports. He sighed heavily, and read the letter again.

*Dear, dear, dear Stanley, my love, my only love. It is with sadness that I must write these words. I could not bring myself to tell you what had really happened, and for your own good and mine, I allowed myself to go through the comedy of divorcing you. I will be dead when you read this. My darling, my darling, my sweet darling. You know that I have my annual medical check-up as sure as clockwork. The physician found horrid lumps in my breast which I was aware of but had ignored out of cowardice. He said had I come to him sooner, he might have saved me. The biopsy confirmed late stage cancer. He said he must put me in hospital straight away to see if the cancer had spread, and I was to have my breasts removed, then horrid chemotherapy. Stanley, I could not do it. I would not have that done, and have you look at me with pity. I would not sit and watch my crowning glory drop to the ground in chunks. I did not want to hear your prayers or your sobs or say goodbye. If you remember me, as I know you will, remember me whole. So I told the doctor to say nothing, I swore him to it. Perhaps what I decided to do is not very Christian of me, but the last thing left to me after the cancer diagnosis was to choose the manner in which I died. So I began procedures for the divorce, blamed it on the differences on how we saw the church, and argued over the changes to come. I knew you would believe that. I told myself you would never believe that I didn't love you so I was quite the actress, wasn't I, perhaps even your Edward would hire me for a film. I went into hotel when the divorce was final, and I took pills. The doctor had prescribed several for pain and he cautioned me that an overdose would be fatal. I believe he knew what I intended, after knowing me for so many years and I was glad of it because I knew Violet would not get them for me. I told her I was ill and not to tell you, but to give you this letter when the time came. Even the most beautiful of roses have thorns and having to leave is my thorn, thrust forever in my heart. My darling, do not mourn me, I will not have it, go and save souls as you were intended to. God forgive me, and God watch over you to the end of your days. England will be a far darker place when you leave it, but you will be carried to*

*heaven by the angels you are named for and should God forgive me I will wait for you there. My darling, my darling. My love. Forgive me.*

*Your Cupcake.*

Ed sighed again, fiercely wiped away tears, and stood up. Reading it had reminded him of what it was like to have had someone that truly loved you, and then have them torn away from your grasp. You never stopped bleeding. There was no reason to be confident that Claire would even know who he was, let alone be able to remember the strength of their love. The idea of losing her became all too real to him and he started to feel faint. He threw both the envelope and the letter into the fireplace savagely, and watched them burn. Afterwards, he settled on the chair a second time. Some time went by, and he started to doze, until there was a tap on the door. Automatically he scowled, reaching the conclusion that Alec would barge in on him and not bother to knock, so it must be a stranger. He rose reluctantly, and opened the door. His heart gave a distinct whoosh. It cost him a deficit of his powers of concentration just to form a thought. No sound left his mouth.

"I apologize for disturbing you, Mr. Straker, I just came to tell you that after giving the matter serious thought, I decided you were quite right. I must confess I didn't think very much of your manners, but your friend Alec changed my mind about you. Colin has invited us all to have supper, and unless you object, I should very much like to stay. As for this young woman, I believe you know her."

"Yes. Yes I do. Of course you can stay, Lady Westbury, and thank you for understanding about Angel. I presume you know what that letter contained?"

"I told you before, I can guess. You can count on my silence. I'll see you later, Mr. Straker."

Lady Westbury quietly closed the bedroom door behind her.

Claire Swanson stood for an eternal moment, studying him.

"Claire."

"Colin tried to retrieve any Maelstrom within me, but there was only one female remaining, Edward. She's dead. I felt her die!" Claire burst into tears.

Ed walked toward her, trying to remain detached.

"So you know all about it now. I should have been with you when it happened. Are you all right?"

"Now. Now I am. You're finally with me, Darling."

He took her into his arms.

"Tell me what happened, and how much you remember. I know about Devon, what he tried to do to you."

"I wouldn't let him have me. I belong to you."

"Why did you go? Why did you feel you had to leave?" he said sorrowfully, holding her close.

"I'm so foolish, I don't remember much Edward, I lost so much more of my memory when I left and after Reginald's attack. I didn't want you to suffer. I didn't want to see you die. Or to see Alec die. You didn't make me stay, I know you didn't feel you had the right to. We both made mistakes. I'm here now."

"You felt the Maelstrom, you connected with her. I thought you might have achieved that more easily than I did. Tell me what happened."

