

The Rabbit's Paw

A UFO Series original non-profit fan story by Amelia S. Rodgers in collaboration with E. Straker ©2011

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Straker's serious shoulder injury was an idea developed by writer/editor/SHADO Librarian Deborah Rorabaugh, which we use often, because it suits my view of the character. His duty and imprisonment in Vietnam is suggested by service ribbons seen on his Air Force uniform in UFO. Again, this story is not canon.

Some adult content, language, deaths and violence. Factual information in the story may have been changed for dramatic purposes.

Situations and opinions in this story are not necessarily the views of the author, but may have been used for dramatic purposes.

The fictional Dream Path Foundation is loosely based on the real Make-a-Wish Foundation:

Dedicated to my daughter 'Bunny' and my son Rex, and as always, my husband Ed. (Who playfully agreed to choose the nom de plume 'Ed Straker' because I've always kidded him that he acts like Straker on occasion!)

This story was inspired by my fellow writer Denise Felt's **A Little Magic. The Rabbit's Paw** is my second story involving what appears to be magic, the first was **Magic Fairies**. This story takes place fairly soon after *A Question Of Priorities*. Enjoy.

Chapter One: Coup d'etat

"You did what, Alec?" Two vividly blue crystalline eyes scanned Alec like an X-Ray machine, drew a conclusion and then expertly filed the results under D, standing for destined to be dead second-in-command.

Alec Freeman had reported in late that morning, and he tried to remember if his medical insurance payments were up to date and should Straker draw his Glock, could he duck in time to dodge the bullet?

Yes, to the first and an emphatic no to the second. Commander Straker was a crack shot. That fact had saved Alec on several occasions. It wouldn't in this case. Alec purposely made his tone as light hearted as possible. You didn't get clumsy around a stick of dynamite, and this one had white-blond hair, stern blue eyes and a marked tendency to explode under pressure, he thought.

"I briefed Miss Ealand about it some time ago, Ed. You keep her so busy with everything else she's expected to handle for you, she probably just forgot to tell you about it. You of all people must realize the importance of maintaining our film studio cover. Part of achieving that requires that we have a working relationship with charitable organizations. So I wrote to the Dream Path Foundation after getting a letter from them and made a generous donation in Harlington-Straker Film Studios' behalf. It's an extremely worthy charity, Ed. They fund and assist in granting seriously ill children's last wishes."

"Miss Ealand didn't inform me about this at all, Alec. Fine, fine, I appreciate your donation, and approve of it, but how does this involve me?"

Alec had decided not to add he'd had a private chat with Ed Straker's executive assistant, Miss Ealand, and the two of them had come to the conclusion that not telling Commander Straker about their coup d'etat until they had to, was the right direction to go in.

"When I sent them information about the studio, your standard publicity photograph was on one of our studio press brochures." Alec flashed a smile he hoped was reassuring. He would have liked to have dated Marilyn Monroe, but that hadn't happened either.

Ed Straker looked like he spent a good deal of time licking fresh lemons, judging from the expression he offered Alec.

"Get to the point, Alec. I have the distinct feeling I'm not going to like this."

"You know perfectly well you haven't been taking your mandatory holidays, and you've skipped several appointments to get your yearly SHADO physical, which no doubt is going to show that your stress levels are elevated to stratospheric heights. So I had a refreshing private chat with Dr. Schroeder about your little problem. A wonderful opportunity has opened up for you to get away from SHADO for two weeks, take in the sights in San Francisco, meet the Dream Path staff there, then fly out with their client to Anaheim, California, and-"

Ed Straker's eyebrows performed Olympian gold medal worthy somersaults as he listened to Freeman.

Uncharacteristically shocked at the latest effort by this crafty Australian to get him to be a normal human being and not the perfectionist workaholic he actually was, he mouthed 'San Francisco?' back at the man who was *supposed* to be his closest friend and trusted ally.

"I'm not flying anywhere, Colonel," Ed retorted, his normally pleasant, unique voice now anti-aircraft flak.

"Come on, Ed. Your luxury commercial class flight from Heathrow to San Francisco International Airport leaves in five hours, more than enough time for you to drive home,

shower and shave, change your clothes and catch the flight. I took the liberty of packing your luggage for you; it's in your car. See, I thought of everything, you can thank me later. Colonel Lake graciously volunteered to fill in for you. Here's your briefing material, and Miss Ealand has your tickets and passport. I forgot one small detail. You either do this or Dr. Schroeder and I go pay a visit to your favorite person in the world and fill him in, and I understand he's an American General. Have a great flight, Ed!"

"This is nothing less than blackmail. I'm being forced to do this under duress. You forget Alec, I never negotiate with criminals."

"You're actually comparing me to a criminal? After all I've done for you? Ed, how could you possibly do that?"

"Easily, and you're right, Colonel Freeman. I shouldn't insult criminals by comparing them to you."

Ed Straker grabbed the file from Alec, stretching and nearly breaking his second-in-command's arm in the process. The Commander shoved the file into a slim black attaché case on his executive desk. He snapped it closed then locked it, giving Alec the impression that he would have liked to stick the Australian colonel's head under the lid before he did so. Alec noticeably backed away as the Commander stood up, picked up the attaché, smoothed down his pristine black Nehru jacket, and slipped past a nervous looking Alec, heading for the door. The door hissed open, and Straker pivoted on a heel, giving Alec a parting laser blast of an expression.

"You brought this on yourself, Ed," Alec bravely countered, wondering what the circumference of the hole Straker's gaze had just burned through his skull was.

"I'll deal with you later, Colonel."

The door at last swallowed Straker, and closed behind him. Alec headed immediately for the office bar, aware that Miss Ealand sometimes handled the mercurial Commander far better than he did. After emptying half of the single malt whiskey in his tumbler in relief that he was still breathing, Alec dropped into Straker's chair, and allowed himself a triumphant grin. Alec grinned again, this time wickedly. Commander Straker didn't yet realize it, but he was about to go to Disneyland!

Chapter Two: Grounded Pilot

Commander Ed Straker wearily put a brand new, crisp American hundred-dollar bill into the busboy's hand after he had eagerly placed Straker's battered black leather carry on and his suitcase on the luggage stand in the spacious suite of the Coronet Hotel. He had been proudly informed by the busboy that he was staying in the Presidential Suite. The Commander thought a more accurate name for it would have been the Bankrupt Suite, after seeing the room rates. Ed had retained his attaché case, and he tossed it on the California king bed, which he thought an Interceptor could easily have landed on. After he had boarded the Pan-Am commercial jet to Heathrow, a non-stop flight to San Francisco International, Ed had totally ignored the spiel from the captain, battling his own nervousness at being aboard any jet aircraft which *he* wasn't flying himself, while devoutly praying that nobody recognized him. Nothing was sadder than a grounded pilot, he reasoned. Thinking of several bloody, painful and prolonged methods of killing his second-in-command Colonel Alec Freeman had somewhat eased his suffering.

Finally unbuckling his harness, all too aware that his so-called luxury class seat hardly had enough room to have a coherent thought in, he fell fast asleep.

That miracle had happened after refusing the packages of stale cashews, the tiny liquor bottles, the underdone snapper dinner accompanied by rubber vegetables, with a hunk of strawberry shortcake hard enough to kill a man with one blow, and the lascivious looks of the stewardesses who had hopefully offered him their phone numbers, only to watch them be torn up.

Ed had been agreeable only to accepting a miniscule pillow and a blanket with the Pan-Am logo all over it. His blissful sleep had soon been shattered by a baby crying somewhere in back of him, and Ed was sure the decibel level had fractured his eardrums. Mortally wounded, he picked up the in-flight magazine, flipped it open and glanced wearily at an advertisement for birth control. It took all of his training to convince himself that giving it to the baby's mother, as a subtle hint was a bad idea.

Now he stood in his hotel suite and studied the expression of the busboy, who was staring at his generous tip like it was a nuclear bomb about to go off.

"Sir, this is a hundred dollar bill."

"I guarantee it's real, if that's what you're worried about. I have clothes, toiletries, and several changes of underwear in my luggage. That is all. Nothing to crank out counterfeit bills, I promise you. Is there anything else I've overlooked? I really want to grab some sleep-what now?"

"I've only been working here for a month. I took this job just to get me through college. I could sure use this money, but it doesn't seem right to get this for just carrying-"

Ed stepped up to the startled busboy, reached out, grasped, and read his plastic name tag, then let it go like it was a yo-yo string.

"PETER. Look, Peter. I've had a rough flight out here. I'm out here on business when I'd rather be back in England, sleeping in my own bed. I can count dollar bills. I even count extremely well. I have an important appointment in three days, and I want to get it over as fast as possible so I can go home. Three days is all the time I have to adjust to this damn West Coast time zone. Now be a good boy and get out of here for me, would you?"

"Sure thing! Look, anything you want, you call me, okay? We have a concierge, Harris, but he's a sourpuss, all the tourists say that to me. You're English? Wow! You don't sound English. Don't bother with calling room service. Anything you want, *I'll* get for you. Have you

rented a car? Have you ever been in San Francisco before? I know your name is Straker, I heard you tell the clerk-"

"Peter," Ed responded in frustration. "I need to sleep now. Very badly."

"You're a decent guy, you know that? Real friendly! Some tourists treat me like I'm part of the furniture. They treat me like I'm a pack llama in Peru or something. Do you know we have to carry up to six bags sometimes? Sometimes I think the suitcases are full of lead! You just leave everything up to me-what did you say your name was again?"

"Will you go if I tell you?"

"Sure thing!"

Ed went over to one of the night tables, opened the drawer, and sure enough, there was the Gideon Bible. Ed held it out. The busboy looked at it, confused, but then Ed was beginning to realize that was the young fellow's natural state of mind.

"Swear you'll leave on *this*," the Commander said.

The busboy did, with a dramatic flourish. Ed tossed the Bible back in the drawer, at the back of his mind vaguely considering that his act would be considered slightly disrespectful, but this busboy's zeal would test any Deity's patience.

"I'm a devout Christian too, Mr. Straker! My Dad is Ortho-"

"My name is *Ed*. E-D. Ed. Now go. *Now*."

"Sure thing, Ed! See you first thing in the morning!"

The door finally shut. Ed locked it while he considered ringing the Vatican to have Peter's departure classified as a miracle. He glanced at his attaché. He had the Dream Path file to read, but work could wait for a change, he was exhausted. He stripped and went into the bathroom, and showered, the tired muscles on his sinewy frame at last relaxing under the warm spray.

He emerged from the bathroom fifteen minutes later, wearing the complimentary terry cloth bathrobe, which had been placed in his suite with the compliments of the hotel, and he ignored the leather slippers they'd provided, and instead padded barefoot across the soothingly soft tan carpet. The suite was painted in autumn tones with gold trim, which contrasted beautifully with the abstract art on the walls that Ed took in, and admired. At least his temporary home pleased his eye. Now to get some sleep.

The Commander went over to his suitcase to fetch his pajamas, snapping the lock open absent mindedly. He suddenly groaned so loudly that it must have registered on the Richter scale, and cracked the hotel building, easily competing as a disaster with the great SF earthquake of 1906.

Judging from the peach colored silk and lace peignoir, the three inch gold high heels, the sizeable bottle of perfume, the red linen knit suit and the Vogue magazine all neatly packed within, this clearly was **not** his suitcase. To add to his rising heartbreak, outside his window the standard clatter of traffic was interrupted repeatedly by a harshly clanging bell.

Cable cars, he realized. Miss Ealand had booked him in a hotel suite situated directly on the route of San Francisco's famous but extremely *noisy* cable cars.

His hand reached for the telephone to ask for a change of suite, and to call the airline, but he froze. With his current run of bad luck, the night clerk would undoubtedly send Peter up to him. He doubled his groan, and allowed himself to fall across the bed without bothering to crawl underneath the sheets, thankful that his Glock had not been in his main suitcase, but in his carry on bag. Getting his beloved Glock past airport security both back in England and here in the States had been simple with his identification and licenses; all recognized by the major

police departments, Interpol and the local FBI, not to mention his unique SHADO Aegis security clearance. The hotel, however, had been more significantly impressed by his international driver's license and his personal platinum credit card. He hadn't thought it wise to use his Harlington-Straker Film Studios business credit card, fearing he'd be pegged as a celebrity, a fate worse than death in his eyes.

With a final heartrending groan, he closed his eyes, and slept.

Chapter Three: **OUT**

Ed Straker's hand slid wearily toward the ringing telephone, and he picked up the receiver, eyelids longing to shut again like Venetian blinds.

"Straker." he somehow managed to mumble.

"Mr. Straker, my apologies, I realize you didn't wish to be disturbed, but there is a woman who wishes to see you, she says it is very urgent. Shall I send her up?"

"Is she claiming she lost a battered black leather Swaine and Adeley suitcase by any chance?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"Is that busboy Peter around anywhere?" Ed asked, ignoring the question.

"He's assisting some new arrivals with checking in. I can have him-"

"**No!** Send her up in exactly five minutes."

"Right away, Mr. Straker."

The Commander managed to roll off the bed as if he was demonstrating a martial arts move, dash into the bathroom and smooth down his hair, which fell immediately into place except for a few stubborn silver strands that dared to disobey him. He splashed cold water on his face, washed his hands. There was an insistent knock on the door, and he tightened the sash that kept his terry cloth robe in place, and then stuffed his feet into the ill-fitting slippers provided for him. It was painfully uncomfortable to be in the least bit unclean, and under these conditions, he figured he might just as well have joined the pigs in a sty. Alec had always been amused by his obsession with sartorial and personal perfection. He left the bathroom in two rapid strides, quickly fetched his Glock out of the carry all, slid it into his pocket, and cautiously opened the door. Ed hoped that being armed wouldn't be noticeable to his visitor should they not be a threat, which he had to be prepared for, no matter how short a rest he'd had.

