

A Real Man

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This is a sequel to my story Herod.

No offence is intended towards the Republican Party, they just happened to be in power at the time.

"We don't get much chance for a social life," said Ed Straker as he picked up another piece of sushi between his chopsticks. "The studio takes up pretty much all our time."

He was at lunch in an upmarket suite in one of the more exclusive hotels in London, exclusive enough that its name was not commonly known.

Kate nodded. "I'm afraid Sam -"

"A man's got to work, Ed. It's one of the things that makes him a man," insisted Dave Reynolds. "Leave the socialising to the ladies."

He smiled indulgently at his wife. "I insisted Carrie gave up her job when we married."

Kate Straker's smile was somewhat forced. She had met Carrie through work. "If I didn't have a job at the studio, I'd never see Ed. Anyway, Carrie, what do you do now?"

"Oh, I..." Carrie smiled brightly. "I make things lovely for Dave."

"She tries," Dave said.

As lunch went on, Kate kept trying to bring the conversation back to her old friend. "Carrie, have you seen Nat recently?"

"I don't like that woman," insisted Dave. "Too pushy."

"No," Carrie said quietly. "I haven't."

Ed tried to back her up but Reynolds insisted on bringing the conversation back to Ed or to himself, total strangers.

"And I'm sure some of the electronics my company produces could be adapted for the film industry. If I could talk to some of your technical guys..."

"Actually," Ed told him with a slight smile "our technical head's a woman."

There was no way to get out of there quickly without being rude.

"But we don't have to go back, do we?" Ed asked as they finally drove away from the hotel. "I mean, I know she's your friend..."

Kate shook her head, not entirely listening. "She's not herself."

"No? I mean, she wasn't... She's not like you described," he agreed.

She pursed her lips. "Ed... Would you mind if I bunched off work tomorrow?"

"Bunched off work, Colonel?" He frowned at her and she started to laugh. "This is a serious matter, Colonel. As your commanding -"

"It's a shame you're driving or I'd start tickling you."

"I'll pull over."

She pulled herself back to seriousness with some difficulty. "Would you mind? I'd really like to see Carrie on her own. She used to be able to give Nat a run for her money - although I was wrong about Nat."

Ed put his hand reassuringly on her arm. "Go see her if you want to but do remember what you keep telling me, we can't fix everything. And invite Nat over if you want to."

She nodded. "Can't fix everything? I saw you talking to Wayne this morning."

"Kid works for us. Well, he does." He squirmed ever so slightly and Kate grinned.

She was not grinning the next morning. She dropped Sam off at the new studio creche and called the Reynolds' hotel to check that Carrie was alone. Then she drove over.

"Surprise!" she proclaimed, a forced grin on her face as Carrie opened the door.

"Kate? I thought... I thought..." Carrie just stood there.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?"

She nodded and stepped back for Kate to pass. "I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting you. I wasn't expecting any one."

"Didn't think you were." Kate turned to face her. "Look, I won't beat around the bush. You really didn't look like yourself yesterday. I know - believe me I know - marriage can cause a lot of shake-ups but -"

"My marriage is fine."

Kate sat down deliberately on the plush sofa. "I'm glad to hear it, though he's not exactly what -"

"Dave is a wonderful man, a *real* man. I'm lucky to have him." She spoke too quickly, her voiced too tight.

Kate nodded to herself. "Then why don't you sit down and tell me all about him? We can compare notes."

Carrie smiled weakly and sat down on the sofa beside her. "He doesn't really like me having visitors when he's not here."

Kate raised an eyebrow. "Why not?" she asked innocently.

"I'm not really sure. He just... Well, he likes to know I'm safe."

Kate smiled. "I'm hardly a threat. And I'm sure he'd be flattered if he knew I'd come to talk about him."

"Oh yes. He told me yesterday how much you were attracted to him but he didn't want to encourage it for your husband's sake."

If Kate had been holding a cup of coffee it would have been all over the sofa. As it was, she could hardly manage to be tactful.

"I'm happily married and even if I wasn't..." She took a deep breath. "He seems a little controlling."

"He says that's a man's place." Carrie gave it simply as a statement of fact. "He says that a real man knows how to take care of his woman in every sense. I mean, I can see your husband's very good looking -" she broke off. "You won't tell Dave I said that?"

It should have been accompanied by a suppressed giggle or a wink but the look in her eyes read as real fear.

"Of course not." Kate assured her. "I'm perfectly used to women throwing themselves at Ed. Got a whole studio full of them."

"And you don't mind?"

"He ignores them. I'm not even sure he sees them. All those beautiful girls and he chose to marry me - it may be odd but I don't feel I have anything to worry about in that department."

Carrie smiled sadly. "I'm happy for you."

Kate chuckled. "Just when you've given up hoping, Mr Right suddenly appears."

Carrie turned her head away. "I had given up. I kept wondering what was wrong with me."

Kate thought of her own situation. No interest for years then Ed turns up out of the blue, crazy about her. And as for Alec... Best not go down that route. It was not as if she was sure...

Carrie was still speaking. "But Dave said he'd take me anyway."

"Anyway? What you mean?"

Carrie stood up, almost wringing her hands. "In spite of me being stupid and ugly and... And all the rest of it."

Kate got to her feet. "Your *husband* said that to you?"

"It's the truth."

Kate put her hand to her head. "No it isn't. You are a very successful woman. You were a very successful woman. Why on earth would you marry such a pig? What else does he do?"

"Nothing I don't deserve and he was doing me a favour. I couldn't expect anyone else to marry me and really, I had to learn the truth about myself, didn't I?"

"It's not the truth."

"It *is*." Carrie believed it now, believed it totally. "And your husband -"

"*My* husband. My husband is nothing like that."

"But you do as he says?"

That was a tricky one. As her commanding officer she had to obey his orders, wanted to because she knew he was the best man - person - for the job. But as for Ed Straker, the gentle man that she had married...

"Ed doesn't tell me what to do."

"Never?"

"Only in terms of the business and I'm still a relative novice at that. Even there, he usually lets me get on with my own job."

"And he doesn't get angry with you? Even when you make a mistake?"

Kate gave a wry grin. "I try not to make mistakes, not with so much at stake... in the film industry. And I only once remember him getting angry with me and that was understandable."

"You see."

Kate growled slightly. "I'm not making excuses for him, it was simply a painful situation." She sighed and sat down again. "Ed lost his son by his first marriage. He didn't think he could cope with having any more children. When I accidentally got pregnant, it was simply more than he could cope with. He dotes on Sam now. He's probably liberated her from her creche and is crawling around the office with her on his back - and the door locked so no one can see him."

Carrie smiled wistfully. "He sounds wonderful. I'm sure he doesn't need to discipline you."

Once again alarm bells rang in Kate's brain. "Discipline? What are we talking about here?"

Carrie looked away. "Well, I know any man, any real man, is going to get physical occasionally."

"*You mean he hits you?*" Carrie flinched and Kate regretted her own ferocity. "That is what you're saying? That he hits you."

"Of course. Doesn't Ed hit you? Ever?"

Kate was horrified, as much on Ed's behalf as Carrie's. Her mind flashed back to that moment when he had grabbed her wrist and raised his hand to strike her. But he had not, then or at any other time, and she knew he never would.

She sat Carrie gently down on the sofa. "No, he never has. And no *real* man would. Oh, hit a woman if she's coming at you with a knife but not your wife, not for being herself." She thought hard but there was only one solution she could come up with. "Come away with me. Pack your bags and we can be out of here before he comes back."

