



"We're really going there?" White yelled, springing to his feet. "What the fuck do you want from me? To tell you every horrible thing that's ever happened?"

Michelle kept her voice as cool as she had this entire time. Cool but not icy, firm but not sharp. "I want you to answer my questions."

"I am answering your fucking questions! I'm cooperating! So why are you making me look like I'm some kind of monster!"

"Are you a monster, Gunnery Sergeant?"

At the use of his rank, White snapped to face her. Hands balled, it looked as though he was fighting the urge to leap at Michelle and strangle her. When he spoke, his words were stony, bubbling with molten rage underneath. "I'm a sniper. It's what I do."

"And what is it that you do, Gunnery Sergeant?"

"I take the shot before the target has a chance."

"And does that make you a monster?"

"Fuck you."

Michelle didn't let the insult faze her. "It's very simple. Are you a monster because you're a sniper?"

"You know the answer."

"You tell me."

"No."

Michelle paused. White was good at doublespeak, and that "no" could have been an answer to the question or a refusal to answer. She could force him to be specific, but she was about to push him on more important topics. She gave him the win and continued. "Then it's settled. You're not a monster. Now, have a seat. I want to go over just a few more things before we break for the day."

White growled under his breath, muttering something foul in a language Michelle had analysts to translate, but he did as she asked.

"You were in Mosul with CJTF-613, yes?"

"Hammerlock."

"Hammerlock, of course. Let's go over that, actually. How did you become a member?"

"I was recruited," White sneered. He was obviously furious about how she'd forced him to address Cody Pacheco and how the incident had shaped the course of his life. But that was by design. It was good to have him angry in this case, for his sake, not for hers. The next topic had enough potential for guilt that it would be far too easy for him to drown in it. But if she was able to keep him at a simmer with the anger seething under the surface, then he was more likely to direct the blame outside himself. That was, after all, what she was here for.

Or at least that was part of it.

"You were recruited by Captain John Stirling, yes?"

"We called him Price."

"Why the alias?" Michelle asked. "You didn't call him Stirling? Or even Captain?"

White shook his head. "It's better to use the alias all the time. We were in deep. Easier to practice so we didn't slip and say the wrong thing."

That wasn't true. "But wouldn't people know who you were if they heard your codenames outside of the mission?"

"Sure, let's go with that."

This was getting bogged down in specifics. Michelle moved on. "So Price was Captain Stirling, British SAS. And was he the originator of the task force?"

White shook his head, but his eyes stayed fixed on her. "No, but he was head of field ops. He reported to Kingfish. I don't know his name."

"Brigadier General William Derlin, British Army."

"See? You know more than I do," White replied hotly. "You don't need me for any of this."

Putting the clipboard down again, Michelle met his gaze. "We've gone over this, Gunnery Sergeant. I'm here to evaluate you for discharge. And that means evaluating your part in Operation Spellbind. I can't do that unless I hear your version of the events leading up to it."

"And fucking high school was leading up to Spellbind?"

"It affected the course of your career, wouldn't you say?" She reverted to the topic at hand without pausing. "General Derlin wanted a team in the field for covert ops against a growing threat in the region. Do you know why he formed an international unit instead of using purely SAS members?"

"Ask him," White spat.

"I would. But unfortunately it's difficult to question a field commander of an allied NATO member nation. What would you guess?"

He leaned back, staring at her, thinking things over. Michelle could tell the question intrigued him. White was smart, tactically more than strategically, but he had a good sense for field operations. He wanted to give his opinion. The question was whether he would decide to hold back.

"By the time ISIS was an issue, we'd already been pulling out of Iraq for years. So in 2013, they renamed Operation Iraqi Freedom to New Dawn, and on paper we handed over responsibility to coalition forces. That's when ISIS started showing up in the

North. My guess is Kingfish wanted someone in there early for recon and counterinsurgency since the Iraqis weren't doing shit. Hammerlock was black ops and shouldn't have ever been public, but if it ever did go that way, it would look a lot better to have a coalition rather than just Brits."