A very attractive redhead, wearing a short pink dress, stood in the doorway, and studied him with a disapproving expression on her face, which was camouflaged to her advantage. She towered over him by several inches. Her ruby red lips formed a pout, and her blue eyes flashed danger signals at him. Anyone taller than he was, even the so-called fairer sex, caused him to be somewhat ill at ease. The description of women as the fairer sex was an idiom he always found droll, being acquainted with and respecting the often-superior capabilities of women, especially females in SHADO.

The Commander mused that any male lacking enough sense to suggest to Colonel Virginia Lake, for example, that women existed solely to cook a man breakfast and please him in bed, would find a saucepan wrapped around his neck, and his ability to do anything at all in bed painfully removed from him with a dull kitchen knife. Yet this woman's stature still made him a little uncomfortable, despite not being intimidated by man, woman, General, or scheming second-in-command. Nevertheless, he admitted to himself, it was only a little discomfort. What made him *extremely* uncomfortable was that she wasn't carrying his suitcase. He wondered where he had seen her before, and then it came to him despite his lack of decent sleep. She was the woman on the cover of the Vogue magazine he'd seen in the suitcase.

"You have no idea how much trouble you've caused me. When I found out the airline had lost my luggage, I insisted that they trace you. I don't know or care who you are to have merited all those security checks they did on me. Me! Kay Cassidy. My name is known all over the world! Why, they treated me as if I was a Communist or something. The idiots didn't

even know that I was a supermodel and my photographs are on the covers of fashion magazines everywhere. Can you believe it? You're the only passenger that owned a suitcase like mine. I know, because I saw you hand it over at the same time I did, and believe me, mine was brand new and *very* expensive. Now just hand it over, and I can get out of this inferior shack of a hotel. Why would someone as wealthy as you ever stay in a fleabag establishment like this? You're short, but reasonably good looking, I suppose. Obviously, you must be rich enough, to have owned a Swaine and Adeley suitcase *exactly* like mine. To think that they assured me it was one of just a few they'd only made for important customers. Trust those snobby, untrustworthy British to lie; they don't even speak English like Americans do. Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Could you back up a few inches?" Ed said, with a smile as charming as he could manage to produce under the circumstances. It required a Herculean effort matched only by Russian weightlifters.

"Why?" the model batted both her store bought eyelashes at him in utter puzzlement.

The Commander continued smiling, and swept the air in front of her with one hand, moving closer to her, forcing her to move back. She did, until she found herself standing right outside his door, in the hallway.

With a single, determined jerk, Ed slammed the door closed, wearing a steel melting scowl. He could hear her muttering to herself, calling him several unpleasant names. She knocked loudly and repeatedly on the door. Ed waited patiently until she was in mid knock, and then opened the door rapidly, causing her to pitch forward and fall off her skyscraper high heels in front of him. He noticed her hair roots were as black as her personality.

"How dare you! Help me up." She held a hand out delicately, expecting to be waited on like some delicate princess. He treated her more like a frog. The Commander did nothing, but stood with arms crossed, at this point hoping she *did* see his gun, and that she would threaten his life so he had an excuse to use it on her.

"You *filthy* little man!" she exclaimed, and struggled to her feet.

"I suggest you stop flapping those cosmetic dipped lips of yours to insult me, unless you want me to throw your precious expensive suitcase out the nearest window. With the way you've been behaving toward me, I just may throw you out after it. Now, are you going to be civil towards me or not?"

"I really was rather rude, wasn't I? Well, try to understand how desperate I am. All my personal belongings were gone, and I had a photo shoot scheduled for later today." She feigned a smile, needlessly brushing herself off.

Ed Straker stood there, impassive, imagining a shoot that wasn't quite what she may have had in mind.

"Describe the contents of the suitcase. I'm assuming that somehow, you didn't take mine by accident, since you would have brought it with you. So tell me what's in the suitcase."

"Must you continue like this? Listen, why don't we go downstairs to the hotel bar-"

"In a fleabag establishment like this? I don't believe I'm misquoting you. Lady, there isn't a British citizen dead or alive any more snobby or untrustworthy than you are."

She frowned. Men did not usually react to her like this.

"Look, I admit we have gotten off to a bad start. Forget what I said. Let me buy you a drink. I bet you're a champagne man, right?"

"*Wrong*. I don't drink, although right now I'm beginning to regret it. Now tell me exactly what's in the suitcase. I have no proof at this point that it even belongs to you."

"Oh, now Mr. Straker, don't be that way. Of course, it belongs to me. I suppose you were embarrassed to see my lace peignoir, weren't you? On the other hand, maybe you imagined a woman wearing that and nothing else but her strappy high heels? Were you fantasizing about a woman, a woman like me?" She'd pitched her voice low, all strawberries and whipped cream, got closer, let her fingers slide up his arm. Her perfume assaulted his nostrils like a police SWAT team. The Commander's expression was undiluted acid.

"Take-your-hand-off-me." Each word he uttered was a lightning strike. Full of herself and sure of her power to seduce, she didn't even notice.

"Good grief, you poor confused little man, you must be one of *them*," she sneered, her fingers twisting the sleeve of his robe in contempt.

Ed Straker was aware of, knew and admired, and had personally hired some loyal SHADO operatives who just happened to be gay. It had always puzzled him why their private sexual preferences were anybody's business but their own. The blatant ignorance from the poor excuse for a human being standing in front of him caused Ed to lose the last tattered thread of his patience. He grabbed her arm in a martial arts move, twisted it, and forced her to the ground. She shrieked. There came a hardly unexpected knock on the door.

"Mr. Straker, you okay?" It was Peter's voice. Peter suddenly seemed like a dream come true compared to the rubbish he'd just discarded on the carpet for the housekeeper to pick up.

"Come in, Peter. The door's unlocked. Leave it open after you come in."

Peter came in hesitatingly. Before he could say a word, the mauled model shrieked at Peter.

"Do you *see* what this imbecile has done? He assaulted me! Well, just don't stand there, you fat little moron, call the cops!"

"Oh. It's *you*. I saw you abusing the desk clerk downstairs. Don't you call me a fat moron! Just because you're some rich skinny model, and I'm a little chubby doesn't mean you can't treat me with common decency! Mr. Straker, do you *know* this person?"

"Thank God, I haven't known her for long. Keep an eye on her while I get her suitcase, Peter. I mistakenly mistook it as mine and this fragile little flower came back to get it. If she tries to leave, smite her with the Gideon Bible or something harder. If you kill her, I'll provide you with an airtight alibi. I'll be back in a minute. And call me Ed."

Peter beamed.

"Sure thing, Ed!"

The model was being less than a model citizen as she rubbed her injured arm, and cursed Peter. She tried to stand up to run, but Peter threatened her with a table lamp. She shrank down again, silent.

In a minute, Ed came out of the bedroom, carrying the suitcase. He swung, and the suitcase went flying out the open door. She gawked at the incensed Commander. Peter started laughing.

"*Out*. I'll remind you of all those security checks you went through before you decide to call the police on me. Those checks were nothing compared to what will happen to you if you as much say my name out loud to another living being. Am I making myself clear enough to you, lady? Now, *OUT*."

Clearly beaten two to one, and in a rage, out she went. Straker slammed the door behind her, disgusted with his loss of self-control. Peter looked at him with more than a suggestion of hero worship. Straker took a deep breath, and then let it out slowly. So Alec thought he was stressed in SHADO? Being tortured and having his organs pulled out by the aliens would have

been less stressful an experience than this trip had turned out to be. Well, at least it appeared to have cured his jet lag for now. Thank God for small mercies, he thought.

"Ed, can I do anything for you? My gosh! Is that-you know-a *gun*?" Peter looked thrilled. Ed teasingly narrowed his large, clear blue eyes at Peter in a mock threat, the way he often had on outings with his late son when Johnny misbehaved. Ed was feeling more composed by the minute.

"The first thing you can do for me is forget you ever saw it. Can you get some time off work, Peter?"

"I *am* off duty now, Ed. I came up here just to see if you were in so I could invite you out to lunch, but I heard that rotten lady yelling. I know a great place to eat, and I'm driving my Dad's car, it's a Mustang convertible, and it's super! I'm San Francisco born and bred. Locals know all the tourist traps, but much better than that, Ed, we know all the genuinely best places to eat!"

Ed all at once finally acknowledged he was hungry enough to eat the furniture, and the screws that bolted each piece down. Besides, he was beginning to be fond of the boy. If Johnny had lived, but no, he wouldn't accomplish anything by giving way to that old grief now. He put an eager lilt in his singular voice.

"Offer gratefully accepted, but *I'm* buying. First, I need you to go on a little shopping expedition for me, Peter..."

Chapter Four: The Tourist

The ill-tempered, disciplined, humorless and remote Ed Straker of the secret organization SHADO was enthusiastically digging his fork into his delectable chef's salad, an archeologist hoping to find epicurean gold in a pyramid of food. To his utter mystification, he felt himself smiling again. He had been smiling all during his bumpy ride over bumpy streets in the Mustang convertible, which was fire engine red. The Mustang was unequivocally super, just as Peter, whose last name was Iatros, had promised Ed it would be. Ed had genuinely admired the flashy convertible, telling the Greek bellboy she was a real classic. Peter looked as elated as a bride on her wedding day, and explained that his Dad had handed over the keys for the very first time before he'd left town, the keys being an award for Peter consistently having a perfect grade point average. Previously rolling over the steep, traffic and noise congested streets of San Francisco, while Peter pointed out the highlights of Market Street as he skillfully drove, had relaxed Ed, put him at ease, and made him feel like nothing more than another tourist. Of course, since Ed had no clothes other than the outfit he'd worn when he'd boarded the plane back at Heathrow, he had to admit there had been a few mishaps in remedying that situation.

The Commander had given Peter a roll of fifty-dollar bills the size of the California sun, causing Peter's dark eyes to grow almost as large as the roll was. Peter's assignment, armed with a list of what Ed required, as well as his clothing sizes, had brought the engaging young lad to the Macy's in Union Square. The Commander had taken a long, warm shower while he waited, had sent out the clothes he'd previously worn to be dry cleaned, and afterward had reluctantly flipped through the cable channels on his suite's color television. That hadn't been an activity he'd cared to repeat, so he'd made a call to Alec Freeman's personal telephone number, assuring him in business-like tones that he was perfectly all right and would be back at the studio as soon as possible. He hoped the prospect of returning prematurely would sufficiently alarm his unrepentant second-in-command and his partner in crime, the *usually* dependable Miss Ealand.

Peter had energetically returned from his shopping spree at Macy's department store weighed down with boxes and shopping bags, apologetically explaining that he had not been able to select all the usual stark styles that his new best friend Ed had asked for. They were nowhere to be found. However, he had managed to get the toiletries, the electric shaver and other brands the Commander preferred. That situation accomplished, Commander Edward Straker sat at a corner table with Peter across from him, both of them hungrily enjoying their late luncheon at a buffet restaurant.

However, the normally restrained Ed Straker was now dressed in cobalt Ralph Lauren shirt, and matching jacket, with a silk paisley ascot around his throat, a thin genuine crocodile belt with a gold buckle, blue denim Levis jeans that looked like they'd been pasted to his lithe, sleek body and black silk socks and matching black leather ankle boots. At least the well-fitting boots were familiar, Ed thought in amusement. The rest of his new clothes were equally as subtle as Mick Jagger showing up on the stage of the San Francisco Ballet in a polka dotted tutu, and introducing himself as Mephistopheles.

Peter had assured him he looked terrific, and had stated if the openly admiring glances of half the female customers in the establishment Peter had chosen were any further confirmation, then, Ed recalled wryly, Peter wasn't exaggerating. Ed had initially donned his gold aviator sunglasses before he'd entered the restaurant, but now ate without them on. He had hoped no one would recognize him. So far, his luck had held out despite the stares.

"Your best friend Alec Freeman really sounds like a lot of fun." Peter laughed. Peter too wore a jacket, shirt and jeans, but not as expensive as the Commander's new threads. Ed had been jokingly telling him about Alec's colorful personality.

"You wouldn't say so if he was on your back all the time like some Australian mother hen, and you got blackmailed into finally taking vacation time by him." Ed smiled. "I suppose he was right after all. It can get pretty hectic running a movie studio; I suppose I *was* pretty stressed out."

"Wow! When you told me what you did for a living, I couldn't believe my ears. I guess you get to see all the movies you want! I was an usher for a while, and I really loved seeing the movies free and before anyone else did. Hey, that reminds me of something. I entered this contest at work, and the grand prize is a trip to any location you choose. Boy, I sure hope I win! I could stand to go away somewhere and just relax with my hectic college and work schedule. Wish me good luck, Ed!"

"Like you keep saying to me, Peter, sure thing!" Ed chuckled. Peter laughed.

Ed had complimented and took a delectable sip of his delicious Columbian roasted coffee, served to him exactly as he liked it, light and double sweet. Peter had pointed out to the SHADO leader that they sold bags of that coffee right in the restaurant, and Ed was determined to bring some home to enjoy again, and also as a gift for Alec.

"Peter, you've talked to me about your Dad and his love for cars, but you haven't mentioned your mother."