Carrie just looked at her. "But I don't want to. I've waited so long for a man of my own, I'm not going to leave him now."

Kate did not know what to say. She could hardly force Carrie to leave. Besides anything else, it would not do her shattered self-respect any good. Was she really so desperate for a man, any man? Did she really think violence was normal in a marriage?

The door of the suite opened and Dave Reynolds strode in, glowering. "The contract fell through. Some -" He broke off as he saw Kate, the anger in his eyes deepening as his mouth tried to form itself into a sociable smile. "Kate? What are you doing here?"

She stood up, facing him, coming between him and his wife. "Carrie and I didn't really get chance to talk yesterday so I thought I'd come back when things were quiet. We've been having a very interesting chat."

"Oh really? What about?"

She had to keep her mouth shut, whatever she felt like saying, until Carrie made up her mind as to what she was going to do. Perhaps the best thing was simply to leave but that felt too much like simply running out on her friend.

Reynolds was looking at her, anger subsiding into a kind of predatory smile. "Were you talking about me?"

That was an opening. "As a matter of fact, we were."

He nodded to himself. "I told Carrie yesterday, I could see the way you looked at me. I'm used to it. I know what women want." He chuckled. "Your husband can't keep you under control, let alone keep you satisfied."

Kate glanced back at Carrie, who was looking at the carpet, making no protest. Kate herself did not know what to feel: amazement, confusion, anger or even amusement. "If you're implying I'm interested in you -"

"Oh but you are. You like my strength."

"Strength? You're a snivelling little coward."

He took two strides across the room, one hand out to grab her, the other up to strike her. "I'll teach you your place."

He got it all wrong. Kate braced her feet, using the momentum of his attack as she had been taught. She could not see his face as he went sailing over her shoulder but she could imagine the look of surprise. She turned, ready to defend herself, as he slammed into the far wall.

So much for the problem of what to do.

He pulled himself up, took a step towards her then hesitated. He did not want to make things worse.

"What are you?" he growled. "Some kind of super-lesbian?"

She sighed through her teeth, deciding to ignore him. She turned to Carrie. "Come on. Come away with me now. He won't find you."

Carrie looked at her, horrified. "But... But I can't. I don't want to. He's my husband."

"He's a brute. You're worth more than this."

Carrie shook her head. "Go. Please go."

With a deep sigh, Kate turned to leave. She stopped at the door. "You know where to find me."

She put her hand on the door to shut it but could not, could not give him those few moments more because she knew what he was going to do. She turned back.

"You wouldn't know a real man if he hit you in the face. Which he very well might. Carrie is under my protection as soon as she wants it."

Then she walked away, knowing the gesture was futile. She stopped by a phone. Should she call the police? She would only make things worse - as she had done already. The first move had to come from Carrie.

Kate's concentration was so bad on the way back to the studio that she almost ran the car off the road. Once back, she walked across the gardens to the creche. As she had suspected, Sam was not where. Her father had already taken her for her lunch. She found both of them in the canteen, Ed spooning pink mush into his ash blonde daughter's mouth.

"And the jet's coming in to - oh, hi Kate. Didn't go well, then?"

"Disaster." She slumped down in the seat across the table from him and related what had happened. "Couldn't have got much worse if I'd tried."

Ed's frown had slowly deepened. He did not speak for a moment. When he did, it was the other response she had been expecting.

"I nearly hit you."

"Once," she said. "And you didn't. And I doubt if she's ever given him a shock like I gave you."

She shivered. "He's such a creep. He thinks he's God. And I've made things so much worse."

Ed put his hand over hers. "At least she knows she's got a friend. Now... I guess we just have to keep our ears open."

She squeezed his hand.

"Din-dins!" demanded Sam and they laughed uncertainly.

Ed handed Kate the spoon.

* * *

Once more Ed Straker sighed through gritted teeth as General Henderson droned on. Once more the twin thoughts flashed through his mind: *How was I ever friends with this man?* and *Where did it all go wrong?*

Finally the old man shut up and Straker got a chance to speak. "David Reynolds is a security risk. He is irrational, unstable and violent. Any advances his company have made can be absorbed by our own personnel or, where appropriate, we can recruit individual members of the company. Reynolds himself should be completely sidelined."

Henderson glared at him. "How is it you have so much information on this man?"

Straker was not sure he really wanted to explain that one. "We have intelligence on him." Which was true enough.

But nothing he could say would sway the General. Reynolds' company's latest developments, combined with SHADO's own Umatics, might produce detectors which could find UFOs within Earth's atmosphere or underwater with far more accuracy than their current equipment. Vital hours could be saved. Enemy craft that had slipped through unnoticed might be caught before they could wreak their damage. For that price Straker would deal with the

devil.

There was plenty more to think about as he drove back to SHADO HQ. The obvious person to put onto this was Colonel Lake but it was unfair to inflict Reynolds on her.

When he got back to the studio, Ginny and Kate were practising unarmed combat on each other, Freeman instructing them. Ed watched from the sidelines for a moment before they knew he was there, half an eye on the combatants and half an eye on his second in command. He smiled to himself. Odd how Alec could switch off his over-active male instinct when there was something serious to be done. The lithe, rounded figures were...

Maybe not so odd, if he could switch off those feelings himself. And Alec did not have a passion for either one of them like he felt for Kate. Or if he did feel that way about Lake, he kept it well hidden.

Time to give them the bad news.

He stepped forward and all of them became aware of him.

Kate smiled when she saw him. "How did I do?"

He grinned. "Not bad."

"Not bad? She's a foot taller than me."

"I am not," said Lake. "Just because you're a dwarf." She stuck out her tongue in a most unladylike fashion - which meant they must have been having a good session.

He sighed, not pleased to break it up, and relayed what Henderson had ordered. "So we're going to have to work with the man. Colonel Lake, I know you can take care of yourself, I just want you to be forewarned."

"Oh, don't worry, sir." she said with a glint in her eye. "I had plenty of experience with recalcitrant males before I joined SHADO. He won't get anything past me."

She left them in order to get a shower and read up on the relevant background information.

"What about Carrie?" Kate asked.

"I'm sorry." Ed said. "We can't break security for her, you know that."

She nodded reluctantly.

"Don't worry." Alec told her. "We'll come up with something."

He grinned a grin that Reynolds might live to regret and Ed knew that Reynolds might well come to regret Henderson's decision and his own behaviour. So be it. So long as nothing harmed SHADO's security, that was fine by him.

It was two hours after that a routine incursion turned into something more interesting.

"It's coming down towards Cornwall, sir." Ford reported. "Sky One is on the way to intercept but it's doubtful he'll be in time. Just going off radar now, sir."

"This is when we could do with Reynolds' new device," Straker muttered to himself.

He frowned and looked down at the file he had been reading. Reynolds and his wife were holidaying in Cornwall. It *could* be a coincidence.

What to do? He had the address of their hotel. It was an isolated place on the coast. Straker had not had a chance to see much of Cornwall but he got the impression that 'an isolated place on the coast' or 'an isolated place on the moor' described pretty much all of it.

There was a report from Peter Carlin in Sky One, coming up fast on the Cornish coast. "Target in visual range but it's headed away from me. Can't see where it's going. It's not attempting to engage. - It's firing."

"At you?" Straker demanded.

"At a building. I'm engaging."

For several seconds there were the sounds of a firefight, distant over the radio. Straker imagined himself up there with Carlin, putting the plane through its paces. Imagination was all he had for the moment.

