

Safety On:
A [REDACTED] Report
Case File 3 of 9

DOCUMENTING AGENT: Ben Cislowski, alias "Homer"

EDITING ANALYST: Grace McCarthy, alias "Herald"

This file requires DELTA GREEN Security Clearance

- Language
- Sexual content

ABSTRACT: [REDACTED] Jeremy White, alias "Rooster" [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] 12:28 [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Charlie [REDACTED]

Breckenridge [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Canteen [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Davis, California [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] 07/20/2021 [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

It seems that mass-made cafeteria food can actually be edible, as long as it's fueled by corporate pockets and not the Corps. In an effort to remind us they're pretending to be an army, Breckenridge calls it the Canteen, but let's be honest: it's a cafeteria. At least it's a cafeteria where the food actually makes me want more, though. They're feeding me as well as they're paying me here, and it's weird living off of something other than drive-thru, blue box mac-n-cheese, and Top Ramen.

The special today is "Bratwurst with pickled cabbage, dijon aioli, and fried shallots. Served with a spring mix and champagne vinaigrette." I don't know what half of that means, but I pick it anyway since Charlie is hitting the salad bar and I need to look like I have better taste than my usual pepperoni pizza.

It turns out, that in English, the crazy foodie gibberish translates to "Brats, kraut, mustard, fried onions, and a salad." And it is damn good. I slice off a piece of sausage with my plastic knife, take a little of everything on my fork, and place it gently in my mouth. See? I can be cultured too. Especially if there's someone I'm trying to impress. I close my eyes, enjoying the flavors and remembering my first station.

"The one thing this is missing is a good lager. The Germans get that much right."

Charlie arches a perfectly shaped brow and looks at me quizzically. "Excuse me?"

"Beer," I say, realizing I hadn't said the whole thing out loud. That's weird. Usually the problem is that I say too much. "The Germans drink it like water. When I was stationed at Camp Panzer Kaserne in Boeblingen, I got used to the idea of a lager with lunch."

She screws up her face and spears some tofu (blech) from her salad. "And they let you do that during the day? You'd think having a bunch of drunk soldiers every afternoon wouldn't be a good thing."

I laugh. "Oh, believe me, it's not. But you can't do it on base. You have to go into town, and then the beer is cheaper than the water. And it tastes a whole lot better too."

She delicately puts the tofu in her mouth, chews, swallows, then frowns. It's probably because she's eating gross bean cube, but I'm sure she'd never admit that. "I'm not certain I like that idea. I like to be on my game."

"Oh yeah, and what's your game? Volleyball?" I try hard not to look down at her body again.

She laughs, then leans back and gestures at her body. "Have you seen me? I'm not exactly spiker material. They like someone who can actually jump high enough to get over the net for something like that."

Well, she gave me an excuse, so I stop trying not to, and I look at her amazing body. I rub my chin as though thinking hard. "Hmmm, so was it horse racing? I bet it was horse racing. You have to be short to be a jockey, right?"

Charlie blinks hard at that as though she's trying to figure out if I'm serious, but I'm not done. "Not a jockey? What about ice skating?"

"I'm from Stockton! We don't have ice there!"

"So not curling then. Okay, then maybe foosball? No wait! I have it! Limbo! You're a competitive limbo-er!"

She rolls her eyes in what I notice is something other than disgust, which is a good sign. "I was swimmer. I was competitive up until my senior year and even medaled a few times."

Look. I know Charlie didn't do limbo, though with her body, she'd probably be good at it. She's lean, slender, and lithe. I imagine her bending backward, and then in other more interesting positions. "Why'd you stop?"

Charlie shrugs. "I don't know. There were more interesting things to do than swim every day, I guess. It took too much time away from studying."

"Ah, so you're a nerd."

She looks hurt but realizes I'm teasing. Well sort of teasing. "That depends on your definition of nerd, I guess."

"You did good in school, you gave a shit about studying, and you gave up something else you actually liked to do more of it," I say, and scoop up some sauerkraut. "You're a nerd."

"And you aren't? I thought you had to have good grades to enlist."

"Oh, you take that back."

"I will not."

