

Irresistible

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(This is a sequel to my story If I Should Die Before I Wake)

Warning: contains adult material and violence.

Ed and Kate Straker got out of their car in front of the studio offices, not speaking. He moved to put a hand on her arm but she pulled away and he let it drop, following her into the building.

The receptionist, Maria, smiled at them. "We've all heard the news. Congratulations, Mrs Straker."

"Thank you." Kate said stiffly, the same response she had made to the guard on the gate, and carried on walking.

Maria looked at Ed but he did not respond. It was Kate's job to cover for him, not the other way round. He was as perplexed by her reaction as anyone else.

Alec appeared in the corridor, carrying a champagne bottle in one hand and three glasses in the other. "Congratulations, Kate. You nailed 'em, fair and square. You going to have a drink for once, Ed, or shall I share it with Maria?"

She smiled, hardly relaxing at all. "Thank you, Alec, but I'm not drinking. . . Now if you'll excuse me I have a lot of work backed up. I'll be in my office."

She brushed past him, taking no account of his bemusement, and carried on towards her stated destination. Ed came up beside his friend, watching her go.

"I wasn't expecting that." Alec said once she was out of sight.

"Me neither. She was fine until the verdict then something just snapped, like a switch flipped. I thought she'd be happy."

Alec nodded as Ed steered him towards his office. "Hate to say it but if she's not better soon, I'd say that was a case for Jackson. You both refused before."

Ed sighed. "Maybe we should have."

Three hours earlier he had clapped his hands when the jury had brought in guilty verdicts on the men who had beaten Kate into a coma, causing her to miscarry their child, and killed her bodyguard. The judge had given out automatic life sentences for the murder and Ed had felt they were out of their lives for good. Of course neither judge nor jury knew that the young thugs had been hired by alien agents with the express task of killing the Strakers' unborn baby. They never would, just as the people of earth did not know they had been fighting a war for more than fifteen years. But that did not explain Kate's odd behaviour. Delayed shock, he told himself as they entered his office.

"I guess she just needs some space."

Miss Ealand looked up, smiling but made no comment other than: "Miss Lake and Mr

Foster are waiting in your office, sir. I'm not sure what it's about - not studio business, I think - but they wanted to see you as soon as possible."

Straker nodded, reassured. Studio in that tone of voice meant SHADO and if it was not SHADO, it was not desperate.

He turned to Alec. "If it's a personnel matter, can you deal with it?"

"Sure. Though if it was, I doubt they'd be bothering you with it."

The door opened to show Colonel Lake flying across the room to knock Colonel Foster backwards over his chair. Straker and Freeman were already reaching for their guns, cocking them loudly. The two colonels broke apart. Lake was white faced, Foster red.

"Sir -" Foster began but Straker cut him short with a look.

Instead the Commander spoke over his shoulder. "Miss Ealand, have Colonels Foster and Lake escorted down to Doctor Jackson. They are to remain under guard until he and Dr Schroder have determined whether they're under any alien influence."

He turned back to his senior officers. "For your sakes, you'd better be."

Foster had the grace to swallow hard. A moment later, they were taken away.

Alec put a hand on Ed's shoulder. "I'll deal with it, assuming it's not Jackson's problem. I'll bring it to you if I have to but otherwise, I'll deal with it."

Ed nodded. "Thanks. But tell me anyway - because half of me really doesn't want to know."

* * *

Kate Straker hesitated at the doorway of her office, wondering if she should go back and apologise to Ed. None of this was his fault, it was just that she could not help thinking of her dead daughter. Perhaps she ought to spend more time with the live one. When the verdict had come in it had unexpectedly hit her that she would never see her child's face and, that being the case, she did not want to see anyone's. Not even Ed. Especially not Ed. Pamela would have looked like him, she was sure. Sam did.

Miss Mehta, her secretary, looked up. Her long, brown face was as solemn as ever. "Good afternoon, ma'am."

"Good afternoon. Do I have a pile of paperwork to do?"

The slightest shadow of offence passed over the great stone face. "I have kept it to a minimum. I doubt it will take you more than half an hour over the usual time. On a day like this, I suggest you visit the lots."

It was warm outside but Kate did not think she was talking about the weather. "I don't want to see people."

"Perhaps a casual greeting would be easier than hiding from them."

She sighed and nodded. "And if I stay here, people will come looking for me. Right, fine, if anyone wants me I'm out there somewhere."

She gestured in the general direction of the sound stages and set off, using back corridors in order to avoid chance meetings. She emerged into the sun at the back of the building, finding one of the studio go-karts parked a few feet away. She borrowed it and steered towards Lot 3. In normal times she would know exactly what was shooting where but at the moment she was sure of only two lots. Barry Brewer was shooting on Lot 5. He was too precious at the best of times so she decided to visit Karen Lowder. Ed had always encouraged female film makers as he had encouraged female officers and Karen had responded with loyalty.

It was hot and sultry out, too much for an English summer.

The electronic signs on the huge metal building were not indicating a take so Kate went

in. It was even hotter inside with the lights on, illuminating a set dressed as an eighteenth century mansion. Karen was lining up maids and footmen for a shot. Turning, she grinned as she saw Kate.

"Darling! Oh boy have I got a treat for you. Have you met my leading man?"

Kate blinked. It was not quite the response she had been expecting. "You cast an unknown, didn't you? Well, almost unknown. While I was in hospital. Sorry, I don't remember the name."

Karen's smile broadened and Kate noticed she was wearing rather more make-up than usual. Her blouse was also tighter than expected.

"That's right, last minute replacement when what's-his-name crashed. He's a real find. All the girls love him, I'm having to fight them off."

Something clicked in Kate's brain. *She's having an affair. And she's normally so reliable.*

Then she dismissed the thought as none of her business. Even more than in SHADO, the studio did not interfere in personal relationships unless strictly necessary. Nevertheless, a director sleeping with their star had been known to cause problems.

