

The Island

By Ed Straker and Amelia Rodgers

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A UFO Story For our Shrew

In memory of Raymond Chandler

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Chapter One: Dishpan Hands Life

Occasionally he allowed himself to think about the past. Not often, mind you, a mere momentary indulging in a luxury now and then. The rest of it was just by rote. The alarm clock went off, you rose, you did your toilet, you showered, you dressed, and you got into the used car. It ran the way you ordinarily felt, which was always badly. You merged with early afternoon traffic. You weren't all that conscious of the world around you other than the radio and the bracing air. Often, you didn't bother to eat. At the perimeter of your consciousness, you had to admit that such a practice was destructive. What the hell did it matter? You were a judge and jury of one. No one gave you rules for living your private life.

No one gave you anything.

You substituted the crisp spring air of Brighton cooling you through the open windows of the car for the sights and smells of a café called **The Rock Bottom**, which catered to the lunch crowd. You cast aside a cloak of privacy and you became Ed White. There were tables to clear and clean, supplies to replace, dishes to wash. No mod cons in this sorry existence. You worked hard. You had been working hard since the accident.

It seemed unbelievable that a year had passed since the accident, maybe two, three, but the calendar in the back room didn't lie. Neither did the lines, planes, and architecture of your face reflected in the bathroom mirror. The bathroom boasted a resident mouse you ignored even though U. K. health inspectors wouldn't approve. Besides, it had to be a vastly stupid mouse to choose this particular dump for a free meal now and then.

It drew the odd homeless person too, some of which you liked better than others. Certainly this place wasted more food than it served, so it really wasn't a gallant effort to bag it up and distribute it to those who needed it when the boss wasn't looking, which was a rare occurrence indeed.

The mouse, however, didn't beg as they did. Damn fat, arrogant mouse.

He dropped it a hunk of cheese, which it seized and then it disappeared into its hole with what seemed to be an attitude problem. You've really gone haywire Straker, he chided himself. You've given it a personality.

"So I'm a little late with your lunch?" he grumbled. "You want to catch food poisoning from eating here, its fine with me!"

A rare smile parted the straight pink slash of his lips for a second, illuminated the wide blue eyes. Straker bent over the sink to wash his hands, ignoring the offending mirror and its unwanted truth about the passage of time. He took the time to rub some lotion into his hands, which had become callused and raw from dishwashing, and all the other jobs he did in this paradise of a restaurant.

"God bloody damn it! Half hour before lunch and the bastard decides to have a bloody heart attack!"

That could only be his boss Mackey yelling. Mackey was a stocky, greedy fellow who would not only shoot Bambi's mother, but Bambi as well, sit there and take bets on how long it would take the creatures to die.

Ed Straker took a deep breath, dried his hands, and entered the skirmish. Undoubtedly, the boss was again cursing the cook George Fisher, whom Ed liked. George wheezed as badly as he turned out dishes for the customers, and did not believe in the National Health system. Now he was stuck in it. He and George shared a love of literature. Ed hoped he'd recover.

"What's wrong?" Ed asked, more to annoy the boss than needing explanation. The boss

didn't like Americans. The boss didn't like anything that moved. "What's wrong? Fool! George is laid up in hospital, and Wind's threatening to quit on me! You know anything about cooking?"

"I can do it when it's necessary. Want me to have a go at it?"

"Stupid American twit, what do you think? Do I look like I can afford to let this place lose money? Don't think I don't know you give food to the tramps that come round back. I'm going to start taking it out of your pay, do you hear me?" Ed was not listening at this point; he had headed toward the kitchen area to prepare it for the business day. The predicted half hour later, in poured the not so distinguished clientele. Five hours after that, Ed was applying salve to a hand mildly but still painfully scalded from dropping fish and chips into hot oil, and then covered it with a questionable looking bandage from the first aid kit.

The bandage seemed a hand me down from Florence Nightingale's era, judging from how it had turned slightly yellow, he mused. Whatever worked, he told himself.

God he was tired, his eyes seemed permanently crossed for life from reading food orders, and he'd sweated away at least a pound, in the unventilated kitchen. He'd have to fix that damn broken fan himself if they expected him to take this job full time. Ed held no illusions that he'd be thanked or paid for it. He barely had enough vision remaining to see from the clock that it was closing time.

"I wouldn't have dreamed you had it in you, love. Customers loved the grub. I was getting tips right and left. Here! You've earned it."

Oh God, not *her*, he thought. I can't take *her* right now.

The woman responsible for his being employed there, with the Christian name of Wendy Wilson but known by everyone as Winds for her velocity of chatter thrust a tenner followed by a pair of bosoms at him. She'd been divorced twice, and he knew she imagined his head artfully displayed on her trophy wall of men I have known, seduced, swindled and suffocated. Ed trusted his mouse's morals more.

Still, she didn't ask questions, had collected him after the accident, believed all his many necessary lies, managed to produce a forged American I.D. for him in the name of Ed White, transplanted ex Air Force Yank, and found the bedsitter he lived in.

Working there for next to nothing (*as an alien of all things!*) Ed thought, appreciating the irony, had advantages. Ed realized that eventually she'd collect on his debt, and since he didn't want to be paying alimony or taking drugs to clear a dreaded bug she so generously had shared with him during a night of sex, he knew he would have to move on. Okay, escape was a more accurate term for it.

For now, it was just a unexpected job promotion, accepting his fraction of the tips he knew she actually had collected, and back to rote.

God he was tired. He never knew it was possible to get this tired.

The common people. The civilians that in another life he had sacrificed everything for so they'd be protected from the alien threat. Now he knew what life was like for them. He was one of them now.

That was all he was.

Except, most of them had ties to one another, friends, lovers, husbands, wives, life partners.

"No man is an island, entire of itself...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

He didn't have a soul in the world, nor did he need one, he had proved John Donne wrong, he truly was an island. He shoved his way past her, shutting his ears to her chattering, to collect his jacket and go home.

What home?

No, he wasn't going to think about what he'd said to Alec Freeman. Even though it was truer now than it ever had been in his history.

Now he scarcely could remember Freeman's jagged face and pair of warm blue eyes and a personality that flared like a friendly sun. A relationship needed and cherished more than either of them cared to admit.

On the other hand, was it that he didn't want to remember?

He knew the answer. That truth burned him as the oil had. He picked up a brown sack from out of the refrigerator, stuck it into his knapsack and kicked the door closed.

"You're a strange one, you are! Where do you think you're going?" Winds said.

"Home," he told her, shifting the knapsack onto a shoulder, zipping closed his thrift store acquired jacket and checking in his pockets for his car keys. I'm only strange because I won't go to bed with you, Ed thought.

"Take a second to rethink that, Eddie, boy. You have to close up for me. "

He'd been heading for the door, now he turned on a heel and stared at her. She actually backed a pace away, fearful, but managed a few words of bravado. "Don't look at me like that. I'm off with Mac for the weekend. Friday night, remember? I've been working a long time to get him to put a ring on my finger and my old bones tell me it's going to be tonight. Don't sulk so. Cor, you're a strange one, Eddie. Seems I've known you forever and suddenly realize I don't know you at - "

"I like it that way." he replied, and took an almost sadistic pleasure in how it blanched her face, stopped her customary gibberish in mid-sentence and scurried her out the door.

Wasn't he the ice cold, unfeeling bastard Commander Straker? Some things never changed.

Like being in pain, he told himself. That's never changed either.

Ed closed his mind and heart to pain, which had no resemblance to that acquired from working without a break for five hours. He began piling the chairs up onto the tables, then took the broom and swept the floor immaculately clean before he left.

Even then, he collected the bag of food out of the knapsack, and distributed it to the grateful queue of people collecting in the back of the restaurant. Ed had started a ritual on the second day he'd worked there. The **Rock Bottom** had a patch of land behind it which led to a far off winding path to the sea. Dotted by more weeds than spring wildflowers, it was still a place of calm for him. Ed had often gotten a book from his knapsack and sat on what grass remained, and read. Reacquainting with, and comforting himself with Raymond Chandler's stories, when Ed had gotten to work earlier and had time to relax outdoors before his shift. Just another of those luxuries he permitted himself now and then.

A stone wall surrounded the area. When the last beggar had vanished out its gate, he felt a sense of loss and he picked up his things and turned to go. A long wave of dizziness seized him and he found he had to grasp the wall to keep on his feet.

"Damn."

Charity begins at home, he reminded himself. When was the last time you ate, Straker? None of your business, he answered himself. It was then that he gave a start, because he realized people were watching him, had been for several minutes and he hadn't known it. He'd

really allowed his tradecraft and training to go south. That thought amused him, because who would be interested in harming him now. He was a nobody. Preposterous.

The snap of a jackknife opening was a signal that he was dead wrong, with the emphasis on dead, he realised.

Peering at him was a scruffy, leather clad trio of youths, and that added up to nothing but trouble. Gang types, local bullies. Two that looked capable of doing him some real damage, one that looked as if he'd prefer to be anywhere else, but he still held the knife.

"Let's see. It's been a long time since I've been to the cinema. You lads want my wallet?" Ed asked in the local accent.

Oh, brilliant, Straker, the wise cracking, hardboiled sarcastic hero. Forget Phillip Marlowe, for Christ's sake! Two minutes ago, you couldn't even stand up straight without help. Idiot! Do you even remember how to defend yourself?

Does it even matter?

Yes, it matters, Ed decided. All I have left in the world is my pride and my life, and I'm damned if I'll allow some punks to intimidate me, he thought fiercely.

He casually dropped the knapsack from his shoulder to his arm, and feigned fear. He actually was weighing his approach to each of them. Since he didn't have Alec Freeman or even Bogart as Phillip Marlowe, judo would have to get him out of this mess. Being skinny and a tad less than six feet tall forced a fellow to think in terms of various means of compensation, and it always had served him well.

"Shut up, you old tub of scum, and hand it over," one of them announced. "Friday's pay day so you'll have plenty. Hand it over. The lot." He seemed to be the ringleader, and was the closest to Ed.

"Oh, don't talk that way to Grandpa, where's your manners?" The younger, skinnier one said, toying with the knife, enjoying Ed's pretense of fear even though he looked none too brave himself. The others laughed and it seemed to reassure him. The reassurance didn't last long.

Ed swung the knapsack in the leader's face with all his strength behind it, drawing a cry of pain, and a backwards stumble, plus momentary disbelief in the other two.

Grandpa was not following the script.

Ed had reinforced the knapsack with rocks sewn into its sides and bottom. He would have preferred carrying a gun for self-defence, but he was willing to guess Bogart's Marlowe would approve of the alternative.

The one with the knife came after him, but Ed jumped aside, and took advantage of the youth's momentum to grasp him hard, and hurl him straight into the wall. He folded like a Chinese laundry, and Ed swept down, picked up his knife and held it in a defensive position.

That left two.

Ed had miscalculated. One pulled out a gun.

So much for Bogart, Ed thought. He hurled the knife at the youth with the gun, with no time for a precision aim, and dived out of range of fire. The knife impaled the youth in the shoulder, drawing screams but Ed didn't bother to inspect his handiwork. He was too busy throwing himself at the third attacker's legs and both Ed and the kid came down hard. They struggled, and Ed found to his dismay that whatever adrenaline had gotten him through this was rapidly draining. The kid suddenly had him by the throat, he was holding on to the kid's hands, willing himself to be alert long enough to shake off the grip and then knee him in the groin, but the kid suddenly let go, wildly punched his chest then kicked him repeatedly. He

obviously wants to do as much damage as he can to me, Ed thought, as his gut exploded with agony. Fine, his rage keeps me alive longer. The Brighton sky swirled past him after one particularly brutal kick and Ed's stomach readjusted itself as he painfully gulped air. He felt ribs crack. The old bloody-mindedness kept him going. Ed forced himself to get up, doing all he could to get his hands on the gun, but he was slower from his injuries. The other kid was hysterically screaming, and shouting at the third one to get help. "Shut up!" he yelled back. He had turned around, giving Ed his chance. Ed dived for it.

Ed froze. What would Bogart think of the odds now?

The kid had gotten to the gun first.

Ed waited. He was surprisingly unafraid. He figured it was shock.

Goodbye, Alec.

The kid fired.

They stared at each other.

The kid Ed had hit with the knife was on his knees, crying and moaning. It occurred to Ed that being able to hear the kid shrieking meant he, Ed, wasn't dead.

Ed recovered first, rose up, chuckled softly despite his injuries, and fighting to keep from passing out.

"That's the inconvenient thing about owning a gun. It needs bullets to work."

"You knifed Stu, you son of a bitch." The would-be killer gasped, threw the gun in Ed's direction. It didn't come anywhere close, and Ed picked it up. As he'd figured, it was empty. The kid was shaking badly, as bullies tended to do when things didn't turn in their favor. Ed doubted he even knew how to load it. It had been for show.

"He's going to live, provided he doesn't try to take that knife out without a doctor's help. Forgive me for missing his heart. Now get the hell out of here. You're lucky I don't like police. Take your pals with you. "

"You come after us, old man, I'll kill you, you hear?" The kid got his last word in, didn't waste much time in getting out of there. There was no fight left in him, he was as empty as the gun.

"You're welcome to try." Ed replied. The kid yanked his screaming companion to his feet, slapped him a couple of times, and dragged him off.

Ed waited until they had gone, moved gingerly, examined the gun. The last scared kid, obviously not as important to his pals, began to groan.

Ed had temporarily forgotten him. *Another sign of my getting soft, he thought. Maybe Grandpa was too accurate a title.*

"Great, just great." Ed sighed.

Ed moved to the kid's side, and prodded him awake with the gun. The kid's eyes opened and focused on the gun and he sat up in terror.

"Shit, shit, shit! Mister, don't shoot me, okay, we didn't mean no harm, honest!"

"Take off your shirt, toss it on the ground, and then start running." Ed said, holding the empty gun on him. "You have three seconds before I shoot you." The kid clearly didn't know the gun hadn't been loaded, if he'd known of it at all.

"Mister, please, I don't even like them!"

Little late to come to that conclusion, thought Ed.

"One."

"Mister, PLEASE!" He was terrified, and pulled his shirt over his head with difficulty and tossed it at Ed's feet.

"TWO."

Ed watched him begin to what vaguely resembled a run. For a moment, Ed considered clapping his hands loud enough to sound like a gunshot.

No, enough sadism for today, Ed thought, and picked up the shirt, tearing it into strips to wrap around his chest to keep the ribs immobile. It hurt like hell, but that too meant he was alive. Ed tucked the gun into his knapsack. At least he had that prize for protection. God only knew how the punk had acquired it in England, with the strict gun laws. It was a Glock too, weathered with use, just needed cleaning. The trick would be in acquiring the bullets Ed needed. He'd think of something. No doubt, Winds could find him a source for ammo, or she probably had it herself. If ever there was a black market expert, it was she.

Ed checked the runner's progress. The horrified kid was maybe a yard away, still falling, stumbling, or looking back more than he was running. It was annoying. Really annoying.

"Oh hell," Ed said.

Ed clapped.

The boy screamed, dropped, realized he was still moving, rolled, jumped up and sped out of sight.

"Straker, you bastard," Ed said with a grin. He had to grab the wall again when the dizziness struck, almost like the universe punishing him for his macabre humor.

Damn it, you will NOT pass out!

"I don't know about that, sir. The little fiend had it coming," a voice said from behind Ed. Ed whirled, furious at letting down his guard yet again.

A short man dressed in brown tan cloak and what looked to be a bespoke gray flannel suit with a yellow shirt, pink necktie and polished tan shoes stood there. He was paler than Ed, had a headful of thick white hair which seemed genuine despite the man's age, and he possessed more arrogance than the mouse. He looked to Ed as if he'd been born into blue blood with his upper class accent, but there was unmistakable warmth in his blue eyes as he leaned on a cane and took in the sight of Ed.

"Who the hell are you?" Ed snapped.

"I'm Sir Percival Falcon, but my friends call me Perry. Don't worry, I don't like the police either, I'm not getting you in trouble for the gun. And you are?"

There was something about the man, Ed thought. Something familiar.

"I don't see that it's any of your business."

"You know me, you told me your name was Ed White when we first met," the man chuckled. "Yet you just used the name Straker."

"I've never told you anything, you're wrong. What do you want?"

Where had he seen the man?

"To do for you what you've done for others. I want to help you. I'm quite rich, you know. I'm a bit eccentric, I travel about using the gifts I've been given by the Goddess, and I look for extraordinary people, people like you, who get lost in the Between. Oh dear!"

Ed had slumped against the wall then pushed himself up when the man approached. Ed held up a shaky hand to warn the stranger off.

"Stay away from me; I don't need your help."

"How wrong you are, my dear Edward, but that's a practiced lie on your part, I fear. Now don't be difficult. Although wanting that from Ed Straker, is a lost cause indeed, isn't it?" he tittered.

"My name isn't Straker. Where the hell do I know you from?" Ed grumbled.

"Perhaps I'm your mouse," Perry said knowingly.

"What?" Ed said, startled out of his tough manner.

The man chuckled again, delighted with Ed's confusion.

Clearly, he was dotty, but Ed instantly liked him. What was even more perplexing is that the man did look a bit like the mouse. Well, that proves it, Straker. You've lost your wits for sure.

"My dear Edward, you've been feeding me for weeks now. I've been coming when the other homeless do, and taking your food. Not dressed like this, of course, good heavens no." Perry chuckled.

"Why would you want to do something like that?" Ed scowled.

"Edward, enough of this, come with me, I'm taking you home with me and out of this hell hole you worked at. You're in pain, dressed in clothes not fit for the gentleman you are, plagued with self doubt, and half starved."

"Now see here, I'm not going anywhere with.."

Ed slid down the wall into a lump of unconscious ex-Commander.

"I do say that Alec Freeman of yours must be a saint, having to cope with you." Perry laughed. He drew out his mobile, and tapped in a number.

Chapter Two: Saccharine and Sacrilege.

Alec Freeman hated every time he had to do it. There he stood, end of shift, approaching Ed's office, only it wasn't his anymore. Ed had been missing for the best part of a year, and SHADO was tiptoeing around it, pretending it didn't exist, like having an important dinner guest wearing a lampshade at your party, and acting as if things were normal. Alec could feel eyes on him from Command Centre; sense the pity from one or two. Well, bugger most of them, he was second in command still, and as long as he was by God, they'd know it.

