

Without You

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(This is the sequel to my story **Irresistible**)

Warning: this story contains some adult material.

"There are quite a number of things I can tell you." Dr Parkins said, looking from the Commander to his wife and back again. She was an older woman, her fading blonde hair curled into a bun. "Would you like to know the baby's sex?"

It was only in recent years that the Mayland Hospital had developed its maternity section, only since the aliens had decided to breed human hybrids. This child, however, has not one of them.

"Just the one question." Commander Straker replied.

It was the one she was avoiding. This child was a consequence of an alien plot but not an intentional one.

Parkins sighed, looking from man to wife and back to man again. "I'm sorry, sir. You're not the father."

Kate Straker placed a hand on her bulging stomach. "We'd better go, then, hadn't we? We'll let you know."

She pushed herself to her feet but before she was upright her husband was supporting her. Without a backwards glance they left the office. They did not speak. They got into the car and drove away, still not speaking.

Ed parked in a lay-by by the side of a wood. "This is as private as it's going to get."

She nodded.

"What are we going to do?"

She looked out of the window. "I was hoping we weren't going to have this conversation."

"I know, honey, I know. But there are things we need to decide."

He put a hand on her arm and she looked back at him. "I don't know what I want. Do you?"

Hesitating, he said: "Yes."

Her eyes widened. "You do?"

"But I'm not the one who was raped. I'm not the one who has to carry the child."

She moved closer to him. "Tell me."

"Well..." He looked away. "You know how I feel about kids and if this one's Greg Masters'... It's not the child's fault."

"You want to keep it?" she asked. "You're prepared for it to be a Straker?"

"It?" he said gently.

"It has to be it. I can't feel close to it."

He sighed. "Then maybe we shouldn't. If you can't love the baby, maybe they'd be better off with someone else. Maybe they'd be better off not born. But you asked what I want."

She squeezed his arm and managed a half smile. "I can wait three months. What happens then I don't know but you're right, it's not the child's fault. They deserve a chance somewhere."

He nodded and started up the engine. The birds were singing as they drove away.

That was not SHADO business, of course, though it might be related to it. It did not go into any report. Only the medical one contained any information. It was not discussed with the other officers, except Alec. Everything was discussed with Alec.

Alec said nothing except "I don't know what to say." and swore at the aliens.

Ed felt as if he was in a dream, somehow circling his wife but not touching her. He had never imagined that a price like this would have to be paid, not even in the cold years between losing Mary and finding Kate, but he was also expectant. He was looking forward to the birth, even if he only saw the child once. His child, whatever the biology might say.

It was only the next day that the worst happened. No, not the worst. He had had Sam in his car because her mother needed to attend a location shoot at a nearby country house. They had used it and its grounds so often the studio was thinking of acquiring them - might be cheaper than renting. So, whatever had been intended, Sam was safe. He dropped her at the creche and she gave him a kiss on both cheeks, an affectation she must have picked up from one of the actors, before he drove round to his office and SHADO.

"Didn't the gate tell you?" Alec said before he had time to speak. "We've got one coming in straight past SID. Thought he might be the target but they're not firing."

"Interceptors?" Ed asked.

"Too far."

"Target area?"

Alec shrugged. "Somewhere around here? It's too early to tell."

Ford cleared his throat. "Excepting any course changes, sir, it's certainly Northern Europe and probably Britain. We'll know soon, it's coming in fast."

"There's another one." Alec said, checking displays. "Coming down the same track. Ayesha, keep an eye on that and make sure there aren't any more."

She nodded, intent on her job, as Straker asked: "SkyDiver?"

"SkyDiver Two is in the Atlantic, sir." Ford responded without looking up from his monitor. "Do you want me to put you through?"

"No, signal them for immediate launch and inform Captain Bambara that there are at least two to deal with." Straker moved to Ayesha. "Any more?"

"Nothing showing, sir, on SID or any other system."

"Two is enough." he grumbled.

"Wonder what they're here for this time." Alec said, half to himself.

"Isn't that always the question?"

Ford chimed in. "It's southern England, this area. SkyDiver is launched."

A moment later Bambara's mellow voice came through. "I have visual contact. Will be engaging in two minutes. Visibility excellent so you'd better look out for witnesses."

"And you'd better look out for the other ufoe." Freeman reminded her.

"Will do. Engaging now."

Alec looked across at Ed. "Hate being on the wrong end of the radio at a time like this."

Ed nodded. "It's out of our hands. Or most of it is. Ford, where exactly are they?"

"Almost directly above us but at the limit of Sky 2's range."

"And the second ufoe?"

Ayesha replied. "Still coming in on the same track roughly five minutes away."

"Sky 2's engagement is going lower." Ford continued. "There's a possibility of commercial aircraft in the area."

"Not much we can do about that." Alec said. "Too late to get them re-routed. Note and record them."

"Nothing so far." Ford continued.

Bambera again. "We hit each other and we're both going down. Sorry Commander. I'm going to try and make it back over water so Diver can pick me up."

"Good luck." was Straker's only comment before turning back to Ford. "Do we have any other SkyDiver within range?"

"No sir. Do you want the Mobiles deployed?"

Straker nodded. "I want them on the ground before the UFO is. With any luck they're no threat but the second one will be."

There was the usual tense silence, silence filtered through background noise but palpable all the same.

Then Ford: "Mobile One has visual, the UFO is coming down." He paused, then jumped, ripping off his headphones. "I think it exploded. But I've still got Mobile One on the line."

So that was one dealt with. Mobile One closed in to examine the wreckage, in case there was anything of value or concern. That only left the other.

Which proved more of a problem.

At last Ford had a definite fix. "It's headed for our training school, sir."

"Finally." Straker said. "I've been expecting that for years."

"Obvious target." Freeman said.

Straker nodded. "Let's see how they hold up. And get the other Mobiles there."

Ford was talking to Gay Bradley, head of the school since her marriage to Mark some years earlier. Straker came over to speak to her. It gave him an odd sense of déjà-vu to see her on-screen, as if she was still on Moonbase despite wearing her own hair.

"I've deployed the staff according to plan." she reported. "And I've got some of the students observing. They can step in in case of casualties."

Straker nodded. "Good. How's the equipment?"

"Working perfectly. It could just as well be a drill."

Her attention was distracted by a voice from off-screen and he could hear distant explosions.

"Mobile Three has visual contact." Ford said. "Reports they have the UFO under fire. So has the school."

"We have a hit." Gay said, the moment Ford reported the same.

"But the target is not destroyed." he continued.

One, two, three explosions rocked the camera at the school and Gay came up coughing. "Communications are damaged. I can't see you, Control, do you read me?"

"Yes, we have audio and visual." Straker assured her. "What other damage have you taken?"

"Control, do you read me? Do you read me?"

It was obvious she could no longer hear and Straker did not bother trying to get through.

He turned to Ford. "Do we still have Mobile Three in contact?"

"Yes, Commander, and Mobile Two is now in range. They report some damage to the school but the UFO is not in sight. They think it's destroyed."

"Get them to confirm that and report back." Straker ordered. "Then render any assistance

necessary. Have medical teams on standby. And as soon as it's confirmed this is wrapped up, I want people out checking for witnesses. Oh -" he half smiled, confident that this one was over and already looking at his watch for a timing "- and you'd better get on to my wife for a cover story. That's a Grade 2 listed building and if we just blew a hole in it, someone is going to want to know why."

He could just imagine Kate's comments on why they had to pick a listed building as such an obvious target in the first place.

Confirmation came in from Mobile Three that the UFO was destroyed and Ed relaxed. There were only casualty figures to come in now and it looked like those would be light. It was as if the UFO had blown away his own tensions. The baby would be okay, one way or another. Maybe the child should be adopted but it would be okay, somehow. The aliens had not won, not on any count.