Kate realised she had better get acquainted with the man in question. "Where is he?"

"Greg." Karen called. "Oh, Greg. Come and meet the boss lady."

She was looking over Kate's shoulder and Mrs. Straker turned.

Greg Masters, that was the stage name. As he advanced towards them she could see he was of medium height, well-built and dark. He would look good on screen but in the loose frilly shirt and tight breeches of his costume he looked a little flashy for her taste.

I don't know, though, she thought as he approached. There was a kick inside her, a rush of warmth. Muscles tightened. *Wow, he's got something, he really has.*

He stood too close, invading her space, smiling as if he meant to devour her. She pulled back, pulling herself together.

"Mr Masters, pleased to have you at the studio. I'm Kate Straker." She put an unaccustomed stress on the last word.

His voice was gruff, a little like Alec's but not so mature. "Kate, I've been dying to meet you. I've heard so much about you."

Her heart pounded as he said her name. Karen was looking daggers at her as she stumbled for words. But Karen's name was being called and she had to go, leaving Kate with the man. His smile surrounded her, his arm went around her shoulder.

"It's so stuffy in here. Let's go outside and get some air." he commanded.

She went with him unwillingly but she did go. The thought *He's so banal* rose through the fog of her brain but it did no good, her body had taken over.

* * *

Ed Straker signed the last of the papers on his desk, hoping he had not made any mistakes. His concentration had gone to pot. That was the problem with having a family. If Sam got toothache he spent all day on the intercom to the creche. As for this, he knew Kate would get over it, he just wanted to be there to help her.

He got up and went to take a look round Control. Everything was in order. Henderson was on his back because of the time he had taken off over the trial. He had still pulled an average of an eight hour day - Kate had worked nearly as long - but it was never enough, not for Henderson.

Henderson could go hang. He needed to see Kate, had to see her. And she would probably be pleased to see him. She usually was. Just not today.

He went up in the lift, then walked along to Kate's office but she was not there. Miss Mehta re-directed him to the lots. He worked his way along methodically, greeting those he knew and approving details. At Lot 3, a sour faced Karen Lowder informed him Kate had "gone off with my star. She's out there somewhere." The director gestured in the vague direction of the outside world and turned back to shouting at someone almost invisible behind the lights.

Ed shook his head, thinking that everyone was in a bad mood today. Maybe it was the weather. He wished it would break.

He left, walked along the side of the sound stage looking for his wife. There was no sign until he turned the corner. She was leaning back against the metal wall. A dark haired, costumed actor was leaning over her, kissing her passionately. For a moment Ed stood frozen in spite of the heat. Then he turned and walked away.

* * *

When Jackson called, Freeman stomped down to his office. "Well?"

Jackson almost smiled as he waved him to a seat but Freeman continued to stand over him.

"The results of the tests have been very interesting." the psychiatrist purred.

Freeman thumped a fist on the desk. "You're not saying the aliens have got to them? Which one? Both?"

"No, I'm not. Please sit down, Colonel. They are both in the grip of strong emotion, anger in Colonel Lake's case. In Colonel Foster's I would say it was jealousy. Most interesting."

Freeman rolled his eyes. "You mean I have to tell them both to grow up?"

"If you think that's wise."

* * *

Kate broke away from the kiss, panting and hot. She could feel the electricity in the air but otherwise, it was like the whole world had been removed.

"More." Greg demanded.

"No."

He pushed her back against the wall.

"No."

He would not let her go. Her mind was foggy but she knew this was not right. She pushed him away and, reluctantly, he let her. She turned her back on him, stumbling away.

"I want you." he shouted after her.

She wanted him too, in a way that was so overwhelmingly physical her body was shaking even now. She did not reply and she was grateful he did not come after her.

It was too hot, too stuffy, even here in the open-air. She wanted to breathe. She wanted Ed. She wanted Greg. She wanted to be in control.

She wanted her life back.

Odd how the thought struck her as she walked the byways of Harlington-Straker studios. Ed's studio. Ed's name. Her name was Ed's name. Her friends were Ed's friends. Her career was Ed's career. Her child was Ed's child, that was obvious to anyone who saw her. And the baby, Pamela, she would have been Ed's. Would have been just like Sam. Kate's life was Ed's life, as she had known it would be when she married him. She wanted it that way. Only now she wanted Greg. And whatever he wanted, she would never have him.

She turned and headed for the creche.

* * *

Alec decided to deal with Ginny Lake first. "You do realise you should be on a charge for assaulting a fellow officer? Unless you're alleging he assaulted you first?"

She slumped into a chair. "Only verbally."

She sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, Alec. I lost my rag and it was unprofessional of me. I'll take my medicine, just don't ask me to apologise to Paul."

"So," Alec asked "what did he do?"

He waited while she looked away, thinking. Then she spoke.

"He posted Keith to Moonbase. It's jealousy, pure and simple. He as good as admitted it."

Freeman looked at her. "He's rigged the rotas because he doesn't like you dating Keith Ford?"

"Yes." Colonel Lake and Lieutenant Ford had been seeing each other for several months, ever since she had decided she wanted someone more reliable in her life.

He shook his head. "And that's why you hit him?"

"No, that's why I called him an egocentric windbag with no dress sense. I've never known why he was so keen on purple. And he responded by calling me a slut."

"He what?"

"He called me a slut. He said I was sleeping my way through SHADO. He just looked so smug."

Alec blew out a long breath. "And that's why you hit him?"

"It was a rather longer conversation than that but yes, that's the essentials."

He nodded. "Anything else?"

"No, that's pretty much it." She leaned forward. "I'm sorry, Alec, I really am. It is partly my fault. One of the actors had made a pass at me and I was feeling antsy about it - I was being faithful to Keith, for goodness sake - but really, I still think it's Paul's fault."