"I don't talk about my birth mother much, I guess. I was an unplanned pregnancy. I wouldn't have made it at all if Dad hadn't insisted she carry me to full term so that he could adopt me. It was tough on him, he paid her a lot of money he really didn't have. Dad had to fight for custody, but she finally decided she didn't want to be saddled with a kid so she gave me up. The courts awarded him custody, and Dad said fathers are denied rights that automatically go to mothers. He was upset; he said loving your own flesh and blood had nothing to do with what sex you were. Dad did a great job of raising me. He recently remarried a great Christian lady. I really like my new stepmother, Ed. I guess I'm lucky. Dad considered *my* needs before he proposed to her, you know? Dad's always been one of a kind."

Rights that automatically go to mothers. If only I'd been in a position to raise my son. Maybe he'd be alive today, a boy as terrific as Peter. Why does everything have to remind me of my grief? Don't be so damned morbid, Straker. Enjoy this moment while it lasts.

"Peter, I feel I owe you an apology. Quite frankly, at first I thought you were a pest. Now I find that you've made my very first tourist experience a complete pleasure." Ed chuckled. Peter looked surprised.

"Ed, you don't owe me any apology. I really like being with you. You treat me like an equal."

"You are *more* than my equal. That makes it easy."

"Yeah, but-"

"Something on your mind?" Ed inquired.

"I don't exactly get along with most guys my age, Ed. I must be the only kid in the world that never liked sports; I always buried my nose in books. I tend to put on weight. The kids at grade school used to make fun of me, and even as an undergrad it still happens. To make things worse, I was born here, but my ancestry is Greek. So I look different, too. I'm a people person; don't get me wrong, Ed. I just always have felt like I don't fit in. Look, I'm sorry if I spoiled your mood. Just forget I said that. It's just that you're *so* easy to talk to. You're funny,

sharp as a needle, you have class and looks to kill but you don't have an inflated ego and you didn't let that stupid model get to you for one minute. I wish I were more like you, Ed. As much as I love my Dad, sometimes it's hard to talk to him about things that bother me like this. He's away on his honeymoon. I get kinda lonely without him. I miss him a lot." Peter looked dejectedly at the carpet.

"*Peter,*" Ed said succinctly. Something in his voice made Peter look up quickly, shifting in his seat to absolute attention. Ed reserved that particular tone of voice only for his job as Commander of an organization that was as far removed from the glamorous world of making motion pictures as you possibly could get.

Ed forced himself not to smile at Peter's willingness to please. He *liked* Peter. He liked Peter *so* much; he truly regretted that he'd have to leave him soon.

Ed felt the all too familiar sting of regret, which he'd always been plagued with when leaving his son after his monthly visits, leaving him to the mercies of a stranger of a stepfather that typically ignored him because he reminded him too much of Straker.

For God's sake, this innocent, wide-eyed lad, with his enthusiasm for life, and his obvious caring for his fellow human beings, is exactly what I would have been proud to see my own son grow up to be. Greek, for Christ's sake. Greece. Greece was where Mary and I were supposed to have spent our honeymoon. On that day. On that day which was the beginning of the end of my marriage. Ed sternly looked at Peter, not a sign of private bereavement for his lost son and marriage showing on his impassive, closely guarded face.

"*Peter.* You don't want to be like me. Concentrate on being **you**. As far as fitting in, remember this. It isn't a question of you changing to fit in the world. It's a question of the world changing to fit you. Don't worry about trying to live up to someone else's standards. There will always be people that need to feel superior, and the only way they feel they can accomplish that is by attacking others with words. They feel more in control that way. Don't agree to play their games for which only they make the rules. Be *proud* of who you are, no matter how insignificant anyone else may try to make you feel. Confidence will follow, believe me. Can you do something for me, Peter?"

"I'd do *anything* for you, Ed. I *mean* it."

Ed pretended he didn't see the young man blink back tears, but the tears sought and touched his heart.

"*Two* things, then. One, as soon as your Dad gets back, sit him down and tell him *exactly* what you told me."

"Okay, I will, I promise! You said *two* things, Ed."

"Right. Two, could you go and get us two slices of that French apple pie? I feel like celebrating. Later, you can show me around Fisherman's Wharf. I haven't had freshly cooked crab for ages, and I used to eat it all the time in Boston. Sound good?"

"*Sure thing, Ed!*" Peter jumped up, accidentally spilling his glass of water all over Ed's Levis. The Commander rose up, grabbed a napkin and tried to soak up most of it, chuckling. "I assure you, Peter. I *did* have a shower at the hotel."

"Oh no, I'm such a jerk! Let me help you-"

"I'll be fine, don't worry about it. You go get us the pie. I'll go make a trip to the bathroom. I can handle this." Ed let his hand rest for a moment on Peter's shoulder, and then he made his way to the men's bathroom. Not conscious of the other men present as he tried to make himself presentable, he went on doing what he could about his ruined jeans. After a few moments, he was the only one there.

That's when the little girl approached him. He blinked at her, he hadn't heard her come in, being too busy with trying to get dry. So much for security measures and staying alert, although he was wearing his Glock in its customary shoulder holster. She had long blonde ringlets and a plastic headband dotted with tiny stars holding them in place. She wore a flounced yellow dress edged with white lace, white tights and white patent leather shoes with pearl buckles. Her light blue eyes were trusting as they searched Ed's.

"Hi." she said. Ed chuckled.

What next? he thought.

"Hi. You must be lost. This isn't exactly the place for a little girl to be in. I bet your parents are worried sick about you. What's your name? Mine's Ed."

"Do you like stories?" she asked, ignoring his question.

"What kinds of stories?" He smiled, amused.

"Stories about rabbits. Magical rabbits that turn into wizards that protect children, but grown-ups can't see them, because they don't believe. My favorite storybook of all is *The Rabbit's Paw*. My Daddy gave it to me. It came with a special necklace. The necklace is a magical crystal jewel made by a wizard rabbit in the story, and it's called the Rabbit's Paw. It makes wishes come true. I'm wearing it around my neck now, see? Isn't it pretty?" She held it up for him to examine. It sparkled.

He smiled affectionately at her.

Is it possible that I was once as small as she is?

"Yes, it is very pretty. I read fairy tales to my son when he was small. Hans Christian Anderson, mostly. I do like stories. I always have appreciated literature. Right now, I think I better help get you back to your parents. What are you doing?"

The mysterious little girl had taken off the jewel and was holding it up to him. It was swinging slightly on its long golden linked chain.

"I want *you* to have it." She went to Ed, took his hand in her tiny delicate fingers, opened it, pressed the necklace into his palm and gently curled his fingers around it.

"*But-*" Ed protested, the facade of his usual ice-cold demeanor crumbling.

"Please be careful, okay? Please? Promise me you will!"

How can I possibly resist those eyes, and that plea? I can't. What in blazes is happening here?

"I promise. Now-" but she'd hurried out the door. He held the necklace tightly, standing there, frozen.

"Ed? Ed? **Ed!**"

"Hmm? Oh. Peter. You'll never guess what just happened to me."

"Are you *okay*? I paid our bill, I had to. The restaurant's closing soon. You've been in here forever. I was so worried about you!"

"Closing so early? That's nonsense." He put the necklace around his neck, and lifted his sleeve to look at his Certina Swiss wristwatch. *The time was exactly nine in the evening.* A chill seized him. As though some mechanical switch had been thrown, he became the disciplined SHADO Commander again. He wasn't in any mood to repeat that damn business they'd code-named Timelash. He'd come pretty close to losing his sanity with the repeated injections of X 50, and he knew Colonel Virginia Lake still couldn't remember everything that had happened back when the aliens had manipulated Turner and time so that they could freely attack SHADO.

"Let's get the hell out of here, Peter," he ordered coldly.

Chapter Five: **The Wish**

"That's correct, Mr. Straker, Markham Publishing did offer a limited edition of *The Rabbit's Paw*, and the profits were donated directly to the Dream Path Foundation. Only twenty copies were distributed. Only *those* copies were accompanied by a rhodium necklace with a crystal created to look exactly like the one in the story which the Rabbit Wizard character created."

"Can you give me a list of the names and addresses of the twenty people who purchased those copies?" Ed Straker asked. He was sitting at the desk in the hotel suite.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Straker. That information is strictly private. I'm sure you understand the privacy issues involved."

"I see." The Commander hung up, pinched the bridge of his nose, already plagued with one of his headaches.

It would take too much time to utilize the Aegis security clearance and get the information he needed. Time had become an issue again, and right now, he couldn't afford to cancel his appointment with the Dream Path executives. His cover had to be maintained.

The night before, he'd abandoned Peter and hailed a taxi, and gone directly to SHADO's San Francisco branch to have the necklace examined, but they'd assured him, there was nothing unusual about it. The scientific analysis had shown it to be composed of crystal quartz, hung on a rhodium chain coated with 12 karat gold. If there were any concealed characteristics about its composition and origin, the SHADO laboratory didn't yet have the advanced techniques and equipment to detect them. If it *was* alien in nature, whatever effect it had on him had already happened.

Peter still showed no ill effects, and none of the restaurant staff recalled seeing a little girl of that description. They had hundreds of customers, they'd complained, identifying one little girl was near impossible.

Peter had skipped his classes, determined to help Ed.

"Ed, I really don't understand why you're this upset," Peter remarked.

"I appreciate that. I wanted to ask you once again, Peter. Have you noticed any ill effects, problems with the passing of time, or seeing things in motion previously which suddenly appeared to be frozen?"

"Frozen? You're kidding, right?" Peter chuckled. "I just don't get it. I tried to touch that stone you said the little girl gave you and you nearly bit off my head. Yeah, I know that was a strange experience, but Ed, you haven't had enough healing sleep since you got to San Francisco. Sleep deprivation can really mess a guy up, you know. You might have just dozed off, that's all. You still look pretty tired. Ed, you better go. You don't want to be late to your meeting with the Dream Path Foundation."

"Peter, I may need to get in touch with you after I get back to the studio."

"Sure thing! I'll give you my phone number." Peter tore a sheet of paper off the Coronet Hotel scratch pad, and jotted down the numerals.

"I want your home address and the address of the college you're attending as well."

"Why?"

"Not *now*, Peter. Look, I'm checking out of the hotel now, my taxi's waiting. It's been nice meeting you," Straker said hastily.

"I'll really miss you, Ed. Take care of yourself, okay? Promise me you will!"

Please be careful, okay? Please? Promise me you will!

Straker scowled, remembering the little girl's words, and hearing Peter repeat them. He ignored Peter's outstretched hand, and left the suite.

Peter sighed. The phone rang. Without thinking, he picked it up.

"Presidential Suite. Peter Iatros speaking."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Iatros. We were trying to reach a Mr. Straker. Is this an incorrect number? This is Mary; I work for Pan-Am's Customer Service Department," a female voice announced.

"Aw, well, he was here, but Ed left five seconds ago. Can I help you?"

"We managed to recover his suitcase, it was shipped to us from Heathrow Airport, and apparently, it had gotten mixed up with another one by accident. We sent a messenger to Coronet Hotel to deliver it and that's what I wanted to tell him. Can you get in touch with Mr. Straker?"

"Sure thing, Mary! Hold on!" Peter put her on hold, and switched to the front desk.

"Coronet Hotel. How may we serve you?"

"Dan, it's Peter Iatros! Did Mr. Straker leave already?"

"What are you doing working here this early? Don't tell me you skipped classes today. How a whirlwind on legs like you ever got all those A's is beyond comprehension."

"Dan, never mind about me, stop his taxi!"

"Do I look like a detective from the movies to you? I'm an old man for heaven's sake. He left already, yeah. What is the problem anyway?"

"Oh heck! The airline just called. They found his suitcase, and they're sending it to us by messenger."

"No problem, we contact the guy's credit card company, we let them know it's here. We ship it back out to him gratis. Now go back to your classes. I'm expecting guests to check in any minute now. I'll talk to you later."

"No. I want to accept it for him. I know exactly where he's going; I can bring it to him today."

"Whatever. He's just another paying customer to me."

"Well he isn't to *me*. He's my friend, and means everything to me. He was really upset by something, I just know it. Nobody ever treated me like he has, and when you have a new friend who changed your life, loyalty is more important than attending college classes."

"What's got into you? You sound different."

Peter grinned.

"Confidence, I guess."

"Well Mr. Confidence, your pal's messenger just arrived. I'll probably lose my job for this, but I'll let you have Straker's suitcase. Get down here, pronto."

Peter whooped, and then filled in the Pan-Am official, hung up and raced out the door.

* * *

"They told me you had a break-in, a robbery?" Ed Straker remarked. "I wondered why the police officers stopped to question me, and then I spotted the crime scene investigators dusting for prints in your office suite." Ed had easily cleared himself of any suspicion by showing the San Francisco police his special Aegis identification. Quickly, he became untouchable by them and every other International Police, Military, and Intelligence Agency worldwide. If they had wondered why the chief executive officer of Harlington-Straker Film Studios comfortably occupied the top rung of the security clearance ladder, they didn't utter as much as a word to question it. Ed Straker counted on that. After all, Aegis was **his** baby. Deux ex Machina in a plastic card.

"Yes, and that's why we're meeting out here in the lobby instead of my office. Please forgive me, Mr. Straker, I'm still a little shaken up. I know you went to all that trouble to come out here from England and do this for our client. Did you read all the reference material on our Dream Path Foundation?"

"I'm afraid something came up, and I didn't have time to look it over. I must admit I'm a little curious about this robbery, Miss-"

"It's *Mrs.* actually. Mrs. Janice Turner. My husband Barry founded this organization after our baby daughter Tara died from an inoperable tumor. Barry's away right now, on business. I have a call in to him, but he gets busy handling financial matters. I should have properly introduced myself when we met, Mr. Straker, but this robbery really has me on edge. I suppose I'm really acting in a childish manner. My husband usually handles things like this. I was previously a social worker. A police investigation like this is really all Greek to me."

The Commander's eyes narrowed at her.

