

A Different Reality

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A Cross-over with Amelia Rodgers' *UFO* fan-fiction series, and *The Adept* series by Kathryn Kurtz and Deborah Turner Harris,

And references to characters and situations created by Thomas Hunter, Peter Powell and David Ambrose

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Elizabeth Kathryn Komack-Straker looked over at her son driving the borrowed Jaguar. "Enjoying being back in England?"

"Mom, we come to England every Christmas," Alex Straker complained. "Running around the British countryside in the middle of winter isn't my idea of fun, you know. I'd much rather be skiing."

"You've made that very clear, but Alec Freeman decided he was going to have his retirement party tonight and let us meet his fiancée, finally," Kate reminded him. "We had to go shopping for a gift."

"I can't believe a man his age could get his girl friend pregnant and have to marry her," Alex complained. "I mean, I know better than that and I'm the one who's supposed to have raging hormones and no brain."

"I'm not aware of anyone accusing you of having no brain, boy child," Kate chided.

"Uh, Dad, when he saw my last grade report."

"It does help if you remember to take your brain to class and turn it on," his mother replied with a wry grin.

"If I pull in straight A's next semester, think Dad will spring for a car like this?" he grinned back.

"Maybe," his mother said. "Assuming I let him live that long."

* * *

"I still can't believe you're finally retiring, Alec," General Ed Straker told his friend of forty-some years. "And becoming a father in the bargain."

"Well, I hadn't really planned that part, but I figure it's time to let the younger generation have their way. I've been chair of the IAC longer than Henderson was. The Korrekaad threat is pretty much contained. It's past time for this old war horse to go out to pasture and enjoy himself."

Straker looked around the office of the SHADO C-in-C. "I approve what Commander Spainhauer has done with the place." The once concrete gray walls were now a pastel yellow. The drink dispenser in the corner had been replaced by an oak cabinet housing a compact audio system. The liquor bottles were hidden behind doors. "I can't believe I spent fourteen years down here."

"You put it together, Ed. We wouldn't have anything if SHADO hadn't been put in place,

if you hadn't worked your ass off to keep the alien threat under control."

"And now we have aliens in SHADO," Straker reminded him. "And I'm in charge of getting humans off-planet."

"Who'd've thunk it when we started," Freeman mused. "Second generation aliens, born and raised here. Part of the effort to keep terrorists at bay, homegrown and off-world."

Straker checked his watch. "Kate and Alex should be here in a little bit. And thanks for loaning them your car to go shopping."

"I wasn't comfortable with the idea of our people going around in a non-issue vehicle," Freeman explained. "Besides, I usually use the limo these days. Have a hard time getting in and out of the Jag."

"You're only sixty-nine," Straker reminded him.

"And I feel every year of it. I don't know what I was thinking, taking up with a woman a third my age."

"Delayed mid-life crisis?"

* * *

"Colonel Chomsky, I am tracing an unusual storm coming this way," Lieutenant Kiri Sun called to the SHADO duty officer.

"Storms aren't all that unusual, Lieutenant," Chomsky told her.

"This one is," Sun said. "It is only showing up on one radar channel and only on every other sweep. It is not a glitch in the system. Also, I cannot get a direct visual on it from satellite, but it does show up on the satellite radar and optical wavelength photos as a smudge. No discernable internal architecture."

"Analysis?" Chomsky asked.

"It fits the description of a tempocane. But considering the extreme rarity of the phenomena, and the lack of magnetic loci in this area..."

"Well, keep an eye on it, Lieutenant," Chomsky ordered. "Let me know if it looks like it might impact our operations."

"Yes, sir."

"Red alert, red alert. Have one K.E.C. on positive track," Space Intruder Detector's synthesized voice announced. "Four-zero-three, One-three-two, Blue."

The operatives in the command center knew that two Moonbase interceptors were already on their way to search out and destroy the enemy craft. After a few moments, SID announced: "Destruct negative."

"It's through, Colonel," Sun said. "A KEC 37. Projected termination grid reference Green 14-B, Southern England."

"Alert all ground stations and alert Sky-1 for intercept," Chomsky ordered.

Sun passed the instructions on. An shrill siren sounded throughout the underground complex of SHADO headquarters.

After a few minutes, Sun reported: "Sky-1 has launched and is on an intercept course with the K.E.C. IP in five minutes."

"Sir," Lieutenant Derro called. "The craft appears to be on an intercept course with General Freeman's car."

"That's General Straker's wife. Call and warn her," Chomsky ordered.

Derro keyed in the combination that would link SHADO operations to the communications system of the Jaguar. After a few moments, he shook his head.

"Sir, I'm not getting through."

* * *

"Mom, what's that?" Alex asked, looking into the rearview mirror. Kate turned to look out the rear window of the Jaguar. A quarter of a mile back, the roadway was gone, replaced by a curtain of roiling black clouds lit up by phosphorescent green lightning. Wind began to whisper around the car. The mid-afternoon sun disappeared behind the clouds.

"Shit," Kate grumbled. Alex looked over at her in surprise. His mother wasn't prone to swearing. The wind grew louder and stronger. The Jaguar began to buck. The storm grew closer, the lightning brighter. There was something familiar about the color of the lightning, the eerie green. Kate suddenly recalled the last time she'd seen lightning that color - mid-summer's eve, nineteen years before - the day before her wedding to Ed Straker. A madman had kidnapped Straker's ex-wife and had tried to summon unearthly powers to help the alien invaders. Those powers had not taken the insult lightly.

The Jaguar began to buck harder, like a plane in heavy turbulence. It was all Alex could do to keep the car on the road. Rain began to slash onto the windshield, blurring everything.

* * *

"What's wrong?" Straker asked, coming into the control room, followed by Freeman.

"A K.E.C. 37 just got through," Chomsky explained. "It appears to be after the Jaguar." He turned back to Derro: "Keep trying to warn them."

Chomsky turned to Sun. "Tell Sky-1 to step on it."

"Yes, sir," Sun acknowledged.

"Colonel," Sun called from her station a moment later. "That storm line is getting heavier. It almost looks like it's following the K.E.C., or the General's car."

Straker went over to her station. The storm was a solid line across her screen. The alien ship was a faint blip. It was making erratic course changes, as though it was being buffeted by the wind, or maybe it was trying to elude something, or worse, find something. Beyond the storm line, the screen was clear.

"What's it doing?" Straker wondered aloud.

"The K.E.C. has increased speed to mach seven, and it's definitely heading for the Jaguar," Sun reported.

"That's crazy," Straker commented. "It can't possibly land at that speed. It shouldn't even be able to get a lock on a ground target at that speed."

As they watched, the radar image of the storm jumped and disappeared. The radar blip that was the Alec Freeman's Jaguar vanished with it and so did the alien.

* * *

The storm was on them. Gale force winds shoved at the car. There was a piercing wail as if the universe itself was crying out in agony. Alex hit the brakes and the car skidded onto the paved shoulder.

The sound drove through their skulls. They covered their ears, but the keening wail was too knife-sharp, driving itself into their brains. It was louder even than the thunder that rolled all around them.

Then, the world fell up. The car groaned and twisted and fell back onto the pavement, bottoming on the shocks.

The knife sharp scream stopped. The thunder stopped. The lightning stopped. The slashing rain stopped.

The Jaguar was sitting on the roadway. The engine was still running. The afternoon sun was shining through a cloudless blue sky.

* * *

"They're gone," Sun said.

"Nonsense," Chomsky said. "We must have an equipment problem."

"No, that's not it," Straker said. He glanced over at Freeman. "It was a time storm, a tempocane. Question is, is it natural, or have the Korrekaad found a way to manipulate it?"

"Unknown, sir," Sun replied. "But I'll have research on it immediately."

The speaker at Derro's station sputtered on.

"Sky-one to SHADO control," the pilot called. "I can't get a fix on the K.E.C. Do you have it?"

"The K.E.C. is off our scopes," Derro reported.

"I'm not picking up a ground trace from them," the pilot reported. "Are you sure it wasn't a system error?"

"We'll look into it, thank you," Chomsky said into his own headset. He looked over at General Straker who suddenly looked ill.

"Sir?"

Straker looked up with haunted eyes. "I can't feel them," he said.

* * *

"What the hell was that?" Alex Straker demanded.

"A tempocane, also known as a time storm."

"I thought those were just theoretical, one possible result of a conflux of electromagnetic fields and gravity waves."

Kate gave him a grim smile. "Now you know better."

There was a crack of thunder that wasn't thunder above them, and the brush by the side of the road exploded in flame.

"It's that K.E.C. It followed us through!" Alex shouted in alarm.

"Check the back. This is a SHADO car," Kate instructed as she turned on the onboard radar system. A heads-up display appeared on the upper section of the windscreen. The alien craft showed up as a green blip swerving around for a second run.

Alex reached behind his seat and pulled out a wide-bore pistol, like a flare gun, and several steel-plated shells. He loaded one of the shells into the pistol and handed it to his mother.

"Remember, it has one hell of a kick," Alex warned unnecessarily, toggling a switch on his door that lowered the window on the passenger side of the car.

"The K.E.C. is swinging around," Kate observed through the windscreen. Alex waited until it was closer then gunned the engine, speeding away in an attempt to throw off the alien's targeting.

Kate aimed the pistol out the open car window and pulled the trigger. The shell hit the K.E.C. amidships, sending the craft careening down into the fields beyond where it exploded.

