



Blitz & Breach (Charlie 3/3 #2)

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Category: Sport

Description: When the Stadium Lights Fade, One Linebacker Must Face the Fight of His Life in Combat Boots.

Brutus Brutal Townsend, a Pro Bowl linebacker, a team captain, a feared enforcer, has it all talent, fame, fortune as well as a busted ankle and a temper he cant shake.

So when a devastating loss sends him over the edge, he blows up and challenges a soldier to a fight on live TV.

Faced with career-threatening backlash, he agrees to a week-long immersion with a battle-hardened Army unit.

No cameras. No endorsements. Just early mornings, cold chow, grueling drills in a squad that wants nothing to do with a pampered celebrity.

Staff Sergeant Linda Castellanos is a by-the-book Army fire team leader with zero tolerance for bs.

She had to work real hard to get where she is in her male-dominated world and is in no mood to babysit a six-foot-five distraction with something to prove

But in the unforgiving grind of training, mutual respect turns into something neither of them expected and both of them are afraid to want. Falling for each other could cost them everything.

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brUTUS

The roar of the January crowd was deafening, familiar.

For eight years, Brutus had lived for this, the annual playoff grind.

This year, though, the weight of expectation felt heavier than ever, a leaden pressure in his chest. The game he was about to play could change everything. If they lost, what would he do then?

One year, they'd tasted victory. That championship run, with the Bluecats hoisting the trophy, remained the highlight of his career. He clung to the memory like a lifeline, something that helped keep him from remembering other, more painful things.

But this year was different. The defense still had bite, but the offense was struggling. The new quarterback, a gamble that had backfired spectacularly, was costing them games. Brutus felt the weight of it all on his shoulders.

Now, as the Bluecats took the field for the second half, their playoff hopes hung by a thread.

"Well," Brutus told Johnson, their strong safety as they stretched, "at least we're not in New England."

"Or Buggalo," Johnson replied, intentionally mispronouncing the city. He'd never forgiven that team since their general manager had passed him over. "Think they'll be able to keep it up?"

Brutus didn't know. All season, the offense had faltered, leaving the defense exposed. Even his own record-breaking performance felt hollow. What good were personal accolades when they weren't winning?

The defense had kept them in the game, barely clinging to a two-point lead.

"We win this," Brutus said, the words a low growl. "We shut them down."

Brutus glanced up, the first flakes of snow already swirling. The game, already a battle, was about to become a blizzard. Like his life, the weather was changing dramatically. The snow had been forecast for after the game, but it arrived early, quickly turning the field into treacherous terrain.

The weather was a great equalizer. But as a defense, they were ready to handle anything.

"Let's end this here," Brutus barked in the huddle, feeling the energy of his teammates around him.

The Corsairs were backed up against their own goal line, desperate. Brutus crouched, muscles coiled, the quarterback his target. This was it. One play to change everything.

He exploded off the line, ignoring the ache in his bones, the years of battles fought and won. He was in his element. He reached the quarterback just as he released the ball, his hands wrapping around his waist as he drove him hard to the ground.

Brutus sprang up, ready to celebrate, but a flag lay on the ground.

"Come on, Davey!" he yelled, frustration boiling.

The modern rules made it impossible to just play hard, to get to the quarterback.

"Chill," Johnson pulled him back to the huddle. "You know how it is."

Brutus nodded, attempting to contain his anger. He understood protecting players. He might have been an aggressive player, but he wasn't trying to actually hurt anyone.

For a moment, relief washed over Brutus as the Corsairs punted. Then, disaster struck. A fumble gave them the ball back, deep in Bluecat territory.

"Defense! Let's fucking go!" Brutus shouted, glancing at the clock. Two minutes, twenty-seven seconds left in the game.

It was all or nothing. The Corsairs were within striking distance. Brutus rallied the defense. "We hold them here. We win this."

As the teams lined up, Brutus's ankle twisted beneath him as the ball snapped. A searing pain shot up his leg. Frank Bradshaw, the Corsairs' massive tackle, slammed into him, driving him into the ground. Helpless, Brutus watched as the running back slipped past.

He pushed himself up, ignoring the white-hot pain.

"I can do my job," he snarled when Johnson asked if he needed to come out, though a part of him wondered if he really could.

Doubt gnawed at him as he lined up again, fire flaring through his leg with each heartbeat.

He saw the confidence in Frank Bradshaw's eyes.

The ball snapped. Brutus charged, but this time, there was no power behind it.

Frank met him head-on, a wall of muscle.

He felt himself lifted, slammed to the turf, his ankle twisting again.

Helpless, he watched the tight end catch the winning pass.

It was over. They weren't going to the playoffs.

He sat on the sidelines, the trainers poking and prodding his ankle. Each failed play by the offense twisted the knife in his heart. The clock ticked down to zero, and Brutus, blind with rage and disappointment, limped off the field.

"Brutal! You fucking blew it!" A voice cut through the cacophony of boos. Brutus's head shot up.

A man in military uniform, his face twisted with disgust, pointed at him. "You had your fifteen minutes. Washed up!"

Normally, Brutus would have ignored it, but something inside him snapped. He'd given everything to this team, to this city. Now, they were turning on him. A wave of shame washed over him, hotter than the pain in his ankle.

"You know what? Come down here and say that to my face!" Brutus yelled back, suddenly not caring about the consequences.

"You're done, football star," the soldier called back, each word laced with contempt. "Some warrior you turned out to be."

As beer rained down on his head, Brutus lunged towards the stands.

“Know what, how about you get your ass down here, motherfucker!” Brutus yelled, waving the man down onto the field. “See who’s a bitch? Fuck you and fuck the Army!”

The pain in his leg and the quick hands of security personnel stopped him from reaching the railing. His fingers brushed it before they pulled him back.

"Let me go!" he shouted, but they dragged him toward the tunnel, a chorus of boos following him.

Later, as a trainer examined his swollen ankle, the General Manager stormed in, his face red with anger.

"Do you know the mess you've made?" Hank McMahon demanded, standing over Brutus with his arms crossed.

"Hank, it's the end of the goddamn season," Brutus replied, hissing as the trainer slowly moved his ankle. "Can you please not yell at me right now?"

"Can you please not start fights with military personnel who are here at the team's invitation?" the GM countered. "This Bad Boy of Football routine needs to stop, Brutus."

Brutus winced, the label stinging almost as much as his ankle. It wasn't like he'd asked to be called that. Sure, he picked up his share of penalties, but he wasn't dirty. And he'd been clean off the field since college.

"Or what?" he challenged, though he already knew the answer.

"Ask the league," McMahon said, turning to leave. "I've already got my phone blowing up with texts asking what happened. Trust me, Brutus, there will be

consequences for that outburst."

He left, and Brutus laid back on the table, letting out a frustrated groan.

"Goddammit," he whispered, covering his eyes with sweaty his arm. "Just the cherry to put on top of the shit sundae of not making the playoffs."

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LINDA

"What's that?" Linda Castellanos adjusted her pack on her left shoulder. She shivered slightly under her body armor, not enjoying the return to true winter weather. "The frequent flier miles?"

"Don't I wish," Orkin admitted with a laugh, running his hand through his short hair, his helmet resting in the crook of his elbow. "I'd be taking leave in Australia for free if that was the case. Nah, it's the weather."

"The weather?" Takeshi Satomura, Linda's assistant team leader, asked. "No offense Sarge, but are you nuts?"

Orkin laughed. "Not at all. How's the weather right now, 'Keshi?"

"'Keshi, huh? Guess you're officially one of us now, Sarge," Linda said with a playful edge to her voice that didn't quite mask her protectiveness of her team.

"Colder than the inside of my fridge," Takeshi answered, wrapping his arms around himself. Like Linda, he wasn't originally a warm weather person and definitely did not enjoy Virginia winters. "Why?"

"That's the beauty of our job, don't you see?"

" Orkin said with a grin, gesturing broadly at their surroundings.

"Think about it. We're freezing our butts off here in a good old fashioned Virginia

winter, scraping snow off our windshields and making sure we've got our Chapstick on before PT so we don't start bleeding when we run.

And bam, Uncle Sam needs us to go take a week's vacation in the warm, sun-drenched tropics.

All for the low, low price of doing what we've been trained and paid to do. How sweet is that?"

Linda had to chuckle at Orkin's enthusiasm.

The mission hadn't been too difficult compared to others she'd seen in her time with the unit.

Two journalists had flown down to South America for another 'exposé' on the drug trade and gotten themselves into trouble with one of the cartels.

They'd asked too many questions to the wrong people and captured too many faces on camera.

Another couple of journalists in trouble. Linda sighed. This rescue mission was likely more about avoiding political embarrassment than genuine concern for the reporters. Still, she was glad they'd gotten in and out without complications.

"So how was your first action with the squad, Hollywood?" Linda asked her newest fire team member, Logan Goodman. 'Hollywood' Goodman had been with 'Cranked' company for a couple of months and would pin on Specialist soon. But he was a lateral transfer, having started off in Third Squad.

Linda usually approached lateral transfers with caution. They often signaled a soldier who'd struggled to find their footing. But Goodman was different—sharp, motivated,

his reason for transferring had nothing to do with his performance.

"Good, Sergeant," Goodman replied, yawning.

He hadn't slept much on the plane ride back, his body still processing his first time in action.

Linda would have been worried, except that he'd managed to nap during the last two hours of the flight.

"But remind me... I gotta work on my foreign language skills.

I felt like a damned idiot with you translating for us all the time. "

Linda smiled, her fingers unconsciously touching the small Puerto Rican flag pin she kept on the inside of her pocket. While she was proud of her bilingual abilities, she'd joined the infantry to be more than just a translator.

"We'll get you set up for classes tomorrow then," Linda replied. " Tranquilo , the Army's got some good programs, but there are apps you can use too."

The Spanish word slipped out naturally, a small reminder of the home and family she carried with her.

The squad reached the hangar where a large van awaited them. Linda relaxed, looking forward to some downtime before the weekend. Major Kirk usually took care of them after a mission like this.

"Hey Hollywood, is your girl ready?" Specialist Derrick Jackson asked, settling into his seat.

With his close-cropped hair and sharp features, he caught the eye of many, though Linda had never seen him actually maintain a relationship longer than a month.

"You don't have to push anything back, right? "

"Nope, we're all good," Goodman said. "I messaged Sabby when we were about to go wheels up, so she knows we're still on schedule. I mean, that was a hell of a bachelor party I just had, but I'll still make it Saturday morning."

Everyone laughed, and Orkin clapped Goodman on the shoulders. "Yeah well, you enjoy the two weeks off, got it? And we want a full video after the ceremony."

Linda smiled, thinking about the wedding. Goodman and Sabby were doing things their own way, a splash of color in a world of green. It made her own life feel... stark.

"If Sergeant Adams lets any video of her doing something as soft as a wedding ever even exist," Goodman joked, getting more laughs.

The care he took to maintain professional boundaries with his future sister-in-law was something Linda genuinely respected.

"Well, can you at least tell me what color hair Sabby's going to have?" Takeshi asked. "I've got bright pink and electric blue in the company pool."

"Sorry... mint green and platinum silver," Goodman revealed, causing another round of laughs. "It matches the decorations that she and my mom decided on."

"Can you bring in photos to prove it?" Takeshi asked. "So that somebody can win and we put all that behind us?"

"Sure. How much is the pool, anyway?" Goodman asked curiously. "Nobody told me

about it."

"Well of course we didn't," Orkin said. "That'd ruin the whole thing. And three hundred dollars."

Goodman whistled. "How many people are in on this damn thing?"

"Too many, in multiple companies," Linda said with a little chuckle. She knew about it but had decided against the five dollar buy-in. "So where's the honeymoon going to be? Disney? Miami? The Keys?"

"Actually, Sabby found a metal concert in J-ville that she wants to go to," Goodman admitted. "So yeah, back home in the fourth greatest football city in Florida it is."

"Jacksonville," Simon Dawkins, the youngest member of the fire team and just out of high school, said in disbelief. "Of all the places you could go on your honeymoon, and you choose Jacksonville. I just... no words."

"And where would you go, Dawks?" Derrick asked, raising an eyebrow. "You know, on a PFC's salary?"

"Pssh, that's why I'm not getting married for a long while," Dawkins replied confidently, leaning back in his seat.

"I figure I'm not even looking at settling down until I get to Sergeant at the very least. Until then, I'm playing the field and making sure my wild oats don't get sown in fertile soil. "

Linda turned to look out the window, her reflection staring back with a knowing expression. She'd heard that same speech from at least a dozen soldiers who ended up married within the year. It always seemed to be the ones who protested the loudest

who fell the hardest.

The van ride was short, less than two miles through Fort Pickett. As they pulled into the Charlie Company area, whistles erupted when a flash of metallic green and platinum hair bounded out of the company offices.

"Baby!" Sabby called, running over and hugging Goodman tightly.

Linda felt her chest tighten as she watched them.

She looked away, busying herself with her gear.

It wasn't Hollywood she envied, he wasn't her type at all, but that moment of pure joy when someone sees the person they love return safely.

She couldn't remember the last time anyone had looked at her that way.

"What're you doing here, beautiful?" Hollywood asked, planting a kiss on Sabby's cheek. "I thought you had work today."

"Evening shift, and I wanted to come by and verify some stuff for the project," Sabby explained. "Major Kirk said I can start as soon as we get back from our honeymoon."

"Sabby, we've still..." Linda began, but Sabby waved her off.

"I know, I know, Sarge. You guys have gear to clean. Guns to clean, boots to clean," Sabby said with a dramatic sigh. "I get it. So I'll bounce for now. Logan and I can have our dessert later."

Wolf whistles accompanied her statement as Sabby strutted off, her clunky goth anime boots clapping on the pavement.

"God I'm going to be glad to get the fuck out of the barracks," Goodman declared to more laughter. "Finding privacy is hard."

"Why not use her house?" Dawkins asked, earning a jostle in the shoulder from Takeshi.

"Sabby lives with her sister," Takeshi explained. "I don't think Goodman wants to go to pound town when Muscle Mommy's in the building."

"Oh yeah." Dawkins shook his head and then groaned. "Oh hell... does that mean Sergeant Adams is moving back into the barracks?"

A collective groan went through the squad at the mere thought. Sergeant Adams's legendary attention to detail was inspiring on duty but terrifying off duty.

"No, I already talked with her," Orkin reassured them. "As an NCO she doesn't have to live in the barracks unless she wants to. She found a place in Blackstone that's near her favorite gym. So you barracks rats can continue to live in your slob holes."

"Man, that's good... I can't handle having M Squared on my ass in my downtime," Derrick said. "No offense to her, but she scares me."

"Hey, just a reminder she's my soon to be sister-in-law," Goodman said with a bit of heat in his voice. "And while she's tough, she taught me a lot when I was hers. So chill."

"Good point, Hollywood." Linda turned to go to the back of the van. "Sergeant Adams knows her shit, and taught you a lot. So no disrespecting her from anyone, got it?"

There were assenting grunts all around. Linda opened the back of the van, and

grinned. "Now, Alpha team... we get to unpack the van while Bravo can get the personal bags into the barracks. Then our favorite time begins."

"Cleaning... yay," Takeshi said in mock excitement, earning laughter again. "And I thought we did a lot of cleaning at school in Okinawa."

The squad got to work, and as cleaning began, Linda paused to look at Goodman. He was easily the happiest of the entire squad, and she knew why. The man had a lot to look forward to.

Linda didn't, but at the same time she was glad about one thing.

She respected Jessica Adams immensely, and she'd done a fantastic job of training Hollywood to be a good soldier.

On the mission he'd more than held his own, and Linda knew that if they really got into the shit, Hollywood Goodman was someone she could depend on.

But as the only other enlisted woman in Charlie Company, if Jessica did move back into the barracks, they'd end up being roommates. They were the same rank, both female... it was just the nature of the system.

And the truth was, Linda liked having a barracks room to herself.

"Hey Sarge!"

Linda looked up, realizing she'd been lost in thought, and Sergeant Atkins, the Bravo team leader, was looking over at her. "Yeah, sorry. What's up?"

"XO just got the armory unlocked," Atkins said. "Let's get this stuff broken down, what do you say?"

Linda flashed him a thumbs up. "Let's knock it out."

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brUTUS

Brutus hated coming to Bluecat Stadium in the offseason.

The complex was cavernous and felt like a hollow wound of his failures.

At least during the season, there was always some sort of energy, workers either cleaning up from or preparing for the next game.

And of course... game days. Glorious, glorious game days.

Looking out at the snow-covered field, he was reminded that this past season ended in failure, a bitter pill to swallow, especially with the league championship just days away. And the meeting he was heading into wasn't going to make him feel any better.

Coming up the escalator to the team offices level, Brutus saw his agent and legal representative, Keith Stone, waiting for him.

"Brutus, what's up baby?" he asked, exchanging handshakes. Keith was a bit old school, and always seemed to talk like he was straight out of an eighties or nineties movie. "How's the ankle?"

"It sucks," Brutus confessed. "You know what the MRI said."

Keith nodded, his face tightening. The results of the last two plays were serious, a high ankle sprain for Brutus, and this time the injury was lingering.

During the regular season, Brutus would be missing time for sure, with as little pressure as he could put on the foot.

While there was nothing torn, that didn't mean the pain wasn't there.

"Well you've got time to rest and rehab it now, so you'll be fine come minicamp," he said. "In the meantime..."

"I got it." Brutus looked towards the wooden double doors with the Bluecats logo painted on them.

Normally his interactions with team executives were casual, friendly. After all, he was the poster boy of the Bluecat defense. Keeping him happy was important to the team.

This wasn't one of those days, and as Brutus was shown into the general manager's office, he could feel the storm clouds in the room.

They started with the eyebrows of Hank McMahon, the team's president and general manager, and were reflected in the face of head coach Don Pugh.

Both men were clearly in a bad mood, and didn't really care how Brutus felt about it.

"Have a seat, Brutus." McMahon indicated the chair on the other side of his desk. "How's the ankle?"

"I'll heal." Brutus settled into the chair gratefully. He didn't like showing pain, but that didn't mean he was going to put himself through agony just to look like a tough guy by standing up. "Let's get to business. What's the league telling you?"

"Hold on a minute," Coach Pugh said. "Brutus... damn boy, you keep wanting to

gloss over the problem without actually addressing the cause."

Keith held up a hand, popping off. "Just a minute Coach Pugh, my client..."

"Stop, Keith," Brutus said, holding up a hand.

Keith was a good contract negotiator, and had made Brutus a lot of money. But that didn't mean Brutus wanted him always talking for him.

"Let Coach speak. He's earned the right."

"Fine... but you're the one who's the All Pro linebacker," Keith reminded Brutus, doing his job as Brutus's pitchman. "You're the second generation superstar."

Brutus grit his teeth. Keith had been around since his college days, but sometimes his "man above the team" attitude grated. Besides, Coach Pugh detested the man, he knew that for certain.

"Brutus, your agent's got a certain point," Coach slowly admitted, "in that you are the biggest attention grabber on the defense.

I'm sure Mr. McMahon can tell you the numbers, but you sell more jerseys than any member of the team for certain.

My problem is that you're making headlines for headaches almost as often as you are for great plays. "

"Come on Coach, I haven't-

"Week two, five thousand dollar fine for roughing the passer," Coach said.

"I don't give a damn about your paycheck, but that one cost us three points on the field.

Week five, another roughing the passer. Week eight, two unnecessary roughness penalties.

The past two seasons, you've racked up nearly a hundred thousand dollars in on-field penalties. "

Brutus couldn't deny it. He was certain he wasn't a dirty player, but he knew that he had a temper. And he hated the way the league was enforcing roughing the passer currently.

"Coach, those penalties are up across the board. I think my contributions are more than my drawbacks."

"Fine... until you start trying to start fights with military personnel in uniform," Mr. McMahon said. "Brutus, those men were there at the invitation of the Bluecats and the league. Do you know how much money our partnership with the Pentagon is worth?"

"More than my contract?" Brutus asked.

McMahon scoffed.

"Look, I was hurt and pissed off. I know I fucked up, and I'm sorry for what I said. That's why I had Keith release that statement."

"A statement isn't going to fix this," Coach Pugh said.

"Especially some text wall on Instagram and Twitter.

You didn't even say it on camera. Brutus, on a teammate level, you pissed off about half the locker room.

That's the number of your teammates who have family members either in the military or are military veterans.

Shit, our starting left tackle went to Annapolis!

Those are people that you have to play with, that you have to trust and have watching your back next season. "

"On a professional level, the team's fielded thousands of letters, phone calls, and emails calling for your release," McMahon added.

"Including season ticket holders threatening to cancel their tickets for next year if you're in a Bluecats uniform.

The league has fielded even more calls, and a massive online petition for your release has roughly a quarter million subscribers.

The cable news pundits are screaming about how you're disrespecting the flag and the military, and it's become a major national controversy. "

Brutus sighed, and leaned back in his chair. He knew that his outburst had gone viral, but the pure scale of it was disheartening.

"And now the league's having to answer. How bad is it?"

"Well, the Commissioner's office is giving you three options before making a public decision," McMahon said. "There's a fourth, of course."

"Fuck around and find out?" Brutus asked.

McMahon nodded.

"Go ahead with what the league offered then."

"Option one. You don't say anything other than what you have," McMahon said. "Sit on that press release, keep your head down, and don't fuck up between now and the end of the situation. For that, you get a half million dollar fine and an eight game suspension."

"There's no way the union would allow that!" Keith exploded. "This is excessive! They can't just cave to public pressure like this!"

"They have to be more mindful of their collective bargaining agreement," McMahon said. "Such as the upcoming talks. The union does not want to go into those on bad footing. Defending Brutus won't be a good image."

Brutus nodded, unsurprised. "You said three options."

"Option two, same fine, four game suspension, but you have to go through a full-blown PR campaign, including public apologies and charitable donations. Basically, you get to wrap yourself in sackcloth and ashes, and they take four games off your suspension."

"The donations would be more money than sitting out the additional four games," Keith pointed out.

Brutus shook his head. He definitely didn't like that one.

"Which is why I talked with the league," Coach Pugh said. "As you know, the head of

the player conduct committee and I have a connection."

"You coached him to one of his two league championship rings," Brutus pointed out.

Pugh closed his eyes to agree.

"So what did you two hash out?"

"Quarter million dollar fine," Pugh said, "and a three game suspension that can be served during the preseason.

So no real suspension at all. But there's a couple of contingencies.

One, you start seeing a shrink, on your dime, Brutus.

Look, I've seen you carry the weight of that name and your father's legacy your whole life.

This option gives you a chance to address that and get the help you need. "

Brutus had to silently agree. He hated being treated like a dumb jock. "Go on."

"The second part is that you do a sort of outreach with the Army, not stuff that'll involve money but will involve a good chunk of time in your off season," Pugh said.

"Including charity work the Army will approve of.

Again, not so much money but time and lending your image and endorsement to Army approved causes. "

"So, what kind of commitment are we talking about?" Keith asked. "A quick photo

op, or something more involved?"

"That's up for the Army to decide after Brutus takes the offer," Pugh admits. "I know it's not great, but the Army will be flexible and take your team commitments into account with its requests. It's a generous offer, Brutus. And one that won't come again."

"Or option four," McMahon said quickly. He leaned forward. "Let's be clear, Brutus. We value you, but we can't carry a liability. We need you on the field, contributing, and that starts with making the right choice here. You're not getting any younger."

"Are you threatening to fire me, Hank?" Brutus asked, his jaw clenching. "Trust me, you do and I'll make the Bluecats regret it. I don't care if I sign with Miami, Los Angeles, or New York. I'll sign somewhere, and when I do, I'm going to make it my mission to make your life a living hell."

"After you serve your suspension," McMahon pointed out.

"Because the league won't waive it if we cut you.

Now, we want you on the team, Brutus. I'm not trying to insult you.

I see this as a respect move, talking to you dead even like a man.

So as a man, and as the GM, I'm saying I won't go into next year with a dead spot in the linebacker corps for half the season. "

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"Would you let me talk it over with Keith for a few minutes?" Brutus stood up. "You'll still be able to tell the league office what my decision is by the time the commissioner's morning blowjob's over."

Without waiting for an answer, Brutus walked out of McMahon's office and into the hallway, Keith right behind him.

Leaving the Bluecat offices, he paced the hallway of the stadium, his feet slapping on the polished marble and sending flares of pain up his leg from his hurt ankle.

The pain made the anger that much worse, and he knew he was dropping into the sort of on-field rage that often got him in trouble.

He didn't get penalties when he wasn't in pain.

"Fuck!" he growled, jamming his hands in his pockets. "Do you fucking believe them, Keith?"

"I do," Keith said quietly, shaking his head.

"Fucking owners nowadays. They've got the league office in their back pocket, and you know how it is.

They don't give a damn about championships except as a way to make more money.

You know, what you get up to isn't shit compared to the old school players?

When I was growing up, football was watching organized assault on a weekly basis.

Some of those old school players straight up went out there to hurt their opponents.

And don't even get me fucking started on what they did off the field. "

"My dad's told me the stories."

Brutus went over to the railing. He leaned against it, looking through the gap in the concrete structure to look out at the field.

"He said that if guys my size and strength played under those old rules, there'd be legitimate fatalities every Sunday. Maybe the new rules are better in that way."

"Yeah, you might be able to walk when you're fifty," Keith admitted.

"Look, I don't want to get into a diatribe here.

We're not in my office, and I don't want to say things that'll be used against me later on.

But I'm your numbers guy, right? Well here's the numbers.

I've already had two of your endorsement deals contact me, saying they're going to at least temporarily suspend your contracts with them. "

"Who?" Brutus asked. "And why the fuck didn't you tell me?"

"Because there wasn't anything you could do about it, not until after the league comes out with their decision," Keith said.

"And you needed to focus on healing your ankle.

They aren't your biggest endorsement deals, but the trend is going right now.

Brutus Townsend's a bit of a toxic name, so even the ones that don't suspend you are going to be back benching your stuff unless you do some major PR rehab. "

Brutus nodded in understanding. "And I don't have a ton of time to rehab that image."

"You've been the so called raging bad boy of the Bluecats defense for nine years," Keith pointed out.

"Sells a fuck ton of jerseys, but it's cost you millions in endorsements too.

Now you're in prime age for cashing in on your image, and you've got this to deal with.

So here's what I say. Go with that last option.

Eat crow for the Army, and I'll work with them to make sure whatever you say or do won't embarrass you too much.

You'll still eat humble pie some, but nothing too bad.

Serve your suspension in the preseason, and come week one of the regular season, your ass is out there on the field getting cheers. "

Brutus nodded, imagining it in his mind. "And the shrink? You know I've been seeing head docs my whole life."

"Yeah, but those were sports psychologists," Keith pointed out. "Those guys just give

a damn about your on field performance. Hell, maybe talking to a shrink will help you. You can't go through the rest of your life not dealing with that temper of yours."

Brutus inhaled deeply, knowing he was tempted to snap back at Keith and tell him exactly why he had that temper... but resisted.

"Fine."

Turning, he walked back into McMahon's office, where he and Coach Pugh were exchanging small talk.

"Deal. Let's go with that third option. But I've got one condition myself."

"What's that?" Coach Pugh asked. "I don't think you've got a lot of wiggle room here, Brutus."

"I know. But I want to actually do something with the Army," he said. "Whatever it is, I want to do something meaningful, not just some corporate ass kissing session. Think the league can set that up?"

It was McMahon's turn to smile, and he pointed to a picture on the wall. "See the guy third from the left in that pic, Brutus?"

Brutus looked over, seeing a picture of McMahon along with four other guys, all of them about the same age as him. "Crew cut dude, the one without a pot belly?"

"That's my old college fraternity brother.

He's now a two star general in the Pentagon, in fact he was with me in the owner's box that last game," McMahon ignored the pot belly comment.

Mainly because it was true. "Let me give him a call, see what we can arrange.

If he's got a good idea, I'm sure the league will sign off on it. We have a deal?"

Brutus nodded, and stuck out a hand. "Deal. Let's do this right, and move on to next season."

"Careful what you wish for, Brutus." McMahon shook his hand. "My friend, the general? After the game he was pretty hot, said that you needed to learn respect by spending some time with real troops."

"Okay."

"So you may not like what the program entails," McMahon warned him. "Might get dirty and sweaty."

Brutus nodded, smiling a little. "Like every football practice I've done since I was five years old hasn't been? I'm a linebacker. I may wear a different uniform, and I may not actually kill anyone. But I'm a warrior too."

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LINDA

"So how was the weekend?" First Lieutenant Tristan Parker, Linda's platoon leader, asked as the platoon gathered in the shaded picnic tables by the company offices. "Everyone refreshed and rested? First Squad?"

"We're good to go, sir," Orkin replied, looking around the table. "What's up?"

Linda didn't mind the unusual post-lunch gathering.

Most Mondays were spent all day in the motor pool, doing maintenance on various pieces of company equipment to make sure that training the rest of the week went according to plan.

And while they'd done that this morning, doing maintenance checks on all the trucks in the platoon, after lunch they were gathered here instead.

Lieutenant Parker glanced at Sergeant First Class Jackson Lincoln, the Third Platoon Sergeant, lifting an eyebrow.

"You didn't spill any beans there, Sergeant Lincoln?"

"Figured you'd enjoy the announcement more, sir," Linc said.

Off duty, Linc wasn't a bad guy. He took mentoring seriously, but approached it more like a seasoned player guiding the rookies. He'd roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty, proving he could still run the plays alongside them.

Parker was more... buttoned-up. He came from a long line of Army officers – mother, siblings, the whole nine yards. Some days, it felt like he bled green, which could be a pain. But he wasn't all bad like Linc, loyalty within the platoon was paramount.

"Why thank you Sergeant, I shall do my best to enjoy it then," Parker replied, giving a sarcastic little wave of his hand. Looking at the rest of the platoon, he shared his news. "This morning we got a unique assignment from Major Kirk. As you know, we need someone to fill in for Hollywood."

"At least until Wednesday. Hollywood's gettin' hitched!" Sergeant Nate Nichols, the second squad leader, called out.

"Good point Nichols," Parker said patiently. "Who here's familiar with Brutus Townsend and his little... dust-up?"

There were hums around the area. Of course a lot of the troops had seen it, the Bluecats were one of the local teams. Every Sunday you could be certain that the Bluecats were going to be on television.

And even if you weren't a football fan, Townsend's near fight with the soldiers in the stands got replayed on television at least a couple thousand times over the next few days.

Linda had seen the whole incident live, and had to admit that she wasn't happy with either side.

Brutus Townsend shouldn't have been trying to start a fight, yes.

But at the same time, those soldiers were in uniform.

What were they doing drinking beer, harassing players, and throwing drinks at

people?

Nobody seemed to care about their behavior.

"So what's the deal, sir?" Nate Nichols, the second squad leader, asked.

"The deal is, Townsend's worked a deal with the Pentagon and the league," Lieutenant Parker said.

"In addition to a fine and suspension, he's going to be working with the Army to kiss up and make nice.

Part of that is going to involve us. Seems the Pentagon or the White House or someone above our pay grades decided that the best way to get that relationship started is for Brutus Townsend to spend a week sort of 'interning' with a real unit.

And we're the lucky unit who gets to do it. "

There were groans around the area, none more heartfelt than Linda's. Parker had started off his comments by saying that the platoon had some temporary holes in it, and she knew what that temporary hole was.

Hollywood was on leave.

"Sir, really?" Linda asked, raising her hand. "We're supposed to give this guy a guided tour for an entire week?"

"Not a guided tour, Castellanos," Lieutenant Parker corrected her.

"He's going to be working, sort of a one week internship, on the job.

The Pentagon chose us because we do the kind of basic training Townsend could actually participate in.

He can't fly a helicopter or work on a missile system, but he can learn about basic combat skills. "

"So we're basic, sir?" someone asked.

Parker laughed.

"Hardly. We're good at what we do, and we do it well. Townsend lives here in Virginia, and the Pentagon can keep an eye on us here too. But we're also isolated enough that this won't turn into a press media circus."

"Hooah!" the platoon echoed almost in one voice, and Linda was right along with them.

She knew that most of the hard work would come down on her, but she was good enough to handle it. She knew that she could walk Brutus Townsend through a week as a soldier.

"Good," Parker said. "Now, I shouldn't need to say it, but I'm going to anyway because I'm an officer and we love to hear ourselves talk."

"Hooah!" the platoon replied again.

Parker laughed, relaxing slightly. The man might have been ambitious, he might have been looking at his time in the Army as a career, following in the footsteps of his mother and siblings. And sometimes that caused him to clench up a little, but he wasn't a bad person overall.

"Thank you. So we're not going to have any sort of harassment of Brutus Townsend.

Nobody's going to kiss his ass or try to get him to sign footballs or pose for a thousand selfies for your Instagram.

In fact, his visit's under the same operational security as any other mission, at least until he leaves. Get me?"

"Roger, sir," one of the soldiers said.

"And on the flip side, nobody's going to give him a hard time either," Parker continued.

"There's not going to be any sort of hazing, none of that.

Yeah, he said some stupid shit to our brothers and sisters in uniform.

But let's be clear, most of us have said stupid shit to someone in uniform.

And from what Major Kirk told me, Mr. Townsend requested that he not do dog and pony work.

I hold that in his favor. So we're going to be what we are.

We're professionals. We do the odd jobs that nobody else in the Army is capable of doing.

We're the unspoken elite because of that.

And this is just another odd job that the Army wants done. "

It was glowing but oddly strange praise, and Linda felt warm inside at hearing her platoon leader's words. He was right, they were professionals, and they could get the odd jobs done.

"Now, specifics will be coming down the pipe over the rest of the week," Parker continued. "But for now, know that Mr. Townsend will be filling in Hollywood's spot on the line. So he'll be in Alpha Team, First Squad."

"Sir, a question?" PFC Vincent from third squad called out. Parker nodded, and Vincent continued. "What sort of training will be on the line for that week, if he can't do anything classified?"

"We're Third Platoon, Charlie Company," Parker said.

"Our missions aren't typical Army, you know that.

But that means we can be flexible, and I've gotten permission from MAJ Kirk to do some 'badass' stuff.

So while Motor Pool Monday will be typical, we're also going to go just a bit old school, polish up some of those skills that we don't pay as much attention to as we normally do.

So be prepared to run obstacle courses, do some forest patrols and land nav, and whatever else Major Kirk, myself, Top, or Sergeant Lincoln can cook up over the next few days. "

"Now that's a spicy mix," Linc said.

Linda had to chuckle. The man could be devious with his training ideas, Linda knew. The truth was, the skills that Charlie Company used weren't all that complex.

Complacency and boredom could set in just running the same training scenarios over and over.

Linc knew how to toss the occasional wrinkle into the mix, keep things fresh and everyone on their toes.

"The key is to teach Brutus Townsend about the Army and he'll respect us more," Parker said.

"Now I already know we're going to end with a three day of Field Training Exercise that'll cover the weekend.

On the positive side, when we get back the platoon will have Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday off, a normal Sergeant's Time Thursday, normal Friday, and then a normal weekend. "

"Shit sir, sounds like we're going to have some stories to tell Hollywood when he gets back," someone called out.

Laughter greeted it.

"Sure we can't get Townsend to sign at least one poster, saying something like 'Miss You Hollywood!' or something?" someone else asked.

"I'll mention it to Major Kirk, but nobody below a captain's bars asks for his autograph," Parker said, which included himself. "For now, go ahead and get back down to the motorpool, I'm going to meet with Major Kirk to get our plans hashed out. Dismissed."

The platoon broke up, and started walking back towards the motorpool. As Linda walked, she heard boots behind her and glanced back to see Sergeant Orkin coming

up.

"You know you walk louder than half a dozen people, right?"

"Tell that to my first platoon sergeant," Aaron said, chuckling. "Man wanted us pinging when we were in garrison."

"Pinging?" Linda asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, that old school power walking thing. Still slips out when I'm trying to catch someone."

"So what's on your mind?"

"Look, El-Tee's got to say what he's got to say," Orkin said. "And we'll bring Brutal Townsend into the squad. But I want to know how you're going to handle it. You okay, or do you need me to sort of hand hold this guy when he shows up?"

Linda hesitated, wondering if she was truly ready for this. The last thing the platoon needed was for her to misstep with a high-profile civilian. Still, she couldn't let her squad leader think she couldn't handle a task, no matter how unusual.

"I've got no problems, I'll deal with him just like he's Hollywood," Linda said. "Why?"

"I just want to be sure. Lot of people are pissed with him after what he did. Also, I'm going to play things a little loose with this guy. El-Tee Parker's right, we're not going to haze this guy."

"That's good."

Up ahead, Linda could see the motorpool, the scent of diesel and oil already reaching her nostrils.

Orkin slowed up a bit. "That being said, I plan on us running Brutus Townsend ragged. He might be a professional football player, but I'll bet you twenty bucks that we can send him back to the rest of his offseason with real respect for the Army."

"You want to make him tap out?" Linda asked, a little surprised.

Orkin did play fast and loose with certain traditions and regulations even, but he was never one to go over the line maliciously. If anything, he always broke the rules for the good of the unit.

"If you mean grind him into the ground, not intentionally," Orkin said, relieving her worries. "We're not going to ask him to do anything we won't put ourselves through. Lead by example, you know?"

"That's the way I do things," Linda said, "and the way that you've always done things with the squad too. So what do you mean in his case?"

"I mean we're going to challenge him, hold him to the standard that we always hold," Orkin said.

"I'm going to need you to help me with it.

You're the fire team leader, and you'll be the one responsible for teaching him how not to get himself killed on all of the tasks that we're going to be throwing his direction. Think you can handle it?"

Linda didn't answer right away, because she knew this was more than the standard request. When a new soldier came to the unit, they'd already had at least six months

of military training, if not years of experience being in other units.

Brutus Townsend was a professional football player.

There might be some similarities in terms of physical activity, understanding hard work, and not being afraid to sweat.

But there were a lot of differences, and he couldn't be expected to know any of the skills an infantry soldier would know coming out of basic training.

She wondered if she was really qualified to guide a celebrity through this experience. What if she messed up? What if he didn't respect her authority? What if, worst of all, she found herself distracted by him?

She would have to handle that.

"No... no. I can do it," Linda said. "I'll be able to teach him. Or I'll be able to task it out to some of the other troops in the team."

"Cool." Orkin started walking again. "Then you can be the teacher. But if he needs to be sent to the principal's office..."

"Then you'll be there to have my back."

"Exactly."

Linda hummed, clenching and unclenching her fists in anticipation of the next week's challenges. "Then let's send Brutus Townsend to school."

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brUTUS

Standing in his bedroom, Brutus double checked the bag that he'd packed for the week ahead. It wasn't much, just a single gym bag of exercise clothes, toiletries, some casual hangout clothes for the evenings that he didn't really expect to have a chance to use, socks, and underpants.

The Army said they'd provide him with the rest.

Picking up the bag, Brutus glanced around his bedroom one last time.

His home was his sanctuary, a place to escape the relentless spotlight.

He'd traded the convenience of city life for the peace of these five acres, finding solace in the quiet that allowed him to recover from the physical and mental demands of his career.

The forty-minute drive from the Bluecats practice facility was a small price to pay for the rejuvenation this place offered.

Keith was waiting for him along with Vanna, his housekeeper.

"You got everything?" Keith asked him. "You're not going to need much."

"The Army doesn't have a problem with me wearing an ankle brace?" Brutus confirmed, and Keith nodded. "Then I'm good."

"Don't worry about the house, Mr. Townsend," Vanna said, her comfortable clothes reflecting Brutus's preference for practicality over formality. "I'll be by every day to keep things in order."

"Thank you Vanna, I'm not worried at all," Brutus said. "It's just like training camp, right?"

"You just wake up earlier," Vanna, whose brother was in the Air Force, said.

She'd been surprised when Brutus had apologized to her a week ago, and their relationship had become warmly professional because of it.

"Don't worry Mr. Townsend, you'll be fine."

After giving Vanna a little wave of goodbye, Brutus left the house, taking his bag out to his truck. It was one of three vehicles he owned, and the one he'd decided was best for the two and a half hour drive to Fort Pickett.

"Remember," Keith said as Brutus unlocked the door and tossed his bag into the back, "the league put some rules on this."

"I know," Brutus said, not liking the league sticking their nose into the arrangement at the last minute but knowing he didn't have another option. The team had already signed off on the deal.

"You know, but let's be clear." Keith pulled an envelope out of his suit pocket and handed it to him.

"It's seven straight days, Brutus. You have to complete the week with the unit, and at the end they're going to give you a grade."

You have to pass in order to get credit towards your league suspension. "

"What did you learn about these guys anyway?" Brutus asked. "They're in the middle of nowhere, right? Had to double-check it wasn't a prank."

Keith shrugged. "They're the real deal, but low-profile. They'll push you, but they know you're not a soldier. Put in the work, and you'll be fine."

"That's the whole plan," Brutus assured Keith. "Get it done."

"Good. From what I heard, you won't be in basic training mode, but you won't be living the high life either. When you get to the base, the unit commander's going to walk you through it all."

