

Midsummer's Eve

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Copyright Aug. 16, 1998

**Country of first publication,
United States of America.**

A U.F.O. - Father Blackie Ryan story

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The report in Ed Straker's hands was disturbing - a sudden spate of missing persons and mutilation deaths in the Dublin area even though there hadn't been a U.F.O. through Earth's defenses in over a month. The last one had been destroyed while leaving Ireland. A coincidence, according to SHADO's analysts, but Supreme Headquarters Alien Defense Organization was on alert just in case.

He looked up from his reading, carefully placing the report back in its opaque folder. He silently debated on telling Kate Komack about the report. They were supposed to be on holiday, yet Alec Freeman had sent the papers anyway. It was probably a small token to keep Straker away from any SHADO bases while he was in Ireland. He was ostensibly on vacation while Komack oversaw the filming of a Harlington-Straker production about Michael Collins, Ireland's tragic revolutionary leader.

The filming was going well, despite a short-lived suspicion that one of their cameramen had been involved in the disappearance of the Sword of St. Michael from the crypt below Christ Church. According to the paper, the police had no further leads concerning the brutal murder of a young man working in the church that night, or of the sword that legend claimed was given to St. Patrick by the Archangel Michael himself. Like many legends, this one had little, if any, bearing on reality. The sword's design was from the 15th century, much too new to have any relationship to a 5th century saint. Besides, Patrick was supposed to have used holy water to have cleared the serpents from Ireland. The paper didn't name the dead man.

A pert little waitress poured him another cup of coffee and he took a moment to look over the near empty lounge. Five and a half-year-old Esther was deep in conversation with a little man sitting by the empty fireplace, wearing a Chicago Cubs windbreaker. The man was bobbing his head in apparent agreement with whatever she was saying. Odd, but Straker didn't recall seeing the man come into the lounge.

He tucked the report under his arm, picked up his coffee, and stepped over to them.

"Hullo, Daddy," Esther chimed, seeing him approach. "This is Father Blackie. He's from Chicago."

"Oh?"

The little man looked up, an impish smile on his face. He had short brown curly hair and his pale blue eyes glittered mischievously from behind a pair of thick glasses. "You must be the proud father of this charming and diminutive font of information," the little man said. "John Blackwood Ryan." He held out his hand to be shaken. "Call me Blackie."

"Ed Straker," Straker said, shaking the man's hand. The little man wore a collarless black shirt with beneath the Cubs windbreaker. "She hasn't been bothering you, has she, Father?"

"Hardly," Blackie grinned. "We've been having a quite serious theological discussion concerning Santa Claus's usurpation of the gift giving role of the wise men in the Nativity

story."

"Really?" Straker commented. Somehow, Ryan's statement didn't surprise him.

"Ed?" Kate Komack called from the wide doorway. "Were you coming to the play with us?"

Straker shook his head. "Alec sent some reports. I was going to call him about them."

A flicker of disappointment crossed her face and disappeared so quickly he might have imagined it.

"All right. I'll pick up some souvenirs while I'm in town so you can prove to the office you really did leave London," she said, holding out her hand to Esther. The diminutive blonde font of information ran to take her mother's hand and they left the hotel.

"The baby's due in September?" asked Blackie.

"Third week," Straker answered.

"I am always amazed by the glow that surrounds a happily pregnant woman," Blackie said. "She reflects God's passionate love of the world in bringing new life into it."

Komack, despite her protests that she was getting fat and ugly, was more beautiful each passing day. She did glow. People around the studio had commented on it more than once.

"I think you're right," Straker admitted with a smile.

"Arguably," Blackie commented. "Hoping for a boy or a girl?"

"It's a boy."

Blackie raised one eyebrow at Straker's definite statement of fact. "How long have you been married?"

Straker's lips grew thin as he shook his head.

"My apologies," said the priest. "Sometimes my curiosity gets the better of me, even when it's none of my business."

Straker grinned and shook his head again. This Chicago priest was a character.

"Care to join me?" Blackie asked, indicating the now empty chair opposite him. The impish grin was back.

"As I told my lady friend, I have some calls to make, including, I think, dinner reservations for tomorrow and flowers, to apologize for not going to a badly produced college production of Macbeth," Straker said, returning the priest's grin.

* * *

Paul Foster was on duty in the commander's office when Straker called.

"How're things going?" Straker asked.

"No problems," Foster replied. "I assume you got Alec's message?"

"All twelve pages," Straker replied. "Anything more on it?"

"Only that the IRA and the UPA have finally given up blaming each other and the SAS and are now both blaming druids for the mutilation deaths."

"Yes, I got that from today's paper," Straker said. "Anything the Times doesn't have?"

"Only that it looks like the bad guys, but we can't find them."

"What about the missing persons?"

"They all fit the profile, but again, if it's the other side, we won't find them until they move."

"And nothing's gotten through since the end of March?" Straker asked, knowing the answer.

"Well, just one last month and we got that on its way out," said Foster, confirming what Straker already knew.

"Well, they've changed tactics on us before, maybe this is a new one," Straker commented. "Oh, I want you to check something for me, Paul."

"What?"

"There's a fellow staying here, says his name is John Blackwood Ryan from Chicago."

"What did he do, make a pass at Kate?" Foster asked. Straker could hear the smile in Foster's voice.

"Worse, he seems to think Esther is a charming conversationalist."

On the other end of the line, Foster chuckled. "You can stop worrying. Natiroff handed me the report this morning. By the way, it's Monsignor Ryan and he's been the rector of Holy Names Cathedral for about two years. He's on holiday, looking up some family history. The information we have indicates he's very well liked by his parish even if he is considered a little odd, even by American Roman Catholic standards."

"How odd is 'a little odd'?"

"Not being American or Roman Catholic, I'm not sure," Foster admitted. "Natiroff's report indicates the man's harmless, so don't worry about it. Enjoy your holiday. Don't work too hard."

With that, Foster broke the connection. Straker shook his head in bemusement. It had been Freeman's idea to force Straker to accompany Komack to Ireland, to take a break from SHADO. Straker suspected - correction **knew** - the Australian had an ulterior motive, probably to give Straker the opportunity to break down Komack's resistance to the idea of marriage. So far, Straker had made a hash of that. If anything, she'd gotten more stubborn about it.

He called the restaurant and made dinner reservations for the following evening and then ordered flowers and a box of chocolate to be delivered to their room at the hotel. With that mission accomplished, he grabbed a light jacket, a small flashlight, his handgun and his portable phone, tucked them away in various pockets and went back downstairs.

Father Blackie had abandoned his table in the lounge and was chatting with the young woman at the reception desk.

"If anyone should call for me, I'm out for a walk," Straker said. The hotel had an old-fashioned switchboard. All incoming calls came through the hotel desk clerk; not that anyone would call except one of the film crew staying over at Jury's. Straker and Komack had opted not to stay there, choosing a smaller, quieter establishment on the outskirts of the city.

"Would you mind some company?" Blackie asked. Straker shrugged. He preferred to be alone with his thoughts, but he didn't want to be rude. Blackie zipped up his windbreaker and followed Straker out the door.

"You look like a man with troubles," the priest said after they were away from the building.

"Concerns," Straker admitted. He hadn't been aware his worry over the report was so obvious.

"Anything you care to talk about? I'm a very good listener."

"I'm sure you are," Straker said with a chuckle. "It's nothing, really. I don't have a nine-to-five type job and sometimes it's hard to leave the work at the office, even when I have people capable of handling it."

Blackie nodded in the dusk but said nothing. Straker recognized the tactic, letting the silence weigh in the air until he broke it, hopefully continuing the conversation and possibly giving away more than was proper. It was a game two could play.

The two men continued to walk in silence, following the gravel road around a small,

heavily wooded hill. Rounding some overgrown bushes, they came across a car across the road, nose facing up the hill. The headlights were still on, the engine still running, but the driver's side door was wide open, as was the driver's side passenger door.

"Somebody wanted out in a hurry," Straker commented, looking around.

"Arguably," Blackie agreed, following Straker around the car. Straker pulled out his flashlight and scanned the area. The tall grass had been trampled, as if there'd been a struggle. Trails of bent grass led up the hill, into the trees. Straker headed up the hill, the little priest at his heels.

Straker had a sense of foreboding, of evil surrounding this place, this hill. Michael Collins had been murdered not too far from here and Ireland had more than its share of ghosts, assuming he believed in ghosts. But, this evil was more immediate, and more menacing. He knew, without knowing how he knew, there had been aliens here. Without really noticing, he pulled out his handgun.

Proof of aliens came moments later, when Blackie tripped on something soft sticking out from under a bush. Straker pointed his flashlight at the object. A woman's leg. He crouched down and ran the light up the body, to the cavernous rips he knew would be there, where the aliens had ruthlessly removed her organs. Blackie gasped in horror and crossed himself.

"We need to notify the *garda*," the priest managed to say.

"No," Straker said. "This is out of their jurisdiction."

"Whose jurisdiction is it?"

To answer, Straker pulled out his portable phone and tapped in a number. "Paul," he said into the phone. "We have a problem. We need a team at my location NOW."

Straker could hear Foster conferring with someone, probably Ford.

"We can have an immediate response team there in fifteen minutes," Foster said after a moment.

"Good," said Straker. He broke the connection and put the phone back in his pocket.

"Military," Blackie said. "You know who did this."

"Yes," Straker answered. "And yes."

Straker paused, weighing how far he could trust someone he'd just met, priest or not. His instincts said yes, but SHADO security didn't accept instinct as valid input, even from the C-in-C.

He was interrupted by the sound of an animal-like whimper somewhere near. Something, or someone, in pain or abject terror. Pistol ready, Straker approached the source of the sound, his senses preternaturally alert. There was a faint rustle in the underbrush and the sound became clearer, more human. Straker reached out and pushed some of the lower branches aside. Something small ran past him, screaming shrilly.

Father Blackie caught the running object, which struggled against him. After a few moments, it calmed enough to reveal itself as a small child, maybe three years old, dressed in a jumper and blouse. She was filthy, but didn't look injured. Her screams diminished into tearful sobs.

"Mommy!" she repeated through her tears.

Blackie hefted the child into his arms to carry her and gave Straker a meaningful look. Straker shook his head. The dead woman was little more than a teenager, with a very dark complexion. It was unlikely she had been this blonde child's mother.

"We'll try to find your Mommy," Straker said.

"She told me to hide," the child said, hiccuping. "I heard Megan scream."

"Megan?"

The child nodded.

"What's your name, dear?" Blackie asked.

"Alicia."

