

Dire Situation

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A UFO Series Story

April Challenge for SHADO Writers Guild

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To the man that inspires me to write, my husband Edward.

His eyes in the shifting city lights were a long forgotten language, and as he swept his athlete's body into the hired Jaguar without effort, so did he sweep his accompanying air of electric anger. Anger at two people who had told him what not to do.

Already shrouded and belted into the artificial warmth of the automobile, his wan male companion watched him in an active silence. Even as long as he had known the man who drove as if he was no more than one of the metals that were part of the car, he never was jaded by his careful study of him. Jaded was not his word. He had heard the driver say it once, and patiently asked what it meant, and was patiently told. That had happened a long time ago, during terrible days he preferred to forget. The driver always encouraged him to ask questions, discover new words, and read new books. His education was very important, the driver said.

The driver's moods made mercury seem dull and without purpose. Or at least he had heard an Australian man named Alec say that. He admired this man so much, a driver who could put any car through its paces as if it was a modern predator in search of a living meal, and move it swiftly out of the grand chaos that was London. A man with a body as sinuous as a snake. Those unfamiliar descriptions had been made of the driver, by strangers the companion didn't know, but the driver did. The most important of them, the one he liked best, was the Australian, who seemed to be the driver's best friend. He wondered what it was like to have a best friend. He wondered what it was like to wear a uniform, which the driver sometimes wore on the days they were together. He watched the driver in silence. He watched him in awe, another word he had learned from the driver. He had always watched him with love.

Love was a puzzling thing. He sensed that love might be a bad word to the driver now, but he never spoke of it. His intellect, another special word, didn't touch the driver's but he was sure that some things were not spoken, were not even allowed as part of the driver's quicksilver stream of thought which the Australian had said the driver possessed. He liked listening to the Australian. For now, he watched the driver, feeling upset.

"You're scared." the driver said without as much as a sideways glance at him, and it was not a question.

"We're not supposed to do this. They're going to be real mad."

"I expect they will, yes." The words were spoken, and that door was shut as if it never had been opened, had been bolted for all time.

"Are we really going to do it?"

That won him a rare chuckle. He liked when the driver laughed, since after the bad days

he had hardly laughed at all.

"We're really going to do it. We'll win, too. "

"But it bites!"

"Most rodents, and some men and women do. We'll be armed."

"It's a magical beast."

"I don't recognize magic, I put my trust in science. I know more about it now than its mother does. That is, if something that deadly and huge actually ever had a mother. Sit tight, we're almost there."

"Why can't everything be the way it was?" the companion asked plaintively.

Clearly, asking that question was an error in judgement. The driver's mouth pulled into a thin, taut slash, like fishing line with a doomed fish on the end of it, struggling against fate.

"It can't. Nothing's accomplished by longing for it to be that way. I know things are difficult for both of us now. You just have to trust me. You do trust me, don't you?"

There was only the slimmest hesitation before that last, desperate question, but again, the companion didn't know it. To him, the driver was perfect, and never was afraid.

"Sure." the companion replied easily, meaning it. His heartfelt trust was not lost on the driver.

"Good." Then again, stronger. "Good. I'll find a place to park this thing, and then we'll enter the forbidden cavern together. No doubt that thing is waiting for us there. Well, it better watch out, right?"

"Right! But suppose it eats us?"

"It *won't*." Spoken with a familiar snap and the clarity and confidence of a man revealing his name only when asked for it. And sometimes not even then.

"But what if it does? It's got great big teeth!" the companion exclaimed, growing excited.

"Incisors. Four. Two above, two below. Razor sharp. Capable of tearing us to bloodied ribbons as the beast's poison venom infiltrates our bodies like a biological ninja. It won't be neat nor quick. Pain will be our final memory."

The companion listened to the driver's words, not fully understanding them, but listening to the driver always made him feel safe.

A memory of pain, a thing to be tolerated, the driver thought. Some things in life are not to be tolerated. I've given more enough to them. I've sacrificed for her and my job. That stops, stops now, stops tonight. A duel, to the death. A triumph to be seized. Some humans have incisors too. Tonight, he thought in amusement at his own melodrama, tonight I bite, tonight I taste blood.

He caught his reflection in the driving glass as if it was a whisper. Exactly three strands of silvered hair had been compromised like a spy in an enemy's bed. The rest of him was, as always, immaculate. Perfect.

Perfect. Not free of sin. No, not of remorse and sin. Some wounds festered forever. Our divorce was barely over, and she's already- No, no brooding tonight, he scolded himself. Tonight was for victory. Nothing less. Losing is only a six letter word to me.

"Ready?" the driver asked, a rare, excited gleam in his blue glass eyes, blown like his assurance in a rainbow of sizzling flame.

"I guess so."

"I know you're still scared. Don't be. There's the cavern. One souvenir pelt of a 60 pound, 3 foot rodent coming up," the driver exclaimed, and firmly lay a reassuring hand on his companion's shoulder for a fraction of an instant before they both got out of the car.

An eager chuckle was his response.

"Better get ready to die, dire rat! We're coming to get you!" the companion happily shouted.

The driver nodded and smiled, then squinted to take in the cavern's depths, for he was about to enter territory previously untraveled, despite his careful preparation. They swiftly moved to the cavern's entrance and entered, hearing the tinkle of a bell as they did so.

In true Sherlock Holmes style, the game was afoot.

Unlike the assurance that Sherlock Holmes' ability would crack a case, two hours and a half later, no such success was savored by the pair. The two of them came wearily out of the glass and steel cavern with faces as long as the British winter.

"It killed us!" his companion cried.

