

## An Officer's Disaffection

*Many stories were written after The Muffler's Mission, primarily for the supporting characters in preparation for The Muffler's Misery. This one is set during that novel, telling the tale of what Dave Elkington and Morena Lessen were up to while the missions were underway.*

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Dave Elkington entered his office with a brief sense of unfamiliarity. Nothing had changed, but it was the first time in over a week that he'd headed straight to the Ministry of Information in the morning.

Colin Head, Tia Tobin and, last but not least, Rowan Webb had all now set off on their missions to Exwater, Emforth and Brightgate respectively. Morena Lessen had been inundated with work organising for these trips, some of which needed information via him from the Ministry of Information, so it had been easier to call in at the Muffler's Ministry first every day.

Once he knew what was needed, he then headed back to his own office to sort things out, often shuttling between Ministries two or three times a day. Dave enjoyed feeling part of something important. He also felt he needed to make amends, having been accidentally complicit in helping Jason Parr during the first crisis. Not that anyone had blamed him, other than Rowan, naturally.

Dave missed not seeing Morena at the start of the day. They'd established a friendly and professional relationship surprisingly rapidly, which made getting the bulk of tasks completed so much easier. She seemed to trust and rely upon him.

It wasn't a feeling he was used to. After sharing an office with Rowan for so many years, starting the day by meeting someone who seemed genuinely pleased to see you was unexpectedly gratifying. He was determined to make this role work.

Today, now there was a lull in the Muffler liaison work, he needed to focus on the other parts of his role for the Ministry of Information itself. Not all of his old responsibilities had gone away. First, he needed a strong coffee.

After making a mug of coffee, he took an obligatory couple of sips to keep him going until he was back in his office. Before he could leave, Courtney Godel entered the kitchen.

Dave hadn't seen Courtney much since he'd taken over as XD from Brett Webb, and rarely face-to-face. The last time had been when Courtney was sat on stage during the town hall meeting. He was a busy man.

'Ah, good to see you, Dave,' said Courtney. 'Haven't seen you around much lately.'

Was that an accusation?

'No, sir,' said Dave. 'Had to spend more time than usual with the Mufflers in the last week. There was a lot to sort out before...'

Dave suddenly realised he didn't know what he was allowed to tell him. That was disconcerting, having knowledge that he might not be allowed to pass onto someone as senior as a Minister – and someone who was his ultimate boss.

'It's OK,' said Courtney. 'I know all about Jason Parr and the missions to our neighbours.'

'That's good,' said Dave. 'Yes, they've all left now, so I can spend more time here. Sorry, sir.'

'Nothing to apologise for,' said Courtney. 'Your priorities were correct. I have heard nothing but praise from Brenda for the role you've been carrying out. You've made quite a difference in helping them reorganise after the tragedy in Gooseport.'

'Thank you,' said Dave. 'That's good to hear.'

It was. For a moment, he'd worried Courtney would be upset. Instead, he was fully in the loop and happy with Dave's judgement. Maybe this would be a good day, after all.

Dave nearly made it safely back to his office with his coffee when a voice called out as he passed an open door.

'Dave? I need to speak to you. Come in and shut the door.'

It was Martha Deveson. She was XD4 now, Dave's immediate boss – and didn't look happy. Dave took the offered seat, sipped his coffee, and waited for her to start.

'I've been trying to speak to you for a few days. Nobody ever knows where you are. What have you been doing?'

'I'm sorry,' said Dave. 'I've been working with the Mufflers a lot lately.'

'That's not good enough,' said Martha. 'I need to know where you are.'

Dave probably should have kept her informed, but there was always so much to do. He didn't have time to keep checking in. Still, it might be better to be conciliatory given how upset she seemed.

'I'm sorry,' repeated Dave. 'They've had a bit of a crisis, so I've been rushing back and forth to support them. I did try to find you.'

That was true. He did look for her... once.

'That's not good enough. You're Head of Section. Have you talked to your team members?'

'Of course,' said Dave. He was starting to bristle at her approach. 'I speak to them every day, and I trust they know what they're doing.'

Martha tried a different tack.

'You know you're not supposed to spend more than fifty per cent of the time with the Mufflers.'

'That's on average. I'll make up the time, don't worry. I judged that their crisis was the top priority in the last week.'

'You'll need to justify that,' said Martha. 'What's been going on?'