Michelle almost smiled. White thought he was so good at this. He was smart. But in this sort of situation, it was so easy to read and guide him. He still hadn't figured out the real game. Someone less skilled than Michelle might start getting cocky at how well she was manipulating him, but she knew exactly how dangerous this entire mission could be. "How did you become a part of it?"

"It was April of '13. I was a staff sergeant, just out of sniper training, and nothing could touch me. I was a god among men. I was a certified badass."

"What does that have to do with joining CJTF-613?"

"Hammerlock," White interrupted, highlighting again just how much the team identity meant to him.

"Of course. What does that have to do with them?"

"Everything," White replied. The anger was still evident in the way he clipped his words at the ends of sentences, but he was regaining control of his composure. "I was in Turkey. Incirlik Air Base. They had me doing recon and spotting ops, but I wanted more than that. I wanted the dangerous missions. The secret shit where you say 'I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you.'"

"So when you were offered a chance to be part of the task force," Michelle started.

"I didn't just jump at the opportunity. I dove in headfirst."

"Tell me about the team then. This is where my information starts becoming limited." It was a lie, of course, but the look of excitement in White's eyes made it worth it. He took the bait and continued.

"Kingfish is in charge of Hammerlock, but Price runs the actual ops. Then there's four of us on the team with him. Nomad's our communications and systems expert."

It made sense he used the present tense since he didn't know what had happened to the team. Michelle let that one go. The truth would be revealed soon enough. "Maître Luc Benoit from Commando de Montfort. France," she clarified.

"Right," he agreed. "Nomad's signals. Chill dude. Even when the shit hits the fan, he never loses his cool. Then Saturn's our medic. I know his name, but it's in Polish and my face can't make those sounds."

"Porucznik Franciszek Wojciechowski," Michelle said with what she knew to be the perfect accent.

"*Gesundheit*," White replied. "Yeah, he's from GROM, the Polish Spec Ops. He's also second in command when we actually have one."

"What do you mean?" Michelle asked.

"Hammerlock runs things different. Less chain of command and more teamwork. Price knows what we're good at and when to listen to us. He's," White searched for the word, "deliberate, I guess. Doesn't make decisions on the fly, but once he does, it's the right one."

"I see. So, Price, Nomad, and Saturn. Who's the last member?"

"Alloy, from Canada. Demolitions." White said the words slowly, and with more emotion he tried desperately to hide. From what had happened on Spellbind, she wasn't surprised.

"Alloy: Chief Warrant Officer Angelo Roy. Canadian JTF2. What's he like?" she asked, following White's lead on tense.

"He's an interesting one. Damn good at his job, but he changed after Mosul."

That actually was news to Michelle. She knew the facts on paper about the foreign members of CJTF-613, but not much more than that. "Changed how?"

"Mosul was rough," White shrugged. "After that he got a little more distant, a little harder to read. But nothing we couldn't handle."

Michelle filed that information away for later. Roy was already on the list of topics to discuss at some point. "And you are the sniper. What's your call sign?"

White cocked an eyebrow dubiously. "No way in hell you don't know that one."

"Okay, Rooster."

"Hehe. That's me."

"How were your call signs chosen?" This was a legitimate question. Michelle had suspicions but no confirmation yet.

White sighed heavily, his exhale dissipating much of his remaining anger, like exhaust from a tailpipe. "There were suggestions. But I asked for mine."

"Rooster? Because you were cocky?"

"Funny. But you already know, don't you?"

Michelle debated whether to bring up the IED incident again. She didn't want to break her illusion of omniscience.

Luckily, White confirmed it before she had to make the choice. "Alice in Chains. Seemed like a way to honor Dave, you know?"

"Is that why you made playlists for the team?"

"You know about that? Of course you do. Yeah, I'd started doing that a while back. I missed having them after Dave was gone, and no one else was going to do it."

"So you had your team. Price, Nomad, Alloy, Saturn, and Rooster. Overseen by Kingfish. What was your first task?"

