

# Take a cup of kindness yet

by Tanaqui

Beck wiped away a trickle of sweat running down his brow. It had been hotter in Afghanistan, but that had been dry heat; the Kansas air he was currently breathing was sultry with an approaching thunderstorm that had been rumbling closer and closer for the past hour or more.

Heather seemed to be having as much trouble concentrating as he was; twice now, she'd trailed off halfway through a sentence, as if she'd lost her train of thought. She'd squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, and had to backtrack a few words when she went on.

He would have suggested they give up entirely on their discussions for the day, but he didn't want her to have a wasted journey, and he expected—or at least hoped—to be spending a large part of the next day discussing new intelligence with Gray and Eric. If, of course, Jake had managed to develop any of the photographs he'd taken when he'd pulled that crazy stunt with the cropduster.

Beck sighed inwardly. The heat would probably be making him less irritable if he wasn't already equal parts grateful and annoyed about Jake's attitude and antics since he'd arrived back in Jericho. They could do with the intel; they could do without provoking Hoffman and his troops into a shooting war. The resourcefulness he'd seen from the people of Jericho over the last couple of weeks had convinced him they could hold out for a long siege, peacefully waiting out the AS Army while the wider political situation resolved itself.

They didn't need a loose cannon like Jake Green, with his propensity for poking hornets' nests....

"The farmers have some concerns about water u—." Heather broke off from what she was saying and tilted her head at the sound of a commotion from the far end of the camp.

Beck turned at the same moment, squinting out across what he could see of the camp. Two sides of the command tent were rolled up in hopes the hot breeze would provide a little relief. But even though he couldn't see where the noise was coming from, the cause of the disturbance quickly became all too apparent: a bright flash of lightning split the sky, followed almost immediately by a long, deafening roll of thunder. Hard on its heels, sheets of rain came slanting down.

Beck, his aide, the radio operator and the two sentries outside all scrambled to let down the sides of the tent before the rain could get everything wet. Heather stayed where she was, but leaned forward and pinned down the papers they'd been looking at, to prevent them from being carried off as the breeze picked up.

When the canvas was tied down—though the gusting wind still rattled it—and some lamps lit, Beck took in a deep breath, relieved not just that everything was secure but that the temperature had dropped considerably. Turning back to where Heather still stood by the table, he saw her shiver and rub her bare arms. Before he could offer her.... well, he wasn't sure quite *what*, but he was sure they could find something for her to put on over her thin sundress, she'd dived into her tote bag and produced a pink cardigan. As she slipped it on, Beck smiled to himself: he should have known Heather would have the foresight to come prepared for all eventualities.

With the temperature back down at a level where it was possible to think again, they got through the

rest of the items they needed to discuss in just a few minutes more, despite having to raise their voices to be heard over the sound of the rain drumming heavily on the roof of the tent. The rain was still lashing down when Heather put her notebook back in her bag; Beck saw her glance up at the canvas above her and make a face. He guessed she was thinking about trudging back through the downpour to where she'd left her truck at the main gate, and driving back to town through the storm.

Making a snap decision, he put out a hand to stop her turning away from the table. "Would you...?" He cleared his throat. "Would you stay and have a drink?"

She looked up at him, frowning. "Sorry, I didn't quite catch...."

"I—." He raised his voice so it would carry over the sound of the rain. "I wondered if you'd care to stay and have a drink while you wait for the rain to stop." He gave a half shrug. "I still have some of that scotch left."

He was painfully aware of his aide and the radio operator in the corner listening in, and how this maybe sounded to Heather like more than he'd meant it to be: he saw she'd gone a little red. But then her cheeks dimpled as she smiled at him.

"I'd like that." She sat back down, tucking her bag under the chair, while he fetched the bottle from the locker in his quarters, and a couple of mugs, feeling unaccountably pleased. Pouring a measure for each of them, he handed her one and then settled back in his chair.

"Skol!" Heather saluted him with her mug before she drank. She coughed as she swallowed, and made a face, and he guessed she hadn't been quite prepared for the burn as the whisky hit the back of her throat. Since it was a pretty smooth blend, he wondered whether hard liquor was something she normally drank. He realized he knew almost nothing about her, beyond the bare facts on the registration form she'd filled out when she'd arrived back in Jericho.

Except that she was smart and brave and kind. Sipping at his own drink, he watched her covertly. There was so much he wanted to say to her, but he didn't know quite how to start. He wanted to thank her for all she'd done for him and his men. He wanted to be sure everything was all right with her: not just that she could sleep safely at night and had enough to eat, but that there weren't any repercussions from her championing of him. Jake Green, for one, had made his disapproval of Beck's continued presence in Jericho—and Heather's part in making that possible—pretty clear, although he seemed mostly inclined to blame Beck rather than take his anger out on Heather.

He wanted—. She caught his eye and he realized she'd been watching him too. Feeling embarrassed, he looked away.

"So...." She leaned forward a little, so she didn't have to raise her voice too much. "Is this how you normally spend your evenings? 'Cause I have to say that I think we'll be running low pretty soon on anything but that awful 'white lightning' Mary's been brewing."

Right on cue, another flash of lightning outlined the places where the edges of the tent flaps didn't quite meet. Beck found himself automatically counting until the thunderclap came; the storm was still close and moving off only slowly, and he found himself perversely willing it to stick around, just so that Heather would have to stay, too.

