

Attention to Detail

by Tanaqui

"So where are we?" Beck peered down at the map spread out on the hood of the humvee. The running battle with the road gang had taken them a long way down the highway, dragging them much further into Nebraska than he'd expected when they'd set out that morning, and he wasn't even sure they were on the same road as they'd started out on. Things had got a little confused for a while back there.

They'd have to backtrack to secure the places they'd bypassed, of course. But at least this group of thugs would no longer be free to rob and murder. Glancing up, Beck cast an approving eye over the remnants of the gang, their hands tied, being shoved into the back of a humvee. Beyond them, a group of soldiers was trying to right and clear from the road the bullet-ridden truck the gang had been hiding behind during the final shoot out.

"Think the last mile marker we passed was thirty two, sir." At Beck's side, Lieutenant Parker had whipped out a small pair of fieldglasses and was squinting back down the level, dead-straight road. "Yes, sir. Thirty two." Parker tucked the glasses back into his vest and leaned over the map. "That puts us here, sir." He tapped a spot on the map.

Parker had only been in Beck's command a couple of weeks, and the major was still trying to figure him out. He couldn't quite put his finger on why, but there was something about the lieutenant that rubbed Beck the wrong way, like Parker regarded the Army and what they were doing with contempt. It was almost as if he were just playing at soldiers. However, Beck couldn't fault the way Parker performed his duties, and the lieutenant had to be the most damned observant officer he'd ever served with. He noticed—and remembered—*everything*. Beck would've been happy to take him at his word that they were just past mile marker thirty two even without the visual check.

He squinted down at the point on the map that Parker had indicated. "Hmm. Looks like there's a farm less than a mile on. We should go introduce ourselves before we set up camp." Experience had shown it was the best way to avoid 'misunderstandings'—and their unfortunate consequences. Not to mention, the farm probably had a clean water supply, and they could likely get some intel on the area. Beck nodded at Parker to refold the map. "Lieutenant, you're with me."

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The humvee bumped along the rough dirt track that ran for a quarter of a mile from the road to where the farmhouse squatted unhappily against the horizon. The place was so run down that Beck might have taken it for abandoned, if it hadn't been for two late-model cars in the collection of vehicles drawn up outside the barn to one side of the yard. Something about the way the cars were arranged itched at Beck as he climbed from the humvee, but he couldn't say what, unless it was that their tires were half flat and none of them looked like they'd moved since the pulse. A much older and rustier pickup was parked next to the house.

The house itself had clearly once been elegant, with a wraparound porch and fancy fretwork trimming the windows and roof. Now the dirtied paint was peeling from the clapboard walls and sad winter

weeds straggled around the footings. A low growl drew Beck's attention to the crawl space under the porch. A dog crouched there, its lips drawn back in a snarl to reveal pointed teeth. Even as Beck tried to figure out what kind of threat it posed—it looked half-wild, with matted hair and a feral expression, but maybe it was just defending the bone between its front paws—Parker murmured, "Sir, there's someone at one of the windows."

Beck nodded to show he'd heard. "Watch out for the dog." He made a small gesture with his rifle in the dog's direction as he moved forward.

The dog seemed content to hold position for now, and Beck transferred his attention to the house. A gust of wind set up a mournful clatter from a set of windchimes hanging from the porch roof a few feet to the right of the steps as he climbed them, careful to keep the barrel of his rifle pointed at the ground, yet ready to swing it up if necessary.

The door opened before he could knock. The man who took a step onto the porch matched his dog. He wore a greasy baseball cap over straggling gray hair, a faded and none-too-clean plaid shirt, frayed jeans and muddy workboots. A scar ran down one side of his face, and Beck noticed he was missing a little finger on the hand that curled around the barrel of the shotgun that was not quite but nearly pointed at them.

Beck reminded himself that the man didn't look a lot different than many of the other farmers they'd met as they worked their way out of Colorado, who'd turned out to be welcoming enough once they'd gotten over their initial suspicions. From the stories they'd told of the last few months, Beck didn't blame them for being defensive.

