

BENEATH THE FALL

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Beneath the Fall
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ABOUT THIS PIECE

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CHAPTER ONE

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Rayleigh smacked the wad of quintillion dollar notes on the table in front of her. ‘You are pushing your God damned luck! You do know this, don’t you?’ Her tone was indignant, and she had that mad glint in her eyes Hiko knew all too well. She stared down the heavily armed dealer in the eye.

His face remained calm, albeit peppered with micro-expressions of fear. The dealer, or ‘Scratch’ as he was known, glanced at his backup — two lanky fellows in shifting camo gear that gave them a sketchy appearance as the fabric tried to blend in with its environment. Their faces, hidden behind anti-recognition shrouds, made them impossible to read.

They must be packed to the brim with weaponry, Hiko thought.

‘That’s over five hundred quint in cuckbucks, you fuck!’ Rayleigh shouted while standing up from her chair. Spitfire hit Scratch in the face, despite him leaning back in disgust.

The two lanky guys both took a step forward, perfectly in sync. Scratch stopped them by holding up his right hand.

Hiko interjected. ‘What my partner is trying to say, is that last month, you were happy to trade for less than a quarter of this amount.’

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‘AND NOW, YOU’VE GOT THE GALL TO—’ Rayleigh interrupted, nearly foaming at the mouth.

Hiko wrapped his hand around her belt and tried to pull her back down into the old lawn chair. He hissed through gritted teeth at Rayleigh, ‘And now,’ turning his gaze back to Scratch, ‘we are very happy that you are willing to accept paper and would love to continue our business relationship for years to come.’

‘Listen to your partner, woman. He knows I should be demanding sats instead of that toilet paper. You’re lucky I get a steady trickle from on high.’

Hiko didn’t like the situation. It was hard enough scrounging up the fiat. And negotiating with Scratch was no joyride. They had come in at noon in unrelenting heat to enter this greasy dark shit-hole of a warehouse, and it left them nearly blind for the first ten minutes. It was hot too. The corrugated roof only amplified the heat. Sweat stung his eyes. He didn’t trust Scratch one bit.

‘How long have we known each other? At least a year or two. Maybe three? You know how it is out there. And this heat! It’ll make the best of us agitated. Never mind our lesser peers.’ He nodded at Rayleigh while keeping his eyes on their counterparty.

‘Ha!’ uttered Scratch as Rayleigh grumbled under her breath. Scratch sat back, visibly more relaxed.

‘You know,’ he said ‘I like you Hiko. You’ve been a reasonable man. And I do know what it’s like out there.’

‘It’s no picnic,’ said Hiko in agreement.

‘Ain’t that calling a meatgrinder a merry-go-round. That’s why I stay right here.’ Scratch said, holding out his pale arms. They were covered in scars, scabs and fresh cuts. His long fingernails, filthy black-rimmed things clipped into sharp points, looked horrific.

Hiko watched as he used them to vigorously scratch his bald head and neck, painting pink stripes. Even drawing blood in a few places. 'Have I ever given you the tour?'

'Euhm...' Hiko was definitely not interested in extending their visit. 'I don't think you have, but that's okay, we don't want to waste your precious time.' Hiko offered. 'But maybe next time? Besides, we still have a dog to skin, don't we Rayleigh?'

Rayleigh, however, wasted no time, looked Scratch dead in the eye, and said, 'Show me'.

'You see, she wants a peek.' Scratch said. 'I must insist and finally show you my little paradise. What kind of host would I be after all these years? Just keep that bitch of yours on a short leash!' He snarled, scratching his many chins while staring intently at Rayleigh.

'Oliver, help our guests up. We are going to give them a grand tour of the place.'

A humanoid robot had silently approached. It pulled them up, painfully, by the trapezius, that muscle between neck and shoulder. The robot was dressed like a butler. It even had a bowtie. If not for the excruciating grip, it would have been comical.

'Get your hands off of me, you stupid machine,' Rayleigh shouted in anguish. It was no use. It had taken hold and would continue to do so until commanded otherwise, or until its battery ran dry.

'You may leave the money on the table.'

'Not until you let us go and give us the goods!' Rayleigh responded.

Scratch glared at her, then at Oliver. 'I said, you may leave the money on the table.'

The robot squeezed even harder.

'Aaah okay, okay!' The big wad dropped down with a thump.

'Follow me.' Scratch fiddled around beneath the table. His chair started to roll back and swivel, revealing something new. Scratch sat on a motorized wheelchair. It looked like a miniature tank.

'Nice tracks,' cried Rayleigh, tears rolling down her face. 'But can you tell this chips-for-brains that I would like it to loosen its grip!?'

'Will you behave?'

'Yes, yes, I'll fucking behave!'

'Good girl. Do as she says, Oliver.'

Rayleigh whispered as quietly as possible. 'You heard that, Oliver, your boss commanded that you should do as I say.' There was no response. It must have its voice disabled. Or maybe it was one of the early models. She whispered again. 'Pretend you are holding me, but don't really.'

Hiko looked in her dark brown eyes, amazed by her quick thinking. She winked at him through a lock of equally dark hair.