"Preliminary figures indicate five wounded but no dead." Ford reported. "Medical teams on the way. They're evacuating the main house in case of structural damage."

Straker nodded. "Fine. And find my wife. She should be almost back at the studio by now."

Ford frowned. "I can't raise Colonel Straker, sir. Was she in her car? She might -" He stopped, his hands flying over the instruments. "I'm getting an emergency transponder signal from her car."

Ed registered the location and flew towards the lift, ordering a security team as he went. He felt Alec right behind him. She was ten minutes' drive from the studio, perhaps less but in the opposite direction from the training school. Neither UFO had been anywhere near her.

The car stood by the side of the road with its door open. The ground was muddy but there were no footprints. No UFO. No forensics. No Kate.

And that was where it hung.

"You can't have a senior officer simply disappear." General Henderson growled as he sat in Straker's office.

"I know that." the Commander replied. "But we've exhausted every known avenue. There are no UFOs unaccounted for. None of the human contacts we've traced have been active. There is no physical evidence, either inside the car or out."

Henderson snorted. "You can't leave it there."

"You think I intend to?" Ed took a deep breath. "But it may take time. At present I have nothing further to report and, unless you intend to scold me further, I don't see much point in you being here. Sir."

The old man scowled, then relaxed. "No, I don't suppose there is."

He got to his feet, then turned at the door. "How's your little girl?"

"Wondering where Mommy is."

"And you?"

"The same."

Henderson shook his head. "I'm sorry, Ed. You know my views on your wife and her working here but this is... unfortunate."

Ed nodded. "Thank you."

Henderson left and Straker went back to work.

"He's right, though." he told Alec. "We've hit a dead end. Where is she?"

* * *

What happened?

Kate found herself looking up at a fluorescent strip light on a plain concrete ceiling.

Where am I?

Uh, that's a classic.

Her muscles ached. She tried to bring her arms, which were above her head, down to her sides but something rattled and she found they only moved a few inches. She tugged. Nothing. And her heart began to race.

Calm down. Focus. Facts, I need facts.

She could turn her head, though it was between her bare and chained arms. Those were the facts: that she was chained, spreadeagled and naked, on a hospital bed. The bump of her child was the most prominent thing she could see.

The room had no windows, simply bare concrete walls with one plain door. The wall by her head was lined with medical equipment.

Monitors?

She noticed, almost incidentally, that wires and tubes were attached to her arms. A catheter led out of her bladder and down the side of the bed.

Not a good sign.

And there was something beyond the foot of the bed, some kind of machine. She could not raise her head high enough, no matter how she strained, to see what it was.

I don't know enough to worry about that, she told herself. I'm naked and chained up. And pregnant. What more do I need to know?

If I'm going to die, I didn't want it to be like this.

* * *

Funny code, Keith Ford thought.

He was monitoring routine but unknown transmissions, dull work and he had never known anything come of it but as the officer responsible for communications it was part of his job to set a good example. This one had four symbols repeated in a seemingly random fashion.

Four symbols? DNA?

He took a closer look. There were two sequences and they appeared to be related, sharing perhaps half the pattern.

Could be DNA.

But there was no way to be sure. He checked them against the alien sequences on the computer. No match. He logged them for future reference.

Then he had a thought.

There were a few things he could do that he probably was not allowed to, a few ways he had learned to get round the system. He could go to the Commander or better yet, to Colonel Freeman, but there was no need to bother anyone. He could do that if he was right. He checked the first sequence against Kate Straker's DNA. It matched.

At least, it did if each of the symbols fitted the values he had assigned to them. If not, it could be the recipe for candy floss for all he knew.

He checked the second sequence. That would be the baby. He separated out the unknown elements and, hands trembling, checked them against the Commander's DNA.

He looked over his shoulder.

But there was no match. Whatever it was - it could still be DNA, just someone else's - he had gone as far as he could.

It was the end of the shift so he changed out of his uniform and went home.

* * *

They never did explain. In fact, they never spoke.

It was impossible to tell the time but she guessed it was about two hours after she woke up that two men and a woman, all in white coats, entered the room.

"Hello." Kate said.

That's a stupid thing to say. Try protesting.

"Hello?" she repeated. "What's going on?"

They did not reply. They did not look at her, only at the monitors. Apparently they were content with what they saw.

"Where am I?" she asked. "Who are you? What's going on? And all the other obvious questions, if you don't mind."

They had to look at her when they came to the bed but never at her face. It was her arms and legs they were interested in. Two held her down while one man unlocked her wrist and passed it over. They chained it again, over the first, then repeated the performance with her leg so that she was lying on her side. Kate was too surprised and curious to fight. Then they left.

"Hello?" she called to the closing door.

* * *

Alec Freeman pulled every string he knew of, whether he had a right to or not. Over the years he had built up a mixed bag of contacts from the security services to the gossip columnists. Nobody knew anything, not even George Cowley at CI5.

It had been nine days and no news. He did not think about her, he did not dare.

But she would come back. She had to do.

Ed was pale and snappish. Alec could see Keith Ford wince every time he walked into Control. Yet, after the first two days, he was not working longer than usual. Every evening at 6pm he walked over to the creche and picked up his daughter, then they walked back and he drove her home.

Alec wondered what Sam was thinking. She said no more than her father did. At least, she never mentioned her mother.

They had made no public announcement, Kate was simply not there. Her meetings were on hold, Miss Mehta fended off her calls.

"At some point it will impact on the running of the studio." but Ed made no further comment as to what they would do then.

Alec worked, in the studio or out of it, but there was still no news.

* * *

Sensory deprivation. The thought came to Kate quite suddenly days, perhaps weeks, into her captivity. *It's a form of torture. I'm going to go mad.*

No I'm not. She was determined on that point.

There was one break from the monotony. Exercise.

Mostly when they came in, every few hours, they turned her from her back to her side or the other way. She had realised that that was to prevent bedsores and was grateful that they wanted or needed to do it. Once a day, however - she told herself it was that regular, there had to be some measure of time - they let her up.

Not let, took. Took her from the bed to the machine she had seen - it was just a treadmill, like they had in gyms - and chained her to it. Then they set it going and she had to walk. They left, she walked. Walked till she was almost exhausted. Then they came back and chained her to the bed. And she lay there, staring at concrete, her brain slowly dying.

* * *

Rumours were circulating around the film world, of course, rumours that it would normally have been Kate's job to suppress or deflect. No one knew for sure she had disappeared but she had missed meetings, she had not been seen.

Some said there were artistic differences between her and her husband. Some said she had been approaching other studios, that she was about to join Paramount or Universal. Some said it was more personal than that. She had had an affair. He had had an affair. He had caught her with an actor and got rid of both of them. Maybe Greg Masters had not taken an overdose or not voluntarily.

More charitable souls suggested that she had miscarried once, perhaps it had happened again. Someone had said she was looking a little plump but then, by showbiz standards she did.

Some said she had had a breakdown and gave various reasons for it. Some said she was working on a special project. Some said she was just working and not everyone had time to sit around and gossip.

The papers had not got hold of it yet but they would.

It was close to but not quite the least of SHADO's worries.

* * *

They were efficient enough, Kate had to grant them that. Nutrition came in through a tube in her arm, waste products left through a tube at the other end. She was washed on a regular basis, she was not sure what with but it made her skin uncomfortably dry. She got enough exercise to make sure the important muscles were still working and so far she had no bed sores.

And that was pretty much that. In fact, that was everything. There was nothing else. Nothing except her itching skin, the cramp in her muscles and the weight of her unwanted child. Compared with the vacuum, she was glad of them.

