

Tour of Duty

By Huskyteer

Major Flecker extended her claws and began to clean the sand from under them with a pencil. Her fur would have to wait until she could shower. It was daft, giving a desert posting to a Eurasian lynx, but that was the army for you. Impartial to the point of idiocy. Flicking her tufted ears, the Major reflected that she wouldn't have it any other way. Following the rules and maintaining strict fairness and discipline had got her where she was today.

"Come in," she called before the hesitant rap at her office door could be followed by a second. The door opened and a young private walked stiffly up to her desk, where he saluted. Flecker returned the salute but did not invite him to stand at ease.

"Ah, Holz," she said, looking the soldier up and down. He was a genet, small and skinny, face all nose and whiskers. His long, fluffy tail twitched slightly at the tip. Flecker, who had years ago learned to control her own tail when at attention, wrinkled her nose and stared pointedly at the offending body part, but her spotty young soldier didn't take the hint. The Major pressed on.

"Improperly dressed for duty, Holz?" she prompted. "Second button of your shirt undone? Again?"

"It was hot, Ma'am."

"It was hot." Flecker's eyes narrowed and her ears went flat. "Are you in command of this army, Holz?"

"No, Ma'am." There was the suspicion of a sigh in his voice, an oral eye-roll. Flecker knew this type and she specialised in breaking them. The ones who thought they knew better than their commanding officers - they were the dangerous ones, the ones who went to pieces in a combat scenario. For everyone's safety, she had to make them toe the line.

"Do you make the rules?" she asked.

"No, Ma'am."

"I'm tired of seeing you in my office, Holz. Seven days on fatigues, starting tomorrow, 5AM. Dismissed."

Holz bit his lip but didn't protest. He saluted again, turned about, and marched from the room.

Fatigues were as much of a timewaster for the CO as for the soldier on detail, Flecker thought as she marched over to Holz's tent with her fur fluffed up in the predawn cold. No - the punishment was necessary to instill discipline, which benefitted the unit as a whole, therefore it was a sensible use of both her time and Holz's. But if he cared to stop getting himself put on fatigues at some point soon, it would be no loss to either of them.

The line of tents made black squares against the horizon, lines and angles harsh among the soft curves of the desert. A single silhouetted figure broke the repeated pattern of tent and sky. From a distance it appeared still as a statue, but when Flecker got closer she could make out fur moving in the breeze. The morning wind would die down as the sun rose, bringing another stifling day.

Holz, resplendent in full service dress, returned her salute. The Major inspected him up and down, and could find no fault. Every button gleamed; there were creases where there should be creases, and none where there shouldn't. The fabric across his chest stretched almost imperceptibly as he breathed. Flecker stuck her head inside the tent to check that the bed had been made. It was immaculate. Stooping through the flap, she picked up his hairbrush and sniffed it to check it had been recently used, then laid it back on the washstand at the correct angle.

"Good," she said, emerging. "Grab some sleep if you can." Holz relaxed gratefully. "I'll be back in an hour, and I want you in full gear again."

He knew the rules, Flecker reminded herself as she walked away, and he had to learn to live by them. But the memory of Holz's expression wasn't making her feel particularly good.

There was no figure outside the tent when the lynx returned, a precise sixty minutes later. She hadn't tried to sleep herself, had thought she'd get some paperwork out of the way, but the need to keep an eye on the clock so as to be on time for the genet proved too distracting. Sergeant Voss might have been late deliberately, just to keep Holz hanging about, but the Major wasn't like that. Play fair with me and I'll play fair with you was the message she tried to get across. And someone wasn't playing fair here. Twitching her stumpy tail, Flecker poked her head inside the tent again.

Holz was visible as a lump under the bedclothes. A small lump - he had tucked himself up tight. Only his pink nose stuck out from under the covers, the end of his fluffy tail wrapped around it like a comfort blanket. Flecker drew a breath to bawl at him, then changed her mind and shook his shoulder. The genet sprang awake and sat up, mumbling something that could have been "Ma'am".

She should have extended his punishment by another day for his lapse. Instead, she found herself saying "I'll be back in five minutes, Holz. If you're ready then we'll say no more about it."

To his credit, Holz was up and outside the tent when she returned, looking a little hot and out of breath under his combat clothing but otherwise immaculate. No - one cuff was pulled back slightly further than the other. Flecker reached out to pull it down, and her pads brushed the grey fur of Holz's wrist. How soft it was!