"There was a woman within me, Edward. Colin said she must have chosen that gender as she came to know me, to live through me, to survive. She spoke to me all the time, told me to

get away, to try to go back to you. She said Devon was dangerous. I hardly remember buying the knife. Or killing him. I think she may have forced me to do it. That day he came, the day he tried to rape me, her voice was especially strong in my head. But I wouldn't listen to her. Even when she said if you and I weren't together we'd both die. I didn't understand. I thought I was just going insane. I thought it was the illness. But we're all going to be all right now. She didn't survive, Edward. She let go of life. Maybe if I had listened to her, she saved me Edward." Claire wept again. "She saved me to be with you. I know it."

"No. Colin explained a lot of it to me. Sometimes transference fails and Maelstrom die. What happened to you was much too catastrophic, far too difficult for one of his people to overcome. At least you made a connection. I told Colin you were different. All that is important is that you're here now. Clifford and Devon are dead and can't hurt you anymore."

"Edward," she smiled. "You left SHADO. Incredible! I could hardly believe it when Alec told me about it. It's a great accomplishment what you've achieved with the Maelstrom. I trust these people, Edward. I came to know them through her. They want to help us defeat the aliens. I know all this must frighten you, you think you're walking away, like a traitor deserting your post. You would never turn your back on your duty, don't you see that? This is the most important thing you've ever done, this is what will save your world, and revenge what was done to the victims of UFO incidents. I know returning to living a normal life scares you."

He chuckled.

"I shouldn't be surprised you'd know that. But I am. You and Alec always reading me like a book."

"A leather-bound first edition," she said with a smile.

"What are you staring at? "

"I'm sorry Edward, but you are beautiful. I so longed to see your face and your eyes. You are beautiful."

"You make me sound like I'm one of Lady Westbury's oil paintings." He smiled, and stroked her mass of dark hair.

"I like her, Edward. She's a very lonely woman. Her brother is terrible , he's done terrible things to her, things she can't bear to think about. I knew it from the moment I met her."

"Practicing your ESP or is it your psychology again? How much do you remember, did the drug help? They said after the near-rape and you murdering Reginald Devon that you went into a fugue state, but that the drug brought you out of it."

"No Edward, not my psychology. Colin said once you had Maelstrom inside you, you were never the same. I've changed, my senses and instincts are so much clearer. The fugue state? I suppose so. It's unclear to me, my time with Reginald , or perhaps it was so horrible I don't want the memory back. Colin couldn't help me. Edward, do you still want to..."

"Yes?"

She had her arms around him tightly, now she withdrew an arm and showed him her hand shyly. The ring sparkled even in the light of the fireplace.

"Tell me what this means," she said tearfully.

"It means you and Alec taught me that maybe I didn't have to put happiness behind me. It means I want you in my life, and whatever memories you lost don't trouble me, it doesn't matter anymore. We have a new life, Claire. We can start again. I want to make you Claire Straker. I want you to be my wife. If you want it. If you want me."

He let her go and smiled shyly at her, then slowly got down on one knee.

"I know it's old fashioned, but I believe in doing everything properly. Will you-"

"Oh pins and needles, you're such a stupid man, a stupid, stupid, beautiful man. Oh God Edward, yes, did you really think I'd say no-" she paused in shock. "You *did*, you *do*, don't you? You're so scarred by Mary and every other woman in your life. You think I'd say yes only because of the bond which will save us both. I'm saying yes because I need you, but not as much as you need me. I'm saying yes because I love you, I've always loved you, because no man is worthy of being loved and cherished as much as you are worthy of being loved and cherished. Yes. Edward precious, yes. Yes, yes, yes-"

"Hush up, will you, and let me kiss you!" he said happily .

She kissed him, hurried to the door, and locked it. He chuckled at her.

"Claire, you can't possibly think, you can't think... we have guests in the main building for Christ's sake!"

"I don't give a damn about the guests, Edward. Even the titled one. Besides, I used to be your doctor, Alec said. I can't think of a better way to heal our bond than this," she chuckled shyly.

"You're insane." He watched her take off her clothes and felt himself become aroused by her. She finished undressing, and he pulled her to him, and he felt it was right and would go on forever, he wanted her, he wanted her badly, he had never experienced desire like this before. He had loved Mary, but that was pale in comparison to what he felt now. It was exhilarating, but damn frightening, too.

"Claire, this is our Maelstrom bond doing this rash act, we're out of our minds, they'll come looking for us eventually," he said, as solemnly as he could manage with a naked woman in his arms. She was beautiful, so beautiful and it was beautiful. The whole world was beautiful.