"Forget it," Brutus said. "You just keep ESPN and TMZSports or whoever from badmouthing me any more."

"You're slow news now, baby," Keith assured him. "Football's over until the draft, everyone's talking basketball now. Relax and enjoy being out of the spotlight for a few months. Give me a call if you need anything."

They shook hands, and Brutus climbed into his truck, pulling away into the morning chill.

He'd planned his trip to take his time, pausing halfway to the base to get a pair of drive-thru double cheeseburgers.

He knew that it wasn't the healthiest meal in the world, and the Army had assured him that he'd be able to eat enough to maintain his strength and health.

Brutus knew he had to look out for himself. Maintaining his body mass was a

constant challenge, and past experiences had taught him not to rely on promises of adequate nutrition. That's why he'd packed his own protein powder, just in case.

When he was about a half hour out according to the GPS on his phone, he sent Keith a message, who said he'd contact the Army and make sure they were ready.

From there it was an easy drive, the GPS steering him right where he needed to go.

Pulling up to the main gate with its two-lane overhanging structure that read Joint Training Center, Virginia National Guard on it, Brutus was directed into a visitor's parking area just beyond an old-fashioned World War II tank.

An MP came over, along with two men in military fatigues. Both men were in shape, one with a slight tinge of gray to his temples and the other carrying himself like a former athlete.

"Mr. Townsend?" the taller officer said, offering a hand. "Lieutenant Colonel Paul Remsburg, commander of the Third Battalion, Third Infantry Regiment. Welcome to Fort Pickett."

"Thank you for hosting me, Colonel," Brutus said. "I hope you weren't waiting too long."

Remburg glanced at his watch, and shook his head. "About ten minutes. I waited longer the last time I had to meet a Senate subcommittee, and they had supposedly professional drivers."

Brutus chuckled, glad the Colonel had a sense of humor. "Still, it is your day off."

"That's why we make the big bucks," the Colonel said. "Anyway, let me introduce you to your company commander for the next seven days, Major Tyson Kirk."

"Nice to have you here, Mr. Townsend." Major Kirk offered his hand. "First up... is the truck clear?"

The MP who had come over with the two officers nodded. Apparently he'd been inspecting Brutus's truck for something. "Roger, sir."

"Good." Major Kirk reached into the thigh pocket of his uniform and taking out a piece of paper.

He handed it to Brutus, and he saw it was a temporary parking pass.

"Please keep that in the front window of your truck on the passenger side, displayed for people to see.

You won't be driving much, but it'll save you hassle and prevent your truck getting towed in the meantime. "

Brutus went over to his truck and immediately put the paper where asked before coming back.

"Okay. Now what?"

"Now you get to follow our Humvee back to battalion headquarters, where we'll brief you on how this upcoming week is going to go and introduce you to your chain of command," Remsburg said.

"We're going to try and keep things short and to the point today to give you a chance to settle in and get accustomed to the barracks. "

Brutus climbed back into his truck, and saw a military Hummer pull out of another parking spot. As it pulled into the roadway an arm stuck out to wave him on.

Considering the rear bumper read HQ 3/3 INF, he was pretty sure he had the right vehicle, and followed it as it drove away.

Fort Pickett was a lot bigger on the inside than he'd expected.

Following along behind the Humvee, he was surprised to see row after row of white clapboard type buildings, interspersed with the occasional brick walled structure.

He did note a huge complex off to his left as they turned down a different road and kept going, finally stopping at another brick and white boarded, two-story building.

Pulling around into the parking lot, Brutus stopped and followed Remsburg and Kirk into the building.

"I know it doesn't look like much on the outside.

" Remsburg pulled open one of the double glass doors, "but the Army's done a decent amount to make sure our offices are up to the highest standards. "

The man wasn't lying. Sure, the walls were a plain, boring white, and the furniture was pretty much what Brutus expected, government issue and ugly as hell.

But the computers on the desks looked newer than the ones the Bluecats used for team meetings, and the conference room he was led into was serviceable, with chairs that were more comfortable than they first appeared.

Inside were four more people. His gaze immediately locked onto the woman at the end of the line.

Stunning. Slightly taller than average, her light caramel skin and incredible eyes almost glowed under the fluorescent lights.

She wore sergeant's stripes, but it was her captivating presence that held his attention.

"Mr. Townsend, this first briefing will be kept simple," Remsburg said. "You'll be meeting your chain of command today before I turn you over to Major Kirk. He'll be the most senior officer directly observing you on a daily basis, and you'll be interacting with his company the most."

"I understand, Colonel."

"Good," Remsburg said. "Now, while I'll be signing off on your completion of this week's training, you can guess who's actually going to be giving you your grade."

"I get you, Colonel," Brutus said.

"Something like that," Remsburg acknowledged. "So, Major?"

"Thank you, sir." Kirk picked up a remote and hit a button.

On the ceiling, a projector fired up, and while it wasn't as powerful as the huge LED screens that the Bluecats used in their team meeting rooms, it worked.

"So Mr. Townsend, for the next seven days you'll be a member of Charlie Company, otherwise known as Cranked. You're going to be slotted into Alpha Team, First Squad, Third Platoon. With that let me introduce you to your chain of command. First, your platoon leader, First Lieutenant Parker."

The tall man gave him a nod, and Brutus nodded back. He looked serious, and was definitely a lifetime Army man, Brutus thought. It was like meeting other second-generation professional athletes, there was a certain air to them, like they were born for what they were doing and knew it.

"Next is your platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class Lincoln."

"Sergeant."

"Townsend," Sergeant Lincoln replied, and Brutus could hear the iciness in the man's voice. Obviously he wasn't a Bluecats fan. Or maybe he just wasn't a Brutus Townsend fan.

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Major Kirk continued. "Next we have your squad leader, Staff Sergeant Orkin, and your team leader, Sergeant Castellanos. They will be the people you will be working with most closely."

Brutus couldn't help but study Castellanos more carefully. She really was beautiful, and even the severely pulled back ponytail she wore to keep her hair within military styling couldn't detract from the fact the woman was prettier than any of the Bluekitten cheerleaders the team had.

"First, some rules," Major Kirk said, forcing Brutus attention away from her. "Between the hours of six in the morning and five in the afternoon or whenever we finish work, you're to be in your assigned uniform at all times. You were briefed on that, correct?"

"Yes. Major, quick question. If there's a problem with the program, who do I go to?" Brutus asked. "Just in case."

"If there's an issue, you'll follow the same procedures as a regular soldier," Kirk said.

"You follow this chain I just briefed you on.

If Sergeant Castellanos tells you something and you don't agree, you go to Sergeant Orkin, and on up the line.

Although I'll say, if you want to take it higher than Colonel Remsburg.

.. well, I seriously doubt the program's going to be workable at that point. "

"I agree, and I don't expect that," Brutus allowed. "But it's like with my team. I just like knowing who's coaching what positions and who tells me what to do."

"Okay, that's clear enough," Kirk said, visibly relieved.

"The general thing is, you'll listen to anything another member of your fire team, Sergeant Castellanos, or Sergeant Orkin tells you.

Occasionally someone with stripes might tell you to do something, but it shouldn't be an issue as it'll be clear why. "

"I understand," Brutus said.

"Good. Now, you won't be cut off from the world, you'll be able to use your phone or a computer during your off hours. But you won't be allowed to carry your cell phone during work hours, a nod to your... intern status."

Brutus bristled at the term intern, but nodded.

And it could be worse. During the first week of preseason camp, the players weren't allowed to have any internet access at all.

If you had to contact the outside world, you had to get the team's permission, and getting caught with a cell phone was an automatic fifteen thousand dollar fine. "What if there's an emergency?"

"I've already given the Bluecats and the league office our contact information," Major Kirk said. "So if something does come up, you won't be out of the loop. And if something happens to you, we will make sure to inform all relevant parties."

"Cool. What else?"

"You'll eat in the dining facility with the rest of the troops," Kirk continued, "and the battalion cooks have been briefed on your dietary needs. Basically double protein portions for you. If you gain a little weight from the carbs... well, you've got the rest of your offseason."

"Can I take supplements?" Brutus asked. "Creatine, vitamins, stuff like that? I've got a tub of protein powder in my truck."

Kirk nodded. "Of course. Actually, there's another sergeant in your platoon who you could swap nutrition stories with if you have the time."

"Any question?"

"None that come to mind," Brutus said. "I just want to say first..

. thank you. All of you. I know I stuck my foot in my mouth, and I'm sorry about that.

I've been talking to some professionals, trying to become a better person.

It's a long path, and I'm looking forward to this week, hopefully learning a bit about the lives you lead.

And if I have questions, I'll be sure to ask them. "

"That's all we can ask for," Major Kirk said. "For now though, Lieutenant Parker?"

"Actually sir, I'm going to let Sergeant Orkin and Sergeant Castellanos take Mr. Townsend to get his supplies and his bunk," Parker said. "Just like a normal new enlisted member of the platoon. Sergeant Orkin?"

"Thank you sir." Orkin flashed a grin.

He looked every bit as fit as the other soldiers, but with an unmistakable mischievous air about him, like someone who'd enjoy harmless pranks.

"Come on Townsend, you can give us a ride down to the barracks in that sweet truck I saw parked outside."

It was a lot less formal than Brutus had been expecting, but seeing the chuckles around the room, he knew this was Orkin's style.

Outside, Orkin paused next to Brutus's truck, looking it over. "Nice. V-8 engine?"

"Sure is... ah, Sergeant?"

"Good, you looked that up," Orkin said. "Just remember, stripes are sergeants, bars and foliage are sir or ma'am.

We've got a female officer in the company, Lieutenant Starr.

Anyway, here's the lowdown. You're going to be filling the hole left by a hell of a good soldier, so you need to give it your all. "

"Hole?" Brutus asked, a little worried. "Like... he's gone?"

"Yup... gone and got himself married," Orkin said, laughing.

Seeing Brutus's reaction, he grinned. "Had to get one in on you.

But seriously, the guy you're subbing in for, he's a good dude.

And you're going to be expected to be part of the squad, part of the fire team.

We won't expect you to be as good as a trained private, there's stuff you just don't know.

But I am going to evaluate you on the effort you give and the attitude you display.

On the positive side though, you won't have to salute officers, although like I said, call them sir or ma'am. "

Brutus, Orkin, and Sergeant Castellanos piled into his truck, and Orkin directed him to the barracks. Shouldering his gym bag, Brutus wondered if he should just leave his keys in his room all week, but decided against it. He'd just keep them in his pocket, even if they were useless.

His room was on the first floor, and as Orkin opened the door Brutus looked around, pleasantly surprised. "This isn't so bad."

"Not so bad?" Orkin asked, looking around. "Dude, you can be cheerful and positive tomorrow, I'm starting the eval then."

"No, I'm serious." Brutus set his bag down on the utilitarian couch against the wall.

"I mean, it's spartan. But you should see the dorm rooms the Bluecats use during the first two weeks of training camp.

Coach Pugh is old school, takes us out to this JUCO in the mountains.

.. trust me, this is luxury compared to that deal.

We quadruple up in these cinder block walled rooms, bunk beds, all of that.

Two whole weeks of funky bodies of three hundred pound men who pump out

protein farts all night long.

Even worse is when you get a roommate who's on the verge of getting cut. Fear sweat reeks."

"Well, these rooms are normally two person rooms, but with Hollywood getting married and another person transferring out, the room's yours fully for the next week," Orkin said. "By the way, your uniforms are in here. Castellanos will show you."

"Follow me," Sergeant Castellanos said, and Brutus couldn't help but watch as she walked across the room to a door, opening it. Even in the baggy, shapeless Army uniform she was captivating. "Brutus?"

"Sorry, I just... yeah." Brutus came over. It was the first time anyone in uniform had used his first name, and from this woman's mouth it sounded a lot better than it normally did to him.

The room was a bedroom, with a full sized mattress on a steel frame, a dresser, and nothing else. The bed wasn't even made, and the pillow looked about as helpful as yesterday's newspaper.

On the bed were his clothes. "You guys already got them?"

"Our central supply warehouse doesn't always have what's necessary, this is a small base.

And they're closed on Sundays," Castellanos explained.

"So our choices were to have you come in on Friday and then have nothing for you to do over the weekend, or get it for you. We got your numbers from... someone-"

"Probably my agent, Keith Stone."

"-and we picked them up for you. You'll be happy to know that you can keep these after you're done, you bought them."

Brutus went over and picked up a pair of camo pants, looking them over. "They look like they'll fit."

"A hint." Castellanos tapped a box on her end of the bed.

"These are your combat boots. While they're easier to break in than the old fashioned black boots, at least that's what I've been told, they're still new boots.

I suggest wearing them around the barracks today, get them to start breaking in. Did you bring athletic shoes?"

Brutus nodded, and pointed to his feet. "These will work, I assume? Shoe contract."

"They're running shoes, right?" Castellanos asked, and Brutus nodded. "They'll be fine then."

Looking at Castellanos, he continued, "Castellanos, if you're cool here, I'm going to head out. Do you need anything?"

"Ah, quick question on the pillow situation?" Brutus asked, holding up the pillow. "Is there anywhere I can snag another one?"

"I'm sure we can scrounge up something, if in doubt one of your couch's arm cushions works reasonably well," Orkin said. "Make sure you get Townie up to speed on the morning protocol, and I'll see you in the morning."

"We're good. See you tomorrow Sarge." Castellanos turned her attention back to Brutus.

"Now, your uniform will be a bit different from everyone else's.

First off, it's in an older pattern that's no longer current.

That's on purpose, so that everyone knows that you're not a trained soldier.

If you compare those pants to mine, you'll see the difference. "

Brutus looked, and saw what she meant. His pants looked a lot 'grayer' than hers, which had stronger green and brown tones. "Okay."

"Second, you will not be wearing any rank, name tapes, any of that. You're not a soldier, even though you need to behave in a soldierly manner," she said. "Think you can do that?"

"I can try," Brutus said, but in his mind all he could think of was how Castellanos looked nothing at all like what he expected a soldier to look like.

"Good. Remember, I'm going to be the first person in the chain of command.

So if you have problems, you come see me first," she said.

"Jumping the chain is not something you want to do.

Also, I happen to live in the barracks as well.

I'm in the other corner unit at the end of the hallway.

You know where to find me if you need anything. Don't forget to knock."

"Ah, two things," Brutus said. "First, what's this about dinner?"

"The DFAC, that's the dining facility, is just down the street," Castellanos said. "If you want, I'll swing by myself at dinner time and walk you down. You'll need to be in your uniform to do it, so at least have your workout clothes on."

"You sure?" Brutus said. Pressing his luck, he asked, "There isn't a boyfriend or someone that'd be upset you're taking me to dinner?"

He thought he was being subtle. But the truth was, subtlety had never been his strong point, especially when it came to women. And seeing Castellanos's face, he saw that his question had gone over badly. The woman looked pissed.

"Listen up," Castellanos growled, her face hardening.

"You might want to get it through your head that for the next seven days, I'm not a woman to you.

I'm something frightening, a creature with no mother, no father, no heart or soul.

I'm a new soldier's deepest nightmare, and their guardian angel all at the same time.

I can make you, and I can for damn sure break you. I'm a sergeant. Got that?"

Brutus swallowed, but at the same time was turned on. "Yes... Sergeant."

"Good," Castellanos said, her demeanor relaxing a bit. "Then I'll be here at seventeen thirty, that's five thirty your time, with your pillow. Be ready to go, I suggest ACU - that's Active Combat Uniform - pants and boots with the long sleeved undershirt to

go with your parka."

Castellanos walked past Brutus, and for a moment he caught a whiff of her perfume. It was... spicy, and exotic, and sent a surge down his spine and to his groin. Sergeant... she's a sergeant... she's a...

"Welcome to Cranked, Townsend," Castellanos said at his door, giving him an unsettling look with those gorgeous eyes. "Good luck."

Seven days, he reminded himself as she closed the door behind her. For seven days, he could be professional.

But on the eighth, he was going to remember that he was a single man... and she was a very beautiful woman.

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LINDA

The morning was chilly as the official first day of 'The Brutus Project' began. Linda ran down the mental checklist of what she needed to do. This field exercise was standard fare, but Linda knew this week would be anything but. Brutus's presence changed everything.

He looked ready, freshly shaved. But then he was also out of uniform. The royal blue of his Bluecats warmup suit cut a striking contrast against the sea of black and gold, drawing her eye immediately. It was impossible to ignore him.

Of course, part of that was Brutus himself. His warmup suit strained against his shoulders, chest, thighs, a testament to the raw power beneath the fabric. Linda had to resist the urge to stare.

Even in the offseason... Linda's mind whispered. The man's a stud.

"Good morning Cranked Company," Major Kirk looked around. "And a special welcome to our guest this week, Brutus Townsend. We're going to kick our week off with something everyone just loves to partake in, right?"

"Hooah!" was of course the response, but Linda had to chuckle.

She'd done fitness tests her entire time in the Army, taking one in the early March cold sucked. The heater wasn't doing anything about the chill at that point but at least they were indoors

"Just what I thought," Major Kirk, who could hear all the subtle nuances of the 'Hooah,' said with a grin.

"Now for most of us, this will be a diagnostic test. We'll be doing it just because it's a good way to kick off the week.

But for Mr. Townsend and five other members of the company, you will be doing them for the record.

However, I still expect everyone to give their best effort.

So first, fall out, gather around Lieutenant Starr as she demonstrates the first event, the three repetition max deadlift. "

The company broke up, everyone gathering around Lieutenant Starr. Linda slid over to Brutus, who was watching intently. "You feel up for this?"

"Sure," Brutus said, a playful smirk on his face. "What's the top score get me?"

Linda leaned in, her voice a conspiratorial whisper. "Maybe I'll tell you... if you impress me. But seriously, you don't need to max out everything."

"You want me to do my best, show a good attitude, right?" Brutus asked. "Then you'll get that. Now let's get warmed up."

The platoons reformed and spread out throughout the gym for warmup exercises. She wasn't worried about the events in general, she had pushed herself hard to stay fit, and to keep up with Lieutenant Starr and Jessica Adams, who looked excited and ready to go.

As the platoon got in line for their run through the tests, she even came over from

Third Squad, a confident look on her face. "Five bucks says I can out-lift your new guy."

Brutus, who was right in front of Linda, gawked when he overheard the comment. Turning around, he looked at Adams, taking the measure of the woman. "You're serious?"

"You're serious, Sergeant," Linda corrected him. "And I'm not taking that bet. I know how you get, Sergeant Adams."

The event started, and Linda kept herself loose.

The three rep deadlift was her least favorite event.

Linda hated it. It seemed unfair how long and thin she was.

So while she did okay on the women's scale, deadlifting a hundred and fifty pounds for her test, on the men's side she was barely passing.

But when it was Brutus' turn, almost all eyes cut to him. People were understandably curious how well a professional football player would do... but the results were shocking.

"More weight," Brutus said after repping three hundred pounds. A twenty-five pound plate was inserted on each side, and he lifted it like it was nothing. "More weight."

"Mr. Townsend, you only need three fifty to-"

"More. Weight."

In the end, Brutus topped out at an even five hundred pounds, the best in the

company, and still he did it like it was easy.

It even topped Jess Adams, who put on an impressive show per her bodyweight with a maximum of three hundred and eighty pounds, but still lost out on total poundage to Brutus easily.

Putting the weight down at the end, he grinned. "Okay... what's next?"

For the next ninety minutes, Linda watched in shock and awe as Brutus put on a physical clinic. She expected him to be the best in certain events, the man was a professional athlete. But it was by just how much he was better that shocked her.

The standing medicine ball throw? He tossed the ten pound ball a casual three quarters the length of the basketball court when it was his turn, and probably could have gone further if it hadn't been that his release angle was off and he arced the ball too high into the air, almost scraping the roof's support beams. Again, he outclassed the entire company by a measurable amount.

He maxed out the hand release pushups, and in the sprint-drag-carry, he was ten seconds faster than the max score time. He was near-unbeatable.

By the time the company lined up for the next event, the plank for time, people were starting to cheer him on, and take bets to see if anyone could beat him.

"Max score time is three minutes and forty seconds," Captain King, who was scoring Brutus for the event, said.

"Company record is an even five minutes. "

"Because of the score sheet, or because of actual tapping out?" Brutus asked.

King lifted pursed his lips. "Little of both I suppose."

Brutus nodded and assumed the position. Linda was right next to him, taking the test at the same time, and when the whistle blew she glanced over. "Still feeling strong?"

"Our S&C team at the Bluecats has us work these," Brutus said. "I'll be fine."

"Good... because I'm the one who has the company record," Linda informed him with a smirk. "Planks are easier when you only weigh a buck thirty six."

"We'll see," Brutus replied, his eyes fixed on the floor.

Linda did the same, hearing the cheers from the rest of the company as time continued, but she kept going until she heard a grunt on the other side and saw Brutus waver. Her stomach gave up and she dropped to the court at the same time as Brutus, to the cheers of the company.

"Six minutes, nine seconds!" Captain King declared, and Linda thumped a fist on the ground.

"Six-nine?" Brutus asked, earning laughs as the meaning came through. "That was totally unintentional."

Linda was helped to her feet, and as the company stretched to get ready for the run, she stretched her arms over her head.

"You okay?" Orkin asked her. "You probably fucked your run."

"I know, but I'll pass." She groaned as another cramp threatened. "Just a diagnostic for me today anyway."

"Yeah well, congrats," Orkin told her, glancing over at Brutus who was carefully rolling his ankles back and forth. "You're the first person to actually make him work. Even Push-up Waller only beat him because of non-counted reps. Now we'll see if someone else can push him in the run. No offense."

Linda, who did well in the run but was far from the fastest member of the company, shook her head.

"None taken. I'll be happy if I break eighteen minutes today. God the APFT was faster."

"We were less tired then," Orkin reminded her. "Okay, see you on the line."

The only event to be held outdoors in winter, the two-mile run was an event of the old test. Then, she had to run the two miles in roughly sixteen and a half minutes to get ninety points, but today was looking like a failure.

She could be a full minute slower on the ACFT and still get ninety points, but as the whistle blew and they took off, she knew that wasn't going to be the case today.

She'd used too much of her stomach and leg power keeping herself locked in the plank, and as the company rounded the first gentle bend of the flat road course, her watch told her that eighteen minutes would be a struggle even.

Amazingly though, she saw a repeated flash of blue bobbing in and out of the group running ahead of her, and as they rounded the second turn that marked the one-mile point, she pulled even with Brutus, who was puffing and grunting with every step.

"Second half, second half," he chanted to himself, almost not seeing Linda as she pulled up next to him.

"What?"

"You okay?" she asked, and he grunted.

"Brutus, this isn't a real test for you, you can?—"

"I can make it," he grunted, pouring on the effort and picking up his pace.

He pulled ahead of her by nearly fifty yards, but as they came to the last turn and the finish line, they were dead even again, Linda even slowing up a bit to finish at eighteen minutes, thirty seconds.

It was far from her best time, but still passing.

Actually, Brutus had passed as well, but was near the back of the company. Only a few others had been slower.

"Okay Cranked, good job." Major Kirk looked around as everyone did their cool down stretches. "Everyone passed, but I expected that. Get showered up, get changed for work, and I'll see you all at the motorpool for everyone's favorite day of the week, Motorpool Monday. Dismissed!"

The company broke up, and Linda pulled Brutus aside.

"Brutus, what happened?" she asked. "You're limping."

"Forget it," Brutus said, clearly in pain.

His face was nearly bedsheet white, with sweat still trickling down his temples and slicking down the hair at the back of his neck. With every step, his nose twitched as he tried not to show his injury, yet he refused to utter a single syllable of complaint.

"Seriously, I'll be fine."

She wanted to argue with him, but let it go. The man's pride obviously was bigger than his common sense, and whatever was wrong with him he wasn't going to talk about right now.

She had to get back and shower up anyway.

Still, as she hopped in the shower and soaped up quickly, she couldn't stop thinking about Brutus and the way he'd run.

He clearly finished the run in absolute agony, and she reminded herself to check up on him.

Maybe Lieutenant Parker might know something about it?

It would have been tempting to luxuriate under the pulsing water, but Linda knew that she didn't have time.

Instead, she got out, drying herself off efficiently with her towel before going into the main room and pulling her uniform off of the clothing bar next to her television.

Since she lived alone she'd done some rearranging, and now all her clothes hung in the main portion of her barracks room, which got better air circulation in the summer.

She'd just pulled her undershirt on and had her pants up when there was a knock at her door. Not even thinking, and figuring it was just one of her team members who needed something before work began, she buttoned her pants and called out,

"Come on in!"

It was Brutus, and again Linda was struck dumb.

He was in just his pants and boots, shirtless, and as she looked at him she couldn't help herself.

Her eyes unconsciously traced every curve and swell of muscle on his thickly muscled upper body, from the dinner plate-sized pectorals and baseball-sized biceps to the powerful, thickly blocked and chiseled abdominal muscles of his stomach, to the happy trail that just started below his belly button and disappeared into his pants.

And in her mind, she felt a very un-military-like flush of desire for the man.

"Uhm, Sergeant? Got a problem."

"I... I can see that." Linda tried not to bite her lip as she drank in the sight of the sexy, muscular man in her doorway.

She knew he was handsome, she'd seen him perform up close and in person.

She'd even had him flirt with her. But now she was left instinctively attracted to him, and had to force herself back into her job.

"What is it?"

"I just opened the package of uniform t-shirts that you guys picked up for me, and someone messed up." He held up one of the brown undershirts he was supposed to wear with his uniform. "Instead of extra large... well, you see."

Linda did see. The shirt looked barely big enough to slide the torso over his arm, and she thought the shirts would be too small even on her.

"Damn, I didn't know they even made them that small."

"Yeah well... I tried, and there's a rag in my room demonstrating that," Brutus said.

"Any ideas?"

Linda thought quickly and nodded.

"You have another exercise t-shirt with you, right?"

"Yeah, I packed three of them." He snapped his fingers as her suggestion got through to him.

"Wear that?"

She nodded.

"Wear that under the top, and keep the collar up. If anyone asks, tell them I told you to do it. We're at the motorpool all day today, so most people will be in coveralls anyway. The Major doesn't like people getting their uniforms oily and dirty unnecessarily."

"Okay, cool," Brutus said. He rubbed his hand through his hair, and took a deep breath.

"And uh... thanks for slowing up on the run."

"Thanks for pushing me on the plank," Linda replied, flashing a grin that wasn't quite sergeant-like, but more Linda-like.

"Now go get your ass in gear and get to the DFAC. There's only forty-five minutes

left in breakfast, and if you eat breakfast anything at all like you ate dinner last night, you're going to need every spare minute you can to shovel eggs down your throat."

"Eggs?" Brutus blanched slightly.

"I hate eggs. Especially runny ones."

"Ooooh, tough one there dude." Linda laughed.

"They're not going to give you enough bacon to offset no eggs, so if you want your protein and calories... close your eyes and think of something slick and slightly salty that you like going down your throat. It's what I do."

"Is that so?" Brutus asked.

Linda gasped, realizing what she'd just said. It was a total accident, she hadn't meant it that way, but now that she'd said it, the innuendo was very clear. And she couldn't get it out of her head.

"Go, get a fucking shirt on," she replied quickly, pointing. "I'll see you in the DFAC to walk you to the motorpool."

Brutus left, and as her door closed, Linda let out a shaky breath.

Slick and salty, running down her throat.

Where the hell had that come from?

Actually, she knew... but she didn't like it.

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brUTUS

"So you guys do this every Monday?" Brutus asked Takeshi Satomura as the formation broke and people started going to do their jobs. "Just... car maintenance?"

"Any Monday we're not in the field," Takeshi told him. "It's not just vehicles, but all our equipment."

Brutus noticed Takeshi had a faint accent. Something in the vowels hinted at somewhere else, a place far from Fort Pickett.

"Why so much maintenance time?" Brutus asked, but before Takeshi could answer Sergeant Orkin called his name. "Talk later?"

"Cool." Takeshi went off in the other direction. Brutus hurried over to Orkin, who had a pile of clipboards in his hand.

"Okay Brutus, I'm going to pair you off with Sergeant Castellanos." Orkin handed him a clipboard. "You're going to be on the ISV over there."

Brutus took the clipboard, surprised. "I'm not being given the shit details? I fully expected to be scrubbing toilets or something."

Orkin chuckled and shook his head. "That's not the way we operate. And you're going to be getting plenty dirty today, so don't think you're getting off light either. Head on over, get familiar with the check sheet before Castellanos joins you."

"Deal." Brutus walked towards the line of vehicles that looked like stripped down pickup trucks. Getting closer he thought he could identify the original vehicle the large truck was based off of, but the drab green paint and pipework sides definitely changed the overall design.

Walking around the truck, he had to admit that whatever the purpose of the vehicle was, it was a badass looking truck. He'd just completed his trip around the truck when Sergeant Castellanos came over, stopping him in his tracks.

He thought she'd looked good when he stopped by her room, with her hair damp and sticking to her neck, her undershirt clinging to her athletic frame. Then, she'd looked like a very sexy woman, and Brutus found it hard to tear his eyes away.

But now she looked like something out of a dream, clad in olive drab coveralls, her hair pulled back into a ponytail. There was a confidence in her stance, a knowledge in her eyes, that made Brutus's pulse quicken.

"You ready to get to work?"

"Sure." Brutus flexed his hands. He was wearing thin gloves to combat the chill, but still his fingers were stiff with the late winter cold. "You're not freezing?"

"Nope." Castellanos flexed her own gloved up hands. She was wearing Mechanic's gloves, the lightweight material meant to protect her hands and give her better grip on the day's labors. She looked him over, checking out at his own outfit. "Are you?"

"A little," Brutus admitted, shivering in the pullover Gore Tex parka that had come with his issued uniforms. It was in the current coloration style, and was reasonably warm on his upper body. It was his legs that were suffering. "I know, I know, big baby. But this is different from games."

"How so?" Castellanos asked, stepping forward and taking the clipboard from him.
"By the way, where's the rest of your thermal gear?"

"My what?"

Castellanos sighed. "The Army has a freakin' seven layer system of clothing to use in the cold.

Even with your older uniform pattern it works.

Let me guess, you skipped the long underwear and thermal t-shirt, and just went with the standard ACU.

Wait, of course you did, you're wearing your workout shirt underneath. Fuck, my bad."

"No, it's okay," Brutus said quickly. "Maybe I can adjust during lunch.

Look, I just... for games in places like Cleveland or Buffalo or something, we've got these heavyweight thermal compression tops, and our shoulder pads themselves are insulating.

It's a solid half inch of padding and plastic around my upper body before we get to the jersey.

And on the sidelines we've got the parkas if we need it, and heaters, and more. "

"Okay well, get through this morning, and after lunch we'll get you back to the barracks and get you into the right gear," Castellanos said. "In the meantime, you can get warmed up by getting down and crawling around this beast with me. It's my ISV, so I baby the hell out of it."

"Satoshi was telling me about these Mondays," Brutus said. "I didn't think the Army spent so much time doing basic maintenance."

"We put our gear through hell on a regular basis," Castellanos explained. "Out there, our lives can depend on these vehicles working properly."

Brutus could see the logic in that. "Guess it's the same in football," he admitted as he got down on the ground. "We just have an equipment manager and his staff to do it for us."

Castellanos chuckled. "We've got maintenance personnel too, but only for the bigger problems."

"How often does that happen?"

"Not as often as you'd expect," Castellanos said. "The Army might overpay for this stuff, but it's usually tough as hell."

They got started, going slowly as Castellanos showed him how to go through the military's PMCS system.

"So what's this truck for, anyway? It looks too lightweight for anything, you know, pew pew."

"It's meant to get us close to the action," Castellanos explained, "but it's not exactly armored. First sign of trouble, we bail."

She gave a grim smile.

"It looks like a mega dune buggy." Brutus looked at the clipboard, seeing what was next on the list. "Shit. Tire gauge?"

Castellanos pulled one out and handed it to him. "Orkin put you on the ISV because it is our newest vehicle. If you miss something, it won't be as big a problem as if you were on some of the older, more beat up equipment."

"That makes sense," Brutus admitted. "I don't exactly take care of my truck. I have a house manager who handles all that for me... and cleans the place."

Brutus waited for Castellanos to criticize him, but she didn't. Instead she just checked the box on the tire pressure. "Okay, now we do the same for the other three tires," she said, and he tilted his head. "What?"

"You're not going to talk down on me for having a housekeeper who goes to get my oil changed?" Brutus asked.

Castellanos chuckled.

"What?"

"You're making assumptions, Brutus," Castellanos said, a slight smile playing on her lips. "Not everyone's out to get you here."

After a pause, she continued.

"So what if you have someone help you out? Football's practically a full-time job. If you can afford it, why not?"

"Huh... pretty much how I think about it," Brutus admitted.

"So... okay. Reset. I came into this with a lot of assumptions.

My therapist keeps telling me that I need to let go of those and take the world for

what it is.

You're obviously not matching up to those assumptions anyway.

So how about I audible this thing and figure some shit out. "

"Now you're with the program there, Brutus. Therapist?"

"Part of my deal with the league, but I've found it helpful anyway." He didn't want to say more about it, but Castellanos just nodded, accepting the fact.

"How's that tire?"

Brutus put a finger in the tire treads, measuring the depth and said, "Three quarters of an inch."

"Good enough."

Looking for something else to discuss, Brutus focused on Castellanos. "So what's your story?" he asked as he checked the tire pressure. "How'd you end up in the Army anyhow?"

"Wanted to get off the island," Castellanos said, causing Brutus to look at her questioningly. "Guayama, Puerto Rico."

"Really?" Brutus asked, and Castellanos nodded. "So you traded in a life on a tropical island in the Caribbean for the Army? No offense, but why?"

"Because all that tropical island stuff? There's about as much bullshit as there is truth to it," Castellanos said. "We were poor. My father washed cars and my mom worked in retail."

"That's not the stereotype for sure."

"It isn't. And despite what the singers and writers say, there's not a goddamn thing romantic about growing up poor in the tropics," Castellanos added. "My older sister thought she could make a better life by going to San Juan. What happened when I visited her... I got off lucky."

"Got off lucky?" Brutus asked.

Castellanos nodded, her eyes haunted as she thought about her past.

"Look, if you don't want to?—"

"I was assaulted," she said.

Brutus dropped the tire gauge to the gravel.

"I was sixteen, I'd gone to Bayamon to see my sister, and... there's a lot of seedy places in some parts of that town. It's a rough town, okay?"

"I've heard about Bayamon."

Castellanos shivered at the name, and plunged ahead.

"Anyway, I wanted a way off the island that didn't depend on my looks.

I know how I look, Brutus. I had the offers, but I didn't want the strings that came with those offers.

The Army said they didn't give a damn about my looks, they wanted me to work. "

"And you chose Infantry...?"

"Because I'm never going to let that happen to me again," Castellanos said simply. "I was going to be a fighter. I'm not going to end up like my sister."

"Where is she?"

Castellanos snorted darkly. "Right back in Guayama, with three kids by three different fathers.

Two of them said they were just going to the mainland to find work and that they'd be back for Carmen and the kids.

.. yeah right. I send some money back every couple of months, but it's not enough. It'll never be enough."

"I'm... sorry," Brutus said, shaken up.

He tried to pick up the tire gauge, and dropped it again before he could maintain a grip long enough to tuck it in his pocket. But instead of continuing he sagged to the gravel, sitting down with his back against the right rear wheel.

"Fuck. I just..."

"Don't say you're sorry, Brutus," Castellanos said almost harshly.

"Don't you fucking dare take pity on me.

I made it out of the island, and I'm glad.

I've got my degree, I've got a good start on a good career as long as I can avoid

asshole colonels and generals trying to shuffle me off to some PR job because of my looks.

I'm here because of my skills, not my looks. "

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Brutus nodded, rubbing his cheek.

"I guess... look, I've shared locker rooms with guys who've come from rough upbringings before, know what I mean? In college, I shared a dorm room with a guy who grew up in Liberty City, Miami. Heard of it?"

"I've seen the documentaries," Castellanos said. "That part of Miami, you either grow up to be a rapper, a football player... or you may not grow up at all."

"Pretty much. And the stories he told me..." Brutus took a deep breath, shaking his head. "Sorry. Fucking therapy, gets me into my feels too often."

"That's not a bad thing, once you learn how to handle those feels. Lots of men, including the ones I work with, don't," Castellanos said. "You just need practice."

Brutus nodded, shaken up. He hadn't told anyone just how much the past month of weekly sessions with a psychiatrist had affected him. "I just... what do you know of my story?"

Castellanos sat down next to him, leaning against the other tire.

"Brutus Townsend, thirty years old, only son of Jake 'Juggernaut' Townsend and Bethany Parker-Townsend.

Your dad played defensive end for Los Angeles throughout the nineties, and while he was a dependable player, didn't exactly light up the stat columns the way you have.

Your mother was an Olympian... heptathlon, I think. "

"You know my bio well," Brutus said, impressed. "And yeah, my dad's Juggernaut Townsend."

"When I heard you were getting assigned to me, I read your Wikipedia," Castellanos said simply. "Anyway, with your parents being athletic superstars, you and your sisters were bound to be competitive athletes, right?"

"Billie's still competing, she does jiu-jitsu," Brutus said with a little smile.

"She'll be going for her black belt soon probably.

She got into it after playing football herself all the way through high school and then after college, played pro for a few years.

Just make sure you never, ever call it the 'Lingerie League' around her.

I've seen her smack the crap out of a guy for that. "

"Sounds like he deserved it."

"Yeah well... pro women's football doesn't pay the bills, so she put the shoulderpads aside and moved on.

But football's been my birthright even before I knew it," Brutus admitted.

"I could read an offense and knew how to predict a quarterback's check down progression before I could ride a bicycle. "

"I ride a bike," Castellanos said suddenly.

Brutus looked at her in surprise. "Growing up, money was tight, so I learned to pinch pennies until Abe screamed. Anyway, I knew how much of an average soldier's paycheck gets eaten up by car payments, insurance, all that shit. So when I got to my first unit, I bought an electric assist bicycle."

"An electric bike?" Brutus asked, humming. "That's... actually kinda cool."

"I can go forty miles on a single charge, and get up to twenty miles an hour," Castellanos said with a bit of pride. "Best of all, I charge up the battery in my room. Anyway, you were saying about football."

"Yeah well... my life's always been about football," Brutus admitted.

"As a kid I lifted weights not because I wanted to look like The Rock or some super hero from the comic books, but because it would prepare me for football.

All of my routines were about building football strength, not looks.

You know why most guys do bicep curls, right? "

"Curls for the girls," Castellanos said wryly.

Brutus laughed.

"You didn't?"

"I've never done more than three sets of direct bicep work a week, and that's only so I can keep my bicep tendons strong. Football doesn't require biceps," he explained. "Summer camp always was at a university, sometimes one my dad would guest coach at, but always, always included the pigskin."

"But you want more."

Brutus looked at Castellanos, surprised. The only person he'd ever told that to was his therapist. "What makes you say that?"

"A vibe I get from you," Castellanos said. "Look, if all you cared about was football, you'd have never gotten the rep you have, the so-called Bluecat Bad Boy. By the way, who came up with that nickname? The PR department?"

"Some asshole at ESPN," Brutus said. "But it hurt me. So you're looking to be more than either a poster boy of the league, flashing a pearly white smile from time to time and not doing shit other than football. But something about that, and about what you've just told me, eats at you."

"You're insightful."

"Comes with the background, learning to read people."

That rep, you're caught between trying to live up to it, and not wanting it.

If you were at peace, you wouldn't get worked up about the fans, or be here.

You'd have paid your fine and done the easiest job possible to get out of trouble with the league. Am I right?"

Brutus nodded reluctantly, surprised that someone saw so deeply into him so quickly.

"My agent thinks I'm nuts to have insisted on doing my internship with a real unit and not just done a spring football camp for one of the service academies or some PR work with one of the more famous units."

No offense, but the Three-Three isn't well known. "

"Compared to the 82nd or the 101st, for damn sure we're not," Castellanos admitted. "Sort of comes with the territory of our missions. We're... utility players. Can't go into it more than that. So you want to be known as more than a football player."

Brutus didn't answer, just looked at the ground in between his feet for a bit before getting up. "Come on. I bet the Army doesn't like us sitting around on our asses."

They kept going over the truck, but Brutus felt different than before. Knowing that the woman with him had been through so much, yet didn't judge him for his privileged upbringing, affected him deeply.

"So the last items I'll do," Castellanos said, "since it involves the radio. You haven't been through the classes."

"Can I watch though?"

"Sure. Can you take the clipboard?"

Brutus took the passenger seat and watched while she started working on the military radio in the center console. After a moment, he spoke up. "My ankle."

"What?"

"You asked me this morning why I sucked so hard in the run."

"I wouldn't say suck," Castellanos replied, shifting to get a better view of the radio's controls. "You weren't at the same level as you were with the other events."

"I was almost last."