Carling gave a cry of pain. "I'm hit. Damage to the wings, I'm going to have to ditch. Hope the ejector's working. The spinner's also going down. It's beneath the surface. Wish me luck."

There was an explosion. Straker hoped it was the ejector firing correctly and not anything worse. They were still ruing the loss of Lew Waterman and Sky Two.

Straker barked half-a-dozen orders and in minutes had the answers he was looking for. He nodded a curt *well done* and retreated to his office, part of him once again proud of their efficiency but most of him preoccupied with the inconsistencies of the alien attack.

Kate and Alec joined him a few minutes later and he gave them a run-down of events, waiting to see if they would come to the same conclusions that he had.

Alec wore a puzzled look. "Either they're being thick or we are."

Kate nodded, frowning. "Reynolds simply runs the company. He's not a scientist, the research would go on without him, yet they attack his hotel. I don't suppose there was anyone else there they could have been after?"

Ed shook his head. "We're still checking but it doesn't look like it."

"Is Carrie alright?" she asked.

"There was no serious damage done, Carlin saw to that."

"And is he OK?" Alec asked.

"Pretty much. He's being picked up now."

"Kate, I want you to go down there with me. I know there are problems but Carrie might be a way in. We need answers."

She nodded. "I'll be glad to go - provided you don't mind me pursuing my own agenda on the side."

"Just so long as it doesn't get in the way."

"Of course not."

"And Kate?"

"Yes?"

"This is a field assignment. You go armed."

She pulled a face but did not comment.

"What do you want me to do?" Alec asked.

"Cover things here. I need to know anything, anything that doesn't fit." He thought for a moment. "Get Paul back here to cover in case you have to follow us down. Ginny's too busy."

Alec nodded and left. Ed steered Kate down to the armoury. He trusted her but she had a very British dislike of guns and he wanted to make sure she was kited out properly. She thought about a shoulder holster.

"But even with the modern designs, I still don't think they're suited for women."

In the end she took a forearm holster and a gun so small Alec would have made jokes about it - a Seecamp .32 ACP - but it was capable of stopping a man if necessary. Ed was already carrying his own gun. Even in the office he was rarely without it. Funny, she did not seem to mind that.

They left Sam with Miss Ealand, her godmother, who was always pleased to take charge of her. They took a helicopter for most of the journey, it was too far to drive. The car was waiting for them, a nippy little thing but he missed his own. Kate snorted, she was still sore at having to give up hers when Sam was born.

They had landed on the edge of a secluded cove where a small river ran down between white, pink and blue houses to a little stone harbour. He had barely glanced at it. Now he drove away to the west, along the coast road that ran across the top of the cliff. Blue waves on the one side, green grass on the other. Coming up on the seaward side was a tall, masonry box with a long cylinder rising above it, the ruined shape of an engine house from one of the ancient tin mines.

"Now you can tell we're in Cornwall," Kate commented.

It seemed strange to think this wild landscape was once so industrialised. As they passed the engine house, there was the slate roof of the hotel. The rest of it dipped away into another secret cove. Perfect for smugglers. Straker swung the car round a steep bend and a moment later they were pulling up in front of the converted, early nineteenth century mansion. There was a hole in the roof on this side and the stonework was scorched but, thanks to Carlin, there was no substantial damage.

A security team was already in place, its helicopter perched on the cliffs above. The leader, Lieutenant Forbes, came out to meet them.

"Sir, ma'am. We have the hotel secured and ready for you but there's no sign of the UFO. The mobiles have had problems getting in over this terrain. I have people out with hand scanners but I guess it's out of range."

It was exactly the kind of job they could use Reynolds's new equipment for.

"Any human problems?" Straker asked.

"They're not happy, sir, but only the man Reynolds is really kicking up a fuss. Most of them were pretty subdued by the attack though they aren't sure what it was. There were only a couple of them saw the UFO itself, as far as we can tell. Mrs Reynolds was among them. I've got more people out looking for stray hikers and the like, just in case."

Straker nodded. "And security checks?"

"Those on the hotel owners and staff are back. Nothing known. I can show you the details inside. Those on the rest of the guests are expected shortly."

"Good. I don't suppose there's anything but I don't like to be surprised."

He could see Kate suppressing a grin at that. Now was not the time to get into that kind of thought.

He had another question. "Did Mr Reynolds see the attack?"

Forbes hesitated. "I'm not sure, sir. Reynolds is loudly protesting that he doesn't know anything about it. A bit too loudly, if you ask me. You know how some people can get, not wanting to be taken for loonies. Mrs Reynolds is keeping very quiet and I think there might be something going on there. She admits to having seen it but doesn't seem to want to say anything without her husband's approval. And he's not giving it."

Straker turned to Kate. "You talk to her, I'll take Reynolds."

"You sure that's a good idea?"

"There's no way he's going near you."

She looked at him. "See what I mean?"

He did but he was not going to admit it. "Let's get on, Colonel."

She glanced at Forbes to be sure he had turned away, then pulled a face at her husband. He had to smile. Then he had to get on with business. He walked into the lobby of the hotel, Kate following.

The place was luxurious to say the least. Every surface gleamed: marble, metal or sumptuous fabrics. It was rather too much for Straker's taste. There were discreet signs to

conference rooms, gyms and jaccuzzis. They made their way to the dining room, where staff and guests were being detained.

Perhaps two dozen people sat at the small tables, guarded by four SHADO security operatives. The guests' postures ranged from the utterly disconsolate to the blazing mad. That was Reynolds.

The look on his face when he saw who had come through the door was priceless. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Straker smiled inwardly, then reminded himself that he had a job of work to do. He ignored the man, instead turning to Forbes who had followed them in.

"You can begin the debriefing. Usual procedures unless you encounter anything important. I'll deal with Mr Reynolds. Colonel Straker will deal with Mrs Reynolds."

"Colonel Straker?" Reynolds exclaimed, echoed a moment later by his wife.

"Yes, sir," Forbes answered briskly. Then he glanced at Reynolds. "Will you or the Colonel be requiring any security, sir?"

Amazing how gossip got round what was supposed to be a secure establishment.

Straker shook his head. "Not necessary."

Then he turned to Reynolds. "Come with me."

The man glared at him. "Why?"

"Because the chances are that someone just tried to kill you and it's my job to keep you alive. You do want to stay alive?"

He turned and walked out, confident that if Reynolds did not follow him voluntarily, security would propel him in the right direction. The man caught up with him in the lush entrance hall.

"So who are you?"

"You know as much as you need to. Now, you saw the attack?"

"I saw something."

"Show me."

Reynolds nodded reluctantly. "I was outside."

As they went out and round onto the cliff, he began: "Your wife -"

Straker turned his icy blue eyes on him. "I haven't brought up your assault on my wife and I suggest you don't, either. But I'll tell you this - you found out she is quite capable of defending herself but I don't see why she should have to. If you ever touch her again, I will make sure you don't do it a third time."

Reynolds sneered. "Big man with all your tin soldiers behind you, aren't you?"

Straker spoke very quietly. "I didn't say you'd have to deal with *them*. Now, will you tell me what you saw or do I leave you to be killed next time?"

That got a wary response. "I was behind the hotel, walking round to the car park."

They headed in that direction. There was a small parking space in front of the hotel but most cars were housed in an area at the back, carved out of the cliff.

"I was standing here." Reynolds said.