Suppressing a smile at how ridiculous his thoughts were, he considered her question. "No." He leaned forward as well, resting his elbows on his knees and cradling his scotch between his palms,

so that she would be able to hear him more easily. "If I get a few minutes peace and quiet—" He left unspoken that it didn't happen very often these days. "—I mostly read." His lips twisted wryly. "I'm on my third time straight through *Les Misérables*. Only thing I brought with me."

"Well, that doesn't sound very cheerful!" Heather's mouth quirked, and his own lips twitched at the joke. Then she grew more serious. "If you'd like, I could lend you some books...."

"Thank you." It was his turn to tilt his scotch in salute. "That would be very kind."

"Oh!" Her face lit up. "Maybe some of your soldiers would like that too. I know the Millers used to ask for magazines and books to send out to their son and his friends when he was in Iraq. I could ask the library to put some stuff together and we could set up a little library out here." She frowned. "I know some of the library books got damaged when there was a fire about a week after the attacks. And maybe they burned some for fuel during the winter. They did that over in New Bern...."

He had to lean closer to catch the last words, almost lip reading them. A distracted expression settled on her face for a moment, before she shook herself and chuckled. "Anyway, maybe they had the sense over here to start with the Harlequins, so we won't need to wade through those." She looked up at him uncertainly. "If you think...?"

He gave her a warm smile. "That sounds like an excellent idea. Thank you." He sighed and took another sip of scotch. "I think the troops are going to be a little bored when they're in camp."

Her face grew thoughtful again. "Maybe we could ask the High School if they'd loan some sports equipment?" she suggested. "Or let your guys use their gym from time to time? And what about board games...? Perhaps we can find some chess sets? Checkers? Or Scrabble. That kind of thing...."

Watching her, he realized how much he'd come to rely on the way she took the initiative, and on her capacity to come up with creative solutions to problems he'd scarcely articulated.

He became aware that she'd stopped talking and was again waiting for his approval. "Yes. Please. All of that would be...." Again he raised his mug to her in acknowledgment. "Thank you."

She shrugged "It's hardly flying in rock groups or the Harlem Globetrotters...."

An unexpected laugh escaped him—when had he last laughed?—and he shook his head. "Give you a couple of weeks and I thoroughly expect you to have organized Colonel Davies and the Texans into making that happen."

She bowed her head again, and took another sip of scotch, but he could tell she was pleased by the compliment.

"So what can I bring *you*?" She looked back up at him.

"Me?" he asked in surprise.

She nodded. "So you don't have to read *Les Misérables* again." She rested her mug on the table. "Do you have a preference for nineteenth century literature? Or classics from any era? Or are there particular kinds of story you like? Anything I *shouldn't* bring?" She peered at him anxiously.

He hesitated for a moment, torn between giving her a safe answer and the one that had sprung immediately to mind. He allowed the rash side of him to win out. "Why don't you bring me something *you* enjoy."

She blinked a little, and then chuckled. "You do know I taught third grade? That I like children's books?" She sighed. "I was reading *Alice in Wonderland* to my class right before the attacks happened."

He gave her a wry smile. "I think we're all through the looking glass, now." Growing serious again, he added, "I used to enjoy reading to my daughter. It would be good to—" He stopped, remembering the peaceful evenings when he'd been home on leave, sitting by Isa's bed, quietly transporting her to distant lands and times as she fell asleep. She'd grown out of being read to a few years back, but he would have given anything right then, anything at all, to be at her bedside, reading her to sleep....

"I'll see what I can find." Heather's gentle words broke into his memories.

Wordlessly, he nodded at her, before finishing the last of his scotch. He noticed as he put his mug on the table that the rain was no longer hammering down so hard. "I think—" His voice was a little hoarse, and he cleared his throat and tried again. "I think the storm's going over."

"Yes." Even as Heather gave her reply, the sound of the rain sputtered out to just the occasional heavy splatter. She drained her own drink. "I should get back to town before it starts getting dark."

"Yes." He stood and waited for her to fish her bag from under the chair, before he walked her to entrance to the tent. Pulling back the flap, he saw the edge of the storm cloud rolling away to the south, and the camp bathed in the low rays of the setting sun.

He turned back to her. "Thank you for the suggestions about the library and the other things. I'm sure the troops will appreciate anything you can provide."

She bobbed her head. "I'll see what I can do." She hesitated for a moment. "And thank you for the drink. I'd...." She stopped and he raised his eyebrows, inviting her to go on. Maybe it was just the failing light that brought a flush to her cheeks as she said hurriedly, "Maybe we could do this again some time?"

He nodded wordlessly, smiling at her as he held her gaze for a moment. Then he took a deep breath and, reluctantly, made a small gesture in the direction of the main gate. "Have a safe journey."

She dipped her head in acknowledgment, and set off across the worn grass, confidently picking her way through the puddles that had formed after the storm. Watching her go, he promised himself: *some time soon.*

**Disclaimer:** These stories are based on the Junction Entertainment/Fixed Mark Productions/CBS Paramount Television series *Jericho*. They were written for entertainment only; the author does not profit from them nor was any infringement of copyright intended.