Castellanos laughed, causing Brutus to look at her askance. He didn't like people laughing at him, but he held his tongue as the beautiful woman's laugh sounded so genuinely amused. Finally, she slowed. "You're comparing yourself to infantry soldiers, Brutus."

"And?"

Castellanos took a deep breath. "Okay, let me explain. Infantry is filled with physical psychos. It's like... like IQ tests. You know how they score those, right?"

"Yeah, had to take one before the draft," Brutus said. "My point is, 'average' is supposed to be a hundred, right? But what happens if everyone starts scoring a hundred and fifteen?"

"Nice. But that's exactly it," Castellanos said. "So infantry is literally saying that 'average' is a B plus in school, or an A. But if everyone's scoring an A, what's that mean about 'average'? It doesn't mean shit."

"Yeah well... I don't like being almost dead last," Brutus admitted. "I never have."

"You'd never have made it as a pro football player if you did," Castellanos pointed out. "Now what's this about the ankle?"

"The game that... I popped off," Brutus said reluctantly, "I fucked up my ankle. Those last two plays, I tried to plant my foot and it rolled. Then went and got yeeted onto it. Didn't help I had a three hundred and forty pound assist on those plays."

"I remember the team saying something about that. Their first attempt to let the whole thing blow over."

Brutus nodded, sighing. "Yeah well, the press doesn't know about it, but it was more

than just a rolled ankle. It was a more serious injury."

"Jesus Brutus, why didn't you say something?" Castellanos asked heatedly, turning in the driver's seat to glare at him. "The fuck, man?"

"What?" Brutus asked, just as hot. "I've had problems with my ankles for the past three seasons, ever since Trent Jackson tackled me on an interception and stopped me from getting a pick six.

I've had every ortho and their brother take a look at the MRIs, and they all tell me the same thing.

Surgery isn't going to improve the situation.

So I wear heavy duty ankle braces during practice and games under my socks, rehab the fuck out of my ankles every day, and 'suck it up' for the field.

It adds to the whole Bad Boy thing anyway, I play a third of my games pissed off because of the pain. "

"I get that, using the pain to motivate you," Castellanos said, "but look, you slowed down. So how did they feel right now?"

She was upset, angry, but also concerned about him. It made him more calm, and Brutus took the opportunity to let go of the anger and try to be in the moment, to be open with her.

"During the test, it felt like I was getting kicked in the ankle every step," Brutus admitted.

"Just like every other time I've run for significant distance in the past three years.

So in the off season, I do exclusively non-impact cardio when I'm doing anything but sprints.

Even then if I can I do water sprints in the pool. "

"Makes sense," Castellanos said. "Still Brutus, you should have told us. Told me. We've all got security clearances, I know shit that I can't tell you. We would have kept the secret."

"It's not that, I just... it's not my system to ask for the easy way out," Brutus said. "I do what needs to be done, bottom line."

"Yeah well," Castellanos sighed, "More importantly, as your team leader, my job is to take care of my troops.

I keep my team healthy for their jobs, because here's a little inside info related to the fitness test. Nobody's ever won a war in track pants and t-shirts, and the last time anyone ran two miles uninterrupted in combat, they were going the wrong way. "

Brutus laughed, nodding. "Okay, I can see the logic in that."

"Good. Now here's more logic," Castellanos said.

"I will bust the chops of any soldier under my umbrella.

Ask any of them, and they'll tell you I'm three times stricter on them than Sergeant Orkin is.

But at the same time, tell them how I am when someone says some shit about anyone on my team.

That includes you, Brutus Townsend. I'll tear anyone's head off if I need to. "

"A mama bear, huh?" Brutus asked.

Castellanos nodded.

"Cool."

"Yeah well, my job is to keep you able to perform your duties. Now, are you wearing your ankle brace right now?"

"No... for just walking around I'm okay, and these boots help a good bit," Brutus said. "You military types do well with those."

"Okay. Well on the upcoming days, we're going to have some pretty physically active days, so wear the brace inside your boot. In the meantime, I'll pull Lieutenant Parker aside, talk to him on the down low. We'll see what can be worked out."

"So the press never finds out," Brutus said, and Castellanos nodded. "You don't need to."

"Bullshit." Castellanos handed him the clipboard. "Now, you just did this truck with me, get started on truck sixty five right next to us while I go chase down the lieutenant. I'll be back before you get into anything you're not trained to do."

Castellanos left, and for a second Brutus was tempted to run after her, ask her not to do it.

But instead he stopped, and went over to the truck sixty five and popped the hood, getting started.

The truth was, he'd been having ankle problems since his high school days.

Nothing was going to fix it, and any run over a hundred yards was painful.

Two miles? Absolute agony, especially being so close to the end of the season and the grind of the past seven months. Taking February off for rehab wasn't enough, not by a long shot.

Just survive this week, he told himself. Then you can spend the next four months resting, rehabbing, and popping glucosamine powder like it's Kool-Aid.

He looked over, where Castellanos was talking to Lieutenant Parker, and he felt better about the upcoming week than he thought he would.

Maybe this week wouldn't be so bad after all.

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LINDA

Linda forced herself to focus. Despite the distracting thoughts of Brutus, she had a job to do.

"Sergeant Castellanos, got a minute?"

Linda looked up from the notebook in her palm, seeing Lieutenant Parker and Sergeant Orkin waving to her. Snapping her notebook closed, she gave them a thumbs up before quickly turning her attention to Derrick Jackson.

"Okay, so you and the rest of the team run Brutus through how to do a Swiss seat, get him set up for rappelling during the field exercise."

"You're going to let him go down the tower?" Jackson asked incredulously.

Linda laid out the plan. "He'll go down the wall side first only if he's any damn good will I send him down the free rappel side. And no way is he carrying a load."

"Shit, I plan on Spidermanning the fucker," Jackson said with a grin. "Bet Superstar can't do that."

Linda almost smiled at Jackson's antics.

Even the casual nickname "Superstar" grated on her.

She needed to get a grip. She was about to say something to Jackson about the

nickname she'd heard over the past few days for Brutus, but when Orkin cleared his throat she dropped the matter for the moment.

Instead she turned and hurried over to Orkin and Lieutenant Parker, who was looking at her in amusement.

"Yeah, sorry sir." Linda glanced at her fire team. Jackson and Satomura could hold the fort. A status update on Brutus. She wondered if this was going to be good or bad. "I was going over this morning's training plan with Jackson. He and Satomura can handle things for a few minutes. What's up?"

"Wanted to talk about Project Brutus," Parker said. "We're almost at the halfway point, and Major Kirk wanted a status update. How are you feeling?"

Linda thought for a few moments before answering, because she was having trouble separating certain things into their proper perspectives.

Finally, she said, "It's complicated, sir."

"How so?" Parker asked. "You seemed pretty satisfied Monday at least."

"Yes, but that was... that was the beginning of the week," Linda said. "And on the surface, I don't have too many complaints. He's worked his ass off at the tasks I've given him, and more than once he's told me that what he's seen people do is tough. But..."

"Ah, the but." Parker chuckled. "Sergeant Orkin was just telling me about the but. How about you repeat it for us, and then you can add your two cents, Castellanos."

Linda paused. It was true. It wasn't that he was mouthy but his presence...it was hard to ignore. Especially when he looked at her. Blue eyes focused with intensity. A

football player's body honed and ready.

"I gotta agree, sir," Linda admitted. "It's not that he's mouthy.

He's never mouthed off when I've told him something.

But when he talks to the rest of the squad, he's a little too direct, and you can get this sense that he wants to take charge and either have everyone do it his way, or just have everyone focus on him and tell him exactly how to do it.

He's not much of a passive group learner. "

"Give me an example," Parker said.

Linda swore the man sounded almost slightly amused.

"Of each."

"Sure sir. Like this morning, we're doing that adjusted PT so we can deal with his.

.. issue," Linda said, alluding to Brutus's ankle, "and as soon as we break out into fire team relays on the calisthenics, he's just going balls out, pushing everyone.

I had to tell him twice to shut up and listen to the count I was giving, and I could tell he definitely didn't like that. "

"Okay... and the other?"

"Well, check him right now sir." Orkin nodded in the direction of the storage container where Brutus was gathered with the rest of the fire team.

It was clear that the student was in charge, as he was directly telling Takeshi Satomura to do something with the knots on his Swiss seat.

"See what I mean? He's the lowest on the totem pole, but he's making everyone dance to his tune."

"And in a normal situation?" Parker asked for clarification.

"It's be more of a monkey see, monkey do sitch, Lieutenant."

Linda was far lower on the totem pole but she did trust the man, they'd fought and even bled together on missions. He was smart and insightful... if sometimes a bit insufferable.

"He's not just a football player," Lieutenant Parker explained. "He's a man who, if his bio's at all accurate, has been bred since birth to be a take-charge type."

"Okay. Look, Brutus Townsend isn't just a football player.

He's a team captain for the Bluecats, and on the field he's the guy who's supposed to call the defensive plays.

It's a mentality that's deep in his soul.

Some people have problems letting go of it unconsciously.

I ran into that in Ranger school, as you can guess.

Most of my class were officers or had been in long enough to be NCOs.

You try getting an entire platoon of lieutenants and staff sergeants or older together

and get it to run.

On paper, it seems easy. Well-trained, intelligent people, right? In reality, it's a clusterfuck."

Linda hadn't been to Ranger school, but Orkin had, and he chuckled. "Especially when you're sleep-deprived, sir. Although Brutus isn't sleep-deprived. Reports from the barracks say he's a good boy when it comes to his rest. The man's usually in his room and snoring by nine-thirty."

Linda nodded. It was true. She'd even checked on Brutus personally, and had to fight back an emotional urge to do more than just listen to the muffled sound of his snoring through the door. It was almost, she hated to admit to herself, cute.

"So he's squaring himself away. We just need to put him in a position where he has to not only be second banana, but accept that position and rearrange his internal thinking on the matter at hand.

" Parker tapped his chin with a forefinger.

"Okay. Well, effort-wise, he's getting passing marks and I'll tell the CO that.

But tomorrow's going to be a big test for you all.

Sergeant's Time, which means I'm going to be missing out on everything while you two run the show.

Sergeant Lincoln's going to be getting the final touches ready for our field exercise on Friday. What's your plan?"

"You and I were thinking similar things, sir," Orkin said. "So we're going to do some

old-fashioned soldiering for the platoon. Range Eighteen, you know it?"

"The FBI training area?" Parker asked. "Yeah, of course. You requested it?"

"We're going to go Fortnite the fuck outta the place, sir," Linda explained with a grim little smile. "Fire team against fire team, using simunitions. While I'd like my team to win at least a couple of rounds, I'm expecting Brutus to get shot in the ass at least once."

Parker laughed, nodding. "Good plan... and I have to confess, I'm a bit jealous.

While you two get to do some real training, I'm going to be spending from oh-seven to ten-hundred hours meeting with the other officers in the battalion as we all get briefed up on the upcoming Combined Federal Campaign charity drive. "

Parker left, and Linda looked at Orkin. "So, what about Brutus?"

"Look, let me take your fire team over this afternoon. Have you run Brutus through a firearms familiarization class yet?"

"Not yet, but I didn't think we'd need much," Linda said. "Half hour at the range tomorrow to make sure he doesn't shoot himself in the balls and that's it. More time for hooah soldier shit."

"Nope, let's do this by the book," Orkin said. "We keep him safe, and that means he knows the guts of an M4. So dust off the old classroom training mat, get him down in the armory, and go over the weapon with him this afternoon."

"Will do," Linda said reluctantly.

It wasn't that the class would be difficult. She could break down, clean, and rebuild

an M4 in her sleep, and could walk a blind man through familiarization with the weapon.

But the armory was the most isolated area of the Charlie Company offices, in the basement next to the supply cage where nobody went unless they either had to get something or were fucking off, trying to avoid work.

But since the company was doing almost exclusively group training activities today, there were no chances to disappear for slacking off.

Which meant she'd be alone with Brutus.

And what she hadn't told Orkin, or Lieutenant Parker, or anyone yet... was that part of what worried her about Brutus's personality was that she found herself tempted to give in and listen to him too.

A very primal side of her liked the idea of Brutus Townsend taking charge.

More than once last night, she'd had idle thoughts about the sight of him shirtless, those rippling muscles and powerful hands on her skin, those searing blue eyes looking into hers as he told her exactly what to do. .. on her knees.

And in her idle thoughts, she could see herself obeying those commands.

Which could be very, very dangerous for her career.

brUTUS

Brutus reached out and touched the compact weapon. "Looks different from what I've seen in movies."

"The real thing usually is," Castellanos said. "This is what we'll be using for all the rest of your training. You'll learn how to operate it, field strip it, clean it put it back together."

Brutus's stomach roiled suddenly and he turned his head, burping loudly and painfully. Castellanos stopped. "Damn! You okay?"

Brutus nodded, rubbing his stomach. "Ugh... that chili mac n' cheese for lunch was rough as hell," he said. "I don't handle spicy food very well, but that was the only protein other than milk available. I think next time, I'll just go with a double protein shake instead. Damn."

Castellanos chuckled, and reached into her pocket. "Here. I hate spicy food myself, and keep some antacids on me all the time."

Brutus took two of the tablets and chewed them up, savoring the chalky flavor. "Thanks. No spice for you too?"

Castellanos nodded. "People assume once they hear my name that I always want spicy food.

But Puerto Rican food isn't spicy by nature.

Still, people hear Castellanos and assume I'm Mexican or something.

Hell, even Mexican food isn't always spicy.

" She took a deep breath, and blew a lock of hair out of her face.

He could tell she had more to say on the subject, but was trying to focus on her job at hand.

"Anyway, back to the M4. You're going to learn how to operate it because we will be carrying rounds during the exercise. "

"We will?" Brutus asked, surprised. "You people trust me with ammunition?"

"Actually, we'll be using Simunition."

Castellanos reached into her pocket and taking out a round. There was a hole in the back, it clearly wasn't 'live,' but for teaching purposes.

"The bullet's been replaced with a paintball-like round. And you will be wearing body armor, because trust me, these little fuckers can leave a welt that'll last a long time. I once caught one in the... hip. I was limping and bruised for a week afterwards."

Brutus lifted an eyebrow, intrigued. "Hip, huh?"

"Hip."

"Uh-huh. Well, let's make sure we don't have a repeat of that," Brutus said. "So how do we use this thing?"

Castellanos started her instruction, and Brutus had to admit that the class was

remarkably clear. Part of it of course was that Castellanos had Brutus echo her movements, demonstrating each step with her own M4 before he did the same.

"So after you put it on semi, you just aim and squeeze the trigger." She squeezed her trigger. A dry click echoed through the armory, and she rotated her switch back to safe. "Now you try. The M4 is safe for dry firing."

Brutus did as instructed, 'chambering' a non-existent round by pulling the charging handle and then bringing the rifle up to his shoulder and peering through the sight.

"What about accuracy?" he asked as he squeezed the trigger.

When Castellanos didn't answer, only pointing at her selector switch, he quickly cleared the chamber and put the rifle back to safe mode before setting it on the table.

"Sorry. Aiming?"

"During the exercise, we're only going to be on short range scenarios," she said. "Normally, we'd fine-tune your sights, get you comfortable with this rifle. But for this exercise, short range is all we need to worry about."

"What's yours?" he asked, intrigued.

"Seven right, three up," Castellanos said automatically. "It's something you just know after a while."

"And how accurate is that?" Brutus asked. "It always seems like in movies that people shoot a hundred times and don't hit anything."

"That's usually plot armor," Castellanos joked.

Brutus laughed.

"Truth is, it's not that hard to adjust to someone else's rifle.

A common trick that a lot of drill sergeants do in basic training to inspire confidence in the new privates is they take just some random private's rifle, without any adjustments, and go out on the qualification range.

They might not hit a perfect score, but they always qualify. "

"And your score?"

"With the M4? I shot thirty-nine out of forty my last trip to the qualification range. Anyway, let's keep going, then I'll go over the body armor you're going to be wearing. That might be more familiar to you, Mr. Shoulder Pads."

Brutus grinned, wondering if he'd heard the little note of flirtation in her voice that he thought he'd heard.

He wasn't sure, and had restrained himself from doing anything about his self-admitted attraction to Castellanos because he didn't want to fuck things up with the league or the Bluecats.

But sometimes when she wasn't clearly annoyed with him for some reason, he'd caught her glancing in his direction, and he thought that maybe she was interested in him as more than just a visitor to her fire team.

And now he heard it in her voice.

They went through the rest of the class, finishing with Brutus breaking down, demonstrating how to clean, and reassembling the M4 in front of him before

Castellanos was satisfied.

"Okay during the exercise, still make sure you check off with me after you do any cleaning or field stripping." She locked the weapons up, "but nice job. Now onto what we'll be wearing. Follow me."

Castellanos led Brutus deeper into the arms room, to a huge triple rack of vests on thick metal hangars. "Beefy."

"Pick one up, you'll see why," Castellanos said, gesturing. Brutus picked up the vest off the hangar, grunting in surprise when it was fully in his hands.

"Damn, this is heavy," he said.

"That's just the training weight. A full combat load? Fifty pounds, easy. It takes a toll on your body."

Brutus took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

"Why aren't they making it... I don't know, lighter?"

I mean, every year they're coming out with lighter and lighter weight equipment for us.

I think my game day uniform's about ten or eleven pounds, and that's distributed across my entire body to include my cleats, helmet, and pants. "

"Oh no, this is the lightweight stuff," Castellanos said sadly.

"Brutus, I know you don't quite get it, but it's this sort of shit that takes out so many soldiers I've lost count.

Guys go over a wall to get out of the line of fire, and their knees get blown out because they're landing with all that extra weight.

Or their spines get turned to glass and jelly by landing just a little too hard on a parachute landing, or coming off a rappel a bit too hard, or just having to carry all this shit and another fifty pounds of gear on a ruck march for day after day after day because there's no other way to get all the shit a soldier needs to live from point A to point B in their theater of operations.

Good soldiers, their health ruined and their lives forever altered because of the very equipment meant to keep them safe in battle. "

"How do you deal with it?" Brutus asked, shaken up. "I mean, I've got millions socked away, the Bluecats have team doctors, trainers... you guys have what?"

"Not as much as I wish we had," Castellanos admitted.

"But that's what the job requires, and why we train so hard.

I do yoga every night in my room to help realign my joints and keep my shoulders and spine as healthy as I can.

And while it's not the same in every unit, at least here in the 3/3 we do PT with the idea of getting maximum benefit out of our workouts while doing minimal damage.

Probably a lot like what you do in your offseason? "

"Yeah... but you don't get an offseason," Brutus pointed out. "I mean, Dawks was telling me about how you guys have red, yellow, and green cycles where you have greater or lesser chances of going on missions... but you don't have an offseason."

"We deal with it."

Brutus shook his head, and put the plate carrier vest back on the rack. "Still Castellanos... I mean, I'm two hundred and fifteen pounds right now, give or take. I'll add about fifteen over the offseason as I pack on muscle to get ready, but you know what I mean. You're what, a buck twenty?"

"Remember, I told you at the PT test, I'm a hundred and thirty-six pounds," Castellanos said with a hint of pride. "I've always been skinny, but the Army's packed some muscle onto me too. It's denser than soft curves, so I look one twenty to most people though."

"You're right, I forgot you said that," Brutus acknowledged while thinking a lot about Castellanos's feminine curves.

"I'm just saying that the toughness you've got, dealing with the job, the danger, the pounding on your body, makes me feel like a total chump.

You're tough, Castellanos... almost as tough as you are pretty. "

He paused, measuring how Castellanos would react. Since asking about her dating life, he'd tried to keep things job-based, but he had to say something. She was so remarkable that he felt it was worth the risk.

And this time, he saw, she didn't immediately rebuff him. "Brutus... you're here to work."

"For another few days." Brutus pushed things a little.

"Look, we're going to go do this field exercise through the weekend, right?"

Well I'll say it again. I've learned my lesson, Castellanos.

And I still think in my gut that yeah, I'm a warrior in my own way.

But you're all more warrior than I am. Still.

.. I'd at least like to know your first name. "

Castellanos stammered, and Brutus stepped closer. Her lip quivered, and he could feel the magnetism between them as she exhaled... "Linda."

"Linda," Brutus repeated softly, reaching up and cupping a soft cheek. "The name fits."

He leaned in further, and pressed his lips to hers.

For a moment she stiffened, resisting his advance before giving in and kissing him back.

Her hands found the front of his uniform and he slipped his hand to the back of her neck and pulled her in tighter as his free hand went around her waist. She was glorious, her mouth opening to his tongue and meeting his, moaning as their kiss deepened.

Sliding his hand down, Brutus groaned deep in his chest as he felt the firm curve of her ass through her pants, grateful for the wonders of Army training combined with yoga, at least in the realm of Linda Castellanos's derriere.

He'd never felt a more perfect ass, curving lushly while still firm and supple under his hand.

He was about to let go of her neck to see if he could feel the soft weight of her breast with his hand when a rattling sound came from the door, and Linda pushed him away.

"Hey, Sergeant Castellanos!" a voice called from the door.

Linda wiped her lips, staring accusingly at Brutus as she called back, "Yeah, whatcha need Crews?"

"Top wanted me to check with you what size Superstar is. Top's going to run by the PX and get him a tactical undershirt for the FTX."

Brutus cleared his throat. "I wear a XXL, or XL if it's stretchy!"

"Oh, you're in here too?" Crews appeared around the corner of the armory. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Sergeant Castellanos was showing me the plate carriers we'll be using on the exercise."

Brutus looked at Linda and hoping he was covering well. He was painfully erect, and the ACU pants he was wearing were doing a shitty job of disguising it.

"We're almost done, if you want me to stop by the company office."

"Nah, it's cool. Top'll see what he can get," Crews said before leaving.

Brutus looked at Linda, who was staring at him with anger, hurt, and something else in her eyes. Disappointment, he thought. "Linda, I-"

"Save it," she whispered fiercely, poking a finger into his chest as hard as she could.

"Because if you really respected me as a warrior Brutus.

.. you wouldn't have fucking done that. Now get the fuck out of here and wait for me in the hallway.

I'd like to kick your ass for that... but I don't want to explain to First Sergeant why I'm doing it. "

Brutus wanted to protest, to point out that she'd kissed him back. He wanted to say that he felt her hand on his ass just as much as he'd groped hers. But instead he left, knowing he wasn't going to get anywhere at the moment.

Still, as he waited outside in the unheated basement hallway, he could still feel his lips burning from Linda's kiss... and he very much wanted to feel those lips again.

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LINDA

The wind bit at Linda's exposed skin, but as she rounded the final turn, a surge of exhilaration pushed past the chill. Project Brutus was almost over. Now it was a straight shot to the company area the last exercise of the field exercise would be complete.

Up ahead, the line of the platoon stretched out, Brutus's different colored uniform sticking out. Stepping out of line, she jogged up the middle of the road to catch up to him, falling in next to him. "How're you feeling?"

Brutus's face was once again roughly the color of swiss cheese. He nodded grimly.

"Orkin gave me what he called 'Ranger Candy.' He laughed when I asked him what it was. Told me nothing compared to what I'd get from the Bluecats, but it'd take the edge off."

Linda huffed a small laugh herself. "Eight hundred milligrams of ibuprofen. You'd be surprised at how much you can get done on a couple of those."

Brutus nodded, keeping his head down. "Yeah well, he lied, or else I'm in worse shape than I thought. At least I've got one thing going for me."

"What's that?" Linda asked, and Brutus looked up to glance along the line of the company, two platoons in a single line on each side of the two-lane road.

"You guys look tired too," he said, cocking a little grin. "I guess fifteen miles takes it

out of everyone."

Linda couldn't disagree. Her knees screamed with each step. Sixty pounds of gear, plus the ache of fifteen miles, made every muscle protest. The pack, body armor, and equipment she carried was almost one and a half times her normal body weight.

"Just a half mile to go, and we can drop this crap," Linda assured him. "First platoon might already be able to see the company area even."

"Cool," Brutus grunted. "But I'm going to be so happy to have a hot shower."

"So will everyone," Linda said. "Which means, of course, that we're going to drain the barracks water heater and nobody's going to get more than five minutes of middling hot water."

Brutus grunted again. "That'll be a start. I can get the sweat and stink off of me at least."

When they reached the company area, Linda gratefully dropped her rucksack, mimicking the practiced movements of her team, and was relieved to see Brutus do the same, he was fitting in. She unstrapped her body armor, feeling pounds lighter as the weight lifted off her shoulders.

Up front, Major Kirk brought the company to attention, and looked around.

"At ease!" he called, grinning as the company relaxed slightly while staying in their organized lines. "Well that's a fun way to greet a Sunday, isn't it?"

"Hooah!"

Kirk laughed. "That's what I thought too. Which is why I had a little discussion with

the XO, and Captain King had a great suggestion. One final surprise extra duty."

Linda glanced down the line of the squad at Brutus to see his reaction. The man had just endured a three-day training exercise where he'd slept in a sleeping bag on the ground, eaten nothing but field rations, and gone through almost half a dozen different training scenarios.

None of it was hard for the members of Charlie Company, but it had challenged Brutus to his limits. He'd spent three days not only not being the best in the group but getting subtly embarrassed constantly. Like Orkin had wanted, Brutus had gotten shot more than once during the exercises.

Yet he held his demeanor throughout the entire exercise, not complaining at all.

He did it now too, not letting any disappointment show on his face as a few other members of the company groaned.

Perhaps he was just in too much pain to care, he still looked like he was holding back a scream by sheer force of will.

But then, Major Kirk smiled. "Today's last duty is... a barbecue. So go stash your rucks in your rooms or your vehicles, and get your weapons cleaned and checked in. Captain King and I will get the barbecue started. Right, Captain?"

"Long as you didn't forget the gasoline, sir!" King called, getting plenty of laughs.

King was a good XO, and everyone in the company thought they were lucky to have an officer like him as second in command. In any other unit, he'd have already been a company commander, but that's the way the 3/3 operated.

Linda took her ruck sack into her room, dropping it off before quickly changing

undershirts, pulling on a warm and dry shirt to go along with a fresh polypropylene top.

Outside, the sun immediately felt warmer as everyone found a spot to clean their weapons.

Music broke out as someone, probably Tyrone Crews judging by which window it came from, turned on a stereo.

"So how's it look?" Brutus asked, offering her the M4.

Linda ran a practiced eye over the weapon. "Good job. Really good. You actually got it cleaner than some of the lifers. How'd you get the barrel clean so quickly?"

"DJ showed me," Brutus said, referring to Derrick Jackson.

Brutus had become familiar with the lower enlisted, and Linda approved. They openly called him 'Superstar' or 'Brutal,' while he would often refer to them by their company-given nicknames as well.

"Instead of using the normal swabs and solvent, use a length of string and a thin strip from an old sock. He loaned me his."

Linda laughed, nodding. "I use the bottom hem out of an old t-shirt personally, but same effect. Okay, go check with Sergeant Lincoln and get your weapon checked in. Sergeant Lincoln, got a check for you!"

Weapon cleaning didn't take long, and as shimmers of heat rose over the barbecue and Captain King and Tyrone Crews got food onto the heat, Major Kirk formed up the company again.

"Brutus Townsend, front and center!"

Brutus jogged around, limping slightly, but Linda didn't think anyone would connect that with his secret. After fifteen miles, many first-time marchers had blisters and sore feet.

"Brutus," Major Kirk said when Brutus got in front of him, "for the past week, you've been more than a guest of Cranked, you've been a hard-working member.

Not perfect, but I never expect perfection from my new soldiers.

But your time with us has reached its end, and as of the end of this barbecue, I can gladly say that you are honorably discharged from your time in Charlie Company, Three Three Infantry. "

The company cheered, and Brutus shook the Major's hand. Linda felt proud, and knew it was the strangest temporary assignment she'd ever complete. But she'd done her job well... if not perfectly.

You crossed a line with him, she thought guiltily. But you pulled it back. And maybe that pull back is what got him to turn the corner. He certainly has been different since the arms room.

She nodded to herself, reminding herself of her mistakes. She'd learn from them.

"Thank you Major Kirk," Brutus said as the Major ceded the speaking position to him. "Uhm, I'm really, really hungry y'all, so I'm going to keep this short."

"Damn right you will!" someone called to general laughter.

Brutus grinned lightly.

"Yeah... yeah. Look guys, when I showed up last Sunday, I wasn't sure what to expect. I'll admit, I didn't think it'd be half as tough as it's been. And for about the first hour and a half on Monday, I thought I was cruising along. No offense to the PT test."

There was general laughter. Brutus joined in before sobering.

"I quickly learned my lesson. Or at least started to.

Over the past few days though I've seen even more.

I know that the fans, the sports writers.

.. hell, even my other fellow football players, will say I'm a warrior.

That we go out onto the field of battle.

It's football culture, I guess. We feel a lot better about ourselves and our salaries when we say we're going to battle when we're really just going to play a kid's game.

But the truth is Charlie Company, you're tougher, you're more dedicated, you're more warrior than I'll ever be.

You've humbled me, but more importantly taught me a lot.

Uhm, I'm not done with the Army, as you guys can guess I've got quite a few more league-mandated charity events and things like that to do.

But this week? This means a lot to me, and I hope to carry the lessons of this week into the other events, and into my future.

Ah, I'd like to give special thanks to Alpha Team, Second Squad, Second Platoon.

You guys really have hand held me when necessary.

So DJ, Keishi, Dawks... thank you. I wish I could meet Hollywood, because he's lucky to be working with you guys.

And the same goes for the chain of command.

Sergeant Castellanos, Sergeant Orkin, Lieutenant Parker.

.. look, everyone in Charlie. I don't want to name you all because the burgers I can smell would burn, so just..

. thank you. And I plan on staying in touch if you guys would let me. "

There were cheers at that, and the barbecue started. It was a typical infantry barbecue in Linda's eyes, with lots of meat, a decent amount of charred corn on the cob or other vegetables, and now that the firearms were locked away, a decent amount of beer for those who wanted it.

The smell of charcoal and sizzling meat filled the air, mingling with laughter and the clink of beer bottles. Linda savored the taste of a juicy rib, the sauce tangy on her tongue, as she watched soldiers relaxing after a hard week's work.

About halfway through, Lieutenant Colonel Remsburg came by in civilian clothes, shaking hands and checking on the troops. Eventually he made his way over to Linda, who was still gnawing on a rib.

"Sergeant Castellanos, how was it?" he asked, smiling. He was trim and dressed casually, his civilian jacket clean and neat on his compact body. "I'd say a bunch of

the credit goes to you."

"The credit goes to the whole team, sir." Linda wiped her right hand clean on her pants before shaking the offered hand. "And to Brutus too. He worked hard."

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She meant it. Listening to his speech to the company, she knew that a lot of the words were similar to the ones she'd heard in the armory. But this time there was no deception, no ulterior motive. She thought he'd been heartfelt, and meant every word.

"I'll be happy to report that up the chain then," Remsburg said.

"One hint, though? Don't sell yourself short, Sergeant.

You deserve your kudos for this, especially in this unit where official kudos are often hard to come by.

This time, I think you and the rest of your team can expect at least a positive note in your files. Enjoy the rest of your Sunday."

The barbecue continued, some of the troops scattering as the food got eaten and seven straight days of work caught up with them.

Linda helped out with cleanup though, taking a bag of garbage to the big dumpster behind the barracks.

When she came back it was only Major Kirk and the other officers still outside, doing the last of the cleanup.

"Hey sir, you need a hand?" she asked Lieutenant Parker, who waved her off.

"This is on us now, Castellanos. You go catch up on rack or whatever you want to do. You've earned it. You'll have Hollywood back come Wednesday, so out with the

new, in with the old."

Linda laughed, shaking her head. "After this past week, Hollywood's going to be nice and boring. See you Wednesday morning sir."

Linda went back to her room, but after changing out of her uniform and into some casual, warm sweats for comfort, she couldn't help but feel like things were just a bit off. She hadn't seen Brutus since about five minutes into the barbecue, and for him to leave without saying goodbye felt... weird.

She decided that if he wasn't going to come by to see her, she could go by to see him, if anything to make sure that he was okay. But just as she pulled the door open she almost ran into Brutus, who had his hand raised to knock on the wood.

"Oh!" he said, jerking his hand back to avoid rapping her in the forehead. "I was... uhm, are you going somewhere right now?"

"Actually... no." Linda stepped back. She looked him over, and saw that he'd changed into one of the Bluecats track suits he'd been wearing for PT. "Getting ready to leave?"

"In a bit, but... can I come in?" Brutus said quietly. "I'd like to talk with you for a minute or two if you'd let me."

Linda nodded, and allowed Brutus into her room. Going over to her small couch, she sat down, her eyes fixed on him as he stayed by the mostly closed door.

"What's up? I didn't see you much at the barbecue after the colonel stopped by."

"Yeah... I just... had to think." Brutus ran his hand through his hair. "Look, Linda... I'm sorry about Wednesday."

"You're sorry?" she asked warily. "Why?"

Brutus stuck his hands in his pockets, struggling to find the words. "I should have respected you as a professional. I should have... look, I'm not saying anything I did wasn't true. Hell, I wanted to... you know."

"Lay one on me?" Linda asked.

Brutus nodded.

"You can talk plainly, Brutus. These walls are thick and nobody comes down to this corner unless they're coming to see me. So you wanted to kiss me."

"I did. But I shouldn't have. The more I thought about it, the more I thought of what my therapist would tell me."

"So kissing me was psychologically scarring?" Linda asked.

Brutus looked at her, his eyes flaring with anger and shame.

"Sorry. It shook me up too. What would your therapist say?"

"That while I might have acted honestly, I didn't act wisely. In football, there's times for both. When you're in the film room, in the huddle... hell, up until the ball snaps, you're in thinking mode. But when that ball snaps, you don't have time to think. You have time to see and react."

"Something I'm familiar with, as the past few days have taught you."

"Right, totally. You were right, I said I respected you, but I didn't really respect you." Brutus took a deep breath. "But that's changed. And I'm sorry. That moment in the

arms room, I should have thought, and not acted. If I could take Wednesday back, at least the kiss, I would."

"You've got some impulse issues for sure." Linda chuckled. "I can't put all the blame on you though. I did kiss you back."

"That you did... and wow it was good," Brutus said with a soft laugh. "Best I've had in a very long time."

The heat in his words felt good, and Linda tilted her head.

"So what drove it home for you? Because the words you said out in front of the company were pretty similar. But I could tell they were a lot more heartfelt than Wednesday."

"Yeah, I know, but... you remember Friday?" Brutus said. "The tower?"

Linda nodded, remembering. One of the basic activities they'd taken Brutus through was rappelling, and at first things had gone well. He'd demonstrated all the right positions, keeping a strong L-shape on the six foot high practice wall, his braking hand strong and his knees soft.

But when he'd gone off the tower, he'd frozen, his primal mind telling him that the idea of hanging from a deadly height by nothing more than a thin rope was inherently wrong.

Linda quickly realized what had happened, and hooked up to go down next to him, quietly talking him all the way down to the ground.

He'd been terrified, and he nearly fell to his knees in relief when his boots crunched into the sawdust at the bottom of the tower.

"You know, when I went through Air Assault school, our final rappel was going out of an actual helicopter," Linda recalled, smiling at the memory.

"For my class, they used Blackhawks. Because of the weight of my pack and everything, I decided to do a friction hookup.

I was really new at the time, didn't have the grip strength I do now, and worried I'd go down that rope like a greased goat. "

"Greased goat?"

"It's a Puerto Rican saying, or maybe just mi barrio saying," Linda said. "Anyway, I get to the edge of the chopper, and the rappel master calls for us to go. So I push off, swing my arm out wide to give myself the slack to drop... and proceed to go chest first into the bottom door frame."

"Ouch!" Brutus gasped. "Why?"

"The friction hookup had gotten crossed over," Linda admitted.

"Anyway, there I was, a hundred feet above the grass, dangling.

I looked at the carabiner, trying to figure out how to get this fucking thing unstuck when bam!

I get hit in the helmet. I look up to see the rappel master on his knees, bonking me on the helmet.

'What's wrong?' he asked, and I told him.

His solution was to keep bonking me on the goddamn helmet until the rope clicked in

right and I went down the rope.

.. slow as an old man walking the stairs.

I really, really didn't need that friction hookup. "

Brutus laughed. "But you did it. Look, I watched you over the entire exercise, Linda. You fought better than me, but like the tower, you kept trying to help me too."

He was using her first name again, and she didn't mind. In fact, it sounded good coming from his lips. "That was my job."

"No, that's leadership," Brutus said. "I might not know how to be a soldier, even after a long week of cosplaying.

Because, that's what I did. But I know leadership.

I've shared locker rooms with real bastards, assholes I wouldn't trust with fifty cents.

But I've figured out how to get the most out of them on the field, in the huddle.

We've won playoff games together. I got to hoist a championship with one group of them, something I'll always be proud of.

But you did that over a simple exercise to help a spoiled football player learn his place, even when you could have let me fall on my ass.

That's leadership, Linda. And I... thank you. "

"You're welcome, Brutus." Linda stood up. "You weren't that bad though. I mean, you tried. And if you're a spoiled football player, you unspoiled yourself by the day in

my eyes."

"Thanks... you're being nice," Brutus said. "Look, another thing. Earlier this week, when I told you about myself, you said something to me that's really been sitting with me. You said you thought I could be more than a football player."

Linda nodded, smiling a little. "You could be. You're not a rocket scientist Brutus, but I'm not one either."

"Yeah well, you're like one of only a handful of people who thinks I can be more than a football jock," Brutus said, almost a trifle sadly.

"The team wants me to be a football player, a linebacker.

My agent wants me to be a football player so he can keep making two million dollars a year off of me, his cut of my contracts.

My family wants me to be a football player, my dad says I need another two to three years before I can guarantee myself a spot in the hall of fame.

That's something he never got a chance to do, as you know. "

"Is that what you want, though?" Linda asked.

Brutus shrugged.

"What's that mean?"

"It means that even my ex-girlfriends have always been about me being a famous football player," Brutus said. "And rich. They wanted to be a Bluecat WAG more than anything else."

"WAG?"

"Wives And Girlfriends."

"Ah. Well, I don't give a damn about your money or your football career, and I like football," Linda said. "You're a good guy, Brutus."

"And that's why you're so... remarkable, Linda.

" Brutus took a deep breath. "Look, I know this might be stupid.

I fucked up on Wednesday, so if you tell me to GTFO, I get it.

I'll walk out the door knowing I fucked it up.

But I'd like to be able to call you, to.

.. to see you after this week. To get to know Linda Castellanos outside of the uniform, even if the uniform is part of who you are. "

Before Linda could answer Brutus reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a card, thrusting it forward. "What's this?"

"My personal cell." He blushed. "I'm asking you out on a date, Linda.

Next weekend, Saturday. I'll come by, pick you up if you'd like or meet you somewhere in town if you'd prefer.

.. whatever. You don't have to answer me right now, you might still be thinking of me as a sergeant and not as Linda.

But if you don't want to go out, just throw that card away. Like I said, I get it."

"Brutus... hey Brutus!" Tyrone Crews called from the hallway, and Brutus stuck his head out the door.

"Yeah?"

"Major Kirk was wondering if you were ready to clear the barracks!" Crews called. "Ready to sign out?"

"Yeah... one minute!" Brutus called, ducking back into Linda's room. "Anyway... think about it."

"I will." Linda held onto the card. "You know the CO and probably Remsburg would like a photo. Nothing big, just a selfie or something."

Brutus shrugged. "Don't tell anyone, but I already texted my agent. Next season, I'm treating all of Cranked to a home game. You guys'll have to figure out how to get to Bluecats Stadium though. I don't think we've got electric bike parking."

Linda laughed, and stuck out her tongue. "Go on, get out of here, Brutus. And I promise, I'll think about it."

Brutus smiled and left, leaving Linda looking at the card in her hand. She could see the handwritten number, along with a single quick inscription.

Please.

Going over to her wallet, she undid the Velcro flap and tucked it inside for later. She wasn't going to call him now, she wanted to think it over, take a shower, maybe grab a nap.

But the truth was, she already knew what she was going to do.

She was going out on a date with Brutus Townsend next Saturday.

brUTUS

"S o Brutus, how was your week with the Army?"

Brutus sat back in the chair, considering his answer before replying. He hadn't been to see Dr. Caster in two weeks. It felt different coming in now than it did before.

"Eye-opening," he said finally. "In a good way."

"How so?" Caster, who had a good reputation working with anger management issues, asked. Unlike the stereotypical doctor/patient therapy setup, Caster liked keeping a little half-desk with his chair, making his seat look a lot like a very expensive, very comfortable school desk.

"Well, you know how we've talked about self image?" Brutus asked.

Caster nodded.

"During my time there, I was able to see... a me I didn't think other people saw."

"What do you mean?" Caster asked.

"These people... well, some of them, not all of them, they didn't treat me as Brutus Townsend, linebacker and football player.

I mean, they accepted that I'm a football player, and when I had problems understanding their world or their point of view, they'd try to recast what they wanted

through the lens of football for me.

But they also accepted me and even challenged me to be... more."

