

Circle of Nightmares

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This is a sequel to my stories *Sick Leave* and *Two Days*.

It was an old, isolated, semi-derelict house: the sort of base the aliens seemed to prefer. Alec Freeman had tracked the three possessed humans here. Now, with a full security team arriving, it was time to go in.

They hurled stun grenades through the broken windows, then followed them in. There were three teams. One took the ground-floor, one went upstairs. On a hunch, Freeman had decided his team should take the cellar.

The girl by the door shot down Carstairs before Freeman could take her out. He cursed himself for not leaving time to fetch tranquilliser darts but she had to be stopped. He took aim, she sprawled dead on the ground and he stepped over her, heading down into the darkness.

The cellar consisted of a bare brick corridor with four doors off it. All were closed.

Two of the men had followed him down. He gestured for them to take the doors on the left. He took the one on the near right. Giving them a hand count - three, two, one - they threw them open simultaneously.

He had not known what he had expected. Not this, though. In the far corner cowered a skinny boy in his mid-teens. He was filthy and ragged and around his head was a chunky metal circlet. No wonder he was scared.

"Please don't hurt me. Please, no more. Please."

Freeman carefully holstered his gun, then held his hands wide in a gesture of openness. He moved slowly towards the boy.

"It's okay, kid. You're safe now. We'll get that the thing off you."

He had only once seen a circlet like that before. That had driven Ed Straker almost mad with pain a year earlier. Its effects on a child like this did not bear thinking about.

Indeed, the boy did not seem to have taken his words in. He kept babbling: "No, please, no. No more, please."

"It's alright. You're safe. I won't let them hurt you."

He reached out to put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

The kid attacked. There was no co-ordination, no skill, but he landed his blows with the strength of sheer terror. Freeman was knocked backwards, startled. He landed between the boy and the door. The kid kept at him, trying to escape. Struggling to his feet, he tried to restrain him.

"Listen to me, you'll hurt yourself."

The boy did not respond. There was nothing for it. Freeman chopped him across the neck. The boy dropped. He caught him cleanly and laid him gently on floor.

He heard a noise behind him. Spinning round, he saw the security men stood in the doorway.

"Lot of use you were." he blazed. "Check the other door."

* * *

Freeman was back at the studio before Straker, who was returning from Moonbase. Colonel Lake was also waiting for the Commander.

"I've got the latest batch of reports on the pods and Kate's UFO. Want to see?" She had been insanely busy investigating the substantial captures of the last few months.

"I'd love to but I'm afraid this takes priority. Stick around if you want but I don't know how much of his time you'll get."

Lake pulled a face. "We won't get anywhere without their technology."

"I know. But I've got to tell Ed something he's really not going to want to hear."

She nodded reluctantly and placed the reports on Straker's desk. "Make sure these don't get lost in the melee."

She left just as the call came to say that Straker was on his way down. Freeman dispensed himself a whisky as he waited. He was not sure how to put what he was going to have to say.

Straker strode in. "How did it go?"

"A qualified success. They're all dead, I'm afraid. Two shot and the third committed suicide. We found someone else, though."

He told him about the boy and about the circlet, watching his eyes cloud over as he did so.

"Who is he?" Straker asked.

"We're still checking, there was no ID on him. Though what a kid that age could have..."

Straker nodded sharply. "You'll have to ask him."

Freeman hesitated a moment. This was the crunch. "I think you ought to do it."

Straker dismissed that with a wave of his hand. "You're the people person."

"Even so -"

"Even so, I've been there and you haven't?"

Freeman nodded. "That ought to get through to him - because I doubt he'll be too keen to talk to us. I also thought it would boost his confidence if he knew the top man was taking an interest."

"Good point. It'll need boosting." They both knew that from experience. "I'm still not sure -"

Freeman shifted his weight to the other foot. "There's another thing. I had to sedate him - the old-fashioned way."

"You mean you hit him."

"Yeah. I thought he might resent that."

Straker managed a weak smile. "He might at that. Alright, where is he?"

"I had him taken to the Mayland. I thought if he's been in a cellar, he'd want windows."

They were there in ten minutes. The boy was just coming round. Freeman decided to wait outside - "In case the sight of me upsets him." - so Straker went in alone.