They had reached the corner of the building. Straker could see the wall of the house, the cars, the cliff and the sky above. Not much of an angle.

"What happened?" he asked.

Reynolds stuck his hands in his pockets. "I looked up at the sky - there was this weird noise, rising and falling. There was -" He looked at Straker.

"Go on, I've heard it all before."

"There was a flying saucer. A shiny, metal thing. Not like you see in films, more cone shaped. It started firing laser beams at the building. I ducked. It stopped firing. I picked myself up and went back inside. I was just telling Carrie to pack when your storm troopers arrived. Now, when do I get any answers?"

"When you need them." Straker smiled. He had almost said *When I feel like it.*

* * *

Carrie had been in her room, so Kate took her up there.

"I don't understand." Carrie kept saying.

"What don't you understand?"

"Any of it. The flying saucer, the guns, what you're doing here. Did Ed really say you're a colonel?"

Kate sat down in one of the chairs by the window and looked out along the cove. She could see a Shadair jet over flying the area. "That's right but I don't usually use it. I'm Mrs. Straker or Kate to most of the staff, most of the time. Ed was just making a point."

She looked up at Carrie, who was fussing around the bedside table. "I'm sorry about what happened before. Did he hurt you badly?"

"No. No, of course not." The answer was far too quick, too sharp, but Kate could see no point in pressing it.

She carried on. "I have a lot of questions, about you and Dave and yes I know you don't want me to ask them. But we'll leave that for the moment. This is a serious business and it needs to be dealt with first. Where were you when you became aware there was something happening?"

Carry gestured across. "Sitting where you are."

"Good." Kate surveyed the view. "You could see well."

"I saw everything, I think."

"Then come over here and explain it to me, blow-by-blow."

Carrie came and stood behind her. She had indeed seen everything, though she had not initially realised how serious it was.

"I thought it was the RAF on manoeuvres and that I was just getting a funny angle on the odd looking one. Then it got closer and I realised."

She had sat at the window and watched the whole thing, making no attempt to protect herself. The energy beams had hit this part of the building. Kate wondered whether she had some kind of death wish. Surely her husband had not changed her that much?

"Go on."

"I sat here, wondering what to do, until Dave came in and told me to pack. So I did. Then your people came in and took us down to the dining room. Is this really what you do?"

"Us as an organisation? Yes. Me personally? No, not usually. I'm here because you are. Ed and I were worried about you - and frankly we're a little mystified. It seems like your husband's the target but what we can't figure out is why. What does he have that's so vital?"

Carrie looked rather offended. "What do you mean?"

Kate sighed, trying to phrase it carefully. "He's not a scientist or anything like that, he's a businessman. Why would -" she was not sure if she should mention the aliens, though Carrie must have worked it out by now "- anyone want to make this kind of attack on him?"

"I don't know. I mean, I know he's important -"

"Because he keeps telling you?"

Carrie pursed her lips. "I know you don't like him."

"He's a brute."

"And you still say Ed never hits you?"

"Never."

Carrie looked at her. "He's... What is he? A soldier of some kind? A man of action. A real man. I suppose I was wrong about that one."

"I didn't marry him because he drives a fast car and shoots people," Kate snapped. She paused, then said more slowly: "He doesn't often shoot people."

Carrie looked at her for a long moment, then turned away. Kate needed to explain the truth to her.

"My Ed's strong but he's not violent. He takes pain and yes, he inflicts it but sparingly and only when there's no other way. I am not talking about someone annoying him, I am talking about real, literal life and death situations. He's a kind, good man who takes care of me - and a lot of other people too."

She was still not sure Carrie understood. "I love the Ed Straker who carries a gun and can command fire from the skies, just like I love the Ed Straker who wakes up screaming because of all the things that have been done to him but most of all I love the Ed Straker who adores bathing our baby and who kneels down to put my shoes on my feet when I'm too pregnant to bend over. That's a real man, Carrie. That's my man."

"I'm preaching, aren't I?"

Carrie was too closed off for Kate to be able to read her reaction.

She sighed. "If you want to talk husbands, let's go and get some fresh air. There isn't anything else you need to show me here, is there?"

"I don't think so."

"Good. We'll get a better view of the search from up on the cliffs."

* * *

Straker and Reynolds had moved up onto the cliffs above the hotel so that they had a clearer view out to sea. Reynolds was puffing slightly and complaining. Straker ignored him. His people were busy out there. He had received a message when his helicopter landed that Peter Carlin had been picked up and was not badly injured. The salvage ship was on its way round to pick up what remained of Sky One. Henderson was going to throw a fit. They had only received delivery of the new Sky One and Sky Two six weeks earlier, after they had been shot down attacking the aliens' breeding colony. He could only hope the studio's profits kept going up in order to offset some of SHADO's losses.

He sighed. He had not joined up to become an accountant. And there was still no sign of the UFO.

Reynolds was saying something. "... Think you're macho, why do you get your wife to do your dirty work? Why isn't she at home looking after the baby? And what kind of work is it that lets you lock up innocent people -"

"You weren't locked up." Yet.

"You've got all these thugs at your beck and call."

"I thought you liked thugs."

Reynolds sneered. "I think I liked you better when you were a film producer. At least then you had an excuse to be pathetic."

"Mr Reynolds, I honestly do not care what you think of me. I have a job to do and I'll do it. You can help or hinder me but it will get done." Straker paused. "How do you get any business done if you're this rude to your clients?"

"I'm not rude, I'm honest."

"And you're not a wife beater, you're...?"

Reynolds took a swing at him. He had half expected it. He dodged easily.

"Frankly, I don't see starting a fight on the edge of a cliff as awfully smart."

The other man took a deep breath and seemed to calm down a little, his face colouring down from puce.

Straker nodded. "Better. Go back to the hotel."

Reynolds turned sullenly. Ed watched him take a few steps before returning his attention to his people out at sea. Was that the salvage ship on the easternmost limit of his vision?

It was only at the last moment that he heard running feet behind him and half turned, throwing his arm up to defend himself from Reynolds' onslaught.

* * *

Kate took deep breaths of the fresh, sea air as she strode out onto the cliff. "Wish we got time for holidays."

"Don't you?" Carrie asked.

She shook her head. "I never said he was perfect. Ed's - What the -"

Ed was on his back on the very edge of the cliff, Reynolds on top of him. She could see Ed was trying to pull away but under Reynolds impetus they were rolling closer to the drop.

She set off at a run, reaching for the gun clipped to her forearm. Finding it, she fired into the air. It did no good. She stopped, steadyng herself to shoot Reynolds. She was going to have to get this one exactly right.

She took very careful aim.

Too late.

The two men rolled on, Ed kicking upwards as they did. It broke Reynolds hold. Ed threw himself into a roll the opposite way, the safe way.

Kate was in a flat out run.

Reynolds was pushed in the other direction. He landed lengthways on the edge, his back half on the grass and half in mid-air. He tipped.

Straker rolled on to his front, saw what was happening and threw himself full length across the grass. He caught the man's wrist as he went over.

Reynolds cried out in pain. "Bastard."

"Stopped thrashing around, I'll drop you."

Kate was alongside Ed now, kneeling at the edge. "Wish you would."

She also leaned over and took a grasp of Reynolds arm. "Stay still and we'll pull you up."

Carrie was on Ed's other side. "Grab my hand, Dave."

He did, desperately, violently, threatening to pull her over.

"One, two, three." Ed commanded and they pulled in jerky unison.

Reynolds, making no effort to help them, groaned as he was hauled up onto solid ground.

