

A SHADO Christmas Carol

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(With no apology to Charles Dickens. After all, he didn't have to study me at school.)

Ed Straker looked around SHADO Control with sour eyes.

Alec Freeman avoided his gaze for a moment. "You can't exactly say it's over done. One pack of tinsel and two packs of baubles for a space this size. We don't even have a tree."

"Any of it is too much." growled Ed. "This is a military organisation and the fact that the date is December 24th has absolutely nothing to do with anything. The world does not stop for Christmas, whatever you may think, and the aliens most certainly do not."

Alec sighed. "Should we have this conversation in your office?"

"We shouldn't be having it at all. Make sure all this garbage is out of here by the morning. I'm going home."

He stalked out, leaving the SHADO operatives on duty to sigh with relief.

"None of that now." said Alec. "Nobody likes working over Christmas. Now, where are the mince pies?"

* * *

Ed drove home along the frosty lanes to his apartment block. He blinked as he approached the door. To the very modern design, someone had added a traditional door knocker. Maybe that was their idea of Christmas spirit. He walked towards it and blinked once more. For moment, just for a moment, he thought he saw in that knocker the face of the late General James Henderson.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. Alec had told him he was over tired but he had refused to believe it. He was always tired, there was no way round it. There was simply too much work to do, more now that he was trying to do two jobs. He had had to fill in for Henderson since he died and there seemed no immediate prospect of a replacement being appointed. He was beginning to see why the old man had been so bad tempered. Dealing with the money men make the aliens look soft. Yet Straker himself hated to waste money. Keep costs down to the bare minimum and you might be able to afford another interceptor or to train another pilot. He shook his head. These things took billions.

The door knocker looked simply like a knocker now but he avoided touching it as he went in. The metal would be cold.

Inside his own flat there were no decorations. There was a box in one of the cupboards but he had not used them for many years. There was no point.

He looked at his watch. It was already nearly eleven and he would be on duty again at eight. Best to get some sleep. He remembered he had not eaten since lunch so he toasted some cheese and made a cup of coffee. Half an hour later he slipped into bed. Exhausted, he was

asleep within minutes.

He did not sleep for long. A sound woke him and he checked the clock. 11.52. He groaned and that groan was echoed by a rather perfunctory one from the sitting room. There was an odd, deep clanking sound. He frowned, lying still in bed until he could work out what it was. 11.53. The groaning continued, accompanied by the metallic noise. He still had no idea. He slid out of bed and padded to the door.

Sitting on the black and white sofa was the translucent image of General Henderson, clad in his uniform and what looked like about half a mile of chains. He was scowling.

"There you are, Straker. I've spent ages trying to wake you."

"I've been asleep less than twenty minutes." Straker mentally kicked himself for talking to an illusion. He walked towards it, holding out his hand.

Henderson flinched. "What are you going to do?"

Straker passed his hand right through him. "Just proving a point. You're a projection. Who's doing this? As if I had to ask."

Henderson rolled his eyes right back in his head. "You idiot, I'm a ghost. Don't you recognise the scenario? Didn't I feel cold and clammy? You could at least say something about undigested cheese."

"Cheese?" Straker asked, deliberately sitting down next to him.

"It's in the book. Don't you ever read?"

"Don't get time. Just explain to me what this is about and get on your way."

Henderson shivered a little. "Don't particularly want to go back there. But the problem is, I'm Marley to your Scrooge. All those years I spent forging these chains, well, you're turning into me. You don't intend to but it happens. How many people have you shouted at today for no good reason? Forbade a Christmas party. Didn't even want the decorations. You're forging your own chains link by link and one day they'll be as heavy as mine. I'm here to stop that because..." His expression softened for a moment. "Because you were my protege once and this wasn't were I intended you to end up. Or me. You know the drill. Three ghosts will appear to you between now and midnight. You learn the lesson or you're toast. OK?"

With that he melted slowly like the Cheshire Cat until just his scowl was left. Straker quickly searched the flat for any sign of projectors. There were none. He knew he ought to call this in but it was most probably a nightmare and he did not want to look ridiculous in front of his staff. Maybe he could talk to Alec about it in the morning or Jackson. Warily he went back to bed. A moment later he was asleep.

The voice was small, high, thinner than he remembered it. "Dad, Dad, wake up. Come on, Dad, we don't have much time. Come and have a look."

Johnny was not transparent as Henderson had been. He looked just as he had the day he died. The same clothes, even. Ed assumed that was how he would forever be fixed in his memory.

