You can attend any bootcamp or run any realistic simulator you want. There's no training to prepare you for the fucking hell that is Iraq. You can be the best damn shot the Marine Corps has ever seen, but at the end of the day, you're breathing, sleeping, and shitting in the dirt and dust with a target practically painted on your back. It's not exactly like staying at the Hilton.

"Harlowe!"

You don't ever get any fucking peace and quiet either.

I sneak a last bite of my protein bar before leaving my tent. I find McCallister a few meters away, squinting from the harsh sun. His face is already caked in dust from the wind kicking it up. "Grab your gear! We got somethin', rolling out in 5!"

"Roger!" I shout back before disappearing back into my tent. I put on my vest, securing the velcro in place. I pull on a gaiter and sunglasses as defense against the dust. I pull on my ComTac then do a quick check on my rifle and sidearm. By this point, the routine is as familiar as brushing your teeth every morning.

I jog over to the humvees as others from my unit start to pile in. I take my seat in the back next to Cruz and shut the door. McCallister's in the driver's seat with Tyler sitting pretty as the TC.

"Tyler beat you to command again, Micky?" I tease.

"Only 'cause I had to go find your happy ass," he hits back, a little bit of his Texan drawl rearing its head.

"Sure you boys could handle this without me."

"Yeah, then you'd hand us our asses for not coming to get you," Cruz adds in.

I pull down my gaiter so they can see the smug smile on my face. "You're damn right, Marine."

"Careful, Cruz, you'll inflate her ego more than it already is," I hear from Tyler in the front .

"Leave the kid alone, Ty, he's still learning," I say as I look out the window, watching the desert pass by. "What are we rolling up on?" I finally ask.

McCallister answers first. "Satellites show Iraqi insurgents bringing in weapons to a village we had tagged as a possible. Goin' in to shut 'em down. Orders are capture/kill."

I do one more check on my rifle. "Let's fuckin' run it, boys!"

"Oorah!"

B.J. Tucker

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When orders are capture/kill, you're not exactly holding your fire. You're running in with guns hot and survival on the mind. At that point, any captures are either coincidental or convenient.

We didn't have any captures this time around.

I jump out of the humvee as we pull up back at camp, the rest of our unit doing the same. As I start to walk away towards my tent, I hear my name called.

"Harlowe!"

This time it isn't as friendly as earlier. And I'm not in the fucking mood. I keep walking.

"*Harlowe!*" Tyler yells again.

I spin around and find he was hot on my heels. There's less than a foot distance between us. "*What* Tyler?"

"What the fuck was that back there?" He points in the direction of the now decimated village.

"A lot fucking happened, Tyler, so be specific."

"We were not ready to breach that building. I told you to wait for my goddamn command. So what the fuck happened?"

"They knew we were there," I say with confidence to back me up. "If we waited any longer, they would've gotten the drop on us and it would be our blood in the fucking dirt!"

"How do you know we were spotted, hm?" he crosses his arms over his chest, waiting for my answer.

But the problem is that I don't exactly have one.

I rub the dirt off my face with the edge of my gaiter and break eye contact, my confidence fading now. I work up enough courage to at least not whisper my response. "It was a gut feeling, Sir."

He screws up his eyes as if it's the stupidest thing he's ever heard. It probably is. "Sergeant, are you telling me… that you *knowingly* disobeyed orders because of a *gut*... *feeling*?"

"It was a lapse in judgment, Sir. It won't happen again," I promise with as strong a voice as I can muster.

B.L. Tucker

“Let’s sure fucking hope not,” he says before turning and walking away. I hear him mutter to himself, “God bless America…”

That all could have gone better.

But hey, could have gone worse, too. And I take my wins where I can get them.

Letting out a breath I didn’t know I was holding until now, I begin the walk back to my tent. I avoid eye contact with the other Marines as I pass by. They all saw. They all heard. My best bet is to just let it go and hope they do too. It’s not just the dirt that makes this place hell.

When I pull back the flap of my tent, I’m instantly on alert because someone is *in it*. I feel the color drain from my face as I realize who they are, or at least *what* they are. This man is a fucking Brigadier General. I immediately assume POA and salute. “General, sir!” I say with my chest.

“At ease, Marine,” he says in a voice that I was sure only existed in military movies until now. I assume parade rest. “Sergeant Finley Harlowe, I am General Henry Gormond. I am here because someone back State-side has recognized something in you that they find worthwhile. And I am here to take you to that someone.”

“Sir, it would be an honor, General Gormond, sir!”

“You may speak freely, Marine. Walk with me,” he says as he strides out of my tent. I follow after him.

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“Tell me why I’m here, and don’t fucking sugarcoat it,” I spit at the suit, not a single care for any repercussions.

“Do you think I got this job by fucking sugarcoating, Marine?” she spits right back. By the way she stands and carries herself, I’d say the answer is “fuck no”.

I look up at her with a steeled face, deferring to her authority.

“You’re here because I can use you. You’re *here* because you’re going to be my mole.”

My eyebrows scrunch in confusion. “I don’t have any background in intelligence,” I state.

“And that’s why you’re perfect. Because the people you’ll be cozying up with know all the tricks. You’re just some rookie that’s going to be a pain in their asses.”

“Who are they?” I ask.

B.L. Tucker

“Before I tell you anything, before I give you even a fucking sticky note, I need your commitment. Are you in, or are you out?”

My mind works a mile a minute as I weigh the situation. On one hand, I could be putting myself in serious fucking danger. But on the other, I’d be indispensable. I’d be worth something. That makes the choice pretty easy.

“I’m in.”

She slides a file towards me. Stamped in bold letters is the word “KNIGHTS”. I stare at the file for a moment, then look back up at the suit. When she gives an expectant nod, I open it.

Most of it is blacked out, censored, confidential. I see the words “capture”, “eliminate”, “infiltrate”.

“They’re special ops,” I observe. When I try to parse through for the names of the operatives, I come up with nothing. “What are their names?”

“You’re not supposed to know. All you need to know is what I need from you.”

“Which is?”

“This team has something going on behind the scenes. But they’re smart. They know how to clean up after themselves. We trained them *too* well. They’ll see me coming. What they won’t see coming is you.”

I stare down at the file again, trying to make sense of what I’m seeing and what I’m hearing. “What is it they’re suspected of?”

“Some of their marks have disappeared. They enter the premises for capture/kill, and when they come out, neither has happened and we never saw the mark again. Either they’re making deals with terrorists or they’re working with them. And we need to know which one and why.”

“They won’t trust me.”

“They will.” The way she says it is with such finality that I have no choice but to believe her.

I grit my teeth. “I’ll be walking into some pretty fucked up shit.”

“Are you saying you can’t handle it, Marine?”

I pin her with a gaze as fierce as fire. “I never said that.”

B.J. Tucker