

Mission in the Hospital

by Monica Wenzel

Dr. Steven Linden fed a dollar bill into the lounge's soda machine. The machine promptly spit it back out at him. He grumbled at it. A can of caffeine near the end of his shift was what he needed. And the moment of quiet that came with being the only person there.

As he tried to flatten the bill between his hands, he heard heavy footsteps enter the lounge.

"Lieutenant Linden."

He spun around and he saw the uniform of a major. He snapped a salute on instinct. The dollar bill fell to the floor.

"At ease, lieutenant."

"No one has called me that for a long time, sir."

"Seven years and four months."

And eighteen days, Linden thought.

"Intelligence says you're a civilian doctor now. You put yourself through medical school without the G.I. Bill's help."

"Yes, sir." Linden's jaw tightened.

"That must've been tough for you and the little lady."

Does a soldier shit in the desert? Linden wanted to say.

"After war, everything is easy, sir."

The major laughed. "Spoken like a true soldier. I knew there was a reason I was sent to recruit you."

"Why would the army want me back? Getting discharged once is enough for me."

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“That’s all a misunderstanding, soldier.”

“It felt real to me, sir. Since I’m not enlisted anymore, I don’t need to ask your permission to get back to my patients.”

He nodded, fought the urge to salute, and headed for the door. The major stepped in front of him.

“I can’t make you listen to me, but aren’t you curious why I’m here?”

“I’m not interested in discussing my military career, if we can call it that, or anything else related to guns and uniforms.”

“What if you didn’t have to avoid discussing it at your daughter’s school? Do you want to feel proud on Memorial Day or when you see bumper stickers supporting the troops? Do you want to look your wife in the eye and not see that speck of disappointment you know is in there but she won’t ever admit to?”

“You leave my family out of this.”

The major patted the doctor’s shoulder. “I’m here to help, lieutenant.”

“Here to help me remember a past I’ve had to overcome.”

“That assault was a misunderstanding. You were just trying to help that Afghani woman. It wasn’t your fault her injury was to her chest and she would’ve preferred to die in the street instead of having a man outsider her family touch her.”

In the past seven years, he’d wondered how everything might’ve been different if he’d waited for an interpreter to arrive, or a female medic, or let that woman die in the dusty street. He only had too many answers, and he doubted if he’d ever settle on one.

Yet, he knew how his life would be different without a dishonorable discharge.

“You served the army honorably for six years and three deployments. Two medals. And this one incident that lasted less than half an hour. Doesn’t seem fair.”

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Linden squared his shoulders. "Fair is where you eat cotton candy and ride the ferris wheel."

"Fair is also getting what you deserve. Changing to an honorable discharge. The G.I. Bill reimbursing you and your family for college costs. Getting you the recognition you earned."

"What's the catch?"

The major paused. "I prefer to think of it as an opportunity. We have a last mission for you. You complete it and you can be honorably discharged from the service."

"I'm not getting deployed again."

"The general thought of something closer to home. A short term mission with one objective in this hospital. It's a new mission, as in I got authorization to offer it to you about two minutes before I came in here."

Linden's forehead wrinkled.

"We have a special patient for you to treat. We don't even have to go far."

"Is it a general or the governor?"

"Interesting. Your buddy Amundsen got you a job at this hospital without explaining what he was doing here."

True, Linden thought. He'd never discussed what brought a New York man to the Midwest. The hospital's reputation wasn't enough, as good as it is internationally. When former Lieutenant Amundsen offered him a job, he was excited to finally have an offer.

"You still haven't told me what I'll be doing here. Or for how long."

"You should finish the mission tonight, if all goes well."

Linden checked his watch. "My shift ends in an hour."

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“Soldier, I expected you to be willing to put in more effort to get the deal I’m offering you. It’s a once in a career opportunity to get back everything you dreamed about when you enlisted. Hell, I was told you were smart.”

“I’m tired and suspicious of anything the army tells me. We all know the joke about military intelligence.”

“This mission is time sensitive and classified. You need to deploy now. You can’t discuss the details with anyone. Not Amundsen. Not your wife. Not now. Not on your deathbed. Otherwise the army revokes your honorable discharge, all the money the G.I. Bill gave you and the benefits for your family. Understood?”

He wondered what he was getting himself into, besides what he hadn’t dare hope for in seven years. At best, he’d have to make up a lie for Kristin about the change in discharge. At worst, he’d never regret not trying to get it changed.

“Yes, sir. I’m ready to serve my country again.”