"What... What happened?" Carrie asked.

"What does it look like?" Dave snapped. "He tried to kill me."

"Now look here -" Kate began.

"After all you said." Carrie stared accusingly at her friend.

"You believe him?" Kate forced herself to calm down. "You really think you can believe him?"

Carrie looked away.

They were all getting to their feet. Ed had not said anything yet. He brushed the grass and

dirt from his suit, looking at Reynolds as if to say *Now I know*.

Kate looked between the two men, not sure what was happening or what was about to happen. "You want me to get security?"

Ed shook his head. "We'll go back to the hotel. There's nothing else to find out here and they should be getting on with the debriefs."

They trudged back in silence. The group in the dining room had broken up and some were off being interviewed.

"Any word from Colonel Freeman?" Ed asked one of the security people at the door.

"No, sir. Do you want me to contact him?"

"Don't bother, he'll call when he has anything."

Forbes came out from behind a closed door. "Sir? It's General Henderson on the line. He wants to talk to you."

Kate watched him not quite grimace as he walked silently away.

* * *

Ed picked up the handset. "Sir?"

"That you?" the old man growled. "How's Reynolds?"

"Fine. He just tried to kill me but he's fine."

"What do you mean?"

Straker explained what had happened and gave the General an overview at the same time. "I did say he was unstable."

"You did but we need him."

"Why, sir? Why is this man so important?"

"You really want to take over the company?"

"More than ever. We cannot work with him."

Henderson sounded vaguely embarrassed - and a lot more sympathetic than usual. "I'm sorry, Ed, I don't like it either but Reynolds's mother is American and his uncle is a big wheel in the Republican Party. He's on the committee that deals with your appropriation and you know the USA is the biggest contributor..."

"That's corrupt."

"That's real life. I told you I don't like it but it's the way the world works. You're so shut away in your hole in the ground, you forget how the rest of us have to live. Reynolds must not be captured and he must have nothing to complain about, otherwise SHADO will be adversely affected."

"And if he tries to kill me again?"

There was no answer. Henderson hung up.

Straker went out into the hall. Reynolds and Forbes were staring each other down.

"If the Colonel says you're under arrest -" Forbes was saying.

"He isn't," Straker interrupted.

Everyone turned to look at him. He could not face Kate so he concentrated on glaring at Reynolds.

"I know who you are now, I know what pull you've got. Don't think that means you can get away with anything."

Reynolds sneered. They both knew it was an all but empty threat.

"In that case," he said "I'm going up to my room to pack."

Straker turned to Forbes. "Make sure Mr Reynolds has a man with him at all times to... protect him."

"Yes, sir." He got the message and so did Reynolds.

As the others left, Ed turned to Kate. She was not looking happy.

"I'm sorry. I don't like to countermand your orders -"

"All I'm looking for is an explanation."

He told her.

"Should have seen that coming. What do -"

Baxter, one of the security people, came through the front door at a good pace. "Sir, we found something interesting. On the beach."

Reynolds was still on the stairs. He turned, a calculating look on his face. Calculated to annoy. "On the beach? Come on, Carrie, let's go for a walk."

Reinhardt came through the door of the temporary communications post. "Sir, Colonel Freeman's on the line."

Straker nodded curtly. "Kate, take that. Follow me down if it's anything important.

Forbes, stick with Mr and Mrs Reynolds. Mrs Reynolds, you'd be wise to stay here. Baxter, show me."

The SHADO people sprang efficiently to the tasks. Mrs Reynolds hesitated uncertainly at the foot of the stairs. Her husband took her arm and all but dragged her along. Straker strode out of the door ahead of them.

There was a narrow concrete path that wound down the cove to the small beach at its foot. He could see the clean, pale sand stretching out beyond the encircling walls of the cliffs. What he could not see was anything of particular interest.

He turned inquiringly to Baxter, who answered before he could ask the question. "We've been exploring the caves, sir. Though we might not get much further with the tide coming in. We could really use some local knowledge."

"We'll bring someone in if we have to."

Reynolds was close behind them, trying to overtake but the path was too narrow and he found his way constantly blocked by Forbes and Baxter. Carrie dragged along behind them, though Straker could not tell if she was more reluctant to be going with her husband or towards danger. The only reason he could guess for Reynolds coming along was simply to prove that he could.

Kate was at the top of the path, coming after them but not in such a hurry that it alarmed him. Whatever Alec had had to say had not taken long.

He stepped out onto the sand, looking to his right and left. The beach broadened out into a funnel shaped bay with the cove as its spout. An ideal place to relax on a fine day like today. Shame he would not get the chance though, glancing out to sea, he could observe a storm brewing on the horizon. Wasn't there always?

He waited for Kate catch them up. The Reynolds were standing uncertainly on the beach: him glaring at anyone in sight, her gazing on her husband as if there was no one else there. Forbes was keeping an eye on them.

Kate came up to her husband.

"Anything?" he asked.

"Alec's sources told him pretty much what Henderson told you. Not all the details but that his uncle's got pull. Alec's on his way down."

He frowned at her. "You told him what happened on the cliff?"

"Only after he said he was coming. Paul's back at HQ so there shouldn't be a problem. And you didn't say not to."

Straker growled. "It doesn't take three senior officers -"

"So let's just get on with it. And don't take it out on me and Alec, I'm not in the mood for it either."

He managed a slightly apologetic smile. "No, I don't suppose you are."

He turned back to Baxter, who was waiting at a discreet distance for his superiors to conclude their business. At this sign he stepped forwards.

"It's to the right, sir. Those two larger openings only lead to shallow caves but the third one along, that's something like a whole system. The others are still exploring it..."

Straker set off along the beach at a pace that would be comfortable for Kate. He glanced across at the cave mouths as he passed. He could see they did not go back far, they were simply sections hollowed out of the rock.

The third cave's mouth did not look like anything much. Under normal circumstances he would have passed it by but he was pleased that his people had taken notice of it.

"Mind your head, sir." Baxter warned him, as he ducked under the lintel and squeezed in.

Straker had to bend low to get through, resting his hands on the rough rocks. He turned to make sure Kate was through OK. Being smaller, she had less of a problem.

The tunnel continued low and narrow for about ten feet. Straker could feel his pulse speeding up. He could not see past Baxter, could see no escape. He felt Kate's hand on his back, reassuring him. She must know what he was thinking. He wondered if she could feel him shaking.

It seemed an age before the tunnel opened out, first into a small chamber, then into a larger one about the size of a school classroom, lit by several standard issue chemical lanterns. They cast a bright but eerie green glow. Two of his security people - Davies, a petite blonde woman, and Rajendrun, a Tamil man - were standing over an uneven formation of rocks in one corner. Another tunnel stretched away behind them. As he approached, he could see the formation held a pool perhaps four feet across.

He was aware of Forbes and the Reynolds entering behind him. He ignored them. He walked over to see what was so interesting about this pool.

The others stood back so that he could see. It was a lot deeper than he had expected, hard to tell how deep through the water. And at the bottom a flash of red, an alien spacesuit.

"Can't tell what they're doing, sir," Davies whispered "but we think that level must lead out to sea, to where they parked their ship."

He nodded. What were they up to? Fishing?

"Have we found that end?"

"Got people looking for it, sir." Baxter told him. "Hard to communicate in here, the rocks are too thick."

Straker nodded. "Station someone outside to act as a runner. I want to know as soon as they find it and if an approach can be made from that end. I would like to know if they already knew what was here but I don't suppose we'll find that out."

