



"You're going to walk out on him after that?" Roberts asked.

Michelle looked up at the burly lance corporal. He was a full head taller than her, but his discomfort and confusion made him seem small. She hadn't spared much thought for Roberts during the last three hours, except for how to use him as leverage. Now, it seemed she would have to deal with his feelings about the interview.

"Yes, Lance Corporal. In fact, I just did. Are you questioning my methods?"

The veiled threat landed hard despite the softness of the delivery. Roberts squared his shoulders and looked straight ahead. "No, ma'am."

"I thought I told you to call me Michelle," she said with a smile. Earlier today, she had decided he wouldn't break regulations like that, but now that she'd seen more of how he addressed White and the overall situation, she wanted to confirm her suspicions.

"Right," he said, not calling either name.

"Right." About more than one thing. "Now, please take me to Captain Soodjinda."

Roberts turned on a dime and headed down the hallway. Michelle knew where to go, but giving an underling a sense of purpose was an excellent way to reinforce the hierarchy and improve morale. When they arrived at the security room, he remained at attention by the door.

Soodjinda and the lieutenant were back in front of the enormous bank of monitors, which showed different angles of patient rooms and corridors. Four screens on the main display were showing White's room. "Doctor Park," the captain said.

"Hello, Captain, I came to debrief with you."

Soodjinda nodded and looked down at the lieutenant. "Clear the room." The junior officer stood, saluted, and shut the door behind him. When they were alone, she turned toward Michelle. "I think it's time for you to tell me exactly what's going on, Doctor."

Michelle let the comment linger as she fumbled in her briefcase. "Gum?"

"No. Just tell me what you want with the gunnery sergeant."

"I'm here for to evaluate him for discharge."

"And I'm Robert Oppenheimer," Soodjinda replied sharply. "So let's pretend for a moment that we're both intelligent women and we both know you're not telling me everything. Why are you here?"

"It's important to see how he reacts after I've left," Michelle replied.

"Is that all?" The captain stepped aside to clear a view of the monitors. Despite the old décor and yellowed wallpaper, the new LED flatscreen monitors showed White's room in high definition.

The gunnery sergeant had stopped yelling at the windowless door and now stood unmoving next to the couch. His face was screwed up in concentration rather than anger. He was obviously thinking hard about everything that had just happened.

"Good," Michelle said, aloud. "He's taking it seriously."

"It would be hard not to," Soodjinda interjected, "with the things you said."

"Oh, you have sound? Can you turn it on please?"

Soodjinda tapped a few keys, and the quiet of background noise leaked out of the speakers. "He's just thinking."

"Good. How long did he yell for?"

"Only a minute or so. He's been like this ever since."

"Good," Michelle repeated. That meant that her methods hadn't broken him as they had others in the past. He hadn't shut down, cried, or tried to ignore it. He was thinking about everything that had happened. "He's making preparations for tomorrow."

"What do you mean?"

Michelle smiled. "He realizes how thoroughly I played him today. So he's trying to figure out how to play me tomorrow. He thinks he needs to appear sane, healthy, and fit for duty. So he's planning to do that."

"He thinks he needs to appear that way?" Soodjinda asked. "He doesn't need to?"

"It depends." Michelle continued watching White as he finally turned away from the door and collapsed onto the couch. He picked up the game controller, but rather than shooting match, he scrolled through some menus until music played. Even through the tinny computer speakers, the piano introduction of Linkin Park's "In the End" was unmistakable. The lyrics were appropriate, Michelle thought. Though not for much longer.

"He'll start exercising soon," Soodjinda said.

She was right. White started stretching, first one arm across his chest and then the other, and then standing on one foot, pulling the other up to his buttocks. He was actually quite limber for a man his size. Finally, he dropped into a crouch, sprang back up to standing, and then threw himself toward the floor. He caught himself on his hands at the last instant and started angrily doing pushups. After 30, he spread his feet out, put one hand behind his back, and continued.