"You said in the past that you've often struggled with the world's view of you," Dr. Caster commented. "The soldiers you worked with wanted you to be more than you are?"

"They did," Brutus said. "It was sort of refreshing, having to prove myself to these people while at the same time being told that I could grow, do you understand? It left me with a lot of thoughts."

"What sort of thoughts?"

"During the last three days, we did what they called a field exercise.

It was easy for them of course, these people are some tough individuals who can put up with ten times worse than I ever had to deal with.

But we marched out into the woods, set up a base camp and did patrols, training scenarios and more.

When we were back at camp though I got to think...

and I started thinking about what I want to be beyond being a football player. "

"Interesting. Any particular reason you started thinking about this?"

"Well, there was this one soldier... a very beautiful one..."

* * *

Brutus felt weird pulling up to the main gate at Fort Pickett again, having driven out the gate just the week before.

This time he wasn't in his truck however, but his comfortable daily cruiser, a slightly used Mercedes with a custom made driver's side seat that was contoured perfectly to his body.

The seat was after market of course, but made any sort of trip over an hour feel like nothing.

It was the car he used for going to practice, since even after a hard practice or home game, the car made any commute feel easier.

"What brings you to Fort Pickett, Mister... Townsend?" the gate guard asked, checking his ID. He handed it back to Brutus, who tucked it into his wallet.

"I'm here to pick up someone," Brutus said. "I've been told I'm supposed to just park it right over there if you don't mind, I'm meeting her here at the gate."

The guard looked over his shoulder at the parking area Brutus indicated, and nodded. "Sure. Thanks."

Brutus pulled over, and shut off the engine. He was a few minutes early, but traffic had been light. The truth was, he was taking a risk coming back. He knew he was scared because he knew he was risking getting hurt. There was no way that he could be superficial with Linda, she wouldn't accept it.

But the more he'd thought of Linda over the past five days, the more he felt she was a chance very much worth taking.

Yes, he was risking his emotional self. But at the same time, being with Linda felt

good, even when she was 'just' Sergeant Castellanos. She felt right with him. And the way she'd challenged him, and showed faith in his abilities to learn, made him feel like she was worth the risk.

Still, he'd almost given up on getting a reply from Linda when she hadn't texted him by Sunday night.

But when she sent him a message Monday morning, he'd been almost overjoyed.

In fact, he'd even cut his therapeutic soak in his house's whirlpool short in order to get out and dry off his hands enough to text her back.

Since then they'd exchanged a few texts, mostly at night after Linda was off work and could have the time to reply.

She'd shown a side of her that he didn't even suspected existed before with the first pic she shared of herself.

He'd playfully asked what she looked like 'off duty,' just so he was sure he could identify her when he came to pick her up.

She'd replied with a photo of her in her room doing a yoga pose, the camera clearly on the floor next to her, her thumb hitting the button. She hadn't been dressed provocatively, just regular PT shorts and a compression top... but it had been sexy nonetheless.

He'd been a little surprised when she said to meet him by the front gate, but agreed. He knew that Linda's career was important to her, and he wasn't sure how them seeing each other might affect her. He didn't want to create any problems for her.

A minute later he saw a figure on a bicycle, and he had to laugh quietly to himself as

he saw Linda come riding up, the bike flying along while she barely pedaled. She got up to the guard shack and dismounted, and all concerns about professionalism fled his mind as he saw her.

She was glorious. In snug fitting jeans that showed off her long legs, a slightly puffy jacket that probably overly insulated her from the hint of chill even in the afternoon sunlight, and a purple beanie to protect her ears, she was beautiful, sexy, and everything he could ever want in a date.

"Hey Jerry, I'm heading off post," Linda told the guard as Brutus got out of his car. Clearly Linda wasn't too concerned about them being seen together, and she knew the guard on duty. "Mind if I plug in here?"

"Nah, go ahead Linda," the guard said. Pointing towards Brutus, he said, "Think that's your date. No worries, I'll take care of the bike."

"Thanks Jerry!" Linda said brightly.

She reached into her pocket and pulling out a cable, probably what she used to charge her bike's battery. She handed it to the guard before turning around to look at Brutus.

"Well now... you made it."

"I did." Brutus' eyes widened as Linda unzipped her jacket to reveal a crop top underneath that exposed about two inches of skin and a belly button that left his knees quivering. The jacket was clearly just for the windchill effect, and she'd dressed to show just how feminine she could be.

I knew she was gorgeous , he thought as she walked across the street, lighting up the day like a supernova. But she's a fucking goddess. It was like being back in high school with a crush.

"H... hi," Brutus stammered as she got to the car. "You look amazing."

"Thanks," she replied, blushing lightly. "Hey, just to let you know, I said to meet me here because of work. The battalion's doing some intense stuff, and we're working with some... other units. I can't say more than that, but the area around our barracks is currently a no-go zone."

"Thank you for that." Brutus chuckled. "I was worried it was because... well, you were my sergeant just last week. I don't know how that'd affect your Army life."

"Not at all, but you're sweet for thinking about that," Linda said. "If I wanted this to be secret Brutus, I wouldn't have had you even come to the front gate. Someone is going to talk, you have to remember that this is the Army after all!"

"Okay. So this thing you were just talking about, are there any problems that you might have?" Brutus said worriedly. "You know, are you like, on call or something?"

Linda shook her head, patting his forearm. "Don't worry, I'm completely off duty. Short of a national emergency, I'm all yours for the night. The unit that's working with us right now, they're... secretive."

"Oh."

"Look, can we not talk about Army stuff for our date?" Linda asked. "We spent a week with you calling me Sergeant all the time. I'd like to just talk about Linda and Brutus. And other things that have nothing to do with the military."

Brutus smiled, nodding. "I'd like that too."

He offered her an arm. He walked her around to the passenger side of his car, opening the door for her and offering her a hand in as she settled into the leather. Going

around he met Jerry's eyes, giving him a nod. Jerry smiled and nodded back, and Brutus pulled out of the base.

"So where are we going anyway?" Linda asked. "You just said casual."

"I know a guy who knows a guy," Brutus joked. "Would anyone say anything if you didn't get back until really late?"

"Nope," Linda said. "I'm a big girl, and I can stay out all night if I want. As for them talking about why, that's their damn problem. And like you said, I'm a bit of a mama bear. You don't talk about mama bear unless you want to see the bear side of her."

"Good. Because we can ditch this idea and just go get some barbecue or something," Brutus said, "if you want."

"Nope, I'm more than ready for whatever you've got planned," Linda said. "So how was your week?"

"Restful," Brutus said with a laugh as he started driving back towards the highway.

"I spent the whole week doing work on my ankle, getting back into regular lifting and getting with my personal trainer about my offseason plan.

I also had a session with my therapist, and spent lots and lots of time in the hot tub. "

"You've got a hot tub?" Linda asked.

Brutus nodded.

"I'm jealous. What else?"

"I've got a pool." He grinned as he saw her gawk. "Can't use it right now of course, but it's not a big one. You'd probably have more fun swimming in whatever's on base."

"What is it, some sort of above ground pool or something?"

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"No, it's one of those current pools, do you know what I mean?" Brutus asked. "I have it installed on my deck, next to the whirlpool. The machinery creates a current that you can move against. Although I customized mine, it's got a motorless treadmill in it."

Linda laughed. "Perfect for you. High intensity, low impact cardio. Let me guess, you've got rowers and more in that home gym of yours?"

"And a big ol' heavy bag... for those days when you just want to let off some aggression," Brutus admitted with a chuckle. "But I didn't use that at all this week. But I did do something else that's new."

"What's that?"

"I signed up for an online education website," Brutus said, slightly shy about the revelation. "I just... look, I don't know if I said it before or if you looked it up, but I don't have my degree. Not that it means anything. You know what college was to me?"

"The minor leagues?" Linda asked him.

Brutus thumped a fist on the steering wheel of his car in agreement, grunting lightly.

"I've heard that before."

"Because it's sadly true." Brutus sighed. "For guys like me, college ball was nothing more than vocational education for football players. I barely even showed up for

class."

"What about shows like Last Chance U? Don't those guys get hounded about going to class constantly?" Linda asked him.

Brutus guffawed.

"No?"

"Yes and no. Linda, those guys already burned bridges to end up where they did. Even then, they get chances after chances. Most teachers bend over backwards for players. It was the same for me, except my classroom buildings were a lot more expensive."

"So what was college like for you?" Linda asked.

Brutus hummed. "Not that different from last week. Early workouts, pretending to go to classes, and spending most of my day at the athletic complex. Looking back, I wasted opportunities I wish I had back. I did my three years, declared for the draft, and that was that."

"But you want to be more, don't you Brutus?" Linda asked.

"Yeah. And when you said you had your degree, it got me thinking.

Like I said, I'm not dumb. I do read up on things, a lot more than I did when I was a college student.

So I thought, what if I used my free time during this offseason to get back into the swing of things?

I'm not going to start hard, but take a few free audit classes, and who knows?

" he asked with a laugh. "Maybe I'll actually go and get my damn degree in something. "

"You can do it," Linda said quietly, assuredly. "I know you're not dumb. I've worked with dumb, Brutus. You're not. And if you'd like... I could help."

He glanced over, surprised. "Really? You'd help?"

"Hey, I just finished up my degree last year," Linda said.

"I hadn't planned on it at first of course, the stereotype is enlisted aren't college types.

But that's no longer true, the military's a lot different from the old movies.

Once you hit NCO, it makes career sense to get at least an associate's, and the military has lots of programs to help soldiers get their degrees while still in uniform.

So I... fuck, here I am talking about the Army again. "

"Well, tell me about what you studied then," Brutus said. "Let's see... you're too driven to take the easy way out and get a degree in Spanish Literature or something. You're a native speaker, right? I mean, being Puerto Rican?"

Linda laughed. "Piss me off enough and you'll see how much of a native speaker I am. I'll melt the ears off the side of your head."

For the rest of the drive, they talked about academics and mental exercises. Brutus was delighted to learn about Linda's degree in business management, and how two members of her fire team also had degrees.

"So you see, even during the season you could take a self-paced course," Linda said as she explained a way he could pace himself and not get overwhelmed, "sort of keep up the momentum.

And it'd give you a break from beating your head against football prep all the time.

Let you decompress even. I'll say, it was a great way for me to handle the stress of work, digging into macroeconomic theory and forcing me to put my brain somewhere else. "

"I think I will." Brutus made a final turn, spying the lit up sign ahead. "And here we are."

Brutus was glad to see the look on Linda's face as they pulled up to the convention center, bright spotlights swinging back and forth on the roof.

On the big display board it read One Night Only: Enrique Iglesias. "You remembered my comment!"

Brutus nodded. It was a throwaway, part of a bigger conversation the entire fire team was having during PT on Wednesday, but he remembered when Linda said that of all the Latin artists she'd listened to growing up, Enrique Iglesias was her favorite. "Yep. Now... check this out."

The pass in Brutus's dash got them private parking, and as they walked through the backstage entrance, Linda was giddy.

"I'm backstage at an Enrique Iglesias concert," she whispered, her hand still clutching the pass around her neck. "Mi familia no va a creer esto!"

"If they don't believe you," Brutus said, making Linda pause in surprise, "who cares?"

You got to do it. And maybe I can see if we can snag a pic with Enrique." Seeing her surprise, he grinned. "I'm not fluent, but I know what creer means."

"How'd you do this?" Linda asked, and Brutus shrugged. "The benefits of fame?"

"Yeah... but, I wish I could hear this from the crowd," he said.

"Fame opens some doors, but also keeps you from walking through others.

I've heard too many concerts half distorted from the backstage wings, or had to see a movie only via private showing or waiting until it came out on streaming services.

But my agent, Coach Pugh, the whole team would shit themselves if I took the risk of getting mobbed in a crowd at a concert.

Besides, it'd take away attention from the main act. Come on."

They found a spot in the wings off stage, far enough from the speakers that they weren't blasted to deaf while still giving them a great view of the stage. Brutus couldn't understand the lyrics to at least half the music, but Linda sang her heart out, cheering at the end of every song.

It didn't matter what the lyrics were though, because when the music slowed, and a slow ballad started, Brutus reached for her.

This time she came into his arms willingly, dancing along to the guitar and soft tones.

Again Brutus couldn't understand, but as he looked into the dark eyes of the woman in his grasp, he didn't need to.

The scent of her perfume mingled with the electricity of the concert atmosphere. Her

eyes reflected the stage lights, shimmering with excitement and something more tender. The warmth of her body against his made his heart race faster than any football game ever had.

And when she put her arms around his neck, the words didn't matter. What mattered was Linda, and the smell of her skin, the gleam in her eyes... and the feeling of her lips pressing against his.

Because this time, there was no reluctance at all.

LINDA

Walking through the front door of Brutus's house, she had to remind herself that he'd come from privilege. When he'd told her that he had a 'regular style house' that wasn't anything special beyond the features he'd put in for his football career, she'd expected a regular style home.

Instead, the girl who grew up in a home with bare concrete floors and a gauzy curtain covering the front entrance for three quarters of the year was floored as she looked around at the gigantic, luxurious home in front of her.

Twelve foot high ceilings, furniture that was clearly custom made for a man Brutus's size, high tech touches everywhere... the man's living room alone was bigger than her entire home growing up. She couldn't even begin to try and put a price tag on what it all cost.

"Are you okay?" Brutus asked her, taking her hand. "Linda, if you don't want to-"

"No... no, I want to," she assured him. "I just... when you told me you had a regular style house, I expected something different. This isn't a normal house, Brutus. It's luxe on a level I've never seen before."

Brutus looked around, slightly surprised. "I guess I need to recheck my definition of normal then. But this house is hardly luxurious compared to you."

Linda felt heat flush her neck, and she bit her lip. "Brutus..."

"It's okay." He took her hand again. "Linda, I want you.

I'm not going to lie. We've kissed twice, and my chest is still tight from the memories of those kisses, and the anticipation of what I want to do.

But there's no pressure. If you want to just have a drink, we can do that.

You want to have me drive you back to base, I'll do that.

But if you would let me... I want you very, very much. "

This time, when he tugged her closer she went with him, kissing him again. He lifted her in his arms, carrying her into the living room and to the couch, where they tumbled to the soft surface, Linda still in his arms.

"Wow." Linda landed on top of Brutus, feeling the surface of the couch.

It felt like one of those couches that somehow instantly molded to your body regardless of how you moved, supporting you perfectly and making you feel like you were on a cloud. The upholstery was both silky yet cool to the touch, and her fingers wanted to stroke it again and again.

"I could get used to this couch."

"And I could get used to you on the couch with me." Brutus reached for the hem of her crop top.

She's worn it on purpose, knowing it was one of her sexiest pieces of clothing. She wanted to feel sexy on their date, and Brutus had made her feel especially so.

They squirmed, clothing flew around the couch until Linda found herself nude,

Brutus's arms wrapped around her as he kissed and nibbled at her neck, his hands stroking her flesh and lighting her body on fire.

She was just as ravenous, exploring the feeling of his muscles and reaching down to gasp as she found his manhood, hard and insistent against her belly.

"How do you even get your football pants on with that thing?"

Brutus chuckled. "I'm more of a grower than a shower. And I don't get hard for football. For you... very hard."

"Gracias Dios for growth then," she said before kissing him again intensely.

They ground against each other, squirming back and forth before Brutus tumbled to the carpeted floor, pulling Linda with him. She grinned, pinning him down.

"So it's like that, huh?"

She slid up his body, Brutus grinning as he helped, pulling her higher until she was straddling his face, and he licked his lips.

Lifting his head, he kissed the tender flower between her legs and Linda moaned, pitching forward and barely catching herself on the carpet as Brutus and his tongue did things to her body that she'd never experienced before.

She didn't know where he learned to pleasure a woman like this... but she was glad he did.

Linda had never had a man use his mouth and tongue on her the way Brutus did. Growing up in a macho culture, and then in the macho Army, her previous lovers had all been the type to 'go to pound town,' which she admitted she enjoyed when a lover

had skillful stamina.

But when Brutus's tongue stroked the button at the top of her cleft she knew that she'd found another new favorite.

He tasted and licked her like his entire purpose in the moment was to make her body melt and give in to his caresses, and as he nibbled on her clit, she couldn't resist it.

She surrendered to him, amazed that even though she was on top, he was the one in total control of her pleasure.

"That's it, Linda," Brutus encouraged her as her hips started rolling, grinding down on his eager lips and tongue. "Let go baby. I've got you."

Linda moaned in utter ecstasy, riding Brutus's face, his fingertips digging into her hips as he brought her untold levels of pleasure.

She threw her head back as she felt a release building in her body.

She'd been too long without a lover, and while she wasn't afraid to take care of her own needs in her room in the barracks, she'd never felt something this big building inside her.

It was almost scary, but at the same time she felt totally secure under Brutus's control, his mouth and hands and touch telling her that she could fall apart with him.

She'd never felt safer being totally out of control with a man, and as the tip of his tongue flicked over her clit quickly, she gave herself totally into his touch.

The first jolt of her orgasm hit her like a punch in the chest, stopping her breath and making her eyes roll back in their sockets.

Her hips lost all control, her thighs trembling as she felt waves of release course through her.

Brutus stayed right with her through it all, hungrily sucking and drinking down her juices until his face gleamed in the overhead lights, and he was grinning foolishly, everything from his nose to his chin gleaming.

"You should see how you look from down here."

Linda chuckled, and pushed down his body so she could kiss him, licking her tang off his lips. "You should see how you look. Half drunk almost."

Brutus smiled and kissed her back. His arms wrapped around her, stroking her skin and cupping her ass. "You are pretty intoxicating."

They kissed again, Linda pushing her body back along his torso until she felt something press against her.

Breaking the kiss, she looked over her shoulder at his still rock hard dick, knowing what she wanted next.

He was big, a lot bigger than any of her previous lovers for sure, and even though she knew that didn't mean anything about his skills as a lover, the primal part of her yearned to feel the pleasure such an endowment could give her.

"We can't let that go to waste, can we?"

Brutus shook his head, his breath catching as she reached down and took him in her hand. Holding him aloft, she positioned him at her entrance. "Brush your hair back," he said, his voice tight. "Or let me. I want to see this."

Linda tossed her head back, looking down at the junction between her thighs as Brutus disappeared into her body inch by gloriously thick inch. She felt filled before he was even halfway inside her and she paused, her breath coming in short hitches as she finally had to pause.

"Brutus, I-"

"Take what you need, Linda." He reached up to hold her by the waist. He supported her weight effortlessly, the strength and power that could inflict untold damage on a football field restrained and adjusted totally towards her needs and her pleasure. "I've got you."

Linda relaxed, letting herself go into Brutus's hands.

His strength was amazing, he held her stone still as her body slowly, agonizingly adjusted to his massive, amazing dick.

When she felt the pain go away she lifted up a little, sliding back down and feeling her eyes literally cross as another fresh, deep wave of pleasure pulsed its way up her spine to explode in her lust-addled brain.

"Oh fuuuucck..."

"That's it," Brutus said encouragingly, his voice tight as he held himself under steel willed control.

She could feel his desire to claim her, to ravage her body and seize what he wanted.

But he held back, letting her adjust so they both could enjoy it.

"God you feel so good. Just let yourself be, Linda. I've got you."

And the truth was, she felt it. She could feel herself in his hands as she rode up and down his length, slowly working more and more inside her with each rise and fall of her hips.

By the time her ass settled against his hips she was throbbing, her body shivering with the need to come again, her eyes tight as she tried to draw it out.

But Brutus wouldn't let her.

"Linda." He let go of her waist to cup her breasts. "Let go. It's okay. I've got you."

The inherent strength and comfort in his voice, the surety and the desire, unlocked her inner vixen, and she let go of all restraints she had.

Riding him fast and hard, her hips clapped up and down on his thighs, her body jolted by the intense sensation of his manhood thrusting in and out of her.

He was unlike any man she'd ever been with before, and while size wasn't everything, in Brutus's case, it was enough to trigger nerves and sensations inside her she didn't even know existed.

Her second orgasm hit her even harder, her body shaking so hard she spasmed off of him, gasping and curling up on the floor until she thought she was going to lose consciousness.

But when it passed she looked at him and saw he was still hard...

and the fighter inside her knew she wasn't going to let him go unsatisfied.

Turning around, she planted her elbows on the cushion of the couch. "Inside me." She looked over her shoulder. "Brutus, do it until you let go this time. Fill me up."

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"You sure?" Brutus got to his knees. His body glistened, sweat coating every inch of his torso, and to Linda he looked like a living, breathing god of lust and desire.

She nodded, pulling her hair back into a ponytail and offering it to him as he got into position, his knees pushing hers apart as he pressed against her wet, hungry opening.

Brutus chuckled, and took her hair in his powerful fist. "Promise you'll tell me if it hurts. "

"I promise," Linda said, and those were the last words her mind could make.

She thought he'd been deep before? It was nothing compared to the depths he reached as he thrust into her.

She felt like if he went any deeper, her spine would be replaced with his dick, and waves cascaded upon each other like a waterfall, sweeping her away in the hard, body jolting pleasure as his hips slapped against her ass.

Her entire body was jolted. Her hips pressed against the side of the couch, her breasts dragging over the silky smooth upholstery and adding to the pleasure. Unable to even hold herself up she buried her head into the cushion, crying out in joy with each deep, hard stroke.

There was no sex talk, no words. Just the sound of their bodies slapping together, the huffed gasps of their breath as they pushed each other harder and harder, the squeak as the sofa's frame protested the intense strain put upon it in a direction it was never designed to take.

Linda lost herself in the haze, feeling like she was when she was a little girl, when she'd floated, adrift on the waves and where the water moved her back and forth, and everything felt... good.

This was better, it was like the sea but with utter pleasure mixed in, the pounding of each of Brutus's thrusts like waves, tumbling her and making her want to shout to the heavens as she felt more like a woman than she ever had before in her life.

And Brutus was right there with her, powerful but also restrained, giving her just what her body needed.

He was savage, but not too hard, pulling on her ponytail enough to bend her head back but not hurting her.

He was the perfect lover, and Linda came harder, again and again in a rolling wave of climax.

His guttural cry tore from his chest and he thrust a final time, swelling inside her before his release.

Linda cried out, her body clamping down around him until she thought she was going to fall apart, held together by nothing but the feeling of him inside her and his hand grasping her ponytail.

It was the biggest orgasm of her life, and as it subsided she sagged to the sofa, unable to even hold herself up, and not caring.

What she cared about was the feeling of his arms around her as he stayed with her, holding her close, and keeping her safe.

* * *

The next morning, instinct decided to take a vacation and Linda woke up at nearly eight in the morning. Her first thought was that the world had gone... fluffy. She was warm, and naked, and both totally relaxed and sore in a way that brought back all the memories of the night before.

"So it hadn't been a dream," Linda murmured as she rolled over.

She was in a super king-sized bed, the mattress made out of some space-age material that was as supportive as memory foam but more breathable.

It was like she was at her perfect temperature, perfect support, and she knew that if she slept on a mattress like this every night she'd have no aches and pains in the morning ever.

Still, she was worried as she got out of bed and padded to the palatial bathroom, squatting on the toilet to relieve her full bladder.

What was last night? Why didn't Brutus wake up in bed next to her?

Was this just an amazing date and a one night stand?

Had she let her fandom of football and her animal attraction to him lead to a crush-fuck?

Going back into the bedroom, she saw a Bluecats t-shirt she hadn't noticed before folded at the foot of the bed. Pulling it on, she was amused to find that it went almost halfway to her thighs, and as she walked down the hallway she heard some very welcome sounds... kitchen sounds.

She found Brutus in his kitchen, looking like a vision in nothing but a pair of boxers from behind as he stood at the stove, whistling to himself. She couldn't see anything

that was cooking, but the smell and sounds told her that pork was on the menu.

"Careful." She leaned against the doorway. "Pork fat and bare skin don't mix."

Brutus looked over his shoulder, and his smile relieved any remaining fears. He was happy to see her, and had only left her in bed alone to come out here and prepare some food for them to enjoy.

"You wear that shirt a lot better than I do, I should just give it to you. And I'm wearing an apron, see?"

He half turned, showing off a modest white apron that covered him from the nipples to his knees, and looked sexy as hell on him with his lean muscles poking out everywhere else.

He'd brushed his hair and washed his face, and while he had some morning stubble on his cheeks, he looked absolutely dreamy with a spatula in one hand and tongs in the other.

"Wow... let me get my camera, you could be every woman's dream looking like that," she teased.

Brutus blushed.

"So what's on the menu?"

"I didn't know what you really would like that I can make, so I hit up the basics," Brutus said.

"Waffles are in the toaster, I've got breakfast sausages on right now, and if you give me a few minutes I'll have a plate of scrambled eggs for you.

I haven't really learned to make a ton of food myself, but I do a pretty decent scrambled egg.

The secret's using a dash of heavy cream. "

"Can you do three for me?" Linda asked, and Brutus nodded. "I'll get the drinks."

A few minutes later, they sat down to a delicious looking breakfast, with a mountain of fluffy scrambled eggs, ten waffles stacked on a plate, and a dozen sausage links. Brutus brought over sliced peaches, laying them on her plate.

"Always have some fruit with breakfast," he said as he put the same amount on his and sat down. "It's something my nutritionist always says. Says it's better than supplements and vitamin pills. Me? I just think it cuts the monotony."

Linda laughed, and picked up a slice. "Your nutritionist and my mama. We'd have fruit almost every day, sometimes from the local mercado, sometimes just picked off the trees that mama knew she could get away with. Guava, papaya, mangos... and lots and lots of limes. We had limonada almost every day."

"Lemonade?"

"Limeade," Linda corrected him softly, smiling. "Don't ask me why you English speakers call a limon a lime."

"Ah."

"So where's this domestic side of you come from?"

" she asked teasingly. "Big tough guy, cool.

Stubborn as hell intern with the Army, totally understand.

Amazing lover who did shit to my body that I never even thought possible last night?

Oh hell yeah. Domestic Daddy who would have cooked me breakfast in bed if I'd slept in any longer? Unexpected... but I really like it."

Brutus chuckled, and took her hand. "You give me the courage to express more of myself, even if it's on our first date or whatever you want to call this.

I get to show this side of myself to you, and if you like it, I'm glad.

I liked making breakfast this morning. And yes, it would have been served in bed if you'd slept in any longer. "

"And you have a breakfast in bed tray?"

"No," Brutus admitted. "I would have fed you with my own hands if necessary."

The idea of Brutus holding out morsels of food for her to enjoy sent a ripple of desire through her body, and she shivered at the thought.

"Maybe another time. For now, let's dig in, this smells great."

The eggs were so fluffy and rich, they tasted like sunshine on a winter morning, which more than made up for the frozen waffles that were...

well, basic frozen waffles. Linda was starving, and found herself sneaking a sausage from Brutus's plate as she sipped her big glass of unsweetened iced tea.

He noticed, and his smile told her he definitely didn't mind.

"So." She set her glass down, "I guess we should talk."

"Yeah... I mean, I'd like to just keep going on instinct and feel. That probably won't work much longer," Brutus said. "So what would you like to start with?"

"Well, I have to admit I'm worried," Linda said. "I just had my first date with you, and we ended up at your place sleeping together."

"Do you regret that?"

"No, and I definitely do not regret us having sex," Linda said quickly, "I'm just... worried."

She cast her eyes down, thinking of past relationships that had fizzled quickly after the passion faded.

"I mean, I'm just an Army sergeant. You're anational superstar. That's got to have issues that come with it, right? And do you want this to be something, or something else?"

"I get what you mean, 'something or something else.

" Brutus's voice was soft, understanding.

"We're both feeling this, but we need to figure out what 'this' is.

" He squeezed her hand gently. "And about your job.

.. I know it's a huge part of your life, and it's something we need to be realistic about.
"

"Correct. There may even be days where all I could say is we can't meet up, and I'll call you when I get back."

"Which... would absolutely suck," Brutus admitted. "But I think that I can deal with it. I trust you, and I know the people you'll be doing missions with."

Linda tilted her head, looking at him in concern. "Are you sure, Brutus?"

"As sure as I can be about this until it happens," Brutus replied taking her hand across the table. "Linda, please don't worry. I know your duty station is a bit of a distance from here. And the Army is a part of who you are. But that's the thing, Linda. I'm okay with it."

"You're okay with it?" Linda asked. "Most men I've tried to see weren't. They just want a strong woman who looks good in uniform."

"You're beautiful, Linda, no question," Brutus said, his gaze warm. "But I've met plenty of beautiful women. It's your strength, your passion, the way you see the world... that's what drew me in."

Linda felt a flutter in her chest at his words. They reminded her of why she'd been drawn to him beyond his celebrity.

"I just worry that I'll get called away on assignment, and when I come back, things will have changed."

"I can't promise what the future holds," Brutus said honestly.

"But I can promise that I'm interested in you as a person."

Hell, I like you as a person. The tough mama bear who protects her team, the fiercely

independent woman, the intelligent go getter.

.. and yeah, the vixen who rode me like a bronco and made me see the gods last night.

But most of all, I want to keep seeing you because you see me like nobody else in the world.

Not my family, not my team, nobody. You see me in a way that sometimes I don't even see myself.

You let me feel comfortable standing out here in boxers and an apron, making you breakfast and not feeling self conscious about it. And I want more of that."

"You do?" she asked.

Brutus nodded.

"I'd like that too."

The admission felt vulnerable, like opening a door she usually kept locked. With other men, she'd always kept one foot out the door, expecting them to leave once they realized the realities of dating a soldier. But something about Brutus made her want to risk it.

"Good," Brutus said. "Now, I figure we can finish up breakfast while our clothes finish washing. That's why I had to leave you with my t-shirt, by the way. I put everything in the washer. And then we probably need to get you back to Fort Pickett. Would you like to grab a shower before we go?"

"You said something about a hot tub?" Linda lifted an eyebrow. "Think I can grab a soak in that?"

"Only if I can join you," Brutus said.

"I'm down for that, too." Linda grinned. "As long as we get back to post by five o'clock. I need my rest before tomorrow."

As she gazed across the table at him, she realized that for the first time in years, she didn't want to rush back to base.

The thought of returning to her barracks room, usually her sanctuary, felt less appealing than staying wrapped in Brutus's arms. That feeling both thrilled and terrified her, but with his warm eyes meeting hers across the table, she found herself ready to embrace the uncertainty.

brUTUS

L ate March wasn't Brutus's favorite time of the year. He hated the offseason circus. The endless combine hype and free agency drama were a distraction when all he wanted was to focus on next year ... and more importantly, seeing Linda this weekend.

Also, the weather in early March was still a little too cold for his ankle's liking.

But as he turned around, doing another hundred yard lap of his backyard while dragging the fifty pound sled behind him on the slick grass, he felt like it had been a good month, and that with spring coming up he was in a better place than he'd been in years.

His workouts were going well. He felt strong, focused, and ready to prove himself again this year... but that wasn't the only reason he felt good.

It was Linda. Over the past few weeks, she and Brutus had developed a sort of pattern.

At night, after she got off work, they'd text or chat daily, often for hours.

She'd sat up with him as he went through an online course on European history, working with him to help him get back into the pattern of academia.

Or more precisely, to help him learn how to be a real student, one without a tutor, an academic advisor, a teacher's aide and a professor all contorting themselves in order

to make sure he understood enough of the subject matter in order to pass the course.

It was refreshing, and as he learned how to study, he found it wasn't that hard from studying for football. He actually enjoyed the whole process. Which of course led to the two of them joking about him getting 'nerdy,' but the way Linda said it made him eager to be even nerdier.

"You're cute when you get all intellectual," she'd told him last night, her eyes sparkling with mischief as they video-chatted. "Smart is sexy, Brutus."

Apparently Linda Castellanos thought nerds were hot.

Or maybe she was just joking with him, but either way, the encouragement kept him going even if reading about the transition period from the Ancient Greeks dominating the Mediterranean to the Ancient Romans dominating the world was pretty damn boring in his opinion.

Get to the dominating, dammit!

In his headphones, his phone rang, and he paused his laps. His heart leaped when Linda's name flashed across the screen. Noon already? Her lunch break.

Grinning, he tapped the call pickup button, his pace quickening instinctively. "Well now, this'll get me going for the rest of my walk. How was your morning?"

Linda's warm chuckle had him leaning into the harness strapped around his chest, and his pace picked up a notch.

"Just fine, sexy man. Actually it was rather boring, doing maintenance for the most part.

Not even interesting maintenance, but checking ropes and web gear for abrasions.

So please give me a reason to not go hang myself with some of that web gear. How's your workout going?"

"Good." Brutus reached the end of the hundred yards and turning around.

He didn't have a clock on it, but he thought that Linda's voice had put a little pep in his step, and that last lap was faster than the previous one.

"This morning's not really interesting, steady state cardio by dragging a sled around the yard. Another twenty minutes, and I'll be ready to grab lunch. What'd you have, by the way?"

"You'd laugh, which is why I called. The DFAC was serving spicy enchiladas," Linda said.

And she was right, Brutus did laugh. He loved her honesty about her disdain of spicy foods, especially spicy Latin foods.

"So I bounced out, grabbed a barbecue sandwich off post."

"Sounds delish."

"Trust me, it was," Linda said. "Hey, let me ask you something."

"Go ahead."

"Every time I call you during the day, and sometimes even at night, you're working out," Linda said. "Why are you such a fiend for it? I don't hear about other athletes working out as almost a full time job in their off seasons."

Brutus laughed, which made him a little winded, but he was glad for it. Instead of stopping, he slowed down a little and kept walking.

"It's something I learned long ago, back when I was a kid. Who's the greatest wide receiver in football history?"

Linda's answer was immediate, and he knew she would be. She'd shared with him her knowledge of football over the past month.

"Jerry Rice, of course. I mean, the man's stats are almost untouchable."

"And one of the things that made Rice a beast for so long was that the man was legendary for the hard work he put in during the off season," Brutus explained.

"Even into his late thirties, he'd do two a day workouts that were so hardcore, so strenuous, that he'd make other players ten years or more younger than him puke up their guts before the end of the day. "

Brutus reached the end of his lap and turned around.

"I'm not going to do five mile hill runs, not with my ankle.

You've seen that, and you've seen how distance running is to me.

But I do plan on following in his path to be the best by outworking everyone.

So right now I'm dragging the sled, assault bike later, and anything else I can do to be ready for training camp. "

"What about overtraining?" Linda asked. "Aren't you going beating yourself up on it?"

"My trainer has me rotating through different exercises to shift the strain. I do it because there's going to be at least three or four rookies in camp who'll think they're good enough to take my spot. Same as every year. It won't happen easily, and I'm going to make them work for it."

Linda hummed warmly. "I like the results so far."

Brutus had to agree. While their respective schedules meant that they had to spend the work week apart, Brutus had become a regular visitor to Fort Pickett, to the point that last Friday, the gate guard had worked up the nerve to ask him for an autograph.

So in their free time, they spent as much of it together as they could. Whether it was Friday nights, Saturdays, or even Sunday mornings, they were practically inseparable. Even their daily chats felt like a treasured moment of each day.

The cherry on top of the sundae was last weekend. It had been glorious, three whole days at his house due to a federal holiday. They'd hung out, learned more about each other, made love repeatedly, and more. It was the best three day weekend in his memory.

"So does that mean we're still on for Saturday morning?" Brutus asked. "I know it's only one day, but I'll need Sunday to study something besides European history."

Linda hummed happily. "We're on, for sure. So... minicamp, huh?"

Brutus sighed. "Yeah, Coach Pugh's old school—two minicamps per year. This first one's just for veterans, seeing who's at what position, where we need help."

"But won't that just blow up whatever images he comes out of this minicamp with?" Linda asked him. "So what can he get from minicamp that he can't get from just, I don't know, looking at a chart on the wall?"

"Honestly?" Brutus asked.

On the other end of the line Linda hummed. She hummed a lot, and he'd come to learn what each of those hums meant.

"I think it's to allow him to get an eval of people's mindsets.

Sure, there's a ton of time between now and the start of the preseason.

And people's minds change, a motivated guy could lose his fire and vice versa.

Contract issues could spoil a dude's motivation, or light a fire under his ass.

But it lets him see the minds of the team.

I know I've done the same. As the captain of the defense, I take the opportunity to talk with our coaches after minicamp, give them an insight into what I'm seeing from the guys as we get ready for training camp and next season. "

"That's a tough call, only three days and then making calls that can affect someone's career."

Brutus chuckled, and stopped walking to shake out his ankle. "As Major Kirk would say, that's why I get paid the big bucks."

On the other end of the line Linda laughed.

He continued. "On the good side, I'll be able to stay in touch during minicamp. As a veteran and a team captain, I can drive in to the team facilities each day."

"You don't have to," Linda said. "Isn't there a place you can get better rest?"

"Well, I could sleep in the stadium like some players do, but I'd rather come home and be able to talk to you. Just a reminder, for main summer camp though, I'm going to be in lockdown in a hotel for the first three weeks."

It felt strange and wonderful to Brutus to be talking about summer training camp with Linda. To know that he was even considering their relationship lasting until late July told him just how fast he was starting to think of Linda as something very serious.

And hearing the happy sound she made in her throat when he told her that he wanted to come home to speak to her told him she thought very much the same way, and that she liked the idea.

When she laughed, his heart lifted, and he knew that his workout that afternoon was going to be all the better because of it.

"So you'll be in boot camp then, huh?"

Brutus laughed along with her, looking up at the blue Virginia sky. "I think I can handle it. I've done it plenty of times before, and besides, now I've got some extra special experience in what a real tough camp's like."

"So does that mean I get to wear those short coaching shorts and blow on a whistle for you?" she purred.

Brutus gulped, inhaling deeply.

Linda heard. "Oh, like that idea?"

"Now? Yes. But let's wait until after camp," Brutus said. "I really, really don't want to have any incorrect thoughts about my coaches in the middle of camp."

"Hmmm... I think I can do that," Linda said. "As long as you're here right at oh nine hundred Saturday morning."

"A timeline, huh? Why's that?" Brutus asked. "Everyone knows where you're spending your weekends. Or do you have other plans for the day that I should know about?"

"I'm actually quite proud of spending my weekends with you.

But I still like showing off my stud boyfriend in front of the National Guard bubbas who have to come in for the weekend," Linda said before clearing her throat.

"But speaking of work, my watch just beeped, I need to get back. Call me after your afternoon workout?"

"I will," Brutus promised her. "Thanks for this call, babe."

"Uhm... can we make it a video call, too?" Linda asked shyly. "I miss seeing your face, even if it's only been a few days."

Brutus nodded, wondering if their video call might go other places as well. "Deal. Then let's make it after dinner, so that you can refuel after a hard day's work. Hopefully it's better than spicy enchiladas. See you tonight, Linda. Be safe this afternoon."

"I will."

Linda hung up, and Brutus took a deep breath, his heart light. He had lunch, and some history homework to do before his afternoon training session, but as he started dragging the sled towards the garage, he was thinking mostly about how much he was looking forward to that night.

He remembered how her eyes had lit up during their last video call, the way she'd leaned closer to the camera when he'd told her about his day. The memory of her laughter sent a shiver of anticipation through him as he unloaded the weight from his sled.

Whatever she's got on her mind tonight, I'm going to be ready for it , he thought. Because while video's better than just her voice, the truth is he could barely wait until he had her in his arms again.

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LINDA

"W hoooo... look out!" Jake Hyunh, the Bravo Team Leader, Second Squad, joked as Linda gathered with the other Third Platoon NCOs in the motor pool as part of the regular Monday procedures. "Someone's wearing that nice perfume after this weekend. Smells like big bucks."

"No, smells like endorsement contracts and Astroturf," Terry Atkins, First Squad's Bravo Team leader, said. "Man, working with you at PT this morning left me having flashbacks to my high school dreams. Felt like I was playing in front of fifty thousand fans."

"Only position you'd play would be the left out," Linda tossed back, causing all the NCOs to laugh.

Everyone knew Linda was seeing Brutus. While she'd been worried about it at first, everyone seemed okay with it.

The NCOs for sure were okay with it, and any of the lower enlisted that had a problem with her relationship were smart enough to keep their opinion to themselves.

It allowed her to relax, and have some fun with her fellow sergeants.

"Own it Atkins, I've seen you play in the Turkey Bowl."

There were plenty of laughs about that. Each year, the 3/3 played against Fort Pickett's Garrison Command Group in a pair of charity flag football games.

One game was only officers, the others only enlisted.

Due to the 'ranking' system used in the rules as a way to prevent both groups from fielding a team of just out of school studs, NCOs were very valuable members of each team... except for Terry Atkins.

The man was a good NCO, and a good soldier. She was happy to go into combat, his fire team and her fire team working together.

Still, the man couldn't catch a football to save his life.

"Alright, let's cut the chatter and get squared away," Sergeant Lincoln growled, stopping the joking around.

Lincoln was always that way, all business and squared away. Joking was done after work was completed.

"We're coming out of our yellow cycle and going green starting next week, so focus on actual deployment equipment for this Monday.

With that, light, air loadable vehicles are the first order of business.