Baxter left smartly to sort things out.

"And check on the tide tables." Kate told him. "We don't want to get stuck."

Straker nodded to himself. He did not want to get stuck in a hole in the ground, did not even want to be here. Best to get to work. Only, what was there to do except observe or dive in the water? There had to be something.

Reynolds was still there.

Straker turned to him. "Your friends want you safe. This is not a safe place. I suggest you

return to the hotel."

"Not a chance. I'm keeping an eye on you."

"Suit yourself. But if you endanger anyone else, you'll regret it." He took Kate into a corner. "Ideas?"

"Bit iffy, isn't it? Even a diver would have problems down there. We could block the far end and force them up this way... I don't know but I don't suppose we've got long. The tide was coming in fast."

He nodded. They were slightly below sea level in the cave.

"There's water coming in," said Carrie quietly.

He looked. A trickle was running down the entrance tunnel and through the anti-chamber.

He took a deep breath. "We'll have to leave them to it. We can't stay here any longer."

"If you've got a job to do -" Reynolds began.

"I'm supposed to keep you alive." Straker said. "If you want not to drown, go back to the hotel. It could be too late already. Where's Baxter?"

Footsteps running towards them seemed to answer that question. Footsteps followed by gunshots. An alien emerged from the entrance tunnel, gun at the ready. He had the advantage of surprise.

Davis threw herself in front of Straker and reached for her gun in one smooth movement. The alien got its shot in first. She died silently.

All of SHADO's people were reaching for their weapons. More footsteps ran and stumbled along the tunnel.

Forbes and Rajendrun fired simultaneously. The alien fell.

Straker swung to cover the entrance. He aimed, ready to catch their attack immediately they came into view. He waited for the blur of a red space suit.

It did not come.

Baxter stumbled in, bleeding from his shoulder and his side. "Sorry sir. Came up behind me. I couldn't hear over the waves. The storm... It's going to be bad."

He collapsed to the rocky floor. Forbes and Kate hurried over to him. Straker knelt to close Davies' eyes. She had died for him - not the first and he felt no better for that. Rajendrun was checking the alien. He took a rock and smashed its faceplate, just to be sure. Green goo oozed across the wet granite.

Straker took a deep breath. One down but he doubted it was the one he had seen below the water. He strode over to take a look. There was nothing at the bottom of the shaft, not that he had expected there to be. The view was too narrow.

He turned his back on it. "OK. Forbes, Kate, get Baxter out of here. Rajendrun, can you take Davies? I'll take the alien. Reynolds, Mrs Reynolds, wait until we've checked the entrance then follow us out."

The water was slopping around his ankles now and he could hear strange, watery noises echoing along the passage that he guessed must be the storm. He hoped there was still some beach to walk along. It could be difficult otherwise. They could leave the two dead bodies if they had to but getting a seriously injured man to -

It was as Kate and Forbes lifted him that Baxter gave a great shuddering groan and died.

Two dead and he still had no answers.

The noise of the sea was getting louder.

Forbes swung the body over his shoulder, though Straker was not sure he could get out that way. The tunnel might well be too narrow.

A bubbling noise. Straker felt an arm round his throat, his head wrenched backwards. His feet left the ground. He was being upended into the pool. He heard a scream from somewhere, running feet, a voice shouting "Dave, come back!".

His head hit the water. He thrashed around, unable to get a purchase on anything. He hit rock. The world was turning cold, dark and silent.

He was being pulled apart, his feet going one way and his head the other. Something gave. It hurt but it was not part of him, he was fairly certain.

His head broke the surface. He collapsed to the ground, coughing and blinking, for a moment too weak to move.

"Ed?" Kate was standing over him. "Ed? You OK?"

He retched up sea water. She held him. He realised that water was washing over his extended legs.

"We have -" cough "- to get out of here. Forget the -" cough "- bodies. We'll recover them -" cough "- later. If we can."

He looked around. Reynolds and his wife were missing, they must have made it out already.

Kate must have read his thoughts. She shook her head and indicated the tunnel behind the pool. "Reynolds panicked and Carrie followed him. They went that way."

"And the alien?" He could see no sign of it. "That's what it was?"

"Went back underwater where we can't touch it. Don't know whether that was the plan or if he was just taking the opportunity."

Straker was recovering quickly. "Alright, everyone away for the pool. Kate, Forbes, get back to the hotel if you can. Get help. Rajendrun, you're with me."

He was on his feet now.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Kate asked. "I'd rather stay."

"Go."

Like the disciplined officer she was, she went. Forbes headed down the entrance tunnel in front of her. Ed watched her for a moment, then turned to look at the back tunnel. It was low and narrow. He swallowed hard and set off in pursuit of Reynolds and his wife.

* * *

The water in the tunnel was up to Kate's knees. Even slipstreaming Forbes, it was hard going. She was not happy about leaving Ed in the cave. Even with his claustrophobia under control he was going to be uncomfortable and he was starting to look tired.

And you're not the only one, Ed.

A surge of water pushed her back, left her spluttering.

"You alright, ma'am?" Forbes asked.

"Fine. Keep going."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Don't ma'am me, it usually means something's going wrong."

"Yes... Er, yes."

They struggled on for a few more feet.

The water came down the tunnel like a steam hammer. Kate felt her feet lifted up and her head slammed back, the breath blasted from her body.

She forced herself to be calm, counted to five and tried to resurface. She blinked her sore eyes as she came up. Forbes was standing over her, offering her a hand.

"Come on."

She shook her head. There was another wave coming along, not so high but enough to slap her in the face.

"I can't make it, I'm too short and I'm not strong enough. I'm going back for the Commander. Can you get out?"

"I'll do my best." He did not sound too sure.

"Come back if you can't."

He took a deep breath and headed on. She turned back.

* * *

The back tunnel sloped unevenly upwards, with two sharp twists. Straker could feel the water receding slightly but it worried him how fast it was coming in. He guessed that by the time he had retrieved the two strays, it would be too late to escape. He could only hope that there was another way out or a safe space further along. He knew he should probably have sent Rajendrun back. Too late now.

The tunnel broadened slowly to a point where the light from his lantern barely reached the walls.

He called out. "Reynolds? Carrie?"

There was a wavering reply, her voice. "Over here."

He could see another lantern some way in the distance. That gave him an idea of the size of the cave. Big. Big enough to be something like comfortable.

"We have to get back." he called.

"No way." shouted Reynolds. "It's not safe. We have to explore this way."

Through gritted teeth, Straker said: "Fine, do as you like. Mrs Reynolds, are you going to be sensible or are you going to let him get you killed? You can feel how high the water is."

There was a bubbling, rushing noise to his right. He turned, lantern held high. An alien, coming out of the floor. No, another pool.

Swift memories of drowning assailed him as he and the alien took aim at each other. Straker fired first, two good body shots.

The alien fell, loosing off half-a-dozen wild bursts as it died. Rajendrun was moving forward to protect his Commander. He took half the shots, dead before the last one hit him.

This day was turning into a disaster.

Reynolds was throwing up in a corner, trying pathetically to pretend that he was not.

"We can't stay." he said when he got his breath back. "We can't. There could be more of those things."

"I've been trying to tell you that but I think it's too late now. We need to keep guard against them. Can you see anything at your -"

Something was thrashing up the waters of the tunnel. He took cover at the mouth.

It was carrying a lantern.

"Ed?"

It was Kate.

"What are you doing here?" He was less than pleased to see her.

