

"Keep up," Park demanded as she strode down the hallway.

It wasn't hard to do, but Lance Corporal Trayvon Roberts was still in too much shock to reply. Had that really just happened?

Had Park really just thrown a man's career away to silence the truth? Had she really done it so carelessly? And had that man really been Gunny White? The gunny was an asshole, and he was dangerous. He'd attacked Petty Officer Chaffee. He'd harassed Trayvon ever since he'd arrived in Walter Reed's Basement. Had that really been the same man at the end, standing tall and refusing to dishonor another warrior in the best tradition of the service?

Trayvon was so lost in thought that he didn't realize they were at Captain Soodjinda's office until Park opened the door and walked in without permission.

"Why Doctor Park, how nice of you to stop by," she said bitterly.

Park didn't take the bait. "My business is concluded," she said without a trace of emotion.

"And did you get what you were looking for?" Soodjinda asked, steepling her fingers.

"Not at all. Your lance corporal saw to that."

Trayvon gulped internally but held his position, at attention, by the door. He had stepped out way over the edge when he'd spoken in Gunny's room. He wasn't about to repeat the mistake now.

Soodjinda didn't move from her position. "Did he now?"

"Yes. And I trust that you will reprimand him accordingly."

Trayvon clenched his teeth to keep from letting any response show on his face. He was in trouble and he knew it. He

couldn't pretend to understand everything that had happened in that room, but he knew that he had messed up Park's plans.

"Maybe he needs to learn to clean bedpans?" Park continued.

Soodjinda didn't even look at Trayvon as she replied, "Perhaps. But rest assured I will deal with him."

Trayvon tried not to let his nerves show. He was so screwed. But at least the punishment wouldn't come down until after Park left.

The doctor held out a manila file folder and dropped it callously on Soodjinda's keyboard. "You will file this as soon as possible."

"Will I?" she arched an eyebrow slightly, testing Park's so-called authority. "And what is this?"

"Please don't insult either of us by asking questions to which you already know the answers," Park replied coldly. "You were watching the interview."

Soodjinda leaned back in her chair. "A dishonorable discharge. Please explain to me again why I'm filing this?"

"That's above your pay grade, Captain."

"And this is my ship, Doctor Park," Soodjinda answered, emphasizing Park's title and lack of rank. "So humor me. I'm just a dumb Navy girl who doesn't pick up on the details so well."

"Very well." Park looked like she wanted nothing more than to take Soodjinda out with the trash, but she stayed professional. "The US government cannot afford to have an international special operations team destroyed by a giant spider. By not recanting his account of events, White has made his silence a necessity. This is the cleanest, least expensive method."

"And if I don't agree with you?" Soodjinda asked.

Park's expression didn't change. "You have your orders, Captain."

"You don't give orders here, Doctor." Soodjinda shot back, venomously.

Trayvon clenched his teeth tighter and stared at the opposite wall. If he was lucky, maybe they wouldn't remember he was still here.

"So why don't you try asking for the favor you need instead of slinging around 'orders,' a word you obviously don't understand," Soodjinda continued. "Try to make me realize why I want to help you."

"White is a problem. He knows things that cannot be made public, or even made permanent in classified records. He's refused to give us an easy explanation for the events of Operation Spellbind. This means he must be silenced before his accounts bring questions. If he's court martialed, there will be political fallout that certain individuals have determined is unacceptable. And if he dies, then certain individuals in command of secret hospital facilities will be held under suspicion."

Trayvon watched Soodjinda and Park face each other down, neither willing to blink. The tiny doctor was unflappable under the captain's stare.

Finally, Soodjinda caved. Looking down at the file on her desk, she sighed. "I'll take care of it, Doctor. You don't have to rely on clumsy threats to get your way."

Park seemed to miss or ignore the barb. "Delete all security footage of today. I was never here." She spun on her heel, sneakers making an audible squeak against the linoleum.

Looking down her nose at Trayvon with disdain as she passed, she added, "I can see my own way out."

"No, I'll escort you personally. This way please," Soodjinda said. "Roberts, stay here."

"Yes, ma'am," he affirmed.

The captain's voice was calm and unthreatening. But as she closed the door behind her, Trayvon caught her expression. It wasn't fury so much as disgust, which was so much worse. It was just like how Gunny White had treated him in the hospital room.

"I'm not angry, I'm just disappointed," Trayvon remembered his mother saying, after he'd taken the car out without telling her. And yet, that had been to protect him. She'd known that if the cops found him driving after dark, they'd pull him over. And then who knows how much worse it would have gotten.

Could it be the same with Captain Soodjinda? Was she waiting to handle it until after Park was gone to keep the reprimand in the family? Could it be the same with White?

The gunny had ultimately chosen his own shame instead of lying about someone else. And his whole life, White had been punished for doing the right thing.

The right thing. That's what Park had said that had made White change his mind. It hadn't been Trayvon's interruption at all. The gunny had done the right thing, just like he always had. Maybe Trayvon had actually helped him by giving White an opportunity to realize it.

Well, Trayvon could do the right thing too. And he could follow White's example. If he was going to get punished for helping an honorable man, he would stand tall and accept what was coming to him.

It didn't take long for Captain Soodjinda to return. She stared Trayvon down and waited a long moment before asking "What do you have to say for yourself, Lance Corporal?"

"Permission to speak freely, Captain?" he asked.

She studied him before saying, "Permission granted."

"I spoke out of turn and jeopardized Doctor Park's evaluation."

