

A Killing Kindness

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The back doors of the van were wrenched open and Straker and Henderson were hustled out into the darkness. Straker got an impression of an old house, big and remote, as they were bundled down the path. Henderson was not going fast enough. One of the guards struck him, knocking him over. Straker stopped, offering him a hand up. The older man would not taking it. He got another blow for that. Straker took him by the wrist and pulled him to his feet.

They were hurried on, reaching the top of a narrow flight of stairs that lead down to a basement door. One of the guards preceded them, unlocking it. The rest of them followed single file.

The room was a damp, brick built cellar. There was a table, a couple of chairs and an iron bedstead with metal shackles attached to it. Straker noticed the wires which wound around the legs. He shivered.

There was a door in the far wall. The two prisoners were pushed through it and left. He looked around. Much the same as the other room, it was empty except for a light fitting behind a grill and a bucket. It was obvious what that was for.

"This is all your fault." grumbled Henderson.

He had nothing to say to that, it was simply not true and there was too much to think about. Their captors were entirely human. Who were they and why were they working for the aliens? If they were working for them.

He glanced at his watch before remembering that it had been taken, along with his gun and the contents of his pockets. He wondered if anyone knew they were gone yet.

Henderson was pacing up and down, muttering under his breath and wasting energy.

Straker decided to use the bucket while he had the chance. It was embarrassing to relieve himself in public but it was better than doing it in front of his captors once they started work on him.

Henderson gave him a disgusted look.

Straker shrugged. "I'd advise you to do the same."

The old man growled.

A few minutes later they came for Straker. They removed his shoes and socks, pushed back his sleeves and chained him to the bed. The cuffs fitted tight to his skin. Then the shocks started. He tried to hold on to a thought, to learn something of what they knew from the questions they were asking. He tried to keep quiet but it was no use. So on it went, on and on.

He came round alone in the back cell. He could hear screaming from the next room. Henderson. He sounded like he was on the edge already - but maybe he had sounded like that himself and he knew he had a little more left in him.

His hair and clothes were stiff with sweat. His wrists and ankles were painful where the cuffs had burnt him. His muscles ached and he was very dehydrated. He also smelt like roast meat that was going off.

Turning over, he saw a bottle of water. They obviously did not want them to die yet. He pushed himself into a sitting position and sipped it slowly, forcing himself to ration it in case there was no more forthcoming.

He tried to rest but every scream cut into him. He would not wish what was happening on his worst enemy - even if that probably was Henderson. He listened as the sounds got slowly weaker. It did not seem to take long before they faded to silence. A few minutes later the old man was dragged back in, grey and unconscious. Straker was taken out.

The pain started as they fixed the chains over the burns. This time he had two things to concentrate on. As he fought not to talk, he also fought to stay conscious. It was the only thing he could do for Henderson, to give him some respite however brief. Not that the old man would thank him for it.

Alec had to be looking for them by now. He would find them eventually. Eventually. But the pain went on and on.

When he came round he just lay there, listening and trying to think. He was exhausted. It must be daybreak by now, maybe even lunch time. He had no real idea. Alec must be tearing his hair out.

He struggled to his feet as the door opened but they did not take him. He tried to make the general comfortable but there was little he could do. He wondered if their torturers were having a tea break. The thought was vaguely amusing.

A few minutes later, two of them came back. One stood in the door, covering them while the other carried in a tray with two bowls of tomato soup, half a loaf of sliced white bread and another couple of bottles of water. He put it down and left.

Straker drank the soup from the bowl, there was no spoon provided, and ate the bread. Both were all but tasteless. He did need them, though, he was extremely hungry. And it meant their captors did want to keep them alive. The electricity fitted that pattern. Used intelligently, it could keep the victim going for as long as was needed. Maybe they knew they would have problems getting answers.

Henderson was stirring. He went over to him. He tried to help him up but the old man shook him off.

"I'm not an invalid."

Straker handed him the food without comment. There was no point in rising to it. Henderson did look ill but he doubted he was looking much better himself. He drank some more of the water.

They came for him perhaps half an hour later. His heart sank - he had been hoping for more time - but he went with them quietly. There was nothing else to do. Again he tried to stay conscious, stretching himself to the limit. But the limit was closing in.

Something was different when he woke up. It took him a moment to realise what. The silence. There was no screaming.

Shock thudded into his stomach. Had they killed him? Had he had a heart attack?

He hauled himself to the door to see if he could hear anything. He could, voices. One was harsh, the other subdued. He could not hear what they were saying through the thick wood but it sounded like some kind of conversation.

Then it hit him. Henderson had broken. He was talking.

He ought to blame him but he could not, he was too close to it himself. It was a mess, though, and one that he would have to clear up.

He just needed to sleep for a while, then he could think clearly, but sleep would not come.

It seemed an age before they brought the general back. He shuffled in, glancing at Straker then quickly looking away. Neither of them knew what would happen next.

Straker was not entirely surprised when they took him through again. They wanted confirmation. He assumed Henderson had told them the truth. He could try and confuse them by lying but he knew that when things got really bad he would not be able to hold in his head what he had told them. Probably that would make things worse, if they could get worse.

