



"I was wondering how much of Errant Venture you'd ask about," White said. He was relaxed now, though in uniform his bearing was still formal and restrained. Even so, he reminded Michelle more of the man from yesterday than the one who'd welcomed her today.

"Really? Why is that?" she asked.

"You've been going over everything horrible that's ever happened to me, so I figured you'd ask about the third Purple Heart eventually. But I didn't know if you'd want to talk about OEV. You haven't asked about any of my actual successful missions yet."

"Do you count Operation Errant Venture as a success?"

One side of White's mouth crooked up in a cocky grin. "We achieved our objectives. We went through shit to do it and lost a lot of good people, but we did it."

"Then let's start there," Michelle said. She flipped her notes open to a random page. "Errant Venture was part of Operation Inherent Resolve to fight the Islamic State, right?"

"Sort of," White replied. "Hammerlock's mission was in progress by the time NATO decided to do something about ISIS. But once the international coalition made it official, they renamed our mission OEV and reclassified it as part of OIR. All classified, of course."

"Of course," Michelle agreed. She noticed that White didn't look at Roberts when he'd said that. For that matter, the gunnery sergeant had barely acknowledged his presence at all. White must have accepted that Roberts was here and he couldn't do anything about it. That was a perfect situation for Michelle to take advantage of later. "What was the objective of Operation Errant Venture?" she asked.

"Originally it started as recon and intel gathering on ISIS," White said. "But after Mosul it changed."

"How so?"

"It got personal. We saw what those fanatics did to people who actually wanted democracy and freedom. People who had helped us got strung up or crucified or beheaded. And all the women had to cover up or get stoned to death."

"And why was that personal?" Michelle kept her question vague. She knew about White's history with what could barely be called "relationships." She wondered how far down he fell on the misogyny scale.

"We were in and out of Mosul for months, and we got to know a lot of those folks real well. I don't take kindly to seeing shit like that happen to people I like."

"Like the women?" Michelle asked, carefully steering the conversation away from Yousef.

White chuckled. "Yeah, with everything else you've got in your notes, I'm sure you know I like the ladies. But I also like seeing them get to choose how they dress, who they spend time with, and how they run their lives. Religious fanatics are the shitstains of humanity. All of them."

"Did the rest of your team feel that way?"

Chewing on his lip, White nodded slowly. "I think so. We didn't really talk about deep feelings if you know what I mean. But I could tell Nomad was pissed."

"Nomad," Michelle replied, pretending to check her notes. "Your French signals expert."

White nodded. "Yeah. He's a chill dude, but when he heard radio chatter about what was going on there after we left? The bastard went ballistic. Kept rattling off shit in French that

I'm pretty sure would make me blush. We had to hold him back from jumping out of the truck and running back there."

"Interesting," Michelle said noncommittally while she genuinely took notes. It didn't matter much, since Luc "Nomad" Benoit was dead, but new information had to be recorded. "What about the others? Did they feel the same way?"

White glanced away and to his left, an obvious tell. Michelle pretended not to notice as she waited until he finally said, "Not really."

"Not really? Is that all?"

He sighed. "You're going to make me tell you anyway, aren't you?"

"Only if you want me to help you."

"Fine. What do you want know?"

Michelle started with the easy one. "How did Wojciechowski react?" she asked.

"Saturn handled it best, I think. Or, at least, he looked like it. He didn't like it, but didn't lash out or anything."

"And Chief Warrant Officer Roy?"

White looked away again, and when he returned his gaze to Michelle, it was cold. "Look. I know you have clearance, and you probably know everything anyway. But I'm not going to say anything that'll get my team in any sort of trouble. Do you understand me?"

The change in demeanor was abrupt but not unexpected. Michelle had already seen hints of White's loyalty to his team, and with what little she knew about Roy, it made sense for White to be protective. "Off the record."

White glanced up at the cameras mounted in his room. "Really?"

"Really." She put her clipboard face down.

He looked at Roberts. "You're a witness that I was told this is off the record. Do you understand, Lance Corporal?"

Roberts' nod was stiff and silent, but apparently did the trick. White's shoulders relaxed and he leaned back in his chair. "Alloy hasn't been right since Mosul. I don't know if there was something specific, but he's just, I don't know, different."

Michelle made a concerned face. "Can you explain what you mean?"

"Not really? I mean, maybe. Alloy's Hammerlock's joker. He's the one cracking jokes and making us laugh when we're in the shit."

