

# A Dog's Day

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*Every dog has his day* – ancient proverb

*Lord help me to be the person my dog thinks I am.* – author unknown

Nils Bergstom sat in the doorway of the SHADO mobile and waited for the signal that would send him and his canine partner into the dark woods beyond. Beside him, Sultan whined and Nils gave him a reassuring pat. Behind him he could hear the mobile mission controller giving instructions to the teams already searching for the UFO that had gotten through Moonbase defenses an hour before.

Standard procedures called for mobiles and security teams to search the estimated landing area for the UFO and its occupants, but a report had come through of a car by the side of the road, three doors standing open and occupants missing. Then someone remembered Nils and Sultan.

Nils met the Alsatian over a year before in the same woods. An alien had killed Sultan's master and Sultan, in turn, had led SHADO's team to the alien. At the time Nils hadn't realized what an achievement that had actually been. Most dogs would have been unable to stay on target, especially at the hands of someone they'd just met. But Sultan had taken it in stride.

Colonel Foster had ordered the dog checked out by SHADO medical and then returned to his family. Nils was the one assigned to take care of that.

Nils knocked on the front door of the late Trevor Mitchell's home. The report Foster had handed him indicated that Mitchell the park warden had a wife, Gillian, and three children. The youngest was ten. The house was average and autumn gave the yard a shabby unkempt look.

A worn looking woman with brown hair opened the door and gave him and the dog an incurious look. "The police said someone would be around with the dog," she said. She made no move to take Sultan's leash. "They said he was murdered by some druggies in the park. They burned his body..."

All Nils could do was murmur meaningless condolences.

Mrs. Mitchell stared at Sultan. "He was Trevor's dog for work. The boys... the boys don't have time to take care of a big brute like him. And I certainly don't."

At Mrs. Mitchell's request – demand really – Nils took the dog and all his paraphernalia – dishes, toys, bed, food, treats. The problem for Nils was that he lived in a house with two

room-mates – Moonbase astronauts who were home only a few days a month, but neither had signed on to living with a medium-sized dog. He wasn't sure what their reaction would be to yet another roomie and a four-footed one at that. At least his house had a fenced yard.

Despite some early problems – Nils decided he hadn't actually liked Jerry's old sofa anyway – Sultan settled in comfortably. Or at least Nils thought so at first. But repeated calls from his neighbors reporting Sultan's escapes gave Nils second and third thoughts about adopting a dog.

Finally, Nils decided to bring Sultan to work. Nils was scheduled for studio security for the next month and most of that involved keeping an eye on the studio buildings, checking passes and dealing with the occasional troublemaker. Having Sultan along tended to subdue most trespassers. Plus there was lots of room for Sultan to play – the dog loved playing fetch.

It was going well until the day one of the 'downstairs' security men ended up in the hospital with appendicitis and Nils was called to cover his shift. He couldn't leave Sultan alone in the studio lot and so Sultan came with him into the underground complex.

"You know the commander doesn't like having animals down here," Doctor Jackson said conversationally after finding Nils at his station. Jackson scratched Sultan under his chin and ears and Sultan was practically purring in pleasure.

"I can't leave him alone at home," Nils explained.

"Of course not," Jackson assured him. "Dogs are very social creatures."

Emboldened by Jackson's seeming friendliness, Nils said, "I figured you'd be more of a cat man."

Jackson actually laughed. "Dogs have families, cats have staff. But we all prove our humanity in how we treat those who are defenseless against us." The psychiatrist gave Sultan a speculative look. "I think this fellow may be missing his old job."

"Park warden?"

Jackson beckoned Nils to follow him into his office. Jackson rummaged through his desk drawer until he found what he was looking for – a piece of paper. He let Sultan sniff the paper, opened the office door and said: "Find."

Sultan stood in the door as if getting his bearings, then started down the concrete corridor at a gallop, Nils and Jackson running behind him.

Nils skidded to a stop at the entrance to the Control Room. Sultan had jumped up on Commander Straker and was licking his face. *Commander Straker...*

Except for the whirr of the computer drives, the room was silent as everyone stared at Sultan and the Commander.

Sultan and Commander Straker...

"Sultan! Down!" Nils finally managed to croak out. The dog dropped to the ground, mouth open and tongue hanging out in obvious joy.

"Doctor Jackson, would you mind explaining this?" the commander demanded, wiping dog slobber off his face.

"I asked him to find you and he did," Jackson responded. "Now you should thank him for his excellent work."

If looks could kill, Nils thought, he and Jackson would be smoldering piles of ash right

now.

"I'm going to end up walking the perimeter of a Sky-diver base in Newfoundland," Nils muttered. "Or worse."

