

Prologue

The old wooden door burst open in a shower of splinters, and the blonde stepped across the threshold, pistol at the ready, struggling to peer through the thick cloud of dust that now floated in front of her.

There was the distinctive click of a hammer being cocked, and she instinctively swiveled her aim toward the sound, muscles as tense as steel rope.

As the dust began to settle, she slowly began to make out the short, slender figure standing motionless in front of her, legs apart and arms raised while its hands expertly cradled a pistol in them. A further silent moment revealed the emotionless, steely eyes of her adversary.

"Kim Taeyeon."

"Well if it isn't the FBI prodigy, Jessica Jung in the flesh. And I'd thought you only existed in gangsterland fairytales," came the mocking voice.

"I hate having to deal with smartasses, so do yourself a favor and shut up. We're bringing you in. Now," Jessica retorted, arching an eyebrow, steady aim unwavering.

"We, you say? And who might 'we' be, pray tell?" the brunette challenged.

"Me, and-"

"Me," a low, husky voice came from behind Jessica, almost a whisper.

A tall, devilishly curvaceous woman stepped in, pistol in hand, arms raised in a similar fashion to the others in the room.

She stopped at an arm's length away from Jessica, aim set on Taeyeon.

Taeyeon's expression remained unreadable.

"Amber. You're here. What do you say we take out the trash?" Jessica said coolly, not taking her eyes off Taeyeon.

Taeyeon immediately arched an eyebrow, one corner of her lips pulling upwards in a mock smile. "Amber, you say? You and *Amber*?"

"That's right. You're outnumbered. Put the gun down, Taeyeon," Jessica ordered.

Suddenly, Taeyeon let a hearty chuckle burst out through her lips, eyeing the two with a renewed interest when her laughter subsided.

"*Amber*?" She enunciated the name as she turned her eyes to the woman named Amber, still training her pistol on Jessica. "Amber, darling, Agent Jung here seems to be a little lost. Why don't you shine a little light her way?"

"With pleasure." The woman named Amber suddenly swiveled her aim toward Jessica, the barrel of her pistol mere inches away from the latter's temple.

Jessica felt her heart take a nosedive through her body and then shoot up through her throat. She blinked; the only sign that her resolve had just been seriously dented.

"Amber? What are you doing?" she asked calmly, a slight nervousness tainting her usually cool tone.

"My name is Yuri, Jessica. Kwon Yuri," she said in a menacing whisper as she lifted a thumb to cock her pistol.

Chapter One : Welcome To Rio

One Week Ago

"Rendezvous with the client's contact at the location plotted on your GPS. Follow through with the instructions given to you to get his attention. He'll take you to the client personally."

"We already know exactly where she is. Why do I need to be ferried there like a child?"

"She won't be impressed with you showing up right at her doorstep when she's thought herself invisible all this time."

She scoffed. "Fine. I'll play along then."

"Tread lightly."

"Always."

The woman snapped her phone shut and tossed it onto the empty seat beside her, gazing out the window of the Gulfstream jet toward the vast expanse of cloud-carpeted sky, now bathed in a rich orange hue by the setting sun. A crooked smirk played its way across her delicate features.

She felt her stomach lurch as the aircraft took a noticeable dip in altitude, preparing for its final descent to her destination.

Some hundred miles away, a fair-skinned brunette had her satellite phone to her ear, crossing one leg over the other and tenting her fingers as she looked intently at the widescreen monitor in front of her.

Her tailored suit fit perfectly against her slender curves, its vertical stripes adding a bit of height to her

rather short stature.

"The exchange has been confirmed. We meet at the agreed location in one week. There won't be any problems, will there?"

"You know how little weight promises carry in this world. The most I can say is I'll bring enough security to feel comfortable."

There was a short laughter on the other side of the line. *"Of course, of course. You never disappoint, Miss Kim."*

She gave a short scoff in reply and pressed a button and the line was cut, and placed the phone in a dock on the table while bringing up a couple of pages onto the screen.

"Problems can always be solved...but then again, there can't be a problem if there isn't anyone around to cause one," she mused thoughtfully as she played with her lower lip with her fingers, then rolled her chair closer to the table.

She scrutinized a picture of a woman on the left of the screen. Her hair was a striking blonde, unusual for the fact that she was of Asian descent. A litter of smaller captions filled the right hand side; essential information followed by a wall of detailed text.

Name: Jessica Jung

Date of Birth: April 18 1989

Place of Birth: San Francisco, California, United States of America

Nationality: American

Ethnicity: Asian

Hair Color: Blonde

Height: 5ft 4

Weight: 99lbs

Family Relations (Immediate):

- Stephanie Jung / Sister
- Elliot Jung / Father - Deceased
- Carmen Jung / Mother - Deceased
- Krystal Jung / Sister - Deceased

Affiliation(s): Federal Bureau of Investigation

Notes: Touted as FBI's youngest and most capable agent to date; responsible for dozens of high-profile arrests since her inception into the agency.

"Jessica Jung." She rolled the name around in her mouth for a while before letting her lips curve upwards into a satisfied smile.

"How unfortunate the FBI must be for having to lose such a talented agent."

Reaching toward the screen, the brunette swept two fingers across it from right to left, and the pages were replaced with another two, revealing a different set of information.

She frowned.

She'd pored over endlessly detailed reports about dozens of people for many years now, and this dossier was, at best, disappointing. To say that the file was almost devoid of information would be an understatement.

The page which was supposed to contain a picture of the individual was simply an empty space with a large question mark in the middle. On the right were a few lines of terribly scant information.

Name: Unknown

Date of Birth: Unknown

Place of Birth: Unknown

Nationality: Unknown

Ethnicity: Unknown

Hair Color: Unknown

Height: Unknown

Weight: Unknown

Family Relations: Unknown

Affiliation(s): Doppelgangers

"Doppelgangers." For some reason, she felt a chill run down her spine as she said the word.

She knew little of the organization other than its name and the 'services' it provided. In order to even reach the organization in the first place, she had to pull strings from contacts in every corner of the world; all that effort yielding her a mere phone number to a secure line that, upon further investigation, apparently did not exist. It was like phoning another planet.

According to popular belief in the criminal underworld, the Doppelgangers were a mercenary organization whose history spanned decades, far back to around the breakout of World War II. Aside from the members themselves, only a handful of people in the world knew about its existence. Some say it was responsible for the unexplained deaths and disappearances of hundreds of important figures over the years. In fact, there were a number of individuals who believed that Adolf Hitler was assassinated by a Doppelganger, rather than the accepted fact that he had committed suicide.

There was one uncanny thing that people noticed about the organization, though. Those 'removed' by the Doppelgangers were always extremely powerful, high-profile criminals such as international drug lords, black market weapons profiteers, modern mobsters and the like. Most people attributed that fact to the omnipresent infighting that was part and parcel of criminal life; after all, the removal of a top boss meant the ascension of another. One could easily hire external help instead of getting his own hands dirty.

That bothered her a bit. Despite the fact that it was likely an organization similar to many others operating in her realm, she couldn't help but feel curious. What kind of people could carry out targeted

killings and maintain such secrecy under the noses of the dozens of highly capable intelligence agencies around the world? What kind of structure did they operate on?

As far as she was concerned, the Doppelgangers would provide her with clean, effective service for a price she was more than willing to pay.

A buzzing noise came from the corner of the table as her cellphone came to life, vibrating as it inched sideways across the smooth glass surface. She picked it up, flipped it open, entered a password to connect her to a secure line and held it to her ear.

"The mark has arrived."

"Excellent."

A slender blonde clad in a fitting Ferragamo suit made her way across the vast hallway of the airport with quick, efficient strides through the throng of tourists milling about, carrying a simple briefcase in her right hand. Although her expression seemed calm and careless, she was in fact examining every detail of her surroundings as she continued forward toward the exit, making a mental note of every feature she deemed out of place. It was like a mental radar falling into place piece by piece, smooth as clockwork.

2 o'clock. 50 meters. Two men in suits sitting at the outermost table with coffees in their hands.

11 o'clock. 20 meters. Man in white polo tee making conversation with a young, scantily dressed lady.

3 o'clock. 30 meters. This was the one who gave everything away in an instant. He had a cellphone to his ear and they made eye contact for a split second.

Kim Taeyeon's men. All of them.

"Looks like she was prepared. As always," she thought mirthlessly as she crossed the threshold into the warmth of the outside.

All around her was the hustle and bustle of tourists and locals alike, dressed in gaily colored t-shirts and shorts, carrying luggages and haversacks of all sizes. Approaching from her right was a small squad of guards in red berets and fatigues, armed with heavily worn FN FALs.

Directly in front of her, parked at the curb, was a black sedan with fully tinted windows; a tall, well built man in a tailored suit and shades standing perfectly still and upright next to it.

She scoffed. *"They said this was supposed to be covert ops. They might as well fly an airship with 'FBI' painted all over it,"* she thought, slightly embarrassed.

Pulling a corner of her lips down in distaste, she calmly approached the waiting man.

"The weather's rather warm today," he challenged.

"Never warm enough to keep the tourists away."

"Welcome to Rio, Agent Jung," he said with a curt nod, opening a door with servile courtesy and gesturing for her to enter.

She did, shaking her head as she did so, making sure her next words were for her ears only.

"Idiot."

Chapter Two : Elaborate Games

Two hours had passed since the tall woman had left the city limits, and she was beginning to get impatient. She had seen nothing but trees, shrubs and monkeys for the past hour as the jeep revved and sputtered its way on a rugged dirt path through a dense tropical rainforest that lay just beyond the bustling city.

She felt beads of sweat trickling down her back, staining her shirt. Her fingers fidgeted on top of her briefcase, ready to draw her weapon in case her escort was planning on taking her somewhere other than the promised location. Almost bursting with impatience, her hand was cautiously crawling its way to the lock on the briefcase when she spotted a clearing past the flora in front of her.

A few more seconds of bumping and jerking gave way to a break in the trees and a wash of intense afternoon sunlight, and for the first time since she left the city limits, she spotted buildings. Hundreds and hundreds of them, stacked one on top of the other in a quasi-terraced fashion; a dense concrete jungle that sprawled haphazardly across the space in front of her. Further to the right of her vision, a white sandy beach in the shape of a crescent gave way to a bay which led to the South Atlantic ocean.

A further study of the area allowed her to identify the one landmark that confirmed she was in the right place. In the middle of the concrete mess was a tall stone tower, probably around a hundred feet tall. It was, according to her sources, a lookout; a primitive alternative as an alert in the unlikely event that intruders could evade detection by prior means.

"We have arrived, senorita," a raspy voice called out from in front of her.

She was soon bathed in shadow as the jeep slowed and found its way onto a cobbled road leading into the massive complex. She couldn't help but notice the stares drawn to her as the jeep passed small groups of people on both sides of the narrow street, most of them in worn, tattered clothes, carrying sacks of produce or raw materials. It was probably the suit that piqued their interest; she then realized how grossly overdressed she was for this assignment. She'd have to change.

A few minutes later, the jeep sputtered to a halt outside a nondescript building with a sign hanging outside that read 'The Copacabana'. From the noise, she'd guessed a live band was playing inside.

Handing the other half of the promised payment to the driver, she stepped out of the vehicle, smoothing down her suit with her free hand as the driver revved the engine and pulled away.

Taking a moment to run the instructions given to her through her mind, she stepped through the cowboy-style swinging doors and into the brightly lit establishment. A bar sat to her right; a long countertop backed by countless shelves of alcohol that spanned the entire wall. To her left sat a large number of wooden tables and accompanying stools, all of which had been occupied by noisy patrons. And to her front laid a short, wide stage on which a band was performing popular Latin music.

As soon as she stepped in, there was an abrupt silence as the band stopped playing and the bar's patrons, mostly men, set down their drinks and turned to face her. The looks on their faces were calm and emotionless. Of course, there were a few raised eyebrows in response to her expensive outfit.

Letting the side of her lip curve upward into a smirk, she calmly set down her briefcase and, with a snapping of fingers, struck a dramatic pose.

"At the Copa!" she shouted lyrically.

"Copacabana!" the crowd responded immediately with huge smiles and cheer, raising their mugs and toasting each other as a welcoming gesture to the newcomer. The live band resumed playing after a pickup by the drummer, adding some melody to the surrounding clamor.

Satisfied, she smiled as she picked up her briefcase and strode over to the counter, taking a seat on one of the high stools directly beside the stage.

The bartender was in front of her right away.

"What'll it be, senorita?" the chubby, unshaven man asked cheerily while polishing a mug with a rag.

"Ask for this drink and this drink only. Down it in one shot, and deposit the glass in the bin at the other end of the counter. Nothing you can't handle."

She looked up at the man, grinning. "Graveyard, double tequila."

Immediately he stopped polishing his mug and looked at her curiously, obviously aware of her intentions.

"Always the well dressed people," he muttered while shaking his head, moving to another station a few steps away to prepare her drink.

She watched with renewed interest as he swiped a cocktail shaker from a high shelf and placed it in front of him, filling it with crushed ice. He then chose from a wide selection of hard liquors, taking each bottle and pouring a little alcohol into the shaker. She counted about ten selections in total; two of which were different brands of tequila. Covering the shaker, he raised it up high and gave it a few shakes to the left and right, then swiped a shot glass from a different shelf and turned around, placing it in front of her.

"This is dangerous business you are dabbling in, miss," he said in a cautious tone, pouring a portion of the concoction into the small glass.

"What can I say? There's something terribly seductive about danger. Don't you think so, senor?"

He shook his head again mournfully, moving away to continue polishing the mug he had set down earlier.

She smiled and eyed the drink in front of her for a moment. Her smile soon disappeared as she realized this was as good as staring death in the face.

Gritting her teeth, she picked it up and threw her head back, closing her eyes as she tossed the contents into her mouth. She swapped the mixture around in her cheeks for a moment for good measure, and then swallowed the lot. Her eyes shot open as she then felt the effects of the mixture, burning her from the outside in as it made its way down. Blinking away the horrible feeling, she slammed the shot glass down onto the counter and, with a flick of her wrist, sent it sliding all the way across the length of the counter before it disappeared into a bin that hung at the end.

Closing her eyes once more to deal with the still present burning sensation, she waited for a few seconds.

She then opened her eyes to the feeling of hands on her shoulders, massaging them slowly as a rough voice whispered in her right ear.

"I was getting tired of taking men to Miss Kim." She could smell the nicotine and rot in his teeth. "I didn't expect her newest lackey to be this..." He paused as he took a noisy whiff of her hair. "Tasty."

In a blur, she moved out from under his grip and pinned the man to the countertop, slamming his ribs into it as she did so. She was careful not to crack a rib; she still needed the cretin. At the same time, another flick of her wrist produced a small knife with a blackened blade from the sleeve of her suit, whose flat side she pressed deep into his right cheek. All of it happened in less than two seconds.

Once again, the band stopped playing and patrons turned to look, most of them unsurprised by what apparently was a common sight. A few girls were giggling in the background.

Whatever facade he was trying to put on before was gone now; the man was trembling like a frightened rabbit. His shaking only worsened when his eyes caught sight of the blade on his skin. It was serrated on one side, designed to inflict very, very painful wounds.

She leaned over to whisper in his ear. "If you ever disrespect me again, I will cut what remains of your teeth out of your gums," she twisted the blade slowly to make sure he saw the serrated edge, "one by one, and watch you choke to death on your own blood. Do you understand?"

He sucked in a couple of frightened breaths before rapidly nodding his head.

Releasing him, she slipped the blade back up into her sleeve with a flick of her fingers, and crossed her arms.

Ahead of her, the bartender wondered just how many of those knives she had hidden under her suit.

"I'm waiting."

Cowering, the man gestured toward the entrance, hands shaking uncontrollably, eyes to the floor. "Th-th-this way, s-sen-nor-rit-ta."

By the time she stepped out through the doors, the lively atmosphere of The Copacabana had returned to full swing.

Agent Jessica Jung swiped a card along a reader on the door in front of her, and setting down her briefcase, placed a hand on the handle while reaching into her blazer. Withdrawing her standard FBI issue Glock 23 compact, she carefully pressed down on the handle and gently eased the door open.

Stepping cautiously into the room with both hands on the pistol, she methodically cleared the adjoining bathroom before moving forward into the living space, appraising her surroundings with keen eyes. If there was one thing her training in the FBI Academy taught her to do, it was to have an obsessive attention to detail...and to live in a state of perpetual paranoia. Satisfied that she was alone and nothing had been tampered with, she strode back to the door to pick up her briefcase before closing the door and double-locking it, and moved to the dresser.

Placing the briefcase down, she withdrew an electronic key from a pocket in her blazer and inserted it into a socket, giving it a half-turn. There was a series of faint beeps as the pad on her key scanned her thumbprint, and a loud snapping noise confirmed that the briefcase had been unlocked. Lifting the cover revealed a small laptop which she then turned on. Fishing out a nondescript file from the underside of the cover, she tossed it onto the glass-topped table and flipped it open whilst waiting for the platform to load completely.

She stared at the thin stack of papers in the file, its top page containing a full color, albeit low quality photo of her person of interest.

As she had done every day for the past couple of months, she studied the woman in the photo carefully. Though a little blurred and pixilated, it was one of the best photos the FBI had of the woman; rarely were they able to capture a well angled front view of a person with a hidden camera.

Flowing brown hair curled inward at the ends framed a delicate face set with brown eyes set a little widely apart, thin eyebrows, a small nose and mouth with a slightly thick lower lip. Her skin was very fair; greatly contrasting against her black suit.

"Kim Taeyeon," Jessica breathed quietly.

Just as Jessica Jung had a reputation for being the FBI's golden girl, Kim Taeyeon had acquired fame in a very different context.

At the tender age of 26, she had taken over a massive drug empire that her father had left behind. The international cartel dealt in cocaine, heroin and marijuana trafficking and wholesaling, weapons trafficking and protection rackets. It was reminiscent of the Italian-American Mafia in the twenties. Her father had been exposed in the US and consequently taken into custody by agents from the DEA, but was assassinated while en route to a detention center in another state. A sniper had positioned himself in a building along the route and as the vehicle stopped at a traffic light, he shot her father in the head, killing him instantly. The killer was never found. That had certainly given the higher-ups a new perspective with which to view the problem. There clearly was someone even higher up in the ranks coordinating the empire, but the Feds had already run into too many dead ends as it was. There was no hope in further exposing the cartel.

In the short span of two years that followed, Kim Taeyeon took the cartel under her sound leadership, establishing highly organized cells in an additional fifty countries, on top of an existing global network that was the criminal equivalent of all the richest multinational companies combined. Shrewd, articulate and highly intelligent, she had no difficulty maintaining relationships with her father's contacts and securing the trust of new ones in the business. Her power had even allowed her establish her own secret global telecommunications network; a feat that allowed her freedom of communication and information sharing with other cartels undetectable by federal agencies. It was this freedom of communication and movement that made her virtually invisible, making it extremely difficult to trace, much less locate her.

In addition to this, she had acquired contacts in various government agencies across the globe, no doubt through the use of bribes and threats, all of whom fed her the information she needed to keep her on her toes and on the lookout for intrusions. It seemed as if her protective walls were impregnable.

By chance, the FBI was finally able to exploit a tiny loophole in her network, allowing them to trace a recent short string of communication that revealed her current probable location. Unfortunately, that was as far as they had gotten, as the drug lord had apparently discovered the fault soon after and had it

fixed, once again sealing her off from the outside world.

The FBI could think of no better than to immediately put their most promising agent on the job; so desperate were they that they were prepared to put all their resources into this one case.

At least, that was what the spooks over at intelligence had told her.

Jessica sucked in a calming breath as she continued to process the thoughts and information in her head. She knew very well that by agreeing to take this case, she had just made herself a threat to one of the most powerful and dangerous people in the world; and even at this very second, her life could be hanging by a thread. It would pay to be extra cautious for the rest of her stay in Rio de Janeiro. She remembered the men at the airport. There was no doubt that Kim Taeyeon already knew she was here.

An intermittent beeping from Jessica's laptop brought her back from her thoughts, and she turned to investigate the noise.

"New Message Received"

She punched in her password followed by a series of other commands, and the alert maximized to fullscreen, bringing up a secure message.

To: Special Agent Jessica Jung
From: Federal Bureau of Investigation
Classified - Top Secret

Target's meeting has been confirmed for tomorrow at 6pm.

Location: 22.974199S 43.199444W.

DEA Mobile Enforcement Team will be at your disposal.

Liaise with your FBI contact in Rio for more information.

Jessica nodded to herself instinctively while reaching for the NAVSTAR in her pocket. Inputting the coordinates she had received in the message, the GPS plotted the required location on the screen.

"You've been running from us for too long...No longer."

"I grow tired of waiting."

Kim Taeyeon looked up from her seat at a figure leaning against a wall in the corner of her room, clad in a charcoal black suit and dress shoes, eyes obscured by a pair of shades. He had a head of oily looking, slicked back hair which made him look like a Japanese Yakuza man. His black-gloved hand was resting on a tall black case that stood next to him.

"Patience, Siwon," she said chidingly. "I didn't think I'd have to tell that to a sniper."

"One gets bored of waiting after doing it for a living for a few years." He straightened up and turned to face the woman sitting at her table. "Anyway, why is there another assassin involved?"

"A little competition never hurt anybody, don't you think? It adds more thrill to the hunt. Besides, there's nothing to worry about. If what I've heard about you is true, you can beat her hands down," she said, smirking slightly at the last sentence.

"I wonder if those Doppelgangers are a match for this guy," she thought.

"Her? Puh," he scoffed indignantly, folding his arms. "You're pitting a woman against me? This is going to be too easy."

"Confidence. That's one thing I hear you never lack," she replied with a chuckle.

"And one thing you're probably going to lose very soon."

Chapter Three : Dominoes

The long haired Asian glanced to her left and right as they walked along one of the many dirt roads that snaked their way through the favela. Even as the sun was beginning to set, sounds of commoners continued to shuffle around, going about their daily business. Both edges of the road were dominated by street market stalls. She spotted two squads of men with red berets and sunglasses armed with rifles moving slowly amidst the bustling crowd.

"Local militia and police make up the bulk of Kim Taeyeon's general security. Even as law and order are being routinely kept in Rio de Janeiro, don't be fooled. Most, if not all of them are under her sole control. As far as we know, she has no second-in-command, but with her caliber, it's not difficult to believe she can handle everything perfectly well by herself."

For a moment, she wondered exactly how much money and blood was involved for Kim Taeyeon to have achieved such complete control over the city. And as quickly as she thought it, she decided that it did not matter; not one or a thousand guards would be enough to separate her from her goal.

The pair soon stopped at a nondescript building that sat at a junction at the end of the road. Its walls were cracked and stained, showing years of neglect. There were no identifying signs or guards; to a commoner, it seemed like just another tree in the concrete jungle.

Out of the corner of her eye, she glanced at the guide standing beside her, knees quivering so badly that he looked like he could collapse on his own weight at any moment.

"I-i-in-in...in...", he stuttered, pointing a trembling finger at the building in front of them.

She made a sudden step in his direction and the guide jumped, shrieking as he scurried away into the crowd.

Smiling, she smoothed down her suit and made her way inside.

Immediately, she was greeted with stares from the building's occupants, mostly unwashed, unshaven men sitting loosely in small groups around beaten tables, playing card games and knocking back shots of hard liquor. She could feel their eyes travelling up and down her slender figure, obviously brimming with testosterone-fueled interest at her delicious curves. Most women of her color and descent would immediately downplay and falsely criticize their outer appearances, but not her. She was well aware of how savagely attractive she was in a man's, and sometimes woman's eyes, and she was, above anything else, proud of that fact.

She put on a disinterested look, ignoring the animated chatter which, if her keen hearing caught correctly, contained bits of I'd definitely spank that, man, that's tight and other shameless comments. Her eyes came to rest on a stairway that was almost hidden behind a wall on the far side of the building. She'd have to get through this mess of filthy animals to get to it.

She sighed deeply and stepped forward.

As she expected, a man stood up from the table closest to her to block her path. Mud-stained jeans hung loosely over a pair of dirty work boots, and a half-buttoned plaid shirt revealed a full chest of hair clotted and matted with old sweat.

"Where you goin', sexy?" Alcohol-laden breath wafted from his lips, enveloping her in a sickening haze. She wrinkled her nose ever so slightly and frowned.

She placed her briefcase on the floor and spoke up, addressing not only the man in front of her, but apparently everyone in the room.

"Gentlemen." She mentally kicked herself for socially upgrading the cretins. "I'm heading over to that staircase over there." She gestured towards the far wall with her head. "Unfortunately, you are in the way. So this is what's going to happen. I'm going to reach that staircase, and no one is going to stop me."

There were bursts of laughter and slamming of tables as the men settled into a state of ridicule.

"And what if someone does stop you, babe?" One of them shouted from table on the far right.

The man who was standing in front of her closed the distance and casually slipped an arm around her waist, pulling her closer. She could smell the stench of liquor and tobacco streaming from his mouth, but neither was as strong as the odor coming from his body.

"Yeah, babe. What if someone does stop you?" He asked huskily.

Flashing a small, easily seductive smile, she tip-toed, her face only inches away from his. "Do you really want a woman today, big boy?" She said with a similarly husky voice.

Breaking into a wide smile that revealed a set of yellowed teeth, he pulled her even closer, slipping another arm around her and resting his hand in the small of her back. He gave nothing more than a chuckle which made her blink in disgust.

Tip-toeing even further, she stopped beside his ear. "Then I'll make you one."

Casually moving her arms upward along his back, she shifted her grip around his shoulders and gave a small wink. Feinting a small step back, she suddenly surged forward, driving her knee into the unsuspecting ruffian's groin.

The seated crowd went wide-eyed, stunned. One of them gasped and placed a hand over his mouth; he'd sworn he had heard something crack somewhere.

The victim had opened his mouth to scream, but before the sound escaped his throat, she punched him square in the Adam's apple.

There was another series of cracks as his vocal chords collapsed, contorting the shape of his throat.

He collapsed to the floor in a heap and curled up in a fetal position, coughing, squeaking and shrieking in raspy, supersonic bursts through his ruined vocal chords as his hand disappeared between his legs to feel for what he desperately hoped were still intact.

They weren't.

Dusting herself off, she turned her attention to the now silent congregation. "There's your woman. Careful now boys, she's fragile," she said coldly before reaching down to pick up her briefcase and taking a step forward.

Immediately, the men sitting to her front made way, the silence broken by panicked grunts and the grinding of wood against wood as stools were hurriedly shifted out of the way. The others sat motionless, eyes shifting rapidly between her and the whimpering man on the floor. He was convulsing so badly it looked like he was having a seizure.

It took all of ten paces to reach the stairway at the end, and during that time all she heard was the steady tattoo of her heels against the wooden floorboards and an endless series of muffled cries. At this point, he should be going into shock, and his windpipe would soon swell to such an extent as to block all airflow. It was either that or he'd choke on his own blood. It wouldn't be long before his expiration.

Filthy scum.

Climbing the last of the creaking, termite-eaten steps, she arrived at a landing which gave way to a long, narrow corridor that ended in a wide room. Moving with efficient strides across the hallway, she stepped into the relatively wide expanse.

To her right was a pair of plainclothed men, their poise statuesque and faces stoic. They stood on either side of a wooden door, hands behind their backs, feet shoulder width apart. At first glance, they appeared to be from the military. Judging from their posture and balance, she deduced that they were skilled, very highly skilled in fact, at one or more martial arts. They looked vastly different from the guards she had encountered in her journey to this place. Clearly Kim Taeyeon kept the best as her personal guard. Beside the man on her right was a small steel table.

She approached the duo, only to be when she reached within a few feet of them.

"Business, ma'am?"

"Here to see Miss Kim. Hired mercenary, codename Ghost."

One of them turned, revealing a small intercom set into the wall behind him. Pressing a button, he bent down slightly before speaking.

"Miss Kim. The mercenary has arrived. Codename Ghost. Please confirm."

"Send her in," came the crackling, digitized voice.

He turned back to face her, gesturing for her to move to the table beside him.

"Please leave all weapons and dangerous objects here. You may collect them later."

A guard with manners. Finally, something even mildly respectable in this country.

For some reason, she was prepared to adhere to the condition. Setting down the briefcase, she stepped up to the table and began removing the various implements hidden around her body.

Flick. A familiar serrated knife appeared from her right sleeve.

Three more flicks. Three small throwing knives appeared between her fingers from her left sleeve.

Yuri carefully laid them out side by side on the table.

Reaching down, she withdrew two longer blades from the outer sides of her calves. From where they came, only she knew.

One of the guards raised an eyebrow, but whether it was out of curiosity for her excessive armament or the irresistibly alluring bulge in the back of her pants, was a mystery.

The blades joined their smaller cousins on the table.

Finally, reaching a hand into her suit, she withdrew a pistol. This one was special in its own way. It was a Les Baer .45, a relatively old model modified to carry picatinny rails on the slide and the underside of the barrel, with a custom pistol grip that allowed for better finger ergonomics. It was heavy; that one trait was no doubt the reason why anyone would feel gutsy with it in his hands. Its most unique feature was an engraving made into the right side of the slide; a line of cursive text that stood out against the polished silver finish of its background.

"For justice, which humanity may provide none."

She placed this one down carefully in the center of the table, away from the precise arrangement of her blades. Yuri frowned. She contemplated asking one of the guards if they had a 'Do Not Touch' sign, then thought better of it.

Picking up her briefcase, she moved back to the front of the door, and a guard stepped up toward her. He scanned her briefly with a handheld metal detector before stepping back and nodding toward his companion. The other, in turn, tapped a series of keys on a keypad below the intercom, and she could hear a subtle shifting of weight behind the door before something clicked.

The guard extended his arm, opening the door and gesturing for her to enter.

She stepped into the confines of the room, and once again there was a shifting of weight behind her, much louder this time from where she was standing. She casually turned her head to see a massive shape of stainless steel slide its way out of a wall and settling into place where the wooden door had been. *Click.*

She turned back and raised an eyebrow, letting a corner of her lips turn upward.

Interesting.

"You've arrived," a voice called out from behind the heavy mahogany table in front of her.

Walking up to the table, she set her briefcase down on the glass surface and, shifting a few dials, opened it. She fished out a small sheaf of papers and placed it on the table before closing the briefcase and stepping back.

Taeyeon picked up the papers and crossed one leg over the other, appraising the information with an interested eye.

At the same time, she was being scrutinized closely. Taeyeon was a lot shorter than she was, with skin as white as marble and smooth as cream, framed by wavy brown tresses that rested upon her small shoulders. Yuri had to admit that she was incredibly attractive. Perhaps cute would be the better word? Everything about this woman was small; from her physique to her facial features, but she sensed something extraordinary about Taeyeon. Her eyes sparkled with experience; focused, ever-appraising pupils demonstrating a keen attention to detail, seriousness and a cunning mind that overflowed with endless possibilities. She was young, but despite that, she appeared to be formidable in her own right.

"Kwon Yuri," she said, holding the first page up with her left hand while still digesting the information on the second. Or at least, she was pretending to read it.

Taeyeon looked up to meet Yuri's stoic gaze briefly before observing her further.

Good posture means she's a woman with confidence and poise. Those traits further show an inborn or inbred compulsion to get things done and in such a manner as to warrant approval.

Her eyes moved down Yuri's body to her legs.

Excellent balance. She doesn't need to rely on little knives or big guns to make a point; her nimble limbs and wonderfully proportionate body could produce the same effect with proficiency in hand-to-hand combat. Doesn't look like the stamina-kind...she'd go straight for the weakest points and finish it quickly.

Shifting her gaze upward, their eyes met for the second time.

There's something about those eyes which I can't quite place. Dark, unreadable and mysterious...I'm sure I'll find out soon enough.

"There was quite a commotion downstairs a moment ago." Taeyeon paused, frowning as she gave Yuri a knowing look. "You didn't have anything to do with it, did you?"

"Just a little...societal adjustment."

Taeyeon let out a knowing chuckle. "And how did you find your drink, Yuri?"

"It made me confirm something which I had been debating on whether to believe during my journey here."

"And what might that be?"

"I hate this country."

Another chuckle, heartier this time.

"I like you already, Yuri. I trust that you have, by some obscure means, acquainted yourself with Siwon over there?"

Siwon was still standing motionless in the corner, head tilted downward toward the floor. A finger twitched above the black case and an eyebrow was raised.

Yuri's eyes shifted slightly toward that corner. The man had probably thought himself invisible, though she had felt his presence the moment she'd stepped into the room. Better to let him keep his ego, she thought. "I'm afraid that does not concern me, Miss Kim."

"Oh, but it should, Yuri! Only one of you is going to get paid for this assignment. A little competition I decided to set up between the two of you."

"I am not here for your games, Miss Kim."

"Humor me. Please."

Yuri remained silent.

Taeyeon reached over to the tray on her printer, jostling the papers into place and then tossed them onto the table toward Yuri.

The latter woman picked up the loose sheaf.

The practiced face that Yuri had learned to employ for years might have failed her for a split second as she appraised the full color picture on the first page.

You...

What sort of twisted fate has brought us together again under such circumstances?

"Jessica Jung, one of the FBI's finest agents."

Yuri looked up and met Taeyeon's gaze.

"One million US dollars. That's what I'll pay you to turn her into a rotting corpse."

Chapter Four : The Sister And The Spy

"Miss Kim."

"Yes?"

"Miss Hwang is here to see you."

"Send her in."

The reinforced door went through its usual routine, shifting and clicking before the wooden pseudo-door opened behind it. A young woman stepped into the room, wavy brown tresses framing a perfectly oval face. A suit hugged her perfect curves.

"Tiffany," Taeyeon greeted before standing up to welcome her.

Tiffany flashed a smile; a rather heart stopping one at that. She approached Taeyeon as the latter moved around the table.

Before she could open her mouth to speak, Taeyeon reached forward and with a rough shove, pinned her to the adjacent wall. She found her fingers intertwined with Taeyeon's as she stared down into the shorter woman's eyes; eyes that were filled with an all too familiar meaning. In positions such as this, Taeyeon found it convenient to be the shorter one; it gave her better access to Tiffany's neck.

Leaning in, she teasingly brushed the tip of her nose against the underside of Tiffany's jaw, tracing small circles before moving up and over her chin, pausing when their lips were barely centimeters from each other. The cornered woman's eyes were closed now, and Taeyeon could see the rapid eye movement behind her eyelids. Her hot breath gently teased Tiffany's lips over and over as she released one hand from its grasp and traced a path downwards over her chest with a fingertip. Tiffany gasped and let out a soft, husky moan.

Taeyeon smiled.

"There's something I need you to do."

Tiffany opened her eyes, barely able to conceal a frown. "And so it ends here yet again. When will you stop teasing me, Taeng?"

Taeng. Out of the thousands who worked for Kim Taeyeon, no one had addressed her by anything other than 'Miss Kim'.

"I take great pleasure in seeing the hunger in your eyes. Forgive me." Taeyeon gave a suggestive smile.

Taeyeon released Tiffany and moved back behind her desk. Tiffany smoothed down her suit before following, stopping at the other side.

"There's another undesirable that is going to be taken care of tomorrow. I need you to take care of the cleanup afterwards." Taeyeon unconsciously tidied the pile of loose papers on her desk.

"Why do I always have to do the dirty work?" Tiffany pouted a little.

Taeyeon laughed at the expression. "Because I don't trust any one of those goons, Tiffany. There are some things that require the utmost care and discretion, and those are the things that I'd prefer to entrust to you."

Tiffany flashed another smile. "Does it have anything to do with that Siwon guy who came in earlier today?"

"Why, as a matter of fact it does. And speaking of that, there's something else I wanted you to do for me."

"Something else?"

"Yes. There was someone else I hired other than Siwon."

"Someone else?" Tiffany cocked her head to the side in curiosity.

"I recently acquired another mercenary contact, and I figured it would be good to do a little exploring. So I'm pitting another one against him. Call it a competition, of sorts."

"My, my. You do like playing games, don't you?"

Taeyeon sat down on her chair and crossed a leg over the other. "Life itself is a game, my dear. Wits and luck will bring you to the top in the blink of an eye; a wrong move could, on the other hand, destroy you completely. Speaking of games...we could play a little one sometime, if you'd like."

Tiffany blushed. "You mentioned something I needed to do?"

"Ah yes, I digress. The other mercenary's name is Kwon Yuri."

Kwon Yuri? That Kwon Yuri?

"Why do you look so surprised?"

Tiffany was caught for a moment. "Nothing. I'm just surprised that it's a woman."

"Not you too!"

"I'm sorry?"

Taeyeon sighed audibly. "Forget it. Anyway, as I was saying, there's something about this woman that I can't quite place. Call it womanly instinct, but I think she's hiding something. I need you to keep an eye on her for me until tomorrow."

Taeyeon picked up a tiny device from her table and plucked off a small cap, revealing a USB port. She

handed it to Tiffany.

"A tracking device has been planted on one of her weapons. Plug this into your GPS and it'll show you her location. It updates in real-time and can pinpoint her exact location within any building thanks to the new software, so she'll be impossible to miss."

Tiffany held the object up to the light, scrutinizing it thoughtlessly. "Alright. I'll get down to it immediately."

Before she knew it, Taeyeon was already in front of her. She looked down curiously, seeing the same expression in her eyes as before. Taeyeon had her arms around Tiffany's waist, and slipped a hand into her back pocket before spinning her around and pinning her onto the tabletop.

"Now, now, what's the rush?" A sinister smile had found its way onto Taeyeon's lips as she pulled up one of Tiffany's thighs, giving it a tiny nibble.

Tiffany's breathing quickened; the rise and fall of her chest seemed to accentuate its size. Taeyeon slipped a hand down to her bum while she skillfully undid Tiffany's top shirt button with her teeth. Another gasp.

"These walls are soundproof, so don't be holding back."

The moon had taken its place high up in the sky, giving the outlines of the surrounding buildings a subtle aura. Night had fallen over the city; the harsh glow of the Sun had been replaced by brightly lit signs and streetlights that sparsely lined the roads.

Yuri was deep in thought as she exited the jeep that had brought her back from the outskirts of town to her hotel. The constant ramblings of this rather chatty driver were nothing but a faded clutter of sound waves as she tuned him out. She carelessly handed him a hundred dollar bill.

The target is FBI agent Jessica Jung. By some odd err the FBI had been alerted to Taeyeon's presence in

the area, and sent Jessica on what they expected to be a decisive bust on an upcoming deal between her and another shady underworld figure. Necessary steps had been taken, all going as planned, to lure the FBI into the ruse. Doctored flight schedules and a detailed chain of action had been put in place to simulate the deal proper.

The crux: wait for the agent to 'bust the deal' in a warehouse in downtown Rio and eliminate her. Permanently. A third party would be present to take care of the body. Or bodies, depending on how messy the situation might turn out to be.

Yuri reached into her pocket and fished out the photograph she'd received earlier at the meeting with Taeyeon and Siwon.

Despite the years of separation, nothing had changed Jessica enough for Yuri to not recognize her. Her sharp, pixie-like features, petite physique and keen, attentive eyes all rang a familiar bell in Yuri's memory. The only significant change was that her hair had been dyed blonde, in contrast to the natural black hair she was born with.

Taking in a deep breath, she slipped the photograph back into her pocket and focused on the matter at hand.

There was something she had to take care of first.

She passed through a revolving door into the cool air of the hotel lobby, her heels clicking distinctively against the marble flooring.

When she arrived at the concierge, she was greeted by a well dressed young man who had just gotten off the phone. She slid a thin sheaf of hundred dollar bills across the countertop and put on her best smile.

"I called earlier."

"Ah yes. Miss Liu, is it not?" The young man took the bills and casually slipped them into his jacket pocket, the size of his smile growing exponentially.

"Your room has been prepared, and here is the little favor you requested." He pushed two keycards toward Yuri, bowing slightly as he did so.

Yuri accepted the cards and shook the man's hand before heading toward the nearby bank of elevators.

Stepping into an empty one, she pressed a button for the eleventh floor and moved to the back of the elevator as the doors closed, immersing her in a soft jazz tune.

The elevator doors opened moments later with a ding, and Yuri exited into a long carpeted hallway. She turned right and strode noiselessly down the soft surface, stopping in the middle of two doors labeled 1108 and 1115. She stole a couple of quick glances around her before putting down her suitcase giving three sharp flicks with her left wrist. Three knives appeared obediently between her fingers.

Holding the throwing knives in her hands, she held them up one by one, weighing them briefly in her hand before replacing two of them in her sleeve. Holding the last one in one hand, she took out a Swiss army knife from her jacket pocket and pulled out the screwdriver tool. With a few twists of a couple of screws, she removed a grip from one side of the knife, and what was revealed underneath confirmed her suspicion.

I knew it felt a little heavy.

A tiny round object was sitting inside. It was impressive in every sense of the word. Never before had she seen such a small tracking device. In all her years of work and training, this was definitely something new. She wouldn't have realized it was there in the first place had she not been so familiar with her weapons. She was about to pick it off with the Swiss army knife when she paused halfway in thought.

There might be some kind of alarm trigger set on this thing...removing it might alert her. Best to leave it alone.

Tucking the knife into her palm, Yuri folded and replaced the Swiss army knife in her pocket, then took out the keycards from her pants pocket. She tried both on the door to her left, and the reader gave a little beep as the door was unlocked with the correct one. Pushing it open, she stepped inside and tossed the tainted throwing knife onto the bed near the end of the room. Making an about-face, she approached the opposite door and opened it with a different keycard.

Picking up her briefcase, she stepped inside.

She tucked her briefcase under the table and opened the nearby mini-bar, bending over to inspect its contents. She frowned at the selection.

Cheap beer, soda, chocolate...Ah, yes. This will do.

She picked out a small bottle of chilled wine sitting in the corner away from the cheap-looking beverages, unscrewed the cap and took a long pull.

So, she doesn't trust me, is that it? Or perhaps she'd like me dead before the assignment tomorrow. Strange, but possible. Either way, I'm going to find out.

She replaced the bottle, knowing that it was best to be in the clearest state of mind for the impending intrusion. Drawing her pistol from her shoulder holster, she sat on the bed and waited.

"Only a matter of time now."

Tiffany Hwang stood at the foot of Hotel Rio, holding her GPS in one hand. A red triangle was beeping softly on the screen, displaying the current position of her mark. Pushing a series of buttons, the image on the screen zoomed and twisted and the rough 3D blueprint of the building came into view. The image climbed through the levels of the hotel, stopping at the eleventh floor. She counted. Kwon Yuri was in room 1115. The opposite room was 1108.

Slipping the GPS back into her pocket, she stepped into the lobby and approached the concierge.

A young man stood up to greet her, and she flashed a smile before sliding a bill across the countertop.

"I'd like room 1108, please. I don't know how many nights I'll be staying, but take this as down payment for the time being. I'm sure I don't need to stress the need for anonymity."

It took a second or two for the man to regain his composure before he nodded and accepted the bill. He smiled. It was not out of mirth; it was a knowing smile.

A moment later, a keycard was in his hands, which he passed to Tiffany.

"Thank you." Another smile.

The man seemed to stagger.

She turned and headed toward the elevators.

Perhaps this would be the first incident of a person having a cardiac arrest whilst standing.

Yuri was seated motionless on the bed, pistol in one hand. Her expression was dark; eyes staring at the floor and yet it looked like she was seeing right through to the ground floor. Words and memories played about constantly in her mind, as they had for the past two hours.

"I don't understand. Why? Why Yuri?"

"There are some things...some things that have made this impossible between us."

"You promised me. You told me to put my faith in you and I did! And now you're telling me to forget everything, to throw it all away? What gives you the right? Why are you trampling all over my feelings?"

"Because I don't love you."

"..."

"Because I've never loved you at all."

Beep. Click.

Yuri jumped off the bed, moving to the wall beside it and pressing herself against it, out of sight of the doorway.

There was a soft high pitched screech as the door eased open.

Three.

Two.

One.

"Hands where I can see them," Yuri ordered, holding the pistol in both hands and pointing it at the back of Tiffany's head. She took a step back.

Not too close. She could turn around and disarm me in an instant. Or at least, attempt to do so.

The woman named Tiffany obeyed, holding up her hands and freezing in her spot.

"What the hell? How did she...," Tiffany thought incredulously.

"Why are you following me? Why was I being tracked?"

Silence.

Yuri gave a sarcastic chuckle. "Honestly, of all things, putting it in a throwing knife. Not very bright, those lackeys of hers."

More silence.

"Turn around."

Tiffany did so slowly, still holding her hands up.

Yuri's eyes widened.

You.

"You. What are you doing here?" Yuri asked, her tone vastly different from before.

The brunette's face was stoic. "I'm not telling you anything. Kill me if you want. You'll be hunted wherever you go."

That's not what I meant. But then again, she doesn't recognize me, does she?

"Your name. Tell me your name."

Tiffany found no harm in revealing that.

"Tiffany Hwang."

A small smirk played onto Yuri's lips. "Tiffany Hwang? Is that what you're called now, Stephanie?"

Tiffany was shocked. It was written all over her face.

"Stephanie Jung." Yuri lowered her pistol.

Tiffany's expression only seemed to grow more surprised.

"Don't you recognize me? No, of course you don't."

Now Tiffany was confused.

Wait...could she really be...

Yuri took a step back. "You can put your hands down now."

Tiffany let her hands fall to her sides. She was confused, but even more so, intrigued.

"Maybe this will help."

Yuri pulled a rubber band from her hair, letting it down. With a couple of quick pinches, she removed the green contact lenses from her eyes and threw them onto the floor.

Tiffany gasped audibly.

"Yuri?" Tiffany said slowly.

"Funny how even though you've changed your appearance so much, it's always the eyes that give you

away."

"Kwon Yuri?" Tiffany took an instinctive step closer, unable to hide her surprise.

"Hello, Stephanie," Yuri said with a small smile, holstering her pistol.

Something was burning behind Tiffany's eyes, and Yuri could see what was about to come next. In the blink of an eye, Tiffany stepped up to Yuri and swung a fist at her face. It was far too easy to read, unfortunately, and Yuri caught her wrist before the slap connected. Tiffany hissed.

"You! How could you do that to my sister? You weren't there for her when she needed you the most!" She snarled through gritted teeth.

Yuri immediately felt guilt building up in her stomach. For the millionth, billionth time, she regretted what she did. She considered telling Tiffany about Taeyeon's plan; obviously, she didn't know. A moment of thought told her it would be best to keep quiet for now.

"Stephanie, this isn't the time to be talking about this," Yuri said calmly, still gripping tightly onto Tiffany's wrist.

Tiffany pulled it free and stepped back. She scoffed.

"All it took was one day to turn you into a heartless monster. What happened to the Yuri I knew?"

"She had to go."

Tiffany scoffed again, looking away. "Indeed she did." Their eyes met again. "What are you doing here?"

"I believe I asked you that question first." Familiar or not, Yuri wasn't one to let her guard down easily. "I know I was being tracked, but I knew Kim Taeyeon wouldn't be satisfied with merely knowing my location, so I set up this little trap for whoever was to come my way."

"Nobody likes a smartass, Yuri."

"It takes a damn smartass to do what I do." Yuri took a deep breath. "Stephanie, I need to know. Why are you here? Are you working for Kim Taeyeon? What the hell is going on?"

Tiffany stepped over to the bedside and took a seat, running a hand through her hair. She looked relieved and distressed at the same time.

Yuri's expression softened at the sight.

How much this girl has changed...but for better or worse?

"I'm working for Taeyeon." Tiffany paused to look up at Yuri. "Undercover."

Yuri raised an eyebrow. "Undercover?" She was trying to figure out how that was even remotely possible.

"Years ago, after the...incident, I decided that I couldn't live with Jessica anymore. She was becoming...obsessive. I felt suffocated in that home. She was so full of hate and guilt and regret, and I didn't know what to do for her. So I left."

"You left Jessica alone after *that*?" Yuri sounded incredulous.

"I was young. I didn't know what I could do. So I..."

"So you ran away."

"Hey! Look who's talking!" Tiffany spat, gripping the sheets under her hands.

Yuri sighed. She admitted that she'd said the wrong thing in the wrong way. "Nevermind. As you were

saying?"

Tiffany looked down at the floor again. "I managed to get a police scholarship to get through college, so I went straight to the LAPD after that. By some stroke of luck, I was transferred to the NYPD soon after, and served there for a few years before being picked out by Interpol. Still can't figure out how that happened. Funny sometimes how connections can get you almost anywhere."

"And during all that time, Jessica didn't try to look for you?"

"Like I said, she was obsessed. I don't know if she even noticed me gone. Later I found out that she'd gone the same way, only she'd gotten into the FBI instead. Turned herself into a spook, apparently. We never tried to make contact with each other, though." She gave a rueful smile and went back to focusing on the floor, hands clasped over her knees.

Yuri held her chin. "I see. So now you're here because...?"

"The CIA, FBI and Interpol have been trying to track down Taeyeon for years now. Her power and influence in the underworld has grown greatly since she took over from her father, and it was becoming worrisome for the higher-ups. The problem is, she's all sealed from the inside. We even recruited a few Chinese hackers to break into her system, but no dice. Sent them back to prison where they came from, by the way. So the only way to get to her was from the inside. That's me."

"Just you?"

Tiffany held up one finger and pointed it into the palm of her other hand. "One person to go right to the source. That was all they needed. Too many and we would draw attention. Being the closest person to Taeyeon there ever was, I managed to learn a bit about her communications system and after a lot of digging, I found a loophole. Went through hell trying to make it look like an accidental leak. Anyway, I couldn't direct the decrypted string of chatter to any one agency. I did hear from Taeyeon that the FBI was up to something, so I figured they'd picked up the transmission first."

Should I tell her now?

"The FBI probably thinks they're all up there now because they've managed to find a lead, no matter

how small. Little do they know they've got Interpol to thank."