We're focusing on the lightweight vehicles today.

Major's orders—the heavy Humvees stay on base unless specifically authorized. "

"That's good, my squad's Hummer is a fucking rack queen," Nate Nichols said, using the military slang term for a vehicle that was always up on the racks getting maintenance.

"This afternoon I'll have a list of other light gear we'll get into, and we can get the

boxes checked," Sergeant Lincoln continued. "The officers are going to be handling their own thing today, so if there's any issues you come to me, the El Tee may or may not be around. So let's get it done."

The group broke up, and Linda got her team going. She started work on one of their armored vehicles. As she checked the tires, she was reminded of doing similar maintenance checks with Brutus, and even though they'd only been apart just over twenty-four hours, it felt like more.

"Face it chica, you've fallen for him," Linda murmured to herself as she checked the box on the PMCS sheet. "You didn't mean to, you certainly didn't plan for it, but you're head over heels for one of the biggest football stars on the planet."

If she'd asked herself a year ago where she expected to be going into this spring, she could have said she would still be in Charlie Company. She liked her job, and she had no desire at the moment to try and leave the company and rotate to a more regular unit.

She could have said she expected to still be living in the barracks.

While as an NCO she could apply for living off base on her own in order to save barracks space for lower enlisted troops, the truth was that Linda didn't mind the barracks.

Having a whole room to herself helped, and there were no apartments in Blackstone that could measure up, or at least none she could afford on the military's housing allowance.

But to be the girlfriend and lover to Brutus Townsend, to spend nearly every spare weekend minute with him, exploring limits both emotional and sexual that left her shaky every Monday morning? No way in hell.

The morning continued on, and as eleven thirty came up on her watch, she was looking forward to lunch.

Over the past month she'd been hungrier than normal, and she suspected that all the sexual hormones and energy she was burning through with Brutus had her metabolism in overdrive.

The thought both thrilled and unnerved her.

She was changing, her body adjusting to this new life, this new relationship that still felt surreal at times.

She was in for a surprise however when Jess Adams approached her, her hands still slightly grimy from whatever vehicle she'd been working on that morning.

"Hey Linda, what do you think of lunch on me?"

"On you?" Linda asked, lifting an eyebrow. "I'd say you've got an ulterior motive. Ever since your sister moved in with you, you've squeezed every nickel you could until Tom Jefferson screamed. But if you're paying, I'm down. What's on the menu?"

"I'm thinking Tio's Pizza?" Jess offered. "Come on, you're down a pound or two, you can afford to share an extra large with me."

Linda couldn't object, and since Jess was driving the decision was made. Fifteen minutes later they were seated in a booth at Blackstone's best pizza restaurant, an order of Italian style hot wings between them while they waited for their order, a meat lover's supreme, to be delivered.

That was another advantage of Tio's. If you were in uniform and came in during lunch, you got moved to the front of the preparation line.

"You know, I never thought you'd be one to go to town on a pizza." Linda sat back, sipping her unsweetened tea. "You're always so... disciplined on your diet."

"Meh, I'm doing a mini-bulk." Jess shrugged.

"For the rest of this week I'll relax, and then dial it in once we go green.

And I'm actually trying to not be such a damn tightwad now with Sabby out of the house.

I'd like to have a bit more joy to my life than the endorphin rush of fucking up some big weights. "

"How is your sister doing anyway?" Linda asked. "I know I should stop by to see how she and Hollywood are adjusting to living in on-post housing, but I haven't found the time yet."

"Meh, no big deal," Jess said. "We talked with the housing office, and they're actually in the same house I used to be in.

So it's sort of a win-win. All I had to move out was my personal stuff, and I didn't have to worry about clearing housing and dealing with the inspection.

Sabby and Hollywood get to start off with some basic furniture, and the move-in was super easy and casual. "

"That's good." Linda plucked a wing. "So you're happily settled into your new place?"

"Yeah, it's actually really, really good." Jess grinned. "I've got an apartment right next to my gym. The gym owner's my landlord, if you can believe that."

"Sounds like you're in heaven," Linda said, glad for her. "And he's not charging you an arm and a leg?"

"Nope, in fact he's cutting me a deal," Jess said. "Basically, I keep an eye on the property when I'm around and off duty, and he doesn't charge me for gym membership. I'm literally making money living off post. So I guess I still am a bit of a tightwad."

"There's a difference between being a tightwad and being a smart negotiator, at least my business degree says so," Linda said. "So what's up? Why'd you want to grab lunch, anyway?"

"Well, I wanted to ask you something... off the books," Jess said. "About Hollywood."

Linda leaned in, intrigued. The two women couldn't be more different physically, despite being the same rank and in the same platoon.

But they'd always been at least professionally friendly with each other, bonding over the fact they were the only two female non-commissioned officers in the entire battalion.

In a lot of ways, Jess was the closest thing Linda had to a 'girl friend' on Fort Pickett.

But one of the reasons that they'd maintained their friendly professionalism was because they were, always and forever, professional. Both being team leaders, they might offer advice to each other, but also stayed out of each other's business as much as possible.

Business was business, and personal life was personal life. They rarely mixed in the relationship between Linda Castellanos and Jessica Adams.

However, Logan Goodman was someone they both had to deal with, and transcended the line between business and personal between them.

"What would you like to know, Jess?" Linda asked. "How he's doing? If I've been busting his chops too much?"

Jess laughed, leaning back in her booth seat. "Trust me, after dealing with me for a few months, Hollywood knows not to complain about his team leader ever again. Actually, last time he did say something about you. He said you were pretty cool. So take that for what you will."

Actually, Linda did. She knew that her style was different from Jess, who was hard charging. She was much more of a disciplinarian, more by the book while Jess was rough and tumble. But they both got the job done, and Linda was secretly pleased by Goodman's praise.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. And Sabby's happy, so you're obviously giving him enough time at home to handle the... icky stuff." Jess made Linda laugh.

She was foul mouthed, could go toe to toe with anyone, and was maybe the toughest soldier in the platoon.

But anything to do with real-life penises in a sexual realm left Jess Adams feeling queasy and talking like a pearl-clutching old lady.

Dicks became 'equipment,' and sex became 'icky stuff.'

' Linda had always been comfortable with Jess's sexuality, and had no problem exposing herself to Jess when there was a company-wide drug test and she, Jess, and

Lieutenant Starr had to observe each other pissing into the plastic cups.

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It was still worth a good laugh though to watch Jess transform from a badass into a baby.

Of course, the fact she was talking about her brother in law having sex with her sister didn't help.

"I'm glad your sister is still... satisfied," Linda said with a chuckle. "It's a good feeling."

"More on that later," Jess said. "I want all the damn tea spilled on your relationship with Superstar for my own personal curiosity.

But Hollywood... I gotta ask, he's doing okay, professionally?

I just... look, Linda. I feel like he's my baby too still.

I started the man off, his very first team leader, and he got transferred away from me with the job only half done.

And since he's family, I just worry about him even when I'm not supposed to. "

"Well don't," Linda reassured Jess. "Goodman's a good soldier.

He's still right on track to pin on Specialist soon.

Although last time he and I talked, he's going to hold off on going to the Basic Leaders Course until later, so it'll definitely be Specialist and not Corporal.

He wants to spend as much time with the squad, learn as much as he can...

I think he wants to just have some solid time with the unit before he goes to school. "

Jess nodded, sighing. "Yeah, makes sense.

I mean, it's a good idea for him and Sabby.

I'm not going to lie to you Linda, I don't like the idea of my sister or Hollywood leaving.

Not when I'm just rebuilding a family again.

And you know how the S-1 offices are. They say they're going to send him back to the unit?—"

"—Right up until they don't," Linda finished for her, and Jess nodded.

Army personnel was infamous for last-minute changes that disrupted people's lives. A reality they all lived with.

"You know it'll have to happen eventually. I mean, you're not too long for the unit yourself, you've been with the company for over two years now."

"I know, I know," Jess grumbled. "And it'll suck. On the bright side, the dating possibilities will hopefully drastically improve."

"Ah, to be the only muscle mommy in fifty miles." Linda clucked her tongue and shaking her head in mock sadness. She was on comfortable ground with Jess here, and felt like she was safe. "You must hate life."

"Definitely a lot more than you. You're the one who's found someone," Jess pointed out. "And yes, while I love my gym here in Blackstone, I really, really could use an upgrade in my dating options."

Their pizza arrived, and Linda pulled off a slice of the huge, sixteen inch wide pizza, folding it in half.

"I guess I have found someone, haven't I?" she mused. "I just have to get through the next few days."

"What do you mean?" Jess asked. "You guys meet up every weekend, right?"

"Yeah, but we also try to talk at night, and he's reporting to minicamp," Linda admitted.

"I mean, we already have plans for this weekend, but while he says he'll be home every night so we might be able to talk, I expect he'll be so tired that we'll be out of touch for a few days. You know how much that sucks?"

"Actually... gotta admit, no," Jess said with a laugh. "Look, I lived with my sister. And I love that crazy little goth pixie to death, but sometimes I actually liked getting on the damn plane for a mission. Because I was about to love that girl to literal death. Ah well, she's Logan's problem now."

"You know, we notice it," Linda said, and Jess tilted her head. "How you and Hollywood talk about each other. When you're talking about the soldier, he's Hollywood. When you're talking about his relationship with your sister or your family situation, he's Logan."

"Huh... guess you're right," Jess said. "And what does he say?"

"I've never heard him speak about you or to you as anything other than Sergeant Adams," Linda said with a grin. "No nickname, sure as hell never calling you Jess. It's sort of admirable, the way you two make it work."

"Guess we do, we've never talked about it," Jess said. "But enough on him, tell me more about you and Brutus. It's been what—two months now? Things getting serious?"

"I don't know if I should say..." Linda swirled her straw in her drink, surprising herself with how much she actually wanted to confide in someone.

"Oh come on," Jess urged. "Give me something. Is he as gentle as he seems in those interviews? Or is there a beast underneath all that politeness?"

Linda felt her cheeks warming as memories from their weekend flooded back—his strong hands gripping her hips, the way his voice deepened when he wanted her.

"Let's just say there are definitely two sides to Brutus Townsend, and I'm lucky enough to see both."

Before Jess could press for more details, both of their cell phones rang simultaneously. Looking down, Linda saw the caller, C Co Office.

"Damn," Linda growled, answering. "Castellanos."

"Sergeant, it's Crews. CO's initiated recall, everyone needs to get to the company area ASAP."

"Understood. Sergeant Adams and I are off post getting a pizza. Give us fifteen minutes?"

"Understood. Time limit's thirteen hundred hours."

The line went dead, and Linda looked at Jess, who lowered her phone. "I got Nate Nichols on my call," she said. "Looks like something's going down."

That was an understatement. If a recall happened during the middle of lunch, it meant more than something going down.

It meant something major was going down.

And while Crews said that they had to be back by thirteen hundred, the official end of lunch, that wasn't a good thing.

As NCOs, both Linda and Jess had to be there as quickly as possible so as to get their fire teams spun up and ready for orders to come down from higher up.

It was the classic 'hurry up and wait' that the Army was notorious for, but when shit happened, it worked.

"Grab the pizza." Jess stood up. "I'll drive."

They hurried out to Jess's truck, Linda holding the quickly boxed leftovers in one arm as she texted with her other hand. She had to tell Brutus something. Plans for this weekend might need to be delayed. Work.

She didn't expect to get a reply, but as they pulled through the gate, she got one anyway.

I understand. Please tell me when you can, and be safe. I need you.

"You okay?" Jess asked her.

Linda nodded, putting her phone away. Her vision blurred slightly as the words echoed in her mind, I need you.

No one had ever said those words to her before, not like that.

Not with the weight and meaning Brutus had put behind them.

Even her family had always seen her as the strong, independent one who didn't need anyone.

But Brutus... he wasn't afraid to admit he needed her.

"Just dusty ass fucking roads," she managed to say, her voice slightly thick.

"Yeah... dusty ass roads," Jess agreed, giving Linda the space she needed as they rushed back to base, toward whatever crisis awaited them.

brUTUS

The big film room at the Bluecat practice complex was as familiar to Brutus as his own living room.

In fact, for roughly six months out of the year, he spent more time in one of the fold-down movie theater type seats than he did his own living room.

He even had 'his' seat, the leftmost seat on the second row.

From there, he'd dissected hundreds of offenses, and broke down blocking schemes and quarterbacks.

He'd watch and rewatch films on these men, learning the way they moved, the way they positioned their bodies, the way they fought on the football field.

By the end of each week, he felt he knew the men better than their own wives and children.

But as the film rolled by on the screen that morning, replaying clips from last year, he was distracted and he knew it. If Coach Pugh had called on him to even say what game of the year the film was from, he couldn't have told him.

He was distracted because of Linda. He'd gotten three texts from her the day before, two at around lunch time saying she had a mission and replying to his text, and a final one at around eight o'clock saying she was going to be out of touch for a few days, and might need to e-mail instead of text.

That was it.

No location where she was going, no mission, no information about how long she might be gone.

Just three texts. There was no update this morning, and now as he sat watching clips go by on the screen in front of him, he didn't know what to think. His thumb hovered over his phone, checking for notifications every few minutes, even though he knew there wouldn't be any.

"Brutus... hey, Brutus!" Coach Pugh called, jerking Brutus back into the moment. There was a point to all of this film right now, and Brutus had been called into the film room for a specific purpose. "You with us?"

"Yeah Coach." Brutus focused on the film.

It was last year's game against Chicago, one of his better performances despite having zero sacks. The defense had hemmed in Chicago's dual threat quarterback, and Grapefruit had returned a fumble all the way to the Chicago two yard line.

Even the Bluecat offense couldn't be stopped with that much of a gimmie.

"Good, because I've heard from the coaching staff and the bean counters upstairs," Coach Pugh said.

"Now, Coach Huffman says that we need to hold off on drafting anything on the defensive side until at least the third round.

He says that we're strong enough on defense, and we need to use every dollar we can under the cap to improve our offense. What do you say?"

Brutus considered what he knew of the upcoming draft, and the players currently available in free agency.

"We could use more strength in the middle," Brutus said. "Coach, what's the name of that kid out of Colorado, Richert or something?"

"Riker," Coach Huffman, who was the Bluecat defensive coordinator, said. "You think he'd help?"

"He's exactly what our defense needs," Brutus said. "Jerome's solid, but quarterbacks know they can take their time in the pocket against him. Riker would change that completely."

"The guy's only six-two," Huffman, who was a former defensive lineman himself, said. "Not going to be blocking many passes from someone like Horne."

"Having a strong presence in the middle changes everything," Brutus explained. "It makes every position on our defense more effective. Quarterbacks get nervous, receivers run sloppy routes, and our outside guys face fewer double teams."

"We'll see," Coach Pugh said. "Next up, I talked with John Mathers this morning. He wants a trade."

"What?" Brutus growled, sitting up.

He wasn't best of friends with John Mathers, the man was a flashy blowhard in the third year of his rookie contract. But he was a good cornerback, who was able to play both slot receivers and tight ends well.

"Why?"

"He thinks he's worth ten million a year, and wants to ink a long term deal ASAP," Coach Pugh said. "When I told him no nickel in the league was getting ten million a year, he said he wanted to be traded."

"Damn," Brutus grumbled, cracking his knuckles together.

Mathers was a blowhard, but he wasn't usually this stupid. Something must have been up with him to make him try to jump and bite on a long term contract now.

"Let me go talk to him, Coach. He's still on his rookie contract, right?"

"Yeah. We could franchise him after next season if we want to, but?—"

"If I can't talk some sense into him, I'd rather get what we can in a trade for him," Brutus said. "This team's about loyalty. We need guys who want to be here, who understand what we're building."

"He's right, Coach," Grapefruit, who was there to represent the defensive backs, said. "The way the rules are now, we need pressure up front. Our secondary can only cover for so long before flags start flying."

"Don't I know it," Huffman grumbled. "Point taken. I don't know what we can find in the later rounds, but maybe Riker'll still be there."

The meeting continued, and as Brutus walked out he was glad that he and Grapefruit were the only defensive players in the room. Coach Pugh used these meetings to allow the captains to say what they needed to say bluntly, without any worries about players taking it personally.

Not that Brutus cared. He was there to be a professional, and if people were still butt-hurt about being criticized when they were getting paid a million dollars a year, then

pro football wasn't for them.

The day continued, Brutus getting in a workout with the rest of the linemen and linebackers, going through what the strength and conditioning staff called 'flow training' to see how their joints were doing.

It reminded him of some of the yoga poses Linda had sent him pictures of to flirt with him, and he quickly put his mind somewhere else before he became erect in his shorts.

The image of her perfect form, stretching gracefully in warrior pose, stayed with him though, along with the worry about where she might be right now.

"Try to open that hip, Dequan," the instructor, a former MMA champ, said.

It was an upgrade over who the team had hired before. The sessions had previously been led by a hundred and ten pound woman who could twist herself into pretzels regularly. She'd been hypocritically tough, and some of the bigger guys hadn't taken her snide comments about their big bellies well.

But the new instructor had a dad bod himself, and as the guys moved through the various poses, Brutus moved easily. During a stretching break, he checked his phone again. Nothing from Linda. The knot of worry in his stomach tightened.

After drills were over, he had an appointment with the team trainers and doctors. Hopping up on the table, he gave Paula Steinman, the Bluecats head athletic trainer, a grin.

"Washed my feet and everything today Paula."

"Then I can skip the heavy duty gloves for something a bit lighter." Paula sat down

on a stool at the end of the evaluation table. "How's it feeling?"

"Same as it's felt the past six years," Brutus said. "I run through all the exercises, take the glucosamine, the fish oil, and all that other stuff you tell me to try. Say, have you heard about stem cell therapy?"

"Of course," Paula said. "You think you want to give it a go?"

"Hey, if it helps rebuild these ankles and the league doesn't say boo, I'm tempted," Brutus said. "Think you can point me in the right direction?"

"Sure," Paula said. "Although it might require a quick flight down to South America or Europe, so we can't sit around on it. In the meantime let's go through the eval, see how you're doing."

Brutus went through the same evaluation of his foot and ankle mobility he'd done dozens of times before, and at the end Paula said the tests were good.

But inside, Brutus knew the truth. His ankle felt like it was on fire, and the whole thing was being held together by determination and athletic tape.

Still, Paula cleared him for non-contact drills that afternoon, and as he stretched out with the rest of the team, he knew he'd do his best. The whole session went well, Coach Huffman hadn't changed anything in the defensive scheme yet, and as he walked off the field he felt like the day had gone well.

"Brutus!"

Brutus stopped, turning to see JT Smith, the Bluecats new linebackers coach, approaching. They'd been rivals for the first few years of Brutus's career, the old lion and the hot young upstart fighting to see who was going to be the most feared

linebacker in pro football.

Now, JT was retired and in coaching, while Brutus was... about the same age JT was when he'd been a rookie. "Coach."

"Coach Pugh blew the whistle five minutes ago Brutus, you can cut the Coach shit with me," JT said, smirking. "Wanted to see how you feel."

"It was just a light day in minicamp, you know how it is," Brutus said. "Half these guys I was happy to see after six weeks... and the other half I could have gone a few more months without seeing."

JT laughed, his dark skin glistening in the afternoon sun. "Yeah, I know what you mean. Hey, after you shower and get dressed, you want to get a beer? Catch up a little?"

"Sure," Brutus said before heading for the locker room.

A half hour later, he and JT were seated at one of the more popular bars for Bluecats players, owned by a former team security guard who'd decided that it was more fun to watch the games on a big screen than trying to deal with the fans in the stands.

They each had a longneck in front of them, and JT was laughing over an anecdote he was telling about his life just after retiring from the field.

"So there I was, standing in the back of the studio, and this girl comes up to apply makeup on the top of my head because apparently my skull was catching the lights and making a glare," JT said, rubbing his hand over his mostly shaved, partially naturally bald head.

"It was right then and there that I decided I needed to get out of the broadcast game. "

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"So you went into coaching." Brutus chuckled. "Why? Why not just walk away and enjoy life? You made plenty of money in your career."

"Football man... it gets in your blood," JT said.

"I mean, even today, watching you and the other guys go through those drills, there was a part of me that wanted to be out there too, cleats on my feet and four pounds of plastic and steel on my head.

But I also know the truth. I even touch a helmet and Keisha would have words for me. "

Brutus laughed softly. "When I heard you got married, I gotta admit I was surprised."

"Me too," JT admitted. "But it's good man, real good.

Keisha knows the life, and she's been able to take care of the kids when I'm not there.

They're the best part. My son's six now, and it feels good being able to play with him and not just lie on the couch unable to even change a diaper because I'm too beat up from Sunday. "

"Or worse... Monday night." Brutus groaned. "I really, really hate short weeks."

"True. Remember that year we played you on a Monday night?" JT asked, and Brutus nodded. "Turned around and then had an early Sunday game against Dallas, man. And that was when they were in one of their good years. That was a rough six days."

"You're going to have more of them this year," Brutus pointed out. "Rookie coach and all."

"Oh I know, Huffman and I have already talked," JT said. "I'm the linebackers coach, but let's face it, I'm a glorified intern right now. So here's what I'll ask you. You work with me. You're the defensive team captain, you're a leader, and you're damn near smart enough to do my job for me."

"But what's the fun in that?" Brutus asked wryly. "Besides, you'll be the one with the eyes I don't have."

"Which is why we work together," JT said. "Huffman'll be up in the box, you know that. So we put his plan in place, get the Bluecats to the playoffs again. Damn... feels weird saying that. Spent too many years wanting to see you guys anywhere but in the playoffs."

Brutus laughed. "Yeah, bet it does."

JT sipped his beer, and checked his watch. "Okay, just a few more minutes. Hey, gotta ask you... I heard something about you seeing someone?"

Brutus sighed, shaking his head. "Fucking football players, man. We're worse than TMZ when it comes to gossip and who's seeing who."

"Helps, so you know who you can and can't be fucking with, at least as a single man," JT pointed out. "So who is she?"

"Linda Castellanos," Brutus said. "She's a soldier, I met her during that week I was working with the Army."

"Army girl, huh?" JT asked, and Brutus nodded. "How is it?"

"She's great... but I gotta admit, I was distracted today in the film room," Brutus said, his voice softening. "She's in a unit that gets last minute missions, hush-hush kind of shit, and she texted me yesterday that she was going out of communication for a while."

"Ah," JT replied, humming. "And you don't know anything?"

"Just that she's out of communication," Brutus admitted, the worry evident in his voice. "No idea where she is, what she's doing, or when she'll be back. It's the first time I've felt this way about someone, and not knowing if she's okay... it's messing with my head in ways I wasn't prepared for."

Suddenly, JT laughed.

Brutus turned to him, perplexed. "What?"

"Just thinking how much the cleat's on the other foot now," JT said.

"You know, before Keisha and I got married, how many times I had to listen to her worries about me?"

And I get it. Think about it, Brutus. Football wives, how many times do they have to sit there and watch their men put themselves through car crashes multiple times a week?

How many times do they watch their men on the turf in pain, wondering if this is the time the body won't get them up again? "

Brutus hummed, and sipped his beer. "More than a few." He sighed, and took another sip of beer. "Guess I should ask Keisha then."

"Ask Keisha what?"

"Is the worry worth it? I told Linda I could handle it. But just between you and me right now, I'm glad I've got camp to keep my mind off of what she might be going through. When I'm alone, all I can do is imagine her in danger, and it's... it's terrifying."

JT nodded, and drained the rest of his beer.

"Well, at least in Keisha's case it must have been worth the worry.

But if you're even asking me, that means you're seriously thinking about it.

My point of view is this. You might love football, but football don't love you, man.

You can't lay in bed at night and hold a helmet, and when you're old as fuck and feel like getting off the couch to go the bathroom or grab a beer is like the labors of Hercules or something, football ain't going to be there for you.

Keisha will for me. Just think about it, and we can talk tomorrow after the linebackers meeting. "

"Cool." Brutus finished the rest of his beer, his mind drifting back to Linda. Wherever she was, he hoped she was safe. "Think I'll stop at one. See you in the morning, JT. Hell, I have to see my therapist tomorrow morning before practice anyway, and I do not want to do that with a hangover."

"How is that going, anyway?" JT asked. "Helping?"

"So far, yeah," Brutus said. "I mean, I don't know how it's going to go with tapping into that caveman rage side of me until we strap up and start hitting people. But I can

look in the mirror and feel a lot better about the guy looking back at me than I used to."

"It's a good start then." JT reached into his wallet and pulling out a bill for the bartender. "And thanks for telling me about that. And about Linda."

As they walked out, Brutus found himself checking his phone one more time.

Still nothing. The fear and worry remained, but alongside it was something new, a deeper understanding of what it meant to care for someone whose job put them in harm's way.

Linda was worth the worry, he realized. Whatever she was facing, he'd be here waiting when she returned.

LINDA

The tropical weather hit Linda in the face like a wet towel as she and the rest of the platoon made their way through the heavily wooded terrain.

Orkin might have liked those sorts of rapid weather changes, but for her, it played hell with her sinuses.

The oppressive heat reminded her of how far she was from home, from Brutus, and it unsettled her in a way missions never had before.

Next to her was Agent Foster of the DEA, the platoon's partner in this operation.

He was short and compact, and a man totally not built for the tropics.

His pale skin was slathered in sunscreen to the point that his skin glistened with an oily, almost alien shine.

But at the same time, the man's forearms and face were a nasty shade of sunburned pink.

The whole company had been flown down under the cover of darkness for this one.

While Charlie had technically been on yellow status, they were called in when the mission required more troops than usual.

This wasn't the first time a yellow category company had been called when the

situation demanded it.

Linda's team was assigned to the assault element, the most dangerous position.

In the past, she would have welcomed the challenge without hesitation.

Now, she found herself occasionally distracted by thoughts of Virginia, of Brutus waiting for her return.

The realization that she had someone to go home to felt foreign and slightly unnerving.

Never before had her focus been divided between mission and personal life.

"Okay, pause here," Agent Foster said, holding up a fist.

The squad would have stopped with just the plain fist, they were well trained in nonverbal communications. But Foster was an outsider, unfamiliar with them. Dressed in plain olive green fatigues, his body armor was identical to theirs except for the giant DEA emblazoned on the back.

"Waiting on verification."

"Verification of what?" Dawkins whispered, shaking out his right hand before returning it to his rifle. They were all carrying heavier-than-usual weapons today, the extra ammunition adding weight but providing the firepower they might need if things went sideways.

"Gallegos is verifying with our source that Ramirez is in the compound," Foster said.

"So we wait."

Dawkins sighed, and leaned against the tree he was crouched next to.

In the thick near-jungle like foliage, he was well covered, and while Linda would prefer him on his belly in a potentially hostile situation like this, she knew that if he was any lower, he wouldn't be able to see anything in the distance.

"You know," he whispered, "if we're going to keep doing these drug missions in CA and the Caribbean, I really need to learn more Spanish."

"What do you know?" Foster asked.

Dawkins smirked.

"A donde esta la playa? Yo quiero una cerveza," Dawkins admitted. "Useful in Veracruz."

"We need to have everyone learn foreign languages," Linda pointed out quietly, remembering Hollywood's comment after their last mission on the same subject.

Taking out the bite nozzle on her Camelbak water supply, she took the opportunity to have a small sip. Dehydration crept up on you in this kind of weather, and she insisted on everyone on her team taking frequent small sips from their three liter reservoirs.

"Yeah well, you already know Spanish," Dawkins pointed out. "What else do you want?"

"Italian would be nice," Linda said. "But yeah... Spanish is useful."

Dawkins snorted quietly. "Think I'll start on Mandarin maybe, just in case we need that. We fuck around in that part of the world enough."

"Shhhh." Foster held a finger to his ear. "Okay, we're a go. Let's move, west wall."

The plan was simple, like most good military plans. The compound was owned by one of the largest drug cartels in the region, a notoriously violent group that routinely killed local politicians, law enforcement, and even military if they weren't willing to take the cartel's payoffs.

Which is why they couldn't be trusted. And part of the reason for bringing in so much force. Going with a purely American op, there was no official involvement of the local government at all beyond giving the C-130 Charlie Company had taken from Virginia landing directions.

So while very few beyond the country's President knew of the operation... she was still nervous about betrayal, and was glad the DEA was checking their boxes.

The compound itself was backed against a brackish inlet in the wide river that led directly to the ocean.

It was too narrow and shallow for anything more than a single pleasure cruiser motorboat, and protected on the other side by steep cliffs that made an assault from that direction impossible.

The other three sides were thickly walled, but as Linda and the rest of the squad moved in bounding cover towards the wall, her mind was focused on the task at hand, and yet, strangely aware of what she now had to lose.

As she prepared to scale the wall, Linda felt time slow around her. In previous missions, this moment of suspended danger would have brought nothing but focus. Now, unbidden, Brutus's face flashed in her mind. What if this was the mission where her luck ran out? What if she never saw him again?

She pushed the thought away as quickly as it came. She couldn't afford distraction, not when lives depended on her.

With practiced efficiency, she took a boost from Derrick Jackson, swinging herself up and over the wall.

As she balanced at the top, providing cover for Takeshi who followed using Hollywood as his boost, Linda felt that familiar rush of adrenaline, but it was different now, knowing someone was waiting for her return made each risky move feel weightier, more consequential.

For a dangerous few seconds she would be exposed, and she knew that until the rest of the squad was up and over she could be massively outgunned.

But before any guards could respond to her and Takeshi on the wall, Second Squad did what they did best, drawing all attention away with a dramatic entrance.

An explosion ripped through the main gate of the compound as Second Squad unleashed their firepower against the wall.

"Go!" Orkin called from the ground, and Linda dropped down, taking a quick kneeling position behind a birdbath while Takeshi took cover on the ground.

The first guard to respond came around the side of the pool house, his weapon raised and ready to fire even as he appeared. Linda took him with a quick burst of fire in the chest, dropping him hard to the stone deck.

It wasn't the first blood she'd spilled in her job. But each life she took carried a weight.

As soon as everyone was over the wall, the squad swept the west side of the

compound, going by the numbers. Alpha and Bravo teams leapfrogged one another, going room by room through the enormous near-castle that was the home to the cartel's second in command and head of shipping operations.

Linda knew that from this compound, fifty or more tons of cocaine alone would be processed and shipped north per year, through Mexico and then into the United States. The street value was more than she could juggle in her head.

"Cover!" Hollywood, who was her 'battle buddy' on this op, called, kicking in the door. Linda immediately tossed a flash-bang grenade, waiting for it to go off before she and Hollywood cleared the room, putting down a staggering man who was carrying a pistol in his right hand. "Clear!"

"Clear!" Linda replied, sweeping the room. Her pulse was racing in her ears, and even through the hearing protection she wore she could hear the gunfire that rattled through the entire compound.

Getting to the end of the hallway, Linda and the rest of Alpha Team went up the stairs while Atkins and Bravo Team provided cover.

Linda and Orkin led the way, and as they got to the landing a man burst out, spraying the stairwell with gunfire, screaming in Spanish so tinged with rage that even she couldn't understand the exact curse he was using.

It felt like she'd been kicked in the chest, and the pain was immediate.

It'd happened before, so she knew she'd taken at least one round, but this time was different.

As the impact knocked her back a step, her mind wasn't consumed with completing the objective or returning fire, her first thought was of Brutus.

Of never seeing him again. Of leaving things unfinished between them.

For the first time in her career, Linda found herself not just concerned about completing the mission, but about making it home.

She and Orkin immediately returned fire, putting the gunman down. Not even breaking stride, Linda took her cover position, peering down the second floor hallway, pushing through the pain radiating from her chest.

"Move!"

It was another twenty minutes before everything was swept, and Linda and the rest of Second Squad joined up with the rest of the platoon in front of the compound.

"Alpha Team accounted for," Linda told Orkin, who relayed to Lieutenant Parker that First Squad was all present and accounted for. "What now?"

"We burn the entire compound to the ground," Agent Foster said. "We're leaving nothing for the cartel to reclaim."

Foster was in a foul mood, and Linda could understand why. She'd heard the whispers, and knew that the cartel underboss they'd been sent to kill or capture had gotten away. Apparently someone had talked, and while there'd been soldiers... the boss himself had been nowhere to be found.

"Feels like a damn shame to burn this place," Hollywood said as he and Linda dumped gasoline from the fuel depot in the first floor library.

When she looked over, he indicated the furnishings around them. "You have to admit it's a nice house."

"I'm sure you can take your second honeymoon here sometime," Linda commented wryly, grimacing slightly as the pain started to set into her chest. She was going to be sporting a bruise, that was for sure.

Hollywood noticed. "You okay?"

"I've been hit harder in martial arts practice," she lied through her teeth, chuckling. "I'll be okay, just don't ask me to do a pushup test for a week or so."

"Yeah well, I won't be so okay when Sergeant Adams learns my battle buddy got shot," Hollywood griped. "And I promised her we'd get in a lift together when we got back. You got shot, but I'm the one who's going to die."

A moment of silence passed between them before Hollywood asked quietly, "How's Brutus going to take it when he finds out you got shot?"

Linda paused, surprised by the question. "I... I don't know. I've never had to tell someone who cares about me that I got hurt on the job before."

"First time for everything," Hollywood said with unexpected gentleness. "Jess was a wreck the first time I came home with a bullet graze. Now she just asks if I kept pressure on it properly." He gave her a sideways glance. "It changes things, you know. Having someone waiting."

"Yeah," Linda admitted. "I noticed that today. When I took that hit upstairs... my first thought wasn't about the mission. It was about him." She shook her head. "Never happened before."

"Welcome to the club," Hollywood said with a small smile.

Linda laughed, knowing just how much Jess Adams cared for her brother-in-law, and

how accurate Hollywood was about her reaction.

"I'll tell her on the plane that it was me and Orkin who took the stairs," Linda assured him. "Besides, if she gives you any shit, ask her to tell you the story about how Sergeant Lentz got that star-shaped scar on his left buttcheek."

"Who?"

"Her former squad leader," Linda said with a grin. "Don't tell her I said who to ask about."

They finished their preparations, and as they formed up to evacuate, smoke began to rise from the compound as fire ripped through the guts.

"Good work today Third Platoon," Lieutenant Parker said as they climbed onto the trucks that would evac them back to the airfield. "Let's go home."

Those two words—"go home"—resonated differently in Linda's mind now. Home wasn't just a place anymore. It was a person.

"For now," Takeshi Satomura said under his breath as he took his seat.

Next to him, Dawkins looked over. "What do you mean?"

"The cartels... they're like the yakuza back home," Takeshi said.

"Yes, they are illegal. Yes, they are criminals.

They do bad things to many, many good people.

But they still exist. We took out a building today, and many soldiers.

But the bosses are still out there. Which means we'll be back in six months, or next year. "

"But—"

"He's right, Dawks," Linda said sadly, pressing a hand gently to her bruised chest. "The problem is, the local government is seen as either inept, or just as evil as the cartels. So until the locals are ready to pick the government and the law over the cartels... they'll just reform and come back."

She leaned back in her seat, allowing herself to think of Brutus, of getting back to him. For the first time, the prospect of future missions came with a new kind of tension, not fear, exactly, but awareness of what she now had to lose. What she had to live for.

"You asked about foreign language learning earlier, right?" she continued to Dawkins. "The entire fire team might as well start working on your Spanish. You're going to need it."

As the truck bounced along the rough road, Linda gazed out at the tropical landscape blurring past. She'd return to this hellhole if duty called, but for now, she was going home. To Brutus. To something she'd never had before—a future beyond the next mission.

brUTUS

“So you’re feeling better?” Dr. Caster asked, sitting back in his chair.

“I do,” Brutus said gratefully. “Minicamp went well, even if I was distracted. Our new linebackers coach is a former rival, but a friendly one. So we’re able to be chill in our roles since we were friendly but not buddies.”

“Establishing power structures is a key element for many relationships in a sport like football,” Caster acknowledged. “But I suspect that you’re not feeling better because of minicamp.”

“No, and I might need to cut this session short,” Brutus replied. “Linda’s coming home today. She was able to tell me that much, which I’m grateful for.”

“That’s not always a given in the military. If it was, there wouldn’t be all those surprise reunion videos on YouTube.”

Brutus nodded, laughing softly. “True. I guess what they do isn’t available for public oversight, but they’re able to tell us when they’re coming home.”

“You’re not officially a dependent however,” Caster pointed out. “How’d you hear?”

“A text message from the wife of one of the soldiers. Apparently someone gave her my phone number, and she reached out to me. Normally I’d be pissed about my personal number being handed out like that to someone I don’t know. In this case, not so much.”

“I see. How did you feel while Linda was gone?”

Brutus shifted in his seat, uncomfortable. “Scared. I’ve always been the one taking the risks, not the one sitting on the sidelines. I told JT the same thing, sort of. Said the shoe’s on the other foot this time.”

“JT sounds like a smart man,” Caster said. “Should I be jealous you’re seeing another therapist?”

“Hardly, he’s the new linebackers coach.”

Caster chuckled softly. “I see. Well, coaches and bartenders can often act as therapists in some ways.”

“Don’t worry Doc, I plan on still talking to you until I’m certain of this... change in me.”

“I’d like to talk about that change if you’ve got the time,” Caster said. “I’m curious.”

Brutus checked the clock on the wall, and nodded. “Yeah, for a few minutes at least. But then I’ve got to get on the road. I don’t want to be late for Linda’s return.”

* * *

Standing in the parking area outside the barracks, Brutus felt no embarrassment at all as he saw a couple of other people waiting for the return of Charlie Company.

He practically bounced on his toes as he waited in his Bluecats warmup jacket and jeans, waiting for the ‘bus,’ the series of vans that would bring the members of Charlie Company back to the company area from the nearby airfield.

“Your first time, huh?” an amused voice asked behind him.

Brutus turned to see a dramatic sight, a rather short woman in a tight black dress and fishnet stockings, combat boots, bright purple highlights streaking through her hair.

“Relax, big man. You’re going to have cramps in those calves by the time they get back.”

“Huh?” he asked, looking down at his feet. “Oh. Yeah, it’s my first time.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve been deflowered twice with this.” The woman chuckled. “Sabby Goodman.”

“Ah.” Brutus got the reference. “You’re the one who texted me. Hollywood’s wife.”

“And Muscle Mommy’s sister,” Sabby added, offering a hand. “And you’re Brutus Townsend.”

“Yeah... say, you’re the artist who’s doing all the logos, right?” Brutus asked.

Sabby nodded.

“I’m impressed.”

“I’ve still got Alpha Company to do, they just changed commanders and their new commander wanted me to make some adjustments.” Sabby shrugged. “But thanks.”

“You look very relaxed about this,” Brutus noted. “Why?”

Sabby tapped her elfin chin, pretending she was thinking before grinning and answering.

“Because my sister is the biggest badass in the Army. She’s the bitch Rambo checks under his bed for at night before he goes to sleep.

And since Jess trained Logan, that means my husband is a total badass too.

And following that chain, since my husband’s a badass, and my sister was on the mission...

Linda’s safer than if she was sitting in an office all day. ”

“That obvious, huh?”

“Like I said dude, it’s easy to see you’re losing your deployment cherry today,” Sabby said. “Oh wait, I see them now!”

Brutus’s head whipped around as he saw five plain white vans come down the street, turning into the parking lot and pulling around. Brutus was about to rush the van when he felt a tug on his belt, and realized Sabby was pulling him back.

“What-”

“They’re still carrying their weapons,” Sabby said as the doors opened. “Major Kirk’s very clear, they get the guns checked in, then we can help them with their bags if they want it.”

Brutus nodded, and waited. Just seeing Linda get out of the second van helped with his emotions, and when she came out again to get her bag he was there to sweep her into his arms, spinning her around as he embraced her. “You’re safe.”

Linda grunted in pain, and Brutus put her down. “What happened?”

“I... here.” She tugged her undershirt up. Brutus’s eyes widened as he saw the large purplish bruise forming, coming out of the cup of her bra over her left breast. “I’m okay, just a little tender. Let me dump my gear and we’ll talk afterwards.”

“Take your time.” Major Kirk came out of the company offices. “I’m giving the entire company a forty eight hour pass starting now. Headquarters element will take care of barracks NCO detail. Just stay within recall distance, and I’ll see you all on Monday.”

“That’s great sir.” Brutus gave Linda’s hands a squeeze. “What do you say I make a few calls, and get you a place with a tub and room service? Get out of the barracks for a few days?”

“Hey Superstar, can I get some of that action too?” Derrick Jackson, who was carrying his gear, called over. “Man I could use some good grub!”

“Tell you what.” Brutus looked to Major Kirk. “Doesn’t that barbecue place in town deliver on base?”

Major Kirk nodded. “It does.”

“Then dinner for the company’s on me,” Brutus said. “Just get me the numbers Major, and I’ll call it in myself.”

“Oh sure, just buy your friends with barbecue,” Sabby teased as she came by, one arm around Hollywood while she carried her sister’s bag. “What about bowling? Everyone loves bowling, you know! And karaoke!”

