

Sick Leave

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Collapsing in your own office was not a good way to win an argument, especially when the argument was over whether or not you should take sick leave.

"You're going." said Alec and for once Ed Straker did as he was told. The next day he drove down to the Dorset coast, picked a bed and breakfast at random and settled in.

"I'm surprised to have two guests in out of season." said his landlady, as she showed him upstairs. "But I doubt you'll know Miss Allen's here. She's out walking most of the time."

He saw Miss Allen at dinner that evening. She smiled across from her table, a small, mousey haired woman in her mid- to late thirties. A year or two younger than him, he thought. He smiled back and exchanged pleasantries.

Later he phoned Alec. "I'm fine. I'm not doing anything. I'm going to get an early night."

* * *

The pain was too much. He tore at the device, he smashed his head against the wall but nothing would move it.

He was outside, running. He fell into the ditch.

If he could keep silent, maybe they would not find him. Maybe they would go away. But it was too much. He writhed and screamed, again and again and again.

Straker awoke with a start, aware only of the darkness, of the memory of pain and of someone pounding on his door. He struggled out of bed, remembering where he was.

He opened the door to find Miss Allen there, clad in blue pyjamas and a worried expression. "Are you alright? I thought you were being murdered."

He sighed. "I'm sorry. It was just a nightmare. You should get back to sleep."

She looked at him closely. "I'm not sure you should, you might go straight back into it. Would you like some hot chocolate? It might settle you. I've got some in my room."

He was about to refuse but the drink would be good and she might be right about the nightmare. "I'll put the kettle on."

She smiled and went back for her things.

The kettle was already full, he only had to switch it on. As he waited for her, he brushed his hair back with his hand and looked in the mirror at the scar the metal circlet had left across his brow.

Her reflection appeared over his shoulder. He saw the look of horrified compassion on her face and swiftly let the hair drop, turning to face her.

"Someone did that to you, didn't they?" she asked.

He did not have to answer. She made the cocoa and they sat and drank in silence.

* * *

This is not what I expected. I came here to think, think about my life. About finally doing something worthwhile with it. I did not come here to think about men. I did not come here to think about a studio head with a reputation.

What did they do to him? And who?

We sit in silence because I cannot think of anything to say that would fill the gap. This was no imaginary nightmare, this was real life but so far beyond the life I know. I want to help - but how can I?

* * *

In the morning he was not exactly sure why he knocked on her door before going down to breakfast. She smiled when she saw him and chatted companionably but made no reference to the night before. They re-laid the tables so that they were both on the same one. He felt awkward about what had happened yet comfortable in her presence at the same time. They talked about walking the local countryside.

"I don't go very far." she said.

"And I'm on sick leave."

So they went out together, a long enough walk by the sea in the cold sunshine. She was in PR and knew who he was.

"I have friends in the film industry." She gave him a wry smile.

They talked about the weather and went down onto the beach to look for fossils. He found a fine ammonite and gave it to her. She smiled. So did he. It was a good day. At dinner he talked about the studio and she talked about finding something more satisfying than PR. Afterwards she made cocoa, then left. He slept well that night.

* * *

He's good company. Quiet, but I like that. Not like so many of the pushy men I meet. Yet I want to explore his silence. It seems as if it covers a labyrinth. On the other hand, he can enjoy the simple things. He smiled when he dug that fossil out of the rock... And he gave it to me.

The next day started off to much the same pattern. He drove them further along the coast before they started to walk. They had only been going ten minutes when he heard it, almost as if it had been waiting for him to get away from the car phone. At first he thought he was imagining it.

Then Kate turned. She looked puzzled rather than surprised. "I think that's a flying saucer."

His heart sank and his guts clenched. He grabbed her arm. "Come on."

She did not resist. When he ran, she ran with him. There was a wood in the distance, hardly more than a large copse. They might make it.

The UFO was following them but not firing. They wanted to take him alive. He might as well be back in the nightmare, except now he had someone else to think about.

They made it to cover. He took them further in, not sure how big it was. He was also not sure what was best for her. She would not be able to look after herself on her own but if they found her with him they would either take her or kill her. She was holding up pretty well.

"This isn't random, is it?" she asked, only slightly out of breath. "This has something to do with your nightmare."

He nodded. She caught on fast. He was about to explain the basics when he heard the UFO coming in to land.

