

Straker's Angel

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(Amelia Rodgers and I have both created separate continuities as to what happens to Ed Straker before and after the UFO TV series. This story totally confuses those two realities. You may understand this better if you have read some of Amelia's stories, such as Frozen, and some of mine, such as Sick Leave. Then again, you may not.)

Kate yawned, which set off everyone else around the conference room table. The senior officers of SHADO might be marked by their diversity but one thing they had in common was their dislike of routine staff meetings. The one virtue of the occasions was that Ed, who was also not keen, kept them as short as possible. On the other hand, he did insist that everyone was fully up-to-date with the nuts and bolts of the organisation.

For the moment he ignored the reaction. "If we can continue to make savings in these three areas and the studio's profits increase as projected - and if we do get that Oscar nomination, Kate assures me they'll be better than that - then we should be able to afford -"

A puzzled look crossed his face and he broke off.

"Are you alright?" his wife asked.

He nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. It's just -"

He broke off again, shuddering. He reached for the support of the table. Alec was already out of his chair, moving to his side. The others were close behind. They were too late. Ed's eyes rolled back in his head and he crashed to the floor.

Alec checked his pulse and his breathing. Colonel Lake thumbed the intercom and called for medics.

Kate knelt by his side, trying to get a reaction. "Ed? Can you hear me? Ed, what happened?"

It was no use, he was out cold. He was still alive but his vital signs were weak. He was in SHADO's Medical Centre within five minutes but even there, the doctors could not say what was wrong with him. The first indications came from the science labs. Colonel Lake went back to check her equipment, to see if any of the various monitors indicated an outside influence. They did.

"I've been working on this one ever since the aliens caused time to stand still at the studio. To be honest, I wasn't sure it would work but it seems like it has. I don't have the details yet, I've got everyone I can lay my hands on working on them, but it seems that someone has been playing about with time and that's what's affected the Commander."

Alec sat with his chin resting on his hand. "I know I haven't got a hope of understanding this but can you do anything?"

She shrugged lightly but her face was worried. "I'm not sure. They're way ahead of us in

this field - I guess it's a by-product of their faster than light travel and we're years away from that. If I can narrow down exactly what they've done, I might be able to rig something up. But I'll need all the resources the science section has."

"You've got them."

She took that as her dismissal and left. Everyone else, concerned as they were, had gone back to their routine work. There was nothing else to do until she could come up with something they could act on. Kate was out on the film lots, checking on the new productions. Paul Foster was catching up with his paperwork. Alec was going over every UFO sighting in the last month. There was nothing unaccounted for. Either the aliens had set this up some time ago or SHADO had missed one completely. That was not a comforting thought but it did happen. He wished Ed could go over this himself. Ed would understand the science of it. Alec suspected that he and Ginny Lake were probably the only people who could.

Of course, if this really was to do with time travel, the aliens could be doing it at any point in the future. Alec sighed deeply.

The science section put in the kind of effort that he expected from SHADO in a crisis. They came back with preliminary results within three hours.

"We think..." Colonel Lake said. "We think that they've actually gone back in time. We think that they have somehow interfered in Ed's past. They've done something that means he shouldn't be here now, he's somewhere else. Or he should be. I can only assume that they haven't been completely successful, otherwise he would have disappeared and so would SHADO as we know it. We're working on the exact date of the interference now."

They were all listening intently to her report. It was Kate who asked the obvious question. "If you do that, can you... Can you put things right?"

Lake sighed. "We're working on that as well."

She went back to her lab, leaving them with one further comment. "If we don't deal with this soon, it will start affecting other people. The people he knows, the people he's recruited, the whole of SHADO could eventually be... I can't tell you. I only know that everything will change."

Kate took a deep breath. "If we are working backwards from now, I'm assuming I go first. I'd better avoid any hard surfaces. Don't want to give myself concussion."

Her shoulders slumped as she turned to walk away. Alec called her back.

"Go be with your husband. It's the best thing you can do right now. I'll make sure you're paged as soon as there's anything worth knowing."

She nodded and walked down to the medical section. Ed was laid out on the bed, pale and lifeless. Was it just her imagination or was he starting to become transparent? She put that thought away, it was ridiculous.

This whole thing was ridiculous. When had that ever stopped the aliens?

She took his hand in hers, carefully avoiding the monitors. "We'll get you out of this. You know we will."

But there was no response.

There was another emergency staff meeting called two hours later.

"You're making good time, Colonel." Freeman told Lake, trying to be encouraging.

"We're doing our best." Her head was stuck in her papers and she barely looked at him. "We've got a rough trace on the date. It's back in the 1960s. We've narrowed it down to within one year. I'm assuming you don't want to know the technical details. We should be able to get it down to... I'm not sure. It could be a month, we could get lucky and bring it down to within a

few hours. I'll need access to his personal records. Everything."

Alec nodded. "That's something Kate and I can help you with. It would make sense if it was before I met Ed. That was in 1967."

"That's the year were looking at." Lake confirmed.

"What exactly are you looking for?" he asked.

"It's probably a major event but it could be something that seemed minor at the time. You're right, it would make more sense if -"

A frozen look had come over Alec Freeman's face.

"Oh no." Kate groaned.

Foster was out of his seat and running around the table.

Freeman looked up at them a moment. "Wrong way round."

Then he fell face forward onto the table.

The medics cleared him away moments later but, like Straker, there was nothing they could do for him.

"He was right, we got it the wrong way round." said Kate. "Which means we could start losing SHADO's senior staff at any moment." She banged the table. "Moonbase. We've got some of the earliest recruits up there. We're going to need to get them re-staffed. And SkyDiver, Peter Carlin will be one of the first to go. I'll get Keith Ford - no, not him, he's been here too long - to look at the staff rotas and workout who should go next. Looks like I might be the last of the senior officers."

Lake nodded. "Then I guess that puts you in temporary command."

"Hold on a minute." Foster protested. "You and I should be safe for a while."

Kate put her hands up. "Let's not argue about it, there's enough work to go round. Ginny, have you got anything else we should know? Any ideas as to a solution?"

"Maybe. I don't think we can project a person back in time - not yet, maybe soon. Even if we could, the energy requirements would be phenomenal. However, I think we can manage a kind of two-way video link using holographic projection."

Kate stared at her and started to chuckle. "Colonel Lake, you've been watching the television!"