She played thinking games, she rehearsed scripts in her head. She went over the budget, she tried to avoid thinking about SHADO, just in case. In case of what she was not sure. She thought about Ed and Sam but bit those thoughts back, they were too sharp. She tried to remember everything she could about sensory deprivation and its effects. She was expecting hallucinations. She was not sure if auditory or visual were more likely but she speculated on what might come up. Oases came to mind and that Sherlock Holmes story with the oysters. Then she remembered he was faking it.

Would they react at all if she faked madness? She doubted it but on the other hand she might try it just for the distraction. Talking rationally to them had had no effect.

She was not prepared for the hallucination when he came. More important, she was not sure if he was a hallucination.

"Johnny?" She blinked.

She would have rubbed her eyes if her hands had been free.

He sat on the side of the bed, a bit of a struggle with his short legs, and smiled at her. He looked just like the photographs, a child arrested in time. Except that he was moving. He sat. He smiled. He reached out to her. He did not go away.

"Oh well," she said "could have been worse."

* * *

"Star light, star bright,
First star I see tonight,
I wish I may, I wish I might
Have the wish I wish tonight."

Ed Straker watched as his ash blonde daughter climbed onto her toybox and looked out of the window. He had taught her the names of the stars, she knew most of them, but she still persisted in wishing on them.

She looked back towards the door and he stepped out of the way. Why did he not want her to see him? He answered his own question: because he wanted to know what she would wish for.

She turned to face the stars again. Either he had hidden successfully or she was fooling him. Perhaps she was just not bothered if he heard.

"I wish I could have Mummy back." She hesitated. "And Daddy."

* * *

Kate slept with Johnny curled up over her bump, not knowing if it was night to day.

* * *

Time passed. Ed marked it in board meetings and UFOs shot down. That should have counted more to him now but he stumbled through the days, aware of the concern of others but unable to deal with it. Any UFO they missed might be taking her away but even that despair faded as the slow weeks past.

One thing still concerned him, the one remaining piece of family he had left.

* * *

Time passed. Kate marked it in the silent visits of her captors and the gradual swelling of her womb. She had long ago stopped trying to speak to them. Not that they punished her, they simply ignored her and now she regarded them as no more human than they did her.

She did speak, though her mouth was dry with lack of use. She spoke to her silent little visitor. Strange that he was the only hallucination she saw, though sometimes she thought she heard music or distant conversations. Perhaps she did, perhaps the room was not as soundproof as she imagined. And she spoke to the child inside her: all the old, familiar things she had said to Sam before her birth. All the old familiar things she had said to Pamela. Pamela who had never lived.

She tried not to think of Sam or Ed or any of the others but to block up her thoughts with Desert Island Discs and panel games and books she had once read but sometimes they crept through. Sometimes she wondered what would happen to either of her children and had no answers.

* * *

It was after a studio meeting Ed called Alec into his office.

"Something up?" Alec asked as he flung himself down on the corner seat.

"I'm thinking of having Sam adopted."

Alec froze. "Say that again."

"I'm thinking of having Sam adopted." There it was, clear and cold as a sheet of ice, just as Straker's face was.

Alec choked on all the responses that rushed to his mouth. He coughed hard, cleared his throat, began again: Ed saying nothing, waiting for his response all that long second.

"You can't."

Ed looked disappointed, as if the words were too obvious for words. "It would take some arranging but it's technically possible and it's the logical thing to do."

"It's ridiculous. You can't."

"You're repeating yourself."

Alec held his hand up. "Alright. You tell me why and I'll tell you why not but you can't

just spring something like that on me."

Ed nodded. "I suppose not. And as her godfather, you do have a right to be consulted. I'll speak to Miss Ealand later. As to the why, I'd have thought that was obvious."

"Tell me anyway. I'm simple, remember?"

A twitch of the lips that might in other circumstances have become a smile and Ed continued. "I can't have a family."

"No, I'm the one that can't have a family. You've got one."

Ed acknowledged the comment with a nod. "I shouldn't have a family. Not for my sake, not for SHADO's and most especially not for theirs. I should have known that after Mary and I certainly should after Johnny. As it is, with Kate gone, with the exception of Mary - whose heart I broke twice - I've killed all my family -"

"She's not dead." Alec found himself on his feet, shouting. "Kate's not dead."

Ed was staring at him, almost in horror or disgust. Alec sat back down shakily, aware of giving himself away but not knowing how Ed read it. Had he finally seen how his friend felt about his wife?

Ed's voice, when he eventually spoke, was low but his eyes blazed. "She has to be dead. You know what the alternative is, I can't live with that. She has to be dead. I'd kill her myself rather than let them... That's why Sam has to go away. Go where I can't find her."

It was Alec's turn to see now, not the present horror but the future. "Just because you couldn't, do you really think they couldn't find her?"

Ed was still looking at him, frowning now.

He pressed on. "And if you didn't know and I didn't know, who'd protect her? Because they would find her and they would use her."

Straker's voice was shaking. "Not if they thought I didn't care, I didn't want her."

"Would they believe that? Can you take the risk? And what would it do to Sam if she believed it?"

Ed slammed his hands against the desk. "She wouldn't know. She wouldn't remember."

Alec kept on. "She's four years old. She'd know what you did but she wouldn't know why and even if she blocked it out it would stay with her. You can't do that to her."

"What choice do I have?"

It was a plea for answers but Alec had none. "It's quiet. Why don't you take her home? Either way, that's the best thing."

Ed nodded. "Yes. Yes, for the moment."

* * *

Straker felt as weary as if he was climbing stairs to the Moon, not riding the lift to the surface of the Earth.

He nodded to Miss Ealand. "I ought... No, never mind. It'll do later."

She gave him a quizzical look. "Sir?"

He smiled weakly. "Alec's sent me home, I'm tired. Can you tell the creche I'll be there in a few minutes?"

She brightened at that. "Of course, sir."

He began to head in that direction but stopped in an empty corridor. Someone turned the corner to face him, one of the actors. Straker did not know his name.

The man hesitated. "Are you alright?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm fine. I just forgot something."

"If you're sure?"

"Fine, I'm fine." Ed strode off, not waiting for the man's reaction though he could almost feel his eyes burning in his back.

He did not go to the creche but made the decision almost subconsciously to venture into Kate's office. Miss Mehta was still at the outer desk, keeping up the pretence of normality. She looked up at him, opened her mouth but decided against speaking. Kate's door was locked and she reached for the key card but Straker had his before her. He entered and closed the door.

Now he did not know what he had come for. Something, an object, a comfort he could hold in his hand. There were less ornaments than there had been. Some had disappeared after the attack by Greg Masters, though he did not remember them being broken. The photographs on her desk had duplicates in albums at home. He opened the drawers one by one. They had been cleared of anything important. There seemed a ridiculous amount of rubber bands in the almost empty space.

At the back of the second drawer down was a row of cassette tapes. Each had a handwritten label, blue Biro on white card. He flipped one out from the middle and grasped it in his hand, felt the hard edges, a corner driving into his flesh. That would do. He had not even read the label but that would do.

He shut the drawer and resumed his journey to the creche.

* * *

Alec Freeman found himself in a place he usually took trouble to avoid - Dr Jackson's office. He glared at the man supposed be responsible for SHADO's mental health, swallowed his pride and said it. "Ed needs your help. I think he's on the edge of a breakdown and we don't have anywhere else to go."

Jackson smiled a smile that made Freeman expect to see fangs. "What has brought you to this belief, Colonel?"

"I think you'd better hear that from him, not me."

"Very well. The Commander has been conspicuously avoiding me - perhaps for the reasons you yourself fear - but I think I can do something about that."

Alec was not sure if he meant he could help him or simply see him.

"Is that it?" he asked.

