



White was back at the table by the time Michelle returned from the restroom. As she approached, Roberts handed him a cup of water. Apparently the two marines had made nice while she had been gone, which had, of course, been the reason she'd left. She sat down across from White and offered him a fresh pack of gum.

He looked at it suspiciously. "What's so special about this gum of yours?"

"It's wintergreen," she said with a smile.

White cocked a dubious eyebrow. "Right. Let's go with that. So, we wrapped up Errant Venture. Does that mean it's time for the big show?"

"That depends. Is there anything important to talk about regarding the Tunnels of Gibraltar?"

"You're the one guiding this evaluation." There was the slightest pause before the final word, just enough for White to remind Michelle that he knew she wasn't telling him the whole truth. If she were playing a fair game with him, that might have mattered. But she had already positioned her pieces to penetrate his defenses and was two moves from checkmate.

Michelle looked at the clipboard. "All my files say is that after Operation Errant Venture, CJTF-613 was transferred to Gibraltar for training. Though I suspect you needed recovery time after your extended mission."

"Something like that," White agreed. "Bullets in shoulders take some rest time. And the rest of the team was cut up too."

"So there was no actual training?"

"No, there was. We worked with some of the limey spooks there, but nothing that took a lot of heavy lifting. And we got to watch Netflix. Have you heard of the *Sharknado* movie? Now there's another one. And it's killer."

White laughed at his own joke, and Michelle made sure her condescending scoff wasn't aloud. She wasn't surprised he'd like utter stupidity like the Sharknado travesties, but the fact he was bringing it up now wasn't a good thing. He was feeling confident, even cocky. He hadn't made jokes at all since she'd first arrived. She needed him vulnerable again so she could advance and position him in checkmate.

"Your family must have been excited to talk to you. You'd been deployed for over a year since you last visited home, and you'd been in the field for months." She looked up to see the pained expression she'd expected. "Oh, am I wrong? You said there was Netflix in Gibraltar, so I expected they had video chat as well."

"No, they had it," White said, deflating. "But we already went over that conversation, remember?"

"Oh, was that when you found out about the hardware store?"

"Yeah. Funny how I was on the other side of the world when they told me." He sighed heavily. "Look, you and I both know that after Gibraltar we got moved to Afghanistan, and that's where Spellbind happened. Can we just get this over with?"

He wasn't wrong, Michelle mused. But White wasn't entirely right either. The next and final topic was White's last mission, but she was here to talk about its implications more than its details. "Very well. Operation Spellbind."

"Operation Spellbind," he repeated, leaning back and defensively crossing his arms.

"My first question is why CJTF-613 was still active. You had completed your mission in Iraq."

"I don't make those kinds of calls," White said. "Kingfish still wanted us, I guess, so we got transferred to Camp Qargha."

"Kabul, that's right. And what did you do there?"

"Mostly the same type of thing we did when we were working out of Mosul," White said. "Recon, surveillance, some hostage extraction. IS-K was starting to become an issue, maybe that's why they wanted us there."

"IS-K?" Michelle asked, though she knew what it meant.

"Diet ISIS, basically," White scoffed. "Some leaders from ISIS and the Taliban got together under al-Baghdadi and claimed they were going to take Khorasan. That's all of northern Afghanistan, some of Pakistan, Uzbekistan, that whole area."

"So you were dealing with them?"

"And the Taliban still. But it wasn't anything special. Until Spellbind, that is."

"What was Operation Spellbind's objective?"

"Intel gathering mostly," White replied. "We got inserted into Helmand Province in the south. Operated out of the town of Baghran. Our job was to put eyes on combatants, evaluate their combat readiness, and sabotage them, if possible. But we weren't supposed to initiate combat." White's tone soured on the last sentence, as though the words were bitter in his mouth.

Michelle looked down at her clipboard prop to buy herself time to think. Discussing Operation Spellbind was her last opportunity to mold White so he would be receptive to her final move. She had planted seeds over the last two days, but if she wasn't careful, there wouldn't be a harvest to reap. She needed him off balance so he'd listen to what she suggested. She had to focus his anger in the right direction and counter that by keeping his self-image positive so he didn't slide into guilt and blame. This would be a delicate operation.

"Walk me through what happened," she finally said. "How long were you in Baghran before you met Arash?"

The look of utter disgust on White's face showed Michelle she had picked the right target for his ire.

"We'd been out about two weeks before that cunt showed up," he growled.

Michelle pretended not to notice the shift. "And how did he enter the picture?"

"One of our contacts in the village brought him up. Said the shitstain had volunteered to guide us through the mountains. Out of the blue, no questions asked, just showed up and offered to help out of the goodness of his heart."

"Is that normal?"

"Fuck no," he spat. "Normally it's only guides that our side has vetted and paid."