"He'll go to sit ups next. He puts his feet against the wall over there." Soodjinda pointed to one of the views that showed a dark smudge on the yellowish paint. "Then he uses that exposed I-beam for pull-ups. It's his normal routine, but he doesn't usually do it this late in the day."

"I expect he's burning off anger and energy," Michelle said. "What time is his next meal?"

Soodjinda looked at her watch. "It's 17:09 right now. About 20 minutes."

"Delay that a half hour. I don't want him interrupted while he's thinking."

The captain looked down at Michelle. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. I have him right where I want him. I can't let little things like food get in the way of this now."

"Get in the way of what?"

"That's classified."

Nodding, Soodjinda turned the sound back off. The echoes of White's grunts disappeared, but she didn't move. "I know you can't tell me everything, Doctor Park. But answer me one question. What's going to happen when you're through with him?"

That was the one question that Michelle didn't have an answer to. "Only he can answer that, though I certainly have my desired outcomes."

"He's gone through a lot. Less than some. More than most."

"Yes," Michelle agreed. "That's what makes him so valuable."

Soodjinda studied her. She had seen everything that had happened in that room, so she was wise to the perky Korean girl routine. The captain's eyes narrowed in concentration, then she

finally gave a tiny nod and strode toward the door. "What time should we expect you tomorrow?"

"What time is his breakfast?" Michelle asked.

"07:00."

"And how long does he usually take to finish?"

"It depends on his mood. He either eats it in five minutes or he ignores it until lunch."

"Tomorrow he'll eat quickly," Michelle said. "I'll enter at six after seven. Please be ready."

"We will." Opening the door, Soodjinda turned to the waiting Roberts. "Lance Corporal, escort Doctor Park out."

Roberts snapped a perfect salute. "Yes, ma'am. This way please." He gestured forward and fell into step next to Michelle. His gait was parade-ground perfect, with no sign of fatigue betraying that he'd been standing for the last several hours. Marines. He didn't have the experience or skill of White, but he was a marine nonetheless.

"Is there something the matter?" Michelle said sweetly, as Roberts paused at the conference room.

"No ma'am. Just giving you a chance to collect everything before you leave."

The lie was obvious, but there was no malice behind it, so she entered the room. "Why don't we sit and have a chat then. I can tell you have some questions for me. Gum?"

This time, Roberts reached out and delicately took a piece in his thick fingers. Unwrapping it, he placed it between his teeth, crumpled the wrapper, and stuck it in a pocket. So he was a crumpler, not a folder. Once he decided to discard something, he no longer cared about it. But he hadn't gone out of his way to put it in the wastebasket or simply left it on the table for

someone to else to deal with. That matched the observations Michelle had made over the course of the day. He took responsibility for himself and his work, but once he made a judgment, it was final.

Or was it?

"You have questions, Lance Corporal? Please ask."

He moved his jaw around, chewing on thoughts and gum before he spoke. "What exactly are you trying to do with the gunny?"

That was an interesting use of title. The casual honorific was a sign of respect and kinship. Perhaps Roberts could be useful as more than a doorstop, after all.

"I already told you. I'm here to evaluate Gunnery Sergeant White for discharge."

"But discharge from what?" Roberts asked. "I don't know why he's here in the Basement, but it's not for medical treatment. He hasn't had anything stronger than a Tylenol since he arrived. So what are you looking for?"

This wasn't a difficult inference, but Michelle wondered how much more Roberts had picked up. "Why do you think I'm here, Lance Corporal?"

"That's what I can't figure out. You said you're with the State Department, but you talk like a psychiatrist. You have a lab coat. But your ID doesn't say MD or PhD. So, what are you exactly? Miss Park?"

Michelle let the smile show on her face. She had underestimated Roberts. "I said to call me Michelle."

"Yes you did, Miss Park. Are you going to answer my question?"