"Good shot, Mom," Alex commented, turning on the radio. The preset station came on and after a familiar pop tune the announcer gave the time and weather report. The time and date matched the time on the console chronometer. The weather report was for clear weather through the next week with a possible hard-frost in the evenings.

"According to that, the storm didn't do anything," Alex observed.

"No, it did something. Can't you feel it?" Kate asked. Her voice was shaking.

"Feel what, Mom?"

"It feels wrong and I can't feel your father. We're not where we belong," she said. "Let's

get onto H.Q. and see what's happened to us."

* * *

"Colonel Ellis, Commander Straker," Ford called from his station in SHADO HQ. "Radar picked up a blip near the A-1, then it disappeared."

"System glitch?" Gay Ellis asked.

Ford shook his head. "I don't think so. Computers identified it as an alien, but it was like it just popped into existence out of a storm front and crashed."

"Storm? I thought all the weather reports were for cold and clear for the next week," Ed Straker said.

"Yes, sir. But radar picked up a band of ionization and water vapor that had all the signatures of a nasty storm front just before the alien appeared. Now it's gone, just like the alien."

Ed sighed, leaning heavily on his cane. He looked over at Gay, acting SHADO commander. "Better send a security crew out there and check it out. Just in case it isn't a glitch."

"My thought exactly, sir."

* * *

The Jaguar rolled to a stop beside the security kiosk at the entrance gate to Harlington-Straker Studios. Kate handed the guard her gate pass. The uniformed man peered at it quizzically, then handed it back, directing them to park in the lot directly in front of the main office building.

"He didn't recognize the car, or you," Alex observed.

"No, he didn't," Kate agreed. She nodded to a sleek bronze car with gull-wing doors parked near-by. "And that looks like your father's old SHADO car. He got rid of it before you were born. Not enough room for a family."

"That's a classic Omen. Must be worth a heap."

Kate shook her head. "There're no decals on it. No Ford logo."

"Meaning?"

"I don't know," Kate admitted.

Inside the building it was much the same. People they'd been introduced to only hours before gave them quizzical, questioning looks as they headed for the office of the studio CEO. They stopped at the door and read the name-plate: E. Straker.

"But Dad hasn't run the studios in years," Alex said with a frown.

"And the storm didn't take us back in time," Kate said.

"We've slid into a parallel universe," Alex reasoned. "The problem, then, is how do we get back to where we belong?"

"I have no idea," his mother admitted, opening the door to the office of Harlington-Straker Studios' CEO, Ed Straker.

A young man was seated at the desk in the outer-reception area. He looked up as the door opened. "How can I help you?" he asked blandly.

"You can tell Mister Straker he has visitors," Kate told him, equally blandly. She jerked her head to one side and Alex closed the office door behind them. She reached into a side pocket of her purse and pulled out two cards.

"Mister Straker is in a conference and cannot be disturbed. If you give me a number where you can be contacted..."

"Tell Commander Straker that Colonel Komack and Lieutenant Straker are here and need

to speak with him. Now." She dropped the cards on his desk.

Kate hadn't raised her voice at all. In fact, her voice pitch had lowered and gotten softer, but the secretary blanched. Although the man prided himself on a ramrod straight adherence to protocols, he found there was something profoundly disturbing about the woman, something that demanded both attention and obedience. He picked up the two identification cards and studied them. His hands were shaking just a little as he picked up the handset on the desk and keyed in a number.

"Duty officer? There's a Colonel Komack and a Lieutenant Straker here to see the Commander."

* * *

Ford relayed the message to Ed Straker standing beside him.

"Colonel Komack and Lieutenant Straker?" Ed asked. "Punch up the security camera in the office."

Ford did so.

Ed studied the screen. He didn't recognize either of the visitors, but there was something impossibly familiar about the young man. He looked to be about twenty, blond, slender build with even, finely honed features and intelligent eyes. He was dressed in cargo pants, fisherman's sweater and, despite the temperature, sandals. The woman was strikingly elegant, somewhere in her fifties, silver streaked auburn hair pulled back into a French braid. Her dark-green Cardin suit was perfectly fitted to a body that was obviously well maintained. She was also looking straight into the security camera as if she knew exactly where it was. Even through the camera lens, Ed could feel the tension coming off her.

"Have Evers meet me at the back elevator," Ed ordered.

"Are you sure you don't want security to handle it?" Alec Freeman asked, coming up behind Ed. "It's obviously a ploy to get to you."

"Possibly, Alec. But look at them. I don't think they'd be here if I wasn't their last hope. And they know about SHADO. Plus, she scared the shit out of my new secretary. That takes some doing."

* * *

General Freeman watched his friend worriedly.

"I can't feel them," Straker repeated.

"Did you feel their passing, sir?" Sun asked gently.

Straker shook his head. "No. It's like they suddenly moved out of range."

"There is no known limit to telepathic range," Sun said. "But it is like electromagnetic waves in that the greater the distance, the more power it takes to send and receive."

"So if I could add more power, I might be able to reach them?" Straker asked, half joking.

"Yes, sir," Sun agreed seriously. "This isn't my field, but I know Doctor Jackson has been studying the ability. It may be possible to artificially augment your native ability."

"Of course, we could just wait. Don't tempocanes usually return their victims within twenty-four hours," Chomsky asked.

"But not always," Straker said. "I've been through one of these monsters. After I returned, I managed to get hold of Warren Lasky's report on the phenomenon and what happened to the Nimitz in 1980. I also attended some top-secret conferences with the Tideman Foundation. Theoretically, under the right conditions, a tempocane can cross dimensional barriers. In that event, there's no guarantee of a return trip back to the point of origin. It has to do with the nature of the field. When an object passes through a tempocane field, it's marked with a

temporal energy signature and since the field is multi-dimensional, both ends remain open until the return trip seals the rip in time. That's what brings the storm back, the energy signature. But, if the field has crossed spatial dimensions, the field ends may not be stable enough to support the return trip."

"Is there a way to stabilize the field?" Sun asked.

"Lasky didn't think so," Straker said. "But then, Lasky didn't think there was anyway to send communications through the field and I know that's possible, at least a little."

"How do you know, Ed?" Freeman asked.

"When Mark Bradley and I went through a tempocane and came back, Kate told me later that she felt me 'move away'. But she also said she didn't lose me, so she wasn't worried. I was preoccupied at the time, so I didn't try to send her a message through the link. But looking back, I'm sure I could have," Straker said.

"Let's see what Jackson says," Freeman suggested. "Maybe the research section can come up with something."

* * *

"Why don't we just have security pick them up, sir?" Peter Evers asked his commanding officer as the pair walked down the corridor heading for the CEO's office.

Commander Ed Straker shook his head. "She asked for me. More to the point, she asked for Commander Straker. And the young man with her looks damned familiar."

Ed opened the door to the office that had his name on it and stepped inside, Evers right behind him.

The young man, Lieutenant Straker, turned as the door opened and Ed saw a quickly dashed flicker of hope cross the young face. The lieutenant turned to the woman, disappointment evident in the slump of his shoulders.

"I know," the woman murmured. Resignation colored her tone.

"My name's Straker," Ed said. "I believe you asked to see me?"

"Yes," Kate responded. "We have a little problem and I was hoping you would help. My name is Elizabeth Kathryn Komack-Straker. This is my son, Alexander Paul Straker. We're associated with an organization known as SHADO."

"Sounds eerie, ghosts and goblins and all that," Ed said with snide grin.

"Try hostile aliens from outer space."

"Good story idea," Ed said.

"In that case, I'd better find out who's doing that job here, if you're not," Kate said. "I'm sure MI-6 or the CIA would be overjoyed to hear my story about hostile aliens and Ed Straker and Alec Freeman and Supreme Headquarters Alien Defense Organization, a.k.a. SHADO. They might even believe me."

"You say your name is Straker. Am I supposed to know you?" Ed asked.

"No," Kate said. "We've never met. And the General Straker I know is somewhat older than you appear to be. But you do resemble him, physically at least."

Ed glanced at the secretary who handed him the identification cards. Ed glanced at them - the cards looked authentic. He waited for an explanation.

"The materials are authentic, as is the security coding. However, the badge numbers on them were never assigned by our system," the secretary explained.

"I was assured those badges could not be forged," Ed told him.

"According to the system, the badges are genuine. They just don't belong to anyone in the system."

Ed turned to Kate. "Can you explain it?"

"They are genuine. And we are not in your system because we don't belong here."

"And what do you want me to do about that?" Ed asked coldly.

Alex turned to his mother. "Let's go, Mom. He has no intention of helping us. If Professor Lasky is right, then the temporal gate is still open and all we have to do is wait for it to come back for us," Alex said. "We don't need his help."

"And what did Professor Lasky say what happens if it crosses a dimensional barrier instead?"

Alex's face fell. "The gate becomes unstable." He gave his mother a curious look. "How do you know Professor Lasky?"

"SHADO, our SHADO, has had experience with tempocanes."

"And what, may I ask, is a tempocane?" Ed asked.

"A time storm, a rip in the tapestry of time and space," Alex explained. "Only in this case it appears more space than time."

"They're *sliders*, sir," Evers said. "Sliding through dimensions, alternate Earths. Like the television show."

"And in your alternate Earth, you're both members of SHADO?" Ed asked.

Kate nodded.