White blew his breath out noisily again, seeming to relax even more. Michelle hoped he didn't get too relaxed. Then the guilt might start becoming a threat. She might need to raise his ire again soon. But not yet.

"We were assigned to Camp Fallujah. Your reports probably say MEK Compound." Michelle knew the colloquial name but didn't interrupt. "From there we started doing recon missions into Northern Iraq, checking on ISIS. Do you want details on all of them? Or can we skip through?"

"We can gloss over these. But let's stop for a moment on your second Purple Heart. The first one that's classified." Over her shoulder, Michelle heard Roberts shuffle. He'd been quiet for a while now, and she spared a stray thought to wonder if he was curious or just restless. It didn't actually matter, but his reactions were curious. She would need to debrief him too. "You were stabbed?"

White snorted. "Stabbed? Sure, let's go with that."

"You weren't stabbed?"

"Well it was more of a slash. Or a slice or something. It wasn't what you'd think."

"Enlighten me."

Standing again, White raised his undershirt to expose objectively impressive abs. "Right there. The scar that's coming up from my hip? That's the shrapnel from the Humvee. This one," he said, pointing to an ugly irregular line just under his floating ribs, "that was the saw."

Michelle heard Roberts shuffle again. He was curious. She had to admit she was too. All the report had said was that it was a long wound from an improvised weapon. She had called it a stab specifically to coax him into explaining. "Did you say a saw?"

"Yep. 18-inch saw. My dad would kill me if I ever said I didn't know if it was a rip cut or a cross cut, but it was dark and I sort of had other things on my mind at that point."

"How exactly did you get slashed with a hand tool?"

"Pretty simple actually," White shrugged. "This was Operation Urban Shark. The objective was to plant a bug in a radio tower so our people could hear ISIS chatter. I inserted first to set up overwatch in a building that was under construction. But that night, someone was doing overtime stealing pipes so he could sell the copper. I turned the corner, surprised us both, and he attacked me with the saw he was holding."

Michelle blinked. Everything about White's body language said he was telling the truth. But it seemed so far-fetched. "You were almost killed by a saw-wielding construction supply thief stealing copper pipes."

White nodded. "Almost killed is putting it wrong. Sure, it cut me open, but I put the saw across his throat. And you know the sad part?"

Michelle humored him. "What's the sad part?"

"If the guy had known his tools and used a hacksaw instead of something meant for wood? He would have already been gone by the time I got there."

"So that was your second Purple Heart."

"Yep. Nomad joked he was going to pin it to me with a nail gun. I just got hammered instead."

Michelle ignored the groan from Roberts and moved on. "After that you moved to Al Udeid Air Force Base in Qatar. And you were promoted to gunnery sergeant there?"

"Yep," White confirmed. The last story had erased the rest of the anger, and he was looking almost cocky as he recounted the story. "We were in Doha for a few months for regular rotation and training. The ops were still classified, but apparently someone got word that I was doing something right."

"And after Qatar, you started working out of Mosul."

White's face soured. "Yeah."

"How long were you there?"

"A few months. We went in early 2014, end of January, I think. And then we were there until ISIS took it over in June."

"And that's where you met Yousef."

The sour look on White's face intensified. "Yeah. That's where we met Khalid."

"Tell me about him." Michelle watched the emotions flicker across White's face. He tried to say several things, but stopped himself each time finally sighing heavily. "You know all of this already, right?"

"Only what was in the reports," she lied.

Another deeply heavy sigh. "Khalid Yousef. We met him the first time when he tried to sell us bootleg CDs. He spoke decent

English, and he knew his way around the city. He sort of attached himself to us and helped us out as a guide.”

“How long did you know him?”

“A few months, I think. I don’t remember exactly.” It was the same type of evasive phrase he had used earlier to avoid a subject, but this time, she could tell he was being truthful.

“And what happened in June?”