"This is the most pleasurable thing that homo sapiens do and I want to do it with you until-"

"My *bed* breaks?" he guessed, methodically removing his own clothes and folding them neatly to set on the chair. "It had better be the bed, because I don't want to think about the alternative!"

She laughed, but he interrupted her by kissing her down the length of both her arms, and then on both breasts. He settled on the bed beside her, holding her, needing her.

"I love you," he whispered hotly. "I want you, do you understand me? I need you, my God, Claire, I want you! I want you now. I don't want to hurt you or frighten you off after what that bastard Devon did to you-"

"Take me. Make love to me, Edward," she managed to say. She gasped at his first thrust but she pulled at him and he at her as if they each longed to take all of the other inside them, whole body, whole soul. Their spirits soared as if coiled in some erotic ballet performance and when their tender pas de deux ended, he lay beside her, his hands entwined in her hair, his breathing still uneven from exertion, as was hers.

"Can this be real? Can this happiness be real?" she cried aloud.

"Yes. Oh yes. You're so lovely, sweetheart," he said softly in his distinctive voice, in a tone still as heated as the flames. "I love you so much, my treasure."

The door knob rattled, putting an abrupt end to their mood.

"Damn!" Ed snapped. "If it's that Westbury woman again-"

She chuckled at him, stroking the fine hairs on his chest in an effort to soothe him, but it was doing quite the opposite, judging from his expression.

"It's probably just Alec teasing you, you know." she said.

Ed began to appear nervous and pushed her hand away.

"I think he has a key to this room," Ed said suddenly. "Get dressed! He has a..."

"What?" she replied, blushing wildly. He grinned at her.

"What are you two doing in there?" Alec shouted. Ed could hear the mischief in his voice.

"I thought I better break in and check on you two! What have you been doing in there?"

They sat up, pulling the covers over them and laughed.

"None of your business what we're doing, Alec! Go away!" Ed yelled.

Claire giggled, and he smiled at her. Her name meant light, he had told her once. Now that she was with him, all of England seemed bathed in soft light. *This was love. This is what love was meant to be, he reflected. Love changed everything.*

"Isn't that just like the oversexed gentry, no respect for the common people," Alec playfully yelled back. "Okay, you two lovebirds, I'm going!"

They heard the sound of deliberately exaggerated footsteps as he walked away.

"The last of the clowns. He never changes." Ed smiled. "I'm not sure what I'd do if he did."

"I know. He means everything to me too. I guess we should go..." Claire began resignedly.

"No," Ed said firmly, and decisively pulled her to him again.

Supper was served very late that evening.

## **Epilogue: Confessions, Cocoa, Chocolate and a Caroling Cleric**

Hannah Safra sat in the kitchen, still wearing her handmade lace-trimmed apron, with a trace of flour remaining on her fingers, stirring a cup of cocoa and sipping from it delicately, leaving a trace of the whipped cream that topped it on her lips. She reflected that the times in the kitchen she liked best was when she worked dough, beating it like it was an uncooperative, ungrateful donkey, then later smelling its transformation, the unmistakable smell of fresh bread, or cake, all the delicacies her mother had made her learn how to make. How often she had made strudel for Jacob, but now Jacob was no more than a nightmare, and she had finally awakened from it. He belonged to the memories of the camp, locked up deep inside her with the horrors of the camp. She had not expected to survive, she told herself. Here she was, and Edward had told her he would find her another library job, but she had persuaded him to let her be his cook and he had expressed dismay over that prospect to tease her. Then he had taken her to a room in his private cottage she had not seen before, claiming he would lock her up in it if she tempted him with even a single gingerbread cookie. To her extreme delight, it actually was his mother's sewing room, and he'd smiled and pronounced it hers now, as his Christmas gift to her. She had already started to make him a morning suit to wear at his wedding. How wonderfully tall he had grown, so tall yet so thin, as if he never had tasted food. Q- Tip never had tasted life, Angel had secretly told her.

But last night he had grinned, and smiled, and proudly introduced the brunette woman with the doe eyes the color of the cinnamon that Hannah used in making her pastries, and Hannah's heart had lifted to see him smile again. The woman, Claire, that was another thing. Quite another thing. Oh, naturally Jacob had said she was a foolish old woman. Nevertheless, she saw more than he had. She often knew things others didn't.