"No, sit down."

Reluctantly, Freeman sat. "This is confidential, isn't it? Morale's bad enough as it is and I certainly don't want Henderson finding out."

"No indeed, I do not believe that would be helpful. I imagine you would also prefer it if the Commander did not find out you were here?"

Alec harrumphed. "I don't have any secrets from Ed."

"Really?" Jackson sat forwards, hands steeped.

"Really."

"Interesting. And how are you reacting to the loss of Colonel Straker?"

Alec was on his feet before his brain could tell them not to. "I - I have work to do. Someone has to keep SHADO running."

Jackson's eyes went right through him but he did not pursue the question. "We may not have much in common, Colonel, but I too am here to keep SHADO running - as you seem, in part, to have noticed. If you need me, you obviously know where to find me."

Alec managed to keep his feet from running out of there.

Paul Foster had taken over in Control. "You alright? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"No, just Jackson."

"Oh, that explains it."

"I'm going home, Paul. If anything comes up don't call Ed, call me. Not unless it's complete end of the universe kind of stuff."

Foster nodded. "Let's hope we all get a quiet night."

A few minutes later Alec walked into his bachelor pad alone. At least Ed had Sam. How could he think of giving her away? But Alec understood. She would never be safe while she was a Straker. Maybe she would never be safe but Ed would collapse without her and if Ed collapsed, how would the world cope?

Maybe he should talk to Henderson. The general had been suspiciously quiet these last few weeks. Maybe he thought they would all come crashing down without his help and preferred not to get his hands dirty. Or maybe he felt as lost as the rest of them.

Alec took a half empty bottle of whisky from the drinks cabinet and went to the kitchen in search of a clean glass. He looked at the glass. He looked at the bottle. He poured the whisky down the sink. Drink was the last thing he needed right now.

He knew it was only a gesture - he could easily get more - but he poured away all the alcohol in the flat, a good two hundred pounds worth. He stopped short at the two bottles of vintage champagne. He would drink those when Kate came back.

He made coffee and went to bed.

* * *

It was late. Ed had made Sam's tea and then her supper, letting her watch television past her bedtime. He watched her. Her breathing, her careful movements, her quick smiles. He had no idea what he would do without her and no other notion as to how he could keep her safe. Perhaps Alec was right, perhaps he never could.

He had tucked her into bed and read her a bedtime story. She had asked for *Peter Pan* tonight and he had read her two chapters, then she had settled down quietly.

Now he was alone. He took the cassette from his jacket pocket and examined it. The label was in Kate's handwriting - *The World's Most Depressing Songs*. Down the side was a list of individual titles, mostly ten years old or more: *Paint It Black*, *Goodbye To Love*, *Cathy's Clown*. He recognised most of them.

He thought about getting a drink. They kept alcohol in the house for guests but he found himself heading towards it more and more often these last few weeks. He had not done it yet, he knew that if he did it would take him over. Maybe Alec was right, maybe it did take more self-control to know when to stop than not to touch it at all.

He put the tape into the hi-fi, noting that it was halfway through. It took him a moment to recognise the song. It was only when the words began and that gut-wrenching voice:

No, I can't forget this evening

Nor your face as you were leaving -

It was *Without You*.

He reached out to stop it but his hand would not obey him. He realised he was shaking. His face was wet.

I can't live

If living is without you.

I can't live -

Sam was there, hugging him, crying herself.

"It's okay baby, it's okay. We'll get by. It's okay."

"Don't go away, Daddy."

"I won't." He wasn't sure he meant it. He wanted to but either way he would betray her.
*How I had you close
And then I let you go.
And now it's only fair that I should let you know -*

* * *

Through the round window we can see a stream and a little hill. On top of the hill is a castle, which has seven towers. That's where we're going to live: you, me and Johnny. And maybe Daddy and Sam will join us later.

Kate paused for a moment in the construction of her new world, then rallied.

The castle has a big drawbridge we can pull up to keep people out but a landing pad for all our friends to visit. And we have a fire-breathing dragon for defence. He has green, iridescent scales and a spiny crest and his name is Jackson.

But like all the other worlds, it was just out of reach.

* * *

Jackson was in Straker's office when he came in.

Ed sighed. "What?"

"I'm merely here to enquire after your welfare."

"Yeah, right." Ed paused. "You want to help?"

"Yes."

"Then come up with a plan to keep my daughter safe. Top marks if you can keep her with me."

Jackson looked at him. "Surely that's a job for Security?"

Ed raised an eyebrow. "You think I haven't spoken to them? And when did you ever stick to your field? Give me something I can use."

Jackson paused, frowning. "Very well. It will be a challenge."

* * *

Time passed. Kate built three separate worlds for herself and the children: a castle through the round window, a space station through the square window and a forest through the arched window. She saw less and less of Johnny but the baby inside her kicked and lived.

* * *

Time passed. SHADO got used to the idea of having four Colonels again, though many of the newer staff could not remember a time when there had been any less than five. Discussions were held as to how to explain Kate's absence to the world.

"We're going to have to do it sooner or later." Ed said and he marked a date on the calendar. "After that, she is officially dead."

Alec looked at the date and looked at Ed but neither of them spoke.

"What was it?" Paul Foster asked as they got out.

"The day the baby's due." Alec replied.

* * *

Kate noticed the doctors were taking more interest in her as the time for delivery grew near. Not in herself, they still treated her as an inanimate object, but in the instrument readings. Their visits doubled, as near as she could tell, and she spent more time on the treadmill.

It got in the way of her fantasies. She tried talking to them once again but they still did not respond. She kept on dreaming.

* * *

"I'll take this month's inspection of Moonbase." Straker informed Freeman.

"Okay." Alec looked at him. "I was going to ask you about that. Only it covers the day..."

"The day we announce Kate is dead."

"You're putting it off, aren't you?"

Ed nodded. "It'll do when I get back. Only -"

"Only you've always felt more comfortable there."

Ed almost managed a wry grin. "Do we have to keep finishing each other's sentences?"

"But it's true?"

"Yes, it's true." Ed turned away. "Still don't have a cover story."

"We'll think of something."

So, a few days later, Commander Straker took a flight to the Moon.

"Er, Colonel..." Keith Ford turned in Alec's direction.

"What is it?"

"SID's reporting two ufoes, trajectory going from his direction towards the Moon."

Alec swore. "Alert the Commander. Tell him it's going to be a rough ride."

"They're almost there, sir. They'll be docking just as UFOs reach them." Ford manipulated his controls and Nina Barry's face came up on the monitor.

"We're tracking everyone, Colonel." she reported. "Interceptors are ready to launch."

"Do that." Alec said. "Tell them to protect the Commander. And don't tell him I said that."

"I heard it." Straker was on audio. "Tell them to protect the base."

"You're the obvious target." Alec protested. "It's too much of a coincidence."

"I'll tell them to blow them to pieces, sirs." Nina replied. "Now, if you don't mind..."

"Go ahead, Nina." Straker replied.

Three interceptors, two UFOs but the sums were not quite that simple. Interceptor One got in a glancing blow and had to bank tightly to avoid retaliation. The second UFO blasted Interceptor Three before it could get its missile off.

"I've got no firing control."

"Other damage?" Nina asked.

"Some. I can get back but I'm no use out here."

"OK, withdraw. Interceptor Two, the ball's in your court. Try and take one out and we'll do the rest."

"Great, let me line this up."

Interceptor Two shot. It hit, the UFO juddering back and forth. The other came past, chasing the SHADO craft home. The first alien exploded, knocking its fellow off its track.

"Hey, look at that!" the pilot exclaimed.

"Take the bow when you get home." Straker said. "It's not destroyed yet."