The boy stood up straight as if he was presenting something at a play. "I am the Ghost of Christmas Past. I've come to show you things. Come and have a look."

Straker shook his head. "I remember the last time you want to show me something. This is just a dream."

Johnny grabbed his hand and tugged at it. "Come on, you've got to see this."

Reluctantly Straker got out of bed. He reasoned there was no other way to make the dream go away but to see it through to the end. Johnny walked him to the door of the sitting room.

"Watch the front door."

It was opening. Johnny stood there, too, a younger Johnny. Six years old. Straker knew immediately what he was supposed to see. The little boy had eyes like dinner plates and his jaw almost reached the ground.

"Oh, Daddy, it snowed in here!"

Behind him a beaming Ed held the little suitcases as the boy ran forward into a room covered in artificial snow by the special effects department.

"Best idea I ever had." the older Straker murmured to himself.

"It was fun." said Johnny.

For a moment they watched as their two selves had a snowball fight, built a snowman, slid across the furniture, had more fun than Ed could ever remember. Later, but it seemed no time at all to him, a suspiciously familiar Santa Claus with a slight Australian accent appeared through one of the windows.

Ed turned away.

"I could have shown you other things." said Johnny. "Things before I was born."

"Not that first Christmas with your mother."

"No, your own childhood. It was happy, wasn't it?"

For a moment they were stood in a snowy Boston suburb but Ed would not look. "That was another me. Send me the next ghost, Johnny. I can't cope with you."

He closed his eyes and when he opened them again, he was back in his own flat. The artificial snow was gone but there was a warm smell of food cooking mixed with pine needles, oranges and spices.

"Ho, ho, ho!"

Ed turned to see a huge pile of presents wrapped in brightly coloured paper, covering one corner of the room. In the midst of it sat a very familiar figure.

"You know the worst of it is, I can imagine you looking like that." Ed said as he looked Alec up and down.

Freeman was dressed as a giant Christmas pudding, complete with a flaming sprig of holly on his head. "What's wrong with it? I'm the Ghost of Christmas -"

"Present. Yeah, yeah I know. You..." Ed paused a moment, trying to remember the story. "He showed Scrooge what his nephew and the Cratchets were doing. Please tell me Ford's not going to turn up as Bob Cratchett."

Alec's eyes were suddenly cold. "No, he's not."

Ed walked towards him and picked up one of the presents idly. "Thank goodness for that. OK, let's get on with it. What are you going to show me?"

Alec's smile was back. "Shall we start with me? Seeing as I'm only a ghost, we can do that."

Ed shrugged and found himself in his own office at SHADO control. Alec Freeman was behind the desk, hurriedly scribbling away at something. Ed peered over to see that he was writing Christmas cards.

"He's already sent those for all the outlying bases." the ghost said. "He hasn't had time to do the ones for those on duty tonight. And he's including your name."

Alec licked and sealed the last envelope. He picked up a plastic sack by his chair and headed out of the door. Those on duty were watching their screens as efficiently as ever. Ed noticed the decorations had not come down yet. One by one, Alec went to each of them and handed them a card and a present. Each one looked up and smiled at him.

"He does it every year." the ghost commented.

Ed sighed. "That's why I brought him in, for his people skills. One of the reasons."

Behind Alec, Ayesha was coming round with a tray of coffee and mince pies. Ed grimaced, not so much at the scene as at the contrast.

"Good job there's no sign of the Commander." said Bright, one of the technicians.

Alec scowled at the man. "He's had one Christmas off since we started. Is it any wonder he doesn't enjoy himself?"

"I always thought they looked unhappy when I'm on duty because they didn't want to work Christmas." Ed said.

"They don't." said the ghost. "But he makes it feel like Christmas and the spirit of Christmas anywhere makes it more bearable. Now, you were asking about Keith Ford?"

Ed did not need to say anything, in a moment they were transported to the studio canteen.

"Haven't gone very far, have they?" he commented.

"Where would they go?" the spirit asked.

Here there were decorations, lavish ones provided by the studio - a ten foot tree - for the actors and film technicians. Some of them were at the party but mostly it was SHADO people, those on the other two shifts. Colonel Lake was passing out drinks, carefully dividing alcoholic from non-alcoholic depending on whether a person was going on or coming off duty. Paul Foster was still pinning up bunches of mistletoe in various quiet corners. Ford was distributing finger food to the guests, too busy to eat himself but with the usual shy smile on his face.