"That isn't you?" Michelle interrupted.

White snorted. "Hell no. I'm just the asshole. He's the comedian. But since we got pushed out, he's been serious, more distant. Sometimes he's super focused on risk assessment, and then the next minute he'll do something where it seems like he didn't think it through."

"Can you give me an example?"

"So after Mosul, we headed north toward Kurdish territory. I remember Price talking over our route with the team, whether we should stay with the convoy or break off on our own. Alloy was the one doing all the pros and cons."

Michelle took notes. "Why was that out of character?"

"He'd never really been the decision maker," White shrugged. "But now he was going all in. Then, when we got to a crossroads that wasn't on our map, he just picked a random direction and started driving before Price could give him the go-ahead. Turned out it was the right way, but still."

"Hmm," Michelle said thoughtfully. This was all good information, though of arguable value, since Roy was also dead. But now that she had worked her way through the rest of the team, she could focus on her real target. "What about Captain Stirling?"

White crossed his arms and cocked an eyebrow. "Are we still off the record?"

"Do we need to be?"

"No," he replied, shaking his head. "Honestly Price didn't change much. He's cool. He thinks things through, and I'm not sure if he's ever felt anything strongly enough to get in the way of making a decision. You can tell when he's upset, but he always keeps his head and doesn't show it much."

Michelle grunted noncommittally. That was unfortunate, but at least she had a baseline for her next line of inquiry. "So all of you were upset about Mosul, some more than others. And you said you headed north."

White nodded. "We had allies we'd worked with up in Kurdistan, so we headed there."

"Were those orders from Stirling or Derlin?"

White looked confused for a second. "Derlin? Oh, right. Sorry, I never heard his name until you said it yesterday."

"You didn't know who you were working for?"

"Hammerlock is need-to-know. I know Price gets his orders from Kingfish, but I only met the guy once. I only found out he's a general because of the challenge coin we got after Iraq."

"A coin like this one?" Michelle asked. She reached in her pocket and brought out a heavy metal coin, embossed and enameled on both sides. Letting it slip through her fingers, she casually

"dropped" it onto the table, where it landed heavily with an audible thud.

White shot her a disgusted look, instantly recognizing the competition that had begun. He reached into his own pocket and slapped his hand onto the table with a metallic bang, then looked up, finally acknowledging Roberts. "Well, Lancey, where's yours?"

If Roberts' complexion hadn't been so dark, his face would have paled. Even so, the expression on his face was one of a terrified raw recruit, and he looked down in shame. "I don't have one yet, Gunnery Sergeant."

"Huh. Haven't done anything worthwhile yet?"

"No, Gunnery Sergeant."

"Oh well. You can't buy drinks here anyway, unless you can get me extra apple juice." White pulled his hand away from the table, revealing his own coin that bore crossed sabers and a laurel wreath along with the words "COMBINED JOINT TASK FORCE-OPERATION INHERENT RESOLVE." When he flipped it over, there was an emblem Michelle had only seen in her notes. It was reminiscent of a pirate symbol, but it had a fox head instead of a skull, and the crossed swords behind it had longsword hilts and blades like keys. A British brigadier general's emblem sat below the fox's chin, and the words "TEAM HAMMERLOCK CJTF-613" went around the border.

"So the only time you met General Derlin was when he gave you this?" Michelle asked. "What did you think of him?"

"I thought he was a general," White said flippantly.

"Can you elaborate?"

"Not really. It was a formal thing. He was touring the base, met us, shook our hands, and gave us coins. Then he left."



White looked down at his coin where it lay on the table, and his grin lifted cockily on one side. "Well? I showed you mine, now you show me yours."

Michelle didn't take the sexual innuendo bait. But she pushed her coin forward until it was in front of White. He let out a low whistle as he saw the seal of the US Secretary of State. "Good thing you're here, Lance Corporal, or I'd be buying today," he said, then turned his attention back to her. "You really know Secretary Kerry?"

She didn't reply, and with a polite smile, put the coin back in her pocket. "So after Mosul you went north. What happened then?"

"We hooked up with a group of Kurdish rebels. They'd helped us out with intel and infiltration over the last few months, so we knew where to find them." White's expression became wistful. "Good people, men and women both. ISIS hated that."

"Was this the start of Operation Errant Venture?"

He shrugged. "Like I said, it wasn't named anything official until after it was over. We just knew our objective."

"And what was that?"

"Who, not what," he replied. "A high-profile ISIS target, codename Millstone."