"So why are you still here? The FBI probably has this all covered by now."

"Because I can't leave. It was an all-or-nothing deal for me, and I took it. I only get out when the bust is made. Only then will Interpol come to get me. Right now, I'm stuck, but I suppose I'm just about wrapping up the assignment now."

I should tell her now.

"Stephanie."

"It's Tiffany."

"Excuse me?"

"Tiffany Hwang is my alias for this assignment. I think you should get used to that."

"Right. Tiffany. The FBI has already made their move on this."

"They have? Great. I've been in this mess far too long now."

"But you're far from wrapping up. Tiffany, they sent your sister."

"*What?*"

"And tomorrow's meeting..."

"There's another undesirable that is going to be taken care of tomorrow. I need you to take care of the cleanup afterwards."

"It's a trap. That's where I come in."

Tiffany gave her a half-surprised, half-questioning look.

"What do you mean?"

"Kim Taeyeon hired me to kill her."

Chapter Five : Breaking Point

Tiffany was standing now, having hopped off the bed in a fit of horror. Her face was contorted in a vastly uncharacteristic visage of shock.

She held out a palm towards Yuri and shook her head, blinking a few times in trying to comprehend what Yuri had just said. "Wait, wait, wait, wait. What did you just say? You're here to *what*?"

"Tiffany. Before you go into one of your panicky tirades which I used to know you so well for, let me remind you that if you decide to pick a fight with me now, you are not leaving this room in anything less than a body bag, or something similar." There was a grave firmness in Yuri's tone that told Tiffany she had meant it.

Tiffany took an instinctive step back before regaining her composure. She stepped forward again. "Excuse me? You have no idea what kind of scum I've-"

"The Interpol flips burgers compared to what I do, Tiffany. And you have no idea what kind of scum I've disposed of since I started this job." Yuri folded her arms.

Tiffany scoffed in disbelief.

"By the way, you didn't let me finish," Yuri continued.

"Finish? You just told me you're going to kill my sister! I think you're quite finished here." Tiffany reached for her pistol, but just as she was reaching into her suit, she found herself staring into the barrel of one already. A rather large one, at that.

"Tiffany. I didn't say I was going to kill her," Yuri said calmly, maintaining her aim on Tiffany's chest.

Tiffany still had her hand on the lapel of her suit, unsure.

Damn, she's fast.

"And you expect me to believe you?"

"I don't, because nobody does. It's part of what I do. But here's something you can believe: I'm not laying a finger on Jessica. Now if you would be so kind as to put your hand down, I will do the same." Yuri gave a reassuring nod, if that had any effect on the tense woman in front of her.

Tiffany hesitated a moment.

I'll be dead even if I so much as twitch.

She put her hand down in resignation.

"Thank you," Yuri said with a smile, re-engaging the safety and holstering her pistol.

Tiffany folded her arms and glared at Yuri in discontent. She paced around her spot for a moment,

running a hand through her hair in frustration before she stopped to face Yuri.

"Yuri, who the hell are you?" Even Tiffany found her own question strange.

Yuri walked over to the dresser and reached down to grab her suitcase. "It doesn't matter. But there are three things you should know. One, I don't exist. Two, I belong to an organization that doesn't exist. And three, my job is to make sure that certain people cease to exist."

Tiffany shook her head in disbelief. "But that's impossible. That kind of anonymity is-"

With a couple of quick flicks and turns, the briefcase snapped open, and from it Yuri extracted a sheaf of papers. "Possible with the right resources. Personal records, school records, birth certificates...anything that relates or had once related to me in any manner...you can't and won't find them anymore. Even my face is different, as you can tell. The day I..." She paused briefly. "The day I left Jessica, I was literally wiped off the face of the Earth. The fact that you 'know' me won't do anything to expose me."

"What kind of organization could provide and maintain this kind of secrecy?" Tiffany thought.

Yuri tossed the papers onto the table as Tiffany came over beside her. The latter picked up the loose stack, eyes instantly widening at what she saw. Flipping page after page, one quicker than the other, her jaw became slightly loose.

"This...this is...How were you able to compile so much information about Kim Taeyeon? We weren't able to get anything more than a bloody picture of her and some scant details!" Tiffany was still flipping the pages frantically.

"Like I said, you guys should be flipping burgers," Yuri said coolly, earning another glare from Tiffany.

Tiffany suddenly stopped going over the papers and turned to look at Yuri. "Wait a minute. Why do you have this with you?"

Yuri smiled. "Let's just say that when I came to Rio, I'd already had a target in mind...and it wasn't

Jessica."

Tiffany raised an eyebrow.

"But first things first. Tomorrow will still be coming, and we need a plan."

"Hold on. Who said I'm working with you? I don't even know who you are...or what you are, if that makes any sense," Tiffany said.

"Let's stick with Yuri for the moment." Yuri reached into the briefcase and pulled out a small silver case, which she flipped open to reveal a large array of color-coded bullets resting in foam indents. "And if you think you can save Jessica alone, go ahead."

Yuri pulled out a green striped bullet from its indent and held it up to the light.

"But I will not stand by and watch Jessica die."

The sheets ruffled and crumpled under Jessica's desperate grasps; her eyes twitching rapidly from side to side under closed eyelids. For the nth time, Jessica Jung found herself spiraling helplessly toward an abyss that stretched down forever. She tossed and turned, unable to rouse herself from her torturous slumber.

For years, she'd never slept for more than a few hours a night. She forced herself into work holism, because every time she lay down and closed her eyes, she would just witness another twisted way for her family to die. Every time she'd allowed herself to sleep, she'd wake up a wretched soul whose heart was empty, and at the same time filled with hatred and guilt.

A series of short gasps escaped her lips as she continued tossing in bed, her eyes scrunching and lips twitching in denial of the events unfolding in her mind. Events that had been painfully turned her life

upside down many years ago.

"Hold her down."

Two masked men pinned a middle aged woman to the ground, her legs thrashing about in futile protest. She screamed with all her strength, but no one would hear her. No one would hear someone screaming in a thick-walled mansion at least a mile away from the nearest neighbor.

"No! What are you doing to her! Let her go you bastards!" A tall, well built man struggled in the arms of three masked men; to his side stood another masked man with a pistol in his hand, arm trained on the tall one's temple. He appeared to be the leader.

A little girl cowered behind a nearby sofa.

"We do not take betrayal lightly, Mr. Jung," the leader said, his deep voice muffled through the fabric of the mask.

Mr. Jung tried his best to maintain his composure and curb the rising panic. He spoke in a soft, pleading voice. "Please, let them go. It's me you want. There's no point in...in hurting them. Please."

The masked man bellowed a long, hearty laugh. "Look at you." He jabbed the pistol at Mr. Jung's head. "General Elliot Jung. Pleading for the lives of his loved ones with tears in his eyes." He spat on the floor. "What happened to all the guts you had when you tried to sell us out? Huh?"

The leader stepped closer to Mr. Jung. He flipped the pistol around in his hand to hold it by the barrel and with a swift swing, struck him hard across the temple. Immediately, blood began to flow freely down the side of Mr. Jung's head, mixing with the sweat that matted his thin gray hair. Head wounds were always a rather bloody affair.

"No!" Mrs. Jung screamed in the grasps of the men holding her down, still thrashing about on the carpeted floor.

The little girl whimpered.

The leader laughed again, wiping the blood off the butt of his pistol.

"P-please..." Mr. Jung's voice was barely a whisper now, his head spinning in what felt like a concussion.

"So tell me, Mr. Jung. Who would you like to go first?" Mr. Jung's head snapped up, his eyes wide. "Your darling wife Carmen..." The leader gestured towards Mrs. Jung with his head, then stepped away and moved over to the sofa.

Before the girl could escape, he grabbed her by the hair and pulled her to her feet. She was barely half his height. She let out a stifled cry.

"Or your precious little daughter?" A malicious sneer was evident on the leader's face.

"You let her go," Elliot snarled.

"Ah! There's the guts we saw from before! The daughter it is, then," he said animatedly, dragging her by the hair while she screamed in terror.

Carmen was thrashing ten times harder now, tears of anger streaming down her face and falling to the floor. "No! Krystal! No!!"

"Don't you dare hurt my daughter!" Elliot was yelling his lungs out, struggling against the grips of his captors.

The leader stopped at the redbrick fireplace; an old looking adornment on which hung five huge red socks lined up in a row.

"Let's see now...Jessica...Stephanie...Ah, here we are! Krystal!" He was still dragging Krystal across the floor, who was crying helplessly, all will to fight vanished.

"Krystal!" Tears escaped Elliot's eyes; tears that he had held in since he realized tonight was the night everything would be destroyed. The night he realized his mistake was too great and unredeemable.

"Krystal...I'm sorry. Daddy's so sorry."

The leader reached down and grabbed Krystal by the back of the neck and lifted her off the ground; the girl's legs thrashing about and her hands tugging at his fingers as they dug into her throat. He lifted her further till her head was well above the fireplace, and with a grunt, slammed her headfirst into the edge of the fireplace, right above her sock. There was a sickening crack as the sharp brick edge penetrated and lodged into her skull, killing her instantly. Blood and brain matter spilled into Krystal's sock as her body fell limply to the ground.

"NO!" Elliot yelled. He let out a primal scream and with a superhuman effort, burst out of the grasps of the tree men holding him, lunging toward the leader.

The latter raised his pistol and fired twice, hitting Elliot in the right knee and thigh. Elliot faltered and fell with a cry as the three men approached him and began kicking him in the ribs. More cracks. Elliot was numb to the pain. He could only scream as hard as he could as his heart was torn a thousand times over.

Carmen continued to scream in agony.

"Enough!" the leader shouted, holding a hand out. "Pick him up. We're not done yet."

The men halted their assault and hauled a broken Elliot to his knees, gritting his teeth in pain and fury.

"And next, we have Carmen!" the leader announced enthusiastically, stepping over to the writhing woman. He tucked his pistol into his pants and reached down to draw a combat knife from his leg. Holding it up, he slid a gloved thumb across the sharp edge as the blade shined in the light.

"Carmen...", Elliot said softly as his pleading, guilt-filled eyes met her wild ones.

The leader knelt down to the ground, holding the knife in one hand.

"Bring her to her knees." The men did as told.

"My, my...such energy you have, Mrs. Jung. No wonder you had three kids," the leader taunted as he caressed her cheek.

She spat in his face. "Go to hell," she growled.

The leader turned to Elliot. "This little bitch is going to die slow," he sneered. "I want you to see her face when she dies."

One of the men moved behind Elliot and held his head in place so he couldn't look away.

Holding the knife in a reverse grip, the leader thrust it deep into Carmen's abdomen, pausing for a second to let the initial shock set in before pulling it sideways toward him and out through the side.

There was a choked cry followed by an eerie silence as blood and entrails spilled out through the opening, Carmen's face freezing in shock. The men holding her released their grasps, and she awkwardly collapsed to the floor, the carpet underneath stained by a rapidly growing pool of blood. Her head was turned to the side and her eyes were twitching rapidly. She was still alive; dying slowly with the growing blood loss and shock.

Elliot could do nothing but suck in short gasps, unable to comprehend what had just happened. But in his mind he knew all of it was true. His wife and daughter were dead, dying horrible deaths. And it was all his fault.

All of it.

He looked from the skinny, lifeless body of his ten year old daughter, hanging awkwardly off the edge of the fireplace, to the prostrate form of his beloved wife of twenty years, her clothes drenched in her own blood. He bit his lip and hung his head in resignation.

The leader stood up and walked over to Elliot's kneeling form. He reached down and raised Elliot's chin with his free hand and held the knife over his face. Fresh blood dripped from its tip down onto Elliot's lips. No matter how much Elliot tried to keep the warm liquid out of his mouth, he could still taste the metallic substance, teasing at the tip of his tongue. He squeezed his eyes shut in shame as his stomach twisted in disgust.

"Taste it. The blood of your wife. Sweet, is it not?"

Elliot began to sob, and blood diluted with tears flowed down the side of his face to the floor.

The leader snickered at the sight. He wiped the blood off the knife with a handkerchief and replaced it in its sheath. "You, Elliot Jung, shall die the slowest." He knelt down to whisper in Elliot's ear. "Mors principium modo est."

Turning back to one of his men, the leader held out an arm.

"Bring me the axe."

Jessica bolted upright, shirt and hair drenched in cold sweat. She was panting; hyperventilating as she always did when she woke up from another sordid nightmare. She wiped her wet forehead with her hand, feeling the heat radiating from her face as she did so. It came back to her, bit by bit, memory by painful memory.

"The Christmas Slaughter"

"Top Military Official Murdered With Family"

"Two Escape Christmas Killings"

It was all over the news; catchy and quirky headlines on the front pages of broadsheets and tabloids alike, and every one of them stabbed at her eyes like glass shards.

She and her sister had, by pure chance, escaped execution.

Her sister.

Jessica shook her head, willing herself to clear her mind of all the mental clutter that pulled savagely at her heartstrings.

Looking around, her eyes at last fell on the digital clock sitting on the nightstand. Four A.M.

Hauling herself off the bed, she stepped into the bathroom and ran the sink, splashing her face a couple of times with the cool water.

Grabbing a nearby towel to dab her face dry, she looked up at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were bloodshot, and were getting teary by the second. A total psychological mess.

"I haven't cried for years, and I will not start now," she thought determinedly.

"I will discover the truth someday."

Throwing the towel into the sink, she stepped out of the bathroom to prepare for the day ahead.

Chapter Six : Hunted

"What's that you're holding? And what are the rest of these?" Tiffany asked as she peered curiously into the box, filled with bullets sporting different colored stripes.

Yuri handed the bullet to Tiffany, who in turn held it up to obtain a clearer view.

"Sometimes certain situations call for special kinds of ammunition. Some are lethal, while others are not," Yuri explained, carelessly running a finger over the rest of the bullets in the case.

"It doesn't look any different from a regular bullet," Tiffany observed with a slight frown, turning the bullet over and over in her fingers to observe every possible angle. It was true. It looked no different from any regular .45 caliber bullet, save the colored stripes.

"And that was exactly how it's meant to be. On the outside, it seems like any regular bullet, but it's really what's on the inside that counts." Yuri waved a hand over the case.

Tiffany was still frowning. She looked at Yuri. "I wish Interpol had stuff like these. Who knows when you might need this kind of versatility." She handed the bullet back to Yuri, who replaced it in its indent. "So what does this one do?"

"You'll see." Yuri closed the case and replaced it in her briefcase. Opening a small compartment, she fished out a pair of tiny, nondescript packets, which she deposited in a suit pocket.

"What are those?" Tiffany asked, quick to observe the rather surreptitious action.

Yuri tactfully ignored the question. "What time is it?"

Tiffany frowned before glancing over at the digital clock sitting on the nightstand. "It's 4:30am. Why?" As that information began to register in her mind, she struggled to stifle a yawn that was building up in her throat.

"We need to get moving."

"This early?" Tiffany asked, fairly surprised. "Do you need time to prepare or something?"

Yuri's expression turned markedly serious. "Listen to me very carefully. Do not look at the window behind you."

Tiffany's back was toward the windows, and she instinctively shifted her eyes to the sides as if to roll them to the back of her head. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

"What's going on?" Tiffany's voice was suddenly tense and worried. Her hand moved unconsciously toward her piece.

"Relax. Put your hand back down. Listen, I believe you know that Taeyeon had hired another mercenary, yes?"

Tiffany paused for a moment, and then nodded. "Siwon?"

Yuri nodded in reply. "Taeyeon hired both of us to set up some kind of competition for the bounty, but any mercenary worth his salt knows that there's no such thing as 'competition' in this business."

Tiffany didn't like where this was going.

Yuri made a miniscule gesture with her eyes. "Before I came up to my room, I'd made arrangements with the hotel staff to inform me personally if Siwon came up to them asking about my whereabouts. Once again, nothing a little green couldn't handle."

"How did you manage that?"

"Text me at this number if a buffed up, greasy-looking Asian man in a black suit comes probing about a long haired Asian woman in a suit. Tell him what he wants to know. A no-brainer, actually," Yuri said casually. She began fiddling with her briefcase to make the scene look more natural.

"I got the text just before you arrived. That means he's been in the opposite building for nearly a couple hours now," Yuri continued.

Tiffany couldn't help but cock her head to one side. "How are you so sure?"

Yuri shrugged. "Siwon's a sniper. A sniper always finds a suitable position in which to establish a nest; somewhere from which he has a clear, unobstructed view of his quarry at all times. Once that's done, he waits."

"Wait a minute, he can see us? I could've sworn that when I came in, the curtains were drawn."

"Thermal scope. Real cheaters, those little things. Takes the fun out of everything. He can see us right through the curtains, glowing white hot in this room of grey."

The fact that they were being watched for the past two hours and Tiffany had no idea chilled her right to the bone. It appeared her senses needed a lot more honing.

"So...", Tiffany started slowly, maintaining her calm. "Why hasn't he made his move?"

"He needs me alone. Right now, chances are he doesn't even know who the person standing next to me is. Killing me in front of another person might make things messy. Sure, he could probably kill both of us within fractions of a second of each other, but that just serves to double the risk of messing up. Snipers don't like to mess up. They're perfectionists."

"So what do we do?"

"We turn the hunter...into the hunted."

Siwon huffed in frustration. He'd been waiting for the right moment for hours now, and just when he thought he had the chance, it was gone. When he thought Yuri's companion was going to leave, she had followed right after, leaving the room a lifeless grey space.

He moved his eye away from the scope and carefully laid the butt of the rifle on the floor, reaching for a pair of binoculars that stood beside his bullet case. He stood up and walked over to the other end of the room, peering through the binoculars at the entrance of the hotel.

He waited ten minutes, then twenty. Where were they? Perhaps they'd gone to the hotel bar for a drink. He just have to wait until Yuri got back to her room - alone.

Jessica scanned the rack of weapons that stood in front of her. There was much variety; heavily modified carbines, shotguns, submachine guns and other similar small arms. The DEA Mobile Enforcement Team had gathered with her in the armory, looking over the selection and taking their pick. It was a small crack team of six male operators; all eager to show their skills in what they were told was a career-making, headline-worthy, high-key bust. They had arrived here an hour earlier for the briefing by Jessica, and were now making their final preparations.

There was a cacophony of noise as magazines were checked and loaded, bolts were cocked and safety mechanisms were checked, along with a myriad other equipment.

Jessica shook her head at the remaining weapons on the rack.

M4 carbine SOPMOD, SCAR-L with a holographic sight, MP5A2 with a red dot sight, and a G36C.

So big. So bulky. So noisy. No thanks.

She patted the pistol sitting in her thigh holster, confident that her little friend would be more than enough if things were to get messy. And they could get very much so. Usually, busts were straightforward. They went in hard and fast, catching their prey unawares, who would stand their ground, dumbfounded at their own exposure. Other times, things didn't go as smoothly as expected. Gun battles had broken out, often resulting in prolonged standoffs and, invariably, a few wounded or

dead comrades. She was lucky to have been untouched for the length of her career.

As heartless as it sounded, Jessica felt no pity for those who had lost their lives in the line of duty. During her training, she'd learnt and lived by one rule.

A beginner practices until he gets it right. A professional does it until he can't get it wrong.

A mistake was a mistake, and sometimes, there would be a dire price to pay. Jessica Jung was not one to make mistakes. She always made sure of it.

She looked up at the men milling about the steel tables, checking their weapons conscientiously and whispering in hushed voices about the operation.

"Gentlemen," she began with a clear voice that was loud enough to be heard, but not too much that it sounded domineering.

They looked up immediately, focusing their attention on the blonde woman who was easily half their size. Despite her being a young female agent, she had their sincere utmost respect as one of the finest agents the FBI had to offer.

"This is the break we've been waiting years for. Let's make this quick and clean, got it?"

"Yes, ma'am!" they sounded off in unison.

"We move out in one hour."

"This looks like the right place." Yuri scanned the room they had just entered, paying special attention to the low ceiling. Old paint was peeling off the surface and cobwebs were nestled in all four corners of the room; clear signs of neglect for a building that hadn't been used in at least a year or two. She laid the small ladder she was holding onto a wall adjacent to the entranceway.

Yuri and Tiffany had slipped into a janitor's closet in their hotel to 'borrow' a few things before leaving the hotel via the back exit. They then took a roundabout route to enter by the rear of the building Siwon was in, making sure they stayed out of sight of the front face at all times.

Tiffany was clutching a paint roller with a 6-foot long extension handle in one arm and a paint tray containing a variety of other objects in the other.

"Yuri, you still haven't told me what all this is for," Tiffany said, looking rather flustered at the amount of items she had on hand.

Yuri halted her building inspection and turned to Tiffany, a small smile spreading across her lips. "Set those down first. You'll see."

Tiffany frowned. She didn't like all the "you'll see's" she was hearing from Yuri.

Tiffany did as told, setting down the myriad objects she held onto a nearby table. Yuri moved in to join her, plucking some of the items out of the paint tray, at the same time reaching into her suit to extract the two packets she'd brought from her room.

She laid out the items in a neat row, taking stock mentally as she went over the impending procedure in her head.

"Filter funnel, filter paper, two beakers, sodium hydroxide gel, distilled water, stirrer, paint..." She nodded at each of the items in turn as she moved over them from left to right.

"Looks like some kind of chemistry lesson," Tiffany interrupted, attention also focused on the items spread out in front of her.

"You could say that," Yuri said before picking up a sheet of filter paper.

She folded the rough circular sheet in half, and then again, before opening up a small flap at the top to make the shape of a funnel. That went into the filter funnel. Next, she picked up the sodium hydroxide gel, squeezing a little of the substance into a beaker. She then poured in the distilled water, stopping

when the water level reached the 100ml mark. The next few seconds were spent stirring the contents of the beaker, dissolving the gel until a colorless solution was produced. She set the beaker down on the table and picked up a packet with a sticker that read 'KI'.

Yuri turned to face Tiffany, who looked rather thoughtful. Chemistry classes had been a thing of the distant past, but she hadn't completely lost her touch.

"Potassium iodide?" Tiffany inquired.

"Very good." Yuri smiled. "One gram of potassium iodide crystals." She tore the top off the packet and poured its contents into the beaker, stirring it vigorously.

Once the crystals were fully dissolved, she picked up the other packet.

"Iodine," Tiffany announced confidently.

"Bingo again." Yuri tore the top off and poured the crushed purple crystals into the beaker, still stirring the contents. "Tiffany, help me pour the paint into the tray." Yuri held the beaker in her left hand and gave a quick flick with her right wrist. A serrated blade appeared in her hand. Tiffany's jaw dropped slightly.

"Here, use this." Yuri handed the blade to Tiffany, who accepted it rather gingerly, noting the serrated edges on both sides of the devilish looking weapon.

Tiffany did as instructed, pouring an amount of paint into the tray.

"One last thing I need you to do for me," Yuri said.

Yuri then gave Tiffany a serious look. "Leave the room. Wait for me outside."

Tiffany raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because the next step has the potential to be very, *very* dangerous," Yuri said gravely.

Tiffany's eyebrow twitched upwards even further.

Less talk, more action. I hope she knows what she's doing...

Setting down the can of paint, she turned to leave.

Yuri drew in a deep breath as she continued stirring the solution. She went over the facts in her head once more.

Once she began filtering the solution using the filter funnel, she would have an estimated thirty second window to mix the powder in with the paint and apply a coat on the ceiling and get out. Once the precipitate had completely dried, it would become extremely unstable and sensitive; exploding with the slightest application of pressure. A piece big enough to fit on the tip of a pencil would produce an explosion equivalent to that of a firecracker. And this was quite a bit she was making here. Her goal was to leave the room while the precipitate was still wet.

She placed the filter funnel upright in the second beaker and slowly poured the solution through, noting the precipitate that had begun to form on the surface of the filter paper.

Clock's ticking.

Quickly, she removed the wet filter paper from the funnel, using the stirrer to carefully scrape the damp powder off the surface and into the tray of paint. Using the roller, she gave it a good mix before holding it up to the ceiling, rolling the paint over a roughly rectangular area.

Fifteen seconds.

An even coat was now visible on the ceiling, peppered with a rough texture of precipitate. Yuri set down the roller before quickly leaving the room.

Tiffany pushed herself off the wall she was leaning on, approaching the jittery looking woman. "Yuri?"

Yuri swiftly closed the distance, giving Tiffany a gentle shove to flatten her against the wall. She did the same while retrieving her pistol from her suit. They made eye contact for the briefest of moments.

"Whatever happens, wait here...and you might want to cover your ears," Yuri said as she held the Les Baer in both hands, finger clasped over the trigger.

Tiffany nodded, a grim expression on her face. She decided that she wouldn't cover her ears, and would come to regret it in the seconds to come.

Yuri pivoted on a foot, aimed for the center of the painted section of ceiling and squeezed the trigger.

Siwon heard the shot, and before he recognized the familiar bark of the pistol, he suddenly felt his insides lurch upwards as a deafening explosion shook the room from below, and then he was falling. In less than a second he felt a sharp surge of pain in his back as he hit the floor on top of a pile of loose concrete and rubble. He gasped and groaned, struggling to gather his senses. The cloud of dust floating around him was debilitating.

Choking uncontrollably, he had barely gotten to a kneeling position before he found himself staring into the barrel of a gun. Beyond the silver pistol was the tall form of Kwon Yuri, her face a mask of comfortable indifference.

"You thought you could hunt me down in my own trade? I don't know if I'm supposed to be insulted," Yuri snarled, maintaining her aim on Siwon's forehead, careful to stand far enough away that there was no way for him to disarm her. Then again, he looked like his back was about to give out at any moment.

Siwon spat on the floor beside him and tried to stand up, but was sent sprawling to the ground by a snap

kick to the side of his face. He grunted in pain, holding his now bleeding temple with one hand while trying to push himself off the floor with the other. Another burst of pain seared through his arm as Yuri slammed her foot down onto his hand, breaking a few fingers in the process. He screamed.

"Did you ever learn to shoot with your left hand?" She leaned into her foot, further exacerbating Siwon's pain, and he screamed even louder. "Didn't think so." She took her foot off, returning to her practiced firing stance.

Siwon took his battered hand in the other, gritting his teeth.

"Enough of this." Yuri held the pistol in one hand, pointing it to Siwon's forehead. "I don't trust you enough to keep you alive, even though you're practically useless now." Her finger shifted from the trigger guard to the trigger.

"Wait!" Siwon coughed and a wad of blood splattered onto a piece of concrete. He took a few strained breaths before swallowing what blood remained in his mouth. "I know something that might be of use to you."

How pathetic.

She could see the rapidly rising fear in his eyes behind the sunglasses.

"I already know."

And then she pulled the trigger.

Yuri looked up at the sky, which was tinted with the warm glow of orange. The sun was rising, and she and Tiffany were heading to their next destinations. The latter seemed a little shaky; even in her trade, she could not yet stomach the fact that the person who used to be her sister's lover had just executed a man a couple of strides' distance away from her.

"We're running out of time," Yuri said hurriedly as she quickened her pace.

"I'm going to go prepare the vehicle for later. I'll meet up with you there," Tiffany said. Matching up to Yuri's efficient, lengthened strides, her breath was becoming slightly strained.

Yuri gave a curt nod, her expression serious. She glanced at her watch.

No time.

"Yuri."

Yuri kept her gaze forward.

"Yuri, Siwon said he knew something. I heard it from outside the room," Tiffany pressed further.

Yuri didn't answer, and the silence was filled by the sounds of their footsteps and those of passing vehicles.

"You know it, don't you? You didn't tell him you did just for the sake of it," Tiffany continued.

"Yuri." Tiffany finally stopped, reaching out to grab Yuri's wrist.

The latter woman stopped in her tracks, clearly frustrated with Tiffany's persistence.

She turned to face the Interpol agent. "Fine, if it'll get you off my back." Yuri pulled her wrist from Tiffany's grasp.

Tiffany straightened up, waiting.

"Remember how Kim Taeyeon's father was assassinated a few years ago, just before she took over the

cartel?"

Tiffany nodded.

"Siwon was the one who did the hit."

Tiffany's expression remained unchanged. "So someone paid him to do it. Why does it matter?"

"Because, Tiffany, that someone is Kim Taeyeon," Yuri said matter-of-factly, placing strong emphasis on the name.

Tiffany's cool mask shattered. She closed her eyes for a moment. "Wait a minute, you mean Kim Taeyeon hired him to kill her father in a power grab?"

"Theoretically, yes."

"Theoretically? What do you mean, *theoretically*?"

"Kim Tae Woo is still alive. It was a ruse."

Chapter Seven : Gravity

A While Ago...

Taeyeon allowed herself a small smirk as she watched the blinking blip on her desktop screen disappear.

The grin grew more twisted as she now laid her eyes on the remaining two flashing blips; one in the same room as the one that had disappeared and the other outside in the hallway.

She tented her fingers.

"And so the game begins."

Yuri listened to the approaching purr of an engine before it stuttered to a halt. She was in the building Taeyeon had set up the meeting in; lying prone on a maintenance landing twenty feet off the ground. There was a soft click and one of the front double doors opened before a familiar brunette stepped in. She looked around curiously, taking in the geography of the place.

Yuri grinned mischievously.

With a silent flick, a throwing knife produced itself between her fingers. Shifting her weight slightly to get a better view, she cocked her forearm back like a spring and sipped a small breath before whipping the blade in Tiffany's direction.

There was the faintest whisper of steel slicing through air, and as expected, the brunette shifted her body ever so slightly to the left, watching the tip of the blade sink itself effortlessly into the concrete surface as it made contact. She turned and looked up, immediately spotting the culprit.

"You're not as dull as I thought you were, Stephanie," a voice echoed to the furthest corners of the warehouse.

Tiffany pulled the side of her lip down and shook her head.

Still, how could she have aimed directly at me? I could've been stabbed in the calf!

With a huff, she bent over and plucked the knife out of the ground and turned to ascend the ladder that

led to the landing Yuri was on. It was the work of thirty seconds to scale the twenty foot span of ladder and drop down beside the mercenary.

"Didn't your mum ever teach you not to play with knives?" Tiffany grumbled as she handed the knife to Yuri.

"I don't see the fuss if nobody gets hurt," Yuri replied simply. She accepted it and slipped it back up her sleeve.

Reaching into her suit, Yuri pulled out the metal case they'd seen earlier in the hotel and placed it on the metal surface between them, opening it to reveal its many color-coded bullets.

She plucked a green-striped one from its indent and placed it standing upright, then went about picking more bullets of a different color from the case.

Five seconds later, one green-striped bullet and six blue-striped ones stood upright in a straight row between them.

"The green one contains a special neurotoxin that induces a comatose-like state in a target. It goes right into the bloodstream and to the heart, so it only requires a few seconds to take effect. The only way to counteract the toxin is with an antidote," Yuri explained, knowing that Tiffany would ask eventually. "The blue ones are less potent versions of the toxin, inducing a similar effect which only lasts for an hour or so. After which the target wakes up from a well deserved nap," Yuri continued.

"As you would have guessed, the green one is for Jessica. We don't know exactly how long we're going to have to keep her comatose, so I'm going to have to play on the safe side. Don't worry; I have the antidote on hand. The rest are for the team that is going to be with her. Mobile Enforcement Teams operate in six man squads, hence the six bullets. You'll take three and I'll take the other three. They're all in .45 caliber, so you won't have issues loading them into your Glock 30."

Tiffany narrowed her eyes at Yuri.

Smartass.

They both fished out their sidearms and unloaded their magazines, ejecting the live rounds that occupied them. The bullets clinked noisily onto the metal surface, each rolling in diminishing circles until they laid still in a small pile. They then loaded the special ammunition into their magazines with Yuri loading the green-striped bullet last.

"Aim anywhere except their torsos, since they'll have Kevlar vests on. Fire on my command. Naturally I'll go for Jessica first."

"And what if you miss?"

"Tiffany." Yuri gave Tiffany a cold look.

"I don't miss."

Jessica sat in the moving unmarked van, nearest to the back doors. She pulled her sidearm from her holster and checked it before replacing it. Then she pulled it again and checked it one more time. The constant hum of the engine was becoming increasingly irritating. She wiped the sweat from under her eyes.

She was always cool during busts; it was the preparation period that never failed to give her the jitters. A perfectionist always covered all his bases.

"We're rounding the last turn. ETA ten seconds, ma'am," a voice called out from the driver's seat.

Jessica nodded and replaced her sidearm, looking up at the men seated around her. Most of them were staring blankly at the floor, rifle or submachine gun in hand, either dazed from excitement or acquiring some sort of focus. She nodded again in approval. From her experience, it was the ones who looked completely relaxed who got into trouble during a bust. A smug expression before usually turned into one of agony when the bullets started to fly. She only hoped there wouldn't be any shooting later.

"This is it, men. Remember, quick and clean."

"Yes ma'am!"

Soon the van slowed to a stop and the tech sitting beside the driver whipped out a small dish, holding it facing the warehouse as he listened in on a pair of earphones.

Turning around, he gave Jessica an affirmative nod.

The side door of the van slipped open and the squad spilled out in flowing order, taking up positions along the front wall. Jessica stepped out last holding her sidearm in both hands, taking in her surroundings.

It was a quiet street with no civilians in sight. Perfect.

Jessica nodded toward one of the men and gestured toward the door.

He stepped forward to secure a large, flat square on the door before signaling the others to stand clear. They flattened themselves against the wall of the warehouse, two taking up positions on either side of the door to prepare for the breach.

The breacher held up a trigger and shook his hand once, twice, then thrice.

Click.

There was a dull blast as the directional explosives ignited and blew the door inward. At the same time, the men standing astride the door went in one by one, weapons at the ready.

"Freeze and put your hands up! FBI!" one of them shouted.

The rest of them poured into the warehouse, forming up in a loose staggered line with Jessica at its head.

They paused. There was a tall screen, probably around seven feet high, which was obscuring their view of the center of the floor. An agitated voice came from behind it, dripping with a heavy Russian accent.

"I told you, I will accept no less than what was agreed upon!"

"I said let's see some hands!" another MET operator shouted.

The entire line cautiously moved forward before splitting into two groups of three and four to flank around the screen.

"You thought you could fool me!?"

The yelling was followed by a gunshot which startled the team.

Jessica immediately waved everyone forward and they quickly moved around the screen and met on the other side.

"FBI! Put your-"

"What the hell?"

In the middle of the floor stood a steel table and atop it stood a cheap-looking radio.

All the alarms in Jessica's body started ringing and a surge of adrenaline coursed through her veins.

They'd been fooled.

"It's a-"

"Now."

Before Jessica could tell her team to get out, two pistols barked from behind and several things occurred at the same time. First she felt as if she was slugged in the left thigh by a baseball bat. As she was spun around like a top from the impact, her eyes went skyward and caught sight of two shooters lying prone on a high ledge before all she could see was the pyramidal metal roof. She heard another six shots, one after another, each sounding duller than the last and a cacophony of stifled cries as the world began to spin and fade.

And then darkness took her.

Tiffany glanced in the rear view mirror for what could have been the twentieth time. Her blonde-haired sister was lying unconscious in the rear seat, her head resting in Yuri's lap. The latter woman thoughtlessly ran a finger through the length of Jessica's golden tresses before it found her cheek. She then traced the smooth skin with the back of her finger, rounding Jessica's sharp jawline and her other cheek. After all these years, Yuri couldn't help but indulge herself in this exploration, silently reacquainting herself with Jessica's features.

Tiffany looked away and focused on the road ahead. She needed to get to the safehouse that the Interpol had secured for her since the start of her assignment. After all this time in the field, this was the first time she'd needed to use it.

Her thoughts strayed to her paralytic sister. She'd thought that years of voluntary separation had diminished what attachments she had to her, but when she held the woman close as she and Yuri had carried her to the car, she couldn't help but notice her galloping heartbeat. It was a result of both anticipation and trepidation, and something else she couldn't quite place. She missed her. Didn't she?

And then there was Yuri, who was so engrossed in her whom she had not seen for even longer. It wasn't Jessica's and Yuri's past Tiffany was concerned about. Rather, it was Yuri's present that irked her. Who

was Yuri? Who was she working for? And above all, is she really on her side? How would Jessica react to Yuri when she awoke from her involuntary slumber? Would she recognize Yuri at all?

So many questions ran through her mind, each adding to the confusion that had already taken control of Tiffany's mind. This entire operation was getting out of hand. Somehow, Tiffany felt this was a disaster in the making.

An hour later, the car exited onto a smooth dirt path that led through a dense copse of rainforest trees before coming into a grassy clearing. It slowed to a stop outside a sturdy-looking building; a wooden construction with a rusty zinc roof.

Tiffany turned off the engine and the three of them were instantly surrounded by a jungle symphony of crickets, bird calls and the sounds of small animals trudging through the thick brush. A monkey called from a distance. Tiffany looked over her shoulder to Yuri, whose eyes were still fixed on the sleeping blonde.

"We're here," she prompted, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel.

Yuri opened the door closest to her, being careful to lay Jessica down gently as she climbed out. Tiffany followed, waiting for Yuri to lift Jessica by the armpits before she stepped up to help her. But before she could, Yuri pulled Jessica up and cradled the woman in her arms like a baby, tucking Jessica's head into her chest.

Tiffany went wide-eyed for a moment in awe of Yuri's strength, pushing out her lower lip slightly before making her way to the front door.

A digital keypad stood anachronously on the rickety-looking door. Tiffany punched in a series of numbers and was rewarded with a beep and shifting of tumblers as the door unlocked. She opened it, ushering a heavily burdened Yuri inside.

Yuri looked around, seemingly unfazed by the weight of the woman in her arms. A cloud of dust hung low in the air, and sunlight shone in through the north window, casting a shadow on the wooden floor that looked like a tic-tac-toe grid. It was considerably more humid inside, and a strange smell seemed to hang in the air. Fungi?

"There's food, clean water, electricity and internet access here. Full medical supplies too. The armory is in the back shed. You can find the combination in the laptop over there," Tiffany explained, waving her hand briefly across the cramped expanse of the room.

She walked over to a cabinet beside the sink and opened it, taking out a pack of mosquito coils. She fetched a lighter, lit one up and set it onto a nearby table.

Yuri moved to a small bed, bending over slightly to deposit Jessica gently onto its unruffled white sheets.

"I have to go back now."

Yuri turned to Tiffany with a raised eyebrow. "*Go back*? Chances are Taeyeon already knows you're in on this. How do you know you're not being tracked yourself?"

Tiffany sighed and crossed her arms, leaning against the doorframe. She closed her eyes and dropped her head, speaking to the floor. "I don't know. And like you said, it's only a chance, and a chance is something I can't afford to take. I have to go back."

Yuri remained silent, shifting her eyes to the sleeping Jessica.

Your sister is making a huge mistake.

"You'll be coming for Taeyeon, won't you Yuri?"

"Soon."

"Alright. So we'll meet again." Tiffany pushed herself off the doorframe and turned to leave. She stopped halfway, looking over her shoulder. "Take care of my sister."

Yuri nodded slowly without looking at Tiffany, taking a seat on the edge of the bed.

She sat in silence as she listened to the car being started and driven away, and once again she was immersed in the noises of the jungle.

Reaching over, she picked up Jessica's hand and held it between her own.

So small, thin and fragile...you haven't changed a bit.

She looked out the window beside the bed, barred from the inside with a grid of wrought iron.

"One more person to save."

Chapter Eight : The Push

Night had fallen, and the shadows that had been playing across the floorboards of the safehouse for the past few hours had now thinned into nothingness. The sounds of the jungle saw a gradual diminuendo and only the chirping of crickets remained.

Yuri's fingers remained amidst the curls of gold that were Jessica's blonde tresses, caressing them over and over as if to feel and study each strand.

She felt incredibly perplexed. Her heart was beating so hard and fast that she could hear it throbbing in her ears, as it had been from the moment she had carried an unconscious Jessica to the car hours earlier. She felt more breathless with each passing second. What had happened to the composed mercenary who had maintained a 55bpm heart rate since completing her training so many years ago? The practiced cool exterior that she never failed to maintain suddenly collapsed.

She became nostalgically aware of emotions long lost; feelings that had been unconsciously defined and

brought to life when she had discovered her attraction for Jessica Jung. It didn't happen immediately; her first impressions of these strange feelings for Jessica were that they were unnatural and perverse. How could a girl possibly be in love with another girl? At the very least, it went against the laws of nature.

The welcoming, slender curves; bodily perfection that would make any woman scowl in envy. The sweet, warming smile that was ever present. Those deep brown eyes that seemed to sparkle whenever Yuri was around, and last but certainly not least, the soft, shy lips that one could only find on someone of the same sex. And those were only the physical aspects of Jessica that had had Yuri so enthralled.

Yuri felt herself sway and become slightly dizzy as she dimly recalled the days of their distant youth; days devoid of the pain, blood and treachery of the present.

Both of them were wealthy; very wealthy indeed, and that had simply made their relationship that much simpler, in a sense. They had spent their time together in the nights; being in the same college made it all the more convenient. Movie dates; romantic dinners; sinful ice cream indulgences in the quiet stillness of the city park. It was a typical romantic relationship, and they had lived regular, normal lives. Of course, due to its rather unorthodox nature, they had thought it best to keep their love under wraps at least for the time being so as not to attract unnecessary prudery.

And then the day came; the day where Yuri had sundered herself from Jessica's embrace.

Yuri suddenly felt a sharp pang of guilt accompanied by a growing, roiling pain in the pit of her stomach. She unconsciously gripped Jessica's hand tighter. She squeezed her eyes shut, fighting futilely against an influx of familiar memories. When she finally relented, it had become just another of the many nightmares that had haunted her since that day eight years ago.

What was that, a tear?

Eight Years Ago

Yuri grabbed her keys off the massive mahogany dining table before shrugging her backpack over one shoulder. She flicked her long ponytail to one side before casually addressing her seated father as she made a beeline for the door.

"I'm going out, Dad."

Aloysius Kwon looked up from his newspaper; one that he had been pretending to read for the past half hour. He adjusted his low-sitting reading glasses and sat up in the leather armchair. "With whom, Yuri?"

The side of Yuri's lips and her eyes twitched in their natural way, as they always did when she spent a split second to think of an excuse. "Oh, just a couple of friends. We're going to catch up for a bit since they're going back home for Christmas tomorrow." She stopped in her tracks. Why had she stopped? She mentally kicked herself for her awkwardness, fiddling with her keys.

Aloysius closed his eyes for a moment, taking in a slow, deep breath.

It has to end today.

"Come here, Yuri," he said softly.

"But Dad, I'm going to be late!" Yuri whined, her face turning into a pouty frown.

Please, give in to the aegyo. Please?

"Kwon Yuri," he warned.

Damn it.

Yuri huffed audibly before stepping toward her father. He motioned for her to sit on the settee adjacent

to him, and she plopped down with another loud huff. The side of her lip was drawn down in ostensible frustration.

Aloysius set down his newspapers on the glass-topped stone table in front of him and took off his spectacles. He looked at Yuri intently, and she winced slightly at the eye contact.

"Dad...did I...do something wrong?" Yuri said cautiously, feeling herself shift away slightly from his presence.

Aloysius closed his eyes again. "Yuri, I know."

Something dropped in Yuri's body. She sat upright, raising her eyebrow and broke into a rather nervous smile. "Know...what, Dad? I swear, I haven't ditched school at all! And I've been turning in all my assignments..." Yuri's voice became frantic, her eyes darting this way and that as if to find a fault she had recently committed.

"Yuri." Aloysius reached over to place a hand on Yuri's jittery arm. "I know about you and...Jessica."

Something definitely dropped in Yuri's body. Had her heart and liver switched places all of a sudden? She felt dizzy.

"W-...what are you talking about, Dad? We didn't do anything. I mean, we're not having...I mean-" Yuri stuttered and then shut her eyes in self-loathing. She mentally kicked herself again.

"I know that the two of you aren't best friends like you say you are."

Yuri remained silent.

"I'm not saying I don't approve...", Aloysius began.

Yuri immediately looked up, eyes sparkling as she looked at her father. Was she smiling?

Aloysius let out a long sigh. "The world is changing...and there are just some things that old people like us can't control anymore." He squeezed Yuri's hand. "I know you're happy, but this has to end. Tonight."

Yuri's eyes went wide at the sudden change of heart. "W-what?" She stuttered again. "B-but why? You said-"

"I know I said I didn't mind, but Yuri, you have to listen to me. There are things in life that you haven't prepared for. You're about to come of age, and must now live the tradition that has been present in our lineage for a long, long time."

Yuri was flabbergasted to say the least. Coming of age? Tradition? "Dad, what are you talking about? I don't understand."

"Yuri, we come from a very special brotherhood that has been around for decades," Aloysius said, a little unsure of how he should bring it across to Yuri.

Yuri raised an eyebrow. "What, you mean like a...secret society?"

"Well you could call it that I suppose. But there's one thing you must understand: we work on the side of good. We're not like those crazy fanatics who go around doing ritualistic killings."

"Well, it does involve a bit of killing, actually," he thought rather amusedly.

"Wait, wait, wait." Yuri held her hands up in front of her. "You want *me* to join a secret society? Dad, I'm twenty! I have *normal* things to think about, like...like school and friends and...other stuff twenty-year olds think about!"

"Twenty-one is the age where we begin training, Yuri. That's when I started too."

"Wait a minute, this is all so crazy. You're saying you want me to be some kind of clansman or something like that? I don't even know what this is about!" Yuri was gesticulating wildly with her hands. She settled down before looking her father in the eye. "What if I don't want to?"

Aloysius sighed.

I knew it would come to this.

His tone was suddenly serious. "Yuri, you have to do it. It is your destiny, as ridiculous as it may sound to you right now. If it weren't for people like us, the world would be in a complete mess. Do you really think those so-called government agencies are doing anything right out there?" He scoffed. "We're the ones doing all the work and those wimps take all the credit. When something comes up and they're not up to the challenge, it's up to us to take care of it. And once again, the credit goes to them. Why? Because in reality, we don't exist."

Yuri's expression grew more and more confused as she registered each word.

"We're the world's guardian angels, Yuri. You have no idea how many times mankind came this close '-' to total self-annihilation and we saved them from their own stupidity and mindless pride. You wouldn't be breathing right now if it weren't for us. And I'm not talking about birth here. That's why you have to do this. Maintaining this tradition is the only way to maintain the existence of humanity and to tell you the truth, every single day, the life of the world hangs on a thread. That's how fragile we are."

Yuri looked down at her lap again. She furrowed her brows, not able to comprehend the weight of the words her father had said.

"But this...whatever it is that you're talking about...can't I do it...without leaving Jessica?" She winced at the thought.

"You'll be too isolated from the outside world for the duration of your training, so you won't be able to contact or see her. More importantly, being associated with her is only going to put her life in danger."

This was ridiculous. Yuri just couldn't wrap her mind around whatever her father was saying.

Training? Tradition? Isolation?

"What the hell is going on? And I have to break up with Jessica...Oh my God, I have to break up with her!"

"But then, you and Mom..." Yuri trailed off, uncertainty in her voice.

Aloysius nodded before looking over his shoulder. "Ga-In!"

Yuri's mother stepped into the living room, a knowing look on her face.

She walked up to the settee, rubbing Yuri's head before resting her hands on Yuri's shoulders.

Aloysius smiled. "Your mother is one of us. Well, was, actually. We're retired."

Yuri turned to her mother with a questioning glance. The latter nodded, smiling.

Yuri turned back to her father with pleading eyes. "So I don't have a choice?"

Aloysius shook his head solemnly. He felt guilty for having to force his own daughter into the business. He felt even more so for having to break up what he knew was a healthy, happy, albeit slightly unnatural relationship.

"Can't I take a few days to think about Jessica?" Yuri tried again.

"You and I both know that she's going back to L.A. tomorrow, dear. I think you should tell her face-to-face tonight."

Yuri sat still for a moment before rising slowly from the settee, her mother's hands sliding off her shoulders as she shuffled dazedly to the front door. Moments later, she was outside in the cold winter evening.

Ga-In looked at Aloysius, who had a pained expression on his face.

"There was something between her and that girl, wasn't there, Aloysius?" She asked softly.

Aloysius nodded, running a hand through his hair and then covering his mouth.

"She'd have had to do it eventually," she said assuredly.

He sighed in disappointment. "With all the lives I've taken, no matter how filthy they were, I'd never guessed that the only thing that would truly hurt me is breaking my daughter's heart."

Ga-In moved to sit on one of the arms of the chair Aloysius was sitting in, draping an arm over his shoulder as she placed her other hand on his chest.

"We both love her dearly, Aloysius. And I'm sure she feels the same no matter what. She understands. She will understand. She'll do well."

Aloysius nodded slowly. "I'm sure."

Yuri was numb to the chilling cold and biting wind. They seemed trivial compared to the aching coldness in her heart. She walked; even though the city was a good half an hour away by car, against the harsh weather she walked. It was as if every step would ease her suffering and help clear her mind for the task ahead, but it only seemed to drown her deeper in an emotional shadow.

Cars passed, their bright headlights shining occasionally across Yuri's back as she trudged forward along a thin layer of snow and frost. A driver leaned into his car horn to accost Yuri as she accidentally strayed too much toward the center of the road in her mindless advance. The curses that spluttered through his lowered window were but a muffled mess to Yuri. For a moment, she became aware; so painfully aware that she would disappear, and so would Jessica Jung.

Tonight would be their last.

Jessica rapped her fingers against the tabletop, crossing and uncrossing a leg over another as she continued to wait nervously.

A waiter approached for the fourth time. "Are you sure I can't get you something, miss?" He was actually looking for every excuse to approach the pretty girl under the pretense of serving her.

Jessica shook her head and smiled sheepishly. "I'm sorry, I'm still waiting for my gir-...a friend of mine."

The waiter nodded, albeit a little disappointedly, gliding off to offer his services elsewhere.