The interceptors raced for base, the alien close on their tails. It fired off a few weak, inaccurate shots. As the SHADO craft landed, it skimmed over their heads. The base's guns opened fire. Two hits. The UFO slammed into the cratered surface and exploded.

"Damage report." Nina ordered.

"Minimal." came the reply. "No leaks."

She sighed. "Welcome to Moonbase, Commander."

* * *

When the pain struck, it took Kate a while to realise what it was. She did get cramps, often, terrible cramps and would roll from side to side in an effort to relieve them. But this pain passed and she sighed with relief until it struck again.

Contractions.

How does the baby know it's time? she thought. *How does my body know?* And : *Don't come, don't come. It's all over if you come.* Over how she did not know but it would be an end for one or both of them.

The white-coated jailers came in. She thought for a moment that they knew but they simply went through the usual motions.

Shan't tell you. Shan't let you take my baby.

She gasped. They looked. The pain had struck from behind before she had had a chance to ready herself. She swallowed it but they were looking now. They knew.

They spoke in Latin or medical jargon, it was all the same to her. One went out and returned a moment later with an older man she had only seen once or twice. He checked the instruments, gave some instructions and went out, taking all but one with him. That one remained perched on the rail of the treadmill, watching her. He timed her from contraction to contraction. She did not need him to tell her the intervals were getting shorter - not that he would tell her.

She pulled against her shackles in her agony but there was no relief and she knew it would only get worse. It had been hard enough giving birth to Sam - hard but quick - in the Mayland, properly attended. Now she was chained to the bed in a medical cell. Surely they would not let the baby die now?

The timings met with her captor's approval or concern and he hurried out but she was not alone for long. Soon there were half a dozen of them. They were talking over her head, literally. They did not even bother to tell her to push but she pushed anyway. She knew what to do.

It went well, thank goodness. She did not know what they would have done if it had not. Would they have ripped her open?

Something was wrong. It was more in their tone than in their words. She could feel nothing different, it must be with the baby. Busy hands were between her legs, doing things. Not forceps, she would have felt forceps.

It was the umbilical cord, her intuition told her. It was around the baby's neck.

"Tell me." she cried. "What's happening?"

They did not.

Long moments, then they relaxed. Only one was left supporting the baby. Then she felt the child slip from her and she gasped with relief.

"Boy or girl?" she asked, exhausted.

One, a nurse she presumed, was wrapping the child in a blanket. There was nothing to wash with. They must have cut the umbilical cord already. They were heading for the door. They were taking her child away.

"Please," she said, "let me see my baby. Please. At least tell me if it's a boy or a girl."

They were moving out of the door.

"Please."

They were gone.

Kate collapsed back into dark oblivion.

* * *

Keith Ford sat at his controls, bored. He had learnt long ago that war was like that, especially this war. Nothing might happen for weeks, months even, but you could not relax in case this was the moment when the aliens chose to launch an all-out assault. Or a sneak attack.

Or a trick to undermine morale. Or a simple organ raid. And whatever it was, he had to be on top of it and he was but there was no denying that some days it was boring.

He was running through some routine monitoring of broadcasts. There was a bad pile-up on the M4 and two new pirate radio stations, one of which was perilously close to SHADO's own frequencies. He noted that down and alerted the appropriate authorities.

Moving the dial slightly he heard something familiar. There was that four base code again, the one he had come across several weeks ago. The one that looked like DNA. It was on a different frequency, however. He brought up the record of the previous transmission on screen. It was identical, which was odd but not necessarily suspicious. Still, if it was something to do with Mrs Straker -

A thought struck him, a nasty one but he had to check it out.

"Ayesha?"

"Yes?"

"Monitor this for me, will you? And get it triangulated."

She was flicking controls to transfer it to her station as he stood up. "What d'you think it is it?"

"I'm not sure but I need to ask Colonel Freeman something he's not going to want to hear."

"Be thankful it's not the Commander."

"Him I wouldn't ask." *Not this question.*

Ford approach the Colonel's office and was admitted. Freeman gestured him to a seat but he remained standing, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

"What's up, Keith?"

"Colonel, you have to understand I have a good reason for asking this question."

Alec chuckled. "It's that bad, is it?"

"You're not going to like it."

"Go on."

Keith took a deep breath and blurted it out. "Is there any chance the Commander isn't the father of Mrs Straker's baby?"

Freeman's frown drew in like a thundercloud and Ford knew he had blown it this time but what the Colonel said was: "If you were anyone else I'd be worried. And what's your reason for asking?"

Keith told him.

Alec pushed up from the chair. "Get me the details."

"Yes, sir." At the door, Ford turned back. "It was that actor, wasn't it? He attacked her."

"Yes. And I think you're the fifth person to find that out."

"Do you have his DNA? I can run a comparison to be sure."

Alec shook his head. "Send the details to Schroder, you deal with the transmission. And well done."

Ford hung his head. "I should have realised sooner."

"We were trying to make sure no one did. Now get going."

* * *

Freeman was in conference with Foster, Lake and Schroder when Ford came back carrying a sheaf of papers. "Do you want the good news or the bad news, sir?"

Freeman looked up from his seat. "Go on, spit it out."

"We've got a location - it's in Norfolk, about five miles from the coast and isolated. The

bad news is it's maternity hospital."

Foster groaned. "Another breeding colony?"

"Don't know, sir. We're checking the details now."

"Never mind that." Alec said. "We need surveillance."

Ford nodded. "Yes sir, already up and running. We've borrowed a spy satellite from the Americans and we're moving in some of our own remote sensing gear."

"Good. Paul, you're with me on the operation. Make sure our people know it's a mother and baby job."

Foster nodded sharply.

Freeman turned to Lake and Schroder. "You two need to be ready to test every kid we find for traces alien influence. Ginny, I also need you to fob Ed off if he calls before I get back."

"Alec!" Lake protested.

"I'm not expecting you to do anything criminal, I just don't want him bothered until we have something definite."

"Alright." she said. "But I won't tell him a straight out lie."

He nodded. "And you, Ford, if this does turn out to be a breeding colony - looks like they're being more subtle if it is - I'll need you to trace every child that's ever been born there. Don't tell me, you're on to it already."

Ford managed a slight smile. "It had occurred to me, sir. I'll get it started as soon as the retrieval operation is concluded."

One of the technicians came in and murmured something to Ford.

"Uh-oh." He hurried out and the others followed him.

On one screen of his station was a picture that was momentarily hard to decipher but resolved itself into an overhead shot of a large vehicle, an ambulance perhaps, running along a minor country road.

"It's just left the hospital, sir." Ford said, checking his data. "We don't know who's on board."

"No but I can guess." Freeman muttered.

"I'll get it." Foster said. "If I can have the helicopters I can cut it off."

Freeman nodded. "Go. But try and take out their communications first or they'll be waiting for us at the hospital."

* * *

Paul Foster took the three helicopters that were standing ready on the pad at the back of the studio, slipping into the pilot's seat of one himself. From the outside they looked like civilian aircraft. In his headphones he could hear Keith Ford updating him on the position of the ambulance.

"Still keeping to backroads but it's heading consistently south."

They would intercept it more quickly than he had anticipated.

"You two hang back." he instructed the other pilots. "Stay on the edge of visual range, we don't want to spook them."

The others acknowledged. In a moment they were in the air. The built up South was falling away below them and they were soon into rural East Anglia. Anything could happen on these remote farms, you could hide a thousand UFOs. He eyed the skies warily but Control would advise him of any aerial activity.

"You're within five miles of the target." Ford said eventually, then: "You should have

visual contact."

"Well I don't." Where was it? "Hang on, I have something. I'm going for a high-level pass to check it out."

