

SGX 23. Aftermath

Adam closed his mind to guilt as he tiptoed out of the trash heap that had replaced his normally tidy flat. He left Emma asleep, or at least in bed, because he didn't check. He had accepted her offer to clean up – after all, he was working. A tiny voice of conscience said that after all, she was on holiday, but he squashed it firmly, and headed for the base. If there was anything to do when he got home, he'd do it.

Most of his colleagues seemed to be suffering from hangovers. He was tired, but hadn't drunk much, and was irritated rather than sympathetic. Niki, in particular, annoyed him by moaning theatrically in the commissary, and he snapped that maybe if he couldn't stand the smell of food and coffee he should go back to his lab. Then he had to spend the next fifteen minutes apologising when he saw how hurt his friend looked. So he hadn't time for coffee himself, and arrived back at the computer in a worse mood than ever.

Vlad found him there at lunch time, swearing at the screen, and scribbling frantic numbers and signs on a notepad beside him.

'I think you do not enjoy your party, English,' he said quietly. Adam looked up, dropping the pencil as he did. He gave a rueful grin.

'I enjoyed it, Vlad, but I seem to have made everybody else miserable for the day. And I'm tired.'

'Peoples is always miserable after great parties,' Vlad said, after some consideration. 'More miserable if is more vodka.' Adam had to acknowledge the truth of this.

'But I am tired, Vlad,' he went on, 'And because Emma is here, I can't relax, can't sleep in my own bed, can't ...' He looked at Vlad and saw he didn't need to finish the sentence.

'I tired too, St. George,' said the Russian. 'I am thinking two weeks is being enough holiday for any people.' And Adam had to agree.

They went for lunch and Niki had stopped moaning and was merely unusually quiet. Jean-Pierre was there and joined them, reminding them that he would be gone for a fortnight after finishing work today. Vlad and Adam weren't able to explain to anyone why they found that incredibly funny, but at least the shared laughter sent Adam back to work in a better mood for the afternoon.

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Niki was feeling better by home time but he frowned at Vlad as they rummaged in the fridge for something to eat.

‘You two are getting too serious,’ he commented, his voice critical for once.

‘You sound like a school master! Who threw us together?’ Vlad replied, with mock hurt, and a grin.

‘It seemed a good idea, but I didn’t think you would both be so ... so ...’

‘Involved?’ Vlad finished for him. ‘Well, we are. What’s so bad about that? You like Adam, don’t you?’

‘Too much to see him hurt.’

‘By me? Why would you think ...?’

‘Because you’re military. Because you aren’t going to be here for ever. Because you’ve seduced him and eventually you’re going to leave him high and dry.’ The Russian speech, usually so comforting and relaxing to listen to, exploded from him with real anger. Vlad thought carefully before he answered.

‘Adam knows I’m a Major. He knows about military postings. His own contract is temporary; his government could recall him at any time.’

‘But what would you do? Either of you? You can’t whisk him off to Russia in your kitbag.’ Niki sounded exasperated and Vlad realised he was concerned for both of them.

‘I’ll always care about him. And at least I’ve shown him where his true inclinations lie. And how to do something about it,’ he added with a mischievous smile. Niki sighed. Perhaps Vlad was right.

‘And when you aren’t there? Who rescues him from predators?’ So the incident with Jean-Pierre hadn’t gone unnoticed.

‘He’s capable of looking after himself – just needs a bit more education in what to look out for.’ Vlad was defensive now.

‘Then let’s hope you have time to provide that.’ Niki turned to switch the oven on and fill the kettle. The conversation he’d promised himself was over. Maybe Vlad would draw back a little and maybe not. After all, the couple were both adults – and perhaps their current pleasure was worth future pain.

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The flat was pristine except for some bin bags, tightly tied, of rubbish, which Adam soon took down to the large container that served the whole block. Emma had been shopping, too. A light meal was ready and Adam was grateful and apologetic for not having helped.

Emma brushed his apologies away. She was in a strange mood, quieter than ever, and occasionally she had a small smile on her face. He hadn't quite the nerve to ask what it was about.

When they had eaten, Adam cleared away, washed up and brought coffee for them both. Contrary to general opinion, that of Americans, anyway, coffee was at least as popular as tea, if not more so, in England, and he and Emma belonged firmly to the coffee drinking sector.

Emma was curled on one of the floor cushions, still smiling. Adam expected more desultory conversation about the party or the hospital. Her words took him totally by surprise.

'Would you be offended, Adam, if I left this weekend instead of next?'

'Of course not, if that's what you want, but ...' Adam stared at her. Had he upset her? Dare he ask or would it be better to keep up a polite pretence and just let her go? It wasn't as if he wanted her to stay, but he hoped she didn't know that.

'It's OK. I've reorganised my flights and everything. The thing is, I've had an invitation to tour with one of my new friends, and as you're at work, I thought ...'

'Well, that's great!' Adam hoped she would only hear his pleasure for her and not the dizzying excitement on his own account. 'I was sorry I couldn't take more time off for you. Where are you going?'

Emma was vague. One of the medics, whose name Adam didn't quite manage to catch, was taking her on a trip in the south. She would catch her flight to New York from wherever they finished and then connect with her transatlantic journey, now postponed for a further week. It was a happy coincidence that Jan (he heard her this time) had holiday due this week.

She had some further leave due which she had been going to spend in England, but now, well, this was too good a chance to miss.

For a moment Adam wondered whether to ask more questions, make sure she knew where she was going, what she was doing, then told himself he had no right to be over-protective, and should just thank his lucky stars for the good fortune.

They moved to the computer and he looked up places and routes and sites of interest, but Emma didn't show a great deal of interest. She said she'd go wherever Jan took her and find out about the places when she got there. Adam could only wish her a happy holiday.

She was leaving the next day, quite early, and Adam promised to get her to the airport in time. She and Jan were flying to Jan's parents' home then borrowing a car for a few days.

Adam didn't recognise the name of the airport she mentioned but he wasn't really listening.

As he lay on the couch – for the last time – he considered whether he should have phoned Vlad. Then he decided that he would surprise him by arriving on his way back from the airport, unencumbered, and ready to move his things back into the flat.

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There was an autumn chill in the air as they loaded Emma's luggage into the car and left in the morning. Adam told her she was wise to be going south, and she laughed.

'Yes, a holiday needs some sunshine,' she agreed. 'I'll get plenty of frost back in Newcastle. Don't you wish they'd sent you somewhere warmer?'

'Not really. I'm working, remember, not on holiday, and I'm enjoying my life here.' Adam hoped she wouldn't guess just how much he was enjoying it. And how he could go back to enjoying it once she was gone.

It was amazing how familiar Colorado Springs felt to Emma after only a fortnight. She pointed out various places where they'd eaten or had coffee, and Adam got the impression she meant it when she said she'd had a good time. Then they were at the airport and despite her protestations he parked the car and helped her with her bags.

It appeared the first leg of her flight was to Miami and she'd agreed to meet her friend airside, so all Adam could do was watch her at check-in and then wave as she went through the barriers. He walked slowly back to the car, savouring his freedom but genuinely wishing his girlfriend, no, his ex-girlfriend, well. Perhaps he should have told her in person, but that might have spoiled her visit. He was sure he was doing the right thing.

He thought he saw Jean-Pierre, tall, black and assured, going into the terminal as he left, and mentally wished him well, too.

Then he had a job not to break the speed limit on his way back to Vlad.