That stumped Dave.

'I'm sorry, I don't think I can tell you. Courtney knows. Ask him, and he can decide if you've clearance. That's not my call, but I can guarantee it's a critical matter.'

Martha's face reddened.

'I will speak to him. I was never happy with this arrangement. I'm not sure it's working.'

That angered Dave. He wouldn't let Martha ruin this role, not now he was enjoying it so much.

'I was just talking to Courtney,' he said. 'He's delighted with how it's going. So is Brenda Harper. You know, the head of the Mufflers. I'm carrying out important work there.'

'Well, maybe you should go and work for them.'

'Maybe I should,' said Dave. He took a deep breath. This wasn't going anywhere useful. 'Is there anything specific you wanted to talk about, or can I get on with my work?'

Martha looked away, glaring over his shoulder, seeming surprised at how angry she'd become. She gave a sheepish nod of dismissal.

'Go on then.'

Dave felt shaken as he made his way back to his office. He didn't know Martha that well yet. She'd only recently taken over as Head of Division after Courtney's promotion to Minister, but he'd never seen her angry before. She'd always come across as calm and considered.

He took into account that she was still adjusting to her new role. She was probably having pressure heaped on her from above too, and he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Dave would cut her some slack but would fight back if it threatened his work with the Mufflers.

Even that thought made Dave realise how much he'd changed in the short period of his exposure to the Mufflers. He used to tend to go with the flow compliantly, but now he had something worth fighting for. Hopefully, Courtney would back him up. Morena definitely would, and she'd be able to get Brenda on his side.

After sitting at his desk for a few minutes, he'd nearly got his mind straight to start on the first item of work when there was a knock on his door.

'Come in,' said Dave.

A man Dave recognised entered, wearing a brown overall and carrying a toolbox. The last time Dave had seen him, he'd come to remove some of his carpet as he didn't qualify for wall-to-wall coverage at his rank.

'I'm here about the carpet,' he said gruffly.

What fresh hell was this?

'You can't take any more,' said Dave.

'Not take, put back,' he said. He turned around and picked up a narrow roll of carpet from the floor in the corridor. 'Lucky I saved it from last time.'

'What? Why?'

He pulled out a piece of paper from his coat pocket, stroked his stubbled chin, and made a sucking noise as he scanned the page.

'Says here you've been promoted again. So the carpet goes back.'

'That's stupid,' said Dave. 'There'll be a join all the way around. Can't I have a whole new bit?'

'No chance. You'll need another promotion to qualify for that.'

'Leave it as it is then,' said Dave. 'I'd rather have a smaller bit than a patchwork.'

'I don't make the rules. It says it has to go down, so down it goes.'

Dave stared at him for a few seconds, then relented. It wasn't the man's fault. It was the stupid bureaucracy at the Ministry of Information. He shouldn't let it get to him, but having experienced something more relaxed with the Mufflers, it did.

'Do what you like,' said Dave. He stood up. 'I need to get some fresh air.'

The sun was shining outside. It was just what he needed, but if Martha saw him loitering around, he'd only get another bollocking. So he strode out of the main gate and kept walking. Lost in thought, trying to reconcile how he was feeling, Dave paid no attention to where he was going, until he suddenly realised he was halfway up the hill towards the Mufflers.

What the hell; he needed to see a friendly face. Dave increased his stride, not caring what Martha thought. He only hoped Morena was free.

She was. He knocked lightly on her office door.

'Come in,' said Morena, her warm voice the tonic Dave needed.

'Hi,' said Dave, somewhat embarrassed.

What should he say? At least she seemed happy to see him.

'This is a pleasant surprise,' said Morena. 'I wasn't expecting to see you today.'

'I wasn't planning on coming,' said Dave. 'I just had a bit of a rough start back at the office. Got some fresh air to clear my head and found myself halfway here. Then decided I needed to see a friendly face. So here I am.'

'It's lovely that you thought of me,' she said. 'Means a lot, thank you.'

'I should be thanking you for letting me barge in.'

'Don't be silly. Sit down, and tell me what's up.'

He did. He wasn't used to sharing his feelings with others like this, with the possible exception of fake jokey altercations with Rowan, but it seemed natural with her. She didn't judge. She quietly listened to his description of what had happened, prompted for details, and understood how it made him feel. Once he'd finished, Morena took a few seconds before replying.