"Do you have another name?" Straker asked.

"Rutland."

His ex-wife's name was Rutland and he knew she had a daughter named Alicia, just about this age. It was a coincidence, Straker told himself. There were lots of people named Rutland in Great Britain.

"Was your daddy in the car?" Straker asked.

Alicia shook her head and wiped her runny nose with her hand. "Daddy's working."

"Okay, I'll tell you what we're gonna' do," Straker said. "We're gonna go and take you someplace safe and then we'll see if we can find your daddy and your mommy, okay?"

"You talk funny," Alicia said.

"I'm American," Straker said. "And so's Father Blackie, here."

* * *

Neither man spoke much as they made their way down the hill, back towards the hotel. Blackie gave Straker another questioning look as a pair of dark helicopters landed on the hill, disgorging armed figures that disappeared into the wooded darkness.

A dark-skinned young man in military fatigues was waiting outside the hotel's main entrance. He beckoned Straker aside. Straker motioned for the priest to go ahead, into the building.

"We'll have the area cordoned off in less than ten minutes, Commander. If it is aliens, we'll find them," Donald Murphy assured his commanding officer.

"We found a little girl up there, hiding," Straker said. "We need to identify her, contact next of kin."

"You think her parents were taken, sir?"

"Her mother, at least," Straker said. "She mentioned the name 'Megan', but I don't think that's her mother."

Murphy checked the clipboard in his hand. "I don't see a missing person report on anyone named 'Megan', sir."

"They probably don't know she's missing, yet. The car was still running and her body was still warm," Straker told her. "It can't have happened more than half an hour ago, if that long."

"We'll do what we can, sir."

Straker nodded and headed into the building.

Blackie had ordered cookies and cocoa for the little girl and was now seated at a table in the dining room, watching in worried bemusement as she devoured the sweets on the plate.

"I see she's in good hands," Straker commented dryly, taking a seat at the table.

"The young are remarkably resilient," Blackie said. The waitress came over with a heavy green tumbler of something golden color. Blackie accepted it with a smile and a nod.

"Something to calm your nerves, Father?"

"Arguably," said Blackie with a smile as he lifted the glass, but the worry hadn't left his round face.

"You look like a man with troubles, Father. Care to talk about them?"

"Not troubles, questions," Blackie corrected. "Our quite observant desk clerk, Sara Anne, tells me you and your lady friend are in the film business."

"Among other things," admitted Straker.

Blackie nodded. "The other things being matters the *garda* has no jurisdiction. Tell me, are the 'lads' involved in these other things?" He used the usual euphemism for Ireland's various revolutionary terrorists.

"I would be very surprised if they were."

Blackie took another sip of his drink. "Her mother's name is Mary, by the way. Mary Rutland. They were driving out to meet her father."

Straker felt the blood drain from his face and he was glad he was already sitting.

Blackie looked over at him in sudden concern. "Are you all right?"

Straker managed a shaky nod. He shouldn't have been surprised. Horrible coincidences happen all the time. The aliens couldn't possibly have known who it was they were taking and if they did, was it under the mistaken belief he would negotiate with them, that they had some sort of hold on him through her?

"My ex-wife's name is Mary Rutland. She has a daughter from her second marriage, Alicia, about two and a half years old."

"I'm so sorry," said Blackie.

"No need, Father. My marriage to her ended a long time ago. She made a new life for herself, and so did I. The only thing we had together was a son and he died in a traffic accident three years ago, before this little one was even born."

Blackie shook his head. "Do you think the ones who took her did so to get at you?"

"I don't know," admitted Straker. "There are better targets, certainly. And I'm not all that well known outside of certain circles."

There were voices in the main hallway adjoining the dining room. One voice in particular Straker recognized - Steven Rutland, his ex-wife's husband. Straker felt his heart sink in his chest. He didn't want to have to deal with this.

"What do you mean, they haven't checked in?" Rutland was saying to Sara Anne.

"You can check the register yourself, sir," Sara Anne said, her soft brogue becoming thicker as she got more upset.

Straker left the table and stood in the dining room doorway as Rutland checked the guest register. Straker was well aware whose names were on that page. Ed Straker and Kathryn Komack, followed by John B. Ryan's scribbled signature on the next line. Rutland saw the names and looked up, catching sight of Straker standing there, waiting.

"What the hell's going on?" Rutland demanded. "Where's Mary?"

"I don't know," said Straker. "But, your daughter's in the dining room having cookies and cocoa."

"My...?" Rutland rushed past Straker, nearly knocking the blond man over in his haste. Straker straightened his jacket and followed him. Rutland knelt by Alicia's chair as if to reassure himself that she was, in fact, all right. "What happened? Where's Mommy?"

Alicia started to cry again. "Bad men. Mommy told me to run and hide. Megan screamed real loud. I hid until the bad men went away."

Rutland sat back on his heels and looked up at Straker. "Bad men? What the hell's going on here?"

"Megan was a young woman, dark complexion, short curly hair?" Straker asked.

"Yes. Her father works for me. She was flying up with Mary for a holiday. How do you know?"

"Father Blackie," Straker nodded in the priest's direction, "and I found a woman's body in

the brush on the hill. There were signs of a struggle. She hadn't been dead very long."

"What about Mary?"

"There was no sign of her when we got there. They must have taken her with them."

"You mean, she's been kidnaped? Why would anyone want to kidnap her? I don't have any money, any connections." He looked bewildered.

"I don't know, but the authorities are already investigating it. I'm sure they'll come up with something."

A throat cleared behind him and Straker turned to see Lieutenant Murphy standing, waiting for his attention. Straker stepped over to the younger man.

Murphy leaned close to speak into his ear. "We've identified the car, sir. It's a rental, signed out to a Mary Rutland, wife of Steven Rutland. He's a contractor, working on a project in Dublin. Mrs. Rutland flew in to Dublin International from London late this afternoon, accompanied by her daughter and a young woman named Megan Roth."

"I know. That's her husband over there. Any sign of Mrs. Rutland?"

"Negative sir. But our information from London indicates she was eight months pregnant. The bad guys tend to take them alive. Two for the price of one, I guess," Murphy said.

"I guess," said Straker. "Keep me posted."

"Certainly, sir," Murphy responded as he left.

Rutland had taken a chair at the table and was watching Straker with narrowed eyes. "When Kate told us you hadn't left the military, I didn't believe her. Neither of us did."

"And now you do?"

"I don't know. It certainly explains some things. How you could be so sure you could get that drug over here from New York. How it could be delayed and why you couldn't explain why. You had it put on a military flight, didn't you? The plane got delayed or diverted for some reason."

"To Ireland, as a matter of fact," Straker said. "The rest of it's classified."

"Of course it is," said Rutland. The dark bearded man folded his hands in front of his face. "Who would want to hurt her? Why? Why kill Megan? She was a good girl. She was planning to go to college in the fall. She wanted to be a doctor."

"I'm sorry," said Straker, not sure what he was expected to say. Rutland could never know the truth, but Straker had never been a very good liar. It was unlikely Rutland would believe anything he said in any case.

"Just my bad luck," Rutland continued as if Straker hadn't spoken. "Just when it looks like all that time at the therapist has done some good, when it looks like she's finally put you behind her, you're here. And for the first time ever, you don't have any place better to be."

Blackie beckoned the waitress over once more, whispered something to her. She nodded and returned moments later with a cup of coffee and another tumbler. She placed the tumbler in front of Rutland.

The construction man took a swallow. "It's very good. Bet it's expensive."

Blackie shrugged. "A little."

In response, Rutland finished the whiskey in one swallow. Straker nodded to the waitress, who poured another glass and brought it over. "Put it on my bill, okay?" he said. The woman nodded and went back to the bar.

"You don't stop, do you? Showing off. Expensive liquor, expensive clothes, expensive dollies," Rutland growled.

Straker tried to keep his expression impassive. It was unlikely that just one drink had

gotten the man drunk.

"You spoiled that kid rotten, you know that?" Rutland went on. "Nothin' I did was good enough. I would have done anything for that boy. But you were always sending your fancy presents to buy him off. I wanted to adopt him, but Mary wouldn't let me talk to the lawyers about getting the papers together."

"He was using your name," Straker reminded the other man. He tried to keep the pain out of his voice but from Blackie's sharp look in his direction, he knew he hadn't succeeded.

"I wanted us to be a family, fat lot of good that did any of us," Rutland continued. "He ran out into the road, chasing after that fancy car of yours, not looking where he was going. We'd told him and told him to be careful on that road, cars came around that blind corner too fast. He didn't listen. I wasn't his father."

Straker had nothing to say. It had never occurred to him that Rutland might not have been the selfish oaf Straker had always pictured him to be.

Alicia had fallen asleep in her chair, curled up like a kitten. She snored softly.

"I think it's behind time you got the little one into a bed," Father Blackie said.

Rutland looked at him as if seeing the little priest for the first time. "Yes, I suppose so." Rutland looked around at the otherwise empty lounge. "I would have expected the police to be in asking questions. Who'd gain from her death, do I have any enemies, that sort of thing."

"We don't know that she's dead," said Straker.

"What sort of monsters are they?" asked Rutland as if he hadn't heard Straker's statement. "The baby was due next month."

Blackie had picked the child up and she snuggled into his shoulder. "I'll see them to their room," he said. "I assume the authorities will be by in the morning, to ask their questions."

"I'm sure they will be," Straker assured him. 'As soon as I remind them they should be following police procedures,' he thought to himself in annoyance.

* * *

Straker was still awake, watching the evening news when Komack and Esther came in.

"Get ready for bed," she ordered her daughter, who ran to the adjoining bathroom to change and brush her teeth.

"Lieutenant Murphy was outside," Komack said as soon as the bathroom door had closed. "What's going on?"

Straker clicked off the television. "I went for a walk with Monsignor Ryan, Esther's new friend? We found a body and a scared little girl whose mother is missing."

"The other side?" Komack asked, using SHADO's outside-the-office euphemism for 'aliens'.

Straker nodded. "Sure looks like it. But, that's not the worst of it. The missing woman's name is Mary Rutland and her husband is staying just upstairs with their daughter."

Komack sat down hard on the bed. "Ed, I'm so sorry."

"For what?" he asked. "You didn't arrange for them to be here. It's just a horrible coincidence."

"Want to talk about it?" she offered.

"There's nothing to talk about," Straker came back. "It was over a long time ago." He looked over at her. "You look tired. Go to bed."

"You look worse."

He shook his head. "I'm not sleepy. How was the play?"

"About what I expected," Komack said.

