

The Harder You Try

By Scribblesinink

An aide enters the command tent and hesitates slightly before he approaches. You look up at him. "What is it?"

"Sir...", the lieutenant holds back a moment more, "you're gonna want to see this for yourself."

You frown in displeasure. Whenever someone tells you you need to see something for yourself instead of informing you what it is they want you to see, it's never anything good. You grab your helmet and follow the lieutenant out of the tent, trying not to show your impatience; you'd believed the insurgent activity in New Bern was back under control and were expecting to return to Jericho shortly.

A humvee is waiting to take you out of New Bern. It heads south toward the hills, and turns onto a back road. Bouncing along a winding dirt track, the car goes another mile before the private driving it slows and points ahead. "Sir?"

The humvee pulls over and you climb out, hardly believing your eyes: a body is strung up from a tall tree, gently swaying in the early morning air. You recognize who it is instantly: *John Goetz*.

Dammit...!

A myriad of different emotions flit through your mind: anger, frustration, disappointment, a couple you can't even name before they've come and gone.

You feel no pity, though. Maybe that makes you a bad person, but you can't bring yourself to feel sorry that Goetz is dead; he was a corrupt and vicious bastard. Though it's another American life ended after so many have died already, you can't really count it much of a loss; unless he's still got a mother somewhere, you doubt anyone will mourn for John Goetz.

But great loss or no, you understand immediately that Goetz's murder compounds your problems and complicates things even more. And between having Valente riding you about locating Sarah Mason while attempting to put this part of the country back on its feet, you almost wish you were back in Afghanistan instead. At least back then, things were much more straightforward: you talked to The Guy, and you came to an understanding. And if you didn't, well—.

Fury and exasperation rise up unbidden, and you clench your jaw to keep in another curse. Because, dammit, you told Jake *specifically* that Goetz was off limits, didn't you? You *promised* him you'd see to the matter as soon as you were done in New Bern. Had it been too much to ask that Jake keep things under control for just one night?

The dangling body provides the answer: apparently, yes.

Your anger simmers to a slow burn souring your stomach, though you're not entirely sure whom you're angry at: Jake, or yourself. So, you were wrong about Jake Green: he's turned out not to be the kind of man you thought he was. You've been wrong before, of course, and paid the price for your misjudgment, but this time you were *so sure*...!

You glance up at the body one final time and cross yourself—Goetz may have been a crook and a killer, but the dead are blameless—before you finally turn away and walk back to the humvee. "Have someone come out here to collect that body."

Your aide relays the order over the radio while you glance at your watch. It's almost nine o'clock in the morning, and you've been up since six the day before. Your face itches and you scratch absently; you need a shave, and a shower, and a couple hours of shuteye. But as you climb back into the humvee and tell the driver to return to the command post in New Bern, you know full well that while you might manage to squeeze in the first two somewhere, the latter will definitely be out of the question for a long while yet.

During the drive back to New Bern, you consider the things you'll have to deal with over the next few hours. There are calls you need to make, to Director Valente in Cheyenne and Colonel Hoffman in Camp Liberty. You make a note to schedule a talk with Trish Merrick about who will handle Goetz's affairs until Ravenwood sends a replacement. You sure as hell know you can't ease up on the search for Sarah Mason. And while things might appear calm and quiet in New Bern this morning, you know that's an illusion too.

On top of all that, you need to find the people responsible for Goetz's death and bring them to justice....

You run down the mental list of people you believe are involved: Jake and Eric Green, of course; probably the two deputies, Taylor and Erickson, as well; Stanley Richmond, for sure. And you wouldn't be surprised if some of those damned 'rangers', that civil vigilante force Jericho created in the days after the bombs, are part of it too. You reckon it's not gonna be easy to find them; they know Jericho and its surroundings like the backs of their hands, and the townspeople will probably protect them. Nobody was very fond of Goetz and the ruthless way he enforced J&R's rules. If only—.

You stop yourself from finishing the thought. *If only* has never done anyone any good.

The humvee reaches the command post, and you scrub a hand over your face, again noticing the stubble, before you get out. In the tent, you make straight for the radio operator.

"Get on the horn with Jericho." You pause a moment, collecting your thoughts. "Have them spread the word: those responsible for the killing of John Goetz have twenty-four hours to come forward. After that—" You stop there, giving a brief shake of your head. After that, you know you can afford to leave no stone unturned in the effort to find them. Your superiors won't give you another choice. "Twenty-four hours," you repeat to the operator. "Until 9.30 tomorrow morning."

You're not hopeful that anyone will take you up on your offer, but you still feel the need to make it. You can sense the situation sliding ever further out of your grip; it seems like the more you try to keep things under control, the more things slip away from you. But the alternative—Phase Three Operations, as the generals in Cheyenne call it....

You shake your head wryly, ignoring the puzzled look the radio operator gives you as he catches it. Well, you've seen what Phase Three entails. Once, in Montana. You don't ever want to see it again.

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