"Couldn't get out. I told Forbes to go on but I was a liability to him. Another alien?"

"And another loss."

She groaned. "What do we do now?"

"Keep moving up."

"Oh, no. No." said Reynolds.

"Make your mind up." Straker told him. "It's what you wanted a moment ago."

"Come on, Dave." said Carrie. "I don't think I can get out that way."

"I don't care. You're pathetic. You always hold me back." He took a swipe at her.

Straker waded swiftly towards him. "Stop that."

Reynolds looked towards him, dropping his hand. "I don't understand you at all."

"I'm glad. Take your lantern, go right. Shout if you find anything. Kate, can you pick up the fourth lantern and give it Carrie? You two go left. I'll go straight ahead."

But it was getting hard even for him to walk and he was the tallest and strongest.

Kate took the lantern from beside the corpse of the security man, closing his eyes as she did so. She took Carrie by the arm and they struck off to the left. Ed headed straight forward, trying to feel if the floor tended upwards or downwards. The violence of the sea was mitigated by their distance inside the cliff but the water was up to his knees. There had to be some safe place, maybe a ledge towards the ceiling they could reach.

This cave was wide, as well as deep and high, there was quite a distance to the women's two lights. He looked right and frowned. There was no sign of a lantern in that direction. He swivelled round, looking for it.

Kate shouted out. "Ed, we found something."

He turned back. "What?"

"A shelf and I think... Yes, a chimney. Too narrow to climb but it's clear, a good air supply."

"Good. How high is the shelf?"

"Give me a minute, I want to explore further."

"Fine."

He turned his mind back to Reynolds. The bobbing, chemical light was behind him, almost at the tunnel.

"Reynolds! What are you doing?"

He could not see the man's face. "Getting out of here."

"Don't be an idiot, we've got enough dead already."

"That's their problem. I'm not going to join them."

"You will if you go down there."

"Told you you were a coward." The lantern disappeared, softened by water then into the rockface.

With a profound sigh, Straker waded after him.

This end of the tunnel was only half flooded. Even so, Straker had to bend his face almost to the water. "Reynolds, can you hear me? Reynolds?"

* * *

Kate pushed her way through the water that was almost up to her waist. She was cold and tired and wanted to be anywhere else but here. She had, however, found a chimney - a little patch of sky far too far away. The problem was that the shaft was perhaps eighteen inches wide, two feet at the broadest. There was no chance of climbing up it. Below it was a shelf, an alcove in the rock with its floor two or two-and-a-half feet above the floor of the cave. It was the best bet they had.

She frowned. "Carrie, do you hear something?"

"Only the sea."

"Nothing else?"

They both stood very quiet. She was not sure over the rush of the waves but she almost thought she could hear voices at the top of the shaft.

She clambered onto the shelf. "Hello? Hello? Anybody there?"

* * *

Straker grabs Reynolds' collar and pulled him back towards the air. "Idiot."

Reynolds was barely coherent now. "I have to go, I have to get out. Let me go."

"What about your wife?"

"What about her?"

Straker was tempted to let him go. "Come on, come back. You'll drown."

He yanked him back towards the cave.

* * *

"Hello!" the voice bounced back and forth until it was almost indecipherable but she thought she recognised it.

"Alec?"

"Kate? Hell! Sorry. Can you get out?"

"No chance."

"Hang on, this isn't working. I can hardly hear you. We're going to try and lower an intercom down."

"OK."

Carrie was pulling at her sleeve. "Kate, where have Dave and Ed gone?"

Kate groaned. Looking around she could see no sign of them.

"Alec, you got a rope?"

"Rope?"

"Yeah. I need to go back in the water."

"That wise?"

"No. But my moron of a husband's got himself in trouble again."

A moment later she saw the end of a rope snaking down towards her. She tied it firmly around her waist.

"Carrie, stay put. If the intercom comes down, tell Alec what's going on."

"Who's Alec?"

"Never mind that now."

After a moment's hesitation, Kate leaped into the water. Cold as she was, it was still cold enough to take her breath away and it was well over her waist now, swirling and threshing. She stumbled along, not moving far or fast.

"Ed? Can you hear me?"

She could hear something at the other end of the cave, the sound of water moving violently but she was not sure if it was the men or the sea. Or even another alien.

"Ed."

She saw a flash as his head broke water, heard him gasping for breath. "He's trying to get back out."

Ed's head crashed down again and she could see Reynolds on top of him. She struggled to draw her gun, not sure if she could stand steady enough to get a decent aim.

"Reynolds! Back off!"

She thought he looked at her but the light from her lantern barely reached that far. He dived back towards the tunnel.

"Don't be a berk!"

He was not listening. He plunged into the tunnel. Ed was up on his feet, going after him.

"Ed! No! Please."

She strode on towards him, knowing she could not catch him. Idiot was going to be a hero again. His head disappeared down the tunnel.

It was a moment before the water surge hit her, knocking her over. For a moment she thought she was going to drown. Then she knew she was. She could not get her head above the water. She tugged desperately on the rope and felt herself being dragged backwards. She held her breath, lungs burning, and realised how rough the cave floor was.

Seconds later she hit the rock face and climbed onto the shelf. The intercom was dangling by its wire in mid-air.

"Kate?" Alec's voice crackled. "What happened?"

"Fell over," she gasped. "Can't see Ed. I'm going back in. Stand by to pull me out again."

"Be careful," he told her.

Carrie touch her arm. "Don't go. You can't help them."

She looked at her. "I have to. Hold on."

She turned to step off the shelf.

* * *

Straker hated Reynolds, he admitted that to himself now. He had pulled him out of the tunnel but the man had fought him all the way. The other cave had to be flooded to the roof by now.

He had seen Kate's light like a beacon in the distance but only for a moment. Reynolds had gone for his legs, pulling him down. He fought his way back to the surface and followed him back down the tunnel. He was not going to let him die now, there had been too many deaths today.

The world was dark and cold and constantly in motion. He was sick and exhausted and scared. He could barely see, eyes stinging with salt. He was feeling his way forward. Reynolds was not going to win, he was not going to die.

Then everything in the universe pushed him up and back. He wrapped his arms around his head a moment before it hit the roof of the tunnel. Stunned, he let himself float backwards. Just float. It did not really matter if he breathed air or water.

"Ed?" she was calling him in the distance. "Ed? Where are you?"

She sounded sad. He did not want her to be sad. He tried to swim towards her, towards the light.

There was a long, vague moment before he felt her arms around him.

"Wake up. Come on, wake up."

He shook himself, coughed, made the effort. "Kate? Where's Reynolds?"

She gestured off to one side, towards the open-eyed, twisted-necked, bloody-skulled corpse of Reynolds. Straker felt a sense of failure but nothing else.

He got his feet back on the floor and he and Kate stumbled through water that was now almost up to her chest. He was not sure who was hauling on the other end of the rope but he had a pretty good idea.

When they reached the shelf, he insisted she climb up first. It was a struggle for her. He followed, finding they were standing on each other's feet.

Carrie was talking into an intercom. "She got him."

She handed it to him. He could hear Alec's voice. It sounded reassuring, despite his friend's obvious worry.

"Ed? What do you think you're -"

"Hang on."

Kate was untying the rope from around herself.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Making us secure." she said as she tied it around Carrie, then himself. Finally she tied herself into the loop. "Ask Alec if he thinks he can get a flask of coffee down here. Or some glucose bars."

"Heard that." Alec said. "We'll have a go."