"That bad, huh?" Straker chuckled. "I made dinner reservations for us for tomorrow, to help make up for tonight."

"Tomorrow's Midsummer's eve, remember? When Shakespeare's fairy folk come out to play? You promised to go with me to the solstice party at Lugh's Dance. I know you won't attend the dawn ceremony with me, but you did promise to go to the party."

"I blew it again, didn't I?"

He was interrupted as Esther came out and bounded over to the cot set up in the corner of the room. She tumbled into her bed and Straker pulled the blankets up. He tucked her in, giving her a peck on the cheek. "Remember your prayers," he reminded her.

She shut her eyes tight and began reciting a simple 'God Bless' under her breath, ending in a loud 'Amen'. "Oh, and God, don't forget Father Blackie," she added as an after thought.

* * *

'He's still in love with her,' Komack thought to herself as she removed her makeup. 'The divorce was seven years ago, she has a husband, but he still loves her. And I'm an idiot for loving him.' Hot tears ran down her cheeks. She had no doubt that he still cared for his ex-wife, whether he admitted it to himself or not. It showed in how badly Mary could still hurt him even in turning up missing.

She was certain he didn't care that way about her, even when she wasn't pregnant and fat. There had been times when, in the throes of passion, he had forgotten and had called her by 'her' name. She never told him of his mistakes, and pretended they hadn't hurt her deeply, but she knew she was nowhere near the top of his list of priorities, despite his claims of wanting to marry her. It also showed in his disregard of her religious holidays and the social engagements he no longer had to worry about because she was there to handle them.

And what would happen if Steve Rutland were gone and Mary were free again? SHADO was together and operational, the hard parts over and done. Ed Straker could have a more normal life if he wanted it. As she had once hoped he would have with her.

'I'm being stupid,' she remonstrated her reflection, wiping the tears away. Mary Rutland was a married woman, now a missing woman. She should be worried about her, grieving her fate at the hands of the aliens. Mary was once her best friend. They'd been roommates and she had introduced her roommate to her Uncle Jim's assistant. The rest, as they say, was history.

Ed and Mary had gotten married after a whirlwind courtship, surprising their friends and families with the suddenness of their decision. Their friends had predicted it wouldn't last, it wasn't a good match. Mary's mother had hated Ed from the first moment she'd laid eyes on him, had done everything in her power to break them up and finally, she had succeeded. But he still loved Mary.

"Kate?" Ed's voice called through the door. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine," she lied. She towed her face off and got into her nightdress. If nothing else, she had her own duty to SHADO and at the moment, that duty required she be the commander's mistress. But no orders could force her to marry a man who was in love with someone else.

* * *

The next morning came too soon. Lieutenant Murphy caught them coming down to breakfast. The young SHADO operative looked like he hadn't slept at all and didn't expect to sleep until Mrs. Rutland's fate had been determined, one way or another.

"Sorry, sir, just routine questions," Murphy was saying as Straker, Komack and Esther made their way to the dining room. Monsignor Ryan was already digging into a stack of

blueberry pancakes. Rutland and his daughter were seated at the same table. Alicia was nibbling at slice of black bread slathered with jam and butter.

"Hello, Father Blackie," Esther chirped, abandoning her parents to run over to the little priest. He introduced her to Alicia as Murphy continued to ask Straker the questions he should have asked last night to keep SHADO's cover in place. From the embarrassed look on Murphy's face, Straker was sure his ears were still burning after last night's security lecture.

"We haven't found anything definite yet, sir," Murphy said after he had finished writing his notes. "It looks like the other side, but there are some strange things about it, too."

"Strange things?" Straker repeated.

"Yes, sir. We know that a harvesting team is usually two, at most three, individuals. We found evidence that there may have been more up there last night. Maybe a dozen people. We've found spent alien ammunition and spent terrestrial ammo as well. There was a lot of blood on the ground, but with the soil up there, it's hard to tell how much may have been spilled."

"The other side killed the girl, but then someone attacked them?" Komack asked.

Murphy shrugged. "We have no way of telling, sir."

Straker nodded, expression dark with worry. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

Murphy hurried out of the room, almost bowling over Sara Anne as she came into the dining room, holding a large white envelope. She hurried over to Steven Rutland and handed him the envelope.

Rutland's face went ashen as he read the contents of the letter inside. After the bearded man had finished reading it he looked up, not seeing anything. Blackie reached over and gently took the letter from the stunned man's hand. The priest quickly scanned the paper and beckoned Straker closer.

"The 'authorities' are going to want to see this," the priest said, carefully placing the note on the table.

Straker read the note without touching it. 'We have your wife,' it read. 'If you want to see her again, it will cost one million American dollars and a set of blueprints. We'll get in touch. Do not contact the police, do not contact SHADO.' The note had been printed on a computer printer, but there were hundreds, if not thousands, of those in Dublin alone.

"It's a little late to avoid contacting SHADO," Straker commented mostly to himself. It bothered him that the kidnapers knew about the organization. Earth people working with the aliens? Not unheard of, but the aliens preferred more control over their Earthly confederates. Extortion and kidnaping wasn't their style.

"One million American," Rutland moaned. "I can't raise that kind of cash. And blueprints, what blueprints?"

"And who, or what, is SHADO?" Blackie completed for the distraught man, looking at Straker.

"You don't really want to know," Straker assured him. "Let's just say we clean up certain types of messes." Straker turned to Rutland. "Raising the money won't be a big problem. We do have certain resources at our disposal, including a multi-million dollar film studio."

"What?" Rutland asked, as though he hadn't understood what Straker had said.

"Don't worry about the money," Straker explained.

"Even you don't have a million American lying around," Rutland sneered.

"Maybe not," Komack said. She had come up to stand beside Straker. "But we happen to know people who do. One question, though. What type of blueprints would be worth Mary's

life? A bank? A government building? Something military?"

Rutland shook his head. "I build houses and small office buildings. The last big government project I was on was over ten years ago, a big excavation for the office block across the street from that film studio of yours."

"You were involved in the excavation?" Straker asked. Security had never reported that Mary's new husband had been involved in SHADO's construction. Then Straker remembered he hadn't bothered to read the security report on his ex-wife's second husband.

"Yeah," Rutland said.

"What was your job in the project?" Straker asked. Rutland couldn't possibly have the blueprints, but what was in his head could be just as valuable to the wrong parties.

"It's classified," Rutland said. "I never even told Mary about it."

"You were one of the blasting supervisors," Komack said.

"How do you know that?" Rutland demanded.

"I've read your file," Komack said. "Eight years in the Royal Navy, munitions and explosive demolition, a degree in mining engineering."

"I wanted to get into that, but I ended up running my uncle's construction company instead," Rutland said.

"On the project beneath the studio, you'd know where all the faults were around that vault, wouldn't you?" Straker asked.

Rutland shrugged. "Assuming I had the notes I took at the time. Nobody was allowed to take their notes off site and when I was done with the job, my notes were left with the site manager. I recall finding a few weak spots in the rock, but I can't remember where, not after all this time. And it doesn't matter. That vault was proof against anything but a direct nuclear strike."

"Arguably, someone thinks differently and believes you might remember, if the incentive was strong enough," Blackie pointed out. Rutland looked at the priest in surprise, as though he'd forgotten the little man was there.

"They must realize you wouldn't have access to those blueprints, so why demand they be part of the ransom?" Komack asked. "It doesn't make sense."

"What about the instruction that SHADO not be notified," Straker reminded them. "They must know that SHADO's already on the scene."

"Unless..." Blackie let his voice trail off as a faraway look came into his face.

"Unless?" Straker prompted.

"Unless it's a red herring," said Blackie.

"They know SHADO's already involved, but want to make it look like SHADO's not the real target?" Komack elaborated.

"Arguably," Blackie said with a smile.

Straker's expression turned thoughtful, then hard, as he came to a decision. He strode to the dining room doorway and called for Lieutenant Murphy. Then Straker and Murphy disappeared outside. Ten minutes later, Straker returned.

"We should have copies of your notes and drawings here shortly," Straker announced.

"How can you?" Rutland demanded. "That was a top secret project." He stopped as he suddenly realized what he had been about to say. Top secret 'military' project. It all clicked into place. "Of course you know about the vault, the whole complex under there," Rutland continued more soberly. "You'd have to."

Murphy ran into the room, skidding to a halt when he saw Straker talking with Rutland.

The young man handed his commanding officer a thick file. Straker accepted it, noting that the paper was still warm from the printer. He scanned the papers clipped to the file before handing it to Rutland.

"We can't let them have the information they want," Straker said.

"Is what goes on inside that complex so important?" Rutland asked.

"Yes."

"And nobody knows about it?"

"SHADO's mission is extremely sensitive," Straker said. "By the way, your security oath is still on file and still stands." He turned to Blackie. "Monsignor Ryan, I trust you will treat all this as being extremely confidential?"

If Father Blackie was surprised at Straker knowing his title, he didn't show it. "Certainly, and call me Blackie," the little priest said. "I assume you'll want Mister Rutland to falsify his original findings, so that the 'other side' won't be able to use the information?"

"Precisely," said Straker.

* * *

Rutland spent several hours studying his old notes, the old drawings, making new notes. He pointed out to Straker the location of the various weak spots in the rock strata surrounding SHADO's underground complex. Weak was a relative term in this case, places where the stone was just a little more porous than in others, where drilling might be a little easier if it was a mine.

"Places more susceptible to a shock wave, from say, a bomb?" Straker asked.

"Possibly," Rutland said. "One big bomb, though. It'd level the studio and everything else for a mile around."

"And if the charge was below ground, say in an access shaft?" Straker asked, a nasty suspicion growing in his mind. He looked at Rutland's drawings and recalled the layout of the complex. Unless he was completely off, the shaft from the studio office/entrance elevator passed through one of the larger weak areas.

"The path of least resistance would be along the shaft, but there could be substantial damage to the surrounding area, depending on the size of the charge and where in the shaft the device went off."

Straker pointed out one area on Rutland's old drawing. "There's an elevator shaft from the surface right here. About twenty feet square."

Rutland whistled through his teeth. "If a big enough charge went off between, say, forty and sixty feet down, it could conceivably collapse the roof in that area. It would also do severe damage to the building above it. There's no way I can make that section look like it isn't a good target."

Straker pulled out his portable phone and punched in a number. "Alec? I want you lock down the main elevator up top. No one's to use it until we have this situation handled." He heard Freeman pass along the orders.

"Do you want it locked at the bottom or the top?" Freeman asked.

"Top," Straker instructed. "Limit access to the office, and seal off the bottom doors."

"Sure, but what's the problem?"

