

Julianna

By K.T. Welch

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Alec Freeman strode through the glass doors at Mayland Hospital with ground covering steps. He paused inside the doors and scanned the reception room until he caught sight of Paul Foster leaning against the wall next to the reception desk, arms crossed over his chest.

Alec summoned him with a glance, "How is he?"

"Alive," Foster returned with a nod. "He's in recovery now."

"Recovery," Alec said with a frown, "How bad is it?"

They turned and started down the carpeted hall. "From what I understand, there's a concussion, some broken ribs and some shrapnel in the chest. He's lucky, I guess it's hard to kill Ed Straker."

"Exactly what happened, Paul?"

"There was a bomb in the waste receptacle beside his car. It was set off by a remote. Apparently whoever set it off wanted to see that the job was done."

Alec turned to him in astonishment; "Our friends are taking a rather up front approach, aren't they?"

Paul shook his head; "There is a possibility that it has nothing to do with those particular friends. Security is looking for a fellow named, Rubin Samuelson. Yesterday Harlington-Straker Studios killed a major project Samuelson was working on. The word came down from Straker himself. Apparently Samuelson made threats in Straker's ear and then stupidly said some things to some others, as well. It could be that the whole thing was motivated by simple revenge."

"Simple revenge doesn't end up in the hospital, Paul. By the way, where was security all this time?"

"Samuelson managed to keep his security clearance. With all the renovations going on around the studio and a studio clearance, it wouldn't have been that difficult."

They stopped at the nurse's station out side the recovery room. Alec pulled out his Studio I.D. and told the nurse behind the desk. "I'm here for Ed Straker. Who do I talk to?"

"You talk to me," said a voice from behind them. Both men turned to see Dr. Frazer approach.

"How is he?" Alec asked.

"He's doing quite well. We had no trouble removing the shrapnel from his chest. The broken ribs are going to be mainly an inconvenience for him. However he does have a mild concussion, we do have to keep an eye on that. He'll be in ICU for the night, at least. We'll keep him there as long as necessary, even if we have to tie him down."

Alec grinned. "That should be interesting. Can I see him?"

"Of course," Frazer said. "Just don't stay long."

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Alec stood at the end of Ed Straker's hospital bed and watched the nurse make a final check on the I.V. and write some notations on his chart. She flashed Alec a friendly smile as

she brushed past him. He moved over to stand beside his friend. "Hello, Ed," he said.

The light blue eyes that tried to focus on him were set deep in black and yellow bruises. There was a scrape along the side of his face and he'd lost some skin off his nose. Alec shook his head as he looked down at Ed. "Is there a possibility that I could take leave sometime without having to visit you in the hospital when I get back?"

Ed closed his eyes and asked, "What happened?"

"Well, it seems that the head of Harlington-Straker Studios killed the wrong project."

Ed's eyes snapped open. "You're kidding."

Alec shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Does the name Samuelson ring any bells?"

Apparently he considers a bomb an effective form of revenge. Ed, you are really lucky to be alive."

"All I remember is walking to the car, I don't remember anything else."

"I don't think that is unusual. I'm posting a guard outside the door, at least until we have Samuelson in custody. You get some rest, Ed. We'll take care of everything else." Alec contemplated the other in amusement, "You probably will get out of here faster, if you do as you're told, as impossible as that will be."

Ed looked at him with an obvious attempt to focus. If possible he paled even more as he said, "You know, Alec "

"What?"

"I really think I'm going to be sick."

Alec moved back from the bed in alarm. "I'll get a nurse." It was the fastest exit Alec had made from any room in a long time.

* * *

"Two weeks, Alec," Ed Straker said in disgust as he paced his hospital room floor; his hands jammed in the bottom of his robe pockets.

Alec watched his friend in amusement and replied, "It's your own rule, Ed. Any injured personnel must be cleared by the doctor before returning to duty."

"But I'm fine," insisted Ed.

"So, how are the headaches?" Alec asked with wide-eyed innocence.

Ed's head snapped up and he shot him an icy look. "They're fine."

After this many years with Ed Straker, Alec Freeman was pretty well impervious to Ed's icy glares. "Uh huh, fine are they?"

Straker dropped his gaze and began pacing again, trapped within the limits of his own regulations. "They are getting better. Frazer said they'll fade in time."

"Well," Alec said cheerfully, "in the mean time, maybe two weeks will help. Besides, I have the perfect place for you to go."