The woman had smiled, and laughed, and shyly showed off her ring. Not something large or gaudy in a modern setting, but something very old world, very conservative, like the garment she was making for Edward. She had felt it very much defined the woman that her Edward would marry. They had not spoken long, but Hannah felt Claire would make Edward a very good bride indeed. Of course, Alec had cautioned her to not speak to Claire of children, since the woman could not have any. Yet both Edward and his lovely fiancée were childlike in their hearts and in their love and that was what had mattered most.

Hannah frowned. All that night she had watched the woman, watched the way she looked at Edward with protective eyes, in fear that this woman's secrets might scar him further. That fear had gone. But something was wrong. There was a deep sadness in this woman, Claire. Hannah felt it was so clear she might have reached out and grabbed it. Perhaps she felt the pain of never giving birth to a child as Hannah did, perhaps the woman just longed to remember what she had lost. At any rate her Edward would not die. That Colin and the others had not been born as she had didn't trouble her at all. They were good, she felt it to be so. Pah! It was very late for her, almost midnight, quarter to, and she was an early riser like Edward, she would be up at five, sometimes six, to prepare breakfast. She was not that young anymore, but not yet old, however she needed sleep. It was just that there was so much to think about, so much to be thankful for. She drained her delicate porcelain cup, washed and carefully placed it in the china cupboard. Then she began to walk toward the rooms Edward had allowed her to choose in her new home. Ah! This place, this place with its grandeur, and majesty, and beauty, so proper that someone as singular as Edward would live here and add to its history.

She had yawned and then she heard it. She paused, stopped. Perhaps it was only the sounds of the woodland creatures that lived outside the manor grounds?

No. Someone was definitely weeping.

She walked until the sound became clearer, and it brought her to one of the leaded stained glass windows. There. Down near the entrance to the garden. His bride-to-be. His woman. Claire. It took her only a minute to reach her, she marveled at how fast she had gotten back her agility and strength, freed of Jacob and his negativity, his world of ugliness, betrayal and lies. Old? She had never felt so young as when she found someone like Edward, who needed her. What was old age? Pah! She would defy it. She'd survived Auschwitz. Age was nothing.

"Child."

"Oh Hannah, you startled me!"

"You are crying. Why?"

"I am just so happy to be united with Edward." Claire lowered her head.

Hannah shook her head solemnly.

"No, child. All last night I saw that you were in pain. I am sure that Edward would have seen it too, had you not made him so happy by coming back to him. Do not try to lie, child. I see things others do not."

"Monsters. You told Edward he hunted monsters. Edward is a scientist, Hannah. That isn't a word he might have chosen but it describes the aliens very well. But you know, don't you? You know about the Maelstrom. You know now about his SHADO, and about what happened to me."

"Did Edward tell you what I said to him when I first saw him as a grown man?"

"He did not have to. You see things as I do, Hannah. I too have seen things others have not. Hannah, let's go somewhere more private, please?"

"Of course, dear child."

They finally stopped at a newly constructed gazebo, Edward's tribute to the victims of the fire, which was located deep in the garden and had a plaque engraved with the names of the dead. They sat next to one another, oblivious to the cold.

"Hannah, please believe me. I would never ever knowingly hurt Edward. I had to do what I did. You must believe that. If I hadn't, he would have died. Please understand that, Hannah. He would have died a slow lingering death, unable to hold his head up without help, a cripple. Alec told you what happened when Edward tried to get up the day he came to. Then, when he finally would have been released from the torment, Alec's heart would have broken, surely as if Edward truly was his only son, and he'd die too. I love Alec almost as much as I love Edward. Alec has been Edward's *real* shadow, Hannah. He has cared for and nurtured him for a very long time. Hannah, you must not repeat what I tell you. It will kill both of them!"

"All that I can promise is that I will listen, nothing more can I say."

"Hannah, Claire Swanson is gone. Reginald Devon murdered her."

"I don't understand."

"Oh, but you do. You do! Hannah, we of the Maelstrom do not lie. We have never had a reason to until some of us came to Earth."

"Ach mein Gott! You are an *alien*. You are one of *them*, Maelstrom."

"Edward was infected with a virus by a woman who was evil. She hoped it would kill him. She didn't realize we Maelstrom can assume many forms, that we could change into something that resembled a virus. I was among the Maelstrom that she took to try to lengthen her life and when she had no result because we changed to defy her and her kind, she injected me and

others into him. All of Edward's doctors believed he was dying. When Claire bonded with him sexually and emotionally, I was aware of it. At that point I had no gender. But I had come to know him. I had come to love him. I became obsessed with him. So when they bonded..."