"Something's come to my attention and I'd rather be safe than sorry," Straker said, cutting the connection before Freeman had a chance to ask any questions.

A young woman in camouflage fatigues walked into the dining room, accompanied by a teenage boy who had his arm twisted behind his back. Melek Binte Asad let go of the boy's

arm and shoved him toward Straker and the table, then she handed Straker the white envelope she'd had tucked under her arm.

Straker looked over the envelope - it was identical to the one delivered earlier. He read the note inside: 'Put the money in locker 0175 at the main Dublin station along with the blueprints to SHADO Headquarters. Do not contact the authorities or you'll never see your wife alive.'

"He was handing that envelope to the clerk when I nabbed him, sir," Asad explained in clipped British accents. "He's got quite a mouth on him, too, sir."

Straker turned to the boy, who couldn't have been more than fourteen. "Your name?"

"It's none of your fockin' business, you fockin' Yank," the boy spat out.

"Should we send him off to London, sir?" Asad asked.

"No, That won't be necessary," Straker replied. "When's the transport due in?"

"It should be landing any time now," Asad answered.

"Good," Straker replied with a grim smile. "As soon as it's landed, have Doctor Jackson brought here and turn this 'person' over to him for interrogation. Let him know he has a free hand this time. I don't care if he leaves scars."

The boy paled. "You fockin' can't do that! You're not the fockin' *garda*, you can't fockin' hold me. I've done nothing fockin' wrong!"

"Wrong on all counts," Straker said. "Now, what's your name?"

The boy glowered at him, grumbling obscenities under his breath.

"Lock him up till Jackson gets here," Straker ordered. "I don't want to have to see the little shit again."

"You can't do that!" the boy shrieked as Asad motioned to her partner to help her deal with the boy.

"You're not playing with the 'lads' anymore, little boy," Ahiga Brown said, a grim smile on his copper face as he took the boy's arm. "The Marquis of Queensberry rules don't apply in the big leagues."

Straker jerked his head, indicating they should get the boy out of the room. Brown and Asad escorted the boy away, each SHADO operative holding firmly to an arm.

"You are one cold hearted bastard," Rutland commented. "What could that kid possibly know?"

"Kids a lot younger than that are trained soldiers in some places," Straker reminded the other man. "Ten year-olds can be trained to set a bomb or use a rifle and there are parents on this planet who willingly sacrifice their children to further their own agendas. Let's just hope his parents aren't among them since he's the only lead we have right now to who may be holding your wife."

A few moments later Brown returned. "We've tentatively I.D. him as Ronan O'Grady. Lives not far from here. We're picking up the parents for questioning now."

"Keep me posted," Straker instructed. "In the meantime, see to the instructions in the ransom demand. Mister Rutland is just about finished with his notes. You know what to do."

"Yes, sir," Brown said. He gave Straker a brief salute then turned and left the dining room.

"What instructions?" Blackie asked from the doorway. Behind him, Straker could see Asad taking both the little girls by hand and leading them away.

"The second ransom note came, with additional instructions," Straker explained. "We've also picked up a few leads. For terrorists, they're not very bright."

"Don't make the mistake of underestimating them, Edward," Blackie said.

"Call me Ed," Straker replied with a smile. "No, I'm not underestimating them, but the IRA or the UPA would have used better security to get the note to us. Something stinks about this whole set up. It doesn't make sense." He was feeling the beginning of a headache and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"A headache, Commander?" a softly accented voice asked.

"I'll live," Straker assured Jackson. "Your 'victim' is under guard."

"Very well," Jackson said turning to follow Brown to where the boy, Ronan, was being held. "I shall get to work." He stopped and looked back at Straker, the faintest trace of a smile hovering about his thin mouth. "You know, I don't normally make house calls. You could have just sent him to London."

"I'll keep that in mind the next time I find myself in this situation," Straker promised. Jackson snorted as he followed Brown to the stairway that led to the upper floors.

Esther and Alicia were playing with dolls on the landing, under Asad's watchful eye.

"I tried to put them both down for naps, but they weren't having any of it," Asad explained with a shrug.

"Keep them down here, will you?" Straker asked. "I don't want them near the boy."

"Certainly, sir," Asad acknowledged. Then, she sat down on the steps with her back to the wall and joined in the play.

Sara Anne was not at her place at the reception desk. Asad saw Straker's look and said: "We gave the girl the amnesia treatment and sent her home. Murphy's made arrangements with the management for the studio to rent the building for the next couple days. We'll be doing without maid service or room service while we're here, too."

"Health department shut down the kitchen, hmm?"

"Well, sir, they just might if they knew we had Concetta and Stasio in the kitchen."

They bantered a few moments more before Straker realized Rutland had come into the hallway and was waiting.

"I've finished the modifications, though I can't see what good it'll do," Rutland said. "Anyone with any knowledge of geology or mining would know it's not right."

"Possibly," Straker admitted. "I just hope they accept the drawings as adequate substitutes for the blue prints they want."

Any further conversation was interrupted by the sound of an explosion somewhere upstairs. Plaster dust poured down from the ceiling. Without waiting for reinforcements, Straker ran up the stairs, followed by Rutland and Father Blackie. The second floor hallway ended in open air. The end wall had disintegrated, as had the guestroom on the right hand side of the corridor. The carpeted floor was covered with debris.

"Doctor Jackson, Lieutenant Brown!" Straker called. A large chunk of debris shifted to reveal a slender form under the rubble. Jackson pushed more of the rubble away from himself and struggled to sit up. He began to cough.

"Where's Brown?" Straker asked, his voice thick with worry.

"I left him with the boy while I went to get my medical bag," Jackson said through his coughs. Drops of red appeared on the psychiatrist's lips.

"Try not to move," Straker ordered as started to pick his way through the rubble to what remained of the room the boy had been in with Brown.

He found Brown near the door. The copper skinned man's face was gray with pain and a red stain was spreading its way through the dirty white plaster dust. From the angle of the

timbers over the lower section of Brown's body, Straker knew the man's legs and pelvis had been crushed. It was unlikely he would live long enough to be extricated from the debris. Straker didn't bother to try to move the timbers.

"I blew it, sir," Brown whispered, unable to speak louder.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"The boy asked for water, so I started to get him some. Then the roof fell in," Brown said, his voice growing even weaker. "Sir, tell my Pa..." Brown voice faded. He tried to grab Straker's arm, but his hand fell way, leaving blood on Straker's beige jacket as the light faded from his brown eyes. Straker gently closed the dead eyes and sat back on his heels.

Blackie crossed himself and began a prayer for the dead.

Rutland waited for the priest to finish before saying: "I don't see any sign of the boy."

Straker got to his feet. "You won't. His body was the center of the explosion. It was the bomb."

"That's impossible."

"I wish it was," Straker said. Brown had been a good security man. Straker felt his headache coming back in full force. He turned and walked out of the room, barely noticing the three-person team that had gotten Jackson out of the rubble and was now carrying him out of the hallway on a stretcher.

Straker heard Rutland calling him but kept walking. His head was pounding and a sense of failure and impending doom clutched at his throat. He managed to keep from breaking into a run to escape the building and the encroaching walls.

* * *

Asad was waiting with Murphy when Straker came back half an hour later.

"The hospital reports that Doctor Jackson's injuries were minor. They'll be releasing him shortly," Asad reported.

"He was very lucky," Murphy added.

"We're were all very lucky," Straker said. "If we'd taken the boy to London, with all the high power conduits at HQ..." He let his voice trail off as he let the implications sink in. Asad and Murphy had both been involved in the 'psychobomb' incidents two years before. The Fairfield tracking base and Skydiver four had been completely destroyed by unarmed civilians the aliens had used as walking bombs. It was only luck that had saved SHADO headquarters from the same fate.

Murphy's portable phone buzzed and he listened to the voice on the other end of the connection. "Yes, I understand," he replied to the unseen voice before cutting the connection. "Stravros and Martini. Mr. and Mrs. O'Grady got away from them."

"What do you mean, got away from them?" Straker demanded.

"Well, sir, apparently, they went into another room to get something and when Stravros followed them, they weren't there. They'd vanished, with all the doors and windows locked from the inside. Stravros and Martini are checking with the neighbors, and we've asked HQ to run a computer check on them. Plus we're still watching the cash at the locker. Someone should be by to pick it up."

"Maybe," Straker said. "Or maybe we're already screwed. Keep on it."

"Yes, sir," Murphy and Asad both said.

Straker headed back to the dining room for a cup of coffee. Blackie was waiting.

"Bad news?" the little priest asked.

"Not good," Straker admitted. Something was tickling at the back of his mind, something

important he couldn't quite bring into focus. It was infuriating. "One piece of good news is Doctor Jackson wasn't seriously injured. He'll be fine."

"I leave for two hours and look what happens," Kate Komack said walking into the building. "Was anyone hurt?"

"Jackson had minor injuries," Straker said. "Brown was killed and the fourteen year-old who delivered this morning's ransom demand along with him."

"The other side?" Komack asked.

Straker nodded, but that irritating tickle made him frown.

"What else?" Komack insisted.

"Something doesn't add up, but I can't figure out what it is," Straker admitted.

"I was going to look in on the filming this afternoon," Komack said. "Make sure they're up to schedule and can be back in London before the end of the month."

"Sounds like fun," Straker said. "Take Esther with you, will you? And maybe the Rutland girl? In fact, it might be better if you checked into Jury's with the crew tonight."

"Sure," Komack said. "When shall I tell them you'll be arriving?"

"I'll be staying here until this is settled," Straker said. Komack nodded agreement, but there was sadness in her expression.

"If you wouldn't mind some extra company," Father Blackie said from the table, "I'm not much help here and I've never seen a movie being filmed."

* * *

"The second unit is filming sites around Dublin, places Collins would have been familiar with," Komack explained as she drove the short distance to the outskirts of Dublin. "The first unit is still up in Cork, filming his last days. We normally don't do biographical pieces or political things, but Greeley's script was just too good to let go."

Blackie's head bobbed as he listened.

She stopped the car near Trinity Church. A film crew, with trucks painted in the red, white and black Harlington-Straker livery, had taken over the street in front of the church. A crowd had gathered to watch the crew as they worked.

Komack left the two girls with Blackie as she made her way through the crowd, past the barricades and over to the young man in charge.

Blackie took a moment to inspect the spectators. It always amazed him how uniform the Irish seemed, especially to someone from as ethnically diverse a place as the Archdiocese of Chicago. Three people in the crowd stood out although they looked Irish enough, a middle-aged couple and a teenage boy. Although it was warm June day, the boy was wearing a long sleeved shirt and a watch cap covered his hair. The couple with him was watching the crowd instead of the film crew and there was something oddly familiar about them, as though he knew their family.