Ed stopped his pacing and looked at him, amused in spite of himself, "The perfect place, you say, and where is that?"

"A friend of mine inherited an estate to the north. She can't keep it because of the inheritance tax. In the mean time, it's big, it's empty and it has three things that you'll like."

Ed looked at him suspiciously, "And those three things are?"

Alec extended a hand with a set of keys dangling from the fingers, "Solitude, a library to die for and fish that fight to get on your line, interested?"

Ed snorted in disbelief. "Do you know how long it's been since I've been fishing?"

"Too long to remember how to bait a hook?"

He shook his head with a smile, "Not that long." He took the keys and looked at them

lying in his hand. "So what's the catch?"

Alec said quietly, "No catch Ed, she's a friend. She said you could explore to your heart's content. You'll have to pick up some provisions, but the freezer's stocked with meat. Anything you don't use will probably be discarded when the estate goes up for auction. Oh, and you'll have to take your fishing pole."

"Fishing pole," Ed looked thoughtful, "I don't even know if I have a fishing pole."

"Then I suggest you get one." Alec smiled in satisfaction, knowing he had won the battle.

* * *

The house was originally called Worthington's Lodge. Over the years the name had been shortened to Worth's Lodge. It had been built in 1759, primarily as a hunting lodge for a peer of the realm. Two years later it was lost in a game of chance to a not so peerless member of the realm; who decided he liked the area enough to settle in with his wife and two children.

Around 1860, it once again changed hands. This time it ended in the possession of an Earl. It was part of a dowry, payment from a measly squire for a bit of royal blood in the family. It was around this time, that a lightning caused fire burned the front portion of the house.

The following year it was rebuilt in a much grander scale, as befitting an Earl's title and position, bankrolled entirely by the grateful father-in-law. At the turn of the century, it was finally sold to the ancestor of the current, though temporary owner.

Straker thought about the history of the house as he drove up the road. As much as he hated to admit it, there were times his American background got the best of him. The age and history of some of the buildings in the English countryside impressed him.

He also had to smile at the reaction of the proprietor in the small village he'd stopped at for some supplies. Though they were fading, his clear blue eyes were still set above the smudges of black and yellow bruises. The scrape along his cheek was still a bright red and the skin on his nose was peeling.

They definitely looked at him with suspicion, especially when he told them where he was going. It wasn't until he told them the name of his absent hostess, that they began to show any signs of friendliness.

He slowed the car as he approached what could only be the entrance for the estate. Having been told that it was the only private drive within five kilometers, it was hard to miss. He turned onto pavement that had seen better years and tried to stay to the center of the drive to avoid the overhanging branches of firs that had outgrown their boundaries.

He was seriously beginning to doubt the wisdom of Alec's choice, when he came around the corner of the drive and saw Worth's Lodge.

The house was sprawling stone, aged grey with time. To the back, Ed could see it rose three stories in a conglomeration of size and shape. It was obviously the result different expansion projects from different generations. But the front of the house looked like there was a possibility it hadn't been changed since it had been rebuilt after the fire.

Ed felt the welcome of the house in his imagination and for the first time he was actually glad he'd accepted Alec's idea.

Thunderclouds were building to ominous height in the east. As Ed walked up the steps to the massive front door, an oppressive heat sent a line of sweat down his neck. The door opened to a dusky, cool interior that was a welcome relief from heat that triggered a mild headache. He sat his bag down in the entrance hall and rummaged through his pockets for the medication Frazer had prescribed for the headaches. Experience had taught him that it was

better to catch them at the start, rather than trying to take care of them after the pain was in full force.

The rest of the afternoon was spent getting acquainted with the house, pulling the dust covers off the furniture and settling in. He pulled back dusty drapes to let the sun in an otherwise gloomy interior. The last of the day was spent in the library. Ed smiled as he read the leather bound spines of heavy volumes. Some of these were first editions, he was sure. Alec was right; this was a library to die for.

A clap of thunder and the flash of lightening woke Ed from where he'd fallen asleep in the thoroughly modern recliner, a book laying open in his lap. He wondered if history was about to repeat itself with another fire; but the sound of the downpour outside the dark window, reassured him that any lightening strike would most likely be taken care of by the rain. He sighed. The room had grown dark and oppressive and as he laid the book on the table next to the chair, decided to call an end to his first day at Worth's Lodge.