"Child, go on."

Claire looked at Hannah with eyes full of tears.

"I chose to enter her, to be even closer to him, to be able to touch him. I was aware of his conflicting feelings for her. My people are primarily a race of scholars, Hannah. Even when we join for life, there is not much feeling besides preservation for our race and acquiring knowledge. Not until we join with humans does that change. I had studied with the rest of the Maelstrom, but not until I shared with Claire her knowledge of all that was Edward Straker, did I start to feel. To feel, Hannah! *TO FEEL!* It was overpowering. I chose to be a human female. I joined with her. I felt her love for him. Yet she too was a disturbed person, Hannah. She had no real love from either parent, and she had always done what she felt people expected of her so she would be loved, not what was in her heart. Not until she met Edward, and loved for the first time in her life and was loved back. When Edward left to go and operate the new spacecraft, the Sejong 1, he was afraid. Afraid of what he felt. Afraid to allow himself to love again. So he fled, not knowing how ill he would become from leaving her. With him gone, she threw herself into her work. After what happened to her with the amnesia drug, she did not want to live. She gave up, Hannah. She loved him with all her heart, but she gave up. The drug had affected her, it had affected her gift, the same gift of seeing the unseen you and I have. When Claire left Edward to live in San Francisco and await death, the last of the Maelstrom inside her died, except for me. Edward's love sustained me even then. I would speak to her, I would tell her to go back to Edward, but she believed me to be nothing more than a hallucination, the way Edward had when the Maelstrom tried to connect with him. Finally, I forced her to go and buy that knife. I was hoping for her to get away from the people who constantly watched her, to use a weapon to escape. To make matters worse, she allowed Reginald to come to her clinic, then eventually her hotel room. It was clear to me what he wanted. He took her against her will and he tried to rape her. I took the knife and I stabbed him, but his injury was not lethal, it was only meant to stop him. I had never killed, neither had she, and he was a trained assassin, hollow where his heart and conscience should be. Hannah, to kill - to kill is *wrong!* To lie is also wrong! What could I do? She would not listen to me. She was empty, Hannah. She knew she would die. She even wanted to die! I was foolish, I should have made sure he was dead. But all I could do was try to get her out of there and back to Edward before they both died. When I wasn't looking, he took the knife and stabbed her. It was then I took her wounded body, I took it as my own, somehow my bond with Edward allowed me not to succumb to my injury. He had not expected her to fight him and when he saw her still alive after he'd lethally wounded her, he realized what I was, because he knew what Perry was. I stabbed him until I was sure he was dead. I tried to save her, Hannah. I swear to you, I tried to save her. I cured our wounds, she could have lived, but she let go. May your God help me, Hannah. I tried. I managed to convince Colin that my Maelstrom self had died, and that I was really Claire Swanson. I had melded with her so completely that even Colin did not know who I am."

"She is dead?"

"Not exactly. Her mind lives in me, but inert. I healed, then preserved her body as my own. I then made it look as if she had succeeded in killing him. Hannah, I have not completed the transference ritual. There is a final step. I believe Edward will live, but he is an intelligent,

perceptive man. He will find out if I do not take the final step, and his world will be torn to pieces. He will die, Hannah! I can't bear it! I *love* him Hannah. I love him the way she did, the very way she did, but perhaps I am stronger than she was. I pretended to be in the fugue state so that the SHADO doctors would not suspect anything. I looked at their photographs and kept up a pretense. I even was careful enough to think the way she would had she not given up and told them what they wanted to know. Perry got me out of there, out of the San Francisco SHADO branch by posing as Edward. Had I stayed any longer, they would have eventually seen that her blood had changed. Had I not gotten back in time, Edward would be a cripple, then dead."

"You said there is a final step?" Hannah found herself shuddering, and she knew it was not the frigid English weather.

*Edward dead was unthinkable. To lose him after thinking all those years that he was being tortured in the war, only to die? Then to see him, to feel him seize her arm in an attempt to see if he was being lied to? Pah! She had not even known it was him! Yet he had proved it was her. It was like years and sorrow had not separated them. To lose Edward now would be worse, much worse than if Hitler had lived and wiped out all of her people. In her heart, the comparison was a true one. He may be grown, but she had looked into those beautiful, expressive blue eyes and seen the monsters. Not only the aliens. The twin monsters of pain and of loneliness, the thousand burdens he carried alone. She had lived to help him live, she saw that now.*

"That is so beautifully put, Hannah. I feel his pain too, his thousand burdens he carries alone. Twin monsters of pain and loneliness. Monsters of guilt too, and as Colin told him, Edward needlessly imprisoned himself. To live, to help him live. I too want that. Hannah, can I be forgiven in your eyes for what I have done? I was in his bed. I mated with him for life. Were he to find out what I did, and reject my love, I would die with him too."