"Let me talk to him. Whatever happens, I'm going to have to give you a slap on the wrist but if you're right, I'll see he gets his fair share of the blame. But I don't want this worrying Ed, understand?"

She nodded. "I understand."

As she got up to go, Commander Straker appeared in the doorway. He nodded but otherwise ignored her. "Alec, I need to speak you."

He was perfectly calm, the kind of calm that made the hairs on the back of Freeman's neck stand up. He saw how rapidly Ginny exited the room and he doubted it was simply down to her own bad conscience.

"Ed?"

Ed came in, hesitated, almost went out. "Have you sorted it out?"

"I haven't spoken to Paul yet but I think I know what's going on." He got up and moved around the desk. "That's not why you're here."

"No," Ed said "it's not."

He turned his back, looking at the print of a palm-fringed beach as if it was a window to stare out of. Alec got himself a drink while he waited.

Eventually Ed spoke. "I think Kate's having an affair."

Alec downed the drink in one go, not even noticing what he had got himself. "That's not possible."

Ed's voice was dull, flat. "I've seen her with him. They were kissing."

"You know what film people are like," Alec protested "they kiss everybody."

"It wasn't that kind of kiss. And how do you know he's in films?"

Freeman forced a chuckle. "It's not going to be anyone in SHADO, is it? They're all scared of you and you know it. And who else does she see? But you have to be wrong, she's not like that."

Ed turned round and he could see the conviction in his eyes. "I saw. Not that I blame her, I'm hardly the world's best husband."

Alec's lip curled. "Is that it? You're on a guilt trip? And you're confusing her with Mary."

"Mary didn't have an affair." Straker shot back. "She thought I did."

"She had an affair alright," Alec insisted, "with a fantasy, dress uniform you she dreamed up. She never loved the real you. Kate isn't like that. She sensible and she's yours, I should know." He sighed. "Even if she did fall out of love with you she'd be loyal, to SHADO if nothing else. That's who she is."

Something seemed to break inside Ed and he sank into a chair. "I don't know, I really don't. Maybe I misread it, you know how bad I am with people, but I don't dare talk to her. And it looked..." He began again. "You're right about SHADO. Maybe I should just leave things be and let her get on with her work."

Alec shook his head but could think of nothing to say. He could not speak to her, his own feelings were too complex. In other circumstances he might have asked Ginny Lake to intervene but now was not the time.

"Wait and see." was the best he could manage. "If she doesn't bring it up, well, it probably means that nothing happened."

* * *

Paul Foster decided to take his break above ground, though it was more stifling there than in SHADO HQ's controlled environment. Greg Masters was chatting up one of the catering staff as Paul arrived in the canteen, though he broke off to speak to Foster.

"Don't you ever stop?" Foster asked, weary and envious.

Greg smiled. "Why should I? And aren't you supposed to be working?"

"Aren't you?" Foster shoved his hands into his pockets and looked through to the serving counter.

"Director's in my pocket." Greg laughed. "Or at least she wants what's in my pocket."

Paul joined in the amusement, though half his brain was telling him that this was simply too crude, that Masters was too crude. "Women. It's because of one of them I'm in trouble."

Masters sniggered. "You mean you've got her in trouble?"

"I wish. Frigid cow's run off with the dullest man in the studio. He makes accountants look interesting. She goes and hits me and - just my luck - the boss sees it -"

"Straker?"

"Yes, Straker himself. Just back from the trial. The only good thing is he's left Alec Freeman to handle it."

Masters nodded in what Foster assumed was supposed to be a wise manner. "I've heard his reputation - I think the whole of the film world has! He should know how to handle her. I bet he has handled her!"

Foster laughed outright. "Oh, she's good to hold, believe me."

He went on to describe some of Ginny Lake's more outstanding attributes until he could see Greg was more than interested. Greg was the best mate he had made in ages, always made him feel relaxed and sure of himself. Alec would understand. The only problem now was that he might have a three-way fight on his hands for Ginny's favours.

* * *

Ginny Lake decided to get some fresh air so she took the lift up and stepped out into Miss Ealand's office. The blonde secretary was laughing, a dippy expression on her normally cool face as that actor, Greg Masters, leaned over her desk.

He turned to Ginny as she came through, warming up his smile. "Hello again. I didn't know you were in there."

Miss Ealand was scowling.

Ginny felt the blood rush to her face but she kept it straight. "I'm just passing through."

She hurried out, flustered, hoping he did not follow. *Think about Keith*. Odd, though. The further away she got, the easier it was to think clearly and the more she realised how strange it was for Miss Ealand to be flirting. She might smile and banter with Alec but not with the actors. Lake shrugged. Greg seemed to have that effect on people.

* * *

Paul Foster was hanging around outside Alec's office when Ed left. "He doesn't look too happy. I'm glad you're taking care of this."

"Don't be." Alec growled. "Come in, sit down, give me your side of the story."

Foster came in and dropped himself down into a chair. "What's she been saying?"

"Why would you need to ask?"

Foster shrugged. "Honestly, Alec, I thought she could take a joke. And anything I did, I did for her own good. She doesn't seem to be able to look after her own interests."

Alec sat down behind his desk and leaned back a little. "So tell me."

"You know she's been dating Keith Ford? She can't see how ridiculous she looks. I tried to talk to her but no dice, so I did something about it."

"Go on."

Foster was relaxing into his subject. "I sent Ford to Moonbase, permanently. He goes on the next flight. Little weed didn't even tackle me about it himself, she did."

"And what did you say to her?"

"Oh, I stood and took it for a while - she was very emotional - and then I advised her that she ought to stop sleeping with any man she could find - let's face it, why else would she be seeing Ford? - because she's beginning to get herself a reputation."

"You called her a slut?"

"Well, yes."