He looked at the skinny kid stirring in the pristine bed. His forehead was crossed by a livid scar that Straker knew encircled his head. It must be sore right at the moment, though they would have him on painkillers. His hand momentarily went to the scar on his own forehead, hidden by the fringe.

The boy's eyes opened. He flinched as he fixed on his visitor.

"It's alright." Straker told him. "You're safe now. You're in hospital."

The boy took a moment to assure himself of this fact, looking around the room, then tried to speak. Only a hoarse croak came out. Straker walked forward and handed him the glass of water from the bedside cabinet. He drank it thirstily.

After a moment he tried again. "Who... who are you?"

"My name is Straker. My people rescued you. I know you won't want to answer any questions at the moment but I'm afraid it's very important that I ask them."

The boy screwed his eyes shut and pushed himself down into the bed.

"Could you at least tell me what your name is?"

There was no reply. Keeping his voice steady, Straker continued. "Open your eyes a moment, I want to show you something. Then you can decide whether you want to talk to me or not."

Reluctantly the boy opened one eye and then the other. Straker put his hand to his own forehead and pushed aside his fringe, revealing a scar that matched the boy's own. After a moment, he let the hair fall back into place.

The boy continued to stare at him, his hand rubbing nervously at his own scar. "They did it to you too?"

"That's right. And as far as we know, you're the only other person they've used it on so what they wanted from you must be very important. Now will you answer my questions?"

A pause. "My name's Wayne Barrett. I don't know what they wanted, it didn't make sense."

"They just tell me what happened."

Patience, Straker took him through the events of last few days, knowing it was all being recorded in the next room. He wondered if Alec was listening in.

Wayne was sixteen and living in local authority care. He had run away after a fight with a larger youth. He had lived a very ordinary life up to that point, not much hope and not much to do.

The narrative was interspersed with questions. "It's not going to keep hurting, is it?"

"That will fade in a few days."

"And it's not done anything else to me - except the scar, I mean?"

"You might have flashbacks and nightmares for a while. But don't worry, we have a drug that can make you forget."

He felt a little guilty, dressing the amnesia drug up as if it were for the boy's benefit but in this case it probably would do him good. He had wished he could take it himself. He shivered slightly.

"Now go on. You were in the woods."

The boy had seen something - it was not clear what because he had not understood it. All he could say was that it was a big, shiny machine with lots of whirring parts, that looked as if it had been dropped out of the sky. "Like *Star Trek* or something. I was almost expecting little green men to jump out at me."

"They did."

"What?"

Straker shook his head. He had not intended to speak out loud. "What happened next?"

The boy glared at him. "I don't remember - *and I don't want to*. Don't you understand that?"

He nodded, searching for something to tell him. Wayne had grown more and more distressed the further he had moved in his story.

There was only one positive thing that had come out of Straker's experience. Kate. So he told him about Kate, about how she soothed his nightmares and started to rebuild a life that he had not realised was so broken. He knew he was going further than he should - he knew he

was being recorded - but watching the tension drain from the boy, it was worth it.

"She sounds like she'd make a great Mum." Wayne said, a wistful look on his face.

Straker shook his head. "We agreed, no children."

Wayne look surprised. "Why not?"

"Because... because it makes life too complicated, among other things." He was sharper than he intended and regretted it but the boy did not react to that.

He simply said: "That's a shame. I think you'd make a great dad, too. Tell me more about her."

He was tempted to run from the room at the mention of children. He had expected one old wound to be reopened but not that one. He stayed, however, because the boy needed him and he liked talking about Kate. It was the next best thing to having her with him.

"She's very patient."

"Patient? Like how?"

He smiled ruefully. "Like we've been married for months and haven't had time for a honeymoon yet. Every time we try and get away, something happens."

"Like what?"

"Like you."

The boy grinned sheepishly.

In the end, Straker left him sleeping. He found Alec in the next room and they went out together, Straker having given orders for the last part of the tape to be erased. An icy glance ought to mean that no one would mention it - except, possibly, Alec.

"Got under your skin, didn't he?" Alec asked.

Straker glared at him. "He couldn't give accurate directions to the... What do you think it is?"

Alec shrugged. "No idea. Odd, though. Sounds like it belongs to them so why are they asking him about it? I've already set his background check going."

