

A military soldier reflects on her life during her time as a civilian, coping with her challenges and struggles. But her mood soon changes when she receives an unexpected invite by a superior officer.

Military Life

"Finally, a peaceful night of sleep! I couldn't even sleep for the past few days!" For the past week and a half, Jade could barely get any shuteye whenever she is exhausted and sleepy. Nightmares and other horrible memories have been plaguing her, along with the loss of her mother, which made it even harder for her to get some peaceful slumber. Even during her daytime activities, Jade will suddenly start freaking out over a flashback involving her mother or some other wartime event.

Moving along in the early part of the day, Jade began getting herself together for the day so she can get on with her day. At the current moment, Jade is off-duty for now. She usually keeps a list of activities and chores to do to keep herself active and well-maintained.

After getting herself together, Jade dons a pink short-sleeved T-shirt and normal denim jeans, and after checking her smartphone, she notices a notification about a new message. Seeing this makes the female husky mutter, "I don't recall anyone messaging me last night or recently..."

Jade begins to check the message and her eyes widen in surprise from reading the text. It was an invite given to her to meet some other squad members, but the contact had been left anonymous, presumably for privacy reasons. Yet Jade likely had a thought on who the mysterious contact could be.

All of a sudden, Jade begins to daydream when she suddenly shakes her head to snap back to reality, telling herself, "Focus; no daydreaming! You're not at war now! This is my relaxation time."

Jade is about to start her day when the sound of a bold blaring horn catches her attention. Immediately, Jade dashes to the window and is surprised to witness a dark red Mercedes CLK-GTR outside parked on the curb by her apartment. But it wasn't just the car that caught Jade's attention, it was also the driver stepping out of the car.

Stepping out of the Mercedes is a coffee furred cocker spaniel, whom Jade recognizes immediately. Gawking at her, Jade rushes to the front door to meet her, not wanting to keep her waiting.

Once she reaches the door, Jade unlocks it and swings it open in anticipation of the spaniel's arrival; yet she couldn't contain her surprise on her face and in her tone of voice. "Sergeant Cox!? It's you!!! I never thought it would be you!!!"

The female spaniel raises a hand up to halt Jade, admonishing her, "Please, call me 'Denise'. That'll do rather than addressing me by my rank. Anyways, how do you know me so well?"

"Who doesn't know you so well?? You're one of the most recognizable dogs in the Army, inside and outside!" Jade explains while stepping aside. She invites Denise inside while adding, "So how have you been, 'Top Sergeant'?"

Denise averts her face away from the Siberian husky, a big smile having immediately grown on her face from the verge of laughing. Even Jade is sniggering, using the address of Denise's rank in a joking manner. Even the spaniel picks up on the teasing.

A light laugh escapes Denise's muzzle once she meets Jade's gaze again, and she twirls a finger, proceeding to boop Jade on her nose while addressing her in return, "Doing well, 'Specialist'. Got any plans for the day?"

The two share a moment of laughter between them in passing, to which Jade later claims, "I was about to start my day when I saw that text message just now. I just want to know what's going on, cause whoever sent it has no name or anything."

"That was me." Denise frankly admits to her. This leaves Jade shell-shocked.

After a moment of stunned emptiness, Jade finally squeals, "That was you?! You did that!? Why did you go incognito then!!?"

Denise utters a soft, audible groan and bluntly relates, "Pay grade and gender."

"I don't get it; come again?" Jade's tail begins to wag in interest upon wanting to learn more.

"I'll explain inside the car. Come on." Denise turns to leave, leaving Jade to hurry up and grab a few important items before leaving her house to ride shotgun with her superior, or at least one of them.

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"So, tell me again what happened. You mentioned you're a Sergeant, but until last month, I didn't know you were a 'Master Sergeant'. Was this a recent promotion?" Jade and Denise were conversing on similar material while riding in Denise's Mercedes CLK-GTR. While Jade is simply curious, Denise simply explains, "Recent promotion while on duty. Still, leadership roles make me nervous as I am technically responsible for the welfare and condition of everyone I am overseeing. To lose them would be worse than a demotion itself."

"I can hardly imagine that since I'm in no role of command; I'm just a specialist." Jade frankly stated. She changes the topic to the subject that intrigued her the most. "So, you said you went anonymous because of pay grade and gender. Women aren't inferior, so do you mind explaining to me what you mean, Sarge- I mean, Denise?"