"All right, Holz," she said, feeling her tail twitch behind her. "Shirt sleeve order, go and join your mates for breakfast. Report to me this afternoon."

That was how fatigues worked: the luckless squaddie undergoing the punishment wasn't allowed a moment's free time. While the rest of Holz's unit lounged about, writing letters, reading or playing cards outside their tents, the genet toiled. Flecker set him to cleaning the latrines, a classic punishment. At the end of two hours, she examined his work and released him.

"5AM tomorrow, Holz. Number 2 Service Dress again."

"Ma'am." He was taking his punishment quietly, at least - and doing a good job, too. He hadn't breathed a word of complaint about the hard labour in the afternoon heat, or the smell. Traditionally, tasks meted out for fatigues were utterly pointless - repainting the flagpole was a classic example - but Flecker preferred to get some use out of her soldiers if she was going to tire them out. Besides, it might have taxed Holz too far. His contempt for the way the army worked was obvious. Major Flecker snorted, and her whiskers flattened against her face.

The next day was even hotter. Flecker, who had been out here for eight months, wouldn't have thought it possible. In the afternoon, she set Holz to washing the jeep.

“Not just the shiny bits, either,” she said. “Get right underneath - that’s where the sand does real damage.”

The genet nodded.

“Take your shirt off, if you like,” Flecker added, surprising herself. He folded it neatly on a chair and worked topless, droplets of water from the hosepipe arcing above him in rainbows and settling on his grey fur until the sun burned them off. Then he disappeared under the vehicle with a brush and sponge. When he emerged there was a smear of oil running from his cheek to his chest, and another down his back.

Flecker got down on paws and knees to look at the underside of the jeep. “Good work,” she told him. “The army’s like that jeep, you know. You notice the shiny bits, all the uniforms and drill, but it’s the greasy underbelly where the real work happens.”

“It would still work if the bit on top was all sandy and scruffy,” Holz pointed out. “Ma’am.”

Flecker studied him, eyebrows raised. It was a smart way of referring to his transgression with the shirt button, if a little cheeky. “People have more respect for a shiny jeep, Holz, and it really takes very little effort to keep it that way. And speaking of greasy underbellies, go and have a shower.”

He marched away into the heat haze, still bare-chested, with his shirt slung over his shoulder and his tail swinging behind. Major Flecker caught herself gazing after him, and snapped her head aside with a little growl.

On the fourth day of Holz’s punishment Flecker couldn’t bear to be outside, so she had the genet tackle the filing in her office, which had an ancient air-conditioning unit. The Major sat at her desk, nominally writing a report while studying Holz from under her eyelids. His own file was among those that needed sorting - she knew because she had consulted it the night before, and she knew exactly where in the haphazard pile it was. When he reached it, though, he gathered it up and placed it in alphabetical order without a moment’s hesitation.

"Why did you join the army, Holz?" Flecker asked. The genet, bent down to move a ring binder from a lower shelf to a higher, froze in position. The curve of his tail mirrored the arch of his back.

"It's what my family does," he said, straightening up. "Dad. Grandad. My three older brothers."

“And you’re not enjoying it. This is all off the record, by the way.”

“No...Ma’am.”

Flecker saw the soldiers in her unit as individuals, not as a single mass, but she couldn’t afford to have favourites. All men, and women, had to count for her, but none too much. And lately, she had been noticing Holz more than she ought to, more than a senior officer had a right to notice a young private. She had seen how little he talked to the rest of his unit, and how little interest they had in him. She had noticed him struggling not to talk back when Sergeant Voss drilled them in the blazing heat or criticised the shine of his boots.

"Let me give you a piece of advice." Flecker picked up a pencil and held it delicately between the pads of her forefingers. "I know some of the rules seem silly, but they're there for a reason. We keep our buttons done up to avoid sunburn, and our boots polished because they last longer if we look after them. We use the regulation shampoo because stuff from home clogs the drains. The

military is no place for petty little acts of rebellion; you'll just get stomped down again and again until you break. You have to pick your battles."

"What was yours?"

The lynx looked up sharply, and ran her tongue around her teeth before replying. "Do you see many female Majors around here, Holz?" she asked at last.

"I haven't been looking for any other ones."

The pencil between Flecker's paws snapped in two.

"Dismissed," she said.

The rules are there for a reason.