They were alone in the car park by now.

Straker sighed. "They've been behaving oddly the last few months. Those pods the day of the wedding. Looks like we've got two factions. We have had indications before. The only question is, do they hate each other enough for one of them to help us?"

"Don't know." Alec told him. "But the report on the pods is on your desk. Please tell Ginny I told you that, she was rather annoyed I took you off without seeing her."

The pods were an ongoing mystery. The day Straker had married Kate, the reception had been interrupted when an apparently rogue UFO had dropped six canisters into the ocean before being shot down by one of eighteen craft sent after it. It had been quite a show but very puzzling.

Recovering the pods had not made it any the less so. Two had been destroyed. One held what appeared to be a dead alien female, the first female they had seen in all these years. (There had been speculation that there was no such thing, that the aliens were only male. Now there was speculation that they were an extremely sexist society who would not let their women out. Straker had never subscribed to either theory.) Several of her organs were transplants but her womb was her own and it appeared to be sterile, something they had always found with the male bodies they had recovered.

The second canister held a human woman and a pregnant one at that. Both pod and contents were badly damaged - SHADO's medical staff thought she might have been alive when she went in. The baby, however, had non-human DNA. How it had been produced and

how it was sustained without rejection from the mother's body was something they were still working on.

The third pod held batches of chemicals that appeared to hold some of the answers. Perhaps anti-rejection drugs, perhaps a great deal more. The fourth contained what might be a DNA sequencer. Colonel Lake had postulated that it could even show what particular genes did - "Which is something we can't do for humans yet, never mind the aliens."

It was Colonel Lake he wanted to see now. They found her in one of the labs, picking over a section of Kate's captured UFO. The thing had had to be sliced up so it could be vacuum sealed - otherwise it would have deteriorated within the usual forty-eight hour period. The pieces had all been numbered but how in practice they linked up was proving something of a problem.

"Did you read my report?" she asked. "I think we might be able to get a few bits working. Though what they'll do..."

"I'm here about something else." Straker told her.

She pulled an exasperated face. "Sir, I'm snowed under. Don't you want this completed?"

"This won't take long." He repeated back to her Wayne's description of the machine he had spotted in the wood.

She shrugged. "It could be anything. Literally anything. That description means nothing. I'd have to see it."

He nodded. "I thought you'd say that. We're trying to find it."

He had stopped to send out search teams before he reached her but with an equally vague description of the place, it might take a while. He would have to go back to the boy as soon as he was rested. That would probably not be until the next morning.

He and Alec set to the paperwork that had accumulated while he had been on the Moon. They were almost through when Kate appeared.

"It's seven o'clock, it's dark outside and I bet you haven't eaten since you got back. Bet you haven't let Alec, either."

"He has not." Alec agreed.

Straker grimaced, a little guilty but the thought of food had gone right out of his head - as it often did.

"I've just got these last couple to finish." he assured her.

She glared and sat down, watching him as he finished up. He could see a look pass between her and Alec, he was not sure what it meant. Maybe he would ask when they got home. Home. He actually wanted to leave the office these days.

Kate drove him back, stopping for a Chinese takeaway. She chatted about the studio: the two new projects she was working on, the actors they were hoping to attract, the finance. Her takeover of the business had been seamless yet even in these few months the quality of the films they were producing had improved enormously. He was very proud of her. Give it a year or two and they might be winning Oscars. Getting that past Henderson might be a little awkward but Kate swore it was good for their cover.

It always surprised him to find he cared about Harlington-Straker as well as SHADO. It was an almost guilty pleasure and he said so.

"I don't feel guilty." she replied. "I want to be the best. If we can't get credit for SHADO, at least we can get it for this."

She was cheerful and busy but the way she kept looking at him, he could tell she was concerned. The fact that she made him cocoa confirmed it. It had already become a signal

between them, a sign that she was worried about him.

"There's this boy, Wayne..."

She held his hand as he explained. The simple touch of another human being was something he had almost forgotten until she came along. He had made do with fur rugs and the like but nothing was as soft as her hand against his face and her breath against his cheek...

Alec rang a couple of hours later. "Sorry it's taken so long on the security check but the fact is, the kid's nobody."

"Nobody?" He knew he was angry at the wrong person.