Lake grimaced. "I have to relax some time and I like science fiction. Besides, you could call it keeping an eye on the competition."

"What are you talking about?" asked Foster.

Lake shook her head. "Doesn't matter, I just pinched someone else's idea. I think I can make it work. I think I can project an observer back to the appropriate time. It might even help us home in on whatever we're looking for."

Kate nodded. "We'll leave that side of things to you. You follow up whatever leads look promising. Paul, you take command of the day-to-day running. What's the betting they'll use this as cover to launch an attack while we're distracted? I'll catch up any loose ends. We meet back here if anyone has anything to report."

Hours passed. Moonbase saw off a concerted attack, only allowing one UFO through to be dealt with by Sky One. Paul Foster immersed himself frantically in paperwork. Kate divided her time between the re-staffing of vital sections of SHADO with those who were least likely to be affected by the temporal anomaly, doing her usual work among the film sets and spending time with her husband and Alec Freeman. Both men lay still, barely breathing, their beds side by side. She could not help wondering if there was another copy of them out there somewhere, where they were supposed to be now that the aliens had made changes in the time

stream. And if there were, what were they doing? Were they just as lifeless? Or, without the support of each other, had they died long ago?

Colonel Lake and the technical section worked on for hour after hour. They checked instruments, refined calculations, set up power links and turned one of the store cupboards into a holographic generator that was capable of propelling an image through time.

"At least, we think it should be. We haven't exactly done this before."

Colonel Lake, like most of her staff, was looking tired and harassed.

"What exactly can it do?" Kate asked.

"In simple terms, you put a person or camera in there. Then you throw the switch and it should be transported back to a particular moment in 1967. We've managed to rig it up to read Ed's gene code and home in on it. That took a bit of doing. The person or device should then be able to see the area immediately surrounding the Commander. I'd rather send a person in. I don't think there's any danger and a human is more versatile than a piece of equipment."

Kate raised an eyebrow. "You surprise me."

Foster used his height to try and impose himself on the other two colonels. "It had better be me, then. I'm -"

"It had better be me." interjected Kate. "You have SHADO to run and we need Ginny running the technical end. I have the least to do and the most reason to go."

"Don't know about the first part but the second is certainly true." Lake agreed. "Let's get on with it."

Kate walked into the bare concrete room. It was little bigger than a toilet cubicle and dark except for one unshielded light bulb. *This would give Ed nightmares*, she thought. There were a couple of power cables snaking across the floor and lines of equipment that she could not identify circling the ceiling, walls and floor. On the ground, waiting for her, was a small hand-held remote control. It had a simple switch which could move in four directions. Handwritten labels told her which was forward, back, right and left.

"Are you ready for me?" she shouted.

The voice that came back was tinny, one of the techs. "You can speak normally, Colonel. We can hear you perfectly well."

"Like this?"

"That's fine. And we are ready to go."

The walls blurred. Things grew dark. She blinked and blinked again. Space had opened out. She could see plants in front of her. Forest. Jungle.

She whistled. "I think it's working. This doesn't look like England. "

Lake's voice came through. "Should be -"

"Vietnam. Yes, I know."

"Can you describe it for us? Are you getting a clear image?"

"Perfectly clear. And they can't see me?"

"No more than we can see what you're seeing. So please remember to keep us updated."

In spite of the situation, Kate chuckled. This was a real achievement, one she hoped she would be able to share with Ed in the future. It would be impressive enough if they were simply projecting a picture around her but to be able to see another country twenty years ago - that was mind blowing.

She turned right round. It was a full three hundred and sixty degree panorama. Towards what should have been the back wall was a series of huts of various shapes and sizes. There were lights on in one or two but most were dark. If she listened carefully she could hear sounds

of movement.

She described the scene for the benefit of those in the next room. "I'm going to see if I can move towards them." She pressed the switch into the forward position and began to glide in that direction. "It's working fine. What happens when I meet a wall? Do I have to look for an open door?"

"No, you can go straight through it."

"Just like a ghost."

She passed through the nearest wall without feeling anything. Perhaps that was the oddest sensation, that only two of her senses were working. At first she had thought it was only one but she realised she could hear rustlings from the jungle and the occasional stamp of boots around the huts. And coughing, some ragged, some regular and rhythmical. That would be the code. A code which, unfortunately, she was unable to decipher.

She stuck her head through the walls of several huts. One was some kind of office, another was guards' quarters. Then she found what she was looking for. One long building was divided into a series of tiny cells, smaller than the room she was standing in. Each of these contained a ragged male figure. Most were slumped in the corners, ragged and dirty. All were horribly thin, curiously alike in their suffering, though she did notice one large African-American who stood out from the rest by his size. Time and again she looked into the cells, forcing herself to see what was there. It made her want to throw up as well as glad she could not use her sense of smell. Time and again she looked but could not find the one person she was looking for.

He was in the last cell of the block, almost unrecognisable. His blond hair was filthy and matted. He had a straggly beard that must have taken some time to grow. His bones were sticking out between the rags of his prison uniform and there was blood on both his skin and his clothing. The moonlight made him look paler than ever.

Ed Straker, hurting and young enough to be her son.

"Oh my poor darling."

Slowly, painfully he raised his head. His look was perplexed. "Who... What are you?"

* * *

A woman's voice. A kind, compassionate woman's voice speaking English. And with an English accent at that. Ed Straker would have thought that he was dreaming if he had not been quite sure that he had not slept that night.

He looked up. She was there, in a manner of speaking. He could see only her face, bright against the wooden door as if lit by some internal fire.

"Who... What are you?"

She started and the face pulled back, disappearing behind the door. The move was so natural that it convinced him even more that he was not dreaming. Yet what else could this be?

A moment later the face reappeared. The head pushed a little further in, followed by the body. She was standing half in, half out of the door. There was not what really enough room to get both of them entirely in the cell.

She did not look how he would have expected a supernatural being to look, not even a ghost. She was short, as short as the Asian women that he had seen before he was shot down but not as a petite. Her colouring was fair, in a mousey sort of way, and she seemed to be in her early Forties. He did not recognise the

style of her clothes but they seemed to be very much a human fashion.

But she did glow faintly in the dark, not like some luminous watch but like... Like an angel. And her eyes, her eyes were full of love. Surely that was what she was.