“More than just your country needs you now, lieutenant.”

Linden wanted to ask what he meant by that, but the major left the lounge without an explanation of where he was headed. Dr. Linden straightened his lab coat and tie and scratched his goatee. As he followed, he found himself automatically in step with the major.

At the elevator, the doctor expected the major to press the down button. The major pressed the button for the top floor three times.

“Permission for Dr. Linden to enter the ninth floor,” the major said.

Linden couldn’t figure out who he was talking to. The elevator started up and stopped at the top floor.

“Permission granted,” a serious voice said.

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The doors opened to a locker room. The major opened a locker and started taking off his fatigues. He took a set of scrubs from the closet and tossed them at Linden.

“Put on clean clothes. We don’t want any problems. And don’t forget to wash up.”

Linden also found clean slip on shoes. He knew this mission wouldn’t be like any other he’d been on.

At the door on the other side of the locker room, he stood with his shoulders back and head high. He told himself he was prepared by the army and the hospital for any situation.

The major punched in a code, the red light turned green and the door hissed open. One look beyond the door told Linden that he couldn’t prepare himself for what waited.

After a first look at the patient on the exam table, Linden wanted to leave the room. The major urged him closer.

“Is this for real?” the doctor whispered. “Are you sure this isn’t an early Halloween prank?”

“Lieutenant, this patient needs medial attention.”

The major sat in a chair off to the side, leaving the doctor to start the examination.

The patient focused its large eyes at him and seemed like it used them to plead with him. With a patient in need, he felt compelled to help. But he wasn’t sure where to start. Or what to think of it.

He’d learned years ago to review the vital signs first. The patient was hooked up to the usual monitors. Blood pressure, heart rate and respiration all seemed a bit high, but those might come from the patient’s stress. Surely it was uncomfortable here. Hell, hospitals made normal people feel nervous.

Examine the outside next, instincts told him, if nothing else for his own curiosity. The greenish-gray skin felt warm to his touch, warmer than his human patients. The patch of red

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skin on the chest felt hot. The cheeks looked swollen to Linden, but he realized he didn't know what the face of the patient normally looked like. The eyes were large, but not as big as he'd expect from movies. They had a deep brown color and big pupils that reacted to light like human pupils. The hands had a surprising grip for their thinness.

The outside of the patient, besides the non-life threatening red skin that was probably a superficial burn, looked normal in his medical opinion.

He realized he couldn't know what normal was for his patient because he'd never treated anyone like it. Like him? Like her? He had no medical proof of gender.

Whatever was wrong must be internal. Shit, he thought, that could be harder to diagnose and longer to treat. Earn that honorable discharge and all those benefits. Just treat the, breath now, the alien.

There. He'd said it to himself. The extraterrestrial. The little green man. The creature he'd seen in movies. The alien waited for him to help.

He picked up a stethoscope off the table of equipment and held it to the alien's bare chest. The heart seemed to beat fast, for a human. The lungs wheezed. Ah, a symptom maybe. He picked up a tongue depressor and a flashlight.

"Open your mouth."

The alien looked at him with its huge eyes.

"Major, does this patient speak English?"

"We're making progress on that mission. Tap your chest twice and show him what you want him to do."

Linden made the signal for the alien to open its mouth and it cooperated. The doctor clenched his jaw when he reminded himself that he'd have no idea if the small trachea was

normal for his patient. He couldn't ask other doctors and the major didn't look like he knew a scapula from a scalpel.

At least he could hear the raspy breathing from the patient from that close.

So, he had potentially irritated skin and probably irritated breathing to work from. He wanted to ask if anything felt uncomfortable or hurt. He wasn't sure if gestures would translate to whatever language the patient spoke.

For lack of better ideas, he found the medical chart and looked at the notes. Where was the regular physician who'd noted body measurements and vital signs. He didn't find anything alarming in the chart. The quality of the patient's eyesight was impressive, not alarming.

"Has the patient hurt." He coughed. "Himself recently?"

"Our friend here is monitored 24 hours a day. He even eats dinner with his doctor. No chance of that."

"Has the patient been in a new environment lately or met anyone new?"

"Besides you, no."

Linden tapped his chin. "Has the patient had anything unusual or new to eat or drink recently?"

"No, but a snack sounds like a good idea."

The major went back into the locker room and returned with a pouch of peanuts. After sitting back down, he popped one into his mouth. The alien's breathing grew shallower and faster. The doctor's eyes widened.