Taking one hand from his rifle and holding it out to make his stance less threatening—while trusting Parker had him covered—Beck dipped his head in greeting. "Sir. I'm Major Beck, Tenth Mountain Division. We're undertaking security and relief operations in the area."

The man gave him a narrow-eyed look. "Don't need no help," he grunted eventually.

Beck nodded again. Also wouldn't be the first farmer they'd run across who thought the world was better without the government interfering in his business. "Well, if you change your mind, sir, we'll be happy to assist in whatever way we can. Meanwhile, I wanted to inform you that my men will be setting up a base camp in the area for several days. Perhaps you could assist us by directing us to a water supply."

Again, the man stared at them suspiciously for a long moment. Beck could almost see the thoughts whirring in his brain. Eventually, he jabbed a thumb in roughly the direction they'd come from. "There's a creek 'bout a quarter mile that way."

"Thank you." Beck tried a smile, but it elicited no response. "We'll try not to trouble you more than we have to."

"Uh-huh." The man's hard-eyed stare said they'd better not.

Beck dipped his head again in a farewell salute and retreated from the porch, backing down the steps. The man hadn't lowered his gun any during the conversation, and Beck wasn't much inclined to turn his back on him until he knew Parker, hovering at the bottom of the stoop, had a clear shot.

Reaching the yard, Beck half-turned, and saw that the dog had crept out from under the porch while he spoke to its master and was now stationed in the middle of the yard, between them and the humvee. It was hunkered down, its gaze fixed on them, ready to spring.

"Sir..." There was a shocked quality to the quiet word that made Beck look up at Parker. The lieutenant was flicking his gaze between the farmer and the dog, a mixture of disbelief and horror on his face.

"Lieutenant?"

"It's human, sir." Parker's voice barely carried to Beck.

Beck raised his eyebrows, wondering if Parker had taken leave of his senses. "The dog?"

"No, sir. The bone." Parker pressed his lips into a thin line, his usual slight smirk completely absent from his expression.

Beck glanced back over his shoulder at the farmer, who was still standing on the porch with the same sullen expression on his face. Beck reckoned he was too far away to have overheard Parker's words. Beck looked back at the dog, and at the bone it had dragged out with it and dropped between its front paws. It looked like a shinbone, maybe, if on the small side for a cow or a horse.... "Are you sure?" He couldn't quite keep the disbelief out of his voice, although Parker sounded very far from making a bad-taste joke.

"Yes, sir. Animal bone would be bigger and denser. And," Beck heard Parker swallow, "the windchimes, sir. I thought there was something odd about them. They're finger bones."

Beck turned a little and lifted his gaze to take another look at the windchimes. Now that Parker had said it, he could see it: the bones had been strung together with wire, little fingers—or children's fingers, maybe, the bones were so small—dangling from the bottom tier of three, index fingers from the top.

Beck froze, just for an instant, while his mind tried to make sense of the situation. Or rather—because those windchimes made the situation perfectly clear, didn't they?—while he tried to figure out their next move. Because it wasn't as if anything in the Army Field Manual prepared you for something like this.

Another rattle of the windchimes brought him out of his horrified daze. He realized that, even as he'd stood there paralyzed, part of his mind had been racing, evaluating their options, caught as they were between the farmer with his shotgun and the dog, and with the humvee impossibly far away.

Taking a deep breath, Beck pulled his shoulders back. "Act like we're just worried about the dog," he ordered. He tilted the tip of his rifle barrel to indicate they should make a detour around the animal. A quick glance over his shoulder as they circled the dog showed the farmer watching them, still motionless, while the dog turned its head to follow them.

Reaching the humvee, Beck leaned in through the driver's window. "Corporal Richards, we have a situation. Turn the vehicle and be ready to cover us—or get us the hell out of here."

"Sir." Richards put the humvee into gear.

"What's the plan, sir?" Parker was at Beck's shoulder, his restless gaze continuing to scan the yard.

"Take a look in the barn." Beck reckoned it was the mostly likely place for the bodies to have been butchered. "See what our friend there does."