Alec leaned slowly forward. "As I see it, there are two, maybe three problems we need to sort out here. You want to tell me what they are?"

Foster looked blank for a moment. "Ginny getting over-emotional?"

"No." Freeman said, hardening. "The first problem is that you don't seem to realise what a massive abuse of power you've just committed."

"What?"

"You are a colonel in SHADO and you have just used that position so that you could steal another man's girlfriend. You moved a vital member of staff for personal - what, pleasure? The thrill of the chase? Or just petty-minded jealousy?" Alec looked up at the ceiling, then down again. "Paul, you could have cost us a battle by moving Ford without consultation, never mind what you've done for morale."

"Oh."

"Are you getting it now?"

"I think so."

"Good. The fact that you can't see Ford's worth is by the by - though it doesn't speak

highly of your leadership skills - but if you ever use that kind of language to Ginny again, I'll knock you down."

Foster stood up, pushing back his chair. "Right, fine, if you think you can. It's true, though."

Alec did not rise to the bait. "I know for a fact you've slept with more women than she has men so what does that make you? Or me, for that matter? She's a lovely girl and you're not going to treat her like that."

Paul raised his chin as if he was going to speak but Alec ignored him. "Frankly, I'd bust you back to lieutenant if I didn't have other things on my mind. Expect to find out your punishment in a couple of days and in the meantime, don't do anything that will bring you to my attention. Dismissed."

Stiffly and silently, Foster walked to the door.

As it opened, Freeman added: "I'm disappointed in you, Paul."

Foster did not reply.

When he left, Freeman called for the staff rotas and got on with the paperwork to negate Ford's transfer, cursing Paul Foster under his breath.

* * *

Lake decided she would not stay beyond the end of her shift that evening, she would find Keith and go get something to eat. The possible modifications for SID she was supervising in the design workshop could proceed perfectly well without her.

Ford was just heading for the men's locker room. "Did you talk to Colonel Foster?"

She groaned.

His face fell. "No joy?"

She shook her head. "It's been a really lousy day. Although if you haven't heard the gossip maybe it won't be quite such an embarrassing one as I'd assumed. I think Alec will block your transfer but frankly, I didn't dare ask."

"Well, that's something," he said. "But the rumour mill doesn't have anything on you today. At least, if it does no one's telling me. Everybody's talking about one of the actors. I'll tell you when we somewhere more private."

"OK." But the name of Greg Masters was already in her mind.

* * *

Kate decided to take Sam home - Sam Straker, slim and blonde like her father and not yet four years old - after giving her her tea in the studio cafeteria, a treat often occasioned by necessity. At the moment there was just such a lot to be caught up with and Kate's head was slow. She told herself it was the relief of the trial being over but that was not what her mind kept going back to.

Sam looked up from her tomato soup. "Is Daddy coming home with us?"

"I expect so."

But Ed sent up a message to say he had been detained, no explanation, so she took the little girl home and read her another chapter of Peter Pan.

"Wish I hadn't had to grow up," she muttered and Sam gave her an odd, piercing look.

When her daughter was asleep she wandered round the house, unable to settle. She wanted Ed here, to block out everything else from her mind. It was like an infection, a drug even. Greg Masters had got under her skin.

The thunder rumbled round and she hardly heard the car draw up outside. They had put in a gravel drive for security but it made no difference over the storm. Ed ran for the door as the

heavy rain began to fall and she opened it for him. Almost before he was over the threshold, before the door was shut, she took his wet body in her arms and pulled him down to kiss her. He pulled away momentarily, then threw himself into it.

"What's this for?" he asked, an edge to his voice.

"It's been a bad day." she said. "I didn't expect it to be but it has. Now I just want you."

"Fine by me."

"Have you eaten?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to go to bed?"

Again that pause before he nodded. She almost wondered if he suspected something. Ed saw a lot but he did not understand people. That was what she and Alec were for. She wondered if he had the least suspicion of Alec's feelings for her. Half of her wanted to confess what had happened with Greg but it would only hurt him. It was something she would have to deal with by herself.

She led him into the bedroom. The walls were thick and Sam was a heavy sleeper, she would hear nothing. Ed laid Kate gently on the bed and for a little while, for half the night, it was as if they were first married. They were united, one flesh, moving together. She felt the joy of his presence, felt the cares drop away from him and she wept.

* * *

Greg Masters got in late after a hot date with one of the actresses playing serving maids in the film. Amazing what you could get a girl to do for you if you really pushed. He just hoped she did not tell Karen. That might make things a bit hotter than he intended. Now he needed to get some sleep if he was going to make it to work in the morning. He smoothed the dark satin sheets on his bed. Not that he could not sweet-talk Karen and if she did cause trouble - on either count - that might bring Kate closer to him.

He frowned and at that moment his phone trilled.

He picked up the handset by the bed. "Hello, this is Greg... Oh, it's you... It's not working."

He flung himself down in one of the designer chairs his agent had picked out for him. "Sure the girls are chasing me. That's got nothing to do with what you gave me, that's just me... Oh, don't give me that."

He played awkwardly with the phone cord. "Yeah, fine, whatever. But Mrs Straker didn't bite... I got a kiss, that's all. Ugly old cow turned me down. Why couldn't you send me after somebody else?"

He slipped off his shoes as the calm voice at the far end reiterated his instructions. He could not get out of it and the pay-off was superb. For all he said, girls were dropping like flies in a way they never had before. He made the right noises and eventually his contact rang off.

There was one thing he could do. He took the little pillbox from the bathroom cabinet. One a day, they said. Well, if one did not bring down the silly bitch, two would. At the very least, it could not hurt.

* * *

In the morning Ed and Kate moved awkwardly around each other, focusing their attention on getting breakfast for Sam. Ed took her to the creche, kissing her before he left, while Kate went for an early meeting in her office.