"You said your name is *Turner*?" he frowned.

"Yes. Is there something wrong?"

The Commander recalled that Radar Operator Turner had no surviving family, but as soon as possible, he intended to order a G6 on the pale, shaken woman who sat next to him. If her nerves were a sham, then she'd missed her calling. She would have qualified as an actress for the studio with the performance she was putting on for him. Something told him, however, that she was legitimate. The name Turner had certainly rung his alarm bells, additionally, the idiom mentioning a Greek. Still, he was certain that she was what she appeared to be, and there had to be countless Turners in the San Francisco phonebook. For the moment, her problems didn't concern him; he had to get back to headquarters. Alec would already have established that the Dream Path Foundation itself was trustworthy, but Ed would have this woman checked out anyway. He couldn't be sure that his judgment was solid, especially when he still didn't understand what had happened to him at the restaurant.

*I've got to identify that little girl. I hope Peter Iatros isn't involved in this mess. I can't allow my personal feelings for him to interfere with my investigation. If the aliens are up to their old tricks, SHADO has to put a stop to it. I'm still not convinced that necklace is as harmless as our scientists claim it is. Suppose it's really the rock from the incident we codenamed Mindbender? I may be under its influence, and not realize it. I need some answers for a change. **Fast.***

"Look, I'm sorry, but I actually came out here to inform you that I won't be able to-"

"After the day I've had, thank God you've been understanding enough to see this through, Mr. Straker. The child is really looking forward to this. The *poor* little thing. Her name is Miranda Kaiser. I really wish my husband Barry were here. I don't know how much information he gave your Alec Freeman, and now I can't get at any of our files. Barry is the one who spoke to the Kaiser family, and agreed to take Miranda on as a client. We've arranged for you to catch a special charter flight to Anaheim, California, all expenses paid. You'll meet the client there. All you need to understand is that Miranda is dying. Her last wish is to go to Disneyland with her father. I know you're a busy executive, Mr. Straker. I can't tell you how much this will mean to her. Believe me; the Dream Path Foundation is very grateful for your help."

Straker's expression was grim.

"Mrs. Turner, I'm afraid you've lost me. If all this child wants is to go to Disneyland with her father, why doesn't he take her, what on earth does all this have to do with *me*?"

"Dear me, I should have explained further, I forgot you said you hadn't had time to look at what we sent you concerning our client. When Barry met Miranda, she happened to see the publicity packet on Harlington-Straker Film Studios on his desk. Your photograph was on it, of course. I think Barry said Miranda had never gotten over losing her father, she adored him and he adored her. You see, Mr. Kaiser was a colonel; he'd enlisted in the Air Force, completed his training, and then was sent overseas. He died some years ago when his plane went down in Vietnam. He was captured, became a prisoner of war and died in captivity. And you happen to look *exactly* like him."

Chapter Six: **Ground Zero**

Ed Straker made his way cautiously down the steps which had been rolled up to the Dream Path Foundation's chartered plane so that he could escape from it.

Escaping from that plane wasn't only a figure of speech, he thought.

The flight from San Francisco to Anaheim had been as bumpy as an avocado, and he'd felt just as green aboard the plane, barely tolerating the ride. The flying hours he'd logged as a pilot incredibly were no longer to his advantage. He'd left his stomach at twenty thousand feet, and his stomach's contents in the plane's toilet bowl. That hadn't happened since he'd trained aboard NASA's centrifuge, better known to some of his astronaut pals as the salad spinner. Not to mention the accident which had left him with his damn claustrophobia.

There's a first time for everything I suppose. I wouldn't have allowed that pilot to fly as much as a kite, if I'd had any choice in the matter.

He'd soon spotted the unpleasant surprise that awaited him at the foot of the steps, and he quickly put on his sunglasses, but not rapidly enough to shelter him from several flash bulbs going off in his face. The gold wire frames of his aviator sunglasses sparkled, bouncing oncoming rays from the afternoon Anaheim sun. A few strands of his silvery hair became fluttering ribbons in the cooling breeze.

The eager photographers awaiting him got a stern '**No comment**' as an answer to every question and had their '**Give us a smile, Mr. Straker!**' totally ignored. Nimbly, he crossed the tarmac, and slipped quickly into the back of the limousine awaiting him, as if he'd launched himself into an Interceptor chute to climb the stars.

His chauffeur, a bald, bored looking man, shut Straker's door for him, then got into the driver's seat, started up the ignition.

"Get **out** of here! **Go!** Run over them if you have to!" Straker snapped.

"You gotta be kidding-" the chauffeur only needed one look at Straker in his rear view mirror to know what the answer would be. The Commander was sitting ramrod straight in the back of the limousine, eyes blazing like twin blue diamonds. "Okay, you **ain't**. Hold on to your hat, Mister. I can lose anything on two legs or four wheels. I'm your guy." Several press photographers had terrified expressions as Straker's directions were followed to the letter, and they parted like the Biblical Red Sea, their scoops forgotten in the effort to merely survive.

"You want I should put on the radio, Mister?"

"I want you should do the job you're being paid for. I want you to **drive**."

Ed slammed closed the smoke tinted window that separated him from the driver. He leaned back, relishing his privacy, finally let out a luxurious sigh.

Publicity! He'd forgotten that the press would swallow him up alive and whole like the carnivores they were. At least he could ride in comfort on the white leather cushions, it was refreshingly cool and he had plenty of space to stretch out in.

He poured himself a ginger ale over crushed ice, and sipped it. It was bubbly, light and tart on his tongue. Seeing the wet bar reminded him of Alec. He'd had an interesting telephone conversation with Alec while aboard the charter plane. The stern line of his lip softened somewhat into an amused, slight curve as he recalled their words.

"You're **what?** Ed, have you finally lost your mind?"

"You're the one that insisted I go on a vacation. Now you have a problem with it?"

"Look I wasn't with you during that incident we named Timelash, or the one we called Mindbender, and I've always regretted it. You have a talent for getting yourself into trouble

when I'm not around!"

"Alec, the truth is, when you're not around, I actually get work done."

"Don't give me that Bostonian smart mouth of yours. You're certifiable to have actually agreed to go to meet Miranda Kaiser after everything that has happened to you. Suppose this is some sort of trap? Have you had any other strange experiences involving that damn crystal?"

"Nothing I'm aware of. As for the possibility of this all being a trap, yes, yes, I'm sure it could be. There's no other way to find out exactly what the aliens are up to, other than being the bait."

"Did it ever enter that thick silver head of yours that you're too valuable to SHADO to be offered as a tethered goat, Ed? How can any one individual have a Masters in Astrophysics and have studied lunar research for two years at M.I.T. and still be as stupid as you can be sometimes?"

"I'm multitalented, Alec. Did Ford come up with anything on that little girl, or Peter Iatros, Miranda Kaiser or Barry and Janice Turner?"

"Your bellboy Peter and the Iatros family are legitimate as far as we can tell; now we're working on discovering what classes he's taking at UCSF. Nothing on that little girl you saw. Our San Francisco branch reported all the fingerprints on the crystal were yours, and there was no biological matter on either the crystal or the chain."

"*Something* should have showed up, Alec! I knew the chance of locating her from her prints being on record somewhere was slim, but she touched the crystal, I saw her do it. What did we find out about Barry and Janice Turner?"

"Legitimate. They did have a baby daughter who died prematurely of cancer, and Records reports they have no connection to the late Radar Operator Turner. Their security cameras did show a figure breaking into the Dream Path Foundation offices, but the thief was gloved, masked, and dressed in black. I'm in the middle of trying to get a copy of the video film so that our audiovisual technicians can have a crack at it and see what they can come up with. We did find Colonel Kaiser's military record, Ed. He did look remarkably like you, only he had dark hair, and get this, he had your identical rank, identical distinguished service record, same chest full of gongs, and he was captured by the Vietcong and became their prisoner of war like you did. Only you were a lot luckier than he was."

"Yes, most unfortunate for his family, Alec. I'll never forget my imprisonment in Vietnam; it's burned into my brain cells. So we resemble one another? How very peculiar. He checked out otherwise?"

"That's right. Innocent as a nun. There **is** something odd, though. That police robbery investigation you told me about? Apparently, the only thing stolen from the Dream Path Foundation was the file on Miranda Kaiser. The exact one I gave you."

"The Kaiser file? That was all? Someone wanted that file damned badly to go to all that trouble to steal it. I need to know why, Alec! I want you to find out more about the Kaiser family. Something doesn't add up here, the jigsaw remains incomplete. Miranda doesn't have a lot of time, Alec. An inoperable malignant tumor is a devastating enough diagnosis for an adult. Try to imagine what it would be like for a child to get that kind of death sentence."

"Is that the primary reason for your decision to make the trip to Disneyland with her, Ed?" Alec asked, not needing an answer.

"I'm a tethered goat, Alec. Bait for our friends the aliens. You said it yourself," the Commander remarked, dodging his second-in-command's question like a matador confronting a charging Australian bull.

"A tethered goat with human compassion and a big heart he insists on hiding from the world," Alec corrected Ed.

"I'm certain there's something in the SHADO manual that will give me sufficient reason for bringing you up for court martial, Alec. Keep that in mind. I'll get in touch with you as soon as I can. Goodbye, Alec."

*Damn Alec and his uncanny ability to read me like a book. Right, Straker, you **depend** on him and thrive on his ability to do that, and you **know** it.*

Now, he mused with his mouth pulled into a grim slash, I'm about to finally meet Miranda Kaiser, and become her substitute father for a few hours, he thought. What could go wrong now?

*As if I didn't know the answer to **that** question. What's that quote? *Quem deus vult perdere, dementat prius. Whom the Gods would destroy, they first make mad. But **am** I mad? I'm still wearing the crystal. I've become attached to it, against my better judgment and I don't know why. **Am** I tempting fate and the Gods? Or does some part of me long to die in the performance of my duty, so that the grief tearing me apart after John's death will finally be stilled forever? That's one question I won't be asking Jackson. I lost Johnny, now I'm going to have to deal with the Kaiser child needing a father to make everything all right. Just what I needed, another child to go straight to my heart. Not to mention all of this may be the work of the aliens. All right, Straker. Let's go get this unpleasant business over with.**

* * *

"Alec, you just might want to watch **this**." Virginia Lake sat at Straker's desk with a slight grin as Alec entered, and showed him a repeat broadcast of Commander Ed Straker fiercely scowling as he descended the stairway set up for him, discovering that he couldn't evade the less pleasant aspects of being the chief executive officer of Harlington-Straker Film Studios.

"I wouldn't want to be within twenty feet of those reporters with Ed in **that** mood. It would be like being in Hiroshima or Nagasaki after Truman dropped that fifteen-kiloton greeting card on them in 1945." Alec muttered darkly.

She chuckled at his over the top exaggeration of Straker's temperament in that appealingly low voice of hers, the same one that had been capable of raising his body temperature, among other things.

"I never have understood Ed's refusal to do the odd public appearance so that his cover remains believable. It isn't like he has to do it everyday, and I understand he has more important things to do, like run SHADO, but the Commander still baffles me sometimes," Colonel Lake complained.

"Straker is Straker. Have you ever discussed this subject with **him**?"

Virginia widened her heavily lashed eyes.

"If I did, would you protect me?" she asked teasingly, easily flirting with him as he was with her. It was second nature to the both of them, a game that lightened the seriousness of their jobs.

"If you were actually stupid enough to bring it up to Ed, knowing it's a sore subject with him, you wouldn't **deserve** to be protected!"

Virginia Lake laughed, but then, she knew Alec realized from experience she didn't need to be protected from anyone, let alone one Ed Straker. She was far too sharp and intuitive to buy the narrow-minded definitions of Straker that floated around headquarters like a dark, heavy cloud. Like Alec, she saw him as a whole person. Human. All **too** human. Her only objections to Straker's style was when he clashed with her, a blue eyed cymbal when he

thought she was wrong, and Straker's perceptions often were right. Arguing with a man equipped with **that** face and body, often proved too distracting to disagree with him, she thought in amusement.

"Touché. Want to grab a cup of coffee with me, Colonel? It's been slow all day in Control."

"Maybe the aliens went on holiday when Straker did," Alec suggested teasingly.

The desk telephone rang, and Virginia lifted the receiver.

"Colonel Lake. Yes, Lieutenant, he's with me. Go ahead. Yes, the Kaiser family, I remember. **What?** Repeat that. Yes. Yes, I'll tell Colonel Freeman right away." Virginia hung up.

"Tell me *what?*"

Virginia told him.

The color immediately drained from Alec's face.

"But-but that doesn't make any sense! Ed just left to- what was the condition of Mrs. Kaiser?"

"She was rushed to hospital, but there's no guarantee she'll make it, Alec."

"I've **got** to warn Ed!"

"Alec, if she was found dead, then-"

"I **know**," Alec answered, devastated and terrified by the news. "We have to tell the Commander."

He reached for the telephone. Five minutes later, his expression was haunted.

"I can't reach him."

*Be all right, Ed, Alec thought. **Damn** you! Don't die on me! Be all right. **Please**.*

Chapter Seven: Tears for a Commander

"But I **liked** the photographers! Besides, I'm going to die, right? You know I'm going to die. Why can't I have some more pictures taken of us?"

A year in a Vietnamese prisoner of war camp. Commanding SHADO, and losing his wife and child in the process. Having to sit in a courtroom and be declared an adulterer, when it was a lie. Waking up some days, shaving, and hating his reflection in the mirror. Not allowing himself to ever be human like everyone else, striving for perfection, no matter what. Attempting to console himself for one night with a reporter, and finding out all he was to her was a price tag. Yes, very often, his life was hell. Burying good men and women. Having to tell their families their loved ones were dead, their bodies mutilated. No dignity, even in death. All that anguish.

