



"Do you want to turn off your game?" Michelle asked, as White regarded her. Her ploy in dropping the name Cody had worked exactly as she'd hoped, and broken through another layer of his guard. But that meant that the next phase had only begun.

White looked at the TV on the wall, then slowly bent to pick up the game controller. He pushed a couple of buttons, and she saw the game go to the main menu before he turned off the TV with the hospital bed's connected remote. When he finally sat back down, he chose the single vinyl chair at the small desk instead of returning to the couch next to her. "I hate that level anyway."

"Level? Are you playing the campaign?" she asked.

He grunted. "Yeah. Asshole over there doesn't let me have internet so I can't beat up on Korean kids after school. I have to do the same stupid-ass missions over and over."

Michelle glanced back at Roberts. He still stood at the door, one hand on the baton in his belt, but it was more relaxed now. He would need at least half a second to draw and attack from that position. "No internet? Why not?"

"This is a secure facility, ma'am," Roberts replied curtly. "Internet for entertainment purposes would be a security risk."

"Is it really that much of--"

"He's lucky he got the game at all. The captain only allowed it because he promised that he wouldn't be so hard on the orderlies if he wasn't so bored."

Michelle noted that on the clipboard. This was something she hadn't known before this visit. It wasn't anything classified, but details like that were the key to figuring someone out. "So no internet," she said, turning back to White. "Why do you hate that level so much?"

"It's an escort mission. Keep the computer idiot alive against infinite terrorists while they go off and be suicidal." White let out a bitter little laugh. "If I lose, it's because they did something stupid. Not because I messed up."

That was another piece of information, more valuable than the last. White wanted to be responsible for his own failures; or at least he didn't want to be held accountable for someone else's mistakes. It was a common sentiment and matched what Soodjinda had said about how he hated not being in control. But it wasn't a concept that many people could articulate so easily.

"Well, this visit isn't an escort mission, I promise."

"Really? You mean shit-stain over there isn't the HVI?" White gestured vaguely toward Roberts, who scowled.

Michelle just smiled. It was her real smile this time. The time for playing innocent was over. Now she was just playing nice. "No, in this case you're the high value individual, and I'm the escort. Or at least, that's one way this could end."

White's eyes narrowed as he studied her. Michelle waited until he came to a conclusion. "There's more than one ending?"

"There could be. This is more of a Final Fantasy-style Japanese RPG than a linear first-person shooter." She knew White wouldn't perfectly understand the analogy, and she studied him as he peered at her. His reaction would be another piece of information to note.

He thought for a moment, then finally leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest protectively. One side of his mouth ticked upward and she could see what he'd decided before he announced it.

"All right. Let's see what kinds of Japanese fantasy game options I get. Where are we starting?"

So he'd pretended he knew what she was talking about. His ego was still in play. Good to know.

"From the beginning of course," Michelle said. "You enlisted, right after you graduated from high school. Only two days after your birthday, in fact. You knew you wanted to be a marine then?"

"Of course."

"Why?"

"They're the best of the best. Why would I want to settle for second?"

White's eyes stayed fixed on Michelle as he spoke. He was focused now, trying to figure out what her game was. That was a good sign. He'd finally caught on to the fact that she was in charge and he had little power here. Then he'd adapted quickly to the shock of being put on the defensive. Now he was starting to play along and focus on the long game. For anyone other than Michelle, that would be a dangerous proposition, but she had no intention of allowing White to figure out the rules.

"It says here that you were working with a recruiter for quite a while" Michelle continued. "When did you start working with Sergeant Renquist?"

"I got in touch with him when I was 16. Knew what I wanted to do, I just had to be old enough," White said. He glanced at his lap as he said it, clearly making that up. It wasn't an outright lie, but it wasn't the whole truth either.

Michelle made a mental note to circle back to that and continued. "So, how long have you known you wanted to be a marine?"

"I made up my mind when I was 15."

Michelle didn't even need to run the numbers to know what he meant but checked them twice to be certain. He'd turned 18 in July 2004. Three years prior had been 2001. She waited patiently for him to continue.

"I was just old enough to realize how much things changed after 9/11. I was starting to pay attention to things, but I still knew what it had been like before it all changed. And I remember the exact moment that it did."

"The exact moment?" Michelle asked.

He nodded. "Everyone remembers where they were when the towers fell, if they were old enough. Don't you, Sentry McSentryface?"

From his position by the door, Roberts made a sad sound, for once seeming to ignore White's barb. "My mom was about to drop me off at school for our field trip to the natural history museum. She turned around and went home after the news cut into the radio station."

"See? Everyone remembers," White repeated. "What about you? Are you old enough to remember it?"

Michelle didn't let herself laugh even though it was legitimately funny. "Don't you know not to ask a woman's age, Jeremy?"

"Yeah, but this little date isn't going anywhere fun, so who cares?"

"How old do you think I am?"

He gave her a once-over that stopped just before it got uncomfortable, then shrugged. "You've got that Asian immortality thing going for you. For all I can tell, you could be 15 or 50."

The comment wasn't meant as a slight; it was just typical ingrained racism. She was used to that sort of thing, so she ignored it. "Let's just say I remember it. Where were you?"

"My folks' store. White's Hardware is in my file, right? I was putting inventory out in plumbing when I heard my mom's coffee mug break. She loved that mug. It had a stupid frog cartoon on it, but her friend had brought it back from Paris, so she loved it."

"A French frog joke?" Michelle interrupted. "Not very original."