Reluctantly, he buzzed the office door and the doors opened to swallow him, not receive him. There was the woman behind the desk, looking up, smiling, when Alec hated her guts and made no pretense otherwise and he knew she knew it.

"Commander."

God he hated calling her that. Commander Marjorie Jenkins. She was a decent woman he supposed. Late forties, a handsome woman, under other circumstances he might have asked her to dinner, he admitted to himself. Scottish, short, most likely dyed blond hair in tight curls, widow. She'd come to SHADO from the Special Branch, he knew her story from her dossier, she'd shown admirable courage, her hands had been badly burned on her first case in an attempt to rescue a kidnap victim. Jenkins was an expert at hostage negotiation turned terrorism and brainwashing expert turned alien hunter. She sometimes wore thin cotton gloves to spare onlookers the harsh sight of her burn wounds, but she never wore them with him around.

Solid background. Cleared by the security boys. Reliable. Kind to animals. More beloved than the late Queen Mum. Patronizing saccharine smile. I hate her guts.

Alec hated her guts for no good rational reason, he admitted. Unless you counted what she'd done to the office.

Ed's office, goddamn it!

A touch screen map of Great Britain had replaced the electronic mural of swirling colours, the mini bar was gone, replaced by a computer system and a bookcase just adjacent to the map. It held some classics and miscellaneous feminine items. There was a heavy copper bust of Churchill next to some kind of climbing ivy plant. Churchill was the only thing of hers Alec liked.

Churchill scowled. Churchill always scowled. *Maybe he hated her guts too, reasoned Alec, with some satisfaction.*

"Colonel, please come in. There's an UFO incident issue you mentioned we need to discuss?" She stood and extended her hand, as she always did. He ignored it as usual. She only smiled as she always did. It was enough to turn his stomach. Not only that, rumor had it she could hold her liquor. *You couldn't trust a woman who could hold her liquor.*

Christ he hated her. Self-confident bitch.

Alec took a few steps over to the desk, but refused to take his customary chair. At least my chair is still there, he thought.

"That last UFO, we lost the chance to get the bodies," Alec announced.

"Colonel, I've told you before, I don't care about that side of it. We weren't going to take any chances, I had good people out on that location, and details just don't interest me. I wanted to blow that thing out of the sky and keep my team and England safe, that's my job. Nothing is accomplished by having post mortems, which are famous for telling us nothing and waste time and money. I do my job, I take it seriously."

"Ed would hav-"

"Colonel, I am commander of this outfit now. You need to come to terms with it. You're a veteran, I know, one of our best. However, quite frankly you're obsessed with Ed Straker." She started to pour herself some tea from a ceramic pot, sipped some, put the mug down. She tapped a second empty mug.

"Tea?"

Alec ignored the offer.

"Look, Jenkins, you're new to this, maybe you ought to go back and reconsider how this organization needs to be run. Go back over Commander Straker's experience, his rationale, and above all, his success in protecting our arses from those monsters. Ed believed-"

"Alec, please listen to-"

"In here I am Colonel Freeman! Especially to you!" He struck down his fist on her desk, no! on Ed's desk. The tea splattered. He didn't bother to apologise. *Had Ed been there, it would have been coffee light with two sugars, not the horrid tea and Ed would glare at him, and then make him pay double for what spilled out of his own pocket, the bastard.*

I must be crazy to actually miss you, Ed. You were the most bloody minded, self-righteous, brilliant tyrant of a man with the melodic, precise enunciation of an angel, and a quick wrath that would humiliate the devil.

Biggest Yank son of a bitch in the world I ever had the misfortune to meet. I miss you.

Why did I have to admit I needed you in my life when you weren't here to hear it? Ten, no, more years, Ed, more years and we never spoke, and you needed me even though you were as solid as steel to most, yet as transparent as glass to me. Ed Straker, the ice-cold calculating monster.

Anything but, Ed! Maybe I was the only one to see it. Was that why I always came back when I threw my resignation at you and left, because I was the only one to see it?

Now you're the one who is gone.

God, Ed. don't do this to me. I can't take it. I can't take having to be civil to Miss Perfection.

She was studying his face. *Bloody twit of a woman.* She seemed to come to some inner decision.

"Colonel, we both know it isn't my style you're objecting to. It's the shrine of Ed Straker you feel I've trashed, a sacrilege of his memory and you don't like it. I know the two of you were friends. I also know that in his last years Straker had burned out, he was weary -"

"The Commander is not dead," Alec yelled adamantly, screw behaving in a professional manner with this imbecile, he thought. I ought to kill her now and plea insanity at the court martial later.

She paid no attention to him. She never changed her expression.

Women! He thought with disgust.

"Straker was tired. The responsibility he carried can do a lot of damage. I know in his last years he was headstrong, sometimes inconsiderate, and often not caring whom he used to get the job done. He was behaving irrationally, even hiding things from you- "

Damn woman knows exactly what buttons of mine to push.

"Everyone has their moments, the man was human."

"Yet he never acted like it. SHADO become his obsession, not his job. He went chasing after something, maybe even something he only imagined existed without filling you in, and it killed him. Let him go, Alec," she implored him. Throwing his first name in his face, He'd seen

that expression before, too. She wanted something from him. *God, he could use a drink. A double.*

"I told you, Commander, I'm Colonel to you. Concerning Commander Straker's fate, that's your description, want to hear mine?"

"Colonel, we're going around in circles, I've heard it all, and I read your report." She sank into her chair, picked up her cup of tea, patted the small spills dry with a napkin, and then nodded as if indulging a child's tantrum, Alec thought angrily.

"Ed may have been investigating something on his own, something about the aliens, something far too dangerous to reveal to me completely. That last Intel conference he attended, people vanishing like that, he must have opened a can of worms somewhere. I know Ed. He wouldn't have just gone off like that without a reason."

"Their disappearance is a joint Intelligences matter, probably the work of terrorists, not a SHADO matter, and the investigation, as you already know very well, is ongoing. "

"Not a SHADO matter? ***Ed Straker's GONE, damn you!*** Someone broke into his flat, took everything, clothes, books, personal belongings, and stripped his place bare! You don't call that a SHADO matter?" Alec seethed.

"No, I don't. I ordered the SHADO forensics team working the case to go and handle other cases. I allowed his home to be sold. There was nothing to preserve from the crime scene. Nothing left of the man, certainly not a will. He took all his money out of his bank, and just vanished. You know everything I do. I know that made things harder on you. The MO makes it pretty clear to me that this isn't anything the aliens dreamed up."

"I'm telling you-"

She said with sadness, "You want to find out Straker died in some glorious attempt to stop aliens, became a martyr, when the fact is, he was just a victim. An ordinary victim of ordinary thugs. Face it, Straker is dead."

"You're wrong," Alec protested. "He's alive, I feel it."

"Colonel, I can't continue to investigate on what you feel. I looked at the file on Straker, you and he spent a lot of time with each other, respected one another. I also know and so do you that being in this business, with its limitations, means you have to set your priorities straight. Our job is to kill those alien bastards. That's what the Commission put me here for. I told you when I took this job that as long as you wanted, you had an allotment of money and work force to investigate Straker's absence, but like everything in the new economy, things dried up. I'm sorry, Colonel. In my old job, I've seen what losing someone does to civilians. The shock, the grief. Colonel, you're grieving. My guess is Straker got too close to something way out of his experience, and the terrorists got rid of him."

"Then you tell me where the hell his body is, and why we never got a ransom note? You tell me why those people just disappeared in thin air, and the so called terrorists don't boast of what they did via the regular channels, or ask for terms, demand money, anything!"

"God only knows. It's as simple as that. Maybe they took his money and ran. Terrorists aren't common everyday people, Alec. I don't have the time to put everything aside and find your lost friend, give you all the answers. Colonel Freeman, you need to bury Straker. You need some way to find closure. I'm sure that he'd say the same thing to you. Your time is better spent-"

"Is there anything else, Jenkins?" he said angrily. *Screw protocol!*

"Yes. Colonel, you were a loyal friend to Straker. A superb second to me, none finer, but you're still a lonely man and have to go on with your life," Jenkins told him. She held up her

hand toward him. "I never talk about it, but it took me a long time to get used to these. My mates kidded me in the branch that now that my fingerprints had been burned off, I should divert my attention to committing crimes." She chuckled. "I miss those nutters in the Branch, I admit it."

Was she actually showing him some genuine humanity? Some insight into her true self? He doubted it.

When Alec flinched at the word lonely, folded his arms and didn't respond, she shrugged and went on. "I never talked about losing my hands, what it felt like to have them like this, and the nightmare of the skin grafts, being in the burn unit. It's a loss I have to bear. You come to terms with it, Colonel. I wish you luck in the process. That's all, you're dismissed."

Alec balled his hands into fists and stormed out, out of SHADO, out of the studio, out of his troubled thoughts. He got into his SHADO car, opened a hidden compartment and took out a bottle of whiskey, examined it, longed for it. Then he shoved it back and shoved the compartment closed. He took out his mobile, retrieved and viewed a colour photo of Straker scowling. Alec had taken it at a private studio picnic, where studio personnel, among them several SHADO operatives, were enjoying the anniversary of Harlington Straker Studios' grand opening.

Ed had been required to go for cover and the morale factor. That and me threatening to carry him there if he didn't attend, Alec remembered with glee.

Ed had been required to wear jeans and a casual shirt. Therefore, he had. Mouths had dropped open. Chicken drumsticks and salads had dropped off paper plates. Women (and some men) drooled, and it wasn't from hunger. On the other hand, maybe it was. Straker's perfect features always drew looks of longing.

Speaking of such, one look from Straker and things went back to normal. As normal as getting Ed to wear real clothes could get. *Commander Straker not in a Nehru but brand new navy jeans and a blue and cream pattered silk shirt. Civilian clothing.*

Only because I dragged him into Harrods to buy that clothing, remembered Alec. Ed had seen Alec's mobile, but not in time to prevent the picture being from taken. Nor was he going or able to make a scene at the event about it, a fact which Alec was relishing taking advantage of. Ed Straker had to be more photogenic than any actor there was on the studio lot, but he loathed having his picture taken, and it had been taken by the publicity people for the event, something he had to tolerate, but it was under Straker's control. Alec took the candid, shoved the mobile into his windbreaker and grinned at Ed, loving getting away with it.

Wait, Ed was waving at him. This was not good.

RUN!

"Alec! So good to see you here. Enjoying yourself?"

Ed had launched himself at Alec like a platinum-headed missile. Alec gulped. He nodded.

"Great day for this kind of thing, isn't it? Blue skies, friendly people?" Ed said breezily.

Ed pressed Alec's shoulder in a greeting.

With his whole hand using strength that nobody ever expected to come out of such a slender, almost ethereal looking man.

Using some sort of martial arts grip.

Right on a nerve.

For at least two minutes.

"Why, Alec, you're turning the same colour as the potato salad. You all right? I keep telling you to lay off the sauce. Well, I'm off. Enjoy the day." Ed's hand came down hard on

target again, in a innocent looking farewell pat of affection.

Enjoy the day?

What Alec had enjoyed was a pinched nerve treated fifteen minutes later in the SHADO Medical Centre.

However, he had the candid. Straker zero, Freeman a crippled ten.

Alec sighed, snapped the mobile closed, shoved it into a pant pocket. I haven't touched a drop. Not since I went to your place and found you gone. I'll celebrate when you come back and torment me again.

Alec roughly rubbed away tears with a fist.

Ed, if you're gone, then I need to know. I need to hold your body and damn myself for allowing you to be what you never should have been, what you pretended to ignore, and in reality feared.

Lonely.

Because Ed, if you're really dead, than so am I.

I'm going to find you.

Or your corpse.

Or I'm going to be the next one.

Alec started up the turbine motor of the SHADO car, and sped away into the now colder night.

Chapter Three: The Cookie Crumbles

Ed wasn't sure what had awakened him, but he reluctantly sat up, reached down and touched the odd wrapping around his chest. The dim light in the room filtering through heavy diaphanous curtains made him unsure where he was, and that disturbed him. Moving his hands down, he felt a luxuriously thick velvet bedspread which covered him. Tossing it aside, he found to his astonishment that he was wearing just boxers, clearly not his own. Frowning, he stood up, and moved over to a nearby night table on which sat a heavy gold lamp, noticing as he did so that his bare feet sank down at least half an inch into plush carpet. Ed switched on the lamp, and blinked repeatedly when the room was illuminated. It was a spacious bedroom, with an ornate cherry wood four-poster bed, gold and navy bedspread, with gold sheets, and matching pillows and bolsters adorned with heavy gold tassels. An old screen partially concealed the bedroom door. Across the room was a black lacquer armoire with a Chinoiserie design. A handwritten parchment note was taped to it, written in fountain pen noted Ed. Perry might be somewhat deranged, but he had grand style.

Dear Edward, I trust you slept well, you will find everything you need if you just investigate a little. Take your time, and do keep as yours whatever catches your fancy. A robe and slippers are on the guest bed you slept in, and a plate of freshly baked cookies may be found, which if the inclination strikes you, you certainly may share with me. Appetite is key. Don't be alarmed, my dear boy, but I had a doctor attend to your injuries while you slept. See you soon, Your Ever Grateful Sir Mouse

Ed chuckled. He looked over again at the table. The plate was there all right, with the cookies. God, they smelled wonderful, peanut butter, if his nose was to be trusted so should he trust this eccentric old coot as well? Examining the apparatus around his chest closer, he realised it was a lightweight medical brace. There wasn't much pain, but even so, the vividly purple bruises on his body reminded him of the fight with the punks. He closed his mind to it. If the mouse had finally showed gratitude and given him cookies, who was he to turn them down?

Go ahead, you moron, throw caution to the wind, he thought, but his stomach grappled with and beat his intellect, so he picked one cookie up. The first bite was terrific. Moreover, the second, and the third, wait, he had seen something. He shoved the remaining bit of heaven into his mouth, and looked closer at what he spied in a corner.

A brand new, black leather suitcase.

He almost had to restrain himself from clapping, it had been so long since he'd seen and smelled fine leather. *Hell, what was it had the old man said? No, correction, what was it the mouse had said?*

Investigate.

So he pulled on the cream velvet robe, with its quilted silk collar, tied the sash, and thrust his feet inside the slippers. That would have to do for a detective's uniform since a trench coat wasn't readily available.

The suitcase was wonderful, and a quick snap of the brass lock revealed the contents of his knapsack transformed. The paperback Chandler had a new tan suede book cover, and his tenner had been folded in it. The gun he had taken from the kid gleamed up at him, carefully cleaned and polished, but now had heft. An instinctive check proved it fully loaded. Inside there was a shoulder holster as well. Ed wanted to wear the weapon, but the brace made it difficult, and second, it might be helpful to find his clothes first. Inside the suitcase he hadn't

found anything else, so where were his clothes?

It didn't make any sense. Ed's eyes swept the room for a key. No joy. He pulled open the doors of the armoire. Inside was a map, and quickly he unfolded it. One room was marked, and Ed realized it was the very guest bedroom he was occupying. According to the map, a bathroom door was across the hall, but the door to the bedroom was locked. It was beginning to make him uneasy. Ed was on the verge of pounding on a wall to get out, the grandeur of the place rapidly getting stale. Ed suddenly narrowed his eyes.

Stale?

"Stale. Yes, yes! The cookies!" Ed exclaimed.

Appetite is **key** the note had said.

With a laugh, he hurried to the plate. Yes! Under the cookies was a leather fob with keys on it. One unlocked the bedroom door and the other opened the bathroom door, there where the map had said it would be. Ed sighed with relief, willed his heart to stop pounding so hard. *You're okay, he told himself, and you're safe.*

Safe?

I'll never be safe again, not without Alec.

Ed brought his mouth into a grim straight line and dismissed the thought. *Stay in the moment, don't think about it. Close your mind to the past.*

Rote.

His closer inspection of the bathroom revealed all sorts of soaps, shampoos, combs and brushes, shaving cream, razor, turkish towels on an electrically heated rail, colognes, everything for a shower, bath or even spa. Alec had taken him once to Geo, the renowned barber and perfumer, and the bathroom almost looked like a branch of the shop itself. Even better, gray suit, shirt, undershirt, fresh underwear, tie, socks and shoes awaited him on a valet stand. All new, all in his sizes, how Perry had accomplished that, he didn't know. Ed decided to have a good long bath before he set out on his journey of discovery, he didn't remember when he really had felt clean enough, living in that shoebox of a flat, and working in that death trap of a job. Ed granted himself the advantage of the note's offer to keep whatever he liked.

God, I'd keep this feeling. just to feel human again. To be treated like a gentleman. How am I to go back to that dump? I don't think I can stand it any longer. I'll go insane. I will. I will go mad. Oh GOD. What's wrong with me? Who have I become? I was a Commander, for pity's sake. Now look at me. I don't even know black from white, enemy from ally, day from night. I don't remember any of the conversations I had with Perry when he was in disguise, if he is even telling me the truth about them. Oh God, Alec, I'm going mad. I don't know myself anymore. I'm falling apart.

The accident!

"NO!" he cried aloud. He promised himself he wouldn't think about it.

Damn it Straker, stay in the moment. Live for now. Show some pride in yourself. Yet as he locked the door, and ran a gloriously relaxing hot bath, laid refreshingly naked in the citrus scented water, allowing it to restore him, he could imagine Alec's boisterous voice teasing him about all the uncharacteristic self pampering he was engaged in. It broke his heart.

What the hell is happening to me? I don't remember ever being this afraid. When did my independence die?

God, Alec, I don't even remember where you lived. How can that be? Alec, I need you so desperately. Something is wrong with me, something is monstrously wrong. The joy of the nine-year-old boy I once was, that carefree existence, captured again in tasting the sugary

treat of a cookie. Moments. That's all I have to hold on to now. The small luxuries I've sustained myself with. I'm alive! Life is what counts.

Ed nodded, then his head sank for a moment then he raised it, shaking it to and fro in a physical denial of the lie, his body a living negative, his face ashen, trembling, knowing he was losing control.

"Alec, I don't even know where you live!" Ed cried out into the silence. The cry echoed back at him.

Ed sobbed aloud, deep sobs that seized him, blinded him. Paralyzed him. Shamed him.

"Pull yourself together, damn you!"

His tears dropped to merge with the scented bathwater. At least he felt clean.

