



Most people who mentioned the basement of Walter Reed National Military Medical Center thought they meant the underground levels. What they didn't realize was that the "Basement" meant something completely different.

Some secrets, like the presidential bunker under the White House, were secret only in their details. The existence of places like that was well known. The Basement was a different matter entirely because it didn't technically exist. It wasn't listed in any documents or shown on any blueprints. It didn't even have a name that could be leaked to the public, and the select few who knew of its existence were either patients there or had gone through enough security checks to infiltrate the Pentagon.

Michelle Park was one of the latter. As she rode the elevator down past Walter Reed's real basement, she took a plastic ID badge out of her briefcase and clipped it on the lapel of her lab coat, making sure that her picture, name, and the label "March Technologies" were clearly visible. The guards here took their jobs seriously, even if they didn't know the details of the patients they protected.

That's what the Basement was for. When a foreign dignitary needed emergency medical attention or a defecting spy needed a safehouse while their secrets could be verified, the Basement was here to house them. And when something that couldn't be explained happened to an international special operations team in Afghanistan, the Basement was here so Michelle Park could interrogate the team's final member.

The elevator dinged as it reached the bottom floor, trundling open on Cold War-era mechanisms. Michelle waited for her eyes to adjust to the yellowish light. Stepping onto the

linoleum, she was stopped by a marine lance corporal who looked like he couldn't have been more than twenty.

He wore fatigues instead of the khaki and green service uniform the Marines used as the equivalent of a business suit. The sidearm and baton on his belt probably wouldn't have matched the look. "Identification," he ordered.

Michelle absently wondered how long the marine been standing at attention on the off chance that someone exited the elevator, but the answer didn't really matter. She smiled politely, looking up at the man. She was used to looking up at people. She was only five feet, three inches, and she was wearing Nike running shoes with her slacks instead of heels. It was better to be comfortable than to get those extra few inches. People were going to prejudge her as another tiny young Asian woman anyway.

She unclipped the ID badge from her coat and handed it to the lance corporal, who looked it over and cocked his head slightly. "March Technologies isn't on any of our clearance lists, miss."

"Miss." Michelle hadn't even received a cursory "ma'am." Oh well. She could address the incorrect assumption now, but it was easier just to move forward. She wasn't here for the lance corporal anyway.

"Oh, the agency probably isn't on your list, but don't worry, I have clearance, Lance Corporal..." She looked at the Velcro nametag on his chest "Roberts."

Roberts narrowed his eyes. "It's time for you to leave, miss."

Michelle looked past him to the original 60's reception desk that had been reinforced with steel and bulletproof glass

to create a security station. "My access code is Delta-Four-One-One-Nine-Green-Apache-Sigma."

A young lieutenant there typed something in a computer, then with wide eyes turned to a stocky woman in a navy captain's uniform. The captain leaned forward, pushed a button, and her voice came out of a speaker somewhere on the ceiling. "Access granted. Let her in, Lance Corporal."

Roberts either didn't realize things had just bypassed his authority or else he didn't care. He gestured toward the X-ray machine and the metal detector, but the voice on the speaker stopped him. "Let her in. She has Full Access."

The marine did pause at that. But after some gears fidgeted in his skull, he opened the gate next to the security station. He waved Michelle through, and she smiled at him before heading down the hallway beyond, her sneakers squeaking on the linoleum.

After barely a dozen paces, the captain she'd seen in the security office met her with an extended hand. "Doctor Park? Captain Danielle Soodjinda. Welcome to the Basement."

Michelle accepted the proffered hand, allowing her own to be swallowed by the woman's calloused grip. "Thank you, Captain."

"What can we do for you today?"

Michelle smiled. This was the professional smile she gave colleagues rather than the innocently demure one she used when people were busy prejudging her. "Is there somewhere we can speak besides the hallway?"

Soodjinda led her down a hallway to a conference room that looked like it had been taken straight out of a black-and-white police procedural show. She took a seat, knowing that the captain wouldn't sit until she did, then pulled a small stack of

files out of her briefcase. "What do you know about Gunnery Sergeant Jeremy White?"

With a barely masked sigh, Soodjinda took her seat. "Special forces sniper on some sort of international team. He's a marine."

The last sentence was more judgment than statement. It was also the exact type of insight Michelle had hoped to gain on this visit. "What do you know about why he's here?"

Soodjinda's words were carefully selected. "He hasn't received any medical treatment beyond a weekly physical since he was transferred, and I haven't been given any orders for specific care."

Michelle smiled at that and slid a file across the table. "In March of this year, Combined Joint Task Force 613, codename 'Hammerlock,' engaged in an unsanctioned raid on a cave complex in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, while on a reconnaissance mission, codename 'Operation Spellbind.' All information about this mission is classified Green. Do you understand and agree to this security level exemption?"

Soodjinda gritted her teeth, obviously caught off guard. But she was also the commanding officer of the Basement, or at least would have been if the Basement existed. That meant she was used to things not going according to procedure and keeping silent about them. "I understand and agree. And this has what to do with White?"

"Gunnery Sergeant Jeremy White was a member of Team Hammerlock and active during Spellbind. Due to the sensitivity of his most recent mission, I'm here to evaluate White's fitness to return to duty."

"Major Allen is our psychiatrist liaison. Why isn't he doing this evaluation?"

"Unfortunately Major Allen doesn't have clearance for Spellbind." Michelle reached to take the file back, noting that Soodjinda hadn't even touched it. The woman was smart. She knew not to ask questions in this line of work. That meant she could be trusted, but she wasn't going to do any more than she had to. Michelle was on her own with this one.