He checked himself. This was ridiculous. There was no one there.

"You can see me?" she asked slowly.

He nodded. He might as well play along with it.

She pursed her lips. "That wasn't supposed to happen. And I have to say, no one else has been able to see me. Then again, it is you I'm here for."

He frowned. "Me? Why would anyone be interested in me?"

She sighed deeply. "If only you knew." She shook her head. "I have to go. Someone has some explaining to do and it may well be me."

She pulled back through the door.

He cried out, knowing the guards would hear him but desperate not lose her. "Please. Stay. Touch me."

He could hear boots pounding down the corridor.

She looked away then back to him. "I can't. I'm sorry. I will come back."

Then she was gone.

The door opened and the guards rushed in, already poised to strike him.

* * *

Kate blinked and found herself back in the concrete storeroom.

"What on earth was going on?" Lake was asking.

"I could ask you the same thing. He could see me."

Kate put down the control switch and walked towards the door.

"See you?" Lake asked. "You mean Ed? The Commander?"

Kate was in the corridor now and could not hear her but the next door burst open and Colonel Lake was standing in front of her. "What do you mean he could see you?"

"Exactly what I said. I... I said something, he looked up and he spoke to me. What's going on, Ginny? That wasn't part of the plan."

"Too right it wasn't." The scientist turned away, racking her brains. "It must be something to do with the genetic tracking, some side-effect that we hadn't expected. No one else could see you?"

Kate shook her head. "You mean the way the machine tracks down Ed by his gene code _."

"Somehow it seems to work both ways. That's the problem. I'm not sure we can use this method again. And it was working so well."

But Kate was thinking. "Don't you get it? If this is true, we can get him on our side. Who's going to know better than he is the vital turning points in his life?"

Lake sighed. "Let's get a coffee. This is definitely going to take some thinking about. For a start, could you tell me the vital moments in your life without a great deal of hindsight? Could you be sure you got them right even then? And even if you had - I'm not sure. I mean, if we can correct the problem any time he sees you after the nexus point would be forgotten but any time before won't and there is another option. If we can't correct things at the moment they changed, we may have to attempt to push things back on to the right path later on. It's more risky, we can't tell the ramifications, but it's better than nothing. But then he met you

years before he actually did and that might change his behaviour."

Kate leaned back against the wall. "This is making me dizzy. Come on, let's get that coffee and think it through. I don't want to leave him, though, Ginny. He needs... He needs something and at the moment I'm the only thing he's got. Though what on earth he thinks I am..."

* * *

It was a long time before Ed Straker came round and when he did, people were tapping for him. The tap code was the only thing that kept him going, the furtive communications with other prisoners.

- - - Q-tip? Are you alright, son? - - -

Q-tip was his Air Force nickname. He pulled himself to his knees and looked around for a pebble with which to tap back.

- - - That you, Angel? I'm alright. - - -

That was hardly true and he doubted Angel would believe it. He must have heard the sounds of the beating. But he was no worse than he had been at other times. In fact... Something stirred in his memory. That face. The face of his mysterious visitor. That could not be real but if not, why had he incurred this particular beating?

Angel was tapping again.

- - - What happened? We heard you cry out before the guards came - - -

- - - That's a long story. I'm not sure I believe it myself. - - -

- - - I have time, son. - - -

So Ed told him, laboriously tapping out the whole thing on the cell wall. He told it exactly as he remembered it, with no attempt at interpretation. Then he asked:

- - - What do you make of it? - - -

There was a long pause and he could hear more distant tapping, fast but too far away for him to interpret. The state his brain was in, it was hard enough concentrating on what Angel said. He suspected, though, that they were comments on his own tale. Eventually he got a reply.

- - - What do you think she was, son? - - -

- - - I asked first. Do you really want to know? - - -

- - - I do. - - -

- - - If you'd seen the love in her eyes. She wasn't what I would have expected but - - -

He could not say it. He waited for Angel's reply. It came slowly, thoughtfully.

- - - You think she was real? - - -

He knew this was going to sound crazy. He was no longer sure that he cared.

- - - I'll know if she comes back. I think she was an angel. A real one. - - -

* * *

Kate ate a sandwich reluctantly and took a pill so that she could cat nap. The whole of normal life, including such mundane and vital things as eating and sleeping, seemed to have been put on hold. She checked her watch when she woke up and found she had been out for three hours. She forced herself to take a shower and then went back to the new holographic

projector.

Colonel Lake was still there. Kate doubted she had had any sleep and probably not anything to eat. She ought to talk to her about that but all she wanted to know was how the project was going.

"We're narrowing it down." the scientist told her. "We think you arrived just after the focal point. However, if you do want to go back it would make it much easier for us if you went slightly after your first visit. We're still working on the fine tuning and time does tend to go in one direction."

Kate nodded. "Are you ready for me to go again?"

"Are you sure it's a good idea?"

"No but I'll take that as a yes to my question."

She did not say it but it seemed to make sense for her visits to go in the same direction for Ed as they did for her. He must be confused enough already.

This time it was no shock when the jungle appeared around her, although it was still impressive. She headed directly for the cell block and for the correct cell. She did not know what she would do if he was not there. She did not know... She had seen the guards coming for him when he had cried out to stop her. She had wanted to stay but it had been obvious what their intention was and she could not bear to watch him hurt. Now she wondered how bad it had been. She wondered - she could hardly admit it even to herself - if they had killed him.

And if they had, could Ginny reverse the process? If this was after the focal point in time, could they still get him back?

Right at the moment she just wished there was something, anything she could do for him.

He was in the cell. He was slumped in the corner, unmoving as he had been last time. She stood half in and half out of the door, unsure what to do.

She took a step inside, leaning over him and reaching out a hand to brush his hair aside. He looked up.

"You are real. Or else I'm having the same dream."

She smiled gently at him. "I'm real. I told you I'd come back. I'm sorry about what they did to you."

He shook his head. "That was my fault for crying out. No, it was theirs. It's always their fault."

She nodded. But then she was at a loss for words. What could she talk about to her husband so many years before she met him, stuck in this hell she could not get him out of and with nothing she could do for him?

He spoke a little hesitantly. "Can I ask... I mean, I don't think the guys believed me when I told them about you -"

"You told them?"

He flinched. "I'm sorry. Wasn't I supposed to?"