“In June? al-Bilawi happened.” He paused, and Michelle waited patiently to let him know she wanted him to continue. “While ISIS was moving south, we’d been tracking al-Bilawi, one of their leaders.”

Michelle pretended to write something down. “And what happened to him?”

“He blew himself up on June 4, after Iraqi police cornered him.”

“Were you and your team involved in that?”

White shook his head. “We were tracking him, but we never got orders to take him out. But we fucking should have. No, we didn’t know anything was happening that night until we heard yelling outside our barracks. But noise like that doesn’t happen in the middle of the night unless something’s up. We found out later that ISIS had swept through the outer checkpoints like they were nothing. They claimed it was revenge for al-Bilawi. All the Iraqi tanks were in Al Anbar, so Mosul was basically defenseless. Then it got ugly. Street fighting went house to house. They got some of the police and hanged them or crucified them. Fucking religious nutjobs.”

Michelle waited and watched as White paused again. His expression was turning from sour to sorrowful, which could be a

move in the wrong direction. She continued to monitor his mood as he continued.

"The fifth was quiet for us, at least. The ISIS forces were too small to do much, so the police bombed them with helicopters. But the fuckers were still sending in suicide bombers. And that wasn't the last of them. Fuck.. Fucking suicide bombs."

"What about them?" Michelle asked.

"I mean, when does strapping a fucking explosive to your chest come off as a good idea? And then walking into a mosque to blow yourself up? I mean, 72 virgins seriously isn't all it's cracked up to be. I'd rather have sluts who know what they're doing."

The last comment was said bitterly, and Michelle could see White's thoughts begin to turn dark. She couldn't afford that. She needed to get him angry again. "Some people would say suicide bombers are brave."

"Yeah? Well then they're either idiots or terrorists."

"People like that are willing to die for their cause."

"Yeah? And what do you know about it? Have you seen what happens after the bomb goes off?" White stood and paced. Good, it was working. "Most of them are kids. Their lives suck so the religious people tell them they'll go to paradise if they blow themselves up. So these kids kill themselves, and they're happy they're up in heaven or whatever. But what about everyone else around them? The people at the market getting groceries? The kids who lose their legs? Or lose their parents? Suicide bombers are fucking cowards! They pick the easy way out and leave us to clean up their mess."

Now that he was angry, it was time to cut to the quick. Michelle lowered her clipboard. "What happened on June 8?"

He stopped pacing. "We're really going to go there?"

"You knew we were."

"Fine." The word was a curse, but Michelle simply waited until he continued. "That's when the shit hit the fan. We didn't know that Mosul was filled with ISIS cells. Then on the eighth, they all poured out at once, like we kicked a fucking hornet's nest. The police were the only people there to stop them, so they started killing police leaders."

"Where were you?" Michelle asked.

"I was on the roof of the police station. Technically, I was just there as overwatch, but we all knew that was bullshit. I was there to make sure suicide bombers didn't get close."

"And the rest of the team?"

"They were inside the station, but we were all on comms."

"And what happened while you were up there?"

"You fucking know what happened," White growled. "We both know that you have all the details in those fucking notes over there."

Michelle crossed her hands over the clipboard without looking down. "So are you going to tell me? Or do I have to explain again that I need to hear it from you?"

The fire rose in White's eyes and his lip twitched as though he was fighting to hold back a snarl. He stared, keeping her in his sights, but finally spoke. "There were people outside the police station. Yelling, protesting. Something. It was fucking ugly, and it was only a matter of time before they started fighting each other. Then one of them got past the blockade and charged the entrance."

"And what did you do?"

"Maybe I'll tell you if you don't fucking interrupt me!" he spat. "Do you want me to tell you or not?"

Michelle smiled inwardly. This was exactly where she needed him. Angry, but still in enough control to think clearly.

"The comms got real loud real fast. And Price said it was a bomber."

"So what did you do?"

White slammed his hands on the back of the chair. "I said I'm getting there, all right?"

"So?"

"Price said to take the shot."

"And did you?"

