

Staff Sergeant Trey DeMarcus Warner of the Marine Special Operations Command reported as scheduled for his 8 February intake evaluation at the Camp Lejune Naval Hospital outpatient psychiatric clinic. It was the last place he ever thought he'd be, and in fact, he didn't belong here, but it was now mandatory to have an evaluation for PTSD after an incident like his.

After eight years of active duty, he'd learned that there was an infinite number of bullshit things that were nonetheless required by the military. You just learned to do them without wasting energy being angry or even questioning them, but some of them still chafed, no matter how you tried to ignore it.

He stood as tall as he used to feel, back when he was so proud to wear the uniform, when he had his brothers' backs and knew they had his. When they rolled out, he was invincible, a damned avenging god, but eighteen days ago he'd become a fraud, through his failure to protect his team. Now he was adrift, alone, clinging to thoughts of revenge and buoyed by rage, but that only made sense. He sure as hell didn't need to be here.

He had to fill out paperwork, lots of it. Parents, alive or not. Where he had grown up, when he had joined up. He didn't want to think about those times. He was grateful for the military discipline which kept him from fidgeting, but he was antsy as hell, dreading this. He scrubbed his hands across his face, trapped, waiting, pushing back old memories. The room had the same institutional smell that the one did back then, the first time his life had caved in.

His mother had told him, shortly before she died, that she'd tracked down his grandfather. "I thought there'd be more time, baby, but he seemed decent when we spoke." When he'd protested the idea of moving, she'd told him, "Trey DeMarcus Warner, that's enough! Better some 'old white guy' than all these gangs around here! Besides, he's your blood." She'd made him promise, near the end, that he would stay strong, always do the right thing, and go to college someday. When she died he'd tried to do that, but at the second cave-in, he couldn't face college, not with his grandpa dead. He had to get out of there. The third time was no charm; when he lost his squad, he'd tried to be strong, but that was just bullshit now, a pose. And not one of them would have approved of the way he was coping now.

"Staff Sergeant Warner." His name jerked him out of the past. He scrubbed his damp palms on his fatigues and followed the psychiatrist into the exam room. She was a Major, about thirty-five, no special insignia on her uniform, just the medical corps patch. *At least she's not a civilian.*

"I'm Doctor Carpenter," she said, extending her hand.

"Ma'am."

She waved him to a chair. He wished he were anywhere else. He wanted no part of this. Some of his buddies had told him just to lie to get out faster, but his grandfather had drilled into him the importance of being truthful, a man of honor, and he tried to do that to respect his memory.

“Staff Sergeant Warner,” she began, “You understand that this is a routine evaluation, so please try to relax, and answer the questions truthfully. The kind of incident you experienced has a significant chance of short and long-term emotional problems that can cause severe difficulties in a service member’s career and home life, so it’s important to evaluate everyone. You haven’t been singled out for this.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he said. That was true; that was a good point. They weren’t after him in particular. He’d keep that in mind and just get through this as quickly as possible.

“I see that you’re originally from St. Louis,” she said. “A Southern man?” She smiled, trying to get past his guard, probably. She must know that people hated this.

“Yes, Ma’am, to begin with. I moved to Montana to live with my grandfather when my mother died.”

“What happened? How old were you?” asked the shrink.

“Cancer. Twelve,” replied Trey. What the hell was this, dredging up his childhood?

“Why not your father?”

“I never knew him. He died when I was six or eight.” Trey said, shifting in his seat. *Jesus*. He tried never to think of his father, let alone talk about him. Trey’s father had split from his family long before he’d bailed on Trey’s pregnant mother.

“Your history says you signed up at eighteen.”

“Yes, Ma’am, after my grandfather died.” He’d joined up the second he didn’t need his new guardian’s signature.

The Major paused, and he braced for any pity, but she moved on to his service records. “You’re up for promotion to E-7 already, you’ve been in similar engagements before with MARSOC and have an exemplary record: commendations for heroism, awards.”

“We all try, Ma’am.” *Shit!* He wasn’t trying to sound like a smartass. Some of these female officers were quick to lock you up over perceived disrespect. He’d meant none, but did she expect him to sit here chatting about how great he was? Did these medical people not know anything? But she didn’t dress him down for any attitude, simply kept on with the interview. *She’s got a schedule to keep.* That was good to remember. She’d be under time constraints, so this couldn’t go on forever.

“My understanding is that your entire squad was killed, and you had a serious concussion.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” He wanted to walk out. He did not want to be here, but he had no choice.

“We’ll need some baseline tests because of the concussion. Are you recovering well?”

“Yes, Ma’am, I’m fine.” Maybe now he could go.

She gazed at him levelly. “Staff Sergeant, most people would not be ‘fine’ three weeks after losing their entire squad. It would be common to have feelings of grief, loss, hopelessness, and rage. Some develop a condition called ‘survivor’s guilt,’ in which they feel that they should have been the one who died, not their buddy. Are you having any of these feelings?”