Facing an enemy, and making swift, hard decisions that branded him as heartless. There were the days when he deliberately would seek Alec, just to be in the presence of someone who didn't look at him in fear, or loathing.

Sometimes he wondered what he'd become due to his job. Had the job changed him? Yes. Had **he** too, become alien in his steely, obsessive pursuit of aliens? No.

There were resources of strength you drew upon when the odds were against you. The odd joke. A good cup of coffee. A brisk walk in the fresh air. Trading affectionate barbs with Alec Freeman, not only the last of the clowns, but the only Australian mother hen out there, forever shooing his Bostonian chick out of the SHADO nest. You couldn't choose a better friend than Alec.

You learned to cope. Or you'd self-destruct.

But nothing had prepared him for this. Nothing was as difficult as little Miranda Kaiser.

If she weren't dying, I'd take her over my knee and spank her. This is my personal bias. I expected a shy, little girl adorned with silk flowers decorating her bare scalp. The familiar poster child. Charming, infinitely intelligent, braver than an entire platoon of men and women, sweet, innocent, precious. I get a blonde Attila the Hun wearing pink lace hair ribbons. Not in my entire life have I ever had to encounter or deal with a brat like this. Thank God, it'll be over soon. Listen to yourself. This child is dying. She doesn't have to live up to your, or anyone's expectations of how she should behave. If there's any Attila the Hun here, his name is Straker.

*All right, all right, all right. I spend ten years setting up SHADO. I deal with Henderson. I dodge Jackson and his damn tests. So what happens to me? I survive aliens, but one kid is about to make me lose control and scream. Jumping out the window is really starting to look like a good idea to me. Film executive kills himself at Disneyland. The unhappiest place on earth. Now **there's** a headline for those press vultures.*

"You're not listening to me again." she scolded him.

You're so right. I'd rather be locked up in a shoebox with a boa constrictor than try to cope with you at this point.

"We've been walking around that amusement park for hours, sweetheart, my feet are killing me. I'm going to relax now that we're back in the hotel, and order us both some food, I'm starving. Is there anything you would really like to eat?"

"That Dream Path place, it's so stupid."

"It's why you're here. Didn't you enjoy Disneyland?"

"Disneyland was boring."

*I now support mercy killing. She should be shot. It would be merciful for **me**, he thought in amusement.*

"Cheeseburgers and chips. I mean fries. How does that sound to you?" He picked up the telephone to call room service.

"I guess that's okay. I like you, I guess. You aren't acting the way I expected you to."

The reality of her loss struck him, and he was ashamed of his thoughts, his selfishness.

"I'm sorry if I'm not really like your father, Miranda."

"Shut up about my father!"

Ed stared at her, put in his room service order and slowly put the telephone receiver back in the cradle.

Great, Straker. All that fury of hers, all that rotten behavior has to be covering up something. This doesn't make any sense. You're missing something. Try to think!

"Is there something you would like to talk to me about, Miranda?"

The telephone rang again. He automatically reached for it. She ran up, and desperately grabbed his hand, stopping him. He turned toward her, confused.

I know I'm missing something here. All right, yes. I came out here because I wanted to give her an experience she couldn't have without her father. Alec suggested it was because I was a man of compassion. There's something more. This wasn't for her at all.

*I miss Johnny, and I saw my son in every little boy we passed on Disneyland's Main Street. Admit it, Straker. This wasn't for her, this was for **you**. So you could remember what it was like to be a father again. A **father**. The only rank that really counted. Gone. Stripped from me. They didn't even bury my son with his true name. Straker.*

"What's wrong, honey?" Ed asked in a gentle manner.

"No telephones! I need you to talk to **me**! Now!" She seemed to consider what she'd said, and burst into tears. "I'm scared! The tests hurt. They hurt. I want you to hold me. So I can **really** pretend you're my father. Please? Please?"

He put the telephone down again, mind still racing.

"I'll hold you, honey. It's all right to be scared."

Listen to you. You deny your own fears, have you any business telling a child something that you don't even believe in yourself?

"Turn it off. I don't want anything to bother us, Ed. Turn it off, okay?"

Ed Straker pulled the connection end out of the wall telephone socket.

* * *

"So how does it feel to have won a trip to Disneyland, and have actually met Mickey Mouse, Mr. Iatros?"

"Call me Peter, okay? Oh, man! I'm having a ball! I never won anything in my whole life! I'm so excited." Peter Iatros looked about as excited as a corpse.

"I understand you work part time as a busboy at the Coronet Hotel, and during the day you take undergrad classes at the University of California in San Francisco?"

"Is all this really going to be on the tube?"

"Yes. What field are you planning to go into when you graduate, Peter?"

"Look, I don't mean to be rude, but I already answered all of that. I'm almost beginning to understand why Ed hates you guys. I mean, how many ways are there to answer the same question?"

"**Cut.**" The reporter pulled a finger across his throat. The lights illuminating Peter went out. "Look, buddy, the least you could do is try to cooperate here. Someone with your face

isn't exactly leading man material, and won't be on the news for long. Fame is fleeting, chubby. Remember that."

"Somebody with your lack of manners should be asking people if they want fries with their order instead of pretending you're superior to me just because you hide behind a microphone where nobody can figure out how slimy you are, and you pretend to be nice. That pancake you have on would be enough to hide the Golden Gate Bridge."

"Why, you little snotty punk!" the reporter snarled.

"Truth *hurts*, huh 'buddy'? I'm outta here!"

"Hey, Peter," a young, Asian female camera operator called to him.

"Look, I'm just out here looking for someone I think is in trouble so I can give him what belongs to him. Lay off of me, okay?"

"Relax. I just wanted to tell you that you're now my hero; you just hit the nail on the head. None of our news crew likes him, but since we all want to keep our jobs, we ignore the jackass, and I suggest you do the same. I'm Cindy Gongju. Pleased to meet you."

"I'm Peter. I'm such a jerk! You just spent twenty minutes filming me; of course you know my name."

She chuckled at him, nodded.

"No sweat. People get nervous in front of a live lens. Including *me*. That's why I stay **behind** it. Iatros. Nice sounding name. Greek?"

"Yeah. Are you Japanese, if you don't mind me asking, Cindy?"

"Korean. Both my parents came out here to the States, became American citizens. My Dad painted houses for rich people, my mother cleaned them. They're retired now, live out in Oceanside. They mean everything to me. They worked their butts off to put me through college. My dream came true, appropriate for this corny place, huh? The happy land where dreams come true. What about you?"

"My Dad emigrated out here, fought my mother for custody, and raised me. My mom dumped me in exchange for a lot of loot. I don't even know where she is now. My Dad remarried, my stepmother's pretty nice to me."

"I'll be free soon as I get this tape unloaded for my boss; you want to grab a cherry Coke or something?"

"That would be great, but not now, if you don't mind. I'm trying to find my friend Ed Straker and give him his suitcase. He's around here somewhere, but there are so many hotels in this area, it's like trying to find a needle in a haystack."

"Edward Straker? The English guy?"

"Ed isn't English; he told me he was born in the Back Bay of Boston. He told me a whole lot of things. You know him?"

"What reporter worth his salt doesn't? They'd kill to interview him but he's more reclusive than Dracula in the afternoon sunlight. Grouchy, insulated type. At least I thought so before I heard he agreed to help a little kid with cancer. Guess you never can tell about a person until you take the time to really get to know them." she chuckled. "Some people prefer to just make stuff up and call that the truth when it works better for them."

He frowned at her.

"He isn't grouchy at all, Cindy. He's special! If it weren't for him, that guy's insults would have made me go home and bury my face in a whole apple pie. He taught me more about self-confidence in a half hour than all my college counselors did in a year. I couldn't believe it when I won the trip. I chose to go to Disneyland, just so I could be with him again. I've been

carrying his suitcase around forever. I met him while I was on the job at the Coronet Hotel. I **gotta** find him, Cindy."

"No problem. Come on, Peter, we'll find your Ed Straker all right."

"How?"

"Come and meet my boss."

Peter followed her into the back of a news van parked in the Disneyland lot, excited.

"Mel, this is Peter Iatros. Peter, this is my boss Mel Starr."

"Sweetie, you're late." A middle-aged, smartly dressed, thin man with warm brown eyes, a quick smile, and a head of unnaturally sizzling red hair, a shade of red he'd obviously acquired out of a bottle, addressed Cindy.

"Growling at me like you're some effeminate grizzly bear isn't going to make me break out in a sweat, Mel. The whole world isn't going to end because a human-interest story is ten seconds late to a broadcast."

"Sweetie, the problem with you is that you don't care one whit about station ratings. You think the audience tunes in every night to see that Mac Factor devotee, cocktail breath, legend in his own mind, reading off cue cards just to remember who he slept with the night before to climb another rung on the ladder? No. Our human-interest segment grabs more viewers than Lizzie Taylor grabs diamonds. Who's your good looking friend carrying the expensive leather suitcase?"

Peter blinked at Mel.

"Our new leading man of your beloved human interest segment. Here's your tape, Mel. After you edit it and send it out, I need a favor."

"You got it, Cinderella. Go take ten with your new companion, breathe in the polluted Southern California air."

"Ugh! I **told** you never to call me **that** in front of anyone with two ears, Mel."

He winked at her, and began loading her video tape onto a different reel for editing. Grateful to finally be free of the weight of her camera, she waved at her boss.

Peter chuckled as he and Cindy left the van, and found a curb to sit on, while several Disneyland employees assisted guests with their hectic parking.

"Why does he call you Cinderella, and why don't you like it?"

She looked exasperated. Rolled her eyes. Made a face.

"Because that's my **real** name."

Peter gawked at her in disbelief.

"Wait. You mean to tell me your parents actually named you **Cinderella**?"

"Nice baggage to sling on a daughter you're supposed to love, huh? Yeah. Cinderella is my mother's favorite American animated movie. You haven't lived until you've heard a sixty-seven year old Korean woman sing Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo. Dad could have talked some sense into her, but she wears the pants in the family, and he adores her so he didn't." she grinned. "They both love Disneyland like crazy. They've been out here at least twenty times!"

"I thought I had it bad being Greek, a bookworm, and overweight." Peter laughed. "So has anyone found your glass slipper yet?"

"To think I was beginning to like you!" she hit him on the knee affectionately. "And that's another thing, Peter. People take me for Chinese **all** the time. Foot-binding. Look at these damn feet of mine. Size ten, for heaven's sake! I'm a freak! Then there's the assumption that I know a lot about science, right? I'm lucky I can balance my checkbook. People are **so** stupid sometimes. Take my Mel, for instance. There's no man alive more proudly gay than he is,

right? Idiots totally underestimate him until he puts them in their place with bon mots that go right over their heads. He speaks several languages, plays piano and cooks, and has a doctorate in Journalism and was our station's top investigative reporter for years until high blood pressure led to an enlarged heart and slowed him down. I adore him. He was my mentor in the business, gave me my first break, he's a living saint, no exaggeration. What's the matter?"

"I'm just really worried about Ed."

She grinned.

"That egotistical idiot reporter had the biggest scoop sitting right in front of him and didn't know it. Peter, you could make a fortune by doing a print interview just describing what Ed Straker is really like to the National Enquirer or some equally gossip happy British tabloid. You'd be set for life. But **you** wouldn't, I just know it. I really like you, Peter. Do you know how rare it is to find a male close to my age with your decency, and old-fashioned values? This Straker guy is lucky to have you on his side. Come on, we'll find your Ed for you. There isn't a soul in this world that Mel can't find. He still has police and other law enforcement sources coming out of his ears."

* * *

"Okay, what is it you needed, Princess?" Mel asked Cindy. The three of them were eating overpriced but delicious sandwiches at one of Fantasyland's restaurants, and slurping down equally expensive and delicious coffee.

"You know that Ed Straker guy, the British film studio head? Peter here needs to find him, Straker was staying at the Coronet Hotel, lost his luggage, and Peter's trying to return it to him."

"That striking looking American ex-colonel?" Mel asked, looking interested. "You actually **know** that guy?"

"That's him, Mr. Starr. Please help me to find him. I have no idea how to start, and he's my friend," Peter implored Mel. "He's **got** to be here somewhere, in a hotel in Anaheim; he was supposed to bring a kid with cancer to Disneyland to help out the Dream Path Foundation grant her last wish. Her name is Miranda Kaiser."

"**Kaiser?** Easy as pie, Peter. I still have my top-level sources that will tell me things they wouldn't even tell their own mothers. I can easily find your Straker for you. Dream Path is covering all the costs; they'd know where Straker was staying."

"I'm such a jerk, I didn't think of that!" Peter wailed.

"But haven't you two heard?" Mel asked, looking saddened.

"Heard what?" Peter asked, heart sinking.

"Exclusive story just broke a few hours ago. Miranda Kaiser, that sweet little kid you just mentioned, that was a client of the Dream Path Foundation? She was found dead in a pool of blood in her own bedroom at the Kaiser's house, murdered. Stabbed to death. The coroner put the time of death at around nine pm last night. The San Francisco Homicide department put out an announcement asking the public for any information leading to capturing the killer. People are pouring in money to use as a reward for info that nabs the creep who did it. Her mother was stabbed too, the cops think she may have been stabbed while trying to protect little Miranda. Her mother is still in surgery but not expected to make it."

"This just doesn't make any sense. Ed came all the way down here from England just to be with her." Peter exclaimed.

"That's not all. The Dream Path Foundation was broken into. The only thing reported stolen was their file on little Miranda."

