

True Colours

by Tanaqui

"We'll be at the New Bern city limits in three mikes, sir."

"Copy that." Beck let the radio handset drop and stood for a moment, head bent. It had been a long day, and this was just the beginning....

Straightening, he turned and faced the troops remaining in the office. "Saddle up. We're moving out." A corporal gathered up the radio as he stepped away and ducked into the sheriff's office to retrieve Hawkins' laptop. When he turned, looking for his helmet, discarded when he'd opened the bottle of whiskey, he found Heather Lisinski holding it out to him.

She'd stayed in the office for the past hour, perched on the edge of a desk while the last of his battalion bustled around her. He wasn't quite sure why she was still there, but it had been a comfort.

He reached out for the helmet, his hand resting on it for a moment but not taking it from her. "Thank you." His voice was soft, and he hoped his expression conveyed his gratitude for all that she'd done. Even for flinging those hateful, hurtful words at him. Without that, he would have signed the inventory, and Hawkins' laptop would be on its way to Cheyenne.

Heather gave him a faint smile and let go of the helmet. He jammed it on and followed the last of his men out of the office, aware that she had fallen in a pace behind him.

Outside, the sun was setting; as he squinted into it, he discovered himself facing most of the group of Rangers he'd spent the past week turning the town upside down to find. Here to run him out of Jericho, perhaps—or perhaps as lost as he was, from the look of them.

Gray Anderson was with them. When Beck reached the bottom of the steps—Heather had remained standing at the top, he realized—he nodded at him. "Mr Mayor. There's one more piece of business to be done, and then my men will withdraw and leave you in peace."

Gray's only response was a weary shrug. Glancing down, Beck noticed the crumpled Allied States flag at the foot of the war memorial, and he looked up to see what had replaced it. His lips twitched. Yes, that would do well enough for this town. Let anyone else step on her and they'd learn, as Beck had done, that she and her people weren't to be trifled with.

Not that they'd need it, but, "Good luck." He drew himself up and saluted.

Gray acknowledged the salute with a nod, and Beck turned on his heel and strode away down the street.

oOo

Inside the J&R offices, it was mostly dark, a few workers still at their desks, their lamps making little pools of light in the dark labyrinth of cubicles. As Beck had hoped, Trish Merrick was one of them. He approached carefully, walking softly. "Ma'am?"

She looked up, surprise etched on her face. "Major?"

"You should know that, as of earlier today, I am no longer taking orders from the Cheyenne

leadership." He gently laid Hawkins laptop down on the edge her desk. "I believe this government is corrupt at its core. Its actions are criminal, and I no longer recognize their right to lead."

Trish leaned back in her chair, looking stunned. "What?"

"Ma'am," he unbuckled his helmet and removed it, placing it carefully next to the laptop. "I'm withdrawing my men from Jericho and from New Bern. I can no longer guarantee the safety of your people if you stay. I've already had my men in New Bern evacuate the J&R staff there to a safe location, and I would like to do the same with your people here. From there, they can return to Cheyenne if they wish. But first, there's something I believe you should see." He opened the laptop and swung it round so she could see the contents.

"I don't understand." She frowned up at him.

"Please." He gestured at the screen.

She gave him a long, hard stare and then leaned forwards. "What is this?"

"It's a disaster plan for continuity of the government in the event of nuclear attacks on 25 US cities." She glanced up at him, clearly startled. "It was drawn up more than ten years ago. By Jennings & Rall."

"Oh my God...." Trish's words were barely audible. She reached out a shaking hand and paged down the document. He knew she'd stopped on the map by the way her gaze flicked from side to side across the screen. He saw her swallow. "Are you saying the attacks... that it was... that *we* did it?" She gestured around at the J&R offices.

"Not exactly." He found a chair and sat down beside her desk. "There was a man. Robert Hawkins. He was an undercover federal agent. Maybe FBI, maybe not. Before the bombs went off, he infiltrated one of the terrorist cells and got hold of one of the devices. He brought it to Jericho." Beck ran a weary hand through his hair. "Don't ask me why. But because of him, Cheyenne sent me and my men here. To find him. To find the bomb. Top priority."

Trish frowned. "I thought that was a woman... on the posters."

Beck nodded. "Yes. That was who Cheyenne thought it was too at first. It's... complicated. But it was Hawkins they wanted." He gestured at the laptop. "That belonged to him. On it are top secret files from the Cheyenne government. I think he had an accomplice who helped him get them when the President—when Tomarchio visited Jericho. They show that the government lied about the source of the bombs. They weren't from North Korea via Iran; they were ex-Soviet nukes, from a shipment brought into the US for decommissioning by the government. Somehow they went missing and, well, you know what happened. Cheyenne needed to get the bomb back, and they needed Hawkins dead, to stop the truth from coming out."

"And that's why you... no longer recognize their right to lead?" Trish echoed his words back to him."

"Yes." He shrugged. "I don't know exactly who is involved in Cheyenne, although I'm pretty sure Thomas Valente is a part of it. He's Tomarchio's director of Homeland Security, and he was the one who had me sent here, and made looking for the terrorist, for Hawkins, top priority." Beck didn't add that Valente was also responsible for visiting Goetz on the town so that Beck could concentrate on the search. Beck thought that letting Goetz take control, letting him do what he did, letting him

cold-bloodedly murder that girl *over money*, while Beck did Cheyenne's dirty work, was going to haunt him more than anything else. "Beyond that? Well, I know the government and J&R are tight, and that report...." He gestured at the screen.

Trish was staring at him, her eyes wide. "Are you sure it's real? I mean, maybe..." Her voice trailed off.

Beck shook his head. "I guess it could be a fake, but if you look at the date it was created, who created it...."

Trish's hands were already flying over the keyboard to bring up the details. She turned the laptop so Beck could see the screen and pointed. "There. It's a J&R code. Those things are so complicated that you could only fake one if you worked for the company. Heck, *I* work for the company and I wouldn't know how to fake one convincingly."

Beck nodded. "And why would someone who worked for J&R want to implicate them if it wasn't true? Plus.. there's plenty of other evidence that says Tomarchio's people are lying about the bombs."

Trish's hand dropped and she closed her eyes. "President Tomarchio...", she whispered. "He used to work for J&R." She looked at Beck again. "We were all so proud...." Her voice shook.

Beck thought he knew how she felt. To know the people you took orders from, the people you trusted, had lied to you....

"Maybe he wasn't involved," he suggested. "Just happened to be in the right place at the right time when whoever was pulling the strings needed a figurehead." He shrugged. "I don't know. What I do know," he closed the laptop and stood, "is that no matter what might be going on in the J&R boardroom, your people do good work on the ground. I've seen that. So no matter what they choose to do—return to Cheyenne or stay here—I will do what I can to ensure their safety. If they no longer wish to work for J&R—" Meeting her gaze, he knew at least one person from J&R would be quitting. "—then I will find a place for them."

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When Beck and Trish came out of the J&R offices, the group that had been gathered in front of City Hall had gone. But Beck could still see the flag of a free Jericho proudly fluttering against the night sky.

Cheyenne would be coming for them—for his battalion and for the town—of that he was sure. And Cheyenne would send the kind of numbers that would suggest it would be a one-sided fight. But he wouldn't be betting any time soon against the people of Jericho.

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