Clean? He would never be clean again. What kind of man was he, acting this way? Damned self-pity! Stop it! Ed struck the water angrily, sending it spilling out everywhere. He just didn't care anymore. *What was the point of it? Why try and maintain control when there was no point to it? What was he really trying to maintain? Some fractured memory of a Commander's life now lost?*

There was a knock on the door, startling him.

"Who is it?" he shouted.

"I didn't mean to alarm you, I'm Algernon, Sir Perry's butler. Mr. Straker, I have breakfast ready for you whenever you'd like it, sir. I'm afraid Sir Perry had to step out this morning, but he'll return for lunch. Shall I keep everything hot for you, sir?" The voice had the same cut-glass crystal goblet accent Perry had.

"Thank you, I didn't mean to linger in here so long."

"Oh, but Sir Perry insisted you enjoy your stay here, hope everything is to your liking."

"I thought the mouse was my host."

Ed heard the man laugh heartily in reply.

"Well you see sir, I've been amiss in my duty, of course Sir Mouse is your host! When you're ready, look in your bedroom again. I see you found the map, so locating the dining room won't be a problem then. See you soon, sir."

Ed could hear the sound of the butler walking away. He quickly towed off, shaved, replaced the brace and dressed, wondering where Perry had gone off to this time. He wasn't at all sure he recognized the pale man peering back at him uneasily in the mirror.

All right, I seem presentable enough. Why does he want me to go look in the bedroom again? I'm not exactly in the mood for more games.

Ed opened the door, bracing himself for anything.

"Good Lord, don't tell me its you again," Ed exclaimed.

The mouse was sitting on the plate, whiskers twitching, devouring the last cookie. On the bed was a small gold cage with its door opened. Mousehole to grand real estate for a rodent. Bedsitter to mansion for a man. Pretty impressive.

"How the devil did he catch you? Wait a second; you can't really be the mouse from the restaurant bathroom, can you?"

Tentatively Ed held his hand out. The mouse sniffed it for a moment, and then went back to its lunch. It looked like his mouse, but wild mice all looked the same, didn't they? Of course there were the fancier breeds, but this one seemed common enough. Fat, arrogant grey mouse. Sloppy eater, too.

"Nothing personal, but neither of us look or behave like we belong in a mansion." Ed smiled. The mouse turned and looked in his direction, then began cleaning itself.

"Yeah, that helped me, too. Amazing what finally getting the grime off does for one's morale."

"Even with the grime on, nothing could mar your appearance. Oh my gosh I said that aloud., didn't I, I'm sorry. I mean I..oh God."

Ed turned angrily. A woman stood there, looking uneasy.

"I don't appreciate people coming up to me behind my back, and I didn't hear you come in. Who the hell are you?"

"Uh the one that's obviously made you angry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, Ed, I should have realized, oh God, I can be so stupid sometimes."

"How is it you know me?"

"I was the doctor who treated you when Perry and Algernon brought you in last week from Brighton. I'm so sorry. I'm Claire Swanson, please call me Claire." She held out a hand.

Ed ignored it. She looked as if he had struck her. He ignored that, too.

"Last week?" Ed replied, astonished. "That can't be right, I passed out last night."

"Last week. You've been sick a long time. Perry brought you all the way back home to the Cotswolds, here, where his estate is. You were sick for days. Perry has his own clinic on the premises, he has practically everything he needs right here. It's a village in itself. I owed him big time, so he had me look after you. You were really very sick, and I sedated you mildly while I worked on you, because Perry told me you'd never rest if I didn't."

Ed wasn't really listening, he had a sour expression on his face. "Then Mackey and Wendy must have sacked me by now--damn it, I really needed that job."

"I think you need to speak to Algernon after you eat, and I want to see all your breakfast disappear, put some weight on those fine bones. Bring the mouse and cage."

"Excuse me?"

"The mouse silly, its yours now, its such a darling little mouse. Perry had it, uh-rescued for you. Then after breakfast, I look at those ribs of yours again, make sure they're healing properly."

"I take it if you undressed me during the exam you've already seen more than my ribs." Ed whisked the mouse up and into its cage, and fastened the door closed. Until he had more information, he didn't have much choice other than to go along. For the moment, he knew what the mouse must feel like, trapped in the cage. However the mouse looked more at home than he did.

The woman had shot him a look, her cheeks reddened and she then looked at the floor as they walked down the hall of the manor together, their heels clicking on the marble tile floor, Ed carefully carrying the cage along with him.

"I'm the one that changed your underwear, I'm afraid." she added, clearly embarrassed.

Ed scowled at her even though she wasn't looking at him.

" You might want to look up when you walk around in this place, you're about to run smack into a grandfather clock," Ed advised her.

"Oh! Thank you!"

"There, that's better. So it was you who took my underwear, huh? Just goes to show that the advice my mother gave me about always wearing clean underwear was wise. Good of you to tell me. You sound American."

American, he thought, West Coast accent and very pretty. Brunette, warm brown eyes, late forties, maybe. Plain white blouse and jeans. Nice perfume, maybe something expensive and French. Blushes more like fourteen than forty.

"Yes! I always was a complete Anglophile so I dreamed about coming here. I saved up everything I had and came here for the holiday of a lifetime, and promptly got mugged. Passport, money, everything. Perry found me crying in a phone booth, trying to get through to the American consulate."

"Hasn't Perry considered taking in stray animals, much, much easier than taking in stray Americans like you and I." Ed pointed out.

Claire chuckled. "He doesn't take in just anybody. Only special people. Come on, you won't believe the food here. He has a lot of it imported just for the estate. Truce, Ed? Just through breakfast time?"

"You sure you're a medical doctor?"

"Well, not exactly. I don't uh..exactly have the right to treat people here in the United Kingdom."

"Now you tell me," Ed said, suspicious.

"You're alive," she countered.

"That is amazing, considering my fate seems to have depended on you."

"I'm surprised that mouse even likes you, Ed. Must be all the sugar it ate, ruined his good judgement. Sit down and eat you can make fun of me later." They'd reached an elegant looking dining room. Ed set the cage down on a side table. To his amusement, a tall, thin man in a butler's uniform appeared, put a tiny tray of food inside the cage for the mouse, changed its water dish and winked at Ed.

"I'm Algernon Fisher, Mr. Straker, call me Algernon, splendid to meet you. I'm afraid Sir Mouse is not pleased with me, he hates to have his breakfast any later than spot on nine, and it's exactly eleven thirty."

Algernon extended a white-gloved hand and Ed shook it, smiled up at him. Algernon then glanced at Claire.

"Now, now, Miss Swanson, Mr. Straker is far too much of a gentleman to make fun of a beautiful lady like yourself."

"Algernon, you're the last and the finest genuine valet and butler in all of England, but your eyesight isn't too good." Claire grinned.

"This woman snuck up behind me without my knowing just now and made a comment about stealing my underwear." Ed said, deadpan.

"I most certainly did not!"

Algernon gave them a serious glance.

"Perhaps you are right, Miss Swanson. About my eyesight, that is. I thought I was in the dining room, and it appears I'm actually in the nursery."

Ed chuckled. "Touché, Algernon. Incidentally I wouldn't worry about the mouse. It ate all the cookies."

"Ah I see."

"Truce?" Claire asked Ed.

"Fine, fine, truce," Ed said to Claire. She grinned, and poured him coffee. Absolutely everything was laid out on the table, toast on a silver rack, fresh butter, every jelly and jam one could dream of, eggs prepared in various ways, all kept hot in silver trays, sausage, bacon, potatoes, the sky was the limit and he wasn't about to let it go to waste. Besides, he was hungry even after the cookie. The coffee smelled delicious. It tasted better than he'd imagined.

It's all illusion, he told himself. Well, I'll make the most of it.

Some time later, he was sitting back in the chair with a full stomach, stifling a yawn.

"The breakfast was excellent, Algernon, but Perry doesn't seem to have gotten here yet. Exactly where did he go? I still have a lot of questions for him, and I intend to find out why he brought me here. Kidnapped me is a more accurate term," Ed pointed out edgily.

"Stop being silly, Perry just wanted to help you, Ed. I'm glad you have your appetite back. How's your pain? You don't strike me as the kind of person who would accept medication without complaint, but I could give you an aspirin," Claire offered.

"I'm fine, I don't need anything." *God, he thought, not the dizziness again.*

"Are you feeling dizzy? Did those bastards hit you on the head at any time?"

"What bastards are you talking about?" Ed responded suspiciously.

"The filthy beasts that beat you up. Sir Perry described to us what had happened. He saw it all," Algernon told Ed.

"Wait, he stood there and let it happen? I could have been killed! All right, this little scene out of a BBC costume drama is over. Cut, print. I'm getting out of here. I'm going back to Brighton."

"How, Ed? Do you intend to walk there?" Claire asked him.

Ed shot up, and had to seize the edge of the chair with both hands to remain standing.

"I'll hitchhike if needs be, and I have my tenner." Plus my loaded gun. Perry did say I could keep anything I fancied.

"Sir, Perry will be frightfully upset if I allow you to go without him being able to say goodbye, but I will drive you-" Algernon was saying.

"No," Ed said firmly.

Claire and Algernon sighed.

"At least take your mouse," Claire suggested.

"The mouse will be just fi--"

Ed fell to the floor unconscious. Claire and Algernon exchanged nervous looks. "Come on, quickly now Ma'am, help me with him."

"God, Algernon, I hated drugging his coffee like that, but I figured being kept here would make him antsy, just like Perry said it might. I don't like telling him lies. He's been through hell already. Why can't your friend Reginald just ring up Freeman and bring him here?"

Algernon had bent and gotten a neatly folded pair of yellow silk pajamas from underneath the table.

"You know it's because Reginald needs to find out what happened to my partner first. You know that. It's what brought Sir Perry to that dreadful café, why he found this Straker bloke in the first place."

"It made me sick to my stomach to pretend to be some amateur idiot around Straker so he'd lower his guard a little. Mooning like that over his good looks. Jesus. That remark about his underwear. Ugh."

"Well, you did strip him, ma'am." Algernon grinned. "You're doing it now."

Claire rolled her eyes, helping Algernon get the pajamas on Ed. "I had to, you know that. I hated coming up behind him, too, after those little fuckers who nearly killed him did it, and then you know how Perry is, he snuck up on Ed too. Perry moves around, well, you know, like smoke on legs."

"I heard Mr. Straker weeping in the guest bathroom as I came up to it. Sir Perry was quite right to take him in. He needs our help."

"Oh the poor man." Claire sighed.

Algernon smiled and lifted Ed's body effortlessly.

"I forget that you were a cop like your life partner before you were a butler. I forget how strong you are." Claire smiled.

"I wasn't much of a cop back then which is why I am a butler now. I'll put Mr. Straker in the master bedroom."

"No, he'll need to be somewhere familiar, put him back in his guest bedroom." They walked together down the hall to the bedroom.

"Are you picking that up from him, ma'am?" Algernon eyed Claire. "The needing to be somewhere familiar?"

"I keep telling you and Perry, I am most definitely not psychic. Everyone gets hunches once in a while, don't you?"

"I'm getting a hunch at this very moment, ma'am." Algernon had lowered Ed gently down onto the bed, and Claire was busying herself with taking Ed's pulse.

"A hunch? About what?" Claire replied, arranging the wisps of fine, silver hair neatly and carefully back on Ed's forehead.

Algernon watched her for a moment with a gentle knowing smile on his face. "About you falling in love with your patient."

Claire looked up sharply and narrowed her eyes at him to see if he was being serious. His returning steady glance said yes.

"Oh Algernon, stop being a romantic idiot, and ring to find out why Perry and Reginald are late. Then please bring me my bag so I can give Straker a thorough examination."

She turned toward Ed again, smiled as she opened his pajama shirt. *God, he was beautiful. It wasn't a word that fit most men, but it fit him just fine.*

The first time I saw you, Ed Straker, I have to confess it wasn't only your blood pressure that was elevated. So was mine.

She found herself suppressing a sigh. Algernon hadn't been a cop once for nothing. He **knew**.

Straker could melt Alaska with a single look, how the hell did she prevent herself from noticing how attractive he was? The smitten amateur act hadn't been all that much of an act, she had to admit to herself. And hell, having to remove his clothes, revealing that lissom body-

Okay enough!

A professional did not get involved with a patient, damn it. The man seemed to have gone through the wars. She knew bullet wound scars when she saw them. Some sort of surgical scar on the shoulder area-

"You don't seem to be needing your bag for that," Algernon said cheekily, still watching.

"Algernon hush!" she chided, turning to look up at him, but he was gone. Claire looked down at Ed again, remembering her first day in a strange country and how desolate she had felt, her conversation with Peregrine Falcon punctuated by tears.

I don't know what to do, I spent every last dime I had to get to England, Sir Perry, and they took it all. I don't even know how to use the telephones here! She'd dampened his fine handkerchief from his suit pocket.

Don't you worry, child. Everything happens for a reason. Your destiny is here. You'll stay with me. Believe me, this is your place, it called to you. You told me you were a doctor?

Yes, I work at a free clinic in San Francisco, I live there in San Francisco. Well, I have a bit of clout, as you Americans say, Perry had chuckled. I shall see about getting you a permit to work here, and you shall live and work for me. But Perry, I can't do that, my

apartment, my job-she'd protested.

My dear child, can you stand there and truthfully tell me you had any real ties to anyone or anything back in the States?

No, no. God, I'm sorry to fall apart like this, but I've never had anyone show any interest in me, some days life didn't seem worth living and I didn't think of my future and now I'm past fifty and alone. My God, why am I telling a complete stranger this? You could be some sinister killer or something.

Oh, how terribly thrilling! You flatter me child, he had chuckled.

She had laughed, instantly liking the man. I'm sorry, comes from all the murder mysteries I read. I trust you, I don't know why.

Well, old souls know one another, the Between is a special place and the Goddess is a wise mother, and I was born her child, as were you. I feel you've been alone all your life but that time is changing. Perhaps someone you have yet to meet can heal his own loneliness from loving you.

He'd smiled at her confusion.

The Between? Goddess? Perry, I'm not sure what you're talking about. It's all right, child, it's all right. Just believe.

Believe.

Claire sighed, and then remembered where she was. Her wristwatch told her several minutes had passed, and Algernon still was not back with her bag. Ed seemed all right. She reached for and stroked Ed's hand. Even in his drugged tranquility, his features showed a man who had suffered mental pain, and she knew emotional scars were ones her training could never tend.

"Now *you* have to believe," she told the sleeping Ed Straker softly. "Believe. You're going to get back to your Freeman, Ed. You often muttered his name in your sleep so it didn't take Perry long to find out who he was. We just have to first find out what happened to Algernon's lover, the policeman. You worked with him, Ed. Algernon said he told him that you were the only one that ever treated him decently at that cafe and you fed those poor hungry people every day, that's why he never turned you in, even though he knew about the fake ID and everything else that woman gave you. His name was George Fisher, Ed. He was working undercover as a cook, and he was close to sending Mackey and Wendy to prison, where they belonged."

"Yes, my George was," Algernon said from behind her. "Now his body's been found, turned up at a wharf with a knife in his back," Algernon said. "Reginald and Perry just phoned me from the police station. I know those cafe people killed him, Claire, I know they did." Algernon tried to suppress his sobs, but failed. "George was all I had in the world; I hope Reg gets at those evil bastards. I knew something was wrong when George didn't ring me - oh merciful heavens, my poor George murdered-"

"Oh Algernon, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." She held the tall wiry man in her arms as he cried. She'd come to love Algernon as she loved Perry and all the strays he often brought to his estate.

Algernon took a deep breath, calmer now, and she scolded herself for being so selfish over Ed. It was Algernon who needed her now.

"No ma'am, it'll be them who will be sorry, when Reginald gets at them. It'll be them," he said coldly. "Sorry ma'am, I forgot when I heard the news, I'll see about getting your bag now."

For the first time, Claire thought as she watched him go, he sounded completely like the

cop he once had been.

Chapter Four: Air in The Boot

"Makes you sick, Fisher murdered like that, doesn't it, Pers. You've been quiet all this time."

"Sometimes I use my wealth as a shield against this world, Regs. I know there are more people out there like this Mackey alias John Bruin alias James Keller and this Wendy Wilson aka Paula Greene aka Diana Trevor. Just thinking of it makes me want to wash myself all over with bleach."

"George Fisher was an acquaintance of mine, and he knew there is only one way to deal with insects, Per, and it isn't bleach."

The older man grinned at the younger one, who had been driving the unmarked automobile the two of them were traveling in.

"It's a relief that you exist in this world, Reginald. You're a fellow who uses an oak tree to get out the crud between your teeth, who picks up a whole block of traffic in the palm of your hand if it keeps you from getting from point A to point B, somebody who could eat the entire contents of a icebox plus the icebox too then spit the chrome bits out."

Reginald Devon weighed about a hundred and ninety, had the body and muscles and speed and strength of a cougar and stood six feet, three inches tall. There wasn't as much as an ounce of fat on him. *He was a civil servant. In the same way that the Pope was a priest, mused Perry.*

"George Fisher was a personal friend of mine, Pers. So is Algernon. So are you. I admit you were hard to swallow with the metaphysical claptrap, the insisting you can change into animals, your filthy tax bracket, and your bringing people in trouble into your home to fix up as if they were an antique you were planning on restoring. I'm told her Majesty thought highly of you when she gave you the 'Sir' in front of your name for your distinguished military service and your charitable efforts, but I didn't hold her opinion against you."

Perry chuckled.

"Very gracious of you, Reginald. Very gracious indeed. How is her Majesty?"

"Rich. Like you. About fifteen minutes now. That American you picked up is in real trouble. After I speak to Straker we have to bring his Freeman into this, and explaining why we didn't go straightaway to that Australian when we found Straker isn't going to be something I relish. On the top of that, what Straker does for a living scares the bloody hell out of me, and I don't scare easy. Straker's got security clearance the likes of which God doesn't have, and he's as close to being dead as you can be right now and still draw breath. From the bugs I had Algernon place on him, he's wound up tight, unhinged and I've seen the signs before in men and women who have been brainwashed, and that's why we have to get to him. I once was providing security at a meeting he attended. It was full to the brim with men and women of importance. They paid him deference. Straker's the kind of man you'd cut out your liver for, place it on a silver tray and hand it over with a polite 'Will there be anything else, sir'"

"Goddess, Regs. You admire this man greatly, don't you."