The major noticed the alien watching him and tossed it a peanut. The alien caught it with a grace that surprised Linden and ate it before the doctor could object.

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Linden looked over the table of medical equipment set out for his use, but he didn't find what he needed. He opened all the cabinets and rummaged through the supplies until he found an EpiPen.

The alien started to gasp for breath. Its hand clutched at its chest and fell backwards onto the table. The monitor beeped as the blood pressure plummeted. Linden jabbed the needle into his patient's thin thigh, but it remained unconscious.

He got in touch with his dried out Catholic roots and prayed to the saint that part of the hospital was named for. He wasn't sure if she was the right saint, but he didn't have room in his head to figure out the right one.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.

I hope the Lord is with me right now.

Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

I never thought I'd pray for blessings for an alien.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

For the love of God, don't let this little thing die on me.

He didn't think Father Fitzpatrick would approve of his new version. He just hoped someone in the great "up there" heard it.

Will they still let him change his discharge if the patient doesn't make it? That'd be worse than never having a chance.

The alien quit gasping. Linden rushed to examine him with the stethoscope. He released a breath he didn't realize he was holding.

"What the hell was that?" the major asked.

The doctor spun around. "Take your peanuts and get out of here."

"Lieutenant, you have no authority to give me orders."

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“The patient’s health gives me all the authority I need. Out now.”

The doctor tapped his chest twice and signaled for the alien to stay lying on the table. He examined and monitored the patient for the next several minutes. The skin returned to a green-gray color. After making notes on the medical chart, Linden left the exam room.

The major waited for him in the locker room. He pounced on the doctor with questions, but the doctor gave a simple report.

“Peanut allergy. I didn’t know aliens could have allergies. It should be fine as long as no one eats nuts near it.”

“Nothing serious?”

“I’d call an allergy that affects breathing rather serious, but nothing more than that as far as I can tell.”

“Good work, lieutenant. Just a bit of paperwork, and then you can go home.”

Linden sat down to take his time reading over the deal that would improve his literal and metaphorical fortunes with just a signature. The major hadn’t mislead him about the terms.

“You can’t mention what happened at all tonight after you sign.”

“Then I want to ask you some questions first.”

The major sat next to the doctor. “Permission to freely ask questions granted, lieutenant.”

The doctor took a breath.

“Why me?”

“Honestly, you’re the best one working tonight. You’re former military, so we can make a deal with you. You have the skills of diagnosing patients in stressful situations.”

“Who else is involved with the patient?”

“That’s unfortunately classified.”

“Can you tell me how many people?”

“What do you think, lieutenant?”

“Fine, are there others like it, or him, or whatever we call the patient?”

“In the world, yes. In the hospital, maybe. I doubt you’ll personally ever meet another one anywhere.”

“Will people outside this hospital ever know about them?”

“People already do, of course. Don’t expect a press conference anytime soon.”

The doctor shrugged and let out a full breath.

“Satisfied?”

“I suppose so.”

The major handed him a pen. “Time to make your life better. A letter will come in the mail saying that the army made a mistake seven years ago. It’s easier to explain to the wife that that way.”

They both signed. Linden felt the stress release from his shoulders as he stood up.

“Your country owes you another debt, even if they’ll never know why.”

“Hooah, sir.”

“Hooah.”

The former lieutenant saluted. The major returned it with a grin.

Dr. Linden changed out of the borrowed scrubs and made his way back to the elevator. He gathered his personal items from his normal locker and exited the hospital without saying goodbye to anyone.

The breeze outside blew the change of seasons in his face. Fall had abruptly taken over earlier that day. He barely noticed on his four-block walk passed parking lots, bus stops and homes.

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He could finally dream about buying a four-bedroom house for Kristen and the kids instead of renting their two-bedroom apartment. She could stay home if she wanted, or finish her master's degree. His steps felt light on the first of the fallen leaves.

But what should he tell her? She'd ask why he was late just out of curiosity. He knew he'd have to tell her something.

Could he stick to his agreement? He'd have to lie to her and bury his new knowledge under their new lives. The information might just burst from him one day. But he couldn't dump the existence of aliens on her when he was still trying to make sense of it himself.

He looked up in the sky for a moment before he opened the door to the apartment building. Kristin was waiting for him in their living room.

"You're home later than usual. The kids just went to bed."

"One patient just needed me today. It's fine, but I had to stay."

"So, how was your day?"

Linden fixed what he hoped was a neutral expression on his face.

"Fine, honey. Just fine."