Ed went below to find Alec.

"Did you talk to her?" Freeman asked.

"No, no we didn't... talk. I don't know what's going on."
"You'll feel better once you do. And that's my official verdict as head of personnel."
It was a weak joke but Straker managed a smile. "Later. No incidents overnight?"

* * *

Colonel Lake had been talking to Keith for what seemed like most of the night but she still felt a little uptight. "I know our relationship is a lot more than physical -"

He smiled that self-deprecating smile. "You mean a lot less."

"Rubbish. But either way, *that* shouldn't be happening. I'm not some love struck starlet. And it certainly shouldn't be happening to Miss Ealand."

This time he laughed, his hand on her arm. "Tell you what, get the same result with Miss Mehta and everyone will believe you."

They arrived at the studio in separate cars. He went down the back way. She went in through reception then past Miss Ealand, who cleared her throat to stop her.

"Miss Lake, I think I ought to apologise for my behaviour yesterday. I don't know what came over me."

Lake turned to her, a thought dawning. "I might. And there's no apology necessary but can you do something for me?"

"Of course. Is this official?"

"Not yet but it may well become that." Lake leaned over her desk. "Can you arrange for something to be removed from Greg Masters' dressing room? Quietly? An unwashed towel or a piece of costume would be best."

The secretary raised an eyebrow. "DNA?"

"Among other things."

Miss Ealand nodded. "Where do you want me to send it?"

"Medical. I'm going to see Dr Schroder."

* * *

Ford was just slipping into place when a hand on his shoulder made him jump. He spun round to see Colonel Foster behind him. His stomach dissolved but he managed to keep his outsides solid.

"Sir?"

"A word in private, if you don't mind, Lieutenant."

Reluctantly Ford went with him to one of the side rooms.

Foster had his hands shoved firmly in his pockets. "I'm doing this now so you'll know it's from me, not because I've been ordered to. I apologise."

Ford blinked. "Sir?"

"I apologise, Lieutenant. I shouldn't have ordered you to Moonbase, that's playing dirty. And if you can keep her - well, nobody else round here's been able to."

Ford raised his chin a little. "You don't think she's the one you should be apologising to?"

Foster sighed, shoulders drooping. "Probably. Just don't expect me to be all friends over this. I don't want SHADO to suffer for it. Or the Commander to come down on any of our heads. And like I said, that was playing dirty. So forget rank for a moment, are we agreed on this?"

"I'm not quite sure what I'm agreeing to - and if you talk like that to Ginny again it won't be Alec Freeman you have to worry about, rank or no rank - but yes, SHADO comes first."

"Good. You'd better get back to work then."

* * *

Lake and Schroder were busily moving equipment into an already well equipped laboratory when one of the female plainclothes security officers arrived carrying a laundry bag.

"You asked for towels?" She opened the bag. "Three of those and a complete change of clothes. He expects us to do his washing."

Lake's gloved hands took the bag from her. "Sounds about right. Thank you and thank Miss Ealand for me."

Schroder was already switching the equipment into electric life.

* * *

"Greg? Greg, where have you been? We've had to halt production for you. Don't tell me you're drunk at this time of day."

Masters turned to his director and sometime girlfriend. "I'm not drunk, I've got a hangover and yes of course you can't shoot without me, I'm the star. You're lucky I'm here at all, I didn't feel like coming in today. Now shut up and let me get ready."

He could almost see steam coming out of the silly woman's ears. He was in no mood to be nagged, even if she was the director. She was jabbering away but he did not listen.

"Forget it. You don't talk to me like that. I'm going to find someone who can sort you out before I do it myself."

That ought to put her in her place. He would not resort to slapping her yet, he would get Paul Foster to do it metaphorically. He had been told the drug would make other men more like himself but he guessed Paul would have been his sort of bloke anyway. Not like some of the wimps round here.

No. No, he would not go after Paul, that could wait. He would finish his business with the stubborn Mrs Straker. She would thank him for it later. He grinned. She would beg him for it.

* * *

Lunchtime had rolled around already, despite a boring morning spent on paperwork. Kate had popped out to the creche to collect Sam just before Miss Mehta went on her break but otherwise she had avoided going outside. Partly that was because of the muggy heat - the storm had done nothing to clear it - but mostly it was because she did not want to run into any of the production staff. Did not want to run into Greg Masters.

She had thought about telling Ed but in the end decided it would do no good. After all, nothing had happened. Nothing much. If he came on to her again she would give him a piece of her mind and get security to deal with him. He was way too pushy but what was he going to do here in the studio? Jump her?

The other reason was that Ed himself seemed tense and depressed. Probably it was some SHADO business. She never asked. If she needed to know, he would tell her. She appreciated the secrecy necessary for security. All she had ever asked was that he did not to lie to her. Whatever it was, he would be discussing it with Alec and Alec would look after him. If it was anything else it would be the stress of the trial. Ed being Ed, he had felt the loss of the baby as keenly as she had, perhaps more so. They had talked but perhaps the trial had brought it back, as it had for her. If so, they would talk when he was ready. And again, he was probably talking to Alec.

She missed her baby but you had to get on with life, make the most of what you had. Some women miscarried time and again.

She sat Sam down on the visitors' chair in her office, spread a napkin over her dress - the one with the elephants on - and handed her an egg sandwich.

"I don't know why you like those things, I really don't."

"They taste good." her daughter replied directly.

Kate half smiled and sat down on the other visitors' chair. She had chosen prawn salad for herself.

"Is Daddy coming?" Sam asked.

"No, I don't think so. I called his office but I only spoke to Miss Ealand. Now, do you want to say grace or shall I?"

"I will." Sam proceeded to rattle it off and Kate half listened. She thought she heard someone in the outer office. Miss Mehta had gone but perhaps she had come back for something. Still, it was unlike her to need to.