"So somebody wanted information on her really badly, enough to steal it." Cindy pointed out. Mel looked at her with pride, if anyone had the blood of an investigative reporter, it was her. He'd smelled it in her, and made her his protégé. All that remained was to convince her she was wasting her intellect changing exposure settings.

"Listen, this didn't go out on the news for reasons that will become more obvious to you as I fill you in, but there's a lot more to the case. Seems the Kaiser family had **two** daughters. Miranda and Ellen Kaiser. Ellen is older, about fourteen I think the cops said, but she looks much younger. They're looking for her. They think **she** may be the killer."

"A kid?" Peter asked, shocked.

"Not your average kid, Peter. Ellen Kaiser has a history of mental problems, torturing animals, acting out, threatening other kids, defacing property. The homicide cops questioned several neighbors in the area, and they all admitted being afraid of her. They even questioned her former schoolteachers. She actually scared them, too. Finally, she had to have private tutors come to the house, but none of them ever stayed there for long. The neighbors constantly would overhear arguments in the Kaiser home, said that she was jealous of Miranda, and hated the extra attention she got, because she was so sick. Most of all, she **hated** her father and reportedly was glad he was dead, couldn't stand him, because he always preferred Miranda. The cops don't want her to know they suspect her so she won't bolt, but they've put out an all points bulletin for her. She's bright, so she could charm anyone into thinking she was innocent. The F.B.I. profiler they called in on the case thinks she's more than capable of murdering someone without blinking an eye, despite her age. Deranged doesn't even begin to cover that kid's personality."

"You said she looks **younger** than she is?" Peter said, alarmed.

"She could probably pass for nine," Mel told him.

"Oh my God, Mel. Peter's right to be worried. Suppose she-" Cindy said.

"What?" Mel asked.

"If this Straker looks like her Dad, what do you think she'll do to **him** if she's with him and pretended to be Miranda just to get the attention she wants?" Cindy frowned as did Mel.

Peter went stark white.

"Mel. We **have** to find Ed. **Now**," Peter begged.

"I'll call the cops first and fill them in, then Dream Path. Don't worry. We'll find him." Mel said.

Peter burst into tears. Cindy held him close to her.

Chapter Eight: You Look Away

Ed Straker moodily sat in his Disneyland Hotel bedroom, aware that time was running out on him and his small charge.

"Tell me about your movie studio again, Ed," the child in the Commander's lap implored him sleepily as he affectionately stroked her blonde locks. Her head rested against his shoulder, and he was aware of a familiar sharp sensation rising up in that area, like a porcupine had taken up residence there.

Once he had been a P.O.W, leading a knot of terrified men to escape. Fate had forced him into action when their unlikely SRO, a RAF chaplain, had misplaced his courage. That first taste of command had gone down well, until a baptism of fire, compliments of an AK-47 wielding Viet Cong soldier, had transformed what had been blood, bone and muscle into dust, and put him on speaking terms with real agony for the first time in his life. It had happened just as he'd been pulled into a Marine rescue chopper, or more accurately, when what was left of him had been pulled into the damn thing. The sound of the chopper's rotary blades had drowned out his screams until unconsciousness mercifully claimed him. Surgery had saved him from burial at Arlington, but had left him with pins welding shattered bones together, and a fear he'd never fly again. Often enough, when he was this tired, he was reminded of that incident by pain, an unwelcome guest refusing to finally go home.

Ed told himself that some day he'd allow the SHADO medics to take care of it with their advanced surgical techniques, forced his discomfort out of his mind, and thought about Miranda. He noted she seemed unusually heavy for her age. Maybe her weight had something to do with her chemotherapy treatment. Her hair was real enough, he'd expected it to at least have thinned out by now. Ed adjusted his position in the chair, settled back, still battling exhaustion. His legs had gone to sleep before he had. At least they'd adjusted to the Southern California time zone, he told himself in amusement.

His body cried out for sleep. His heart told him a few hours more of maintaining the illusion of a father cradling a daughter wouldn't hurt him, and so he whispered softly to her, waiting until her eyes closed.

*The way I'd whispered to Johnny. No, I can't think about that now. That's a laugh. When haven't I thought of my son being gone. Gone? Try **dead**. Damn it, I never should have allowed myself to be talked into this. This isn't at all like me.*

He moved, and her eyes snapped open in accusation. He didn't like the spark of hostility he saw in them. Wearily, he realized whatever ground he'd covered as far as trust had been concerned, had been lost.

"I have to get some sleep, Miranda, and so do you. Now, off to bed."

"I'm not tired," she complained, yawning.

"Well, I am. I have to catch a early flight back to England tomorrow, Miranda."

"England's stupid. I don't want you to go, Ed."

"I know it. I'll come and visit you again." He hated himself for the lie. At best, he'd send a wreath to her funeral services.

"You promise?" She reluctantly climbed down from his lap, and he stood up. He nodded at her. He had become accustomed to such lies. His job demanded them. "Kiss me goodnight," she said.

Ed bent over to comply, his cramped muscles questioning the sanity of the action. The chain emerged from where it had been hidden by his collar. Her eyes widened.

"What's **that**?"

"What? Oh. Nothing. Now let's go to bed."

I forgot I even still had it on. Christ, no, not another struggle, Ed thought, watching her expression change.

"I know what that is!" she screamed. "It's the Rabbit's Paw! **I hate it! I hate it!**"

How could she possibly know that? I'm so tired, I can hardly think.

Suddenly she approached him, pulled the chain to reveal the crystal, grabbed it and pulled hard, almost causing him to lose his balance.

"I HATE you! I wish you were dead!"

"What in the world is wrong with you now, Miranda? I know this is rough on you, but I have to go home. Miranda! Stop it! Let me go! You're *choking* me! *Let go of the crystal! NOW.*"

"Take it **OFF!**" she screamed. "He never gave one to me! Only **HER!** Take it **off!**"

This has gone far enough.

Ed reached out, and pried her fingers off one after the other, yanked them off the crystal, and made an attempt to pull her into the other bedroom. She screamed, broke free, and ran out of the room.

Okay. Calm down. Anger isn't going to solve anything.

The Commander took a deep breath. He let it out slowly. His hands fell to his sides, and he pulled down his shirt, smoothing it against his body. He glanced in the mirror from habit to check if he was presentable.

Ed gasped as if he'd been struck. He blinked, forced himself to look again.

Nothing but his own reflection.

I saw that little girl from the bathroom again with a rabbit, damn it! A rabbit, a good foot taller than I am. Wearing purple and gold silk. Carrying a crystal ball. That's it. My God, I'm losing my mind. No! It's this damn crystal!

Ed Straker removed the chain from his neck, and hurled it aside. The crystal hit the wall and cracked. He stared at it. He didn't feel different, just as if he'd done something unforgivable, broke some arcane law. The little girl's warning echoed in his brain.

I want you to have it. Please be careful, okay? Please? Promise me you will!

"No! I'm letting myself be affected by that damn moon rock again. That stops *here.*"

Ed Straker marched out of the bedroom, mind made up.

The child seemed to come out of nowhere and flung herself at him like some rabid animal, her screams reverberating in his ears. Too late, he saw the dinner knife from room service which she was holding up only as a silver streak, as she drove it with adrenaline fueled strength into his arm, his hip, and finally buried it into his shoulder. The pain forced garbled screams out of him, electrified his senses, his body crashed to the floor, bathed in waves and waves of white-hot flame.

Shaking violently, like a fish separated from water, struggling to breathe, he tried to stop the bleeding. He tried, but his body wouldn't answer the desperate message he was sending it. The knife remained upright in his shoulder. As if it was standing at brace.

Blood. A lot of blood. Dizzy. How long do I have? Shock. I'm going into shock. Blood. Lots of it. This isn't her. My God. This isn't Miranda. It never was. Hard to think. No, hold on. Must hold on. Bleed to death. Artery hit? Move, damn you! Move! The pain is nothing. No-

"I'm going to kill you." She actually smiled, as if someone had told her she'd spelled a word correctly. "I'm going to kill you like I did Miranda. Like I did my mommy. I made them

suffer. Then I killed them. Adults are so **stu-pid!**"

"Miranda. Please," he gasped. "I'm your friend, remember? *Help me.*"

"That **isn't** my name! I'm Ellen! You're so stu-pid! Miranda, *Miranda*, **MIRANDA!** She got all the attention from Daddy! Just because she was sick! Nobody paid attention to **me!** I killed Miranda! All by myself! I broke into that stupid Dream Path place. I saw how to do it on TV. I was worried someone would find out I wasn't her so I took the file. But you were stupid. Does the knife hurt **lots?** Lots and lots?"

*Why hasn't anyone come yet? Somebody had to have heard her screaming. Oh my God. It ends here. Life. Like this. My God. They **heard** it. They think she was just another spoiled child having a tantrum because she couldn't go on one more ride. You look away. Alec, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. Shock. The Rabbit. The little girl, in the men's bathroom. **Miranda.** No. It isn't possible. Oh God. I'm scared. Help me, someone. Help me. Please help me. **No!** Don't go to sleep. But it hurts, Christ, it hurts. So tired. No! Don't sleep, damn you! Fight it! **Survive!***

"**Answer me!**" she yelled at him.

*All right then. But not like this. On **my** terms. **Not** hers.*

"**Go-to-hell,**" Ed whispered, each word painfully tearing him apart. He closed his eyes. She screeched furiously at him.

That's when they broke down the door.

Chapter Nine: What's In A Name

The first sound Ed Straker was aware of was screaming. That cacophony of pain assaulted his eardrums for several seconds. Then he heard the unmistakable sound of gunfire, a single shot. He cringed, or at least thought he did.

The odd thing is, I'm not really afraid. No pain. No suffering. No nothing. Isn't that what I was trying to achieve? Becoming the perfect man. A perfect tool for SHADO. No. I still feel. I miss Alec. Please, I don't want to die. Please. My clothes are soaked in blood. I can feel them pasted to me with blood and I can't stand it. I hate being anything less than perfect.

His tears felt refreshingly cool on his cheeks.

After a while, he realized he was growing calmer. His vision of whatever was going on faded in and out. He began to hear voices, and he concentrated to hold on to this last connection to the world of the living.

If you can call burying your son living. I had to creep in like some criminal, sneak into the graveyard accompanied by Alec, because my sweet, loving, ex-wife's new husband barred me from attending my own son's funeral services.

Alec warned me if I didn't mourn, my grief and anger would eat me alive. Who has time to mourn in my job? You move on. Business as usual. One less security problem to worry about. That's all it is, Alec. Severed connections. Why didn't I tell you about the transporter? Don't give it a second thought. These things happen. A question of priorities, remember? I could have stopped it. I might have saved my boy, oh my God, my little boy! No, stop it, Straker. It isn't a problem now. Your grief just got in your way.

No. Alec knows me better than that. I didn't tell him because I didn't want him to suffer, too. My God, I miss him so much now.

"Oh man! You! Out of all people, why did **you** go and save him!" It was Peter Iatros' voice.

Peter! *If only you could be my son. I've let you down, the way I let Johnny down. If I live, I will teach you so much about what's **really** important in life.*

"Why do I have to be grateful to **you**?" Peter said in disgust.

Who is he talking to? Another voice he recognized barged into his ear, like a drunken party guest.

That female.

"I told you, Officer, I heard some whiney little brat screaming, and I couldn't get to sleep, so I called the cops. I finished a publicity shoot here at Disneyland, and had a five am shoot scheduled for tomorrow for Cosmopolitan Magazine. My face and great tits on the cover, of course. My God, look at all the blood! Why, it's right out of the movies. It figures that he would get stabbed. You wouldn't believe what I went through with him, he treated me so horribly. Will this be in all the newspapers, Officer? My name is Kay Cassidy. With a K, don't forget that. Why, you scrawny little slant eyed brat. Let go of me!"

Ed chuckled to himself.

Figures. But who is she talking about?

"One more word from that big ugly mouth on that chopstick body, and I break both of your arms. Let the paramedics through or I go all Bruce Lee on your million dollar face. Even someone with your IQ, plainly not high enough to fill a lipstick case, should be able to understand that."

Trace of an Asian accent. Pretty, young voice. If only I could see clearly. I like her. I'd

certainly help her break Cassidy's arm if it became necessary. I need help.

A new voice emerged, low, grim. Straker listened to it.

That's the voice of a man disgusted with life; going through the motions just to make a living. Automaton.

"I shot to take Kaiser out, I saw the steak knife in her hand, she was about to detach his head from his neck with it, like he was just a Ken doll. We found who slaughtered Miranda, and Mrs. Kaiser, radio Frisco Homicide and tell them their case is closed, compliments of the Anaheim Police Department. I had no choice; otherwise he'd be in a morgue already. I wouldn't bet on Straker making it Peter, sorry."

"I'm not giving up on him! If anyone can make it, Ed can! So shut up, okay? Shut up!"

He's sobbing, oh that poor kid. Peter, don't grieve for me if I die. You have your whole life ahead of you. Be strong, Peter. Alec. He'll look after you for me.

"Peter, just keep believing. Okay? Like The Rabbit's Paw book says to do. Faith has power to crush fear, and love can work miracles."

I know that authoritative voice, damn it. I know it from somewhere. But where?

"Nobody in Internal Affairs will question your judgment, Sergeant, relax. Look at the depth of these stab wounds. She must have jumped him. Nobody would believe she could chop him up like that. Just when I thought I'd seen everything. Homicidal maniacs in smaller packages, compliments of the Eighties. Progress. It had to happen, right?"

"Progress? This ain't that. This is animal skins and beating your neighbor over the head back when dinosaurs were the ones that created traffic problems, not people. This ain't progress, pal, it's anything but. We're finished here."

Cops. They're cops. Dear God, they shot her!

