

Desert Storm

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*This is a sequel to my story **A Real Man**.*

Warning: contains some adult themes.

"Weather report's lousy." Alec's said. "We might have to take a detour."

Ed came back into the cockpit from the cabin. "Not towards Marina?"

Alec snorted. "Not likely. Looks like that way would be shorter but we'll have to go in West or way over to the East. Any problem with West?"

Straker shook his head. "Just get us back to Britain."

It had been a long, hard three days chasing down a pair of lost spinners in the humid jungles of sub-Saharan Africa. The mission had been a success pulled off at the last moment. Alec would have been quite happy to recuperate for a few days at one of the coastal resorts that were now being developed for tourism. Ed, of course, had insisted on heading straight back to HQ, even catching up on the paperwork while Alec flew them back. At least, Alec thought, he would get to see Pippa sooner.

The radio called for their attention. Ed, settling into the co-pilot's seat, flicked the switch. "Straker here."

It was Ford, his voice crackling over the airwaves. "Sir, we have incoming. They just passed SID and they're headed in your direction. Sky One is launching."

"Where is SkyDiver?" Straker asked.

"Off the Ivory Coast."

"Not *too* far," Alec said.

It was hard to hear Ford's next words. "Captain Carlin's asking whether you want him to escort you."

"No." was Straker's immediate reply. "We may or may not be the target but we'll be safe if he brings them down. How many are there?"

"Two, sir, and they're splitting. One west, one towards you. We're about to lose contact but you should -"

Alec threw the plane into a steep bank. "Guess what. "

Straker looked out of the cockpit window. The familiar shape of a UFO was coming up fast behind them, the strong sun glinting off its cone.

"We have visual." he told the radio. "We're taking - uh, evasive action."

Alec had put them into a steep climb as he was speaking, throwing Straker back in his seat. There was little that Freeman could do except dodge, the Shadair jet was unarmed and had little protection. An energy beam passed a foot from the window. The only advantage they had was that the plane was slightly more manoeuvrable in the atmosphere. That and perhaps

that Alec was a better pilot.

The next few minutes were a hellish roller-coaster ride. A glancing blow took out the radio aerial, so they had no idea whether Sky One was on its way to assist them. Sky Two was over in the Pacific and could be no help.

In the distance, the dark clouds of the predicted storm loomed over the desert. At one moment they would be level with them, at another above, watching the lightning flash.

Another energy beam narrowly missed the left-wing and blasted the ground.

"Ed?"

"Yes?"

"I've got a really stupid idea."

"What?"

"Would you rather get hit by them or by lightning?"

Ed thought rapidly. He had no idea whether the spinner would follow them into the storm or what effect the lightning would have on it but his gut instinct told him that this was the only viable option.

"Do it."

They plunged into blackness, cloud sporadically illuminated by flashes of electricity. There was no way of dodging them, they were too unpredictable. Nor was it possible to tell what had happened to the UFO. Straker craned his neck to see if he could spot them but he could see nothing.

"It work?" Alec asked, concentrating on his instruments.

"Think so."

"Where to now?"

"We need to stay in here a little longer."

Then the inevitable happened. Lightning struck the wing. The electronics blew. Alec swore as the nose pitched downwards.

"I can't hold her."

"Do what you can."

But there was very little. He pulled the nose up slightly, the landing gear deployed and they hit the sand fast.

* * *

Peter Carlin destroyed one UFO over the Atlantic. The second alluded him.

"We're looking." Colonel Foster told him. "But we've lost contact with Ed and Alec. Not even a homing signal. Can you take a look?"

"I will," said Carlin "but it's a needle in a haystack."

* * *

Straker was pleased to come round. He did not feel anything worse than sore, particularly where his safety harness had bruised him across the chest. Looking over, he could see Alec was also stirring. Unclipping the harness, he went across to him.

"Nice landing."

Alec groaned. "We're in one piece, aren't we?"

"Like I said, nice landing."

The plane was skewed on its side but it was possible to get the door open. Straker stepped outside. The storm had passed over and what little rain there had been was rapidly drying. It would soon be blazing hot. He went back in.

Alec was checking the emergency supplies. "Do we stay with the plane?"

"I don't know. I don't know what happened to the aliens."

"There's something else." Freeman looked at the blankets, avoiding his eye. "I think we crossed the border. I couldn't be sure in the storm, the instruments were fried -"

"I know. And you're right. The plane is too obvious, we need to make for the coast, lose ourselves. Problem is, that way we lose SHADO too."

Even so, they did not hurry over their preparations. They collected the emergency supplies, emptied the soft drinks and ice cubes out of the mini bar and the water out of the coffee machine. Straker thought about fixing one of the foil blankets over his head to keep off the sun but decided its reflective surface might easily attract the wrong sort of attention. Instead, he settled for his jacket. Alec did the same. Then, loaded down with food, fluid, blankets and a compass, they set off.

"North to the coast?" Straker said.

"Seems like the best idea. It has to be in that direction."

They trudged across the shifting sand as the heat of the day increased. It was the wrong time to be moving but there was no help for it. They could not risk being captured by the Marinian authorities.

It was ironic in a way. Being an American was an advantage in some countries and a disadvantage in others but almost anywhere in the world Straker would ultimately be protected from world politics by the fact he was head of SHADO. In almost every country in the world there would be one or two people to whom he could appeal for protection. But not Marinia. It was one of a handful of states considered too unstable or untrustworthy to be informed of SHADO's secret. And Marinia and the US were not on good terms. He had no idea if Marinia was on good terms with Australia but he guessed that Alec would be damned by association.

So they walked on in the blazing heat, over the dunes, hoping at any time to see the sea and unsure how many miles further it was.

"I hate deserts," grumbled Alec.

"You have deserts in Australia."

"Exactly. And when was the last time I went back there?"

Straker looked sideways at him, playing along. "The reason you haven't been home in - how long? - is because the country has deserts?"

"That's not the whole story."

"No?"

"No, there's more to it than that."

Ed grinned. "What's the betting there's a girl in there somewhere?"

"Girl? What's with the singular?"

They carried on for another hour or more, drinking sparingly.

"I hate the heat," grumbled Alec.

"I kind of guessed that, with the desert thing. Anyway, it's better than the cold."

"The reason you don't like the cold -" Alec told him "- is because you're too skinny. You need more meat on you. Lord knows Kate tries to keep you fed."

"She keeps *you* fed."

"I don't need her help in that department."

"And I do?" Ed asked.

"You certainly do. You've got a memory like a sieve when it comes to eating."

They kept walking, though Ed was faint with the heat and already the water was running out. They had to keep going, there was no alternative. No alternative and no shelter.

* * *

Paul Foster was at the end of his tether. It was four hours since they had lost contact with the plane. At the moment he stood glaring over Ford's shoulder.

"Anything?"

"No, sir. Not even a homing signal. Do you think -"

"Don't try thinking, it's not part of your job," Foster told him. "Anything more from Captain Carlin?"

"Not recently. Do you want me to contact him?"

Foster sighed. "No, he obviously doesn't have anything to report."

He turned away. Today was a disaster. No contact with Ed and Alec and - and he knew that this was what Ford had been about to say - it seemed increasingly likely that they had been shot down by the UFO Peter Carlin had yet to find. Foster had always wanted Ed's job but not at the cost of Ed's life. Added to that, it was a politically sensitive area where they could not land the mobiles for fear of military intervention. Over and above that, he had yet to tell Kate that her husband was missing.

He turned back to the monitors, trying to come up with some brilliant plan and failing completely.

* * *

They had had to stop in the end, in the lee of a slightly larger dune than the average. The shade was low and the temperature probably in the hundreds but it gave them a little relief.

"You any idea how far to the sea?" Alec asked.

Ideally, they would have raised themselves off the ground to catch the cooler air but in the circumstances they were digging downwards to get more shade.

"No. You?"

"No. And what do we do when we get there?"

"Head west, I guess. Might take a few days but we must have been... I don't know."

Alec nodded wearily. "We can walk at night."

"Be cold at night."

"And you don't like the cold." Alec sighed. "Shouldn't we be seeing mirages by now? With pools and palm trees and Dorothy Lamour?"

Ed looked at him. "Dorothy Lamour?"