The door flew open in what struck Kate as an overly theatrical gesture. There, outlined in the doorway, stood Masters.

"Who are you?" Sam asked.

He ignored her, striding towards her mother. "You're going to get it right this time. You're going to love me."

Kate swayed, slightly sick. "I don't - no, I can't."

But he had an arm around her now. She felt her body responding as he pulled her close. Her stomach lurched. He was the whole world.

"What are you doing?" said a sharp little voice. "Get away from my Mummy."

Sam, what was this doing to Sam? She had to focus on her. Kate pulled away from Masters, only to find he was pulling away from her. Both of them were turning towards Sam.

There she stood, not yet four years old, blonde and blue-eyed like her father. She would be an Ice Queen someday. Now she stood fuming, hands on hips.

She over articulated. "Leave Mummy alone."

Kate could feel her mind working and she knew that was wrong. It ought to be moving faster than that. She knew she had to protect her child but she could not grasp how.

She saw Masters grab Sam. "No, don't do that."

But he was shaking her. "Shut up. You shouldn't be here. Shut up."

Sam was getting shriller. "I'll tell Daddy. You hurt me. You hurt Mummy. I'll tell Daddy."

"Run away, Sam." Kate gasped.

Sam tried to pull away but she was far too small. Masters caught her around the wrist, pulling her upwards. His other hand came back, slapping her across the face.

"No!" Kate blundered towards him but he sidestepped, pulling the child away from her.

"She's in the way." He scooped Sam up with an arm around her waist. He looked around, settling on a large cupboard. He wrenched the door open and stuffed the little girl inside. Kate was beating at his back but the closer she got to him, the less her will responded. He was the centre of the universe, everything. Nothing else existed. Her daughter's cries as he slammed the door and wedged a chair up against it tore at the deepest levels of her heart but on the surface, on any effective level, she was his. She wanted to be his.

Her eyes fixed on his face. He was looking around.

"We could do it here." He shook his head. "No, I know where. Let's go."

Tamely she followed him.

* * *

"That's it!" Lake said. "That's it! Can you finish up on the gene coding? I'm going to talk to the Commander."

She snatched up her results and was out of the door before Schroder could reply.

Colleagues stepped to one side as she tore down the corridor, muttering under her breath, her usual poise deserting her. It left completely as she almost ran into Paul Foster.

He pulled up, hands away from his sides. "We need to talk."

"Yes." she agreed. "Yes, we do. But not quite for the reasons you think - Paul, you've been seeing a lot of Greg Masters, haven't you?"

He frowned. "He's a good bloke, he's fun."

"He's a plant."

Foster swore. "The aliens sent him?"

"Or they did something to him. I'm not sure whether he's a willing participant or just - but I know he's a danger to someone."

Foster was already moving back the way he had come, towards the surface. "I'll find him."

"Be careful." she insisted as she kept pace with him. "I think he's the reason why you've been behaving so... oddly."

He nodded. "I'll have something to say to him about that."

"And Paul, keep him away from women. Any women."

They split as he headed above ground and she turned towards Straker's underground office. Both he and Colonel Freeman were there and it looked like they had been some altercation between them. She carried straight on. She had found the best way to defuse those situations was to give them work to do.

She slapped her pile of papers down on the Commander's desk. "We have a big problem and it's right here in the studio."

"Oh great." Freeman sat down heavily.

"Explain." commanded Straker.

"Words of one syllable, please." Freeman begged. "You know I don't understand half of what you say to me."

She took a deep breath, keeping her eyes on Freeman. "You know what pheromones are?"

He nodded. "That's up my street. It's some kind of smell people and animals give off to attract the opposite sex."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Straker asked.

"It's one of the actors, Greg Masters -" She broke off as she saw the look that passed between them. "Do you know about this?"

Straker was pale. "Assume we don't. Pheromones?"

"Super pheromones." she said, half smiling at Alec. "He can attract any woman - I think he's having a bad effect on men, too. Paul Foster's been spending a lot of time with him - but he's specifically gene coded to one woman. Could be me, I've seen him have an effect on Miss Ealand -"

Straker was already reaching for the intercom - "We know -" Alec was beginning to say - when it buzzed. It was Schroder.

He hesitated. "Is Colonel Lake there?"

"She is." Straker replied.

"And she's explained?"

"Yes. You have the result?"

"Yes sir."

"It's my wife, isn't it?"

Lake felt her heart sink. "I never thought of Kate."

Straker was already calling Miss Ealand. "Have my wife brought down here immediately."

"Paul's looking for Masters." Lake told them. "But he may need back-up."

Miss Ealand was back on the line. "Sir, there's no reply from Miss Mehta or Mrs Straker. Shall I send a security team?"

"No, I'll go myself." Straker said. "Tell security to assist Colonel Foster in finding Greg Masters."

Straker and the two colonels hurried into the office lift. Miss Ealand was talking on the intercom to Security as they passed but Straker did not acknowledge her. In a few moments they were outside Kate's office. Ed pushed the door open. Miss Mehta's desk was neat but unattended. The door to the inner office was open. They went through to find remains of lunch amidst the disarray.

Freeman looked around. "Well she's not -"

"There's two of everything." Straker said.

Alec groaned. "Sam."

Ginny ran round the desk to the intercom, connecting with the creche but before she could speak they heard a weak but furious hammering. Some of the furniture had been knocked around and it was not immediately clear where the noise was coming from. Straker zeroed in on it, spotting the chair up against the cupboard door. He threw it across the room but he opened the door carefully.

Sam was hunched up, crying. "Daddy?"

Ed put his arm around her and gently drew his little girl out, lifting her up as she sobbed. "It's OK baby, you're all right now. Daddy's here."

He stroked her hair, wincing at the bruises on her face.

"Daddy." She was quieter now and he risked a question.

"Honey, do you know where Mommy is?"