Michelle considered mentioning that Khalid Yousef had not been vetted but quickly discarded the idea. Bringing the boy into the picture would be distracting. Instead, she continued asking about Arash. "But he was your guide, right? That's what you wrote in your report."

"Yeah."

"What happened, then? Why did you break protocol?"

White leaned back in his chair and chewed on his lip. "It wasn't my call."

"Whose was it?"

"You know whose it was."

"Price?"

"Yeah. But he asked Saturn and Alloy," he replied. "And then Price made the call."

That was very interesting. And with what White had already said about the team, it opened up new avenues of attack. "Did that concern you at all?"

White narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "What do you mean?"

"You said Chief Warrant Officer Roy was erratic at that point."

"You told me that what I said about Alloy was off the fucking record."

"Of course, of course." Michelle put her hands up in mock surrender. "Nothing in our conversation will affect Roy. I just want to know if you were concerned."

That seemed to mollify White, and he leaned back again. "Not really. Saturn and Price are both cool heads. I trust them."

"Of course," she said again, this time adding just a tinge of sarcasm to her tone. If White picked up on it, he didn't let on, but she knew it had landed subconsciously. "What did Nomad think?"

"Oh he trusted the fucker about as far as he could throw him. But he also knew we needed a guide. So he made sure he was always on that asshole's six with a loaded gun for when the shit hit the fan."

"Like when you reached the farm?"

"You could call it that."

"What happened?"

White sneered and let out another growl. "A fucking clusterfuck is what happened."

"Can you elaborate?" Michelle asked calmly.

"Not if I don't have to."

Michelle smiled. "Jeremey, you have to know we're almost done here. I know I'm asking a lot, but I'm trying to help you. A little more cooperation will--"

"Oh shut up," he interrupted. "You know I'm going to tell you. It was a farm or something. Just a little field in the middle of fucking nowhere. Some huts, a few people, and nothing else for miles."

He was starting to get angry again. That was fine as long as she didn't let it get out of hand. "How many people were there?"

"Do you really think I remember that?"

"Yes."

He sighed. "Six huts. Ten unknowns. Two were women, two were children, and one of the men was old."

"See? I knew you remembered. You don't forget details like that."

"You don't have to butter me up, okay? I'm already talking."

Michelle nodded silently, though she knew that the compliment would have her desired effect. Getting him to think about that nature of his own recollections had distracted him, and that's what she needed. She waved her hand for him to continue.

"I had overwatch on the rise with Alloy as my spotter. The others went over to talk to them. The people were scared shitless, but Saturn knows Pashto, so he did the talking. Only I guess he said something wrong because the next thing I know, I see a bunch of the men pulling out AKs."

"What did you do?"

"I did what I was trained to do."

"You killed him?" Michelle asked.

"I got glass on him. Then Alloy told me to take the shot."

Michelle nodded, knowing that this was the first crossroads in her examination of Spellbind. She had to tread carefully here. "So you took the shot."

"That's how being a sniper works. Doctor." He said the title with a sneer, insinuating her ignorance. "A sniper team is two people. A shooter and a spotter. The shooter locks on, and the spotter makes the call. I'm the only marksman in Hammerlock, so that meant Alloy was the spotter. He made the call, I pulled the trigger."

"And did you hit him?"

"I don't miss."

"Of course not. You're a Scout Sniper, the best of the best."

"Ooh-rah."

Michelle watched the compliment land and turned back to the facts before she steered White toward anger and suspicion. "What happened after you eliminated the target?"

"A whole lot of nothing. Guys didn't know where I was, so they couldn't return fire. Our boys drew on them and got them to put their guns down. When the team got back to us, Price had words with Alloy. Cap was pissed."

"I imagine so," Michelle replied. "Was he angry at you?"

White shrugged. "He knew Alloy had made the call. So he dressed him down, and we moved on."

"Let me ask you something. I know you don't know, but I want your opinion."

"All right," White replied dubiously, with a raised eyebrow.



"You already said that Alloy had been erratic. Yes, I know, that's off the record. But if Stirling knew that, why do you think he left Alloy to be your spotter?" When White didn't respond, Michelle continued, "Do you think he realized what Roy might do?"

White exhaled. "Where are you going with this?"

"I'm just trying to figure this out. Captain Stirling knew one of his men was potentially compromised, yet he let that man help make important decisions, including whether to fire on civilians. I'm wondering why he did that. Because the only other explanation is that he didn't realize Roy was a liability." She waited just long enough for the implication of what she had said to sink in before moving on. "What happened in the cave?"

"The fucking cave," White growled, balling his fists.

Michelle knew he had gone over this countless times in the last four months and had to have control of himself by now. The fact that he reacted this much showed that her techniques were working, keeping him off balance and pliable. "Yes, it was night when you arrived. What did you find there?"