"Assuming I believe you, what do you want us to do?" Ed asked, curious this time.

"I'm not sure," Kate admitted, rubbing her temples.

Ed noted she looked tired. No, more than tired. Exhausted. Her make-up was impeccable, but there was a sick pallor in her skin tone, and her suit wasn't quite as perfect a fit as it had looked on the camera - she'd obviously lost weight very recently.

Alex was watching her worriedly. "Okay, Mom?"

"Just tired," she replied.

Ed knew with sudden certainty that she was lying. "How about we have you both checked out by our medics? The slide may have been harder on you than you think."

* * *

Doctor Doug Jackson shook his head. "We haven't fully tested the augmentor on Earthers," he warned, placing a metal halo on General Straker's skull.

Straker snorted. "And you haven't tested it on me, either," he said, settling more comfortably into the dentist chair in Jackson's lab.

Jackson's assistant, K'ram, chuckled as he checked the bank of instruments wired to the halo by a bundle of fiber-optic filaments.

"We're starting mapping," K'ram announced. "It should take about fifteen minutes, assuming brain conformation is close to norm."

"Whose norm?" Freeman wondered aloud.

* * *

"She should be over at Mayland," Dr. Carmella Diaz told Commander Straker when he and Colonel Freeman came into her office in the SHADO medical center.

"What's wrong with her?" Ed asked.

Carmella toggled a switch on her wheelchair and moved over to her desk. She shook her head. "I need to do more tests, but it's some sort of blood dyscrasia. At a guess, I'd say it was an infection or maybe an auto-immune attack on her bone marrow. I'd like to send her over to a specialist."

"Does she know?"

"Yes, and she won't talk to me except to tell me not to tell her son and she doesn't want any more tests." Carmella looked up at Ed with a wry grin. "She sounds like any number of SHADO senior officers I know."

"What about the boy?" Alec asked.

Carmella pulled out a file and handed it to Ed. He opened it and looked at the top sheet.

"He's in exceptionally good health," Carmella said, looking at Ed. "And genetically, he's your son. Yours and this Komack woman's."

"No chance of this being an alien trick?" Ed asked.

Carmella shook her head again and shrugged. "I don't see how. By the way, he asked where Doug Jackson was."

"He's been dead seventeen years," Alec said. "Ruptured aorta, right here in the medical center."

"He was quite disappointed when I told him I didn't know a Doug Jackson," Carmella said. "The boy seems quite fond of him."

"Jackson? The man was a snake," Alec told her.

"Well, that's not their opinion," Caroline Constantine remarked, coming into the office.

"Your assessment?" Ed asked.

Caroline shrugged. "If they've been coached for this, it's flawless. Even under drugs, the boy is entirely consistent in his story. He really does believe he's been thrown here from another time-line. Where his father is named Ed Straker and is head of the Mars Colonization Project following a stint as commander of SHADO and chairman of the IAC. A time-line where Doug Jackson is alive and a long-time friend."

"And the woman?" Alec asked.

"I couldn't use the drugs due to the medical problem Carmella found," Caroline informed them. "But, her story jives completely with the boy's. By the way, I sent DNA samples through for identification. There is no DNA record of either of them, but General Henderson did have a niece named Elizabeth Kathryn Komack who died forty-five years ago, in an auto accident, along with the General's wife and her sister, Eva Komack. She'd be the right age if she'd lived."

"Any chance she was an early abductee?" Alec asked.

Caroline shook her head. "No, I don't see it. And it certainly would have shown up in Henderson's records if there'd been the slightest hint of alien involvement, even then."

"Henderson rarely talked about his late wife, but everything pointed to it being a drunk driver," Ed said. "Besides, one of the passengers did survive to tell about it, Henderson's youngest boy, Christopher. He's quadriplegic."

"Why do I suspect the General didn't handle it well?" Caroline asked.

"He didn't," Ed answered. "Would you clear the two of them for SHADO?"

Caroline's expression turned thoughtful. "We've no evidence they're lying, and they're certainly qualified, based on my tests and observations."

"But we've also no evidence they're telling the truth," Alec pointed out.

* * *

"Mapping's complete," K'ram announced. "Odd, the brain conformation more closely matches Rokanni than Earth-normal. Assuming that's true, the augmentor should work well in boosting your native telepathic ability."

"Well, people have been telling me I'm odd for sixty-some years," General Straker joked. "How do we start?"

"First, we establish a power circle," Jackson said. "I have one permanently in place in this

room, so I just have to close the circle."

"Sounds more like witchcraft," Freeman grouched as Jackson picked up an ornately carved stick from atop the instrument bank. The psychiatrist went to the door and drew a line on the floor in front of it, connecting the two ends of an incomplete silver circle inlaid on the floor of the lab. He made an arcane gesture with his right hand and bowed his head in apparent prayer for a moment before sticking the wand through his belt.

"Spellcraft is based on manipulating subtle energies," Jackson replied, coming back to Straker. "And, our experiments have shown us there are dangerous energies attracted to psychic phenomena. The power circle acts as a safeguard."

"Now what?" Straker asked.

"Try to enter a meditative state and start looking for your wife and son," K'ram said. "Look for them by how you remember they feel."

Freeman pulled Jackson aside, careful to stay within the silver circle marked on the concrete floor. "How dangerous is this?"

"We're dealing with dangerous energies here, General," Jackson told him.

"I mean, the danger to him."

"General Straker is aware of the risks."

"I have them," Straker said quietly. His eyes were closed and he spoke with hushed tones. "It's like she's near but there's a thick wall between us."

"And Alex?" Jackson asked.

"I can feel him through her," Straker explained. "I've never been able to read him directly, you know."

"Is she responding?"

"She knows I'm here. She's very worried. It's a different reality where they are."

K'ram looked up momentarily from monitoring the augmentor, astonishment on his face. "Doctor, I have a quantum signature trace. I think I can actually punch a signal through."

"To her PDA?" Jackson asked. K'ram nodded.

"Do it," Straker instructed. "Then we need to figure out how to stabilize the ends of the rift to get them both back."

"If we can," Jackson warned.

* * *

"How do you feel?" Commander Straker asked Kate, entering the medical center examining room. The boy, Alex, was waiting with her. A uniformed guard stood by the desk where the contents of her purse was spread out - wallet, PDA, makeup bag, pocket-tool, tissue, aspirin, the miscellany found in any woman's purse.

"As well as can be expected, I suppose," Kate replied to Ed's question. "Given the circumstances." She looked over to her son. "I don't think we're going to make it to Uncle Alec's party tonight."

Alex shrugged. "I doubt he'll be too upset, given the circumstances."

The PDA on the table chirped. The guard frowned and reached for it. Ed shook his head and nodded to the boy to pick it up.

Alex flipped it open to look at the tiny screen. "It's Dad!" he announced in delighted surprise. "It says they've got a quantum trace on us and are working on a way to get us back." He grinned at his mother. "Dad says he's sorry about last night."

Ed took the device from the young man's hand and read the messages on the screen. "That's what it says," he agreed. He looked at Alex with a frown. "This complex is shielded. So

how is this getting through?"

Alex shrugged. "SHADO, our SHADO, is wired for handhelds. Also this is Doctor Doug's office. You know how he likes complicated toys."

"No, I don't know," Ed said. "Jackson's been dead for seventeen years."

"The one we know is alive and well and has been working on adapting alien technology to Earther use," Kate told him. "The transmitter he's using is probably sitting right over there." She pointed to an empty space near one of the walls. "Only it's in another dimension. A little hard to see from here." She turned to her son. "Do you think the connection will support a reply?"

Alex shrugged. "We can try."

"Tell them we're okay for now," she instructed. "And the KEC that followed us through is destroyed."

Alex punched in the message and hit the send key.

Ed watched Kate thoughtfully. "We sent a team to check out an anomalous storm front and what looked to be a Ufo that got through our perimeter and vanished from our tracking system. All they found was debris from an alien ship and tire tracks from your car."

"My Mom's a crack shot," Alex told him with pride. "That K.T. was dead meat before he even got a lock on us."

"K.T.?"

"Korrekaad Terrorist," Kate explained. "Aliens."

"So your SHADO is at war with aliens, too?" Ed asked.

"Yes," Kate said with a shrug. "SHADO is a crack anti-terrorist group, and the list includes off-worlders. Is there a writer named Clancy here?"

"Tom Clancy, writes techno-thrillers," the guard answered.

"Familiar with his series *Op Center*?"

The guard grinned. "Love it. Wish it was real."

"Where I come from, it is real. It's SHADO. Clancy just doesn't know about the aliens."

Kate's PDA chirped again and Alex picked it up. "It's Dad. *Message received. We think rift end will appear circa midnight. Find exterior nexus point and raise power circle before then. Love you both. J.E.S.*"

"An exterior nexus point and a power circle?" Ed asked.

Kate nodded. "A power point. A magnetic flux convergence area, geo-magnetic anomaly, something like that."

"Why exterior?"

"The fields that surround the rift are quite violent. It's actually safer outside - the building won't come apart on you."

Ed looked thoughtful. "Would Glastonbury Tor work?"

"It's a little public, isn't it?" Kate asked. "Especially since he's referring to raising a witches' circle."

"We could be filming the witch's solstice celebration there."

"The rector might object," Kate pointed out.

