

Tuesday

A short story by CG Hatton

We ran all through the night. Through the falling snow, dodging the searing white of the searchlights. We heard later that Sookie's unit had gotten hold of some of their power weapons. Damn near blew themselves up figuring out how to use them but we celebrated later. We were down to celebrating anything. Finding a bottle of whiskey intact was cue enough for a party. Sat around a few candles in a cellar and toast to us.

That night we nearly didn't make it back. Got one up on Sookie though. We knew they had stuff in orbit. First thing they did was to take out our satellites. No news, no communications except short range radio when they weren't jamming that. No idea what was happening in the rest of the world. Emergency government meetings somewhere no doubt, if there were any governments left that is. Speaking as a planet, we'd never been visited by aliens before. At least not ones that we knew of and certainly not ones that arrived in warships and bombed the hell out of us.

The major sent us out in sections. We had runners trying to coordinate some kind of defence but it was pretty desperate. No air support, they saw to that. Couldn't even use vehicles without being spotted and blasted from space. So it was down to us, the grunts on the ground, but isn't it always? Lousy way to a fast promotion.

It was a bad night, getting rapidly worse. We ended up crouched in the snow at the edge of an airfield. Just four of us left, sergeant in charge now. Didn't really know what we were waiting for, just hoping for some chance, some opportunity to strike back while watching their ships flit up and down. I hadn't even seen one of the aliens yet but I was past curious. My toes were numb and my frozen fingers were curled beyond rescue around the grip of my rifle.

We worked our way round to the gate. They were bringing out equipment, trucks, armoured cars, troop carriers, all dull matt black.

"Why didn't they come talk to us first?" Ginny whispered at one point, sounding more helpless than she looked in her battle gear, chin resting on her rifle as she stared at those huge machines. Two months ago she'd been studying economics, now like me she'd been recruited into the Civilian Defence Force, a rag tag assembly of pretty much anyone who could carry a gun led by what was left of the military. I squeezed her a hug, most unprofessional.

The Sarge grinned at us. "Maybe they did," he said, profound as ever. He looked at me, "Corporal, get up there with a bug bomb."

Thanks, I thought as I cast him a look, grabbed a bomb and scrambled out. A twenty-minute crash course in explosives and I was the expert of the team.

I can't remember how long I waited. Seemed like forever before more vehicles came out. Two of them, lightly armoured recon vehicles I guessed. They didn't look alien, but then I don't really know what I was expecting, insects or something I guess. I shot out the back spotlights on the rear vehicle, ran behind before it could pick up speed and stuck the shaped charge of the bug bomb under the back axle. Mistimed the detonator and got thrown back into the ditch by the blast. Not sure what happened then, shots and shouting I couldn't understand. Then Cal was dragging me up and out, whooping about something. He pulled me to the armoured car in front. I stumbled over a couple of bodies lying in the snow then fell into the back, only noticing then the pain in my arm and shoulder, blood all over. And the fact that I had company. The others were up front. They got the engine to start eventually, after what seemed an age, and got us away.

I stared at our prisoner, clutched my arm and stared at it. It didn't look alien. A bit pale but you would've been hard pushed to notice it in a crowd.

We ditched the car as soon as we reached the edge of town. Just in time before they got a fix on it, the explosion behind hurrying us down the alley. We ended up in a basement. Gin blacked out the small, street level windows and incredibly found a small heater with fuel in it. Cal saw to my arm while the Sarge tried to talk to our alien. I stared at them while it spoke incomprehensible gibberish back at him, smiling to itself, and disturbingly looking an awful lot like one of us. It kept touching a band around its neck. Something twigged and I lurched forward, “The collar, get the collar off it.”

The Sarge cursed, grabbed for it and pulled the band off. The alien smiled, smug as a bug, got a rifle butt in the ribs as a reward. We had to leave our hole, run on through the night, leave whatever it was to signal its position to the aliens. We saw the lights behind, flitting down from the sky moments too late for a rescue. The alien suffered for that, got sullen, kept speaking at us in a way that was obvious it knew we couldn’t understand.

If looks were anything to go by, I assumed it was a male. Couldn’t get over how much it looked just like us, aside from the pasty skin in a grey uniform with writing that we couldn’t read. Still couldn’t think of it as a ‘him’ though. Not even as a person. Not when it flashed eyes at us that were too pale.

We tried to get all the way back to base with our prize, ducking the lights. Stripped the alien of any other electronics. Thought we’d lost them until a commotion up ahead. Explosions flaring bright against the covering of snow. Screams of the dying and wounded carrying on the night air. Cal waved us back.

We made it to another safe house. Safe in the way that only another cellar in another bombed out building in the middle of a war zone could be called safe. I really was freezing by then. Couldn’t use my arm. Propped my rifle against my knee, keeping watch while Gin skulked outside and Cal went off on his own to try and contact our Company. The alien sat in a corner, smiling to itself again, refusing to speak now. We wanted to know why and it refused to understand us.

“Leave it for the psyche team,” the Sarge said at last, frustrated beyond even his legendary patience.

My first contact with aliens and all I wanted to do was hand it over and go to bed. Not that I did get to bed, even when we finally got back to the underground station we laughingly called Headquarters. A couple of shots in the arm and I was ready to party. Hell, as the Sarge says, we can sleep when we’re dead, meanwhile there’s a war to fight.

We’d captured ourselves an alien. Found out later what some of the writing on its uniform said. My first alien word, “Earth”.

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