His tone was respectful, but the words were firm. He wasn't trying to be intimidating and he wasn't giving her an order,

just a suggestion that she comply. She decided to do so, at least partly. "White's last mission, Operation Spellbind, was a failure. It failed to achieve its objectives, and the events listed in the after-action reports are unclear. They use terms like 'Monster' and 'Unnatural.' With capital letters. Considering the casualties and the mess, CJTF-613 has been disbanded. But the questions remain. I'm here to find the answers."

"Are you questioning everyone on the team?"

"Only White and Stirling are capable of answering questions, and the latter is out of reach."

Roberts chewed on the gum. "Then why are you riling him up like that? You're asking about things that don't have anything to do with his last mission. And you're manipulating him. It's hard to watch."

Answering that line of questioning would take Michelle dangerously close to the truth. It would come out eventually, and Roberts would be there when it did, but she wasn't ready to reveal it yet. Not if she could make use of him the way she suspected. "The two reports we have about Spellbind are wildly different. We need to know what really happened, and to do that, I have to understand White so that I can make sense of what he tells me. Manipulating his emotions is the only way to get the answers, and pushing on his traumas to see how he reacts is the only way I'll be able to see through his words to the truth."

"Permission to speak freely?"

Michelle regarded Roberts. He had just pointed out that she had no authority over him, but now was showing a measure of restraint and respect. Perhaps that bit of truth had swayed him. "Go ahead."

"Maybe it's necessary, but what you're doing to him in there? You're one ice-cold bitch."

Michelle allowed a chilly smile to appear on her face as she showed her teeth. "Why thank you, Trayvon. Anything else?"

Roberts gulped as she used his first name, and Michelle could see him thinking back to see if he'd ever given it to her. But he eventually got his brain back on track and continued. Brave of him to keep digging. Or stupid. "You're going to break that poor sucker."

"Why Trayvon—actually can I call you Trey? I like that name." Michelle said it quickly so he didn't have time to interrupt her. "Do you feel for that man, Trey? I thought you didn't like him."

"I don't. I mean, I didn't. But after hearing all that..." He trailed off.

"Why do you hate him?"

"I don't hate him. It's just that I have to be careful with him. He's dangerous. Especially after he took the nurse hostage."

Michelle took out her clipboard and pen. "Why did he do that, Trey? Didn't he know he was in a hospital?"

"Are you evaluating me now?" Roberts asked, nodding at the clipboard. Michelle just smiled. He sighed and answered. "When they brought him here, he had to be restrained for his own safety. He kept yelling for his team and demanding to know what had happened to them. He calmed down after a day or two in the Basement, but it was an act. He attacked Petty Officer Chaffee and tried to use him as a hostage so he could escape."

"He wanted to go back to his team?"

"That's what he said."

Michelle had already seen the surveillance tapes and knew this. But hearing Roberts explain it out loud was similar to hearing White relate his own experiences. She could see the confusion in Roberts' face, but also the grudging respect, or even pity, that he had for White. That was very good to know.

"What has White been told about his team? Does he know CJTF-613 has been disbanded?"

Roberts thought for a moment. "He can't. We didn't know anything about it and no one could have told him. I only heard the name for the first time today."

"Yes. Though you have clearance to learn much more than just the name now."

"What else am I going to learn?" he asked slowly.

It was almost sad how he kept digging. Roberts was tenacious, like a rottweiler with a bone. And he was just smart enough to ask the right questions. Questions whose answers would pull him into Michelle's world of secrecy and darkness that he couldn't imagine. And he had no idea what Michelle had planned for him already.

Stupidity could get someone killed, but so could just enough intelligence.

Michelle stood and straightened her skirt. "We'll find that out tomorrow, won't we?" Michelle said as she stood. She smoothed the pleats in her slacks and turned toward the door, but turned back before she exited. "Can you do something for me, Trey? Now that we're working together that is?"

Roberts' gulp was nearly audible. "What do you need?"

"I want the tie clip from White's uniform."

"His tie clip? Why?"

Michelle smiled. "You'll see." Then she turned away, pleased with an excellent day's work, and confident that tomorrow would be even better now that she had an unexpected but useful new asset.