* * *

Six hours now and Kate would soon be calling for Ed to see if he would be home for dinner. Then Paul would have to tell her the truth. He and Kate did not exactly get on - perhaps it would have been easier if they did - but he had no desire to be the bearer of bad news.

"Sir?" Ford broke into his thoughts. "I've got Captain Carlin."

Foster came over to the radio. "You've got something, Peter?"

"Something, yes. I think I've spotted the wreckage of the plane and it seems mostly intact. There may even be tracks heading away from it.

"But it's inside Marinia and there's military activity on the ground. I had to get out of their airspace before they spotted me." He paused. "I could go back."

Foster put his hand to his face thoughtfully. "No, that's not a good idea. No point in provoking them or giving them a mystery to follow. Any news on the UFO?"

"Not yet. I'll concentrate on that, shall I?"

"Do that. How are you for fuel?"

"I've got a couple of hours."

"Fine. Keep going."

Now he had some idea of what to do. He had already instructed Ayesha to pull up everything they had on Marinia and surrounding countries. It was waiting for him in his office. He also had his own address book to look through. But first he really must speak to Kate, he could not put it off any longer.

He called his secretary. "I need to see Mrs Straker as soon as possible, then Colonel Lake. When you've seen to that, I need to make some international calls."

"Yes sir."

Then he called Ayesha in, flicking through the file she had already delivered.

He looked up as she came in. "This is good. Now I need you to raid all the other databases we have access to and to set up monitoring on all communications in Marinia and the surrounding countries."

"That's more Keith's speciality." she said.

"Fine, you do the databases. I need military installations, security procedures, the likely political repercussions - if they do and if they don't find out their something more than film producers."

"Yes sir."

Kate entered as she was leaving. "What's up?"

He hesitated. "Does something have to be up?"

"You've never called me to your office before and you wouldn't do it to tell me they were on schedule." She looked at her watch. "They should have landed by now."

He motioned her to sit. "The news isn't all bad. There was an incident and they were shot down but we're fairly certain they got out OK."

She nodded. "But you haven't found them yet?"

"Nooo."

"What is it, Paul?"

"They landed in Marinia. we've no evidence they've been captured but it looks likely they will be."

She stayed calm, thinking hard. "We have to work on that assumption. Contacts. I know some people who know some people who might know something. PR gets everywhere."

Foster nodded. "I have friends advising on air defences, technology, that sort of thing in surrounding countries."

"Good. Have you tried George Cowley? I expect he has unofficial contacts we could use."

Foster agreed. "You speak to him, you two seemed to get on."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Trying to keep me busy?"

He shrugged. "We're all going to be busy."

Lake joined them at that point and Foster rapidly briefed her, adding details that he had not yet told Kate.

Ginny groaned. "This one's going to be awkward. I suppose we're in intelligence gathering at the moment."

"I've got Ayesha and Keith Ford on that."

"I'll go and take a look." She squeezed Kate's arm as she went out. "He'll be fine."

Kate smiled wanly. "I'll make sleeping arrangements for Sam and getting on the phone."

"You don't need to be here all night." Foster assured her.

"You said we're going to be busy. I can hardly sit at home."

He watched her go, wishing she would go home and let him get on with his job. But he could hardly blame her for being upset or for not wanting to be on her own.

* * *

It was dusk when they started moving again and the temperature was dropping rapidly. They had both moved their jackets from their heads back onto their shoulders and it seemed that soon they would have to wrap the foil blankets around themselves. They munched the emergency rations as they trudged on, artificial tasting things. Every few minutes Ed checked the compass, making sure they were still headed north.

Ed stopped eating, though he carried on walking. A sound was irritating the back of his brain, a sound carried across the almost silent desert.

"You hear that?" he asked.

Alec perked his head up. "Engine noise? It's a long way off but I don't think it's a plane. More like a jeep or something." He looked across at Ed who nodded. "What do we do?"

"Kind of depends which way it's coming from."

Alec grimaced. "To the left, it's probably our people. To the right, it's the bad guys."

Ed nodded. "Probably."

They stood still for moment, listening as the sound approached. It was hard to tell its direction in the emptiness.

"Get down," said Ed.

The sound was coming from the right. Unless they were on the Western side of the border and help was coming from a frontier post - which seemed unlikely - the vehicles had to be coming from Marinia and almost certainly from the Marinian army. It was that kind of country.

There was nowhere to hide. The best they could do was to lie in the shelter of the dunes and hope that they were not seen. Yet it had been impossible to cover their tracks for the miles - he hoped it was miles - they had walked. They had had to trust to the low wind and unstable sand to do that. There was a fair chance there was a trail of footprints leading back to the plane.

The engine noise passed by behind them. Straker breathed a sigh of relief. They might have to wait awhile before they could resume their journey but they were out of danger for the moment.

Then it stopped, not fading as it went away but ceasing as if it had pulled up. Directly behind them. Straker closed his eyes as he realised that they must have encountered their tracks.

There was a cough as the engine started up again, close enough for Straker to hear the sand churning beneath the wheels. Then it came straight at them.

"That's torn it," Alec said, scrambling to his feet. "I'm not going to get caught napping."

Ed followed suit, holding his hands wide in a gesture of harmlessness.

Two Land Rovers came over the top of the dune, Marinian colours painted on their sides. They pulled up. Men in desert camouflage spilled out, rifles at the ready.

"Hello?" called Ed. "Can you help us?"

The guns were aimed at them and moments later they were being bundled into the back of one of the Land Rovers. Ed went quietly but Alec protested. He made no move to fight, merely giving a "Hey!" as he was grabbed. He was clubbed unconscious with rifle butts. Ed moved to help him and was struck down.

* * *

Nina Barry made the call from Moonbase. "Paul? I'm not sure if this is good news or bad. A spinner just passed us going the wrong way. Interceptors couldn't catch it."

She hesitated. "No one we know on board, was there?"

"I don't think so. Far as we can tell, Ed and Alec are still in the desert. I'll tell Sky One to stand down."

* * *

Ed came round with an ache at the back of his neck, while they were still travelling. He was lying face down in the back of one of the Land Rovers, a row of army boots on either side of him. A surreptitious glance told him there was no sign of Alec. That was probably nothing to worry about. For the moment he played dead.

It was perhaps half an hour before they reached their destination. Ed was pulled to his feet and pulled out. It was dawn outside. He must have been out all night. No wonder his head ached.

They had stopped inside a walled compound. There was no indication as to what was outside. More desert, he assumed. In front of him was a series of long, low buildings rendered the colour of sand. There were other vehicles parked nearby but still no sign of Alec. He was probably here but he could be anywhere.

There was little time to think of that. With a guard on either side of him - they had come pouring out of the Land Rover - he was propelled through the front door and along a dull corridor. He tried to take in as much information as he could but there was little to see. The place was more boring and anonymous than SHADO HQ.

They turned the corner into another long corridor. Down to the far end, then he was pushed through an unmarked door. Inside, the room was bare and windowless. There was a plain, wooden table and chair. Straker moved to sit, knowing that was not what they were there for, but the two guards who had remained with him dragged him back and indicated forcibly that he should stand in the centre of the room. For the time being he complied, curious to see what would happen next.

Nothing happened next. Nothing happened for almost an hour, he guessed. It was hard work standing after the day he had had... It did not seem like yesterday. On the other hand, if he moved too far the guards raised their rifles threateningly. It was better to get tired than get a beating. He assumed they were not going to shoot him right at the moment. If they wanted them dead, they would have left them in the desert.

Eventually two officers walked in. He could not tell their ranks from their uniforms but one was obviously more senior than the other by the amount of pips and braid that he wore. Slim, dark and mustachioed, he went to sit behind the table.

After a moment he looked up at Ed and spoke in clear English. "You have been found inside our borders, armed and obviously spying. What do you have to say?"

Straker sighed wearily, already aware that his gun had been removed. "We were not spying. We were returning from a business trip. We'd filed a flight plan but we were forced off course and eventually brought down by an electrical storm. Your own equipment must have seen the storm and if you examine the plane, you'll see that's true."

They had already stripped the plane of anything that might prove awkward.

"As for the guns," he continued "they were for our own protection. In case of wild animals or the like."

The officer raised a sceptical eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"Yes, that's so." Which, near enough, it was. Somehow it annoyed him that he was telling

the truth and not being believed. It conflicted with his sense of justice. "Can I see my colleague now? I want to know if he's OK."