He gave her an expression, clearly meant to convey the question 'Well? Did it work?'

She hissed at Oliver to do the same for her partner.

Hiko felt the iron grip relax, providing instant relief.

'Now what?' He spoke softly, with unmoving lips, like a ventriloquist.

They neared the two lanky guards and knew to shut up.

The two parted to let them pass, then moved in behind them to follow, again, in perfect synchrony. Hiko looked at Rayleigh with questioning eyes.

‘More bots?’ he asked.

She responded with a look that said probably, but how the fuck should I know?

A nozzle pressed against Hiko’s spine. The movement of the thing, staying perfectly in place at a constant pressure, confirmed it. He looked at Rayleigh, and with a deadpan expression and a slight nod, they both said, ‘Bots.’

They moved deeper into the building. Junked cars, refrigeration systems and old Bitcoin miners lined the walls while the clinkety-clack of Scratch’s tracks on concrete accompanied them.

‘Please excuse the mess down here,’ Scratch said matter of factly. ‘Since the world’s financial system has gone into total meltdown, we’ve not kept it very tidy here.’ He was fingering two thumbsticks on either end of his armrests to steer his vehicle. ‘Only a bit further now,’ he said. ‘We are nearly out of this dreary place.’

Scratch used his middle-fingers to drive, thumbs free to swipe through touch screens embedded below the little joysticks. Two heavy sliding doors in the back wall started to move, slowly. Beyond it, another set of doors.

‘Nice sluice you’ve got set up here,’ Rayleigh said. The doors were as thick as her underarm.

‘In a previous age, when paper and gold were still worth something, this used to be a bank.’ Scratch returned. ‘Hence the airlock. Armored vehicles were inspected at this point, before they could enter or exit fully.’

After the first doors slid shut, and after some more tapping on the touchscreens, the second pair slid open. Light streamed in. The artificial kind. The feel of the air changed too. Less humid, and

slightly chilly. It was a welcome change from the decrepit warehouse.

Scratch told them that this was where they packaged the hard stuff. He moved over to a long table where a dozen or so scrawny kids, who couldn't be much older than seven to twelve years old, were shoveling piles of pills into various sized bags. He picked a white pill off of the table and ate it. 'These little brats are cheaper than automated machinery, believe it or not.'

Rayleigh hated how Scratch said it. She hated how dispassionate he was. The fact that he was telling the truth was even more painful.

A conveyor belt protruded from a hole in the wall, slowly trickling more of 'the hard stuff,' as Scratch called it, into this packaging area. An older kid was working on gathering closed bags and putting them into crates on the other end of the room.

Scratch noticed her stare, and must have read the dismay on her face.

'Are you sure I cannot interest you in a batch? I'll throw one in for free, give you a taste, what do you say?'

'Keep your synthetics,' Rayleigh snarled. 'We don't want 'em!' .

Scratch growled, 'Relax, will you? If it wasn't for me and my synths, you would've perished a long time ago, wasting away in a breadline or sold into slavery. So don't act all high and mighty with me! Besides, someone must provide the higher ups with what they desire. And in return...' His voice trailed off. Scratch stretched his arms to each side, palms facing upwards. The next set of double doors opened automatically. The light on the other side was natural this time and a venerable oasis opened up to them.

Hiko gasped.

Rayleigh's jaw dropped.

Perplexed, they stared at the scene.

'Well, come on, what are you waiting for?' asked Scratch, as he casually rolled into this Garden of Eden.

Hiko had never seen so much green. His eyes were drawn upward. Thick vines wrapped around tall trees. Lush greenery, full of fruit and glistening with moisture reached for the sun. Hiko felt a nudge in the ribs. Once. Then again. He had a hard time diverting his eyes from the spectacle and slowly turned his gaze towards Ray. Unlike his, Rayleigh's gaze was aimed downward. At first, he couldn't figure out what he was looking at. Something glistening, snaking its way underfoot between the many plants, trees, and their roots. Children were darting around everywhere too. It took Hiko a while before he realized he was looking at little streams of water, gently meandering, irrigating the carefully constructed permaculture.

Children, dressed in nothing more than rags were playing in and around the streams. Bathing in it, or playing hide and seek among the trees and shrubbery.

As if signaling a dog to return to its owner, Scratch put two grimey fingers to his mouth and whistled. Two youths, older than most of the little ones that littered the place, approached. 'You two, run up front and go get their canisters.' Scratch pointed to the direction from which they came. 'Hurry up, and meet us at the well. Quickly now!'

'You sure you don't want to spend some sats? I promise, the hard stuff is top quality! Or perhaps you'd like to buy some flesh?

It is getting somewhat overcrowded here anyway. And the higher ups have been throttling down the quantities in their regular order.' He pointed upwards, lazily, as he suggested this proposition. 'You can resell for a profit, I'm sure.'

Hiko and Raleigh followed his gnarly arm and crooked finger to the middle of this lush oasis, a giant tower, bigger than the tallest skyscraper they'd ever seen marked the entrance to the citadel up high.

'We... ehm...' Hiko started. 'We just want to get our water and get out of here.'