He stepped away from the humvee and let the corporal swing it round. When he was sure Richards had his rifle in his hands, though out of sight of the farmer, he turned and headed for the barn.

"Hey. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Beck halted and pivoted to look at the farmer. The man had taken a pace forward and had his shotgun trained on Beck.

"I need to inspect your barn, sir." Beck felt as exposed as he had done back in that Afghan village.

"Like hell you—."

Beck saw the farmer's finger tighten on the shotgun's trigger, but it was the sound of a semi-automatic that rang out first, an instant before the shotgun boomed. Beck hit the dirt and rolled, coming up with his rifle in his hands—just in time to put a bullet in the chest of the dog as it leaped for his neck. As the dog slammed into him, the bullet barely slowing its momentum, he was aware of a couple more shots to his left; he guessed Parker was making sure the farmer stayed down.

"You okay, sir?" Parker called across as Beck pushed the limp dog off him.

"I'm good." Beck flapped a reassuring hand in Parker's direction while he struggled to his knees. He stared down ruefully at the dog's blood splattered across his tac vest. Then a zip and a sharp puff of dust six inches from him had him instinctively rolling again until he came up behind one of the derelict cars. More bullets pinged off the fender. "What the—?"

"Think it's the wife, sir. Upstairs right." Parker's yell came from where he'd taken cover under the humvee. A couple more shots came from his direction, drawing fire from whoever was in the house. A moment later, Corporal Richards must have gotten himself in position, adding his weapon to Parker's as bullets thwacked into and around the humvee.

Flicking his rifle to automatic, Beck ducked from behind the shelter of the car and raked a trail of bullets across the second floor of the house. The sound of all three carbines on automatic bounced noisily around the yard for a few seconds, until Beck realized they were no longer under fire themselves. Releasing the trigger, he gestured and called, "Cease fire!"

Silence rushed in, broken only by the grim rattling of the windchimes.

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Later, when they searched the place, Beck counted more than a dozen skulls among the piles of butchered bones in the barn. A hand over his nose against the stink of rotting scraps of flesh and old blood, he watched for a few minutes as a white-masked squad began the grim task of trying to collect all the human remains they could find. Lieutenant Maris went ahead of them, taking photographs

before they disturbed anything. Not that they had the time or resources for proper forensics, and Beck doubted anyone would ever untangle which bones went with which, but he wasn't going to leave these poor people like this for however many weeks or months it would take to send an investigation team with the necessary skills.

Stepping outside, Beck finally figured out what had bothered him about the cars when they first arrived. The newer models were closest to the barn, blocked in by older models that would still have been running after the EMP. If the farmer had been keeping his old wrecks around as chicken coops, or simply because he couldn't be bothered to take them to the junkyard, they should have been parked the other way round. The newer cars must have belonged to the earliest victims—and they must have met their fates in the first week after the bombs.

Across the yard, Lieutenant McCoy was leading the two children they'd found cowering in the storm cellar past the covered body of their father and towards a waiting ambulance.

"Talk about screwed up...." Parker had appeared at Beck's shoulder.

Beck nodded silently in agreement. Those kids would be traumatized for the rest of their lives in ways Beck couldn't even begin to imagine. For a moment, his thoughts went to his wife and daughter. He had to trust they were okay, and that he'd see them again soon.

Meanwhile, they had a country to put back on its feet. Glancing across at Parker, noting the lieutenant's gaze was still on the children as they were helped into the ambulance, Beck allowed himself a small smile. At least he had men like Parker—for all his attitude—to help him in the task.

End Note: I wanted to write a story about Beck and "Parker" (Chavez) working together before Chavez was exposed. I also wanted to write a story in which the unflappable Major Beck runs into something that shakes even him. Seeing the prompt "cannibal" on the [Spook Me](#) creature list led to the idea of the two of them discovering a cannibalistic family as the AS Army moves out of Colorado. When I got the additional secret [Spook Me](#) prompts, which this year were classic horror comic covers, [this cover](#) influenced the specific direction the story took.

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.