"Will you just shut the fuck up already?" White yelled. "Not at first. I fucking hesitated."

"Why?"

"Because from my angle I could see the target's face."

"Why did that matter?"

"You know exactly why it fucking mattered."

Michelle met White's furious gaze. "So did you take the shot?"

"Of course I took the shot."

"You said you hesitated."

"I hesitated for one heartbeat. And then I took the fucking shot. Okay? You happy now?"

"But why?" Michelle asked calmly.

White's breathing sped up, but he managed to keep his voice level. "Because in the middle of that shitstorm, Khalid was running toward the police station."

"Not because of your orders?"

"What the fuck does it matter? I took the shot. And I don't miss. Click, boom, target neutralized. That was the end of it."

Roberts stirred again behind Michelle, and she swore to herself. She couldn't afford for him to distract White right now. "But was that the end of it?"

"Fuck no."

"Tell me."

"Fuck you."

"Tell me."

"No!" White and kicked the chair. It skidded across the linoleum into the vinyl couch too fast for Roberts to react, but White was already pacing in the opposite direction by the time the lance corporal moved. "It's in the record, all right? That's all it needs to be!"

Michelle didn't let her voice change at all. For the third time, she said, "Tell me. Who was the target?"

"It was Khalid, all right? You already fucking know this! Why do you need me to say it out loud?"

"Because you need to say it out. You need to deal with it."

"I already dealt with it! I dealt with it when I made the shot! I dealt with it when I got down to the station and saw his body! I dealt with it when Khalid's father cursed me and my children and my children's children for killing his son, when he was only bringing us intel!"

"Did you really deal with it though?"

"How the fuck am I supposed to deal with the fact that I killed a thirteen-year-old kid? A kid who was on our side?"

"You deal with it by placing blame in the right place," Michelle said. It was a dangerous statement that had the

potential to backfire, but she had White right where she wanted him.

White took a step forward, lowering his stance. Michelle heard Roberts draw the baton, but she didn't move. "Blame? You want to talk blame? I made the shot. I was to blame. You don't think I fucking know that?"

Michelle smiled sadly. He was behaving exactly as she'd known he would. "For someone so good at thinking on your feet, it's surprising how dumb you are."

That caught him off guard, and the look of disgust and confusion on White's face was almost humorous. "What the actual fuck are you talking about?"

And now he had all but asked her to start leading him where she wanted him. It was almost too easy. "Where was Captain Stirling?"

"Why does that matter?"

Michelle continued in the same tone. "You already said he was in the police station. He gave the order, right?"

"Yeah."

"So he saw Yousef. He knew who it was."

"I guess."

"And Stirling told you to shoot."

"And I fucking did. I made the shot. I killed Khalid. I'm the one to blame."

"Really? He made the call."

"But Price didn't pull the trigger," White spat. "I could have disobeyed the order."

"But you didn't," Michelle said. "In your words, it was a 'shitstorm.' There was no time, and in only the space of a

heartbeat, you had make your own determination or else trust your team leader.”

“I had my order.”

“You said that CJTF-613’s chain of command was looser than others. You know you could have made the decision. Just like you can make the decision now.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” White demanded, without insisting she call the team Hammerlock.

“You can decide to blame yourself for what you did, or you can blame the person who deserves it. But either way, I think we’re done for the day.” Michelle put the clipboard in her briefcase and stood in a single movement.

White spun toward the digital clock under the TV. It read 16:57. “What? You’re going to leave right now? With that?”

“Of course I am,” Michelle said firmly. “I’m here to evaluate you, not Stirling. And if you harbor doubts about yourself, then why shouldn’t I?”

“But wait,” White sputtered, caught completely off guard. “Are you coming back? What about my discharge?”

“That will depend on our next interview. Roberts, the door, if you please?” Michelle turned her back on White and strode casually out of the room. She didn’t turn back until she heard an audible buzz that meant the electronic lock had engaged. His furious screams that Khalid had only been thirteen followed her through the security door and down the hall.