He could almost hear Alec flinch. "Sorry, bad choice of words. I meant he's a normal lad with nothing to attract attention except his bad luck. Father's dead, mother couldn't cope, went into care at the age of six, run away several times - apparently due to bullying. School reports say he is bright but an under-achiever. Hardly surprising, really."

"Nothing else?"

"Been picked up twice for criminal damage, once for trying to shoplift a jacket. Made a mess of it, apparently. He's thought maybe to have helped a young woman fight off some muggers but when he was asked, he denied it. Didn't want them coming after him, I suppose - or just didn't want to talk to the police."

"That's not nobody."

"No, I guess not." Alec paused. "Who do you want him to be?"

He did not know the answer to that so he ended the call.

That night he dreamt he was back in the cellar, pain coursing through him. He screamed defiance at his tormentors, then he just screamed...

"Ed! Ed! Wake-up." Kate shook him until he knew where he was.

He curled up in her arms and together they slept until daybreak.

The next morning he went straight to the Mayland. The search teams had found nothing and were not likely to without more information. He had to pump the boy.

Wayne awoke slowly from his sedated sleep. Straker gave him a few minutes, asked how he felt, waited while breakfast was brought. Then he tried to explain the importance of the information.

The boy nodded, his mouth full of cornflakes. "I get that but I don't know the area. I can't point it out on a map because I don't know where I was."

"You've no idea?"

"Only a vague one."

They had started the search pushing out from the house where he had been found but Straker realised that even that might be miles, counties off. He asked and the boy did confirm which county he had been in.

"At least, I think so. It was near enough there."

Straker tried to hold in his frustration. It was not as if the boy was being deliberately vague. "Could you recognise the place if you went back there? Do you think you could lead us to it?"

Wayne huddled down beneath the blankets, rattling the breakfast dishes. "I'm not going back. No way."

Straker sighed. "I understand, I really do, but you'd be fully protected. If anything happened - and it won't - you'd be whisked away before they could get to you. Please, you're the only one who can help."

Wayne looked away. Straker gave him a moment to think. He had not decided what to do

if he refused. He could give him time but that time might be fatal if the aliens recovered the machine first.

Eventually the boy turned back to him. "It's really important?"

"The most important thing you've done in your life. Maybe that you'll ever do."

A shy smile spread over his face. "I always wanted to be important."

Straker left the medical staff to get the boy ready. Physically he was in pretty good shape after his night's rest. Straker arranged a rendezvous with the search teams - and with Lake.

"Sir."

"Don't you want to get out of the office, Colonel? I thought you'd enjoy a fresh challenge."

She was too diplomatic to tell him what she thought, though he had a general idea of it. Still, it might do her good. She had been working on the recoveries for long enough to get stale.

The boy was dressed in jeans, a T-shirt and training shoes, all long past their best. He did not look warm enough. Straker insisted on finding him a jacket from hospital lost property before they went out to the car.

Wayne whistled. "Never seen one like that before. What's her top speed?"

"Give me a clear stretch of road and I'll show you."

They talked cars till they got near the rendezvous. It helped to keep both their minds occupied but Straker could see the boy gradually tensing as the woods came into sight.

"Can't do this." he said in a small voice.

Straker put his hand on his arm. "Yes you can. I'll help you through it."

He stopped the car. The boy fumbled for the door handle then got out, coming round to stand close to Straker. He stayed close as Lake and the heads of the search teams reported in. Straker made a particular point of ordering one of them, Clark, to protect the boy if anything went wrong.

"Anything happens, you get him out of here."

Wayne stuck his chin up a little higher and managed to move a pace away from Straker.

They had found nothing so far. It seemed the only solution was to drive the boy around until he recognised something, though they had little idea where to start. The house, perhaps? But he had been unconscious when taken there.

"I remember a place that was falling down." he volunteered out of the blue. "Not a house, smaller than that, but it was brick."

One of the searchers piped up. "I think I know where that is, sir."

They found it on the map, then they found it on the ground.

"Yeah, this is it." Wayne was looking around. "I came at it that way so I went off... That way."