Ed grinned. "You'd be amazed at how much forgiveness money can buy." He checked his watch. "Damn, I was supposed to be home an hour ago. I only came down here today for a visit. I'm on medical leave." He turned to Alex. "Send a message that you'll be at Glastonbury Tor at 11 tonight." To the guard, "Ask Colonel Ellis to make the arrangements with the cathedral and also a transport to get us from my house to the Tor in plenty of time."

"The weather's likely to get nasty about then," Kate warned.

"The weather report was for clear and dry for the rest of the week," Ed said.

"Tempocanes don't read weather reports," Kate replied.

* * *

"Just out of curiosity," Freeman said. "What happened last night?"

Straker shrugged, taking care not to dislodge the gold halo around his head. "We had another one of our knock-down drag-out fights. I'm surprised you didn't hear us. You know she's been diagnosed with Shui fever."

Freeman nodded. "That can be a nasty bug when it wants to be."

"The specialists in Ottawa recommended a bone-marrow transplant to kill the infection. I made the mistake of agreeing with them and beginning to make the arrangements."

"Without consulting her as to the specifics," Freeman completed for himself. "After nineteen years of marriage, I would have thought you'd know better than to try anything that stupid. I'm surprised she's still speaking to you."

"Uh, she isn't," Straker admitted. "At least she wasn't when she and Alex left the house this morning." His expression became forlorn. "I can't risk losing her, Alec. We have to get her back. We have to get them both back. And not just for me."

"For who, then?" Freeman asked.

Straker just shook his head.

* * *

"He's what?" Colonel Alec Freeman nearly yelled.

"Commander Straker is taking Miss Komack and her son to his house for dinner," Gay Ellis repeated. "He expects you to meet him there."

"And you let him go?"

"Mister Evers and Mister Zouri are both with him, and the Commander seemed quite convinced that is was safe."

"Commander Straker..." Alec began and cut himself off. *'has had two serious brain injuries in less than a year'* he continued to himself. Aloud he said: "has no sense of self preservation and an excessive penchant for picking up strays."

"Like you, sir?" Gay asked with a grin.

Alec huffed. "Have my car brought around, will you? While I let my fiancée know I won't be home for dinner, again."

* * *

"You own this?" Alex asked as they passed through the wrought iron gates of Silkwood Manor.

Ed nodded. "An inheritance from an old friend."

Alex shook his head. "This is so weird. We spent last night here. Only, it was Uncle Alec's place. An inheritance from an uncle he'd never met."

The limousine stopped in front of the manor house. The body guards, Evers and Zouri, got out first, Evers going to the front door. The broad oak door opened before he got there.

"Ed, Alec's on the phone threatening to have you committed," Claire Spencer announced. "What have you done?"

Ed climbed out of the car, followed by Alex Straker and Kate Komack.

"Uh, Claire, I'd like you to meet Kathryn Komack and her son, Alex Straker," Ed said. "Kate, Alex, my fiancée, Doctor Claire Spencer."

Claire looked closely at Alex, then back to Straker. "Ed, is there something I need to

know?"

"They're sliders, ma'am. From an alternate Earth," Evers volunteered. "He's the commander's son from there."

Claire stared at him.

"Actually, my Dad's a general. Head of the Northam Aerospace Admin Mars Project," Alex corrected. Claire's eyes opened wider.

"It's cold out here," Ed complained. "Can we finish this inside, with some coffee, and maybe cookies?"

"And some strong drinks?" Nate Zouri added.

Claire stepped aside and let them pass into the house.

* * *

"Okay, let me get this straight," Claire said to Ed after settling Kate and Alex into rooms in the far wing of the mansion. "They are sliders from another reality and you're going to help them get back to where they belong. You do realize how bizarre that sounds."

"That's what I've been saying," Alec complained. He'd shown up at the house within half an hour of Ed and his guests.

"Claire, the Holy Grail is locked in a cupboard and we served tea to the Lady of Avalon. I head an organization fighting aliens from outer space. I'm still alive when I shouldn't be, and you, Alec, came back from the dead."

"Apparently dead," Alec argued.

"You were beginning to smell, Alec. You were dead," Ed said. "So, what's so hard to believe about people from another universe? Besides, if they had the ability to destroy headquarters, they would have done it while they were there. At least here, they can't do as much damage."

"Only kill you," Alec said.

"I've been dead," Ed observed. "I don't especially want to do it again, but I know SHADO will survive."

Claire sipped her coffee and gazed at him thoughtfully. "So what do you plan to do?"

"Her husband, my counter-part, was able to send some instructions. They need to be at Glastonbury Tor by 11 tonight, before the time storm comes back for them," Ed explained. "Their people have some experience with these things and apparently a magnetic nexus like the one at Glastonbury should help stabilize the inter-dimensional field when it reappears."

"Is there any reason to believe the aliens have anything to do with these 'time storms'?" Claire asked.

"No," Alex Straker said from the doorway to the drawing room. "My mom's resting. It's been a long day, and I'm sure your doctor told you she isn't well."

"Yes, Doctor Diaz thinks it's some type of auto-immune problem," Ed told him.

Alex shook his head. "Shui fever, an alien infection. Normally, it's just like the common cold, lasts two weeks and you're immune. But in about one in a hundred million people, it attacks the bone marrow. Drugs can't touch it. As to the tempocane, Mom's been filling me in on those. I thought they were just theoretical till today, but apparently when our enemy aliens see one of those monsters, they run as fast as they can in the other direction. The one we shot down was hitting mach 7 at ground level before the storm hit. And yes, the storm can hit mach speeds."

"Nothing natural can go that fast," Alec protested.

"Electromagnetic fields can force anything that fast, or faster," Alex responded.

"Otherwise we wouldn't have thunder. And we're not talking about normal weather. We're talking weather straight from hell." He plopped himself into an open chair by the wide fireplace and stared at the flames. The ornaments on Christmas wreath above the mantle twinkled cheerily.

"Hungry?" Claire asked. "We've got a fridge full of left-overs."

Alex roused himself. "Yeah, I guess I am."

"I'll get you something," Claire offered, getting up from her place on the sofa beside Ed. She gave Ed a quick kiss and headed for the kitchen.

"Just out of curiosity," Alec began, "what do you do in your SHADO? I mean, you're awfully young to be an officer."

"I was born into SHADO," Alex explained. "Both my parents were, are, senior command officers. That didn't end when they retired from active duty to take other posts. I'm on winter break from MIT right now, and I expect I'll join SHADO's research section when I graduate."

"What are you taking at school?"

"I'm majoring in aero-space engineering."

Ed poured himself another cup of coffee from the silver service on the low table in front of him. "You know, we can always find a place for you and your mother if it turns out you can't get back."

"Thanks," Alex said. "But I really hope I don't have to take you up on your offer. I mean, you look a lot like my Dad, and I know that genetically you and he are virtually identical, but you're not my father and this isn't my world."

"Well, if all goes well, you should be back home in about six hours," Ed reminded him.

"We're not there yet, and frankly, I don't think my Mom is well enough to cast as strong a power circle as we're going to need to stabilize the rift end," Alex told him. "At least, not without help. And I'm a total loss at that sort of thing. I'm not even sure about what sort of theoretical basis Doctor Doug's using for thinking a protective circle can even stabilize the rift."

"Let's assume for the moment that your Doctor Doug knows what he's doing. What sort of help will she need?" Alec asked. If Ed was accepting this nonsense at face value, he figured he may as well play along with it.

"Someone who knows how to cast a circle, a magician or metaphysicist," Alex answered.

"A witch?" Ed asked.

Alex shrugged. "Depends on how strong they are and if they're any good with serious power work."

Alec stared at Ed. "Please tell me you're joking. You know what happened yesterday."

"She's the only one I know who comes even close to fitting the bill," Ed said. "Unless you know a metaphysicist."

"God help us all."

* * *

"They've moved away from headquarters," Straker said. "To your house," he added, nodding to Freeman.

"You can tell that?" Freeman asked.

"Yes, I can almost see through her eyes," Straker said. "Jackson, how can I keep in contact if we have to move? If I have to unhook from the augmentor?"

"There won't be a problem, I think," Jackson replied. "We powered down the augmentor a few minutes ago."

"You've been in contact under your own power for some time," K'ram added.

"You knew I could do it, didn't you," Straker stated flatly. "So why the charade with that machine of yours?"

Jackson shrugged his thin shoulders. "To convince you that you could. Kathryn and I have known for years that you had strong psychic abilities, if you would just believe in them. You have no idea how frustrating it has been to know someone with so much potential who simply refuses to acknowledge it."

"Okay, I'm convinced," Straker said in a tone that indicated he still wasn't. "How does that help us get her and Alex home?"

"Tonight, we go to Glastonbury Tor and wait for the tempocane to return. Then, you will guide them both back to us," Jackson answered.

"You make it sound simple," Freeman complained.

"It will be anything but simple, gentlemen," Jackson warned. "Especially considering how ill Kathryn is. But, I do have some acquaintances who may be able to help us."

* * *

Claire bustled about the large kitchen, heartily wishing Frances Brisby could simply move in to become their full-time cook, despite the fact that Frances' husband, Stanley, was vicar of St. Stephen's parish and his parishioners would hardly approve.

Peter Evers was trying to help put together sandwiches, but he was more a hindrance.

"Anything I can do to help?" Kate Komack asked.

Claire jumped. She hadn't heard the other woman come into the kitchen.

"You startled me," Claire stated. "We were just putting together some sandwiches for everybody. I thought you were resting."