"Yeah, that was a pretty dire situation, but it was only our first attempt," the driver announced. "Just remember, that doesn't mean we can't try again. This time, believe me, we'll win."

"Can we get burgers before you have to go?" his companion begged. "There's an American McDonalds over there."

"I'm just as hungry as you are and three times more angry than you at being killed. I want a burger and fries the size of the dire rat!" The driver chuckled. "So sure, let's go!"

They ate, rejoicing in one another's company, exchanging smiles and laughter, and love. Before they knew it, sadly their adventure ended, and darkness moved in to conceal their shared disappointment. They drove to their destination in wounded silence. After a while, the companion curled up in the passenger seat, asleep. The driver treated himself to some stolen, protective glances while his companion slept and he drove.

At a red light, the driver at last bathed his companion in a look of tenderness that might have melted a Swiss alp, eyes shining with tears rarely shed. The companion was his life, his soul, his true heart. His pride and joy, his best accomplishment. But since the day he had been born, never truly his. That hurt most of all. The incisors of a dire rat were gentle raindrops, offered to the earth like the driver's tears, compared to that fierce pain. He, who could not lose, for the stakes were too high, he, who refused to even recognize the concept of failure, he, who had his heart torn to shreds since losing his precious sleeper, without uttering a single cry. Except for now. Grief reserved for a brief moment, while waiting for a red light that meant stop.

Stop wanting, stop longing, stop dreaming, stop feeling, stop loving.

He had lost his little boy, the only son he ever expected to hold in his arms. What was more, he would not allow himself to lean on anyone to lessen the burden, he would not let his weakness show. The poisoned wound from a dire rat was nothing at all, compared to the chasm of pain etched deep within him, in a most secret place which he himself chose not to mend. He chose only to hide it. Especially now. A woman he still loved now shared her body with a stranger.

Johnny Straker ran up to the door of his house and waved goodbye to his dad, still clutching his sack full of games and toys from an establishment known as **The Forbidden Cavern**, which his father had bought for him. Commander Ed Straker's American Express card had become considerably lighter after all that shopping. The shop featured for sale all kinds of board games and game books which his father had amusingly discovered all seemed to cost more than a single SHADO Interceptor.

Every Sunday night, enthusiastic gamers of all ages gathered there to play a role playing

game known as **The Forgotten Realms**, part of something called **Dungeons and Dragons**, where success or failure was determined by the whim of the dice. John had longed to try it out. Now he had. Even the *loss* had been fun. After all, he had shared it with his **real** dad.

Ed Straker watched his replacement creep out of the house like a spider crept out from beneath a rock, and the stepfather exchanged a few words with the boy. The boy grew somber, then he meekly entered the house as if he was facing a firing squad. Phillip Rutland gave the Commander the sour look he always gave him. Edward Straker, capable of giving a look that could bring any charging dire rat down, stared back, his stare as lethal as a expertly fired bullet. As usual, Rutland backed down. Straker let out a breath he wasn't aware he was holding as a woman he had once loved darted up to him, clearly angry.

He was ready for her. **More** than ready. His contemptuous attitude alone would have killed a cavern full of dire rats.

"Ed, not only are you late again, you know how I feel about that game and you took him to play it anyway!" she screeched. Any dire rat would have been jealous of that screech.

"You always had a talent for stating the obvious, Mary."

"Don't give me your twisted sense of humor, Ed Straker. That game is Satanic. That isn't the way I want to raise my son!"

"**Our** son, Mary. Although I find I have to remind you he is my son a lot more often these days. Might be due to the fact you've already remarried and your husband has a memory like quicksand. And the game is Satanic? That idea is absolutely absurd. The game is about as Satanic as an ice cream cone on a hot day. I expected you to have a little more sense than that. Isn't it really your new husband that disapproves of Johnny having an experience that most boys his age want to have? I actually remember grade school in Boston, Mary. It's all about peer pressure, fitting in. Do you really want Johnny to be mocked or bullied because your brand new husband has morals that date back to an age when dinosaurs walked the earth and he possesses the intellectual capacity of their dung? Because this *isn't* about the game at all, is it, Mary? It's about Rutland, and the way he seems to have taken over your life the way your mother did. I remember the woman I fell in love with. I'm sure as hell not standing in front of her now. Good night, Mary. I'm sorry, but I just can't bring myself to wish your new husband the same."

He felt polluted just being with her now, and he wanted to get out of there. Commander Straker smoothed down his cream Nehru jacket and his inner heat of anger, and turned with relief, to leave.

"This is the kind of thing that could put an end to your monthly visits, Ed. And don't think I wouldn't do it. I have Phillip now, remember?" she snapped at his erect back. He spun around with the grace of the highly decorated full bird he was, and came up close enough to her to measure the width of the sclera in her eye. His unique voice, normally beautifully modulated, an instrument which he played frequently and well, became a sonic boom in a steel capsule.

"I suggest you listen very carefully to what I have to say. If you're even still capable of such a thing, between spewing your righteous nonsense at me which you learned from your newest zookeeper. Don't you ever, ever, **EVER** threaten me with that again. If you ever do, believe me, you'll regret it for the rest of your life. I'll see my son next month. Give your husband my total lack of regards. Good night, **Mrs. Rutland.**"

The last sentence tasted like he'd fed her barbed wire.

Commander Ed Straker went home that Sunday night, slept a few hours, showered and shaved, dressed and then reported to SHADO and locked himself up in the ivory tower of his

office, his expression a no trespassing sign. Several months faded into several more of the same. Then, on a day burned into his consciousness with the branding iron of fate, his only son Johnny died.

So did a secret part of Edward Straker himself.

That too, was a dire situation.