"I'll tell you this, Per. At the end of the meeting, Straker came up to me, smiled, shook my hand with a real handshake and personally told me thank you. He knew what my job was. You don't forget that kind of thing easily; it was as rare as a whore at a nunnery. Let us just say I envy Freeman the privilege of calling that man friend, and I hope I can save Straker for him. Can I depend on that American girl of yours, that doctor, to keep this all hush?"

"Algernon does, Reginald. So do I. You know that already."

"Good, I needed a doctor to administer the drugs it's going to take to find out what happened to Straker. I'd rather have someone there with him who gave a damn, and Algernon told me that she's in love with Straker. It'll make things easier in a situation that is never easy. I don't think they have any future after this, more than likely Straker wouldn't want it, if he survives this at all," Reginald added.

"Algernon knows what he is talking about, and the first time I looked into Dr. Swanson's eyes, at the same time I saw the eyes of a man who was living in misery, but still took the time to feed hungry people. She's going to be in his life, one way or another."

"You and your clairvoyance, and Algernon and his true love nonsense, two bloody romantics. Are you all right about what happened, Pers?" he asked casually.

Perry smiled.

"I've killed men before, Reginald, don't worry about me."

"I'm not talking about the Blitz, Pers. I'm talking about you pointing a Mauser at a kneeling, screaming Mackey as he begged for mercy and blowing him away like a dandelion."

Reginald didn't sound upset at all.

Perry took a deep breath. "What was it you said, Reginald? About insects? It wasn't murder, it was extermination. Mackey stabbed Detective Inspector George Fisher in the back, and dumped him like rubbish. Wendy Wilson watched it, and it was probably the high point of her day. When I go to join the Goddess, she can judge me. Until then you don't have to worry about me going soft."

"You're a cold bastard, Pers. I like that in a man, even if you are a bloody Royalist, you demented old twit."

Perry chuckled.

"*God save the Queen.* Speaking of Wendy Wilson, do you think she has enough air in the boot?" Perry inquired politely.

"Just," Reginald answered, stopping the car.

"*Pity.*" Perry said with feeling.

Chapter Five: The Canary

Alec Freeman had pulled up in front of Ed Straker's house just as dusk fell. There was a tricycle in the driveway, next to a weathered looking van. Alec was not sure how long he'd been there, just staring at the house. Without warning he heard a door open and a young man swiftly came toward the car carrying a cricket bat in one hand and a flashlight he used to blind Alec with the other. Freeman squinted, hit the switch to lower the window but kept his other hand on the gun upon his hip. The family had been investigated, but there was always that little something that SHADO security might not have picked up. Otherwise it was John and Jane Doe Civilian.

"Now see here, I've got your licence, and I've got a wife and three kids in the house, so I don't know what you're up to, but get the bloody hell away from here!" the man was saying.

"A friend lived here, owned the house before your family moved in. I'm sorry." Alec shoved one of his variety of official passes at the civilian. The man shoved the flashlight under one arm to examine Alec's offering.

"He disappeared unexpectedly after he put the house on the market. I didn't mean to alarm you. I'm here on official police business."

The man's expression sank as he passed the bit of plastic back to the Australian.

"It's me who apologises, sir. You know how a wife gets. She'll be much relieved to hear it."

"Good night now," Alec said, and shut the window, started up the car again.

We don't have the luxury of making mistakes, Alec. Remember that. Ed Straker had told him.

Yet all his instincts said he was making a mistake. A whopper.

"I don't know what else to do, Ed. Maybe she's right. Maybe the way I can honour your memory is do exactly what she says, blow the alien bastards out of the sky." Alec said aloud, as he drove.

They're a nice couple, Ed, they bought your house. Young bank executive, with a pretty wife, three kids and one on the way. You'd like them. They'll make your place into a real home. Maybe do some things you never had time to. Plant some flowers, maybe. Perhaps a nice fountain on the grass. Hang a swing from two of the trees.

I had to stop myself from telling him you were dead.

I'm starting to believe it. I know you. If there was a way to get back to me and the job, you would have found it no matter what happened to you.

You've got to be dead. I always thought it would be me first, drinking as I do. I didn't imagine you'd go like this. No body to bury. No service. No flowers for your simple grave. No thank you, Colonel, for the job you did, the life of indentured servitude, giving it your heart and your soul.

We don't have the luxury of making mistakes, Alec. But I have made a mistake, I've tried to keep the inevitable from happening. This isn't what you would have wanted. All right then, Commander. My final act as your second-in-command. Alec pulled the SHADO car to an abrupt stop. He took his mobile from a pocket, and keyed through to the photos.

Ed Straker stared up at him from the photo, dressed in the unfamiliar clothing, scowling, quietly disapproving of what circumstances didn't allow him to change. *I took unfair advantage of you that day, Ed. I failed to obey rule number one: never screw with Commander Edward Straker.*

Alec keyed DELETE, ignoring the tears pouring down his pitted cheeks, biting his lip.
This is for you, Ed.

The screen seemed to rebuke him. Or was it Ed's ghost?

DELETE FILE?

The mobile rang, causing Alec to jump. He hit cancel and punched the button to answer.
"Freeman."

"Are you Alec Freeman? From Harlington-Straker Studios?"

"How did you get my number? Who are you?"

"I'm Petey. Do you read the newspapers? They're *dead!*" the voice was on the verge of breaking down. Male, sounded very young. Alec hit the intercept switch, watching as the call was traced over the network.

"What is this about?"

"Stu and Ken are dead. Their bodies showed up police found them. I know who did it. I'm scared they'll come after me next. They didn't like me being with them. I got in over my head, I'm scared, please, I didn't mean any harm. I didn't even know what to do with the knife, I wanted them to be impressed, I wanted to be accepted. I hate school, mister. I hate maths. I've always been slow, my Pops says so. He doesn't know I'm doing this. He's got this book with all kinds of numbers in it, he's a technician in hospital, he knows a lot of people, he knew you were looking for the man. Please understand, I just wanted to be one of the blokes. Winds gave Ken a gun, that man who knocked me out could have shot me with it, but he didn't. Winds gave Ken a lot of money to do what we did, I guess I knew it was wrong, we all knew that place was more than a café, but nobody was brave enough to say anything. I didn't want to hurt the man, I just wanted to act tough, I really didn't like them, honest. Do you think they'll find me now and kill me? I'm only twelve! I want my mum." The voice sobbed.

He watched the letters move across the screen.

CALL ORIGINATING TETBURY, SCANNING. PETER TURNER-SCANNING-

What the devil was this all about?

"Why did you call me? Try and calm down, everything's going to be all right."

"I used to watch him give out the food. I never saw an American close up before. He talked funny to us, but I knew that he was American from the way he talked to the tramps he fed. I went back to ask him for help, but that nice man took him away. Pops told me he's a good person. There was an opening at a hospital that Pops' girlfriend told him about and she lent him money and so we moved out of Brighton to here. I didn't like having to disappoint Pops, so I ran away. I liked the American a lot, did they kill him too?" the boy cried, becoming hysterical.

"What American? **WHAT AMERICAN?**"

"Ed the dishwasher at The Rock Bottom. Ed was his name. Ed White, but the nice man said his real name was Straker. Windy was hiding him. She said he'd been in a car accident. I don't think she liked him much, cause she wanted us to scare him. She liked to see people get scared. Ed could have shot me, but he didn't." *God. God. GOD. GOD. GOD!*

"Petey. Now listen to me. I've got a phone that tells me exactly where you are. I'm going to come and get you from its signal, so keep it on as long as you can until I tell you to turn it off. I'm not going to hurt you. Everything's going to be okay. You did the right thing. Find some place to hide and stay there. I'm coming for you. Have you got a full battery?"

" Yes, it's okay. I'm scared, what if they find me, Alec? When will you come?"

"I'm headed out to the airport now. I'll hire a special chopper. Just hold on, Petey. Hold

on."

"Okay. Hurry, Alec."

"I'll be there before you know it."

"I want my Mum. My real Mum."

"Hold on."

Hold on, Ed. I'm coming for you.

Chapter Six: Rude Awakening

"Ed. Come on, Ed. Wake up, you have to wake up," Claire said urgently. She had tears in her eyes.

The answer was a groan. She bent over his sleeping figure.

"Ed, it's okay, wake u-EEEE!"

Ed rolled out of the bed, shot straight up to his feet, and she found herself staring at his gun.

"I'm awake all right, Swanson, if that's really your name. I've been awake long enough to get my gun and to figure out that last wave of dizziness followed by me falling unconscious had been from someone giving me a Mickey Finn. Ah so I was right, judging by that guilty expression on your innocent little face it was you. You were pretty persuasive in pouring me my coffee, and I should have guessed something was wrong. I figured out that the only way to get answers was to-"

Algernon came into the room, followed by Perry.

Claire screamed as Ed pulled her in front of him, one arm across her neck, holding the gun to her head.

"Mr. Straker, *please!*" Algernon exclaimed.

Perry only smiled knowingly.

"I suggest you tell me what the hell is really going on here, why you had me drugged, and why I was kidnapped. If you don't I'm going to shoot this woman," Ed announced.

"Sir, listen, I beg you to listen. That man you worked for, Mackey. He was being investigated by Detective Inspector George Fisher. George was my life partner. Now he's dead. Mackey killed him. Reginald is ex MI6, and a friend of George's, and Reginald and Perry went to find-" Algernon said nervously.

"Wait, George *Fisher*? The *cook*? Mackey told me he'd had a heart attack."

"George was undercover there for months. He kept me updated on the case every night. He suspected Mackey and Wendy Wilson from their string of aliases. George had been trying to catch them for months. They had their fingers in everything you could think of, forgery, theft, drugs, black market, blackmail, murder. George was getting solid proof, names, dates, locations. They didn't suspect him, he was in disguise, he was one of the best undercover cops England had. When he didn't call me for days, Perry went down there to see if he could help, because I'd left the force and couldn't bring myself to do it and he didn't find George but he did find you."

"Go on." Ed's eyes narrowed.

"Reginald and I caught and interrogated Mackey and Wendy, and he confessed," Perry said. "He and Wendy took George to a wharf in the pretense of knocking back a few beers, bringing him into their confidence. Mackey convinced him they were giving him a part in their sick business. It was the break he'd hoped for so he made the mistake of going along without backup. Instead they shoved a knife in his back. It might interest you to know that Wendy paid those kids to beat you up, Edward. She said she wanted to see you scared, said she was furious that you didn't succumb to her charms, like all the other men she'd seduced and blackmailed. Two of the kids she paid have turned up dead, one's gone missing. Edward, my child, we knew Alec Freeman was looking for you-"

"What the hell?" Ed became livid.

"We knew. I had you bugged at Reginald's request. We couldn't take the chance that you

were actually mixed up in my George's death and George had been wrong to trust you. Please believe me, as soon as we found out what happened to George, we were going to call your Freeman," Algernon pleaded. "Don't hurt Claire, please."

"So let's see. You knew my friend was searching for me, but you didn't try to contact him. You watch me being beaten up, you don't make a move to help me. You kidnap me out of Brighton and you bring me to the Cotswolds. You have the girl drug me for a week, take care of my wounds, and then to keep me from being suspicious, you have her knock me out with drugs again. You give me back the gun I took off the kids, this time you load it. That was your one mistake. There's nothing much that rules out anyone here as being any less dirtier than Mackey and Wendy, if your story is even legitimate. I'm fed up with being lied to. I'm fed up with being manipulated and drugged, and being so sick and exhausted I can't see straight. I want out of here. Now. Or this Swanson woman is dead. Do I make myself clear?"

Reginald had been listening from just outside the door and entered at that moment, dragging along a terrified Wendy. Thick tape over her mouth was masking the sounds she was making, and her hands were tied together behind her back with wire. Her eyes widened in more horror when she saw Ed. Ed looked aghast.

Reginald pushed her down onto her knees.

"Maybe this insect's buzzing will make you change your mind, Straker. I'm Reginald Devon, assigned to-

"I remember you," Ed replied.

"Good, sir, good. I have reason to believe you've been brainwashed. What do you remember about the accident this bitch claimed you were in? Nothing, right? All a blank in your mind. And Freeman. You don't even know where he lives, you said it yourself. I had Swanson drug you and later on your coffee, and Algernon bugged the rooms you were in. He heard you break down while bathing and he told me every word you said."

"*You son of a bitch.*" Ed spit out each word.

"Come on, Straker. I wasn't guarding you that day because you were a movie executive. Try and *THINK!* Tell me about the accident you were in." Reginald said.

"Stop it, he's been sick, don't push him around, he's been sick." Claire said, her voice strained. "Please believe Reginald, Ed. Call the police and have it all verified."

"Swanson, we don't have time for that," Reginald told her.

"I-" blurted Ed.

"You can't tell me about the accident can you, Straker? Because you were brainwashed! Brainwashed into staying out of somebody's way!" Reginald shouted at the Commander. "If they arranged all this so easily, how long do you think it will be before they come after you again?"

"Oh my God. Perry, please, don't let Reginald do this, this interrogation thing. He's had enough ill treatment, Perry, don't let Reginald do this to Ed."

"My child, he needs this. Edward has to remember to save himself, or we have to drug him into remembering. He's in danger," Perry said sadly to her. "I don't want to see him go back into that harsh world any more than you do."

"We could keep him safe here, Perry. He could be happy here." Claire was crying now.

"Claire, love, I'm going to call Freeman right now," Perry said. "Edward will be all right with him."

"Freeman will take him away. We have to find out what happened to Straker first," Reginald told him.

"I won't let you hurt him, Reginald. I don't give a damn about the case, or anything else. I won't allow Ed to be hurt!" Claire said fiercely.

Ed suddenly let go of Claire, and backed away, hit the wall, shoved the gun into a pocket and held the bridge of his nose as if in pain.

"*Stop it,*" Ed said weakly. "Just stop it, *please.*"

"Damn you, Reginald, Ed can't handle this!" Claire yelled.

Reginald ripped the tape off Wendy's mouth and she screamed. He held her by the hair and pointed a silenced gun to her head.

"Tell him." Reginald ordered her.

"Please, don't let him shoot me! I was paid a lot of money, all right? More money than I'd ever seen, more money than what Macs and I got from what we ever did. All right, so we did kill Fisher! Fisher was acting funny, trying to listen to our phone calls, writing things down. We finally figured out he had to be a cop, so we got rid of him and we left his body at the wharf. We'd be free now if these two hadn't found us trying to get away to start our business somewhere else. Nobody ever caught us before, but Macs got greedy, so he was less careful. This bastard blew Macs' head off, even after he talked!"

"Tell Straker how you found him. Tell him everything you told us," thundered Reginald, yanking her hair.

"Damn you, that hurts!"

"Okay. Join Mackey."

"NO! NO! I'll tell him! I'll tell him! A man came and told me what to do; he said I was to tell you you'd been in a car accident, he told me exactly where I would find you. He gave me all your money too, in cash, he told me and Mackey that he'd gotten you to take it all out yourself, that it had been easy. He said that he'd had you roughed up so it would make it plausible that you'd been in an accident. He said that I was to give you that job, a cheap place to sleep, give you a fake American military ID, thrift store clothes, and keep an eye on you. He supplied me with everything to make it easier, he said in the state you were in, you'd believe whatever I told you. He said you wouldn't make trouble, and you wouldn't remember much. He said your name was Straker. He didn't give his name, and he made me swear we'd work you hard, wear you down. He kept sending me lots of cash. I sent those stupid boys after you to teach you a lesson. The way I found you, you would have died if I hadn't taken you in. You never acted all that grateful to me, not like I wanted! So I did it hoping maybe you'd come to me for help, and I'd give you a good time in bed. I didn't tell Mackey that part. When you disappeared, Mackey told me that we'd have to get out of there, fast."

"What exactly did he look like, the man who came to you?" Ed heard himself ask her.

Wendy described the stranger, and blood drained from Ed's face.

"Algernon, get the man a whisky," Reginald said quickly.

"I don't drink." It cost Ed a great deal of effort to say the words.

"Whisky is the last thing he needs, you idiot. He's had a shock, I'll get him a glass of orange juice. He's MY patient, don't you even think about forgetting that," Claire said firmly.

Ed reached out and took her arm. Claire's eyes widened.

"Wait a second. Do you honestly think I'm going to drink anything you get for me?" Ed managed a weary smile for her.

Algernon couldn't help it, and neither could Perry, they chuckled.

"Oh God, Ed." Claire sobbed, her bravado gone.

"I need you to settle down for me, okay? Are you really a medical doctor?"

"Yes, I am, I've been taking care of you, doing my best to make you better. Oh God, Ed. I swear to God I didn't want to do any of that. It's just if you had gone off, than the people who did this to you would have killed you. Please believe me." Claire wept.

"I do. I'd really appreciate that juice."

Claire smiled at him and left the room.

"Straker, I take it you know who the man was?" Reginald asked after a loaded period of silence during which Ed looked shaken to his core.

"*I do*. Somebody I thought I could trust. Somebody I've known for a long time." Ed changed the subject quickly. "What are you going to do with her?" Ed pointed at Wendy.

"This." Reginald slammed the gun butt down on Wendy's head and she hit the floor, out cold. "I'd rather send the bitch to go join her pal Mackey, but I think George Fisher would want to see her face justice before the Old Bailey and be put away for good," Reginald said.

"Good, I agree. Killing her won't solve anything. Algernon, I'm terribly sorry for your loss. George was always decent to me," Ed said.

Claire had come in after a long absence and handed him the iced orange juice quietly. Ed drank half of it and handed it back. There was a puzzling expression on her face Ed couldn't interpret, and he was about to ask for clarification, but a teary Algernon interrupted him.

"He admired you very much, sir. That's why he had decided to let you go once he'd arrested them. He said no man that had taken the nonsense you had, worked as hard as you did and who put other people's needs before his own, could have possibly been that much of a criminal on the run, so he'd intended to bend the rules in your favour. George liked to listen to you read to the tramps as they ate the food you'd given them. George told me he read some of the same books you had."

Ed looked preoccupied for a moment.

"I think the words of Raymond Chandler describe George Fisher," he told Algernon quietly. "*Down those mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid.*"

A voice brimming with barely controlled emotion responded in an all too familiar Australian accent to Ed's words. "The Simple Art of Murder. You left out a lot of Chandler's description of the ideal private detective, Ed. *He is a lonely man, and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man, or be very sorry you ever saw him.* I couldn't quote all of it as well as you would with that melodious voice of yours, Ed, but Raymond Chandler could have been describing you too in that entire last paragraph of his essay in that book."