They kept going, stumbling over roots and scratched by branches. He thought there was a

farm on the other side. If they could make it there they might stand a chance.

The trees were clearing. He could see a red suit ahead of them. He jerked her around. She looked at him almost as if she was trying to reassure him. Shouldn't that be the other way round? He managed a smile.

Until he saw there were two more aliens behind them.

They had not been seen. He pushed her into the brush, pulling out his gun. She gawped but said nothing.

He took off the safety catch and handed it to her. "You just point it and pull the trigger. Stay here and I'll draw them off. Oh, and watch out for the recoil."

"Shouldn't you take this?"

He shook his head, leaving before she could argue. With luck he could get them away from her then hide himself. With a miracle.

They saw him as soon as he stepped out between the trees. He was trapped, covered by their guns. He put his hands up. He thought they understood the gesture.

* * *

They're going to kill him. How do I work this thing? Just like a camera - point and click, point and click.

I can't kill someone. A gun, oh my goodness, a gun.

They're going to kill him.

All three closed in on him. One took him by the arm. And fell, as Straker heard his own gun go off. The other two turned. A faceplate shattered with the second shot. She was good.

He dived at the third and wrestled for his gun. That was when he realised how much the last few weeks had taken out of him. He was seriously outclassed. Next to him he could hear the second one thrashing about as he tried to breathe. He felt in a similar state himself.

Footsteps running. Kate. The alien hesitated. Straker pulled away.

A stab of pain shot up his leg. He must have twisted it somehow. He hobbled backwards. Kate and the alien covered each other.

As he reached her, she put her arm around him.

"I don't suppose you'd consider going without me?" he asked.

"Not a chance."

They backed away awkwardly. All the time he kept his eyes on the alien and the alien kept his eyes on Straker. It seemed an awful long way. Kate stumbled and nearly brought them both down but they recovered.

The trees thinned and light broke through. There was a rumble of machinery behind them. She turned in alarm and he had to twist to stay with her.

* * *

I want to be sick. I want to be sick. Please don't let me be sick.

Then he grinned as he recognised the engine noise of a mobile. "It's OK. We're safe."

Paul Foster was running towards them. "Ed? Are you alright?"

"There's one in the wood, plus two dead. And we need to sit down."

An odd look passed over Foster's face as he guided them into the mobile and sent others after the alien. Straker just wanted a rest and to make sure Kate was OK. He knew he was going to have to let her go but maybe they could finish the holiday. He wondered whether he should tell her about the amnesia drug.

Then she dropped the bombshell. "I always wondered if the rumours were true."

* * *

If I don't make my move before we get wherever we're going, I might not see him again. If I let him get back to business, he'll forget me. I have to keep him interested.

* * *

He turned sharply to her. "What rumours?"

"About Harlington-Straker being a front for something."

He stared at her. He guessed everyone present was doing the same.

"You didn't know?" she asked mildly. Could he detect a trace of amusement?

He sighed. "Just tell me."

She did. "People have been gossiping for years. They do. Any film studio gets that. But there are two things that don't add up about Harlington-Straker: money and personnel. Every film you make makes a loss but you don't go under. You don't even make the kind of art house flops that attract grants. And as for the people you hire -"

"I get the picture."

She smiled. "Astronaut to movie mogul is a little unlikely. I even heard one bloke telling people it was a conspiracy to cover up an alien invasion. Nobody believed him. Most people think you're CIA or a drugs cartel."

She paused. "I could help you with that. I'm very good at PR."

* * *

I'm keeping him awake. He ought to be in bed. He ought to be... I can't let him go. I have to prove I'm useful to him.

* * *

He let her lay out her plans. "I'm just thinking on my feet, you understand." But she had figured out a lot. "You actually do run the studio, don't you? As well as fighting the aliens? That's a waste of resources."

He had a lot to think about by the time they arrived back at HQ. Alec caught up with him as he finished having his leg strapped up. The doctor made a discreet exit.

"Some holiday." his friend said. "You'd have been safer here."

"Told you so."

Alec smiled ruefully. "And you were right as usual. So who's this young lady Paul's been telling me about?"

He had that wicked grin of his but he must have seen something in Ed's face because it disappeared quickly.

"Is there something between you?"

Straker closed his eyes, exhausted. "I don't know. She... she's kind."