Scratch glared at them with a mixture of annoyance and sadistic joy.

Filthy weasel of man, Rayleigh thought. She saw what he was. And she knew those up high were happy to have him as their broker of filth and decadence. It spared them from witnessing the insanity of the financial fallout.

'Come on,' urged Scratch. 'It's not far now. Follow me.'

Oliver, the robotic butler, still holding them loosely, urged them on, as Rayleigh let escape a little yelp, faking pain to keep up appearances.

As they approached the mega-structure that stood centered in this rare jungle, Scratch continued talking. 'By now, you must be wondering why I've decided to invite you, revealing this sanctuary's secrets. You see, It's my turn to ascend into the citadel.' He smiled exuberantly, showing crooked teeth, as he raised both arms up to the tower in reverence. 'Finally, after years of toiling down here, it has been decided. Finally, repair and reprieve! Soon, I'll be lifted upwards to new heights. There, this frail body will be rejuvenated. One of these clones,' he said pointing at the younglings

playing in the streams, 'is already up there, being released from limbs, organs and skin so I may thrive once again!'

The tower was made of some kind of transparent material. Little droplets, like dew, slowly gathered, and trickled down to the base of this tall pillar.

'Isn't it marvelous?' Scratch asked. 'It collects the moisture from the air. Part is sent up via capillary action. The rest trickles down into the old vault. We have over 100m³ of the stuff! Blessed H₂O! And one of you may take my place here.'

Rayleigh could no longer contain herself. 'You monster! How can you live with yourself, knowing what goes on in the world? And these poor kids, fodder to support miscreants and fake gods!'

In a blur, Hiko turned and struck her in the face, hard. The punch knocked her to the ground. 'She's loose!' Hiko shouted as he dropped to his knees and pressed his face into the moist topsoil.

'I know that, you fool' Scratch responded. 'At least we now know who will replace me down here, and who shall become a breeder, don't we? That is, if she's lucky.'

Hiko looked up at Scratch, ignoring Rayleigh, whom he just betrayed. He dared not look her in the eye. Guilt and shame prevented him.

Rayleigh, her face bloody, screamed. Scratch had been fiddling with the touchscreen on his tank-like chair. The robot's grip had obviously returned with a vengeance, pinching her harder than ever before. Picking her up as if she weighed nothing.

'You really thought I would let you loose in here? Forget it! You', he said, pointing at Hiko, 'shackle her to the lift. We'll send her up with the next batch.' A door in the base of the tower opened up. Behind it, a huge stainless steel room opened up.

Hiko did as he was told. 'I'm really sorry about this,' he muttered weakly.

'You will be! You son of shitcoiner!' Rayleigh struggled as Hiko cuffed her wrist to heavy chains that were attached to a bar in the back wall.

'Sir, here is the water you requested, sir.' The two kids carrying their canisters had returned.

'Can't you see we're busy. Leave it be and go make yourself useful getting the hard stuff, and the next batch of clones ready.'

'You, what is your name again? Heko?' Scratch asked.

'It's Hiko,'

'You see those crates, Heko? Be a good boy and place them next to your old friend over there.'

Rayleigh watched as her former buddy helped load crates into the elevator. Stealthily, she inspected her cuffs and the chain. She had some wiggle room but not enough to reach the detonator hidden under her shirt. She had made it herself. The explosives too. Secretly, she had worn it on three previous water-runs.

In the distance, a big group of children had been corralled and were slowly approaching the elevator. Come on Ray, hurry the fuck up. The chain and stainless steel of the elevator was cool, but she was sweating profusely which made it hard to grip the chain. It kept slipping off of her thumb as she tried to whip it around it. Come on... come on! Panic started to set in. The chain rattled while she wrestled it into place. She couldn't escape the cuffs. Not without first breaking or dislodging her thumb.

'What are you up to? Go see what she is doing and make her stop. Knock her out if you have to!'

Hiko obeyed, dreaming about his new position in life he would be granted. Rayleigh saw him approach, and the gaggle of kids drew nearer too. As Hiko entered the elevator, the children were not far behind him.

Finally, she got the chain whipped around her thumb. She grabbed it tightly, jumped, and let her full weight fall onto it. The pain was sharp and instant as her thumb broke and dislodged.

Hiko started to run towards her.

As Rayleigh slipped one hand out of a handcuff, Hiko tackled her.

‘What are you doing?’ Scratch demanded. He steered his chair in closer, nearing the elevator doors.

Rayleigh felt Hiko grasping for her free wrist. The other part of the chain, no longer connected to her damaged hand, was now free to slide behind the bar. As the heavy chain came free, she swung it, hitting Hiko in the head. The thing whipped around her former friend’s head, which increased its speed and impact even more. Bones cracked as the shackle hit his face.

He recoiled, letting go of her wrist.

Rayleigh tore at her blouse, revealing the DIY suicide vest below it. Time slowed, and she saw the shock on Hiko’s face, who until this point, was completely unaware of what she had been up to in her free time.

Scratch looked bewildered. He obviously had no clue he was going to die, nor that the citadel was done for too. Without ceremony, Rayleigh pressed the button.

SOURCE

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