"Alec intercepted me pouring the juice for Ed," Claire told them. "He found the last boy Peter Turner, he called and told Alec everything. He didn't run away like Perry and Ed thought he had. He hid and saw Perry and Algernon take Ed away in Perry's car. Peter was terrified, but he's in a safe house Alec owns now."

Ed Straker's eyes went glassy, turned up in their sockets, and Ed slid to the floor.

Alec Freeman got to Ed before anyone else did.

"Nobody touches him. *Nobody but me,*" Alec said gruffly, cradling Ed against him possessively.

"I'm a doctor, I told you that. Take his gun and hold it on me, if you want, but he needs to be examined right away in our clinic here. Please, Mr. Freeman. I'm not going to take him away from you again-"

"***Damn straight you aren't.*** Nobody is," Alec told Claire. "All right. I was faxed a copy of this estate, the exact address, who owned it, who Falcon was, everything. I know where the

clinic is. I'll carry him there myself. As soon as he's on his feet, he comes with me."

"Agreed. Hurry, Alec!"

Chapter Seven: Secrets and Sandwiches

Three days later, Ed Straker strolled alongside Alec Freeman in Perry's garden under a midday sun. Alec had rung Jenkins and told her he needed some time off to think, and she had sounded glad to hear it. Ed had told Alec he didn't want anyone in SHADO to know he was still alive until he felt ready to return, and although Alec didn't quite understand Ed's reluctance to make his presence known, he'd gone along with Ed's request.

The Commander had put a few much needed pounds on with regular meals, but his pallor still reflected his ordeal. Against Alec's protests, Ed had allowed himself to be given the drugs that would help recover his memories of the brainwashing. Only at Ed's personal insistence had Alec agreed to let Reginald and Claire do the work on Ed without Alec being there. Every day that Ed would undergo and come out of a treatment, Ed seemed a little stronger. It was just the haunted look in Ed's crystalline blue eyes that Alec persistently worried about.

"It's certainly been some experience living like a civilian, Alec. Now you tell me I don't have a house to go back to?" Ed said in amusement.

"You'll stay with me until we find you a new, secure house to live in. Now that you're almost ready to go back to SHADO, I can't wait to see Jenkins' face when you walk in and reclaim your office and replace the bar."

"Yes, I can see how that would be first on your agenda. How's Peter?" Ed asked.

"He wasn't awake when I got up this morning."

"Peter's just fine, I checked, he's reading the Chandler books you had Perry buy him. I can tell you for sure he doesn't miss school."

Ed laughed. "Yes, I got that feeling from him too. He seems to have learned his lesson about choosing his friends more wisely. I like him, Alec."

"I still don't believe you did that to him." Alec grinned widely.

"Did what?"

"You clapped at him so it would sound like a gunshot."

"Oh. That. I was under a lot of duress. Besides, he's a sneak. I had no idea he was hiding and watching me." Ed said in feigned innocence.

"You rascal you. Are you sure it isn't a good idea to let him go home yet?"

"I told you, Alec. I assured his father that he was safe, and they talked over the phone. When I decide Peter is ready to go home, he will."

"Reginald hasn't turned over Wendy to the authorities."

"Reginald knows what he's doing," Ed replied.

"Ed, there's a lot you haven't told me, although Perry filled me in about everything else."

"Such as?" Ed smiled, pointed to a gazebo under which there was a table and chairs, shaded by an umbrella. The men sat down. Algernon came up with a silver tray bearing a plate of sandwiches, and a pair of iced coffees.

"Enjoy," the butler said, and went away. Alec waited until he was sure Algernon was gone. Ed was contentedly putting two sugars in his iced coffee.

"Why you didn't want me to be with you while Reginald was giving you the drugs. Why didn't you? I read the report SHADO code named Timelash, and I never have forgiven myself for being on holiday while it happened. When I think about you alone with Jackson..."

"Jackson's been dead a long time, Alec. That Timelash incident happened years ago. Don't worry about it."

"That doesn't answer my question, Ed."

"What question?"

"Why you didn't-"

Ed picked up a sandwich and shoved it in Alec's mouth so that he was forced to bite off a portion of it. "Egg salad. Taste good? "

"Ed Straker, if you think you are going to get away with this, you have another think coming." Alec said between periods of forced chewing.

"You don't like the egg salad? What about roast beef? I'm having the roast beef with cheddar, Claire said I need more protein, and I had the egg salad yesterday."

"Ed, I'm warning you. You're keeping things from me again. Why leave me out of your treatments? Why didn't you tell me who was paying Wendy off to keep you at that café? Damn it, Ed, I'm your second in command and I need to know these things. I have the right to know these things!"

"Don't tell me, let me guess. You're resigning? At least eat before you go," Ed said mischievously.

Alec rolled his eyes at his friend.

"Why in the world did I ever bother to look for you?" complained Alec, and reluctantly picked up the egg salad sandwich again.

"My mouse seems to be doing just fine; I should go bring him some of this sandwich. Claire said that when I finally leave here, I need to take him with me. Maybe I'll name him Alec."

"You know, I was really beginning to think you were getting better. Now I'm thinking the best place for you is an insane asylum."

Ed pretended to be wounded by the comment as he looked at Alec solemnly over his iced coffee. He put the glass down, shook it so that the ice clattered inside the glass. His eyes searched Alec's face as he took another sip, and then set it down again.

"Oh what is it now, Straker?" Alec moaned, frustrated. "I hate iced coffee, where's Algernon? I need a whisky."

"I missed you, Alec."

Alec shot a look at Ed.

"There's a lot I haven't told you, Alec. And I will fill you in, I'll explain everything, I just can't do it now for reasons I can't go into yet. I give you my word that I'll tell you when I can."

"Right."

"You don't believe me. I can understand that. I thought I'd never see you again, Alec. I can't tell you what that was like."

"Look, if you don't want to talk to me about the brainwashing, that's fine. I just want to see you get well."

"With you at my side, that shouldn't take long," Ed said seriously. Alec looked a bit uneasy.

"Did you really wash dishes?" Alec asked after a moment. "Clean floors?"

Ed sighed. He nodded. He took a bite out of his sandwich, chewed carefully as if the process tired him.

"Cooked?"

"For that one day, yes, yes. I'll never go into a restaurant again without new appreciation for how hard the staff works to maintain it." Ed smiled.

"It's hard to imagine you scrubbing dishes," grinned Alec.

"You keep bringing it up and I may relapse. Listen, Alec. I think it's time you and I and

Reginald go for a long ride."

"Ride? Where to?"

"To SHADO headquarters. To meet this Commander Marjorie Jenkins of yours and tell her what I think of what she did to my office. Reginald can drive us there. He's already got the top clearance necessary to come with us. I want Jenkins to meet him."

Alec stood up with a huge grin on his face.

"Come on, let's get going," Alec said. Ed reached for his iced coffee and drained the remainder in a gulp, and then he jumped to his feet.

"After you, Colonel," Ed said.

Ed seemed uncharacteristically nervous, but Alec told himself Ed's nerves couldn't be all that steady so soon. Besides, he rather resented Reginald coming along, but he told himself if it was what Ed wanted, then he wouldn't complain.

Besides, Ed is alive. That's all that matters.

There was a definite spring in his step as he followed the Commander out of the garden.

Chapter Eight: His Finest Hour

Alec had been a little taken aback at Reginald handing Ed a small bag when he and Ed had gotten to Reginald's unmarked car and they'd settled down in the back seat. The bag contained a tin of camouflage face paint. Carefully, Ed applied it to his face, until he resembled a commando. Nothing could hide his brilliant blue eyes, so Ed put on a pair of opaque sunglasses from the bag. The final touch he acquired from the bag of tricks was a black knit cap that hid his unmistakable platinum hair.

"Ed, what's going on?" he asked and judging by Ed's expression, it was in vain.

"You'll just have to trust me, Alec," Ed said, strapping on a shoulder holster and not his customary gun. Alec noted the gun looked bizarre.

"You armed?" Damn it, Ed, why the hell are you keeping me out of the loop?

"That's what I thought you'd say," Alec informed Ed gloomily. "I'm always armed, you know that."

"This might encourage you, Alec. When someone on the police force would come into hospital with an injury that required X-Rays, radiologist David Turner would treat them with special care. His late brother had been a cop who died in the performance of his duty so naturally he had emotional ties to them. Turner gained plenty of police friends who gave him info so that if he ever got into a fix, he had only to call them to have it taken care of. Turner told me his son Peter had been acting strangely, and it didn't take long before the boy broke down and told his father what happened and described Perry and I. My name sounded familiar to Turner because your pub mate Ian Casey, who just happened to have been Turner's late brother's partner, had mentioned in passing you had told him to contact him if anyone was admitted to hospital with my name and description. Casey figured Turner was a good person to tell, since he worked there and would know if I'd been admitted in casualty."

"Jenkins had ordered me to call off the search for you, I'll be damned if I was going to do that! So I conducted my own search without telling her." Alec grinned. "Good on Ian, the beers are going to be on me from now on."

"Turner searched for his book of special numbers to help out his brother's mate. Only it was missing from the drawer in which he kept it. Peter had taken it and ran away from home. Turner had scrawled your name down in it next to Casey's number, and Peter was familiar with the book and everything in it. So when Peter heard Perry mention the name Alec Freeman after I fell unconscious, well, you can guess the rest. The boy was reluctant to tell his father what happened until his friends showed up in the local newspaper. The deaths of Stuart Daley and Ken Black proved not to be related to Mackey and Wendy. Post mortems conducted by the police coroner showed that Black had taken the knife out of Daley against the advice I gave him. Obviously, without medical help, Daley died of shock and haemorrhage. The death of Black was ruled a suicide, perhaps he blamed himself for his friend's death when he couldn't find me to blame it on. Both boys were barely in their teens, Alec. At least we were able to help Peter," Ed said sadly.

"Now that we know Turner's kid is safe, he can go home to his father. Just to be careful the whole family will be under police protection for a while at Straker's suggestion. Half the police force volunteered for the duty, I understand," Reginald added with a chuckle.

"Good, good. So we have a few more loose ends tied up. The rest depends on me. Now Alec, once we get to the SHADO elevator, I want you to go in ahead of me, as part of this will depend on your status as second-in-command. Reginald will be lending us a hand. Now I'll

brief you, Alec, but the most crucial thing I want you to remember is that you are not to react to whatever I may say or do but just obey my commands when we get in there."

Alec gave Reginald a look, but Reginald was impassive. Alec nodded at Ed. Alec listened to the Commander for several minutes, Alec's eyebrows slowly rising in a rendezvous to meet his hairline.

"You do know what kind of a reception that's going to get us?" Alec asked his friend.

"I'm counting on it," Ed said fiercely.

So much for the man made of ice. Ed looks more like someone set him on fire. I'd feel better if I knew why, Alec thought.

The three men were aboard a MI6 equipped helicopter. Reginald was at its controls. Now it hovered down toward the small helicopter pad atop Harlington-Straker Studios, and within minutes it settled down, after Reginald activated a gadget on it that would kill radar detection, and conceal their arrival from all SHADO security measures in place. Reginald killed the rotation of the blades and the men eased themselves out of the chopper.

"You sure you want to do this so soon, Straker?" Reginald asked, as the men swooped toward the concealed door on the rooftop that disguised the elevator that would take them to the heart of SHADO.

"I couldn't afford to wait any longer, and I don't think I've ever been this sure about anything," Ed replied. He nervously watched Alec punch a code in a panel. The door slid up to reveal the inside of the elevator. All the men entered and the door slid down behind them. Alec pressed a handprint scanner installed in the wall, punched a second code in. Alec then looked up at the concealed camera above the door. It jutted out like an inquisitive giraffe, moved and its computer eye fixed without mercy on Alec.

"Beginning security check," a disembodied voice announced. **"Please commence verification input. You have twenty seconds before elevator seals and defence procedures commence."** A panel opened out with a screen on it, next to the screen was a gadget that resembled an apparatus used in optical exams. Alec bent over the chin rest, laid his forehead against the top, and stared into the pinpoint of light as if he was merely being fitted for glasses.

"Freeman, Alec E. Emergency code Angelis. I repeat emergency code Angelis."

"Identity confirmed. Input new commands."

Alec let out the breath he'd been holding in. Reginald grinned at him. Ed seemed part of the elevator, his expression gave nothing away. Alec drew his gun from his hip holster and pushed back the safety catch.

"Commence code OBE. Override-Beta- Executor. Seal all entrances and exits to HQ except this elevator. Commence descent. Seal this elevator in twenty seconds and reset code to default. Lock all doors and corridors immediately. Open and close no door or corridor without my voice command. Shut down all alarms. Begin countdown to SHADO access," Alec said.

"Code OBE acknowledged. Ten seconds. Nine seconds. Eight seconds. Seven seconds."

"Been a long time since I had this much fun, Straker." Reginald pulled out a silenced Magnum. "I just wish for your sake that your toy wasn't loaded with blanks."

"Six seconds."

"Oh technically, they aren't blanks, but darts," Ed said casually. "They'll put anyone I shoot to sleep for a few hours, it'll feel like being punched by Ali when they make contact. They have to have a dependable velocity; they're used for tranquilizing dangerous zoo animals.

I had the drug they contain changed to a kind designed to put out a man."

"Five seconds."

"How the hell Perry managed to secure this contraption for me, I still don't know, the man's a magician. And Alec remember my briefing, whatever happens, you don't make a move once we reach Jenkins until I tell you to," Ed commanded forcefully, drawing the gun.

"Reginald, you shoot to stop anyone who disagrees with us, you don't shoot to kill."

Reginald made a face, nodded. Alec was looking at Ed.

"Four seconds."

"I remember your briefing, all right, but I didn't think you were that pissed off at Jenkins for ruining your office, Ed." Alec grinned.

"Three seconds--"

Ed's mouth twisted into a brief wisp of a smile at Alec.

"Two seconds."

"It was losing my green glass paperweight that threw me over the edge, Alec."

"Access available."

The next five minutes were a blurry haze of tense commands for Alec, as corridors and doors opened and closed and bodies of SHADO personnel fell scattered in duos as if Ed was playing a macabre game of mah-jongg. They reached Command Center. More personnel went down. The rest glared at the unidentified visitors, and stared at Alec.

Only Keith Ford was willing to trust him enough to allow Alec to explain what he'd done.

"Colonel, what's going on?" Keith Ford said mournfully. "Who are they? Why did you override our security procedures? Why did you lock all personnel in?"

Alec was about to respond but Ed interrupted him.

Big time, as the Americans put it, Alec thought.

A nuclear blast couldn't have carried more devastation than that tone of voice, Alec knew.

Ford knew that voice. That voice kept him awake at nights. That voice had cost him a fortune in aspirins and antacids. When you heard that voice, you sat up and took notice and obeyed or else the look that always accompanied it would kill off your remaining brain cells. Yet he hadn't heard that voice in nearly a year, and he sometimes didn't know if that fact was a curse or a blessing.

"Colonel Freeman is following **my** orders," that voice said.

Ed could make out Jenkins yelling and pounding on the office door, a few feet away from him. Alec's commands had sealed off the exit once concealed by Ed's mural, and now concealed by her map.

Keith Ford transformed into a Christmas tree illuminated by a light wheel, judging from how he was rapidly turning colors, Alec noted. Words were trying to escape his mouth, but there wasn't any sound.

Even after so many years, Straker still scares him, Alec thought with reluctant amusement. And Ed knows that fact, and probably relishes it. In this case, that fact may save our arses.

Ed dramatically took off his cap, removed the sunglasses. Startled looks came from the few operatives that hadn't tried to rush the men; therefore they'd still remained sitting at their consoles or standing.

There were a few awed whispers of the name Straker among some more senior personnel loyal to him, noted Alec, spoken as reverently as if Commander Ed Straker had just floated in

on a cloud, his silver locks accentuated by a halo. Carrying a single commandment carved in stone. Thou shall not piss off Straker. But then, when you're Ed Straker, thought Alec, miracles were routine.

Had Ed concealed his comeback just to get this reaction? Talk about making an entrance. Besides, Ed was capable of theatrics when he wanted to be... You weren't the chief executive of a movie studio, even if it was just cover, without some drama rubbing off on you.

I might believe it, if it wasn't for the look in Ed's eyes and the fresh sweat beads on his forehead. Ed's scared, Alec told himself.

I wish I knew why.

"You are to consider me back in command of SHADO, Lieutenant. Do I make myself clear?" Ed was saying.

"Yes sir! Absolutely, sir."

"All right, Ford. I have a bit of business to conduct with Jenkins."

Ed turned his back, headed briskly toward his office, smoothed down a white Nehru jacket he'd worn just as he reached the door. Reginald was aiming the Magnum, making it plain they didn't want company.

Alec gave Ford thumbs up and a grin, bigger than he was, appeared on Ford's face in response.

Ed was looking at Alec expectantly, impatient.

Perry is a magician, Alec thought, because that's practically the twin of the suit Ed once owned.

Alec had gotten Perry to find it for Ed, and then Alec had presented it to Ed as a get well gift. Ed had had some trouble concealing how touched he was by the presentation of the Nehru suit.

After all, Ed owns so little now. That has to be a sword in his pride.

"Sir."

It was Ford.

For a moment Ed looked like he might eat Keith Ford alive. He waited. Alec held his breath.

"Welcome back, sir."

Only years of studying you tell me that took you by surprise, Ed. Tells me Ford's words got through that control you hide behind and touched the man, Alec mused.

I wonder if you even knew how much Ford admired you all these years.

When he wasn't swallowing antacids, that is.

Nothing showed on Straker's face.

Alec knew better.

Goliath brings down the giant, Alec thought with glee.

"Thank you, Ford," Ed replied. He motioned Reginald over to his side.

"Freeman, Alec E. Release lock on Commander Jenkins' office door," Alec said, his gun still pointed in the direction of command centre, in the event anyone objected to the change in command.

The door slid open. Jenkins rushed at the door only to find Reginald's gun only inches from her head. Reginald motioned her over to her chair with it. Alec stepped in. Ed was behind Alec.

"You look like you need to be off your feet, ma'am," Reginald said. He looked like he wanted to systematically turn her into a sponge.

"Freeman, Alec E. Lock Commander Jenkins' office door."

"What the hell is going on here, Freeman? You know this is a court martial offence, and believe me I will give the command to have you shot!"

The door closed behind Alec. Alec didn't respond, he just moved aside. Jenkins had been standing behind her chair. The minute she saw Ed, she turned absolutely white.

