



"Classified?" White raged, standing up with enough force that his chair shot back and bounced off the wall behind him. "That's fucking bullshit! You tell me what the fuck happened in that cave and where the fuck my team is!"

Michelle put a hand up to calm him and keep Roberts from leaving his position at the door. She heard him holster the baton and settle down while White stood there, looking down and gasping with rage. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said it like that. It's classified material, but I am going to tell you." She smiled to herself as White sat slowly. She had maneuvered him perfectly. This was almost too easy.

"Then what the fuck was that thing out there?"

"Based on the intelligence provided by my program, I think you encountered exactly what you said: a giant spider."

He let out a long, shuddering breath. "Fuck me."

"Now I have a very important question for you, Gunnery Sergeant White. The outcome of this evaluation will hinge on your answer." The use of his rank made White sit up and take control of his emotions. Michelle waited a moment before continuing. "You said you saw a spider the size of a house. Are you sure that it wasn't something else?"

White blinked.

"Are you sure you didn't experience some sort of stress-related illusion or a trick of the light?" she asked. "Are you absolutely certain that you weren't exposed to a hallucinogen?"

He gritted his teeth and started to snap back a retort before he paused. Then he cocked his head and studied Michelle as if trying to figure out what answer she wanted. After a long moment of silence that would have made anyone else uncomfortable, he finally smiled. "What exactly would happen if

I said I wasn't sure? If I said that I might have been impaired? Hypothetically."

"Hypothetically," Michelle repeated. Oh, he was good. Not nearly her caliber, but he was good. "If you weren't sure, then we would be having a very different conversation."

White grinned wolfishly, and his thought process was so transparent it was almost sad. He thought he'd figured out. He thought she wanted him to recant his statement about the spider, and now he'd want to find out what he could gain by doing so. "What would that difference be exactly?"

It was too bad he had it all wrong.

"The difference is what goes on the official reports for Operation Spellbind. The report you filed could remain the official account, that your team was attacked by a giant spider. Alternatively, it could be replaced by something that says you can't confirm what happened because you were compromised."

White leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. He nodded smugly, thinking to himself before speaking again. "And you don't want giant spiders to show up in the reports."

Michelle shook her head with a smile, pretending to agree with him.

"And how does it help me, exactly, if I make sure the forms don't say that?"

It was almost pitiful how easily it was to read and manipulate this dumb ape. He was like a puppy who had just figured out how to open the food container, but hadn't realized she was about to slam it on his nose.

"The US military can't afford to have a decorated special operator ranting about a giant spider and cultists. Anyone who does must be either insane or lying."

His smile vanished. "But it's true."

"Is it?"

"I saw it. I saw its blood burn through the rocks like acid. It's true."

Michelle took a file out of her briefcase and slid it across the table. "I believe you. But others won't. Fortunately, I can add this addendum to your file so the previous report won't go on the record."

"What's this?" White turned his attention and read quickly. "But I didn't write this."

"I know that, and you know that. But no one outside this room does."

He blinked hard, continuing to read. "This says that Price committed war crimes."

"The troops who dug you out of the rubble found people burned with acid," Michelle stated flatly. "How else would you explain that except for torture? Obviously giant spiders with caustic blood aren't real."

"But it says that he made decisions to deliberately get Hammerlock killed. That he was working for the enemy?"

Michelle didn't respond until White looked up at her. She caught his eyes in her stare and allowed zero emotion to show on her face. She was a good actress, and she was even better at playing the emotionless shell than the innocent coquette. White shuddered infinitesimally under her stare. "You told me yourself that Captain Stirling made decisions that could justify a court martial. You said he ordered you to kill a civilian child. You said he made Roy your spotter when he was clearly compromised."

"Price is not a war criminal. He's not the enemy," White insisted. "It was a spider."

"Unfortunately, Gunnery Sergeant, that answer is unacceptable. When I leave this room, one of two things is going to happen. It's your decision which one I put in motion."

"So what are my options?" he asked dejectedly.

Michelle pulled more files out of her briefcase and laid them on the table. "If you choose to implicate Stirling, this addendum will be filed with your new report. It is a request for a psychological evaluation to ensure you're fit for duty. I have already ensured you'll be fast-tracked for a Physical Evaluation Board."

"I don't need a PEB. I'm not sick."

"Yes, you are. That's why you'll receive a medical discharge for mental health. This is a Department of Defense Form 214 classifying your honorable discharge under 'Other Designated Physical and Mental Conditions.'"

He stared at the papers again and took a long, slow breath.

Pushing another paper forward, Michelle continued. "This is an offer of employment with my Program that has already been finalized. Operation Spellbind proved that you can handle problems of an Unnatural nature. If you were to make sure the real events of Spellbind were never made official, we would look favorably upon your efforts. Once you're discharged with full benefits, you will become a consultant for D4ZER."

"And if I don't?" he asked. "What then?"

Michelle slid another paper forward. "In that case, this DD214 will be filed. You will receive a dishonorable discharge for desertion. Files implicating you in the deaths of your team members will also be filed. Though this cannot be proved, it will be enough to ensure you won't be able to appeal."

He looked back and forth between the falsified report and the discharge papers. "So you're saying I have to throw Price under the bus and get kicked out. Or else I get shamed and kicked out?"

"Ultimately, yes. Your career with the US military is over, Gunnery Sergeant. But your future still has promise. I need your answer."

He looked back and forth at the two stacks of papers hopelessly, as though there was actually a question. He was distraught, his face gaunt with grief as the reality of the situation finally settled in.