"I got a little," Kate said. "But I could do with some aspirin." She sat down on a chair beside the center kitchen table.

"Peter, there's some aspirin in the cupboard over there," Claire instructed, nodding to the cupboard in question. "And you know where the cups and glasses are."

"Yes, ma'am," Peter replied, searching through the cupboard as Claire finished dressing the tray of sandwiches. He found the bottle and a battered silver souvenir mug next to it. He tapped two tablets out of the plastic bottle and handed them to the woman, then filled the mug with cold tap water, handing the mug to her as well.

Claire watched as the other woman gazed at the mug thoughtfully before taking the tablets and washing them down with water from the battered mug.

"Peter, where did you find that mug?" Claire asked quietly.

"It was in the cabinet, next to the aspirin," Peter answered, puzzled at the odd expression on her face. "Battered old thing. Why does the boss keep it?"

"Sentimental value," Claire told him, handing him the tray of sandwiches and shoos him out of the kitchen. She turned to Kate. "Feeling better?"

"Yes, actually." Kate looked at the mug for a long moment, then placed it on the table. "It says it's a souvenir."

"Ed found it at Glastonbury Tor. We usually keep it in the study. I've no idea how it got to the kitchen."

"Items of great power frequently have an intelligence of their own."

"That old thing?" Claire said, trying to keep her voice light.

"Can't you feel the power coming off it?" Kate asked. "It's strong enough even those without the Sight can almost sense it."

"I don't understand."

Kate gave her a bemused smile. "You understand," she said quietly. "Where did you and Ed meet?"

"San Francisco. I was working in the E.R. when he was brought in with a fever, severe exhaustion. When he went back to England, I followed him. Ended up working for him," Claire said, wiping the remains of the water from the inside of the cup with a towel. She didn't know why she was confiding in a stranger, but it felt right, somehow.

"What the devil was he doing in that state in San Francisco?" Kate wondered.

"Visiting his late wife's grave. She was originally from there and wanted to be buried there, with her family."

"It wasn't Mary, then," Kate stated.

"No, Margaret. They'd been married maybe a year when her car was hit by a lorry. Killed her and the child she was carrying."

"I'm so sorry," Kate said.

"He so wants to have children," Claire said. "And they've all been taken away from him. His job, his responsibilities, get in the way, but he can't give those up. They're too important. He's come very close to dying more times than I care to know and he cares so deeply and I don't want to see him hurt anymore."

"Only people who feel can feel hurt," Kate observed.

"You sound like Stanley Brisby," Claire said with a smile. "He's a good friend of Ed's. An Anglican minister. I expect he and his wife will show up tonight sometime, just to make sure Ed's eaten today."

Kate chuckled. "Sounds like they have their work cut out for them. I'm glad the Ed Straker of this world has people to stand by him. The responsibility of the Fisher King can be a killing one."

"The Fisher King?"

"He who rules by serving, the lame king," Kate explained.

"Ed had hip replacement surgery a while back. It didn't heal quite right, but the surgeon who worked on him last time says he should be fine."

Kate shook her head. "One of the marks of the Fisher King is that he cannot serve his people with his physical strength, but must do so with his wisdom."

"What about your Ed?" Claire asked. "Is he the Fisher King where you come from?"

Kate shook her head. "No, my husband is the Warder, the guardian. A paladin, a general, a prince even, but not the king."

"What about you?"

"I am the consort of the Warder," Kate answered. "Even the Warder has need of support troops when he goes to battle."

"Sounds like you have your work cut out for you, too. But we all do, when we join the court of the king," Claire said, brushing crumbs from the front of her long tweed skirt. "I hope you can get back to your Ed Straker."

"I hope so too," Kate admitted. "I am the consort of a paladin general, but I have my own duties as well, defending the Light and the Good. There is no place in your king's court for me or my son."

* * *

The SHADO guard watching the gate called the main house and announced the arrival of the Brisby's with Lily Marsh as a passenger.

"I'm surprised Yetunde hasn't shown up yet," Ed commented as he and Alec headed for the entrance hall, followed by Alex Straker and Peter Evers.

Alec snorted. "After the other day, she'd be coming after Marsh with a spear."

"I take it this Marsh person isn't very well liked," Alex observed.

Ed chuckled. "She's an old acquaintance. And she's 'interesting'."

"That's an understatement, sir," Peter muttered. "If I may say so."

"Uh, this should be interesting," Alex commented wryly. "Mom doesn't have a lot of patience with 'interesting' people."

The doorbell chimed and Peter opened the door to reveal Frances and Stanley Brisby and Lily Marsh. Lily looked like she'd been poured into her skimpy skirt and blouse and her spiked-heel thigh-high boots did little except to cover skin.

"Darling Ed, you wanted to see me? Has that Claire person done something?" she gushed, then stopped, staring at Alex. "You never mentioned you had a son."

"Ed, son, is there something you want to tell us?" Stanley Brisby asked, taking off his hat and overcoat.

"Angel, Frances, Lily, I'd like you to meet Alex Straker, who is *not* my son," Ed said. "I guess you could say he's my nephew. And we're going to need your help to get him and his mother back home."

"What sort of help, Ed?" Lily asked suspiciously.

"How good are you at casting power circles?" Alex asked.

* * *

Straker accepted the cup of coffee Freeman handed him. They had moved from Jackson's laboratory in SHADO headquarters to Freeman's house near Tetbury. Frances Cross, Freeman's housekeeper, had returned from a few days with friends to find houseguests. She groused at Freeman, not really meaning it, as she served sandwiches to Jackson, Freeman, K'ram, and Straker before heading back to her kitchen to start dinner.

"You know, Yetunde and I have talked about turning this place into a bed and breakfast," Freeman said, loud enough for Mrs. Cross to hear. "All we have to do is let people know Mrs. Cross is in the kitchen and the place would never be empty."

"You think I'd like cooking for a bunch of strangers?" Cross asked from the kitchen.

"I think you'd enjoy every bit of it," Freeman replied. "You'd have half the country begging for your lemon drizzle recipe. We'd be turning them away at the door." He took a bite of the aforementioned cake and grinned.

The front door chime rang and Freeman excused himself to get it.

"Jackson, even with contact through the rift, how the devil are we going to anchor the ends?" Straker asked. "We're talking about enormous energy flows and fluxes, enough to rupture the barriers between dimensions."

"We use controlled energy flows and controlled fluxes," one of the men accompanying Freeman said. The stranger was tall, in his mid-fifties with dark eyes, dark hair going silver, a sternly patrician profile and the elegant carriage of an athlete. With him were three other men, a younger fair-haired man with thick gold-rimmed glasses, carrying an artist's notebook; an older man, sturdy and muscular, with a bushy gray mustache and a studiedly neutral expression behind his aviator style glasses. The third man was stocky, with thick gray hair. He was wearing clerical collar.

"Ah, Sir Adam, I'm so glad you could get here so quickly," Jackson greeted the newcomers. Straker noted the Hungarian psychiatrist was almost bouncing with excitement at

seeing the new arrivals.

"Well, chartering a plane to get us here does imply a certain urgency to the matter," the tall man replied with a smile. He had a touch of a Scots accent. "I could have given you the names of some local people."

"Not to disparage the local talent, but this is matter of certain delicacy. Ah, General Straker," Jackson suddenly remembered. "I'd like to present Sir Adam Sinclair, Peregrine Lovat and Noel McLeod. Sir Adam is a professional colleague of mine and two of the gentlemen are his associates in matters like this. I'm afraid I don't know the other gentleman."

"Stanley Brisby, St Stephen's Parish," the fourth man introduced himself. His accent held a bit of Australia in it. "I'm afraid I'm one of the local talents."

"Father Christopher had a wedding to take care of, so I asked Father Stan to step in for him," Sinclair explained. "He comes with excellent credentials."

As the others were speaking, Lovat had opened his notebook and begun sketching. "Oh, I hope you don't mind," Lovat said when he finally noticed Straker's cold expression. "But it helps me focus." His Scots accent was stronger than Sinclair's but no less cultured.

"It also helps in other ways," Jackson murmured as he looked over Lovat's shoulder at the quick sketch. The portrait wasn't of Straker as he was but of a knight in chain mail and helm. The white surcoat had a Maltese cross on the shoulder.

"As I always suspected," Jackson chuckled. "A knight in shining armor."

Straker glanced at the sketch. It wasn't a bad likeness and he wasn't sure why Lovat's depiction of him as a knight bothered him, but it did, even though Kate had frequently joked about his past lives as both a knight of the Round Table and a Templar. He also knew it was true, at least in some sense. He frequently dreamed of past lives, and past deaths. Then he realized it was the fact that Lovat had *seen* him as a knight that bothered him. He wondered at what else Lovat might see if he tried.

"Jackson, what did you mean 'in matters like this'?" Straker asked, deciding to ignore Lovat and the drawing for the moment. "Do people get lost in inter-dimensional rifts very often and I just haven't heard about it?"

"People frequently get lost in places mundane means can't find them," Sinclair said. "Although I'll admit, an inter-dimensional rift is a new one on me."

"So, how can you help?"

"General, Sir Adam is a renowned expert in the esoteric arts and a very powerful wielder of metaphysical energy," Jackson said. "We are professional colleagues on more than one plane."

"There are more things on heaven and earth...?" Straker murmured.