"Millstone is Abdul Faizan, right? The Afghani national?"

"Was," White replied with a grin.

"Was," Michelle repeated. "So you completed your objective. How did that happen?"

White looked toward the ceiling as he thought back. It had happened less than a year ago, a fact that made Michelle wonder whether he was trying to remember details or decide how to frame them. The former was problematic. The latter was expected.



"We had to find the bastard first," White finally said. "He was in Kurdish territory, so we linked up with the Kurds and helped them out. Early on, it was a lot of skirmishes. Ambushes, counter-ambushes, things like that. Not many casualties, but when it's people you know, any number is too many. We mostly did recon and training. Sparrow and his people did the dirty work."

"Sparrow?" Michelle repeated.

"That was his codename. His real name's Zoran. He's a local Kurdish leader who'd helped us on some ops in the past when we were based in Mosul. We returned the favor since Millstone was in his territory."

"But they didn't do all the fighting, did they?"

"Did I say that?"

Michelle smiled. "No, you specifically didn't say how much of the fighting they did."

"You're really going there, aren't you?"

"Is there a reason I shouldn't?"

"Because it's embarrassing?" White scratched the back of his neck and glanced toward Roberts.

"A Silver Star shouldn't be embarrassing," Michelle explained.

"The star was to boost morale," White said. "That's it."

"Morale?" Michelle's question was legitimate. The available documents on Operation Errant Venture were sparse at best, so she was venturing into educated guesswork now. But after discussing the IED, she'd expected White would be reluctant to tout his accomplishments. She just needed more to understand if this commendation had affected him the same way. "How so?"

"It was a bad day. A lot of people died. I just happened to be visible, so Zoran picked me to celebrate and make people feel better."

"Zoran picked you?" Michelle probed.

White shrugged. "Zoran? Price? Who knows? But it got run up the chain, and a few days later, we got word."

Out of the corner of her eye, Michelle caught Roberts moving. It wasn't much, but he was definitely intrigued. Good.

"What happened that day?"

White sighed again and shuffled his feet like a child forced to confess stealing cookies out of the jar. Then he took a deep breath, and his back stiffened.

"We utilized a village near the Turkish border as a base camp. It was well situated near Millstone's likely location, on a crossroads that allowed us to send scouts in multiple directions. At 13:00 hours, ISIS militants assaulted the town, advancing under the cover of mortar fire. Our troops repelled them, but there were many casualties."

White's words were carefully chosen, keeping perspectives and emotions out of his description. It was exactly the same way he'd avoided details yesterday. And that was a good sign.

"Can you tell me any more?"

White exhaled. "Most casualties were non-combatants injured by collapsing structures. Once the firefight was over, we engaged in search and rescue operations."

"But what about the actual combat? What did you do?"

"I worked with our allies to reinforce defensive positions and helped injured fighters to the aid station."

He was clearly uncomfortable, but in a vastly different manner than he had been yesterday. Michelle could push, but that

would only put him on the defensive. And right now, she wanted him happy and off balance. It was time to advance her pawn. "Lance Corporal Roberts, do you know why the Gunnery Sergeant received his Silver Star?"

"No, ma'am," Roberts replied with interest.

She could have remarked on her name, but there was no need since her plan was already working. "I have the citation here, if you'd like to hear it."

White put a hand up. "Doctor, you don't have to—"

"Oh, it's no problem. Really." Michelle flipped to the page in her notes and started reading.

"The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to Gunnery Sergeant Jeremy T. White, United States Marine Corps, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action against the enemy while serving as Rifleman, COMBINED JOINT TASK FORCE 613, in support of Operation INHERENT RESOLVE on 25 September 2014. When Gunnery Sergeant White's team and their allied partner nation force came under heavy mortar, rocket-propelled grenade, and automatic weapons fire, he immediately began to emplace allied fighters in defensive positions and orient their fire. He continued leading his partner nation unit in an assault to within 60 meters of the attacking enemy to provide assistance to an adjacent unit. Despite being shot in the shoulder, Gunnery Sergeant White ignored his wound and ran across 35 meters of open ground to drag a seriously wounded partner nation fighter to safety. He then continued to coordinate defensive fire and the transportation of injured allies to the aid station. He refused medical attention until everyone else had been treated. By his bold leadership, undaunted courage, and complete dedication to

duty, Gunnery Sergeant White reflected great credit upon himself and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service."

When she looked up, White wouldn't meet her eyes. Roberts, however, looked stunned. "Isn't that impressive, Lance Corporal?"