She shook her head. "The bad man came. Something was wrong with Mummy. He made it wrong."

"I know, honey." He hugged a little more tightly. "But you didn't see where they went? He didn't say anything?"

She sobbed again. "No, I was in there."

There was a noise behind them. Everyone turned. It was Miss Mehta. For once her usual calm was ruffled.

"Sir?"

Straker's voice was dangerously low. "Where were you?"

"On my lunch break."

Alec came up behind him. "It's not her fault."

Ed nodded sharply. It was not clear who he was talking to. "See if there's any news. And get Security to find my wife, now."

But there was news, bad news. Miss Ealand over the intercom: "I am sorry, sir, but Security reports that Mrs Straker left the studio fifteen minutes ago. In the company of Greg Masters."

"Were they in her car?" Straker asked.

"No, his."

"No tracker." Freeman muttered.

Sam squirmed in her father's arms. "Is that the bad man?"

"Yes, honey."

"What's he going to do with Mummy?"

Ed stroked her hair but did not look at her. "I don't know but we're going to find her before he does anything. You're sure he didn't say where he was taking her?"

"No, he didn't."

Lake decided there was nothing she could do there. "I'll get back to my research, see if there's anything new."

Straker nodded but spoke to Miss Mehta. "Send a team to wherever he's living. They probably won't be there but there might be information."

As Colonel Lake headed out of the door she heard Freeman say: "Ed, I've had a nasty thought."

* * *

Ed took him up on the idea immediately, though Alec insisted on driving. As they reached the gate he looked back and saw security teams ready to head off to various places but they were going home, Ed and Kate's home.

"How is she physically?" Alec asked. "Is she over the last attack?"

"Pretty much. But that's not what this is about, is it? They wouldn't have bothered with the drugs if it was."

"Maybe that's good," Alec clutched at straws, "maybe it means he won't hurt her."

"You know what he wants her for."

Alec sighed. "Yeah, I know."

Kate had been through so much, he could not bear to think what would happen to her. Could not bear to think of any man with her except Ed. But all he could do now was get them there as fast as possible, without crashing.

* * *

As soon as he got her into the house the old cow started to wake up. That might be a good thing, Masters thought. She had been a bit too docile in the car, it would be no fun if she just lay there. But she was muttering something under her breath and he did not like that.

She fumbled with the key and nearly set off the burglar alarm.

"What's the code, you idiot?"

She punched it in shakily. Now he pushed her forwards.

"Where's the bedroom?"

She shuffled towards the stairs and he followed, keeping a tight hold on her arm. He wanted her to do things for him, not just for him to do things to her. Not that anybody who looked like that would have much experience. He assumed her husband was cheating on her. Either that or he was gay. Anyway, she was female and he would enjoy her and if she was any good he would come back for more. He did feel a bit sick, though. The stuff he was taking, it did seem to do that to him. Maybe he should not have taken double but it was working.

As they got into the bedroom, very spartan, he could hear what she was muttering. "Ed. Sam. Ed."

"Stop that."

But she would not, so he slapped her. "Stop it and kiss me."

He pulled her close. It was what she wanted, after all. Wasn't it what any woman wanted? But she pulled away, still muttering about her husband.

"No, no, no." He hit her again, sent her stumbling towards the door.

Her legs twisted beneath her and she fell. She started to crawl towards the landing, slow

and unsteady even on all fours.

This was useless. Well, if she wanted it rough he was happy to oblige. He grabbed her by the neck and threw her down on the bed.

* * *

Ed was out of the car as soon as Alec pulled up at the house but he hesitated at the front door. Freeman could see him, just for a moment, steeling himself. Then he drew his gun and quietly opened the door. Freeman was right behind him.

They listened. Someone was moving upstairs. Ed led the way.

The door to the bedroom was half-open. Kate lay on the bed, eyes not quite closed and her body still. Her clothes were all over the place and there was blood on the sheets. There was no sign of Masters.

Ed ran to her, scooping her up. "She's breathing."

Alec heard the toilet flush along corridor. A moment later the latch rattled and Masters came out, not looking.

He jumped, literally, when he saw Freeman's gun trained on him. "What the - What are you doing?"

His hands were up, unsteady. Alec grabbed him, threw him back across the banister, hanging him half over the stairs. He shoved the barrel of his gun into Masters' mouth.

"You don't say anything. You don't talk, you don't move, you don't do anything without my permission. Understood?"

Masters nodded, as far as he could in that position. Alec withdrew the gun, holding it six inches in front of his eyes.

Masters took a deep breath. "I didn't do anything. She wanted me to -"

Alec smashed him across the face with the gun. Masters was lucky he went down with the first blow, sliding onto the carpet on the right side of the rail, or Freeman might not have been able to restrain himself. But the man dropped and Alec turned away.

Ed was cradling his wife in his arms, whispering to her. Alec reached for the phone by the bedside. Within minutes the ambulances arrived. One took Ed and Kate to the Mayland, the other took Alec and Masters to SHADO's secure medical unit.

"When can I talk to him?" Freeman asked.

"You shouldn't have hit him so hard." was Doctor Kumar's distracted reply. "Come back in half-an-hour."

Alec wandered off, knowing there was no point in trying to question an unconscious man. He wanted to be with Ed and Kate but there were things he needed to check on first.

Paul Foster was in Control. He nodded grimly and launched into a report. "The team at Masters' flat have found whatever it was he was taking. I've had it sent straight to Colonel Lake. There's no sign yet of any useful documentation."

"Never is." Alec muttered. "What else?"

"I had a word with the director myself and I've got people talking to the film crew, see if they can tell us anything."

"And can they?"

Foster shook his head. "Only in general terms. Everyone had had it with him, especially the women, but they were convinced he was going to be a big star. I, er, I hinted that wasn't going to happen. I hope that's alright."