What is taking her so long? Did something happen?

At that moment, the door to the restaurant swung open, letting in a draft of cold air that sent shivers down Jessica's spine.

There stood Yuri, eyes sullen and unfocused, her hair a mess and dribbled with snowflakes. She looked up slowly.

Jessica waved from her seat, her initial smile curving downwards into a frown as she noticed Yuri's saturnine disposition. Her frown deepened with each step Yuri took in her direction. Something was wrong. Very wrong.

Yuri mustered a small smile as she plopped down on her seat, her thick coat making her feel cumbersome in the small chair.

Jessica immediately felt awkward. Yuri had never failed to greet her with an exuberance so great that it was publicly embarrassing. But this time the girl sitting in front of her was silent, staring at some random

spot in the checkered tablecloth.

"Umm...Yuri? What happened? You're two hours late and you didn't answer any of my calls," Jessica began, leaning across the table. Reaching out, she brushed away the snowflakes and fixed Yuri's hair somewhat.

Yuri looked up briefly before dropping her gaze. She couldn't bear to look at Jessica for the fear of bursting into tears. "Oh I uh...I just got caught up in something," she managed to mumble.

"Yuri, what happened? I'm sure something did," Jessica said as she brushed aside Yuri's bangs to get a clearer view of her face, tracing her cheek with the back of her fingers. She did look terrible.

"Yuri?"

"Jessica, let's break up."

Jessica withdrew her hand, instantly sitting bolt upright. Seconds passed before a small smile broke out across her lips as she coyly thought she had Yuri's ploy figured out. "Ha ha, very funny Kwon Yuri. You think you can walk in here looking all pitiful and pull something like this on me? No way!" She snickered and reached over to smack Yuri on the crown of her head.

Something shattered inside Yuri. That smile, that laugh...they were two of Yuri's most loved expressions. Seeing them made her task that much harder. She briefly recalled their tryst in the chemistry lab, making love to Jessica for the very first time.

You look like an angel when you smile. Now all you're missing are your wings. Tell you what; let me be your wings.

Yuri scrunched her eyes shut and steeled herself.

"Jessica." She looked up and straight into Jessica's mirthful eyes. "I'm serious. Let's break up."

The eye contact made Jessica shiver. Something told her that Yuri was serious about her words. She unconsciously gripped the tablecloth.

"Y-Yuri?" she stuttered.

"I...don't think this is the right kind of relationship for me." Yuri clenched and unclenched her teeth to force out the blasphemous words she was saying. Each enunciation tore her flesh from bone. "You're not right for me."

"But...I thought...I mean..." Jessica couldn't stop stuttering. The tabletop shifted slightly as she gripped the tablecloth tighter. "We're happy together! Aren't we? I don't...I can...I can change! Tell me what's wrong. Tell me what you don't like about me so I can be better."

Yuri suddenly felt a surge of momentum. "People never change, Jessica. No matter what they do or how much they try, people will never change. And if you do change, Jessica, you won't be the girl that I once loved."

Once...loved?

Yuri sighed and got up from her seat, turning her back to Jessica. She could find no more words to say; or rather, she couldn't bring herself to speak the words that would further devastate Jessica. She took a step forward.

She was abruptly stopped as a pair of arms circled around her waist as Jessica hugged her tightly, burying the side of her face into Yuri's back as she began sobbing. The other customers in the restaurant began to take notice of the drama.

"Yuri, please don't leave me," Jessica sobbed uncontrollably, tightening her grip on Yuri.

Yuri remained silent, placing her hands on Jessica's to pry them loose.

"I don't understand. Why? Why Yuri?"

Yuri turned her head to look over her shoulder, but couldn't see the crying girl. When she spoke her voice was so soft it was almost a whisper. "There are some things...some things that have made this impossible between us."

"You promised me. You told me to put my faith in you and I did! And now you're telling me to forget everything, to throw it all away? What gives you the right? Why are you trampling all over my feelings?" Jessica's words grew in volume as she locked her fingers together, still struggling to hold onto Yuri.

"Because I don't love you."

Yuri could feel Jessica flinch and back away slightly. Her grip had faltered enough for Yuri to gently push her hands away.

"Because I've never loved you at all."

Not looking back, Yuri took a step out of Jessica's embrace and strode out once again into the snow, leaving an utterly destroyed Jessica standing alone in the middle of the restaurant.

Somewhere, a clock tower tolled the hour of ten o'clock. The deep sounds reverberated through the city, smothering it in whispering echoes that coursed through the streets.

By the tenth bell, Yuri had turned the corner and collapsed with her back against a brick wall, wailing in agony.

Chapter Nine : Betrayed

The sounds of the night became apparent to her once again as Yuri found herself staring at the sleeping

figure on the bed. She blinked, and the last of her tears fell onto the surface of Jessica's blazer. Yuri's lips were still quivering; the sobbing was taking longer than usual to subside. She was still getting used to the fact that she had actually succumbed to what was supposed to be a long-forgotten weakness. A weakness that usually got people killed in her business.

She stood up, reluctantly letting go of Jessica's hand, and it fell limply beside her body. She moved to the plywood table near the door, ripping open a new box of tissues and grabbing a few to dab at the moist streaks. She pushed the sting of remorse out of her mind; she needed to steel herself for the impending encounter with a conscious Jessica. Even though they used to be two people very much in love, Yuri had absolutely no idea what to expect when Jessica woke up, especially after having been separated for so many years and subjected to such trying circumstances.

She took a deep, calming breath and felt her heartbeat slow, still listening to the quiet whispers of the jungle. Something cawed. A cool breeze wafted in through the windows and stirred the paper-thin linen curtains, helping circulate the dank, stale air in the cabin. Tossing the dampened tissues into a bin, she walked back to the bed and sat down on the chair, reaching into her suit.

She pulled out a couple of items from a pocket and set them onto a short wooden stool behind the bedframe before fishing out her cellphone, checking the display for connection strength. All four bars. Perfect.

She only heard the dial tone once before hearing a familiar voice.

"There have been complications."

"Complications have never stopped you before, Yuri."

"Jessica Jung was involved in the decoy operation. She is now in my care."

"She is what?"

"I have her safety at heart."

"Yuri, you're getting out of line here. Jessica Jung is not critical to your assignment. Have you forgotten your training?"

"Not once, not ever. But she remains with me till the end of this assignment. I have not forgotten my priorities, so don't worry about that."

There was a brief pause on the other end.

"Very well. Do not lose sight of your objective. Be warned, Yuri. If she knows-"

"Then she will die. I know that."

"I await your return."

"That time remains nowhere in sight."

Yuri flipped the phone shut, placing it back into her suit. She turned her attention once again to the sleeping angel. With one hand, she lifted Jessica by the back and propped up a pillow with another, and unbuttoned Jessica's blazer before removing it with some difficulty. It was tight. Then, she folded up one of Jessica's shirtsleeves to the elbow, noting the smooth, flawless texture of her bare forearm.

Picking up the hypodermic needle on the stool, she removed the shielding cap before picking up a small vial. She drew some of the colorless liquid and flicked the tip of the needle, squeezing a little of the liquid out to eliminate any air bubbles.

With utmost care, she inserted the needle into the inside of Jessica's elbow and pressed down on the syringe.

"Time to wake up."

Seconds later, the angel stirred.

Tiffany navigated the meanders and curves of the path leading to the villa's foyer, the dirt and gravel sifting and crackling under the tires and came to a smooth stop past a grand sculpted Italian fountain, its gentle streams of water having stopped flowing for the night.

Exiting the car, she looked up. A guard was keeping watch on either side of the front door, as usual. They eyed her with both recognition and masculine curiosity. Well, she did have a very attractive butt.

Confidently, she made her way up the marble steps, pausing as one of the guards moved to open a door for her.

He worked the electronic lock before carefully easing the enormous door ajar. "Miss Kim is expecting you."

Tiffany pulled her lips into a tight line and nodded before stepping in, noting with familiar disgust how his eyes had shifted slyly downwards as she passed him.

She passed a short hallway before coming to the main hall. The interior of the villa was ostentatious to say the least, with its expensive leathered furniture and gem-encrusted stone tables sitting on a massive Sultanabad carpets. A single diamond-laden chandelier easily as large as a small car hung precariously on chain-link from the ceiling, and the many walls and niches were adorned with oil paintings, china and sculpture.

Tiffany pulled down the side of her lip in disgust as she mounted the red-carpeted spiral staircase to the second floor. She had nothing against wealthy people; after all, she had pretty much grown up as one herself. It was those who lived in shameless avarice that made her skin crawl. While others gawked in wonder at the opulence, the richness made her insides churn.

It was the work of ten seconds to reach Taeyeon's room, which lay at the far end of a long corridor.

Adjusting the lapels of her suit and smoothening the rest of it down, she fixed her hair somewhat before knocking politely on the solid wood door.

The locks disengaged with a beep and a few clicks, and the door automatically sprang ajar for Tiffany to

enter. She paused.

She knew she was taking a chance by coming back to the lair of the beast. And what was that Kwon Yuri had said earlier? Kim Tae Woo was still alive? If that were true, then where was he? Could he be in this very same mansion, right at this moment? Instinctively, she said a small prayer.

"Aren't you coming in?" came a voice from inside.

Tiffany looked up, realizing that she had paused for a tad too long. She reached out to push the door open and stepped inside.

A rich, soothing fragrance filled her nostrils, and she blinked in surprise.

Aromatic oils?

She looked around, noting that the lights had been dimmed considerably, and candles were perched around the perimeter of the room, their flames flickering haphazardly. With some hesitation she shifted her eyes to the massive bed to her left.

Her eyes grew wide.

Taeyeon was lying sideways on the bed, a black satin nightgown flowing along the length of her flawless skin and down to just around her thighs. The sheets were hardly ruffled. Tiffany's eyes traced the slender outlines of Taeyeon's body, finally noticing the black underwear underneath her gown. For some reason, her ears began to burn. Furiously.

Taeyeon smiled. She held out a hand, beckoning Tiffany to her seductively with her fingers.

Tiffany unconsciously took a step forward, heart racing. The woman lying on the bed in front of her...could she possibly be Aphrodite incarnate? For some reason, Tiffany felt powerless against the alluring gaze of Taeyeon's hungry eyes, and she was drawn in helplessly. Before she knew it, she was

already at the side of the bed, jaw still slightly slack from the scene.

Taeyeon reached over, pulling a reluctant Tiffany onto the bed. The latter lay on her side, eyes fixed on Taeyeon's, feeling immensely awkward either from being hopelessly enthralled or being ridiculously overdressed.

"Do you know...how much I love you, Tiffany?" Taeyeon asked softly, gently tracing Tiffany's jaw with her fingers. Her pale face seemed to glow in the darkness of the room.

Tiffany gulped. She could only blink as Taeyeon shifted closer, adding to the smell of the burning oils the sweet, rich scent of her body butter. Rich, deliciously sinful cocoa butter. Tiffany licked her lips unconsciously.

Their faces were inches apart from each other now, and Taeyeon's fingers continued to stroke Tiffany's baby-soft skin before moving into her warm hair.

"Did you know...that I would give anything to be with you, Tiffany?" Taeyeon said again.

Tiffany could feel Taeyeon's hot breath teasing the surface of her skin, and felt herself drowning in the deep brown pools that were Taeyeon's eyes. She gasped and gulped as she felt the hunger rise up from deep within.

Taeyeon brushed her lips against Tiffany's ever so slightly, making sure to allow only the slightest of contact to fuel the woman's desire.

Tiffany sighed, closing her eyes as desire began to take her. She eased her head forward to capture Taeyeon's lips, but the latter pulled back slightly, obviously teasing. She pouted.

Taeyeon's smile grew, and she shifted closer yet again until their lips were almost touching.

"Do you want me that bad, Tiffany?"

Tiffany nodded slowly, biting her lip as she blushed furiously.

Suddenly, Taeyeon jumped on top of Tiffany, straddling her. Tiffany recovered from the surprise and felt a surge of excitement, quickly reaching to pull Taeyeon roughly down toward her.

"Such hunger...you are quite the animal, aren't you?" Taeyeon teased.

"Only for you," Tiffany replied before slipping off Taeyeon's gown and capturing her lips.

Their kisses immediately turned hungry, and lips gave way to tongues as they twisted and twirled almost acrobatically around the inside of each others' mouths, parting only when one began to feel asphyxiated. Hands set off in exploration, and Tiffany soon found herself in nothing but her underwear as parts of her clothing were flung through the air and onto the floor. Sensual sighs and soft moans accompanied the rhythm of their kisses. Tiffany's hands found their way down to Taeyeon's backside. She was surprised to find her fingers touching smooth, bare skin. Was she wearing a thong? Tiffany smirked.

Her thumb found its way through the side of Taeyeon's panties, twisting and pulling the sultry lace teasingly before pulling it down to just below the hips. Taeyeon let out a muffled moan in the middle of a deep kiss.

Tiffany's thighs suddenly felt cool and exposed as her own underwear soon joined the clothes on the floor.

Wet lips eased their way downwards along the soft, fragile skin of Tiffany's neck accompanied by a steady stream of hot breath, kissing, sucking and licking as it travelled steadily downwards: collarbone, chest, stomach, thighs...

And hours passed by in the blink of an eye.

For what felt like the twentieth time, Tiffany arched her back and shuddered uncontrollably, her fingers and toes curling inward as she let out a cry of pure pleasure as she crossed the peak into paradise, closing her eyes to savor the mind-blowing contractions before falling back through space to Earth. Her

lips trembled and her eyes fluttered open, her thighs crossing over one another, noting the ever-growing wetness beneath her. Her skin was slick with a film of warm perspiration, the soft hair on her arms damp and matted. She turned, and Taeyeon's angelic face once again graced her vision. The latter's lips were curled upwards in a smile. Soft lips met hers once again.

Anxiety suddenly took hold of Tiffany.

Does this mean she doesn't know?

Tiffany flashed a wide albeit tired smile in an attempt to hide the epiphany, and reached over to bury her fingers in Taeyeon's long tresses.

They stared at each other in silence before Taeyeon spoke up, her voice strained and husky from exhaustion due to their hours of intimate interaction.

"I'd never thought I'd love anyone like this. Falling in love with you has brought such peace and security to me, two things of many that I thought I'd never find in my life."

Tiffany moved in closer to Taeyeon, snuggling in the latter's warm, silky embrace, tangling their legs together. She felt Taeyeon kiss her on the top of her head as she found a comfortable spot on her neck to nestle in.

"Loving you has given me an outlet, of sorts," Taeyeon continued, stroking Tiffany's soft hair. "It makes me forget all the hate and pain that comes from doing what I do."

Tiffany continued to trace small circles on the small of Taeyeon's back, her eyes closed.

"Do you know...what I hate the most, Tiffany?"

Tiffany's eyes shot open. Something was ringing in her. Something was-

Tiffany gasped as she felt a tiny sting in her thigh, and she looked down to see a hypodermic needle sticking out of her side, the syringe having been pressed all the way to the bottom, and she felt the cool liquid coursing through her veins. Around the body of the needle was Taeyeon's marble-white hand. She whipped her head back to meet Taeyeon's eyes, which had darkened infinitely. Her brow creased in a devilish malice she had never seen before.

"I *hate* it when people *betray* me," Taeyeon hissed.

Tiffany reached to remove the needle, but felt her tips of her fingers go numb, as did her toes. The paralysis worked its way upwards, slowly but steadily, till she felt her panicked breaths slowing to a mere crawl. She could hear her weak heartbeat and strained breathing in her ears; till she could hear them no more.

The last thing she saw was Taeyeon's fingers reaching toward her eyes then above, then all went black as she felt her eyelids being pulled shut.

Chapter Ten : The Crux

Fingers drummed impatiently on heavy wood as the call pried its way through a seemingly endless stream of connections and proxies, finally making it through to the other side. There was the muffled sound of a roaring wind that sounded deceptively distant, coupled with a clanging of metal.

"Ivan, my good man! How on Earth have you been?"

The voice that answered was gravelly and full of disdain, dripping with a heavy Russian accent. It was pitted with brief bursts of static. *"Freezing my ass off, that's how I've been, Kim. My promise to the government will be fulfilled in just a few days and I'm still stuck in this hellhole."*

"Siberia can't be that bad."

"Shall I arrange for a tour, comrade?"

A hearty chuckle. "Fair enough. We might be in for some rough times, Ivan, but we are going to endure it as very, very wealthy men."

A wheezing laugh came from the other end of the line. *"Very wealthy indeed. Maybe just wealthy enough to afford myself a damned heater. But right now, I just want to get out of here. God damn it, they think the worst thing in the gulags are the rats. They can't even begin to imagine."*

"You'll have your freedom soon, Ivan."

The static was longer this time, the grating sound clawing at his eardrum.

"Nothing interesting happening on your end, Kim?"

Kim Tae Woo spied the CCTV screen sitting in a recess in his broad mahogany desk, watching as a woman stood in front of another who was strapped into a chair in a basement. A hand swung across the screen. His eyes shifted to the pile of papers on the table, a color photo of a blonde woman on the top page.

"Nothing worth worrying about, Ivan. Nothing at all."

A knowing laugh. *"Somehow, I doubt so. I'll see you in a few days, my friend."*

"Dasvidanniye, Ivan."

Kim Tae Woo folded his hands in front of him as he continued to watch the familiar figure on the monochromatic screen, arching an eyebrow in mirth as the nude seated woman was slapped across the face, over and over again.

Tiffany coughed, spitting out a wad of blood on the floor as another blow came to strike her across the cheek.

She had been brought out of unconsciousness an hour ago and found herself strapped to a metal chair in the middle of a dark, cold room made entirely of cement. A shielded fluorescent light dangled from the ceiling, casting a harsh spotlight on her. Something tiny moved in one of the corners of the room before disappearing into the sea of shadows.

She breathed slowly, strained breaths being sucked through sore cheeks into exhausted lungs. She could hear herself wheezing, occasionally choking on her own blood, and her head felt like it was going to burst to pieces at any moment. Her vision was blurry and grainy with dark blots and stars.

She felt a hand grab her chin and her head was jerked roughly to the front. A few seconds later, the vision focused into the image of Kim Taeyeon. A vastly different Kim Taeyeon.

Her eyes were pitch black, bottomless pools of hatred on a face that seethed with fury. Her pallid face was illuminated by the overhanging light, giving it an ethereal, albeit terrifying glow. Her eyes travelled down to Taeyeon's free hand, both sides of which reddened and stained with smudges of her blood.

"I trusted you," she hissed before shoving her chin to the side and stepping back, tossing Tiffany's long hair across her sticky face.

"Against all logic, I trusted you. In a business where trust meant about as much as the dirt in the other guy's pocket, I trusted you." She turned around, her back to Tiffany.

Taeyeon snorted, casually flicking the blood off her fingers, bringing up a stained hand and staring hard at the reddish-brown streaks. "And for what? For love?"

She turned suddenly and grabbed Tiffany's chin again, looking her in the eyes. "For *you*?"

The inside of Tiffany's ears rumbled and roared as yet another dull thud connected with the side of her face, causing her world to spin for a brief moment before the piercing light once again penetrated her eyes, bringing with it some semblance of sight.

Taeyeon backed away, suddenly laughing quietly to herself, letting her head hang low. "And to think I actually hoped and believed that someday you would change...for me. That someday, I would be able to share my life with you despite who I was...and who you were."

Tiffany looked up with tired, half-closed eyes, and Taeyeon met her gaze.

"You think I didn't know from the start? I pick drunken girl off the streets who has the brains of a Yale graduate, skilled in persuasion and firearms. And then a year later a leak in my communications network shows up and the FBI is drawn to my presence. Only you could've done that."

Tiffany blinked once, slow and deliberate, in morbid realization.

"I *knew* you, Stephanie Jung."

Tiffany seemed to wince at the mention of her real name.

So much for being undercover.

"I knew everything about you. Why you came, what you did and who you worked for. But something inside me told me to give you a chance. To see what you were capable of and perhaps what your true intentions were. Something told me to hold back, because you were somehow different. Special."

Taeyeon began to pace, spot to darkened spot, just out of the light of the lamp hanging from the ceiling.

"And special you were. So special that I'd allowed myself to succumb to a weakness that was unforgivable in my trade."

She stopped, and her chest heaved in and out as she sucked in a couple of deep breaths. Her eyes once again made contact with Tiffany's.

"I fell in love with you." She paused, closing her eyes. "When everything else inside of me told me that

this was dangerous beyond reason, I decided to listen to that tiny stray inkling that said it was okay."

Somehow, in spite of the searing pain on her face and the fear in her heart, Tiffany felt something begin to well up in the corner of her eye. She continued to stare at the floor.

"You thought I was using you," Taeyeon continued in almost a whisper. "That I was using you as nothing more than my squeeze...an object to satisfy my desires." Now her voice was so soft Tiffany felt herself involuntarily straining to hear her voice. "You never realized that even while I kept myself guarded and alert, my feelings for you were true. It just...happened that way."

Tiffany felt a droplet of moisture trickle its way down the side of her cheek, mixing with the semi-coagulated blood and then running downward, a reddish blob hanging at her chin. More tears began to escape the corners of her eyes, unbidden.

"I loved you and you betrayed me...even though I should have expected it from the start." Taeyeon pulled out a Glock 26 subcompact from the back of her pants, holding it up one-handed to Tiffany's head.

"You *used* me."

Tiffany looked up, staring dazedly into the muzzle of the weapon and then at Taeyeon's emotionless eyes.

"Your tears mean nothing to me now."

Tiffany closed her eyes, tears still streaming down her cheeks as Taeyeon squeezed the trigger.

At first all Jessica could see was darkness; a stretch of pitch black that spanned across her field of vision. She reached up and gingerly felt for her eyelids, and knew that her eyes were open. She suddenly stiffened, a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. She blinked a few times.

Am I blind?

"Just relax. The blindness is only temporary." It was a woman's voice.

Jessica stiffened again at the voice. She quickly thought back to what had happened before this, sifting through a fuzzy puddle of fragmented memories and realized with a creeping dread that she was probably in the hands of the two shooters she'd seen before she went down. Her mind jerked back to a candid thought.

Wait a minute, if they took me hostage or something, why aren't I restrained? And why does that voice seem so vaguely familiar?

A few seconds later, the blackness seemed to dissipate. Blurry images began to form at the corners of her eyes and worked their way inwards, color and shape becoming recognizable as her vision returned, albeit an unfocused mess. She could just barely make out a form beside her.

Her vision began to focus, and she eased her head from right to left, taking in her surroundings: barred window framing a starry night sky and full moon, wooden frames supporting a zinc ceiling spotted with cobwebs, and a woman.

Wait a minute.

Jessica immediately tried to sit up, but was thrown back down onto the bed with a sudden surge of vertigo. She held her head and squeezed her eyes shut, fighting a wave of dizziness and nausea, desperate to get herself together so that she could get out of this predicament. She gritted her teeth; she must've looked like a fool to whoever that was.

"The antidote will take some time to come into full effect. Just relax. I'm not going to hurt you," the warm, husky voice came again.

Jessica turned her head to look at the woman sitting on a chair beside the bed, looking far away and fiddling carelessly with an empty hypodermic needle between her thumb and index finger. She tossed it aside and turned her eyes on her.

Jessica quickly appraised the woman who was no more than two feet away from her. Long black hair tied up in a ponytail, framing an oval face with sparkling green eyes, beautifully sculpted nose, a pair of smile lines and a sharp chin. She was dressed in a fitting black suit, faint vertical gray lines accentuating her apparent height. Probably taller than she was.

Yuri, turning and noticing the studying look on Jessica's face, casually turned away again, spying her laptop sitting on a nearby table. As if on cue, a soft ping chimed from it. She stood up to check what it was.

Jessica frowned at the retreating figure. This woman had shot, drugged (or drug shot, whatever that meant or however it was possible), and captured an FBI agent in the middle of an operation, brought her to an obscure location in the middle of the jungle, and she hadn't even bothered to tie her up? She was either very confident or very stupid. Nonetheless, Jessica decided she wouldn't be staying here any longer.

She reached for her piece, discovered it was still in her thigh holster. Stupid. Silently, she drew it and pulled out the magazine, checking it. Full. Very stupid, indeed. She felt control coming back to her muscles, and she silently lifted her legs over the side of the bed.

Yuri unfolded the laptop, looking intently at the new message that had popped up on her screen. Punching a few keys, she brought the message to full screen, hunching over slightly to read it. A click came from behind her. She smiled.

"Whoever you are, you're under arrest for the charges of assaulting and abducting an agent of the FBI, amongst others which I'm sure you're liable for. Where is your accomplice?"

Unseen by Jessica, Yuri closed her eyes briefly and sighed. "You're not arresting anyone, Jessica. And she's not here." Yuri's back was still turned to Jessica.

Jessica blinked at the mention of her name. She deliberated for a moment. This woman had laid in wait, shot her and abducted her. On top of that, she looked professional. Of course she would know her name. More than anything, she was pissed at the fact that this woman wouldn't even look at her when she was speaking. She shook any insecurity from her head and stepped forward.

"Yes I am. Now turn around. Slowly." Jessica kept an authoritative note in her tone to stress that she was the one in charge now. After all, she was the one with the gun.

Yuri kept her eyes on the computer, frowning at the newly arrived message.

"There is an object of interest that must be retrieved in conjunction with the completion of the assignment.

Article is of extremely high value and the information contained within is considerably sensitive.

Therefore, priority of the assignment has been shifted to the object's retrieval."

"Object of interest?" Yuri muttered to herself, creasing her brow.

"I said, turn around."

Yuri turned, but not in compliance with Jessica's orders. She faced the blonde, noting the confident look on her face, her Glock trained expertly on Yuri's chest. She kept her cool, showing no sign of fear or alarm to Jessica. She knew that she was safe from Jessica, but would only get cockier if she showed any weakness.

"Jessica," Yuri began slowly. "I don't know how to explain this to you, but I'm on your side."

Jessica scoffed in obvious disbelief. "You shoot me and my men and abduct me in broad daylight and you expect me to believe that?"

"I shot you to knock you out for your own good, because you would never have left that place alive on your own. And then I brought you back here, waking you up unrestrained and unharmed. Think about it. If I'd wanted you dead, you already would be."

Jessica arched an eyebrow. "What do you mean I would have never left that place alive on my own?"

"The moment you and your men breached the building, Kim Taeyeon had her own men set up in the surrounding buildings as a hedge. If you had walked out on your own, they'd shred you to pieces in a hail of bullets, haul ass out of there, and none would be the wiser. The police would then arrive a convenient five minutes later; the ones Kim Taeyeon have under her payroll, of course, gather your bodies and toss you to the sharks. Goodbye."

Jessica paused, taking it in. "So you're saying I wasn't supposed to come out of that building alive?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

"And who was it that was supposed to kill me, then?"

"Me." Yuri paused. "And another who isn't important right now."

Jessica stiffened, her fingers further tensing around the plastic grip of the Glock. "And you say you're on my side." Her voice was heavy with irony.

"That's exactly why you're still alive, you idiot."

Jessica was taken aback by the outright insult. For a moment, she believed the woman. If she were meant to die, she'd already be. And what good was she alive to Kim Taeyeon? She knew no government secrets, and was of little or no value as a bargaining chip. The US government would never negotiate with kidnappers for an FBI agent on a covert mission, especially with an underground figure as powerful as Kim Taeyeon.

"You said there was another."

"He's too dead to be of any importance."

"You killed him?"

"Naturally."

"And that adds murder to the list." Jessica was suddenly wary again, flexing her forearms to maintain her aim.

Yuri visibly slumped, her frustration with Jessica's hard-headedness ostentatious to say the least. She'd known Jessica to be this way when they'd first met, and tingled slightly inside at the fact that this quality had stayed with her through the years. She sighed audibly.

"Jessica Jung, you have to listen to me. There are things that need to be done, and I need you for what's to come." There was some assurance in her tone. "I have a feeling that we are but two pawns in a game that's much larger than what we think it is."

Jessica didn't budge.

"Look, if I were any threat to you, don't you think I'd take precautions in case anything backfired? Look at yourself. You're holding a gun."

A series of vibrations interrupted the standoff, and Yuri reached into her suit pocket.

"Don't even think about it." Jessica straightened, inching the pistol forward in her grip as she readjusted her stance.

Yuri fished out her cellphone, dangling it between thumb and index finger, an innocent look on her face, her eyes wide.

She flipped it open without waiting for Jessica's consent, bringing it to her ear.

Jessica pulled the side of her lip down, clearly annoyed.

Why am I even putting up with this bullshit?

She strained to hear the voice on the other side of the line, but couldn't.

"Yuri, did you get the message?"

"Of course I did. I always do."

"Good. I'm sure I don't need to stress the utmost importance of this change."

Yuri's cool exterior was replaced by a look of skepticism. They never once needed to tell anything her twice. Something was wrong. Jessica raised an eyebrow. "There's something you're not telling me, is there?"

"Just retrieve the object and return to us with it. It must not - I repeat - it must never be allowed to be exchanged at the meeting three days from now. The details aren't important."

Yuri's face darkened considerably, her cool expression quickly returning, creating an icy mask. "As a matter of fact, the details are important I don't appreciate being kept in the dark when it comes to details on an assignment. If I don't know what I'm dealing with, I don't do it. Got it? I want the whole truth on this."

The voice seemed to rise in volume, and Jessica could make out the tense, sharp chatter, but none of the spoken words.

"Good God, Kwon Yuri. When the hell is anyone told the whole truth in this business?"

"Now."

The conversation continued for about another fifteen minutes, with Yuri listening quietly for most of it. In front of her, Jessica waited with the pistol in her hands. Her forearms were beginning to feel sore from the weight.

Yuri slowly slapped the phone shut, depositing it in her suit, her face taking on a new expression; one of morbid understanding and purpose. She turned her gaze on Jessica.

"Once again, your all-mighty government has slipped up," she said coldly.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Jessica shot back.

"For God's sake, Jessica, put down the damn gun." Yuri had had just about enough of staring stupidly into Jessica's gun barrel.

"What's my motivation?" Jessica said, voice laden with sarcasm.

"Your sister."

Jessica's eyes darkened. She seemed to be gritting her teeth behind her lips. Her trigger finger twitched.

"My *what*?" Jessica said slowly, with a hint of menace.

"Your sister. Remember her? The one who barely escaped death along with you so many years ago."

Jessica's brow furrowed further, creasing her delicate forehead.

Who is she? How does she know about...

"Stephanie Jung became an Interpol agent years ago, apparently without your knowledge, and earned an unfortunate place in an undercover operation, posing as one of Kim Taeyeon's own. How do you think the FBI knew where to look? You thought the FBI just stumbled across a trail and said '*Oh, we've found her!*'?" Yuri threw her hands up in the air for good measure.

A look of realization crossed Jessica's face. Realization, and then horror. She suddenly thought back once again to the moments before she blacked out, this time focusing on the second shooter.

"Then back there at the warehouse...When you...And I..." Jessica caught herself stuttering, blinking and shaking her head to rid herself of the shock and confusion, to no avail.

"That was your sister next to me, Jessica," Yuri said coolly.

Confused, frustrated and utterly tired, Jessica dropped her arms, her gun now hanging limply in her right hand. She looked up at Yuri.

"Who the hell *are* you?"

Yuri paused for a moment, then made her decision. There was no point dropping another bomb now, lest Jessica went mad with confusion. Everything would be revealed in due time.

"Liu." Yuri stepped forward, extending her hand. "Amber Liu."

Jessica looked at the hand, then reluctantly holstered her pistol, and took it.

"Glad to see we're finally on the same page here." Yuri smiled. "Now, let me explain what's going on."

Chapter Eleven : A New Era Of Power

"Maybe you'd like to take a seat," Yuri offered, gesturing to a nearby chair.

"I think I'll stand, thank you." The icy tone quickly returned to Jessica's voice, and she stood upright, arms folded.

The handshake had been brief and rather intriguing. Yuri shook her hand with a firm, authoritative grip; usually, it was Jessica who did the shaking when meeting someone for the first time. And that tingle. What was that she felt?

Yuri huffed in response. "Fine, I suppose."

An awkward silence passed before Yuri turned back to her laptop, opening a series of windows which soon filled with pages of information. Jessica stepped forward, peering over Yuri's shoulder. Yuri could feel the hot breath gently wafting around her ear. She focused intensely on the screen in front of her.

Yuri opened up a few more windows with a series of clicks, then pushed back the laptop screen farther back so that Jessica could get a better view. The latter had now moved up beside Yuri, resting her palms on the surface of the table.

"What's all this?"

Oh, her sweet, angelic voice.

"What do you know about antimatter?" Yuri said calmly, shaking off the incipient emotions.

Jessica looked at Yuri curiously. "Antimatter? I know that it's the opposite of matter...you've got anti-hydrogen for hydrogen, stuff like that." She immediately felt embarrassed for her apparent intellectual inferiority.

"Right." Yuri brought up a window for Jessica to see. "And what do you know about what happens when you mix matter and antimatter together?"

"They cancel each other out? So...nothing."

"Half right. According to the laws of conservation, you can't create something from nothing, and likewise, when two bodies of equal mass meet, the resulting reaction must have some form of conversion of mass to energy for the laws to hold true." She pointed to the screen. "Therefore, when

matter and anti-matter mix, they annihilate each other, creating high-energy gamma rays and other particle-antiparticle pairs."

Jessica nodded slowly. "I'm following."

"Okay. So now you know that energy is formed when these reactions occur. But do you know how much?"

Jessica shook her head, pursing her lips.

Oh, those lips.

Yuri gulped unconsciously and scrolled down the page, revealing more walls of text and numbers.

"When matter and anti-matter annihilate each other, the entire mass of the constituent particles are converted to kinetic energy. Here's some numbers for you: The reaction of 1 kilogram of antimatter with 1 kilogram of matter would produce 1.8×10^{17} joules of energy, or the rough equivalent of 43 megatons of TNT. By comparison, the Tsar Bomba, the largest nuclear weapon ever detonated, yielded the equivalent of 50 megatons of TNT, and required hundreds of kilograms of fissile material."

Yuri paused to let Jessica absorb the sheer power of the information, then added the icing on the cake.

"The Tsar Bomba was detonated over the Mityushikha Bay nuclear testing range in October 1961, about 4 kilometers above land level. Upon detonation, the fireball touched the ground, reached nearly as high as the altitude of the release plane and was seen and felt almost 1,000 kilometers from ground zero, and the heat from the explosion could have caused third degree burns about 100 kilometers away. The subsequent mushroom cloud was about seven times the height of Mount Everest, its base 40 kilometers wide. The explosion could be seen and felt in Finland, breaking windows there and in Sweden. Atmospheric focusing caused blast damage up to 1,000 kilometers away. The seismic shock created by the detonation was measurable even on its third passage around the Earth. The energy output of the entire reaction was equivalent to around 1.4% of the power output of the Sun." Yuri paused again.

"Such destruction could have been easily replicated with a mere 1 kilogram of anti-matter."

Jessica's eyes widened briefly, and she nodded slowly. "Wow. So why aren't they producing bombs using anti-matter?"

Yuri clicked open another window, scrolling downward. "Because it was so expensive to produce. Take a look here." She gestured to a portion of the screen, and Jessica leaned in further. Briefly, Yuri was awash with the smell of Jessica's shampoo.

Oh, the smell of her hair. So little has changed.

Jessica dictated the script verbatim. "The produce 1 gram of anti-matter, it would require 100 quadrillion dollars and the production facility would have to be run for 100 billion years" She stood upright again. "Wow, bummer...I think." She paused, then turned to Yuri. "Wait a minute. You said it *was* expensive to produce. What about now?"

Yuri smiled at Jessica's perceptiveness. "Here's something the world can't yet find on Wikipedia. Something only the US government, and us, of course, know."

Jessica quirked an eyebrow.

'Us'?

"Ever heard of Fermilab?" Yuri asked.

Jessica nodded. "I've heard of it, but don't know anything about it."

"It's a US Department of Energy national lab in Batavia, near Chicago, specializing in high-energy particle physics."

High-energy particle physics. Big words.

"Does it have something to do with antimatter too?"

Yuri nodded, bringing up another screen. "It was 1995 when the first anti-hydrogen atoms were produced by the European Organization for Nuclear Research, or CERN, as it is more popularly known as."

Jessica's eyes glimmered with recognition. "I know about CERN. It's a laboratory in Switzerland which conducts research into anti-matter as well. Saw it in a book that was popular about 8 or 9 years ago.

Angels and Demons, was it?"

Yuri nodded again. "It's the world's largest particle physics laboratory, with 20 European member states and many more involved in the laboratory's research programs. It was also the birthplace of the World Wide Web."

Jessica nodded, more enthusiastically this time.

"Now, it's been more than 20 years since the first anti-matter atoms were created. Given the benefits, do you think the Americans would just sit by and watch the Europeans take all the glory for anti-matter research?"

"Fermilab's been working on it too," Jessica concluded.

"Right. Not only working on it, Jessica. They've *succeeded* at it."

"What?" Jessica looked closely at Yuri.

"I don't know the details, but they made a breakthrough or two. Fermilab found a way to considerably improve the operational efficiency of some of the processes involved in producing anti-matter, and in so doing reduced the previously astronomical operational costs by several orders of magnitude. To put it simply, they've made the production of the most expensive substance on the planet affordable and feasible. And this was six years ago."

Jessica did the math. "Fermilab has been producing anti-matter since 2012, and still no one knows about it?" Her face took on an incredulous look.

"Exactly. Remember the late 2000s' global financial crisis and recession?"

Jessica nodded. It was the time of her youth, and she vividly recalled the massive panic that gripped the country when people all around the world saw their assets turn to dust, bringing the world into another stale period of financial hardship, setting people thinking about how they should be spending their money.

"The US recovered completely from the recession in early 2010. Later that year, The US government announced a major boost in its defense budget on the notion that it would be better supplying the troops deployed in the Middle East and researching into improved military methods and technology for the coalition effort. Analysts and skeptics, however, saw no benefit in the Middle Eastern picture later on, but were rebutted by US officials saying the money went into improving intangibles, and not directly to the coalition war machine."

"That money went to Fermilab," Jessica stated matter-of-factly.

"Right again. Fermilab used the huge boost to fund the accelerated building of an anti-proton decelerator and an anti-proton ring similar to the one used at CERN, which allows them to produce and study anti-matter. The rest of the fund went into research on anti-matter storage. Coupled with new knowledge on how to efficiently produce anti-matter, the facility has been conducting deep research into the field in secret ever since the completion of the projects just two years after."

Jessica closed her eyes, absorbing the information and trying to organize her thoughts, putting her questions in a separate place so as not to clutter her mind. She opened her eyes.

"What has this got to do with what's happening now?"

Yuri pulled her lip into a tight line, looking away for a moment.

"Amber."

Yuri's eyes snapped back to Jessica. She was used to working under and responding to her aliases, but hearing it come from Jessica just felt off. "Right."

She brought up another screen on the laptop. They were now looking at news articles instead. Immediately, Jessica took an unsteady step back.

She recognized those articles, very, very grimly, and wished she hadn't.

"What...is this?" She managed to whisper, pointing a trembling finger to the screen.

Yuri straightened up and turned to face Jessica, letting out a short sigh. "You should've taken a seat like I asked you to."

Jessica was rooted to the floor, unable to process the slew of thoughts, memories and questions flowing unbidden into her mind.

The Christmas Slaughter

"Jessica? Are you okay?"

Jessica swallowed and blinked her eyes a few times, struggling to maintain her composure. Now was not the time to break down and let her emotions affect her work. She nodded curtly.

Yuri cleared her throat somewhat awkwardly, then spoke carefully. "In the winter of 2010, Major General Elliot Jung was murdered along with two members of his family." Yuri paused, noting the rapid darkening in Jessica's face. "Neither US government agencies nor the police were able to track down the killers, much less find out why it happened. The execution-style murder pointed to a professional hit, but it was a road to nowhere without any evidence or perceptible connection."

Jessica was embroiled in an emotional struggle, and her herculean efforts to conceal that did little to hide her growing pain from Yuri. Yuri knew that this was hurting Jessica deeply, but she needed to press on.

"There was indeed a reason for General Jung's murder." Yuri paused again, though she did not mean to.

"And?" Jessica said through gritted teeth.

"General Jung acted as a middleman for the passing of classified information to a Russian KGB officer, one Ivan Fedorov; information related to the processes for the production of anti-matter. A mole in Fermilab had somehow smuggled the data through extremely tight security and out of the premises. However, General Jung reported the breach to the CIA a few days later, apparently due to guilt. Agents caught Fedorov at John F. Kennedy International Airport just before he boarded his homebound flight, took him into custody, but could not locate the data on his self. The Russians naturally denied his existence, and as to the information, either he'd already forwarded it to the Russians and destroyed the physical evidence, or he didn't have it in the first place. Either way, the US government didn't have enough dirt to put on him to keep him in custody, so they let him go. Fedorov was deported to Russia a few days later, where he was immediately stripped of his rank and imprisoned without trial in a Siberian gulag. The Russians, of course, did get the data. A couple of weeks later, General Jung was found murdered along with his wife and daughter."

Jessica straightened up visibly. She was baring her teeth now, her eyes darkening with an incipient rage. "Are you saying *my father* was a *traitor* to his country, and divulged classified information to America's largest political enemy?"

The truth was, Jessica hated her father. The lack of concern he showed his family in the past had created an irrevocable rift between them. Still, Jessica felt obligated to defend him.

"Our sources confirm it, and they're one hundred percent reliable, Jessica."

"How dare you! He was a good man! He loved his country and his family! How can you dishonor him with such slander!?"

Yuri took a step forward, putting on an assuring face. "Jessica, calm down. I know it's hard for you to accept this fact, but what's done was done, and he did somehow redeem himself for it."

"Redemption? He died, taking the lives of my mother and sister with him!" Jessica screamed, her eyes brimming with moisture. Her composure was surely almost lost.

"He didn't take the lives of your mother and sister, Jessica!" Yuri raised her voice a notch.

Jessica gritted her teeth, fighting back her tears when a sudden realization came to mind. She cocked her head slightly to the side.

"Kim Taeyeon...did this to my family?" She said slowly, almost like a growl.

"Not technically. During that time, Kim Tae Woo was still in power, so he would have been the one who ordered the hit. Kim Tae Woo was the one who sold the information to the Russians through your father."

Yuri noticed Jessica's clenched fists; so hard that she could clearly see the whites of her knuckles through her skin.

"Jessica," Yuri tried softly, "anger is going to get you nowhere. You've got to get your head straight and in the game."

That was it. This was the break she'd been looking for all these years; the one who had been responsible for barging into her life that Christmas life and turning it inside out. Kim Tae Woo was the man who had taken everything away from her. She shut her eyes in shame and frustration. He was the same man she had captured in a major arms dealing bust back in the day, but he was killed before his trial. He'd never paid for his crimes. Especially not to her.

"I don't need you to tell me what to do," Jessica hissed, clenching her fists further.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay? I know how hard this is for you," Yuri said, feeling her own heart hurting from watching Jessica suffer. "But you have to accept it."

Jessica's visage seemed to soften a little, and the bulging knuckles slowly receded under her skin. She

slumped backward into a chair, holding her face in one hand. It was too much to bear, finding out from a complete stranger that her own father, an esteemed United States Army general, had betrayed his own country and implicated his family in the process. A few seconds passed in silence, and giving her face a quick rub, she looked back up at Yuri, all seriousness returned. She needed to keep her emotions in check.

"Okay. I still don't see how any of this relates to the mess that we're in now."

"I was getting to that. Remember when I told you that the rest of the money that Fermilab got went into research for anti-matter storage?"

Jessica nodded.

"When everything first started off way back in 1995, CERN had the ability to produce anti-hydrogen atoms, but had no viable, efficient means to store them for future use. The problem was that you couldn't store anti-matter in an ordinary matter storage device, because the anti-matter would react with the matter. That meant the anti-hydrogen atoms would be formed, and then soon disappear after a short period of scientific study. The same was true for other anti-matter particles that they managed to produce. The only way to store anti-matter was to use a combination of electric and magnetic fields, which they made some headway in with something they called Penning traps. However, they could only store a few million atoms at a time, which was the equivalent of less than a femtogram. As a result, it was incredibly expensive and difficult to store large amounts of anti-matter. But now, eight years after Fermilab began producing and studying anti-matter, they've succeeded in finding a way to properly store sizable quantities of it for prolonged lengths of time. That means that they've begun to accumulate and stockpile anti-matter instead of merely studying them."

"And Kim Taeyeon's moles are busy stealing the data to give to the Russians."

Yuri nodded. "They've already succeeded in retrieving the data, and the Russians are sending Fedorov here, to Rio, to receive it in three days."

"Why Fedorov, when he failed the last time?"

"The Russian government sees no gain in allowing him to redeem himself, but apparently one of the

conditions of the deal was that it had to be done with Fedorov, and no one else."

"And who's the middleman this time?"

"There isn't one."

"You mean Kim Taeyeon is handling the deal herself?"

Yuri shook her head. "Wrong. Kim Tae Woo is going to meet Fedorov."

Jessica's eyes widened in shock. "What? But Kim Tae Woo was killed two years ago, shot in the head whilst en route to a detention facility in the States."

"That's a story for another time, Jessica. Right now, we have to focus on the task at hand. The information that he holds is the object of interest in my assignment. Under no circumstances must that information be allowed to reach Fedorov's hands, or we're going to have a global crisis on our hands."

"Global crisis?"

"Do you not see the repercussions of having that information fall into the hands of the Russians? Do you think they're just going to sit in their labs all day and simply 'study' the most powerful substance on the planet? The Americans are already conducting military research into utilizing anti-matter in Area 51 as we speak, and the Russians are sure to follow suit. Once they know how to properly store anti-matter, we will have two countries on opposing ends stockpiling the most dangerous substance in the history of mankind. The Russians will surely declare their ability to produce and store anti-matter, to the dumbfounded dismay of the Americans and the world, and even conduct a test to prove that claim. We will see the start of another Cold War and an arms race the likes of which the world has never seen. Forget nuclear weapons, Jessica. This will usher in a whole new era of power."

Jessica slowly stood up. She could feel the hairs on the back of her necks standing on end. "I don't like the sound of that."

Yuri stepped closer to Jessica, looking her straight in the eye. "We have to stop this, Jessica. We've already slipped up once when we allowed the Russians to get their hands on the anti-matter production data. We have to stop this at all costs, before it's too late."

Chapter Twelve : Loving Thy Enemy

Tiffany counted the heartbeats throbbing like a huge drum echoing in her head: one, two, three...

Her breath caught. She expected to hear an explosion of gunpowder and a split second of pain before she left her human shell, but it never came.

Four, five, six...

Taeyeon had paused in mid-trigger pull, hand trembling as she kept it in a steady aim at Tiffany's head. She gritted her teeth and closed her eyes for a brief moment. What was she doing? Letting her emotions take control of her was not what she had been taught to do. Assess your situation. Think of the possibilities. Never limit yourself to merely one option.

Seven, eight, nine...

She exhaled sharply took the slack off the trigger; a soft click resounding through the room as one of the safeties in the Glock re-engaged.

Tiffany drew a breath; she hadn't realized that she had been holding her breath since Taeyeon had drawn her weapon. Eyelids fluttering, she opened them slowly while still keeping her head down, peeking through them at the figure in front of her. She couldn't see Taeyeon clearly now; her vision was

too blurred by the remnants of shed tears. She could faintly make out Taeyeon pulling her hand back and around her waist, apparently to re-deposit the gun. The next thing she knew, she was listening to a series of slow footfalls as Taeyeon turned and walked out of the room without a word, slamming the steel door shut, then a cacophony of shifting bolts and locks.

And with a soft clang, the only light in the room went out, engulfing her in a suffocating darkness.

Taeyeon stood outside the interrogation chamber, leaning against the wall whilst looking up at the plain cement ceiling. She brought a hand to her face, wiping off the perspiration that had beaded on her forehead before pushing a few errant strands of hair behind her ears. She breathed; slowly and deeply, closing her eyes in an effort to calm herself and clear her mind. She needed to think; acting rashly now would only disadvantage her in the future. She assessed the situation, considering her options.

Seeing as how Tiffany Hwang, or Stephanie Jung, was with Kwon Yuri in the time before she returned to the villa, it was a possibility that Stephanie had somehow convinced Yuri to spare Jessica. After all, Stephanie couldn't have just sat beside Yuri and watch her sister get killed. That meant that Jessica Jung could still be alive now, and hence remained a considerable threat. If that were the case, Kwon Yuri could also have turned against her, adding another threat to the table.

Taeyeon did have one advantage at hand; Stephanie Jung was now under her control. She wasn't sure how close her relationship with Jessica was, but she could be certain of one thing: Jessica's actions could be manipulated if she knew that her sister's life was at stake. She knew about Stephanie's loss. She knew that her father had ordered the hit on Stephanie's family eight years ago; it was one thing she was personally ashamed of. If anything, she was sure that either sister would not be so careless as to lose another by acting rashly. All in all, Stephanie Jung was her trump card, and in order to keep that advantage, she needed to keep her alive.

Taeyeon breathed a small sigh. That was one option down.

Her eyes suddenly refocused. What about the impending meeting with the Russians? Did they know about that? Then again, it was highly unlikely because she hadn't told Tiffany about it. Sometimes, it was imperative that certain secrets be kept. This would be the biggest deal in the Kim cartel since eight years

ago, and though she didn't know exactly what it was they were selling to the Russians, she didn't really care.

Turning to face the wall, she pressed a small button on an intercom next to the door.

"Yes, Miss Kim?"

"Bring me a couple of towels and two buckets of warm water."

"Right away."