"You can read my thoughts, child?" Hannah smiled.

"The thoughts you think most intensely, yes. I believe I don't have all the Maelstrom's abilities now. It no longer matters, I want to be human, I only want to love him."

"Tell me of the final step, my dear."

"Hannah, all that remains of her is her mind and what you might call her soul, her essence, everything that made her unique. I have not yet completed making that a part of me. Once I do, I can never go back to my people. I will tell you this, Hannah. I know with all my heart that she would want me to save him. To love him and keep him from harm. Never to let anyone or anything hurt him again. Perhaps some part of her knew I genuinely loved him and she allowed us to be together. What he has done here haunts him, Hannah. He must start a life he is not familiar with. He made a choice a long time ago, the choice of duty. But Hannah, he had no one to share the burden of that choice with. Not even his beloved friend Alec at first. Now, Alec has seen him clearer, in Edward's memory was something Alec said about you. That of all of them, your vision of Edward was the clearest. That you saw Edward as the child he had once been. You saw the innocence. The love. The need. I have always thought of Edward just as she did. That he still was a wunderkind, an intelligent child, forced to be perfect but in that striving for perfection he was a child no one had bothered to hold. I saw in his memory what you had meant to him. Hannah, if anyone was a perfect mother to him, it was not Iris Straker, who wouldn't defy her husband to protect him until he almost killed Edward. It was you. I beg of you, don't give me away, do not kill your son now." Claire sobbed.

Hannah, whose cheeks were damp with her own tears, took the woman's hands in her

own.

"Child. These things you say are true. I never knew the woman that Edward has fallen in love with, but I watched him look at you and I know that having you back has started to heal his soul as much as it has healed his body. Alec told me a great deal. He told me of Edward's callous first wife and of his losing his son. Things that broke his heart. I touch you and I know that you love him as I do. Perhaps, child, now that you have lost your alien family, perhaps you too could look at me as your mother?"

"Oh Hannah yes, you are so good to me, I don't know how anyone could not love you. What am I supposed to do? My God, what do I do? She would want him to live. I know it. But I was in his bed and lied. I lied with my tongue and my body. I didn't lie with my love. He means everything to me. Hannah, you must-"

"Child. Put your heart at ease. Do the final step. I believe only then will Claire Swanson and Edward Straker be at peace."

"Will you stay with me while I do it, Hannah?" Claire smiled.

"Yes, child."

Claire closed her eyes. Her head slumped and Hannah started to panic. Then, Claire sat up and looked directly at Hannah. Her eyes were shining. She spoke with a rich, strong voice.

"I'm so *glad*, I'm so glad Edward has both of you and Alec now. He must never be alone..."

She collapsed in Hannah's arms.

Deeply asleep in his mother's bed, Edward Straker suddenly sat upright with a scream. He sat gasping for air for several seconds then he saw that the bed was empty. Dressing hastily, he ran down the stairs and into the great hall of the cottage and then out the door like a frightened rabbit. Alec was dressed and frantically looking for him after being awakened by his cry, then he saw the door to the cottage was open.

Ed had run to the main manor building and then realized he had forgotten his keys. He began to pound on the oak door. Alec finally caught up with him, touched him on the shoulder.

"For heaven's sake Ed, I have my keys, what's wrong? At least you're running around without the cane now. Claire finally getting here has helped you."

"Claire. I had an awful dream. Alec, she's dead! Alec my God, she didn't fight Reginald Devon, she killed herself. Claire, I've lost her!"

"No. She is right here with you where she should be." Claire smiled at him. He whirled around wildly, seized her, and took her into his arms.

"Thank God. Thank God you're all right." Ed said. "I dreamed that you were-"

"Did you think I left you again? Oh, my darling Edward."

He had his eyes squeezed tightly shut, and Claire felt him shake with the force of barely controlled emotion. Then he slowly let her go and he smoothed down his clothes in the way she'd often seen him do to his customary Nehru jacket.