Ed stood there casually, but his eyes were locked on hers. Alec looked at Ed in disbelief. Christ, he's shaking, what the hell is this about?

"Sit down, Jenkins."

"**Straker**," she managed to say, and fell into her chair.

"Jenkins. You know, Alec's told me so much about what you did to my office." Ed replaced his gun in its holster. Jenkins watched it as if it was a snake.

"So Freeman found you, Straker. I still don't understand what this is all about."

"I can't say I like what you'd done to the place. I can't say I like it at all."

"You know what standard procedure is when an operative is missing, Straker. We all believed you were dead."

"Ah, but we didn't include Alec, did it? I'm inclined to believe not everyone thought I was dead, did they? Jenkins, do I look dead to you?"

"No."

Christ! She looks like she wishes he was! Does he intimidate her that much? Was her insistence on declaring him dead based on personal jealousy? Alec wondered in fascination.

"I see you've got your gloves on. How gracious of you to want to spare us the sight of your poor hands."

"What is this about, Straker?"

"You know what it's about, Jenkins."

"I assure you I don't," Jenkins said nervously. "My throat is dry, do you object if I have some tea?"

"So you can throw it in my face?"

Straker suddenly swept everything off her desk with a loud crash. Jenkins understandably jumped, as did Alec, who stared at Ed as if he never saw him before. Reginald swept his Magnum coolly in Jenkins' direction, indicating for her to not move an inch. Ed's violent action didn't surprise him.

"Tea time **over**," Ed said.

Jenkins turned to Alec wide-eyed with a look of desperation.

"Freeman, listen to me. You must listen to me! Is this the Commander Straker you remember? This madman? I told you that before he vanished, he was acting erratically. Take a good look at him. Straker's deranged. He's homicidal. The aliens brainwashed him."

Alec stared at her for a moment, and then he looked at Ed.

Now I'll brief you, Alec, but the most crucial thing I want you to remember is that you are not to react to whatever I may say or do but just obey my commands when we get in there, Ed had told him.

Not react? How? Why?

What if she's right? My God, what if she's right? What if that's the brainwashing Reginald claims he's curing him of? What if Reginald is in on it? What if all of them are involved in this? I just delivered SHADO into their hands. At the request of Ed Straker. God help us all.

"Jenkins, either you shut up or I'll shoot that mouth of yours off your skull," Reginald told her.

"Ed," Alec said weakly.

Ed had wandered over to the shelf with the bust of Churchill on it. He carefully picked it up, examined it.

"Bronze?" Ed asked Jenkins. There was a strange look in his eyes. He was disturbingly calm now.

"For pity's sake, Ed," Alec said, sounding torn apart.

The humanity came back into Ed's eyes, and he turned back toward Alec. "Alec, I know what you're thinking. I also know this is a lot for me to ask of you. You always claimed you knew me better than anyone else, even myself. Alec, trust me. Just trust me. I need you to trust me."

"Ed," Alec blurted out, finding it impossible to say the right words.

"Alec, I need you."

"Freeman, I'm telling you he's insane!" cried Jenkins. "They've turned him!"

"Ed, I--"

"You never gave up on me. You remained loyal. You persevered. You never turned your back on me. Even when you hated my guts, and questioned my actions, you weren't afraid to speak up to me. You never gave up on me. For all these years, you treated me as a human being, even when it went against your grain. As Perry might put it, you believed. For the love of God, Alec, I need you to believe me now."

But I did give up on you, Ed.

But damn it... I can't give up on you now. I will never give up on you again. God help me if I've made the wrong decision. God help the world.

"I have your back, Commander," Alec said.

"Thank you, Colonel," Ed responded.

With that, Ed Straker slammed the bust of Churchill down heavily upon Marjorie Jenkins' scarred hands, which were flat on the desk.

The bust shattered, as did her expression.

Blood spurted in all directions.

"That, Jenkins, with apologies to Winston Churchill, was my finest hour," Ed said quietly, and dropped into the chair Alec usually occupied, utterly spent. His hand went to the bridge of his nose, the tell tale sign of an impending migraine.

Alec's blood had seemed to freeze in his veins.

"We couldn't tell you, Freeman. Straker had to be certain that what he remembered was real. So he had to surprise her into reacting to him, and he had to face down what she did to him. She's the one who brainwashed him. Now we have to find out how much damage she did while she was here, and we have to track down who helped her cover up what she was doing. Straker said you were a poor poker player and would never be able to be calm, bluff her out. If you'd known when we got here that it was Jenkins who put him through almost a year of sheer hell and humiliation, we would never have been able to keep you from strangling the bitch of a woman, and I use the term woman loosely," Reginald said.

It was several seconds before what Reginald was saying sunk in, several seconds before Alec even realized that no scream had come from Jenkins' open mouth after the blow. Like a putrid corpse rising from the dead, she suddenly bared her teeth, gave a snarl and flew up murderously toward Straker. Alec jumped protectively in front of the commander, and Reginald smashed her across the skull. She went out like a light.

"She-she-" Alec stammered.

Ed looked absolutely exhausted, but made the effort to look up and respond to Alec. "Was an alien? No, Alec. Just a turncoat human surgically altered by them, in the hope to restore her scarred hands to normal. When you saw her with gloves on, Alec, she wasn't wearing them to spare anyone from looking at them. She was hiding her perfectly healed hands. At other times, she wore makeup to simulate burn scars. She blamed everyone but herself for the accident that destroyed them, and she plotted to get back at them. The aliens contacted her and told her they were experimenting with a new drug which healed wounds at a fantastic rate and prolonged life, and people were being taken by the aliens with Jenkins' assistance like white rats to perfect the drug on. That's why she never allowed any of our retrieval teams to go near the UFO crash sites, never allowed them to examine the bodies. It's because there were no aliens aboard. The UFO's were operated by remote control. Jenkins was at the meeting I attended with Reginald present. She was the one who called our attention to the disappearances of certain key people in security positions, acting like she was concerned. The truth was, the aliens had taken them for experimentation, and then used their clout and prestige to push Jenkins to the top. They made it easy for her. By then I was pretty far gone, I was helpless to do anything about it. After some sessions with Reginald's drugs, I began to remember what had happened to me. I was forced to watch the poor kidnap victims she had experimented on die. She'd shoot them in front of me, and they'd die slow painful deaths. Some of them were the victims' children, Alec. I finally broke completely."

"My GOD," Alec said.

"Straker smelled a rat. Something about her made him suspicious. So they advanced their plan to have her replace him, and he was kidnapped, tortured, and brainwashed, all by her."

"Yes. I was made to go to the bank, and withdraw my money. Once I wasn't a threat anymore, she handed me over to be disposed of, had everything I owned removed, every stick of furniture, everything cleaned off, left the place pristine. When as she hoped, our forensic people found nothing, she dismissed them, and placed my house up for sale. As she brainwashed me, she used certain code words to control me, to put fear in the deepest recesses of my mind. You recall the film *The Manchurian Candidate*, Alec? Some of my control words were accident, Alec Freeman, Chandler. She convinced me that I was delusional and she tampered with my memory, my sense of self. There may be some details I've forgotten, but it will take time to remember everything, a long and painful process, I'm afraid. She would have killed me, but someone who masterminded the takeover of SHADO and made it a piece of cake for her had other plans for me which is why I am still alive now. So his little scheme backfired, Alec."

"Ed, who was it?"

"Alec, in time, in time. As soon as I am well, really well, you and I will pay him a visit. First we have a lot of work to do here. We have to go over everything with a fine tooth comb, have every operative be examined medically and physically, we have to make sure SHADO HQ is secure. Alec, I'm afraid I can't be of much help to you, it's in your hands again, the responsibility seat. My mind may not be completely healed, so I'm going to require more treatment to make absolutely sure that I am not a threat myself. Reginald's going to get you some help from the Intelligence Services, people with the necessary clearances that he feels we can trust-"

"Straker! Look at this. It must have been in the bust of Churchill."

Reginald held up a memory chip. Ed took it and looked at it with new life in his eyes. "Alec, get Ford in here and tell him to have a look at that. Tell him to use caution, to work

alone in the computer lab, to make sure he isn't monitored and make sure he doesn't use a computer that's connected in any way to our critical systems. It may be the clue we're looking for, or it may be a weapon. It may be highly dangerous. It'll have to be him alone in a haz mat suit, we can't take the chance that any of the SHADO boffins that would normally assist would sabotage it. We don't know yet how many webs Jenkins spun in HQ." Ed rose to his feet. Alec had to stop himself from running to support Ed. The SHADO Commander looked infinitely exhausted.

"I'm on it, Ed. Where will you be?"

Ed rolled up a sleeve, glanced at his bare wrist. He sighed. "I forgot, my Certina swiss wristwatch that you had engraved for me as a present for me on the day I took command of SHADO, that's gone too. Never mind. By now Perry and Algernon are here with that Swanson woman to pick me up. I'll be at their mercy at Perry's manor for some R and R before the psychologists pick at my brain."

"Just remember, Ed."

"Hmm?"

"Don't drink anything Swanson gives you." Alec chuckled and was relieved. The smile he had hoped to provoke as a brief respite from the horror appeared on his friend's pale face.

"Just hurry up and say open sesame to the door, Colonel Freeman. You're keeping me from my iced coffee and egg salad sandwiches and that nice soft bed. Plus I have a mouse waiting for me."

"Call the critter Winston," Reginald suggested.

"Commendable choice but it already has a far better name taken from another man I admire even more than Churchill, and he's standing across from me."

Ed smiled at Alec.

Alec smiled back.

Chapter Nine: Fall on your Sword

"I'm going with you tonight," Alec Freeman announced to Ed Straker.

Ed looked at Alec gloomily and put away a silver Sony Ericsson mobile phone that Alec had presented him with.

He was at Alec's comfortable flat in Chelsea, seated on the edge of a bed in one of Alec's guest bedrooms. Ed had broken Perry's heart by refusing to inconvenience the man any longer by being his guest, and had settled in to Alec's nest. Ed had stayed there on occasion in the past, especially when Mary had filed for divorce and he'd given her the house he'd purchased after their marriage. Not all overnights at the Australian's flat were unpleasant, and Ed always felt at home there. This time was practically like moving in, and Ed wondered what lie in store for him in the immediate future. Not to mention his mouse. The Commander and the mouse were becoming used to one another. Ed knew that pleased Alec to no end.

Just think of the blackmail possibilities, Freeman, Alec told himself with glee. Ed's got a pet mouse. Maybe we could get it a tiny Nehru to match his. Of greedy mice and mercurial men or should it be man against mouse? Think of the free whisky I could get for sale of one photograph of Ed and his mouse alone. Alec was certain the mouse was taming Ed.

Alec put his money on the mouse accomplishing his mission, and had told Ed that with a grin full of bliss.

"So much for that speech I made about how loyal you are, Colonel." Ed had grumbled at Alec, but there was a faint twinkle in Ed's eyes.

Accompanied by Claire and her feminine input, the two men had spent the latter part of the afternoon shopping for clothing and accessories for Ed, and Ed currently wore a new grey suit with a cobalt shirt that mirrored the intense blue of his eyes. He'd worn it to a press conference that morning at the studio. Alec had reminded him that the press had been merciless in asking for his whereabouts, so the three of them had come up with the idea of Ed having taken holiday in the rainforest of Brazil, supporting its preservation while scouting for film locations. It was a bizarre enough an idea to be what a reclusive film executive did in his free time, even if it seemed a bit extended for a vacation. Ed had thrown himself to the press yet again, this time for two minutes, taking no questions, while blinded by the flashbulbs snapping at him.

The ruse had been perfect, if not painless since Ed needed the press the way worms needed robins.

"Besides, Alec, Henderson always did say I had a monkey on my back," remarked the Commander. "Now I can claim it followed me home from the rainforest."

Alec grinned widely in response.

Ed's humor was rarer than a rabbi at a Nazi memorabilia convention, and Alec appreciated every time it escaped out of his taciturn friend. Plus Ed seemed to be doing better; some of the distress had gone out of his eyes. Maybe the continuing progress at HQ had helped, Alec reasoned. Ed valued self-control, and Jenkins had stripped it from him bloody and replaced it with hells Alec couldn't begin to imagine.

You didn't bounce back from a thing like that, not even if you'd been christened Edward Straker at your birth in a Boston hospital.

SHADO was nearly completely functional, and the memory chip inside the bust of Churchill had proven to be priceless in that process. Ford had been able to crack the code built into it and it yielded a lot of information, in particular a list of SHADO operatives turned

traitor. Jenkins had brainwashed a group of operatives, most of them in medical jobs. Her notes had shown she had planned to systematically get rid of senior personnel, and then use drugs on all remaining personnel leaving them to be farmed for body parts for aliens.

She'd played with Straker the way a dog would maul a chew toy, and she's paid for it a hundred times over, Alec thought. I still would have liked five minutes alone with her in one of our brigs.

Ed has better ideas, but for the love of God, what that woman did to him. Now it no longer matters.

Alec had served as Commander in the short-term until he'd handed the job over to a more mellow Colonel Lake. Lake was now part time commander of SHADO's base in Australia, which used a vineyard as cover. She'd become expert in shiraz grapes, married one of the SHADO HQ technicians, and given birth to two daughters. Not surprisingly, she had been relieved that Ed was all right, and she was more than glad to step in to allow Alec to spend some time with the Commander as part of his recovery. Ed Straker, she had confessed to Alec, was always the fish that had got away, and she made no secret of wishing she had been a more suitable worm.

Watching Claire instinctively relating to and with Ed, Alec wondered if she might just be the real worm Ed needed.

There were other matters that demand Ed's attention now.

Life-changing matters.

Due to illness, General James Henderson was planning to retire from active duty as head of the International Astrophysical Commission. The Commission's senior member, Helena Duval, the daughter of the late Monsieur Duval whom had insisted Ed be chosen as SHADO Commander, was expected to fill his seat. There were rumors that Henderson was dying from cancer and had been having treatment somewhere abroad, but he had just returned to England.

Ed had had no reaction when Alec had filled him in on Henderson's situation. "I had Reginald Devon take care of a little matter for me this morning. I was speaking with him just now. He assures me it's been taken care of. I'll handle this myself," Ed was saying.

"We come or you don't go, Edward," Claire announced.

"Now look, Swanson, unfortunately you became involved in this matter and serve as my personal physician for now but that doesn't mean you can order me around."

"Is he this delusional often?" Claire wanted to know.

She had been exploring the possibility of training as a SHADO therapist but Ed had not been verbal about condoning the possibility. What had fascinated Alec was the way Ed would follow Claire with his eyes when he thought neither Alec nor Claire were looking. Alec couldn't interpret Ed's motives.

So much for snapping at her, Alec thought.

He and Claire had discussed Ed's loneliness when Ed was out of earshot in the shower. Algernon had mentioned to Alec that he felt sure Claire had fallen for Ed in the short time she'd been around him, had insisted that soul mates were drawn together when they most needed one another and Alec privately had found that ridiculous.

Falling in love at first sight.

Yet what female wouldn't when they saw Ed? If anything, Ed's looks had not been sullied with 50 plus years of age. Somehow his fine silver hair remained in place, even had taken on a slight wave Alec hadn't noticed since Ed's wedding day. The twin blue lamps Ed claimed were eyes still blazed with light. The figure remained wafer thin, even with the weight Ed had

needed to put on. The posture was still what one could expect of a military man.

It was just that Bostonian brain that sometimes shorted out, Alec smiled to himself. Ed's American, you expect lack of common sense in Yanks. Now this love thing... Love at first sight is for the movies that Harlington-Straker produces, not for the real world. Yet the way this girl is, I just wonder. Maybe a bit of romance is what Ed needs. With just a little help from me. All right, a push from me. Ed is so bloody minded that he ought to be the cover boy for jackass magazine, so this won't be easy.

I may call it Operation Worm.

Alec grinned at Claire.

"If you mean does he march fearlessly into quicksand and then forget to bring a rope to pull himself out of it, yes. Not to mention the tendency of his not to confide in people that care about him, that too." Alec looked steadily at Ed.

Ed was in full don't go there mode, Claire noticed.

Alec apparently didn't.

"The last thing I need is more armchair psychiatrists practicing their trade on me. I've had enough sessions to last me a lifetime. I said and I won't say it again, Alec. I'm going alone."

"Fine. OK," Alec said and picked up a key fob from the top of a dresser. He put it into a pocket of his windbreaker and zipped the matter and his pocket closed.

"What are you doing, Alec?" growled Ed, who already knew.

Barracuda seemed more civil than Ed did at the moment, Alec thought with a gulp. His nerve endings in his shoulder pulsed a warning about crossing Ed Straker.

It wasn't only Keith Ford that occasionally feared Straker.

Not that I'd know who else did, Alec thought in amusement.

One of the keys on the fob went to a car that Ed had hired, an old but dependable Vauxhall saloon. He'd been relieved to remember that the Air Force provided retired Colonels with a monthly pension. That had allowed him to get a temporary loan and be financially secure for the moment, minus a few trillion pounds that went to the British taxman.

The late George Harrison hadn't been kidding around when he'd composed that song, Ed had mentioned to Alec. 'Nine for you, nineteen for me.'

Still, I'm not as broke as I feared. Rational thinking is slowly and painfully coming back after my brainwashing ordeal. I can picture the word accident without my head blowing apart.

The nightmares are under control.

Face it, Straker.

They aren't.

If I think it enough it may happen. Maybe what I need is ruby slippers to click together and I'll be out of the wicked witch's hold. Only Alec would insist on buying them for me.

Damn Alec, he thought to himself with amusement.

Having my own money and not accepting charity from you is a matter of pride. Now all I have to do for those keys is move Ayers Rock, otherwise known as Alec E. Freeman.

The E always did stand for exasperate Ed.

"Oh Lord, I'd hate to see where Commander Earthquake is on the Richter scale right now", Alec said, determined to soothe the Commander with humor.

Claire stifled a grin as she wondered what a glaring Ed was thinking and wondering what Alec's blood type was.

Bloodshed seemed imminent, she reasoned.

"I still think you should allow me to handle Henderson's briefing, Ed."

Alec's eyes darted around nervously when Ed's temper hit peak temperature, blew, and spattered around like drops of mercury.

"May I remind you that I still carry the rank of Commander, Alec?" Ed crisply replied.

"Now give me those keys."

"Alec just is worried about you; do you have to be cranky about it?" Claire asked.