He increased altitude a little and passed over it as if he was simply going about his business. "You two stay back. Yes, it's an ambulance but that's all I can tell. Ford, d'you have any more on it?"

"Sorry, sir, but it did come from the hospital."

"Okay." Foster frowned, turning the chopper in a wide arc. "Do you have any idea how they communicate?"

There was a babble of voices in the background. "Some kind of radio?"

"Well obviously. I see an aerial but nothing out of the ordinary." Then he realised the white vehicle was moving away. "They're speeding up, they're onto me. Two and three, back me up."

He made a swift pass over the top of the ambulance as it tried to speed away. It was not really the vehicle for that, even if they had altered the engine. On the other hand he had no idea if they were armed but he had to stop it without damage to those inside. A baby. The Commander's baby.

The lane was narrow, a little further up were high hedges and a bend. He pulled upwards, checking for traffic but there was none.

"Don't let them retreat." he ordered.

He caught the ambulance just before the bend. It chipped his skids as he took the aerial off. Foster smiled. He wished he could communicate with those on board but he guessed they were getting the message. Still, there was no time to lose.

He was past them now. They were slowing. He swung the chopper in a tight arc.

"Two, stay airborne, cover us from above. Three, come down behind them."

He brought his own craft down vertically to land fifty feet in front of the ambulance, observing as he did so that the others were following his orders. The great, white bulk of the vehicle sat there as if it was glowering at him. He could see the driver and his mate through the windscreen. They just sat there, as still as the ambulance.

Foster spoke, both to the crew on his own craft and to the others. "I'm going in. Three, send two people to check out the back - and be careful. The rest of you cover us. Remember they could be working for the aliens, they could be brainwashed, they could be exactly what they appear to be. We don't know how they'll react."

He reached for his gun as he got out but held it down. If it came to a fight he would be relying on the others. This was for the ambulance men to see but he did not want to unduly provoke or alarm them.

He walked slowly across, holding his gun where they could see it. He had no view of what was going on at the back, the narrow lane was completely blocked between the high hedges, nor could he hear anything except the second helicopter buzzing overhead and one bird singing, oblivious to all the activity.

He opened the heavy passenger door of the vehicle. Both men put their hands up.

"What's going on?" asked the driver. "Is this a hijack?"

"Who have you got in the back?" Foster asked.

"It's a kidnapping?"

"Who?"

"Just a baby." the man said. "A newborn. Got to deliver it to the father in London."

"And the mother?"

The man shook his head. "No, a nurse. Mother's still in the hospital, I was told."

"And you didn't think that was odd?" Foster asked.

"You get odd every day in my job, mate. Like yours, by the look of it."

Someone was approaching down the side. Foster half turned. It was one of his own men.

"We found a baby and a nurse, sir. Is that what we were looking for?"

Paul sighed. "Well, we're halfway there."

He gave orders for the ambulance to be cleared and the adults to be taken into custody.

The baby, its shock of dark hair showing above the blanket, he gave to Garson who was a father himself. Then he took the helicopter up. Control put him through to Alec, on the road to Norfolk.

"We've got a baby, I don't know if it's the right one. I'm taking it to the Mayland."

"It?" Alec asked. "Is it a boy a girl?"

"I didn't look." Paul said. "I had other things on my mind."

Alec managed a chuckle. "Let me know if he or she is our baby. Keith Ford has the details."

"Keith Ford seems know more than I do."

"Yes, Colonel." Alec said. "That's because he pays attention."

Foster put down on the roof of the Mayland, it seemed like only a moment later. Medical staff were there to receive the child. Foster sighed and got a lift back to the studio. He stopped the car a few moments later and sent it back, climbing once more into his aircraft. He needed to refuel but even so, he could still make it to Norfolk in time to meet Alec.

* * *

Alec Freeman's biggest worry now was that the ambulance had got a message through to the hospital. If so, the enemy would know they were coming. He wondered what kind of resistance a maternity hospital in the middle of the English countryside could put up. Enough to get people killed he was sure. His people or innocent bystanders - the most innocent newborn babies - or Kate herself. If she was alive, if that was her child, if she had not been moved. All these ifs were trying to eat like acid into every part of him but he kept his mind on the minute details of the raid, still staring at photographs and plans that Ford had got for him. He checked and rechecked his deployments. They were as good as he could make them but everyone knew that anything could happen once they got in there.

He really wondered if he should have told Ed. Again he came to the same conclusion - no. It would do him no good.

* * *

"Commander Straker from Moonbase for you, Colonel." Ayesha told Lake in Control.

Lake nodded reluctantly, willing her shoulders not to tense. "Put him through."

Reception was a little worse than normal, a few dots and flecks reminded her how far away her commanding officer was. "Lake here, sir."

"No Alec?" Straker asked.

"No sir, he's above ground." It came out more smoothly than she had thought.

"Doesn't matter. The sunspot activity is causing a few problems on the sensors."

"I can see that on screen, sir."

"Quite. So I'm staying a few hours to help Nina with things here and until there are better conditions for the flight."

Lake nodded. "Makes sense. Is there anything else?"

"Not if you don't have anything to report."

Her mouth opened before she had decided what to say. "No, nothing. I'll let everyone know."

Ed signed off and the whole of Control breathed a sigh of relief.

Ayesha looked at her. "If he finds out..."

"That's Colonel Freeman's problem, I'll just duck."

* * *

Alec Freeman walked up the sweeping drive to the long, low building that was the hospital. It looked like it dated from the late eighteen hundreds, a bad copy of Sandringham, probably once described as a shooting lodge. He walked because they had not brought anything that would pass for an ordinary car and he did not wish to go in with all guns blazing. Behind him walked Harrison, a tall Jamaican who reminded him a little of Peter Carlin but without that extra spark that it took for a command position. Everyone else was out of sight, waiting for his word. They could hear every word, he was fully miked up.

As he rang the doorbell he refrained from giving them any last instructions. That would be more for his benefit than theirs and he did not want to sound like he was wittering on.

The door was opened by a nurse in uniform. "Can I help you?"

"I'd like to see Dr Danbury, please."

She stepped aside. "I'll see if he's free. Are you a father?"

He smiled. "No, I'm visiting a friend."

The reception hall was large and the stairs heavily wooden. Thick carpet muffled their footsteps as they ascended. There were plenty of people around, mostly women. Some were nurses, some were patients. There were plenty of babies being carried or wheeled here or there. He was right not to have ordered an assault.

The door of the office was also heavily wooden, adorned with a nameplate and a finger guard above the brass handle. The nurse knocked and went in. Alec did not try to follow her, not for the moment.

She returned promptly. "Dr Danbury will see you, gentlemen."

Alec smiled at her once more and entered. The office looked more modern and professional - full of filing cabinets, a computer on the desk but a view over the gardens. Danbury looked depressingly normal except for his small goatee.

He waved them to a couple of comfortable looking armchairs. "What can I do for you, gentlemen? When I get two visitors, I usually expect one of them to be female."

He smiled a small, professional smile and Alec echoed it. "We're looking for someone. A friend. Her name is Kate Straker."

If there was any reaction, he did not see it.

"Straker? No, we don't have anyone by that name."

"You're sure?" Alec asked. "Your patients must come and go pretty quickly."

"They do indeed but I've never had a problem keeping track of them."

"Didn't mean to imply you had."

There was a moment's silence as each considered their positions. Harrison sat there stolidly, waiting for instructions. That was his job.

"What brings you here?" Danbury asked. "Surely you're not here on the off chance?"

"Information. I was told she might be here. Perhaps she's using another name. Her husband owns a film studio, you know."

Danbury frowned. "Then I'd have to respect her confidentiality. You can take a look

through the public rooms if you like but not the private ones."