Due to Jade having caught herself, Denise gives the husky a side-eyed glance. Then she goes on to explain, "There are very rare cases where soldiers complain about work pay. I mean seriously, is money more important than protecting your country? That's what being a soldier is all about: serving your country; much like the local police forces across each country."

"I can somewhat see your point, Denise. But complaining about pay and rank seems so unordinary! What gives??" Jade implied.

"You don't hear about too many women being promoted to or bearing the rank of Sergeant; or in this case, 'Master Sergeant'. And there are way more men than women in the military." Denise bluntly claims with a grumble. Adding to this, and further increasing Jade's curiosity, the cocker spaniel asserts, "My biggest guess is that most of the people who are under my command or in the same unit as me are somewhat jealous or salty or both, but who gets mad over military pay when they're serving their home country? I don't get that."

Suddenly, Jade begins giggling lightly at Denise's explanation, causing the cocker spaniel to give her another side-eyed glance. She demands, "What's so funny, Jade?"

Jade's laughter slowly subsides while she proceeds to explain, "Well technically, since you're an enlisted soldier and not an officer of the Army, you're still subordinate to an officer of the Army depending on rank. So if you're at E-8, you'd be below Sergeant Major, but still higher in rank than Sergeant First Class. Still, your rank is equal to that of First Sergeant but you'd still be subordinate to a regular officer."

"Even though that's beside the point, I see that you're really knowledgeable about all of the military ranks in the Army. Somebody's been doing their homework." Denise notes, impressed with Jade's logical reasoning. This only cements

Jade's explanation when she uses her current rank as an example. "Well given my rank of 'Specialist', I'm not really in a leadership role. It's more of a subordinate role, really; a 'junior officer' to put it more frankly."

"Well even though you're a Junior Officer, you still have some level of command over a few lower ranks." Denise mentions in passing.

Jade is more than pleased with the conversation between her and her superior officer, though she pouts, "But I am not a Corporal yet and in terms of NATO rank, they're equal."

"Not quite. Corporal is higher than Specialist." Denise utters, much to Jade's further frustration. The husky then whines, "Easy for you to say since you're a young Master Sergeant!"

"I wasn't expecting the promotion to that rank, but I still accepted it out of surprise and gratitude." Denise whispered slowly.

"How did you make such a massive climb in rank?" Jade wondered immensely.

The pair soon enter a business district with a few small shops in the area, some of them outdoor restaurants. One of these is an outdoor restaurant with an adjacent, moderate-sized parking lot. While Denise arrives, she explains, "It's a long story that even I still can't fathom completely, but I will tell you this much; you're looking at a junior Sergeant who's suddenly become a higher-up in the senior NCO ranks at a young age. Apparently, I was selected for promotion because of my leadership, primarily; I had experience in other fields."

"I see. That was a huge step in your life, wasn't it?" Jade pondered conclusively.

"Yeah, unexpected." Denise mumbles in return. After pulling into a parking space, she kills the 6.0L V12 engine and removes her seatbelt, where she and Jade both exit the CLK-GTR. However, once Jade and Denise make their way onto the sidewalk, the husky notices something peculiar on the curb and she immediately dashes towards it, her expression growing to one of surprise.

"Whoa, how are you guys so fancy?" Jade directs Denise's attention to a silver McLaren F1 LM that is parked on the curb directly in front of the cafe they're headed to, its silver painted-body gleaming in the sun.

"You'll have to ask each one of us separately." Denise chuckles in response. While Denise turns to head to the Cafe, Jade stays outside to visually feast on the silver F1 LM. But when she begins to walk to the front of the car, she stops by the hood upon making out a series of blank lights on the visor and grill. Seeing these, Jade rests a hand on the hood, just staring in complete awe of the machine. She begins to wonder internally, 'Did someone create this or is this some kind of reward for something?'

"Sergeant, why is there a Siberian Husky staring at my car? Who is that??" A sudden snappy voice literally jolts Jade back to reality, prompting her to quickly remove herself away from the silver McLaren F1 LM. While Jade retreats, she stops upon staring at a black Labrador Retriever, and she isn't happy.

"Uh Sergeant Cox, who is that?" Addressing Denise via military rank, Jade points directly to the black Labrador beside her, wondering who she is. Denise uses this opportunity not only to introduce the black Labrador, but also a couple more acquaintances of hers.