Slowly, she released her finger from the button and let her hand fall to her side. For a brief moment, her thoughts shifted to Tiffany. Just how badly had she beaten her? Judging by the pupil dilation and ragged breathing, she surmised that Tiffany was just about at the brink of unconsciousness when she had left her. She felt slightly relieved that she had thought against pistol whipping Tiffany instead. She lifted her right hand in front of her and spread out her fingers, mentally tracing the streaks of dried blood that coursed from the tips of her fingers down to her knuckles and wrist. Tiffany's blood. For some reason, she felt the beginnings of a rent forming in her heart.

Just then, a series of vibrations in her pants pocket stirred her from her trance of guilt. She took out her cellphone.

"How's the girl?"

She paused briefly. "In rough shape, but still breathing." Taeyeon instantly felt another pang of guilt at the coarseness of her words.

"Good. I was beginning to worry that you might have killed her, especially after you had that gun to her head. You do realize that she's of no use to us dead, especially since we're not entirely sure that Jessica Jung is dead."

"Of course I understand."

"Excellent. Tiffany Hwang, as of now, is our second most prized possession. Keep her alive at least until we find a reason to decide otherwise. The meeting is less than three days away."

"Yes, father."

"Good girl. I'll see you soon."

Taeyeon flipped the phone shut, sliding it back into her pocket, noticing one of the guards approaching her with a bucket of water in each hand and towels draped over his forearms. She motioned him over.

"Just put those down here."

He did as told. "Anything else, Miss Kim?" His voice was obsequious and monotone.

"You may go."

He turned to leave.

"Wait!"

He stopped in his tracks, spinning on his heel. "Yes, Miss Kim?"

"Bring down a set of Miss Hwang's clothes. Preferably something comfortable." Taeyeon could see him narrow his eyes even through the tint of his sunglasses, and the slightest quirk of an eyebrow.

"Yes, Miss Kim." And he turned to leave.

"So what are you, Amber? CIA? Military?"

Yuri gave a small smile, wondering if she should describe her affiliation as she had to Tiffany.

"I work for a non-governmental organization."

"So you're a freelancer."

"You could say that."

"Freelancers work for the highest bidder, don't they? You'd do anything for the right price." Jessica's words were once again laden with disdain and sarcasm.

Yuri scoffed, chuckling slightly at Jessica's indignance.

"Well I have to admit, I'm paid well, but my work is in the interest of humankind as a whole. We don't involve ourselves in the petty squabbles of the rich and sinful."

Jessica let out a scoff of her own, folding her arms.

"People of your kind are always so full of themselves."

Yuri let out a frustrated sigh. "What can I possibly say that will make you believe I'm on your side?"

"Nothing," Jessica replied coldly. "I don't even know you. If I can't trust you, how can I work together with you?"

Yuri took a step forward, causing Jessica to inch back. "What are you doing?" Jessica instinctively reached for her piece.

Yuri looked straight into Jessica's eyes, making sure they had solid eye contact before she opened her mouth to speak.

"There are some things we've done in this life that we've come to regret. Let me ask you just one thing: fifty years from now, would you rather look back and say you wished you'd trusted me?"

Jessica blinked once, slowly. The words had struck soundly home; after all, it did make sense.

"I can't tell you anything more about myself than my name, because that information puts you in danger, not me. Do you think I'm afraid of being in danger myself? I stare death in the face every single day. It feels like wherever I go, the grim reaper is just one step behind." Yuri's voice was suddenly stained with a belligerent tone as her frustration gradually mounted. She was worried and angry at the same time that the two of them had been involved in the same incident. Such a predicament would only further endanger Jessica, and she didn't want any of that at all. She cocked her head to the side. "Do you want to know more?"

Jessica stood still, then shook her head slowly, eyes falling to the floor. It was the first time in years that she had been trumped, and she felt an incipient shame build up inside. She'd have to get used to losing some once in a while.

Yuri suddenly felt guilty for her outburst. "Look, you know how grave the situation is. Are you going to be stubborn at the cost of mankind's future?" she pressed.

Jessica sighed. "Alright, alright. I got it," she said, looking Yuri in the eyes once more. She sighed before pulling her lips into a tight line. "Let's make this work."

Yuri eased up. She looked down and realized that she'd been clenching her fists all the while, and urged her fingers to relax. It was only then that she discovered her sudden outburst at Jessica.

Jessica noticed the tension in Yuri, and wondered.

There's something about her...why would she get all angry like that? And why is she worried about my

safety? I'm nothing to her.

All her training in profiling at the FBI Academy and in the field told her that this woman was hiding something; something other than the fact that she was part of some clandestine organization with goals that even she could not possibly comprehend. Professionals always had complete control over their emotions, because emotions were always a serious weakness. This secret was personal and emotional; it showed in her eyes just moments before. Unconsciously, she sized her up.

Yuri moved towards her laptop. "I'm going to bring up any and all information I can find about the Kims and maps of the local geography. Fedorov isn't likely to be in the country already, and if he arrives earlier than the meeting date, which is similarly unlikely, we have to stop him before he gets his hands on the information."

"How do you intend to stop him?"

Yuri turned halfway, looking over her shoulder to meet Jessica's gaze. "Are you kidding?"

Jessica looked at Yuri strangely.

"We kill him," Yuri said simply before turning back to the laptop.

"Kill?" Jessica's voice was incredulous. "He's an ex-Russian KGB officer. And killing him surely isn't the only solution."

"Who or what he is doesn't matter in this business, Jessica. Even if he disappears off the face of the Earth, no one will care. He's a tool, and tools get rusty. Rusty tools get discarded. It's how it works here; always have, always will."

Jessica was slightly taken aback at Yuri's superficial analogy of a human life, but then again, it did make sense. People die in this business every day, and sometimes, none are the wiser.

"Killing him might not be the only solution," Yuri said as she typed in her password to the Doppelganger

database and tapped the Enter key, waiting for the main screen to come up. "But it's the quickest, simplest and cleanest way. He dies, we retrieve the information, and the Russians don't get any smarter than they should."

Jessica nodded slowly, though she knew Yuri couldn't see. "Shouldn't we contact the US government? I mean, if everything you've said is true, this is a matter of national security."

"First of all, The US government is going to do nothing but call you crazy if you claim that Fermilab's lost information of highly classified value. The soft information at Fermilab is security checked, tagged and locked away every single day. It's next to impossible to smuggle anything out. How Tae Woo's moles did it, we still don't know. Nobody is going to believe you if you say that the Russians have been studying anti-matter for the past eight years; they're just too self-centered. Second of all, they're going to accuse you of instigating malice between the US and Russian governments without substantial evidence. And third of all, if they do believe you, they're going to hold endless panic-ridden meetings in the Oval Office talking about declaring states of emergency and how there's not enough sugar in their coffees before even thinking about mobilizing a force as backup or intervention, which I honestly doubt they can do in less than three days."

"So we're on our own?"

Yuri nodded gravely, attention still focused on the laptop in front of her. With a series of clicks and a rapid hammering of keys, she brought up a screen that looked somewhat like Google Earth; just much more sophisticated.

Jessica moved closer to inspect. "What's this?"

"It's our global tracking system. I'm pinpointing the location of Kim Tae Woo and Kim Taeyeon as well as their personal guard in Rio."

With more hitting of keys and mouse clicks, the screen zoomed in to show an enhanced view of Rio de Janeiro with two separate marked locations to the North and East, apparently villas tucked away in the surrounding jungles.

"Who would you like to look at first?" Yuri inquired, looking over her shoulder at Jessica.

"Let's try Taeyeon."

Yuri nodded, moving the mouse over one of the marked red dots on the screen. As the mouse hovered over the dot, a small caption appeared, displaying a 360 degree view of the exterior structure. She clicked, and the screen switched to a top view of the building, its walls and various roofs transparent like a 3-D blueprint. In it, about a dozen or more blue pointers moved slowly or remained still all around the villa.

"Those are the Kims' personal bodyguards. Highly trained in various martial arts and firearms, extremely well disciplined. Most of them are ex-military. Not your average street thug," Yuri said, pointing to the blue pointers on the screen.

There was something Jessica didn't quite understand. "How is your system able to detect and identify everyone in there in realtime?"

"It's the year 2018, Jessica, and technology has taken many huge leaps forward. We have our own satellites in orbit, and some of our technology is home-brewed, giving us access to information that even the most technologically advanced government agencies would give an arm and leg to acquire. What the global tracking system does is it sends penetrating rays of energy down to the desired location to map out the surroundings, giving us an accurate-to-the-inch view of whatever it is we want to look at. As for the humans, we track them individually."

"What do you mean, individually?"

"Human beings can also be considered objects of interest. If we suspect that certain individuals are involved in criminal activities or might need investigating in the future, their next hospital or clinic visit will include a complimentary 'disease immunization' jab, which is actually the introduction of a non-intrusive, low-profile radioactive isotope into the subject's bloodstream. This tags them as individual objects and allows the satellites to track their location, as well as read basic information about them such as heart rate and general medical condition. Today, we can see tens of thousands of such objects in realtime, anytime, anywhere."

Jessica's eyes widened. There was no doubt that she was shocked at the fact that this gross invasion of privacy was actually happening in the real world.

"Of course, some slip through because our plan isn't exactly foolproof, and we do lose a few in the case of blood transfusions and the like, so in those cases we have to do it the old fashioned way, like you guys do."

"Isn't what you're doing illegal? I mean, injecting people with foreign matter without their knowledge..."

"Does saving the world need to be legalized before it can be done? We use every possible means to ensure our goals are met. We take no chances."

"So...am...I one of those people?" Jessica seemed to stutter. There was a certain uneasiness creeping into her.

Yuri turned to look at her again. "Why...yes you are." She almost seemed guilty for the confession. "An emotionally scarred individual who found some sort of solace in working for the FBI...you seemed like an interesting subject."

"I don't believe you," Jessica said.

Yuri sighed, turning back to the computer. With a scroll of the mouse, she zoomed out and into another region of the map. The screen now hovered above a small building surrounded by jungle. Zooming in further, she initiated the penetrative mapping, allowing them to see through the outlines of the building. In the middle, two pointers were huddled close together.

Jessica remained stoic.

Hovering the mouse over one of them, a small caption appeared, and on the left was a full color photograph of Jessica. Jessica's eyes widened.

Yuri looked at some of the realtime information on the right, and looked up at Jessica. "Hey, relax. Your heart rate is at 130bpm."

Unconsciously, Jessica raised a hand and placed it on her chest, and to her surprise found that her heart

was, indeed, beating a lot faster than usual. She remained speechless.

"Believe it or not, Jessica, that's you."

Jessica immediately felt sick. She vaguely recalled what the doctor had told her on her visit to the hospital for her mandatory checkup before her inception into the FBI.

It's a newly-released immunization for an advanced strain of tetanus. Don't worry; there are no side-effects whatsoever.

Jessica shook the thought from her head, and rubbed her forearm. She figured that changing the subject would probably take her mind off the fact that she was tainted with some tracking drug. "So...where is Taeyeon?"

Yuri turned back to the laptop, zooming out again, moving back to the villa and scanning the screen for a different colored pointer. There was one colored yellow, standing outside what looked like a large room. A blue pointer - a bodyguard - was moving away from it at that moment. She pointed to it.

"That's her."

She watched as the yellow pointer slowly moved into the room and stopped beside a green one.

"Who's that?" Jessica asked while pointing at the other pointer, furrowing her brow.

Yuri glanced at Jessica out of the corner of her eye. Carefully, she hovered the mouse over the pointer. A small caption came up, with a picture on the left followed by a large amount of text on the right, along with other realtime information.

Jessica gasped, bringing a hand to her mouth. Yuri's eyes fell to the keyboard. She bit her lower lip.

"Stephanie."

Tiffany stirred at the sudden flash of light, burning her eyes through her closed eyelids. With much effort, she lifted her head from its hanging position. Slowly, she opened her eyes, barely making out the figure standing in front of her. Her vision was still blurry. Kim Taeyeon was standing in front of her, a small white towel in hand. She moved over to the side to grab a stool, which she brought up and placed beside Tiffany's restraining chair.

Sitting down, she dipped the towel into a bucket of water and brought it up to Tiffany's face.

Tiffany turned sharply away from the towel, biting her lip.

"Don't be stubborn," Taeyeon said, moving the towel closer.

"Why are you doing this?" Tiffany said, so soft it was almost a whisper, head still turned away.

"If you get an infection and die of complications, you'll be of no use to me," Taeyeon said simply, brushing the side of Tiffany's face with the towel.

Tiffany winced; the contact stung greatly as the towel slid over a cut on her cheek. Somehow, she felt Taeyeon hadn't meant what she'd just said. She felt the warm water being squeezed out of the towel and coursing down the side of her face. Looking down at her lap, she saw the reddish-brown solution of blood and water dripping down steadily.

Taeyeon squeezed out the remaining water into a separate bucket before she dipped it in fresh water again and continued to clean the side of Tiffany's face. The latter winced again.

"Keep still. you're only making this more difficult for yourself."

"It..." Tiffany felt something well up in her eyes again. Something in her twisted into a knot. "It hurts."

Taeyeon pulled her hand back, and she held her breath. She looked at the woman sitting in front of her, forearms strapped to the arms of the chair, ankles similarly strapped to its legs. Tiffany would not look at her. Inside, she felt a wave of hurt, crashing again and again against the fragile surface of her heart. Hearing those two words had somehow opened her up to vulnerability again. She clenched her jaw,

reaching her hand out again. She was gripping the towel so tightly that the water was being squeezed out of it even before touching Tiffany's face.

"Look at me."

Tiffany remained still.

"I said, look at me!" Taeyeon raised her voice, causing Tiffany to jump slightly. The latter turned her head slowly to meet Taeyeon's eyes. They were still cold, devoid of any emotion; the same eyes she saw before she blacked out on the bed.

Taeyeon's hand fell to her lap. "You brought this upon yourself, Stephanie."

Tiffany's eyes fell.

"I said look at me, damn it," Taeyeon hissed, earning Tiffany's gaze once more. Her next words were cold and frighteningly believable.

"Believe me when I say that I'm done with you. I will never allow myself to fall for you again. Remember this, Stephanie Jung. Remember it well."

A single tear fell from Tiffany's eye.

Taeyeon stood up, bringing the stool with her. She paused at the doorway, glancing over her shoulder. "Clean yourself up and get dressed."

With that, she stepped out and the steel door slammed shut with a series of locking bolts and levers. There was a brief silence before Tiffany heard a few beeps, and suddenly, with a loud cracking sound, the metal straps around her forearms and ankles snapped open, freeing her. Tiffany rubbed her wrists, tears still rolling slowly down her cheeks. For some reason, she didn't care about the throbbing in her head, the searing pain in her face, the shivering from the surrounding cold or the fact that her life was hanging by a thread.

Slipping off the chair, she fell to her knees and began to cry.

Outside, Taeyeon leaned against the closed steel door, blinking her eyes continuously to fight back her incipient tears. She brought a hand over her heart and gripped at the thin fabric that was her shirt, staining it with Tiffany's blood.

Without a doubt, she was still in love with Tiffany Hwang.

Chapter 13 : The Fortress

"Stephanie."

Jessica's eyes remained fixed on the photograph of her sister, a face that was so familiar and yet strangely alien at the same time.

"Jessica-"

"What's going on?" The voice was cold and serious.

"Judging by the abnormal rate of hormone release and high heart rate...and the fact that she's right in the middle of a room, I'd say she's under interrogation," Yuri said carefully.

"Interrogation? You mean-"

"Taeyeon knows."

Something dropped inside of Jessica, a growing feeling of doom creeping up on her from the bottom up.

"We have to go get her."

"I agree, but Taeyeon will almost certainly kill her if we so much as try to get close. Acting rashly now will just put your sister in more danger."

"Look, if anything, Taeyeon's using Stephanie as insurance, at least up till the scheduled meeting. And what happens after that?"

Yuri remained silent. She knew the answer all too well.

"They're going to *kill* her," Jessica said. "And I'm not going to let that happen."

"Jessica, your job is to ensure the capture of Kim Taeyeon. Even if-"

Jessica cut her off. "My *job*," she paused for a moment, "changed when Stephanie came into the picture."

Jessica took a deep breath, weighing her next words carefully. "I have lost too much for one lifetime, and I will not allow myself to lose another. Not when I have the power to prevent it."

Yuri looked at Jessica closely. In those dark brown eyes, she saw a deep sense of purpose and an incipient anger, but those were merely a facade for something buried even deeper down. In those eyes, Yuri saw an anguished state of loss and suppressed hatred; a blurry mix of a thousand belligerent emotions compounded into a dark mass of pain. She cast her green eyes down at the floor, considering the options they had, and decided that they, in fact, had no other. She looked up, matching Jessica's intense gaze.

"Dawn is twelve hours away. I suggest we find the password to that armory now," Yuri suggested finally.

Jessica looked intently at Yuri and allowed herself a small sigh of relief.

"Thank you," she said earnestly.

"Let's get to work." Yuri nodded and turned back to the laptop, looking up the password within the secure folders. She found it and memorized the alphanumeric sequence.

"Do you have it?" Jessica said impatiently.

"Yeah." Yuri suppressed a giggle.

"What's so funny?" Jessica asked seriously.

"Nothing." Yuri huffed the last of her amusement out of her.

"Then let's go."

"Hold on, I've just got some make some final adjustments." Yuri brought up the global tracking screen, punching a few keys before fishing out her GPS from her jacket pocket. She fiddled around for a bit with the handheld gadget before clicking around with the laptop mouse, and there was a soft beep.

"There, I've synchronized the global tracking system with my GPS so that we can still use it as realtime surveillance while we're there," Yuri said, popping the GPS back into her jacket pocket. "Now let's go."

They duo exited the small hut into the cool night air. Crickets chirped and insects buzzed incessantly, providing a monotonous background noise which drowned out the crackling of dry grass and dead leaves under their hasty footfalls. Within seconds, they came to a smaller building, about a fifth the size of the house they were in. It stood near the treeline and seemed to be made entirely out of corrugated

tin, and a small keypad lay beside the entrance.

Yuri recalled the password Tiffany had placed in the laptop and smiled. It was a peculiar yet effective combination of numbers and alphabets, one she came across very few times in her line of work. It was a combination of a random word interjected with numbers from a numeric sequence, such as the numerical equivalent of *pi*, *e*, or other mathematical symbols. Simple, yet very effective.

p3i1n4k1f5a9n2y6 (*pinkfany* + 3.1415926, or *pi*)

She keyed in the password, and the keypad answered with a series of beeps and a loud mechanical click as the electronic lock disengaged. Lifting her hand, she placed it on the cold metal exterior and gave a little push. She quirked an eyebrow in great approval. Jessica peeked over her shoulder and produced the same reaction.

The heavy metal door eased open; it in actual fact was a five-inch thick reinforced steel door covered with a layer of corrugated tin. The interior was lit by a single lamp, bathing its contents with a soft blue hue. Racks upon racks of cold steel stood in the middle of the room and on the surrounding walls, displaying myriad firearms including rifles, submachineguns, shotguns, pistols, grenades, various accessories, bullet-proof vests and even a small rocket launcher. Yuri stepped in and discovered a small glass display case sitting in the corner of the room, filled with an astonishing variety of combat and throwing knives.

"A pity we can't use most of this stuff," Yuri sighed as her eyes moved over the room.

"Why?" Jessica inquired, giving herself a tour of the impressive display.

"It's the middle of the night, and we want to be in and out of this quick, clean, and most of all, quiet. We're going to have to settle for suppressed weapons. Small ones, at that, because of the confined spaces of close quarters combat," Yuri explained, inspecting the weapons with a quick glance. "Take your pick."

Jessica found herself in a similar situation as the one she was in before the supposed drug bust. She looked over the guns once, then twice, and sighed to herself. She couldn't use her own piece as she was

not issued a matching suppressor. She stepped up to a rack and picked out a USP Tactical, for which she found a matching laser pointer and suppressor in an underlying case. Good stopping power, decent magazine capacity, though a little big. "I'll stick to a pistol."

Yuri was too busy choosing her weapon to be bothered with Jessica's choice, and her face lit up when she spotted something suitable for her needs. She reached up and lifted a H&K MP7 off its rack, finding its matching suppressor and a couple of spare magazines nearby. Its telescopic stock, selective fire, forward grip and compact overall structure would make for an ideal close quarters weapon. She then moved over to the knife display case and frowned in disgust. She'd stick to her own. Popping a magazine into the housing, she pulled out the collapsible stock and cocked the weapon, looking through a sight fixed on its top rail. She didn't like the idea of reloading in the middle of a firefight, so thirty bullets in a magazine should suffice for her needs.

"Did you find something you like?" Yuri said, still looking through the optical sight. When she was satisfied, she switched the submachine gun to safe, slung it across her chest and spun it around, pulling the strap tight so that it was flush with her back.

"Yup. Let's go," Jessica said, screwing the suppressor on before cocking the pistol, flipping the safety on and popping it into a new thigh holster designed to hold a suppressed pistol.

They found themselves standing on thick grass once again. The full moon was sitting high up in the sky, casting a warm glow on the surroundings, giving nearby trees a ghostly white aura.

"How are we going to get there?" Jessica asked, finally noticing that they didn't have a mode of transport.

Yuri gave Jessica a somewhat twisted smile.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE I LET YOU TALK ME INTO THIS!" Jessica yelled through her helmet as she tightened her grip around Yuri's waist.

She yelped audibly as Yuri gunned the scrambler even faster, tearing down the dirt path at breakneck speed. Dust kicked up around them on both sides, blasting a maroon-colored jet in the motorcycle's wake. Jessica's blonde hair added to the palette as it whipped haphazardly behind her like a tail. Even in

the humid environment, the roaring, cold wind sent chills down Jessica's spine.

"WE'RE ALMOST THERE, HOLD ON," Yuri replied, as she leaned deeply into a corner and accelerated out of it.

She felt her breath hitch when Jessica tightened her grip around her waist even further, and felt a new pressure on her back. The MP7 was somewhat a hindrance, but Jessica had somehow managed to find an empty spot just below her left shoulder and pressed the side of her helmet against it. Their bodies would have molded together perfectly if not for the weapon and the helmets. Suddenly, Yuri felt a sharp pain in her heart as she was reminded of that night in Seoul where Jessica held her from behind, begging her not to leave. She blinked once, then twice, clenched and unclenched her jaw, and gunned the engine further.

She was certain that she had heard a whimper from behind.

Half an hour later, Yuri eased off on the gas and guided the scrambler to the side of a dirt road, shutting off the engine and allowing it to glide to a smooth stop beside a heavily defaced road sign. She kicked down the stand and leaned the motorcycle on it, reached up and slipped her helmet off, letting her long black hair fall back into place around her shoulders. Something was pulling on her stomach. She looked down. Jessica's hands were still around her waist, fingers locked with each other. Biting her lip to suppress a smile, she craned her neck to look back and found herself staring at the top of Jessica's helmet. The poor girl was still pressed into her back, hiding from a now nonexistent stream of passing air.

"Jessica."

No response.

"Jessica, we're here," Yuri pressed, turning to rap on the helmet with her knuckles.

Jessica stirred. "H-huh?" The voice was tiny and muffled through the confines of the helmet.

"We're here...You can let go of me now," Yuri said, still suppressing her mirth. She tugged on Jessica's

sleeve.

"O-oh...S-sorry," Jessica stuttered, quickly removing her hands from Yuri's waist. For a moment, she considered stalling taking off her helmet because she was dead sure she was blushing madly. Taking a deep breath and feeling the blood circulate away from her face, she carefully slipped her helmet off.

Her blonde hair cascaded around and past her shoulders, accentuating her milky white skin like an angelic mantle. A stray strand of hair lay across Jessica's forehead and she pushed it back behind her ear, biting her lower lip and then looked up at Yuri. The latter began to feel her ears go red. Quickly and somewhat awkwardly, Yuri slid off the motorcycle and onto the grass, smoothing down her suit. Jessica followed suit, slipping down the opposite side of the scrambler, teetering briefly on jelly-like legs before depositing her helmet on its seat. She found a rubber band in her pocket, reached up and tied her long blonde hair into a tight ponytail. Yuri could only stare in surreptitious admiration.

"You didn't have to hold on so tight, you know," Yuri said casually as she slipped her MP7 off her back, fiddling with it in the apparent act of checking the weapon. The moon provided a decent amount of illumination, and the last thing she'd wanted accentuated were her flushed cheeks and ears.

"Well you didn't have to go so fast," Jessica shot back, smoothing herself down, eyes darting from the ground to Yuri and back. "And you told me to hold on."

An unfathomable silence ensued and the both of them found themselves drowned in the jungle's muted susurrations.

Yuri slipped the MP7 back around her, and fetched a pair of black leather gloves from the inside of her jacket. She slipped them on before fishing out a similar pair, tossing them to Jessica. The latter caught them in one hand.

"Put those on," Yuri said, taking out her GPS and tapping at it furiously.

"What, now you want me to look like you, too?" Jessica said, suddenly realizing that she had not meant to sound so cold. She scrunched her eyes closed in frustration.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Yuri looked up from under her eyebrows. She decided against showing her frustration. "We're going to be trekking through about a mile of jungle to get to the villa. I'm sure you don't want to be cut by thorns and barbs, nor bitten by some of the most venomous spiders in the world."

Jessica immediately found a new interest in her shoes and felt herself flush from embarrassment. Quietly, she slipped on the gloves, finding them to be a perfect fit. She approached Yuri, who was still engrossed in her GPS.

On cue, Yuri began her ad-hoc briefing. "We're going to be moving north-east through the jungle in a straight line for about eight hundred meters before we come to the edge of the jungle. Beyond that is the villa compound, surrounded by gardens on all sides." She traced the path they were going to take, and the screen shifted and morphed to follow her finger. Soon the compound could be seen on the top right of the screen, and Yuri pulled the rest of it into view. "The west wall has a side door that's guarded by two men. Between the edge of the jungle and the west wall is a low wall and a hedge maze, so we're going to have to get past those first. Surveillance cameras are restricted to the villa interior, so we won't have to worry about those during our entry."

"And once we're inside?" Jessica asked.

"There's a security control room in the basement level, and we're going there first. Till then, we're going to have to avoid the cameras. The interrogation chamber is in the second basement level all on its own. We'll take the northwest stairwell down; there's an elevator but it's going to be under surveillance," Yuri explained before looking up at Jessica.

"My GPS system includes a security bypass that allows me to hack into the security system, unlocking any and all doors and freezing security cameras, so getting to the security control room is our first priority. After I hack into the system, we'll have a much easier time since we won't have to dodge the cameras every now and then."

Jessica nodded, slightly impressed at the technology held within such a small device. Looks like her NAVSTAR was for naught.

Yuri turned and held the GPS in front of her, marking off her starting point. She turned back and motioned Jessica forward.

"Let's go."

Fallen leaves and thick brush crackled under careful yet efficient strides as Yuri and Jessica made their way through an endless slew of enormous buttresses and old rainforest trees sprouting limitless meandering roots, with Yuri leading. The latter never looked back once. Shifting her attention from her GPS to the flora in front of her and back again, she surged forward with breathtaking speed, hopping around obstacles with sleek agility, making Jessica look like she was crawling by comparison.

"So-," Jessica managed to blurt out in between staggered breaths. "What about Kim Tae Woo?"

"What about him?" Yuri said, keeping her eyes forward.

"You said he was alive, and there was a story behind it. I want to hear it." Jessica struggled to say the words, gesticulating with her hands to keep her balance in the uneven terrain.

"It's complicated," Yuri replied simply, avoiding the question.

"Still, I want to-" Jessica's words were cut off by a stifled scream which, though short, surely managed to register as supersonic. She had tripped over a hidden buttress root, and felt herself hurtling forward with no hope of-

Huh?

Whether it was because of the swiftness or the fact that her world had briefly gone topsy-turvy due to her loss of balance, Jessica didn't notice that she had stopped in midair, and was now resting in the steady hands of Kwon Yuri. She looked up tentatively, and found herself staring into Yuri's deep green

eyes. The gems regarded her carefully, never shifting as they caught Jessica's own in a gripping gaze. The whispers and soft resonance of the surrounding jungle suddenly deadened, encasing the two in an awkward silence.

Yuri couldn't help but let out a small smile at the look on Jessica's face, which was an amusing mix of confusion, trepidation and shock.

"You should be more careful," she said softly, pushing forward and easing Jessica to a standing position. The latter quickly removed her hands from Yuri's forearms.

The action only served to widen Yuri's grin, and she looked at Jessica assuredly. "Let's slow down. We're not going to get anything done if you end up twisting your ankle, anyway."

Jessica gave a tiny nod, rubbing her forearm while keeping her eyes on the floor. Before she knew it, Yuri had turned and resumed her hike. She followed closely behind.

They continued forward at a more comfortable pace for a couple of minutes before Yuri suddenly broke the silence.

"It was the first case you'd ever failed," Yuri said.

"What?" Jessica looked up. Her eyes had been toward the jungle floor since they started moving again, for fear of embarrassing herself once more.

"Kim Tae Woo. He was en-route to the Miami Federal Detention Center to await transfer to a maximum security facility when he was assassinated by an unknown sniper," Yuri continued, refreshing Jessica's memory. Of course, the latter remembered everything all too well.

The FBI had received intel regarding a weapons deal between Kim Tae Woo and a Middle Eastern black market liaison in Miami a little over two years ago, and sent tactical teams to bust him red-handed. At the time, Jessica was the overall in-charge of the operation, and due to her sound leadership, it had gone perfectly well. The FBI made dozens of arrests including Kim Tae Woo himself and his Middle Eastern counterpart in a five-minute raid and seized over five million US dollars worth of weapons and high-grade explosives, scoring what would have been one of the largest weapons busts in the 21st

century, and saving the coalition forces in the Middle East a whole lot of trouble.

Their celebrations were cut short as complications arose on Tae Woo's transit to the Miami Federal Detention Center. As the delegation of vehicles stopped for a red light at a cross-junction in downtown Miami, five shots rang out in rapid succession. The first four hit the driver of the vehicle carrying Kim Tae Woo, an agent at his side, and two tactical squad members seated at the back, killing all of them instantly. The fifth had hit Tae Woo, presumably killing him as well. Chaos broke out as remnants of the delegation exited their vehicles, only to find all five members of the middle car dead. Ambulances arrived soon after, followed by a horde of local police, and paramedics retrieved the bodies. The sniper's nest was discovered soon after, but the perpetrator was never found.

"Except, he wasn't assassinated," Yuri said, breaking Jessica out of her reverie.

Jessica felt her pace slow involuntarily.

"Four people were killed in that incident, Jessica. The sniper had fired five shots, four of which were small-caliber, most likely full metal jacketed 5.56mms. He didn't want to make a huge mess by blowing their heads apart, so large-caliber was out of the question. Those four bullets killed the agents surrounding Kim Tae Woo." Yuri paused as she negotiated a rather large root. "The fifth bullet was special. Its projectile had a frangible casing containing fake blood, enclosed within a sabot to penetrate the bulletproof window glass. The impact to the head, however, did manage to knock Tae Woo out, and that luck turned out to be very helpful. In that kind of chaos, anyone would automatically assume all five passengers dead, and that was exactly what the sniper had intended."

"But we had confirmation that Kim Tae Woo was dead. An official autopsy was carried out determining his time and cause of death," Jessica tried to argue. She almost tripped over another root.

"One of the ambulances that arrived at the scene carried a team of Kim Tae Woo's own men, disguised as paramedics. They retrieved his unconscious self, tossed him in, and left the scene, and later, the country. Medical records can be easily forged, Jessica, especially when you have the wherewithal to finance the act. And the sniper...you didn't manage to find out who he was, but we did. In fact, we knew that this would happen from the start."

Jessica's mind was positively whirling. Yuri's enlightening explanation had not only succeeded in completely changing Jessica's perspective on the entire chain of events, but also brought a certain

shame to her as she now knew how she was blatantly fooled into thinking her newly captured prize had been killed and then forgotten.

"If your...your people knew that this was going to happen, then why didn't you intervene?"

"The higher-ups thought it best to let nature take its course and see how the plan developed. They knew why he was doing it, but what they didn't yet know was who would run the cartel in his place."

"His daughter, Kim Taeyeon."

"They decided that now is the time to step in, Jessica."

Not able to see Jessica's perplexed expression with her back turned to her, Yuri continued. "The sniper was one Choi Siwon, a professional hired by Kim Tae Woo to fake his death."

Jessica finally found the means to speak. "Is he in any way related to our current situation?"

"He was the other assassin hired to kill you."

"Then that means-"

"I killed him yesterday."

Jessica's breathing deepened as she continued to push herself forward through the unforgiving brush.

"I can't believe all of this..." She muttered to herself.

"The whole operation was a setup from the start. Kim Tae Woo had been planning his death and disappearance for some time, and all of you were simply pawns in a grand plan," Yuri said, surprising Jessica, who hadn't meant to be heard. "We'll deal with Kim Tae Woo once and for all soon enough, but

for now, let's focus on the matter at hand, shall we?"

Jessica remained silent as she followed Yuri for what felt like the last leg of their jungle trek.

A few minutes later, Yuri spotted a clearing beyond a copse of trees, and signaled for Jessica to stay crouched as they inched forward, careful not to make any unnecessary noise. Yuri cursed the full moon under her breath, as its illuminating rays threatened to silhouette them against the background should they unduly expose themselves. They paused a few meters behind the edge of the treeline and settled into a prone position. Jessica lay flat on the ground beside Yuri, propped up slightly on her forearms as she surveyed the forward area.

"Don't move." Yuri's voice was suddenly grave and hushed, and Jessica turned her head guardedly to the side to meet her gaze.

She caught Yuri's eyes darting back and forth between her and something between them, and shifted her eyes to see what the woman was looking at. She choked back a scream, trapping it in her throat before it could escape through her lips.

An enormous spider was crawling ever so slowly between them, its light brown color camouflaging it against the mass of dead leaves. Jessica predicted that it was at least as big as her outstretched hand. She could just make out its huge fangs and the thick dark stripes that covered its legs.

Slowly, Yuri reached down to the side of her leg, finger closing onto something. She began to draw a long, blackened blade out of the side of her shin and raised it in the air as surreptitiously as she could. The gigantic spider continued inching toward a helpless Jessica, front fangs bared and held high in an aggressive stance.

With immeasurable speed, the blade came plunging down toward the ground, and before the spider could jump away, it was pierced square in the sternum, the blade driving all the way down through the creature and into the soft soil below. Yuri gave the blade a quick shove downward, slicing the spider's head in half. It twitched for a few seconds before finally laying to rest, blood and innards spilling from the gaping wound. There was a sharp exhalation of air, and Jessica remained in her paralyzed state.

"Brazilian wandering spider. Would have had you in cardiac arrest within minutes of a bite, and I couldn't just let it pass because it would attack as soon as it decided you were in its way. Rather aggressive buggers, those," Yuri said quietly, taking out a cloth from her jacket pocket and wiping the blade clean. She tossed the tainted material over her shoulder and sheathed the weapon. Her eyes travelled back to a motionless Jessica.

"Hello?" Yuri wheedled, waving a hand in front of Jessica's slack face.

"Oh." Jessica's eyes focused. "Um...sorry. It's just that...I'm really...scared of...spiders."

Yuri smiled. "I know."

"I'm sorry?" Jessica was startled by the unexpected answer.

"I mean, I could tell, judging by your paralytic face," Yuri quickly tried to cover, and shifted her view forward.

You've been terrified of spiders since you found one in your shoe when you were eight. I learned that after putting a rubber spider in your purse on your birthday. Almost landed you in hospital, it did.

Yuri felt around for her GPS, picked it up and surveyed the compound. Jessica eased herself closer to share the view.

"There's a perimeter wall ahead of us, and beyond that is the hedge maze. See the entrances and exits? We'll take this one, here." Yuri pointed to a gap in a hedge just beyond the stone wall. "We'll split up and take different routes in opposite directions, and meet up at this exit, here. Just behind that exit is the kitchen door."

Jessica gave Yuri a strange look and decided to let the matter rest. She looked intently at the GPS, memorizing the correct path through the maze in order to get to the other side. Looking further up the screen, she noticed two blue pointers on either side of the kitchen door. She looked up at Yuri.

"Ready?" Yuri asked.

"Ready."

The duo pushed themselves off the ground and into a crouched position, and Yuri led the way out of the treeline, stopping briefly at the edge to peruse her surroundings before giving Jessica the ok. They shuffled silently to the stone wall and flattened themselves against it. Yuri got into a high-kneel, holding one palm over another out in front of her, and nodded to Jessica. The latter took the hint, stepping onto them and found the top of the wall. She pushed herself up, lifted her legs and swung them lithely over, spinning on one palm and landing the other on the opposite side before easing herself downward and dropping to the ground on the other side. She bounded to the hedge wall, flattening herself against it and waited for Yuri to join her.

On the opposite side, Yuri sized up the wall from her crouched position. It was a little high to conquer alone, but it was nothing that she couldn't handle. Backing up a little, she sprinted toward the wall, running up it and caught the top surface with her hands, using them as leverage to lift her legs into the air and spun them over, pushing herself off with her palm to enter another 180 degree spin before landing on the balls of her feet and rolling to break the fall. A few meters away, Jessica's jaw went slightly slack. It was a display of tremendous agility and perfect fluidity. Yuri scurried over at a crouch toward the waiting agent.

"Still remember the route?" Yuri whispered, reaching back to reach for her weapon.

Jessica nodded, taking the pistol from her thigh holster.

Yuri reached into her jacket pocket. "Here, take this and put it on."

Jessica accepted the tiny black object, straining to see what it was.

"It's a communicator. We might not be going in blind, but being mute isn't a good thing either."

Jessica fiddled a bit with the tiny accessory before sticking it securely into her left ear.

"Weapons free. If you meet with any resistance at all, shoot first, ask questions later. Got it?" Yuri flicked the safety down to single-fire, and looked at Jessica. Was she trembling?

"Hey, relax, it's not like you haven't done this before," Yuri said with an assuring smile.

Jessica looked up and into Yuri's green eyes, pulled her lips into a tight line, and gave a small nod.

"We're going to get her out of this, okay? Just trust me." Yuri's smile widened. Jessica was speechless at the gleam of white teeth under the bright moonlight. And those mysterious green eyes...who was this person?

"See you on the other side," Yuri said, taking off without waiting for Jessica.

Jessica moved cautiously along the dirt path, surrounded on both sides by more than nine feet of neatly trimmed hedges. Her hands were on her pistol, trigger finger trembling slightly as it rested on the side. She approached the first corner and flattened herself against the hedge on her right, then stepped out in a flash, weapon at the ready. Clear. She proceeded forward, passing the next few corners in a similar fashion. Soon, she arrived at her first junction, and she tried to recall the route she'd memorized earlier.

Left, right, right, left, right, straight, left, left, straight, right, left. Damn, never have I wanted a pen and a piece of paper more than now.

Jessica forged ahead, repeatedly calling up the route in her memory as she negotiated the seemingly endless turns and corners, and she stopped at another junction.

Crap.

Jessica called upon her memory again and again, but each time, her mind simply drew a blank. She looked around, and suddenly every direction seemed to look exactly the same. An incipient panic began to well up from the pit of her stomach, and she felt cold sweat building up in her palms. She was lost.

"Turn ninety-degrees to your right, and go straight ahead," a voice called into her ear. Amber.

Jessica breathed a relieved sigh, and did as she was told. As she turned the final corner, she found herself in a long, straight path; Yuri crouched on one side of a gap ahead. She moved forward to join Yuri, crouching on her side of the gap.

"Thanks," Jessica whispered, looking rather flustered. Yuri could only smile.

Yuri gestured her head toward the outside, and signaled Jessica using her fingers.

One on either side of the door. You take the one on the left. Shoot on three.

Jessica nodded.

Yuri counted down with outstretched fingers.

One...two...

Three.

Chapter 14 : Acid Rain

A couple of soft thumps and then muffled cracks broke the dead silence of the night as two bullets found their way into the guards' skulls, kicking their heads backward and into the wall behind with a dull thud. It took two seconds for the guards' knees to buckle, and their lifeless bodies slid noiselessly down along the whitewashed surface of the walls. The small caliber used in Yuri and Jessica's weapons weren't

powerful enough to create an exit hole; they had done their job by penetrating the guards' skulls and ricocheting around inside, obliterating their brains, death arriving soon after a starburst of pain that lasted barely a second.

As they collapsed, Yuri nodded once and moved out of their shady spot, keeping low to the ground while surging forward with military efficiency, Jessica following closely behind. They climbed a short flight of steps and onto a raised stone platform, passing two sets of covered tables and pool chairs before stopping on either side of the kitchen door, flattening themselves against the adjacent walls.

Yuri found a thumbprint detection pad on the right of the door, and promptly reached down to grab one of the dead guard's wrists, lifted it up and pushed his thumb into the pad. A small LCD screen above the pad blinked to life as a biometric sensor slid up and down the length of the pad, registering the guard's thumbprint. A picture of the guard appeared in the screen, and a second later, a beep and shifting of mechanical locks confirmed the unlocking of the door.

Yuri checked her GPS, zooming into their section of the villa. All clear, for now. Nodding to Jessica, she gently pushed down on the door handle and swung it outward on oiled hinges, allowing Jessica to move inside.

Yuri stepped in after Jessica, finding herself in the dark confines of a modern kitchen, complete with marble tabletops, expensive kitchenware including an impressive collection of cooking knives. Once again, Yuri consulted the GPS, satisfied that the only guards on this level were on the other end of the villa, where more exits were located. She found the north-west stairwell.

MP7 in both hands, Yuri moved silently around a counter, being careful to walk in a full heel-toe motion to minimize noise. She exited the kitchen and turned left to face a long, carpeted corridor with heavy wood doors on either side, its flanking walls sporting old mirrors and ornate vases. Jessica took up the rear, occasionally turning to walk backwards to watch for any unexpected surprises. Yuri paused at the end of the corridor, beyond which lay the cramped spiral staircase that led down to a deep, yawning blackness. She held the GPS up for Jessica to see.

There was a camera covering the stairwell, and it was the domed variety; the kind which one could not ascertain its current field of vision. Yuri pointed behind Jessica.

Cover me.

Jessica nodded, watching her back while Yuri began to temporarily disable the camera. She zoomed in on the GPS, found the obstructing camera, and tapped a finger on the icon. The GPS sent out a short-wave signal to the camera, secretly inquiring its status. A semi-opaque wedge formed in front of it, showing the field of view and direction it was currently surveying. According to the GPS, it switched between views of the stairwell and the corridor at a right angle to theirs every three seconds. Yuri frowned. It was possible to get past, but the timing was going to be very tight. She tapped Jessica's shoulder and signed her instructions.

Three second window. On my count.

Yuri waited for the camera to level its view on the stairwell, and began counting.

One thousand, two thousand, three thousand...

Go.

Yuri leapt forward, reaching the stairwell in two strides and bounded down the narrow stone steps, straining her calves to make as little noise as possible. Jessica kept close behind, almost crashing into Yuri as her smaller frame allowed for a quicker start. Just as the camera switched back, Jessica had ducked into the shadows.

"Hey, did you see that?"

"What?"

"The north-west stairwell. I thought I saw something go down the stairs real quick."

"Probably just your eyes playing tricks on you, Dave."

"No I swear I saw something. Do we have any blonde guards?"

"Blonde? Dude, let me do you a favor and get you some coffee, huh?"

"I swear I saw?"

"Triple espresso. Got it."

Yuri and Jessica reached the lower level, hustling to a nearby wall and out of the light. A long, narrow corridor stretched out from the stairwell, empty and bathed in a harsh white light. They huddled close together in the deepest part of the shadows, the only light being the dimmed display of Yuri's GPS. Yuri surveyed their surroundings, locating the control room through a door to the left. A white pointer, representing low-level security staff who were otherwise of minimal threat, was moving toward the door from the inside. She held a palm up, signaling Jessica to wait.

They heard the crack of a door being opened and a soft click as it shut on its own backswing, and a steady tattoo of muffled footfalls as the tech made his way down the hall towards them. Yuri flattened herself against the wall, motioning Jessica to move further back into the shadows. Jessica complied, inching backward until she found herself flush against another wall. Her fingers tightened around her pistol. Seconds passed, the footfalls growing louder and more distinct, accompanied by a gravelly grunt as the tech cleared his throat.

An outstretched foot appeared beyond the corner of the wall, in half-pace. Yuri waited for him to pass, then leapt out and placed one hand on the crook of his neck, the other on his temple on the opposite side. With one swift motion, she pushed, and a loud snap confirmed the breaking of his neck. He collapsed soundlessly into Yuri's arms, and Jessica watched in awe as she effortlessly dragged him across the floor into the shadows. Yuri dumped the body in a pitch-dark corner searched his pockets, found a keycard and motioned for Jessica to come forward.

"Control room's to the left. There's at least one more inside," she whispered.

They came out into the light, moving silently across the drab corridor before stopping at a nondescript metal door. A keycard slide lay beside the knob, and Yuri slid the dead tech's access card through. With a beep, the door automatically unlocked and eased ajar.

"Marcus, I'm telling you-" The tech paused midway as he spun on his chair to face Yuri, standing in the doorway.

"Who the hell are-" His words were cut off as something akin to a shadow zipped through the air, hitting him in his left eye. The throwing knife burrowed itself deep into the socket, splitting the eye in half and piercing his brain. The tech jerked backward in his chair, twitching uncontrollably, causing it to fall backward, and ended up sprawled awkwardly across the ground. In the blink of an eye, Yuri was above him. She knelt down, yanked the sunken knife out of his eye socket, covered his mouth with a palm before he could scream and slit his throat. Moments later, he lay still.

Jessica almost gagged. She found herself staring at Yuri. How had the woman gotten all the way over there so fast?

Yuri flicked the blood off the knife, wiped it and slipped it up her sleeve. A single unfocused eye stared back at her, mouth agape and yawning.

Don't look at me like that.

Yuri stood up, roving her keen eyes over the security console spread out in front of her. Dozens of small screens dominated the wall above the console, displaying monochromatic images of live feeds from cameras all over the villa's interior. She spotted guards in many of them, patrolling the corridors in pairs. Glancing over the other screens, she did a mental calculation. There were more than thirty guards. Much more.

She found an LCD screen and keyboard, and brought up the command prompt, punching in a series of commands. She then reached into her jacket, fishing out a thumbdrive, which she uncapped and plugged into a nearby reader. A small window popped up as the system read the drive's contents, and

automatically began to initiate the bypass protocol. Yuri pushed up her sleeve and started her countdown timer for ten minutes. Jessica spied the CCTV screens, and found that the feeds had somewhat frozen. Typing more commands, Yuri brought a 3D blueprint appeared onscreen, displaying four levels: Second floor, Ground floor, Basement One and Basement Two. She brought up the security screen, unlocked the door to the interrogation room and disabled its security features.

"There, the CCTV feeds are on a five-second loop. That way the pair on the next shift won't be able to see us on camera. Help me move this guy," Yuri said quickly, extracting the thumbdrive and tucking it away. She and Jessica lifted the obese body up by its underarms, dragging it across the length of the control room. Yuri found a storage closet, opened it, and they deposited the body inside.

"Now let's go get Stephanie."

Tiffany sat stoically on the chair, arms and ankles restrained. She had stopped crying, and her bloodshot eyes were intensely focused, contrary to the dim, wild ones from before. Something played repeatedly in the inside of her head, and no matter how much she pondered over it, it didn't even begin to make any sense.

What the hell is going on?

A succession of loud mechanical shifts brought her out of her trance, and she suddenly found her arms and ankles free from the chair restraints. Her eyes widened in wonder, and they looked instinctively to the door. It was ajar. For a moment, she was flabbergasted. Had Taeyeon returned? Or had Yuri and Jessica?

With a twisted sense of hope, she tried to push herself off the chair to stand up, but fell right back down as her knees buckled from the fatigue. She cursed as her mind spun in a whirlpool of dizziness, and moments later, two men in suits entered the room, weapons at the ready.

"What the hell is going on here?" The one in front barked, Glock pointing straight at her.

Tiffany could only stare.

"Go up to the control room and see what's wrong."

The other one spun on his heel, and suddenly there was a sharp, distinctive *ssssshhkk!*, like the sound of a long blade being drawn. A similar sound followed almost immediately after, but this time it sounded dull; wet even. The guard slumped to the side, blood splattered to the ground on both sides and spurting profusely from his neck. Before the first guard could turn, there was another sickening *slrrrrrrrk!*, and Tiffany found herself staring wide-eyed at two blackened blades emerging suddenly from the middle of the man's chest, inches away from each other. His mouth was agape in shock and horror, and he let out a moan akin to a yawn as he was lifted a couple of inches off the ground, his piece clattering to the floor. His legs swung about in panic. He was thrown to the side, limp body sliding smoothly off the blades with another wet *slrrrrrrrk!* Before he hit the floor, the figure wielding the pair of long, curved blades twisted in an arc and slashed him across the back of his neck, creating a gaping wound half as wide as his neck and severing his spinal cord. Death would be instantaneous. The lifeless body collapsed to the floor in an awkward heap, a crimson pool forming almost immediately.

Tiffany turned her attention to her savior, brandishing the blades in a backhand grip, dressed in a fitting suit. She gasped.

"Yu-"

"Don't try to speak, Tiffany." Yuri leveled a meaningful gaze at her, furrowing her brows deeply.

Tiffany turned to Jessica, who stood just by the door, staring at her, and back to Yuri. She nodded her understanding.

"Thanks."

Yuri did her best to flick the blood off her blades and slipped them back into the hidden sheaths, and moved forward to help Tiffany up. The latter found her balance with some effort, but still needed to be supported by the taller woman. They shuffled to the door with some difficulty, Jessica stepping backward into the corridor to make room.

"Aren't you going to say hi to your little sister?" Tiffany said softly as she approached Jessica, managing a weak smile.

Jessica was statuesque, and, unexpectedly, a small smile broke out across her thin lips.