'Maybe Martha's onto a good idea. You should come and work here.'

Dave wasn't sure what to say at first. He'd never considered that it was a possibility. He quickly perked up when he realised how much it would annoy Rowan.

'I mean, I'd love that, but how would that work? It's only my current job that gets me access to the information you need.'

'Not at all,' said Morena. 'Access wouldn't be a problem, not if Brenda and Courtney agreed. You know how the Ministry of Information works. You have the contacts there and the tenacity to get answers. You're thorough and organised. You've proven that to me already.'

'Really?' said Dave. 'Thanks. I mean, I love working with you. I feel more at home here than anywhere, but you sure it would be possible?'

'I don't see why not,' said Morena. 'We'll probably have to wait for the current crisis to be over before making any changes, but I can start getting Brenda used to the idea. If things come to a head before then, well, we'll see.' She paused for a few seconds. 'I like working with you too.'

Dave felt a sense of relief wash over him. As long as he knew he wouldn't lose the chance of working here, he could put up with Martha's disapproval in the meantime. There still was a lot to work out.

'How would I fit in here?'

'I haven't thought it through yet,' said Morena. 'It'd only make sense as part of my Division. Largely what you're doing now, but based from here, maybe filling in with other stuff for me when there's nothing needed down there. Could you cope with working for me?'

Dave grinned.

'I'm sure I'd manage.'

'I'd want there to be an obvious career progression path for you if things work out,' said Morena. 'Honestly, in terms of liaising with your current Ministry, you're better qualified than Jon Black was. You mainly lack experience. That will come. Give it a few years, keep taking on responsibility, and we could consider swapping your role out to a standalone Division again, just like it used to be. You'd be in charge.'

Dave was distracted from that bombshell by the surprise at how casually Morena had dropped Jon Black's name into the conversation. Her relationship with Jon had only just started when he'd been murdered by Jason Parr in Gooseport.

Still, he couldn't help but feel stunned by a future he'd not imagined even a remote possibility a few moments ago.

'Let's see how things go,' he said. 'Got to be right for you as well as me. I'm not sure how I'd feel about taking part of your division away.'

Morena laughed warmly.

'You're lovely, you know?' she said. 'Most people would jump at the chance for more power without a second thought. Honestly, it wouldn't worry me at all. I never particularly wanted it in the first place. I know Brenda only dumped it on me to keep me busy after... after Jon.'

Dave felt he should say something but didn't want to raise difficult memories for her.

'You must... you must miss Jon.'

Morena breathed deeply for a few seconds. She didn't look upset; more that she was deciding to choose her words carefully.

'As a colleague and a friend, yes. It was terrible what happened to him. He was brave. It's just...'

She trailed off.

'Go on,' said Dave. 'I mean if you want to. I don't—'

'It's fine,' said Morena. 'It's just that I've not talked about this before. Not even to Ashley. I haven't been ready.'

Dave decided the best course of action was a supportive, attentive silence.

'Did you know I was married before?' she said.

It was an obvious change of subject, but Dave assumed it must be leading somewhere.

'No,' said Dave. 'I don't know much about you from before we met. I'd love to learn.'

'It was when I was much younger, before I became a Muffler. It was great at first. Although he had a bit of a temper, he was lovely to me, just not always to others. They say

love makes you blind; well, I was definitely blinkered until that temper ended up being turned on me. I had to get out.'

'That sounds awful. I'm so sorry. How did you end up here?'

'I used to work at the Ministry of Logistics and spent a lot of my time liaising with my predecessor here. When he heard about my divorce, he offered me the chance of a fresh start. It was just what I needed.'

'I didn't know that,' said Dave. 'So you took over from him?'

'Yeah, after a few years as his deputy. He was Ashley's father. It was so sad. He died of a heart attack relatively young.'

'Didn't know that either. Guess that's why you're so close with Ashley?'

'Yeah, we're more like sisters,' said Morena. 'Anyway, I'm straying from the point. Jon had asked me out several times before I said yes. We did get on well, but it took me a while before I realised the source of my misgivings. He reminded me a bit of my ex-husband. I wondered if he'd end up turning his grumpiness on me.'

Morena seemed to want to talk about it more. Dave wanted to help but was unsure where to tread.

'Did... did you regret going out with him?'