“I think Hollywood’s the only eight pound balls you get to play with tonight,” Linda teased the diminutive goth, getting more laughs.

Linda went and got her things while Brutus made the arrangements. As he did he watched Linda move, worry creeping in as he saw the pain she was in. She was limping on her left leg, and regardless of her saying anything about being fine, she wouldn't carry anything in her left arm at all.

It took hours, but in one way that was good in that there was plenty of time for Brutus, with Sabby's help, to set up a buffet line for all of the Charlie Company soldiers.

He'd bought everything the barbecue place had or could put together in an hour, and he was happy to see soldiers with sauce smeared on their faces or chewing on a large Rice Krispy treat, or putting together a pulled pork sandwich while he waited.

Cleanup was even easy, as there were literally no leftovers.

Linda didn't eat anything though, and as he watched her do her job, he grew increasingly worried. Eventually though the company was released, and she came out of the barracks, changed into a large sweatshirt and some casual pants. He was glad, because this was about her.

It was dark by the time they got to the resort, a 'log cabin' place just outside of town that Hollywood had told him about when Linda was inside the company offices making sure the rest of the fire team was getting their gear hung up properly to dry.

Their cabin was quiet, with dinner waiting for them as Brutus ran a hot bath for Linda.

"So what can you tell me?" he asked as he measured out the bath oils. "About how you got that?"

"Just a little bit." Linda came in wearing a bathrobe. She was so beautiful, and while

his body surged with desire upon seeing her shrug off the robe, the huge dark splotch above her heart tempered his want as he took her hand. “We went down south, a drug interdiction mission.”

“That’s... that’s all you can say?” Brutus said.

Linda nodded.

He took a deep breath, trying to understand. Dr. Caster had warned him about this at the end of their session, about setting aside his need for comforting knowledge in the face of Linda’s job requirements.

“Is this one of those missions I might read about on the news?”

“Doubtful.” Linda took his hand and let him help her into the bath.

It was rustic, a ‘horse trough’ that had clearly been adjusted to become a bathtub.

But in that regard it was absolutely perfect for their current needs.

The deep corrugated aluminum container nearly came up to Linda’s chin though, which was just what Brutus wanted as she sank into the fragrant depths.

“It wasn’t as successful as the DEA wanted. The big bad guy got away.”

Brutus sighed again, and sat down on a stool next to the tub to keep talking with her. Picking up a washcloth, he lifted her right arm, slowly cleansing the skin.

“And how’d you get shot?”

“Guard with a nine mil pistol, we were taking a building just like you and I did the

week you were with us.” Linda squirmed slightly in the hot water as she adjusted. “It was just one of those things.”

“Just one of those things,” Brutus repeated, the cloth stopping as he felt a surge of anger inside him. “What else?”

“Not much else I can say,” Linda added, leaning back against the slightly sloped back insert of the tub. “Just that in the end, what Takeshi told Dawks is probably true. We got out with nothing but a bruise today. But we’ll be back, sooner or later. It’s pretty much inevitable.”

“What? Why?”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:08 am

“Because we can’t change the larger cultural and socio-economic factors in play, really,” Linda said.

“As long as drugs are so damn profitable, the cartels are going to be able to buy or intimidate the locals into silence if not outright support. I mean, the country we went to, Brutus, the average rural worker makes about three hundred dollars a month or less. You can buy your local chief of police for about two thousand bucks. Five thousand will get you your own police department for a couple of months. And that’s if you’re playing nice and not just intimidating them into helping you.

Meanwhile, the United States spends roughly a hundred and fifty billion dollars a year on illegal drugs.

That’s bigger than the economies of all but six Latin American countries.

That’s before you figure in sales to other countries, and the other little corruption businesses these cartels run on the side.

Those guys can literally buy a whole country, and there’s not much we can do about it. ”

Brutus got up, walking across the bathroom to try and calm down before thumping his fist against the log wall of the cabin.

“Then why? Why are you doing it, risking your life like you did if it’s just going to be... irrelevant?”

“You think it’s irrelevant what I did?” Linda asked, her voice tight. She sat up in the tub, lifting her knees to give her a more stable sitting position. “Why?”

“Because I know what your people were talking about. God Linda, I’ve lost count of the number of parties, or even locker rooms, I’ve been to where someone offered me some marching powder, or any other street name for drugs you might know.

And that’s not counting the number of guys who simply toked up.

That’s just a huge gray area, you know.”

“Oh, I know,” Linda said. “You think I didn’t grow up surrounded by that shit? I saw lives ruined by drugs, remember? Brutus, yesterday I ruined at least a ton of pure coke on this mission. That’s something. Something you should think about.”

“I-” Brutus growled before taking a deep breath.

He wanted to go back and sit down next to her again, but he could feel the anger inside him. He wasn’t going to be good company right now.

“You’re right. I’m going to do what my therapist keeps telling me to do, and take a walk. I need to process my feelings right now, because I don’t want to fight with you over this. This argument isn’t worth hurting your feelings over. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

He left the cabin, walking through the darkness along the softly lit path to the main resort building.

He didn’t have any real goal in mind, just to breathe and let his anger be.

It was the key, Dr. Caster said. Not to reject his anger, and not to embrace it...

but just to acknowledge it. By acknowledging it, he took away its power to control his actions.

As his feet crunched on the gravel, he thought about what Linda had been through. He wondered if drugs had touched her sister's life, the one who'd gone to Bayamon for a few years, or maybe her friends growing up. Had it played a role in the assault she'd endured as a girl?

What drove her to be willing to get shot in order to get the mission done?

When he got back to the cabin, he saw that the small dining table was set, with their dinners laid out. Linda was still in her bathrobe, her hair up as she sat in one of the chairs, waiting for him.

"Your timing's impressive. They left like, two minutes ago."

"Good." Brutus closed the door behind him. Crossing the room he reached out a hand, and when Linda took it he pulled her up, looking into her beautiful dark eyes.

"I'm sorry."

"For?"

"For not understanding. For not trying to understand why you'd accept the job you do," he said. "For being so... accepting of getting shot. Linda, the past few days have been hell for me. Minicamp was shit knowing that you might be in danger."

"You know why I couldn't tell you," she said, and he nodded.

"I know. I just... getting my mission cherry popped isn't very much fun."

Linda smiled. “You’ve definitely been talking to Sabby I see.”

“She’s weird.”

Linda laughed, nodding. “But fun, in small doses.”

“And she was the one who texted me, telling me you’d be back today.” Brutus shrugged his shoulders. “So I’ll accept her weirdness. Linda, the reason it sucked is because I’ve never been in this position before.”

“You mean being the one in the relationship who has to worry about the health and safety of the other?” Linda asked.

Brutus nodded.

“I’ve spent a lot of time the past few weeks thinking about it. How I’m going to face four months of you putting your health and life on the line every Sunday.”

“Could be Monday or Thursday,” Brutus pointed out, trying to keep it light.

Linda frowned. “I know. And I won’t say I haven’t been greedy in the past. I’ve never tried to understand what my ex-girlfriends might think about the dangers of football.

I’ve just accepted it, and if they couldn’t accept it, there was the door.

Don’t let it hit you in the ass on the way out, you know? ”

“I’ve heard it a few times.”

“And now the shoe’s on the other foot. The idea that you could get hurt on a mission

scares the shit out of me. And I don't want to walk out the door, or to see you walk out the door. At the same time, I don't want to lose the woman I care about."

Linda reached up, cupping his cheek. "I understand. But I'm a soldier, Brutus.

It's who I am, who I want to be. And while this mission might have been just a stopgap measure, a temporary ding in the cartel's operations, I've had enough missions where I know I've made a difference.

Even if it's just to save a few people, I've made a difference. That's worth a bruised tit."

Brutus nodded, and swallowed. "I don't quite understand Linda... but I promise you, I want to try."

"That's a start," Linda assured him. "Now, if you want to really start, I could use a little pampering from my boyfriend... if you want to try."

LINDA

Stretching out on the bed, Linda felt pampered as Brutus picked up the bottle of massage oil, uncapping it and inhaling the scent. "This'll do."

"You know what you're doing?" she asked him.

Brutus smiled.

"Really?"

"I've been getting sports massages since I was thirteen years old," Brutus said, "and the team has two therapists on staff in addition to beds and massage chairs. But this isn't one of those. I promise."

She nodded, laying her head back on the pillow as Brutus climbed onto the bed. He was stripped to the waist, wearing just his boxers as he picked up her foot and started his massage.

His touch was electric, yet soothing at the same time. Feeling his thumbs work on the arch of her foot, she sighed in pleasure, tension she didn't even know she had pouring out of her as he worked her foot.

"I like that smile," Brutus said softly as his hand moved up to her calf. His fingers kneaded, not hard enough to cause pain but enough to slowly lengthen her muscle and leave her leg feeling soft and supple.

"You make me smile a lot," Linda admitted as he switched feet, working his way up to her other knee.

Only then did he start on her thighs, using the heels of his palms to work the oil into her skin.

She could feel her own arousal growing as he reached her hips, the desire evident in his eyes and the bulge in his boxers.

Yet, he remained patient, respecting her boundaries even as her body responded to his touch.

The warmth of his hands against her skin sent waves of anticipation through her, and she found herself yearning for more.

"It's amazing," Brutus said softly as he lifted his hands from her hips to instead lift her left arm up, "how strong you are. I can feel the muscle and strength underneath my touch, but it doesn't show on your figure when you're moving."

"Except for my backside," Linda said softly, smiling. "I definitely suffer from the disease of no-ass-at-all."

Brutus huffed in good humor, running his hands in a tube up and down her biceps and triceps, working on them before focusing on her forearms.

"Not from what I've seen. I like the curves of your backside."

Brutus continued his massage, each stroke of his hands soothing her body while at the same time adding to the heat building inside her. Brutus knew it too, ignoring her sensitive areas for everything else until finally the fingers of his hands found her chest.

"Yesssss," Linda hissed, her back arching as he stroked her skin.

He wasn't even touching her nipple, just running his fingers over the softer skin of her breast while working her chest muscles.

"Shhh," Brutus whispered, his eyes fixed on hers. "Linda, I'm not... ohhhh."

She smiled, looking up at him as he felt her hand wrapped around his shaft. She stroked him slowly, their hands working together as Brutus massaged her chest. He was especially tender around her bruise, a reminder of their recent ordeal, but his touch brought her a comforting sense of peace.

His fingers closed around her stiff nipple and she gasped, her hand stroking him faster as he tugged on her nipples until she squirmed. When he let go she pulled him up higher until his hardness was even with her mouth and she turned on her side, taking him between her lips.

Brutus groaned, his hand guiding her head gently as she pleased him. It had taken a while for her to get used to his size, but the tenderness in his responses made learning to pleasure her boyfriend an eagerly embraced journey.

His taste was surprisingly sweet and tangy on her tongue. She didn't know what it was about his diet, maybe just that so much of it was healthy, organic foods, maybe it was that he balanced his vitamins perfectly, or maybe it was just him.

"Mmmm, that's it baby," he growled lightly, reaching down with a free hand to the juncture between her thighs.

She was already ready for him, and as he slid two fingers inside her, he groaned in desire.

"God you're so wet and ready."

Linda pulled back, nodding. "I've wanted you since we first shared that quiet moment in the bath after everything that happened."

Brutus smiled and pulled back, lifting Linda's leg and getting between her thighs. As soon as she nodded he joined their bodies, the two of them gasping as they connected.

"So full," Linda purred, reaching up and stroking the back of his neck as he pushed further into him. "So good."

"You're the best." Brutus pulled back and moved forward again.

As they moved together, the world around them seemed to fade, their connection deepening with each shared breath. The cabin filled with the sounds of their passion, the wooden bed frame creaking softly beneath them.

They'd made love so many times, Linda couldn't believe it. She hadn't had a lot of lovers in her time, and none for more than two or three occasions.

But she was never, ever tired of Brutus. The power of his movements, the intensity in his eyes, the strength and assurance he had as he brought her body to the quivering edge of release was good each and every time.

"Yes yes yes," Linda gasped, clutching him tightly with her hands as he sped up.

The bed rocked against the wall of the cabin and she locked her legs around his body, her entire being consumed by the sensations coursing through her. Her spine coursed like a raging river of joy, her body washed away in the tidal wave that was Brutus's passion.

"Linda!" Brutus called out, his body tensing.

She cried out, her climax cresting as he found his release inside her, their shared pleasure making the moment all the sweeter.

She had her man. She had joy.

She had all she needed.

Afterwards, they lay side by side, Brutus cradling her in his arms. He never crushed her underneath his weight, never hurt her.

Instead his strength was all for her, for making her feel safe and secure.

Sweat glistened on Linda's chest as she lay in the moonlight that poured through the filmy curtain, her chest still shaking with the aftershocks of her climax.

For the first time since getting shot, her chest didn't hurt, that was for sure.

Sex endorphins were a hell of a thing.

"Can I tell you something?" Linda caught her breath. "When you walked out tonight, it scared the hell out of me. I nearly got out of the bath to chase after you."

"Why?" Brutus asked, his own body bathed in sweat. "Like I said, I just needed to calm down. There's no need for you ever to chase after me, Linda. I'm here for you. I just don't want to show you the ugly side of me that often."

"I know but... I was worried that we'd come to a point where you couldn't handle who I am any longer," Linda said.

"And I was scared that it'd happen at the same time I realized something.

Because Brutus, I didn't just shrug off getting shot.

Sure, in the second I did. I reacted, I fought, and I did what I've been trained to do.

But as we left the zone and got on the plane, I remember sitting in my seat, trembling with fear, not just from the mission but from the thought that I might not make it back to you. "

"Trembling?" Brutus asked.

Linda nodded.

"Why? Fear?"

"I was shaking because all I could think of was you.

And yes, fear. Because the realization hit me that I nearly didn't come home.

Before it wouldn't have really mattered to me, not beyond a pure instinctual level.

I was so scared afterwards though because I wouldn't get to see you again.

And it hit me. Now, you don't have to say anything.

But I need to say it, to get this out of me. "

She took a deep breath, her eyes finding his in the dim light.

"I love you, Brutus. I'm in love with you, and that scares the hell out of me as much

as it does thrill me. Because for the first time since I joined the Army, I'm scared of not being able to come back."

Brutus nodded, and turned onto his side.

"I don't want to sound trite or forced, but Linda... I love you too. I've spent the past few days sick because you not being in my life would be more pain than all my years in football lumped together and more. So here's what we'll do."

"What's that?" she asked, turning to look at him and his smile, her heart blooming in her chest.

He said it so naturally, so easily, that she knew it was true. The way his eyes were lit up with joy told her that it was true.

Brutus Townsend was in love with her.

"More sex?" she asked, seeing the light dance in his eyes at her soft joke.

"Oh for sure," he said with a chuckle. "But also, I'm going to tell you I love you again, and again, and again.

I'll say it as many times as you want to hear it.

Not just when we're in bed, but when we're eating breakfast, when we're walking together, when we're relaxing.

.. whenever I feel like you want to hear it.

And for the rest of the weekend, I'm going to celebrate you for the beautiful woman you are. "

Linda purred happily, and leaned in to kiss him. He was so many things... but the man was a full romantic.

"But more sex too?"

Brutus laughed, and pulled her on top of him. "And more sex too."

brUTUS

Brutus leaned back in the leather seat of the black town car, taking in the familiar sights of New York City through tinted windows. The driver, a middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair who had introduced himself as Tony, glanced at him in the rearview mirror.

"Hey, aren't you Brutus Townsend?" Tony asked, recognition lighting his eyes.

"That's me," Brutus replied with a practiced smile.

"Man, it's an honor driving you today. Been following your career since college." Tony's enthusiasm was genuine. "Heard there's some talk about the offseason. You handling it okay?"

"Trying to stay focused," Brutus said. "It's been a rough few months."

"I get that. The media, they don't let up, do they?"

Brutus nodded, appreciating the man's understanding. "Part of the job."

They drove in comfortable silence for a few minutes before Tony spoke again. "There's always some chatter about the games."

"Yeah, but I try to stay out of that," Brutus said. "I prefer to keep things straightforward. Gambling's not my thing."

Tony nodded approvingly. "Smart man. Keeps you out of trouble."

"New York's got its ups and downs, much like anything else," Tony continued, navigating through the morning traffic with practiced ease.

"Yeah," Brutus agreed, gazing at the skyline. "Sometimes I'm glad to just keep my distance."

The car pulled up to a sleek office building in Midtown. Brutus thanked Tony and stepped out into the crisp morning air, straightening his tailored suit. Keith was waiting for him at the entrance, dressed similarly but with an expression that suggested he'd been up all night.

"Morning," Keith greeted him. "Ready for this?"

Brutus took a deep breath. "As ready as I'll ever be."

They rode the elevator to the thirty-eighth floor in silence.

The doors opened to reveal a reception area adorned with modern art and minimalist furniture.

A woman in a crisp blazer led them to a conference room where people were already seated.

One of them was Pamela McMahon, the Chief Marketing Officer of Zelus.

"You're a valuable member of the family, Brutus," she said.

Total bullshit, but that was Pamela's job.

“Which is why we wanted to have this chance to talk about the past few months, and what we can expect over the next year. As you know, this is the time where we like to put the finishing touches on our summer and fall advertising campaigns, and the prime time to figure out where we’re going with our football clients. ”

“So what would you like to know?” Brutus asked.

“Well obviously the first thing we’d like to know is if there’s going to be any more negative PR incidents,” Pamela said.

He had worked with Pamela before, and could appreciate this side of her. She shoveled out the bullshit by the bucket load, but when it was time to get down to business, she got to the point pretty quickly.

“Well, I’ve learned a lot in the past few months, and I’m trying to not only become a better football player, but a complete person,” Brutus admitted.

“What did you learn from the Army?” she asked curiously. “As a person?”

“I learned a lot about sacrifice, about hard work, and to be blunt, about both matter of fact arrogance and about humility,” Brutus answered.

“But we’ve heard,” Pamela said. “You’re dating one of the soldiers you trained with?”

Brutus bristled, his eyes narrowing. “And? I haven’t gone public about my personal relationships, this time or in the past.”

“Well, relationships and star athletes are always a challenge,” Pamela explained evasively, seeing Brutus’s reaction. “And there are costs and benefits of being in a relationship.”

“Wait.” Brutus held up a hand.

Inside he was boiling, wanting to slam his fist on the table and rage at these people. How dare they try and use his personal life, his relationships, as fodder for ad campaigns?

“Let me shut this down right here, right now. Yes, I’m in a relationship with a woman.

A wonderful woman, who I care for very much.

Her name is Linda, and yes, I hope the relationship continues and develops even deeper.

But my relationship with her is not, and will never be, a publicity stunt.

Nor is it anything for anyone to make a buck off of.

Before you ask, I’d tell the Pentagon the same damn thing if they approached me about this as well. ”

“Are you sure, Brutus?” Pamela insisted. “Zelus is really making a push into women’s wear, and-”

“And that’s not a question for me to answer, except to say that I seriously doubt Linda would agree even if you made her the offer,” Brutus said, his voice low and tinged with heat.

What the hell were these people even thinking, approaching him with this?

“Furthermore, Pamela, the Pentagon has rules about this sort of stuff, and her unit

would not approve of her being a public person in any way. She's a soldier, not a spokesmodel. Although I do wonder... how the hell did you all know about me and Linda anyway?"

Pamela reached over, and tapped at a tablet computer before sliding it across the table to Brutus. "Hate to tell you Brutus, but you are famous. And when you're an All Pro linebacker, someone's inevitably going to take pictures of you in public. These came out about half an hour ago."

For the next hour, they discussed the photos of Brutus and Linda that had surfaced online. The pictures themselves were innocent enough—the two of them walking together in Central Park, sharing coffee at a small café—but they had sparked a flurry of speculation.

Brutus picked up the tablet, his gut dropping as he saw what Pamela was talking about. It was pictures of him, at the resort after Linda's mission. Most of the pics were polite, taken from a distance as they walked along the paths, or sat out grabbing some sun.

But there were three pictures that weren't so polite. One was the two of them kissing outside, while the other two were blurry photos that had obviously been zoomed in... through the window of the cabin.

"Fuck," he muttered, sliding the tablet back across the table. His stomach roiled, and whatever good feeling he had evaporated in the light from the tablet. "How much do you guys know, and how much is in the dirt sheets already?"

"You might want to give this... Linda... a call," Pamela replied. "While the reports we've seen haven't named names, there's enough out there that someone's going to figure it out soon enough."

Brutus leaned back in his chair, sighing. His first instinct was to tell Zelus to shove their contract up their ass, he didn't need or want to be part of a company that was willing to dig into his private life. Exploit him as a football player? Fine. That came with putting on the uniform.

Exploit him as a person because he's fallen in love? That was totally wrong.

But... this wasn't the time to make a decision.

Instead, Brutus looked to his right, where Keith had a grave expression on his face. Keith could see Brutus's feelings, and knew that a big check was on the line. "What do you want to do, Brutus?"

"Keith, after this, I'm going to need to make a phone call."

LINDA

Linda was nervous as she walked into the company offices. Normally, she avoided the administrative hub of Charlie Company as much as possible, with the First Sergeant, the XO, and the Company Commander located there. And then there was Tyrone Crews, who loved to hear himself talk.

But when Sergeant Lincoln told her to report to the company commander's office, she had to do it.

What freaked her out more than anything though was the fact that Crews made himself noticeably absent when she came in. Even though it was officially lunch time, Crews was never the kind to miss overhearing some gossip unless doing so could get him in trouble.

Lieutenant Parker was waiting for her though, his freshly cut hair sticking up slightly more than usual and making him look more like 'Iceman' than normal.

"Hey Sergeant... you look worried."

"No offense sir, but no Crews, and lunch hour? That's normally a recipe for at least a bit of skittishness," Linda said. She took a deep breath, and lifted an eyebrow. "I hope there isn't a problem."

"Well, there shouldn't be," Parker said, "but Major Kirk wanted to have a chat with you. I'm pretty much in the dark as well. Come with me, we're in the conference room."

Linda followed Parker, surprised slightly to see her entire chain of command outside of Sergeant Orkin gathered in the conference room.

What was shocking and turned her concern up to full nervousness was seeing Lieutenant Colonel Remsburg sitting at the head of the table.

The Battalion Commander didn't come down to the company offices, the company came to the battalion.

"Sergeant Castellanos, thank you for coming in on your lunch break," Remsburg said, indicating a seat on his left. "Please have a seat."

"Uhm... okay, sir." Linda walked over and stood behind the chair. "Sorry, is this a reporting situation?"

"No, no," Major Kirk said.

He was seated on the other side of the table and looked rather relaxed. That helped, but didn't totally allay her fears.

"We're having a chat outside of duty right now, hopefully to prevent having to do it later on duty."

Linda nodded in understanding. There were plenty of ways that the military handled things. Sometimes, things had to have paperwork. Sometimes though, things got handled through unofficial channels.

"Thank you. So what's going on, sir?" she asked, sitting down carefully in the chair.

She might be in the conference room unofficially, but she was surrounded by the most powerful officers in her chain of command. There was no way she was going to

fully relax in front of the battalion commander.

After all, she was just an E-5 sergeant.

"So, I got a call from the Pentagon this morning," Remsburg said as way of introduction. "A friend of mine has a wife who happens to like certain gossip websites. She noticed a story, told her husband... long story short, you're in the gossip sites."

"What?" Linda asked, shocked. "Uhm, how, sir? I haven't talked to any reporters or magazines. You know that if someone approached me I'd tell them to talk to the Public Relations Office, and-"

"It wasn't specifically about you." Major Kirk handed Linda his phone. "Rather it was about Brutus."

Linda looked, her eyes widening as she read the short story. It wasn't much, mostly just asking a lot of leading questions. Did Brutus have a new girlfriend? Who was she? Why did they choose such an out of the way location for their torrid weekend?

That last one brought the hairs on the back of her neck to full attention and she looked through the pictures, her jaw clenching as she saw the last three.

"Someone was spying on us? And uhm... Dios mio."

"On the positive side," Remsburg said as Linda passed the phone back to Kirk, "the photos don't identify you. In fact, of the published ones, none of them have a clear image of your face. You're just 'a new woman' in Brutus Townsend's life."

"A new woman who had a torrid weekend with him, quoting that story. And I'm sensing a 'but' coming, sir," Linda said, swallowing her nerves. "The three photos-"

"Castellanos... Linda," First Sergeant Austin rumbled, getting her attention.

"What you and Brutus have been doing is totally above board.

As for someone taking hazy photos through a curtain because you two left the lights on isn't something you should be ashamed of.

If it were up to me, I'd like to find the photographer and teach them a few lessons about the right to privacy. "

"Well said First Sergeant," Colonel Remsburg said.

"Linda, I'm certainly not going to tell you anything about you dating Brutus Townsend.

Everyone says that you were a totally professional team leader during his time in the unit.

But my Pentagon friend did bring up something to think about.

While you weren't named in the story, it's almost guaranteed that there's other photos out there.

Maybe they weren't published because they didn't have a good angle on Brutus in them, or maybe they just weren't spicy enough for this website.

Either way, it's only a matter of time before someone sees the PR photos the battalion took and starts putting the pieces together. You might get named in the press."

"Is that a problem, sir?" Linda asked. "I didn't know about the photos, and I for damn sure didn't authorize anyone to take photos of me when I was on pass."

"Normally, no," Major Kirk said. "No more than any other member of the company dating a civilian. But there's a few things that we need to make sure we're all clear on. First off, most of our missions are classified, and operational security is essential."

"I know, and Brutus knows, sir. I swear to you, I don't tell him anything about the job that he doesn't already know from his week in the unit. Actually, it sort of annoyed him, considering the bruise I had after the last mission."

Kirk nodded, leaning forward. "I'm sure."

Actually, I was amused that day. I could see he was full of questions, but you kept shutting him down.

It was sort of funny to watch this big linebacker get mentored by Sabby Goodman.

What was it Sergeant Lincoln, three or four times that Sabby had to tell Brutus to shut up and nobody could tell him? "

"Only twice I think, sir," Linc said. "Sabby just makes a big, repeated impression on people. Was he as curious when you two were on pass, Castellanos?"

"Negative Sarge," Linda insisted. "He wanted to know what I got shot with, but other than saying it was a drug interdiction mission, I didn't tell him anything. We've told people that before, leaving out the details. Was I wrong?"

"No... no, you're right, I told my brother the same thing when we got back," Major Kirk said. "If we're going to ding you on that, ding me as well."

"You're right, but perhaps we can all have a review class on what we can and cannot tell our friends and family members about missions," Colonel Remsburg said. "In the meantime though, I think we've all wasted enough of our lunch time then, let's go

ahead and end this. Thank you for your time."

Remsburg left along with the other officers, and Linda waited for them to leave. Afterwards, it was just her and Sergeant Lincoln, who had a clouded look on his face. "Got a minute, Castellanos?"

"Sure Sarge," Linda said. "I was going to grab some lunch, though."

"Let's walk together." He led her out of the company offices and heading towards the dining facility.

"My point is, while that's old Army, there's still enough of those old minds, old thoughts around places like the Pentagon.

All it's going to take is the wrong colonel or general, or hell, wrong politician on some budget oversight committee getting wind of this. Feel me?"

Linda nodded, swallowing. "I feel you, Sarge."

"Then let's try and get some lunch," Lincoln said.

Agreeing, Linda went into the DFAC, where she ate her lunch and thought.

Did Brutus have someone take the photos? She wasn't sure, but it would be a surefire way to rehabilitate his image. How could anyone say he was anti-military when he was seeing a soldier?

Or was it a paparazzi thing? Brutus was famous enough that he was recognized every time he came onto post, and more than once on their dates he'd been recognized by a fan.

She'd laughed it off each time, but this was on a whole new, disturbing level.

Could she handle that level of inquisitiveness into her life?

The truth was, the answer to that last question was no. She was more than just a regular soldier. She was a female infantry NCO in a unit that handled lots and lots of classified operations. She wasn't a person who could afford to be in the press constantly.

Wrapping up her lunch, she pulled out her phone, texting Brutus quickly.

Hey, saw something online about you. About us. Need to talk as soon as possible, tonight if you can.

The rest of the day went almost as normal, with only a light day of training on the schedule.

She didn't know if nobody else had seen the news story, or if Linc had put the lid on any commentary about it.

Either way, she was grateful, just wanting to get the day over with.

Luckily she was able to get by without too much focus, although as she formed up for the end of day formation, she saw a few glances from people around the company.

Clearly the news had gotten out.

"Come on," Jess Adams said as soon as Major Kirk released the company for the evening. "Join me over at the gym. You clearly need it."

"You sure?" Linda asked. "We're nowhere near the same in strength levels."

"Yeah, I'm doing some acceleration work tonight, so the movements will be awkward for me," Jess assured her. "And what's speed work for me might be a good regular style lift for you. Come on, we can stop by the barracks for you to grab some gym gear. I'll give you a ride."

"What, my bike isn't cool enough?" Linda asked wryly,.

Jess rolled her eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:08 am

A few minutes later they were at the barracks, and Linda went inside to quickly change clothes, knowing that Jess had her things in her truck.

She didn't have too many 'civilian' gym clothes. She didn't need them. But after a minute she grabbed a plain black t-shirt and some yellow basketball shorts, tossing them in a backpack before joining Jess in her truck.

"So... static?" Jess asked as Linda closed the door. "Need backup?"

"No, not yet," Linda replied, grateful for Jess's discretion in her questions. "I mean, I texted Brutus to try and find out about this, but I haven't heard back yet. I'd like to talk with him first before I do anything else."

Jess nodded, inhaling through her nose.

"Obviously I didn't work with Superstar as much as you did.

I think I talked with him twice the entire week he was here, and both of those conversations were about supplements and weight training.

But he doesn't strike me as the type of guy to want problems like this.

You know, for a superstar football player, he seemed to be a really private guy, more of a homebody than anything else. "

"You know, he sort of is?" Linda admitted. "His house is luxurious, but most of his public persona is sort of just that. It's like there's Brutus the guy I'm dating, and

Brutus the football superstar. I haven't seen much of that second side of him."

"It's not football season yet," Jess pointed out before laughing. "You know, my sister says I'm the same way? Sort of a bitch on duty, but I'm a total girly-girl when I'm in a relationship?"

Linda laughed. "Abs like yours, and your next girlfriend can wash her clothes on them instead of using her washing machine."

They got to the gym, and Linda had to admit that it was a total Jess Adams place.

The building looked like a warehouse, with scuffed paint on the walls and a few scars on the wood paneling, but every single machine and bar was in perfect shape.

Rust was afraid to live here. They went to the locker room, where they changed out of their uniforms.

Linda was surprised, as she often was, at just how different she and Jess Adams were built.

The woman's back was thickly muscled, with clear definition on her traps, lats, and muscles she didn't even know the names of, to the point they made her look like she had a diamond between her shoulder blades.

"You're just wearing a bra top?" Linda asked as she pulled her shorts on. "Showing off?"

"Psssh, next to you, I have to do everything I can to show off," Jess said. "I'm going to be doing kettlebell swings next to a supermodel. Even if you're taken, be prepared for every dude in the gym to be feelin' really, really thirsty."

Linda laughed, but before she could say anything her phone rang. Checking the screen, her heart skipped a beat before speeding up as she saw it was Brutus.

"Gimmie a minute, Jess?"

"Sure. I'll go stretch, join me when you're ready." She grabbed her plastic cup full of her workout drink powder and left the women's locker room.

Alone, Linda picked up the call. "Brutus, thank you for calling back."

"Hey, I'm sorry I didn't call earlier," Brutus said.

His voice was muffled, and the connection sounded like he was in a tunnel or something it was so poor. Still, hearing his voice helped her feel better.

"I was caught up in business meetings with one of my big endorsement contract companies. So you saw the story?"

"I did. Had a little chat with Colonel Remsburg and Major Kirk about it."

"Fuck," Brutus hissed. "I found out this morning just before lunch myself in fact. Bunch of suits sprung the damn news on me as we sit down to talk about my contract."

"Brutus, I need to ask just because but... this wasn't something you did, right?"

"No!" Brutus assured her, sounding a little upset.

It made Linda cringe, but at the same time the heat of his denial soothed her soul all the more.

"Linda, I would never do that. If I find out who took those photos, I'm going to be having a very intense conversation with them. I already talked with the resort, and let them know that whatever the hell happened, I'm not happy about it."

"Do they know what happened?" Linda asked.

"No, but the staff on duty said they don't remember any press around that weekend.

The invited me to come by when I get back, apologize face to face and try and make it up to me," Brutus answered.

"If they really didn't have anything to do with it, I'll be cool with them, don't worry.

My agent figures that it was a random fan thing, someone saw us and snapped a pic, then later realized they could make some cash with it. .. so they went further."

"It's that further that pisses me off," Linda said, and Brutus's low rumbling growl on the other side of the line told her how he felt about the issue. "So what now?"

"Well, immediately for me is catching a flight back home, I'm still stuck in New York for another hour or so," Brutus said.

"And I know there's a lot to talk about.

I want to sit down, talk this all over with you.

This... I know this is a part of my life that we haven't dealt with before.

And I want to figure it out. I don't want this to get in between us, Linda. "

"I don't want it to get between us either," Linda said. "Okay, well I'm here at the gym

with Jess Adams, so I've got my evening planned out. If I can lift my arms tonight after this I'll count myself lucky."

Brutus laughed softly. "How about I check in with you as soon as I land then?" he asked. "I'd like to make sure my girl is doing okay."

"Your girl?" Linda asked warmly.

Brutus hummed.

"I like that."

"Good. Because there's something else I wanted to tell you," Brutus said.

"I know the timing isn't great on this. And I know that there's a lot about my life in football that we haven't really addressed.

I want to though. I want to work with you, to bring you up to speed.

Because you don't deserve to ever be unhappy. I love you."

The words flowed out of her phone and into her ear, and in her mind Linda could feel her lips spreading in a wide smile.

"Good. Because I love you too, and I want to figure all this out too. Call me when you get back."

"I will. I was thinking coming down Thursday, if that's a good time for you?"

"That sounds perfect," Linda said. "We can meet up Thursday afternoon after I get off work."

"Great. Well then, I'll let you go. Have a good workout."

Brutus hung up, and Linda put her phone away, locking it in the gym locker. Out in the gym, Jess Adams was halfway through her drink, rolling her shoulders as she shook out her arms. "Well you had a good call."

"You can tell?"

Jess laughed. "It's written on your face, Linda. So, what happened?"

"He... he said he loves me," Linda admitted, blushing a little. "And he wants to work things out, to... I think he wants this to be long term."

"And how do you feel about that?"

"I love the idea of long term with him!" Linda gushed, grinning.

Jess smiled, and offered her a fist to bump. "Okay then. So let's get to it."

They did, and Linda felt good. As she expected, she was nowhere near able to hang with Charlie Company's 'Muscle Mommy,' who even in a light workout was moving weights that made most of the men in the gym glance over in admiration.

But Linda held her own on an effort and energy level, and as she and Jess completed the last set of standing rope crunches to complete their workout, she was in a good mood.

Thursday couldn't get here fast enough.

brUTUS

“S o what’s the surprise?” Linda asked.

From his driver’s seat, Brutus looked over, smiling mysteriously. In the Thursday afternoon light, he looked youthful and happy, like a man at peace.

“You look like the cat who just ate the canary. Seriously, what’s up?”

“I was just... it feels good to be with you again,” Brutus said, still smiling faintly.

“How was your Thursday?”

“Typical Sergeant’s Time,” Linda replied, leaning back in the passenger seat.

“Sergeant Lincoln had the platoon working on first aid and evacuation. A refresher course really, everyone in the platoon’s already a combat lifesaver.”

“So you can patch yourself up?” Brutus asked, and Linda nodded. “How much?”

“Just basic first aid, enough to patch ourselves up until the medics arrive,” Linda said.

“The only thing really specialized is dealing with lung punctures.”

“Sucking chest wound?” Brutus asked, and Linda nodded. “What’s that?”

“A lung puncture... it's nasty. You can't breathe. Hopefully, with the body armor we're issued, that won't happen.”

Brutus’s smiled dimmed, and he shivered at the thought. “Grisly.”

“We even practice IV drips on each other,” Linda said with a chuckle. “One time, there was a mix-up, and someone got a glucose drip instead of saline. He was bouncing off the walls!”

Brutus laughed. “That didn’t cause diabetic shock or anything?”

“Nope, medic monitored him, showed us how. If there’d been any risk at all we’d have pulled the line. So where are we going anyway? This is just a regular neighborhood in town.”

That was an understatement. They’d been driving past house after house, plainly designed suburban houses that didn’t look at all remarkable except in their overwhelming plainness.

Brutus knew it, but got even more excited though as made one more turn. “It is... and here we are.”

He pulled up to a stop in front of a house, shutting off the engine.

It was another cookie cutter house, with tan vinyl siding and white trim that reminded Brutus slightly of a gingerbread house, a slightly upward slope to the driveway to what looked like a single car garage that was next to what looked like a small cupola type construction, and solar panels on the roof.

“Welcome to my new training camp headquarters.” Brutus looked at Linda with a hint of nervousness. “Like a boxer leaving the house to go somewhere where he can focus on nothing but prep for an upcoming fight, I’m renting this place for the next six weeks until training camp starts.”

“You-”

“I know it’s smaller than my place, and I’ll have to do all my own housekeeping, but that’s okay,” Brutus said, eager to get Linda on board with his quickly put together plan.

He was jumping into the deep end with both feet, but in his gut it felt right.

“Really all I have to do all day is train, do some studying for the online courses I’m taking, and rest. I figure I can spend an hour a day doing housework.”

“But... when boxers do that, they’re isolating themselves, right?” Linda asked. “What about this? I mean, your home-”

“Come on, let me show you.” Brutus held out a hand. “Trust me, it’ll be okay.”

Linda nodded, biting her lip as she gave his hand a squeeze. Getting out, he went around to her side of the truck, opening the door for her. He was a little nervous, he wanted her to approve of this surprise so badly.

“Let’s start in the garage.” He hit the button on the opener in his pocket.

The door trundled open quietly, revealing a plain concrete floor, a washer and dryer, and two exercise machines, a rower and an exercise bike.

“As you can see, my morning cardio is well taken care of. I even moved my cardio equipment from the house, and I’ve arranged to use the heavy bag at a local gym.”

“I see.” Linda looked around. “What else?”

“Well, as you can see I’ve got a washer and dryer, although if the weather’s nice there’s an old fashioned clothes line out in the back yard that I think I’ll use,” Brutus said.

“Most of what I packed is old team gear, and they’ll replace all that for me as soon as training camp starts.

So if some old shorts or t-shirts get a little sun faded, who cares?

I like the smell of line dried clothes more anyway. ”

The kitchen was small, and Brutus suspected that the house would normally be labeled as a ‘starter’ home by most real estate services.

There was enough room for a small three or four person dining table, but really that was about it in the cupola, and the stove had a quirky three burner design.

The fridge was shorter than Linda, and as she ran her hand over the door, he knew what she was thinking.

The place was tiny.

“I wouldn’t expect you to whip up three star meals with this, but it looks like you’ve got the basics.” Linda looked around. She looked through the pass-through to the living room, nodding in approval. “Nice recliner though.”

“Yeah, that was a lucky find,” Brutus admitted, looking at the brown leather recliner next to the pass-through.

“I asked the host, and they said that this house belonged to their parents, who downsized after his father retired. Apparently the old man’s dream retirement was to have a leather recliner and be able to watch all the football he wanted. ”

“Sounds like you renting the place is a bit of an homage to the man’s memory,” Linda said, and Brutus shook his head. “But he-”

“Moved into a retirement home after breaking a hip in the bathroom,” Brutus said.

“Apparently the old man likes his new chair more than this one, and so they left it here. I did promise the house owner a signed jersey though as thanks, if he keeps it mum who he’s renting the place to.

Not that I won’t be recognized, obviously. I don’t plan on being a hermit.”

“What is your plan?” Linda sat down at the kitchen table.

She looked so comfortable but also out of place in her uniform while sitting there, Brutus had to pause. He shook his head, and took a deep breath before going over and sitting down across from Brutus.

“Brutus, is this your way of asking me to move in with you or something?”

“Linda, I rented this place because I want to be near you,” Brutus said.

“I don’t want to waste one more minute than I have to driving to see you, or only being able to see you on weekends.

We’ve been doing that for a while now, and while it’s been good...

I want to have you near me more. Now, I’m not forcing anything.

I understand if you want to tell me to piss off, or you’re tired from work and just want to crash in the barracks and enjoy the mess hall food. ”

Linda chuckled. “Well, lunch today was cheeseburgers. Pretty good,” she teased.

“But what about you, Brutus? How will you train?”

“I spent the last day getting things arranged,” Brutus said, gesturing around. “I’ve got a great gym nearby for lifting, and Dr. Caster will continue our physical therapy sessions by Zoom.”

“So you’ll stay here...” Linda looked around. She got up and went into the living room before walking through the rest of the house. “What about me?”

“It’s simple, Linda. I just want to be near you,” Brutus replied sincerely.