"Exactly," Jackson agreed. "I asked Sir Adam and his associates to help raise the protective circle and help ground the rift, so then you can guide Kathryn and Alex back home."

"Can you do it?" Freeman asked Sinclair.

"It won't be easy," Sinclair admitted. "But the good Lord knows, I'm not usually given the easy cases. With God's help, we should be able to get Mrs. Straker and young Master Straker back home."

"With God's help," Straker repeated.

* * *

"This is quite impossible!" Lily protested. "These things must be planned, aligned with the planetary influences, properly timed. You can't just announce you're going to cast a circle and

do it. It needs planning, the right tools."

"Are you saying you can't do it?" Kate Komack asked quietly. The two women were alone in the bedroom Kate had been assigned.

Lily drew herself up to full height. "I am a daughter of the Goddess. Of course I can do it. But it won't be easy."

"I would certainly understand if you feel it's beyond you," Kate said. "It is a very risky operation."

"Risky? You have no idea what you're talking about!" Lily huffed. "I am trained to use these energies, to turn them back to the worlds they originate. I am a daughter of the Goddess."

"So you've said," Kate observed with a wry smile. "Repeatedly."

"You don't believe me," Lily said with a huff.

"I believe you'd look ten years younger if you took off the pancake and wore clothes that fit properly." Kate was openly grinning. "As to your abilities..." Kate pulled a sapphire ring from her pocket and put it on the ring finger of her right hand, then she drew a pentagram in mid-air. Lily could almost see a blue trace lingering in the air as Kate held out her hand. "Show me!"

Lily hesitated. "Yesterday I tried to see how powerful Ed's chosen was." She swallowed hard. "She's the one you need to help you. Linked, they are incredibly powerful."

"But untrained and untried," the older woman said, still holding out her hand. "Give me your athame."

Warily, Lily handed over her ritual knife. Kate kissed the blade and began the invocation to create a stronger protective circle in the bedroom. East, south, west, and north she called upon the elements to shield them.

Lily could see in her mind's eye a blue light emanating from the circle the other woman was drawing on the carpeted floor. When the circle was closed, a cone of blue light sprang up to completely surround them.

"Your hand," Kate demanded once again.

Lily reached out, touched the older woman's hand and screamed.

She could smell the sweat and blood, hear the screams of the men and horses, the clanking of swords against shields. She looked up and saw on the hill above the king and his queen and *knew* them. The lame king with Ed Straker's face and the queen was his black-haired chosen, Claire. Behind the queen, another woman stood, auburn haired and imperious, but which one was the lady of Avalon or were they both the high priestess? Another woman appeared, much younger and blonde, the same coloring as the king. Were they three faces of the Lady Goddess? Lily was afraid to ask. But wait, there was another figure beside the king, a brother, a twin, clad in chain mail and a white surcoat with a red cross splashed across one shoulder. His longsword was raised in salute, glowing blue in warding. And behind him, fading into the distance, more warriors, more kings, more guardians of humanity.

She looked over at the woman in the circle with her. Kate was glowing with the same blue light as the circle, same light as the sword. Her face had changed into something ineffable, a terrible beauty. She was dressed in purple robes, or was it chain mail, or even the black habit of a Mother Superior?

"Oh, my Lady," Lily said with a sob.

"Not I," Kate corrected. "But that which I serve. Stay here. I have work to do."

"I don't understand," Lily murmured. There was a ruffling, as of huge feathery wings and

Lily looked past Kate to discover a pillar of cold blue light standing - Lily couldn't tell where, or if, the figure was standing, that part of the room had vanished to be replaced by stars.

"*Welcome mistress of the hunt,*" a voice like the tinkling of bells said, addressing Kate. "*You are far from home.*"

"But not so far you could not find me, Mistress," Kate addressed the pillar.

"*And why have you brought Lilliana to us?*"

"That was not my intention," Kate said, bowing her head. "But I do need to know her strengths for the coming endeavor."

"*Lilliana has the strength,*" the bells said. "*But her teacher will come when, and if, she chooses to join those that honor the Light. You are not that teacher. You have other duties. And this one has much to learn before she returns here. Be aware, there is great danger in this endeavor, not only for yourself and your child.*"

"But, Mistress, why has this happened?"

There was a sense of a shrug in the pillar, the rustling of feathers. "*That has not been given for me to know, except, there is healing here and power, but this you already have discovered.*"

The pillar became brighter and the light made Lily's eyes water and she was overcome with dizziness. After a long moment, she raised her head again and the room was back as it was before, but now she could see figures beyond the circle: two young men holding hands and an older couple. Another man stood a little apart from the couple and despair rolled off him like an overpowering scent. The woman looked a little like Ed, fine-boned and blonde. Rosemary was the name that slipped into her mind. Rosemary and Lawrence, Eric and Ryan, and Edward. All dead and all here, watching, waiting.

Lily shuddered and let go of Kate's hand. "Did you see?"

"I saw many things," Kate replied.

"What, who, was that?"

"A servant of the Light," Kate answered. "My *sensei*, if you will, on the inner planes. You are one of the maidens of the Isle. Always wanting the king, the power, but unable to keep it, unable to hold it."

"I am not worthy," Lily murmured. "I am not strong enough."

"On the contrary, you have the strength," Kate replied. "But you want so badly to grasp what you want, you squeeze the life out of it. You drive it away. The Mother of all things provides. Trust that you will receive what you need. You know it in your mind, know it in your heart."

"They've been together through so many lives. And the Goddess has chosen him and not her. Her death will destroy him," Lily whispered.

"You underestimate the strength of the king and his chosen," Kate replied. She glanced at the figures still hovering outside the circle. "He has supporters on the Other Side as well as this one, not to mention those of the inner planes."

"Their presence, their energies, could make raising the circle more dangerous," Lily said. "Dangerous for Ed and Claire. Dangerous for all of us, if they think we're endangering the king."

"Then we must make sure they know we are not endangering him."

Someone started pounding on the bedroom door, twisting the knob, trying to open it. "Is everything all right in there?" they could hear Ed Straker demanding.

"We're fine," Lily called in a shaky voice. "We're both fine."

Kate handed Lily the athame and the younger woman released the circle, reversing the process Kate had used. As soon as the circle was down, Kate went to the door and unlocked it. Ed, Alec, Alex and Claire were all standing in the hallway.

"We heard a scream," Claire said.

"Lily showed me a vision she had. She wasn't expecting it," Kate explained.

"Are you okay, Mom?" Alex asked, concern written over his young face.

"Yes, I'm fine," she replied. "Just a little cold. I tend to get a little hypothermic when I do trance work."

"Trance work?" Claire asked.

Kate nodded. "Deep meditation, if you will. It can lower the metabolism and body temperature. I'm always cold and a little tired afterwards."

Ed noted that despite Kate's obvious fatigue, her color was much better than it had been at headquarters. "Why do I have the feeling if I asked Diaz to check you out right now, she wouldn't find any trace of the disease?" Ed asked.

"There are potent energies in this time and place, this reality," Kate said without answering his question. A clock on the hall table chimed ten. "I think it's time to get moving."

Ed nodded. "The copter's here. It'll take us about half an hour by air. Gay has everything arranged for us. Including a film crew for cover."

"Gay always was efficient," Kate commented as they headed for the stairs to the main floor.

"One minor detail," she turned to Lily. "I don't have an athame."

"You can borrow mine," Lily offered.

Kate shook her head. "You'll need it."

"An athame?" Ed asked.

"A ceremonial knife, dear Ed," Lily explained. "Preferably a double-edged one, like a small dagger."

"I thought I saw a letter opener in the study that was shaped like a sword," Alec offered. "Will that do?"

"I don't remember having one like that," Ed commented as Alec disappeared into the study and reappeared a moment later with an eight-inch long miniature sword.

He handed it to Kate, who inspected it closely. The workmanship was excellent. It was a replica of Arthur's battle sword - the name escaped her at the moment, but her husband had one just like it at home, except his had a blue-black blade instead of the usual silvered steel, it was full-size, and it didn't have 'made in England' stamped on the end of one of the cross-pieces.

"This will do nicely, thank you," Kate murmured. She could feel the power waiting inside the miniature, waiting to be unleashed.

"Claire," Ed said. "Do you remember where we got that letter opener?"

Claire was staring at it. The miniature sword was impossibly familiar. She'd last seen the full-sized one in it in the hands of Arthur, King of all Britons, when he knighted her beloved Ed.

"I saw one like it at Glastonbury," Claire stammered.

"That's where we must have gotten it, then," Ed agreed.

"Do you object to my using it?" Kate asked.

Ed and Claire both shook their heads.

"Ed, boy," Stanley Brisby called out as he and his wife came out of the kitchen into the

large hallway. "A troop transport just landed in the garden. Where are we going at this time of night?"

"Glastonbury," Ed replied.

"But, they don't need to come," Lily announced. "We have no need of his white haired god in this."

"On the contrary," Kate contradicted. "This is the famous Father Brisby and his wife isn't it?"

Stanley gave a tiny bow of acknowledgement.

"Are you high or low church, Father?" Kate asked.

A look of bemusement crossed the priest's face. "My parishioners' don't much like the bells and smells, but sometimes I do it, just to remind myself."

"You do it, pet, because you love all the pomp and fancy," his wife chided. "You should see him at Easter," she told the others.

"Then you know how to consecrate and purify an area," Kate said.