"It's nice to see you again."

Yuri grunted. "Let's save the reconciliation for later, shall we? We only have a few minutes left."

"Right." Jessica moved quickly to Tiffany's side, supporting her opposite Yuri.

They moved forward with agonizing slowness, pausing briefly at the ends of corridors. With each step, Tiffany seemed to be growing weaker, and their advance became increasingly laborious.

Yuri huffed to a stop. "This isn't going to work. Stephanie's too weak for us to be able to sneak out. We have to find another way."

"But how? It'll be impossible to gun our way out."

Tiffany immediately felt guilty for being a burden. She wished she hadn't been so weak, or that her body was able to better combat the aftereffects of the drug. Being a liability felt like hell.

"No it won't." Yuri steadied herself and held Tiffany across the waist with one arm, and slipped out her GPS. She studied it for a few seconds, and looked up.

"Follow me."

In a few minutes, they arrived at the ground level, and began to make their way towards the east end of

the villa. The problem was, it was the east section that was the most heavily populated with guards, and they'd have to get past them to get to their destination, which was a separate smaller building sitting just outside the east entrance. They struggled across a long corridor, and Yuri felt increasingly worried as the narrow path had no cover on either side, effectively exposing them till they reached the other end.

Her worst fears were confirmed when she spotted a couple of guards emerging from the other end of the corridor.

"Jessica, take them out before they call for backup!" Yuri hissed.

Jessica drew her weapon too late under Tiffany's awkward weight, and the guards spotted them, drawing their weapons.

"Intruder in the east wing!" One of them shouted into his earpiece, taking aim.

"Get down!" Yuri pulled Tiffany along with her, taking cover behind a small chest of drawers below an antique mirror. Jessica dropped to the other side, fortunate to find cover behind a small tree pot just as the guards began blasting away. A mirror shattered, glass shards splaying all across the floor and on them.

Jessica dropped to a high-kneel, aiming her weapon and popping off a couple of shots in the guards' direction. They hit the walls just inches away from them, spraying bits of plaster and puffs of pulverized stone into the air and onto the ground. Yuri pulled out her MP7 and switched to full automatic, popping out to add a few bursts of her own. The guards returned fire, the blasts from their pistols echoing deafeningly across the corridor and around the house. The others would surely hear them, and soon the girls would be surrounded.

"We can't stay here!" Jessica shouted above the shooting, still firing in their direction.

"Give me covering fire! I'll move forward and then you'll bring up the rear with Tiffany in tow!" Yuri shouted back. She turned to face a frightened and helpless Tiffany, putting a hand on her shoulder. "You're going to be alright. Just stay down and trust us."

With that, Yuri moved out of their spot, moving forward steadily while firing the MP7 in short bursts, knocking off edges of wall and sending bullets whizzing past the hidden guards and into the windows that sat beyond. They exploded into a thousand glass shards, spraying across the floor and the outside. At that moment, both guards exposed themselves in the corridor, and Yuri immediately dropped to a kneel and fired two bursts, hitting both of them across the chest. They staggered back from the force of the impacts, falling backward onto the floor. Yuri moved quickly to the end of the corridor and took up a position along the wall.

"Move!" Yuri shouted back to Jessica, who hopped over to Tiffany, helping her up. They moved forward as best they could.

More guards had arrived beyond the corridor, and Yuri took them down, one by one. She found the optical sight on the MP7 to be a hindrance considering the fact that the guards were approaching from all directions, and slung it across her back, picking up a dead guard's Glock along with a couple of spare magazines, and continued returning fire, using only one or two shots for each target to conserve ammunition. Many of the men fell to her quick aim just as they appeared in her field of view, with efficient shots to the head or heart. One who was hit in the chest earlier began to squirm, reaching for his piece. Yuri turned and placed another bullet in his head.

Jessica arrived with Tiffany, and Yuri turned, urging them forward. She summoned a throwing knife with a flick of the wrist, and held it across her gun hand, using it as a tactical knife. "Come on, the door's just up ahead!" She fired three shots in quick succession at a guard who appeared at the top of a nearby staircase, sending him toppling over the railing and falling to the marble floor below..

They moved quickly toward the east entrance, and suddenly, a pair of guards appeared right in front of them out of a corridor, and Yuri spun on her heel, putting one bullet in one of the guard's heads and lunged at the other, driving the knife all the way to the hilt into his neck, and pulled it right out toward her, almost severing his head. He crumpled to the ground, hand on his neck as blood spurted out. Another appeared from the opposite side, and Yuri spun again, pulling the trigger but hearing nothing but a click as the magazine was empty. The guard smirked, raising his weapon to fire when Yuri cocked her left arm back and threw the knife, catching him square in the Adam's apple. He clutched his neck, whimpering and wheezing, knees buckling.

The trio finally reached the east entrance, and Yuri hopped forward and kicked it square in the middle. The door burst open in a spray of splinters and broken pieces of metal from the destroyed locks, and Jessica and Tiffany shuffled outside into the cool night air. Yuri covered them, walking backwards, ejecting the empty magazine and slipping in a fresh one, racking the slide to chamber a round. More

guards were approaching from inside, and she fired a few aimed shots, not hitting anyone but enough to keep them back.

They had arrived in the garage, and Jessica found herself in front of a black Maserati Gran Turismo. She pulled Tiffany further into the garage and out of the doorway.

"Are you hurt anywhere?" She asked, touching Tiffany in various places.

"No, I'm fine. I'm sorry, Jessica." Tiffany's eyes were glittering with moisture.

"Don't say that. We're going to be okay. Alright? We're going to be fine," Jessica said, placing a hand on top of Tiffany's head. The latter managed a weak smile.

An alarm began to sound across the villa compound, and the rest of the guards would soon be upon them. Yuri fired a couple of rounds at what would surely be a bulletproof window, unlocked the door and hopped in, ripping off a panel on the underside to expose a mess of wires.

"Cover me," she said, trying to hotwire the car.

Jessica leaned Tiffany against the side of the car, training her weapon toward the villa's east entrance. Guards had begun to crowd at it, seeking cover as they awaited more backup. She fired toward them nonetheless, if only to keep them back for as long as possible. Seconds passed, and she found herself out of ammo, and she reached for a fresh magazine. She didn't see a guard taking aim at her, and he fired. Jessica felt her left leg being thrown savagely backward as a bullet struck her in the shin, deflecting off the shin bone and ricocheting into a nearby wall. She grunted, dropping to a kneel from the impact.

"Jessica!" Tiffany screamed, instinctively rushing toward her.

An intense, searing pain swelled from the wound, and she let out a whimper, gritting her teeth to control her shock. Pushing up the fresh magazine, she pulled back the slide and fired, hitting the guard in the forehead.

"I'm okay, I'm okay. Get back!" Jessica hissed through strained breaths, motioning Tiffany away.

Just then, the Maserati roared to life.

"Jessica, let's go!" Yuri yelled from the inside of the car, taking aim with her Glock and providing covering fire for Jessica. Her shots were more rapid this time, but no less accurate; a last ditch effort to keep the guards away long enough for Jessica and Tiffany to get in. More men fell under the hail of fire.

Jessica and Tiffany were now supporting each other, and they limped around the back of the car to the other side. Jessica opened the door, pushed her seat forward and shoved Tiffany in the back before pulling it back and hopping in, slamming the door shut.

"Go!"

Yuri shifted into first gear and gunned the engine, and the car surged forward, tires screeching, into the gravelly road beyond. One guard materialized out of the darkness, standing in their way, weapon pointed straight at them. Yuri snarled and accelerated, ramming him, sending the body flailing body hurtling across the bonnet and over them like a ragdoll.

Guards had begun to pour into the garage from the villa, and through her rear view mirror she could see them entering the other three cars; a BMW M3, Mercedes S-class and an Audi A8. Turns out things wouldn't be as simple as she'd thought. She shifted through the second and third gears, accelerating ceaselessly along the road as the villa's front wrought iron gate loomed into view. It grew larger and larger by the second, and as she shifted into fifth gear, she could only hope that the car was of true Italian construction.

"Get down! Stephanie, find something to hold on to!" Yuri shouted as she aimed for the middle of the gate, flooring the accelerator. The Maserati roared.

There was a tumultuous crash as the car hit the gate dead-center, throwing it wide open. The Maserati shuddered from the impact, and Tiffany was thrown against the front seat from the sudden deceleration. She groaned. Yuri shifted down to compensate for the drop in speed, and floored the accelerator once more as the car recovered from the impact. Jessica looked over her shoulder to see her sister sprawled hopelessly across the back, matted long hair splayed across her face. One eye was obscured by the mess of hair. She was a mess. Jessica began to giggle.

Tiffany looked up at her incredulously, holding onto the front seat for balance. "You're *laughing* at a time like this!?"

"I-hur hur-don't know-hur hur hur...must be the wound and...hur hur- the adrenaline rush," she blurted out in between chuckles, biting her lip to control her delirium.

Yuri took one look at Jessica and began to chuckle herself, and it quickly grew into a deranged, cackling laughter that reverberated in the confines of the car. Tiffany couldn't help herself, and the three women found themselves laughing mindlessly, sprinting away from an impending danger. The whole situation seemed surreal. A staggered flurry of shots rang out into the night, and a couple made contact with the car, hitting the rear window. It exploded and shattered glass sprayed all over Tiffany.

They stopped laughing.

Acid Rain [Liquid Tension Experiment - Acid Rain]

Yuri navigated the slender meanders of the tarmac road at 120 miles per hour, the purr of the Maserati's engine steadily climbing in pitch, making a beeline for the city, where she hoped the pursuers would not dare to follow. She spied her side mirrors and spotted the Audi coming up right behind her, and she swerved from side to side, keeping it back. Another burst of automatic weapons fire was hurled their way, and instinctively the three women ducked their heads as the bullets zinged past the vehicle thanks to Yuri's skilful driving.

Little did they know that the BMW was lined up right behind the Audi, and moments later it suddenly swerved out from behind it, slingshotting to the fore, coming up beside the Maserati fast. Yuri tried to maneuver, but it came up so fast that its bonnet was already past the Maserati's rear bumper, and it was inching into place beside them. The Audi's engine roared and it surged forward, coming up on the right. The two cars were now sandwiching the Maserati, almost lined up with Yuri. She gunned the engine, hoping to escape the trap that was forming on her sides, but the two flanking cars caught up easily. Checking her rear view mirror, she saw the Mercedes was lining up to close up the rear. Soon they would be surrounded. She checked her sides, and found both cars beginning to wind down their windows. Glancing toward the back, she made a quick calculation.

Just enough space.

"Hold on!" she shouted, and waited for the perfect moment before jamming down hard on the brakes, and made a hard left, shifting down to compensate for the drop in power.

The tires screeched against the tarmac as the car lurched and suddenly slowed to the left, just as the guards in the flanking cars began to open fire with their MP5s. The Maserati had just gotten out of their line of fire, and they ended up spraying bullets at each other instead. The burst from the BMW perforated the side of the Audi, hitting the driver across the shoulder and neck. The latter car suddenly swerved to the right as it lost control, careening into a barrier at the edge of the road and crashing through it, plunging into the forest beyond and smashing right into a buttress. Doors were quickly opened, but seconds later, an earth-shattering explosion shook the ground, a fireball erupting from the destroyed Audi.

Jessica looked back at the burning ruin, wide eyed. Tiffany was still trying to keep herself as low to the floor as possible.

"Hold on tight. This isn't over yet," Yuri said as she shifted up, flooring the accelerator.

The Maserati surged forward, easily passing the BMW which had slowed due to the shock and confusion. The Mercedes brought up the rear on the right side, and the three cars continued jostling for position as they tore down the road.

"Should I-" Jessica started, gripping her pistol.

"No!" Yuri exclaimed suddenly, later realizing her outburst. Jessica looked at her strangely.

"Just stay inside the car. The chances of getting hurt are less that way. Let me take care of them," Yuri said calmly, keeping her eyes firmly planted on the road ahead of her.

Yuri spotted something up ahead; a faint gleam of light approaching them. An outline began to manifest in the distant darkness; what looked like a truck was coming their way. Yuri smirked; she had an idea. She shifted up once again, gunning the engine. The speedometer read 160 miles per hour, and it was

increasing by the second. The truck began to take a more solid form now, and Yuri spied something that looked like a large tank on its rear. Perfect. She checked her mirrors: both her pursuers were at least fifty meters away.

"Wanna see more fireworks?" Yuri teased. Jessica gulped, and Tiffany's face paled.

The truck had spotted Yuri now, and it began blaring its horn, its deep bass carrying over the great distance between them. She eased the car right, and pushed it further. The two vehicles were now approaching each other at a combined speed of over two hundred miles per hour, and she'd have to be quick if she wanted to pull this off. The tanker was still blaring its horn as it passed, and just as it did, Yuri opened her door and leaned out. Jessica immediately panicked, leaning over toward her, but before she could pull Yuri back in, the latter had fired a burst from her MP7, hitting her target spot-on.

One of the tanker's rear tires burst in a loud pop, and the driver lost control as its rear jumped a few inches off the road and swerved to the side until the entire tanker was almost perpendicular to the road. The sudden change in direction caused the tanker to flip onto its side, sending a tremor through the ground as it did so, and it slid across the tarmac, sparks flying in all directions as the ground grated along the steel frame with an ear-splitting screech.

Inside the BMW, one of the guards watched in horror as the tanker slid toward them at speed, and he tapped the driver's shoulder in futility as the latter realized he that he could not maneuver around the incoming length of truck. At the last moment, he brought up his arms to shield his face as the car came within milliseconds from impact.

Far ahead in the Maserati, Jessica and Tiffany flinched as another blustering explosion rocked the ground. Tiffany felt something brush her as the shockwave buffeted the car, and she looked back, shielding her eyes from the bright flashes of light to see an enormous fireball many times the size of that produced by the Audi drifting up into the air, nondescript chunks of debris hurtling in all directions. A bonfire began to dominate the middle of the road, and to her left, a silver form had just emerged from the flames. The Mercedes was still on their tail.

Yuri knew the Mercedes had somehow evaded the tanker, but as she looked forward, she could make out buildings and other signs of urban life brimming in the distance. They were approaching the east side of the city; the one closest to the coast. Dawn was still hours away, and the night life in Rio was still very much in full swing. The Mercedes was gaining, and was now less than fifty meters away from them. A guard popped out, spraying bullets their way, a couple hitting the rear bumper. Still, the Maserati continued forward; an urban chase was now in sight.

Up ahead, officers at a toll booth spotted the speeding vehicles, and came out of their stations waving for them to stop. They never slowed, and seconds later they jumped to avoid the cars as they burst through the toll barriers, gunning into the city roads. One officer scurried back into his station and picked up a phone.

The two cars tore down a two-lane road, now merely ten meters away from each other, slipping and swerving to avoid cars parked roadside and panicked people. Club patrons and partygoers began screaming and scattering as automatic fire continued to pour from the Mercedes, the bullets pinging off cars and shattering the glass windows of surrounding establishments. Moments later, a familiar sound began to fill the air.

Sirens.

"Damn it, always the cops who come at the very last moment to make a mess out of everything," Yuri hissed. Jessica glared at her, but got no response.

Two police cars had emerged from a cross junction ahead, stopping in the middle, bumper to bumper in an ad-hoc roadblock, the troopers within exiting and standing behind the cars, revolvers drawn.

Yuri ignored the threat and floored it, aiming straight for the middle of the roadblock. The officers opened fire, but the distance between them was too great for the revolvers to handle, and bullets zinged off the tarmac and past the Maserati instead. By the time the car came within range, the officers had jumped out of the way. Jessica and Tiffany braced themselves as the Maserati broke through the roadblock with ease, its solid construction mashing the sides of the police cars with no significant damage to itself. The cars were each spun nearly 180 degrees. The Mercedes followed closely behind.

"Up there!" Jessica pointed toward her right, and Yuri followed her finger, spotting a man standing on the roof of a small building up ahead. He was bringing something up to his shoulder.

"Hold on!" Yuri shouted, making a sharp left and mounting the curb, the car bumping wildly as it did so.

An RPG rocket came flying towards them with a whistling stream of propellant exhaust, hitting a spot just shy of the rear bumper, plucking a lamp post right off the ground in an intense explosion. It shrieked

as the melted metal at its base gave way, and the entire post bent sideways, crashing in a burst of sparks and shattered glass across the road. Tiffany felt the heat through the rear window, and covered her head with her hands. The Maserati surged forward, crashing through sidewalk tables and chairs, sending them flying through the air.

"What the hell!" Yuri couldn't believe what was happening. These guys would stop at nothing to accomplish their means, even if it meant turning the city upside down.

Another militia popped up on another building ahead, aiming his RPG right at them. Yuri made a hard right, once again just avoiding the incoming rocket as it hit a nearby car and exploded, sending the car jumping four feet into the air as its windows imploded. Civilians continued to scatter about, taking cover inside shops and screaming.

"This isn't working. We need to get inside," Yuri shouted as she spied the Mercedes on their tail.

"How!? We can't possibly stop and run now!" Jessica shouted back.

Yuri perused her surroundings, and spotted an opportunity.

"Hold on!"

The Maserati surged forward, and suddenly, Yuri hit the brakes, shifting down and pulling hard on the handbrake. The car went into a drift, brakes screeching in distress and Yuri guided the car into a ninety-degree turn, bursting through a pair of sliding glass doors just as another rocket exploded at their rear. Thank God they were poor shots. Jessica shielded her face as shattered glass splayed across the bonnet and windscreen.

They were now inside a shopping mall; the car slowing to navigate the narrow space flanked by numerous concrete pillars and shops. Thankfully, the middle was clear, and Jessica looked around as the car sped forward. The walls were whitewashed and plain, and the mall took up all of four floors, topped by a pyramidal roof made entirely of sections of glass. She heard a screech of tires and looked back; the Mercedes was still hot on their tail.

Yuri took a hard right, and they tore down another wing of the shopping mall. She could see an exit

ahead, beyond which would surely be a main road. But she also spotted something else. She spied a mass of tall, thin white structures, bobbing gently in the distance. She checked her rear view mirror, and found that the Mercedes had not made the turn into their section of the mall yet. She gunned the engine, and Jessica and Tiffany once again braced themselves for impact. The Maserati burst through a set of glass doors and bumped onto a road. It was a broad four-lane carriageway, divided in the middle by a strip of ferns and coconut trees lined up in an ordered row. Yuri hit the brakes, making a hard left, and the car screeched to a stop between two coconut trees fitting almost perfectly, a crushed mash of green ferns rustling below the car.

"What the hell are you doing? Why did you stop?" Jessica shrieked, slack-jawed as she accosted Yuri.

Yuri remained stoic, keeping her eyes firmly planted on the now obliterated mall entrance. She could hear Tiffany's ragged breathing in the back, punctuated by a few dry coughs. The Mercedes had turned the corner, its blinding xenon lights on highbeam, heading straight toward them. Its engine roared as the driver floored the accelerator, his goal to T-bone the apparently stalled and stranded Maserati right on its driver's side. The initial impact would surely kill the driver, at least, and taking care of the other two would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

Just as the Mercedes emerged from the entrance, Yuri shifted into first gear and tore out of the divider, creating an empty space between the two coconut trees. The driver had no time to react as the Mercedes was going too fast to initiate an effective turn, and it surged between the trees, onto the other side of the road, and crashed through a railing. There was the revving of an engine followed by an immense splash as the Mercedes hurtled through the air at top speed and slammed bonnet-first into the sea, dipping forward as it sank steadily.

Jessica and Tiffany looked back at the sinking Mercedes in shock while Yuri shifted up, on a course out of the city and toward their safehouse.

As the Maserati cruised on an obscure path on the final leg to the safehouse, Tiffany crept up behind Jessica, pulling herself up to lean on the seat. Her mind was a mess of confusion, and she looked at Yuri only to realize that tapping her shoulder to get her attention instead of calling her by name would only seem weird to Jessica. She called out to the latter instead.

"Jessica."

"Hmmm?" Jessica had been dozing in and out of consciousness; inborn habits paid no attention anything else. She cast her weary eyes on her sister, fingers clutching tightly onto the leather of her seat.

"There's...something I think you should know," Tiffany said carefully, unsure of how to phrase herself.

Jessica's eyes focused, and she sat up visibly, turning her head to face Tiffany.

"Just before you two rescued me, Taeyeon came to see me in the interrogation room, and then left."

"Why, did she say something important? Something that's useful to us somehow?"

Yuri's eyes, previously focused on the road ahead, stole a glance their way. She remained silent.

Tiffany bit her lower lip, frowning slightly. "She told me that she knew you two would be coming."

"Well that's pretty much common sense," Jessica said simply, shrugging.

"No, what I mean to say is that she meant for you two to come...not to rescue me, but rather...to pick me up," Tiffany said, still unsure of her interpretation.

Jessica turned back, frowning. "What?"

"She let me go, but couldn't let me leave the villa, so I had to wait for you two to come get me."

"Why would she do that? I mean, shouldn't she have had the intention to keep you as insurance for the meeting?"

"That's the point. I don't understand what she's doing, or why she's doing it."

Jessica ran a hand through her sticky blonde hair, looking out the window towards the starry night sky, deep in thought.

"Is there anything else she said?" Yuri suddenly said.

Tiffany turned to the rear view mirror and found a pair of eyes regarding her intently, awaiting an answer.

"She told me..." Tiffany paused. Jessica turned to face her again.

"That she loved me."

"Were you followed?"

"No."

"Come in."

Taeyeon waited for door to unlock before turning the knob and easing it open, stepping through into the smoke-filled confines of her father's office.

Bookcases spanned the west and north walls, filled with leather bound volumes that reached up to the ceiling. A single ceiling fan spun lazily in a futile effort to circulate the heavy cigar smoke that dominated the dank air. Taeyeon closed the door behind her and made her way towards the middle of the room. Her father was standing at the far end of the office, gazing out a window toward the full moon, a burning cigar between his fingers. He brought it up, took a long draw, and blew out the smoke slowly, savoring the sweet, full bodied flavor.

"Taeyeon." His voice was husky and distant.

"Yes, father?"

"You must have a lot of questions on your mind now, don't you?"

"I...I do."

Tae Woo turned to face his daughter. "We must leave this place."

Taeyeon's eyes widened in surprise. "Why?"

Tae Woo took small steps toward the east wall, in front of which sat his huge mahogany table. He found the ashtray and snuffed out his cigar, head hung low.

"There are some things I have to tell you. Things I have to...show you."

"I...don't understand," Taeyeon said softly, confused at her father's sudden behavior.

"Come with me."

Chapter 15 : 'E'

The stuffy air didn't help as Tiffany, once again, found herself mentally battling wave after wave of furious questions. Her head still spun, hungover from the drugs, and she struggled to keep her rationalizations as clear as possible. Yuri had filled her in on her father's involvement which had led to the untimely death of her family, and she did not take it well.

There were, as always, two sides to every argument: one that carried emotion where Taeyeon was involved, and the other that was influenced by the fact that she was an Interpol agent with a job to do. Everything had begun to spiral out of control ever since Kwon Yuri came into the picture. She stole a quick glance at the woman leaning against the wall at the opposite end of the safehouse, arms crossed over her chest. She followed Yuri's gaze, and, not surprisingly, found them fixated on her sister, who was resting on the only bed. She tensed her fingers as she rested her forearms on her thighs, observing Yuri carefully.

Change is the only thing constant in the world, and if it were up to her, Tiffany decided that Yuri personified the most drastic change she'd seen yet. Who would've known that the tall, mischievous girl of twenty who had so completely stolen her sister's heart had, at the mercy of years gone past, transformed into this shadow of her former being?

Yuri had become a woman of utterly complete focus, in total contrast to the girl who could afford to pay so little attention that she could be considered cheap. Her eyes betrayed nothing, though Tiffany knew that in Yuri's heart raged a savage battle. And on top of all that, she was obviously a trained killer, quite possibly a paragon of her kind. No matter how hard she looked, she could not find any semblance of the original Kwon Yuri, save for the part that never ceased to yearn for Jessica.

She turned her eyes to her sister; blonde, sleeping, and thankfully familiar for someone she'd not seen in eight years. They'd done their best to clean, disinfect, and bandage her wound as soon as they'd arrived, and she had succumbed to exhaustion not long after. Tiffany remembered the outburst she'd faced in the car on their way back, and though it was expected, it did carry an unexpected twist.

"She said what?"

"She...I...well, it's complicated..."

"You fell in love with the daughter of one of the most wanted men on the face of the Earth. How the hell is that complicated? It's just wrong beyond all reason!"

"I know her! I understand Taeyeon, and she's not the villain everyone makes her out to be. Sometimes people just find themselves stuck in a predicament they would not even wish on others. I know she's not a bad person."

"Bad person or not, that's not the point! Stephanie, if you have even one shred of emotion for that woman, then you obviously don't know what's transpired between our families."

"Our...families?"

"You don't know, don't you?"

"Know what?"

"Kim Tae Woo is the one responsible for the death of our family, Stephanie. He killed Mom, Dad and Krystal."

"It was him?"

"Stephanie Jung, you fell in love with the daughter of the man who killed our loved ones. How can you ever live with that?"

Tiffany buried her face in her hands, rubbing her temples as she tried to piece together a puzzle without a complete picture for reference. All she had were a thousand tiny pieces, missing many more, and neither of them seemed to fit in the right places to yield a picture that was even remotely clear. She began to feel helpless; all purpose and direction she'd thought she had at the beginning of her assignment and in the past few days were now waning hopelessly, draining from her like leaking blood. There had to be some explanation. There had to be some way to absolve Taeyeon from any and all of this. Deep down, Tiffany knew that Kim Taeyeon wasn't guilty.

"Hey."

Tiffany looked up to the sound of Yuri's voice, eyes tired and bloodshot.

"You and Kim Taeyeon...you really have something going on, don't you?" Her voice carried a hint of calm and knowing.

Tiffany turned her head to look at Jessica, worried that she might awaken from the noise.

"Don't worry." Tiffany turned back to Yuri. "She's out like a light. And we both know she operates on some kind of mysterious body clock that wakes her up at a predetermined time. Nothing can stir her in her sleep. Honestly, I don't know how she became FBI with that kind of habit." Yuri let out a soft chuckle, wildly uncharacteristic, at least in current times.

Tiffany hung her head.

"You know, things like this...can't be controlled, even when you think you're in complete control of your emotions," Yuri said slowly, her voice distant.

Tiffany looked up with renewed interest. Did what Yuri just say make any sense in this situation?

Yuri pushed herself off the wall, moving to the window, looking at something far away. "Where emotions are involved, control always turns out to be a sodden illusion. You think you can block out the feelings, you think you can force yourself to forget everything you've shared with someone...but you're always wrong." Her tone was strained and bitter.

Tiffany stood up and moved to Yuri's side, joining her in gazing out toward the starry sky, the full moon dominating the scene. She suddenly felt uncertain. This wasn't about her. Yuri was referring to herself.

"Jessica...", Tiffany began.

"Jessica was a memory that I found and held close to my heart," Yuri interrupted. "Her smile, her touch, her entire being was engraved into my soul from the moment we met, and that never changed when we parted ways. It was a simple love, as you would recall. Typical teenage stuff but...it changed. When I left to begin my training, leaving her behind-" Yuri choked up as a slew of images flashed across her mind, and she inhaled a sharp breath to control herself. "My memories of her grew and grew, so much so that I felt her taking over me. The bitter yearning was all I could think of, and ironically, it was from there where I drew the strength to survive my training. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, so they say."

Yuri turned to Tiffany, whose intense eyes were trained upon her, listening attentively.

"I am a Doppelganger, Tiffany. I don't expect you to understand who or what a Doppelganger is, but suffice it to say that the difficulty of its training far surpasses that of any elite force on the planet, and the scars each agent carry afterward are deep and unique. My desperate memories of your sister were what drove me through those pain-ridden years; those, and the tiniest hope that someday, I would be with her again." Yuri let out a small sigh, and her eyes fell.

"How does one...become a Doppelganger?" Tiffany asked, feeling the weight of the four syllables.

"I think you would have known me well enough in the past to conclude that such a choice wasn't mine to make. We are born into this profession, though it's more of a duty than a choice. The Doppelganger lineage is vast, and we take no outsiders in; no exceptions."

"Can you quit?"

"We're allowed to retire, but only when we have children to continue the family's work when they come of age. Doppelgangers marry other Doppelgangers, so that kind of makes us one huge family. If we don't get married...then we serve until death takes us," Yuri explained quietly.

"That's rather...restrictive. This whole thing about you being a Doppelganger carries a lot of secrecy, but

then again, couldn't you still have...maintained relations with other people?" Tiffany's tone was careful.

"You're asking why I left Jessica?"

Tiffany caught herself, then nodded slowly, avoiding Yuri's gaze.

"I didn't do it because of the organization's laws on relationships. The initiation is a rite of passage. Some consider this practice to be backward given that this is the twenty-first century, but no one can deny the fact that our organization is akin to that of a brotherhood. No; no blood rituals and all that, and we're definitely modern and high-tech, but tradition still holds great meaning for us. It is what defines us and our duty." Yuri paused to sigh. "And that meant I had to sever all connections with the outside world before my training began, and it was then up to me to make new ones once I became a full-fledged Doppelganger. Needless, but acceptably necessary."

"Necessary, why?"

"Because we dabble in dangerous things, Tiffany. We operate in top secrecy, but everyone knows that there's a limit to really how stealthy we can be. One slip from any agent could expose the entire organization. We root out and eliminate the worst of the lot, striking at the very heart and then crushing it to destroy any hope of recovery. Trust me when I say that there are forces in this world which no one except us know about, some having histories spanning generations, and they can wreak a world's worth of havoc should they choose to. We've disposed of many such powers since times long past, but new ones always spawn soon after. We have powerful and dangerous enemies, and because of that, we put our connections in danger. Such connections are weaknesses; liabilities in both that they are vulnerable and that they might betray our secrets. They interfere, if unknowingly, in our work."

Tiffany looked at Yuri, then nodded in understanding.

"I didn't want to put Jessica in that kind of danger..." Yuri's eyes trailed to the sleeping blonde. "Someone like her shouldn't have to be looking over her shoulder all the time. She deserves so much more...So I never made an effort to see her again after completing my training, focusing on my work, struggling to forget..." She suddenly chuckled and ran a hand through her flowing black hair, glistening in the moonlight. "But as fate would have it, here we are, barely two feet from each other...and she doesn't even know who I am," Yuri finished ruefully.

"I was wondering myself why she hadn't caught on yet," Tiffany said casually.

"Sometimes certain things are presented as plainly as could be, and yet we fail to recognize them. She knows me as Amber Liu, which happens to be my alias for this assignment."

"I'll have to remember that...but might I be so bold as to ask-"

Yuri stepped away from the window, moving to the bedside and seating herself gingerly. The covers crackled softly and creased under her weight. Unconsciously, her lips creased upward in a smile as she absently touched Jessica's soft blonde tresses while observing her angelic features. Her naturally pale face was smooth and white as milk under the moonlight; thin lips pursed slightly as her chest rose and fell in a slow rhythm. Yuri's eyes moved to Jessica's right leg, which was bare and bandaged, a small splotch of crimson in the center. Tiffany swallowed.

"Jessica's got too many things on her mind now, what with the truth about your father and the fact that she's smack in the middle of a huge mess that nobody understands. A good time to drop the bomb would be when this is all over, I think."

Tiffany nodded. "When do you think that will be?"

Yuri looked up at Tiffany and shook her head. "Not soon enough."

The two walked side by side in silence, down a quiet hallway flanked on both sides by exquisite oil paintings and hung frescoes, muffled footfalls whispering against the silence on a length of thick Persian carpet. Her father hadn't said a word since they'd left his office, and she was beginning to feel...uneasy.

Her journey here had been with its distractions; so illogical was his request besides the one to see her that she could not even begin to understand his intentions.

Before the rescue

"Taeyeon, I need you to come to my villa right away."

"But Tiffany-"

"You and I both know that they're coming for her tonight, Taeyeon. Let them come."

"What? You're telling me to just let them come and take her?"

"Don't utter a word to the guards."

"You want me to just let her go?"

"That's exactly what I said."

"But I don't understand."

"Come, Taeyeon. You will in time."

Taeyeon flipped her cellphone closed, brows furrowed both in confusion and trepidation. What in the world was her father talking about, and what was he thinking, allowing Tiffany to be swept off their hands just like that, especially when he'd just called half an hour ago telling her to have the woman secured.

She glanced toward the bank of television screens arrayed along a wall in her office, and spied Tiffany wiping her face with her hands; no doubt she was drying her tears. Her heart ached as she continued to watch Tiffany dress herself ever so slowly, struggling against the aftereffects of the drugs and wincing occasionally as the strained muscles were worked against their will.

Taeyeon was confused without a doubt. Logic had compelled her to physically hurt and berate Tiffany, and it told her that all she did was necessary in the bigger picture of things. Emotion, however, never failed to claw at her will, as her heart could scarcely bear the pain that had followed after her actions. She loved Tiffany, and that was certain, but she had no clue as to how she could allow herself to enforce this emotion without sacrificing her duties to her father.

Perhaps letting her go could allow her to redeem herself somewhat. Perhaps she would pay for her sins in the near future, and Tiffany would be her executioner. That would be merciful. Who knew? Taeyeon was too tired to think anymore; she would just let her go and be done with it. She got up and made her way down to the interrogation chamber, gesturing a pair of guards away as she did so. They nodded and slipped aside, and the door opened with a shifting of mechanical bolts.

Taeyeon closed the door behind her, and leaned against it, watching as Tiffany's chest rose and fell. If Tiffany was surprised by Taeyeon's intrusion, she didn't show it. Her eyes were fixed upon her lap, and even from this distance, Taeyeon spotted dark splotches on her pants; tears, blood, or both. She stepped forward, stopping in front of Tiffany's feet, looking down at the crown of her head. Tiffany's shoulders were moving more visibly with her breathing now, testament to her unease. Taeyeon reached down and gently held Tiffany's chin, and was relieved when she didn't turn away. She lifted her chin, and almost staggered as a pair of eyes met hers.

The lovely eyes she'd gazed at from the moment they met, shimmering gems framed by delicately molded eyelids and fluttering eyelashes, were gone. She was staring into the eyes of desperation, longing and pain, the whites streaked with ruby veins, bloodshot and tired. Her pupils were dilated, and they looked frighteningly unfocused. Her eye lashes were matted with perspiration and tears.

"Tiffany, listen to me."

The girl didn't answer. She continued to stare up at Taeyeon with disinterested eyes, lips drawn into a tight line. It was a look of utter defeat.

"Yuri and Jessica are coming for you. Tonight."

Still, no answer.

"You're going with them."

Something sparkled in Tiffany's eyes, and her eyelids showed the slightest flutter. Tiffany swallowed, if unknowingly. At that moment, Taeyeon captured a glimpse of the old Tiffany. Her Tiffany, before all of this mess occurred. Her mind went blank briefly as her heart took dominance, and from it burst a myriad of familiar and welcome emotions that were sorely missed. Taeyeon drew in a breath.

Taeyeon removed her hand from Tiffany's chin, instead cupping her left jaw, unconsciously rubbing her sticky cheek with her thumb. Tiffany's eyes seemed to change. Something glimmered in what had previously been hollow, lifeless pools. Tiffany's lips twitched, and then she closed her eyes, as if to savor the feeling.

"Perhaps in another lifetime we could have been together." Taeyeon said softly, as a tear began to brim at the corner of her eye. "Perhaps in an alternate universe, we could be living normal lives devoid of all this pain and confusion, sharing something unique only to the both of us. And perhaps somewhere in this lifetime, should I be granted the privilege...I could apologize for everything I've done to you...to us...perhaps I could atone for my choices...and my sins."

Tiffany opened her eyes and looked at Taeyeon earnestly, seeing a film of moisture over her pupils, welling up and finally falling as a pair of streams down the sides of her face. Her heart seemed to lurch, and inside her, something grew.

"We may never see each other again, but know this."

Tiffany's own tears began to fall. How she wished that she were free of her restraints, so that she could hold the hand of her captor, to feel the silky smoothness of her pale white skin, to reach up and embrace her and release all the pent up sorrow inside of her. How she wished she could wipe Taeyeon clean of her suffering, instead of her own.

"I felt more human than ever before when I was with you. Even under the most unlikely circumstances, we shared something that was...special. You brought some part of me back from a darkness which I doomed my life to. You touched some part of my soul and made it glow amidst the blackness that consumed it. And all of that was because of one simple reason..."

"I love you too, Taeyeon," Tiffany whispered amidst a cascade of tears, shifting her head so that she could better feel Taeyeon's hand, so that her face could better fit the subtle curves of her fingers.

Taeyeon wiped a tear away with her thumb before she leaned forward, planting a chaste kiss on Tiffany's swollen, tear stained lips.

"I love you, Stephanie Jung."

Taeyeon backed away from Tiffany, and the latter found her head easing forward, if only to prolong the touch for another fraction of a second. Something ravaged Tiffany's heart, and she felt the sobs surging up to burst through her lips once again. The door opened in a cacophony of shifting metal, and Taeyeon paused at the doorway.

"I hope we meet again, should fate see fit," She said softly, and passed through.

Behind her, Tiffany wailed.

Her father suddenly broke the silence. "Life is but a game, Taeyeon...a game of power and hierarchy. And in that hierarchy, we have kings, pawns, and everything in between to fill in the necessary spaces."

They entered an elevator, and after the door closed, Tae Woo fished a key out of his pocket, which he inserted into an electronic keyhole at the bottom of the panel of floor buttons. Giving it a ninety degree twist, an alphabet instead of a number appeared on the elevator's digital interface.

"E"

Taeyeon frowned. In all her years of being in her father's villa, she had never known that the elevator could access a floor other than those in plain sight on the panel, much less a floor called "E". The elevator shuddered and began its descent, and judging by the time it took, it went deeper than the lowest stated floor, B3. Much, much deeper.

"Everything is pretty straightforward if you're at the top or bottom. It's when you're in the middle where things begin to get complicated."

Taeyeon looked at her father.

"I'm in such a position, Taeyeon. And contrary to popular belief as well as those of yours, I take orders from a higher authority."

"Y-you do? But I thought you were the head of this cartel."

"Indeed I am. But did I say this was the only cartel that exists with respect to this business?"

Taeyeon's eyes widened.

"Ours is but one of a handful, Taeyeon. Cartels like this are spread across the world, each with their own areas of expertise, methods of government, and control. On their own, they are considerable forces. But together, they present a power the likes of which the world has never seen."

Taeyeon felt her heart race, and was startled briefly as the elevator suddenly lurched to a stop. The elevator doors opened silently, revealing a long, metal clad hallway devoid of any adornment; it was just a hallway, with nothing else, and ended in a steel door sitting at the far end.

"Come."

Tae Woo exited the elevator, and Taeyeon followed closely behind, looking around and seeing nothing but the color of steel all around them. Harsh sodium lights lit the short hallway, and their footsteps echoed loudly against the steel floor.

"The cartels work independently, and go by their own rules, as long as their duties are fulfilled. But they all answer to a singular organization which controls them all. One person at the head of the largest unofficial empire in the world."

They stopped at the door, and Taeyeon found that there was another door in the wall to their right.

"This is one of the things I've been wanting to show you," Tae Woo said, reaching up and sliding a viewport cover hard to the side.

Taeyeon cautiously stepped forward, and to her surprise, made out a dry cough followed by the shifting of what sounded like blankets or covers. Another gravelly cough reverberated from the pitch darkness of the inside. She looked to her father.

"There's...someone in there? Who is it?"

Before Tae Woo could answer, a booming, gruff voice echoed from the inside of the cell, making Taeyeon jump.

"Elliot Jung."

Chapter 16 : Assets and Liabilities

Eight Years Ago

"Bring me the axe."

The masked leader was handed a small steel hand axe with a rubberized handle, which he brandished in the light of the overhanging chandelier.

"Hold his arms out."

Elliot was defeated; he made no effort to struggle as two men, one on each side, pulled him hard onto the ground and spread his arms outward, pinning them to the floor. The leader knelt down on one knee, bringing the axe up over his shoulder, cocking his arm back. The razor sharp edge of the blade glittered once in the light, and Elliot closed his eyes, his jaw tightening as he clenched his teeth in preparation for the pain to come. It would be his well deserved end.

A flurry of muffled thumps punctuated the intense silence, and a sudden weight upon his chest shocked Elliot's eyes open. He was staring into the mask of the leader, eyes dead and unfocused. Startled, he shoved the dead weight over to the side, sat up and looked around. The men that had been his captors were dead sprawled on the ground in contorted positions, and he counted three new arrivals in his house, all carrying suppressed pistols in gloved hands. They were similarly masked, but were clad in smart business suits, a far cry from the assassins' scruffy garb.

One of them approached him, pistol disappearing into his blazer before he leaned down to pluck the axe from the dead thug's hand.

"Wait...w-who are-"

Before Elliot could finish his sentence, the man flipped the axe to hold it by the hollow in its blade.

He struck Elliot hard across his temple, and the latter's head was smacked forcefully to ground, finding himself staring at the bodies of his wife and daughter; one hanging motionlessly at the brick fireplace, arms limp and knees buckled, while the other lay on her side in a great pool of blood, abdomen torn and eyes wide open. He felt his vision tunneling and dimming, and heard muffled footfalls as the men began to remove the thugs' bodies.

"I'm...sorry..." he whispered through dry, cracked lips, before everything faded and went black.

Two Days Later

Somewhere in the USA

Elliot Jung awoke with a pulsing pain in his head; like someone was hammering his brain with a spiked club. His blurry vision took a few seconds to find focus, and he found himself with one hand on his forehead, thumb and second finger on his temples, lying in what appeared to be a large bed. His free hand gripped the sheets, and he was surprised to feel the warm sensation of a luxuriously soft comforter. Hutterite down, perhaps? He soon felt the glow of the Sun filtering in through the blinds on his right, adding to the warmth and casting a series of rectangular shadows on his body. He tried to get up, and his head spun, and he struggled to prop a couple of pillows up behind him so that he could better survey his surroundings.

A bathroom lay to his direct front, in which he spied a large jacuzzi. An enormous bookcase spanning from floor to ceiling spread out along the wall directly beside it, filled with leather-bound volumes holding old, yellowed pages. To his immediate left he found a rather excessive vanity, complete with oval mirror and various personal effects. His attention was immediately drawn to a glass of water and a white pill beside it.

"You're awake."

Elliot sat bolt upright, ignoring the nascent vertigo that swirled nauseatingly in his head. He recognized that voice, and immediately felt sick. He found the origin of the sound: a small speaker perched next to a security camera tucked into the top corner of a wall, staring down almost mockingly at him.

"The pill will help freshen your mind and relieve the hangover. Take it and meet me downstairs in the lounge. Let's talk, man to man."

Elliot glared at the camera, gritting his teeth.

Man to man my ass, you sonofabitch. You killed my-

"Now, now, General Jung. Or should I say, Mr. Jung. Let's not dawdle. I don't want to have to send my men up there to get you."

Elliot glanced at the pill on the vanity and snarled. His lips were cracked and his throat was parched, but he could not bring himself to down the glass of water beside it.

To hell with it.

He swung his legs across the bed and onto the floor, found his shoes sitting just beside them. Slipping them on, he closed his eyes with a hand on his head and willed himself to stand up, moved haphazardly toward the open door and outside.

Upon stepping through the door, he was met with a grand sight. Elliot was standing in a carpeted hallway, and directly in front of him was an elegantly carved stone balustrade, beyond which lay the view of a massive living space decorated with furniture, huge carpets and works of art. A great diamond chandelier hung from the middle of the ceiling, sparkling in the morning rays of the Sun. The sudden influx of color and sheen seemed to blind him, and he squinted as he looked for a way down. It lay to his left; an immense stairway leading down to the first floor. He held onto the handrail for support, making his way down the carpeted steps cautiously, all the while gazing with mixed feelings at the excess which surrounded him.

As he arrived at the landing, he found himself looking past a wooden wall divider into what looked like the inside of a bar. A long heavy wood counter dominated the center, backed by shelves of liquor bottles and polished glasses. A little ways to the side was a small round table flanked by a pair of leather divans, one of which was occupied by a tall, stocky, fair-skinned man clad in a black suit and spectacles, his eyes looking far away through the nearby windows. He scratched his gruffy beard, one leg crossed over the other.

Kim Tae Woo.

Elliot felt a surge of hatred ebb through his veins; a feeling not unlike an adrenaline rush. He looked down and found himself clenching his fists, his strong forearms bulging. From where he found the strength, he did not know.

"Come. Sit," Tae Woo said casually, eyes still far away.

Elliot took one step, then another, feeling an incipient rage build from the pit of his stomach. How badly

he had wanted to grab him by the neck, slowly crushing his windpipe and just before doing so, rip out his tongue and shove it into his eye socket. In just that span of a second, he had thought up a thousand ways to slowly, excruciatingly torture the man. He wanted to hear him beg; he wanted to hear him scream, and he wanted it to last for *all eternity*. As he crossed into the space of the lounge, he stole a glance to his left and right, and found the room to be empty. It was just the two of them.

"I put my guards on standby. No need for their presence to pressure us, Mr. Jung. Business is business."

Elliot stood still, jaw clenched.

"Business?" he spat.

"What business could I possibly have with the man who killed my wife and daughter!?"

Tae Woo turned his head to look at Elliot, whose face was a mask of pure hatred. Underneath those fiery eyes, though, he spotted the weariness and fatigue that dominated Elliot.

"I see you didn't take the pill. And I did not kill your wife and daughter, Mr. Jung."

"Yeah, you didn't. Your godforsaken thugs did it for you. You don't need an innocent's blood on your hands," Elliot hissed, his words heavily laden with sarcasm.

"Let me repeat myself, Mr. Jung. I may have recruited you for the job, but neither I nor my men were responsible for the deaths of your wife and daughter."

Elliot suddenly remembered the three other men who had entered his home after the killings, apparently saving him from death. Could they have been Tae Woo's men? He chose not to take any chances.

Elliot took a step toward Tae Woo. "You took the lives of those dearest to me and now you're denying it!?" He was shouting now, and his deep voice echoed around the house, leaving a ringing in Tae Woo's ears.

"I hate to say this, but *you* are the one responsible for your own loss, Mr. Jung. Had you kept quiet about the deal, none of this would have happened." Tae Woo paused, looking intently at Elliot's face, which was reddening by the second. "However?" He paused again, noting the twitch on Elliot's lips. "I know who killed Krystal and Carmen."

"Don't you dare say their names," Elliot spat, jabbing a finger at Tae Woo.

Tae Woo gestured toward a beige jacketed dossier on the table. "Sit down, Mr. Jung."

Elliot regarded the dossier, but could discern nothing from his position. Feeling sick that he was complying with the man that could have killed Krystal and Carmen, he sat.

"I trust you've had a good rest since your arrival here yesterday. I'll need you to be in the clearest of minds for what I'm about to discuss with you."

Elliot clenched his jaw.

Rest?

All he'd had were recurring nightmares of the scenes he'd witnessed during the massacre. Krystal, dear Krystal, young and pure, her life ended upon the fireplace they used to sit in front of and sing Christmas songs together every year. And Carmen, the love of his life; accompanying him through the crises of life and sharing one heart with him for more than twenty years, staring him in the face in a pool of her own blood. He shut his eyes to purge the images from his head.

Tae Woo pushed the dossier toward Elliot and leaned back in his seat.

"I think you will find this man familiar."

Elliot hesitated, then reached out to take the dossier. It was heavy and thick, and he let it fall into his lap before turning the cover over.

Something inside him lurched.

Dominating most of the first page was a full-color photograph of an Asian man, probably mid-forties, with a small face, strong jaw and a head of spiked hair.

Elliot indeed found this man familiar. In fact, he had been studying him for almost two years now. Before his budding involvement in the anti-matter research project, the CIA had approached the US Army Intelligence and Security Command, of which Elliot was the commanding officer, in an unprecedented request to utilize US Army resources in clandestine investigations concerning this man. The agency provided no more authorization than a document with the signature of the President of the United States, and INSCOM could not refuse. Elliot formed a separate team of officers and men, each of them sworn into secrecy, tasking them with investigating whatever the CIA required of them from that point forward.

Interest piqued, Elliot flipped through the dossier, sifting through the information within; noting maps, communications logs, travel logs, and any other details no matter how scant or insignificant, related to the man. There was money involved; with so many zeroes he'd have to use his finger to count them all. He also noted the dates printed on each page, and saw that the first date was a little over three years ago. Apparently, Tae Woo had begun collecting information on him even before Elliot even knew of his existence. He looked up at Tae Woo, who was regarding him with a sort of satisfaction.

"Are you working with the CIA?" Elliot asked carefully. Somehow he felt he'd just asked a very stupid question.

"The CIA? Oh no. The CIA would definitely be interested in this man, but I have far different intentions. I've done my fair share of research concerning him."

"I've been on this man's trail for two years. The CIA could have been following him for much longer."

"And that, Mr. Jung, is exactly why I brought you here."

"I'm...not sure what you mean."

"I mean this man killed your wife and daughter. After you tattled to the CIA, I discovered that he'd ordered a hit on your family, as is the customary punishment for betrayal, and so I organized a team to intercept them in order to bring your family under my protection. I'm afraid my men arrived too little, too late. *He* is your enemy, Mr. Jung, as is mine, because I've recently discovered something about him that compels me to make him so."

Some part of Elliot found this hard to believe, but the other part told him that what Tae Woo was telling him was true. He had no reason to push the blame to someone else. It did make sense, in a way. No one other than Tae Woo's own men would have attempted to save his family. Of course, Tae Woo should have expected something in return.

"And what would that be?"

"Let's just say that a businessman such as myself would much prefer to do business in a place that's still here. He's involved in a plan that has been brewing for years; one that involves multiple nations and has consequences that involve many more."

