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“This is unacceptable, Mr Quinn.”

Quinn sniffed. “Madam Chair, I don’t give a fig if you accept it or not. That’s my evidence.”

“You cannot simply shrug your shoulders and deny all knowledge of this matter. We are talking about a billion pounds of public money wasted and you, as a senior Secret Service officer, are still a public servant.” The Chair’s voice was growing louder as she spoke. “It must be accounted for and that is why this Parliamentary select committee is sitting.” She slid her glasses down her nose and glared at the older man. “What is more, I strongly advise you to watch your tone before this committee holds you in contempt.”

Quinn looked at his watch.

“Are we keeping you from something, Mr Quinn? Do you have somewhere else you’d rather be?” The Chair could scarcely hide her irritation.

“I do have a hot bacon roll waiting for me, since you ask,” Quinn replied. “Are we done?”

“Certainly not!”

Quinn sighed and settled back into his chair. It was going to be another long day. He was facing the open end of a long, horseshoe-shaped table behind which a dozen suits sat, staring at him. The defence select committee was meeting for a third day in the Wilson Room, on the first floor of Portcullis House, across from Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. Its purpose was to determine what had happened to Project MANDROID.

The Vice Chair cleared his throat for dramatic effect. “If I may, Madam Chair,” he drawled. “Perhaps a recap would be helpful, to allow Mr Quinn to assist in filling any gaps in my knowledge?” He noisily tapped his notepad.

Quinn slumped further into his seat and rested his chin on his hand. The last thing he needed was another windbag MP, in love with the sound of his own voice, grandstanding for an audience of one.

“You, Mr Quinn, work for British Intelligence, and your involvement here began with the disappearance of a Ministry of Defence scientist. That particular gentleman was working on a stealth weapon—”

“Transport vehicle,” Quinn interjected.

The Vice Chair glowered at Quinn. “How many ‘transport vehicles’ do you know that could destroy two

RAF Typhoon fighter aircraft? I will continue. A stealth weapon, developed at considerable cost to His Majesty’s government, I might add, and kept at a classified location. In the course of your investigation, you learned that a plot was underway to steal that stealth weapon and to smuggle it out of the country, for sale to a hostile government.”

“At least you were paying attention,” Quinn said.

“The lead scientist, it turns out, had been captured by an unknown enemy force. You went to negotiate a ransom payment and allowed yourself to be taken, too, so you could gain inside knowledge of the gang.”

“Yep. Regular hero, that’s me.”

“But the enemy was able to storm the secret base, obtain the weapon, load it on to an aeroplane and was in the process of flying it out of the country.”

“And that’s when your MOD geniuses decided to send two Typhoons to blast it out of the sky,” Quinn said. “While I was on board.”

“And in the ensuing firefight, both RAF jets and the Hercules transport were destroyed.”

The Chair leaned forward. “Which leads us back to the original question of, what happened to this MANDROID weapon?” she snapped.

“And I told you,” Quinn said, “it was destroyed when the transport plane crashed into the English Channel. It’s gone. Drowned. Washed away. Under the sea. In Davy Jones’s locker. Feeding the fishes. Finding Nemo.”

“Then why have we found no wreckage? The Typhoons, the Hercules; parts of all three aircraft have washed up on the shore and the remaining airframes recovered, but for this device, nothing.”

Quinn was losing the little patience he had. “The experts have already told you, nothing could have survived that crash.”

“*You* did.”

Quinn paused, his eyes narrow. “That’s different. I jumped.”

“But you take my point. If you somehow escaped intact...”

“You’re forgetting a very important detail,” Quinn said.

“Oh?”

“The nuclear bomb. It was in the hold of the MANDROID vehicle, right? The Hercules crashed, broke apart, everything went down. The rescue sub recovered the bomb.”

“Yes, it was on the sea bed.”

“After being in the plane.”

“Is there a point to this?” The Chair set her pen down and directed a hard stare at Quinn.

“That stealth device was the most advanced craft of its kind in the world. I’m clearly no technical expert and can’t tell you half of what went into it, or what it could do, but I know there was a lot of nanotechnology in there, which is what made it change its shape into different kinds of vehicle, from tractor to hovercraft.”

“We’ve all seen the presentation,” droned the Vice Chair.

“Then you’ll also know that tiny particles held together have a tendency to fall apart when they’re no longer actively controlled. Surely it’s obvious that when the thing crashed, it crumbled to dust and what didn’t end up as silt got washed away on the currents. That’s why there’s no wreckage. You shouldn’t need me to spell that out for you.”

A wave of consternation rippled around the table. Foreheads touched amid the purr of low voices as the suits conferred.

Quinn closed his eyes and waited.

A decision reached, the Chair motioned for silence. “We’ll need some time to consider this development,” she announced. “The hearing is adjourned for today.”

* * *

“Over here, sir!”

Quinn strode over to the black Range Rover waiting opposite on the Victoria Embankment and eased into the passenger side, taking care to scoop up the foil-wrapped package on the seat before he sat down.

In the driver’s seat was Simon Burgess, former Royal Marine, survivor of the assault on MANDROID base, and now the first recruit to Quinn’s new team.

“Think they fell for it?” Burgess asked, easing the car into traffic.

“Let’s hope so,” Quinn said. “It’s a lot easier to believe than the truth.” He unwrapped the package and sank his teeth into the now-cold bacon roll.