“After the mission, and then that bullshit with the media leak, it makes me sick to my stomach knowing I can only see you for one, maybe two nights a week. Even then you’re tired a lot of Fridays, for good reason.

I definitely don’t blame you for it, I’m damn near a zombie most Mondays.

So totally your choice, this house is open to you.

The bedroom’s got a king sized bed, and while I haven’t slept a full night in it yet, I did give it a test drive of just laying down and taking a nap this morning in it.

It’s comfortable enough, better than what I had in the barracks.

But this is totally up to you, Linda. If you want to stay here with me, every minute you want to be here, I want you here. ”

“Are you flexing your wallet?” Linda asked wryly.

Brutus laughed, shaking his head.

“Good. I don’t care about your wallet, Brutus.”

“I know that, but if I can use my money to make time available for us, then I will. So... yeah, I hope you want to stay here as much as you want for the next few weeks.”

“And afterwards?” Linda asked. “Do you want to move in together or something?”

“I’ve thought about it,” Brutus admitted.

“But I know that during the season, it’s going to be impossible.

The distance is just too much, and we’re going to have to have some discussions about that.

My days off during the season during regular weeks are either Mondays or Tuesdays.

That’s... tough. But we’ve got some time to talk, to figure it out.

In the meantime, you can stay over however company policy is. ”

Brutus’s heart hammered in his chest as Linda thought about his offer.

Finally, she nodded, looking around.

“We’re well within recall distance of post,” she said, “so staying over isn’t a problem that way. I’d need to make sure Orkin and Linc know that I’ll be staying off post some nights, but... I’m pretty sure I can stay over at least three nights a week. As long as you don’t mind me waking up early.”

Brutus crossed the room, sweeping her up into his arms and wheeling her around before kissing her soundly.

“It’ll be good for me too,” he said as he set her down. “Training camp starts practice at six in the morning to avoid the summer heat. So having a little extra motivation to drag my happy ass out of bed at five isn’t a bad thing.”

Brutus proudly showed Linda what little was left of the house, both of them laughing over his total lack of military style to his bed, which was a cover sheet, plenty of pillows, and a light blanket tossed on the bed.

“Is this how you sleep at home?” Linda asked. “Your housekeeper doing it for you?”

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“Actually, she gave up years ago,” Brutus admitted.

“She just changes the sheets twice a week, which she’d show by folding the blanket before setting it on the bed.

I just can’t sleep with tucked in sheets, I always kick and twist until they’re fully out.

When we’re on the road, the first thing I do when I get to the team hotel is pull the sheets out before I even try laying down. ”

“That sounds like a lot of extra work,” Linda said. “And you do that eight times a year?”

“Hopefully twelve or fifteen,” Brutus replied. “We’ve got the preseason games, and the playoffs. Even if we get home field throughout the playoffs, there’s still the league championship. So... maybe we should talk about how we’re going to make my football life work with this?”

“Might as well.” Linda went over and sat down on the edge of the bed. “So, what first? The deets about the press leak, or some ideas on how we might make this work over the next six months or so?”

“How about both?” Brutus offered. “Then we can maybe order some dinner, or if you want I can show off my cooking skills. I was able to make a run to the supermarket before coming to pick you up.”

“On that-”

“We’ll figure out a way for you to have my truck,” Brutus assured her. “Maybe when you have my truck, I’ll have your bike or something? I’ve got no problem riding an electric assist bicycle. As long as you don’t mind my big ass using it.”

“Will you burn out the motor?” Linda teased.

Brutus shook his head, grinning.

“Then maybe that’s where we should start the conversation. Brutus, all of this... I’ve got to admit, it’s putting a lot of sudden pressure on me. I mean, I’m just a girl soldier. And here you are dropping huge dollar amounts to hang out with me.”

Brutus nodded, putting his hands behind his back as he started pacing back and forth.

“Linda, I make enough money that this isn’t a big deal to me. I’m not trying to impress you with my wealth, I just want you to know I can afford to do this.”

“Still... what if this... you know, something happens?”

“I don’t think it will, and that’s fear talking right now,” Brutus said.

“Something I know about, and something I’ve been talking about a lot with Dr. Caster.

Linda, you’re the most extraordinary woman I’ve ever known, and I feel right with you.

But let’s say I am temporarily insane. Let’s say that I go and blow every single dime I’ve ever made in a Quixotic attempt to woo you, and I fail in the biggest, most spectacular romantic fail outside of a bad Hollywood film.

I’ve still got a year left on my contract, Linda. I’ll be able to recover.”

“Well, that’s good,” Linda said wryly. “I wouldn’t want to leave you homeless and penniless.”

“Linda, what I mean is that this, right here, right now... it’s worth more to me than a paycheck.

It’s worth more to me than a sponsorship, which is why when those idiots in Manhattan told me they wanted to use our relationship for making money, I told them that they were ninety nine percent chance wasting their damn time, and almost told them to stuff it up their ass.

The only reason I didn’t was because I’m not the guy to talk to. ”

“What do you mean?” Linda asked, and Brutus paused.

“When they... told me about the photos, and showed them to me, the head of their marketing department started talking about the risks and rewards of me being in a relationship,” he explained.

“Suddenly they were talking about the supermodels, and hot girlfriends, and... well, at the moment part of me was laughing inside. I mean, I know you’re gorgeous Linda.

And you could turn just as many heads as all the A-list girlfriends and wives that I can think of.

Maybe I’m lucky you don’t get dolled up more often, because I wouldn’t be able to put two sentences together around you.

Another part of me raged at the idea, that someone would want to use our relationship, the love we’ve found, simply to sell some sporting good.

But the other side of me knows that your career, that uniform you're wearing, are essential to you.

And there's no way you can be 'famous' and be in Charlie Company. "

"True," Linda said. "So what did you tell them?"

"When they pushed, I told them to get in touch with you and the army ... I won't talk for you though. I'm not that dumb despite the years of hits to my head."

Linda smiled, and got up off the bed. Going over to Brutus, she stroked his cheek, running her fingers through his hair. "So you really do like me, huh?"

"I'm crazy about you, I love you, I... I've never felt this way about anyone ever before," Brutus replied. "I know that's pretty heavy, but I want to be honest with you about it. So, are you mad about my surprise?"

Linda shook her head.

Brutus's heart swelled.

"No. But I'm thinking maybe we need to do some planning over the weekend so that I can stay here more than three nights a week. Will that interfere with your preparation for the season?"

"Hmmm... well, can I trust you to keep our defensive playbook secret?" Brutus teased. "It's top secret stuff."

"Pretty sure I can be trusted with not leaking your defensive playbook."

"Then I say let's get some dinner... and then we'll see what happens," Brutus said,

pulling her in closer. “It’s been too long since I’ve had you in my arms.”

“Then maybe we should forget getting dinner... and jump straight to dessert.”

Brutus grinned. “I think I like that idea.”

LINDA

"Y ou know Sarge," Derrick Jackson said, grinning as they headed back from the range, "you're looking way too happy for someone who's been sweating all day."

"What, sweat isn't good for you?" Linda asked, grinning ironically. "Maybe I'm just feeling good about the day."

"Uh-huh... you've been feeling good a lot of days," Jackson retorted. "It's been a solid week of good days if I think about it."

It had been a good week. One of the best. Five out of the last seven nights spent with Brutus, four of them waking up in his arms. The scent of his soap lingered on her uniform, a comforting reminder throughout her days.

The early mornings were a small price to pay for those stolen hours with Brutus. The exhaustion faded away in his presence, replaced by a sense of calm she hadn't known she was missing. Funny how sleeping in his arms was more restful than sleeping alone.

"Do me a favor, Jackson," she said, as they headed out for the day. "Keep things down tonight? I've got NCO duty."

"Hell Sarge, I won't be a problem at all," Jackson replied. "I'm staying off post overnight. Already got everything set up, I just need to shower up, make myself even better looking than I already am, and it's all good for me."

Linda sighed, but couldn't criticize him. It was well known that Jackson had a very active social life, and sometimes she thought the man was juggling multiple girlfriends. That wasn't the case this weekend though, she was relatively sure that he was only seeing one girl at the moment.

"Keep it safe, keep it sober," she reminded him. "And I better see you bright and early for PT Monday."

After a quick shower to wash the day's dirt and sweat off of her, she settled in behind the NCO duty desk, ready to pull duty for the night.

Linda groaned as the aches and pains of the day caught up with her.

The shower helped, she wasn't going to have to face the idea of twelve hours of stinky armpits, and she had changed into a fresh uniform in order to make sure she was dry that way as well.

Her body screamed for rest. Friday night NCO duty was the worst, no extra day off to recover, just the long, slow burn of lost sleep gnawing at her energy. It meant sacrificing a precious night with Brutus, and that thought stung.

Thankfully though, Brutus already knew, and promised her that if she wanted to crash in the barracks she could, and if not, the bed at the house was all hers. She hadn't made up her mind yet as to which option she was going to take, but was leaning towards going to Brutus's house.

She knew she needed the sleep, but having Brutus right there might not be that good for her getting any. Then again, she could use a Saturday of pampering from her boyfriend, and she knew he'd do it without her even asking.

In the meantime she had to stay up all night.

Linda wasn't a video person, she found that trying to watch a movie or TV show on her phone mostly led to her nodding off.

Instead, she did her shifts with a book, old school paper and ink.

In this case it was an older book she hadn't read before, Stephen King's *Carrie*.

She'd seen the movie of course, but wanted something short enough she could get through it in one night if things stayed quiet.

And for the first few hours of duty, they were quiet. In her book, Tommy was being convinced by his girlfriend that it'd be the right thing to invite that weird girl, Carrie White to the prom.

Still... it was hard to believe these teenagers could be so blithely cruel. It made her think of her own past, the subtle ways people could tear you down even when they thought they were helping. Carrie's fate felt inevitable, a dark mirror of her own struggles.

It was just about midnight when she heard a noise outside.

Putting her book aside, she walked outside, and saw John Mahoney pissing on the blacktop of the basketball court.

Clearly drunk, it appeared as if he was trying to write his name in urine on the pavement, and making a general mess of the whole thing.

"Ahhhh!" he groaned as he swiveled his hips up and down, left and right in his futile attempt to legibly piss out his name onto the ground. "Yeah, that's it!"

"Doing some painting, Mahoney?" Linda asked, trying to defuse the situation. "You

should try the bushes."

"Oh, hey Saaaaaaarrge!" Mahoney slurred, standing up fully while not tucking himself away. "What's up?"

"How about you put your dick away and go get some sleep is up," Linda said. "It's too late for arts and crafts time. Know what I mean?"

Mahoney squared up, and looked down at his dick. "Little intimidating, is it? Nah, I get it, it's one big example of manhood."

Actually, Brutus is bigger, Linda thought, but set aside the comment to deal with the drunken soldier. She'd tried being casual and nice about it. Now it was time to be an NCO.

"Mahoney, put yourself away, go back to your room, and go to sleep. That's an order."

Instead of obeying, Mahoney reached down and grabbed his cock, stroking it in a lazy masturbatory motion.

"How about you get on your knees and tuck it away for me, bitch?" he asked. "After you suck it dry?"

"Put it away." Linda stepped forward. She wasn't going to be intimidated, and she for damn sure wasn't going to let Mahoney harass her.

"My next order's not going to be polite."

Linda tensed, ready. Mahoney had a good thirty pounds on her, all muscle. She knew this wouldn't be a fair fight.

But Mahoney was drunk, and as he moved to slap her he was slow, telegraphing his move. She stepped in, grabbing the slap while sticking out her leg to throw him over her hip.

He held on though, the two of them tumbling to the blacktop in the puddle of piss. Linda could feel his hands trying to grope her, and his hips ground against her ass.

"Mmmm, yeah, fight it Sarge... I like it when-"

Linda snapped, memories of Bayamon fueling her anger.

Snarling, she threw a back elbow that caught Mahoney in the face, snapping his head back.

Scrambling to her feet, she squared up with him, ready to kick his ass from here to the end of base if necessary.

But before the drunken soldier could get to his feet, another soldier, Staff Sergeant Brandon Korderas, emerged from the barracks.

Grabbing Mahoney, he yanked him back down to the pavement.

"What the fuck was that?"

Linda's heart hammered in her chest, and she could feel in her mind the way Mahoney's hands groped her. Almost reflexively, she wiped her chest with her hands, then her ass.

Her chest heaving, her lips curling in a disgusted sneer, she growled, "He's drunk."

Korderas, who was Mahoney's squad leader, knelt on the man's back, keeping him

pinned on the pavement. "What do you want to do about it, Sergeant? It's a clear case of assault from what I saw."

Linda fought back her first response, which was to beat the man senseless.

She knew that wasn't the right answer, no matter how temporarily satisfying it might have been.

Her stomach was tight and queasy as she quickly considered her options.

Korderas was right, it was an assault. In fact it was sexual assault.

But Linda knew that regardless of how deserved a call to the Military Police and a court martial might be, there'd be blow back on her own career.

"I think we can handle this without official paperwork, don't you Sergeant Korderas?"

Korderas looked up, his eyebrow lifting. "You sure, Castellanos? I saw what I saw."

"I'm sure. Let's not bring a headache to the whole damn company because of this knucklehead," she said, even as she clenched and unclenched her fists to try and calm down. "Actually, you might want to let him up, he looks like he's about to puke."

Korderas got up, 'assisting' Mahoney to his knees while keeping his right arm twisted behind his back.

"Get it out of your system, Mahoney," he growled, holding the man by his shirt collar as he emptied his guts onto the pavement. "How much did you fucking drink tonight anyway?"

"I... blurch," Mahoney replied emptying some more. He retched twice before

sagging. "Urgh."

"Goddammit," Korderas growled, hauling Mahoney to his feet.

"You better be glad it's Saturday now, numbnuts.

Because now I've got to stay up the rest of the night babysitting your ass to make sure you don't go into convulsions or choke on your own puke.

And I don't enjoy the idea of fucking up my entire weekend because of you. "

"Thank you Saaaarge," Mahoney slurred.

Korderas nearly threw the man to the ground again. Mahoney whimpered, his strength gone and the alcohol taking its toll. He started weeping, mumbling incoherently.

"Fuck," Korderas said, sighing. He looked at Linda, nodding. "Thanks. For keeping me clean too."

Linda nodded in understanding. If she called the MPs and Mahoney got arrested, it would reflect negatively on his entire chain of command, starting with his team leader and squad leader.

Korderas was a good NCO, he didn't need that sort of trouble on his record.

"You need any assistance, I'm at the desk."

"Might want to get into the company offices, get one of the combat lifesaver bags from supply," Korderas admitted. "This idiot might need a saline drip if he keeps puking his fucking guts out."

"Not a problem. We'll keep this amongst the enlisted, no need to get the officers involved," Linda said. "I just... fuck."

"If it helps, I know," Korderas said. "Not the details, but there's been whispers about your past, back home. That shit... I'm sorry you had to deal with this sack of shit."

"You didn't cause it, Kordy," Linda said, wanting to wipe her eyes to make sure there were no tears. "But thanks."

"No thanks needed until numbnuts here puts in his transfer paperwork to rotate out to the ass end of Alaska or maybe go bake his fucking ass off at Fort Bliss or somewhere else nice and vacationy," Korderas confirmed.

"I'll handle that. Either way, if he ain't sorry for what he did now...

he's going to be very, very, very sorry by the end of the week. "

Linda helped Korderas get Mahoney back into the barracks, waving a couple of people back into their rooms when they came out to see what was going on.

She was proud to see that Dawkins and Satomura from her own fire team looked ready to step in if need be, but she waved them back with a single look in her eyes.

"You okay, Sarge?" Dawkins asked after she went to sit back down at the desk. His room was on the far side of the barracks from the incident, and she knew that if he'd seen it go down, he'd have been there before Korderas.

"He's Kordy's problem now, you just go try and grab some rack," Linda said, touched.

Soldiers gossiped, yeah. But apparently her people cared about her, and that meant a

lot. She wiped her hands on her uniform again, although this time because they were wet from having just washed them.

"Don't worry, if I need help, I'll holler for you."

"Good deal, Sarge. Goodnight." Dawkins went back to his room.

Linda nodded, drying her hands before picking up her book again. It was hard to focus, though. Her nerves were all over the place, and her stomach felt queasy even a half hour later.

What was the problem? She wasn't sure. It wasn't like it was the first time she'd had to handle herself, and in the overall scheme of threats she'd faced in her life, it was minor business. Even the similarity to her past assault incident didn't warrant this sort of reaction.

Down the hall, she could hear Mahoney yelping. There was a roaring sound, and Linda realized that Kordy was giving his drunken squad member a very strong, very cold shower to try and get him washed up and possibly a little less drunk.

Linda shook her head, and picked up the King book again. Her stomach did a slow roll, and she set the book aside for a moment, taking deep breaths before it settled down and she picked up the book again. Maybe, just maybe, she could get through most of the story before the end of her shift.

brUTUS

"Welcome home," Brutus greeted Linda as she came through the door of the house.

Sure, it wasn't really home, but after the past week of seeing her come in from duty, it felt homey for sure.

He was freshly showered and shaved, having started his Saturday with a light workout. He'd made sure to be ready for Linda, wanting to make her feel welcome and cared for after her shift.

He'd had the idea of snuggling her to sleep, but one look at her face as she came through the door put all that aside immediately.

"What happened?" he asked Linda, taking her hand and leading her over to the recliner. "Here, get comfortable, sit back. I'll get your boots."

Linda nodded, unzipping her top and sitting down in her brown t-shirt while Brutus knelt down in front of her, untying her boots and easing them off.

Reaching up, he cupped her calves through her trousers before easing her socks off, setting them next to her boots before he started massaging her calves again.

She kept so much tension and stress in her calves, some days Brutus swore the woman had rocks in her lower legs.

Linda hummed. "That feels good."

"I figured you'd enjoy it, I remember how my feet ached after a day in combat boots," Brutus said. "Although I've still got mine. Really useful for yard work."

Linda chuckle. "I bet."

"So what happened?" Brutus repeated. "You look more than tired."

"You're paying a lot of attention to me," Linda said with a small smile. "It really was nothing. About midnight one of the soldiers came back to the barracks drunk. Started pissing on the basketball court."

Brutus made a face. "Yuck."

"When I went out to get him to go back inside it got... physical," Linda said softly.

Brutus's hands stopped. Noticing, she looked down at him and shook her head.

"I'm okay, Brutus. He was drunk, I ended up hitting him with an elbow to the head, and his squad leader was there a minute later to take care of business the rest of the way."

"The son of a bitch wasn't arrested?" he asked. "Why?"

Linda shook her head. "Because it was a drunk enlisted soldier, not a big deal. Yeah, he was a little gropey, tried to push his cock against my butt, but I..."

"He what?" Brutus recoiled in anger. "He..."

"Brutus, stop," Linda said firmly. "Look, I'm not saying it's all good."

Yeah, it's sticking with me a little. And for about an hour or two, I had a few

flashbacks to what happened to me in Bayamon.

But his squad leader's handling it, and I guarantee you that this kid's going to regret what he did by the time he transfers out of here.

He'll learn his lesson, and he'll be able to make a change to himself and his life.

That's a lot better than getting arrested, court martialed, and given a Big Chicken Dinner which'll haunt him for the rest of his life. "

"Big Chicken Dinner?" Brutus asked, and Linda nodded. "What's that?"

"A Bad Conduct Discharge. It's... not good. It would ruin his life."

"I... still, it pisses me off to think of anyone touching you that way," Brutus admitted.

"Linda, I know you're a warrior, but still, you're my girlfriend. Only person I want touching you is me. Well, and yourself."

Linda leaned back in her chair, nodding tiredly. "I know."

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked, knowing it was a silly question as soon as it came out of his mouth. "Never mind."

"It's handled, but there might be a few tough times up ahead. Like I said, I had some flashbacks, and we haven't talked about what happened to me in Bayamon, but... I might need to talk about it."

Brutus swallowed, and nodded. "I'm ready to talk, to listen, to... whatever. What can I do to help you?"

"It means something to me that you'd ask," Linda said. "Look, I'm not quite ready to

go to sleep, so... wanna share a coffee? I can smell it, you know."

Brutus hummed, and got to his feet. "Sure. Then maybe we can run you a warm bath, and then you'll be able to get some sleep. I've got a quiet day of studying planned for when you're out, so I won't disturb you."

"Not as romantic as I'm sure you had in mind," Linda said, trying to get up, but Brutus waved her down. "Seriously?"

"Serious. You earned the chance to put your feet up and relax for a bit," Brutus assured her.

Going into the kitchen, he made her a cup of coffee just the way she liked it, with two spoonfuls of sugar and a dash of skim milk. Bringing it out along with a cup of black coffee for himself, he handed it to Linda, who took a grateful sip.

"Good?"

"You spoil me... I can get used to it," she said with a soft laugh. "Not too many people have. I don't let too many people even try."

"Why is that?" Brutus asked. "Because of your position in the unit?"

"Not just that, really," she admitted. "Growing up, we had to fend for ourselves a lot.

Maybe familia is big to us Boriquas, but when your parents are working ten, twelve hours a day just to put food on the table, that didn't leave a lot of time or energy to ask for anything from them.

So I learned not to. Then in the Army... yeah.

Women have been able to serve in the infantry for less than ten years.

I can remember as a little girl a time when women in the Army were only allowed to be in certain jobs.

Even now only a handful, about a hundred, have graduated from Ranger School.

I'm not one of them. That Charlie Company has three women is a statistical anomaly.

Me, Jess Adams, and Lieutenant Starr, we all have to fight for our right to be respected and accepted.

There's a lot of people, in uniform and out of uniform, that would see us out of the infantry and back to doing other jobs.

Some would try and force us fully out of the combat arms. To them, we're good for nothing more than being MPs, maybe the ADA.

And of course there's those who want to see the military go back to the days of women being nothing more than nurses and WACs, never wearing boots and being issued high heels for their uniform.

No fucking way am I letting that happen. "

"Is that why you didn't have this guy arrested?" Brutus asked. "To show that you weren't bothered by what happened?"

"Perhaps a bit. Let's face it, everyone's going to know it by Monday, and the only reason the officers are going to stay out of it is because they'll respect our decision to handle it in house.

They take notice, it requires paperwork.

" Linda sighed. "I had to ask myself, if this guy had tussled with a male NCO, take away the grope, would he be seeing paperwork?

Because as you can see, my boobs are just fine. "

"They do look like they're where they're supposed to be," Brutus admitted. "So would he?"

"In some units, sure. But I've always tried to give my soldiers a chance to fix their mistakes, to correct their shit. Hell, the guy's lucky really."

"So you fight," Brutus said. "In your way. Would it sound too biased if I said I think what you're saying is totally badass?"

"Maybe a little biased," Linda said, "but I like it."

"Yeah well, you're badass, fighting the way you do.

As for those people who say you shouldn't be in the infantry...

fuck that," he said. "I've seen you. Yeah, maybe if we played football you can't play linebacker, but then again in football I've learned that I can't play receiver, or lineman, or god forbid, kicker.

Could you imagine me trying to kick a football? "

"It may or may not go in the right direction down the field?" Linda asked.

Brutus nodded.

"Tell that to the people trying to take my job from me."

"And they're wrong. Because in football, every position is important," Brutus said.

"And you can help your team win from any position.

I mean, look at the scoreboard, and I'll tell you that our kicker scores more points in a single season than I have in my entire career.

What you're doing... that's the sort of leadership the military needs.

If I were to turn my future kids over to the military, I'd hope their drill sergeant would be like you. "

Linda took a long drink of coffee, and set it aside. "Speaking about that, what are your thoughts on kids?"

"Do you mean have I thought about having them?" Brutus asked, surprised by Linda's question.

Linda nodded.

"Well, sure. I mean I come from a decent sized family, and I've definitely got a nest egg ready for them when the time's right. I do know I'm going to be a different dad than too many of the teammates I've had."

"What do you mean?"

Brutus sighed, shaking his head as he finished his own coffee.

"There's too much accuracy to the stories about pro athletes and fatherhood.

Too many parenting via child support checks.

We've got a wide receiver who literally has to get the team to cut the game checks to four different women because of how much he fucked around.

He can't even name two of the kids, that's how bad it is.

I won't be that way. I'm going to be there for my kids, and I'm going to make time for them.

" He lifted an eyebrow, looking up at Linda.

"What about you? Have you thought about children? "

"Sometimes, but in mostly non-concrete ways," she admitted.

"Like, I know if I have a baby, that's it for me in Charlie Company.

I'd be non-deployable for two years, the whole pregnancy and then twelve months afterwards.

That's an eternity for an infantry NCO, I'd basically be losing my entire Staff Sergeant time.

So I'd have to either transfer to another branch, become a schoolhouse NCO... or leave the Army."

"None of which sound like something you want to do," Brutus said, and Linda nodded.

"Until I met you, I'd never even met someone I thought I'd want to even have kids

with," Linda said.

"But you're... different, Brutus. Maybe I'm just so fucking tired that I can't stop my mouth, but when I think of you, and the past week staying here with you all the time...

yeah, a baby sounds nice. I figure your DNA and my DNA could make a pretty decently smart kid. Good looking one, too."

"As long as we don't make a daughter with her father's shoulders and weak ankles." Brutus got to his feet. "You know, maybe there is a little time for what I had hoped to do before going to sleep."

"And what did you have in mind?" Linda asked, taking Brutus's hand and climbing to her feet. "Because if you were thinking sheet ripping, headboard banging wild monkey sex, I hate to tell you buddy, I'm in no mood for that."

"No, I was thinking some soft kisses, a little snuggling, and if we do end up having sex, it'll be slow and gentle," Brutus assured her. "How's that sound?"

"Perfect." Linda whooped when Brutus swept her into his powerful arms. "Whoa there, stud!"

"Saving your energy for the snuggling," Brutus assured her, kissing her lips quickly. "I think we can start with..."

Linda's cell phone rang, and she winced. Brutus immediately set her down, his eyebrows knitting. "What is it?"

Linda went over to her phone and looked, sighing.

"Fuck my life." She picked up the call, holding the phone to her ear. "Yeah? Yeah... okay. Yeah, my gear's still in my room. Yeah, cool. Thanks, Orkin. Cool. Be there ASAP."

"Bad news?" Brutus asked as Linda hung up and sat down to pull her boots back on. "Linda?"

"That was First Sergeant Orkin." She tucked a trouser leg into her boot. "I'm going to have to take a raincheck on the snuggling, my love. Charlie Company just got recalled. Duty calls."

LINDA

"How're you feeling?" Lieutenant Parker asked Linda as the company assembled in the motorpool.

It was three hours since recall, and she'd been ordered to rest while the rest of the company handled preliminary preparations.

The attempted rest had left her physically refreshed but mentally foggy, caught between sleep and wakefulness. The ninety minutes in her room had passed in a blur, simultaneously an eternity and mere minutes.

"I'll be fine, sir." She leaned against the bumper of the Humvee behind her. "If this is a full roll out, I'll grab sleep on the plane."

Parker nodded and moved on, leaving Linda alone.

She felt weird, and not just because of the lack of sleep.

Her stomach roiled, and her body felt sweaty in a way that wasn't typical for the early summer heat.

Her skin felt clammy, and if it wasn't a recall, she'd get herself checked at a medical clinic.

She felt slightly off balance, and as she waited for Major Kirk to brief the company, a gnawing worry chewed at her mind.

She couldn't get that conversation with Brutus off her mind. The end of it, their discussion of children. She'd started it for some instinctual reason, and she was reminded of her sister. Her sister, with so many children, but who knew even before her first missed period she was pregnant.

Each. Time.

Sure, she was taking the pill, but she and Brutus hadn't been 'safe-safe.' And pills could fail, especially if stress or changes in her routine played hell with her hormones. She'd ignored the first rule of the weekend safety brief that she'd been telling soldiers for years.

Always use a condom.

She never had, not from the beginning with Brutus, and now she wondered, when was her last period?

Thinking back, she did the math in her head... and knew what she had to do before the mission kicked off. But she set that aside as Major Kirk entered the motor pool, his face grim.

"Gather around Charlie Company," he said, and Linda inwardly winced.

It was Major Kirk who'd named Charlie Company 'Cranked,' and he was the one person who almost always referred to the company that way.

He only called them Charlie Company when things had the potential to get bad.

"Pentagon's recalled us on this Saturday for... a big one," Major Kirk began. "An Army helicopter's gone down in Southeast Asia."

Linda felt her shoulders tense. Southeast Asia meant mud, jungle, and multiple warring factions who all hated Americans equally.

"Another clusterfuck," she thought, remembering the rumors about escalating tensions in the region. The kind of conflict that never truly ended, just simmered until it boiled over again.

Major Kirk's face hardened. "The situation's complicated. We've got a multiparty conflict that's been escalating recently. What one side calls insurgents, the UN calls refugees, and human rights organizations are calling ethnic cleansing victims."

A murmur rippled through the assembled soldiers. Linda exchanged glances with Sergeant Orkin, both of them recognizing the political minefield they were about to enter.

"The helicopter crashed in an active conflict zone," Kirk continued, his voice dropping an octave. "And now we've got terrorist cells and military groups from all sides converging on the site, looking to use it as leverage against the United States."

Kirk cleared his throat, scanning the faces before him.

"I'm sure some of you are wondering how a single helicopter can create so much of an issue.

Well, besides the whole Blackhawk Down effect.

.. there is an Assistant Secretary of State aboard.

So we're tasked with going in, securing our people, and getting the hell out of there before we do have another Somalia or Benghazi situation to deal with. "

"Sir, what's an Assistant Secretary of State doing in a warzone?" someone asked.

Linda's mind raced with the implications. High-level diplomats didn't just wander into conflict zones for fun.

Kirk's mouth tightened. "That's above all of our pay grades. But it was an Army chopper, on an Army flight. So we're going to go clean up the mess."

He didn't need to say more. Linda knew what that meant: someone higher up had made a mistake, and now soldiers would be risking their lives to fix it. The same old story.

"We're going in light, using the smaller vehicles," Kirk said, his voice shifting to tactical mode.

"The roads won't support our heavier trucks—too much mud from recent rains.

Get your gear, weapons ready, and grab your wet weather equipment.

We're wheels up from the airfield in three hours.

Full operation order will be at the airfield. Let's go!"

The company broke into a flurry of activity, and Linda threw herself into her job. She'd told Lieutenant Parker she could sleep on the plane, and she knew that was going to be the case. In the meantime she had a job to do.

"Hollywood, Satomura," she called out, her voice sharp and efficient, "get those vehicles ready.

Dawkins, Jackson, handle the rest of the gear.

Light loadout, we're not planning on staying overnight.

Focus on food, water, and ammo. Both vehicles need to be fully loaded, gassed, and ready to go in ninety minutes. "

"Hooah Sarge," Goodman replied as he and Satomura headed for the vehicles.

Linda looked around, and saw that Terry Atkins had his team working well. Still, her thoughts before Kirk started talking didn't leave her mind, and she knew she had to do something about it.

"Sergeant Orkin, got a sec?" Linda pulled him aside, her heart pounding with more than just pre-mission adrenaline. "Look, this is really out of the norm, but I need to disappear for twenty minutes."

"For what?" Orkin asked. When Linda didn't answer, he sighed. "Your team's on top of things?"

"They're good. You know I wouldn't ask if it wasn't an emergency, Aaron," she whispered, using his first name to push her point. "I promise, I'll be back by the time Hollywood and Satomura get the vehicles ready."

Orkin sighed again, and reached into his pocket.

"Here, take my car. Just park at the company offices, if anyone asks I sent you to make sure the weapons are squared away. I'll make sure Linc and the El-Tee are distracted... as if they're not already."

Linda nodded gratefully and rushed from the motor pool. Her mind raced with possibilities as she clutched Orkin's keys, the metal digging into her palm. What would she tell Brutus if she was right? How would this change everything between

them?

Jumping into Orkin's slightly out of place Honda, she quickly drove to the PX, where she ran inside to the pharmacy area, buying the first test she saw.

"Where's the toilet?" she asked the girl who rang up her purchase. The girl pointed without comment, and Linda ran down the hallway, locking herself in the stall and pulling her pants down.

There's no way this is going to give me a good reading. I'm stressed, sleep deprived, caffeinated to the fucking gills, I doubt I can even?—

Her flow came, soaking the end of the absorbent tip. While the test did its thing, she washed her hands, looking into the mirror and asking herself if she was ready for this.

She had just started talking about motherhood with Brutus. She wasn't even sure if she was ready for it.

Yet there was no way she was going to get rid of the baby if she was pregnant. Forget religion, there was no way she could not do everything in her power to grow any life that was started inside her body.

But motherhood scared the hell out of her.

Looking into her reflected eyes, the brown eyes so much like her mother's back in Puerto Rico, her mind flooded with memories of growing up wanting.

Of what her sister went through. Of struggle, and sacrifice, and still not being able to have the sort of life that she knew her parents wanted for her.

Of a single night in Bayamon, and terror that left her, if not raped, traumatized and

desperate to get the hell off of Puerto Rico, never to return.

The timer on her watch beeped, and Linda took a deep breath. She was a soldier, dammit. She was a warrior. She was a fighter, and she was sure she wasn't going to be alone no matter what.

"Hell, if anything I'll get Jess Adams to be the godmother," Linda joked to herself in the empty bathroom. "That'll make sure the baby's protected."

She thought of Brutus, of his smile when they'd talked about children. Would he be happy? Terrified? Both? Her own emotions were such a tangled mess she couldn't begin to imagine sorting his out too.

Taking a final deep breath, she turned her eyes to the test. The results were supposed to be clear, white for not pregnant, and blue...

It was blue.

brUTUS

The barbell tore into Brutus's hands, the assistance straps he was using pulling on his wrists as well. He groaned, straining against the heavy barbell with its four hundred pounds in plates and half a dozen heavy chains for additional work, trying to clear his mind.

No dice. Just as the bar got above his knees, the thought of Linda being in danger filled his mind, distracting him. He felt his body slip out of the 'groove,' and half a second later the bar crashed down to the platform, unable to move.

"You okay, Brutal?" Buddy, the gym manager, asked him.

Buddy was a longtime powerlifter, who'd coached quite a few local lifters all the way to the US Nationals. While his expertise didn't quite extend to pro football preparation, he was more than willing to do what he could to help Brutus in his preseason prep.

"Muscle?"

"No... head." Brutus unstrapped himself from the bar. "Linda got recalled yesterday."

"Hmmm... figured that was why Jess Adams didn't come on." Buddy nodded his head sagely. "And you haven't heard anything?"

"Nope. I tried giving Sabby Goodman a call, she sort of helped last time, but she doesn't know anything of course. She's just perfectly secure in knowing that her sister

and her husband are coming back safe and sound because they're both able to piss lightning and crap thunder."

"Yup, that sounds like Sabby," Buddy said. "She's Jess's biggest fan. I saw her cheer Jess on at a local powerlifting tournament, and she was a whirlwind of energy, yelling instructions like a coach!"

"That's fine Buddy, but what do I do about up here?" Brutus asked, tapping his head. "Fuck man, this is..."

"Hard as hell?" Buddy asked.

Brutus nodded.

"I get to train amazing people, but they disappear in the middle of the night, and I might never know what happened to them. It's...hard. Look, maybe talk to the battalion. They've got family groups. You're not family, but...you are family. The way you talk about Linda, you are."

Brutus thought about it, and nodded. "You're right. Okay, let me put this shit away and-"

"And you go shower up, get changed," Buddy said agreeably. "I'll handle the bar this time. Way you are right now, you'd probably drop a damn chain on your foot and then I'd have the Bluecats coaches yelling for my ass. No thank you, sir."

Grateful, Brutus rushed back to the house to pull on a clean Bluecats t-shirt and workout shorts. Pausing, knowing he might be running with his emotions, he called up Dr. Caster. Luckily, the man was available.

"Brutus, what's the emergency?"

"Doc, Linda got recalled and I'm freaking the fuck out," Brutus admitted. "I'm scared man, and the gym manager said that I should go talk to the unit. Is that a smart idea, or am I just being a damned fool?"

"Probably both," Dr. Caster said. "Brutus, it's clear that your relationship with Linda has gotten to the point that it's a long term, maybe even permanent, thing.

As such, you need to make sure that the unit loops you in as much as they can.

That being said, don't expect miracles. From what you've said, they're under very strict security rules. "

"I know."

"You might be rebuffed."

Brutus sighed, nodding. "I know."

"Just keep that in mind when you try. If you're turned away, it's not personal. Accept your emotions before you pop off about them, and you'll be fine," Caster said. "And when you get a chance, call me afterwards. Just to let me know you're okay."

"I will. Thanks, Doc."

Grabbing his keys, Brutus drove to the front gate of the base. The guard, recognizing him, stopped him.

"What's up, sir?"

"I know it's Sunday, but is there anyone at the 3/3 I can talk to? Colonel Remsburg or Major Kirk or someone?" Brutus asked. "I just... need to know what I can."

The guard hummed, and held up a finger. Going inside the guard shack he made a call, coming out a minute later.

"Sir, Colonel Remsburg is currently unavailable, but Major Kota's available. He can meet you at the battalion headquarters."

"Thank you. Please tell them I'm coming," Brutus said.

The guard waved him through. Following the now familiar roads, he drove just a few blocks further, past the three company areas to the battalion headquarters, where he parked.

A lieutenant in uniform came out, checking him out. "Brutus Townsend."

"Jim Peters, Bravo Company," the lieutenant replied. "I'm the current duty officer today. I already called Major Kota, he'll be here in a few minutes."

"Thanks. Is there... Christ man, I don't know what to do." Brutus balled his fists, digging them into his temples in frustration. "Fucking therapist says just accept the emotions, but what the fuck do you do when the emotions are like this?"

Peters waved him over to a picnic table, sitting down on top of it. Brutus joined him, the two of them sitting side by side, their knees splayed, their elbows resting on their thighs.

"If it helps, my friend's the same way," Peters said, "and he's an officer too. It's gotten to the point that he tells me to not even tell him when I'm being sent on a mission, just send him a text when I get back and can count to twenty one on my digits. That's his words, not mine."

"He's not here at Fort Pickett?" Brutus asked.

Peters shook his head.

"Yeah, we're doing semi-long distance ourselves. He's at Fort Lee. It's not ideal, but we make it work, you know? I miss him like crazy when he's gone."

Brutus nodded, feeling a connection. Someone who understood the ache in his chest.

"Linda's only been gone a day and I'm already losing it."

"Here's Major Kota," Peters said, nodding toward the parking lot.

Brutus faintly remembered meeting Justin Kota before, when he'd been processing in and out of the 3/3 for his week of training with Charlie Company. Shorter than most officers, he had a compact body that Brutus suspected was quite strong for its size.

"Brutus, it's good to see you again," Kota greeted him, offering a hand.

He was dressed for the weekend, a gray polo shirt and khaki shorts that made him look like he was getting ready to spend the afternoon golfing rather than talking with Brutus.

"Sorry Colonel Remsburg's unavailable."

"Unavailable as in the man's got a cold, unavailable as in he doesn't want to talk to me, or unavailable as in he's nowhere near Fort Pickett?" Brutus asked. "It makes a difference."

"Certainly does," Kota replied, taking a deep breath but not answering. Another car pulled up, and a man got out. "Ah, here's the Padre."

"Padre?" Brutus asked worriedly as he saw the man put a necklace on, a crucifix.

"Does that mean..."

"No, no." Kota waved Brutus down. "Chris Morgan's the battalion chaplain, but I asked him here because he's also sort of a counselor for us. And it'll be good to have another set of ears to make sure we're clear on what I say, you know?"

Brutus sighed in relief, and shook Morgan's hand when it was offered. "So you're the chaplain, huh?"

"First Lieutenant Chris Morgan," he replied with a nod and a chuckle.

"Major Kirk and I have swapped a few stories about his struggles during his time as a captain.

I can only imagine what a priest named Captain Morgan's going to have to deal with.

So, when Major Kota called me, I can guess what you're asking about. Charlie Company."

"I'm a nervous wreck," Brutus admitted. "My therapist said I should at least come talk to you guys, see what you can tell me.

Look, last time, I wasn't around. I was busy, and since it was just a small thing I was sort of able to handle it.

But this... this is tearing me apart. I was about to tuck her into bed when the damn call came. No offense Father."

"Just Chris," Morgan said. "I'm not Catholic, and my seminary doesn't grant titles for a job like mine."

"So this is your second deployment," Kota said.

He indicated that Brutus should walk with him, and they did, leaving the picnic table behind to walk through the series of nearly interconnected parking lots towards Charlie Company's barracks and offices.

They in all reality were connected, with smooth dirt gaps between each paved area to delineate what belonged to who.

"How'd you handle it the first time?"

"Team minicamp," Brutus said. "I got the notification by text message, so I was able to sort of put it out of my mind. It wasn't until she got back and I saw the bruises on her body that I... dammit. I keep getting her in trouble with you, don't I Padre?"

Morgan shook his head. "There are much worse issues that I have to deal with than a single man and single woman being physically intimate without the approval of the church. So Castellanos was hurt in her last mission?"