"And your clearance? The system recognized your access code, but I don't know March Technologies," Soodjinda said.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but that's above your pay grade. I know it's probably a surprise to have a civilian come--"

"Don't do that," Soodjinda interrupted. "We both know how this works. Just tell me what you need."

Michelle smiled. Maybe she could work with this captain after all. "Tell me about Gunnery Sergeant White."

"You seem to know more than I do," said Soodjinda, glancing pointedly at the unopened file.

"Perhaps. But I want to know about the man, not his record. How has he handled being in the secure wing?"

"He's a marine," the captain said again. "Cocky, arrogant. And he's Special Forces, so multiply that times a thousand."

Michelle noted the scorn in her voice and played into it. "So you're saying he's an asshole?"

Soodjinda almost broke her stoic demeanor with a laugh, but managed to hold back. "I didn't say that."

Michelle laughed for her. "It's all right, this is all classified, remember?"

"Then yes. He's an asshole," Soodjinda acquiesced. "But he's that special type of asshole. He's one of the ones that

doesn't like being out of control. There's nothing out of place in the security video, but if you know the type, you can tell he's pacing the bars of his cage like a tiger in a zoo. Only instead of trying to eat his handlers, he verbally abuses them."

"That's not entirely unexpected. He's been in the Basement for four months now." Michelle returned the unopened file to her briefcase and rummaged at the bottom. It had to be here somewhere. "Gum?" she asked, holding out a pack of Trident Wintergreen.

"No thank you."

"It's here if you want it," Michelle said, putting a piece in her mouth, then neatly folding the wrapper and placing it in a pocket. "It's understandable. If I was used to being in charge, I'd feel the same way White does."

"He wasn't in charge, though. He's a gunnery sergeant, not an officer."

Michelle genuinely laughed at that. "You and I both know that means nothing. He was part of an elite international squad outside of normal oversight, even if he was a junior member. And now he's in a zoo. I think I'd react quite the same way."

"That may be true, but it doesn't excuse his behavior."

"Oh really?" Michelle asked.

Soodjinda nodded. "Not long after he got here, he attacked a nurse and tried to use him as a hostage to escape."

"Interesting," Michelle mused. She put the gum away in the briefcase and took out a clipboard to take notes. "Any idea why that happened?"

"He kept demanding to see his team and ranting about the Taliban spiders. At first, I assumed he was hallucinating, but Major Allen assures me he isn't. When White tried to force his



way out, he screamed about his mission not being over. It took four of my men to subdue him."

"Who were those four?" Michelle asked.

Without hesitation, Soodjinda listed them. "Morse, Lawson, Chu, and Roberts."

"Roberts. The lance corporal I met at security." Michelle stated, feeling another smile cross her face.

"Yes."

"Excellent!" she exclaimed. "Can you call him in? I'll need to brief him before he accompanies me to see Gunnery Sergeant White."

Soodjinda looked caught off guard. "You want Roberts to go with you?"

"I assume someone of White's skill and temperament requires certain security measures. Am I wrong?"

Soodjinda stood, acquiescing through action. "Just a moment." She went to a rotary phone mounted on the wall, lifted it, and spoke quietly before hanging up. "There's no reception down here. You have to use the hard line."

"That's good to know, thank you," Michelle said, crossing one leg over the other in her chair. When the marine who'd stopped her at the elevator arrived, she didn't stand. It forced the tall man to look down at her even more than before, which clearly made him uncomfortable.

"Lance Corporal Trayvon Roberts reporting as ordered, Captain."

"Lance Corporal, you will accompany Doctor Park to room twelve for security," Soodjinda stated, matter-of-factly.

Roberts wasn't able to keep his eyes from narrowing. "Room twelve, ma'am?"



"Did I stutter, Lance Corporal?"

"No, ma'am."

"I'll leave you to it then," Soodjinda said to Michelle. "We'll be monitoring everything on the cameras. If you need anything, just ask."

"Thank you so much, Captain." Michelle stood as the woman left. Turning to Roberts, she held out the pack of Trident. "Gum?"

Roberts looked taken aback. "Uh, no thank you ma'am."

"Please, I'm not old enough to be a 'ma'am,' am I?" She almost laughed at the marine's hopeless expression, especially after he had just upgraded her from "miss." It was fun to push buttons on these strict military types, and now she knew what to expect from Roberts.

"Yes, ma'am—I mean, miss, um..."

"Oh don't worry about it. Just call me Michelle." She took out the file that Soodjinda hadn't looked at. "When you accompany me, you will hear information under classification level Green regarding Combined Joint Task Force 613, codename 'Hammerlock,' and the operation codenamed 'Spellbind.' Do you understand and agree to this security level exemption?"

Roberts didn't even blink. "Yes, ma'am."

"Michelle."

"Of course."

Michelle studied the man. He was big and made even more imposing by his gear and the low ceiling in the underground room. But he wasn't a thug. She could tell from how he watched and calculated every move she made. He glanced at the folder and then back at Michelle. "Are you ready, ma'am?"

She ignored the honorific this time. Roberts was too young to break protocol for a pretty face. He must still be terrified of his old drill sergeant. "So, you were one of the four who had to restrain Gunnery Sergeant White when he took the nurse hostage."

Roberts' face hardened into an expression that didn't hide his disgust as much as he thought it did. "Yes, ma'am."

"And does he hold that against you?"

"If I were to judge by how he speaks to me? Yes, ma'am."

Michelle stood quickly. "Excellent! Then let's go meet him."