He hoped Alec had some clue, some intuition, something.

The pain went on and on and it was more important than ever not to talk.

When he came round this time, Henderson was huddled in a corner watching him.

"Why don't you tell them?"

He croaked. His throat was too dry to speak. He reached for the water bottle and found there was none there. He waited a moment, then found a voice.

"If I do, they'll kill us both. They won't want us to be found."

"So you're saying I've got us killed. Is it satisfying to despise me or have you done that all along?"

"No. To both. You think I haven't thought about it? I understand."

Henderson shook a fist at him. "Why do you always have to be Mr Perfect?"

Straker was nonplussed. "Perfect? Me?"

The general growled incoherently at him and turned away.

Straker lay where he was, too tired to try and understand the old man's reaction. Probably he was just angry at himself.

After a while he said: "It doesn't have to look so bad. We'll need to tell the truth when we're found but -"

Henderson turned on him. "Why are you doing this?"

He shrugged. "You need my help. Why shouldn't I give it?"

He was interrupted by the arrival of more soup, mushroom but equally bland. The old man drank it greedily. Straker could barely get his down. He left the last of it and passed it to Henderson.

"You might as well take that."

He snatched it from him and gulped it down. Straker drank the water but he had only a few minutes before they came back for him. They grabbed him before he had a chance to stand, wrenching his arms as they pulled him through. He had little fight left in him, he was simply too tired, too tired even to feel much fear. He had no reason to try to stay with them. Maybe he would pass out soon. Maybe. It seemed to take forever.

The pain and the questions paused for moment. Confused, he turned his head to see the guards listening at the outer door. He doubted they could hear much, it was a thick old piece of oak. Then he heard. Gunshots.

It must be SHADO. It had to be.

The firing was coming this way. The guards drew their weapons, stationing themselves either side of the door. They would have a clear shot at whoever came through. Alec or Paul, he would lay odds on it.

He could not hear anything further but the guards tensed. Footsteps on the stairs, perhaps? He had to warn them.

The handle turned slowly.

He bawled: "Watch out!"

The door was kicked in, knocking one guard back. The other fell as Alec shoulder charged him. He struck his head on the floor and lay still. The first was up, firing but his aim was shaky. Alec's shot went straight through his forehead.

Two SHADO security men were in now but there was little for them to do. One of them checked the unconscious man, nodding to Freeman.

Alec picked up the keys and crossed to the bed, face lined with concern. Straker knew he could relax now. He winced as the opened shackles tore away another layer of burnt skin. Alec sucked in his breath as he saw the damage but kept going.

He asked: "Do you know where Henderson is?"

Straker nodded and motioned towards the door with his head. Freeman paused to give the order to go and get him.

When they were alone, Straker spoke. His friend had to lean in to catch the words. "Henderson broke."

A look of disgust passed over Alec's face as he passed him the water bottle but Straker shook his head. "Go easy on him. How close have you come? And we expect it. Henderson has been flying a desk since before SHADO was formed."

Freeman pulled a face. "I won't mention it if he doesn't. What you want me to do?"

He eased Ed into a sitting position and held him there.

"Keep it quiet but make it thorough. I don't know what information they have but we need to contain it. All the guards."

"Four of them are dead."

"OK. This could finish Henderson but I want him to have the chance to keep his dignity."

Henderson came out then, leaning on one of the security people. He shot a bitter look at Straker that encompassed Freeman as well. "Mr Perfect."

"Near as." challenged Freeman.

Straker did not have the energy to argue. Henderson carried on out. He would let him go before he went up himself. Alec stood over him protectively.

After a few minutes he gathered his strength to stand. Alec held out his hand to assist but he brushed him away and hauled himself up using the bedhead. His legs went out from under him. The last thing he was aware of was Alec catching him before he could hit the ground.

This time he came round in a hospital bed with his wounds dressed. Alec was in a few minutes later.

"It's contained. I've got Paul going through what we found. He knows if there's anything iffy to bring it to one of us. We could actually save Henderson's career, worse luck."

Straker smiled. "At least it would mean he owed us."

"Maybe. There's someone from his office waiting to see you. Insists."

He sighed. "Better get it over with."

Freeman opened the door and called brusquely. A young man in a smart suit came in.

"Commander?"

"You have a message from the general?"

"In the manner of speaking, sir."

Straker raised an eyebrow. "I'm not in a mood for games."

The young man blanched slightly and continued. "General Henderson was found dead this morning. A self-inflicted gunshot wound."

Straker gaped. That was the last thing he had expected. He looked across at Freeman, who was just as thunderstruck.

When he recovered himself, he asked: "Did he leave a note?"

"Yes sir, two. One to the committee and one to yourself."

He passed over a single folded sheet of paper with one word, *Straker*, written on the outside. Inside it was a single sentence. *I could have lived with your contempt but not your kindness*. Silently he passed it to Alec.

The old man had done the honourable thing after all.

Freeman snorted. "He always had to have the last word." He looked across at Straker sharply. "Don't you dare feel guilty."