"You will be interrogated separately so that you will not pick able to concoct a story between you."

"I've just told you the truth. If I tell you anything else now, you'd know I'm lying." He fervently hoped Alec had the good sense to do the same. He did not add "*Besides, we had several hours before you found us.*"

The man looked levelly at him. "Your name is Edward Straker. You are an American citizen resident in England. You have been caught spying and you will say so on national television."

That was pretty much what Ed expected. The personal details had obviously come from the papers he was carrying. He wondered how good their information was and whether they would be able to backtrack as far as his and Alec's service careers. That would be awkward.

No, the present situation was awkward. That would be potentially disastrous.

* * *

Kate read the note that had been delivered from the Mayland because her phone had been busy with outgoing calls, filed it at the back of her mind and hurried across to Paul Foster's office to find him and Ginny Lake waiting for her.

"Sorry I'm late. I've got some resorts."

"So have I," Foster said, his voice a mixture of eagerness and concern. "I'm afraid I can confirm that Ed and Alec had been captured by Marinian forces."

She nodded. "I know. George Cowley told me a few minutes ago."

Paul scowled, as if his surprise been spoiled.

Lake spoke up. "I'm pulling images off satellites but I need more details if I'm to give *you* more details. What are we going to do next? What do we need to target?"

"I'm putting together a task force," Paul told her. "I'll lead it myself."

Kate looked at him. "Is that wise?"

"Wise?" he asked. "What's wrong with it? Don't you think I'm the best man for the job?"

Kate sighed through her teeth. "For a start, we're already missing two senior officers. We don't want to lose you too."

"I don't intend to get lost."

"Don't suppose Ed and Alec did, either, but it still happened." He was glaring at her now but she carried on. "We also have to take account of external politics. If an armed team raids a Marinian military base someone is going to get the blame, probably the Americans. We could start a small war. And much as I'd like to say 'hang the consequences', I don't think we can justify that."

There was a moment's silence, then Lake got in a fraction of a second ahead of Foster. "You've got an alternative?"

"Diplomacy."

"Diplomacy?" Foster sneered. "The reason we can't just tell them to let Ed and Alec go is because they can't be trusted to know about SHADO."

"Doesn't mean they can't be bought, flattered, leaned on or pushed. It might be expensive and -"

"It's too slow," Foster broke in. "We've got a good idea what's happening to them and -"

"You think I'm not bothered about that? He is my husband."

Lake put her hands up. "They'll both take time to prepare. I suggest we try both."

Foster leant back a little behind the desk. "Fine. That's fine by me."

His expression suggested that he was simply hoping to keep Kate occupied while he got on with the real work. She did not mind, she was feeling pretty much the same way herself. She had to get people talking to people before Paul could do something irretrievable .

* * *

Ed was still stood in the centre of the room, trying to argue his case and not getting very far.

"I don't know what you intend but you'll have to let us go eventually. If we're injured -"

The officer shrugged elaborately. "You've just been in a plane crash, I think that would explain most injuries."

He had a point.

He continued. "Besides, there are other ways of asking questions." He almost smirked. "My friend here thinks you're very good-looking."

Ed slipped an involuntary glance towards the younger officer. He had remained silent so far but he too was smiling. Ed pulled himself up a little straighter, telling himself he was not scared of *that*.

"Strip." the officer commanded.

"Wha-at?"

"Strip. You are in prison, you will wear prison uniform."

He gave them one point for that. For moment he had thought... And uniforms were meant to be demoralising, to remove identity. But it would not hurt him and it would not kill him, so for the moment he would comply.

"Where is the uniform?" he asked.

"We'll bring it in."

"Fine. Do that and I'll put it on. And I want to see Alec."

The officer smiled. "Eventually."

They left him with just the guards and a two-piece uniform, like a pair of pyjamas made out of sailcloth, rough and stiff. No shoes. He changed into them, knowing that was preferable to the consequences of disobedience.

It was an odd situation. He doubted they really believed he was a spy but that was unlikely to save him. They had gone through the preliminaries of breaking him down but he was not sure exactly what they wanted. Was a public confession the only thing?

He wondered where Alec was and what he was doing. He wondered when he would find that out.

The officers returned a few minutes later. The younger one looked him up and down. He did not respond. Nobody spoke.

The senior officer nodded and he was hustled out, the concrete rough against his feet. Corridor, turn, corridor. Another bare room. Why had they brought him in here rather than leave him in the other room? Then he noticed the pulley that hung from the ceiling.

"You were right about one thing." the officer told him as one of the guards wrapped rags around Straker's wrists. "It would be better if you're not too badly marked. Of course your government expect us to hurt you but we have to be discreet about these things."

Straker's wrists were tied behind him and he was hoisted into the air, his arms and shoulders gradually taking the strain. And it was strain, as the weight of his body pulled his joints in the wrong direction. He gritted his teeth and made no sound as the officer continued to repeat the same questions.

Eventually it was too much for him. "I don't know. I didn't do it. Let me go."

"Ah," said the officer, "at last, a normal reaction. You're a bit too good at this to be an ordinary businessman."

Straker groaned. That had never occurred to him, that his own trained reactions would betray him. He had never been in this situation in his persona as studio mogul. Did he need to act? How?

Questions, demands, more questions. More pain. He felt his shoulders dislocate, both at once. He cried out but did not pass out. Not yet. Not for hours it seemed. Not for so long.

But in the end darkness overcame him.

* * *

"A call from Mr Johnson of the Mirror, ma'am." Miss Mehta's, Kate's secretary's, voice came over the intercom.

Kate groaned inwardly. At the moment, the last thing she wanted was to deal with the press but it was part of her job. "Put him on, Anjuli."

Bill Johnson's normally ebullient voice was hesitant. "Mrs Straker? I have a piece of news I'd like you to confirm."

Her ears pricked up at that and she had an inkling of what he might say. Nevertheless, she asked: "Is it to do with a film? We've got several big projects planned."

"Er, no. I've got a press release for the Marinian government. It reads - well, to give you the gist of it, it says your husband and Alec Freeman have been arrested as spies. Is it true?"

Now she groaned out loud.

"It's true, then?" he asked.

"I - we'll make a statement shortly. I make sure you get it first. Thanks. I'm - I'm sorry, I have things to do."

"I understand." he said. "Best of luck."

He rang off and she called down to Paul Foster.

He also groaned. "That we don't need. Can you see to a statement? That's your field."

"Yes, fine. We'll tell them the truth as far as possible."

"Is that wise?" She could hear the frown in his voice.

"They're there, people know they're there and frankly, we don't have anything to deny. It was an accident."

After a moment, Foster agreed. "Do as you think best."

* * *

Ed came round lying face down on the concrete, arms still bound behind him. He lay quiet, eyes closed and trying to keep his breathing steady. For some time no one noticed he was awake.

They noticed in the end, too soon. He kept his eyes closed, not wanting to see what they did.

He cried out when they reset his left shoulder. He passed out when they set the right.

* * *

It was impossible to tell how long he had been unconscious but it seemed like only a few minutes. Certainly they were ready for him this time. He was hoisted into the air almost the moment that he came round.

As the sweat broke out across his body it occurred to him that Alec was heavier than he was. He did not know why it had not struck him before. *Too busy with other things.* Alec was heavier and this torture relied on body weight. It would be worse for Alec, assuming that this

was what was being done to him. Assuming he was still alive.

He had to come up with something to save Alec, to save himself. It had to look like it was for his own benefit because Alec had once caught him... *negotiating* with the enemy in order to save him and it had nearly been the end of their friendship. No, if anyone was to be humiliated this time it would be himself and not Alec.

He allowed himself to act up, to moan and to put a note of desperation into his voice as he truthfully answered their questions. This was all about studio head Ed Straker not SHADO Commander Ed Straker. He could do what they asked, go on television and admit practically anything without it breaching SHADO's security. No one would believe him anyway, except those people who automatically believed the worst of America. Perhaps he could convince Alec that he had done it simply so that they could return to HQ and get on with their work. He would, however, be bringing shame on himself, his family and his country.

At least SHADO would know where he was.

Of course SHADO knew where he was. Maybe they were coming for him even now. But the possible consequences...