Alec pretended not to see his tears, and stared intently at Hannah.

"It was just a nightmare, Edward." Hannah said calmly.

Claire nodded, reached over and took his hand.

He smiled with relief.

"He is determined to catch the pneumonia! Pah!" Hannah complained.

"What on earth are you two doing out here at this hour, Hannah? Claire, were you with her?"

"I couldn't sleep, I was too excited, and..." Claire started to say.

"and I was up making cocoa, my nightly treat, you remember I make it for you when you were small, Edward dearest? I drank it, then decided to take a stroll and Claire was in the garden, so we took advantage of the opportunity for some girl talk."

"Next time, do it during the day," Ed scolded.

"You nearly gave me a heart attack screaming like that, Ed." Alec complained.

"I don't sleep all that well lately, Alec. Not in *that* bed. Too damn much misery in that bed," Ed explained, still looking troubled.

"I have a suggestion. We will trade. I will take your mother's bed to the manor and you take mine here. It is very comfortable, and big enough for the both of you." Hannah winked. Ed grinned.

"Thank you, Hannah. Her bed would suit you, as you were something of a mother to me back then and still are." Ed ignored Alec's triumphant look at that last confession.

"And pah! You are without brains stampeding around in this cold." Hannah crossed her arms. Claire chuckled at her.

"Do you think I could get some of that cocoa too?" the Australian asked.

"She has *you* drinking cocoa?" Ed asked Alec, in astonishment.

"Pah! Of course! It is *MY* cocoa, not the flavored dirt you get in a packet with enough chemicals in it to make a bomb." Hannah exclaimed. Ed grinned at her again.

"Is there enough to go around?" he asked. "I could use a cup right now and Claire loves chocolate."

"I can make some, yes!"

"Cocoa! Sounds so delightful, Hannah. I haven't had any since I was a little girl."

Ed spun around.

"Lady Westbury, what are you doing here? I didn't realize you were still with us."

"I wanted to see the repairs continue on the manor, so I accepted Alec's offer to stay."

Ed narrowed his eyes at Alec, and Alec pretended not to notice it.

"It's all coming along wonderfully. Besides, Charles is the most awful bore. Rather fun having a sleepover. However, Mr. Straker, I must protest."

"Now what? What did I do now?" Ed exclaimed, and suddenly saw Angel hurrying toward the chapel. Algernon Fisher and young Jeremy Lyons waved at him enthusiastically and then continued following the priest. Ed had the distinct feeling they were up to something.

"It isn't what you did, my dear," Hannah said, amused. "It's what your Alec won't do."

Alec attempted to look innocent.

"*Report*. I mean, explain." Ed hastily corrected his amateur slip, ignoring Claire's girlish giggle.

"I want to do the fellow's portrait, he's got the most wonderful face. He won't sit for me."

Ed looked thoughtful for a moment. Suddenly his expression changed to one that made Alec weak in the knees.

"He's got that crafty look on his face. The one that means trouble," Alec told Lady Westbury.

"You asked me what I wanted for Christmas, Alec. Well, I want her to do a portrait of you for me."

"But Ed...!"

"You heard the man," Violet said happily.

"I heard the *tyrant*," Alec grumbled. Ed grinned.

The entire group jumped when suddenly the chapel bell started to peal. Alec found

himself enjoying holding Violet, who was trembling.

"Sorry, that was a bit of a scare," she told him and somewhat reluctantly let go of him. Ed and Claire exchanged meaningful glances.

"I'm known for saving damsels in distress." Alec grinned.

"I can imagine!" Violet retorted, feigning being embarrassed.

"What on earth has gotten into Angel?" Ed said in puzzlement. "I hardly see him at all these days, he's been hiding out at that chapel like a criminal. Now he's ringing that bell so much I'm thinking of calling him Quasimoto Brisby."

"Pah! You do not know what day it is?" Hannah scolded him.

"Oh my. It's Christmas! It's Christmas day!" Violet said and clapped. "Christmas services in the chapel!"

Alec grinned at her and offered her his arm. She hesitated, then smiled up at him and accepted it. Hannah watched them with keen matchmaking eyes.

Ed caught that look and grinned. They did make a nice couple. He hoped she liked cats for Alec was inseparable from his bodyguard of a cat named Ivy, but then he suspected she was similar to Claire, the two of them were the kind of people who saved snails from lawns and French restaurants. This ought to be interesting, he thought.

"Edward, what do you want to find under the tree?" Claire asked Ed softly.