"These people have no families for Christmas." the ghost said. "You know that. You picked many of them because they had no attachments. Others have given up what family they had for SHADO or given up any chance they might have had of having a family. Most will never marry, never have children. Never have those few happy years you had with Johnny. They do it because they know where their duty lies and because of their loyalty to you. Yet here they found a family, people like themselves. And as a family -"

"They celebrate together." Straker murmured under his breath. "I can do without the greetings card sentimentality." he said in a louder voice.

Picking up a plate of cocktail sausages and mini pizzas to take with him, Keith Ford limped away from the buffet table.

Straker cocked his head. "I hadn't noticed that before."

"He injured his leg a week ago, training in the gym." the ghost informed him. "You issued a directive on the subject of technical staff being unfit. He didn't want to be on the sharp end of your tongue so he tried too hard and then was afraid to mention it to anyone."

"He should have let a doctor see it." Ed watched him move painfully around the room. Then his face fell. "Tiny Tim. Lieutenant Ford is Tiny Tim. No, this is all crazy. What would he die of, getting shot by aliens? That doesn't fit the book."

The ghost shrugged and Ed saw that his plum pudding was beginning to dry out and the holly on his head was almost burnt up. "That's not my province. You have another visitor, yet to come."

"No!" Ed shouted, surprised by his own vehemence. Surprised by his own fear. "No, this is stupid. This is just a stupid dream. I need to wake up."

He was standing once more in his own sitting room, alone. At least, that was what he thought for a moment .

From behind him there was a noise of someone clearing their throat. Straker turned and gazed at the figure's skull-like face. *Not the grim Reaper*, he thought, *but close enough*. It

seemed odd he should be dressed in yellow rather than black.

"Jackson. Odd, I was expecting an alien."

"Interesting." commented the psychiatrist, his voice its usual cold purr.

Straker sighed. "Get on with it. I know pretty much what to expect. Everybody hates me, I'm going to die - never could work out why Scrooge was surprised about that - and..." he hesitated a moment. "Ford's going to die. Killed by the aliens I assume."

They were back in SHADO control. From the ages of the operatives walking past, those he recognised and there were several he did not, Ed assumed it was perhaps five or seven years in the future. Hard to tell exactly. Everything seemed to be running smoothly.

He saw himself walk in from his office.

"Ford!" he barked.

Ford, already grey and slightly stooped, jumped to his feet. His mouth opened as if to reply but no sound came out. He looked at the ground as if surprised to see it and fell face forward onto the floor.

"Undiagnosed heart condition." said the ghost with interest. "He had been having problems but he was too afraid of looking weak to admit that."

"Idiot." said Straker, not sure which of them he was meaning.

Around them people were rushing to Ford's aid but it was obvious it was too late. His other self stood apart from the crowd, looking on.

"Doesn't he care?" Straker asked himself.

"He cares he'll have to train a new head of communications." the ghost said. "Very expensive."

Ed's shoulders slumped. "What next? Am I going to die? Or is there more of this?"

"We can skip ahead to your death, if you prefer." the ghost said, watching him all the time.

"You know, I think I might prefer my death to this. But not, I think, what I'm going to see around it."

Jackson nodded slowly. "The death itself is of little interest. Not particularly heroic."

Ed was not that interested in whether he was telling the truth but he did feel that the spirit was simply trying to needle him in order to get a reaction. "Okay, so show me what you need to. The funeral?"

Instantly they were in a modern crematorium, dull and functional. A group of people was just breaking up.

"The service itself was completely conventional." the spirit said.

Looking around, Straker noticed the place was almost deserted. There were couple of lower grade actors, people who had always been hanging around for a part. A few of the technicians were there, mostly people from the studio. Only a handful of SHADO operatives were there. He assumed the rest were working.

Alec Freeman pulled an overcoat tighter around himself as he headed out into the light drizzle that could be seen through the door. His hair was grey and his face was even more lined than Straker remembered it. Virginia Lake came up beside him, still well-dressed but pale and too thin.

"That's that, then." she said.

"About time too." Freeman muttered but it was loud enough for everyone to hear and there were a few nods and murmurs of agreement.

Straker just stood there, shattered.

"Alec! It's the funeral." Lake hissed.

Freeman shrugged. "It's the truth. He was a good man, once. A great one, even. But you know what he turned into. It would have been better for everyone - him included - if he died years ago." The old man sighed. "I wanted better for him, I really did, but that's the truth and everybody knows it."

Straker did not notice the tears running down his face until he tasted the salt in his mouth. "That's not what happens, is it? It's what might happen, not what has to happen."

The spirit stayed silent.