Kate would understand if he gave in. Kate would rather have him back in one piece and damn the consequences. Sam was too young for it to effect her yet. But still, he could not quite bring himself to do it.

The same questions went round and round: what were they doing? What information had they gathered? Who did they report to? He answered all of them truthfully. He was not spying on them. He suspected the officer believed him but the torture went on.

His shoulders went out again and he passed out sooner.

* * *

"Are you listening, Bill? I have a statement for you. I'm afraid it's only half an hour before everyone else but if you want to ask me a question at the end, I'll give you a quote."

"Thanks, Mrs Straker. Go ahead," Bill Johnson told her.

"It reads: Harlington-Straker studios regret to confirm that we lost contact with our executives Edward Straker and Alec Freeman during a routine business flight yesterday. We believe that their plane may have crashed to due to bad weather and may have come down on the Marinian border. We are pleased to hear that they are alive. We deny absolutely that they have been engaged in any espionage activities and we will do everything in our power to ensure their safe return.

"Got that?"

"Yes, thanks." Bill said.

"And a quote?"

He paused to think of the best question. "There's a lot of things I could ask you but I suppose the obvious one is the human interest angle. How are you feeling?"

Kate took a deep breath. "Frankly? This is a nightmare but I can't believe that we won't get Ed and Alec back in one piece. Anything else would be unthinkable."

She finished the call, picked up the tray of food that Miss Mehta had delivered and took it down to Foster's office. "I am assuming, seeing that you're a senior officer and male, you haven't had lunch yet?"

He looked up, unsure whether to be annoyed or grateful. "I'm getting the snatch team set up in Egypt. The Egyptians've been very helpful. I'll be leading it myself of course."

Kate shook her head. "Paul, really, is that wise? We can't afford to lose you too."

He snorted. "I didn't know you cared. Besides, you won't."

She sighed with frustration. "Have you spoken to Henderson? I'm amazed he's not breathing down our necks."

Foster nodded. "At the moment he's somewhere over the Atlantic. As far as I'm aware, he knows nothing about this and I'm happy to keep it that way."

"We need to tell him before it hits the papers."

"True. Will you do it?"

She shook her head. "He hates my guts. If I tell him, he'll opposed anything we have planned. If you won't do it, can you ask Ginny? He seems to be reasonably polite to her."

Foster nodded and look back at his papers. "Sometimes I'm not surprised he gets frustrated. We all seem to make a career out of avoiding him."

Kate agreed. "But it's his own fault."

"Was there anything else?" Foster asked. "I'm rather busy."

She restrained herself from pulling a face. "I still don't think it's sensible, you going off like this. Things are moving on the diplomatic front. I've got an appointment with the Maronian ambassador for 4.30. Just as the worried wife, of course, but I should be able to get something out of them. We're also going through official channels to keep the Americans and other governments quiet."

He opened his mouth to argue. "Now who isn't -"

"I know it could look suspicious but we don't want anyone upping the tension and the Maronians getting the hump. If we need government help we can ask for it. Trust me on this."

He shrugged dismissively. "Fine, you handle that."

Because you don't think it's important.

She left to go back upstairs.

* * *

He came round once more face down on the concrete, groaning. They were on him immediately, wrenching his shoulders into place. He sobbed and went out.

* * *

Kate looked at her watch. She would have to set off for the embassy soon but there was one more thing she wanted to do before she left.

She popped into the studio creche, smile fixed firmly on her face. Sam would be having her afternoon rest but she doubted she would be asleep. Thinking perhaps but not asleep. Just turned two, she was big on thinking. She was growing up just like her father.

The little, ash blond head lay on a bed at this end of the row. The nursery nurse frowned as Kate approached but she could hardly argue with Mrs Straker.

Sam looked so much like Ed it hurt, now more than ever. It was Ed, really, who was the natural parent. Kate had mostly wanted children for his sake. Her smile brightened. She hoped he would be pleased with her news when he got back. But not so much as she hoped he would get back.

Sam was gazing up at her and she knelt down by her daughter's side, unsure what to say.

"You shouldn't be here." Sam told her.

"I know - and you shouldn't be awake. But I have to go out again and I wanted to see you. Are you having a good day?"

Sam paused before nodding. "I saw Daddy."

"Where?"

"On the telly in the office." The little girl frowned. "Is he in trouble?"

Kate did not know how to answer that one. "He sort of got stuck getting home. I'm hoping

he'll be back soon."

"What if he isn't?"

"Then he'll be back later."

Sam nodded, apparently satisfied, and turned over to go back to her rest. Dismissed, Kate tiptoed out.

* * *

Ed hung in mid-air, silent except for his laboured breathing. He hardly heard the repeated questions, though he knew them by heart now. Who? Where? What? He had answered them all truthfully - almost truthfully - but it made no difference. They wanted him to lie. Now he bent what little concentration he had on conjuring up images of his family.

Sam, so pretty and clever. She would be something special when she grew up. She *was* something special. He wanted to be a proper father to her, like he never had to Johnny. Hell, at this moment he would settle for just being there.

And Kate, luminous, passionate, capable Kate. He knew no one else saw her like he did but he blessed the day he had found her - or rather, the night of nightmares that had brought her to him. He would have died of loneliness without her. He had to get back to her. Would it really be so bad to confess? To tell the lies they wanted?

He needed to see Alec. Then he could decide. He hoped to God that Alec was not in so much pain as he was.

Exhausted, dehydrated and confused, he hung on to consciousness little longer.

* * *

Kate took one of the studio limousines for her ride to the embassy, complete with chauffeur. She took the time that it gave her to read up on Marinian history. It was really quite interesting, going back through the early Islamic period to the Romans, the Carthaginians and beyond. It was giving her the beginnings of an idea.

She wore her usual business suit but had softened it with a feminine scarf someone had given her. She wanted to look ever so slightly vulnerable, as well as appropriately modest for venturing onto the soil of a supposedly Muslim country. She wanted to be underestimated.

As she rode along she sipped a glass of water, then put it down as she wondered when Ed and Alec had last been given a drink. It was hard not to let her imagination run riot, she knew too well what could be done to a human body in the search for answers. She knew what had been done to Ed in the past.

The embassy was a tall, Regency house in a quiet terrace where half the buildings were embassies of Second World countries. A discreet brass plaque marked it out.

The door was opened by formally dressed butler. Inside, the place was plush but not without style. Furniture and fabrics of Marinia overlaid classic English style. Kate was greeted politely and ushered up to a second floor room overlooking the garden. She took a seat by the window, watching some blackbirds feeding. Moments later, the tall door opened and a dark and distinguished looking north African entered.

Kate stood up. "Your Excellency, it's good of you to see me at such short notice."

He made a slight bow. "Not at all, Mrs Straker. It's the least I can do. Would you like some tea before we begin?"

Kate's brain raced, trying to see if even something this simple would advance or weaken her position. "Thank you, I'd like that."

He tugged on an embroidered bell pull but she did not hear the bell ring. He came to sit by her and a moment later a young man entered with a silver tray bearing all the necessaries. He

placed it on the table between them, poured the tea and left. Nevertheless, she was fairly certain they were still being observed.

"Now, Mrs Straker," said the ambassador "what can I do for you?"

She raised her eyebrow. "I'd have thought that was obvious, your Excellency. I'd like my husband and Alec Freeman back."

He took a sip of his tea. "The overwhelming likelihood is that they will both be convicted of espionage and imprisoned, if not executed."

"But there are alternatives?"

He smiled. "There are always alternatives. If you could persuade them to confess, their sentences would be more lenient."

"And if I was to convince you that they're innocent?"

He shrugged, a melancholy expression on his face. "Sadly, that is not possible."

"Because you already know they are." She sighed with frustration. "What if I was to offer you alternatives, your Excellency? What if I was to persuade you it's not in Marinia's interests to convict them?"

He sat back. "I'm listening."

She sat forwards. "Your Excellency, any fool knows that you should never kill a policeman because their colleagues will pursue you for the rest of your life. Likewise most people have the sense to see you should never kill a journalist because that turns the whole of the world's press against you and the press hold sway over public opinion. Well, there's a third category of people you shouldn't mess with and that's film-makers."

"And why not?"