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The next morning saw Ed wandering through a garden next to the house. The garden was a riot of flowers, glistening with yesterday's rain. He compared this leisurely pace with the frantic activity at SHADO. At times it seemed they were fighting an almost overwhelming war with the alien forces. Fighting beings with brutal ways and minds no humane person could comprehend on one hand and expense reports and opinionated generals on the other. Maybe Alec was right, maybe he had pushed against a solid wall of confrontation for so long, it was hard for him to simply relax. Well, he'd have two weeks to find out.

He turned the corner of what had one time been a garden path and before him was an object that immediately caught his interest. Over the pathway before him was a stone archway. The stones were grey; moss covered, and overgrown with vines. It looked like he would have to cut his way through to continue up the path. He smiled grimly, another wall of confrontation.

To one side of the arch was a massive oak. From the top to well into the ground around it, lightening had peeled a jagged line. The bark and branches were thrown around its gnarled trunk. It was fresh, obviously the strike Ed had heard the night before.

On a whim, Ed returned to the kitchen and came back with a large meat cleaver and mentally made a note that he would probably have to replace it when he was finished. With consideration for taped ribs, he began to hack away at the vines that ensnared the archway, throwing them in a pile beside that walk. It took him the better part of an hour to clean away the vines.

The arch was almost five feet thick. It only cleared Ed's head by a matter of inches. On one side, there had been a plank bench; there were still signs of it along the edge. On the other side of the arch two names were carved in the stone, Sarah and Elisabeth and the date below said 1810.

He was tired when he finished and his ribs ached with a steady throb. So he sat against the trunk of a large maple along the path where he could look at his handiwork. He wasn't sure at what point he became aware that he wasn't alone. He looked toward the arch and straight into the eyes of a young lady sitting sidesaddle on a beautiful bay mare.

She was smiling at him with a curious look and Ed returned the look with equal curiosity. She looked about sixteen. Her hair fell in auburn ringlets held in some order by a velvet ribbon. The ribbon matched the russet costume she wore a long dress that swept the side of the horse. The eyes that looked at him were a clear grey, straightforward and questioning. For a moment

Ed thought he was dreaming.

She tilted her head slightly and said, "Hello. I don't believe I know you."

Ed returned the gaze with a smile, "My name is Ed and I don't think I know you either."

"My name is Julianna, of course."

"Of course," he agreed with a grin.

"My family has the estate that lies next to this one. I'm allowed to ride here, because this is the home of my best friend. But I don't remember seeing you here before."

"That's not surprising since I only arrived here yesterday."

Her eyes widened slightly with surprise. "I can tell by your accent Sir, that you are an American."

"Yes I am," he acknowledged, "but most of the time I live in England now."

"My brother told me that in America, the savages ravage the women and burn the villages, but my governess told me that was greatly exaggerated." She paused with an intent look, "Is it true?"

Straker blinked a couple of times and replied carefully, "I don't think there are any more savages in America than there are in England."

"Oh," she returned with disappointment. "I met an American once in Devonshire at my uncle's house. But I confess that he was dirty and smelled like a horse, I wasn't much impressed."

Ed leaned forward and as the sunlight struck his face, she exclaimed with concern, "But you've been injured. Were you wounded in the war?"

"The war?" he asked in surprise. "No, I don't think you could call it a war, more a victim of circumstances."

"I don't think it could be too comfortable to be a victim of any circumstances." She looked back over her shoulder and said, "Oh dear, I think my groomsman has caught up with me. He will be vexed!" She turned back to him. "Maybe I will see you again sometime Ed, in the garden, by the arch."

She swung her horse and headed in the opposite direction. As horse and rider disappeared around the corner of the path, he wondered how on earth she'd heard anyone else at all. Aside from the two of them, the only sounds in the garden were the wind and the birds. He shrugged his shoulders and decided not to worry about it. There were too many unexplainables in Ed Straker's life, without worrying about another.

* * *

The next morning dawned bright and clear and even at the early hour that Ed had decided to take his walk in the garden there was already a hint of the heat that would arrive later in the afternoon. As sore as his ribs were today, he was sure that the light exercise that Dr. Frazer had prescribed had nothing in common with the meat cleaver and the vines of yesterday.