She felt awful. In spite of everything, she had not realised how fragile he was. She put out a hand towards him, then withdrew it. She was not sure what effect it would have on him if she passed through him like a ghost.

"I'm sorry. I didn't tell you not to so you had every right to. Please, Ed, even if things that I do or say may look strange I'm purely here to help you. It may take time, it may make things very odd but I'm here to get you home."

"And the others?" That was so much like him.

"We're working on it. What was your question?"

* * *

She had returned. Ed Straker sat in the corner of his cell looking up at her. She had a strange beauty that was nothing to do with the unearthly light that surrounded her. It was as if he could see into her soul.

Did angels have souls?

She wanted to know what he had tried to ask her. He was nervous. He did not want to offend her and surely if she wanted him to know she would have told him already. But she had asked him for his question so he told her.

"Are you an angel?"

She laughed, a laugh of pure merriment. "Whatever made you think that?"

He smiled. "Well, let me see. You appear at the worst moment of my life, literally out of nowhere. You can walk through doors. You glow -"

"Do I? I had no idea."

That amused him vaguely. Wouldn't she know? She obviously could not see herself through human eyes. "You say you're here to help me and... and..."

He hesitated to say it, though it should not be a personal comment for an angel. Surely it was a compliment? But a creature so different from himself, it was impossible to tell.

"Go on." she said gently. "Tell me."

"I can see the love in your eyes."

Her face changed, as if it took on an infinite sadness. "Oh yes, I love you."

He had not known it but that was exactly what he needed to hear. He knew there were people out there who loved him, somewhere, far away. But she loved him, here and now. A real person, if not a human, not simply a tapping on the wall though heaven only knew how much that contact meant to him.

Her image faded and reappeared.

She shook her head, obviously unhappy. "I have to go. I will be back. Remember that."

* * *

"Sorry about that." said Colonel Lake as Kate found herself back in the store cupboard. "Technical glitch. Considering this is an untried system, it's working very well."

Kate nodded, putting down the handset and walking out of the room to meet her colleague. "Very well, though I could have done without it blinking out on me at that point. Will it take you long to fix?"

The taller woman shook her head. "I'm pretty satisfied with how it's working. The bigger problem is what we're going to do with it."

Kate nodded. "Truth is, we may never know exactly what the aliens have done. I think we're going to have to strike out on our own, do a rough approximation. It may cause a few changes in the time line - it may cause horrendous problems, I don't know - but we can't wait much longer. None of us will be here if we do."

"More coffee?" Lake asked.

Over sandwiches and coffee - Kate had totally lost track of the time of day so did not know what meal to call it - the two of them and Colonel Foster pored over the little information they had. It was more than the prisoners would have, that was for certain.

"For once I agree with Kate." Paul Foster said. "I think we should get them to escape. We have the information, we can guide them - Kate can. With that machine, we can even see what the Vietnamese are doing. And I think we should do it now."

* * *

There had been a lot of tapping going on in the camp, though much of it was too far off or too faint for Ed to follow. He suspected it might be about him and in some ways he would rather not hear. He did take note of one exchange - impossible to have private conversations here. Drummer was tapping to Angel.

- - - Sorry, Angel, but he's lost it. It's those brave and brilliant types that do. Angels, for crying out loud. - - -

- - - I agree he has a problem but don't we all? It is possible. Or he's misinterpreting something he is actually seeing. - - -

- - - You're CO. You have to put him straight for his own good. If this goes any further, he'll be truly barmy. Doesn't matter what you think about angels, you're the only one here. - - -

Drummer was right, of course. It had been a vivid hallucination and Ed did not know what had produced it - could the guards be trying out some kind of drug treatment on him? He checked his arm and found no puncture marks but it could be in the food or water. Maybe it was just the despair and the remnants of some childhood belief. Why would anyone, let alone some supernatural being, take notice of him when there were so many other men in trouble?

A voice in his head was saying: *Half an hour ago you believed all this. Just proves I'm going mad.*

- - - Q-tip? Q-tip, are you there? - - -

He could recognise Angel's tap style. - - - Where else would I be? - - -

- - - Some of the lads are worried about you, son - - -

- - - I know, I heard - - -

- - - What do you think, Q-tip? - - -

Ed sighed, hung his head and tapped out the answer, wanting more than anything to be wrong but knowing what had to be right.

- - - I imagined her - - -

He said nothing else but he could hear Angel and Drummer's conversation going on, far, far away by the sounds of it.

- - - I told you, even he sees it - - - Drummer was saying.

- - - It's nothing to be pleased about - - - Angels tapped sharply.

I suppose it means I have some rational sense left, Ed thought, *if I can tell I'm going mad*. But the tears were rolling down his cheeks as all hope left him.

* * *

SHADO's researchers had done an extremely good job. With the access they had, they had managed to pull up not only topographical but also tactical maps of the area around the prison camp for that period. They now knew exactly where Ed was and - perhaps more importantly - where he was in relation to both Vietcong and American forces. They had plotted the easiest and safest route for a group of exhausted and injured men to make their escape.

"This is doable," said Paul Foster.

Kate shook her head slightly. "You haven't seen the condition they're in. But I agree it's their best hope. If we can't find what it is the aliens have changed - and it doesn't look like we can in time to make a difference - then we have to go with this plan."

She gathered up the relevant papers. "Ginny, is there anyway I can read these without dropping out of the hologram?"

Colonel Lake shook her head. "No but we can bring you in and out as required now. I think we've got all the technical glitches ironed out. At least, the ones we know about."

"Then let's go." Kate led them out of the conference room and back towards the holographic chamber.

Ginny went into the control room to sort out the last few details.

Foster was hanging around. "I think I ought to be here in case you need tactical information."

Kate thought for a moment, then handed him some of the maps. "It might help if you could interpret the details for me, rather than me having to pop in and out of existence for them."

He nodded and went to join Lake. Kate walked into the chamber, noting once again how small it was.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"Ready." came the reply.

A moment later she was in the jungle and gliding towards Ed's cell. She was still apprehensive but now, with something to offer him, she felt more excited than she had previously. Now she really could act as his guardian angel. First she would explain, then she would monitor the guards and check for any security measures that they did not know about. Then, once she had given Ed the instructions for the break out and he had led the men into the jungle, she could guide them back to the American lines. Of course it would not be simple but with hindsight they had, she could get Ed home. They would meet as they should and soon everything would be back to as near normal as it ever got with SHADO.