"Because we hold the key to the public's imagination, the collective unconscious if you will. British and American films are sold all over the world, we go into almost every country on earth. How would you like there to be a Marinian villain in every major film next year?"

He sat rigid. "You're not that big a studio."

"We have friends - and not just in America. We could make you pariahs in cinemas on every continent. Or -" She knew she had to get this one right. "- we could give your image the best spring clean it's had in years."

He did not speak but he nodded for her to go on. She tapped the folder she had brought with her. "Marinian history, fascinating but little known. We could get a good few films out of this."

The ambassador had a slightly feral smile. "Shot on location?"

"Let's not push our luck."

"Then what are you offering?"

She spread her hands. "A guarantee of at least one film set in Marinia to go into production within the next six months. That's a very fast schedule for our industry. I'll also talk to other studios, at least try and stop them using Marinian villains. I know that Warner Brothers are planning to for one of their blockbusters."

"What else?"

"What else do you want?"

He frowned. "I think I will have to consult on this. You understand, I do not have the authority to release your husband but it may be that what you have offered will be acceptable. Their arrival was, in some ways, unfortunate for us also."

Kate nodded, relieved. She really did not know what else she could pull out of the hat. She might have a problem selling even this much at the studio. Especially to Paul Foster.

The ambassador got to his feet. "I will speak to the appropriate authorities, Mrs Straker, and contact you tomorrow."

She smiled politely. "Thank you for your time, your Excellency. You've been most kind."

She finished her tea and was shown out. As she left, she discreetly shook the dust of the house from her feet. Then she went home to the studio.

* * *

Foster was in the armoury when the call came. Mrs Straker had returned and would like to brief him and Colonel Lake. He checked his watch. He had pretty much finished here and he had time to see her before he left.

"We're flying out for Egypt at 8pm," he told them. "We should have everything ready to go by morning. Then all we need is the coordinates of the base where they're being held."

Kate nodded. "I might have something for you by then."

She brought both of them up to date.

"You're *bribing* them?" He was shocked.

She shrugged. "Cheap at the price, if you ask me."

Lake nodded. "All that matters is getting them back. One controversial film isn't that much to ask."

Kate smiled. "The word *subtext* springs to mind."

Foster did not follow her and did not particularly want to, so long as they let him get on with the real work. "I'll let you know when we're ready to move."

"I'll let you know before that," Kate told him.

Ginny looked between the two of them and shook her head. "The how is not important. Anyway, what am I supposed to let Henderson know?"

This time Kate and Paul were in agreement. "That we're working on it."

* * *

They must have been impatient. Straker awoke screaming as once again they reset his shoulders. This time, however, he did not pass out.

He lay still, waiting once more to be hoisted into the air. He was confused when that did not happen. Instead, they untied his hands and pulled him to his feet. He sobbed with pain but he tried to keep his wits about him. They were taking him somewhere else, out of the room. He stumbled between two guards as they propelled him down more corridors, across a courtyard and into another building. A cell block, he recognised the smell of sweat, filth and fear. The corridor was poorly lit and the cell doors were solid.

Now he knew what to expect. He was thrown into a cell, door slammed shut behind him. He raised his head from the floor to look around. Rough, mud brick walls and a tiny window giving the only light - and that was failing. As the sun set it was starting to get cold. For the moment it was a pleasant relief from the heat but he knew it would soon be turning from unpleasant to dangerous. He wondered if his captors would provide him with water or if he would need to collect condensation. He doubted they would run to a blanket.

The door whined open and he had to roll out the way as a huge bundle hit the floor.

The door slammed shut once more but Straker's heart had lifted. "Alec?"

Alec smiled weakly. "You look lousy."

Ed snorted. "I'm not going down that road."

Freeman rolled over onto his back and groaned.

"Shoulders?" Ed asked.

He nodded.

Before they could say any more, the door opened a crack and two bottles of water and a handful of pitta bread was thrown in. Straker crawled over to get them. He passed Alec a bottle and two of the four loaves. Then he took a drink, swilling it round his mouth before he swallowed. He began to pull the dry bread to pieces.

They ate in silence, too exhausted to speak. The temperature was dropping rapidly. When they had finished, they huddled together in the corner trying to get warm. Neither of them could bite back the groans as they tried to find a comfortable position for their damaged arms.

Alec swore. "How *do* we get out of here?"

"Don't know. Ask me in the morning."

* * *

Sam Straker was awake early in the morning, flying one of her toy jets noisily around the bedroom. It did not matter, her mother was already awake. Kate watched her for a moment, smiling but worn. She had hardly slept that night but she still had work to do today and she needed to look the part.

"Sam, breakfast."

Sam hurried over. "Mummy, will Daddy be back today?"

She looked up at her mother's face. "That's not a real smile, is it?"

Kate snorted. "It's my job smile, I'm practising it. And Daddy will be home soon. I'm not sure if it will be today."

There was a rustling sound outside and the newspapers plopped through the letterbox. Kate thought she could hear the paperboy talking to someone but she took no notice. Scooping the papers up, she took a look at the headlines. Ed, as she had expected. The Mirror had a nice picture of her and Ed together next to one of Alec with a starlet on his arm. She had ordered all the papers today, that must have given the village a clue something was up before they even read them.

Next in the pile was the Sun. She wrinkled her nose in disgust, then gasped in horror as she saw the photograph. Ed in USAF uniform. Disaster. If the Marinians had not known that Ed and Alec had been in the forces - and she had no reason to believe they did - this could wreck the whole rescue.

The phone rang.

She picked it up. "Mrs Straker? Do you have any comment on -"

She hung up, turning to look out of the window. A bunch of slightly embarrassed looking journalists were hanging about by the gate, blocking the way out. She could have screamed with frustration if Sam had not been there.

Sam was there, tugging on her skirt. "Mummy?"

Kate stroked her head. "We've got some awkward people to get rid of. It's not a problem. Go back to playing for a moment and I'll see to it."

Like most two-year-olds, Sam did not need any prompting to play. Kate tossed up between calling the local police or studio security. She opted for the latter, ordering them to be discreet, and ten minutes later she and her daughter were being escorted to the studio.

"Good job she can't read," Kate told Miss Ealand.

"Won't be long," the secretary assured her as she took Sam to the creche.

Both women were tense but then, so was the whole studio. They all knew, now, and she was receiving sympathetic looks from actors, cameraman and carpenters. What she wanted to receive was a call from the embassy to say that everything would proceed smoothly.

* * *

Straker had barely slept. He knew the same was true for Alec. They had held tight to each other but the pain and the cold meant that they only dozed occasionally.

He was woken by a bottle of water being thrown at him, bruising his side. He groaned, rolled over and drank, as another bottle landed next to Alec. There was no food.

"So," said Alec "how do we get out of here?"

Ed looked away. "The only thing I can think of is to do what they say. If we escaped from here, we're surrounded by desert and we didn't get very far before. Otherwise, we have to rely on other people."

Alec snorted. "Thought you might say that. Oh well, another day, another beating."

The door opened a moment later and Alec was dragged out, spilling the precious water behind him.

The two officers who had questioned Ed to begin with walked in. Ed looked at them, slowly pushing himself up the wall to his feet. He did not want anyone pulling on his arms.

The younger officer said something Ed could not understand and the older one laughed.

"He says he likes you better now. He likes... I don't know what the English term is. Rough?"

Straker did not react, even when the younger man wandered over and stroked his cheek. The man said something else and his senior translated: "He'll wait until you're a bit rougher."

Straker knew they were playing games with him but the threat could be real. When the man spoke again, he looked for the translation.

"He says your friend's pretty rough."

Straker coloured but did not rise to the bait. Alec would break the man's neck if he tried anything but would probably be killed in return.

He was hustled out, along the corridor and into a broad back courtyard. His heart sank. He could see where they were headed: a corrugated iron box not much bigger than a rabbit hutch or so it looked to him. A hot box.

He groaned. It was a very effective form of torture, everyone knew that, but they could not possibly know how effective it was for him. It was so damn *small*. Even from the outside his claustrophobia was raging and he put up a futile struggle as they opened the door and squeezed him in.

Then things got worse. The box was only half the size he had thought. Another piece of metal was welded across the middle.

The door clanged shut behind him, leaving him with no space to stretch out his legs, let alone his body. He sat hunched over, his knees drawn up to his body. The only light came from chinks where the sheet metal had been badly stuck together. Already the box was hotter than was comfortable.