His first thought was to take the opposite direction from what he'd taken yesterday. But his second thought took him of the same path he'd gone down the day before. Flower appreciation, wasn't exactly a phrase Ed Straker would use to describe himself; but he enjoyed this garden. Maybe it was the fact that despite the odds and with out human assistance, this garden managed to survive, reseed itself and grow. Straker admired tenacity. On the other hand, honesty compelled him to admit that the mysterious guest of the day before nibbled at the edges of his curiosity.

She had actually been the first thing on his mind this morning. Julianna seemed a sweet and innocent child. Something that Straker didn't see too often in his profession. Innocence

was a commodity he had forgotten himself.

As he rounded the corner of the path, there was a part of him that wasn't surprised to see the bay horse tethered to the same maple he had leaned up against the day before. It only took a moment to spot the auburn curls amidst the profusion of flowers. She must have heard his footsteps on the path, because as soon as he saw her she stood up.

She wore lavender this time, long sleeved and a long skirt that brushed midway up her leather boots. The ribbon in her hair once again matched the color of her dress and with the flowers in her hand she could have easily been posing for Monet.

"Hello, Ed I'm exceptionally glad to see you! I was hoping to have another chance to talk with you."

"Hello, Julianna. Did you lose your groomsman again?"

She laughed cheerfully, "I left him over watering himself and his horse." Her voice dropped to a loud whisper, "But personally I think he waters himself more than the horse."

She examined him with critical eyes, "You look better today, more rested."

He thought about the vines and the meat cleaver and smiled back, "I do feel better and rested."

"I do hope you will bear with me if I seem a bit forward. My mother says that I ask far too many questions. But I was so hoping you could tell me of some of your adventures in the wilds of America. Most of my friends, you understand, are only thinking about a London Season and making a good match. But I confess that my heart longs for adventure!"

Ed was beginning to wonder if he could see shades of Alec Freeman in this situation; maybe a little mystery on the side of relaxation? But he decided to answer her seriously.

"There are a lot of different kinds of adventure in the world, Julianna."

"That is what Sarah says. She is older than I am and thinks being settled and married are enough adventure for any gently bred female. You see, my father has already arranged a match for me. At this time next year I will have a title, and lands, all that I should ask for. I'm the envy of all my friends. But that is not adventure!"

Julianna turned from Ed and stepped onto the path, a bouquet of columbines and daisies in one hand, and sweeping the tops of the highest flowers with the other. She stopped before the stone archway. "I am glad you cleaned this out, Ed. I can't understand why they let it get into such a sad state. Do you think perhaps, we could sit inside? It is cooler in there, out of the sun."

She stood at the entrance of the arch and looked back at him. He walked over to stand beside her. "I don't think there is anything to sit on in there Julianna."

She laughed up at him and said, "Of course there is!"

Ed leaned over and shaded his eyes to see inside. Against one curving wall of the arch was a heavy plank bench, worn smooth by long and frequent use.

* * *

Ed Straker sat in the recliner in the library and tried to lose himself in the book he had on his lap. As hard as he tried, there was no way to escape the events of the morning. The bench that Julianna and he had sat on this morning had been built into the wall of that arch. If it was a hoax it was definitely an elaborate one. He failed to see how Alec or anyone else could have pulled this off.

Another storm moved in from the east and settled in over the house, rumbling and snarling above. Ed wasn't a man that allowed his imagination to run away with him, but right now it was as wild as the storm outside.

The way Julianna spoke, the way she dressed, the innocence that Ed saw in her eyes were definitely from another time and place. He'd seen the way the aliens could manipulate time, could this be another plan of theirs? Aliens reaching back through time, directing human lives? The implications of that were too horrendous to contemplate.

A portion of Ed's mind could imagine Jackson's face if he told him this story. Something would be said about the medication that Frazer had given him for the headaches. Mix in an over stressed mind and the solitude that Alec recommended so highly and yes, he could just imagine Jackson's reaction.

Whether it was real or a product of injury related circumstances, one thing seemed clear, it centered on that stone arch. Aside from the limited facts that Alec told him about the Lodge, he didn't know any of the history. There was nothing in the library about the house, or the surrounding area. He assumed any such history would be in the possession of the current owner. Interesting records would only add to the value of the property.

There was a possibility, as he had passed through the village to buy supplies he'd seen an old church. From the look of the cut stones that made up its exterior, it was a very old church. A lot of the churches that had been the center of these villages for centuries kept records. Tomorrow he would take a drive back to the village and see what he would come up with.