Ed looked up as she entered the cell then looked away, burying his head in his chest.

"What's the matter?" she asked anxiously.

He did not speak, simply sat there shivering.

She bent down to him. "Did they do something to you? You can tell me."

She was startled by his hiss. "Go away."

"Ed?"

"Go away."

Her confidence deflated but she tried to sound reasonable and patient. "What happened, Ed? Why won't you talk to me?"

He looked up at her and she could see from the tear tracks on his dirty face that he had been crying. "You're not real. I made you up."

After he had accepted her so readily to begin with, she had not seen that coming. "What changed your mind?"

"Shouldn't talk to you. You're not there."

She ran a hand through her hair, trying to think of some argument he might accept. "If I'm not here, would it hurt talk to me anyway? Just explain to me why you won't accept me now. Then you'll have it clear in your own mind."

Slowly, sadly he explained the conversations he had had, the conversations he had overheard.

She could have sworn if she had not known that she would be giving him the same advice had such a thing happened in their own time. She thought for a long moment. Perhaps, perhaps if she could convince these others that she existed then they could convince Ed of the same thing.

She nodded to herself. "I'm going to go away now but I will come back and when I do, I'll convince you I exist. I'll be able to tell you things about your friends you couldn't possibly know. Things they'll be able to confirm as true. Then you can convince them that I'm real. And then, Ed, I'm going to get you out of here. Do you understand?"

He made no response except to let his head slump on his chest once more.

She sighed and went back to her own world. Before she put down the headset she was calling to those in the control room. "We need more research, now."

* * *

Kate could not concentrate on pouring through the pieces of paper and computer records that would give her a lead on Ed's fellow prisoners. Instead, she went up on to the lots and found chaos. Everywhere people were collapsing.

"What's going on?" actors and technicians asked her in a concern that bordered on terror.

She shook her head, realising that she had been concentrating on her husband so much that she had not been doing her job. This would affect SHADO's cover and it was her responsibility to come up with a plausible lie. She sighed with relief when she discovered her staff had been transporting all those affected swiftly to the Mayland and that news of this had yet to reach the press.

"We're going to have to call a press conference," she said to Miss Mehta. "No, not a press conference. We can't afford that. A statement, though. We have a case of... Is Legionnaires Disease plausible? Get the medics to supply some kind of explanation but we need the whole studio in quarantine. I know that's going to annoy the living daylights out of everyone who isn't SHADO but I don't see we have an alternative."

Miss Mehta nodded and, with her usual calm efficiency, arranged it.

* * *

Harlington-Straker Studios regret to announce that they are temporarily suspending production and quarantining their facilities at Harlington village because of an outbreak of an as yet unidentified viral infection. The infection is not thought to be dangerous but may cause nausea or fainting and is highly contagious. Specialists from the Mayland Hospital are currently working on the problem. All those who have recently worked at the studios are asked to report to the Mayland if they show any kind of unusual symptoms. Production will resume as soon as possible but our primary concern is for the health of our employees.

* * *

"I've got some good news and some bad news," Ginny Lake said, trying to lighten the mood though her face belied the fact.

The three remaining senior officers were sat around the table in the conference room.

"What?" asked Foster.

Lake shuffled through a handful of documents and handed some papers to him and Kate. "We've got about half a dozen really obscure facts on each of three different officers in the camp. That should be enough to convince them. If it's not, I don't know what is."

"I presume that's the good news," Kate said.

She nodded. "The bad news is, we're already passed the point at which they should have escaped and I can't tell you why it hasn't happened."

"Are you sure it hasn't?" Foster asked. "Kate's not going to get there and find they're out in the jungle somewhere?"

Lake shrugged. "It might happen. To be honest, I don't know. I do know we haven't got much longer. I've briefed my technicians on everything I can but I don't think I'm going to be conscious for more than a few hours at most. I doubt you are, Paul. Kate's got a little longer. If this doesn't work, we might just about have one more attempt. No more than that."

"I don't see why we can't just go further back." Foster said. "Even if we can't pinpoint the exact moment of the escape we ought -"

Lake hissed with frustration. "Paul, you don't seem to realise that this is the human race's first attempt at time travel. I mean, how far did the Wright Brothers get? And you're asking me to manoeuvre this thing as if it's Sky One. Time tends to go in one direction. All we can do is stick an anchor in the past and watch as it's dragged forward."

"Oh. I was just asking."

"We can't try again?" asked Kate. "Reel the line in and throw it out again?"

Again Lake shrugged. "Probably, if we had time. But we don't. And even if we could, I'm not sure we'd hit the right place a second time."

They were all nodding.

"Better get on with it, then." said Foster. "Are you ready Kate?"

"Yes, I'm ready." Within a few minutes she was back in the hologram, headed for Ed's cell.

He looked away when she entered, muttering something under his breath.

She sighed but proceeded calmly. "I know they're trying to convince you I don't exist. I know it must seem very unlikely for me to be here but I am. I have some information about some of your fellow prisoners, things I hope that they will be able to confirm a will convince them that I'm real. Will you let me try, Ed?"

He looked up at her, considering his options carefully. "I don't suppose I have anything to lose. What you want me to do?"

She smiled and squatted down beside him. "Your Senior Ranking Officer, Stanley Brisby, you call him Angel, don't you?"

He raised an eyebrow. "That's the information?"

"No, that's just to make sure we both know who we're talking about. Have you ever seen under his chin?"

Ed shook his head slightly. "I haven't seen him at all. They don't let us see the other prisoners, mostly."

She nodded, smiling slightly. "Then you couldn't know that he has a scar under his chin. And even if you did, you couldn't know it was caused by him falling downstairs when he was three. Try that for a start and see where it gets you."

The shadow of a smile crossed his face. "It sounds convincing but I hope you have more than that."

"Oh, I do. But get the conversation going with Angel and I'll feed you more. It shouldn't take much. Maybe a couple more things for Angel and I have stuff on Andrew Bell, Tank I think you call him?"

Ed began to tap the wall in a rhythmic pattern. "Anyone else? Drummer, maybe?"

She nodded again. "Quentin Cross? Yes, I've got something on him. If you can convince Angel first, then we can work our way through if we need to but I'd rather not spend more time on this than we have to. There are other considerations."