The three began to move off and Blackie noticed the man held a new black briefcase in one hand, a briefcase that looked uncannily familiar as well. Blackie had watched as Murphy packed the ransom case, noting a set of scratches in the glossy leather, as though the case had been badly packed for shipping. This case had identical scratches.

"Esther, be a dear and tell your mother I think I see the ransom case over there," Blackie instructed the five year old. He kept a tight grip on Alicia's hand as he began to follow the couple and the boy. The trio ducked around a corner and entered a storefront. Blackie put his hand out to open the door and found a young man's hand there before him. He wore a blue uniform with white trim. A shoulder patch read 'Harlington-Straker Security'.

"My apologies, Monsignor," the young man said. "But we'll take it from here." The young man's partner came up to stand with him. She had a pistol in her hands in a double-handed police grip. She jerked her head to indicate that Blackie should back away.

He and Alicia moved in front of the adjacent shop as the two SHADO operatives broke open the door and went inside the shop the trio with the ransom case had disappeared into.

"There's no one here," the young woman announced after a time. Her studio security uniform name tag said 'Robinson'. She holstered her weapon under her jacket. "They didn't go out the back and all the doors are bolted from the inside. I don't understand it."

"Just like the O'Grady house?" Blackie asked. The young woman nodded as Blackie stepped through the door to the empty shop. The floor and cabinets were free of dust, as though a cleaning crew had been through the day before. The white linoleum floor was marred by a single scuff near the door to what should have been a storage room or office. He inspected the door and its bolt more closely and suddenly knew how the O'Gradys got out.

A sound came from below, a scrabbling noise, like a large rat. Blackie threw back the bolt and opened the door. A shot cracked and the wood on the door frame above his head splintered. Lieutenant Robinson had her gun drawn again as she beckoned the priest away from the door and took his place. The door had opened into a stairwell, the steps disappearing into a pool of darkness. More scrabbling.

Robinson spoke softly into her hand-radio, then clipped it back on her belt. She beckoned to her partner to come closer, to cover her, as she started down the stairs. After a few moments, she called up the steps: "There's no one here now, but we need a clean-up crew, on the double."

"Bad guys?" her partner asked.

"Yeah, at least some of it is," Robinson said. "Looks like an arms cache. A home-grown one, and some other stuff, creepy stuff. There are also some bodies - bad guy bodies."

* * *

SHADO's clean-up crew was already at work in the basement when Straker arrived. The three dead aliens had been bagged and removed, leaving only the stench of death and a miasma of evil. The clean-up crew was hurrying to finish their task, as though the stink was getting to them.

Straker looked around the basement. The floors and walls were painted a dark brownish red. At least Straker hoped it was paint - the color was exactly that of dried blood. The ceiling and joists were black, whether from soot or paint, he couldn't tell. There were sconces mounted on the walls for torches, but the sconces were empty. Chains and manacles dangled from the wall at the far end of the room. A crucifix hung upside down near the manacles, set so it would be the last sight of whatever soul was tortured here?

Straker suppressed a shudder. The evil was oppressive. He started to take a step forward and heard a rustling sound, almost like a bird arranging its feathers. He turned and found Blackie standing beside him.

"Be careful," the little priest said, nodding his head toward the floor. A large circle with a pentagram inside was incised on the floor. "We don't know what powers they may have trapped here."

"You believe in witchcraft, Father?" Straker asked.

"This is Satanism," Blackie said. "True religions have no need to degrade the symbols of other faiths. This is diabolic, using and corrupting everything it touches, pagan and Christian alike, trying to bring them all into its darkness."

"Commander, come see this," one of the cleaners called. Straker stepped over to him, carefully going around the pentagram. The operative was holding a leather sheath. "This looks like the sword sheath that was pictured in the paper, the one that belongs to that stolen sword."

"St. Michael's sword?" Straker asked.

"Yes, sir," the operative agreed. "It certainly looks old enough."

"But where's the sword?" Straker wondered aloud.

"Sir," Robinson called, coming down the steps. "A Mister 'Smith' would like to speak with you."

"Smith?" Straker wondered aloud. He turned and headed up the stairs, followed by Blackie Ryan.

"That's what he said, sir. He's unarmed." She bobbed her head toward a husky young black haired man standing just outside the shop door, two security guards watching him closely.

"And aren't you a hard one to get to see, Mr. Straker?" Mr. 'Smith' said when Straker stepped closer. Straker recognized the man - Liam Mahoney, a known IRA 'active agent'. His name and face had been in a file that crossed Straker's desk only a week before, from one of the intelligence agencies that had SHADO on their list of sister firms. Straker couldn't recall at the moment which agency had chosen to share that particular file with SHADO.

"And what would you be wanting to see me about, Mr. Smith?" Straker asked. "Problems with us telling Michael Collins' story?"

"And would I be objecting to the world finding out about our poor fallen heroes?" 'Smith' said. "I'm meaning to talk about your other business in our fair land, if you catch my meaning?"

"And which business is that?"

"And wouldn't I be talking about the one people don't talk about, even in MI5 and SAS?" 'Smith' said.

"And what do you know about it?" Straker asked. The two security guards had stepped back to allow Straker and 'Smith' some privacy, but they were watching the visitor with suspicion.

"And what is there to know, except to wonder what you're doing in Ireland, how it affects my people and if there might be some way we might help each other?"

"I'm not aware that our investigation is related to your people, unless your people includes people named 'O'Grady' who have a talent for escaping from locked rooms."

Smith' gave a loud sigh. "You're sayin' the O'Grady's are involved in this?"

"Didn't I just say that?"

'Smith' nodded slowly. "They're a bad bunch, Mr. Straker. You don't want to be dealin' with the likes of them."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Would you be interested in doing some business?"

"I'm always interested in interesting opportunities, Mr. Smith," Straker said. "What did you have in mind?"

"Assurances that you've no interest in my people," 'Smith' said.

"In trade for what?"

"Information on the O'Grady's."

Straker noticed that Mahoney had slipped into a less convoluted speaking style. "And why would you help us deal with some of your own people?"

Smith abruptly turned his head and spat on the floor. "They're not my people. I don't think they ever were, whatever they might say about it. I'm a good Catholic and a loyal Irishman. I go to Mass every morning and much as I want the Brits out of my country, I'll not suck the devil's cock to do it."

Straker was surprised at the vehemence in Mahoney's statement. The two guards took a step closer and Straker waved them back.

"We don't know their real names," Mahoney continued more calmly. "They came highly recommended by 'friends'. Patrick is an expert in locks and security systems. If it locks, he can open it. The wife, Lenora, does explosives. She can bring down a ten story building and not touch the playground next door."

"And the boy, Ronan?"

"Computers."

"They sound like the perfect people for your line of work, Mr. Smith," Straker said with a smile. "What's the problem?"

"We were approached with promises that they had access to advanced weapons technology, laser rifles, plasma cannons, armor piercing bullets no bigger than a pellet with greater stopping power than a tank shell."

"And?" Straker prompted.

"They told us they were of the old faith, druids, willing to join up with us, combine resources to get the Brits out, win us our freedom."

"And your people didn't have a problem with that?"

Mahoney shrugged his broad shoulders. "We all had the same goal. At least we thought we did."

"What happened?"

"The arms pick-up was supposed to be last night, not far from where you're staying. O'Grady told my team to go unarmed. His 'friends' were nervous around guns."

"But your team went in armed, anyway?"

Mahoney nodded. "When they got there, they found O'Grady's friends cutting up a young woman. They were taking out her insides and she wasn't even dead yet."

"And your team reacted."

"Yes. They brought the three red-suited fellows down here. This is O'Grady's shop, by the way. My boys put them in the basement for O'Grady to find."

"And so, if the bodies were found, the police would investigate O'Grady instead of you?" Straker suggested.

"That thought had also crossed our minds," Mahoney agreed with a lop-sided grin. The grin faded. "When we saw what was down there, we added a few things up and decided we didn't like how it figured."

"And how did it figure?" Straker asked.

"This isn't the old faith. And from other things we found down here... Someone was setting us up. Trying to make it look like my people were involved in this abomination. And it wouldn't surprise me if O'Grady was working for the Prots as well, making them the same deals, planning the same thing for them."

"Any ideas where the O'Grady's may be holding Mrs. Rutland, assuming she's still alive?" Straker asked.

Mahoney frowned. "The solstice is tomorrow. I'm told that it's a high holiday for believers in the old faith. Patrick mentioned something about a big festival at one of the high holy places

sometime back. He was laughing about how the organizers thought they were being so authentic and that someone needed to show them how it was really done in the ancient times."

"That gives us a starting place, Mr. Smith, thank you. You can assure your people we have no interest in you or them unless we discover they've been dealing with O'Grady's red-suited friends."

"Thank you, Mr. Straker, I'll let them know to stay out of your way, so you can handle this," Mahoney said. "By the way, the name's not Smith."

"I didn't think it was, Mr. Smith," Straker said with a grin. "By the way, what would the O'Grady's want with the Sword of St. Michael?"

"They were involved in that?"

Straker nodded. "We believe so."

Mahoney swallowed hard. "If you need any help from me or my people in finding those shites, just call. The shites that took the sword killed a boy working in the church that night. He was my baby brother, Michael. He never hurt anyone in his life. He didn't even know my involvement with the cause. All he ever wanted was to become a priest. The O'Gradys knew that." Mahoney handed Straker a business card. "Just call."

"Thank you, Mr. Smith," Straker said, pocketing the card.

* * *

"Mahoney seems to think Mrs. Rutland is still alive, at least till tomorrow night," Straker told Komack, Blackie and Rutland over lunch in a pub not far from the church and O'Grady's now empty shop.

"What happens tomorrow?" Rutland asked.

"*Alban Hefin*," Komack answered. "Midsummer, the solstice."

Rutland shook his head in confusion.

"It's a pagan high holy day," Straker explained. "Apparently O'Grady claimed to be a druid of the old school and indicated he didn't think much of the local pagan festival organizers. Considering what we found, I have a suspicion he thinks the druids were into human sacrifice on their high holy days."

"Assuming they're really druids at all," Blackie reminded him. "What was down there was satanic, not druidic."

"But *Alban Hefin* isn't really a high holy day. *Lammas*, *Beltain*, *Samhain*, and *Imbolc* are the big ones," Komack said.

Rutland shook his head. "But if it's not a high holy day, what're these people up to?"