Trey stared at her. What the hell kind of question was that? Of course he did, every damned one of them. They were his brothers, and he hadn't prevented it from happening. He was speechless that anyone could even ask that. It was a real Montana shoeshine; he could either dishonor their memories by shrugging it off as no big deal, or admit that he felt that way every damned day, and be carted off to weave baskets. Finally, he looked at his hands, and said, "They were my brothers." That was the truth and she could take it how she would.

But of course, that wasn't enough. She asked about nightmares, daytime triggers, alcohol and drugs, too much sex, inability to have sex, risky sex, fighting. It was stressful enough to make anyone depressed and anxious. He chose his words carefully; he couldn't risk having any problems here, not when he was trying to decide if he should re-up for another four years, or leave the military. To cap it all off, she offered him medicines if he felt anxious, meds which might make him impotent. He felt like chewing his own arm off to get out of there. Impotent, on top of everything else!

"Ma'am, that would make anyone depressed."

She laughed at that and told him to report back in two weeks. He spent it having nightmares, too much sex, and drinking. None of it helped.

Two weeks later

It was always the same.

Trey was the last to move out to the Humvee, as they prepared for the next leg. A weird Arabic soundtrack spilled from the cloudless sky all around them, but his men

didn't notice. The air grew thicker. Trey could feel the pressure in his lungs, on his throat, but his men were unaffected.

Holmes, standing guard, turned as Barnwell and West jumped in, harassing each other, and as his back was turned, several little boys dashed up to the rig, then ran off again. Holmes, Martinez, and Sutter were already loaded up. "Ready to roll?" they asked.

"Negative, local kids just ran off," said Trey. "It was just for a second but we need a sweep." Some of them wanted to climb on the trucks or swipe things on dares. It was probably a waste of time, as young as they were, but it was protocol. You could never be sure in this theater who the enemy was, and in general, the population hated Americans, especially military. It would only take a few minutes.

They started to exit the vehicle, Sutter and Holmes moving like pond water. When he was five paces away from the vehicle, Trey noticed a man watching from across the street, a few houses down. Suddenly, he smiled, his front gold tooth flashing. Trey turned to his crew, bellowing, "AWAY FROM THE VEHICLE! MOVE! MOVE!"

The atmosphere thickened from a gel to a solid. Trey couldn't move, yet the gold-toothed man danced and sang, as frantic Arabic music swelled. The world went up in red flames. Mayfield was burning like a torch. Trey could smell the roasting flesh as Sutter and West blistered and turned black, could hear the screaming of Barnwell and Holmes trapped behind them.

Trey struggled in slow motion to reach the Humvee. He went into the flames to bring them out, again and again, but all he held was charred bones and ash, while the gold-toothed man laughed and shouted “Allahu akbar!” through the screams.

Trey woke up gasping, sweat-soaked. His buddies were dead. He alone had awakened in the hospital with a concussion, second-degree burns, and a little shrapnel from the explosion. His squad was blown to hell. He was only alive because he happened to be sheltered behind another vehicle. His brothers were dead and he was alive. He’d been told repeatedly that he was lucky to be alive. He did not feel lucky. It hadn’t even happened on a mission, just during a goddamned transport. Intel hadn’t been able to determine whether the little boys were involved or not. The consensus was probably not, because this was not how “The Merciful” had operated so far, but this didn’t absolve Trey in the jury of his own mind. Maybe if he’d noticed him sooner, or ordered his men away from the vehicle more urgently, they’d still be here. He leaned over the side of the bed, dry heaving and trembling.

Later that day, Major Carpenter called him back for his second visit. The first one hadn’t killed him but it hadn’t done a damned thing for him. His chest was tight and his belly had a dull ache. He’d have gotten more out of going fishing, but they wouldn’t give him leave until his damned psych evaluation was completed. The dive just off post was the next best thing; when Trey got high centered, he could stagger back to crash. The bartender poured Trey a Jack ditch as soon as he came in now.

“Staff Sergeant Warner,” she greeted him. “How are you doing?”

“Fine, Ma’am.” He waited for it to be over.

She said, “Staff Sergeant, can you tell me how you’ve been feeling? Or do you prefer that I try to drag it out of you one question at a time?” She spread her hands, palms up. “I know you don’t want to be here. But you might as well get something out of it, so it isn’t wasted time.”

*She’s just trying to complete her mission, like all the rest of us.* He had the grace to feel embarrassed, grateful for his dark skin that didn’t blush. “Yes, Ma’am. I apologize, Ma’am. I’m just not used to talking to anyone about...stuff.”