"The old forms work a little better for that, but yes, I can do it," Stanley admitted.

Frances started to look concerned. "Stanley?"

"We're all one in the Light, Cupcake," Stanley assured her. Lily's face lost all color.

"Do you have your kit with you?" Kate asked.

"It's in the car," Stanley said. He turned to his wife, "Cupcake, do you mind getting my visiting kit?"

"Why do we need that?" Lily stammered. "Surely a daughter of the Goddess has no need of these trappings?"

Kate's expression became thoughtful for a moment, as if listening to distant voices. She shook her head as she turned to Lily. "There are none so blind as those who will not see. We're calling down a storm like none of you have ever seen. We need all the help we can get and only a fool turns down a tool because it's the wrong color. His is the triune god - Father, who is neither male nor female, who lives beyond the world in light, Son who comes to earth for a time to taste of life and returns, and Spirit, Logos, Sophia, she that makes the earth move. If he weren't a Protestant, I'd dare say he'd believe in the Goddess more than you do. He is a servant of the Light. You would do well to learn from him."

Lily's mouth opened in protest then snapped shut.

"Do you believe in the Lord, my dear?" Stanley asked Kate.

Kate gave him a bemused look. "Do you believe in rocks?"

"I don't understand."

"To ask someone if they believe in something presumes there is a choice to disbelieve," Kate explained. "You don't ask if someone believes in rocks. And, like the rock, the Goddess and God can be found by simply accepting the truth of the senses you have. You can choose to ignore the rock, but it's still there, waiting to stub your toe."

Stanley looked as though he couldn't decide whether to be offended or to take notes for his next sermon. "What will you need me to do?" he asked instead.

"Right now? Pray for us, Father," Kate answered. "When we get there, help us consecrate the area and protect Ed and Claire. Even communion would not be amiss for those who would partake. There will be dangerous things afoot this night."

* * *

"She has help," Straker said. "They're heading for the Tor in the few minutes."

"Do you have something of hers to use as a focus?" Sinclair asked.

"Her knife," Straker said. "Will that do?"

"I was thinking more in terms of jewelry, something she's fond of, that has her stamp on it," Sinclair said.

Freeman chuckled. "You've never met his wife."

"Kate isn't in to jewelry," Straker explained. "She only left her knife here because it sets off every metal detector around. I'll go get it, and something that belongs to Alex. He's the one with the jewelry."

Straker left and came back a few minutes later with a silver handled dagger with a blue-black blade in a black leather sheath and a shell necklace. Sinclair took the two items and closed his eyes momentarily.

"Yes, I can feel her energy, and the boy's," he said as he wrapped the necklace around the hilt of the dagger and wrapped them both in a silk handkerchief. "These will do nicely."

Sinclair gave Jackson an amused glance. "You forgot to tell me the lady in question was an *Adeptus Majoris*."

"I thought you knew," Jackson replied. "Miss Komack was your counterpart in the New York area prior to her illness."

"Oh," Sinclair said. "I wasn't aware she was married."

"Twenty years next summer," Straker said, with more than a little pride.

"Congratulations," Sinclair said. "With God's help, we'll have her back so you can begin your next twenty years together."

"Do you really think we can?"

"I know we will do our best."

* * *

The trip by helicopter took less than an hour. When they landed beside the cathedral, the weather was already beginning to kick up.

"The weather report when we left called for clear and cold, with winds under 10 knots," the pilot complained.

"It'll get worse," Kate warned. "You'll want to move the helo away from here."

The pilot looked to Ed for confirmation.

Ed nodded his head. "We'll call you when it's done."

"Yes, sir," the pilot agreed. He took off as soon as his passengers had safely disembarked.

"We should all be sky clad," Lily stated. "It is not appropriate to seek the Goddess in earthly vanities."

"Lily, dear," Kate said sweetly. "You may conduct this ceremony sky-clad if you wish, but as for myself, it's blasted cold out here and I think the Lady understands I'd rather not catch my death of pneumonia."

Lily sniffed with displeasure.

"Now what?" Alec asked, chuckling at Lily's discomfiture.

"We need to find the heart of the nexus," Kate said. "Claire said you'd found that souvenir cup at the Tor. Do you remember where?"

"It's a little hard to see in the dark, but over here, I think," Ed said, walking over to an area a little ways downhill from the Cathedral. He tried to recall his footsteps that day, when he and Stanley had stolen an ambulance and Alec Freeman's dead body to come to Glastonbury to find the Holy Grail. He'd found a souvenir cup instead, and if not the miracle of the grail, the miracle of alien bacteria that infected both himself and now Alec Freeman. Alien bacteria with the ability to prolong life, even when modern medical science had declared life to

be gone.

"Here," he finally announced. The ground was a little rougher where he was standing, but it *felt* right. This was where he and Claire had seen the vision of Arthur, king of all Britons.

"Right," Kate said, moving ten feet east of where Ed stood. "Father Brisby, if you could begin your invocation, please, following me around the circle clockwise, starting in the east."

* * *

"This is the nexus," Straker said, moving a little way from the cathedral wall. The group had arrived at Glastonbury only moments before and Jackson had ordered the helo to move to the far side of the massive stone building.

"I can feel it," Sinclair agreed. On the helicopter trip, he and the others had put white wool robes with hoods over their street clothes, making them look like a group of monastics. Father Stan had conducted an abbreviated communion service for them while on the flight to the cathedral.

"Isn't it a little unusual for an ordained priest to be supporting things like this?" Freeman had asked.

Brisby had smiled and shrugged as he settled a turquoise blue stole around his neck and then placed an ornate sapphire ring on the ring finger of his right hand. Freeman had already noted the rings worn by the other men, including Jackson. Each ring was different, but each was the setting for a clear blue gemstone than seemed to shine from an inner light.

"When one serves the Light, it doesn't matter much which form you choose, just which is most comfortable for you," Brisby explained. "Otherwise, why would there be so many different religions, so many different denominations? With few exceptions, they all serve the Light."

"But, magic?" Freeman had insisted.

"Magic isn't alien to Christianity, by any means. Just look at the ceremonies surrounding the Host," Brisby had said with a broad smile. "Just don't tell my Baptist friends I said so."

"It's time," Sinclair announced. By some unspoken agreement with Jackson, the tall Scotsman had assumed leadership of the group. He pulled out his own ceremonial knife. It was similar to Kate Komack's athame but with a more ornate design and a blue gem set in the pommel.

Sinclair clasped the knife between his hands, pressing the blue stone to his lips as he bowed his head. Then, taking the blade in his right hand, his left hand pressed to his breast, he raised the gem to his forehead in salute. "Unto Thee, O God..." Down to his solar plexus "The Kingdom..." The right shoulder. "The Power..." The left shoulder. "The Glory..." To the center again "Forever and ever..." Head bowed. "Amen"

Sinclair extended his arm wide, still holding the knife in his right hand, eyes closed. "Before me, Raphael; behind me, Gabriel; at my right hand, Michael; at my left hand, Uriel." Opening his eyes, he brought the knife to the center in salute before extending the pommel upward and before him, toward the east, silently tracing a pentagram in the air - down and left, up and right, across, down and right, then up to the starting point.

Straker could just make out the after-image of a blue trail hanging in the air as Sinclair turned to the south, again tracing the pentagram in the air before moving on to repeat the process to the west and the north. "In the name of Adonai, may we be protected from all evil approaching from the East, West, South, and North."

Cold blue fire shimmered into a cone, meeting above their heads.

"Now we wait," Jackson murmured.

"Now we pray," Brisby corrected gently.

* * *

"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and all who dwell therein, for it is he who founded it upon the seas and made it firm upon the rivers of the deep. Who can ascend the hill of the Lord and who can stand in his holy place?" Stanley intoned. Frances was holding a lamp on his prayer book as he read. He sprinkled water using freshly cut sprigs of rosemary and hyssop. Inside the circle, Ed, Claire, Alec, Alex and Peter read the psalm together.

Standing beside him was Kate: "Hail, Guardians of the Watchtowers of the East, Powers of Air! We invoke you and call you, Raphael, Golden Eagle of the Dawn, star-seeker, whirlwind, rising sun. Come! By the air that is her breath send forth your light, be here now!"

They moved a quarter way around the circle, Stanley sprinkling water before them.

"Those who have clean hands and a pure heart, who have not pledged themselves to falsehood, nor sworn by what is a fraud. They shall receive a blessing from the Lord and a just reward from the God of their salvation."

"Hail, Guardians of the Watchtowers of the South, Powers of Fire! We invoke you and call you, Michael, red lion of the noon heat, flaming one, summer's warmth, spark of life. Come! By the power that is her spirit, send forth your flame, be here now!"

Then to the west.

"Such is the generation of those who seek him, of those who seek your face, O God of Jacob. Lift up your heads, O gates; lift them high, O everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in."

"Hail Guardians of the Watchtowers of the West, Powers of Water! We invoke you and call you, Gabriel, serpent of the watery abyss, rainmaker, gray-robed twilight, evening star! By the waters of her living womb, send forth your flow, be here now!"

To the north.

"Who is this King of glory?"

"The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle."

"Lift up your heads, O gates; lift them high, O everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in."

"Who is he, this King of glory?"

"The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory."

"Hail, Guardians of the Watchtowers of the North, Powers of Earth, cornerstone of all power. We invoke and call you, Uriel, Lady of the Outer Darkness, Black Bull of Midnight, North Star, center of the whirling sky, stone, mountain, fertile field, come! By the earth that is her body, send forth your strength, be here now!"