"No! Don't pull out that knife, it will kill him! Oh man, come on, Ed! I asked him so many questions. Why didn't I ask him what his blood type was? I'm such a jerk! What are his vitals?"

"Hey, kid, don't you think I know that? We're just going to pack and tape it in place so that it doesn't move. Move away. You're too big now to be playing doctor. I'm doing my job, okay?"

Doing his job. I'm just another stab victim. You have to harden your heart to get the job done. What am I saying? Isn't that what I do too? Harden my heart. Get the job done. Alec. If only I could at least say goodbye to him. Stop this, please. Make this stop. I can't stand it any more.

"I know mine too! Don't you dare speak like that to me! I'm studying to be a trauma surgeon, like my Dad. He commutes to work from San Francisco. You might know of him, he's given lectures on surgery all over the world, especially in his native Greece. His name is Dr. Angelos Iatros. Yeah, I figured you'd know him. Close your mouth so the flies don't get in. You want your job **gone**? Just piss me off and lose my friend Ed. I swear to God I'll make it happen!"

I called my Dad, Cindy! Thank God, he got back from his honeymoon, and he's going to clear an operating room for Ed. Dad's having Ed's medical records faxed to him from Ed's best friend, Alec. Alec said Ed has problems with some antibiotics. My Dad's headed out to the ER at Western Medical, it's closest to Disneyland. Start an EKG on him. Damn it, he needs fluids and a transfusion stat. What are his vitals?"

Good for you, Peter. How ironic. Dr. Angelos Iatros. Greek for angelic doctor. Why didn't I catch it before? What's in a name? Plenty.

"Lousy. BP 78/40 and still dropping, pulse 134 and thready, respirations are shallow and

rapid. We gotta take a chance and move him to the ambulance for more treatment. Anyone else would be a late supper for maggots by now. This guy's a hell of a fighter."

So I've been told.

"Have the defibrillator standing by and go! Western Medical like I said, we'll take the shortest route. When he stabilizes, we'll transfer Ed to UCLA Medical Center where my father's Chief of Surgery. It's one of the best hospitals in Southern California, top rated on patient survival, too," Peter insisted.

*If God willing, I do live through this, no matter what hotel I'm staying in, from Motel 8 to the Connaught, I'm **quadrupling** my tips to bellboys.*

"Peter, how do you know that?"

The Asian girl again. Good question.

"Before I learned to walk, I learned Greek. Before I learned Greek, I learned about every top rated hospital there is. My Dad insisted on it."

"Your Dad has the best son in the world."

*Well, well, well. Now that's interesting. She **loves** Peter. It's right there in her voice. I hope he hears it. Where am I being taken now? Sleepy. Need to close my eyes and rest. Just a brief rest...*

Ed Straker drifted away. Slept.

"Keep pumping that blood into him."

"Yes, doctor."

I'm trying to sleep here. Have a little consideration. Damn beeping from the heart monitor is worse than fingernails scraped over a chalkboard.

"Massive internal hemorrhaging like you feared, Peter, hypovolemic shock. How he held on for this long, considering the severity of his wounds, I don't know. Your Straker is a fighter."

That again? I can't imagine being anything less.

"Another retractor, nurse. The Gods must greatly favor your Straker. He could easily be a Greek God himself. He is in perfect physical condition except for obvious scar tissue over the left clavicle area, the X-rays show it was shattered and reset in pins. Crude surgical procedure. We will correct that when he is strong enough. Straker is underweight but his physical condition will aid in his recovery. He has the tenacity of a lion."

A single lion? Not a den of lions? Alec would say I must be slipping.

Peter moaned. "Dad, please save him."

"Peter, honey bun, don't worry. Have a little faith in your father. If you get too upset, you'll have to leave the operating theatre. You know your father and I had to pull a lot of strings to allow you to scrub up with us and watch the operation."

"No Mama, I'm okay. Ed needs me to stay here and pray for him. I can't lose him as a friend. Neither can Alec. Alec's flying out here, Ed. You hear me, Ed? So you need to hang on."

Alec! Thank God. I'm here, Peter. Hang on? Sure thing.

Ed smiled to himself.

"Oipho! He just arrested."

What? No! I'm right here.

"Ed just flat lined *again*? Dad!"

Flat lined? I don't think so. Damn, I'm dizzy.

Commander Straker felt something massive, yet exquisitely soft, seize his shoulder. He

examined it and was startled to see that it resembled a paw. Ed looked up to see a giant angora rabbit towering over him, its nose twitching furiously, enormous eyes examining him with active curiosity. One of its ears bent, and as it did so, a string of small gold bells adorning it jingled. It was dressed in shimmering purple and gold silken robes elaborately embroidered with constellations and moons. It had the familiar crystal draped around its neck, but this crystal pulsed with changing colors, instantly reminding Ed of his office mural.

"Men and women all over the world have had their own perception of Gods and Goddesses, or just a need to believe in some Universal Power beyond their understanding, for time immemorial. I grew up Episcopalian back in Boston, but I don't think I ever expected to have to justify the choices I made in my life to a oversized fuzzy rabbit when my time came to die!"

As an answer, the rabbit made some sort of strange, almost bubbly sound. It took several minutes until Ed finally realized it was laughter. Ed watched it, and found he was smiling as well.

"Do you speak English?" The minute he asked the question, he realized how absurd it was.

"Speak? Me speak? You wouldn't consider that rational. You pride yourself on the seen, not the unseen. You thrive on fact, not fiction. You prefer physics to metaphysics. Running to walking. Do you not still think that all this is simply alien, Edward?" It drew its paw over its sleek white whiskers, grooming them fastidiously.

"You can't be anything else but an alien hallucination, Mr. Rabbit," Ed informed it, noticing with some surprise that it had spoken in a definite upper class British accent.

The rabbit swatted him gently but affectionately on the head with a swoop of its paw. Ed blinked at it. He knew Alec would have given a lot to have done **that** at least once. Maybe he was feeling suicidal, twice.

"You have a name. Don't you think I might have a name too? Simple courtesies, dear Edward!"

"Okay, my apologies. I'll play along. What's your name, Mr. Rabbit?" Ed chuckled.

"Raphael, King of Wizards. Now that I've told you, come with me. There's someone I want you to meet."

"Who?"

The rabbit repeated the bubbly sound. He hopped away from the Commander, then suddenly leaped into the air, and in mid air twirled as gracefully as a premier danseur in a ballet. Effortlessly, it landed on its powerful hind feet, and hopped up to Ed again.

Ed found that he was suddenly immaculately dressed in his white Nehru suit. Being clean again and wearing the style he preferred was a wonderful relief for him.

"Who? Who, you ask?"

"Thank you very much for the change of clothes, Raphael. Yes, who?"

"You are most welcome. I felt you needed grooming. You may not be blessed with fur, but you are certainly fastidious enough to be a rabbit. You would be a most elegant rabbit, Edward! One wizard's spell would do it."

Ed chuckled again despite of the situation.

"I'm pretty fond of salads, Alec would probably say I'm halfway there already, but I respectfully decline."

Raphael removed his crystal reverently and placed it around Ed's neck. It pulsed with a bright white light. For some strange reason, Ed felt overwhelmingly safe. He nearly cried with

the intensity of the feeling.

"Who guards the Guardian, Edward? After all, your name means prosperous guardian. That crystal will protect you, yes. You shouldn't have tried to break the one Miranda gave you. You gave up hope. Follow me, Edward!"

"Am I **dead**, Raphael? Or dying?" Ed couldn't quite keep the fear out of his voice. "I need to know."

The rabbit swatted Ed again. Ed put up a hand, grasped the paw. It was so large, Ed needed both hands to do it effectively. Ed barely restrained himself from stroking the rabbit's luxurious fur just for some comfort.

"Cut that out, will you!" Ed protested, not all that firmly.

"Cut that out? Edward! That was a poor choice of words! Humans! So obsessively silly! Why would a rabbit's paw be lucky, if having it removed was obviously unlucky for the rabbit? Incredibly silly, I say!"

"Please tell me what's happening to me," Ed pleaded.

The rabbit stopped, and narrowed his eyes at him. Ed found himself mesmerized by the dark depths of those enormous eyes, deep and unexplored as though they were velvet seas.

"Didn't you wish to die?" Raphael inquired.

"**No**," Ed said curtly.

"I ask you again, Edward. Didn't you recently wish to die?"

Ed balled a fist to cover his face, and turned away in tears, ashamed.

Yes. I don't see how I could have ever fallen in love with Mary now. Not after what she took from me, humiliated me in that courtroom, and then denied me the right of saying a proper goodbye to my own flesh and blood. They took away my son's name. Yes. Yes. I feel so empty without Johnny. Everything's gone. Everything feels empty.

I was letting the job get to me, hiding behind it. I neglected my health. I hardly ate. Even as I lived, I belonged in the grave, I waited for it. At times I longed for it. I turned my back on my grief. I didn't ask Alec for help. I hurt, and it only hurt Alec to have to watch it.

"Yes," Ed replied, barely loud enough for the extraordinary creature to hear. He bent his head down, and then something defiant in him made him look the rabbit in the eyes. "Yes, all right? **Yes**."

He wiped away his tears with the back of his hand, and stood there, still meeting Raphael's gaze with courage.

"So you do know what the answer is. You have begun to confront your pain at last. But know this. At a terrible time in your life, and against your will, you still found time to care about a dying child. I find your heart exquisite, Edward. Come, follow me."

"You find my heart exquisite?" Ed couldn't help it, he chuckled. "Don't you think that's something of an exaggeration, Raphael? I know you can read my thoughts. I trust you. I don't know why, but I no longer believe you're part of the alien threat to Earth. I *loved* being a father. You know I volunteered just so I could hold a child in my arms again, and remember my son in that way. It was selfish of me.

I might have helped Ellen, Raphael, if I'd only tried a little harder. She was rejected, she didn't understand what was happening to her. Why did she have to die? I know they shot her to save me, I don't know how I know it."

"You share my magic while we are in this place, Edward. Tell me more."

"Magic? Don't you know what this means? She's just another child that I'm responsible for killing. Just more guilt piled up upon my soul."

"A burden of guilt you were never meant to carry, Edward. As for your heart, I do not give a compliment I do not mean. Your heart is pure and exquisite. Alec has the wisdom of a thousand magical wizard rabbits, and he sees that heart in its every detail, and he always will. Why would he be loyal to you if he did not? Come, come."

"You haven't answered my question, Raphael. Who is it you want me to meet?"

"Look for yourself, Edward."

Ed Straker did what Raphael suggested.

Ed Straker then found himself staring at his own image.

"Colonel Straker, Sir," his image said in his voice.

"You must be Colonel Kaiser," he responded in disbelief. "But I know you're *dead!*"

Seeing Kaiser was like looking at a portrait of himself. Ed looked at Raphael for guidance, but the rabbit remained silent.

"I am, Sir. I committed suicide, Sir."

"No, Colonel Kaiser, your plane was shot down in Vietnam. You perished in the P.O.W. camp. You died honorably, in the performance of your duty."

"Permission to speak freely, Sir?"

"I'm hallucinating, Raphael," Ed muttered. "Or I am as dead as he is. Which is it? Permission unnecessary. At ease, Colonel. We're of equal rank."

"Are we equals? I let my family down, I let them down, Sir. I knew what was happening to Miranda, and I volunteered to be sent out to Nam again to die. I'm a coward. I got in my jet, jettisoned the fuel in both tanks, and went down, taking my co-pilot with me. I can still hear him screaming. He's dead. But I didn't die right away. I thought I'd finally found peace but I found hell. The Vietnamese captured me, and I deserved it."

"What are you talking about?"

This is all so absurd. It's just another alien hallucination. I already bled to death, or I'm slowly dying, and my brain can't deal with it, so it's manufacturing these bizarre hallucinatory images I'm seeing.

"My wife was suffering, Sir, I couldn't help her. Ellen, having to witness the rages she'd fly into. My sweet Miranda, just watching her slowly die of cancer. I couldn't deal with it all. I ran. I ran out on my family. I wanted to die. Couldn't cope. Figured I'd die a hero. Nobody would know. Most of all, Miranda. Got to keep up appearances, right, Sir? That's what **you** always do, right? Keep up appearances. "

"What is it you wanted from me?" Ed asked his image.

"Forgiveness."

"What good will my forgiveness do? You need to forgive yourself."

Kaiser's bland expression turned to an ugly snarl, suddenly reminding Ed of what he'd seen in Ellen's face just before she stopped being an innocent child and became his mortal enemy. Startled by his uncharacteristic fear, Ed took a step back.

"Who the hell are you to preach to me, Straker? You turned your back on your own son. And for *what?* To be some hero? To save Earth? Tell me, was it worth it, Sir?"

That alone was enough to cause Straker to fight back, swallowing his fear whole. Now it was Kaiser's turn to be afraid.

"How dare you speak to me like that! You just admitted you killed your own co-pilot just to serve your ego! Didn't you ever listen to poor Ellen? You never paid her any attention, did you? You bought Miranda The Rabbit's Paw book, with the crystal, but you never gave Ellen one. Miranda was dying of cancer, but so was Ellen! She was slowly dying from the cancer of

not being cherished and loved by her own father. And what about your wife? At a time she most needed you to be there for her, you marched off to the so-called glory of war.

"My marriage fell apart, Colonel, yes. My son died. I'm not perfect. I would give anything to go back, and try to change my fate. But I did my best with what I had. I did my best, my God, Raphael. I see now!"

"Yes. You see now! Splendid. He is you. But he ran away, and he blames everyone but himself. You did your best, Edward. It is you that now needs forgiveness. It is you who now needs to be cherished. It is you who now needs to be loved. Come, his personal hell is not for you. It never was."