"She was shot in her body armor," Brutus said. "That's all she could tell me, which makes it even worse because now she's gone, literally from my arms, and there's not a damn thing I can do about it!"

Brutus growled, balling his hands into fists. He felt so powerless, and he hated it, screwing his eyes shut, he confessed, "Dammit, the woman I love is in danger and I'm sitting here in the fucking sun doing jack shit about it!"

He felt tears threaten, and was surprised when he felt a warm hand on his neck. "Padre, I don't need..."

"That isn't me," Morgan said.

Brutus opened his eyes to see Major Kota patting him on the back, rubbing his neck. Morgan was standing next to him, his hands behind his back and a knowing smile on his face. Kota's comforting grip was so surprising that Brutus stopped, and Kota removed his hand.

"I understand," Kota said. "Not that I have any lovers, my wife's at home today.

But my friends are out there right now in Alpha and Charlie companies.

If it helps, I've gotten some communication from Colonel Remsburg, they're doing just fine.

Keep that between us. But it sucks, sitting here trying to hold down the fort while people we care about are in harm's way. "

"How do you deal with it?" Brutus asked.

Kota shook his head.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:08 am

"I'm not the man to talk to," Kota admitted.

"Do you know why I took the XO spot here?

I turned down my silver oak leaf this last promotion cycle to remain the XO of the 3/3 because I love Special Ops so much.

Now, you can guess how much my wife liked me passing up five thousand dollars a year to hang out here in Virginia instead of being a battalion commander in Texas or Kentucky or better yet, Germany.

Especially since I'm nearing twenty years in service.

If I don't get my ass up and out of here soon, the Army's going to say goodbye to me.
"

"So who would I talk to?" Brutus asked. "Sabby's nice, but she's... no offense, she's young as hell. And my therapist doesn't understand. He'll let me talk, and knows a lot of psychology, but he doesn't know."

Kota laughed. "True. If you want though, you might try talking to my wife.

She's faced this for a long time, going all the way back to my first deployment.

I was a still wet behind the ears butter bar, the epitome of the old joke that the most dangerous person in the Army is a second lieutenant who says his troops should do something based on his experience.

I was in the Tenth Mountain back then, and at that time, communications back home were spotty at best. We were out in the boonies of Afghanistan, literally in the mountains for most of it, and the best I could do was get a once a week email, and a ten minute video call about once every two months.

To say it was hard for Nina is understating things. "

"So how'd you get through it?" Brutus asked. "Because I'm near nuts, and it's only been about a day."

"Lot of faith, which the Padre here can help you with if you want," Kota said, "and she got into other activities.

There's a reason so many military spouses get into those home sales careers.

They talk about becoming a regional rep or whatever, but the truth is they're throwing those Tupperware parties, makeup parties, candle parties, whatever, because they need something to put all that energy into.

If they don't do that, they throw themselves into being parents, or they find some other hobby.

For Nina it's the guitar. She started learning, and now is a really good acoustic player.

She teaches lessons, if you're interested. "

"Guitar player, huh?" Brutus considered it. Anything to fill the emptiness Linda left behind.

"Unfortunately, her and Sabby Goodman have very different tastes in what constitutes good guitar music," Kota said agreeably. "Actually, guitar is why Nina

came to mind when you mentioned Sabby. I thought of someone else in the battalion who can help guide you. They've both had lots of experience."

"So why stay in the unit?" Brutus asked. "You've done your bit for king and country, as the saying goes."

"Here in my gut, I can't walk away," Kota said.

"My time in the operational combat world is drawing to a close unless a battalion command in the 75th Rangers opens up, but I'm not leaving until I have to.

I did move to special operations like the 3/3 though because our missions do tend to be short, in and out missions.

While those almost always mean we can't talk with the family back home, we're also home a lot more.

I've been able to be there for both of my daughter's births, and only missed one graduation, a preschool graduation for my younger daughter. "

"That's not too bad," Brutus said. "I mean, preschool isn't exactly high school. Linda and I have been talking about the challenges of the upcoming season. I'm going to be working a football player's schedule, which doesn't line up with the Army all that well."

"Good point," Kota acknowledged. "I can advise you that if you're this worked up about it now, it means that whatever feelings you have for Castellanos are deep, and they're genuine. Now I'm not one to go pushing people into matchmaking situations, but I won't be not cheering for you."

Brutus nodded, and after a bit more conversation, including exchanging phone

numbers with Kota and Morgan, got ready to leave. "Hey, Chris?"

Morgan stopped at his car, and came over. "Yeah?"

"Doesn't it bother you, the Major calling you 'Padre' when you're not Catholic?" he asked curiously. "Or is it a military chaplain thing?"

Morgan laughed softly. "The second one. I think ever since M*A*S*H, just about every military chaplain in the service has been called 'Padre' at some point or another.

I don't mind. I'm here to counsel and comfort the troops, regardless of how they prefer to have a relationship with a Higher Power. "

"So you counsel other faiths?"

Morgan nodded. "If possible of course I'll direct a soldier to someone of their own faith as a matter of professional courtesy.

But in a pinch, I've discussed some Buddhist holy texts with troops.

In Sergeant Castellanos's team, Takeshi Satomura and I have had fascinating conversations about the interplay of faiths in his homeland, and the Shinto underpinnings of much of Japanese culture. "

"Interesting."

"By the way, I would suggest calling Nina Kota. Nina's not just a good guitar player, she's also the head of the battalion Family Readiness Group. It's imperfect, but they help in times like this."

Brutus nodded, stroking his chin. "I might.

.. because I'm going to recruit them for something.

I did it last time they had a mission as well.

When the companies get back, I'm going to throw them a welcome home party.

I don't have a lot of time until I have to report to training camp, and I'm going to make every minute I can with Linda special. "

"That's sounds like a good thing," Morgan said, "but if I can offer some advice, don't throw the party.

It'll become a habit, and once those are set, it'll cause hurt feelings when the habit stops.

Now, spoil and pamper Castellanos? Of course.

But the 3/3 are professionals. Now if you want to throw them a big Christmas or Thanksgiving party, they'll be more than happy for that.

But the battalion tends to keep their coming home celebrations internal and casual.

At least until your last dose of generosity, which they probably excused because you were a first timer. "

"Okay, plan adjusted." Brutus took a deep breath. "Guess I'll head home, talk to Dr. Caster to let him know I'm not losing my mind. Then maybe do some cardio. Linebackers can't ever have too much of an engine, you know?"

"Enjoy yourself," Morgan said with a gentle smile.

LINDA

"Hey Linda, remember what I said about liking this job for the weather?" Orkin said, the truck bucking violently as it crawled down the ruined road, the undercarriage groaning with each bump.

"Sure do." Linda scanned the terrain around them, trying to peer through the mist and rain that was slamming down on them hard and heavy. "Changed your mind?"

"I'd rather be back home," Orkin admitted as he shook his head, trying to clear his vision.

She understood, since landing at the crappy airfield that seemed barely able to handle the C-17 aircraft they'd spent the entire time soaked to the bone in water that was too warm to be called rain. It felt like they were being soaked in tepid tea more than anything else.

Linda gripped her rifle tighter, her senses on high alert.

They were exposed, riding in these vehicles like sitting ducks.

Every rustle of leaves, every shadow among the hills seemed to hold a threat.

A brief image of Brutus flashed in her mind, his concerned face when she'd told him about this deployment, the way he'd held her just a little longer before she left.

The truck, little more than a glorified pickup with chunky tires, was fast and could

handle the muddy conditions when heavier vehicles would get bogged down. But one well-placed shot and they'd be in serious trouble.

Still, every person in the convoy was on guard, their weapons at the ready as they scanned the forest and hills that surrounded them for any signs of trouble.

Parker's voice crackled over the comms. "We've got a signal. They're holed up in a village about five kilometers ahead."

"Understood," Orkin replied. "What's the plan?"

"Be prepared to dismount and cover the last two kilometers on foot," Parker answered. "Charlie Six wants?—"

Up ahead shots rang out, and a roaring explosion tore through the air. Linda instinctively ducked, her eyes scanning the hills, but she didn't see anything. Goodman, who was driving, also ducked, but kept control of the vehicle.

"Shit! Where?—"

"Charlie Company!" Major Kirk called out over the company wide network. "First Platoon on me, get the hills on the north. Second Platoon with the XO, secure the south. Third, get your asses in there and get that aircrew! Vehicles authorized!"

Kirk clicked off, and the next instant Lieutenant Parker was on the platoon net. "Third Platoon, follow me!"

Up ahead, Parker's vehicle leapt down the road, accelerating hard as they could. First Squad was right behind him, Hollywood keeping a grim hold on the steering wheel as he pushed his foot down harder.

Linda was terrified. This wasn't the same fright of a normal mission. She'd been under fire enough times. But this time, only one thought ran through her head.

The baby.

Gripping her rifle tighter, Linda drew herself up as much as she could, knowing that her helmet and body armor was scant protection, but still wanting as much as she could as the six vehicles roared towards the small village.

It was a farming village Linda could see, a collection of maybe two dozen shanty houses gathered around a central wooden building that was clearly some sort of community center, or temple or something important as it had what looked like rock walls of some sort.

It was near the road, and as they reached the edge of the village trucks started peeling off as squads covered the village.

It was fast, it was violent... it was what they'd trained to do. Years of training kicked in as Linda and Hollywood took the first door, Hollywood taking the lead.

"US Army!" he bellowed, his voice ringing out before he kicked in the door. "Americans!"

Hearing only slight movement and muffled sounds inside, they swept the house, a simple three room building with rough, worn planks laid down as a floor.

In the main room there they found three people, a man, a woman, and a small girl.

The child was trying to scream, but her mother had her hand clamped over the child's mouth to stifle her screams.

Linda could see why, as the dirty dress the child had on was stained red on her side, and Linda's instincts kicked in again.

"Shit... Hollywood, verify the other rooms," Linda said, covering him while staying in the main room. When Goodman came out, giving her a clearing nod, she got on her radio. "Medic, this is Castellanos. Wounded civilian!"

"Second priority," Lieutenant Parker replied. "Air crew secure, two injured."

Linda wanted to argue, but held her tongue.

She knew Parker was right. Their job was to get the American air crew out of danger, not treat the local civilians who were obviously caught in some sort of crossfire.

She couldn't even stay, there were more buildings to sweep and secure before they could be assured the village didn't have any rebels waiting for them.

Still, she reached to her chest, pulling out her combat bandage. Ripping the plastic package open with her teeth, she tossed it to the woman. "We'll send help as soon as we can."

The woman took the bandage, saying something in the local language that Linda didn't understand, but understood perfectly. It was a combination of thank you, what the hell's happening, and can you help my daughter? Linda wished she could answer.

"We'll be back."

She and Hollywood swept three more buildings before rallying with the rest of the team and squad, using the buildings for cover as the rest of Charlie company swept the hills.

It was a tense hour, and Linda's heart never stopped hammering as she tried to keep her team safe, keeping them behind cover and their weapons at the ready. After about fifteen minutes, Orkin came up, staying low as he jogged between buildings.

"What's the sitch, Castellanos?"

"The buildings are nothing but civilians, one wounded little girl," Linda replied, staying on a knee behind the cinderblock wall she was currently using for cover. "The locals are staying low, not leaving their homes."

"The local honcho told them to," Orkin said.

"Linc came by, gave me the rundown. The air crew had to evac, rebels were on their ass, and got taken to the big building in the middle by the villagers.

One of the crew's got a broken arm. Rebels attacked, and what passes for two local cops fought them off with the air crew, but people got wounded.

Doc's treating them now, and will get to your little girl next. Where's she shot?"

"The side..." Linda started before her emotions swelled up and she fought back a sob.

She thought of Brutus again, wondering if her heightened emotions were pregnancy hormones or just the raw humanity of seeing a child caught in the crossfire of adult conflicts.

Clearing her throat, she gave Orkin a thumbs up. "Hooah."

"Okay, just keep an eye... hey, rain's letting up," Orkin noted, glancing at the sky. It was raining less, the fat drops drifting off to a gentle shower.

"Take it for a good sign, right?"

"Right."

Orkin moved on and Linda kept her watch, checking on the other four members of her team until Doc, the attached medic from the battalion command, came by with one of the locals.

"You've got a wounded civilian?" he asked, and Linda nodded. "Where?"

Linda led them to the house, where the mother had pressed Linda's bandage against the girl's wound. The girl was still conscious, but looked weaker, and Linda's throat tightened as Doc went to work, looking the girl over.

Doc called for an IV, motioning for the father to stand. While the mother held the little girl and the local man translated, Doc examined the wound with gentle, careful movements. Linda watched the little girl's face—so brave despite the pain, so innocent in a world that should never have hurt her.

Doc spoke reassuringly as he worked, explaining that the wound appeared clean and treatable. He administered medications through the IV to help with clotting and prevent infection, working quickly but thoroughly.

"If she's lucky, she'll recover," Doc said softly, finishing the bandaging. He handed additional supplies to the translator and turned to Linda. "Come on Castellanos, we need to go."

Linda nodded, wiping at her eyes as tears started to flow.

She couldn't hold them back, her heart just ripped apart at the pain and anguish in the little girl's face.

But there was nothing she could do as she and Doc retreated to the village headquarters, where the rest of the platoon was loading up.

She saw the downed aircrew, including their priority target, the Assistant Secretary of State who looked more than a little rattled by the whole ordeal.

There's someone who's not leaving Washington for a long time , Linda thought bitterly. Lucky fucker. Hope you enjoy Georgetown.

She thought of Brutus back home, how he'd understand this moment without her having to explain it. How he'd wrap those strong arms around her and just listen. The thought both comforted and pained her, he was so far away when she needed him most.

Climbing into her vehicle, they had a new passenger, Sergeant Lincoln, who gave up the space in his vehicle for the air crew.

"Let's roll," Linc told Goodman, who drove quickly. It wasn't quite as fast as when they'd roared into the village, but as the platoon retreated, Linda was grateful to see other trucks join the convoy.

Still, as they drove, Linda couldn't help but think of the haunted looks of the villagers. Americans had come to their village, bringing with them nothing but pain and destruction. The most that the platoon could do was offer gauze and some antibiotics.

That was it.

"What'll happen to the village?" Linda asked Sergeant Lincoln. "The rebels?"

"The lieutenant said Major Kirk's in contact with the government," Linc replied.

"Government troops may or may not come through to assist, since the government is supposed to be our buddies. We'll see."

Linda nodded, wiping away another tear. They reached a paved road, and as the convoy started back towards the airfield, she couldn't hold it back any longer.

The little girl, the futility of it all, the death, the pain... setting her rifle aside, she lowered her head and sobbed, burying her face in her arms until her chest racked with aches and cramps from trying to breathe bent over in the truck while weighed down with body armor.

"Sarge... Sarge, you okay?" Goodman asked. "Sarge!"

"Y... yeah." Linda sat up and wiped her eyes. "Yeah, I'll be okay."

"I get it," Linc said to Linda, not upset at all by her display of emotion. "It's a shitty deal all around. But nobody in the platoon got hurt, nobody in the company's died. Take the win, Castellanos."

Linda nodded, but as the miles wheeled by, she knew she couldn't. She'd reached her limit, at least for a while.

Brutus's words came back to her unbidden. She remembered lying beside him on his couch, her head on his chest, his heartbeat steady in her ear as he talked about his injury.

"There's only so many big falls an athlete can take before the body just doesn't come back the way it used to," he'd said softly, his fingers tracing patterns on her shoulder. "When your bump card's full, even if the body wants to, it's time to hang up the cleats."

Linda didn't know about her physical bump card, but mentally... her bump card was full for the time being.

They got back to the airfield, where Alpha Company secured the field while Charlie loaded up.

The Assistant Secretary of State, who wasn't physically injured beyond being shaken up, got into a chopper alone while leaving the rest of the aircrew behind to catch the long ride back to the United States by cargo plane with the rest of the troops.

"Wonder if they've got champagne on there," Hollywood asked, watching the chopper take off. "Maybe an in-flight movie?"

"Probably flight attendants," Linda said darkly, shaking her head.

Spying Lieutenant Parker talking to Captain King, she approached the two officers, who were in the middle of a discussion on the company's after action report.

"Hey sir? Got a minute?"

"Sure." Parker took a damp cloth and wiped his face.

A roar filled the air, and the two of them looked over to see the chopper take off. Parker made a face, apparently the bad feelings over its usage transcended officer or enlisted.

"Remind me, if anyone wants to hand down medals for today... I don't want one."

"Agreed. Sir, I've got something to talk with you about." Linda took a deep breath. "Something... medical."

brUTUS

Brutus waited inside the echoing hangar. The cavernous space smelled of jet fuel and anticipation. "I appreciate you arranging this, Major," Brutus said, his gaze fixed on the empty tarmac. "I know I'm bending the rules."

Kota's reply was understanding. "Let's just say the battalion owes Castellanos a solid. And this return isn't exactly standard operating procedure, son."

Brutus ran a hand through his hair, glancing at the dust motes dancing in the shafts of sunlight that pierced the high windows.

"I've been glued to news sites, trying to figure out where they've been," Brutus admitted, running a hand through his hair.

Chris Morgan, in his camouflage uniform, offered a reassuring smile. "They don't tell me much either, Brutus. Just have faith in them."

Brutus hesitated. "I'm not much of a praying man, Chris. But I've been asking... hoping... that Linda doesn't have to be in danger anymore. That she doesn't have to spill any more blood."

Morgan nodded. "If she wants to stay in the infantry, that's the life she chose."

"I can still wish that Linda stays safe." Kota nodded thoughtfully. "There's a cadence... 'I'm not the fighter, I'm the fightin' man's son. But I'll do the fightin' until the fightin' man comes.' That's what we are, Brutus. Continuing a tradition. Even if

we don't enjoy it."

"So why do it?" Brutus asked.

Kota's gaze softened. "So that my wife, my daughters, and people I don't even know, might not have to go through what I've been through.

It might be temporary, the peace and security I provide might evaporate tomorrow.

But it's not going anywhere today. Not as long as the 3/3 has anything to say about it.
"

Brutus considered that, the weight of Kota's words settling heavily in the space between them.

The roar of jet engines cut through his thoughts. He rushed to the edge of the hangar, searching the sky. "I can't see them."

Kota's voice was calm. "They'll circle once."

Soon, the planes appeared, lumbering giants descending onto the runway. The engines whined down, ramps lowered, and the troops emerged, all in uniform. Brutus scanned the crowd, his heart pounding, searching for one face.

Then he saw her.

Chris Morgan pointed to the third aircraft. Brutus looked, his heart bursting in his chest as he saw Linda shake out her hair, the long, black tresses flowing down her shoulders before she pulled it back into a ponytail to tuck inside her uniform top.

"Go on, man. It's okay."

"Linda!" Brutus called, running onto the tarmac.

Linda stopped, shocked before dropping her bag and running to him. He caught her, swinging her around in the air before kissing her.

He could hear a couple of whistles, and a few good natured cat calls from some of the troops passing them.

"You don't kiss me that way when I come back, Brutal!" Takeshi Satomura joked as he walked by. "Not cool, bro!"

There was more laughter, but Brutus didn't care. He had Linda in his arms again, and that was all that mattered at the moment. "I missed you."

Linda hummed happily, not letting go of him. "I can see that."

"Having you practically torn out of my arms isn't a good feeling," Brutus said. "I'm sorry if I sound unenlightened, but?—"

"I'm pregnant," she said softly, not knowing the type of response that she was going to get. "I wasn't sure, so when we stopped in Japan to refuel and swap out air crews, I took another test. They confirmed it for me."

"You're pregnant."

Linda nodded worriedly. "I know we didn't plan it, and I swear that I was taking my birth control pills, but they don't always work and ..."

It was Brutus's turn to cut off Linda as he reached out, pulling her in for another deep kiss.

Lifting her up, he held her close, tears of joy trickling from his eyes and soaking into her uniform collar.

He held her until he was certain she wasn't a figment of his imagination, that she was real, and she was his.

"Congratulations," Lieutenant Parker said as he approached. Brutus set Linda down and laughed, shaking Parker's hand. "I'm sure you want to go celebrate your good news, but we've got to get back to the company area and check in some gear, do a final formation before I can release her to you."

"Can I help?" Brutus asked. "I know I'm just a civilian, but there's something I can do, right?"

"Sorry, but not this time," Parker said. "But if you wait back at the company area, I promise that as soon as we can, we're going to release everyone and you'll be able to take Castellanos home."

Linda cupped Brutus's face, kissing him sweetly. "Don't worry. I'm safe, I'm healthy, and it's just unloading equipment. These idiots won't even let me carry my own body armor right now. I love you, and I'll see you in a few hours."

Brutus nodded, but insisted on carrying Linda's bag to the waiting van. After it pulled away, he turned to see Chris Morgan standing there, smiling gently.

"You knew. You and Major Kota knew."

"Linda told her platoon leader and the XO, and they were duty bound to tell Major Kirk. Of course it worked its way up the chain," Morgan said amiably. "Why do you think Major Kota suggested you come here to the airfield?"

"Huh," Brutus admitted, chuckling. "Pretty devious for a man of the cloth."

Morgan shrugged. "Just taking after my boss. After all... if you look at it one way, your prayer was answered. Linda's not going to be in harm's way any longer."

Brutus stopped, blinking. "Huh... how about that?" He started walking towards his truck, Morgan keeping up with him. "You do Sunday services, Padre?"

"Sorry, not personally," Morgan said. "There isn't a big enough active element on Fort Pickett to call for it. But if you're interested, we can talk sometime. Give me a call."

"I just might."

* * *

The house was quiet as he carried her inside, his arms not straining at all as he held her close.

"Welcome home."

Linda smiled, holding him close. "It's good to be home. And this feels familiar."

Brutus paused in the living room, humming. "True. Just about a week ago, I was getting ready to carry you to the bedroom and cuddle you to sleep. Now, I'm getting ready to take you to the bedroom again."

"For cuddles?" Linda asked playfully, running her fingers through Brutus's hair. "You're growing it out some. I like it."

She was light as a feather in his arms as he entered the bedroom before setting her

down on her feet, taking her hands.

"I love you, Linda Castellanos. That you're going to have my child is a gift beyond measure. That I have you in my life is even more of a gift."

Slowly he unzipped her uniform top, smoothing it off her shoulders before letting it fall to the ground.

He was never tired of watching her body reveal itself as the shapeless, functional Army uniform dropped to the floor.

The way the curve of her breasts became something more than a blob of camo, the way her hips went from nonexistent to flared outward, it was no wonder why he was rock hard in his pants even before he'd slipped her boots off and pulled off her socks to reveal her dainty little toes.

"Brutus, you're not... ohhhh," Linda moaned as he kissed her foot.

He didn't know what it was about the nerves in the foot that was so erotic to Linda, but he didn't care either. All he knew was that as he kissed her big and second toe, she was already almost panting.

"Yes I am, Linda." He laid her foot down on the bed before stripping off his t-shirt and pushing his pants off. "I'm going to do everything you like, and do it again, and again, until you're mine forever."

"And what if I already am?" she asked.

Brutus smiled.

"Then I get to do it again... forever."

Climbing into the bed, he kissed her, their mouths merging as seamlessly as their souls. It was a soulful kiss, with Brutus pouring his heart into it. Linda returned it just as deeply, and as he broke the seal to kiss down her neck, he could feel his heart bursting inside him.

"Mine," he whispered as he pulled her shirt off and helped her take off her bra, freeing her breast. "Mine."

"Yours," Linda assured him, gasping sharply as he sucked on a nipple. Her hands pulled him in deeper, and together they lifted her hips and pushed her pants off, leaving them skin to skin in the big bed.

"I want you everywhere." Brutus' hands explored her skin.

She was all curves and smooth lines, the utter epitome of beauty in his eyes, and knowing that the life growing inside her was there because of him left him breathless.

He could explore her skin for days without growing bored, and as he ran his fingers down the sides of her thighs she smiled, parting her legs for him.

Where she was even more beautiful, her skin slightly dusky yet silky soft, inviting his fingers. He stroked her, gathering her honey on his fingertips before licking them clean, smiling at the flavor. Linda hummed.

"You like?"

"I could go down on you every day," Brutus admitted, kissing her lips as he returned his hand to her wet folds, pushing inside her and pumping them slowly. "I could give you orgasms every day. I could have you every day."

"I will love you... every day," Linda promised him in between strokes of his fingers,

whimpering as he found the spots that he'd come to know and love so well.

He knew her body like he knew his own, better than he knew football, better than he knew anything in the entire world.

He brought her to the cusp of coming once, then twice, and finally on the third time Linda could take no more. Pushing him back, she rolled on top of him, swinging a leg over and immediately spearing herself upon him.

"Fuck yes!" she growled, planting her hands on his chest. "Just remember baby, I might be pregnant... but I sure as fuck ain't fragile. And if you doubt me, I might just ride you off."

Brutus grinned, reaching back and smacking Linda's ass playfully. She yelped, grinning as she started to rise and fall on his manhood, squeezing herself around him with every stroke.

She was right, he knew. He'd said again and again that she was a warrior, that she was badass, but he almost never treated her like that in bed. He was always gentle, tender... but as he grabbed her hip and rolled her over, he knew what his love wanted.

"Not if I blow your back out first," he growled, driving his hips hard into her. Linda yelped, crying out in pleasure as his hips slammed into her, his balls bouncing off her upturned hips.

Again and again he thrust, hard and savage, both of them loving the sensation. He never knew it could be this way, this overwhelming. Never had he had a lover who could take his unrestrained power.

But Linda could, and could give it back just as well, encouraging him and drawing more out of him. Her climaxes hit hard and fast but she didn't give into them, instead

using her orgasmic flutterings to clench and squeeze him.

Sweat glistened on their bodies, and she was grinning at him with a feral, unrestrained joy in her face that was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He could almost feel her throb as he ground against her, her walls squeezing him again and again, drawing her into him.

"Linda, I..." he gasped, and she clawed the back of his neck, pulling him down for a wild kiss as Brutus, with one final stroke, released inside her.

A week's worth of passion and seed flooded from him and into her, both of them moaning incoherently as the biggest orgasm yet swept through her.

He could feel her flutter, and finally sag to the mattress, utterly spent.

Brutus maintained his hold on her, rolling to the side carefully to keep her from being crushed as he stroked her hair, kissing her forehead.

"I didn't know."

Linda chuckled, and stroked her fingers down his back. "I know. It's not like I was disappointed before. It's always been the most amazing sex of my life. But now you know."

"Anything else you want me to know?"

Linda chuckled, and kissed his chin. "Yeah. But we've got time to learn and explore. That's what's great about a lifelong relationship. We've got time to learn... and time to cuddle."

She yawned, and Brutus looked down into her now sleepy eyes.

"Didn't sleep much on the plane, did you?"

"C-17's are better than C-130's... but yeah," she admitted. "Never do."

"Then sleep now, my love." Brutus kissed her forehead. "You're forever safe in my arms."

Linda nodded, and within seconds, was snoring lightly. It brought out the tears in Brutus's eyes again, because he knew she believed him. She would always, forever, be safe in his arms.

He closed his eyes, smiling at the thought.

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LINDA

"I t's going to suck to lose you," Hollywood said when she came out of the company offices.

The entire squad was there, and she could see that some of them were almost emotional about it.

"I keep this up, and people are going to start thinking I'm bad luck."

"Well, you are going to be on your third team leader in less than a year," Linda replied, smiling. "Then again, anyone who's looking for their soulmate might want to be in a fire team with you. You're good luck in that regard."

"Huh, we hadn't thought of that." Sergeant Orkin jabbed Hollywood in the shoulder. "What do you say there, Specialist as of next month Goodman? Want to be called Lucky instead of Hollywood?"

"Can we just call me by my name instead?" Goodman offered, getting laughs all around.

"So what happened?" Derrick Jackson asked her. "Are you leaving us permanently?"

"Yes and no." Linda got confused looks all around. "It seems that Colonel Remsburg happens to like my work. So at least for my pregnancy, I'm being transferred to Battalion Headquarters. I'm going to be working for Master Sergeant Austin in the intelligence office."

"Ooooh, Mata Hari!" Satomura teased. "Just try not to get yourself compromised with an enemy agent, Sarge."

"I wish it were that exciting," Linda admitted with a small smile.

"Ninety percent of the job is paperwork.

I'm more worried about my mind going dull than any explosion.

Apparently Major Elfman just gets most of the intel he feeds us straight from the Pentagon.

We're not exactly analyzing stuff up there. "

"Pssh, knowing you, you'll be running the place by Christmas," Orkin joked. "Rank or no rank. If we don't hear about you causing an international incident by Thanksgiving, I'm going to be disappointed in you."

Linda laughed softly. "Well, who knows. Major Kirk also said I'll probably get promoted to Staff Sergeant while I'm pregnant, and that it might be a good time for me to consider leaving active duty."

"No way!" Simon Dawkins exclaimed, legitimately upset. "Just because you're becoming a mom? Big fuckin..."

"Actually Simon, I think it might be a good time for me to rotate out too," Linda admitted. "And that wasn't why. I've been with this battalion since I was a low-ranking soldier. I became a Sergeant here, and I've been leading this team for a long time. I think I'm ready for a change."

"You sure, Sarge?" Satomura asked.

Linda nodded.

"Yabai. Fuck."

"I know. But on that last mission, I know it might have been just the hormones.

Shit, pregnancy is already messing with my head, and I can't seem to stop wanting cheese since getting back Stateside," Linda said with a soft laugh.

"But in that village... I think I reached my limit.

It's not saying I'm done forever, but I can definitely go a few years without smelling gunpowder or kicking in doors. "

"Hey, I totally get it," Orkin said. "Besides, you'll be doing something even harder than riding herd on a fire team. You'll be a mom. That's... whoo, if you've got any chips to call in with upstairs, just pray they're nothing like I was as a kid."

"I just hope she's nothing like me," Linda joked, getting more laughs. "Truth is though, I feel good about maybe rotating out after giving birth or whatever. I've proven myself to myself."

"You proved yourself to us too," Hollywood said. "I know Sergeant Adams started me on my path, but you definitely taught me a lot."

"Yeah well, you guys do me a favor," Linda said.

"We all know why we're here. I won't be out there on the front lines, not for a while at least. Don't forget why you do it, and don't forget that there's other Lindas and Takeshis and Logans and Simons and yes, even some little Derricks out there that you might be able to help. Keep your eyes out for them."

"Never forget, Sarge." Jackson cleared his throat. "And you don't forget who's going to be keeping you and Superstar safe at night, you feel me?"

"Always will," she promised him. "Even when I'm just pushing paper."

Hollywood laughed. "Paper airplane fights are coming soon to an intelligence office near you! But what about the long term, Sarge? The way you're talking, not coming back down here is one thing, but what about the Army as a whole?"

Linda shrugged, looking into the slightly overcast sky. "Who knows? Remember, I'm technically a single, pregnant woman right now. Now don't you idiots go running off saying you've got tea to spill, but those are facts."

"Yeah, for now," Jackson quipped. "We all saw that man. He might be the linebacker, but you're the one who tackled him. And you're not letting go."

"That might be, but we all know I'm not going to be some football WAG either," Linda said. Clearing her throat before her emotions got the better of her, she asked, "Say, don't you doofuses have work to do?"

"She's right." Orkin checked his watch. "Sergeant Lincoln's going to have our ass for lunch if we don't get those containers re-packed. Besides, you're still going to get a formal goodbye, right?"

"Yeah, I'll be there for end of day formation," Linda assured them.

"Major Kirk said he's going to give me the full farewell, so he's probably going to pin an ARCOM(? *) to my chest. Another bit of fruit salad for my dress uniform mostly.

In the meantime today, I get to move my gear into the HQ barracks. "

"Fun." Satomura gave her a nod. "You deserve a damn medal of honor. Take care of yourself, Sarge."

The squad left, and Linda watched them go before going back inside the barracks.

She'd already cleaned so much out, having moved half her uniforms and clothes into Brutus's rented house.

But she still had other things to pack up, and without a truck she was going to have to walk everything up to the new barracks.

Starting with her civilian clothes, she started folding and putting them into her duffel bag, figuring she could always dump the bag out in her new room before getting the rest. She was about halfway done when there was a knock on her door, but she didn't look up.

"Crews, if it's about clearing the room, tell the XO that I'll..."

"Use my truck?"

Linda looked up, seeing Jess Adams standing in the doorway, her compact frame and muscular back making it look almost like it was closed with a pass through window open. "What brings you by?"

"My team's doing fine on the op cleanup, so I checked with Nichols, he said I could cut out for a bit," Jess said. "Can I come in?"

"Sure," Linda replied, plucking a blouse off a hanger in her closet and looking at it. "No way am I wearing this in a couple of months."

"Why?" Jess asked, coming over. "I bet it'd look cute on you."

"Mothers don't wear blouses with this much cleavage showing, do they?" Linda asked, and Jess smirked. "Never mind, you might have a MILF fetish."

"Nah, I still like them nubile and teachable," Jess admitted. "But keep it. I bet Brutus is going to drink you in like a cup of water when you wear it for him. How often do you dress up for him, anyway?"

"Not as often as I'd like," she admitted, folding the blouse and putting it in her bag. "Especially in the past six weeks. He doesn't seem to mind me in ACUs though."

"Then again, he met you in ACUs too," Jess pointed out, taking out a shirt and folding it for her and stowing it in the bag. "I'm going to miss you."

"Whoa, what's this?" Linda joked, looking askance at Jess. "I thought Muscle Mommy didn't have time for soft feelings, at least during duty hours."

"Yeah well, around the guys I don't," Jess joked back. "But you were the only other female enlisted in the company. The only female NCO in the battalion."

"I'll be in the intelligence office, you can stop by anytime you want."

Jess laughed, shaking her head. "I'm a line sergeant, a team leader. I don't go to battalion HQ unless I'm under orders. There be monsters there, abandon all hope, ye who enter here and all that shit."

They both laughed, and Linda understood. "I'll miss you too. You always kept it real with me, and never hit on me. Better than some of the other NCOs in this battalion."

"If you want to, I still can," Jess teased her. "Trust me chica, I can teach you some shit that Brutus's never even thought of."

Linda laughed, and lifted an eyebrow. "Who says I don't already know those things? Maybe you only know what I want you to know about me."

Jess leaned back, and laughed. "And that's what I will so miss about you. I don't think I'll be able to relax like that with another female enlisted, even if they do bring one in. And Lieutenant Starr, I mean... bars and all that."

"Definitely a big no there," Linda said. "Well, this bag's full... want to help me with the TV? That's the biggest thing that I've got in here that I didn't steal from someone else that was leaving."

Jess nodded in understanding. While the military allowed troops to purchase items for their barracks room, it was often deemed too much of a hassle for them to take those items with them when they left for another unit, or another base.

"I'm sure the boys will appreciate it," Jess said, going over and unplugging the TV, carrying it in her arms, the two left the barracks and to her truck, where they set the items down. "So are you going to take a bit of time off?"

"Nah, although I did put in for the weekend prior to Brutus's training camp starting," Linda said. "I'm just glad that now that I'm at HQ, and not deployable, I can actually be at his games."

"Sounds like a plan. Look, I have something really important to ask you," Jess said seriously. "If we get another deployment like what just happened, and shit does go bad... take care of Sabby for me? At least, make sure she knows that she saved me?"

Linda stopped, seeing the emotions in Jess's eyes. Reaching out, she hugged the muscular woman, patting her on the back.

"First off, you're going to live longer and be a better soldier than I ever will," she

said. "You're five feet tall and bulletproof."

"Five foot six, thank you very much."

Linda hugged Jess harder. "Second, you tell her how much she means to you now. Third... yeah, I will. I promise. If something happens to you and Hollywood, I'll be there for Sabby."

They climbed into Jess's truck, and as she sat down her phone buzzed. Linda pulled it out, smiling at what she saw. Jess noticed. "Brutus?"

"Yeah, just checking on me. Says he'll see me after work." Linda typed back a simple message. "Okay."

"What did you tell him?"

"I love you. It's all I really need to say."

* ? ArmyCommendation Medal

brUTUS

"S ee them?" Sampson looked and saw the large group of soldiers, some of them pinning a banner that read "Cranked For Superstar" on the wall in front of their seats. "Yeah... those your Army people?"

"Technically they're Charlie Company and they're here to see Linda, not me," Brutus said with a smile. "Though it's pretty cool they showed up for me too."

"Is that so, Keishi?" he asked Takeshi. "Giving my girl a hard time?"

"Nah, superstar, just making sure she's got the support she needs since you're too busy playing ball," Takeshi replied with a grin, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

Linda stood up, her baby bump visible in her loose shirt. The sight of her made Brutus's heart skip a beat, just as it had since the first day they'd met.

She'd been through so much with him—the long-distance relationship while she was deployed, the worried nights when he was injured on the field, and now carrying their child. Every sacrifice had led to this moment.

"You gonna stand there staring, or you got something to say?" Linda called down, a challenging smile on her face that he'd fallen in love with during their first meeting at Fort Pickett.

Hollywood, who Brutus had called earlier to help arrange this surprise, spoke up.

"We wouldn't have to protect her so much if you weren't playing like such a pussy!"

"Oh yeah? How about you come down here and say that to my face!" Brutus yelled, swiping up playfully at Hollywood, who swiped back.

It started a general commotion, with people yelling at Brutus and him yelling back. He tried to watch his language as he vaulted into the stands, aware of the network cameras tracking his every move.

Linda's eyes widened as he approached, a mixture of confusion and amusement on her face. "What are you doing? The game's about to start!"

The soldiers from Charlie Company formed a circle around them, creating an intimate moment in the midst of the crowded stadium. These were the people who had been there for Linda when he couldn't be, during deployments, training exercises, the difficult days. They'd become family to both of them.

Brutus took her hands in his, suddenly aware of how calloused his felt against her softer skin. He could feel his heart pounding, harder than before any game he'd ever played.

"Linda," he said, his voice cracking slightly. "You know how much I love you."

"I do," she said softly, her eyes searching his face. "But what's going on?"

He reached into his uniform pocket and pulled out a small velvet box. As he dropped to one knee, gasps and cheers erupted around them. Linda's hand flew to her mouth, tears already forming in her eyes.

"Since that first day at Fort Pickett, when you put me in my place in front of everyone, I knew you were special.

Through deployments, injuries, distance, nothing has changed how I feel about you.

You're my heart, my home." He opened the box, revealing the ring he'd spent weeks selecting. "Will you marry me?"

Linda's tears flowed freely now, one hand resting on her belly where their child grew.

"Yes," she whispered, then louder, "Yes!"

The soldiers around them erupted in cheers as Brutus slid the ring onto her finger. When he stood and kissed her, it felt like the entire stadium disappeared, there was only Linda, only this moment.

When they finally broke apart, she studied his face with concern. "What about the game?"

"Babe, I'm done," he told her, his voice low and intimate despite the noise around them.

"Mentally, physically... I don't want to be a linebacker after today.

I want to be a husband, a father. I want to wake up in our home, make you breakfast, take care of our baby.

Not get knocked around twenty times a game. "

Linda's expression softened, a mixture of relief and understanding washing over her face. She'd seen the toll football had taken on his body over the years—the ice baths, the painkillers, the mornings when he could barely get out of bed. She placed a hand on his cheek.

"Then go out there and give it your all," she said, her voice thick with emotion.

"Everything you've got left as a football player. Because it's your last game."

He nodded, feeling a weight lift from his shoulders at having finally spoken the decision aloud. He kissed her, memorizing the moment, the scent of her perfume, the softness of her lips, the promise of their future together.

As he climbed over the railing and dropped back down to the turf, Brutus felt lighter than he had in years. The decision had been weighing on him for months, but now that Linda knew, now that she'd accepted his proposal, everything felt right.

Jogging back towards the tunnel, Grapefruit met him at the sidelines, a knowing smile on his face. "So she said yes."

"She did." He exchanged a hug with his longtime teammate and friend. "Said I need to go out there and give all I've got left."

Grapefruit nodded, taking a deep breath. "Sounds about right. Hey, just to let you know, I talked with McMahon this morning... I'm requesting out of my contract."

"You want to leave?" Brutus asked, surprised. "Why?"

"Because I'm getting older too," Grapefruit admitted, glancing toward where his own family sat in the stands. "Bluecats are going into a rebuild phase. I'd like to see if I can finish my career with a contender, spend more time with my kids before my knees give out completely."

Brutus understood. They'd both given their bodies to this game, and now it was time to think about what came after.

Family.

Future.

Life beyond the field.

"Then one last ride, brother," Brutus said, clapping Grapefruit on the shoulder.

As they headed toward the locker room for final preparations, Brutus glanced back at the stands where Linda stood watching him, her hand resting protectively over their unborn child, her new ring catching the stadium lights.

Charlie Company surrounded her, the family they'd built together through war and peace.

Today wasn't an ending, he realized. It was a beginning.

The roar of the crowd followed him into the tunnel, but for once, it wasn't the cheers that drove him. It was the promise of coming home, to Linda, to their child, to the life they would build together away from the spotlight.

One last game.

And then, forever.