"Yes ma'am," Roberts exclaimed.

"I see why your troops celebrated you. This is real hero stuff," Michelle said. "It's a shame that this is classified."

White looked at his lap. "It's what anyone would do, ma'am."

"No, it's not. No one else did something like this that day, did they?" When he didn't reply, she repeated, "Did they?"

"No ma'am."

"So you were celebrated for doing the right thing?" Michelle asked. White's eyes narrowed sharply, but when he didn't speak, she continued. "Or did you see this as the IED again? Do you think you should have done something better?"

White took a very long breath. "I didn't ask for that award. It was to help the company's morale."

"So what do you blame yourself for?"

"Can we get on with this?"

"In a moment," Michelle agreed. "But I want to know something first. You said you lost a lot of people that day. Do you think that would have happened if you hadn't been stationed in that village?"

"That's one of those things you don't really think about when people are shooting you," he replied.

"How about now? Tell me, how did the enemy find your base?"

The question seemed to take White off guard, and his rigid armor weakened as he pondered. "I'm not sure. They might have followed someone or had recon teams of their own."

Michelle noted that on her clipboard. "But why were you staying in one place? Weren't you searching for Faizan? Shouldn't you have been on the move?"

"Hammerlock is five men. Our allies had many more. So we reinforced and aided them while they helped us find him."

"Was that in the mission parameters?"

White blinked back confusion, his armor crumbling more. "Like I already said, it was sort of written up after the fact."

"Was it though?" Michelle interrupted. "You already said that you had your objective, to find and eliminate Faizan. You even had a codename for him. So why wouldn't you have mission parameters?"

"Spec Ops play things a bit loose. I already told you that. Price thought this was our best shot at finding Millstone, so that's what we did."

Michelle had to keep the smile off her face as White fell on top of the target in her scope. "And you trusted him?"

"With my life."

"But not the mission. Interesting. How about--"

White interrupted her. "Wait. What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing really. It's just that you were in Kurdish territory for four months."

"So?"

Michelle grinned inwardly as White took the bait. "Did your other missions of this nature take that long?"

White blinked. "I don't think so."

"And was Faizan actively hiding?"

He blinked again.

"All I'm wondering is whether the mission was Stirling's top priority, if he was having others search for your target."

"Price made the call. I trust Price. End of story. Can we move on?"

Michelle didn't look down at her clipboard. She would write down this moment later, but for now, she needed to change the subject. She had planted and watered the seed of doubt; now she needed White's attention elsewhere before he realized what she was doing. "So what happened after that? You found Faizon quickly, didn't you?"

The transition caught White off guard, as she had hoped. "Um, yeah. We captured some ISIS fighters, and one of them told us where Millstone was. And the next day, my team went to find him."

Michelle feigned surprise. "The next day? What about your wound?"

"It hurt. I pushed through. We had an opportunity and we had to take it."

"And did you find him?"

"Yes ma'am. And we fulfilled our objective."

Michelle closed her notes and put the clipboard on her lap. "Well done, Gunnery Sergeant. Let me, for one, say thank you for your service and heroic efforts. Don't you agree, Roberts?"

Roberts stood a little straighter. "Yes ma'am."

White looked down at his lap again. He was actually embarrassed. Yesterday, he had been purposefully obnoxious to the point of nudity. Yet here he was, less than a day later, almost blushing at deserved praise. This was going perfectly.

"Ma'am, can we move on?" White asked quietly. "This happened in September, and we both know what comes next."

Michelle feigned disappointment. "I suppose. But let me use the restroom first." Before he could respond, she stood and headed to the tiny room that held a toilet, sink, and shower, then closed the door. She smiled toothily at her reflection in the mirror. She had him exactly where she wanted him.

Yesterday had been all about highlighting the negatives. She'd poked White's wounds, pressuring him to reveal and verbalize the traumas he'd survived. She'd planned on doing more of that today, but White had surprised her with his overnight reset. He was collected and confident, and even tried to use her own tactics against her. Against someone less skilled, it might have worked.

But Michelle was the best at what she did, and White's behavior had merely required a change of tactics. So she'd told the truth about his future to build trust. The next step had been to build up his confidence. But before the final stage, she had to make sure he wasn't overly cocky. That was where Roberts had come into play, showing respect and even adoration. It had and would keep White off balance for the final act.

And Michelle Park had utter confidence that it would play out exactly as she planned.