

Haunted

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*This is a companion piece to my story **The Gate**.*

If General Henderson had shown the least ounce of common sense - never mind human decency - it would never have happened. As it was, he took advantage of the present crisis in order to score points off Straker. Up and down he paced, up and down haranguing him about the poor quality of his work, his organisation and anything else he could think of. Straker sat silent, not bothering to try and get a word in edgeways. When there was a gap and Henderson stared at him for a reply, his voice was almost inaudible.

"General, I'm two days out of the hospital. My second in command is dead. My senior officers have been working round the clock to trying to make up the difference. Not to mention we've lost a serious amount of hardware. And you're interested in whether the forms are filled in correctly? I don't think I share your priorities."

"Maybe you ought to, Commander. Maybe if you did you'd run a more efficient organisation."

Straker sighed with frustration. "Efficient? We run on a shoestring. Yes, I know it's a several billion dollar shoestring but look at what we're having to deal with. Our equipment is coming to the end of its useful life."

Henderson slammed a sheaf of papers down on the desk. "You'll just have to make it last a little longer -"

That was it. Straker exploded. "Longer? That plane we were in was twenty years old. It didn't have the speed to outrun the alien's ships. Damn it, it couldn't outrun a pigeon. And that's why Alec's dead. Because you and your accountants are too mean to give us what we need. Well you saved your pennies, but you lost SHADO one of its best assets."

He got up and walked out. Behind him, Henderson was spluttering with rage. He did not care. He was too tired to care. He managed to maintain a semblance of control until he got back to the solitude of his car. Then he slumped into his seat.

"Alec, wherever you are, I hope you're having a better time than I am."

He drove away.

In Henderson's office the temperature plummeted. The old man looked up, cursed the heating engineers and told his secretary to do something about it *now*. The heating engineers came promptly and found nothing wrong. He put his coat on and bawled them out. That was all for that day.

The next day the temperature dropped at precisely the same time. Henderson cursed, then started as a photograph on his desk fell over for no reason. He had not felt the desk shake. He shrugged to himself, bawled out the heating engineers once more and got back to work.

It carried on like that, every day getting a little more surprising and inexplicable. Every day the temperature dropped at the same time. It must have been a fault in the system but that did not explain the other things - the things that fell over or moved of their own accord. A week after the first incident, the rug pulled itself out from under Henderson's feet and sent him flying.

By the end of that week he had stopped complaining to anyone about what was occurring. It was too strange. Could it be an alien plot? They had never come after him before. Could it be one of Straker's people playing a practical joke on him? If that was the case, how were they pulling it off? But he was beginning to suspect... He was beginning to suspect something he could not admit to.

It was two days after the rug incident that he knew for sure.

He was in the washroom. It was just coming up to the time of day when he had barracked Straker. He splashed some water in his face, tried to prepare himself for whatever would happen today. When he looked into the mirror, he saw. Saw Alec Freeman.

He spun round. There was no one there. Turning back, he could see Freeman clearly. He was laughing - demonic, maniacal laughter. Henderson fled in terror. But now he could hear the laughter.

"No, go away. Go away, you're dead. Leave me alone."

He ran through the corridors, oblivious to the scene he was making. He shouted at the ghost but everywhere the laughter followed him. There was only one person who could help him.

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"I'm very sorry about this, Commander, but he insists on seeing you." Henderson's secretary looked more flustered than Straker had ever seen her.

"Can you give me some idea of what the problem is?" he asked.

"I think you'd better see for yourself."

Straker entered the office. The general was huddled in a corner, his eyes wild. "Thank God you've come. You've got to tell me what he wants. Please."

The old man was seriously rattled. Straker spoke calmly and quietly: "What who wants, sir?"

"Freeman."

He scowled. "Is this some kind of joke? Alec's dead."

"I know that." Henderson hissed. "That's exactly the problem. He won't leave me alone. You're the only one who might get through to him."

It was not a joke. Henderson was not that good an actor. Straker came to the only possible conclusion, the conclusion that Henderson's staff had already come to. The old man was mad.

Straker stayed with him, trying to calm him, until the men came to take him away. They were not wearing white coats but they might as well have been. Henderson was finished. A lousy end to what at times had been a glorious career.

As he watched him go, Straker heard a noise behind him. It sounded as if someone had got up from the chair behind the desk. He turned. There was no one there, of course.

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Alec Freeman sighed and shrugged to himself. He had been rather more successful than he intended. He had only wanted to get a little bit of revenge. Still, if he got the old monster off Ed's back...

He wandered back towards the light, preparing to wait for as long as it took. It was not so bad being dead.