"Fine," I say. "I enlisted straight out of high school. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had been going long enough that they were starting to redeploy guys and extend their tours. I guess they overlooked my grades when I showed up and wanted to fight."

"What was your GPA?" Charlie asks.

I think back. I don't remember the exact number, though it wasn't actually that low. Even after I blew it my senior year, I made sure that I was still plenty above the enlistment requirements. "Fuck if I know," I lie. "I don't even know how to calculate that. I flunked high school algebra."

Charlie laughs. It's always nice to see someone new laugh at the old lines. "I can't decide if you're telling the truth or just making fun of yourself."

"I'll never tell," I say. "But I'm sure you'll figure it out. I'm not a very good actor since I failed drama too."

"You're insufferable!" She laughs and her hand lands on top of mine. A shiver goes down my spine at the unexpected contact, and I reach for my soda to cover my gulp. She doesn't move her hand away as she continues. "So high school, then straight into the Marines. Why didn't you stay in if you wanted to be there so much?"

I hope my internal wince doesn't show. I try to cover the twinge of pain that squeezes at my gut by checking my watch. 12:41. "I didn't exactly choose a medical discharge."

"Oh. Oh, no, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?" She squeezes my hand. I let her.

"I'm all right now. PTSD's a bitch, but nothing pills don't help with, but I got a purple heart out of it so at least I have a paperweight." It's not the whole truth, but it's close enough.

Charlie ignores my obvious attempt at avoidance (my VA therapist taught me that word) and doesn't let go of my hand. "What happened?"

I shut my eyes, but Charlie squeezes again and the warmth of her hand flows into me. "We hit an IED in Baghdad. I managed to make it out but took shrapnel in my hip."

Charlie squeezes my hand again and gives me one of those big-eyed concerned looks. It's not pity, thank God. I don't want pity. I went to the sandbox knowing full well what could happen, and since it did, there's no one to blame but myself. But if she knew about what happened to the other three in the Humvee, or what happened in Operation Spellbind that actually ended my career? There's a reason I don't talk about it. I don't want any pity.

"I'm so sorry," she says softly. "I'm glad you're okay now though."

"Not as glad as I am!" I spear the rest of my sausage, pick it up, and take a big bite out of it. Coupled with the silly face I make, it blissfully breaks the tension, but it also makes Charlie withdraw her hand. Her fingertips softly brush over the scars on the back of my hand, and I try hard not to shudder as my whole body tingles.

"Okay, point taken. I'm leaving the sad topics and the ancient history behind."

"Ancient history?" I repeat through a mouthful of sausage. "How old do you think I am?"

She flashes a wolfish smile. "Old enough. But how did you end up here?"

I shrug. "It was hard coming back to civilian life. I jumped around a lot when I got back, got fired from a lot of jobs. I ended up doing night security at an outlet mall and I was starting to think it was all I was good for until a friend got me a gig here." I specifically don't mention Glasses or the favor she called in so I could go to Montana with R Cell. That part isn't important. Or you know, declassified.

"That's how most people get in, right? Ex-military guys?"

"A lot of them, sure. But not you. Apparently business school, swimming, and nepotism do the trick too. Oh, and limbo."

"It's not nepotism!" she scoffs, mock enraged. "Josh just got me an interview!"

"Uh-huh..." I draw the last syllable out, copping an attitude.

"It's not!"

"Uh-huh..."

"It's just knowing someone in the right place. It's called networking."

I throw a cocky smile. "Sure. Let's go with that."

"And I don't limbo." Charlie rolls her eyes again and stares at her salad. She glances up at me, back down, and then plucks up a piece of carrot and tosses it at my face. I try to catch it in my mouth, but it bounces off my nose and lands on the table. "You're adorable. And however I got this job, I'm glad I got paired with you. This is fun."

"Glad you're enjoying yourself," I say, and reach for the carrot. Charlie does too, and our fingers brush against each other. She lightly takes my hand in hers and strokes it gently with her thumb. Now I may not be good at understanding people, but I know the seduction game like the back of my uh, hand. Let's go with that. Yes, that hand. The one that Charlie's using right now to try and turn me on. Because she is turning me on, and she knows it. And what's more is she knows that I know that she knows it.

Because that's the game. And she's good at it, too.