"Just because the real followers of the Old Religion don't classify it as a major holy day doesn't mean that O'Grady doesn't. Or that he isn't following some agenda of his own to discredit the lads and the pagans. Assuming that is his agenda, where would he do it and where would he and his wife and kid be hiding a pregnant woman while they wait for tomorrow?" Straker asked.

"The biggest festival is over at Stonehenge. Around here, one of the local covens has permission to use Lugh's Dance. It's a stone ring much like Stonehenge. Some say it's even older," Komack said. "We have an A.P.B. out on the three of them and their car. However, I think it's safe to assume they've found other means of transportation. Since they know the shop and their house have both been compromised, it's unlikely they'll come back to either place."

"They'll be lying low, staying out of sight," Straker said.

"A million in American dollars can buy a lot of silence," Blackie observed.

Straker nodded.

"Of course, if we told the *garda* and the press, someone might come forward," Blackie continued.

"You've no idea what you're asking," Straker said.

"Ed," Komack said. "He's right. We need to do something that'll make them move. The next logical step is the police and press."

"And what do we tell them?" Straker asked, bitterly. "First we thought she was kidnaped by aliens from outer space, but then we discovered it was really a crazy druid, or maybe Satanist, who's already killed one of my men, but we paid the ransom anyway so we could get a lead on them and they got clean way from us."

"Don't be ridiculous," Komack hissed at him, standing up from the table. "You're an intelligence officer. Use your brain," she said, heading for the door.

Straker was silent as he watched her leave.

"What do you intend to do?" Rutland asked after a long moment.

"What we should have done an hour ago, when we found out about the O'Gradys," Straker said. "Call the cops."

* * *

It wasn't exactly the cops, Straker mused, but as close as SHADO would be willing to go. General Bond of MI5 had made some phone calls on SHADO's behalf and now a senior intelligence officer of the *garda* was seated across from him at a table in the hotel dining room.

"We know of the O'Gradys," Seamus McGlynn said. "We've asked the local law enforcement people to keep an eye on any unusual movement near the Dance. But quite frankly, I doubt we'll find anything until it's too late. Those three are just too experienced to do anything foolish enough to get noticed, religious fanatics or not."

"Do you have psychological profiles on any of them?" Jackson asked. A white bandage across his forehead gave him a rakish look.

McGlynn shook his head. "I doubt it will do you much good. They're loners, sticking together, no other friends, no one allowed to get close. They prefer to live in the city, to keep access to their suppliers and their employers, greater anonymity. They'll prefer to use cash, no paper trail. Likely their son was schooled at home, to keep him away from other authority figures, other ideas. We have no record of him being enrolled in any school anywhere in the U.K."

"Anything on their religious beliefs?" Blackie asked.

If McGlynn was surprised to find an American priest acting as an advisor to SHADO's senior officer, he didn't show it. "Your conversation with Mahoney gave us more than we've had before," McGlynn said to Straker. "We knew that Patrick O'Grady was a bit on the fanatic side, but we had assumed they were Irish Catholic, not pagan. I'm really very surprised Mahoney went along with them at all, if that's true."

"The evidence we have indicates they're Satanist, not pagan," Jackson corrected before Blackie could speak. McGlynn just shrugged.

"Whichever," McGlynn said. "Frankly, this is beyond our capacity."

"You're not going to help?" Komack asked.

"I didn't say that," McGlynn said. "I've got people on it. I'm just not going to promise we'll be able to do much in such a short time. O'Grady's been very, very good at keeping himself out of sight."

McGlynn stood to leave. "I'll keep in touch. By the way, in the future, it might be best if you intelligence types left the policing to people trained for it."

The three SHADO officers and the Chicago monsignor watched as he left.

"It was a good attempt," Jackson said after a moment.

"But not good enough," Straker grouched. "We're not going to find Mary in time." Across the table, Komack shivered as if suddenly chilled.

"Are you okay?" Straker asked.

Her expression was far away. "It's very cold. I'm so very cold," she said in a low voice, shivering more violently.

Straker was puzzled. The room was actually quite warm.

"Where are you?" Jackson asked softly.

"It's dark," Komack answered. Suddenly she stopped shivering and straightened up in her chair, her eyes focussing on the here-and-now.

"Where were you?" Jackson asked, still keeping his voice soft.

"I don't know," Komack answered, openly puzzled. "It was dark, and bitterly cold and she was very frightened."

"She?" Blackie repeated.

Komack's eyes were wide with fear. "Mary."

* * *

"You want to what?" Straker shouted at Jackson.

"I want to see if Colonel Komack is capable of repeating her contact with Mrs. Rutland under controlled conditions," the psychiatrist repeated calmly.

"Why don't you just get a willow rod and dowse for her?" Straker asked, voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Because Colonel Komack's talents in that area are far greater than mine," Jackson said. "As impressive as yours, in fact, not to mention her training is far superior."

"Ed, he's right," Komack said. Straker glowered at her but she didn't back down. "This may be the only way to get the information we need to find her."

Straker glared at her a moment before turning to Jackson. "What are the risks?"

"Relatively small, I should think," Jackson said.

"Quite large, Doctor," Blackie corrected.

Jackson looked surprised.

"If the O'Grady's have been conducting Satanistic rituals, they may have unleashed dangerous energies. Energies waiting for a focus, for an opportunity," the priest explained. "I've seen such things. It's not pretty."

"Jackson, you said I had talents in that area," Straker said. "Maybe I could be the one to try to make contact."

"No," Jackson said flatly.

"And I forbid it," Komack said. "It may be a trap. We know the other side has greater knowledge of these energies than we do. We don't need SHADO's C-in-C to come under psychic attack."

"And I forbid you to put yourself at risk," Straker said.

"I'm the only one here with any training at all in this. The risk can be minimized if we keep our wits about us," Komack responded. "Besides, you know I don't take orders at all well."

Straker sighed. Accepting defeat gracefully was not one of his strengths. "What do we need to do?"

"First, we need to find something that belongs to Mrs. Rutland for Colonel Komack to

focus on," Jackson said. "Then, ordinance maps of Ireland."

* * *

"I managed to get the ordinance maps you asked for. Four travel shops and three service stations," Murphy said with a crooked grin as Straker and the others arrived back at the hotel and headed upstairs. "You did ask me not to call HQ for them."

"Explaining it all to Colonel Freeman is more than I wanted to handle today," Straker said, returning Murphy's grin as he opened the door to his room.

"We must not be disturbed for at least an half an hour," Jackson instructed as he looked around the hotel room. The blast at the other end of the building hadn't damaged this section.

Murphy nodded as he opened the door to leave. "I'll be right out here."

Straker threw the deadbolt on the door. Jackson began unfolding the maps and laying them out on the bed. One map, covering all of Ireland, he placed on the breakfast table

Komack turned toward the door and Straker was surprised to see a small silver handled dagger with a blue-black blade in her hand. She pointed the dagger at the door, motioning in the air, up and down, side to side. For a moment, Straker thought he saw, just at the edge of his vision, a faintly glowing blue pentagram floating over the door.

Komack repeated the signing over the two tall windows on the far side of the room, then placed the knife back in its black leather scabbard and put it in her pocket.

"What now?" Straker wanted to know.

"Now we go hunting," Komack said. She pulled an pearl earring from her pocket. "This is one of Mary's," she said, unwinding a length of silk thread from a small spool and tying one end to the earring clasp. She closed her eyes a moment and took a deep breath holding the free end of the thread between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand. She stood next to the table, dangling the earring over the map. Slowly, Komack began to move her hand above the map, criss-crossing it, as Jackson kept his eyes fixed on the earring.

When the earring's path across the map was complete, Jackson turned the map sideways and Komack repeated the procedure. This time, Straker caught the faint displacement as the earring passed over an section of the map area some distance to the north of Dublin.

As before, when the earring had passed over the entire map, Jackson turned the paper to repeat the procedure. Although the physical placement of the map had altered, the earring shifted ever so slightly as it passed over the map section between Dublin and Drogheda. Jackson nodded solemnly, went over to the bed and after a moment, selected a smaller scale map, replacing the one on the table.

Twice more, the entire process was repeated, finally ending with a survey map of the selected area. This time, Jackson jotted down in his notebook the precise area the earring indicated before folding up the map and clearing off the table. Komack took a deep breath, almost as though she'd been holding it. Straker abruptly realized he had been holding his breath. Komack sagged against the table and he hurried to help her to the bed to sit.

Jackson picked up the room phone and gave the map location to whoever was on the other end.

"Are you okay?" Straker asked Komack. She looked pale and exhausted.

She nodded. "It's just a little tiring." She looked over at Jackson. "There's a lot of interference around her. They may have detected our search."

"Hopefully not," Jackson said.

"What if they did?" Straker asked. "If they move they'll be seen."

"And if they chose to come against us?" Jackson.

"Nobody's likely to get through the guards we have here," Straker reminded him.

As if to answer, wind began to howl outside the building and rain began to pelt the windows, only it didn't quite sound like rain, or even hail. The windows rattled beneath the onslaught and Straker thought he saw the warding pentagrams over them begin to shimmer blue. Then the lights went out.

"Just a summer storm," Straker said. Komack shook her head, opened a drawer in the bedside table, pulled out a candle and lit it. The flame flickered fitfully, casting bizarre and monstrous shadows on the walls.

There was a knock on the door. Komack handed Jackson her knife and he made a sign at the door before opening it. Father Blackie hurried into the room. He didn't seem to notice Jackson signing the door after he'd closed it.

"Isn't a fit night for man nor beast," Blackie complained, taking off his glasses and ineffectually wiping them on his sleeve. "I've never seen a storm come up so fast. No weather warning at all."

Straker picked up the room phone and listened for a moment. "There's nothing," he said, placing the phone down. He picked up his portable phone. "That's odd. A power outage shouldn't effect the portable."

"We're out of communications?" Jackson asked.

Straker nodded.

"That is not good," Jackson commented. The psychiatrist went to one of the draped windows and peered out at the storm. "The wind keeps shifting direction, almost..." He let his voice drop away, unwilling to complete the sentence.

"Almost as if it were looking for something?" Komack asked.

"I wouldn't go that far," Jackson admitted. "But it is quite peculiar, you must admit." As he spoke, lightning flashed - an eery sickly green.

"I've never seen lightning that color," Blackie commented. "It looks like it came from some other world."

"I wouldn't doubt it, Father," Straker said. "Kate, could the O'Gradys be causing this?"

"If they are, then they're playing with unimaginable power," Komack admitted. "But we already know they were playing the IRA against the other side, so who knows?"