Straker was too honest not to want to find out if all this was in his mind or something he was not prepared to contemplate.

He closed the book he'd been staring at for the last hour and took the pills out of his pocket. If he was going to make a clear determination of the situation, he needed to know the pills weren't affecting his judgement. He put them back in his pocket and decided that any headaches in the future he'd have to tough out.

As the rain moved in with the storm, the old house began to cool with ominous pops and groans. Ed smiled as he was reminded just how strong an imagination could be. He decided he'd thought enough about the situation for one night. He laid the book down on the table beside the chair.

He'd spend tomorrow completely away from here and visit the old church in the village. Maybe he'd find some answers there, maybe he wouldn't. But at least he would be doing something to try to find the answer. There was nothing in Ed Straker's personality that could handle a passive approach to any of his problems: not at SHADO, or in a wild country garden with a girl named Julianna.

* * *

The church was exactly as Ed remembered it, heavy grey stones that had been allowed to keep some of their original texture. The dust and grime of generations had settled into the lines, giving it the appearance of a building carved out of a single huge stone. It was nestled back in a grove of birch and poplar trees. In the lawn in front, a man was pushing a mower and behind a rough split rail fence a woman was digging in a flowerbed.

Straker stopped his car in the graveled parking area to the side and walked over to where the woman was on her hands and knees in the soil. She sat back on her heels and with a wide smile, she pushed her nut-brown hair back from her forehead with a gloved hand. She left a smudge of dirt across her head, which didn't detract from the twinkle in her dark brown eyes.

"Hi," she said in greeting. She used the wooden railing to pull herself to her feet. The round tummy in front indicated that she was about seven or eight months pregnant.

"Hello," Ed smiled back. The mower stopped and the man joined them in the shade of a large birch. "Hello," Ed started again. "Sorry to bother you, I wonder if I could have a few

minutes."

The man that joined them was about the same age as the woman. His hair was a golden blond and his eyes a little darker than Straker's light blue ones. His smile was as wide as his wife's and he held out his hand for Ed to shake. "No bother at all. Anything that interrupts the lawn mower is welcome. You must be the guest at Worth's Lodge. I'm the vicar here, Jim Stroop. This is my wife, Dory."

Ed's startled glance caused the other to laugh. "It's not hard to recognize you. Light blond hair, blue eyes and looks like he's been in a gang fight." He looked at his wife. "It was a gang fight we were told, wasn't it? It had to be, because you're American."

Ed smiled in self-deprecation. "I see, nothing like small town speculation. My name is Ed Straker and as colorful as it sounds, I'm not in a gang. But you're right about me being the guest at the Lodge. A friend arranged for me to stay there while I recovered from a work related incident."

"It's good to meet you, Ed. I'm sorry about the sense of humor, my wife says it will get me in trouble sometime. I do hope I didn't offend you."

"No, I've always found a sense of humor to be an asset. As nice as it is to meet you, it really isn't my history I wanted to talk to you about."

The vicar regarded him seriously, "Of course, what may we do for you?"

"I was wondering if you have any records about the Lodge or any of the area around it? There doesn't seem to be any history of it at the library. Apparently my hostess has any reference to the Lodge with her."

The vicar and his wife glanced at each other once again. She smiled, "I think this is your department, I'll get us some iced tea."

The vicar smiled ruefully at Straker. "I'm the history buff in our family. She thinks I dwell entirely too much in the past and not enough in the present. As to your question, there is a lot of interesting history about the Lodge. What particular time are you interested in?"

Ed thought about the events that surrounded the arch in the garden. The names and date that had been carved into the capstone was 1810. "Around 1800 through maybe 1820."

The vicar's smile widened, "That makes it pretty simple. It's one of the more colorful time periods for the Lodge. It was owned at that time by a chap named Collins, a direct descendant of the second owner, a fellow that actually won the Lodge from the original owner. Collins didn't have any son, but he had two daughters. I think their names were Sarah and Elisabeth. Collins raised racehorses. He was well known around the country."

Ed nodded, that fit the names in the arch. "How about the surrounding area?"

"Well originally, Worth's took up most of the surrounding area. But, the land to the east was owned by a family named Huntington, a wealthy man the did quite well in agriculture."

"Did they have children?"