He was still tapping. "I can imagine there would be."

A moment later the tapped reply came back and he smiled. "Angel's hooked. He wants to know more."

"When he was thirteen he broke his arm trying to climb the church steeple on a dare."

For the first time she heard Ed laugh. "That I would have loved to have seen."

He began tapping again and soon there was a frenzy of taps and coughs going on. "They all want to know what you've got. I think Angel's convinced. If we can get Drummer on side, I think we'll have every one. He's the biggest sceptic."

For a moment she had to rack her brains. She had memorised all the information so that she would not need to refer to the sheets - mostly medical records - that the researchers had managed to come up with. In the excitement of the moment it was difficult to keep one person's information separate from the next. What did she have on Quentin Cross?

Ed frowned. "Angel's trying to get everyone to keep quiet. This is getting out of hand. If the guards find out... Is there any way we could carry on this conversation later? I think I have them but they need more."

She sucked in a deep breath. "We really don't have much time. But yes, I see your problem. I tell you what, I'm going to go and take a look around. I need to do that anyway. When I come back, I should have definite instructions for you to get out of here. If we can convince them then, we can go. Alright?"

He nodded. "Please, don't be long."

She smiled at him. "I won't be. Trust me, Ed. You do trust me, don't you?"

"Yes."

She slipped out of the door and into the rickety corridor. Getting the doors open would be the most difficult part. They were secured by simple latches and she really needed to find one that was loose enough to be prised open from the inside if someone had a long enough piece of stick. She needed to go in and out of each of the cells checking. If she could get one person out, she could get the rest out. She figured that most of the security system simply relied on fear of the guards. With any luck, the guards would be getting sloppy by now, used to dealing with helpless prisoners.

Only the guards were already coming in her direction. She heard the pounding feet before she saw them. They were not in any hurry. She guessed the footsteps would be a psychological weapon against the POWs.

She stood in the middle of the corridor and let them walk through her - shivering at the unwelcome sensation of being a ghost. She tried to see which cell they were headed for. She guessed it was her fault they were coming. The tapping would have attracted their attention. Or maybe it was just random scare tactics. Maybe they would be headed for Angel as he was SRO. But they were not. They tramped down to the end of the corridor and threw Ed's door open with a crash.

She screamed internally, even though Ed was the only one who could possibly have heard her. She hated the sensation of going through other people but she glided through the guards till she was at the front of them and he could see her. Two of them already had him on his feet. She could see him shivering with fear. His eyes met hers, clamped on them in desperation.

"Stay with me. Please, stay with me."

The guards took no notice. She guessed that none of them could speak English or they might have been very confused.

"I'll stay." she said. "Whatever happens, I'll stay."

And she did. She walked beside him as they dragged him down the corridor. She stood beside him as he was hung by his wrists and beaten. She knelt beside him when they cut him down and kept on beating him. She spoke to him quietly, encouraging him, comforting him.

"We will get you out of here. We will, Ed. You're going home. Just hang on a little longer."

He kept his eyes on her, longing, believing. At times they closed and his captors slapped him or threw water in his face to bring him round. Time and again he passed out. Time and again they brought him round. Whatever happened, she stayed.

She could hear the voices in her ear, voices from the present demanding to know what was going on. She told them a little. It was hard to know what to say, how to put it into words and most of her attention was with him.

"Just take time back, Ginny." was all she could say.

She did not immediately realise when the change came over him. His eyes were already closed and his breathing was very shallow. The guards tried once again to drag him back to consciousness. They were the ones who realised first. They started talking amongst themselves, rather than to him, angry and scared. She picked up on the tone rather than the words. Something had gone wrong. Then she looked at him and knew. He was dead, a pale and broken corpse.

And she screamed, a long, keening wail. "No. No, Ed, no."

Tears were blinding her and she barely realise that there was concrete around her, that she was back in the storeroom. She knelt on the floor, still screaming. A hand grabbed her shoulder.

"Kate, Kate. Come on, snap out of it." Ginny seemed to have picked up her own mood without knowing what was going on. She spoke to someone else. "She needs a sedative, now. We're not going to get any sense out of her like this."

But Kate knew now that the world did not make sense and that it never would.

* * *

Kate was awakened by the sound of Colonel Lake screaming at someone. "It's no use. Can't you feel yourself going? Even if we weren't, it won't work. Even if I could get it back to a point previous to... Look at this, Paul. And look at this one. We're stuffed. They're stuffed. The aliens didn't do anything to Ed. The plane that found the prison camp got diverted. They were never found. Even if we could get them out -"

Paul Foster slammed the table. "We've got to do something."

"Like what?"

"Get another pilot to find them," Kate croaked.

Ginny came over to her. "You shouldn't be awake. We couldn't put you in the medical centre, sorry. It was too full."

Kate nodded dizzily. "But we've got another pilot. We know someone who was there."

For once, Foster agreed with her. "We've got to find Alec. He was in Vietnam at the time and he was flying. I know it would mean bending the rules but he's always been up for that."

Lake nodded slowly. "I'll give it my best shot. But are not sure I'll have long enough to do it. I doubt have God on our left, at most."

Foster sighed. "Me too or I'd go in there. I'm sure I could talk Alec round. Can you do it again, Kate?"

She restrained a groan. "Just let me rest till you're ready."

It seemed to take forever. There was a commotion in the control room. The technicians

were buzzing about.

"It's OK. We've lost Colonel Lake but it's OK, we know what to do. I think."

"I'm sitting down." said Colonel Foster. "I don't want to give myself a concussion by keeling over."

Ten minutes later, he too was unconscious.

Kate spoke to Patel, one of the technicians. "You've rigged it to find Colonel Freeman's gene code?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Good. If I don't make it, you're going to have to find someone who's seriously plausible but hasn't been here long. You got someone like that?"

"Don't worry, Colonel. We'll get it done."

Kate did not want to re-enter the hologram room. The memories were just too fresh and even the bare concrete walls threw them in her face. But she knew she had to go on, it was the only way of preventing what she had seen.

"You're ready?" she asked, picking up the handset.

Patel answered her. "Yes ma'am. Shall we go?"

"Go."