Straker grabbed him by the arms. "Tell me the truth, is that what happens? Is it?"

Jackson smiled his icy smile. "I'm supposed to show you two children symbolising -"

"Forget that." Straker pushed him away and turned. "Just take me back. Take me, now. Before it's too late."

The spirit's smile grew broader. "Are you sure you don't want to know what happens to Colonel Freeman? It's a very interesting pattern: General Henderson, yourself -"

"Take - me - back."

Ed Straker was lying in his own bed waking up because... Because the room was cold, he thought. He had turned the heating down to save energy. A little too far, perhaps.

He let out his breath in a whoosh of relief. It had all been a dream.

His face crinkled into a chagrined smile. "No, no, no. If you don't know yourself better than... Well it looks like my subconscious does."

He lay there for a moment longer, relaxed and thinking. Then he rolled over and picked up the telephone.

"Studio catering? This is Straker."

The voice on the end sounded ever so slightly nervous. "This is Smith, sir. What can I do for you?"

"I'm sorry to bother you but what have you got in the freezers that we'd use if a horde of film stars or investors suddenly descended on us?"

The voice perked up a little. "Enough for a full-scale banquet, sir. I don't really have the staff on to do that -"

"I appreciate that. But could you come up with something like a running buffet? For downstairs."

He could almost hear the man nodding. "I can get something going in about an hour. You want it to cover the whole day?"

They spent a couple more minutes discussing details. Then Ed got up, showered quickly and headed for the door. As he reached it, he paused a moment, remembering what Johnny's ghost had shown him. A full-scale snowstorm was not an option, not today and not in SHADO control, but he went back to one of the cupboards. He needed to shift several boxes before he found the one he wanted. Then he went out, placing the box in the boot of his car. A few minutes later he was at HQ.

* * *

It did take an effort to fix a smile on his face but he managed it. His outer office was manned by one of the junior secretaries and he wished her a Merry Christmas. She started in surprise but she operated the door controls quickly enough.

For once he noticed the reaction he got as he walked into the control room. Everyone sat a little straighter, got a little quieter. That was good. What was not good was the range of expressions they tried to hide, from sour to scared.

Ayesha came to greet him. "I'm sorry we haven't had time to take down the decorations sir -"

"Don't bother." he said, handing her the box. "In fact, you can add these to them. And you can inform everyone that the catering staff will shortly be producing a running buffet throughout the day." He raised his voice a little. "I do appreciate that everyone is giving up their Christmas. I think from this year we'll try and make a little more acknowledgement of that."

She blinked. "Yes sir."

She took the box from him, stumbling slightly under its weight. Keith Ford rose from his seat to help her, looked at Straker and hesitated indecisively.

Ed frowned, thinking of what he had dreamed. Ford flinched and inwardly Straker winced. He had to get the tone of voice right on this one.

"Lieutenant Ford, will you please stop skulking around me like a frightened rabbit. If I didn't think you could do your job better than anyone else you wouldn't have held it for five minutes, let alone ten years."

Keith Ford blinked.

Ed sighed. Maybe he had not quite caught the tone. "When did you last have a full medical?"

"Er, well I've been kind of busy, sir. I -"

"Full medical - and I mean full - as soon as the medical staff are back from their break. Is that understood, Lieutenant? I can't afford to have my key people dropping down dead because they can't be bothered to go to the doctor."

"Yes sir." Ford said, with a tone of *key people - who, me?*

Straker turned and headed for his office.

Alec was standing in the doorway, a bemused grin on his face. "What's got into you?"

Ed walked past him, threw himself down in his chair, made sure the door was shut, then growled: "Since when have you been signing my name on Christmas cards?"

Alec chuckled. "I didn't think you'd noticed."

"It was pointed out to me."

Alec's look turned quizzical. "Care to tell me who by?"

Straker took a deep breath and noticed a cylindrical package wrapped in Christmas paper stood on his desk. Distracted and curious, he unwrapped it. It was a jar of humbugs. "Is this from you?"

Alec grinned. "Just a subtle reminder."

"Subtle? You wouldn't know subtle if it hit you in the face."

And Alec laughed at the weak joke, the first time Ed knew he had caused a smile in months.

"Get yourself a drink, you're going to need it. And make a note to check the medical staff test Ford for a heart condition."

Freeman did both those things. "By the look on your face, I'm guessing this is going to be some story."

"And if you ever tell it to Jackson, any of it, I'm firing you. Out of the biggest gun barrel I can find."

Alec raised his glass. "Now this is more like old times."