

The Deeper You Fall

By Scribblesinink

Beck has given you twenty-four hours. Exactly one day for the man who killed Goetz to step forward and turn himself in. That deadline came and went a while ago; according to Hawkins, the army has started kicking down doors all over town. But he also says Beck doesn't have the full picture yet: he doesn't know Stanley pulled the trigger. You wonder: could this be your chance to set things right?

You glance over at Stanley, barely recognizing your friend in the abject man hunched in on himself, his gaze focused on something only he can see. You turn back to Hawkins, mind made up. "There's only one thing to do."

oOo

A small crowd of curious onlookers quickly forms as you walk up to City Hall to give yourself up to Beck.

"I accept your surrender." The major's response once you've had your say is curt, but it's the one you hoped for. You start releasing the breath you were holding. Until he adds, "But not your terms."

For half a heartbeat, you fail to understand, and you merely stare at him in incomprehension. Then someone pulls a hood over your head, cutting off the major's glare, and your arms are yanked behind your back, your wrists quickly tied together with what feels like a plastic strap. As it cuts into your flesh, you hear the crowd gasp in shock.

"No...." You finally find your voice again, but nobody's listening. "No!" Paying no attention to your protests, the soldiers start dragging you away. You struggle, but it's no use.

Beck's men push you into a vehicle—a humvee, you suspect, and your suspicions are confirmed when the engine growls to life. You try to concentrate, making note of the hum of the wheels on the ground and keeping stock of the bumps and jolts, in an attempt to determine where they are taking you. It isn't easy, though; your mind's too busy alternately cursing Beck and swearing at yourself.

You're such a fool: what the hell made you think you could reason with the likes of him? He's nothing but another of Cheyenne's henchmen, just like Goetz was. Beck's simply a little better at keeping a civilized face on things. But, in the end, under the courteous veneer, he's working for the same people that cared more about a bit of missing money

than that Bonnie was murdered to cover up the theft.

By your rough estimate, you've been traveling over thirty minutes when the humvee pulls to a halt. You hear doors opening, before firm hands grab you by the elbow and make you climb out. They don't treat you particularly roughly, but they're not exactly gentle either, and you stumble a little on the step before you reach the ground.

The hood prevents you from learning where you are, but you can feel the dirt under your boots. You also know they took you somewhere northeast of Jericho—you recognized the sound of going over the Tacoma bridge not long after they shoved you into the truck. Beyond that, you have no idea. The humvee turned and twisted often enough to confuse your sense of direction, even though you know these roads like the back of your hand.

Yet, as you take a first breath of air and the smell hits you, the stink clues you in. It's unmistakable for anyone who grew up in the country: you're at a hog farm. And there aren't that many of those near Jericho. You think quickly and reckon it must be Dave Ostrowski's place, out on Route 48.

Before you can consider further why Beck would bring you to a damned hog farm, the soldiers gripping your arms start dragging you along. Tripping and stumbling, you're escorted down a short flight of stairs into a basement, where they shove you down on to a hard chair. The skin on your arms scrapes against metal as they push you back and your hands slide through the hole between the seat and the chair back.

The hood is yanked off your head, and you blink at the sudden glare of light stabbing your eyes. After a few moments, you can make out Beck's features, as he sits himself down on another chair opposite you.

"You have me, what more do you want?"

For a few seconds, Beck doesn't answer. "The truth—."

You only half-manage to suppress a snort. Truth—like beauty—is in the eye of the beholder, and you doubt very much *your* truth is what Beck wants to hear. "I killed Goetz."

Beck doesn't even blink. He just states calmly, "You're lying." He proceeds to tell you everything he's learned. It's a lot more than Hawkins said he knew, and you rack your brain, trying to figure out who could have betrayed you. It all becomes clear once Beck has Russell dragged into the room. Although it's a bit of a shock to see him: you would've expected Russell to have gone into hiding in New Bern long since.

Still trying to wrap your mind around Russell's arrest, you hardly hear Beck's threats, until someone pulls the chair from under you. With your hands tied the way they are, you're unable to break your fall, and you hit the floor hard enough that the breath whooshes out of you. The door slams shut. A second later, hot, bright lamps come on.

You're alone.

For a while, you try to keep track of time by counting the seconds into minutes, and the minutes into hours, but the heat from the lamps and the reek of pigs distracts you, and your mind keeps drifting to the events that brought you here: Bonnie's murder; the desperate struggle to keep Mimi out of Goetz's clutches; the empty look on Stanley's face as he shoots Goetz point blank....

God, you hope Stanley's okay.

Soon, you lose all track of time. Its passing is measured only by irregular breaks when a silent guard offers you a swallow of water (but never enough) or the use of a bucket. You grit your teeth against the humiliation, and try to find a more comfortable position on the dirt floor. But what happens to you doesn't matter, and there's no way in hell you're gonna give up Stanley. Because you recognize the game Beck is playing; you heard enough stories in Iraq, about the methods the army and the CIA use to break their prisoners. Your mistake was to believe Beck was different. But it's obvious that Stanley can't expect justice from this particular government.

As lack of sleep and food slowly wear you down, hallucinations begin to mingle with memories and memories mix with reality, until the lines are so blurred you know longer know which is which. Beck's brief calls are real enough, though, as are the questions he asks you.

You take heart in knowing the army's yet to find Stanley, and that the town is resisting Beck—as you'd told him it would. The news helps you hang in there, even while your hands have gone numb, your shoulders are in agony, and you think you must reek as badly as the pigs by now.

"Open your eyes," you advise Beck on one of his visits. Because although it's like talking to a brick wall, you can't help but try one last time to get him to see the truth for himself. "It's not a country, it's a company." Beck simply looks puzzled, and you drop your head back to your chest, deciding he's not worth any more of your waning energy.

After Beck leaves you again, it's a matter of pulling in one breath after the other in an attempt to stay alive, even as your grip on reality slowly loosens. The people you've failed fill up your cell: Freddy, Dad, Chris, Bonnie.... There are so many of them. The worst is

the little girl from Saffa. She doesn't say a word, but her dark eyes are large and accusing. Whimpering softly, you cringe back from her, while the rough bricks of the basement walls scrape your back raw through the thin material of your T-shirt.

At last, the dreams fade, and you slowly start to sink into unconsciousness. A part of you that's still coherent promises deliverance is near. The human body isn't designed for this sort of treatment, and yours can't handle much more. But then there's a soft, friendly voice murmuring soothing words, and a glass of water is held against your cracked lips. You sip from it, swallowing with difficulty; your mouth is parched, and it's been so long that you hardly remember how to drink.

The water revives you a little, though, and you scrunch your eyes into slits, blinking against the glare. Slowly, you focus on the shadow in front of you. "Mom?" You frown, confused. "Mom, you shouldn't be here...."

It doesn't make sense. She's not dead... or is she? You don't quite seem able to hold on to your thoughts, though, and they scatter again. It's only when she leans close enough for you to smell her scent, familiar and comforting, and she whispers in your ear, "Eric and the boys are coming," that you believe she's not another phantom. That she's *real*.

Before you can process the revelation fully, she's gone again, and you're left wondering whether or not it was another dream. It doesn't really matter, does it? Alone once more, with the stink and the bright lamps and the heat, there's nothing you can do but wait for the end. It won't be much longer now.

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