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It was worse.

Instead of Newfoundland, Nils and Sultan were sent to Texas for four months of training. A look into Sultan's past had revealed that he had started training to become a detection dog for the British military but had suffered a broken leg after which he refused to go out in the field with his trainer. So he had been adopted out to Mitchell with the understanding that Sultan would not work at finding drugs or explosives.

Now Sultan seemed to have no problems at all aside from a perfectly understandable aversion to gun fire. And although Nils was an experienced soldier, he didn't blame Sultan one bit. If war was hell for humans, it had to be doubly awful for a creature whose hearing was so much better than human.

And then there was the search training. Sultan thought it was the best game *ever* – hours and hours running through the wilderness or urban demolition sites looking for people to have more fun with. On the other hand, Nils wondered if he'd ever recover from 12 hours in a sweltering car under the Texas sun pretending to be a victim in need of rescuing, or rappelling down the side of a building. Most of the other trainees took the challenge with an easy grace. Nils had bruises on top of bruises from hitting the brick wall. At least nobody laughed at him and he didn't have to *crawl* off the building.

Sultan took the entire experience in stride. And while he didn't rank top in his class, he was near it. The one black mark on his record this time was his reaction when one of the trainers came near him wearing a red rain slicker. Sultan's hackles rose and he growled until the red slicker was out of his sight.

The trainer who had been growled at shrugged and chalked it up to a bad experience Sultan had once had. The man would never know exactly what that experience had been -- an alien in a red space suit had killed Sultan's partner.

Their return to Great Britain was uneventful. Nils and Sultan settled into a routine. They were assigned as security to various SHADO installations so that Sultan could get used to the equipment. He liked the sky-diver base and the tracking installations, wasn't as enthusiastic about the air strips – probably the noise and jet fuel.

Personnel had arranged Nils' schedule so that he would have weekends and evenings free to work with the local Search and Rescue groups. Nils was afraid to ask why he and Sultan were being given special treatment.

Maybe Commander Straker simply wanted him and Sultan well away from HQ. Nils knew that didn't make a lot of sense, but little about his situation was making sense. SHADO wasn't in the habit of spending its hard earned appropriations on special training for single security operatives.

Months passed. Nils and Sultan were called out by Search and Rescue on real searches a few times, but others found the missing persons first.

Now they had been called out by SHADO. No field assistant, no real support. Just Nils

and Sultan waiting their turn to help.

Gunfire. An explosion -- hopefully the UFO instead of one of the mobiles.

Sultan shivered but stayed down, dark head on his front paws.

"You have a go," the mobile team leader called out.

"Sultan, find it," Nils ordered. Sultan ran off in an easy lope, yellow vest and the glow-light on his collar shimmering like a will-o-wisp between the trees. Nils hurried after him, radio on, lamp and compass in hand.

Search and Rescue dogs were trained to find the victim then return to its handler to lead the way back to the victim. Nils had learned over the many past months that different dogs and handlers had different methods of searching and maintaining contact between them. Some dogs liked to run ahead and others liked to make sure their handler was close by at all times. Sultan was normally one of the later. He liked knowing that Nils was close by. 'Support of the pack' one of the trainers had called it.

But tonight Sultan was moving fast, too fast for Nils to keep up. Then Nils heard a growl -- Sultan's growl. Nils ran toward the sound, underbrush tearing at his uniform pants. He called in that Sultan had found 'something'.

"Hopefully not a rabbit," the mobile leader grumbled back. Nils didn't bother to respond. Sultan wouldn't have stopped his search for a mere rabbit. And he wouldn't growl at a victim.

Nils caught a glimmer of a yellow vest and headed toward it. Then he skidded to a stop. Sultan had found an alien and had it on the ground. An alien weapon was just out of reach of the creature. Nils un-holstered his own pistol and ordered Sultan to stand down. The dog backed off and the alien started to get to his feet. But almost before Nils could react, the alien grabbed for its weapon and swung it around toward Sultan.

Nils didn't remember pulling the trigger but the alien's weapon dropped to the ground, followed by the alien itself. Sultan's growl was deep in his throat as he gazed at something hiding in the brush. Nils brought his lamp up to check it out and light reflected off another alien visor. The alien had his weapon up. A gout of flame erupted from the weapon's muzzle as the alien got off a single shot. Nils took it down before it could fire a second time.

The SHADO operative looked around for his dog. Sultan was sitting beside a dark mass at the base of one of the large trees. Sultan barked and the mass began to make crying sounds as it revealed itself to be a school-age girl. One of the victims, alive and whole.

"Good boy," Nils gushed, giving Sultan a treat and a scratch. He called in the location of the girl, but he also knew there were more victims.