"Yes you did," Soodjinda answered unflinchingly. She walked to her desk and sat, eliciting a squeal from the ancient office chair. Then, picking up the file folder, she stared at it before apparently remembering that Trayvon was there. "At ease, Roberts. Sit down."

"Ma'am?" Trayvon asked, suddenly unsure of how to react.

"Do I have to make it an order? Sit."

He did as he was told, sitting straight, not touching the chair's back. Was this another trick, like Park had pulled on White? Was the captain trying to get him to relax so she could throw the book at him once he did? Or was she just going to make him feel worse with motherly guilt?

Soodjinda looked at him and sighed. "Get comfortable. We have a lot to talk about. Do you drink?" She opened a drawer and placed two glasses on the desk.

"Yes, ma'am, but I'm on duty. And it's," he glanced at the analog clock on the wall. "It's only 09:10."

"Consider yourself off duty while you're in this room." Soodjinda added a decorative bottle of unmarked brown liquor to the table. It looked like the kind of thing that rich people in the movies always had, instead of the bottle they bought it in. He wouldn't know. He was a more of a Miller Lite guy himself. The captain poured two expertly measured glasses and put the

bottle away. Then, she picked up the one closest to her and leaned back in her chair. "You had a hell of a couple days, Lance Corporal."

Trayvon leaned back just enough that he might look comfortable but not relaxed. "Yes, ma'am."

"That scotch is twice as old as you are, Roberts. Drink. You need it." The captain sipped from her glass and breathed another heavy sigh.

Trayvon sniffed. It smelled like dirt, but he took a small sip. Tasted like it too.

"You heard everything that happened to Gunnery Sergeant White, and you had a front row seat to what he just went through." The captain took another sip. "What do you think?"

Trayvon thought furiously. Here it was. She was toying with him, trying to get him to relax so he'd say something wrong. Then she could use him as a scapegoat "I already gave my thoughts in the room, ma'am."

The captain snorted. "Oh, you did that all right. But that's not what I mean. I mean what do you think about her?"

"Doctor Park, Ma'am?"

"I'm not convinced she's a doctor. But yes."

"I think she was doing her job."

She took another sip. "You still have permission to speak freely, Lance Corporal."

Trayvon hid his fear behind the cup as he took another sip and almost coughed as he swallowed. How did anyone like this stuff? "She's terrifying, ma'am."

"That she is. But I don't think either of us know just how much danger you were in the last two days." The captain sipped

again before setting the glass down and steeping her fingers.
"Did you get it?"

Trayvon reached into his pocket and took out the folded paper, sliding the second DD214 across the desk. Park had been too distracted to notice that he hadn't given this one back.

"You don't know it, but you may have just saved Gunnery Sergeant White's life, Roberts. You certainly saved his career." Soodjinda unfolded the paper and set it down, revealing the section that read "Other Designated Physical and Mental Conditions."

"What will happen to him?" Trayvon asked.

"He'll be discharged for mental health," the captain replied.

"He still gets kicked out. For doing the right thing."

"That's what we do. We do the right thing when others can't or won't." She turned her computer monitor so Trayvon could see it and tapped a few buttons until it showed the security feed from room twelve. Trayvon couldn't see his face, but the unmistakable form of Gunnery Sergeant White sat on the couch with his back toward the camera.

That's all that had ever happened to White, Trayvon thought. He had always done the right thing, and he had always been punished for it. At least this time, Trayvon and Soodjinda could mitigate it, even if White would never know what had happened.

The figure in the video shook, and Trayvon squinted to make it out. Was the feed cutting out somehow? He would order a maintenance check this afternoon. Then White put his head in his hands, and the figure shook again, harder this time. It wasn't a technical glitch.

Gunny was crying.

Trayvon couldn't blame him. White didn't know they were about to save him. He thought that his every accomplishment was about to be erased with a dishonorable discharge.

"Captain? How soon can we file this?"

Soodjinda looked down at the document. "I'll have it fast tracked. It'll be official before Park realizes what we did."

"Good," Trayvon said. White deserved at least that much. "But won't she try to get back at you for that?"

Soodjinda took a pen out of her desk drawer and signed the form. "She was never here, remember? There's no video evidence to prove anything." She turned the monitor back toward her, typed something for a few moments, and then said, "There. It's all gone. No one knows what happened in there except for you, me, Park, and White. Good work, Lance Corporal. You're dismissed."

Trayvon stood sharply and saluted. When the captain gave the return salute, he spun on his heel and exited smartly.

As he walked back toward the security office, he wondered if he would be able to do what White had. Could he sacrifice so much for so little? White had always done the right thing, even when he'd known he couldn't win. It was horrible.

But the alternative was worse. If White hadn't made the choices he had, his life would have been so different. He would have been an officer. He would have had a bright career ahead.

But that kid would have assaulted White's sister. His squadmates' bodies would have been left to the terrorists. Price and Hammerlock would have been blamed for something they hadn't done.

Maybe that was it. White hadn't sacrificed for so little. His life had taken an entirely different path, but it was obvious that the gunny wouldn't have done it differently. He'd had the chance to prove it today and still hadn't. For better or worse, White had still done the right thing.

Trayvon shook his head. He couldn't have done it. And that made him respect White even more. That man was a damned hero, and no one would ever know.

He took the USMC tie clip out of his pocket and stared at it, but all Trayvon could see was the image of White's form, shuddering in the monitor as he cried. At least he'd been able to do something for the gunny, however small. White might never know what they had done for him, but no one would ever know what White had done, either. It didn't matter. What mattered was that Trayvon had done the right thing. Just like White had.

"Thank you for the lesson, Gunny," Trayvon said to the tie clip and the empty hall. "Semper Fi."



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