Alec nodded. "I'll do that, thank you, though I don't suppose I'll see her. Are you sure you don't have anyone who's been here three months?"

Danbury pulled back. "Three months? That's a long time."

"Isn't it? You're sure? Because my information was very good and I will find her."

Danbury shot to his feet. "I don't know what you're threatening -"

Alec smiled. "I didn't threaten anything - but I could."

"I don't know anyone by that name. I think you'd better leave."

Alec got lazily to his feet, Harrison echoing him. "Not the name, then, but three months means something to you. Tell me where she is and you might still have a hospital. If not, I shall take all those nice ladies out of here and take the place apart brick by brick."

"Get out." Danbury shouted. "Get out."

"That the best you can do?" Alec stepped towards him. "No 'I'll call the police'? Nothing like that? You're only digging your own grave. And I could mean that literally."

He moved around the desk. He was only two feet away from him, on the verge of invading his personal space.

Danbury caved backwards into his chair. "There's a woman in a coma, no identification. I was told it was being looked into, I'd be told if they found out. I never have been."

Alec pulled back a little. "Where is she?"

"In the basement. I only saw her when they brought her in."

"And the baby?"

"Gave birth this morning. They took him away."

Alec nodded. "Show me where she is. If she's all right, if you haven't done anything, you'll be alright."

Danbury nodded, got up again. "I'll take you down there."

Alec followed him out. He knew the man was lying. How much could be worked out later. He did think he was taking him to Kate, probably. The question was, how much of a trap was this?

Danbury took them along the corridor, away from the route they had entered by. "We'll go down the backstairs, it's more... Well..."

"Discreet?" Alec supplied.

"Yes."

This first floor was quite luxurious and still rather Victorian in its tone. Through a door almost identical to that of the office they passed to a more functional staircase, though even this had a carved wooden banister. There was a door at the bottom of the first flight but they carried on down and emerged into a corridor of white-painted brick. There were no windows but a great many doors, all of which were modern and fitted with locks.

"This is where you keep a patient in a coma?" Alec asked.

"It's private, convenient." Danbury insisted. "We didn't want to disturb the other patients and she wasn't exactly looking at the decor."

"Go on." Alec said. "Which room?"

"That one." He indicated one further down on the right.

Alec tensed slightly as Danbury reached into his pocket but he came out with a rattling bunch of keys. He unlocked the door and pushed it open, stepping aside. The room was dark.

Alec looked him up and down, half smiling. "Why don't you switch the light on?"

"Very well." He was over articulating slightly. "I shall just step inside."

He did, switched the light on then disappeared behind the door. Alec raised his eyes to heaven, shoving the door back with considerable force. It bounced with more than one cry of pain.

Freeman stepped in, drawing his gun for the first time. Harrison was right behind him. They took in the details of the concrete storeroom, boxes higgledy-piggledy on the floor. There were two men behind the door, besides Danbury. One was hugging himself, as if the door might have cracked a rib. A baseball bat lay at his feet. Another, bigger, was still hanging on to a pickaxe handle.

Alec looked at him. "Drop that."

He did, staring at the gun.

The Colonel shook his head. "You're just not playing in the same league, are you?"

He gestured for Harrison to come forward and secure them. Then he took his radio from his pocket. "Did you get all that?"

There was a slight crackle caused by his being below ground. "Yes, sir. Sounded like a fight."

"Not much of one. This lot are strictly amateurs. I want you to move in and secure the place but remember -"

"It's full of mothers and babies, sir?"

"That and an amateur can kill you just as dead as a professional." He signed off and turned to Danbury. "You are finished but if you want to go out with anything approaching dignity, you show me where she is right now."

Danbury hung his head and shuffled towards the door. "She's on this corridor. We didn't hurt her, we simply kept her here as instructed."

Alec followed him. "And she didn't try to get out?"

"We were told to expect that."

"So what did you do?"

"We restrained her, that's all."

They were headed along the corridor.

"And why did you think she needed to be kept here, restrained?" Alec growled.

"None of my business."

"You're a doctor, she's your patient."

"The delivery was perfectly successful."

"Is that all that matters to you?"

They were at another door, almost at the far end. Danbury reached for his keys.

"If this is another trap" Alec said "you'll be carried out of here."

"It's not a trap."

"Depending on what I find, you might be anyway. You're not going to tell me why you did it, are you?"

Danbury shrugged. "It was good business, the money helps provide services for the rest of the home. It's best for everyone."

"Not for you." Alec hit him over the head with his gun butt and the man crumpled.

Reluctantly Freeman opened the door.

She was there, this time. The light was on, that was good. He hardly dared look at her. He had to look. But she did not.

She was naked, chained to the bed, colourless, staring at the ceiling.

"Kate?" he raised his voice. "Kate?"

She did not react.

He moved closer, spotting the keys on the wall amongst the medical equipment. "Kate, can you hear me?"

Still nothing.

Then, slowly, she turned her head.

"Alec?" Her voice was no more than a croak. "Are you real?"

"I'm real." He hurried to her, keeping his eyes on her face. Her hair was lank was sweat. He slipped his jacket off and covered her with it. "Just keep still, I'll get you out of here."

She raised an exhausted smile. "I've been still for three months."

"Yeah, right." He chuckled, reaching for the keys and rapidly unchaining her. Her wrists and ankles were ringed with scar tissue so that he winced.

When she was free she slowly flexed her muscles. She tried to sit up but only made it a couple of inches.

He put his arm round her, then flinched.

Mustn't touch.

She looked into his eyes, deep and exhausted. Everything went still.

"Hold me." she said and just for once he allowed himself that luxury.

So they stayed.

His head snapped round. He had no idea of the passage of time but he sensed someone else present. Paul Foster was framed in the doorway.

Foster looked at Kate and breathed a loud sigh of relief. To both of them he said: "I took the baby to the Mayland. I thought you might need a lift."

Alec nodded. "Can you get a blanket and a stretcher?"

"Of course."

"Paul." Kate croaked. "The baby?"

"He's fine. It's just a precaution."

"He?" she paused and for a moment Alec wondered if they had the wrong child. Then she continued "They wouldn't tell me."

Alec held her closer. "It's okay, you'll see him soon."

Foster went out, looking over his shoulder.

"Where's Ed?" she asked, almost as if she feared the answer.

"You mean how is he? Don't worry, he's fine. I just didn't tell him."

She managed a rough chuckle at that and he explained as the medical team came in and gently got her ready to travel. Foster was waiting with the aircraft. Alec looked at Kate and back at the hospital. It had been pacified without serious incident.

"Paul, can you take over here?"

"Sure. You'll fly her back?"

He nodded. "Find out who we need to detain and who we can get rid of. And see how normal you can make things look."

Foster acknowledged him and headed back to the building. Freeman took the pilot's seat.

* * *

Kate slept for the short ride back to the Home Counties but she was awake as soon as they reached the Mayland. Alec walked beside her as they took her in.

"When does Ed get back?" Her voice was already clearer.

"Soon. You'll see him soon."

"No."

"No?" he looked at her. "You don't want to?"

She shook her head, though in her horizontal position it was more of a roll. "Not until I'm sure I'm alright. Not... Not until I've seen Jackson. I couldn't stand to have them back and lose them again."

Alec nodded silently.

"But I want my baby." she continued. "He won't know the difference."

* * *

Straker was surprised to find his second-in-command waiting for him when he reached Earth. "Has something happened?"

"Yes. Get in the car."

"Tell me now."

Alec smiled at him. "You're going to want some privacy on this one. Get in the car."

So Straker placed his bag in the boot and got in the car. "Now are you going to tell me?"

"Wait till we're parked."

"We are parked."

"Wait till we're parked somewhere else." Freeman started the car up.

"Alec! You'd think you were taking me down Lover's Lane or something."