Alec put his hand on his shoulder. "You poor old - Ed, if you want her, go out and get her. From what Paul says, it even sounds like she'd be an asset to SHADO. Did she really shoot two of them? And if she worked here, you could tell her the truth. There'd be no problem. At least, not that problem."

He waited for his boss to speak but Straker did not know what to say. He just looked at his friend, imploring his help.

Alec nodded. "I'll go talk to her and I'll put a full-scale background check into operation. You get some sleep. By the time you wake up... Maybe."

Straker smiled. "You're the expert."

Then he closed his eyes again and went to sleep.

* * *

Freeman got the security check started, then headed for the guest room where Miss Allen

was waiting. He was curious to see what kind of woman could have that effect on Ed. She must be something pretty special.

She did not look like much - small and mousey and slightly plump. He was not entirely surprised. If Ed had wanted looks, he had had plenty to choose from before now. But when she turned to look at him, he knew. He knew she was the one. He saw in her eyes the kind of life, intelligence and compassion he had seen the first time he had met Straker. In him they had been ground down by years of war but maybe she was the one to bring them back.

She watched him expectantly and he realised how long he had stood without speaking.
"Miss Allen? I'm Alec Freeman. A friend of Ed's."

"Is he alright?" He was sure it was not just a polite inquiry.

"He's very tired. You do know that he was on sick leave?"

"Yes and I've a good idea why."

* * *

A friend of Ed's, yes. More than that, I think. I have to win him over. But I don't think turning on the charm would work this time. He's like me, a lot of bonhomie on the surface but underneath...

Why am I suddenly surrounded by real men?

* * *

He took her above ground, into the small studio garden. They sat on a bench and talked for a good hour or more. He told her a great deal, perhaps more than he should but if things did not work out, she would not remember. He wanted her to understand. He wanted her to make the right decision. He was sure he had been right about her eyes. The intelligence, the compassion came through in her questions. She really cared about Ed.

* * *

We talk. We talk about Ed. We talk about what he does, about SHADO, about the aliens - but most of all we talk about Ed. About his loneliness. About his pain. He does not use those words but I can see them in his eyes. And I can see that everything that hurts Ed, hurts him. Does he know I feel the same? I don't have the right to claim that, I've only known him two days.

He'll help me, though. He understands I have to be here, work here, for it to work.

Am I really prepared to give up my career, my life, to look after a man? I'm a success. I'm respected. I earn a lot of money. I'm a modern woman.

And it all means nothing compared to this.

I tell him I don't understand love, that this is my first time. He smiles - part amused and part concerned - and tells me he'll do whatever he can. "I've taught enough men about women, I only need to teach you about one man."

Am I really prepared to give up everything?

Everything.

* * *

By the time they had finished he was sure of three things. Firstly, she was good SHADO material. Brains, initiative, and by the sound of it some measure of physical competence. Secondly, she was what Straker needed. She had the heart to take care of him, the spirit to keep up with him and the willpower to tell him where to go when necessary.

It was the third thing that was the problem. He was in love with her himself. Hook, line and sinker. But that would never be a problem for her or for Ed.

* * *

"I didn't think boys past the age of fifteen sent their best friend over to ask a girl out."

Straker almost blushed. It was the next morning and he was feeling much better but this was going to be a difficult interview. He glanced out of his office into the control room. He suspected half of them already knew what was happening. Only half, because Alec ran the most efficient grapevine and he would not have said anything.

He looked back to Kate. "I agree with your ideas about the studio and I think I can get them funded."

"If I was allowed to make money from the films, I could increase SHADO's budget."

He nodded. "They have some strange ideas about money but the term *efficiency* usually gets their attention. And you'd have to do the normal training. It's very tough."

"I'd expect it to be. And I'd expect to be judged on my results."

They were thinking along the same lines. She seemed to understand everything he said intuitively. Yet he needed to be sure this was what she wanted.

"You don't have to join the studio. We could -"

She broke in. "How long would it last? You'd be lying to me, I'd never see you. That's no basis for a relationship and you know it."

He did, all too painfully. But still he wanted to be sure. "You do realise what you'd be taking on?"

She was completely deadpan. "An uptight workaholic with a secret identity and a mission to save the world."

For a moment he stared at her, then they both burst out laughing.

Outside, watching them, Alec Freeman smiled.