White scoffed. "I didn't say I loved it. She did. So when I heard it break, I ran to see what was wrong. She was watching the morning news on the little TV in the office, and I got there just in time to see the first tower fall."

"So why remember the mug if it wasn't important to you?" Michelle asked.

"Same reason fuckwit over there remembers the field trip. Those tiny details stick in your head around the big important memories."

"So that's an important memory?"

White narrowed his eyes. It was a tell that he was trying to read her. When he spoke again, his words were casual but still guarded. He was picking what he was saying carefully now, trying not to let things slip. White was trying to figure out the game. She would have to start layering in hints so that he would draw the wrong conclusion.

"Of course it's an important memory. Everything changed that day. That was the day I realized the world was bigger than Tulare or even the Central Valley. It was time to start thinking big picture."

"So you decided to be a marine. So you could fight terrorists?"

White cringed a little at that. "Yeah. Something like that."

"Something like that?"

"I may have got caught up in the flag waving. You know, like everyone else did. And then they said the terrorists had WMDs. They wanted to kill us for our freedoms. All of that shit. It was Tulare."

Michelle made a noncommittal noise. "What does Tulare have to do with it?"

"Do you know what it was like in the Central Valley back then?"

"I can guess," Michelle proffered.

"Not if you weren't there. The Valley thought it was New York, because in 2001, New York was all that mattered. Every house had a flag. And if it didn't, then you wondered why they were siding with the terrorists instead of us. People cried about it. They talked about how they could have died there if they'd actually taken that vacation. The store had a 'freedom sale.' The school cafeteria started having 'freedom fries.' Everything revolved around 9/11."

"So you decided to enlist."

"I decided to be a marine," White said. "The few, the proud."

Michelle noted how White hadn't actually agreed with her statement. He was quite good at doublespeak. With his high clearance level and experience in Special Forces, it wasn't surprising. "So after you enlisted, you went to Pendleton for basic training?"

Nodding, White continued. "My parents took the weekend off and closed the store so they could take me and my sister to San Diego."

"That's a long trip, isn't it?"

"Only five or six hours."

"Less if you fly."

"Sure," he shrugged. "I told them I could have flown, but they wanted to make sure I got there safe."

Michelle put her pencil down. "Doesn't that seem a little ironic? You were about to join the military during wartime, and they were worried about you taking a commercial flight?"

"That's what I said, isn't it? But parents, you know?"

"And what was basic training like?"

A confident smile crept over White's face, the first real smile she'd seen so far. "It breaks you. Completely. They break you down so they can build you back up. And when you've been built back up, you're not the same anymore. You're a marine."

"That's if you make it through," Michelle pointed out. "There's a 12% dropout rate."

"Sure. But those are the ones who aren't cut out for it. Basic is where we weed them out."

Michelle noted the "we" in White's sentence. Like every marine she'd met, there was ownership there. "So had you been preparing?" she asked.

"Oh yeah. Sergeant Renquist had me doing PT, plus football and basketball." White stood as he spoke, stretching one arm across his chest as though he were getting ready for a workout. "I was still a scrawny teenager, but I was fast, lean, and hungry."

"Did you like basic training?"

"Basic isn't something you like. It's something you grow from," he said, stretching his other arm.

"Can you tell me about it?"

"It's hard to explain. It's physical, but it's almost more mental because of what you go through. You have to get tough and get focused. And you learn that you're not the most important thing anymore. But you learn it from doing, not from being told. And everyone around you learns that too, so there's this bond. You don't get it unless you're a marine."

"Is that different than the other branches?" Michelle intentionally used another simple, open question to build their rapport. She wanted to keep him talking to build his confidence before she broke him down.

The ploy seemed to be working as White grinned again. "Oh sure. The Chair Force and even the Coasties have training. But we're the best of the best because we go through the worst of the worst."

Michelle lifted her hands in mock surrender. "All right. Marines are tough. But they're also hard on each other, right? Hazing, nicknames?"

"Not to each other."

"Really? Not even after basic training?"

"Oh, after basic? For sure. That's when things get fun."

Michelle turned a page of her notes to find something she had already memorized. "Is that where Hotdog came from?"

The sudden bark of laughter hit Michelle like a jolt of caffeine as White threw his head back. "Oh man, I haven't heard that in years. Yeah, Hotdog. That was me."

"And why is that?"

"A gentleman never tells."

Michelle raised an eyebrow and looked at White over her clipboard. "Are you really a gentleman?"

"Sure, let's go with that. Anyway, yeah, I got that at Pendleton. After basic, though."

Michelle leaned forward, putting her clipboard down on her lap. "So at that point you were a marine. Was it everything you imagined? Were you happy?"

White thought about that for a moment before replying. "I won't lie, it was hard. Really hard. But yeah. I felt like I was doing something. I was protecting my country. Like I was working for something bigger than myself."

"Did it still feel like that after you went to Germany?"

"Panzer Kaserne? That was mostly like being in Pendleton. Except that when you went on leave, beer was cheaper than water. And you couldn't understand anyone, but they could understand you."

"But it didn't stay like that for long. You were only in Camp Panzer Kaserne for," Michelle pretended to look at her notes again, "less than a year?"

"Something like that."

Michelle leaned back against the couch. White was relaxed now, even using his hands to gesture as he spoke. It was time to press a bit more. "And then you were deployed to Camp Victory?"

The immediate change in tone was nearly palpable. White's face darkened and his jaw clenched. He stared into the middle distance and only grudgingly brought his attention back to Michelle. "Yeah. Baghdad."

"Baghdad," she repeated. "Tell me about the IED."