"Why is this such a hard decision, Jeremy?" Michelle asked softly. She could see White retreating behind the armor of his uniform and training and had to appeal to his emotions before it was too late. "You have a chance to do something truly great with your life. You've done so much already. Don't throw it away now."

"I can't betray them," he whispered.

"Team Hammerlock is gone. Two of them are dead, and the other two might as well be."

"They're still my team. They don't deserve this."

"Your loyalty now should be to your country." Michelle pleaded, "and you can serve your nation best with the Program."

"Mission, Team, Country. In that order," he said as if by rote.

"Your mission is over and your team is gone."

"Semper Fidelis. Always faithful."

"Even to people who can't appreciate it?" she asked softly.

His breath was ragged. "That's the honorable thing to do."

"Is honor really more important than loyalty to yourself? Are you really going to make your life worse again?"

He didn't respond.

"Jeremy. You've been punished your entire life for doing the right thing. You threw away your future fighting Cody Pacheco, even though you knew you could never win. You ruined your relationship with your family over it. You blame yourself for your squad's death in Baghdad. You blame yourself for Khalid Yousef, even though you know neither of those were your fault. You expect the world to hurt you when you do well. You expect it so much that you can't take pride in doing something truly heroic that earned you a Silver Star. You can't improve your own life because you're too set on punishing yourself for fighting unwinnable fights against impossible odds."

White trembled, and he screwed up his face as her logic penetrated his emotions. Good. She was getting to him.

"I'm offering you a chance to fix all of it. A chance to serve your country." She was so close. She just had to get him to sign. "You can protect your country and the entire world from threats that you can't even begin to imagine. Don't you want that? Why is it even a question?"

"Because it's not right!" She'd expected him to say something of this sort, but something about his words sounded wrong. Then she realized White hadn't said anything. "You can't just kick him out for being crazy because he won't lie about his CO!"

Michelle's head snapped toward Roberts like a mantis. "Lance Corporal." She used a tone that clearly said it was a threat.

"It's not right, ma'am."

"Trayvon, you need to stop talking."

"No ma'am, I won't--"

Roberts froze as White slowly stood and turned to face him. Through gritted teeth, the gunnery sergeant pinned him against the wall with his stare. "You will hold your tongue, Lance Corporal, or I will do it for you."

Roberts snapped to attention.

"With any luck you'll never have to make a decision like this, and if you do, then, and only then, can you comment on the state of my affairs." His voice was the purr of panther watching a baby animal. "Do I make myself clear, Lance Corporal?"

Roberts nodded silently.

"I didn't hear you, Lance Corporal."

The junior marine nodded again. "Yes, Gunnery Sergeant," he said quietly.

White sat back down as though nothing had happened. "I apologize for that. Now where were we?"

Michelle's thoughts were too cluttered to allow her to speak at first. She'd expected Roberts to act in White's favor of course, that's why she had made the calculated risk to leave him here. But she'd thought he would show pity for White's plight, making the gunnery sergeant pick the option that was better for himself. Interrupting at this moment was catastrophic, but it wasn't insurmountable.

But White's response might not be. He had reflexively reverted to his marine demeanor when dressing down Roberts, and that would only reinforce the Corps' emphasis on loyalty and duty in the face of personal sacrifice. What's more, she knew why he had shut down the lance corporal's outburst. White hadn't been embarrassed by the pity. He hadn't been angry at the



interruption. That had been a protective move. By silencing Roberts, White was protecting him from whatever fallout might occur after this interview and taking all the responsibility on his own shoulders. He was dooming himself for nothing. Again.

And Michelle might not be able to stop him.

But she had to try. She took a pen out of her pocket and put it down gently on top of the pile of papers containing the false report, the medical discharge, and the job offer. White looked at it, and Michelle could see the tears building behind the mask he wore. His hand trembled as he picked up the pen, fighting against the raw emotions. She could still get him back. He wanted it. She just had to convince him to take it.

"Please, Jeremy. Don't sacrifice yourself for no reason."

His lip quivered, and he lowered his hand toward the falsified report. Yes. So close. She was undoing all the damage Roberts had caused. She could still win.

"Do the right thing," she said.

And immediately realized why it was the wrong tactic.

"Do the right thing," White whispered. His hand steadied in the span of a heartbeat, and he shook his head once. He gripped the pen tighter until the plastic cracked under his grip. Dropping the shards on the stack of papers, he slid it back across the table to Michelle. "No."

It was over. Michelle knew it was over. White wouldn't change his mind, but the benefits he could bring to the Program deserved one last try. "This is your last chance, Jeremy. Once I leave this room, it's over. If you do this, there's no going back."

Gunnery Sergeant Jeremy White stood. The marine's posture was impeccable as he stood in his Service A uniform. He looked

down at Michelle with those icy predator's eyes, the anguish nearly hidden behind his mask. "I will not dishonor my captain," he said roughly. "I will not dishonor my team. I will not dishonor myself."

Michelle sighed. That was it, then. She stood and took out a piece of gum before offering the pack to White.

"Lance Corporal, escort Doctor Park to the exit." His voice was hoarse as he held his emotion in check.

"Yes, Gunnery Sergeant!" Roberts affirmed, a little too eagerly. He picked up the pile of papers and handed them to Michelle before gesturing toward the door. "Ma'am?"

She brushed the wrinkles from her lab coat and walked to the doorway, where Roberts waited. But before she left, she turned back to White for the last time. "I tried to help you, Jeremy. I really did. What's about to happen is your fault."

He tried to stand tall, but all three of them knew it was a façade. White's silent tears fell as the door closed on him.