Elliot was confused. What sort of cryptic clue was that supposed to be? "I don't understand."

Tae Woo uncrossed his leg and leaned forward, plucking the dossier from Elliot's lap and placing it in his own.

"And I don't expect you to. The only thing you need to understand is that I need your expertise in my endeavor. I need all the information you've collected over the past two years on this man. Every photograph; every phone call, *everything*. We are going to find him. Together."

Elliot sat back in his chair, unsure.

Tae Woo sensed his insecurity and pressed on. "Think about it. I'm doing you a favor here. I'm trying to track and bring down the man who killed your wife and daughter. All you have to do is help."

"What about my other two daughters? Are they alright?" Elliot was almost afraid to ask.

A small smile crept up onto Tae Woo's lips. "I thought you'd never ask."

Tae Woo reached behind him and pulled out two more dossiers similar to the first, equally thick. He tossed them onto the table.

Elliot reached over and flipped each of them open in turn, and saw, on the front pages, the photographs of his two remaining daughters. He reached out with a hand, touching each photograph.

"Stephanie...Jessica..."

"Threats are for barbarians, Mr. Jung, and I don't indulge in them because there're always better ways. So I'm going to offer you something else. As a sign of goodwill, if you could call it that, I have a team from my personal guard watching over them as we speak, as they will be for as long as required. They're professionals who know how to keep their distance and intervene only when absolutely necessary. As such, you can be assured that your daughters are in good hands."

"You have your thugs watching my girls?" Elliot snarled, immediately offended.

"Surely you wouldn't want them to be left unprotected? He knows as much as you do that they're still breathing, and remember: he'd requested otherwise. Would you want to take that chance?" Tae Woo countered.

Elliot sat perfectly still, brow creased as he stared hard at the man opposite him. Tae Woo was right. No matter what, they had to be protected, one way or another. As long as they're safe...he'd have one less worry on his mind. He let out a loud sigh, drawn out and defeated.

"Would he know that I'm still alive?"

"Absolutely not. Your relatives should probably be holding your funeral by now, and he'll be none the wiser."

"Funeral?"

"You're dead, remember? And for that to hold true, your body needs to be found at your house, along with those of..." Tae Woo paused. Better to tread lightly, even if he knew Elliot was already in the palm of his hand.

Elliot felt sick again. The thought of his loved ones standing over his coffin, staring down with teary eyes at the body of another man shaped in his likeness. He almost choked at the thought of his two remaining daughters, heartbroken and alone, staining their cheeks for the man who had caused the deaths of their mother and sister. He was unredeemable; condemned in his own right. He'd be better off dead than alive. What mattered more than anything henceforth was the safety of those who remained. The sooner they could bring this man down, the sooner that would be assured.

"They'll be watching twenty-four/seven?"

"My men won't let them out of their sight. For what it's worth, you have my word."

If anything, Elliot was stubborn; a common trait among great leaders. They refused to conform after having settled upon something they considered the best possible way, and trusting people became as hard as fostering friendships with them. He looked at Tae Woo. The only thing he could trust him with was the safety of his girls.

"Your words are *worthless*."

"And so they are, at least to you. Let me remind you that your daughters are well aware of the loss of their sister, mother and father. You, Elliot Jung, no longer exist. Keep that in mind. We will see to the end of this, and then go our separate ways." Tae Woo stood up and glided out of the bar. "Work your magic, Mr. Jung. This contains all the resources that are at your disposal for your task. Also inside is a map of the compound and the access card to the lab below."

Elliot's eyes fell upon the final dossier that sat on the dark leather and pulled his lips into a tight line. He was about to offer his services to one of the most wanted man in the world, chasing down another who barely seemed to exist even after years of close investigation. What would he gain by attempting to hunt down a ghost? Revenge? Honor?

As a man who was already dead, he had nothing to lose. Elliot reached over to pick up the dossiers and stood up, turning to look at the retreating figure of Kim Tae Woo, heels clicking against the cold marble floor.

"Kim Tae Woo!" he called out across the space between them.

Tae Woo stopped in his tracks, hands in his pockets, his back still turned to hide the smirk on his face.

Elliot lifted the dossier in his hand. "Let's get to work," he said softly, but just loud enough for the man to hear.

Tae Woo turned and smiled.

Present Day

Tae Woo and Taeyeon stood in a dark, square room filled with softly whirring server racks. Its front wall was dominated by an enormous LCD screen that stretched from wall to wall, displaying a map of the world, and underneath lay a bank of touchscreen monitors. The air carried the heavy scent of electronics above the reek of antiseptic cleaning agents. Taeyeon was unable to conceal her wonder, what with the revelation of Elliot Jung's survival and her father's recollection on the events following his 'murder'. She found herself unconsciously holding her arm.

"If Elliot Jung is still alive...then...does he know about his daughters?" Taeyeon asked carefully.

Tae Woo regarded Taeyeon with knowing eyes. "You mean to ask, did I know about Tiffany, or Stephanie, as is her real name?"

Taeyeon nodded, keeping herself impassive.

"Of course. Ironic, is it not, that one of the people I spent eight years protecting turned out to become some sort of threat?"

Taeyeon looked down.

"Don't worry. Although Stephanie and Jessica Jung see us as their immediate enemies, that is sure to change in the days to come. We can use them to our advantage."

Taeyeon's lips curled down in distaste. The thought of using Tiffany as a tool sparked an unexpected anger in her, but she kept a straight face. Time to change the subject.

"Dad, if everything you said is true, then what's Elliot Jung doing in a cell?" She almost stuttered, but managed to get the words out. After all, this wasn't the most urgent question she'd had in mind.

Tae Woo glided his fingers on the touchscreens in front of him, entering password after password and accessing an archive deep within the system. As he did so, the screen flashed with a world of information, zipping through folder after folder whose scroll bars were no thicker than a pinch. "He became obsessed," He finally said.

"Obsessed?"

"The need to protect his daughters that spurred him coupled with a morbid realization in the midst of his search almost drove him to the brink of insanity. There was something brewing, and he needed to find it. He spent days at a time without any rest, poring through the archives and hacking into government networks from the safety of my systems. He knew the trade, having been the commander of INSCOM back in the day. He knew where and how to look."

"INSCOM?"

"The US Army Intelligence and Security Command; the US's military equivalent of the CIA, though it's more of a little brother than anything. Elliot made slow progress, however, and it frustrated us both. This man had eluded us for years, and during each of which, Elliot never slowed down, determined to find him and comforted by the fact that his daughters were constantly under my protection. I realized that it was affecting him a lot more than it did me. Every time he hit a wall in the search, it seemed to chip off a little of his sanity."

Tae Woo looked at the door, seemingly toward the cell Elliot was residing in. "There came a time where that degradation reached a flashpoint. It was when I sent him into hiding for a short period while I left to take care of something, a time where he could do nothing to satiate his hunger to retrieve the information he needed. After the incident, he was in no condition to continue the search, and some part of me found certain distaste in killing him, so I kept him locked up since he might be of use someday. And it seems that that day has come." Tae Woo brought up a series of articles dating back two years.

Taeyeon found the articles all too familiar. "Two years ago...when you faked your death."

Tae Woo nodded grimly. "I told you two years ago before that day, didn't I, that there were things about me you didn't know. Secrets that I had to keep and carry to my grave." He looked at Taeyeon, his eyes almost apologetic. "I never did tell you why everything was the way it was."

Taeyeon looked back, meeting his eyes. She was filled with apprehension, a confused girl at the time, but she understood now. "You can tell me now," she said softly.

"I was caught," Tae Woo began. "Caught in faking my death to protect you. It was all part of an elaborate plan I devised to get out of his sights."

Taeyeon knew 'him' referred to the mysterious man in question.

"The reason why you are in this business today, Taeyeon, is because I failed in that plan. He had wanted you to have your share in the business, seeing as how you had the caliber and intelligence. You had just graduated from Harvard, and you had your own future to pursue. As lucrative as my life had been, I didn't want you to get involved, so I intended to fake my death, take you and run; start over somewhere else." Tae Woo suddenly raised a fist and slammed it into one of the touchscreens, the tempered glass groaning under the impact but fortunately not giving. "I was caught. He knew."

Taeyeon waited, and a creeping sense of revelation began to build in the pit of her stomach. *Could it be...*

"I was brought to him on my knees, dizzy and concussed, and what I saw when my vision focused chilled me to the bone." Tae Woo's voice was strained and pained.

"Mom...", Taeyeon muttered, her lips trembling. She looked up at Tae Woo and saw it in his eyes.
"Mom."

He looked at Taeyeon, his breath hitching. She would have to learn the truth someday, and by chance more than anything else, it was today. "He took your mother...and he shot her in front of my very eyes to punish me for trying to escape this life." Tae Woo felt a wave of guilt and shame overtake him, and his small eyes scrunched up in the memory.

"You should understand more than anyone else that there is no escaping from the path you have chosen, Kim Tae Woo." The voice was husky and firm, and Tae Woo looked up from his kneeling position to see the man walk around his desk to a chair in the middle of the room.

In it sat the trembling figure of his wife, Taeyeon's mother, strapped, blindfolded and gagged, flanked by a pair of bodyguards.

"No...please...", Tae Woo begged, shifting on his knees.

The man stood beside the sobbing woman, holding out an open palm. A bodyguard passed him his pistol.

"Betrayal is a crime of the highest order, and must be dealt with in kind," he intoned, racking the slide and pointing it to her temple.

"This is my example to you," he whispered, and pulled the trigger.

"I was trying to protect all of you...", Tae Woo said softly, placing a hand on his head, eyes closed in defeat.

He heard a sob, and turned to look at his daughter. Taeyeon was glaring at him with hateful eyes,

streams of tears flowing down her cheeks. She gritted her teeth, struggling to control the sobs erupting through her chest.

"You killed mom," she hissed.

"Taeyeon, I-"

Smack

Tae Woo found himself looking at the far wall, a burning sensation building on his left cheek. He slowly raised a hand and placed it on the searing area, feeling his own tears building at the corners of his eyes.

"You killed mom," Taeyeon repeated, emphasizing each word with frightening intensity.

She turned and stalked out of the cold room, leaving Tae Woo rooted to the floor, head bowed in shame.

He turned slowly, clenching his jaw to ease both the pain on his cheek and the one in his heart, bringing up the picture of an Asian man to fullscreen. As he looked at the screen, he suddenly became aware that the scheme that had spanned almost a decade was coming full circle, and he was running out of time.

"You'll pay for this. I will find you. I will hunt you down and kill you," he snarled.

The man stared at him from the depths of the screen, face fixed into that of a toothy smile, small eyes cheerful.

"Park Jin Young."

Chapter 17 : Confrontation

Kim Tae Woo swapped out the image of Park Jin Young, revealing once again the world atlas that spanned across the screen. Only this time, it was covered in hundreds of intersecting lines of different colors originating from points all across the globe, converging on various spots in a multitude of different countries. These points of intersection were marked by large circles, some of which having been crossed out after further inspection.

He was aware of the stinging pain on his cheek, but that was nothing compared to the dread that had taken hold of his heart. After nearly a decade of searching, plotting and planning, something was finally unraveling, and he had a good idea about exactly what it was. It chilled him to the bone; the revelation that something so large and with such dire consequences could even have a chance of being accomplished in the world of today. Then again, what isn't impossible in the year of 2018?

He stepped away from the screen to obtain a better view. This was the work of years of unending research and information collection. Every sliver of information that had been gathered in his servers had been fed through complex algorithms created to simulate a global positioning program not unlike triangulation, except it made use of many more reference points than just three. The algorithm evaluated the information, passing it through a series of probability tests and logic sequences, and combined it with other bits of processed data to produce the plot he now saw on the screen: a handful of points that could mark the past, present and future location and targets of his prey.

He noted the locations mentally, one by one. From left to right: Toronto, Washington D.C., New York City, London, Paris, Amsterdam, Luxembourg, Copenhagen, Berlin, Rome, Moscow, Istanbul, Mumbai, Delhi, Bangkok, Singapore, Seoul, Tokyo, Brisbane, Canberra. He knew the list wasn't even complete at this point.

He folded his arms across his chest, pulling his lips into a tight line. He was looking at some of the most important cities in the world. One of which was of little consequence, but a sinister future lay ahead some, if not all of the rest. Unless...

Tae Woo stepped away and moved to a server tucked in a corner of the room; one that, unlike the others, held a single hard drive enclosed within a specially made safe. It was a fortress within a fortress; one that only he had access to. He placed his hand on a reader next to the door, and an invisible beam began to read his palmprint. The reader beeped in response, the red LED light switching to green, and

the door clicked open, springing ajar. He pulled the heavy door open on oiled hinges, aware of its massive construction.

It was one ton of reinforced stainless steel plated with a titanium alloy a foot thick, so large and heavy that he'd had to have holes cut in the ceilings above to allow it to be lowered by a tangle of steel cables into this room.

He reached into the yawning space beyond, inserting an electronic key and turning it to disable the electric field on the combination dial on the safe before giving it a few quick, practiced turns. This was followed by another series of turns, then another, before the lock on the heavy steel door disengaged to reveal a single hard drive sitting in the middle of the darkness.

He removed the drive, feeling the weight of it in his hands. It was a high-density solid state drive, specially manufactured for various government agencies and major laboratories around the world. A single drive like this could hold approximately one petabyte, or one thousand terabytes of data; a technological feat that would have been impossible just a decade ago. On top of that, it had no internal moving parts, was waterproof up to a hundred meters, and could withstand the shock of being dropped from a height of ten meters. Investing in such storage devices allowed users to reduce clutter from having too many hard drives in their servers.

The drive had no markings or writing of any kind on it, but Tae Woo knew its contents all too well.

"Anti-matter containment," he whispered in the darkness, suddenly feeling the weight of the hard drive increase tenfold.

His reverie was interrupted by a blast of gunfire coming from above, and he turned his attention to the ceiling above him. One would have been surprised, but on Tae Woo's face, a smile began to spread.

"They're here."

Yuri fished out her GPS to survey the lay of the land. The villa had been crawling with guards, and the trio had decided to drop all subterfuge, going in hot. Very hot. The guards had surely not expected a full-size Humvee to come crashing through the front gates and then through a window-fronted wall of the villa, emerging from the wreck in a hail of gunfire from three women. It was like a sexy nightmare, of sorts.

Yuri, Jessica and Tiffany were now huddled together, back to back and facing outward, in what looked like the living room. Corpses of fallen guards lay sprawled all across the room and the corridors above, some hanging limply over the stone balustrades, teetering toward the ground floor.

"Taeyeon is on the second floor. No sign of Tae Woo, but I'm sure he's in the villa," Yuri said firmly. She looked over her shoulder to the left at Jessica, then down at her bad leg. "Can you keep up?"

Jessica moved with a slight limp. If not for the painkillers and the special stabilizing method Yuri had employed to bandage the wound, she would've been crawling instead. "I'll be fine," She answered.

"There'll probably be more guards upstairs. Let's move. Be on your toes," Yuri said.

Jessica and Tiffany nodded, their faces masks of steel, and their grips on their pistols tightened. They glided up an enormous curved marble staircase, keeping close to one another. A guard materialized from behind a wall on the second floor, and Yuri spun to put a bullet between his eyes with frightening speed. He slumped over the balustrade and hit the ground floor with a sickening crunch of bone. As they surmounted the staircase, they found themselves in the middle of a long corridor that extended toward the east and west ends of the floor.

"It's too narrow here. We'll expose ourselves too much if we go together," Yuri decided, stealing quick glances across the lengths of the corridor. "We should split up. I'll go west with Jessica. Stephanie, do you think you can handle things on your own?"

Jessica gave Yuri a hard look. She had no intention of allowing Tiffany to get needlessly hurt, especially when the girl still wasn't in top form. Then again, she was the one with mobility problems. Yuri answered with a glare of her own, and the meaning within struck Jessica immediately.

"I trust her."

Tiffany looked back at Yuri and nodded curtly, straightening her arms and raising her weapon.

Yuri let out a small smile. "I'll see you on the other side."

The gunfire continued; Jessica's Glock and Yuri's Les Baer barked intermittently as guards continued to pour from the adjoining corridor and out of rooms branching off to the sides. The duo began to move back to back, moving with tactical efficiency, with Yuri taking up the front and Jessica covering the rear in case any stragglers came up from the first floor. The latter was looking out toward the direction Tiffany had gone, but saw no sign of the girl. She had disappeared past the end of the corridor, having moved into the next. Jessica became suddenly aware of the lack of gunfire from that end. Had she met no resistance? Or had something untoward happened?

Tiffany was beginning to feel her vision tunnel and dim, and her heartbeat suddenly throbbed in her head like a wild tribal drum. She struggled futilely, both hands clutched on those of her assailant while the he kept her firmly within a choking headlock. The guard had leapt out from the shadows of an unseen niche, knocking Tiffany's pistol out of her hands with a kick. Tiffany had answered in kind with a snap kick to the face before spinning to kick his own pistol away, leaving both to duel unarmed. She unleashed a flurry of quick punches all across his upper body, concentrating mainly on the face. A few connected, but they were nothing more than ant bites to the guard who looked more like an upright standing tiger than a human being. He lunged through her trifling attacks, knocking her against the wall behind her before maneuvering to hold her in a headlock. Her feet were now dangling a few inches above the ground, flailing wildly. Her breathing was beginning to thin.

Don't panic, Stephanie. Freaking out won't help. Vital points. Hit his vitals. Get free of this goddamn hold first.

She forced her eyes open, and sucking in as much air as she could through the hold, she raised an arm and slammed her elbow into the guard's solar plexus, effectively knocking the air out of him. He gasped audibly and his hold weakened, but didn't give. With another burst of energy, she raised her arm again, this time slamming it sideways into his temple, following with another elbow to his solar plexus with her other elbow. He grunted, staggering backward and releasing her from the headlock. Tiffany's feet found

the carpeted floor once again, and backed up toward the opposite wall to catch her breath. She touched her sore neck, eyes narrowing, fixing an icy, piercing gaze on her attacker. She was pissed, and very much so.

He recovered, placing one hand on his chest, and with a gravelly grunt, lunged toward Tiffany.

Use his weight to your advantage. You're smaller; faster.

Tiffany dodged the charge, and unable to stop in time, the guard's fist made contact with the solid concrete wall. There was a dull thud, and the guard yelped in pain. Tiffany was now behind him, stance dropped to lower her center of gravity, ready to evade the next attack. He spun with a roundhouse kick, and Tiffany's eyes widened slightly in surprise before she dropped to a knee, letting the tree trunk of a leg pass over her head without consequence. He was off balance. Now was the time. From her kneeling position, she braced her toes against the floor and burst forward toward him, sailing through a short space of air before striking his chin upward with the palm of her hand. He was stunned, eyes toward the ceiling, body leaning back and off balance. She followed with a solid punch to the Adam's apple, and was rewarded with the satisfying crack of soft bone.

She straightened slowly as the guard staggered and crumpled against the wall, writhing and wheezing as air struggled its way through a near-crushed windpipe. She noticed him regard her with glassy, defeated eyes, and a smirk broke out across his face. Wrinkling her nose, Tiffany stepped forward, twisting her body and landing a hard kick across the temple, and his head snapped to the left, body collapsing to the floor.

"What the hell were *you* smiling at?" she sneered before looking around for her pistol. She found it a couple of feet away.

Picking it up, she began to continue along the corridor.

"She's in here," Yuri said, nodding toward the door ahead of them.

Jessica broke off from Yuri's back, moving to the other side of the wooden door, set into the middle of

the corridor. A trail of dead guards lay behind them, a path of death laid by the duo as they moved together toward this point. Jessica slid out her magazine and loaded a fresh one, slipping the half-empty magazine into her pocket. As she racked the slide, she looked over her shoulder and back to Yuri again. The latter checked her own weapon, dropping her magazine to count the remaining bullets, then slipped it back up.

"Where's Stephanie?" Jessica whispered.

"She'll catch up. We have to move as quickly as we can, before Taeyeon escapes," Yuri said, checking her own weapon.

"I still think we should wait," Jessica argued.

"We don't have the time!" Yuri hissed, a little harsher than she had intended. She bit her lip.

Jessica looked over her shoulder again and huffed. "Fine," she said coolly, understanding. "Let's go."

"I'll cover your rear, and look out for Stephanie at the same time," Yuri said, taking up a position behind Jessica.

Jessica nodded, drew a deep breath and stood. Raising her good leg, she kicked.

The old wooden door burst open in a shower of splinters, and the blonde stepped across the threshold, pistol at the ready, struggling to peer through the thick cloud of dust that now floated in front of her.

There was the distinctive click of a hammer being cocked, and she instinctively swiveled her aim toward the sound, muscles as tense as steel rope.

As the dust began to settle, she slowly began to make out the short, slender figure standing motionless in front of her, legs apart and arms raised while its hands expertly cradled a pistol in them. A further silent moment revealed the emotionless, steely eyes of her adversary.

"Kim Taeyeon."

"Well if it isn't the FBI prodigy, Jessica Jung in the flesh. And I'd thought you only existed in gangsterland fairytales," came the mocking voice.

"I hate having to deal with smartasses, so do yourself a favor and shut up. We're bringing you in. Now," Jessica retorted, arching an eyebrow, steady aim unwavering.

"We, you say? And who might 'we' be, pray tell?" the brunette challenged.

"Me, and-"

"Me," a low, husky voice came from behind Jessica, almost a whisper.

A tall, devilishly curvaceous woman stepped in, pistol in hand, arms raised in a similar fashion to the others in the room.

She stopped at an arm's length away from Jessica, aim set on Taeyeon.

Taeyeon's expression remained unreadable.

"Amber. You're here. What do you say we take out the trash?" Jessica said coolly, not taking her eyes off Taeyeon.

Taeyeon immediately arched an eyebrow, one corner of her lips pulling upwards in a mock smile.

"Amber, you say? You and Amber?"

"That's right. You're outnumbered. Put the gun down, Taeyeon," Jessica said.

Suddenly, Taeyeon let a hearty chuckle burst out through her lips, eyeing the two with a renewed interest when her laughter subsided.

"Amber?" She enunciated the name as she turned her eyes to the woman named Amber, still training her pistol on Jessica. "Amber, darling, Agent Jung here seems to be a little lost. Why don't you shine a little light her way?"

"With pleasure." The woman named Amber suddenly swiveled her aim toward Jessica, the barrel of her pistol mere inches away from the latter's temple.

Jessica felt her heart take a nosedive through her body and then shoot up through her throat. She blinked; the only sign that her resolve had just been seriously dented.

"Amber? What are you doing?" she asked calmly, a slight nervousness tainting her usually cool tone.

"My name is Yuri, Jessica. Kwon Yuri," she said slowly, as she lifted a thumb to cock her pistol.

Jessica's grip on her pistol faltered ever so slightly. Her eyes widened with revelation, and her heart seemed to close upon itself, like an implosion contained within. The hairs on the back of her neck stood. She felt the breath momentarily knocked out of her. Had she heard correctly?

"Kwon...*Yuri*?" Jessica said slowly, eyeing the pistol that was now trained on her head.

Yuri, herself, was conflicted by her current predicament. She had not expected things to turn out this way, but then again, with Taeyeon in the picture, there was indeed a good possibility that her identity would have been revealed. She continued to aim her pistol at Jessica, counting on the gamble that Taeyeon would let her guard down thinking she'd just gained an ally. Yuri's mind whirled, attacked by a flash of random thoughts that jumped between her present reality and Jessica's feelings.

You weren't supposed to find out this way...

Just then, Yuri spotted Taeyeon's grip on her pistol loosen, and the barrel tipped downward slightly. She seized the opportunity, swiveling her aim so quickly that Taeyeon could do nothing but lift an eyebrow in shock. She fired, and a loud metallic ping followed the blast of her .45 pistol. Taeyeon's Glock was shot cleanly out of her hands, and she waved them in the air, stunned by the force and heat of the impact. The Glock clattered to the floor to Taeyeon's right. Yuri had now switched her aim to Taeyeon, and the latter glared back at her with intense, livid eyes. She sensed Jessica breathe a sigh of relief beside her. She smiled.

"Drop your weapons," a voice called from behind them.

"Tae Woo," Yuri hissed under her breath, tightening her grip on her Les Baer. He would definitely be armed. She would drop to a knee, spin and-

"Don't even think about it," Tae Woo warned.

Yuri heard a sob.

Stephanie.

"All I want to do is talk. Stephanie here is merely insurance up until we reach that point. Drop your weapons, and I will release her," he said calmly.

Jessica looked to Yuri for guidance. She, too, had the idea of turning around to shoot the man, but though they couldn't see him, there was something in his tone that told her he wasn't bluffing. He had her sister at gunpoint.

She then remembered something she had briefly forgotten upon establishing that Amber...or, Yuri, was indeed on her side. Was this really Kwon Yuri? The Kwon Yuri who all but left her behind so many years ago, disappearing without a trace? Who was she? Or a better question was, *what* was she? And what was she doing here? She felt sick, realizing that this woman had been playing her for a fool over the course of the past few days, and she had been completely clueless. Jessica gritted her teeth. She hated being manipulated, amongst other things. She would listen to Yuri's excuses later. There were more important things at hand.

Yuri caught her glance, closed her eyes briefly and nodded slightly. She raised her hands above her head, dropped her pistol and laced her fingers, turning around slowly.

"Now you, Jessica," Tae Woo prompted.

Jessica followed suit; her Glock clattering to the floor. They turned, and were met with the sight of Tae Woo holding Tiffany across the neck in one arm, holding both of hers in place at the same time, while he kept his pistol pressed to Tiffany's temple. A pair of sunglasses sat upon Tae Woo's nose, and neither Yuri nor Jessica could hope to interpret his intentions with his eyes hidden. The girl had tears streaming down her cheeks, and her eyes were wild. Strangely, it was not fear that Yuri saw in Tiffany's eyes. It was something else...confusion, uncertainty and...revelation?

"We're unarmed now, so let her go," Yuri said, though she was fully aware of the daggers and knives hidden around her body. She could summon any of them in a split second and impale the man in a variety of places, but she didn't want to take the chance. Bullets indeed travelled faster than knives.

Tae Woo nodded, a smirk spreading across his lips. Then he did what seemed to be the oddest thing. He removed the pistol from Tiffany's temple and shoved her toward them, disengaging the hammer on his weapon before calmly stowing it away. Jessica caught Tiffany in her arms and frowned. It didn't make sense. He should have shot Tiffany, then each of them in turn. Even if he did not, Taeyeon had had all the time in the world to retrieve her pistol and do it for him. But there they were, standing together and very much alive. It baffled her. Tiffany found the strength to stand up straight, and looked Jessica in the eyes, troubled and conflicted. Jessica glanced to Yuri, and noted the same frown creasing her forehead. What the hell was going on?

Yuri put forward that question for her. "What the hell is going on?"

"I've told you, I want to talk," Tae Woo said simply, spreading his hands.

Jessica and Yuri now stood bolt upright, ready for another confrontation. Tiffany still looked a mess, and Yuri noted it. The girl had seen something. But what?

"What is there to talk about? You're a wanted criminal. I should put you under arrest," Jessica spat. She then realized how stupid she had just sounded, threatening a man who clearly had the upper hand.

"That fact is very clear to me, Jessica Jung." He eyed the three in turn as Taeyeon stepped around them to join his side.

"I trust that by now Kwon Yuri has filled you in on the details, though I fear those may be incomplete. There are, indeed, great schemes unraveling as we speak, and I plan to further enlighten you," Tae Woo said knowingly, eyeing Yuri closely.

"Anti-matter containment," Yuri said. Tiffany looked to her confusedly.

"I'll fill you in when I get the chance," Yuri offered, noticing Tiffany's look of inquiry.

"Indeed, but that's not all," Tae Woo began, bringing Yuri's attention back to him. "And that's what I want to talk about. If I may, I want to show you a few things. Things that would make you realize that I am not your real enemy."

Something stirred in Yuri, an incipient feeling of dread. There was something brewing, and she could almost smell it, but she couldn't tell what it was. She could almost see through Tae Woo's sunglasses, into his eyes, and felt deep in her gut that beneath his words lay some form of truth.

"How do we know we can trust you?" Jessica said.

"You can't," Tae Woo said simply, smiling. "But if it would put you at ease..." He paused, his smile turning crooked. He stepped aside.

As his tall, bulky form slipped aside, another figure was revealed. The man was tall and lanky, dressed in a t-shirt and slacks, his hair varying shades of black and gray. His face was tired and wrinkled, but his deep blue eyes shone with a lively intensity. Gone were the strong, broad shoulders that flanked his neck and the solid muscles underneath his taut, tanned skin, as they were now replaced by thin, stooped shoulders and a soft, wrinkled and almost desiccated husk.

He spoke, a low, gravelly voice with a rich depth, eyes widening by the second. "Jessica?"

Tiffany and Yuri stood frozen solid in their places, their faces masks of shock and in Tiffany's case, a bitter acknowledgement and longing.

Jessica pushed a word through her lips; a word so unfamiliar, so alien; a word she had not used for more than eight years.

"Dad?"

Chapter 18 : The Unraveling

Elliot Jung took stepped through the doorframe, one arm outstretched toward his daughter. "Jessi..."

Jessica inched toward him, an arm similarly outstretched.

"I've mis-"

Elliot's words were cut off by a sharp crack of flesh against flesh, and his mind spun for a moment before the image before his eyes refocused. His cheek burned, but not more so than his heart.

"Jessi!" Tiffany cried out, reaching toward her sister, fresh tears continuing to stream down the sides of her face.

Yuri held up a hand, gently pushing Tiffany back while she stepped up. She reached for Jessica's shoulder. "Jessica."

"Shut up!" Jessica violently shrugged the hand away, looking over her shoulder and fixing Yuri with a

deadly glare.

Yuri's brow twitched at the expression. Jessica's eyes were now two pools of the darkest shade of hatred she'd seen in years; deep brown irises that seemed almost maroon with the intense fire burning behind them. She blinked slowly, as if to shield her green contacts from being burnt dry. She held her rejected hand in mid-air, then withdrew it while tightening her lips, stepping back.

Yuri knew she could do nothing to intervene at this point. In the doorway stood Elliot Jung, the father Jessica had once loved; the man at least partially responsible for the deaths of her mother and younger sister. Above all else, from the night she had returned to find police cordons outside her home; the night she pushed through the crowd of CSIs and policemen to step into the living room and see the chalk outlines on the floor and carpet; smelling the sharp scent of copper in the air...she had been wronged.

Jessica had gone from crying alone in a restaurant with a broken heart to bawling on her hands and knees with a shattered soul all in less than twenty-four hours. In that short span of time, she had lost some of the most important people in her life.

Why?

That question had beckoned to her for months; no, years. It wasn't fair. She was just a normal college student with a big heart to love with and a bright mind filled with sincere, hopeful dreams. Sure, she wasn't exactly ordinary considering her taste in sexual orientation, and as a daughter, she was willful and temperamental, but why? Why punish her this way, why strip her of everything she held dear and leave her an empty, rotting shell?

From the day she had decided to join the FBI, her life had been a ceaseless journey to determine why she had been punished so unjustly. The question was: did those answers even exist? In solving crimes and capturing criminals, she was slowly lifting herself out from the pit she had banished herself to; step by step, crack by crack, she had climbed out of Hell itself. And she was so close. Jessica's motivation was indeed a far cry from that of Stephanie's, who had merely wanted to prevent such tragedies from happening to other people. It was, of course, a foolhardy vision, albeit a noble one.

Yuri sighed silently. It was no surprise that given the reappearance of her supposed traitor of a father and discovery of her identity, in all her shock, confusion and a tinge of horror, the only logical emotion Jessica could summon was the one easiest to manifest: anger. Anger at her father; anger at Yuri; anger

at herself, and perhaps anger at God, who had given her such a cruel baptism of fire; a test that feasted upon her emotions and her sanity. Yuri could only wonder: how far had Jessica fallen yet again?

She looked ruefully at Jessica's turned back, resting her eyes on her tiny waist. How badly had she wanted to wrap her own arms around Jessica, smooth her hair and whisper those calming words into her ear.

Everything's going to be alright. Come what may, I'll protect you. I swear it.

Jessica's inflamed words brought her back to the present.

"Where were you for the past eight years?" Jessica spat. Elliot continued to look at the floor to the side, unable to meet Jessica's eyes.

Yuri glanced to Tae Woo, whose shaded eyes remained unreadable, the rest of his expression stoic. Would Jessica actually accost her own father in the midst of outsiders? Then again, Yuri remembered the temper Jessica had been born with; it would be no surprise to find that it had evolved into something much more volatile.

"You thought you could run? Is that it? You thought you could absolve yourself of the deaths of mom and Krystal?" Jessica's tone grew increasingly menacing. Even Tiffany cringed, clearly new to the sinister edge in her voice.

"I-" Elliot blurted, fists clenching.

"You. That's right. *You*. It's been all about you!" Jessica jabbed a finger at Elliot. "Ever since you got involved in that research project at work, you changed!"

Yuri looked up. Jessica was really letting loose.

"You never called. Not even on our birthdays. You never came home. When you did, you were a sorry looking drunk! Come to think of it, you were a disgrace! Do you know how worried mom was? Do you know how worried we were? No! You didn't give a god damn rat's ass about us, did you? And before I get a chance to ask why, I come home for Christmas only to find you, mom and Krystal dead! DEAD!"

Jessica was yelling at her father now, who stood merely an arm's length away. Her eyes seethed with fury, her fists clenched into balls so tight the whites of her knuckles were plain to the eye. But Yuri saw, for once, weakness in Jessica's eyes.

"WHY? WHY ARE YOU STILL ALIVE? TELL ME WHY YOU DESERVED TO LIVE IN PLACE OF THEM!" A film of tears was beginning to form.

"Jessica," Elliot turned slowly to face Jessica, leveling his deep blue eyes with hers.

Jessica raised her hand to slap him again, but Elliot caught her forearm in midflight, his eyes remaining calm and sincere. She struggled furiously against his iron grip, teeth clenched, whimpering with every futile attempt. Then suddenly, she relented, feeling her knees buckle and letting herself fall forward into her father's chest. It was no longer rock solid, but it still embodied the warmth and security she'd always felt whenever he held her in this same embrace. For the first time in eight years, she felt hot tears stream down her cheeks.

No matter how hard she tried to fuel her fury against her father, no matter how hard she struggled not to let the tears flow, her walls had crumbled, and all the emotions of years long past, every single memory and bitter curse ran free through her veins and escaped through her tears.

"I hate you!" Jessica cried, pounding a closed fist repeatedly on his chest. "I hate you..."

Tiffany began to inch forward, paths of gray staining her cheeks, biting her lower lip in uncertainty. Elliot looked up and caught her gaze, and nodded her forward with a small smile. She joined in the hug, letting the sobs take hold as she relished, after long years past, the incomplete family reunion.

Yuri's hair stood on end at the sight. Tae Woo shifted uncomfortably.

"I'm sorry, girls," Elliot said softly with closed eyes, holding his daughters close. "I'm so sorry."

10 minutes later

Level "E"

The air had suddenly gone deathly still, and Yuri became aware of the heavy scent of electronics and bleach that stained the dry air.

The group stood in a loose circle before the large LCD screen that spanned the north wall. Jessica and Tiffany stood to the left; Taeyeon opposite them, and Yuri, Tae Woo and Elliot took up the fore. Though Jessica had relented earlier, her demeanor had returned to its original callousness as they made their way down, and Elliot remained cautious, choosing to give her some space. He stole a glance toward her and Tiffany, noting with a carefully hidden smile that their fingers were just barely touching; each girl silently communicating their support for each other.

Elliot had also been thoroughly surprised to discover that Yuri was indeed the Kwon Yuri he had known to be Jessica's girlfriend in their youth. It didn't take long for the first of many instinctive thoughts to form: how the hell had she turned into *this*? The Kwon Yuri he knew was a silly little sap whose only similarity to his daughter was the fact that she was also Korean-American in terms of heritage. The Kwon Yuri he saw now was unlike any trained mind he'd ever seen; and he'd seen many similar, yet profoundly different types in his career in the US armed forces.

Yuri took a tentative step forward. Something jostled inside of her; the face on the screen had the slightest tinge of familiarity to it, but she couldn't exactly place where or when she had seen this man before. She was sure, though, that it had been after her training had started, but that was eight years ago.

"This is the man we've been looking for?" Yuri glanced toward the text astride the picture. "Park Jin Young?"

"That's right," Tae Woo said, stepping forward. "There are several independent cartels across the globe: The Americas, which is under my control, European Union, Russian, South-east Asian and East Asian cartels. They all answer to this one man." He swapped away the picture for the world map.

"What's this?" Yuri asked.

"It's everywhere he's been or might be going, along with locations tied to what communication I've been

able to trace to him. There are a lot of moot points and unaccountable anomalies, but from what data I have, I've been able to come up with a rough idea of his intentions. Since I began my study on him back in 2008, I found that he's been in regular contact with the Russian government and the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research in Moscow Oblast, particularly its Laboratory of Particle Physics. The JINR is an international nuclear science research centre with staff from mainly the EU, the United States and a few Asian countries, the most notable being North Korea."

"North Korea...the world's darkest country."

Tae Woo nodded. "And also the most suspicious. Everyone knows that tensions between North and South Korea have been teetering precariously near breaking point since the Youth Olympic Games disaster in Seoul back in 2016."

Yuri was fully aware of the scandal involved. It was one of the few disasters the Doppelgangers had not been able to prevent. Recently, in 2016, South Korea held the 2nd Winter Youth Olympic Games at the Seoul Olympic Stadium; which ended in unimaginable tragedy at the peak of the opening ceremony. After athletes of all participating countries had entered the stadium and the final torch carrier had lit the Olympic flame, a series of successive muffled blasts reverberated all around the stadium, causing all of its main supports to collapse. The stadium then crumbled under its own weight, raining concrete and steel upon tens of thousands of hapless victims.

Fatalities were officially recorded at more than 90%, including children under the age of 12 who were present at the ceremony in the form of performing arts groups. Official investigations were launched on the incident after a proper period of mourning, and though they did not claim responsibility for the act, North Korea was the prime suspect as alleged by government agencies from various participating nations. Since there was no concrete proof against the nation, the world resigned to further isolating the country, and it sank further into the shadows.

"What has North Korea have to do with this?" Yuri inquired, waking herself from her reverie.

"Park Jin Young is of North Korean descent. After the anti-matter leak incident, I found elevated communication between offices of the North Korean government and an unidentified locale. However, I was able to analyze the strings of heavily encrypted chatter, and discerned that the wavelengths were similar to those used in contacting the JINR and the Russian government. There's definitely a connection here."

Tiffany and Jessica seemed to be taken aback at this statement.

"You said Park is of North Korean descent. Tell me more," Yuri prodded, interested.

"He was born to a North Korean family, that's all. An interesting thing to note, though, would be the fact that there was nothing to be found about him in the first twenty years of his life. Didn't even find anything in the North Korean census databases. A good guess would be that he had somehow defected to the South, thenceforth changing his name to the one he holds today, and after that the North completely erased his history from his birth to his defection. Although, that does confound me a bit, since the North is known to hold deadly grudges against defectors. Also, there aren't any solid records, but he might have a wife and son who are still alive.

"Nothing about the first twenty years, huh?" Yuri muttered under her breath, clenching her jaw once.

"What was that?"

She looked up, blinking. "Nothing. You mentioned a wife and son?"

"As I said, it's not concrete information, so that's a dead end for exploration."

Deep down in her gut, something was irking Yuri. There was definitely something here. She could feel it; almost taste it, even. But she kept the ominous feeling down. Intuition, though a useful tool, had to be confirmed before one acted upon it. Doing so otherwise would be simply reckless.

"These points on the world map," Yuri said, waving a hand over the screen in front of them. "What significance do they hold?"

Tae Woo visibly straightened. "By themselves, their significance is obvious." He went over the marked cities in turn. "Toronto, Washington D.C., New York City, London, Paris, Amsterdam, Luxembourg, Copenhagen, Berlin, Rome, Istanbul, Mumbai, Delhi, Bangkok, Singapore, Seoul, Tokyo, Brisbane, Canberra. Some of these are the world's most important financial centers, and others are either densely populated or hold cultural and historical significance. Notice that cities from the usual Communist

nations: Russia, China and North Korea being the most influential, are absent." Tae Woo stepped closer to the screen. "And then you bring in the issue of anti-matter..."

A brief silence settled over the room.

"So it's not an arms race," Yuri mumbled in realization as she frowned at the floor, not low enough for Tiffany to miss.

"Arms race?"

Jessica answered her query. "Yesterday while...Yuri...and I were in the safehouse, we learned that whatever it is we're in the middle of right now, anti-matter was involved. We thought the Russians merely sealed a deal with Tae Woo to acquire the data on anti-matter containment so that they could stockpile it as the Americans were."

"Nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament has been a serious issue over the past decade, especially since North Korea has been continuing to carry out nuclear tests despite global condemnation. The US and Russia signed the New START treaty in Prague in 2010, and have since begun to steadily reduce the number of nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles on both sides as promised. Therefore, since the shift away from nuclear weaponry was inevitable, it made sense to covertly explore a suitable alternative. The US took that initiative." Elliot added.

Yuri nodded slowly. "So that's why the US had been so intent on exploring the anti-matter field. And when they made a breakthrough back in 2012, they kept it a secret, delving deeper into research and solidifying their ground. As much as it helped broaden their scientific horizons, it also provided a replacement for nuclear power."

Tiffany closed her eyes briefly, sorting the confusing mess of thoughts in her head. This was all too much. She opened her eyes, brows furrowed. "So if it's not an arms race, then what is it?"

Yuri looked her straight in the eyes. "He's going to set off anti-matter bombs in each of these cities."

"*What?*" Tiffany blurted.

"It's perfect," Yuri said simply. "Anti-matter is portable, controllable with the right equipment and above all else, virtually undetectable. You could completely level any of these cities and possibly more with just a suitcase full of the stuff. You don't even need a detonator. Anti-matter ignites when it reacts with matter, so all Park has to do is remotely deactivate the electromagnetic field in which the anti-matter is suspended. And he could do that from virtually anywhere in the world with a powerful enough transmitter."

Jessica had not wanted to discuss anything with Yuri, but felt the need to contribute anyway. "What does he hope to gain in doing so? It would be illogical to just blow up every one of those cities without a goal in mind."

"Maybe he just wants to," Tiffany offered.

"What do you mean, he just *wants* to? That doesn't make any sense," Jessica rebutted.

"Humankind has a rather rich history of doing less-than-sensible things. Sometimes they're so driven to accomplish something that it wouldn't even matter if they had to throw their lives away in the process. Then again, sacrifice is one thing; insanity is another. I don't know what his intentions are, but we have to maintain the possibility that he's just motivated to do so without a tangible goal in mind."

Jessica scoffed.

"Insane or not," Yuri began, "It's pretty obvious who would gain from his act. If anti-matter bombs were to go off in these cities, there's going to be a global financial meltdown, in addition to a widespread panic following the deaths of tens of millions of innocent people." She looked to Tae Woo, who was nodding slowly. "And who would gain in the midst of such chaos?"

"Russia, China, North Korea...the Communist nations," Elliot said slowly. He looked up and addressed the group. "In the event of a global financial meltdown like this, the unaffected countries would wield the greatest financial and consequently political power. Think about it. They would condemn the attack as a terrorist act, then blackmail the affected countries with financial aid."

Tae Woo threw his head back slightly, touching his forehead.

"What is it?" Yuri asked.

"That's not all. To secure the anti-matter containment data, I had to rely on a series of contacts within Fermilab. A recent report said that the US was going to announce its ability to produce and store anti-matter very soon," he said quickly.

"They've kept it a secret for almost a decade, and now they're letting the cat out of the bag?" Jessica said incredulously.

"Power," Elliot said, realization in his voice.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Once they announce to the world of their ability to produce and store anti-matter on a large scale, they will reaffirm their place as a major superpower in the world; a place that they believe would be above that of the Russians'. It'll bolster their standing in both politics and science...and also end in their downfall."

"They're digging their own grave," Yuri concluded, understanding.

Elliot nodded. "If the attacks are successful, it'll only be a matter of time before official investigations show the possibility of anti-matter being used. Since they're the only ones able to produce and store it in large enough quantities, their anti-matter program will surely be put under scrutiny, in addition to an unending slew of criticism. There will be global pressure to dismantle the program, leaving Russia as the sole major anti-matter producer in the world. The balance of power will be totally destroyed."

"And remember," Tae Woo interjected, "That this list of countries is not one hundred percent complete. There may be more targets than just what we're looking at now. Other possible targets may include facilities holding global money reserves and research facilities. All things considered, it looks like Park is trying to cripple the world in every way, in favor of the Communists."

"How soon will Fermilab declare their anti-matter program?" Jessica asked.

"It's not certain, but my contacts tell me it'll be within the next two months," Tae Woo answered.

Yuri felt her insides twist into a knot. The sense of urgency had grown exponentially. "I believe that with the proper funding, that's more than enough time to fabricate a storage medium for anti-matter," she concluded.

"Then Park will strike some time after Fermilab reveals its program to the world," Elliot said.

Yuri was deep in thought. A single question hung over her head: why? Jessica was right. How could a man so powerful and clever enough to stay hidden from every government agency for so many years be devoid of logic? Park had to have a goal that motivated him to commit such a devastating act. But what was it? There was, indeed, a lot more to this man that met the eye. Even with this much information, surely they had merely grazed the tip of the iceberg.

"It looks like you're the best source of information on Park we have right now," Yuri said, turning to Tae Woo. "Still, it wouldn't hurt to pass this through Doppelgangers," she continued, stepping up to the console.

"Doppelgangers?" Elliot thought. Was that what Yuri was? It was a name he'd never heard of before in his life. Was Yuri working for some sort of secret organization? A distant bell rang in Elliot, and he thought if that were true, perhaps that was the reason why Yuri had so suddenly disappeared from Jessica's life. Throughout Tae Woo's surveillance on his daughters, he received weekly updates on their lives, and Yuri wasn't part of Jessica's since after the...incident.

"I'll need the main file on Park to send to a research specialist I know. Tae Woo?" Yuri said.

"Right, although I don't see how we will gain-

Yuri cut him off. "You did mention this was a joint effort, did you not? We're wasting time here, so the file, if you please." She crossed her arms.

Tae Woo pulled his lips into a tight line, and stepped forward, bringing up the main file of their quarry

onscreen.

Yuri slipped out her cellphone, punching a speed dial number for the specialist in question.

"Research Lab," came the practiced voice.

"Seohyun."

"Yuri! What do you need?" The voice became instantaneously bright and sweet. It was good to hear from an old friend and mentor, after all.

"I need you to run a file through database, see if you can find anything."

"Sure. I'll text you the secure channel and you can send it right over."

"Oh, and another thing, Hyun."

"Yes Yul?"

"Do it quietly. I need the search to be anonymous."

"Anonymous? Why?"

"I just have a feeling, Hyun. You know how these feelings guide me, right? You're the confirmation right now."

"I do, Yuri, but you know how the research lab works, right? Every action is noted and logged for security reasons."

"And that's why I called you, Seohyun. Work your magic for me, will you? I wouldn't have asked if it

weren't important."

There was a long sigh on the other end of the line. *"Aigoo, it'll take a bit more work, but alright. Just this once."*

"You're the best, Hyun."

"Just send me the file."

The line clicked off, and seconds later, Yuri's phone vibrated. She read off the channel and began tapping away at the console, and soon the file was on its way to Seohyun's workstation via a private, secret zone of cyberspace the Doppelganger techies had established. It provided the Doppelgangers with the ability to scour the World Wide Web with complete anonymity, as well as an intranet within which operatives could freely share information. Of course, there were private areas within this as well, and Seohyun knew exactly how to exploit them without leaving any visible trace.

Yuri closed her phone, slipping it back into her jacket pocket before turning to face the group. Jessica was still boring a hole in her skull with her eyes, and Tiffany stood an arm's length away from her. Elliot looked strangely uncomfortable, and Tae Woo, as always, was unreadable. Taeyeon remained at the other end of the room, hands placed in front of her, eyes directed toward Tiffany. Yuri sighed. This was the team she was going to work with to bring down the most enigmatic man on Earth?

"She's going over the file as we speak, so we have a little time before things really get going." She eyed each person carefully. "I suggest voicing out any grievances now, because as much as any of you may hate it, the six of us are a team, and we're going to have to work together." Her eyes rested finally on Jessica.

Jessica was conflicted to say the least. She didn't like the fact that her father was alive and kicking; not for that fact per se, but because she didn't know. Neither did she like the fact that she was working together with a crime lord who had dozens of life and death sentences on his head, furthermore one whom she'd carelessly allowed to escape before he even made it to detention. And at this juncture, she'd wanted more than anything else to wrap her hands around Kwon Yuri's neck and find out why the hell she was involved in this catastrophic mess. But something jabbed at her insides a little more than the others. She looked to Tiffany, whose eyes were lost and sullen, fixed upon a random spot on the dark tiled floor.

Their reconciliation had been abrupt; they'd only said quick hellos before dodging bullets left and right. She looked into Tiffany's eyes and saw the confusion; she, too, was conflicted.

Tiffany had always been daddy's baby girl, even though little Krystal was the youngest and the most brittle. Sometimes she wondered if the younger girl's overwhelming love toward her family was the product of an overactive heart or a deep devoutness in Christianity, and usually decided that it was the latter. Jessica was never much of a church-goer; with a pragmatic, realist view of life, it was hard to persuade her to join the family at church every Sunday. To Jessica, it simply did not make sense to place her faith in a being whom she could not see, hear, touch or feel. Still, Elliot loved her dearly. Jessica pondered. Tiffany was having as much a hard time as she was accepting that their father was still alive, though she was probably more upset at the years of love they'd lost together than that he was responsible for the loss of their mother and Krystal.