"Ed? Is that you?" Alec's voice was coming from beyond the centre partition.

That made sense. "Yeah, it's me."

As he looked towards the divider, he saw Alec's thick fingers appear at a hole in the corner. He was trying to bend back the metal, make the hole larger. Ed shifted to put his head next to it, barking his shins in the process.

"Guess they got lucky this time. Or I got unlucky."

There was no point in lying to Alec, pretending he was fine. His friend would simply not believe him.

"You got any holes on your side? Anything big enough to see out of?" Alec asked.

"Maybe. But nothing big enough to make a difference. Guess I'll just have to sweat it out,

if you'll excuse the pun."

"I don't think I will." There was a chuckle in Alec's voice but it was forced.

Ed knew how worried Alec would be about him and knew that for his sake he had to pull himself together. He just did not know how.

"God, why couldn't I be scared of spiders or something?"

"Hate to worry you but there's a huge, great, hairy one crawling across the wall in front of me."

"You're kidding? You'd better be kidding."

"I'm not." A pause, then: "Ed, you don't think it could be poisonous do you?"

He wracked his brains. "I don't think so."

There was a brief, clanging scuffle next door.

"What are you doing?" Ed asked, worried.

A moment later, Alec was breathing hard. "Hunting."

"Hunting spiders?"

"Yep."

"Did you get it?"

"Of course."

Ed smiled. Momentarily he had been distracted, the walls had expanded. He wondered if the whole pantomime had been dreamed up by Alec for that very purpose. But he could hardly keep it up for - how long? A day? He would manage for a day, he told himself, knowing he could barely manage for an hour.

Things went quiet for a while. Alec shifted around, complaining of cramp. That was hardly surprising, cooped up as they were. He was feeling that way himself, besides the ache in his shoulders - and his elbows and his wrists and the bruising...

Ed was not aware he had made a sound but immediately Alec was at the hole. "Ed, are you OK?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. It's just the heat."

It was getting hot, terribly hot and it was a long way short of noon. The metal burned where it touched. It contributed to his misery but it was not the worst thing. That was still the claustrophobia. He had to get through this.

"I'm going to call them," Alec said.

"No."

"Why should you have to go through this? It's all lies and everybody knows it. We can deny everything when we get back."

"No. I won't let you do that. At best you'd be humiliated, at worst it would end your career."

"Like they're going to throw me out for doing the sensible thing?"

Ed groaned. "You know what Henderson's like. He'd use it against you."

"We'd be alive, we'd be free and your daughter would have her daddy back."

"That's hitting below the belt."

"That's hitting home. You think I'm going to let Kate to be a widow for the sake of... Of nothing at all?"

It made sense. It made a lot of sense.

"It's not like you haven't done it for me," Alec continued.

It was very tempting.

But no. "If anyone goes on TV for them, it will be me."

"Ed."

"Alec."

"If it goes wrong, if someone has to be the scapegoat, it's better it should be me. For Kate and Sam's sake if not for the... for the studio."

The box rang like a whole, clamorous peal of bells. Blow after blow struck the metal, the entire structure vibrating, screaming at them. It rang through every fibre in their bodies. Ed put his hands to his ears but he could feel it in his bones. He could barely breathe. Somewhere outside, someone was shouting but he could not understand them.

It seemed like an hour before it stopped. They were still shouting but his head still rang. It seemed like the sound would never go away. He lay curled up on the floor, waiting for the pain to stop.

When it did go quiet, the first thing he heard was Alec swearing.

"Alec?"

"Yeah?"

"Not yet. They're not going to win like that."

"No, not yet. But soon."

* * *

Kate had been on the phone ever since she had got to the studio. Miss Ealand and Miss Mehta were both screening out the press and those who were calling with expressions of polite concern but still there was so much talking to be done.

Of course, she would have to deal with the press eventually. She was still boiling mad at the several papers, British and American, that had revealed Ed and Alec's military past. Probably some of the continental ones had done the same. In her few spare moments she was dreaming up the studio's retaliation. Most, however, had been responsible if not helpful. They had either not known or had had the sense to keep quiet about that little fact. She might do them a few favours in future but that would have to wait.

She now had three phones on her desk. One was for any general calls she needed to handle herself. One was designated for the embassy. The third was a secure line to Paul Foster in Egypt. It was that she was speaking on now.

"I know, I know. They would have been out by now if it wasn't for this morning's papers, I'm sure of it."

"But they're not and they won't be," Foster said grimly.

She hated having to argue with him. "We don't know that. Give me a few hours."

"They may not have a few hours."

"They're hostages, of course they have a few hours. You think I don't want them home now? But I'd rather have them home in one piece and your troops as well."

Foster sighed audibly. She wished she could see his face. "All we need is confirmation of where they're being held. Then we can go in."

She looked down at her desk. Confirmation had come through a few minutes ago, both from SHADO's own sources and also from George Cowley. It was her duty to give it to him despite her misgivings.

She only hesitated a moment before reeling off the coordinates. "It's just a small fort, shouldn't give you too much trouble."

He repeated them back to her. Then it was his turn to hesitate. "It'll take a couple of hours to finalise the details and brief everyone. Maybe... Maybe it would be better to wait for nightfall. Let me know soon as you have anything. Foster out."

She sighed as she hung up. "We're on the phone, Paul."

But at least he was listening to her. She wondered if she should try the embassy again or if that would look too pathetic. She wanted to be with Sam but she needed to stay by her desk. Perhaps she should have Sam brought here.

Then the phone rang, the middle phone, the embassy hotline. Her hand shook as she picked it up.

She weathered the barrage of allegations of deceit until she was given the chance to speak. "Your Excellency, my husband left the forces in 1970, Alec Freeman the same, long before I met either of them. It simply never occurred to me to inform you of something so long ago."

"They will publicly confess their crimes."

"They'd be lying if they did. I'm sorry if this has put you in an awkward position. We've already offered you a good deal. I can't think what else we can do."

She genuinely could not and hoped he was going to suggest something that she could agree to. Then her mind started ticking off a list of all those things she did not want them to ask for.

The silence between them was unbearably, sadistically long.

Finally the ambassador spoke. "My government has decided to be magnanimous. We will release them - on one condition."

"What is it?"

"*You* will go on television. You will make a public appeal for their safe return. Mr Freeman, as I understand it, has no wife."

"No, no one. Do you have a script for this?"

"You may say what you wish provided it is appropriate. Then my government will display its generosity in releasing our legitimate prisoners."

She took a deep breath and nodded, oblivious of the fact she was on the phone. "I'll set about arranging a press conference. You'll have what you want before lunch."

"Good." She could hear the satisfaction in his voice. "Then you will have your husband by tomorrow."

They ended the conversation and she set Miss Mehta to making the arrangements. She spoke to Ginny over the intercom.

"I suppose you have to." Lake said. "Ed's not going to like it but if I was you, I'd do the same. They do make these quixotic gestures occasionally."

"Hope Paul agrees."

"Paul's a man. Ed understands the female way of doing things, if you see what I mean." She giggled slightly.

Kate managed a chuckle. "That's not exactly how I'd put it but yes, I do."

So she made the call to Foster.

"What?"

She explained what had been asked.

"You're going to do it?"

"I don't see any other option."

"And you think they'll keep their end of the bargain?"

"I can't be sure but I think so. It's in their interest to get it over with. At the very least, it could buy us time."

"I'm no politician," Foster grumbled. "I wouldn't know. I'll schedule the raid for tonight

but if there's any suggestion of them being moved or the situation getting worse, I want to know about it."

"Of course. Best of luck, Paul."

"You too. I was going to say don't make a fool of yourself but I suppose you'll have to."

She thought she heard grudging respect in his voice but perhaps that was just wishful thinking. Whatever. Paul was behaving sensibly, even if she did suspect that he would come out with all the credit and she with all the blame. That was hardly what was important.

* * *

Barely conscious with the blistering heat, Straker had to rouse himself to hear Alec's hoarse calls.

"What?" He could hardly hear his own voice.

"Now would be a good time."

"No."

"Not you, me."

"Doubly no."

"I'm doing it, Ed."

"Do I have to make that an order?"

There was a pause, then Alec: "Shush, I hear footsteps."