"Find it."

This time, Sultan let him keep up. Another victim found, this one alive but gravely injured. Apparently SHADO's arrival had interrupted the aliens' grisly chore of vivisectioning this victim.

"Find it."

Again Sultan loped away, making sure Nils was behind him. Fifteen minutes later, one more victim -- this one dead. Sultan nudged the body as though to try to wake it up or figure out what was wrong.

The report was that three people were missing, but there was a chance the report was

wrong. There was something in Sultan's expectant stance that told Nils that the report was wrong.

"Find it."

Sultan stopped to get his bearings, nose in the air as he tried to pick up any evidence that there was a human out there in the darkness. Nils followed as Sultan went through his search pattern, sniffing out the rafts of cells and oils that humans leave in their wake. A confusing eddy by a tree and a dark stain that might have been blood, then off again. Half an hour became an hour, then ninety minutes, then two hours.

The mobile mission controller called twice to find out what the hold up was – the mobiles needed to head back to base. All Nils could say was that he didn't want to leave until he was satisfied there were no more victims.

Sultan started barking -- his happy 'I found somebody' bark. Nils hurried over to find Sultan licking the face of a small crying boy.

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Nils and Sultan were called into Commander Straker's office the next day. There had been no explanation given as to why Straker wanted to see them both. The commander rarely interacted with field personnel. That was normally handled by Colonel Freeman or Colonel Foster.

"Been nice working with you," the mobile team leader said after he'd passed on the orders.

Straker's blond head was bowed over papers when Nils and Sultan arrived in his office. Nils stood at attention, waiting to be acknowledged while Sultan sat at his knee.

"What happened out there?" the commander asked after what felt like an eternity. He didn't raise his head to look at Nils.

"Sir?"

"You were told the mobiles were returning to base, yet you refused to leave the termination zone." Straker finally raised his head.

"I had a feeling there was another victim out there, sir," Nils said.

"You had a feeling?" Straker's voice was mild but his expression indicated he might just order Nils shot for insubordination.

"Sir, Sultan indicated that there might be another victim in the area. I trust his judgment."

"A dog?"

"He found the two aliens, sir."

"Yes, I read the team leader's report. A full security detail beating the bushes for an hour trying to locate the aliens and your dog finds them in what? Five minutes?"

"Sultan doesn't like aliens, sir."

Straker sat back in his chair. "I'm told the little boy you found was very upset that he wasn't allowed to say goodbye to the nice doggie that found him." He finally smiled. "So, what will it take to get a search dog and handler for every mobile unit?"

"Sir?" Nils asked. He knew he sounded stupid but then so did the question.

"You didn't think I authorized all that training for you and Sultan just to give the dog a

job did you? It was an experiment. Jackson's idea actually. Force multiplication, rethinking of what we actually have as assets."

"Are we talking about raising puppies or starting with military dogs or maybe retired military dogs?" Nils finally asked.

Straker's head was down again. "You figure it out," he said. "Tell Doctor Jackson to give you all the reasonable resources you need. I want an outline by the end of the week."

## Epilogue

A small funerary urn was set on a pedestal. A silver star medal on a red ribbon hung over a framed photo of the individual being honored today – an Alsatian dog named Sultan. The photo wasn't recent. It didn't show the grayed muzzle or the cataracts that had left him nearly blind in his old age. It didn't show his fierceness against the aliens, or his gentleness when dealing with traumatized victims of alien abductions. It didn't show his heroic heart.

But the people attending the ceremony knew better.

It was a mixed group of SHADO operatives, mostly from the mobile unit teams, but some from SHADO headquarters as well. It wasn't a quiet group by any means. Puppies yipped and scampered under the feet of their – slightly – more dignified canine elders. SHADO's K-9 corps – puppy parents, trainers, and handlers. More and more of SHADO had gotten involved over the years. Outlying installations raised puppies for guard duty and for search and rescue.

Nils held the leash of his own newest trainee – a border collie called Suzy. She was still a half-grown puppy but was already promising to be a great search dog. But then, she had learned from the best.

The noise level dropped and Commander Straker strode up to the podium next to the urn and photo. "We are gathered here to honor the memory of one of our own. He was a warrior. He was a searcher. He was a hero and the first of a long line of heroes. And above all, he was a friend in the way that only dogs know. His presence reminded all of us that our humanity is measured by how we treat those who cannot defend themselves. He reminded us that we must never lose sight that we are human and we defend humanity and all of Earth's creatures against a threat we all know too well. But most of all, he reminded us that we aren't alone in this fight. Thank you, Sultan, for being our friend."

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Comments and critiques? **Deborah Rorabaugh**