Kate completed the circle with Stanley, returning to the east point. She saluted the sky and earth with the athame as she finished her chant: "The circle is cast. We are between the worlds, beyond the bounds of time where night and day, birth and death, joy and sorrow meet as one."

Ed and Claire gasped as the circle was engulfed with cold blue light, coming together above the group in the cone. Outside, the storm hit. Green-black clouds flickered with unearthly green lightning.

"Now what do we do?" Alec asked.

"We wait," Kate answered. "When the rift shows itself, you'll all need to hold hands, draw strength from one another to hold it here long enough to Alex and I to enter."

"And if we can't hold it?" Alec wondered aloud.

"We will hold it," Ed promised, giving his friend a hard look.

The storm grew closer, louder, but the lightning failed to get through the blue cone of energy that surrounded them.

Suddenly, Claire screamed in terror. Ethereal hands were clutched at Ed's throat. He was fighting to breathe, fighting to loosen the fingers that were trying to choke the life out of him. Claire could see other hands fighting with Ed to free him, but they weren't enough. The attacker had a demon's strength.

Stanley shook his hyssop and rosemary sprigs at the invisible attacker, splattering it and Ed with the last of the holy water.

"Spirits of evil, unfriendly beings, unwanted guests, begone!" Lily shouted, eyes wide. "Leave us, leave this place, leave this circle. Go, or be cast into the outer darkness! Go, or be drowned in the watery abyss! Go, or be burned in the flames! Go, or be torn by the whirlwind! By the powers of life, death and rebirth..."

"We banish you!" Kate shouted with Lily, beckoning the others to follow suit, clapping her hands.

"We banish you!" Alex, Alec and Claire joined in.

"Begone foul spirit!" Stanley shouted. "I command thee by the power of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, leave this place!"

The hands let go with an unearthly wail and Ed fell into Claire's arms, taking deep, gasping breaths. The wailing cry of a lost soul seemed to go on forever. Two other ethereal figures remained in the protective circle, a man and a woman. The man seemed to be comforting the woman as they faded out of sight, but something said they were still close by.

"What was that?" Alec asked.

"**Who** was that," Claire corrected as Ed caught his breath and got back to his feet.

"His name was Edward," Lily said, shaking. "I saw him at the house before we left. He is an angry spirit who will not rest until he punishes, until he destroys, those who hurt him."

"But the only one left alive is me," Ed said. Alec gave him a questioning look. "That was my father, Alec. He died by his own hand in a mental hospital after he tried to kill me. Looks like he's still trying."

Ed looked away from Alec and Claire, glancing outside the blue wall of energy. "It's time! Hurry, we need to anchor this end!" Ed shouted, grabbing Alec's hand on the one side and Claire on the other.

Lily stared in amazement as the black maw of the rift crossed into the circle. The interior of the rift was blacker than black, it was no color at all, as if all light, even the concept of light, had been extinguished within it. Frances tugged at the sleeve of her loose robe. Lily nodded and pulled away, undoing the silk rope that held her robe together. She grabbed Alex's hand, trying a quick loop around his wrist then she repeated the process with Kate's wrist, tying mother and son together.

"May this knot tie you together as the Goddess's love ties us all together," Lily murmured. "So mote it be!" She took a quick step back to grab Frances' hand, to add her strength to the work at hand.

"Concentrate on holding the blackness to this point, to this space, to this here and now," Lily instructed. "See our energy, see our will joined, making an anchor at this spot. Holding, as a needle is held to a magnet, as our feet are held to the earth, holding, as water is held in a bowl, holding, as breath is held in our lungs."

As she spoke, a blue bolt swept out from Lily's free hand to impale the bottom edge of the blackness, pinning it to the earth at the center of the circle, at the spot where Ed had dug up the battered cup.

As the bolt struck, Kate and Alex, holding hands, stepped into the blackness and vanished.

They fell up, flying without wings, without a compass, without guidance. The vortexes within the rift tore at them, threatening to tear them apart, threatening to lose them in the vastness of time and space. Kate cast about in her mind for a signal, anything to guide them to the proper point in space and time in this place without light, where the only sound was the keening of elements, of worlds, being ripped apart.

* * *

Straker held Kate's athame in his hands, Alex's necklace still wrapped around it. He closed his eyes, trying to concentrate on the feel of her mind in his. The ground he was sitting on was cold, distracting, despite the blankets Jackson had laid down for him. He shut the cold out of his mind.

"Feel them in your mind, feel them with your soul," Jackson's softly accented voice repeated. "Find them. Guide them home."

"I see them," Straker whispered. He *could* see them - bright spots in a universe of darkness beyond darkness, chaos beyond meaning. But there was something else in the darkness, an evil, a smog-like foulness that he knew without knowing how, had followed them from that other place.

"There's something else," Straker murmured. "Something dark, evil. It wants to stop them, to hurt them, hurt me. No, not me, the other one."

"The other one?" Jackson asked.

"The Fisher King."

Straker sensed, rather than saw, Jackson's raised eyebrow as he looked over to Sinclair. In his mind's eye they were both limned with the same blue as the circle, the same blue as shone from the gems in their rings. He also observed Sinclair removing the ring from his own hand and gently placing it on Straker's finger. Power surged from the gem, warming his cold body as Straker went deeper into his searching trance. One small portion of his mind recognized that the skills he was using hadn't been developed in this lifetime.

* * *

There, finally, a point of light, a whisper, the familiar intonations of her husband's mind - 'here I am, come to me beloved, come to me'.

Something tugged at her, trying to pull them away from the light, from safety, from home. It tried to untie the silk that bound her to her son. She slashed at the intruder with the tiny sword. It seemed to grow in her hand, into a full-sized sword. Another hand joined hers, a familiar hand, her husband's hand, swinging the sword around with practiced skill. The ring on his finger blazed like a blue star in the darkness. The intruder shied away, skreeling in fury before attacking again. The sword slashed again, the blade shining in the darkness. Finally, with a final wail, the attacker disappeared into the darkness.

The light was closer, growing larger, bluer. She could see the brown of earth inside the blue and then, people, waiting.

General Ed Straker grabbed his wife and son as they appeared in the protective circle beside Glastonbury Cathedral and pulled them away from the rift.

He gave a quick prayer of thanks for the help of his unknown counterpart, then nodded

for the assembled company to release the anchor. The rift mouth vanished in a clap of thunder, knocking them all off their feet.

Commander Ed Straker gave a quick gasp. "Release it!" he commanded, dropping Claire's hand. Lily dropped Frances' hand and stabbed her athame into the earth. "Source to source, flow through me, above and below, turn to return, as I will, so mote it be."

The blue anchor vanished, as did the rift and the howling storm outside. Stars twinkled in the velvet night sky. Lily found herself breathing heavily, suddenly exhausted. Frances' picnic basket was beside her foot. She opened it and found a plate of cookies and bottle of apple juice along with sandwiches that had been prepared. Lily took the cap off the apple juice and poured a bit on the ground. "All life is yours, the fruits of the earth are yours, God and Goddess. We thank you for abundance, for blessings. Blessed be." She passed around the cookies and juice. "Eat, it will help ground the energies."

"Are we done?" Peter asked.

"Almost," Stanley said. "Eat your cookie."

After the cookie plate had been emptied, Lily pulled her athame from the ground. "Lady and Lord, we thank you for your presence, your protection, for your circle, for light and love, for night and change. We ask your blessing as you depart. Hail and farewell, blessed be." She walked around the circle, reversing the process Kate and Stanley had used while casting the circle. The blue light faded into night.

"Are they home?" Claire asked Ed.

"Yes," he answered, eyes focused on a point faraway. His eyes refocused on her and he nodded his head at their surroundings. They were alone with Lily in the darkened front hallway of Silkwood Manor. Claire could hear Frances pattering in the kitchen.

"But I thought...?" Claire murmured.

"Check your watch," Ed instructed.

Claire looked and saw that it was only ten o'clock. There was no evidence that anything out of the ordinary had happened.

"It was a dream?" Lily wondered aloud.

"I don't know," Ed admitted. "But I have a feeling that whatever was controlling the time storm had to put things right."

* * *

"I was so afraid I'd lost you both," General Straker said, holding both his wife and son tight against him. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," his wife answered. "We're home."

"Kate, I promise I won't make you do anything you don't want to," Straker said. "No doctors."

She smiled. "I don't think I'll need them."

He pulled back to inspect her face, using more than just his eyes to look at her. The pall that had been hanging over her was gone. "The virus is gone? How?"

She shook her head. "I'll tell you about it later. For now, let's not over analyze our miracles. I have a gift for you, from the Fisher King." She handed him the miniature sword Ed had given her. Straker took it and gasped at the power he felt surging through it. It occurred to him that something inside him had been mended as well, something he hadn't even been aware was broken. He inspected the miniature more closely.

"Made in England?"

"The Grail has 'souvenir of Glastonbury' stamped on the bottom. He has the Grail," she

said. "You have Arthur's sword." She looked around at the small group of men who had congregated around them. She raised one aristocratic eyebrow at her husband in question.

"Friends of Jackson's," Straker said with a smile. "Protectors of the Right and the Good, which I hope we can be counted as being among."

"And not just in this universe," Kate added with a smile.