"**You.** What do you want for Christmas?"

"You and a whole chocolate cake from Hannah, not necessarily in that order." Claire laughed. Ed gave her a brief but most menacing ersatz scowl. His eyes seemed luminous as any Christmas star. He suddenly stopped. He smiled, and his smile was brighter than his eyes. "*Listen,*" he said intently.

Claire watched everyone freeze and wondered if anyone knew he had unconsciously used the tone that made people into obedient zombies, his imperial tone of command. You could take SHADO from the Commander, but you couldn't take the Commander out of the man. Or something like that, she chuckled to herself.

"Listen to what?" Alec asked. "Oh, someone in the manor must have radio on. People sing carols at Christmas time, Ed. Perhaps someone as cloistered as you've been wouldn't know that." he teased.

"Very funny, Alec. Perhaps Lady Westbury will enlighten you."

"Foolish Alec. That isn't the wireless, that is Right Reverend Stanley Brisby singing praises to God," Violet informed him, like a professor disappointed in her student, Ed noticed. Or her love interest, Ed thought.

"Angel?" Alec asked, in astonishment.

"Now you know why he was nicknamed Angel." Ed smiled. "Come on, everybody. Let's go to the chapel and listen. Maybe even join in, if Colin can find Angel some earplugs."

"My apologies, sir. I haven't fetched earplugs. Hannah would be very justifiably upset with me were you to catch a cold so I brought her cocoa for everyone," Colin explained, and handed it around from his ever present sterling silver tray.

"Edward, my dear boy, you have a perfectly presentable voice, I daresay no ear plugs will be needed. Happy Christmas to all!" Perry said exuberantly.

Ed jumped, spilling most of his cocoa and found Perry behind him, dressed up as Father Christmas.

Alec chuckled at his friend.

Hannah smiled at Claire. Claire smiled back at her with love.

*All was well, Hannah thought. All was well. Claire Swanson was at peace. That had not been the alien that had spoken to them. Why should she question it? On this day as Angel had told her earlier, Christ Himself was born, so a miracle was to be expected, she told herself. Angel knew miracles happened. You did not question a man born with that incredibly beautiful singing voice. Or a man born with that voice and those eyes, she thought, looking fondly at Edward, as he stood holding hands with Claire. She loves him and they are whole now. All is well.*

"Excellent, and afterward you will all have breakfast yes?" Hannah said. They finished their cocoa and Ed led them all to the chapel on the grounds of Silk Wood Manor as if he himself was the star that legend said led three wise men to the Christ child, thought Hannah. Hannah was a devout Jew, but Angel had taught her that there was no right or wrong way to pray. She had listened devoutly, she remembered. Perhaps her devotion had more to do with seeing how handsome he looked now that he had shaved, stopped drinking, and the way his clerical collar seemed to set off his faded but kind blue eyes. Pah! Such naughty thoughts! Hannah privately chuckled to herself.

She did not fail to notice Lady Westbury exchanging looks with Alec Freeman, while her Edward inspected Lady Westbury the way a father would inspect the girl his son was considering marrying. In the meantime, Claire walked hand in hand with the personal Messiah she loved and knew he had come home. Hannah watched her with affection, but grinned at Edward, who failed to notice Hannah's attention. Perhaps there would be more than one wedding on the horizon if the Lord of the Manor found Lady Westbury good enough for his Alec?

Hannah, whose own name meant favored by God, chuckled to herself over the irony of what she'd heard Alec telling Angel. Angel had laughed at Alec's comment that some people, like Keith Ford and Peter Carlin, thought of Q-tip *as* God. Therefore, Edward favored her. Now they'd found out what the Straker family motto was, it couldn't be any more appropriate. She reflected that her Edward's name meant guardian. It fit her sweet Edward, who was her son of the heart if not a son of her blood, very well. Now, within the gates of Silk Wood Manor, she would love and guard her guardian.

### **THE END**

Notes from the author: The late, but never to be forgotten Ed Bishop researched his family roots. That made me curious about Straker's. I started to do research, and thus my original ideas for this story began to come together. That's actually the *real* Straker family coat of arms and motto I discovered, and used in this novel. Again, I make frequent use of canon for flavor, but my stories are not canon, and they're my stories. Telling a story and creating a mood is more important to me than canon. There will be a sequel to this story, my Silk Wood Manor UFO stories (and stand alone stories ) will continue. My husband and I thank you for taking the time to read them.

**Amelia & ED & Nancy**