Denise motions for the husky to join her and the Labrador, and once they make it inside, the cocker spaniel finally makes her way over to a table where a honey-furred female Siberian Husky is sitting. The two dogs exchange waving greetings towards each other and once the four women are all together, Denise proceeds to introduce Jade to the two female soldiers.

Sweeping an arm towards the black Labrador and the honey furred Siberian Husky respectively, Denise introduces them to Jade, "Jade, I would like you to meet Berna Hale and Hitomi Satchimi, both soldiers that are part of my unit."

"Brigade, not unit." Hitomi clarifies knowingly. She smirks while adding, "Plus, Berna outranks you, Sergeant! She can introduce herself, y'know!"

"Captain, this is not a place to start a fight. This is supposed to be a friendly outing between the four of us, so watch your tongue." Berna cautions Hitomi on her sharp tongue, advising her warningly to keep it in check. The honey furred Siberian Husky just rolls her eyes with a scoff while asserting, "Pah, fine! I was just letting our arrival know who's boss around here."

Seeing the exchange, Jade leans forward to Denise and whispers in her ear, "Does Captain Sachimi always act that way?"

"I would say 'no' to that. The only time is when we're on both Active and Reserve Duty. Off-duty has no place here."  
Denise whispers back.

"I see; point taken." Once Jade withdraws, she takes a seat at the table joining Hitomi, followed by Leela and Denise. The first to speak is Denise.

"Well, I'm glad to see the two of you are here, Captain, Staff Sergeant," The cocker spaniel nods her head at Hitomi and Leela, addressing them by their ranks. Then she turns her attention to Jade, "you too, Specialist Edevane. Glad to have you here too."

Jade only blushed in return. Flattered, she whines, "I'm in the bottom leagues; no fair! I'm still honored to be here, but I'm not in the major leagues!"

"Well, you're still a huge help to us, Specialist, even though you're of lower rank. But that doesn't matter." Leela joins in, trying to cheer Jade up. While Denise hugs her from the side, Leela explains, "You've actually done a lot of help with management during your time here! Firearms, equipment, communications, specialists are just as good as NCOs, though Specialists are lower."

"Close in range to Corporal, except without leadership responsibilities." Hitomi adds in, staring between the group.

Denise sighs, "This was supposed to be a friendly outing, not a complaint seminar over ranks."

Leela snickers at Denise's comment, "Yeah, I'll say! This gives us more time to catch up together and enjoy some group fun!"

"Wanna join us, Jade?" Hitomi asks Jade to join in on the activity, but she immediately notices the husky across from her staring down at the table, playing with her fingers. Hitomi calls out to her again, but no response; she notices that Jade isn't paying attention, having left reality.

Already, Jade is experiencing a flashback of her own, this time when she was younger. The events replaying in her mind are those of her mother being killed directly in front of her by her own father, an event that she unexpectedly witnessed, and was left traumatized by it ever since. It is when she hears her name being echoed that she finally snaps back to reality, shaking her head. "!!!"

"H-huh??" The black / white female husky anxiously stares around, which draws concern even from Denise and Leela who are now gazing at her. With fear welling up in her heart, she rises from the table and retreats, excusing herself from the group. Denise attempts to reach her but is left hanging, watching her rush out of the cafe.

Outside of the cafe, Jade retreats to an alleyway to be left alone where she begins to go into panic mode, beginning to break down. The same memory of witnessing her own mother being shot just keeps replaying over and over again, and it wouldn't go away.

When Denise exits the cafe to search for Jade, she can hear soft squeaking coming from close by. Noticing an alleyway nearby and a shadow, Denise rushes over for the source of the sound and is met with a crying Siberian Husky, curled up in a fetal position. Feeling pity for her, Denise kneels down and cradles Jade.

**(BGM: Choose and Contemplate by Skaven [Bejeweled 2 OST])**

Upon sensing Denise's presence, Jade snuffles while raising her head up to meet her, her face stained with water. The husky just flops back over again, not even bothered by her presence. Denise wasn't going to let that slide so easily.

"Jade, talk to me. What's bugging you?" Here, the cocker spaniel gently urges Jade to talk, allowing her to open up. At first, the husky peeks over the spaniel, hesitant to confide. However, the cocker spaniel whispers, "I told them to stay put; it's just you and me now."