"How did you find us?" Straker asked.

"There's a cave map. Ford pulled it off a naval database. They got it off some cavers. What else do you need?"

Straker sighed. "More than you can get down an eighteen inch shaft. Does the map tell you how far up the water comes?"

Carrie gave a gasp of dismay as she realised the implications and he could hear the concern in Alec's voice. "No, it doesn't. I'll see if I can get an oxygen mask down to you."

"That's the most important thing. Though I wouldn't say no to the coffee. I guess we'll just have to wait it out."

Carrie groaned. He could hardly blame her.

"I could get divers down to you -" Alec began.

"No. It's too dangerous and we've lost too many people already. That's an order."

He could hear a deep sigh. "Fair enough but you know they'd all volunteer."

"I know but it's not worth the risk." *Not even for Kate*, he thought.

Kate signalled for the handset and he passed it to her. "Alec, did Forbes get out alright?"

"Yeah, he got a bit bashed up on the rocks but he's in one piece. He says you've only got Rajendrun left."

She looked across at her husband as she said: "No, there's only me, Carrie and Ed."

Alec gave a very heavy: "Oh. Any aliens?"

"Another dead one. We still don't know what they were up to."

Five minutes later there was a clanking sound as a thermos flask bounced from side to side as it was lowered down the shaft. A couple of times it blocked the light almost completely. Then it just stayed dark.

They could hear Alec swearing over the intercom. "The coffee's stuck."

"Does that mean we won't get any?" Carrie asked weakly.

Kate and Ed looked at each other.

"There's something more important than that." Kate told her gently. "They might not be able to get anything else down. Including the oxygen mask."

There was an edge to Ed's voice as he explained into the intercom. "The water's almost up to Kate's neck."

The larger waves were slapping her in the face, making her choke. Ed thought about hauling her up manually but he knew he was too weak to hold her. He needed the rope to keep himself on his feet.

"How long till the tide turns?" he asked.

There was a distinctly reluctant pause. "Two hours."

They gave a mutual groan.

A shower of pebbles hit the top of their heads. Straker looked up towards the darkening sky. It took his befogged brain a moment to realise that that meant the flask was gone, the way was once more clear.

"The oxygen's arrived." Alec reported. "And a very, very long pipe. We're just fitting the

mask."

"I don't think you can get it down." Straker told him. " And we don't need that getting caught."

"It's alright, we've got one of those narrow, divers' mouthpieces. You need something."

A few minutes later he heard the hiss of gas as the long, thin hose approached them. He stuck it into Kate's mouth as the waters washed up and down her face. Only a few moments later Carrie needed to share it. Salt spray was stinging his already sore eyes but he could hang on for a few more minutes.

As Kate's head disappeared beneath the water, he bent down and kissed her on the lips, wanting her to know how much he loved her. She kissed back but there was no comfort in having her here, not in this situation.

Alec kept up a running commentary on anything and everything, trying to keep him engaged. The last order Straker gave was to pull the precious radio up so that it would not be damaged by the water.

"Send it back when the water has gone down."

After that there was only the water - choking him, poisoning him, holding him up - and the pain in his muscles and his concern for Kate and Carrie and the cold.

Carrie passed out. He had to force the pipe between her lips and he could not think how to make sure she did not swallow any water. The precious oxygen was escaping. Kate hung on, too stubborn to pass out. He put his arm around her, she put hers around him. They needed the spare hand for the oxygen pipe - there was never enough air for all of them. He was light headed, barely conscious.

Straker was not sure when the water started to recede. It seemed to go far more slowly than it came. The intercom came back down and Alec was talking to him but it was hard to follow. It was hard to stand once the waters were not high enough to hold him. Kate passed out a couple of times. He suspected he did himself but he was not sure. The times he felt himself dangling on the end of the rope may just have been when his legs were too weak to hold him. Only the rope was holding them up now and they were all shaking. Carrie came round on and off.

"At least you're still there." Alec said.

"Where would we go?" he joked weakly.

Alec was the first one into the cave, wading through the water long before Straker thought it was safe. They did not talk. Alec carried Kate out. One of the others took Carrie. Forbes supported Straker. He made it out to the cliff face before he passed out completely.

He woke up in bed at the hotel, Kate next to him.

He rolled over. "Darling?"

She moaned and opened her eyes. "We made it?"

"Yeah, we did." He kissed her gently. "Guess I'd better find Alec."

She gestured at a phone by the bed. "Call reception."

So he did.

"Don't get up." Alec said as he entered. "You're staying in bed till the doctors say otherwise."

"How's Carrie?" Kate asked.

"Still asleep in the next room. She's not as fit as you two. Then again, she's not as bashed up."

"And everything else?" Straker asked.

Alec gave him a quick run-down. Most of the time had been spent simply cleaning up. All the bodies had been recovered. As to what the aliens had been up to -

"We got divers down through the lower passageway. They found something down there but it was booby-trapped. Don't look like that. Yes it exploded, yes they're OK. Well, no *serious* injuries. They were lucky to be blown out into the open sea rather than against the rocks. Yeah, I know what underwater explosions do but honestly Ed, there aren't any serious injuries. As for what blew up - there wasn't enough left to tell what it was. I've had the bits shipped back to HQ but I'm not hopeful."

"Total waste of time." said Straker. "Total disaster."

Alec shrugged. "They lost, we lost. It was a bad day but we've had worse."

* * *

Kate was still exhausted when she woke up. All she wanted was to lie next to Ed for the next few days but she had something she had to do.

Alec let them up once the doctors had checked them over. Hypothermia had left no permanent damage. Besides that they had cuts and bruises and Ed had a minor concussion, not for the first time.

"I could do with something to eat." he said.

"Me too." she agreed. "But not seafood. Alec, have you been giving out the amnesia drug yet?"

He looked puzzled. "We started. Why?"

"Carrie?"

"Not till the doctors give the go-ahead."

"Good." She hauled herself out of bed. "I need to talk to her first."

Ed followed. "I'll come with you."

They sat by Carrie's bedside, all three of them pale and washed out.

"I'm sorry." Carrie said.

"You've got nothing to be sorry for," Ed told her.

"No you haven't," Kate agreed. "But there's something I need to ask you, about Dave."

She looked puzzled and upset. "What about him?"

Kate pursed her lips. "Carrie, for security purposes we're going to have to give you a drug that will make you forget everything that's happened. Don't worry, there are no side-effects. But we'll have to tell you something. Do you want to hear something like the truth or do you want us to tell you that Dave was a hero?"

Carrie looked away, apparently ashamed. "Tell me he was a hero."

So they did. It was Ed himself who told her how Dave died saving his life. They left her with one of the nurses, sobbing daintily into a handkerchief.

Kate hugged him. "That was very generous of you."

He shrugged. "It didn't cost me anything. She'll inherit the business, now, you know and we'll be taking up the contract with them. She won't know the reality but it will give you the chance to see her."

She nodded. "Though I can't help thinking that by telling her what we did -"

"What?"

"We leaving her open to the same sort of man." Kate looked out across the cliffs, across the calm sea. "It's a shame. She always said she wanted a real man. I think she was finally beginning to learn of what that meant."

She sighed and hugged her husband once more. "I suppose there just aren't enough to go

round."

"Huh?"

She pulled a face at him. "You think we should set her up with Alec?"

His puzzled face cleared. "Oh, I get you."

"No you don't. Well, you do in every other way. Talking about getting me, you think we can actually have some time to ourselves this weekend?"