"I wonder if maybe they didn't start their ceremony a bit early?" Black said.

"The solstice is on the twenty-first. It's a new Moon as well," Komack said. "They could be counting the twenty-first as starting at sun-down tonight."

"We have to find them, Commander," Jackson said. "Whether they're using alien technology or magic to cause this, I don't know, but we have to find them and stop them."

"And exactly where do we find them?" Blackie asked.

Jackson pointed to the folded up pile of maps. "We have an idea where to start, at least."

* * *

Rutland spotted them as they headed through the lobby, heading for the parking area and one of the SHADO vans.

"You've found out something," he stated with certainty.

"Possibly," Straker admitted.

"Then I'm coming with you," Rutland announced.

Straker hesitated.

"She's my wife, remember?" Rutland stated.

"I'm not likely to forget," Straker said mildly. He turned to Murphy, who had followed

them downstairs. "Get Mr. Rutland a gun and a vest."

"Yes, sir," Murphy acknowledged, heading off to follow his instructions. He returned moments later with an automatic pistol and an unmarked kevlar vest. Murphy quickly showed Rutland the gun, going through a brief instruction before handing the construction man two ammunition clips then helping him put on the vest.

"You like to be prepared," Rutland commented with a touch of humor.

"It works for the Boy Scouts," Komack quipped. "And they don't have a monopoly on it." Like Straker and Jackson, she was dressed in black - slacks, boots and an oversize sweater that did little to hide her pregnancy. Her hair was pulled up under a black watch cap. A black leather shoulder holster with an automatic pistol completed her ensemble.

Blackie was also dressed in black, wearing a sweater borrowed from Murphy. It was too large and his hands kept getting lost in the sleeves. He was unarmed, but Rutland could see the upper edge of a white stole peeking through the neck of the sweater.

The candles illuminating the lobby flickered fitfully as the wind dashed itself against the brick and rattled the windows.

"I've never seen a storm like this, ever," Rutland commented. "It makes my skin crawl. It's not natural."

"Arguably," Blackie agreed.

Rutland didn't know how to respond to that.

* * *

Straker's bronze Omen was parked in front of the building.

"Are you sure you don't want a Mobile for backup, sir?" Murphy asked, following them to the door of the hotel.

"Do you think a Mobile can get through this weather in time?" Straker asked in return.

"Do you think an Omen will get there in time, sir?" Murphy asked.

Straker shrugged. "We can but try."

The rain let up for just long enough for the group of five to dash to the car. The rain began slashing sideways again.

"Buckle up and hold on tight," Straker warned as he started the Omen's engine. "It's gonna be a rough ride."

The trees that lined the drive to the main road thrashed back and forth, lashing at the car as it passed. Turning left, the Omen picked up speed along the road away from Dublin, toward Drogheda. A sports car had stalled out on the road, but Straker barely reduced speed as he whipped the heavy Euroford around and past.

The wind skirled with an eery whistling note, like the keening of inhuman voices. In the back seat, Komack noted that Blackie had his eyes tightly closed and he was white-knuckled clutching the arm rest. Jackson wasn't doing much better.

"You know, the weather report for this week was clear and warm," Blackie muttered.

"I don't think the weatherman took into account the possibility of black magicians effecting weather fronts," Komack said.

"Or aliens," Straker added.

"Do you think even a Ufo could make it through this muck?" Komack asked.

"Uh, the last time I saw anything like this kind of weather, the Ufo caught in it headed the other way as fast as it could," Straker said.

"Maybe they've got the *Sidhe* upset," Blackie offered.

"I thought the Church didn't believe in the *Sidhe*," Straker commented.

"The Church, in her wisdom, disbelieves a lot of things the rest of us know are true," Blackie responded.

Straker wasn't sure if the priest was joking or not. Straker's attention was once again taken by the road conditions. The rain had made the road as slick as oil. Visibility was down to two car lengths.

"The road to Lugh's Dance should be just ahead on the left," Komack said.

Just as predicted, the road branched. A shattered post stood beside the road, mute evidence of the strength of the storm. Several cars were off to the side of the road, their occupants staring out at the vicious weather.

"They're up ahead, maybe half a mile," Komack said. Straker didn't dare take his eyes from the road, but Komack's voice sounded strained and distracted.

"Kate, are you okay?" Straker asked.

"Hurry, Commander," Jackson replied for her.

As if to respond to Straker's concern, the wind grew even worse, shrilling so loudly that conversation became impossible without shouting, even within the confines of the well insulated car. Ahead of them, a ghostly green-white glow flickered in and out of phase, sensed rather than actually seen and markedly different from the green lightning that slashed through the sky. Streamers, almost like the aurora borealis, struck ghostly fingers toward the clouds, uniting the sky with the earth below.

"The *Sidhe*," Komack breathed. "O'Grady's tried to open the door to the Otherworld."

The road curved sharply around a hill. The car skidded as Straker hit the brakes, the car stopping only inches away from a tree across the road.

"We're on foot from here," Straker announced. "The map didn't show any buildings near here, so they can't be hiding there. The stone circle is about a hundred yards to the north."

"They're not at the circle itself. They'll want someplace higher, like that hill. If this is an ancient druidic site, there should be some underground chambers beneath it," Komack said.

"The entrance should be...," Blackie said. "About there." He pointed to a dark spot in the side of the hill, not far from where the Omen had come to rest.

Rutland started to open the door of the Omen.

"Not yet!" Komack hissed. Rutland looked back at her in confusion.

"You haven't any protection against them!" She reached into her pocket, pulled out an ornate emerald ring and handed it to him. "Put this on. It has some power. It may be enough. I hope it's enough." She turned to the priest. "Monsignor, a prayer may be in order."

"Arguably," Blackie agreed. "By the power of the Christ of God within me, whom I serve with all my heart, and all my soul and with all my strength, I encompass myself, and these my brothers, with the Divine Circle of his protection, through which no mortal error my pass. Amen."

The *amen* was repeated by the other men.

Komack's prayer was a different one: "I call forth the ancient and sacred spirits of the elements, air and fire, water and earth. Protect us this night from all evil forces and unfriendly entities. So mote it be."

There was a slight lull in the rain and wind. They took advantage of it to get out of the car without the Omen's gull-wing doors trying to fly the car away.

The darkness on the hillside revealed a cave opening. Blackie turned on his lamp and ducked inside before Straker could say anything.

With a shrug of resignation, Straker pulled out his pistol and followed the little priest into

the cave. He sensed, rather than saw, Rutland following on his heels. The cave stank of fear and decomposition.

"There," Blackie whispered, shining his lamp on the far wall. The cave had opened up to standing height and the lamp revealed the walls were lined with dressed stone, blackened with age and soot. The chamber was nearly circular and on the far wall hung a tapestry done in black and blood red, depicting runes of some nature. In the center of the floor was another inscribed circle and pentagram, like the one on the floor of O'Grady's shop basement. There were odd letters painted on the floor as well, letters painted in what looked like blood. The letters bore a certain resemblance to the design on the tapestry, even though someone had taken the time to try and scuff out the ones on the floor.

"Black wards," Komack said. "Badly done, too. Can't you feel it?"

Straker had to admit the circle sent a shiver up his spine that was unrelated to the foul weather outside. It was like horrible smell that he could just barely sense, making him gag.

Komack reached into her pocket and pulled out a small vial filled with white crystals. She popped open the top and sprinkled some of the crystals around the circle, walking clockwise and humming to herself as she did so. The air in the room became palpably lighter and easier to breathe and the foul smell became just a lingering memory.

"Salt, to ground the evil?" Blackie asked.

"Yes," Komack said, putting the top back on the vial and placing the vial back in her pocket.

The priest's lamp picked out a pile of fabric against the far wall, near the black wall hanging.

Rutland went over to the pile to inspect it. "These are the clothes Mary was wearing when she left London yesterday," he said. There was a catch in his voice, as though what was happening had finally registered.

Komack touched the pile, fingering the fabric. "She's very close."

As if to underline her statement, a faint scream echoed through the chamber.

"Mary!" Rutland shouted, swinging the lamp around to find the exit and a way to his wife. The scream seemed louder near the tapestry and Rutland shoved it aside to find another, smaller chamber with a ladder to an opening in the roof. Without bothering to see if Straker and the others were behind him, he clambered up the ladder and disappeared into the raging storm above.

Straker just shook his head and followed, automatic pistol in hand.

The hole in the roof opened onto the top of the hill. If any thing, the storm had actually gotten worse as Straker crawled out onto the grass. Ahead, a shimmering green wall surrounded a circle bounded by stones. Barely discernable within the shimmer was a stone altar with a heavily pregnant woman laying on it. Three black robed figures stood between Straker, Rutland and the woman on the altar. A another figure in black lay huddled on the far side, as if injured. The woman moaned and turned her head and Straker could see her face.

"Mary," Rutland murmured. He moved forward, toward the wall. He touched it and jumped back with a curse, holding his hand. "It's like fire! How do we get through that?"

One of the standing figures turned at the sound of Rutland's voice - a man holding an ornate 15th century sword. Straker guessed he was looking at Patrick O'Grady. The man gave them a vicious smile and turned back to his intended victim. The wind whipped around the wall as if furious it couldn't get in.

"The sword is a relic," Blackie said. "If he uses it to commit murder..."

"But how do we get in?" Rutland demanded again.

"By grounding it," Komack said. She had pulled out her dagger. "The blade is meteoric iron," she explained. She touched the end of the blade to the wall in a downward motion, slicing it open. The wall disappeared with an unholy wail. Rutland ran toward his wife

O'Grady reacted, slashing with the sword, as his two companions pulled out more traditional weapons - Glock pistols. Rutland caught the blade on his arm, but his momentum carried him forward, out of range of the blade and over to where his wife lay. Despite his wound, he shoved her off the altar, onto the ground where he covered her with his own body.

O'Grady slashed at Komack next, only to find Straker standing in front of her, his own pistol in hand. Straker pulled the trigger and O'Grady looked down to see blood coloring his robe before he collapsed with a curse on his lips. Two more shots rang out and the other two black robed figures dropped as if pole-axed. It was hard to tell with the noise of the wind, but the shots sounded as if they had come from the far side of the circle.

The wind grew more fierce and rain began to slash at them once more, viciously pleased to have access to the interior of the circle.

"The energy must be grounded!" Blackie shouted.

"How?" Straker shouted back.

Blackie pointed to the sword O'Grady had dropped.