"Why I allowed Alec to talk me into bringing you along I don't know." snapped Ed.

"Oh, let's see, maybe because Alec is in charge for now and made me your civilian doctor until all the SHADO medical personnel are cleared for duty so someone doesn't stick a scalpel between your ribs when you least expect it?" Ed still wore the medical brace under his tee.

"Let's hope for your sake that your departure isn't too far off in the future." Ed stated with his usual warmth, then rose and unbuttoned his jacket. He examined himself in the dresser mirror, ran a comb through the perfectly groomed platinum hair unnecessarily. He gazed at himself quizzically then picked up his locked attaché case. The red plate on it read E. STRAKER. The SHADO quartermaster had re-issued it to the Commander.

"What is it you've got against me, Edward?" Claire groaned.

Ed turned, laid a finger against his chin, and tilted his head in a position of thought. Alec flashed a newborn grin.

He's testing her mettle that's what that old devil Straker is doing. He's testing her like he once tested Foster! This goes beyond all those tests he had me order on her, he's got a thing going for her, which clashes with the control he boasts to me about. And she gives as well as she gets, Alec thought as he watched the tennis match. This is going to be a blast.

Commence Operation Worm.

Alec mentally rubbed his hands together.

"Ah. Let's see, let me think. You drugged me twice without my knowledge. That ought to be good for starters, Dr. Lucretia Borgia," Ed responded, dripping with sarcasm.

Alec started laughing.

Ed ignored him.

"Is he always like this, Alec?"

Alec grinned at Claire.

"Only on days that end with a Y."

"That's what I feared."

"You insisted on taking the job, Swanson," Ed said. "You burst in even when I could have accepted the offer of a physician from out of the police services. How long now, Alec, since I see it's a Mexican standoff and I don't have time to argue with you so you win. This time."

"Someday you Yanks will realize we Australians always are triumphant in battle."

"Triumphant, huh? I doubt you even know how to spell the word after three Fosters, Colonel Freeman, and I am not talking about our star Paul."

Alec rolled his eyes. Paul Foster was something of a sore point with both men, he'd been less and less tolerant of Ed's command, and Alec had decided he was a risk to the Commander, dosed his coffee and sent him packing. The irony was, he'd gone into acting and now played heartthrobs on the silver screen for Harlington Straker Studios. Maybe over the years after his attempted murder of Straker he'd been rid of that alien implanted impulse, but Alec couldn't be sure. He didn't like being unsure. Being unsure had almost killed Ed. Sometimes *Ed was just plain wrong.*

Like 99% of the time.

So Foster tries to kill Ed, and what does Ed do? Goes into the shooting range with him,

psyches him out, fires live bullets whizzing past his ears, and confronts Foster into a cure, demands that he kill Straker. Quite a guy, Foster said about Ed after that mess. Yeah and I wasn't about to let the possibility that you might put a bullet in his silver skull at some point down the road because you wanted to sit in his chair.

Ed had been furious, but even he'd seen the change brewing and hesitated to do anything about it since Foster had been a rash, but good operative.

No, Ed. I know we both come close to walking away from one another, but I have common sense where you have that steel intellect. What is it you say? No luxury for mistakes, Alec.

Ed had turned his back on them and was getting something out of the suitcase Perry had given him.

"We have plenty of time to grab a good meal and then we go see Henderson together. You game for it, Claire?" Alec smiled at her, putting his dark thoughts aside.

"Maybe I should look into getting an insurance policy from Lloyds of London first?"

"Why?"

Claire simply pointed at Ed, who now had his holster on, and slipped a silenced Glock into it. His expression matched the gunmetal of the weapon.

"Don't fret; Straker's broke, he won't shoot us before a free dinner." Alec grinned, and tapped his own hip holster.

"Don't count on it, Colonel Freeman. Let's go grab some steaks, salads and jacket potatoes, I'm starving."

"I'm paying," Alec said.

"Fine," Ed said in a tone of voice that was anything but.

"I'm driving too," Alec said.

Ed fired Alec a look just a little less forceful than one of his 9mm slugs, but he buttoned his jacket to conceal his weapon and strode out without comment. Behind Ed's back, Alec gave Claire the "V" for victory sign. She smiled.

"Incidentally, with all due respect to the statesman, I've had all the references to Churchill I can stand this week," added Ed. "So enough with the victory signs if you don't mind, Colonel Freeman."

Claire and Alec exchanged bewildered looks as they had to pick up the pace to keep up with Ed's stride.

"How did he know?"

"I've been trying to figure out how he does that for years," Alec admitted.

Unseen by the two of them due to his lead, Ed smiled.

* * *

"God, that steak was absolutely delicious," Claire patted her mouth with a napkin.

"This is an old haunting ground of Alec's; he's a friend of the manager. Alec brought me here not long after I migrated to England," Ed explained, between sips of coffee with cream and double sugar in it. "I'm relatively unrecognized around here, and we generally get this secluded table."

"Migrated? You sound like the great white tufted tit which is our local American bird." Alec put in after a long swallow of the house beer. He was on his third. "They normally have blue eyes and sit around protecting their territory until they fall out of their nest."

"Really, Alec? I didn't know you were a bird expert. Tell me more about their behavior." Claire was now chewing on her bottom lip to keep from laughing. Ed was staring moodily at

Alec again. It reminded Alec of the flashlight the new owner of Ed's home had used against him while he sat in the car, no longer a guest at Ed's home, but an intruder.

How very long ago that seems. There he is, maybe a little singed at the edges, but there Ed is. Alive. Thank God.

I think.

"Do fill us in, Alec. I had no idea you were an ornithologist."

"Ed, believe me, you've never appreciated me enough, I'm a true renaissance man." boasted Alec.

"You call me a white tufted twit one more time; you'll be a dead one." Claire couldn't help it, she laughed.

"Sometimes it's hard for me to remember you two have been friends for so long. You sometimes sound like mortal enemies." She smiled.

"Alec was the first person I recruited into the studio business," Ed said meaningfully. He picked up a board thick piece of garlic toast and showed it no kindness. "I've regretted it ever since."

"Oh stop it! I'm so glad you have your appetite back," Claire said to Ed. He gave her one of his wisps of a smile, and started attacking what was left of his rib eye.

"See, that's what you need, Ed. A mother to look after you."

Ed ignored Alec completely but Claire grinned.

"For a long time there, I'd forgotten what real food tasted like." Ed nodded.

"That's only because when you work, you hardly eat anyway," Alec interjected. Ed shrugged. He took a pensive bite of his green salad.

"Maybe you should see if they need a dishwasher back in the kitchen, Ed."

"Very amusing, Alec," Ed said with that inflection in his voice which always meant trouble. Ed was examining his fork now.

"You seriously thinking of stealing the silverware, Ed? I thought we agreed you aren't all that much in dire straits financially."

"Actually Alec, I was thinking about using it as a weapon. I could stab you in the shoulder with it, for instance."

Alec gave a mock gulp.

"This seems like the proper time to go greet Jack. I'll be back in a bit. You going to be okay alone, Ed?"

"Do you expect me to turn into a dandelion and float away on the wind? Go, Alec."

"Claire, if he tries anything foolish, steal his garlic toast."

Ed watched Alec walk away, slipped his hand inside his jacket for an instant.

Satisfied that his gun was there, he dipped into the salad again. Claire pretended she hadn't noticed the nervous gesture.

"I like Alec," Claire said.

"Few people don't. He's a credit to the studio, and a damn fine combat pilot and the best of friends, with the exception of the hard drinking, the bad jokes and constantly being on my back. Listen, Swanson, I wanted to take this opportunity to talk to you about what I need to accomplish. Did Alec tell you what to expect tonight?"

"He briefed me very well."

"That's not the same as witnessing it. You can't really prepare yourself for things like that."

"

"The process of learning rarely is easy, Edward."

"I suppose you're right. Would you like a sweet after the meal?"

"I'm already sitting next to one," Claire smiled.

Ed sat back in his chair, looked at her solemnly with lips pinched together. Claire knew that look, and she frowned.

"Edward, if I've offended you, I didn't mean it, I just got caught up in the spirit of Alec's teasing-"

"Swanson, I was at Perry's manor long enough to know what Algernon has been talking about."

"I don't understand."

"No, you don't and that's the problem. That is why I have decided to turn down your application to the studio when I get a regular doctor."

"Edward, please. I crossed a line, I shouldn't have."

"It isn't that, Swanson, although to convince yourself you're falling for a man of my age-"

"Oh for heaven's sake, Edward! What did Algernon tell you? He's a hopeless romantic. He told you, didn't he? You know that was one of the reasons he had to leave the force. He just was too frank. I don't think he's lied in his entire life."

"You don't have a good memory, do you? He lied when he bugged my rooms, he lied when he let you drug my coffee, he lied when he didn't tell me about Alec," Ed whispered back angrily.

The area had been swept for bugs by Alec, but it didn't hurt to be careful, he knew.

Why did she have to be so lovely? Lovely, smart, and quick on her feet. I need to keep her safe. Safe means letting her go.

"We were all trying to save your life!" exclaimed Claire.

People at other tables looked in their direction. Ed drew back even further in his chair, hoping that they hadn't gotten a good look at him. He looked at her impassively.

"God. I'm so stupid. I've been so stupid. The last thing I want to do is make this harder on you. All right, Edward. All right. I'll go back as soon as I know you're in safe hands. I just ask that you don't give me that drug. I want to remember you. Please. Please. Please," she whispered.

"You're an innocent, Swanson. I don't want that spoiled. Even if by some unlikely twist of fate you've genuinely fallen for me, there's nothing I can offer you. I was married once, had a son. I lost them both by making the wrong decisions. I - I hurt them. I don't want that ever to happen again. I nearly made a fatal mistake with a woman sometime after that. She was a reporter. She just wanted a story. An exclusive on a film exec to plaster all over the rags and make her fortune on. She had quite the chip on her shoulders about men in power. She wanted a byline. She didn't want *me*."

"She must have been the most ignorant bitch in the world," Claire said with feeling.

Ed chuckled softly. "That's a fair assessment, I suppose."

"Edward, let's be honest with one another."

"About what?"

"Us."

"Swanson, I've been trying to tell you. There is no us. England's just a dreamland for you. Life isn't like that. You know what happened to me. That doesn't happen in the fairytale world you seem to live in, and Perry finding an American tourist in distress didn't help, locking you up like some princess in a turret telling you your prince was around the corner."

"So basically my prince is saying he can't stand me. I'm not strong enough for you, I'm not

pretty enough for you, I'm not intelligent enough for you." Claire took a handkerchief from her bag and wiped her eyes, then stared into the flame of the candle on their table. "Listen to me. Some professional I am. I'm falling apart just thinking about never seeing you again."

"The initial report Alec did for me on you to judge whether you had potential indicated very much the opposite. A computer can't really judge beauty, that's one advantage to being human."

Claire raised her head and looked into his eyes. Hers were brimming with tears.

Those damn doe eyes, Ed thought. I was getting so used to waking up to them. Now it's goodbye. I am the island. I am. I must be. I am.

Then why do I want to be around her for the rest of my life? People don't connect this way. I hardly know her. Hell, I was unconscious half the time she was working on me. She's made herself necessary to me.

How the hell do I face these nightmares without her? Worst of all, how do I survive tonight?

What's that expression?

Suck it up Straker.

"Is that why you look at me, Edward?"

"Excuse me?"

"Do you think I am blind? I watched you watching me."

"It was part of my evaluation of you. I couldn't rely on computer reports alone."

"Edward, your mouse could tell lies better than you do."

"What's keeping Alec?" was all Ed could manage to say.

"If you're going to break my heart by shooting that damn drug in me--"

"We're in a public restaurant, Swanson," the Commander reminded her, avoiding her eyes.

Claire sighed and picked up her bag.

"I lost my appetite. Let's get this over with."

She stood up. He reached over instinctively and grabbed her wrist, then regretted the rash act.

Don't. Don't go. What was it I said to Nina all those years ago? Life is about all the things you never say. Meaningful things.

Things like don't leave me, I may be actually falling in love with you-my God I never thought I could feel like this again with any woman, let alone a complete amateur-what the hell am I going to do? Can you need a woman you hardly know?

"Claire." Is what he heard himself say.

There is resignation in those eyes of hers, those deep brown eyes. I've broken her. I've destroyed someone else. Congratulations, Straker.

"It's all right. You have your duty, I know it." When he didn't take away his hand, she looked at him pleadingly.

"Edward, you aren't helping."

"I'll give the matter some thought. That's all I can promise. I know farewells are painful."

"I'll live," she told him, feigned a smile, disbelieving him.

"It isn't you I'm worried about."

He took his hand away quickly, slammed down control he had spent years building up, and he picked up his attaché case, called for the bill, and he felt in his pockets for his wallet and threw down the tenner as a tip. He saw a grinning Alec coming toward them as he put on

his newly purchased Burberry trench coat. Claire watched him with longing.

It isn't you I'm worried about, he'd said. But he couldn't have meant he wants me-no, damn it, I'm not settling for that. I've got to know for certain. Suppose he wants me to fight him, and all I'm doing is making it easy on him!

"Damn you, Edward-"

"What's wrong, did he eat the toast before you could get to it?" chortled Alec.

"He didn't finish all his meal," Claire lied quickly to spare Ed's feelings.

"Alec, pay up, and let's go. "

"Didn't finish a meal again? So what else is new? I don't have to pay; it's on the house, compliments of my mate Jack. Just as long as they don't arrest Ed for stealing the silverware."

Ed slipped a pair of aviator sunglasses on, and lowered his head as they pushed past the other diners. Soon they reached the car.

"You smell like a distillery, Alec. Toss me the keys."

Alec did and Ed got behind the wheel.

After a few minutes, Ed heard snoring beside him and smiled faintly.

Claire tried to push conversation.

"Edward, maybe you should rethink this roommates business. Alec sounds like a cat in heat going through a paper shredder."

Ed nodded at her in the driving glass, and then turned his attention to the road.

"He's Australian; they do everything bigger and better. Even snoring."

"He's lucky, Edward. He's so lucky to have found you again."

"He won't think so when he sees how early I usually rise, even on weekends." "What will the drug be like?"

"Tasteless, no ill effects. Nothing to worry about."

"Deep down I will remember you, you're a man impossible to forget."

"What I'm doing will keep you safe," Ed implored her.

"How can you say that? I'd rather take the same risks you do than never see you again!"

Ed shook his head.

"The matter is closed."

"Not in my heart, it isn't, Edward. Maybe not even in yours."

"That's enough."

"You two already having an argument? You aren't even married yet," Alec said, stretching and yawning.

"I thought you were asleep," Ed told Alec.

"I was."

"Well, you have good timing. We're **here**, Alec. The residence of General James Henderson."

* * *

"What is the meaning of this?" Henderson barked when he answered the door. He was in pajamas and robe that Ed remembered he'd worn after the accident with the Rolls that had sealed his fate. Henderson's cottage was beautifully furnished, the kind you'd expect a retired military man who had settled in the English countryside to own.

"Aren't you going to invite us in, General?" Ed asked pleasantly enough as he pushed past the General to enter his home.

"This had better be good, Straker, it's nearly eleven o'clock, and I have a flight to catch in the morning!"

"I think your study would do nicely for a place to talk."

"Who is the girl?" Henderson asked as they went side by side into the study.

"A civilian. A medical doctor assigned to me while Alec gets things settled at HQ."

"So what is this about?"

"Mind if I help myself to a drink, General?" Alec asked.

Henderson shrugged his shoulders.

"Have whatever poison you like, Freeman."

"Aren't you going to congratulate me on being alive?"

Henderson went over to his desk, leaned against it and scowled at Ed. "I only found out you'd returned this morning by calling Ford. When I couldn't get through to Commander Jenkins for an explanation, Ford said you'd left Freeman in charge and didn't volunteer any other information to me. You've managed to pull your ass out of difficult situations before with the help of the Commission's money, Straker, so don't expect me to stand and applaud you this time."

"Yes, yes, of course, thank you General, I knew you'd be overwhelmed by the news."

"Get to the point."

"I have something to show you." Ed laid his attaché case on the desk. "I think you'll find it remarkable."

"What's this, Straker?" Henderson said with a sour look.

Ed pushed back the name plate to reveal destruct negative, then opened the latches and pushed up the lid of his attaché case. He slid a transparent folder with a SHADO insignia stamped on it toward Henderson. Henderson opened it and saw that the first item in it was a photograph.

"That was taken two days ago, General. You'll note it's a dead body well into the process of deterioration," Ed told him.

"I can see that, Straker. Are you trying to scare me? I don't have time for any of your lectures about UFO victims; soon as I can I am getting out of this damn business for good."

"Can you identify the corpse, General?"

"Don't be an idiot Straker, of course I can't." Henderson threw the photo on his desk.

"You might want a swig of this, Henderson. "

Alec shoved to Henderson the double whisky he held in a crystal glass. The Australian hadn't touched it. Henderson put it on the desk with a snarl.

"I don't require booze the way you do, Freeman. Maybe it's a result of you being forced to work with Straker."

"You know something? Alec told me all about you. You're more awful than he described." Claire yelled at Henderson.

Ed turned back toward her, gave his head a slight shake. Claire looked at the carpet, silent again.

Alec just grinned at her.

"*Can't you keep your little whores quiet, Straker?*" Henderson snarled.

Commander Ed Straker took a single step up and struck General James Henderson across the face with all the force concealed in his lithe frame. The General sagged against the desk, absolutely aghast, not so much by the pain of the blow but by the fact Straker had actually dared to do it.

"I don't think I ever enjoyed *anything* in my entire life as much as I enjoyed *that*, Henderson." Ed said quietly.

"You hit like a girl, Commander." Alec grinned.

Ed gave Alec a look of warning.

Henderson dived for the telephone. Alec grabbed Henderson then the phone and with a single yank tore the cord off, threw the instrument down then pushed Henderson away from him.

Ed nodded.

"That was just for show, Henderson. An acquaintance of mine was busy in your house this morning. Along with other skills, he's an expert in security measures. He systematically disconnected every security protection you had installed in this place. I might add you used Commission funding to finance installation of them, or do I have that little detail wrong?"

"You might want to reconsider the whisky, General. This isn't going to be your night," Alec said.

"You won't get away with this!"

"Sit down, General," Ed said softly.

"Fuck you, Straker-"

"**SIT DOWN!**" the Commander snapped.