Straker groaned inwardly. "What now?"

The door of the box was pulled open, hinges shrieking, flooding the interior with light. Straker blinked hard as hands reached in and grabbed him by the legs. He was hauled out backwards and dumped onto the ground. Even in the blazing sun, he sighed with relief from the heat. He could hear Alec being pulled out of the other side.

The guards kicked at him until he got first to his knees, then his feet. He ached with cramp and everything else. Alec looked like he was in about the same condition. Very red, burnt. Straker wondered if he was the same colour himself. Certainly his skin was sore. A light breeze made just enough difference to make the burns more noticeable.

The two of them were pushed towards another long, low building within the compound. This one looked like it might be a barrack block. Once more he groaned. Being worked over by the guards held no more attraction than... Shaking his head, he realised he would do almost anything not to go back in that box.

And if they kill Alec? he thought.

The officer was waiting for them inside, in front of a row of showers. Ed and Alec looked at each other warily. The officer was scowling and the younger one was nowhere to be seen.

"Clean yourselves up," the officer ordered. "Then you will be given water."

He stalked out but the guards remained. Ed looked from them to Alec and back. He would have shrugged if it had not been so painful. Reluctantly and with considerable effort he removed the rough shirt then slipped off the trousers. Alec looked at him, pulled a face then followed suit. They stepped into the showers.

The water spluttered out, lukewarm. There were worn bars of hands soap sitting on the floor and a plastic shampoo bottle with Arabic lettering on it, a rip-off of a Western brand. The guards watched but did nothing.

For all his body hurt, it felt good to get clean. But Straker was perplexed. Why did they suddenly want them smartened up? Some of the possibilities were distinctly worrying.

"You think they're putting us on TV anyway?" Alec asked, between gulping down the water.

"Maybe." That was one of the better choices.

It seemed more likely when their own clothes were brought in, freshly laundered. However, another thought occurred to him. Maybe it has about to be announced that they had died in the crash. Some of their injuries might raise suspicions but nothing conclusive. Dressed up and beaten some more, their corpses could be convincing.

He could only dress slowly but he had no problem with that. He needed to think, for all the good it would do him.

* * *

As, amongst other things, Head of Publicity for Harlington-Straker studios (and Head of Lying for SHADO, as Alec had christened her) Kate Straker was completely use to appearing in front of the world's media but today was different and she felt it. For a start, it seemed as if the whole of the world's media had turned up, news crews as well as gossip columnists and film journalists, all of them with their cameras and their lights turned on her. More importantly, her usual press conferences were held in order to publicise Harlington-Straker's us latest film, improve the studio's profile or, at worst, to explain away some minor breach of SHADO's security. Today she could be talking for Ed and Alec's lives.

Of course Paul was probably right, it was probably just a cruel game on the Marinian's part. Make her spill her emotions in public, then say: "No, sorry, we're locking them up for life." Or at least until they could get some advantage from an exchange. Today she was no different from the wife of any other unfortunate who happened to to find himself in the wrong place at the wrong time.

As the lights were set up, she wondered where the two men were now. She had a map reference but it meant little to her. Even calling up satellite photographs of the base had only shown her a series of mud coloured blocks that looked almost as if they had grown out of the desert. It gave her no idea as to what was going on inside. Only her imagination did that and she was having to keep that under strict control. Or maybe she should not. Maybe she should let it colour her appeal.

She checked her watch. Almost noon. Through the half open door she could hear the press corps settling down.

"Are they ready for me?" she asked no one in particular.

There was a pause, then someone replied: "Yes."

So she went out to meet them.

There was a long, low table with a cloth over it and just the one chair behind it. She sat down in the glare of the photographers' lights, noticing the plaque with her name on it that stood on the table rather than the ranks of intent people beyond it. She looked up, focusing on no one in particular, and began to speak.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. You all know why we are here. Two days ago Harlington-Straker studios lost contact with two of our senior executives: my husband, Ed Straker, and our friend and colleague, Alec Freeman. They were returning from a business trip when we believe that their plane was brought down by an electrical storm."

She took a deep breath. So far, so good. Everyone else was silent except for the clicking of cameras and the whirr of electronic equipment.

"We don't know the details of the crash but it seems that either the plane was forced off course or that after coming down Ed and Alec inadvertently wandered into Marinian territory. They were picked up by the Marinian military and have been accused of espionage.

"I'm here today to appeal directly to the Marinian government for their release. I know

that technically they have violated Marinian sovereign territory but that was entirely accidental. They have done nothing wrong, they do not deserve to be punished and I know that I speak on behalf of everyone at the studio - and of my daughter - when I ask Marinia to send them home. I don't know what more I can say."

She gave a sudden sob, snatched out a clean, white handkerchief and ran from the room. An aide slammed the door behind her.

The last part had been pure theatre. She only hoped it had been effective. Now she hurried back to her office before the real tears started to fall.

"Would you like some lunch, ma'am?" Miss Mehta asked as she passed.

"No." Which, she knew, was the kind of stupid answer that Ed would give but there was no way that she could eat while she was still on tenterhooks.

She checked her watch again. There should be just enough time to get the film out on the ITN news at 12.30 if they hurried. Certainly the BBC would put it out at 1pm. She suspected she would have to wait until after that to get a definite reply from the Marinians. Just so long as she did not have to wait until after the evening - or even morning - papers came out. Neither she nor Paul Foster could wait that long.

* * *

Clean, shaven, dressed and watered, Ed and Alec were hurried out of the barrack block and across to a courtyard that was marked out as a helicopter pad. In the distance they could hear a chopper and a moment later they were watching it approach.

"I wonder where we're going," Alec said.

"Could be someone coming to see us. Someone from the consulate if were lucky." Ed did not think it likely but he had to say something.

"I still reckon they're go to put us on TV," Alec replied.

Ed shrugged, his shoulders a little less painful after the shower.

The helicopter was almost down now: a decent sized, Russian built machine in desert camouflage. No one got out. Instead they were hustled in even before the rotors had stopped.

Ed's heart pounded. They would soon know their fate. The capital, he thought, was north. That was most likely where the TV studios would be.

The border was east. He was not sure how they had got to the fort but if they went in any other direction, it probably meant that they were heading towards the crash. That they were flying to their deaths. Looking at the soldiers around him and the compound sinking below, he knew there was nothing he could do.

Should have taken the deal, he thought.

* * *

"Sir, there's movement."

Paul Foster had set-up his temporary command centre at SHADO HQ Egypt. It was there because Egypt was pretty much the most stable regime in the region. At the moment it was also extremely convenient, being housed in a small and obscure temple not so many miles from the Marinian the border.

Foster crossed to the technician who had spoken and checked the images on the screen. A low orbit spy satellite borrowed from the Americans - this agency believed that one wanted the pictures, that one believed this did - was showing them grainy shots of a helicopter arriving at the base where Ed and Alec were being held. With the dust that was being kicked up, it was hard tell exactly what was happening. People getting out? People getting in?

"Stand by." Foster told the room and everyone went quiet.

Was that...? For a fraction of a second he thought he saw a blond haired man being forced into the chopper. Ed.

It was enough to satisfy him. "Track that chopper, I want to know exactly what it does. I want to know where they're heading before they do. I want the snatch team on the landing pad *now*. We're in the air at soon as we have a destination. Gunships standing by in case we have to force them down."

It occurred to him he ought to contact SHADO HQ. Perhaps it would be better to speak to Ginny, she was less involved. No, it ought to be Kate. She had the right to know what was going on.

* * *

Kate was still sat at her desk, absent-mindedly running through studio paperwork and racking her brains for anything else she could do for Ed.

The call from Paul Foster came through and her heart sank.

"You're sure it's them?" she asked.

"Sure as I can be. At least, I'm pretty certain it was Ed. I didn't see Alec and they could have split them up. Which would complicate things."

She groaned. "Wouldn't it just?"

"But if you've not heard from the embassy, we have to assume they're double crossing us. I have to go."

As his voice disappeared from the line, the hotline rang. She grabbed it.

"Hello?"

"Mrs Straker?" It was the ambassador's cool voice.

"Yes?"

"You will be pleased to know that your husband and Mr Freeman are at this moment on their way to the Egyptian border. I assume you can make arrangements for their reception."