He pointed and set off, almost eager. Now he had got into the spirit of the thing. *Perhaps he enjoys being the centre of attention*, Straker thought. *Perhaps it's the first time that's happened.*

Lake was keeping up with them. "I suppose the fresh air is doing me good. Alec didn't like being left behind, you know. He's got a bad feeling about this one."

There were one or two wrong turns but after about half an hour Wayne found the machine.

"There you are." He looked at Straker for approval.

The Commander smiled at him. "Well done."

The boy burst into a huge grin.

Lake was already examining the impressive looking structure. Bright silver, with spindly arms and coloured lights, it stood about four feet high. Parts whirred and parts flashed and parts whizzed round. It made no sense to Straker. Perhaps...

"I hate to worry you..." Lake said slowly "but I think it's a fake."

"Fake?"

"Fake. It doesn't do anything, it's all for show."

He looked at the boy but Wayne seemed equally confused.

In the silence, the sound of guns being cocked was startlingly loud - especially as he had given no such order. He looked round. Two out of the three search parties were covering him and the others.

Wayne took a step towards him. "What's going on?"

"It's a trap." Straker said tightly. "You were the bait, these people have been brainwashed."

The aliens' pawns opened fire. Straker threw himself over the boy. Lake sheltered behind the machine. The others were cut down before they could draw their weapons.

Straker fell sick with anger, shock and fear. It was so fast, so cold-blooded. He could not blame the men, he knew from experience that the aliens could manage a takeover in a remarkably short space of time. If Paul Foster had fallen so completely in the past, he doubted there were many people who could resist.

He was dragged to his feet, the boy left cowering on the ground. One of the men, Clark, took aim at the skinny figure.

"No." Straker commanded, mad with the irony of it. "He's more useful to you alive."

Clark hesitated.

Lake was getting to her feet. "He'd make a good hostage."

Clark paused, then nodded.

The three prisoners were hustled through the trees, not knowing where they were going.

"I don't want to be a hostage." Wayne grumbled in a low voice.

"Would you rather be a corpse?" Straker asked.

He could see boy was pale with shock. Perhaps anger was his way of dealing with it.

After a few minutes they saw a nondescript lorry parked by the side of a narrow road. They were pushed into the back and made to lie on their faces, their hands behind their heads. He would have been grateful for a chance to talk to Lake but he did not know when that would happen.

SHADO would soon know something was wrong when no one checked in. When they would discover the details was another matter. For the moment, they were on their own. As yet he had too little to go on to make plans. He was going to have to play this by ear.

He could kick himself for having walked into the trap so easily. Worse, he had led the boy into it. He had broken his promise.

It was a long journey, more than an hour he guessed though it was impossible to see his watch. At times the roads were rough and the prisoners were bounced about and bruised. They were being taken further and further from SHADO HQ, making them harder and harder to find. There was little chance of them being rescued soon.

Their destination was a small factory unit. The lorry was parked in a high walled courtyard, shielding them from view. They were hustled straight into the cavernous, prefabricated building. The three prisoners were left standing against the far wall, their fingertips resting against it as they were made to stand on tiptoe. Two of the men were left to

guard them. Straker heard the other two leave.

He risked a glance over his shoulder. The men were standing too far back for him to have a chance of jumping them. One took a step forward and raised his gun. Straker turned away.

Now what?

The uncomfortable position was very tiring. He needed to make his move soon.

He glanced across at Lake, to his right. She was looking at him out of the corner of her eye. She made a questioning expression but he was not sure what it meant. She moved her head slightly towards the guards and repeated it. Did she have a plan?

He nodded. He would play along with her idea.

A moment later she gave a loud groan and slumped to the floor. One or both of the guards should step forward to examine her.

Except they did not.

"Stand up, Colonel." Aga told her.

She stayed where she was.

"Stand up or I'll shoot the boy."

Reluctantly she got to her feet. "I suppose I'd have been disappointed if you'd fallen for that. You are SHADO, after all."

Soon the other two returned and the prisoners were told to turn round. They had fetched one of the circlets.

Straker's guts clenched but he was careful to give no outward sign of fear. Indeed, he suspected they would not use it on him. The boy was starting to babble, incoherent sounds escaping him. The poor kid was terrified - and worse, was attracting attention to himself. He would almost certainly be their victim and Straker would have to stand by and watch - because whatever they wanted, it had to be worth more than one boy's pain. Maybe he should have let them shoot him.