"Oh, he isn't. We'll call it a drug problem or something. Burn-out. Good job they weren't far into shooting." He looked at Foster. "How about you?"

He shuddered . "I think I've learned my lesson."

"That's all most of us can hope for. "

He looked at his watch. Twenty minutes before he could check on Masters, enough time to go the back way through to the Mayland.

Sam was in the playroom, watched over by Miss Ealand and a security guard. She was bruised but did not seem distressed.

He gave her a cuddle, careful of any spots that might be painful. "You all right now, Princess?"

She frowned. "I am but I can't see Mummy. I know the bad man hurt her, that's why people come here."

"They come here to get better." Alec insisted .

She nodded thoughtfully. Alec hugged her again and went upstairs to see Ed, wondering where he could get her a teddy bear or a toy dog at short-notice. Maybe he should ask one of the prop masters.

Kate had been cleaned up and attached to monitors by the time he got there. Ed was sitting by the bed, stroking her hand.

"She looks better than I thought." Alec said as his friend looked up.

"They say it's not that bad, physically. Not like before. There are just a few unusual results they want to clear-up."

The two men looked at each other, knowing unusual results could be a problem.

As Straker spoke, one of the doctors came in. An older woman, blond hair up in a bun, Alec recognised her as a gynaecologist. She smiled a professional smile at them.

"I just need to take some blood for tests."

"More?" Ed asked.

"Tests for what?" was Alec's response.

"For the drug." Ed answered him. He looked sharply at the doctor. "You've already run tests. What's wrong?"

She was not exactly evasive. "I think you need to speak to Dr Schroder, sir."

Alec's brain was also ticking over. "I'll go down to Masters, see if he's awake yet."

Ed nodded. "Do that. I'll stay here."

Down below, Masters was conscious but feverish. "What's going on? I didn't do anything. What's wrong with me?"

Alec leaned very close to his face. "That's what I'd like to know. The drug you took, we know it was aimed at Kate but why is it making her ill?"

The man was squirming. "I don't know. It was just a boost, I mean she was going to go for me anyway -"

Alec put his hand quite gently on Masters' throat. "Don't make me hit you again."

Masters was getting flushed. "I'm ill. You did something to me."

"You did it yourself." Schroder came in with a file under his arm. "The drug you took has been slowly poisoning you. Was your last dose larger?"

"Yes." Masters looked blank. "She wouldn't come across."

"I thought you said she would." Alec said, knowing it was petty.

"Is he dying?" he asked. Then a thought struck him. "What about Kate?"

Schroder nodded. "That appears to account for some of her symptoms. Dying... I don't know."

Soon there was nothing to do but wait for the scientists. Freeman tried to question the

prisoner but the man just sniveled. He had had a phone call, an offer that was too good to be true. He would be the biggest star in Hollywood, every woman would want him. All he had to do in return was seduce one old bag of a studio boss's wife. He did not know it was dangerous. He did not know he would get so ill. He did not know why everyone was so angry with him. He did not want to die, he only wanted to have a good time.

Alec restrained himself. The man was pathetic. He also restrained himself from pestering Lake and Schroder. He went backwards and forwards between the Mayland and Control. Kate was semi-conscious now but she was getting weaker. Sam sat on her father's knee, trying to keep her mother calm.

He had gone back to Masters, trying get something more out of him, when Schroder took him aside.

"We have good news and bad news."

"Go on."

"We think we have an antidote."

"I'm assuming that's the good news?"

"The bad news is that it's slow to produce. I can't guarantee we can make enough for both of them before it's too late."

Alec flinched inwardly. "There's going to be a too late?"

Schroder nodded. "For him, certainly. Perhaps not for Colonel Straker."

"There's enough for her?"

"We have enough for one, yes, but as I said -"

"Give it to Kate."

Schroder frowned. "His life is in danger."

Alec put a hand on his shoulder. "So is hers but he did it to himself. Give it to her."

The doctor was not quite convinced. "I should speak to Commander Straker -"

"Commander Straker does not need to be bothered with this."

Reluctantly Schroder nodded. He turned and hurried back to his lab.

Freeman sighed. He did not feel good about condemning the man to death but like he had said, Masters did it to himself. And he might have a chance. Schroder had not said for sure.

The next time he went up to see Kate, she and her daughter were sleeping.

"She looks a lot better," he told Ed. "More colour in her cheeks."

Straker almost smiled. "They can't be sure but they think the drugs are out of her system. Everything else should heal within a few weeks."

Freeman clapped him on the shoulder, unable to find the words. For a moment all the repressed feelings rose up into his throat but he beat them back down.

"And Sam?"

Ed's mouth tightened. "She's just bruised. She doesn't even seem upset. You know how hard kids are to figure."

"No but I know how hard you are. Do you want to think about what to do with Masters if he wakes up?"

Ed shook his head wearily. "Not now. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

He paused and Freeman did not interrupt him, feeling there was something else coming.

"There is something I need to sort out. Can you send Miss Ealand up?"

"Sure. What for?"

"I need to speak to an estate agent. I want everything sorted before Kate comes home."

In the end Masters did die, which simplified things. Alec sat with him as he shivered and

whimpered his way towards the grave. He even held his hand.

"Why did you do it? She never hurt you. She never hurt anyone."

"Women want me. And she turned down. I thought I'd give her a good time but she just kept going on about her husband. She's not normal."

"No," said Alec. "No, she's not. And you don't understand that."

It was a relief when it was all over. Foster and Lake were making a point of professional courtesy. Miss Mehta had had the edge knocked off her icy superiority.

Kate took it all calmly. "If he was here I'd strangle him, especially for what he did to Sam, but he's not and that's that. He did make me think about decisions I've made."

"And your conclusions?" Ed asked.

"It isn't a perfect life but it's my life. I stand by my choices. And my husband."