"There was a tarp in the way. Nomad used his snake cam and saw it was rigged to blow, but Alloy managed to retrieve the claymore and the tripwire."

"So Alloy is reliable."

"Of course he is. He's good at what he does." White spat back.

Those weren't the same things at all, and Michelle noted White's connection before she moved on. "What did you find inside?"

White grunted. "The cave went way back. Some sort of tunnel system. But in that first chamber, there was a cooking fire and

some cots. Recently used. And a stockpile of ammunitions, including RPG ammo."

"RPG?"

"Rocket-propelled grenades. You know, those things you put on your shoulder to take out cars? Like a bazooka?" He mimed the motion.

"Ah, of course," Michelle said. "What did you do then?"

"It was late. We'd been hiking since near dawn. So we decided to keep watch and set up the claymore facing deeper into the caves to defend us while we slept."

"You slept?" Michelle asked, pretending to write on the clipboard. "Was that Stirling's decision?"

"It was all of our decision."

"Really?"

"Look," White argued. "We'd been out in those mountains all fucking day, and there was no cover anywhere. We all knew we were going to have to explore those caves, and no one was fresh enough to flush out sewer rats at that point. So we holed up and got rest."

"That's fine. Can you tell me what happened then?"

The gunnery sergeant leaned back in his chair and studied Michelle. His blue eyes were piercing as his gaze swept over her, analyzing and contemplating. "You've read my reports. So before I say anything else, I have a question for you, Doctor Park. Do you believe me?"

"Do I believe that your guide led you into a trap?" She paused, as though she was considering. "Yes. Do I believe that your compromised team member made a poor decision that got himself and others killed? Also yes."

White's eyes widened in sudden shock, and Michelle congratulated herself on how she'd delivered the news.

"Fuck," he said, slowly. "I guess I knew somehow Alloy was gone after the explosion. But who else? Did we lose anyone else?"

Michelle shook her head. "I'm sorry, I'm not actually allowed to say."

"Bullshit! You tell me what happened to my team!" White yelled, standing abruptly.

Roberts stirred by the door, reaching for his baton, but Michelle stayed calm. She knew White wouldn't attack her. Not if he wanted the information she had. "I'll make you a deal. You tell me what happened in your words, and I'll tell you what I know about your team."

He hated it, but White accepted the deal and slowly sat down. "Fine. But you didn't answer my second question."

"Do I believe that you were attacked by an enormous spider?" She let the words hang in the air for dramatic effect. "That I'm waiting to decide until you tell me about what happened."

White sighed. "All right. What do you want to know?"

"How did the engagement begin?"

"The claymore went off. Rocks fell and closed off the cave in front of us. It woke us up, and then we heard chanting from behind the rubble."

"Do you remember what it said?"

White nodded. "Yeah. Something like 'ailon kabut.' I don't know what the fuck it meant."

Michelle knew what it meant. The linguistics experts at D4MNF had already extrapolated the meaning. That was what had

led to her visit in person, because no matter what she had told White, she absolutely believed his story.

"Anyway, it was time to exfil. Nomad used that snake cam of his to check our way out and said there was someone scoped in on us. I peeked out, and he winged me, but I was faster and took him down. Anyway, that's when we heard the clicking. And the rubble started moving."

"Moving?"

"Yeah. Something was clearing the rubble from the other side."

"Something? Not someone?"

"I said what I said," White shot back. "I said 'something.' There was this clicking and chittering. Alloy planted a munition on the wall next to it so he could collapse the tunnel if it came through. Then Arash dropped to his knees and started chanting too, and someone put a bullet in his head."

"Who killed him?"

"I don't know. It wasn't me. I was turned the other way. But then..." White trailed off. He wrapped his arms across his chest and actually shuddered. When he continued, the words flooded out. She let them. "And then the spider came out. The size of a fucking tank. Those jaw things were longer than my arms. Alloy blew the tunnel. Rocks fell. I unloaded my mag into the thing from point blank range, but half of them ricocheted. I saw Saturn try to drag Price out of there, and then someone, I think it was Nomad, threw a grenade at it. More rocks fell. And next thing I know there's daylight and I'm staring at some army grunt's face."

Michelle didn't say anything, merely watching as White came to his own conclusions.

"I must have got knocked out. I had a killer fucking headache, and I couldn't feel my legs. But Ellis, that's what his nametag said, got us a medevac. I'll never forget that guy's face. After that, I remember the docs at the MASH unit saying something about sedating me. And something about a hand, and I don't know, dissolving?" He looked up at her. "What happened to my team? What the fuck happened to me?"

"CJTF-613 is no more," Michelle said bluntly. "Roy is dead. Nomad is dead. Saturn is in an assisted-living facility for mental instability. And Price has vanished. The answer to your second question, Gunnery Sergeant," she said, putting her clipboard face down on the table for emphasis, "is classified."