This time she found herself on the streets of a small Asian town. Everywhere was the chatter of talk, the roar of vehicles, the clinking of bicycle bells, animals calling, every conceivable sound of civilisation at that place and that time. The streets were packed with people milling about and she had to go through them to search for her target. Most of them were Vietnamese but some were white and most of those were in uniform. She knew there was a USAF air base nearby.

On one of the dusty brick buildings was a painted sign saying *Lee's*. It looked like a bar so she headed towards it. Inside it was dark and for the first time she realised that she could feel no change in temperature. That put her off her stride for a moment. Then she looked around. There were any number of young men sitting at tables, most with friends, some with girls. She could not see Alec. She travelled through the bar and out of the back wall.

That took her into a back room. There was a camp bed there, a card table and a couple of chairs. Alec was there and he was with a girl but not doing what she expected.

"There, there. It's all right. I won't let him do it again." Alec had his arm around the sobbing girl and was wiping tears gently from her eyes.

That's why they all love him, Kate thought. She was reluctant to interrupt but she needed to know first of all if Alec could see her. Only after that could she get on with the plan. She cleared her throat.

Both of them looked up, frowning.

"I didn't see you come in." Alec said warily. "Who are you?"

The girl looked at him. "There's no one there."

His frown deepened. "Sure there is. You heard her. Can't you see her?"

The girl looked worried. "I thought I heard... I don't know. I don't know, Alec. Maybe it's a ghost. They are so many bad things now."

Kate took a deep breath and looked at Alec. "She can't see me. I'm surprised she could even hear me. Tell her that it's alright but you'd like her to leave. I have something very important to discuss with you. And if you don't believe she can't see me, I'll walk through that table. Alright?"

Still looking at Kate, Alec put his hand on the girl's arm. "You better go. Hang on, I'll

write a note to Johnny and if I have to go off anywhere, he'll sort it out. You can trust Johnny."

He found a piece of paper from his wallet, it looked like an old bar bill, and scribbled the note on it. He handed it to the girl along with some money. "That should get you home."

She smiled and ruffled his hair, then she looked in Kate's approximate direction. "I'll burn some joss sticks for you. I don't know, I think maybe this is a good thing."

He held her hand a moment longer. "I hope so."

The girl left and Kate came over to stand by Alec.

He looked her up and down. "I'm not drunk so maybe this is the start of the DTs but frankly, you don't like any hallucination I might come up with. What are you? And why are you here? What could you possibly want with me?"

Kate would have dearly loved to sit down but she realised that she would immediately fall through any of the chairs. "I hope you understand that I can't tell you everything. But what I'm offering you is the chance to rescue a group of American and Australian POWs."

Their eyes met and she could see him thinking.

"Obviously I'm interested but it sounds an awful lot like bait for a trap."

She shrugged. "There's not lot I can do about that. I can give you the exact co-ordinates of the prison camp where they're being held. I can show it you on a map. I might even be able to take you there, though that depends on what's happening at my end. Will you take a chance on it?"

His lip twisted, almost in amusement. "I could be flying straight into an ambush."

"You could."

He stood up. "Well, come on. I don't keep my maps in the back of the bar."

He turned out to have a motorbike parked outside the bar. She had to think for a moment. She knew she could not ride on the back, though he seemed to expect her to. Eventually she found that, provided he did not go too fast, she could keep up by floating alongside him using the handset. She could see him shaking his head at the picture. She just hoped he was concentrating enough on the road not kill himself in a crash.

Because there's nobody else we can go to.

The air base was smaller than she expected, a bit of a ramshackle affair like everything around here. The guards at the gate were in American uniform and they saluted Alec through without question.

"First you show me on the map," he told her as he strode along "then I need to get my hands on a plane."

The first part was easily accomplished. She could see him making calculations in his head as he looked first at the maps, then at aerial photographs.

"Next stop my boss," he said. "Hope he's in a charitable mood."

It turned out that Alec's boss was an American with a headache. He growled something about hating paperwork and Alec agreed with him.

"The thing I've got, paperwork is the last thing we'll need."

The CO looked up. "What have you got?"

Alec swung himself down into a chair on the visitors side of the desk. "A hot tip on the location of a POW camp."

The American whistled. "Is this kosher? Where did you get it from?"

Alec shrugged. "I know people who know people who know people. I can't be sure of it but I think it is worth taking a look at. All it needs is one plane, if I can get a look at the place I can confirm it and someone else can go back in for them."

"Better not take too long." Kate said at his shoulder. "There's a chance they may be moved."

Alec nodded, as if to himself but said nothing more.

The CO checked the maps that Alec offered him. "It's possible. But you know I can't just let you take a plane up on the off chance."

Alec smiled. "Why not? Okay, I know why not. But we have flights scheduled, don't we? Reconnaissance flights? If I could take one of those up and just... Divert it a little..."

His boss sighed. "And the alternative is?"

The Australian shrugged. "You don't really want to court martial me, do you? Cause an international incident?"

"You'd be the one causing it. Alright, go get ready." The man smiled. "It'll be worth it if you're right. "

Kate felt a tug on her, though no one was touching her in either place she was at. She thought she knew what it was.

"Alec, I think it's going to work. Just keep on with the plan. And if it does work, it might be that in a few years time you'll see me again - only I won't know you. Just react like this never happened until... Until I know what it's about. You'll know when." She smiled. "Goodbye Alec. You won't regret this."

As she switched back to her own time she thought: *Funny he was so much easier to convince.*

She staggered as she hit her own time. One of the technicians ran in to help her.

"It is it working?" she asked.

A phone buzzed in the control room. Patel picked it up.

"It's the medical centre, ma'am. They're coming round."

She sighed deeply. "Good, I could do with a lie down myself. Bet you could too. Well done everybody, we don't have confirmation yet but it looks like it's a success. I'll make sure the Commander knows how hard you all worked."

She hurried to the medical centre as fast as her aching feet would carry her.

All of the beds in the medical centre were full and many of the staff were lying on trolleys in the corridors. She knew that other people had simply been placed in side-rooms where they could be monitored. The medical staff, as many of them as were still conscious, had been overwhelmed. However, whereas the casualties had been deathly still the last time she had come this way, now they were all beginning to stir and some were already sitting up. Paul Foster was sitting on the floor, trying to pull himself into a standing position.

She gave him a hand. "How are you feeling?"