"No! Sir! You're an officer of the line. Help me! Tell me what I did was right!"

"Kaiser, I'm not planning on doing that. Not any more. Raphael, I've made up my mind, I want to go *home*."

"Did you not say to Alec: What home?"

"Yeah. You know I did. I don't feel that way anymore."

"Come, Edward."

"Raphael, are you really a rabbit?"

"Questions again! Facts and figures. The Commander, not the man. I am beginning to think Alec is a saint." Raphael wiggled his ears playfully. Ed smiled.

"He's responsible for my disaster of a vacation. Saint isn't exactly a word I'd use to describe him. Raphael, it **was** Miranda in that men's room, wasn't it? At the very moment she died, she sought me out. She stopped time by using your magic, by using her power of believing, so that she could reach me and try to protect me from Ellen. She came to help me, just because I resembled her father."

"I was mad at Daddy for dying, so Raphael came and took me the way he took you and I learned my lesson. So I came and gave you my crystal so you could learn too. But you lost hope and stopped believing in anything after your son died, you shattered the crystal."

"Miranda!" Ed bent and hugged her, and she hugged him back. "Miranda, that's okay. I understand now."

"I had to learn forgiveness too, Ed. But just forgiveness for Daddy, because he left me. I always forgave Ellen. I was the only one who loved her. I always knew she never meant to do what she did."

"Miranda, where is Ellen now?" Ed asked, barely refraining from breaking into tears.

I was the only one who loved her. Ellen destroyed the only person that really loved her, her sister, and never knew it. My God.

"Look over there."

"Ellen, Hi, do you remember me?"

"You're real nice, Ed. I remember you. You held me close, and made me feel loved for the very first time. My sister Miranda and I play here together all the time now. We love one another too! We have lots of fun! Why are you crying, Ed?"

"It's nothing. Are you happy here, Ellen?"

"Way happy! I hated everyone cause they didn't really love me. But it wasn't my fault, Ed. I was jealous of my sister Miranda's attention from my parents because she was real sick and they didn't like me. But I was real sick, too. Everybody really loves me now! See you later, Ed!"

"Raphael, somehow I don't think she meant mental illness when she said real sick."

"You see? Edward, you have the gift of looking into people's hearts. Yes. Miranda was

being killed by a cancerous tumor, but **so** was her sister Ellen. It was affecting her behavior. If they had bothered to take her to the doctor, they would have found it in time for her to be psychologically whole again. They neglected her, thinking she was just acting out, motivated by jealousy, and just paid attention to little Miranda. "

"My *God*."

"Come, Edward."

"Raphael, I'm so afraid. I want to go home. I want to see Alec again. I want to assure Peter that I'll be all right. I want to treasure the people I love, instead of isolating myself in grief. I want to hope, I want to believe. Must I stay here? Must I die?"

"You asked what's in a name. My name means divine healing. I am your guardian angel, Edward."

"You still aren't answering my question. Let me *live*, Raphael. Let me **live**."

"You must let go of your control, Edward. You must allow yourself to feel. Go now, Edward. Live!"

"I'm afraid!" I'm afraid.

I'm afraid.

Ed Straker finally closed his eyes, and let go.

* * *

"Ed! Ed, please open your eyes! ED! Thank God! Oh man, you had me so scared, you had us all so scared! We realized that kid Ellen had taken Miranda Kaiser's place after killing her. She fooled you and hurt you really bad, Ed. But it's going to be all right now. We tried to find you when we realized what she'd done. Of all people, that stuck-up model Kay Cassidy heard her screaming and called the cops. She was at your hotel! It was like she was stalking you or something! The cops broke your door down when you didn't answer, and we arrived just seconds later. Wild, huh? "

"**Peter**. Oh Peter," Ed whispered weakly. "Did I make it back? Am I really alive?"

"Sure thing! You're at Western Medical Center in Anaheim, out of surgery. You coded three times! That means your heart stopped. I prayed so hard for you! We all did! I'm so glad you're okay. I even still have your suitcase for you. Pan-Am sent it to the Coronet Hotel by messenger. Then I won the contest, and chose Disneyland as my place to go, so I'd find you. I wanted to give you the suitcase. You seemed so upset when you left, I wanted to help you feel better, like you did for me." Peter reached for Ed's hand, being careful not to disturb his IV lines.

Ed chuckled, allowed Peter to gently hold his hand. "Now *that's* service."

"Anything for you, Ed! Ed, you aren't going to believe this, but Miranda Kaiser survived!"

Ed turned paler than he already had been.

"That isn't possible-"

"Oh my God. I'm such a jerk! Sorry, Ed. I meant her mother. Sorry to shake you up like that. They have the same name. She's having a rough time, but she's going to be okay."

"I see. I'd like to meet her, Peter." Ed tried to conceal his growing discomfort.

"I think she'd like that. Now you take it real easy. You look strange. Are you in that much pain? My Dad operated on you. He's your doctor for now. He put a morphine pump in you. Alec said you'd prefer it that way, that you always need to be in control. I can adjust your dosage if you need me to."

"Not much pain," Ed whispered the falsehood.

"Peter, one thing you have to learn about Ed Straker is that every time his mouth moves,

he **lies**. Change his dosage. Now."

Ed smiled, slowly turned his head in the direction of the voice. His heart lifted.

"Only one person I know dares to insult me like that on a regular basis. Let me guess. Alec Freeman? Hello again, Alec."

"Guilty as charged. I was worried I would never see those baby blues of yours again. I should have my head examined for even worrying about you in the first place."

"Don't bother. Soon as I can stand on two feet, I'm removing your head anyway for condemning me to hell aka Disneyland. Who is that next to you, Peter?"

Ed sounded alarmingly weak to Alec, and he tried to hide his concern for the Commander. Ed had lost a tremendous amount of blood and he'd required multiple transfusions.

"Mr. Straker, hi, my boss Mel Starr and I helped Peter find you. I'm Cindy Gongju, I work as a camera operator for a news station. I met Peter after he was being interviewed for winning a contest, and well, we hit it off. We're getting engaged soon. When Peter completes his undergraduate studies, he and I will get married and go house hunting. My parents are just so excited about it; they love him even more than I do. Why not, their baby daughter is marrying a future doctor!

Peter's studying to be a surgeon and his Dad and his stepmother love me and convinced me to change jobs and go into investigative reporting. I can't wait!"

"It all sounds wonderful, Cindy. The name Gongju. Doesn't that mean Princess in the Korean language?" Ed asked, wondering how he knew that.

"What? It **does**, Ed? Oh my God, you must be kidding! Your real name is Cinderella Princess?" Peter began to chuckle.

"Keep it up and I'll do a little surgery on you myself," Cindy threatened, grinning.

"What happened to the love?" Peter teased her.

"Peter, I'd listen to her. You'd be surprised at what's in a name." Ed smiled. "Would you mind giving Alec and I some privacy? We need to discuss my future care."

"Sure thing, Ed! Oh, Cindy's parents visited you while you were still asleep and stopped in the hospital gift shop and got you a get-well present."

"That was gracious of them." Ed was beginning to feel grateful but tired again as the morphine washed over him and eased his pain.

"You might want to refrain from thanking them, Ed, until you see it." Cindy chuckled. "My parents are a little weird. I'm afraid they're planning to put half of South Korea on my wedding guest list!"

"Oh?" Ed chuckled. "Alec, could you raise my bed a little?"

"Sure thing, Ed!" Alec said in Peter's West Coast accent.

Straker stared at Alec in amusement. Alec grinned.

"Yeah, your Peter can get contagious." Alec chuckled.

"I did wonder." Ed grinned.

"Look! My parents just thought it was so darling. They're like kids themselves. I'm the only mature one in the family. Isn't he sweet? It comes out of that children's storybook called The Rabbit's Paw. All the proceedings go to the Dream Path Foundation."

Cindy was holding up a stuffed toy rabbit. Ed smiled.

*A toy rabbit. But not any rabbit. A rabbit wizard. Wearing purple and gold robes embroidered with constellations and moons. I swear he's smiling at me. I'm **alive**, Raphael. I'm happy to be home.*

"Thank you, Raphael." Ed smiled.

"Huh?" Alec said.

"I've decided to name it Raphael. Let me hold it. It's so soft! I think I'll sleep with it tonight. Why are you looking at me in **that** way, Alec?"

Epilogue

One month later, Ed Straker opened his eyes when he heard the door open. He still sometimes found it hard to concentrate, and he was still fairly weak, but Dr. Iatros had assured him that it was normal on his daily visits to Straker's bedside, and they'd discussed the prospect of doing more surgery on Ed's shoulder. Alec had taken vacation time off from SHADO, and had checked into a nearby hotel, and visited him daily, making sure he was all right.

Ed had already been transferred to UCLA Medical Center, and had a private room to himself, filled with flowers and balloons and toy animals, courtesy of Alec Freeman, and a personal guard from SHADO outside his door, at Alec's insistence. The room was swept for electronic listening devices as well. Ed had decided to stay in the States, and not be transferred to Mayland Hospital. Henderson had nothing to say about it, since Ed was paying for his own care, and Lake was temporarily in command. Instead of the skimpy cotton gown he'd been given when admitted, Ed now wore a new white striped silk robe and matching pajamas, a gift from Peter and Cindy, who visited him often.

A woman in a wheelchair slowly propelled herself into his room and was looking at him. He sat upright, being careful to not disturb his IV lines.

"I'm Miranda Kaiser. You asked to see me?" she said.

*My God. The grief and agony she has to be feeling is etched into her face. I'm glad she will never know the real reason as to why Ellen was psychotic. No need for me to add to this poor woman's burdens now. I'm glad Alec used Aegis to seal the coroner's report. It may have made the Anaheim police dangerously more curious about me, and we hardly need some cop snooping around in our backgrounds, but it was worth it to protect this woman. Listen to me! Breaking my own rules to protect a stranger. What **did** happen to me? Alec would call it an improvement. Damn. It doesn't matter. I need to give this woman some closure. You just need to believe me, Miranda. **Please** believe me, even if I don't believe it all myself.*

"Hello, Miranda. Yes, I did."

"Hello, Mr. Straker. Are you feeling any better? I'm sorry for staring, but you look so much like my late husband."

"I know. Call me Ed. I will eventually get better, and go back to England, but I've decided to stay in this hospital to be around my friends. I realized I need them. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

"I wanted to thank you. But I don't know how I could ever thank you for all you tried to do for my daughter."

"Miranda, come a little closer to me, would you? That's better. I don't know how to tell you this, but your daughters Miranda and Ellen are fine. Miranda came to see me on the night she died. That's why I wanted to see you, to tell you all about it."

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Ed."

Ed filled her in. He watched her slowly fall to pieces.

Don't fear the grief, or it will eat you alive.

"Oh my God! Oh my God," she wept. He lightly patted her hand.

"Yes. Initially I didn't believe it, Miranda. But I understand the whole point of her favorite book, the Rabbit's Paw, is to accept the magic of hope, and believing. Miranda believed. She was too late to save her father, but she came to try to save me. Ellen is with her. I prefer to believe *my* son is with them too, he died recently in a car accident. It's provided me with some peace of mind. I hope it will do the same for you."

"Oh, Ed. Thank you so much. Thank you oh so very much! I do believe it! I won't keep you any longer, you look so tired. God bless you."

"God bless you too. Goodbye, Miranda."

Ed watched her go out, smiled. After a while, he dozed off again. He wasn't sure what had awakened him, but he opened his eyes, saw a visitor sitting in a chair near him and chuckled.

"*You* again?"

"What can I say? It's those fantastic blue eyes of yours. Enchanting."

Ed chuckled.

"More like Alec Freeman making you swear to keep an eye on me when he can't."

"You caught me in a lie!"

"It's great about the future Mr. and Mrs. Iatros, isn't it?"

"A fairy tale story for our times. They were overwhelmed with the generous check you sent them to help pay for the costs of celebrating their engagement party. Oh, I almost forgot, the police closed the case and asked me to give you this, Ed."

"The crystal I was given by the little girl? Tell me, did *you* believe my story?" Ed toyed with the chain, inspected the crystal. He looked puzzled.

"I've known you for a decent amount of time. You aren't the type to exaggerate or dream up stories just for the hell of it. I believe you completely. You're rock solid in my book, you know that. What's wrong, Ed?"

"*My* crystal was *cracked*. This can't be it. I threw it and broke it, thinking it was the same as the damn moon rock."

"That Mindbender situation was a lulu. You know, I think Alec's right, you do get in all kinds of trouble without him."

"I'm telling you, **my** crystal was cracked."

"Maybe your guardian angel rabbit Raphael fixed it, Ed."

"That's about as believable as your cover as a gay videotape editor, Mel. Enlarged heart? Your health is better than mine is at the moment and you're older than I am! As for the gay part, I've known your wife, the beautiful Mrs. Starr, as long as I've known you. And that awful red wig! You can stretch the truth just so far, you know." Ed chuckled.

"**Some** of us actually do devote attention to *our cover jobs*. What about your truth of concealing a secret organization complex under Disneyland?" Colonel Melvin Starr, commander of the Anaheim sector of SHADO, grinned at his superior, and winked. Ed smiled at him.

"It's worked so far, hasn't it? Besides, it's like my studio. All illusion. What civilian would question anything they saw at Disneyland? It's all fantasy, remember? Now get out of here, Colonel. I need my beauty sleep."

"Good night, Ed. You take real good care of yourself, okay?"

"I will. Good night, Mel."

Ed Straker placed the crystal around his neck, closed his eyes and was almost instantly asleep. At the foot of Straker's bed, perched on the adjustable table, the stuffed rabbit seemed to be smiling.

The End