Stroop looked at him curiously, "They had four I believe. The oldest boy was killed at Waterloo. Let's see his name was Justin. The land was inherited by the younger son, Jonathan, when his father was killed in a spill from his horse about ten years later." He hesitated for a moment. "I think the oldest daughter was called Mary and the other daughter was Julianna."

Straker felt a jolt of adrenaline shoot down through the soles of his feet. "Julianna," he said quietly.

"Yes, it's funny that you should single her out. She actually died at the Lodge you see, a very tragic situation. She died the same night they received news of the older son's death at Waterloo."

"How did she die?" Ed felt as if he was receiving news of the death of a friend.

"Some of it has been speculated about for years. According to local legend, she was going to see her friend, Sarah, probably to tell her about her brother's death. Brother and sister were very close; she probably took the news very hard. The weather at that time was much like we've been having here lately. It seems lightening struck a tree near her and a portion of the tree hit her and her horse. Their bodies weren't found until the next day sometime. It was all very sad."

"Yes " Ed looked thoughtfully out across the green lawn. "It was in the garden, you say?"

"Actually I didn't say. But yes, it was in the garden." Ed didn't see the startled look Stoop gave him before he continued. "As a matter of fact, there is a stone arch in the garden, you've probably seen it. The tree that the lightening struck was just beside the arch."

"Yes, I've seen it. The names and date on the arch are what stirred my curiosity."

"You're curiosity, huh." Stroop's eyes were alight with mischief. "Some say that the Lodge is haunted. That might be something that would stir someone's curiosity, as well."

Straker's expression revealed nothing as he looked back at the other. "Really, I can truthfully say that I've never seen any indication that the Lodge is haunted."

The vicar nodded knowingly; "Well that is good news. I'm sure an English ghost would be a definite liability to the current owner."

Ed grinned, "I'm sure it would." It was lucky for Straker that the vicar's wife chose that moment to bring the iced tea. She definitely rescued him from what could have easily become a spirited conversation.

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Ed Straker had fully intended to spend the rest of the day away from the Lodge. He spent another half-hour talking to the vicar and his wife. They were a very nice couple with a tendency to engage in good-natured bickering.

After that he spent another forty-five minutes picking up supplies and trying not to add to his already colorful reputation in the village. When he finished there, he decided to spend some time at the lake Alec had recommended. The fish weren't actually as anxious as Alec had said; but it was a pleasant enough hour or two, sitting in the shade on the lake bank.

He tried in vain to keep his mind off the Lodge and it's unusual guest in the garden. By early afternoon, the clouds began to roll in. He could hear the sounds of thunder in the distance, a far away messenger calling him back to the Lodge. A portion of his mind felt it would be easier to face a squadron of alien vessels than to meet that young lady in the garden. Another portion of his mind embraced that distant herald.

His car phone buzzed him as he was turning down the drive. Alec, checking up on him. Straker kept the conversation short. If anyone could tell that something was bothering him, it would be Alec. He hoped he struck the right balance of confidence and reassurance. He didn't want Alec, or anyone, coming until he had some answers that he could live with.

He unloaded the car and stored away the supplies. Even though he could hear the sounds of the storm getting closer, he headed for the garden.

She was waiting for him beside the arch, holding the reins of the bay horse. As soon as Ed saw her, he knew she was upset. She'd threaded the reins of the bay through her shaking fingers and her cheeks were shiny with tears.

"I thought you had left," she cried. "I thought you weren't coming."

Ed looked at her with concern, "What's happened, Julianna, what's wrong?"

"My father bought my brother a commission in Wellington's army. He leaves tomorrow."

Ed felt a pang in his chest as he wondered if history was repeating itself. If this was what Julianna had told her friend Sarah so long ago. "I'm sorry, Julianna. I know that's very hard."

Fresh tears dampened her cheeks as she said, "I went to pray with him in the Chapel tonight. I heard him pray Ed. I know that he is afraid. He doesn't want Papa to know that he is afraid, but he is. So many have died in this war you see. But it isn't death that he is afraid of. He told me that if he does die he doesn't want to die alone." She looked at him with tragic eyes. "I can't think of anything more terrible than to die alone, can you?"

Ed thought about the men he'd sent out, knowing that they might do that very thing and he said quietly, "No I can't think of anything worse, Julianna, than to die alone."