Jessica regarded Taeyeon, who was similarly in an unfocused daze, choosing instead to stare at a bank of blinking LEDs on a server rack. Who was this woman that had claimed to love Tiffany? Just looking at the way they avoided eye contact told Jessica these two did have something going on. But honestly, falling in love with a criminal who would later drug you, strap you to a chair and beat you senseless? Where was the logic in that? Oh, right. Jessica had ceased to understand matters of the heart since Yuri left her.

At that moment, Taeyeon and Tiffany raised their chins, catching each other in eye contact. They held it for a second, then abruptly looked away, shifting uncomfortably. This did not go missed by Jessica. She felt a knot tighten in her gut. She would get to the bottom of this when she could.

She glanced toward her father, who stood limply in a corner, appearing to be deep in thought. For a split second, her heart ached. There was no doubt that she was angry at him. For everything. But the tiniest part of her rejoiced in his presence. She shook the feeling away. No. He would not be forgiven so soon.

And then there was Kwon Yuri. Her eyes wandered to the woman in question. Was this really Kwon Yuri? From everything she'd seen since she met the woman, she was more inclined to acknowledge her as Amber Liu than anything. She closed her eyes.

Her *kkab-Yul*, transformed into a killing machine the likes of which she had never seen in all her days in the FBI. She was just like the protagonist in a modern action hero film; indestructible even in the face of assured destruction.

She remembered those green eyes of hers. Contacts, of course, she'd realized. Those weren't the eyes

she used to gaze into in their youth. They were focused, sharp, and alert. Those were the eyes of a trained killer; a confident one at that. Jessica shook her head. Who was this woman who called herself Kwon Yuri?

For the past couple of minutes, no one said a word, and the only sound to be heard was the omnipresent whirring of servers all around.

"Perhaps everyone's tired," Tae Woo took the initiative to say. The others were taken by surprise as he reached up to take off his sunglasses, addressing them with beady eyes that were remarkably drawn; dark circles hanging below them. "I have rooms for everyone upstairs, where you can get some rest while waiting for Yuri's contact to check back. As for the bodies, they may be my bodyguards in name, but their loyalty rests with Park, at least since I faked my death back then. I'll have my personal guard come down to dispose of them and take over security matters here. Not that you need any protection, as I've seen."

"I think that's a good idea," Yuri said, looking over the group once more. It would give them some time to think, and perhaps clear any doubts with each other in privacy. "Shall we?"

Elliot and Tiffany nodded, while Jessica looked away. Taeyeon remained motionless, arms folded.

"Come, I'll show you to your rooms," Tae Woo announced, gliding to the door and motioning for the group to leave.

Yuri waited for Tiffany and Jessica to leave, noting with a certain uneasiness the glare Jessica trained on her as she passed through the doorway. As Yuri herself headed toward the door after them, she felt a tug on her sleeve. She looked over her shoulder and was greeted by a pair of brown eyes a shade lighter than Jessica's, set into a milky white face. Taeyeon.

"I need to talk to you."

Chapter Nineteen : Doppel-Crossed

Research Lab

Doppelganger Headquarters

Seohyun sat under a line of soft fluorescent lighting and stared into her computer screen, surrounded by vacant workstation cells, watching intently as the file Yuri sent through the secure channel came in. She had previously switched on the anonymous mode on her workstation; a simple yet effective protocol she had personally written for such under-the-table errands.

As the download bar approached fifty percent, she fingered her pouting lower lip and pondered.

It had been about six years since she'd been enlisted into the Doppelgangers. Before that, she had merely been a bright, optimistically-driven college girl who for years had shunned media violence and excessive merry-making. She had found it exceedingly difficult to make the transition, but during the course of her training, she had found one tangible blessing: an old senior, Kwon Yuri.

They'd met back in college. The both of them had been popular bandsmen in their college marching band; Yuri in her sophomore year and she, a freshman. Contrary to her somewhat flashy, pampered, rich-girl countenance, Yuri had displayed a level of discipline, determination and skill worthy of any musician's respect. And for a girl who prided herself on a no-nonsense, structured style of living, Seo Juhyun was right at home in the band, which demanded lung-scrunching stamina, strict discipline and the highest order of military precision on a daily basis.

It was not by chance that they had met as it was easy to miss someone in a band almost two hundred strong. Yuri was the center snare of the battery, or marching percussion section; in effect she was the section leader and presumably the most skilled individual to handle a pair of drumsticks. Seo Juhyun, or Seohyun as she'd preferred to be known as, had auditioned as a tenor drum player. Her lithe, delicate body belied a speed, economy of motion and agility with her hands that allowed her to easily produce a staggering flurry of complicated rhythms across a horizontal plane of up to six differently tuned drums built into a harness. The whole contraption weighed almost thirty pounds. Her face hadn't even twitched at the effort. The alumni who auditioned her were stunned mute not by her skill, but by the fact that someone with a face like that could inspire such awe into seasoned veterans like them. Never judge a book by its cover, as they always say.

The two got close quickly; what with Yuri fawning over Seohyun's seemingly inhuman control over the

drums and her shy, easily likeable nature.

And then, as quickly as they had met, Yuri vanished sometime around Christmas of 2010, leaving Seohyun to live her life in the band without the company of a cherished senior and friend. How ironic that she would follow in Yuri's footsteps two years after.

Of course, her inherently gentle nature had closed the doors to any profession in the Doppelgangers that involved killing or otherwise any form of violence, so she had taken a more benign route in her training.

Not all Doppelgangers were elites in the art of killing. Most initiates usually trained to become field agents, undergoing special operations, intelligence and espionage training on top of the mandatory physical and psychological stress routines before mastering a specialization: unarmed and melee combat, explosives, light firearms and sniping amongst others. Better initiates could choose to master an additional discipline.

Initiates who did not make the cut for the field operative vocation or were deemed unsuitable for its grueling physical and mental training were instead offered the structurally longer research and technology route, which entailed specialized training in various fields such as physics, forensics, geology, chemistry and electronics on fast-track postgraduate and doctoral levels specially designed by pioneer Doppelganger geniuses of decades past. It wasn't that they were inferior; every intelligence agency required brains to guide their brawn. In fact, with her theoretical and practical expertise, Seohyun easily matched or even exceeded the capabilities of PhD holders in the real world, if only she lacked their hard-earned experience.

Seohyun had been reunited with Yuri during her Electronics fast-track program, later aiding her as an intelligence officer working from behind the computer on one of Yuri's solo missions.

She stirred from her thoughts to find that the download had finished, and she brought up the file Yuri had sent over. Why did this man look a tad familiar?

She shrugged before initiating a search on the headquarters central database using the source file and waited. A few seconds later, the screen came up blank. Raising an eyebrow, she pouted, tapping the

table with her index finger.

"Nothing...", she muttered, a little unbelieving.

Casting a couple of surreptitious glances over her shoulders, for all they would help, she brought up the command console and began typing.

Total search parameters; all local files; include hidden files; reveal cleared file movement

She tapped the Enter key and leaned back into her seat as the CPU beside the screen began to whir a little louder. She had altered and expanded the search to include any and all references within the entire headquarters outside of the central database. A wall of text began scrolling downward on the screen, displaying the search that was now underway. Moments later, a single entry came up on the screen.

Seohyun leaned toward the screen, squinting as she read the result.

Park Jin Young

She acknowledged the satisfactory result with a nod and got down to studying it. She checked the file's history and database location and frowned. It was in a secure access point within a restricted office, and the file had been moved about a decade ago from central storage. It hadn't been touched since. But that wasn't what worried her. Her eyes were fixed on the root location of the folder.

"Mission director's office?" she mumbled.

Seohyun thought of double clicking the folder to peruse its contents, but decided against it. She imagined Yuri would be better able to make sense of the information within since she was the one who had requested the search. With a flurry of clicks and a chain of typed commands, she copied the main file from the mission director's office and sent it back via the I.P. address from which Yuri's file had come. She then removed any traces of her search and the data transfer.

Reaching for her cellphone and flipping it open, she spun on her chair and craned her neck to look at the

glass window that fronted a wall of the mission director's office. The office on the second floor overlooked the entire research department. It was empty at the moment. An uneasy feeling began to burble from the pit of her stomach; a creeping sensation that made her skin crawl. Instinct: that's what Yuri had taught her.

And it had almost always foretold terrible things.

Taeyeon stepped through the doorway, not turning away from Yuri as she reached back to push the heavy oak door closed. She took in a deep breath, feeling the dry air move through her slightly parted lips and down her throat. There was an underlying scent of musk and a little dust; the room hadn't been used in a while. Then again, a lot of rooms in the villa were there just because. She could almost feel the coolness radiating from the marble tiles beneath her feet.

They had all ascended to the second floor of her father's villa in silence. Jessica and Tiffany were in the room next to theirs, and Elliot Jung and her father had gone back down to the basement to catch up on the situation and discuss their next moves. The gears in Elliot's head had begun turning; apparently reuniting with his daughters had broken down whatever state of incoherence and insanity he had developed over the years. It was as if she had been looking at a brand new man, raring for a challenge. Even his shoulders looked broader.

She took a tentative step forward and realized how long the room was as she watched Yuri approach the stained glass door on the far side of the room, sliding it open to reveal a small stone balcony beyond. A pair of frigate birds flapped away at the intrusion, abandoning their perches on the parapet.

A gentle breeze wafted in, stirring a few strands of Yuri's thin ponytail. Taeyeon felt it caressing the soft hairs on her arms as it glided over and through her. The moon was low in the sky; it had to be since she was able to see it from her place in the room. There were no stars; what glittering gems scattered across the sky were either outshined by the lights in the city below or obscured by clouds. Dawn was approaching. She stepped closer.

"So, what was it you wanted to talk about?" Yuri asked distantly, gazing high and far.

Taeyeon suddenly felt like a primate with her hands hanging limply by her sides, and placed them in her pockets where they felt significantly safer. Her brow creased.

"What happens now?" she asked lamely.

Yuri's head declined to look at the floor ahead of her. She began tapping her foot. "We wait for a reply from my friend, then we get to work."

"And do what? My father has been trying to track this man down for the past decade and failed. Who are we to achieve that with what limited time we have?"

"That's why we only have one shot at it."

Taeyeon's frown deepened. "What do you mean?"

"Tomorrow's the meeting between your father and an old friend of his, Ivan Fedorov. He's handling the transaction for Park Jin Young, as he had eight years ago with the anti-matter production data. Park wants the anti-matter containment data. Tomorrow, we'll let him have it."

"And this will help us, how?"

"Fedorov was caught without the data the first time, so he must have wired the data to Park and destroyed the original copy before attempting to leave the country. Chances are, he'll do the same tomorrow. We tag the hard drive with a tracking bug and let him have it, then track the data transfer when Fedorov initiates it. Wherever the data goes next, there's a good chance that it'll lead us to Park."

Taeyeon nodded slowly, though she knew Yuri couldn't see it. "But what if it doesn't lead us to him?"

Yuri shifted at this. The truth was, she was putting all her chips into this; she was counting on tracking Park down through the data transfer. Otherwise...

"Then we'll have to wait till he begins the attack. Wait till he begins placing the anti-matter bombs in the

cities we mentioned earlier."

"But my father said the list of cities wasn't complete."

"Then we'll have to settle with minimizing losses," Yuri said a little too impatiently.

"But-"

"Enough!" Yuri turned to face Taeyeon.

Taeyeon jumped back a little, surprised at her unexpected outburst. Or maybe it wasn't unexpected.

"Let's face it. You didn't come here to talk about the anti-matter, so stop beating around the bush and spit it out."

Taeyeon felt her mouth go dry. She felt her hands grab the linen at the bottom of her pockets, using them to dry the thin film of sweat that had formed in her palms. She hadn't known exactly what to say; she'd merely been stalling with talk about their future plans.

"I...don't know...what to do," Taeyeon said softly.

Yuri's eyes softened, if inexplicably. She knew it. She'd seen the longing, confusion and guilt in Taeyeon's eyes back in the lab. This wasn't about the situation at hand. It was about Tiffany. Taeyeon couldn't approach Tiffany for guilt's sake, and Jessica appeared to be out for blood, be it hers or Taeyeon's. Talking to Elliot would make no sense, and she had imagined pouring her grievances out to her father would be as helpful as crying to a statue. Still, she was surprised that Taeyeon would make her feelings known at all; her first impression of the woman had told her she was a loner. As such, she didn't lean, she couldn't cry, and she certainly wouldn't show weakness to a person she barely knew. Yuri realized that some people were simply more difficult to read.

Emotion was weakness. Love was a liability. That's what Yuri had been taught during her training, although she never believed it. On the contrary, she'd always trusted otherwise. To Yuri, emotion was a

powerful tool to be exploited. Love was an unfathomable source of strength and fortitude. It was love that had driven her through the years of tortuous training and bloody missions. It was what guided her hands when she sent a knife flying. Too many people had condemned love as a danger to themselves and others when in the line of duty, simply because they couldn't put in the extra effort to ensure it wouldn't become a liability and a burden.

She watched as Taeyeon slowly made her way to an adjacent wall; the one that separated their room from Jessica and Tiffany's. She faced the wall; head hung low, and brought up a hand to place on the cold stone surface. For a moment, Yuri idly wondered if Tiffany was standing on the other side, doing the same so their hands were aligned.

"Tiffany," Yuri said softly.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

"I'm sorry I hurt her. I'm sorry I used her. I'm sorry for *everything*."

"Why are you apologizing to me? You should be saying it to her instead."

"Because I can't face her!" Taeyeon turned her head to look at Yuri. Her eyes glittered as a thin film of tears reflected the moonlight entering through the balcony. Yuri bit the corner of her lip.

"If only we had met in a different place, in a different time, as different people," Taeyeon began.

"I've wronged her in more ways I can imagine; hurt her as no lover should have. I can't ever make it up to her, no matter how much I wanted to. Even if she forgave me..." Taeyeon shook her head slowly, and Yuri saw her shudder as she tried to hold back her tears.

Yuri pocketed her hands. This was definitely a side of Taeyeon she had never hoped to see. She didn't think it was weak, despite what other people would say. An agent with a heart, soul and conscience

could still be considered a human being. Otherwise, he'd be a mere tool to be used and discarded. If Taeyeon could still cry; if she could feel such remorse and self-reproach at her actions toward someone else, it meant that Taeyeon still had a heart. The business of ruthless money-making and brutal killing tended to dehumanize a person, but from what Yuri had seen, Taeyeon was still very much human. If anything, Taeyeon still had some sliver of hope left in her; a shadowed humanity that cried out for recognition and acknowledgement. Like her, she had not chosen this path in life. For some reason, Yuri felt a goading obligation to help the woman.

"Given a choice...would you choose to live the life you're living now?" Yuri asked.

Taeyeon looked up, surprised. She had just begun thinking herself a fool for even hoping that Yuri would listen to her worries. A fool for even making her worries known. In fact, she'd contemplated leaving the room and pretending that none of this had ever happened. She considered face her fears alone.

"Would you?" Yuri prompted.

Taeyeon bit her lip, frown deepening. "No."

"Well, we weren't given one," Yuri said, shrugging. "We're who we are, and we're here and now. The world doesn't revolve around us, and we certainly don't revolve around other people. We make our own choices, and stick to our own beliefs, because we know that those are the things that will lead us forward."

Taeyeon straightened, eyes wide at Yuri's verbal wisdom.

"Love is strength. Love is living life itself," Yuri continued, emphasizing the last two words. "If you've found love and then allow yourself to let go of it, you'll become an empty shell. Nothing is stronger than the will to live, but remember that the will to live is strengthened by the love that exists within you."

Another breeze, stronger this time, blew in through the open door, bringing with it a white-blue flower that drifted in the soft undercurrents. Yuri turned and reached out, gently catching it with her hand before bringing it up into the moonlight. The soft light illuminated the flower, turning it translucent as the petals continued to flutter slightly in what eddies remained in the room. Taeyeon's eyes followed the petal's fluid movements in half-wonder.

"Face her. Tell her you're sorry. I might not know much about either of you, but I do know there's something about you two that transcends any common affection. If she accepts, you'll become a better team. If she doesn't...life closes that door and opens another one somewhere else. No harm trying. Besides, if you two had met in a different time, in a different place, and as different people, are you certain you would still have fallen in love with each other?" Yuri held the flower out in front of her, gesturing before wearing a sheepish grin. "And no, I didn't plan this whole flower thing. A bit dramatic, don't you think?"

A small smile crept onto Taeyeon's lips, which she concealed quickly. She closed the distance between her and Yuri, reaching out with her right hand. Yuri turned her hand over, letting the flower fall lithely into her small palm. It felt like cotton on her skin. She closed her fingers over it gently, feeling its delicate fragility with the tips of her fingers.

Keeping her eyes fixed on the floor, Taeyeon turned, stepped toward the door and opened it. As she turned the doorknob, she half turned over her shoulder, speaking to Yuri and yet not looking at her.

"You should do the same with Jessica Jung."

Yuri did her best to hide her surprise, but failed. She tucked her hands deeper into her pockets, averting her eyes from Taeyeon's. Taeyeon smiled, the crease small and crooked, and turned to leave the room.

Yuri turned to face the deep shadow of the night, feeling a new creeping sensation crawl up her spine. Her eyes looked far, fixing on a spot on the horizon between the dense sea of treetops and the moon, and yet, they focused on nothing in particular. Yuri recognized this feeling.

Taeyeon was right. Duty or not, Yuri would have to make amends with Jessica...but not anytime soon. There was too much on their hands at the moment; any reconciliation would be pointless if the world as they knew it was to be reduced to smoldering dust and anarchy. Love was her driving strength, but a dedication to duty would make sure that love would live on for a long, long time. It was a gamble, as was true for most matters of the heart. She could only hope to follow her own advice and not lose everything in the end.

Her eyelids fluttered as she was wrapped in a cool wind, patting her cheeks and swirling around her aching neck. She brought up a hand to rub a sore spot around her shoulder. One too many knife throws,

far too many headshots. She suddenly felt a desperate need to wash her face. How on earth did field operatives maintain such flawless complexions?

She padded to the bathroom, but before she could reach for the sink, her phone vibrated. Fishing out her cellphone, she flipped it open.

Done.

A small smile crept up to her lips.

Just then, the door to her room swung wide open. She turned to see Tae Woo standing in the doorway, one hand still on the knob.

"Yuri, its-"

"I know. Gather the rest."

Another flapping of wings drew Yuri's attention to the line of trees beyond the villa compound. She eyed the swaying branches carefully, watching as a cluster of leaves were shaken loose and fell to the dense undergrowth. All was silent.

Turning, she left the room.

"Stephanie," Jessica said softly, tugging the said girl's forearm from behind.

Tiffany was leaning against the west wall, one hand planted on the surface as if for support. The tears had since stopped flowing, but her heart continued to burn inside her chest. Her cheeks felt sticky from the previous torrent of tears, and her eyes were puffy

"Jessi, I'm so confused," Tiffany said, not turning to look at her sister.

Jessica wore a concerned expression. She kept a hand on her sister's forearm, squeezing it slightly in whatever semblance of assurance she could manage.

"I know what she's done. I know that I can make even the slightest connection between her and the deaths of mom and Krystal, but I just can't bring myself to blame her. I know she's hurt me in ways damnable by anyone, but still, I can't bring myself to blame her. What's wrong with me?"

Jessica was speechless. She honestly had no idea what to say to her stricken sister, or how to make her feel any better if it were even possible. She had distanced herself too much from her emotions to even make sense of what Tiffany was going through. Right at this moment, she regretted it. She regretted erecting all those emotional walls around herself for protection. She didn't want to deal with loss, so she shunned it outright; almost severing any non-professional connection between herself and anyone else she'd known since she'd left home. And now, she couldn't even help her own sister. Something twisted inside of her. She needed to blame someone for it. She needed a punching bag.

She gritted her teeth.

Kwon Yuri.

Unknowingly, Jessica had tightened her grip on Tiffany's wrist, and the latter turned to face her, apparently oblivious of the growing pressure.

"Why am I being this way, Jessi?" Tiffany pleaded, holding Jessica's hand in hers now.

Jessica lifted her gaze from the floor to Tiffany's eyes. Bad move. Her sister looked like an injured puppy. Try as she might, she could never resist that face ever since their youth. It made her want to help, no matter what.

"B-because you're in love, Steph," Jessica stuttered.

Tiffany's eyes gleaned, and her eyes widened ever so slightly. Jessica found a renewed confidence.

"You love her. That's why you're willing to forgive all her sins, regardless of their gravity. To you, she's blameless."

Tiffany frowned deeper and sucked in her lower lip, averting her eyes from Jessica's.

"Look, Steph. I don't know how or why you two got together, though I'm more curious about the how, and I don't know what kind of woman Taeyeon is, but one thing's for sure," Jessica said, trying to recall some part of her past self; a shadow that existed in the days before her nightmare began. "If two people are truly in love, they can only find absolution in each other. If you love her, you can forgive her, and hopefully, that would be the right choice."

"There's something about you two...I don't know what it is, but my gut tells me you shouldn't let it go to waste," Jessica added.

Tiffany remained silent, squeezing Jessica's hand.

"Do you love her?" Jessica prodded.

Tiffany nodded slowly.

"Hey," Jessica said, lifting Tiffany's chin to look into her eyes. They were still puffy, but Jessica saw something in them that calmed her. She giggled a little inside. She was actually doing this right.

"Do you love her?"

"I do," Tiffany said softly, a small smile spreading across her lips.

"Then you know what you have to do."

The smile widened.

Jessica let out a loud sigh. "Steph, you'll always be my baby sister," she said, ruffling Tiffany's hair with her free hand.

Tiffany swatted the hand away, grinning. "Hey! We're the same age!"

"I'm a minute older. Deal with it," Jessica retorted, smiling widely. "You know I'll always be here for you, right?"

"You weren't there when I needed you for the past eight years," Tiffany observed sourly.

"I'm sorry, okay? I promise. I'll always be there when you need me from now on. Sisters always stick together."

"Aww, who knew you could ever say stuff like that?" Tiffany wheedled, pulling Jessica in for a hug.

"Hey, don't push your luck," Jessica warned, holding Tiffany close.

The clearing of a throat shattered their moment. The sisters turned their attention to the now opened door.

"Excuse me ladies," Yuri said, standing halfway through the door with one hand on the doorknob.

"We're gathering in the lab." With that, she closed the door and left.

Jessica scowled.

"Not going to forgive her anytime soon, huh?" Tiffany asked lamely, noticing her sister's sour expression.

"I'm not a softie like you," Jessica said, her voice steely.

"Hey!"

"Come on, you heard the woman," Jessica spat, stalking toward the door with Tiffany in tow.

"Wait outside," Yuri instructed.

Jessica was the first to protest. "Why should we? It's not like you've got anything to hide, do you?"

Yuri turned to face her. "Look, if my hunch is right, I'm the best person to make sense of what's going on. The answer might be in the file Seohyun sent me. If everyone sees it at the same time, we'll have too many opinions over too many layers of inspection. I'll go over the file, make my own inspection and offer my recommendations. Then you can look at it if you'd like."

"I think we should listen to her," Elliot said.

"But-"

"Arguing isn't going to solve anything. Let's just let Yuri take a look and we can get on with things," Tae Woo said, palms spread, settling the matter. "Yuri?"

Yuri nodded and entered the lab. Behind her, Jessica scoffed.

"What if she's hiding something from us?" Jessica said.

"What's there to hide? She won't be able to edit the original file in there; there's no software for that. It'll be even more obvious if she deletes it," Tiffany offered.

Jessica glared at her.

"What?"

Yuri retrieved the file from a secure server and brought it up onscreen. It was a rather large digital dossier on Park Jin Young. Tagged to the file was a personal note from Seohyun.

"Found in Mission Director's personal files."

Yuri frowned. If Seohyun had found something, why hadn't it been in the central database? Was this information too sensitive? If that were the case, she figured she'd find something of critical importance in this file.

Yuri spent the next half hour skimming through the details of the file. With each passing second, the incipient horror in her stomach grew as each suspicion was confirmed, one by one. Her eyes grew wider as she scrolled down; the gears in her head spinning furiously as everything began to make sense. What puzzle pieces that they had earlier began to fit perfectly together, revealing part of a gruesome image that sent a chill down Yuri's spine.

She fished out her cellphone and began typing a text message.

"Thanks. You probably won't hear from me anytime soon. Be on your toes and take care of yourself."

As she slowly flipped the phone shut, her fingers clamped over the edges of her phone. She remembered the message she had received in the safehouse.

"There is an object of interest that must be retrieved in conjunction with the completion of the assignment."

Article is of extremely high value and the information contained within is considerably sensitive.

Therefore, priority of the assignment has been shifted to the object's retrieval."

Yuri shut her eyes. Of course. How could she have been so stupid? She growled inwardly. She had been used as a tool. She gritted her teeth. No, only up till now. She would be a tool no more. She stepped to the steel door and opened it, gesturing for the anxiously waiting group to enter.

They filed into the room, taking places similar to how they stood previously: the Jung sisters in one corner, Taeyeon in another, and Tae Woo and Elliot taking up the fore next to Yuri.

Yuri straightened, glancing about the corners of the room uneasily before addressing the group.

"Our worries have just gotten bigger," Yuri said before pausing to make assert her point. "Park Jin Young indeed has a son who is still alive."

The others looked to her with eager curiosity.

"Park Jaebeom. Doppelgangers Field Operations Mission Director."

Chapter 20 : Underground

"He's *what*?" Tiffany stepped forward.

Tae Woo's right hand disappeared into his jacket. At the same time, Yuri jerked up her left arm, a shadow of black materializing almost instantaneously in her hand with a faint *sshk*! She slipped a foot back to lower her stance, balling her right fist. It had all happened so fast, the rest of the group

remained expressionless, unsure what to make of the sudden predicament.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Yuri warned, eyes narrowing. An ice-cold edge had suddenly found its way into her voice. As if to make her point, she tightened her grip on the hilt of the throwing knife and the tip swayed slightly. The length of blackened, carbonized steel was immune to the glow of light from above, making it look all the more menacing.

Tae Woo's lips tightened. Perhaps he was acting too hastily. He was well aware that she could land a knife throw on him before he even found the butt of his pistol.

"I'm not asking you to trust me; it would be foolish to expect something that is logically impossible. But consider this: if I'd wanted to hurt any of you, do you think you'd still be breathing at this very moment?" Yuri said, earning uncomfortable shifting from all around. "I'm just about as taken aback as everyone. But at least now, we have a better idea of what we're up against," she continued, glancing at each member of the group.

Tae Woo tightened and relaxed his jaw, then slowly pulled his hand out of his jacket, letting it fall to his side.

Yuri eyed him with approval. She still held the throwing knife in her palm. "I suggest we refrain from jumping to unnecessary conclusions from now on. Every detail counts, but we have to fit them into context before acting. Is that understood?"

Unconsciously, Jessica nodded, then caught herself. Why had she just done that? Maybe it was because despite her loathing for the woman, Yuri exuded an air of authority that simply forced her to obey. From a logical viewpoint, Yuri did appear to be the most able person in guiding them through this situation, and though it was hard to accept, she did appear to know a lot more than all of them put together, especially since the Doppelgangers had come into the picture. She clenched her jaw, averting her eyes from Yuri's emerald green gems. She hated to have to submit to someone else, whatever the predicament. In all of her previous cases, she had always done things her way, and to great effect, since her ways have invariably worked. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. Where was the FBI's ace agent now? To Jessica's disgust, she knew it was all but hidden behind the prowess and wit of Kwon Yuri. It wasn't fair. She opened her eyes to look at the raven haired mannequin. She wouldn't settle for second place.

"And if you try to pull a gun on me again," Yuri said, glaring at Tae Woo, "I'll give you a tracheotomy."

Tae Woo shifted uncomfortably. His sunglasses hid his eyes, but Yuri could tell that he was looking away. Tiffany winced upon hearing Yuri's last word. A tracheotomy involves cutting into the trachea in the throat as an emergency procedure in order to create a direct airway. She had seen Yuri perform one of those on a particularly complacent guard when she and Jessica had come to rescue her from Taeyeon's villa.

With a flick of the wrist, the knife disappeared back into Yuri's sleeve. An unnerving silence followed as reality began to set in. The tension in the room seemed to have mounted tenfold.

"It's as I suspected earlier," Yuri admitted, clenching and unclenching a fist. "Park Jin Young is ex-Doppelganger." She faced Tae Woo. "That's why you weren't able to find any trace of him before his re-emergence. When a person enters service into the Doppelgangers, all records of his past are erased. Everything is wiped clean right down to the roots, and the operative starts his life anew." Yuri watched his Adam's apple move up and down as he swallowed, hard. She wasn't sure if it was due to the revelation of Park's past identity or the fact that she was wriggling the fingers on her left hand as she spoke.

Jessica picked up on the discussion, eager to relieve the choking atmosphere in the room. "I suppose we can safely assume now that the Doppelgangers are in on this as well."

"The Doppelgangers are involved to an extent; that is certain. Though I'm uncertain as to whether they themselves are aware," Yuri said, a twinge of defeat marring her words.

"Your friend," Jessica said. "You mentioned contacting a friend earlier. Does he or she know anything about this?"

"I doubt so," Yuri replied, though she really could not be sure herself.

All agents, field operative or otherwise, were schooled in intelligence, and even the less adept individuals were at least reasonably proficient in the art of deceit. Still, as someone who had been closer to Seohyun than any other agent in the Doppelgangers, she had reason to believe that Seohyun was

innocent. As for the reason itself...what was it? Friendship? Trust? She knew very well that those were next to meaningless in a world spilling over with lies and betrayal. Somehow, she was still willing to hold onto that sliver of hope; hope that no matter how little, such things still existed. No matter how much she regretted it, Yuri couldn't help but feel uneasy by having brought Seohyun into this, not so much because the woman could be an indirect enemy as the fact that she may have implicated an innocent party in this entire mess.

"What's more, the organization is too closely-knit. It would be impossible for Park Jaebeom to form a cabal serving a separate purpose, especially under the supervision of the higher directors. It would raise too much suspicion. My guess is that he intended to use any number of us independently to accomplish his goals, sending each of us on separate missions as required. We'd be none the wiser."

"If your colleagues are unaware," Tiffany began as she stepped forward, "then could there be some way to let them know? Could they help? We could expose Jaebeom for conspiring within the Doppelgangers."

"Let them know, then what?" Yuri said, waving off Tiffany's suggestion. "Inveigle them into going against the Mission Director? Jaebeom has held that position for a decade and counting. Missions were successful because of him. Lives were saved, countless political disasters thwarted. No one is going to believe me if I tell them he's a traitor who's helping his father destroy civilization. Slandering Jaebeom will only serve to strengthen his cause against me if and when he decides I've become liability."

"And you just became one when you opened that file," Elliot said darkly.

Yuri nodded slowly.

"Okay, okay, wait," Jessica said, holding a hand up. "Yuri, why are you here in the first place? What did Park Jaebeom intend by sending you here to Rio?"

Yuri shifted, standing straighter. She eyed Tae Woo and Taeyeon in turn, recalling her initial reason for flying here from headquarters, and then the spiraling chain of events that had followed soon after. She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath, as if the intake of air could swirl up into her head and blow each detail into chronological order. "My initial mission was to eliminate Kim Taeyeon and her father, Kim Tae Woo."

Taeyeon's eyes lifted from the floor to look at Yuri, but the woman remained motionless, arms still folded across her chest.

"Why?" Elliot asked.

"I was told it was due to the increasing threat of the American drug cartel. Stephanie should know more about this. I could only assume that the capture of their communications network would soon follow, lest it fell into the hands of the cartel's foreign counterparts. We've been monitoring the cartel for years now, from the time of rapid growth under Tae Woo's reign to the failed attempt at faking his death, and finally to the era of supposed rule under his daughter. However, we were unable to act due to the lack of precise information on the location of their operations. Our intelligence department picked up news of a communications leak which led to its discovery by the FBI; a leak that was orchestrated by none other than Stephanie, an Interpol agent working undercover. The plan was to send me in as something akin to a babysitter: covertly supervise the FBI's operation, and if they should fail, eliminate the targets and give them credit. It all seemed routine, though a tad ironic."

Taeyeon looked to Yuri again. The latter merely stared back.

"It was I who summoned her here in the first place. I received word that agent Jessica Jung was coming in from the United States to investigate the cartel, and so I played a card that I'd been keeping for a while," she admitted softly with a twinge of shame.

Yuri smiled, unable to fault Taeyeon. She filled them in on the facts. "The Doppelgangers are not an entirely secret organization, at least, not to those working in the criminal underworld. We have agents planted in various cartels in the lower rungs; operatives who take up the roles of international drug runners and bodyguards, spreading word of a mercenary group called the Doppelgangers, effectively establishing the urban legend of elite assassins-for-hire who could only be reached through the most tedious and remote means. It is our way of getting exceptionally elusive mob bosses and cartel leaders to come to us instead of the other way round."

"And that actually works? It sounds a little far-fetched," Jessica said dismissively.

"Trust me, there are individuals who are desperate, ignorant," Yuri paused, noticing Taeyeon glaring back at her. "...or curious enough to try."

"And?" Elliot pressed.

"And I found out that the person Taeyeon wanted eliminated was Jessica. That's where things got a little complicated."

Jessica stirred, remembering what Yuri had told her in the safehouse before she'd learned about the anti-matter conspiracy. Yuri had been the one to kill her alongside the other assassin, Choi Siwon.

"Of course, it was then when I realized I'd bit off a little more than I could chew...in the first mouthful, at least. Not only did I need to dispose of Taeyeon and Tae Woo at the time, but I would also acquire some unexpected company. Naturally, I couldn't let any harm come to Jessica," Yuri explained, looking askance at Jessica. "I'm sure you know why, Mr. Jung," she continued, shifting her gaze to Jessica's father.

Elliot nodded, blinking for a little longer than usual. Perhaps it was a silent word of thanks.

"As if fate wouldn't have it any other way, I then found Stephanie," Yuri continued, looking at the wavy haired woman to her left. "Or rather, *she* found *me*."

Tiffany nodded in acknowledgement.

"With Stephanie's help, I proceeded to dispose of the other assassin Taeyeon had hired, apparently as my competition, before bringing Jessica to a designated safehouse on the outskirts of the city."

"You make it sound as if I needed to be rescued," Jessica cut in, clearly displeased.

"You're lucky she did," Tae Woo said, diverting her attention. "Choi Siwon had worked under me for a good number of...jobs, and he's never failed a single one. Not until he crossed paths with Yuri, of course. All he needed was to get a bead on you....," he trailed off.

Jessica simply scoffed, folding her arms.

"As for the rest," Yuri finished, "I'm sure you have a pretty clear picture."

"Each of you came on different paths, with different destinations in mind," Elliot began, his deep, gravelly voice sounding clear across the room. He eyed each of his daughters in turn, and then the rest. "It was either by fate or sheer dumb luck that we've uncovered this conspiracy, and nothing short of a miracle that I've been reunited with my daughters after nearly a decade."

It was true. Elliot Jung, a supposed traitor to his country, was rescued by the same man who threatened him with the lives of his family members, later spending close to a decade in forced isolation. Jessica and Tiffany, sisters who had been estranged from each other for eight years, had made their own ways in life, and yet they had crossed paths once again under circumstances too unfathomable to understand. Tae Woo's promise to their father had kept them alive throughout the rest of their teenage years and later into adulthood, giving them a security they never thought they had. Their reunification had been made possible by two people. Yuri, a soul lost from Jessica's life since they had parted in the winter of a year long past; a shadow of her former being, yet holding the same heart and mind underneath the layer of blood, lies and secrecy. And Taeyeon, the new face of the American cartel, the supposed pawn of her father Kim Tae Woo; a woman with a heart stricken with wavering trust and suppressed love, tainted by the sins of death, manipulation and betrayal.

Was it merely dumb luck, or had fate brought the six of them together for a common purpose?

Jessica's eyes seemed to soften, though her demeanor remained cold. Tiffany's hands found each other, fingers twiddling.

"I think that means something," Elliot continued.

Tiffany held her breath. God's will? She became suddenly aware of being absent from church for too long a time.

Taeyeon pushed herself off the wall. "Fate has a plan for us."

The others looked to her, startled by the fact that she had chosen to be actively involved in the discussion for once.

She looked across the room at Yuri. Emerald eyes looked back.

"Let's find out where it leads," Taeyeon finished.

Seohyun was facing a dilemma. Her right hand was glued to the mouse, whose pointer in turn hovered over Park Jin Young's file. All she needed to do was double click...

"Should I...or shouldn't I?" she pondered silently.

Seohyun knew there was something of critical importance within the file. She knew that Yuri would be able to make sense of whatever was within, but it wasn't her concern for Yuri that irked her. It was an overwhelming curiosity, coupled with something else she couldn't quite place. Intuition again? Her finger twitched, hovering millimeters above the left-click button.

It was after-hours in the Doppelgangers headquarters, and most of the R&T agents had either gone home or were spending their free time in the city above. Though she'd been coming to this place every day for the past six years, she couldn't help but remind herself constantly that she was more than two hundred meters underground, in a facility so vast it was longer than two Gerald R. Ford class aircraft carriers placed side by side.

With twenty floors extending downwards, it held a great number of facilities. Wide open spaces simulated jungle, urban, desert and arctic environments for conditioning and training. The middle section of floors held driving circuits for vehicles of all sizes, various shooting ranges, a barracks, an armory and a myriad other training facilities.

On the lowest accessible levels and beyond sat a pair of nuclear reactors recently fitted with new cores; variations of the US Naval reactors designed by Doppelganger scientists and engineers to better suit the context of a living, breathing underground facility. Running on highly enriched uranium and cooled by carefully treated spring water, the reactors each produced 50 megawatts of electricity to feed the facility's daily needs, and required no refueling for up to 50 years.

The top section of floors which sat above the training levels, closest to the surface, comprised the Doppelganger research and technology departments, full-scale laboratories, a library whose size rivaled that of the US Library of Congress, recreational facilities and dormitories.

Fresh water ran from various mountain springs from up to a hundred kilometers away, and fresh air was constantly filtered in through scrubbers from the surface, cleaned and cooled before flowing through the facility.

Fresh water and mountain air...born of the picturesque Swiss Alps.

The Doppelganger headquarters sat under an immense wall of mountain that lay at the foot of the Swiss Alps, home to a lode gold mine abandoned since 1928. Painstakingly carved out of the mountain through the maze of passageways that snaked through its mineshafts, it had served as the Doppelganger base of operations for close to a century. It lay north of the district capital of Martigny in southwestern Switzerland. Martigny was a French-speaking district; a small, picture-postcard town of 20,000 favored for its timeless Romanesque museums and luxurious ski resorts. With major roads leading west into France and south into Italy, Martigny served as a gateway from Switzerland to the outside world. Further beyond to the southeast, the majestic snow-capped peaks of the Matterhorn dominated the horizon like a massive stone gargoyle standing guard tirelessly over the Swiss-Italian border.

Over decades of constant internal expansion, the Doppelganger headquarters had been slowly and surely transformed from the dank depths and natural rock-hewn spaces of the former abandoned mine into the vast future-tech facility it is today. Access to the headquarters was possible through a secret passage built directly into a mountain pass invisible from the sky and a series of helipads carved into the side of the mountain, shaded with arctic camouflage nets and infra-red signal jammers to shield it from visual and thermal probing. From within, wave interference generators and heat signature shields cast an enormous cloak over the mountain, keeping the underground base invisible to even the most advanced surface-penetrating radar. Helicopters frequently flew to and fro between headquarters and the surrounding major cities of Geneva, Lausanne and Montreux, and where road travel was possible, jeeps and land rovers ferried passengers to and from Martigny to the south. It might seem like no easy task hiding their activities, but careful logistical planning and blending in with the constant bustle of tourist traffic helped to do just that.

"Seohyun," a voice called from behind.

Startled, Seohyun thumbed an obscure button on the side of her mouse; the one that had been

programmed to work like the alt-tab combination on the keyboard. A window maximized to fill the screen, displaying a wall of text accompanied by graphs and plots. Seohyun spun in her chair toward the voice, putting on her best smile.

"Yes, Seungyeon?" she chirped.

Tiny slits embedded in a fair oval face framed by long wavy dark tresses regarded her with a twinge of suspicion. She carried a stack of folders in front of her.

Seungyeon frowned at the smiling angel who looked up at her from her chest level. "Why so jumpy?"

"Oh, I was catching up on some studying...and it was really quiet here so you gave me quite a fright," Seohyun said, grinning sheepishly.

Seungyeon leaned in closer, squinting to get a better look at Seohyun's workstation screen. It made her eyes seem even tinier. Seohyun caught a whiff of her vanilla-scented perfume. "Quantum mechanics?"

"The future of modern science!" Seohyun announced, nodding enthusiastically. "After all these years, this field of study is still in its infancy. Not surprising, considering how bizarre some of its theories are."

"Smoothing the flaws of classical science, huh? Hmmm..." Seungyeon backed away, frowning. She eyed Seohyun carefully. The latter swallowed.

"Always the scholar, eh?" she said, smiling. "Even geeks need to relax sometime, you know? Like right now. You said we'd check out that teahouse down in Martigny now that strawberries are in season."

"Oh yeah!" Seohyun jolted upright, recalling her forgotten promise to the head of the Technology department. It was strawberry season, and the teahouse was offering pots of freshly brewed strawberry tea. "Are you ready to go?"

"I'm just going to drop by my dorm to change and fetch a couple of things, then I will be."

"Tell you what, I'm just finishing up too and my stuff are in the department locker room, so why don't we meet in, say, fifteen minutes at Gate One?"

"Fifteen? Puh, it already takes that much time to reach my dorm from here. You know how ridiculously massive this place is. They should have buggies down here or something," Seungyeon scoffed, frowning. "See you in twenty-five?"

Seohyun made an OK sign with her right hand, adding a sugary smile for good measure. Seungyeon nodded and turned, heading toward the bank of elevators on the far side of the level.

As the click-clack of Seungyeon's heels faded into the distance, Seohyun breathed a sigh of relief. She spun her chair around to face her computer and minimized the window of the quantum mechanics ebook she'd been reading and stared at the icon on the desktop. Tapping her finger on the tabletop, she bit her lower lip, remembering something Yuri had told her before.

"You can't always wait for the perfect opportunity, or time will simply pass you by. When in doubt, just go for it and never look back."

Nodding with a renewed conviction, she fished out a thumbdrive from her jacket pocket. It was just like any regular 128GB thumb drive, except she'd taken it apart in the workshop and made a few tweaks of her own. One notable improvement was a tiny jamming module that effectively made it invisible to electronic scans, making it possible for her to bring it in and out of headquarters without alerting the scanners at the Gates and in the elevators. Of course, this would be the first time she was taking classified information out of the compound.

She deliberated for a moment, twiddling the thumbdrive between her fingers. Setting it down, she brought up the command console on her workstation and with a series of commands, activated the input device detection shield so the thumbdrive wouldn't be detected by software security upon being plugged in. Satisfied, she popped the drive in and copied the folder over.

She glanced at her watch. 9:15pm. Night had fallen hours ago upon this corner of the Swiss Alps, and the ever-unforgiving alpine winds would surely have grown more brutal, especially at this elevation. She suddenly felt cold; the thought of traveling down to Martigny amidst battering winds and raging snow chilled her to the bone. A cup of steaming strawberry tea felt welcoming now. Thank goodness the teahouse was open 24 hours. She had ten minutes left to reach Gate One.

Removing the thumbdrive, she shut down her workstation before making her way toward the department locker room. Just enough time.

"Before we start making any plans, let me fill you in on a few important details," Yuri began as the group huddled closer around the central computer.

"The file I went through just now contained information on Park Jin Young's family, his involvement with the Doppelgangers and chains of correspondence with various government agencies including those of China, Russia and North Korea," Yuri said, bringing up the information onscreen. "It appears our earlier conjecture about the Communist nations' involvement is spot-on." She sifted through a multitude of threads containing decrypted versions of various correspondences. "I didn't read very much into detail, but I spotted a few snippets that might suggest the Russian government and Park had slightly differing views on the master plan."

"Let's take a closer look," Elliot suggested, pointing to the bottom of the screen. "Right there. Bring that up."

Yuri did as told, and the conversation was maximized to full resolution. Each member of the group focused their attention to the short paragraphs of text.

"I see," Elliot said, nodding.

"What is it?" Tiffany had been taking her time to understand the subtle tones and meaning within each paragraph, unable to finish reading the conversation as quickly as her father had.

"Park was reluctant to allow the JINR full access to the anti-matter containment data. According to the correspondence, he wanted allow limited access to the data at any one time, feeding the facility bits of critical information required to establish a workable process, then remotely force-destroying the data before sending them the next bit. He wanted full ownership of the data," Elliot explained.

"But why? If he'd already let the Russians have full control of the anti-matter production data back then,

why is he holding back now?" Jessica said.

Yuri shrugged. "Maybe he realized it was a mistake to give it to them back then."

Jessica frowned. "How was it a mistake on his part?"

"Not the act of giving it to them," Yuri explained, "But the fact that he gave it to the Russians without any strings attached. Why put something in someone's hands when you can dangle it from a stick?"

"So he plans to give them bits of the data at a time so they can fabricate the anti-matter bombs for him, then dangle the whole lot of it at the end in exchange for something else?" Tiffany said.

"Perhaps, but for what exactly, we don't know," Yuri admitted.

"But even if he gives them a little of the data at a time, won't the Russians be able to save or record the data somewhere? Couldn't it help them figure things out on their own without the help of the rest of it?" Tae Woo asked.

Elliot stepped forward. "I've seen the way the anti-matter production data was structured back in Fermilab. I don't exactly understand the mechanics of it, but it's viewed and accessed via a very complex algorithm that's unique only to Fermilab. Bits and pieces of data mean nothing in a larger context. The data only makes sense when it's present in its entirety. Even if you were missing one file, operative word or formula, the whole lot would be useless," he explained.

"A bargaining chip to use after the accomplishment of his grand plan," Tae Woo said, nodding.

Nods came from all around.

"I think the most important thing we must all understand right now is this," Yuri said, her countenance taking a more serious shade. "We can't let Park have this data, and that means neither the Russians nor the Doppelgangers can get their hands on it."

"But you said earlier that the only way to track Park down was to go through with the meeting later today," Taeyeon spoke up, drawing the others' attention.

"I did, but that was when I assumed Ivan Fedorov, the representative for the Russian government, was to pass on the data to Park. Now I'm not so sure. It seems the Russians intend to double-cross Park and have Fedorov relay the data directly to JINR or some other Russian facility for safekeeping," Yuri said.

Yuri was met by confused looks.

"My initial plan was to bug the data with low-profile tracking software, allowing us to follow the trace of the containment data as it made its way from Fedorov to wherever Park was in the world. It's a long shot, but at least it would give us a place from which to begin the hunt," Yuri explained.

"So that's why the Doppelgangers had you retrieve the data. To make sure the anti-matter containment went straight to Park Jin Young instead of the Russians," Jessica concluded.

Yuri nodded sourly, reminded of her manipulation.

"Of course, we can keep the data to ourselves, but how are we going to track down Park then?" Tae Woo said, anxious. He'd been working towards tracking down the man for a decade, and any opportunity seemed favorable; to grasp and exploit as soon as possible.

Yuri thought hard on this. The meeting had been her only way – no – the *only* way that provided any hope in tracking down Park Jin Young. To choose between going through with it or not; Yuri was between a rock and a hard place. The fate of civilization lay in their hands; the stakes were too high for Yuri to risk spoon-feeding the Russians one of the most powerful scientific discoveries known to man. Something lit up in her mind, but she frowned at the incipient thought. No. It was wrong. The idea lit brighter. A deep sigh escaped her lips as she cursed silently.

"I might have a way," Yuri said, clenching her jaw.

Seohyun pulled her white parka tighter as the snow-beaten land rover hit a bump in the frost-glazed path. At over a thousand feet above sea level, the winds ceaselessly stirred a blinding cloud of snow around the vehicle. She looked askance at Seungyeon, whose black leather-gloved hands were planted firmly on the steering wheel. The woman was entirely focused on the road ahead, looking out for any potential hazards. The all-wheel drive was equipped with vehicle radar that swept its surroundings for approaching vehicles, specially designed for use in low visibility environments. Such a tool was extremely useful, especially since drivers could barely see more than five feet in front of them during the half-hour drive down the treacherous wind-swept mountain paths. Seungyeon teased the brake and shifted down to negotiate a dogleg in the path. In another five minutes, they would pass over the foot of the mountain and into the sub-alpine stretch leading to Martigny.

Seohyun heard a familiar sound: the distant *whup-whup* of helicopter rotors as one approached steadily. The whirring grew louder as the two vehicles closed the distance, and soon the roaring whine of an engine could be heard as the helicopter passed by overhead. Snow stirred violently in the rotorwash, and like a veil being lifted, the view ahead became clear. A couple hundred meters ahead, the trail merged into an asphalt highway that wound into the distant city of Martigny. It was sparsely lit by silver lampposts spaced a little too far apart. Even from this distance in the darkness of night, Seohyun could make out the Chateau de la Batiaz, a 13th century castle that was nestled atop a grassy hill overlooking the city. There was nothing majestic about it; it was a small construct of sandy-colored stone topped by a stout circular keep, nothing like the towering monstrosities that dominated the landscapes in France and Germany. Lights blinked merrily from the city, and many apartment buildings at the edge of the city still had their lights on.

Seohyun slumped back into her seat with a sigh of relief as the air gradually warmed, and for the first time, Seungyeon turned to look at her.

"You alright?"

"Yeah I'm fine. I haven't been out of headquarters for some time now, so the cold really hit me hard. Not to mention the death-defying driving," Seohyun said, pulling down the zip of her parka.