'Regret's too strong a word,' said Morena. She looked pensive rather than upset. 'It was too early. I was more worried that those memories from my marriage would always get in our way. Even if he were the perfect gentleman, I'd always be thinking of what happened before. I knew it wouldn't be fair on him.'

'That's not your fault,' said Dave. 'It's not even Jon's fault. That was down to your ex. I can't imagine wanting to treat anyone that way. He must have known how much it hurt you.'

Morena's thoughtful expression broke into a smile.

'That's why I like you,' she said. 'I can't imagine you treating anyone like that either. Unlike Jason Parr.'

Dave knew that Morena had spent time watching Jason in the hospital but didn't know the full background. It wasn't something that had been easy to bring up before. Now he felt like he needed to know.

'Did you know Jason well? From when he worked here before, I mean.'

Her smile vanished.

'Yeah. You could say that. He'd been pestering me to go out with him for a while. I finally, definitively told him no, just before he disappeared. I always wondered whether that had something to do with it. At least I know now that it wasn't.'

'Must have preyed on your mind though,' said Dave.

'Not too much,' said Morena. 'It's been worse since he's been back.'

'I can't imagine how you must have felt, seeing him lying there in the hospital.'

Morena's mouth twitched uncertainly before settling upon a tentative smile.

'Sorry, I know everyone was worried about me,' she said. 'I got lost for a while. I had a few things to come to terms with, but I was never going to do anything silly.'

'Yes, we were worried. We just wanted to help.'

'Oh you did,' said Morena. 'Knowing you were all there gave me strength. It helped me come back and believe in myself again.'

'You should always believe in yourself,' said Dave. 'I do.'

Morena shook her head slowly as if she hadn't heard what he'd said.

'It was watching Jason that made me admit to myself why I'd been uncertain about Jon. Jon reminded me a bit of Jason, who had an even more fiery temper than my ex-husband. That was why I'd turned Jason down. And why I'd worried about Jon.' She let out a sardonic laugh. 'I seem to attract the same type all the time. I need to change that.'

Dave wasn't sure how to reply, but he had to say something.

'Thanks for trusting me. It means a lot.'

'You're easy to talk to,' said Morena. 'Sorry. I must have needed that.' She chuckled. 'And you were the one who came to me to talk.'

'Don't apologise,' said Dave. 'I'm glad I could help. Anyway, I felt better as soon as I got here.'

'That's good,' said Morena. 'You probably should be getting back. I'd hate for you to get in more trouble. We can discuss the details of you working here another time.'

Morena was probably right, but he'd loved this short time together. He didn't want to let the idea of becoming a Muffler rest for too long.

'Maybe later?' said Dave. 'I'm free after work.'

'Good idea,' said Morena. 'How about somewhere away from here? Don't want people to overhear us planning until we've agreed on everything.'

'There's a new pasta place down by the bay,' said Dave. 'That should be far enough away.'

'Sounds perfect,' she said. 'Shall I meet you there? Say around seven o'clock.'

'Great,' said Dave. 'It's a date.'

Morena cocked her head and looked at him oddly.

'Is it?' she said.

'What?'

'A date.'

Dave was briefly struck dumb. He'd said it without thinking. He liked Morena a lot but never imagined...

'I wouldn't mind,' said Morena softly.

Dave could feel his heart beating.

'Nor would I,' said Dave.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to pressure you,' said Morena.

'You didn't,' said Dave. 'I just never imagined you'd want to, not with me.'

'Why not? Is it because of my age?'

'What age?' said Dave, genuinely confused.

'You do know I'm a lot older than you?'

'That doesn't matter. Anyway, you don't look it.'

Morena gave him that smile again that made the world warmer.

'So why not?' said Morena.

'It's just... well, I'm nothing special,' said Dave. 'And you're amazing. Beautiful. I... sorry.'

## Substrate Constraints

'You do know that you're not supposed to apologise after telling a woman she's beautiful?'

Dave grinned back, his confidence growing.

'I'm a quick learner,' he said. 'Keen too.'

'I can tell,' said Morena. 'Now bugger off and do your job before Martha sacks you.'

'Yes, boss,' said Dave.

It would be a long day, and he knew he'd achieve nothing, not with his thoughts elsewhere, but he didn't care. He couldn't wait for the evening to come.

And, if things went well, he couldn't wait to see the look on Rowan's face when he found out.