"Yes. Yes, thank you. I must do that. Now. Thank you so much. Goodbye."

As she hung up, she was shouting down the other phone for Foster.

Someone else answered, a man with a Middle Eastern accent. "Colonel Straker?"

"Get Colonel Foster. Tell him they're being released. Tell him not to intervene. Got that?"

"Yes, ma'am." She could hear the bustle in the background go up a level.

The quality of the sound changed to the crackle of a radio. Someone had patched her through.

Foster's voice came on. "What?"

"They're being released. They're being taken to the border crossing."

"Which one?" he asked.

"There is only one," she barked back. "They don't exactly get on."

"And you're sure it's happening?"

"It fits. Why would they lie now?"

After a moment he asked: "Got an ETA?"

"No."

"Never mind. I'll make arrangements to meet them. Should have them home by tonight."

Kate let out the breath she had been holding.

* * *

Ed and Alec looked at each other a little uncertainly. They were going East. It ought to be a good sign. They sat in silence for more than an hour, waiting, watching. They could see the ground below but it was almost featureless.

At length, in the distance, Straker could see a line in the sand and two small complexes of buildings - one on each side. Alec nudged him and he nodded. Things were looking up.

The helicopter put down just this side of the line, a roll of barbed wire that would not stop anyone with an ounce of determination or a decent pair of wire cutters. But then, it was the desert itself that would stop people.

The wire was interrupted by a break with a tip up barrier across it flanked by guard huts and on the far side stood a large, battered sign. Along the bottom ran a design of palms and pyramids, with a rather cartoon looking camel. Above, in Arabic, French and English, it said *Welcome to Egypt*. Straker stared at it as if it was a mirage.

The guards attempted to hustle them forward but they needed no prompting. Straker wanted to run for the crossing with all the strength he had left but managed to restrain himself to a dignified walk. Nothing was said as they were handed over to a party of Egyptian soldiers. The Marinians turned and left immediately.

One of the Egyptian officers was speaking: "Mr Straker, Mr Freeman, welcome to Egypt. I'm sorry it should be under these circumstances. If you'll come with me, some people from your studio are waiting."

They were shown into another low, featureless block. This one was fitted out as a waiting room.

Paul Foster leapt to his feet as they entered. "Ed? Alec? That's a relief."

"You ain't kidding," Alec rumbled. "When do we get out of here?"

Turning to the Egyptian officer he added: "No offence."

"None taken. This is hardly the most pleasant part of our country and I'm sure you want to return home."

"We've got a helicopter out the back." Foster was saying. "We can either take you to an airbase where we've got a plane standing by or straight to hospital."

"The airbase," Ed said, so that was where they went.

One of the larger Shadair jets was waiting for them, with a medical team on board. They were in the air in minutes.

"I want a drink," said Alec. "And for once I'd settle for water."

Ed nodded. "Water, food and I want to speak to my wife."

He brushed aside the doctors as he made his way from cabin to cockpit. He was passed the radio handset, already in contact with SHADO HQ.

"Ed?" It was Kate.

"Hi. And before you ask, I'm fine. Just tired. Alec too."

"Pull the other one."

He smiled. "How are you?"

"Tired."

"And Sam?"

"Missing you. Shall I bring her to the airport?"

"Do that."

Her voice brightened. "In that case, you must be reasonable."

He signed off. "I'll talk to you later, the medics are hassling me."

He went back to the cabin. Alec had a jug of apple juice in front of him and there was the scent of cooking drifting from the galley. Ed's stomach rumbled and he could hardly wait the few minutes it would take. One of the stewards bought him a glass of juice and he savoured it.

But the doctors were glaring at him and he could not put them off for much longer. As he

drank, he gave them a run-down of what had happened. He took off his jacket and they checked his temperature, his heart and his blood pressure. They frowned but did not immediately order him to lie down, take drugs or anything else.

Then they examined his arms. That hurt, more than he could hide.

"We'll have to strap them up completely," they insisted.

"No."

"But sir -"

"My daughter is coming to the airport and I am not going to scare her by turning up looking like a mummy. You can do it later."

The look on his face made them back down. "You will need painkillers."

That he had no problem with. He made a half-hearted attempt to persuade Alec to get his arms strapped but he did not push it. They both kept drinking, ate their meals - creme Dubarry, roast chicken and chocolate mousse - and caught a couple of hours sleep as the painkillers kicked in.

It was raining when they touched down in England. They were met by a car and driven the short distance to the terminal building. In a plush lounge, Kate and Sam were waiting. Both broke into beaming smiles.

The little girl ran to her father and he bent down to sweep her up in his arms. As her feet left the ground, he cried out and dropped her.

Kate was striding towards them. Sam burst into tears.

Ed groaned. "I'm sorry, honey. Daddy's sorry. Are you hurt?"

She stopped crying and shook her head. "You are."

"It's just a little thing. I'll be fine."

Kate was wearing her *like heck* face but she picked up her daughter with one arm and put the other around her husband. "Let's take Daddy to the Mayland, then he'll be alright."

She looked over her shoulder. "Alec?"

He smiled. "Same here. I just need a decent night's sleep."

"I've made up the spare bed."

He tried to argue but neither Ed nor Sam would let him.

On the way out, Ed spotted the journalists being held at a distance by police barriers.

"What are they doing here?"

It was Kate's turn to groan. "They were onto the story almost before we were. Don't worry, there's been no security breach. It's all been handled as a studio matter. But I assume they'll be expecting a press conference." She looked from him to Alec. "I'm not sure I dare let you near them. Anyway, hospital first."

Foster brought the car round. As they left the terminal building, Straker could hear cameras clicking in the background but ignored them. He climbed into the back of the studio limousines with Kate, Sam and Alec. Foster got in the front. Sam snuggled up to her father for the ride to the Mayland. That made him feel better.

When they got to the hospital, Alec nabbed Sam. "You want to come and help me with the doctors, Princess?"

"Yeeeeaaaah!"

Ed was grateful. For all he adored Sam, there were things he needed to speak to Kate about. Once the doctors were gone, they could be alone together.

It seemed there were also things Kate needed to say to him. "What did they do to you?"

"I'm OK, really."

Her face tightened. "Don't do that, Ed, just don't do that. You know it makes me worry more."

So, as the doctors fussed around him and muttered about tests and surgery, he told her. That was not the important part and the medics knew the truth about it anyway. Kate seemed a little reassured until she saw the extent of the bandages.

"You can't move! And you're going to be like this for how long? Did they say surgery? I need to make a phone call. I can't mother you, Alec and Sam. I don't suppose Alec's any better."

He smiled. "You did offer."

"I know." She gritted her teeth in mock frustration.

The doctors made a discreet exit a moment later and Ed got the chance to find out what he needed to know. "What did you have to offer them? It was you, wasn't it?"

She shrugged, pacing the room in a slightly embarrassed fashion. "Not much, really. Nothing we couldn't afford. And Paul was standing by with a snatch team in case it didn't come off."

Straker calculated the possible political consequences of that, decided his wife had done the same sums and that he would forgive her practically anything to stop that happening. "Give me the bad news."

She came and sat down beside him. "We owe them a film on Maronian history - but I didn't say it would make them look good. And I had to make a public appeal for your release. You can see the tape if you like but it's embarrassing."

He nodded, wishing he could put his arm around her. "They wanted us to make one. I should have spared you the trouble."

"No, it was better this way."

"That's everything?"

"Yes. I think... I think you were a problem for them. They didn't know what to do with you."

He nodded, and rested his head wearily on her shoulder. "Glad we weren't more expensive."

He sighed. "If they're not prepared to do the surgery yet, I'm not hanging around here. Guess we'd better collect Sam and Alec. Not that he'll want to give her up."

She cleared her throat. "Actually, Ed..."

He pricked his ears up, aware of her tone. "What?"

She spoke slowly. "I've been coming here myself."

He pulled his head up, looking her straight in the face. "To the Mayland?"

She nodded, half smiling. "I had the news for you when you were due home. I've been dying to tell someone -"

"Just as long as you're not dying."

She laughed. "Quite the opposite. I'm pregnant."

He remained silent, just looking at her.

A little apprehensively, remembering the last time, she asked: "You're not upset?"

He leaned over and kissed her and then they each knew how happy the other was.