Straker grabbed the hilt, mentally sending out a prayer. The sword seemed to have a mind of its own, willing itself aloft. He raised the sword above his head and the wind seemed to wait. The sky luminesced, as though the energies unleashed were preparing a final assault.

"I call forth the ancient and sacred spirits of the elements, air and fire, water and earth to defend us. I call forth the rulers of the North, the South, the East, the West to defend us. I call forth the archangels Michael, Uriel, Gabriel, Raphael to defend us. Ancient creatures of Earth and Sky and Sea, heed your children from the West and CEASE!" Kathryn Komack shouted, arms outstretched, dagger in her right hand.

As she shouted the final word of her litany, the sword plunged itself into the rain soaked earth at Straker's feet. With a shrill scream of rage, the green-white aurora coalesced as if drawn to the grounded sword. The air grew thick and Straker felt the energy building, blinding, burning him. He couldn't take his hand from the hilt. It was searing his body, but he couldn't even scream. The foul green aura danced around him.

Blackie reacted, throwing the contents of a water vial toward the aura. The water splashed against the metal of the sword and the ground. The ground hissed and the sword gleamed as if from an inner light.

Suddenly, Straker sensed another presence, the fluttering of pinions and a soft caress. The burning stopped. The green-white ball of malevolence vanished, sucked into the earth, like water down a drain. Straker was able to take his hand from the sword hilt and was surprised to see there was no damage, no burns, not even a blister.

The wind dropped to a breeze and the rain slackened into a gentle rain, but the dark clouds still looked vile and menacing. Green lightning cracked between the roiling clouds.

Jackson ran over to Rutland. "It's a minor flesh wound," Jackson said after a moment. "The woman's had a bad shock, but physically, she's unhurt."

At Jackson's beckoning, Blackie came over to Rutland and his wife to tend to them as the physician went over to the figure huddled at the edge of the circle. The psychiatrist gently took the pistol from a limp hand and handed it to Straker before pushing back the hood to reveal a face.

"Liam Mahoney," Straker murmured.

"Has it stopped?" the IRA operative asked weakly.

"Yes. We stopped them," Straker said. "And the storm has stopped."

Mahoney tried to sit up. Jackson supported him into a more upright position. "O'Grady called me to arrange a new pickup. It was a trap. I knew it and we came prepared. They were better prepared. Five of my people were taken by his 'friends'."

"Why did they leave you alive?"

Mahoney coughed and a froth of blood appeared on his lips. "O'Grady's gods needed something more. An example."

Straker gave Jackson a questioning look. The physician shook his head at Straker's unspoken question.

Komack had finished negating the dark energies of O'Grady's circle and came over to them. "We still don't have contact with base," she said, handing Straker her portable phone. "And if his people were taken, there's a Ufo about."

Straker nodded. "I know. Probably in those woods over there," he said, pointing out a copse of trees less than a hundred yards down the hill from them, opposite the stone circle. "The car phone has more power, maybe we can get through from there. We need to get off this hill. It's too exposed."

As if to echo his statement, a weird whirring sounded, accompanied by a blue-white glow that silhouetted the trees. Almost immediately, the U.F.O. rose above its hiding place, firing a plasma beam at the hill as it rose. Straker grabbed Komack and knocked her down, throwing himself on top of her as the beam seared the air above them. It struck the stone altar, shattering it into a million flying shards.

Beside the shattered altar, Mary screamed.

Above them, there was the roar of jet engines, as the squat, unlikely form of Sky-1 flew by overhead. The U.F.O. fired at its new target. The fighter was hit, but remained airborne, launching one of its missiles at the alien ship. The missile missed, but the lightning didn't, repeatedly striking out at the U.F.O. from the roiling clouds, thunder cracking and rolling across the landscape.

Sky-1 got off the second shot, striking the struggling U.F.O. amidships. The alien craft exploded, raining burning debris over the woods and meadow below it. The flames burned fitfully for a few moments, then died out in the now gentle rain. The lightning had stopped, and the clouds were merely rain clouds now.

"Thank you, Old ones." Straker heard Komack murmur.

Sky-1 disappeared into the clouds.

"Is it over?" Rutland asked. He was bleeding from cuts on his forehead and cheek. His wife was shivering in his arms.

"I think so," Straker said, helping Komack to her feet.

Blackie climbed to his feet and hurried over to where Jackson sat on his haunches beside Mahoney. Blackie pulled his stole out from under his sweater and knelt beside the dying Irishman, murmuring prayers.

"Commander!" a familiar voice called out from the bottom of the hill. Lieutenant Murphy was climbing toward them, followed by a security team. Two camouflage-painted SHADO mobiles were parked beside Straker's Omen.

"We got here as fast as we could," Murphy explained. "As soon as you left, we were able to get through to headquarters and briefed them on what was happening."

Straker nodded. "We'll need a clean-up crew." He turned to look back at Blackie and Jackson. Mahoney smiled ever so slightly, then closed his eyes. The soft rustle of feathered pinions came back to Straker and with it a sudden sense of well-being.

"Go in peace, Liam Mahoney," Straker murmured. He turned to the others. "I think it's time we got out of here." He stepped over to help Rutland get Mary to her feet. The woman didn't seem to notice who he was.

"Standard procedure, sir?" Murphy asked as they made their way down the slippery slope to the mobiles.

"Standard procedure is contraindicated. It would have negative effects on the child she's carrying," Jackson said.

"And there's no sense giving it to one if we can't give it to both," Straker completed for himself.

"What 'standard procedures'?" Rutland demanded. He held his wife tight to him, oblivious to the blood still running down his face.

"Normally, when people have had contact with 'them', or with us, for that matter, we wipe out the last twelve hours of their memory. It's simple and normally harmless," Straker said.

"Ed?" Mary's voice shook as she focused on him in the rain and the darkness. "What's happening?"

"Murphy here is going to make sure you and your husband and your daughter get back home safely," Straker said gently.

"Come along, Mary," Rutland murmured, following Murphy and guiding his wife toward the open back door of the nearest Mobile.

Straker watched after them for a long moment.

"You still care for her," Blackie observed.

"She's a married woman," Straker said. "Happily, I think."

Komack walked away, toward the darkness, auburn hair shimmering where it had come out from the confines of her knit cap.

Straker watched her disappear into the night.

"Go after her, you fool!" Blackie hissed. "Goddesses aren't to be ignored!"

"Goddess?" Straker repeated, suddenly bewildered.

"Bride, indubitably. And jealous, unhappy goddesses aren't to be trifled with," Blackie warned.

Confused, Straker obeyed the little priest's instructions and followed Komack into the darkness. Finally catching up with her, he grabbed her arm and swung her around to face him.

"Let go of me!" she hissed at him.

"No!" he spat back, grabbing her other arm. "For once you're going to listen to me. I love you and I want to marry you."

"You're still in love with her!" she shouted, her voice cracking with a sob.

"Is that what this is about?" Straker asked, incredulously. "Is that what you think?"

"You admitted it just now."

"I admitted nothing of the kind. Of course I still care about her. I was married to her. We had a child together, but I'm not in love with her. I care about Alec and Nina and Paul, too, but you're the one I want to spend the rest of my life with and I'll be damned if I let you get away from me again!"

"But sometimes..." she sobbed.

"Sometimes what?"

"Sometimes you forget you're with me and not her."

"I'm sorry," he said softly, letting go of one arm so he could caress her hair. "You need to tell me when I'm that stupid. You're nothing like her, you know that."

She hiccupped. "I don't need the state to approve our relationship."

"Humor me, okay?" Straker asked. "Maybe I need it."

"I'm not changing my business cards," she warned, but there was the hint of an uncharacteristic giggle in her voice.

"That's fine," Straker said. "I'm not changing mine, either. And I do love you and I'm not letting you get away. Even though you'd try the patience of a saint."

"And Goddess knows, neither us us are saints," she chuckled.

* * *

The next day was bright and clear. SHADO's work crews had made good headway on repairing the damaged hotel. Another week and it would be as good as, if not better than, new. The dining room had been set up as an impromptu chapel.

A quick call to Chicago, then to the local diocese, cleared Monsignor Ryan to perform a wedding. "Not that God mind's private ceremonies, mind you. She makes a perfectly good witness," Blackie explained while looking around for the white stole that was already draped around his neck. He seemed surprised when he looked down and found it.

"I've read Natiroff's report on him," Alec Freeman said to Straker as they both watched the preparations with bemusement. Freeman had flown in from London that morning with a report on the alien bomb they had successfully removed from the main elevator shaft in SHADO H.Q.

"I just can't believe it," Freeman added. "And I can't believe you letting him go on a mission like that. What if he'd gotten himself killed? Not to mention you've blown our cover all to hell."

"Priests are pretty good at keeping secrets, Alec," Straker chided. "I offered him a position as pastor for SHADO."

"And?"

"The Archdiocese of Chicago needs him more than we do. I talked to the Cardinal this morning."

Freeman harumphed at him. "I'll be interested in reading your report on what happened out there last night. Jackson swears Kate opened an alien force field with an iron dagger and you grounded out what was probably an alien generated lightning storm with only an antique sword."

"And holy water," Straker interjected.

Freeman ignored the interruption. "An IRA terrorist killed two of the people helping the aliens. A terrorist you told the *garda* died a hero defending a kidnaped English woman while trying to recover the sword stolen from Christ Church. Jackson also said that the Ufo was taken out by lightning as much as by Sky-1."

"What does Captain Carlin say about that?"

"Peter'd be under psychiatric observation right now except Jackson talked to him this morning and ordered Frazer to send him back on duty. Peter claims the aliens hit Sky-1 and something, he won't say what, kept him aloft long enough to get his engine restarted. He also said the Ufo was under attack by the storm, but none of it touched him. I'm tempted to put Jackson under psychiatric observation, except Murphy corroborated most of his story."

"Last night was Midsummer's eve, Alec, when the fairies come out to frolic," Straker said.

"I don't think they like aliens too much. I know my local goddess doesn't." He turned and nodded to the stairway where Komack had just appeared. The Harlington-Straker wardrobe department had worked overtime last night putting together a wedding dress of beige embroidered silk cut in an almost medieval style, with a low cut neckline and high waist, long, full sleeves and very full skirt which did little to mask how far along she was. She was beautiful.

The ceremony went smoothly, at least as smoothly as it could when the presiding priest gets lost traveling from one end of the room to the other and has to be led by the five-year-old daughter of the bride and groom. Blackie's homily was about how God created strawberries to slow the first woman down so the first man could catch her after their first fight.

It was a beautiful wedding. Strawberries were served with the wedding cake. And this time, a deep satisfied chuckle accompanied the soft sound of feathers.