"Been worse. Had worse hangovers. But I'd rather not be feeling this bad."

She nodded. "I think we're all suffering from exhaustion, never mind anything else. How long have we been on duty?"

He shrugged. "It worked, though?"

"I'm just on my way to find out - if I can get through all these bodies."

He stretched awkwardly. "I'll come with you."

They passed Ginny Lake on the way, who was having her head bandaged. "I must have gone with a wallop. I'll see you in a minute, when this is done. I want to know what Ed and Alec remember. Actually, I want to know what I remember."

Kate nodded and moved on. It took a few minutes to get round all the unconscious and semi-conscious staff. She gave a word of greeting or encouragement to those who were awake

enough to take it in and Foster did likewise. People smiled, beginning to realise it was over. She just hoped they were right.

Ed and Alec were in a two bedded ward at the heart of the medical centre. Both had their eyes open now but were looking rather dazed.

"Kate?" Ed asked uncertainly as she entered.

She went quickly to his side and took his hand. "I'm here."

Foster went to Freeman's bedside. "How are you feeling, Alec?"

Alec groaned theatrically. "What happened? I remember -" A cloud came over his face. "I do remember. You passed out, Ed. Then I did. Then I suppose we started dropping like flies unless Ginny's solution worked. Where is Ginny?"

"Getting her head bandaged." Paul told him. "She hit it on the floor on the way down. I was more careful."

"That's a novelty." Alec commented "Ed, are you alright? You've been out longer than anyone."

Ed looked calm enough, lying back against the pillows, but Kate could feel how tightly he was gripping her hand. "I feel a little nauseous but otherwise I'm alright."

Kate sat down on the side of the bed. "Do you have any idea what happened?"

He nodded slowly, turning more pale.

Alec sighed. "I wish Ginny would get here. It's really weird, I've got two sets of memories. They pretty much merge after I met Ed but before that, they're definitely distinct. And when I met you, Kate. One time I knew who you were, one time I didn't. Is that the same for everyone?"

Foster, slouching against a wall, frowned. "Sort of. I've got the normal set of memories - at least, I think they're the ones I've always had - then I have a sort of vague memory of doing other things. But that's not clear at all."

Kate nodded, stroking Ed's hand. "I have odd bits but nothing coherent. "

Then she asked the question she really did not want to ask: "Ed, how many sets of memories do you have."

She looked at him and saw the chill in his clear blue eyes. "Three."

"Three?" Alec asked sharply.

Foster swallowed hard. "We had to have two attempts. Tell you about it later. Or maybe the commander will. You feel up to seeing if there's anybody in the canteen? We should be alright, the studio's been quarantined."

Catching the mood, Alec nodded reluctantly. "I expect you two are hungry and if everybody's waking up, the staff down here will be busy. We'll bring you whatever looks edible."

Kate noted he had to lean heavily on Foster to get out of the door but he went. She turned to Ed, not sure what to say. It came out of her mouth more baldly than she expected.

"You remember dying?"

He nodded. "It's weird. I can't put it into words, I'm not sure there are words in the language for what it feels like but I know I died. I was dead, really dead."

He took a deep breath and shivered violently. She put her arms around him. She was going to say something but he continued talking, calmer now.

"Must have been hell for you, watching. Did you know I was dead? I mean, from where you were, in the future, was I dead there?"

She had to think about that one. "You need to talk to Ginny about the physics of it. You

were still lying in the medical centre but yes, from my point of view you were dead. And then - well, we tried again and it worked. I'll tell you this, Alec's an awful lot easier to convince than you are."

He smiled and the mood broke.

"Don't want to talk about it?" she asked.

"No, not yet. I have to think it through in my own mind first. Then we can talk." He rolled his eyes. "I'm going to have to order myself to talk Jackson about this. He's just going to love it."

She winced. "Not funny. He's going to make a meal out of me to. Still, that's what he's there for."

Ed nodded, sitting up straighter. "Going to have to get back to work, aren't we?"

"We?" she asked. "I've been on continuous duty for the last few days, you've been flat on your back. Which do you think ought to be on duty?"

The next few days were tough, the whole of SHADO was exhausted, but they managed. The aliens attacked as soon as they realised that their plan had failed, then again six hours later. SHADO lost one pilot, Sims, and took heavy damage to another interceptor.

"Well done, Nina. Give my appreciation to the rest your staff," Straker said wearily. "Under the circumstances, that was a very good job."

But they recovered. The quarantine caused a few problems for the studio, people not wanting to work there if they thought it was unhealthy.

Those most closely involved retained the memories of the different sets of events that had happened. Kate and Alec encouraged Ed to check-up on his fellow prisoners, to see how it had affected them.

Some of Jackson's people went out to interview them under the guise of research for a documentary. With his subtle techniques, it was not difficult to find the confusion in their memories though few of them realised it was there.

Stanley Brisby remembered something odd. "I have this distinct memory of meeting Francis the first time to tell her that Quentin was dead. I suppose you always remember your first meeting with your wife - except I met her with Quentin at a reunion. I wonder if I have some deep down, terrible wish that he had died rather than putting her through such a traumatic divorce."

Straker shook his head when he read that and called Stanley out of the blue.

"Hi, Angel, its Q-tip. You know this documentary, well I guess it's an excuse for me to get in touch with my old comrades. How are you doing? I'd love to meet your wife and I'd love you to meet mine."

A meeting was quickly arranged, aided by the fact the Brisbys had moved to England to get away from Drummer.

Then there was something else, something that Straker checked with Lake. He was almost certain of the answer but he needed to be absolutely sure.

"Ginny, if I remember something from one set of memories that relates to events prior to the focal point - that would apply equally well to all sets of memories, wouldn't it?"

She had to think about that for a moment. "The event is entirely before that?"

"Not entirely but the crucial part is."

She nodded slowly. "That should be the case. Do I take it you're not going to give me details?"

"No, Colonel, I'm not."

When she left he sat staring at the list of survivors. Alec had arrived earlier than the plane that had been meant to rescue them. He had saved more than one extra life. Andy 'Tank' Bell had gone home to a hero's welcome and the Ed Straker who had been rescued had never known who had betrayed him.

He sighed and put the sheet of paper away. Revenge, he decided, was not in his nature - or he was not going to let it be. He hoped Tank had made the most of his second chance but for the moment Ed did not really want to find out.