Taking this into consideration, Jade nods her head; she is still silent, to which Denise speaks to her again a second time. "Come on, talk to me. What's wrong?"

Jade reluctantly whispers, "If I talk about this, word won't circulate, right?"

"You have my word on it and I won't breathe anything of this conversation to anyone." Denise swore sincerely. She has her best interests at heart.

Jade sighs, finally agreeing to comply after taking Denise's consideration to heart. She raises up slowly with her back to the wall, staring down at her pawfeet.

Beginning to open up, Jade explains, "This happened when I was very young and it has stayed with me ever since. I was only a pup when it happened. My mother, gosh she was so beautiful and lovely, I wish she was still alive."

Her bottom lip quivering, she cries, "I witnessed it with my own eyes! All right in front of me! My father shot and killed her, all directly in front of me! I can't shake the memory away!"

Denise just cradles Jade while listening to her speak. And while letting the crying husky pour out her feelings against her shoulder, Denise gently nuzzles her. Although she doesn't say anything, she allows Jade to do the talking.

"I've felt this way ever since that graphic nightmare; nothing will ever make it go away." The husky whines out. Denise is about to open her mouth to respond when she hears footsteps closing in. Gazing up, she notices Leela and Hitomi rushing to meet them, yet she disapprovingly shakes her head at the two, signaling this as a bad time. But when the two gaze at Jade, they have separate mixed reactions.

While Leela comes around Denise to cradle Jade, Hitomi just lowers her head in silence; the sight of her crying counterpart alone makes her heartbroken. Suddenly angry, Hitomi drives a fist into the wall, "RRRIIGGHHH!!!" Cue a split screen cutaway showing the horrified expressions of both Denise and Leela.

"OH!!" On the left is Leela, her horrified gaze on Hitomi punching the wall.

"H-Hitomi!!" On the right is Denise, also aghast at the honey colored Siberian Husky nailing the wall. That's not all, though.

The sharp stinging pain radiating through Hitomi's hand doesn't even mask the anger she is feeling right now. While clutching her hand, she turns towards the trio and growls in a low voice, "Do you have any idea of how much we risk our lives, only to be thrown away in the end?"

"Hitomi, I get it. We all do." Denise answers back in return. She and Leela gently grab Jade and begin to stand her up slowly, the cocker spaniel on her right and the Labrador on her right, supporting her. However, Jade unsuspectingly and unexpectedly enters the conversation.

"We're not babies, Hitomi. We're soldiers, all fighting for a cause; the safety of our country." She stated plainly. She flowers while averting her gaze away, beginning to cry again, "What's the point if we're just tossed away like toys??"

Hitomi scoffs and snidely remarks, "Just because we're Army material doesn't mean we're invincible. Sure we come home alive and whatnot but what about others that aren't so fortunate and otherwise? Our government guys don't care as long as we do our part and are just discarded!"

"I second that opinion, Hitomi." Hitomi whirls to see Denise staring apologetically at her in return, her gaze switching between her, Leela, and Jade. The cocker spaniel continues, "To an extent, they do care, but not as much as we think they should. But compensation doesn't improve mental health."

"I think we should just move on and talk about this later. Right now, we should just enjoy our time together and allow Jade to be with us." Leela advises plainly, also apologetic. The Labrador adds, "Gives her the opportunity to vent and bond with us."

"I think a better idea would be for us to crash at one of ours instead of remaining out here. We don't need any unnecessary attention." Denise suggests thoughtfully.

"I would like that..." Jade was finally released after which she clings to Denise, resting her head on the spaniel's shoulder. While gently scratching Jade's head, Denise pats her cheek. While Leela and Hitomi are in agreement, the honey colored Siberian Husky snickers passively, "Well Sergeant, your husband will be in for a surprise."

"Ah, I'm sure he wouldn't mind." Leela just glared at Hitomi warningly, while Denise waves off the remark, smirking at her in return. "If it's one of us, I'm sure he'll be okay with it. When you're married, you'll understand."

"It also depends on where we go, so I would tread dangerously if I were you, Hitomi." Leela warns. While she leaves, Jade slowly follows her, reserved. But when she quickens her pace, she begins to run to catch up with Leela. Denise and Hitomi just watch and stare at each other before they too separate and depart, ready to continue on with their day.