What could he do? He guessed SHADO would know by now they were gone but they would be searching an area perhaps sixty miles from here.

Clark held up the circlet. "Two of you know from experience what this does. This place is deserted, you will not be found here. Commander, Colonel, you will give us all the information you have on the breeding programme and the rebel faction. Then you'll tell us everything else about SHADO and Earth's defences. We will begin."

The idiot had just confirmed all of Straker's suspicions. Perhaps they thought SHADO knew more than they did. Perhaps they were simply confident that the prisoners would not escape. It looked that way at the moment. Nevertheless, it was valuable information if he could get it away from here.

Clark had also produced three pairs of standard issue police handcuffs. Easy enough to get out of if you had time and were unobserved. Escapology was something all SHADO officers had to train in - and that Alec Freeman ran quite a profitable book on. ("It's an incentive, Ed.") Clark, of course, knew that and would not leave them alone to try.

The boy was shaking, scared out of his wits and Straker could think of nothing he could do for him. He did not dare look at Lake in case he betrayed his own fear. It was important - important to him - that she should believe in the myth he had created, as well as their captors.

Clark stepped towards the boy. And the boy head butted him.

Clark doubled up. Straker chopped him down and span round to dive at the nearest guard. Who was coming towards them.

They collided. Both went down but Straker's reactions were quicker. He kned the man in

the groin as they rolled on the floor. The man tried to get on top of the Commander but Straker threw him over and smashed his head against the floor. Once, twice, three times. The man flopped back, unconscious.

Straker knelt up but before he could push himself to his feet, he heard a shot.

A cry. Wayne.

The boy staggered away from a clinch with Aga. He fell back against the wall, then pushed himself forward as the Indian took aim. Then he caught sight of Straker moving and turned to take a shot at him, the more important target.

It was too far. Even if Straker could get to his feet in time, he could not cover the distance. He looked down the barrel of the gun as it pointed directly at his eyes.

Wayne gave a cry. "Leave off him, you -"

He charged the gunman, spinning him round as he fired. The breath whooshed out of him, leaving him unable to complete the sentence.

That gave Straker the moment he needed. He threw himself forward, striking the man in the chest. Aga hit the ground, his head crashing against the concrete. He lay unconscious next to the collapsed Wayne.

Three down.

No, four. Lake was standing over the last one. She turned to Straker, then saw the boy was clutching his bleeding shoulder as he tried to stand.

"Sit down, Wayne. I'll see to that."

She did, declaring it a flesh wound up she patched it up.

Straker used the handcuffs to secure the four men. Then he went to look for a phone. There was one in the factory office. Miss Ealand had to trace the call to find them. Alec, annoyed with worry, told him he'd be there in forty five minutes. An ambulance for Wayne would be there sooner.

There was a kettle, a jar of coffee and some dried milk, also in the office, so Straker made them all a drink.

Later, back at the Mayland Hospital, he stood over the boy's bed. Wayne was sedated but not badly hurt. Straker himself was bruised and tired, as was Colonel Lake, but all in all they had got off very lightly.

Alec was with him. "He'll be OK. With a few days care and the amnesia drug, he'll be no worse off than before the aliens found him."

"And no better."

Alec sighed. "We save the world, Ed. We can't make it perfect."

Straker's voice was almost inaudible. "I know."

There was a knock at the door, Kate coming to check he was alright. "You should have called me."

"You were busy, there was no need to worry you." Her husband managed a slight smile. "Did you actually notice I was gone?"

She said nothing further but put her hand on his arm.

Alec cleared his throat. "We were talking about the boy. Shame to just throw him back."

Ed nodded. "He's got guts - and I did kind of give him an open-ended promise. Not that I've lived up to it so far. But he's got no skills we can use and he's far too young."

Kate cocked her head on one side. "You need to think laterally. You want to give him a job? We can always use more runners for the studio - and you can keep an eye on him."

He grinned, caught out. "And how do we explain why we contacted him?"

That took her a little longer. "He's injured... And in the local hospital... Car crash outside the studio? A philanthropic gesture? Or we read it in the local paper?"

"I'll get it arranged." Alec left before Ed could stop him.

Not that he wanted to.

Kate took him home.