“That’s understandable,” she said, “but that’s partly the point. This is a safe place to talk with someone who won’t judge you, someone whose job it is to listen, so that you don’t feel you are being a burden, someone who’s heard things ten times worse than anything you can imagine telling me, a professional who is sworn to secrecy. What you say here is held confidential under doctor-patient rules, and can’t even be accessed by your other health care workers without special authorization.” He must have looked skeptical at that, because she went on. “I’m required to report homicidal or suicidal ideation, and I’m bound to assess whether or not you can continue to function on the job. But those are the only limitations.”

“Well, I’m not suicidal, and I don’t want to kill anyone. I mean, besides The Merciful.”

“Well, the world would be a better place,” she agreed.



He suppressed his bark of surprised laughter. *Maybe she's not so bad.* She was a Marine, after all, just trying to do the best job she could, like all of them.

She asked about his nightmares and his grief.

"This is getting really personal, Ma'am." Trey shifted, a finger pulling at his tight collar.

MAJ Carpenter cocked her head. "Yes, Staff Sergeant, it does. It's my duty to help you, and yours to cooperate, but it takes real courage to do this." She stared at him, challenging, and damned if he didn't cowboy up, from force of habit.

She was really slick at pinning him down with her questions and blocking his attempts to dodge them. It became a little easier when he finally just let 'er buck, too tired to spar.

"I think about them every day, every minute," he said, "unless I distract myself with alcohol or women." *Damn.* She was a female. He blundered on, "I feel terrible that I couldn't stop it. My whole team died because of me."

She told him that his grief and anger was to be expected, especially since his squad had been in effect his only family. She got it, that his heart refused to believe what his brain knew, that he couldn't have prevented it.

"Any religious beliefs that are helpful, Staff Sergeant?"

"I was raised Methodist, ma'am," he said. "I do believe in God, but I wonder how much he believes in me anymore." He'd come to understand that he could only depend on himself and his team, but even that was in question now. He stared at his useless hands.

“What else do you believe in?” she asked.

“I believe in the Marine Corps,” Trey said. “And in the United States of America.”

And he’d let them both down. The silence stretched.

“So where does that leave you now, Staff Sergeant?”

“I don’t know, Ma’am. I’m not sure what I should do,” he said. He shifted in his seat, pulling at his inseam. “I’ve always had a clear mission, and completed it to the best of my ability, but now I worry that I won’t be able to work at my highest potential, obsessed with making sure I don’t lose any more men.” He stared at his hands. “I feel so guilty about what happened. And I really do want to kill The Merciful; I think about it every day. That could lead to mistakes, and losing more men.” He looked back up at her. “I don’t know that I can do that again.” Now she’d tell him he was a rear echelon loser.

She nodded, her eyes concerned, no judgment at all. How had he thought this was useless? It was good to let it out—it was poisoning him. His chest tightness eased a bit.

“But the thing is, this is all I know. I always thought I would get out someday, and lead a quiet life. But all these years I’ve been a tool with a clear mission. What if I can’t make a go of it around regular people? I don’t know what I’d even do if I got out.” His voice dropped as he stared at his hands. “I don’t know if I even deserve a life. I let my buddies down.”

She nodded, continuing her gentle probing. She seemed to understand. It did help. By the time he left he felt wrung out, but that night he didn't have nightmares, for the first time in weeks, even though he stayed sober.

Trey sat with Major Carpenter two weeks later. He could finally breathe again, since his last visit here.

"Staff Sergeant Warner," she greeted him.

"Ma'am."

"Your test results are in." His chest tightened. "There's no evidence of CTE." He'd thought that Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy was something only boxers and football players got, but some military men turned into vegetables, too, even without a direct hit.

He let out his breath. "That's good, Ma'am."

"How are you doing? Are you making any progress on your decisions?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I'm going to start outprocessing. I might try contract security work. That's similar but less intense, and will pay the rent; my contacts will be useful. I'll probably go to school on the GI bill at some point, but right now I'm not sure what I'd study. Sometimes I just want to get away from everything and have a completely new start, a clean break." *And get far away from anyone who knows.* He could still serve, without risking anyone depending on him. Maybe out of the military he'd have a better shot at revenge, although that was probably a pipe dream.

"After all these years, it might be fulfilling to try something completely new," she agreed. "It's much scarier than what you know, though."

“Roger that, Ma’am,” he said. “I just don’t even know where to start. Sometimes I wonder if it’s right, after all the training I’ve had—combat skills, languages, all of it—to turn my back on it.”

“I can see that,” she replied. “On the other, hand, how many years do you think you can give? Ten more? Twenty? It will never be enough, if it’s only done out of duty. You deserve to find some contentment and joy in your own life, not be yoked to duty entirely. It takes time as well as courage for anyone to chart a new course.”

“Funny you should say that, ma’am,” Trey said. “That’s the hardest thing for me now. I can’t decide if I’m a quitter for leaving, or stupid if I stay.” He’d feel guilty either way.

“Well, Staff Sergeant,” she said, “I can’t tell you what to do, but it’s my experienced professional opinion that you are neither stupid nor a quitter. I think you just need to have some patience. Give it time.”