A wicked smile crossed the Colonel's face. "That's an idea. But you'll understand when I tell you."

So Straker was patient while Freeman drove them to a wooded, deserted picnic place halfway back to the studio. "Is this Lover's Lane?"

Alec parked the car and looked at him. "Well, I've been here before. But forget that. What's the best news you can think of?"

Ed raised an eyebrow. "The aliens ran home flying a white flag?"

"That'd be nice. But what's the *best* news you can think of. For you, personally."

An idea began to flicker and he said it before he meant to. "She's alive."

Alec simply nodded and he took in a deep breath. "You're sure?"

"Took her to the Mayland myself."

"How bad?"

Alec's brows lowered. "Better than we have any right to expect - but it's been three months."

Ed nodded. "Was she tortured?"

"Sensory deprivation. Maybe more. I don't know."

Ed tried to concentrate on his breathing as his thoughts whirled. "She's alive."

"Yes."

"And the baby?"

"Him too. And he appears to be perfectly normal. He's..."

Ed looked at him sharply. "What?"

Alec looked away. "Not yours."

"I knew that." He looked out at the trees, remembering a conversation three months before, wishing he had resolved the issue then. "Right at this moment - at any moment - I don't care. So, start the car."

Alec did so. "Just be patient. She... Well..." He told him what Kate had insisted.

To his own surprise, Ed quirked a smile. "She's still herself, then."

"Looks like it."

The next few hours were torn between hope and frustration. Ed paced and fumed, more

like the Commander of old. Freeman gave up trying to calm him down. Towards the end of the afternoon Schroder and Jackson came through together.

"The baby is fine." Schroder informed them. "We've run all the usual tests and several unusual ones. We can't find any cause for concern."

"And Kate?" Straker asked.

"She's very weak, of course, but there's little in the way of injury except normal birth trauma. It will take a while but she should make a full recovery."

Straker nodded. "Thank you."

He turned to Jackson, who did not need to be asked. The usual cold smile lit his face, rarely a good sign. "I have spoken at length to Mrs Straker. She has some understandable difficulties and I look forward to observing the effect of prolonged sensory deprivation on her."

Straker stared at him coldly.

"But she seems to have adjusted admirably and shows no sign of any brainwashing."

"She's all right? I can see her?"

Schroder nodded. "Like I said, she's weak but I think home would be the best place for her."

Ed let out three months' worth of held breath. "Take me to her."

Alec slipped away. "I'll arrange the practicalities."

She was sitting in a chair in one of the hospital's examination rooms. The baby was kicking on the table in front of her. She looked up as he came in and smiled uncertainly. "Ed?"

They embraced for a long time, until Kate reluctantly pushed him away. "I need to sit down."

He let her, holding his finger out to the baby who clutched at it strongly. "Our son, if you want him to be."

"I do." she said. "I do. Things have changed. I'll tell you about it but not here, I want to go home."

He put his hand on her shoulder. "Of course. I'll see about the baby things and Sam, then we can slip out."

She shook her head. "No. No, I think I have to let people know I'm back. Can we go through Control?"

"If you're sure that's what you want."

She nodded.

Straker went to the door to find out about baby things but Alec met him as he did so. "The car can take the baby basket safely and Sam will meet you up top. She hasn't been told, yet. Anything else?"

"Everything else is arranged? Diapers, that sort of thing."

"I told you, yes. And I've fetched a buggy for Kate."

So they made it to Control, Alec carrying the baby protectively while Straker drove his wife, bringing her up to date as they went, but she stepped off in the corridor outside. She was going to walk in. Already the whisper was running through HQ and people who saw them stopped and gawked until Ed's icy stare got them moving again.

"You really can't blame them." she said. "That's what this little publicity trip is for."

"They still have work to do." he growled but he could not find it in his heart to be convincing.

The chatter in Control stopped dead when they saw her. Then Ayesha ran forward and

hugged her, provoking a gale of relieved laughter. SHADO had got its heart back.

Ed had someone else to speak to. He stepped towards one of the instrument panels.
"Lieutenant?"

"Sir?" Ford jumped, of course. Typical that he was the one person still concentrating on his job.

"I gather this is down to you. Thank you."

The man blushed. "I was just doing my job, sir. I wish I'd done it earlier."

"You did it - and she's back. Kate and I would like you to be godfather to the baby. He wouldn't be here otherwise."

He turned away before Ford could answer. He was hardly going to refuse.

Kate was surrounded by anyone and everyone but at a look she pulled away from them.
"If you'll excuse me, I have to go home now. I'm rather tired."

He put his arm round her as they took his office to the surface. Sam was playing with Miss Ealand. She came running up.

"Mummy! Mummy! You're home."

Greetings, hugs, smiles, tears. Then Alec brought the baby forward and Sam peered into his basket.

"Hello Adam."

"Adam?" Kate asked.

Sam looked at her. "That's his name."

Kate looked at Ed.

He shrugged. "I wasn't thinking of anything. Were you?"

"Not really. Adam it is, then."

Again, all three of them: "Let's go home."

In the corridor was the showbiz correspondent of the Mirror. His jaw dropped. "Mrs Straker!"

"Hello Jim."

"Everyone was beginning to wonder where you were."

She gestured towards the baby. "Complications of pregnancy, I'm afraid. This is Adam, our son. There, you've got an exclusive."

And we have a cover story, Ed thought. She's back at work.

And they went home. Ed settled her into the car, Alec saw to the children but did not go with them.

"You know what I'd really like?" she said as they were setting off.

"I can't imagine." Nor could he.

"Fish and chips."

So they got fish and chips from the village chippy. Sam was quite happy with that. She was happy to be home with her mother. When they were finished, Kate was too tired to play but quite happy to watch her for a while as Ed washed-up.

"Bed now." Ed said when he finished.

Sam frowned.

"Bed." he repeated. "Your mother's tired."

Sam sighed but went quietly. "Will you read me a story, Mummy?"

"Just a short one."

Soon she was asleep.

"Are you ready for bed?" he asked his wife.

She nodded. "I think I may need some help, I've run out of energy."

"Sure." he kissed her and she responded, then pulled away.

"Oh, don't tempt me."

"You want -" he asked.

She hugged him a little tighter. "There's nothing I'd like more but besides anything else, having Adam... We may have to wait awhile."

"I can live on promises." He settled his arm around her waist and led her towards the bedroom.

At the door she went rigid.

"Kate?"

She was shaking.

"Kate!"

"It's the bed."

"Bed? You mean what Masters -"

She shook her head. "Alec didn't tell you?"

"No." He lifted her up and carried her back to the sitting room, setting her down on the sofa. "Doesn't matter. Just tell me what it is and I'll fix it."

She reached up a hand and stroked his hair. "You can't fix everything."

Nevertheless she did tell him everything. It seemed to take forever as he held her close and for the first time he really noticed the scars around her wrists. He cursed himself for not understanding their significance.

"You're amazing." he said. "But it's over. If you not being able to go into the bedroom is all we have to deal with... Well, we'll deal with it. Just stay here a moment."

He went back to the bedroom, raiding both the bed and the cupboards. It took several trips. Then he removed the sofa cushions, laying them out on the floor with pillows around and duvets over them.

Kate sat on the arm and laughed. "You're building a nest."

He looked up at her and smiled. "Is it working?"

It was not over, he was not so naive as to think it was. This would take a long time to work through but it was enough for tonight. He took his wife in his arms and laid her down amidst the pillows, watching over her once more.

"You want me to tell you a story?"

She smiled. "Yes, yes please."

"Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess" he began, "and a knight who loved her more than anything else in the world. One day the knight rode up to her tower and found that she was nowhere to be seen. No one knew where she had gone..."