Henderson crossed his desk, sank into his chair almost against his will. "You may have clout with Freeman, but the commission will hunt you down like the animal you are-"

"*Animal you are.* Revealing choice of words," Ed put in thoughtfully.

"That unfortunate woman in the photo is your Commander Jenkins," Alec growled at Henderson.

All the blood drained out of Henderson's face.

"No, this is some kind of a trick on your part to take back command, Straker! It can't be Jenkins!"

"I might add that the treatments you and she believed would restore your health and youth are nothing more than a waste of time. The compound heals yes, and then it kills. Very messily, as you can see. That photo was taken after her horrific death. Despite what you think, I have a conscience. I ordered Alec to give her our best opiates to kill the pain. None of it helped, nor did any sedatives. She died screaming. The same fate you'll face, Henderson, for selling SHADO out to the aliens."

"You know," Henderson said a horrific look in his eyes. "This is what this is about. You know."

"That you paid a criminal to take me after Jenkins brainwashed me, that you sent her checks using a falsified identity, much like the one you provided her to give me, that you had her put me through every form of degradation possible? That you wanted me to waste away, because you couldn't stand knowing that I had the position that should have rightfully been yours? That you suggested Jenkins take away even the place I had slept in, every memento, every book, every scrap of clothing, every belonging, every morsel of pride. Oh yes. Yes. I know. I know you had late stage cancer, and you decided to do anything to stop it, so you believed them when they offered you a way out. So you came up with Jenkins, who also was as bitter as you were, General and probably was the reason your game failed. I know."

"You think you're so lily white, don't you, Straker? The untouchable icy almighty hero Straker. Did you enjoy yourself in that place? You're as filthy as it was. Did you enjoy yourself, Straker?"

"I did," Ed said quietly.

"You're a **JOKE**, Straker! I got reports from her about you. We laughed about them. The

pristine hero Straker in his ivory tower of command reduced to a man that couldn't get all the filth out of his skin. Made to be an animal, made to freeze in cold and sweat in heat. Made to prostrate himself so that he could barely stay alive. I wanted you to stay alive, Straker. I wanted you to be in hell like I was."

"Do you know why I say I did, Henderson? Because I learned there that John Donne was right. No man is an island, not even me. I have people that care about me. People like Alec. People like Ford. People like Swanson. I don't have to be an island anymore."

"Oh shove your bloody Bostonian literature degree up your ass. Was the brainwashing a hoot, Straker? **ACCIDENT**, Straker."

"The words don't work any more General, we've found the traitors, we've undone the brainwashing, the aliens have failed, and so has your plans for me."

"You're a small joke of a man, Straker. You were never fit for those eagles on your shoulders. You had everything handed to you on a plate, including a job that was supposed to be mine! All you ever gave a damn about was power. Admit it."

"Did you ever think about what Jenkins was doing, Henderson? She was insane, a sociopath, and the aliens took advantage of it. She brought in the people she had ordered kidnapped and she used the compound on them to assure herself it was safe. The same compound killing you now. Then she'd take great delight in killing them in front of me. It always took them a long time to die, and I was helpless to do anything about it."

"Oh spare me the self-pity, Straker."

"For God's sake, Henderson, what's happened to your humanity? *CHILDREN!* *They were only children-*" Ed's cry held suffering in it, his head lolled down and he looked as if he might collapse. Alec stood like a mastiff at his side.

Come on, Ed. Come on, you can do this. Hang in there, Ed. Alec thought.

Edward, be all right my darling, be all right, please be all right, don't give this awful man any more satisfaction, you've got us. Claire thought, and took a step toward Ed's other side.

"Cracking up, Straker?" laughed Henderson.

"Even when he lie on a bed screaming his throat raw even under sedation from what Jenkins did to him, he was more sane than *you'll* ever be, you poor pitiable bastard," Alec told the General.

Ed jerked his head up, glanced in shock at Alec.

Alec grinned.

"Don't look so surprised, Ed. I worked it out when you wouldn't allow me in while you were being treated, and I beat the truth of my theory out of your pal Reginald Devon. I figured it was because you wanted to spare me the pain of seeing you like that. Typical foolish Yankee decision. Rule number one: Don't piss off Ed Straker. Rule number two: Australians named Freeman are tougher than you'll ever know."

Ed turned toward Claire.

"I've been trying to find out how he does that for years."

Alec openly laughed.

Claire chuckled, and gently laid a hand on Ed's arm for a split second, then stepped away.

"So the stuff doesn't work, Straker. We all die. We all get old. I'm not as weak as you are, I don't need Freeman to hold my little hand, and I've often wondered if the two of you were pansies."

Unnoticed by the three of them, Henderson's hand was moving out of sight to his desk drawer.

"Henderson, I had respect for you from the day I was chosen as your adjutant. You were something of a hero to me. The Henderson I see now is weak. In one sense, I can't judge you. Facing death and decay from something raging through your body, that would change anyone. I just guess I hoped it wouldn't change you. I knew I was wrong when Wendy was forced to describe you and I realized what you'd done. "

"So you've won again, you disgusting bastard you're here to gloat!" Henderson yelled. "You won't gloat long!"

Henderson pulled out the gun he had surreptitiously gotten from his desk drawer and aimed it at Straker.

"Henderson, the bullets you loaded in that thing are gone. Reginald Devon never makes mistakes."

Henderson fired. He shook the gun. He threw it at Straker, with a strangled sob of defeat and the Commander ducked. One window shattered.

"Damn you to hell, Straker!"

"Maybe," Ed said quietly. "At least if that's where I'll go, I'll know I performed my duty, gave this life all that I had in me."

Ed unbuttoned his coat, drew his Glock from his holster under the jacket. Henderson laughed.

"Oh give me a break, Straker. You don't have the guts to kill me."

"SHADO is a military installation, General. Traitors get the death penalty."

"You're a weakling, Straker. You'll never kill me. The great saintly Straker and his halo he polishes every day."

"You recall the incident we code named Mindbender? During my hallucinations you said pretty much the same thing. I never realized that in my drugged conclusion that you didn't care, that I'd one day have proof I had been *right*."

"You're not fit for anything, Straker! You shouldn't have command! This is more up Freeman's alley than yours. You won't dampen your hands with my blood. It takes a real man to kill another one face to face in cold blood."

"I think Commander Straker showed what kind of man he is by showing up at your door tonight, Henderson. That offer of the whisky still stands." Alec reminded him.

"Straker won't shoot me, this is a joke. That would go beyond the rules, and he never would do that, would you, you disgusting piece of scum!"

"Henderson, you'll recall I am a marksman, an expert in small arms, so you have no reason to believe I'll miss."

"Don't make me laugh, you little gutless coward. Do you expect me to fall on my sword for what I've done, like some Roman soldier? You and your idiotic conscience can go to hell!"

Henderson picked up the whisky, threw it in Ed's face.

Claire yelled and was about to jump on Henderson, but Alec caught her, and held her back.

"Ed's okay," Alec assured her.

"I wouldn't say *that*, Alec. Now I smell like a distillery," Ed replied calmly, took a handkerchief and mopped his face. With his hair flat against his head, his blue eyes seemed even more enormous to Alec.

"Karma," Alec said, winking at the Commander.

Ed smiled at Alec.

"Thank you. Thank you both for being here."

"Thank you for being you, Edward." Claire was weeping now.

"Be brave, Swanson."

"Oh kill the fucking drama, Stra-" Henderson clutched his chest.

"You aren't having cardiac arrest, that's the beginning of the cell breakdown process that will kill you as horribly as it did Jenkins, Henderson," Ed Straker said quietly.

"So that is what you're really here for! To stand there and watch me suffer like Jenkins!

To get your revenge!"

"No. I came here to help a man I once knew. To give him some of the dignity he tore from me. To carry out a final command that I know under different circumstances, he would have given me. To make sure he doesn't suffer."

"Fuck YOU, Straker! Do you hear me?" Henderson screamed.

"Take this with you, General. I forgive you. I forgive you --*James*." Ed said in a whisper.

There was the sound of a muffled shot in the room, then silence.

General James Henderson lay on the carpet, eyes staring into infinity.

Chapter Ten: Chinese Delivery

"What are you doing, Ed?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I finished cleaning out his cage and I'm feeding Alec now. I'm convinced now that somewhere in this mouse is a black hole, judging by the size of its appetite."

Alec grinned. He'd just come back home from a fully functioning SHADO after several hours of work. It had been three days since the two men had attended the funeral of General James Henderson. Buried in a military ceremony with all the pomp and circumstance the funeral of a full General required, the body had been laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery. Alec had wanted to see more of Washington, but Ed had not been interested, and had confined himself at their hotel. So Alec and Ed had flown back right away. For most of the flight, Ed had slept, or occasionally stared into space.

"Maybe it's an Australian mouse. We can put away tucker with the best of them." Alec threw his coat and attaché case on a kitchen chair. Newspapers with lists of real estate available for sale were strewn all over the table. The two of them had circled some that seemed suitable for Ed to purchase.

"I'm not surprised." Ed closed the cage, sat back, thrust his hands in his pockets and watched the mouse gobble its food. Ed had on a pair of jeans, a tan leather belt and a white turtleneck.

Alec thought the only thing that could improve his outfit was a smile, but Ed had been sullen a long time. Henderson's cause of death had been put down in the paperwork as heart failure and due to Ed's security clearance it hadn't been questioned. If it had been Alec's choice, they would have thrown his body out with a week's worth of garbage.

Ed didn't see things that way.

"You want me to pick us up something for dinner?" Alec asked. "I didn't think of it until now and I'm starving."

"Perry sent us a hamper of food, you could explore that. Colonel Lake sent us some of those wines you like."

"I feel more like Chinese tonight, what do you say I ring for delivery?"

"Anything's fine, Alec, I really don't feel much like eating anyway. How are things at HQ?"

"Good. I got the psychological report on you back from Dr. Levenger."

"Judging from your tone it isn't good." Ed frowned.

"He and I spoke and I happen to agree with him."

"Meaning I can't go back to work yet. Damn it, Alec, I'm ready. If I could handle Henderson, don't you think I can handle SHADO?"

"I'm in charge, you know. I wouldn't make your medical leave mandatory if I didn't feel it was absolutely necessary."

"How long now?"

"We decided a month more."

"Out of the question."

"That's an order Ed. I'm sorry."

"The brainwashing doesn't bother me anymore, for Christ's sake!"

"Ed, you *do* realize you sleep in the bedroom across from mine?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I hear you crying in the middle of the night, you're still having nightmares."

Ed turned away, uncomfortable with Alec's revelation. "It isn't any of your concern, Alec. It's something I have to handle myself."

"Aren't you going to ask me?" Alec said, opening a bottle of whisky and pouring it into a glass.

"Ask you what?" Ed asked.

"Ask me about Dr. Claire Swanson."

"I know she will be all right at Perry's, he called me and let me know you dropped her off."

"You don't regret asking me to administer the amnesia drug to her this morning?"

"Like you keep reminding me, you're acting Commander of SHADO. It isn't my business right now."

"You've closed yourself off again. After telling Henderson all that John Donne stuff, I hoped you'd be a little more relaxed with me."

Ed turned back toward Alec and sighed.

"I'm sorry Alec. I am. Or at least I'm trying to be. Things have been difficult lately. Give me more time, Alec."

"You've got it. Oh I have some good news for you. Wendy's been handed over to the authorities, Peter's back with his family, and The Rock Bottom has new owners. Nice older couple, they decided to continue feeding the poor in your absence."

"Good, Alec, good."

"Go see if you can find something decent on the telly, and I'll ring for Chinese. I know a great place, egg rolls like you wouldn't believe. I'll make you some coffee."

"I want to go over the house for sale advertisements again." Ed picked up the stack of real estate sections from the newspapers and his pencil.

"You really in such a hurry to get your own place? I've liked having you here as my roommate."

Ed gave Alec a look, shrugged his shoulders and left the kitchen.

Alec grinned at his back and picked up the phone.

Alec came into the living room a minute later, plopped into the sofa next to Ed and passed him a steaming cup of coffee.

"Find anything good on telly?"

"I was paying more attention to the newspapers. This place looks pretty good." Ed tapped an encircled ad with his pencil.

"I still don't know why you simply don't take Henderson's place. You could afford it, you know."

"No Alec, even if I had it remodelled, it would just have bad memories for me. Madame Duval agreed with me on that subject. I do think she'll be a lot easier to get along with as far as allocations for SHADO are concerned." Ed took a sip of coffee. "I will miss your coffee, Alec. It's excellent."

Alec had been flipping through the channels, using the remote.

"Not me?"

Ed seemed to consider this.

"Not you."

"Thanks a lot. You look tired, and I figure fighting with you to eat something is a lost cause so why don't you call it a day?"

Ed stretched.

"Sounds tempting, I am tired. Wait, do you have any work that needs to be done? Paperwork I could sign?" Ed asked eagerly.

"Ed, I actually do get things done at work. Not perfect, and not that efficiently and not as much as you do, but I do get it done." Alec chuckled. Ed looked even more gloomy now.

"All right, Alec. I'm going to shower then grab some sleep."

"Good night."

"Good night."

Ed lie in bed half an hour later, curled up with a blanket up to his waist, but his eyes were open.

You don't regret asking me to administer the amnesia drug to her this morning?

No.

All right, yes.

Yes, I do. I sat all day, Alec, knowing it was happening. I sat knowing I wouldn't hear her voice again; I sat with guilt pressing on my heart. I have a month I have to kill, and it would be much more pleasant if I had been able to show her England. She's safe now, Alec. Perry and Algernon and Reginald will look after her. She'll meet some nice civil servant, marry, and be the lady of the household. I won't feel her wipe my forehead or hold my hand. I won't be able to look at her or hear the swish of her skirt. I will never smell her perfume again. I'll never kiss her.

I don't regret it.

I don't regret this emptiness.

It's just harder to bear as I grow old.

Do you know why I want to get out of here so badly, Alec?

Because I have enjoyed being with you. I've enjoyed cooking you breakfast, putting up with your jokes about it and complaining about how you leave the bathroom, and picking up the clothes you fail to put in the hamper. I didn't really know what companionship meant until I moved in. I've liked discussing films with you, and looking at your things, and touching your medals, and looking at your photographs.

It won't be easy to say goodbye.

It's sadder not being an island.

"**HEY, ED?** You asleep or something?" Alec called from another room.

Ed sat up in bed, glad to have the interruption.

"No," he called back, "Why?"

"The buzzer! The delivery fellow is at the door, can you get it for me, I'm still getting into my pyjamas. I left money on the side table so you can pay him with it. Hurry up, I can taste those egg rolls already, and they better have sent me enough soy sauce this time!"

Ed heard the incessant buzzer. He realized it had been buzzing for a while but he'd been too consumed by his own misery to be aware of it. He sighed. "All right, Alec." He yelled back. Ed rose up, grabbed a robe, wore it tied the sash and padded barefoot into the living room.

He peered into the peephole but no one seemed to be there. Frowning, he studied the door, wondering if he should be armed, although Alec's place had security cameras installed. He went back into his bedroom, opened a drawer, took out his Glock , went back, unlocked and cautiously opened the door.

And his heart stopped beating.

"Excuse me, I hate to bother you, but could I borrow a glass of orange juice? There's a Commander I want to drug."

"Swanson! How the hell--**ALEC!**"

"Let me in, and oh, I got Alec's order for him at the restaurant. My God it smells good! Don't stand there, Edward, let me in and show me where the plates are."

"Alec! You better have a good-"

Claire leaned in and kissed him, then smiled at him, caressed his face. *"I missed you so much."*

"You're out of line, Swanson." Ed said softly, savouring her touch.

"Nope cause you aren't in SHADO right now and that was a treatment." Claire grinned widely, came in and Ed relocked the door. The smell of the food and her perfume was beginning to overwhelm him. "Alec's in charge right now and he reversed your command decision. I'm officially in SHADO, and I spoke to your Dr. Levenger. I told him you needed more time to recover, both psychologically and physically. I have a lot of ideas about getting you well, but right now I feed you, you're skinny as usual."

Alec sauntered in innocently with a big smile.

"I wouldn't eat anything Lucretia Borgia here offers, Ed, because she's going to stay with us a while."

"Alec. I swear to God-"

"Eat first Ed, threaten the acting Commander of SHADO later. Incidentally threats are a court martial offence. Here, I'll put your gun away."

"Where's the kitchen, Alec? Oh your place is so nice!" Claire was saying as Ed gave Alec his gun. They followed Alec as he put the gun away.

"Excuse the mess in my bedroom, his is always immaculate." Alec chuckled as she peered into both rooms. "Kitchen's in there."

The three of them walked toward the kitchen.

"Edward is immaculate? I'm not surprised! Come on, Edward, help me set the table. Oh, Alec looks fatter than he did when I last saw him."

"Hey, that hurts my feelings!" Alec said, grinning at Ed's expression.

"Oh Alec, don't be silly, I meant Edward's mouse!" She laughed.

"Let's just eat in the living room," Ed suggested, never taking his eyes off Claire. "It'll take too long to clear the table, and I'm hungry. The Chinese smells great. Alec and I take most of our meals in there anyway, it's more comfortable. Alec, I'll have to handle this matter of you ignoring my command later."

Alec mock gulped.

"Okay Edward, can you get cups, there's tea I bought in the bag too. Got plastic forks, knives and spoons and some napkins. Plenty of soy sauce for you Alec so don't you worry. Oh, this is going to be fun! Alec, all this place needs is flowers to brighten it up!"

"They make me sneeze!" Alec complained as he followed Claire out of the kitchen, carrying plates.

Ed stopped, watched them, and listened as their chatter died away as they moved out of range. He touched his cheek where she had stroked it. He let his hand fall away.

He turned to the mouse.

"Don't worry; you'll get your share of the food *I promise.*"

The mouse wriggled its whiskers in what could be interpreted as anticipation, Ed supposed.

"You like soy sauce on your food? Just don't accept any orange juice from Swanson."

The mouse stopped, stood on its hind legs, gave a jerk of its tail, and studied Ed. Ed bent and looked at it.

"Oh, you like Claire? You know, I named you Alec; maybe I should give you some whiskey with the food? You know what, mouse? This month might not be so bad after all. Just between us, I like Claire too. I might even love her."

The mouse winked directly at Ed.

Ed's mouth shaped an O. He stood up and blinked several times.

The mouse started grooming itself as if nothing had happened.

Ed shook his head firmly, and headed into the living room with the cups.

The End