"We prayed tonight in the Chapel that neither one of us would ever have to die alone. I wanted him to know that I understood. I wanted him to know I wouldn't want to die alone either. Can you understand that Ed, can you understand?" Her eyes were pleading now for understanding.

"Yes, I do understand."

Relief calmed her features and she smiled slightly. "I knew from the first moment I saw you in the garden that you would understand." She reached out her hand and Ed took her icy fingers in his. "I must go now," she glanced over her shoulder, "they don't know I'm here." She went around to the side of the horse and Ed helped her into the sidesaddle.

As the first round drops of rain began to fall from the storm above, she turned the horse's head and headed down the pathway, around the corner and out of sight. The rain began to fall heavily now, plastering Straker's fair hair to his forehead and dampening his clothes. He came to a quick decision and quickly followed in the direction that the horse and rider had taken. He rounded the bend in the path. There was no sign of Julianna on the straight path ahead; and as he looked down at the trail, he could see no sign of hoof prints in the sandy soil.

* * *

The next day was overcast, heavy and oppressive. Ed went to the garden at least a dozen times through the day, but there was no sign of Julianna. But as the day wore on Ed could feel tension building, coming to a climax as heavy as the atmosphere above him.

Ed Straker was not a naturally patient man, but his years with SHADO had taught him the meaning and value of patience. But right now patience wasn't exactly the value that was coming to the forefront. He paced the floor like an expectant father, feeling that Julianna was not far from him.

He knew exactly when she was in the garden. The storm was almost directly overhead, a crashing opera of light and sound. He threw the front door open and gasped in surprise as he almost collided with Alec, framed in the doorway.

Alec was equally startled and gasped, "What's wrong Ed, where are you going!"

Ed gave him a chilling look and brushed past him without a word.

As Straker rounded the corner, he could see Julianna struggling to stay on the bay. Her fingers grasped at the horse's mane while the animal snorted and plunged in fear. He paused for a moment taking in the scene and trying to decide exactly what he was to do. A tremendous crash and a blinding flash of light threw him to the ground. He felt Alec's hands helping him to his feet. Above Julianna the tree split with the sound of rending wood and bark. A portion of the tree struck both horse and rider and with a wild scream brought them to the ground.

Both men dashed over and began to pull away the debris that surrounded the tree, the smoldering branches that covered Julianna's body. As they reached her, Ed reached out to

move her.

"Don't move her!" Alec warned him and tried to hold back his hands.

Straker shot him a sharp glance and returned, "It doesn't matter Alec."

Her skin was alabaster white against the rain soaked earth beneath her. The grey eyes that slowly opened were dark with emotion and pain. With fingers as cold as the rain she reached up and brushed the red line of the scrape on Ed's cheek; and slowly closed her eyes.

Straker carefully lowered her to the ground. Behind him Alec exclaimed as Julianna's form began to waver, become insubstantial, and finally give way completely to the angular lines of the branches around her. A moment later Ed heard a sweet voice whisper in his ear, "Thank you, Ed. You are forever my friend."

* * *

Ed Straker spooned instant coffee into two mugs of hot water and handed a cup to Alec sitting on the other side of the counter. Alec pulled the collar of Ed's borrowed robe up around his neck, still chilled in spite of the heated kitchen.

Straker looked at his companion and asked, "Why did you come, Alec?"

"I know you too well, Ed. When I called you I fully expected impatience at being stuck here and possibly, though not likely, good humor. But you were so noncommittal you were almost backpedaling. I knew something was going on."

Ed sat his cup down on the counter and added another dab of cream. He said ruefully, "Well, I did have a bit of a situation."

"That's an understatement," Alec replied. "I'd say you were hallucinating, but I'd have to throw myself in on that too."

Straker shook his head; "It wasn't an hallucination. I thought at first that the aliens had thought of another way to manipulate time, you can imagine my feelings about that! I suppose I'm not exactly ghost oriented, because it took me a while to figure out what was going on. When I finally realized it, you can understand my hesitation to share the situation with anyone else. I can see the tabloids, 'Head of Harlington-Straker Studio Encounters Ghost'"

Alec nodded in sympathetic agreement. "I think we'll just keep this under our hats. In the end do you know what the whole thing was about? What did she want from you?"

"I wondered about that myself," Ed said seriously, "until yesterday."

"What happened yesterday?"

Ed walked over to the window and looked out at the moon, shining brightly over the garden. "Yesterday was when she told me that her greatest fear was dying alone."