Seungyeon chuckled. "That's what you get for being a nerd!"

Seohyun pushed out her lower lip, looking out the frosted window. It would take some time for the snow and ice on it to melt.

Seungyeon giggled at the sight as she slowed to merge into the highway. With a couple more bumps, the tyres finally found solid ground on which to turn. "I should drag you out more often. Being cooped up in there all the time can really take a toll."

Seohyun simply nodded. Deep in thought, she stared at the passing mountainscape, limned against the light of a full moon. The surrounding fields and grassy knolls were almost pitch dark, the grass seeming almost still in the cold of the night.

Moments later, her view of the scenery was interrupted by a trio of towering flagpoles; flapping in the wind at the very top were red and white flags that depicted a cross, a griffin holding a mallet, and thirteen stars: the flags of Switzerland, Martigny and the canton of Valais. They had arrived in Martigny.

"Could you drop me off at my place first? I just need to grab something. I'll meet you at the teahouse," Seohyun said.

"Sure."

Seohyun smiled, flipping open her cellphone.

"Call me."

Chapter Twenty-One : Renegade

"I've been watching her. There's no doubt about it. She knows."

"Then you know what to do."

"I'll get right on it."

Seohyun's fingers searched for the bank of switches on the wall adjacent to the door, grateful for the relative warmth the comfort of her apartment provided. She found them and flipped them on, and the engulfing darkness was immediately replaced by a warm, orangey glow. Her eyes searched the living room spread out in front of her. The door to the balcony to the far left was closed. From there stretched an assortment of simple furniture: a tall steel floor lamp, beige two-seater settee and a glass-topped stone table on a woolly rug, all of which fronted by a 32" plasma TV atop a heavywood shelf. To the right lay a small kitchen. Straight ahead was a short hallway from which two rooms sprouted on either side. For some reason, she felt a sudden pang of loneliness. She'd always wanted a dog; in fact, any form of animal companion would suffice, but her long and irregular hours at headquarters had persuaded her otherwise. She sighed, pouting as she tucked her keys back into her pocket.

She padded lithely toward her room; first things first.

Booting up her laptop took all of ten seconds. Choosing not to sit, she popped in her thumbdrive and opened the file. More out of habit than paranoia, she turned to look over her shoulder. Of course no one was there. She sighed again, noting that her heart had begun to race. Why was she feeling so nervous?

She leaned further forward, squinting and frowning as she read the contents on the brightly lit screen. Right hand on the mouse, she scrolled quickly through, pausing at random intervals. What exactly was she looking at? She picked out a few interesting words, aside from the names of various countries. One of them was anti-matter. She paused again, feeling her body freeze as her eyes fell upon another word. Weapon. There was that apprehensive sense of doom again. Something wasn't right.

Reaching into her jacket pocket, she fished out her cellphone and dialed Yuri's number. After a string of clicks and beeps, the dialtone came on. Yuri picked up on the second ring.

"Have you accessed the file?"

"I'm looking at it right now," Seohyun said, continuing to scroll through the mass of pages. "But Yuri, what exactly am I looking at?"

"A Doppelganger conspiracy ten years in the making. Seohyun, I'm currently with Elliot Jung, FBI Agent Jessica Jung, Interpol Agent Stephanie Jung, Kim Tae Woo and Kim Taeyeon."

Seohyun jerked upright, clutching the phone tighter in her hand as she recalled the first name. "*Elliot Jung?* The American Intelligence Corps general who was assassinated in 2010?"

"One and the same."

"Yuri, what the deuce is going on?"

"I'll explain as we go along. Seohyun, listen to me. My most recent assignment in Rio de Janeiro was to eliminate the druglord Kim Tae Woo and his daughter, Kim Taeyeon. Things got complicated. Remember that anonymous search I asked you to do?"

Seohyun frowned. Yuri wasn't making any sense. Or rather, she was unable to make any sense of what she had been hearing. "The file on Park Jin Young."

"The file you found in the Mission Director's office."

Seohyun's frown deepened. "What are you trying to say?"

"Hyun, Park Jin Young is trying to get his hands on data pertaining to Fermilab's anti-matter containment. I believe you've seen that term a couple of times in the file. We think he's going to use it to

make anti-matter bombs with which to destroy major cities across the globe. Mission Director Park is his son."

"What?" If Seohyun hadn't been alarmed earlier, she was now.

"The Mission Director used me to come here in order to retrieve the anti-matter containment data from Kim Tae Woo. I imagine he's watching me at this very moment and wondering why the hell I'm taking so long. Sooner rather than later, he'll realize I've caught onto him. And when he does, he'll probably use other operatives to hunt me down and finish the job."

Seohyun had begun to pace the room, eyes darting about the ceiling. She held a hand to her forehead. "Are you telling me Mission Director Park is a traitor to the Doppelgangers?"

"Ridiculous as it may seem, that's exactly what it looks like. You have to trust me, Hyun."

Seohyun closed her eyes. This was too much. A conspiracy within the ranks of the Doppelgangers? It was unbelievable. Utterly inconceivable. "Why?"

"Because I need your help. I can't take him down alone."

Seohyun remained silent. Her eyes wandered to her computer screen, which was dominated by a monochrome photograph of Park Jin Young. She finally saw the resemblance to the Mission Director.

"Hyun?"

Yuri's voice pulled her attention away from the screen and back to the conversation. "I'm here," she said quietly.

"Do I have your hand in this?"

Seohyun slumped into a chair, heaving a big sigh. After listening to what Yuri had to say, she didn't know

who to believe anymore. Who else was there to trust if the Mission Director was indeed a traitor? She thought back and discerned that Yuri's words had contained every bit of truth. Besides, what could Yuri hope to gain in conspiring against a high-ranking officer in the Doppelgangers? She couldn't have been lying. Not about something like this.

"What do you need?"

Yuri breathed a sigh of relief as she slapped her phone shut and deposited it into her jacket pocket. She turned to face the group.

"I have a colleague who's going to provide whatever assistance she can manage. Her name is Seohyun. She'll be our eyes in the sky. As we speak, she's helping track Park Jin Young's most recent location by using the communication strings we found in the file."

Before she could continue, a soft chime sounded from the computer behind her. She looked up to see that the second file she had requested from Seohyun had arrived.

"Is there any way I can print this?"

Tae Woo stepped forward. "Sure. I'll take care of it."

"What's that?" Tiffany asked.

Yuri eyed the group carefully, letting her gaze linger on Jessica for a little longer. Considering how Jessica had taken the information back in the safehouse, she wondered how the rest of them would accept it.

"The Doppelgangers utilize a human tracking system that lets us pinpoint individuals anywhere in the world. Various satellites pick up energy signatures from low-profile radioactive isotopes administered to whoever we want tracked and relay that information onto regular satellite maps." Yuri paused, looking to see if anyone had caught onto the hint. Jessica cringed, while Tiffany cocked her head to the side.

"The isotope is in each of you, so that makes you visible in the tracking system," Yuri finished, adding the punchline.

Taeyeon's eyebrow rose in inquiry, thoroughly offended. "We have radioactive isotopes in each of us? How did that happen?"

"Hospital visits with doctors pressing the need for immunity jabs. Free of charge."

Tiffany's jaw had literally dropped. "Y-you mean...they can see us? Like right now?"

"Well, not technically. We're probably too deep underground for the tracking satellites to pick us up, but we'll light up this zone like Christmas trees once we're above ground."

Tiffany nodded blankly. Taeyeon rubbed her arm self-consciously.

Tae Woo returned with the prints, handing them to Yuri. She took them and held them up.

"These are the blueprints for a miniature radio-wave jammer. While we wait for an update from Seohyun, I'm going to fashion one for each of you so that we stay invisible under the radar once we leave this place. We'll want to remain unseen for as long as possible."

"But won't that mean we won't be able to use remote devices and cellphones?" Taeyeon asked, concerned.

"I'm going to tweak the jammers so that it only blocks out the energy signature given off by the isotopes. By rendering the isotopes useless, Park will need to apply much more difficult measures to track us down."

Taeyeon nodded, conceding.

Yuri retrieved a familiar device from a pocket. Jessica recognized it as one of the communicators they had used for their infiltration of Taeyeon's villa. She still kept it in her jacket.

"This is how we'll communicate within ourselves if and when we get separated. Jessica already has one. I'm sure there are a few lying around here. All we have to do is tweak the frequencies a little and we'll be good to go," Yuri explained, looking over at Tae Woo. She narrowed her eyes. "You *do* have a workshop here somewhere, right?"

"It's in the 5th sub-basement. Complete with whatever tools you might need."

Yuri glanced at her watch. "Alright, it's almost daybreak. Tae Woo, I'm assuming you have some form of transportation out of the country?"

"I keep an Aerion SBJ in a private hangar at the local airport," Tae Woo replied, adjusting his sunglasses.

Yuri nodded. "Have it fueled and prepared. We'll need to leave as soon as possible. We don't want to get deadlocked in this city."

"I'll make the necessary arrangements."

Yuri regarded the group as a whole and clenched her jaw. Was she making the right choice by allowing all of them to be involved in this? It was beyond all doubt that what they were headed into extremely dangerous waters, with close to zero intel on their quarry. Six people could only do so much. With all the recent developments, she felt that she alone was responsible for the mess they were in considering the Doppelgangers' involvement. If someone was to be included, it would have been Tae Woo, given his obsession with Park, but as for the rest...what if she was leading them to their untimely deaths?

Leader. She winced at the thought of having to lead. Never fond of being given the authority of command or any form of responsibility, leadership was nothing more than a burden on her part. Not only did she have to ensure her own survival and the completion of the task, but she also had to hold the interests of her charges at heart. She felt helpless as she looked at them in turn, painting a macabre picture of each of them lying in pools of their own blood, limbs awkwardly contorted. The last image chilled her to the bone. Jessica, blonde hair splayed across the wet asphalt, eyes wide open and mouth yawning, screaming in protest at her life having been snatched away from her. Fresh crimson blood pooled beneath the tattered seams of her suit. A delicate hand lay upturned, grasping and yet holding nothing. Yuri swallowed. If nothing else, she only wanted Jessica to stay out of harm's way. She balled a fist. Their lives were in her uncertain hands.

Tiffany noticed Yuri's consternation and frowned in concern. The woman was like an open book who wore her heart on her sleeve; any attempt to hide her emotions was easily unraveled. "Are you okay?"

Yuri blinked and looked down at her clenched fist. The blueprints, crushed, crackled under the tension. She bit her lip. "I'm fine. I'll be up in the workshop. I suggest you prepare yourselves for our exfiltration." Nodding, she left the room, smoothing out the ruined blueprints. Tiffany could not find it in herself to protest, though she knew something was clearly amiss.

Tae Woo had stepped to a phone built into a wall, presumably dialing his pilot and maintenance crew to prepare the jet.

Elliot stepped toward his daughters. He eyed each of them in turn and stuffed his hands into his pockets in a display of awkwardness.

"You don't have to come along, you two. You've obviously been through a lot. I can ask Tae Woo to send you back to the States," he offered carefully.

"Why, so we can run away like you did?" Jessica spat, arms folded across her chest.

"Jessi," Tiffany chided, nudging her sister. "Um...Dad, I know you care about us but...I don't think Jessi is going to give this one up easily."

Jessica scoffed.

"And neither will I," Tiffany continued, "The shit has hit the fan and we're all under it. This is something we'll have to see through to the end."

"I know, I know," Elliot said, sighing, taking his hands out of his pockets. "I just...I just want you to be safe. I know I've been a terrible father-"

"Dad, don't say that," Tiffany cut in, but was waved off by her father.

"Don't let *her* stop you," Jessica quipped. Tiffany shot another glare at her.

Elliot sighed, eyes finding the floor.

"No, Stephanie. Nothing I do can make up for what I did, and I take full responsibility for everything that happened all those years ago. I just wish things...could've been different," he said quietly. "I guess saying I'm sorry means nothing to you now."

Jessica looked up from under her eyelids at her father, catching the deep sorrow tucked away behind his storm blue eyes. She closed her eyes, willing away the pity she felt for the man. "We'll get through this," she said simply.

Tiffany suddenly looked hopeful at her sister's words.

"With or without you," Jessica finished.

Tiffany sighed, while Elliot's gloom darkened.

Taeyeon, having seen enough, turned to leave the room.

"Where are you going?" Tiffany called out, stopping Taeyeon in her tracks.

She looked halfway over her shoulder. "To the armory...to get ready," she said plainly before stepping out of the room.

"I'll come with you!" Tiffany said a little louder than she'd intended, bounding toward the door.

"Steph!" Jessica called out, but Tiffany's body was already out the door.

"I'll see you later!"

Jessica sighed, annoyed. She looked up at her father, who looked back hopefully. Narrowing her eyes, she stepped toward the door.

"Wait, where are you going?" Elliot called after her.

"Away from you."

Seohyun's hand hung limply, fingers barely clasping tightly enough to hold her cellphone. She replayed Yuri's earlier instructions in her head. She had already sent Yuri the blueprints for a personal radio wave jammer she'd designed herself, and told her how to tweak the jamming frequencies to suit her needs.

"I need you to go through the file and find all correspondences between Jaebeom and his father. Then I'll need you to run those through the communications satellite database and do a trace. We need the location of Park Jin Young if we are to proceed from here."

The problem was, it was impossible to hook up to the communications database from outside the headquarters. She'd have to access the central server room via her workstation, bypassing level after level of security measures along the way. It was going to be a massive headache, but with her expertise, she was confident enough that she could do it.

Now, all she needed was an excuse to go back to headquarters...

Her cellphone vibrated, startling her. She held a hand over her heart and sucked in a couple of deep breaths before flipping the phone open and holding it to her ear.

"Seohyun, scrap the strawberry tea. We've gotta get back to headquarters ASAP." It was Seungyeon, who sounded rather distressed.

Now there was a convenient turn of events. Still, Seohyun was curious. "What's up?"

"Yours is probably coming in now, but I just received word of a Code Gold from HQ. Came right down from the Mission Director himself. Everyone is to report back to HQ immediately." Seungyeon's voice was slightly strained. She must have been hurrying toward the Land Rover. The assumption was confirmed when Seohyun heard a car door being opened and closed.

"Code Gold?" Seohyun was truly baffled. She'd never heard of that one before.

"It's the first time I've gotten one, too. Seohyun, it's one of our own."

"What do you mean?"

"Some field operative named Kwon Yuri's gone renegade."

"Hey, wait!" Tiffany stopped short, helpless as she watched the elevator doors close in front of her, hiding the form of Taeyeon. She slammed a closed fist on the doors, huffing.

"Why the hell is she being so difficult?"

Tiffany stepped back and watched the digital display above the elevator doors. She had no idea where the armory was; this was the only way she could find out. The number stopped changing after a few seconds.

"B4," she muttered to herself, reaching to press the elevator call button.

A couple minutes later, the doors eased open. Tiffany had expected to find herself in a maze of corridors, but as she stepped out and gaped at the sight in front of her. The spacious area was warmly lit by caged overhead fluorescents, giving the steel-clad room a bluish tint. The air was rank with the smell of lubricant, gunpowder and polished steel. Directly ahead, about thirty meters away, stood an evenly partitioned row, beyond which stretched an unfathomable distance before ending in a series of brightly lit targets. Evidently, it was a shooting range. She took another step forward and marveled her surroundings. The rest of the vast space was a gallery full of guns. It was like a toys-r-us fit for a man. She could roughly make out the sections that spanned along the walls on her left and right. Pistols, submachine guns, assault rifles, sniper rifles, shotguns and grenades of all shapes and sizes adorned the

racks on every wall. Ahead of her, between the elevator and the shooting range, stood glass cases filled with knives and strange devices she'd never seen before. Along the elevator wall, a row of marked crates carried boxes upon boxes of ammunition.

Her eyes settled upon a fair-skinned figure standing at the section containing the armory's pistols. She padded her way toward Taeyeon, watching as the woman slapped the magazine of a Glock 21 into place and racked the slide, holding it out in front of her to check it. The .45 pistol looked incredibly oversized in her tiny hands. Still, she handled it with quiet finesse.

Taeyeon's eyes met hers. For some reason, Tiffany felt a chill run down her spine. There was something in those eyes...

Before she could ponder further, Taeyeon raised her pistol with both hands, taking up a firing stance. She was aiming straight at her. Snapping back to her senses, Tiffany found that she, herself, had drawn her own weapon, sights trained on Taeyeon's forehead. It had all happened so fast, even Tiffany didn't know she had her gun on Taeyeon. She mentally kicked herself. It was a reflex reaction, naturally earned from years of dedicated police training. She became aware of the heavy beating of her heart in her ears. She stared beyond the iron sights of her Glock 30 at Taeyeon. Eyes of a killer stared right back at her, making her trigger finger twitch. What the hell was Taeyeon doing?

"Shoot me," came Taeyeon's quiet voice.

"Taeyeon," Tiffany said in the gentlest voice she could manage, "What are you doing?"

"I said shoot me."

"Taeyeon, please-"

"SHOOT ME OR I'LL SHOOT YOU!"

Tiffany blinked at the outburst. What was Taeyeon trying to do? What was she trying to prove? Try as she might, Tiffany couldn't find an answer. And why was she hurting so much inside? It was a familiar ache that tugged at her heart; the same ache she remembered feeling when she had looked into

Taeyeon's murderous eyes back in the interrogation cell.

Tiffany closed her eyes and listened to the dour beating of her heart. Her trigger finger went slack. Without a word, she let her arms fall, dropping her pistol. It clattered noisily on the stainless steel floor and slid away. Taeyeon's eyebrow twitched infinitesimally.

"I'm not going to shoot you," Tiffany declared calmly. She took a step forward.

Taeyeon raised her pistol, warning her back. "Don't come any closer."

"If you want to shoot me, then shoot me," Tiffany said simply, continuing to close the distance. The two were merely steps away now.

Taeyeon tightened her grip on the Glock, so hard that it began to shake in her grasp. She bit her lip, clenching her jaw as she struggled to keep the pistol trained on Tiffany's forehead. The gun began to shake harder as she noticed Tiffany was looking directly into her eyes.

Tiffany lifted her foot to take another step, but as she did, the pistol went off. Taeyeon pulled the trigger.

A deafening blast echoed throughout the room, and Tiffany felt the world go silent for a timeless moment. She closed her eyes, feeling an unknown wetness run down the sides of her face as her raised foot once again made contact with the ground.

She was crying.

Taeyeon had missed; she'd fired the weapon past Tiffany's ear, resulting in nothing more than temporary deafness and a heart-stopping shock.

Tiffany opened her eyes and was surprised to see a reflection of herself in front of her; tears were streaming down Taeyeon's cheeks as the smoking weapon continued to shake in her trembling grasp.

Tiffany took one final step and wrapped her arms around the broken woman. Even through her deafness she heard Taeyeon's grief-stricken sobs as the latter finally broke down and molded into her body, dropping the Glock onto the floor below. She leaned into the hug, feeling every nuance of Taeyeon's suffering as the latter buried her face into her chest. She tightened the hug when she felt Taeyeon's body spasm uncontrollably in tandem with her growing sobs.

"I'm sorry...I'm sorry...", Taeyeon cried in between sobs, hiding in Tiffany's chest.

Tiffany ran a hand through Taeyeon's wavy hair, stopping at the nape of her neck and pulling her closer.

"Hush, hush...", she whispered through falling tears as she placed a soft kiss on Taeyeon's head.

"I love you."

Chapter Twenty-Two : Hellfire

Mikhail Gorbachov felt his brow furrow for the nth time as he maintained his focus on the screen in front of him. He glanced askance at the round clock mounted on the wall: it was almost 2am. He was sitting at a makeshift workstation of four joined tables, littered with various electronic equipment, the most notable being two laptops, each wired to a separate satellite dish secured to a ledge in the balcony in which Peter was now puffing on a cigarette.

To his left, a screen remained passive; the hyperspeed buffering that ceaselessly refreshed and refined the image on the screen every thousandth of a second went unnoticed by the untrained eye. It was a realtime satellite image; a white-hot infra-red representation of the area being surveyed. Within the glowing three-dimensional structure in the middle of the screen, groups of figures shaded in red shuffled about, apparently moving in a circuit that encompassed the upper levels of the building and ended in a small convoy of vans and nondescript cars outside.

To his right, the laptop screen was a palette of greenish hues, and in the middle of a screen a frequency wave bobbed and spiked in tandem with the chatter he heard in the noise-cancelling headphones around his ears.

"Hurry it up."

"Move that over here."

"Don't miss anything."

Mikhail frowned. So much chatter, but there was nothing that was of any use to him. It had been that way for the past hour, when the same convoy of vehicles had stopped outside the villa, unloading a horde of men who were now clearing the structure of the tens of corpses that littered its floors. Nothing particularly interesting. Earlier in the evening, though, his interest was piqued as he spotted what appeared to be a Humvee barreling into the villa compound and crashing into one of its window-covered walls. Three feminine figures stepped out, and in the next hour he watched closely as the entire contingent of guards in the building lay sprawled on the ground, their bodies gradually losing their red and green-hued heat signatures.

Three women had taken out a force of more than thirty male guards in less than an hour. He had reported the development to Captain Alexandrov, after six subjects in the building had disappeared soon after the firefight, literally vanishing from his watch. They must have gone underground, out of the satellite's reach.

Captain Alexandrov. He would call in soon, expecting another report.

Mikhail stopped to glance over his shoulder. Andrei sat on the sofa directly behind him, brows furrowed in concentration as he dug at the insides of his Makarov pistol with a cleaning tool. The small table in front of him held a good number of the pistol's removable parts, along with a few pieces of carbon-stained flannel cloth. Mikhail remembered Peter, the one who was smoking out on the balcony, taking a reprieve from the choking atmosphere with the help of a little cool air. Dimitri was in the kitchen, whipping up a cup of coffee. Mikhail could use a little caffeine right now, himself.

He was part of squad Delta, the last of four four-man squads who had arrived in Rio de Janeiro via

private jet a couple of days ago under false papers. The members of Alpha, Charlie and Delta squads posed as wealthy Russian tourists looking for a well-deserved break among the country's many sandy beaches. Bravo squad, however, presented themselves as a team of air force technicians sent to inspect a purportedly damaged aircraft in Santa Cruz Air Force Base.

Mikhail, along with the other fifteen men, had been handpicked from military units all over Russia a week ago. He had been told that they had been selected to perform a special operation on the behalf of the GRU, the foreign military intelligence directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. The task entailed two things: focused reconnaissance on a specific individual, a Korean druglord by the name of Kim Tae Woo, who sat at the head of a massive cartel that operated in North and South America, and providing a discreet escort for him for the scheduled meeting with FSB agent Ivan Fedorov. He was a rather interesting character; Kim Tae Woo was dead to the world. Only the FSB knew he was alive.

Like any other operation, there existed an elaborate contingency plan; one that had been memorized over and over again and would be put into action should things take an untoward turn. Mikhail shook his head. He hoped it wouldn't have to come to that. Things would get...messy.

Usually, the GRU would not depend on armed forces units to accomplish their means. But this was different.

Mikhail, along with another fourteen in Rio, was an operative from Spetsnaz: Russia's elite special forces unit. The last and their direct commander, Captain Alexandrov from Alpha squad, was from Spetsnaz GRU, the cream of the crop of the Russian army. Admission to the Spetsnaz GRU required one to have served in the special forces for at least five years, and hold the rank of Captain or higher. As far as Mikhail was concerned, a Spetsnaz GRU operative was as good as a handful or more of operatives from any other special forces unit elsewhere in the world.

As was the custom in the Spetsnaz, operatives trained and moved in secret, often using the uniforms and unit patches of neighboring armed forces units in order to blend in. The ranking structure was similarly obscure. As such, Mikhail had no idea of knowing where each of the other handpicked men was from. He couldn't help but feel the slightest bit of distrust at being put to work with men he hardly knew; teamwork, as the core of military life, required at least a basic understanding of the man beside you to get a job done in the best possible way. To have to engage in a hostile operation with these men...Mikhail wasn't sure. Then again, what was ever certain in the life of a Spetsnaz operative?

His reverie was interrupted by a crackle of static in his ear followed by a hum, and then a familiar voice came on, speaking in his native language.

"Alpha Two. Report."

It was Captain Alexandrov. All four squads were communicating on the same VHF channel, and each operative had a personal earpiece with which to relay and receive information. No spoken detail went unshared.

"No significant movement within the building as of yet."

"Remain in your position. We'll have Alpha Four pick you up at dawn."

"Understood."

"Bravo Squad. Report."

"Fueled and ready. Some minor problems with the chain gun, but everything else is working perfectly."

"Work on it as best you can. We still have until dawn."

"Yes, sir."

"Charlie Squad. Report."

"All clear."

The Spetsnaz team's field of operations covered the entire area stretching from Tae Woo's villa to two of Rio De Janeiro's airports: Galeao International and Santos Dumont. Intel from the FSB suggested that Tae Woo might attempt to escape with an object of interest, so they weren't taking any chances. They would cover as much ground as they possibly could. As such, Alpha and Charlie squads took up positions

in buildings in the Favela Serra Pelada, a stone's throw away from Galeao International. A single Alpha operative kept direct watch on Tae Woo's villa. Bravo squad was holed up in Santos Dumont airport itself, which was just east of downtown Rio. Delta squad, the one Mikhail was in, was a reconnaissance squad which took up a position in an apartment building in Sao Joao de Meriti, keeping a close watch on Tae Woo's villa via the use of the FSB's spy satellites. His squad would be in reserve unless otherwise instructed. They had each already calculated the quickest routes to each other as well as to the airports in question, along with a couple of alternatives in case of road congestion or other unforeseen circumstances.

"Delta Squad. Any developments?"

Mikhail blinked, then took a deep breath. "Still no sign of the three females or Kim Tae Woo. Men have been clearing the premises of dead bodies for the past couple of hours. I ran a search on a few of those men who were within the satellite's field of view. Infra-red portraits suggest that they are under Tae Woo's charge."

There was a long pause at the other end. Mikhail could feel that Captain Alexandrov thought there was something amiss. He had felt it too. Who were these three mysterious women? What purpose did they serve in storming - successfully storming, in fact - Kim Tae Woo's villa? There was another bugging question: if reinforcements had arrived at his villa, where were the bodies of the three women? It didn't make sense that they hadn't been embroiled in another firefight. Unless...they had a more intimate relationship with Kim Tae Woo than he had thought. But why? Why assault his villa, kill all his guards and then go underground with him while his guards cleaned up the mess?

And then there was that massive incident that had occurred in the city the previous night: two cars had entered the eastern end of the city, gunfire spewing from the rear car. Captain Alexandrov had requested a shift in focus to the firefight for the moment. The two cars had carved a devastating swath through a handful of streets; a fifteen-minute long chase that ended in the rear car crashing through a barrier and into the boat-ridden bay beyond. Mikhail ran the facial recognition software on a man carrying an RPG on the roof of a building. Another of Kim Tae Woo's militiamen. As the lead car drifted perpendicular to the street, he had super-zoomed into the driver's side window, capturing the side profile of the driver's face. It was a woman. He recalled the image he had saved in the laptop. Long nose, hair tied up in a tight ponytail, face contorted with a serious frown as she maintained strict control of the car. Facial recognition came up nothing. He frowned. That never happened before. FSB facial recognition never failed. Ever.

The crackle of static in his ear brought Mikhail back to the present.

"Maintain your watch on the compound. Report in as soon as you see Kim Tae Woo leaving the villa."

There was a pause to his words, and Mikhail felt he should hold his piece until the Captain was done.

"We may have to put plan B into action. Standby."

Mikhail felt his breath hitch. Plan B. It wasn't going to be pretty.

"Yes, sir."

Seohyun sat at a bank of computers, furiously typing. It had been almost an hour since she had returned to HQ with Seungyeon. Before doing so, she had erased her cellphone history. She was taking no chances, especially not with her own organization. Through her headphones, she heard the Mission Director barking out orders behind her toward the nine other operatives. The Ops room was abuzz with activity, with each operative having a task of his or her own, all focused on one thing.

"I want all eyes in the sky on that villa! I want a visual on Kwon Yuri!"

Seohyun glanced toward him out of the corner of her eye and clenched her jaw. Park Jaebeom stood ramrod-straight, arms folded across his chest, looking intently at the bank of widescreen monitors aligned across the front wall. He had never looked tenser than right now, and for good reason. Having one of his own going renegade was a very delicate matter. The screens offered a bird's eye view of the compound, limned in shades of green to penetrate the darkness of the night. No movement could be seen within the villa's premises.

Whether by fate or pure serendipity, Seohyun was assigned the role of visual reconnaissance officer; the person in charge of all satellites trained on the villa compound: standard, infra-red and x-ray. Neither of them had spotted Yuri or her companions at the moment. They must still be underground, out of the reach of the satellites' penetrative power. Of course, whenever they did...Seohyun would not find it hard to manipulate the satellites at will.

She knew she had to do whatever she could to hide Yuri for as long as possible. But even more so, she knew she had to access the central database to track down Park Jin Young. She couldn't do that with Jaebeom breathing down everyone's necks in the Ops room. She looked askance at Seungyeon, who was sitting few meters away to the side. As a side thought, Seohyun was thankful for the space. Seungyeon was coordinating a team of field operatives currently heading down from the US. They were travelling via private jet and would be arriving in Rio in less than an hour.

Seohyun fought a tinge of unease. Who was to say that whatever was happening in this room was a ruse, and Jaebeom had his own team of operatives working somewhere else, doing the exact same thing? If that were the case, she was prepared to wreak havoc with the systems to keep Yuri out of sight and out of reach. Her astute mind was her ammunition; her quick fingers her weapon. She really didn't know who to trust anymore. In fact, she didn't care. She was placing whatever trust she had left in Yuri. Yuri wouldn't lie to her...would she?

Just then, the door to the Ops room opened and an agent peeked in.

"Sir, call for you in your office."

Jaebeom turned and nodded dismissively before turning back to the screens. Seohyun groaned. To her surprise, he dropped his arms to his sides, took a tentative step back while still looking at the screens, then spun on his heel and moved briskly out of the room. She sighed in relief. Time to get to work.

Minimizing one of the satellite screens in front of her, she plugged in her thumbdrive and accessed Park Jin Young's file. She then brought up the command prompt and accessed the central database, entering line after line of code to break through the security prompts. Two minutes and ten commands later, the central database menu came onscreen. Seohyun allowed herself a small smile. Nothing too difficult. She highlighted a few lines of correspondence from the file. They were less than a day old. She fed them into the search filter, watching as a wall of indiscernible information scrolled across the screen. She refined the search, digging deeper, and refined it again with a location and communication frequency filter. Another screen came up: a world atlas. She watched as the screen centered towards the top right, just outside of Europe. In the next few seconds, the screen shifted left and right as a crossing of lines searched the mass of land, trying to pinpoint the exact location. Moments later, the crosshair settled.

Seohyun turned away from the computer and fished out her cellphone, connected it to a earpiece and put it in, covered by the bulk of her headphones. She made the call.

6:00 A.M. BRT (Brasilia Time)

Two Hours after Code Gold

Yuri stood at a table in the workshop, looking down at her finished work. It took a while to understand the instructions, but the process was as simple as fixing together a jigsaw puzzle, plus the electrical element. Laid out neatly in front of her were six objects the size of a small magnet. They were powered by zinc-air button cells, similar to the ones used in hearing aids. They would last a couple of months, but Yuri knew they'd only need them for a few days or a week at the most. Tuned to the right frequencies, they effectively blocked out the low-energy radioactive signatures emitted from the inside of their bodies. Below the jammers were six earpieces connected to a small transceiver, complete with a throat resonance microphone. Those would be secured to their throats, allowing them to hear even the slightest whisper.

Unconsciously, Yuri rubbed a hand over her flat abdomen. Underneath her shirt was an additional piece of equipment that was unavailable to the other five. It had been tailor made for her since the completion of her training at the Doppelganger HQ; something she had learned to be grateful for time and again in the missions in the following years.

The vibrating of her cellphone in her pocket snapped her attention back. She flipped it open and held it to her ear.

"I just thought you should know-"

"Seohyun? Speak up. I can't hear you."

"Then listen harder. I'm in the Ops room. The Mission Director has declared you renegade."

Yuri frowned. She knew it would have happened sooner or later. Her moment in thought gave Seohyun another chance to speak.

"He's formed a team to track you down. A dozen support operatives, me included, are coordinating the operation. Field agents from North America are en-route to you as we speak. The works. You should get out of there as soon as possible."

Yuri nodded, more to herself than to Seohyun. The longer they stayed here, the more danger they were in. It wouldn't help to be locked down in a place like this. "Then I'm assuming you've found the location?"

Yuri paused to listen to Seohyun's response, then nodded.

"I'll leave within the hour. When the time comes, I'll need you to work your magic."

"I'm in charge of visual recon. I'll disable the systems when you're ready to leave the villa. Just give me a heads up."

"I'll do that."

"Do you need anything else?"

"No..."

"Then-"

"Wait, there is something."

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"Excuse me?"

"Thank you. For everything. I know how much danger I'm putting you in by asking for your help, and-"

"Yuri, I just want you to be alive the next time I see you, you got that? Tread carefully. When this entire mess is over, you owe me."

Yuri smiled, grateful for what encouragement Seohyun could provide, no matter how indirect. "That I do. I'll contact you again. Stay safe."

The line clicked off, and as Yuri slowly lowered the cellphone to her side, she couldn't help but feel that twinge of guilt prod at her conscience. Seohyun was working behind enemy lines, in the lair of the beast. If she were to get caught...

She clenched her jaw, steeling herself for the day to come. She knew nothing of fatigue; the nightmarish training she had undergone years ago had built in her an alertness bordering on paranoia and the endurance of a polar bear. Even after having forgone days of sleep, she was still sharp as a needle. She reached down to scoop up the jammers and earpieces and headed toward the elevators.

6:25 BRT

Seohyun got to work. The text had come moments earlier. She fingered through a series of codes and commands, placing a loop on the satellite feed images on the main screen. That way, only her workstation displayed the movements of Yuri and her team, while the rest of the support crew continued to stare at the same satellite feed indefinitely, oblivious to the figures cast in infra-red. Now she could only hope that the support team wouldn't have the adroitness to see through the ploy. She would stay at her workstation and assist Yuri as best she could, at the same time looking over her shoulder every now and then with the same paranoia that she had developed since training. One glance to make sure all is clear, another just to make sure. The game was now in play.

6:30 BRT

"Sir, I'm seeing two cars leaving the compound right now."

"The meeting is scheduled for noon. It's just past daybreak; it's too early."

"Sir?"

There was a long pause.

"Plan B."

The overhanging clouds were stacked in enormous tiers, shaded in a dark gray, blocking out the warm hues of orange the rising Sun cast from the east. Far above, a crack of thunder rolled amongst the clouds. A storm was coming.

Yuri sat at the wheel of a BMW M5, maneuvering through the crowded streets of Nilopolis, a small district northwest of the city center. Beside her sat Taeyeon, with Tiffany in the back. In the Bentley Continental Flying Spur just behind them, Tae Woo drove, while Elliot sat beside him. Jessica sank into the luxurious leather upholstery in the rear. Yuri glanced every so often at the rear view mirror, watching as their tail maintained its distance.

"We're being followed," Taeyeon said, similarly checking the mirrors every couple of seconds.

Tiffany sat straighter, controlling the urge to look back over her shoulder. After all, she'd just be looking back at Tae Woo and her father's faces.

"I know," Yuri answered. She had her cellphone earpiece in one ear. Keeping one hand on the wheel, she called Seohyun.

"Yes?"

"The field agents. What's their status?"

"They're still en-route. Should arrive in the next half hour. Why?"

Yuri's lip twitched. She had already presumed that they weren't being tailed by Doppelganger operatives. Field agents were taught to follow at a distance of five car lengths. This one was following at four. She then frowned. If the Doppelganger field agents hadn't arrived, then who was following them now?

"Nothing," She said carefully. "Thanks."

Yuri turned to Taeyeon, who regarded her with wary eyes. The latter appeared to know who their tail was. She was just waiting for Yuri to confirm it.

"They're not Doppelganger."

An eyebrow rose.

"Wait, if they're not Doppelganger, then who are they?" Tiffany said, leaning closer.

"I don't know. But what I do know is that we have to shake them. Fast," Yuri said simply.

She pressed a tiny button on her other earpiece and spoke.

"Tae Woo. We're being followed."

"I know. Black BMW, Rio plates. They've been on our tail since we passed out of Nova Iguacu."

"We have to lose them."

"What do you propose?"

Yuri tapped the GPS fixed to the car's dashboard, zooming out to obtain a better view of the city.

"We make them choose. We split up. Take the next left toward Sao Joao de Meriti. I'll go on ahead for the next few blocks, try to lose them, then swing back in the direction of Galeao International."

"Got it."

Tae Woo had already pictured the route in his head. He pretty much knew all the nooks and crannies of Rio after being here for almost a decade. He would take the Via Pres Joao Goulart past Sao Joao de Meriti, merge onto BR116, then make a beeline for Galeao International.

Yuri tightened her grip around the steering wheel as the next left turn came up.

"Follow the leader, follow the leader, follow the leader..."

She watched as Tae Woo swung off into the turn. She waited and saw the black BMW maintain his line.

Yuri allowed herself a small smile of satisfaction. Now to shake the rats off.

She continued south, glancing back often to check the following car's distance. He still remained four car lengths away. As she looked into the rear view mirror, she also spotted Tiffany looking rather troubled.

As the plush leather seats engulfed her, Tiffany wore an almost permanent frown on her face. Her arms were folded across her stomach, almost as if she were wishing someone else were holding her. Yuri looked askance at Taeyeon, whose expression remained stoic, except for them she checked her side mirror for their tail. The atmosphere between the two had changed drastically since the time she had

left for Tae Woo's workshop. She could not explain it, but there was just something...comfortable about the two of them, even though they still maintained a fair distance from each other, avoiding any body contact. It was their eyes that had given them away. Previously, they had turned away quickly upon making eye contact. Back in the server room before they had left the villa, however, Yuri caught them sharing eye contact for more than just a few seconds. Tiffany wasn't very good in suppressing her mirth. Yuri's lip twitched in an attempt to hide her own smile. So the two had made up. Things had gotten that much better.

The next few minutes were spent dodging cars and making abrupt turns in an attempt to confuse their tail. They were sharp, though, and each attempt was met with a well-controlled recovery. This was one tough rat to shake.

A few minutes later, as Yuri passed an intersection, she spotted the tailing car turn off suddenly, heading perpendicular to their direction of travel.

Taeyeon had noticed it too. "He broke off. What's going on?"

Yuri's brow furrowed. "Damn it, they must have figured out where we're headed. That means they have a separate recon team watching us right now. The tail is going to cut off Tae Woo on the way to the airport."

Yuri floored the accelerator and swerved into an oncoming lane to overtake the car in front of her, earning the blare of a horn before she swung back in. Tiffany sank into the seat and reached for a seatbelt. Yuri reached for her earpiece.

"Tae Woo, they know where we're going. Head straight to Galeao International and get that jet up and running. I don't think we'll have time to stop and board the plane."

"Don't have time to stop? Then how the hell do you suggest we get on the jet?"

"Improvise."

"What's your ETA?"

"I'd say ten minutes."

"Make it five."

Yuri made a hard left at the next intersection, heading toward the airport on an island off the coast of the city. The M5 roared as she zipped through the maze of cars on the road, handling the vehicle with the skill of a professional racer. Time was of the essence.

Tae Woo had his cellphone to his ear.

"Yes, that's exactly what I said."

"Stop asking me questions and just DO IT!"

Without another word, he slapped the phone shut and tucked it in his jacket.

"What's going on?" Elliot asked from beside him.

Tae Woo kept a straight face. "We can all get new jobs if we can pull this off."

Elliot frowned. "What are you talking about? What jobs?"

Tae Woo turned to look at Elliot with a twisted smile. "As stuntmen."

He floored the accelerator as he merged onto BR116.

Yuri sped along BR116, the speedometer inching towards 140mph. The highway was fairly empty at this time of day. She swung out onto another lane to overtake a car, and watched in the rear view mirror as Tiffany was thrown to the side from the momentum. For a split second, Tiffany caught Yuri's gaze in the mirror and pouted. Yuri smiled before gunning the engine even harder.

A couple minutes later, they were on the last stretch to the island that supported Galeao International. Looking straight ahead, she caught sight of Tae Woo's Bentley, now being followed by not one, but two black BMWs. They, too, were breaking all the laws of traffic, zipping in and out of lanes as they jostled along the highway.

Yuri held a hand to her ear.

"I see your wingmen are seeking to overthrow you."

"Very funny. The jet is prepared. The pilot threatened to quit after I told him of my plan."

"He threatened to quit?"

"That was until I told him I'd have his mother's tongue cut off."

"Very persuasive."

"Try to catch up. The jet is preparing to taxi as we speak."

"I'm right behind you."

Yuri slipped around one of the BMWs and came up alongside Tae Woo. She across Taeyeon and out of the window toward him, and he nodded, determined and confident. They both surged forward.

Alpha Three looked to Captain Alexandrov, who handled with BMW with confident finesse.

"Sir, we're going to lose them if we don't open fire."

"We'll get them at the terminal. Bravo squad is already on its way."

Alpha Three looked away in frustration, huffing. He'd already tolerated the first few minutes of the chase, not understanding why the Captain wouldn't allow them to just blow the tires out. Covert as this operation was, they would fail this mission if they allowed them to escape.

"Do you have a problem, soldier?" Captain Alexandrov said, a cold edge in his voice.

"No, sir," Alpha Three hissed.

Yuri and Tae Woo blazed across the final length of BR116, merging onto a smaller two-lane carriageway along the length of the airport. Horns blared all around them as startled drivers watched them zoom by. Pedestrians instinctively moved away from the street, slack-jawed at the four-car chase that zipped by them. They were headed toward the runways on the northernmost end of the island, just past a village sitting just outside the airport grounds. They maintained their breakneck speeds, determined to keep abreast of the BMWs for as long as they could. Up ahead, they turned left onto a road that ran between Morro de Itacolomi and Galeao International. Yuri, in the lead, watched as a Boeing 747 jumbo jet lifted off its front wheels in takeoff.

The sky was now carpeted in rising stacks of dark gray storm clouds. Thunder rolled between them, rumbling in the pit of Yuri's stomach. Raindrops had begun rapping on the windshield, gradually growing heavier until it was a rapid tattoo. About a hundred meters ahead, a tall concertina-topped fence loomed, separating them from their destination. Not enough to stop an M5 going this fast.

"They're not stopping at the terminal," Alpha Three pressed.

Captain Alexandrov knew he was right. He couldn't let them escape. Not when the interests of Mother Russia were at stake. Not when his illustrious military career was at stake. He could not hold back any longer. He held a hand to his ear.

"Weapons free. Stop them. Now."

As they approached the chain-link fence, Yuri heard a familiar noise above that of the falling rain. Like a distant popping. Behind her, she heard the hammering of steel before the rear window shattered to pieces. They were under fire.

"Hold on!" Yuri yelled as she lined up the car with the fence.

A small slope led up from the road to the fence. She hit it at full speed, bracing herself as the car leapt up and over the slope, soaring through the air at 160mph. A split second later, there was a deafening crash as the car fell with gravity and ploughed through the fence, knocking the entire section down onto the tarmac. The Bentley followed suit, crashing down nose-first into the tarmac with the absence of the fence. Still, its sturdy construction held. They sped forward, arcing left towards the beginning of the northern runways. Behind them, the two BMWs crashed down onto the road, still spewing gunfire from its side windows. Yuri knew she had to get away fast; travelling at this speed, all it took was one blown tire to have them thrown into the air and barreling across the concrete.

The four cars continued westward, passing under a taxiing Airbus. Yuri couldn't help but look skyward as one of the jet's massive wing engines loomed overhead. For a few moments, they were draped in its shadow, testament to its massive construction. The whine of its slowly awakening engines rang clear in Yuri's ears. They were now halfway along the length of a runway, sandwiched between the topmost and bottommost, which was the shortest. At the end, Yuri spotted the Aerion SBJ taxiing toward the topmost runway. Something else caught her eye; something off to the side of the small jet. A staircase? As it straightened on the runway, the jet began to accelerate.

The cars swung right, merging onto the topmost runway.

"I think you know how this is going to work," Tae Woo said over the radio.

Yuri glanced over her shoulder at the Aerion, which had accelerated to match her speed.

"I'm afraid so. You go first. I'll cover you."

Yuri turned to Taeyeon.

"Let's share the love, shall we?"

Taeyeon reached into her jacket to extract her Glock 21.

"I thought you'd never ask."

"Tiffany?" Yuri glanced back.

Tiffany already had her '30 in her hands, along with a few spare magazines spread out across the backseat. She nodded.

Tae Woo lined up the Bentley with the Aerion's staircase, which was attached to the door on the right side of the jet. He nodded to Elliot, whose ocean-blue eyes stared back with solid confidence. Elliot nodded back before climbing into the backseat. Behind them, a new spate of gunfire erupted. Taeyeon and Tiffany had their heads halfway out the windows, returning fire for the first time. Jessica craned her neck to see them land a few shots on the bonnets of the BMWs. A side mirror was blasted off its perch. She turned to her father, who was now reaching for the door. She eyed him with a faint change of heart. Was it worry? She shook it off as Tae Woo backed away from the Aerion. As her father opened the door, a rush of air and water buffeted them both. Jessica had to shield her eyes with her arm. Tae Woo inched closer to the jet, placing the car door just ahead of the now drenched staircase. Elliot looked back at his

daughter.

"I'll go first," He said simply, pulling his lips into a tight line. His eyes looked troubled, pleading, even. He would not let Jessica take the first step. He would clear the way for her first. He reached out, one arm holding the door open, one foot reaching for the foot of the staircase.

Back in the M5, Tiffany had shifted back into the car to reload, just in time to see a familiar figure sandwiched between the Bentley and the Aerion.

"Oh my God."

Elliot shifted forward, reaching with his foot. The tarmac passed underneath at breakneck speed, threatening to take his leg off if his foot so much as touched the ground. He kept his eyes forward, aiming for the railing. Standing up on one leg, he waited for the right moment, and with a grunt, leapt out of the car, arms reaching for the railing. He caught it and his feet made contact with the steel surface, but his grip slipped on the rainwater, causing him to stumble. Behind him, Jessica squeaked. Before he toppled off the staircase, his other elbow nudged into the space between the railings on the opposite side, holding him in place. Heart hammering in his chest, Elliot allowed himself a breath of relief before he gripped the opposite side and hauled himself up. He turned, securing a firm grip on the railings on either side of the staircase. He looked down at Jessica, beckoning her forward.

Jessica inched toward the open door, a permanent worried frown on her face. This was not going to be easy. Not at this speed, not with this rain. But her father had made it. Would she? She sat at the edge of the backseat, feeling the rain whip the side of her face as it fell in a punishing torrent. An outstretched arm appeared before her, and she looked up to see the comforting eyes of her father. How could he look this calm at a time like this?

"Come on! We're going to run out of tarmac!" Elliot yelled over the howling wind, reaching toward

Jessica. "I'll help you! Just trust me!"

Jessica nodded weakly and reached out, fingers searching for her father's. Just then, a stray bullet hit the rear window, shattering it. Jessica pulled back her hand with another squeak, shoulders raised in fear. The crash caused Tae Woo to lose his focus, and the car slowed infinitesimally. The open door came into contact with the staircase, and the vibrations produced an ear-splitting rattling noise that shook the car. A second later, Tae Woo regained control of the car, and Jessica inched forward again. She reached out and found her father's hand, still waiting beyond the staircase. Elliot grasped her with full strength, the muscles in his forearms tensing to their limit as he supported her climb over to the staircase as best he could. Jessica leapt the rest of the way, stumbling into her father and they both toppled backward into the stairs. She found Elliot's arms clasped protectively around her. She looked up and met her father's eyes.

"Get up into the jet," he said calmly before standing up and pushing her inside. She obeyed without question.

"Now you, Tae Woo!" he shouted down into the car.

Tae Woo nodded and surged forward in the Bentley, using the momentum to close the rear door before slowing down to align the driver's door with the staircase. He opened it just as another stray bullet zinged past, nicking the edge of the door. A flurry of sparks flew, dying out in the pouring rain just as quickly as they were born. He swung the door wide open, reaching out with his left foot as he kept his right firmly on the accelerator. Like Jessica, he found a strong arm waiting in front of him. He looked at it and nodded in appreciation. Keeping his left hand on the steering wheel, he took Elliot's arm with his right and leapt out of the car as Elliot yanked him in. His body just cleared the length of the open car door as the Bentley slowed and dropped off. He found his grip on the staircase railing, giving Elliot's arm a firm squeeze before climbing the stairs to the jet's interior.

Elliot raised a hand to his earpiece.

"Yuri! Now!"

Yuri didn't need to be told. The back of the M5 was now riddled with bullet holes, and a single bullet had made it through the open rear window and cracked the windshield. She had fired her own weapon through the windshield and cleared out what glass she could, and now her entire body was wet from the

oncoming rain.

"Taeyeon! Get in the backseat and prepare to board the plane!" Yuri yelled over the buffeting wind.

Seconds later, Taeyeon and Tiffany sat side by side as Yuri accelerated to line up with the Aerion's staircase. Taeyeon opened the side door, squeezing off a few shots in the BMWs' direction. Elliot Jung waited at the foot of the staircase. She slipped the Glock into her jacket before taking his arm and easily crossing onto the staircase, mounting it halfway before stopping to provide covering fire. Her balance was phenomenal. The bark of her .45 pistol rang clear in the torrential rain. Elliot looked ahead, in the direction of the Aerion's travel. They were running out of tarmac. What remained of the runway dropped off into a bay leading out to sea. Time was running out.

"Stephanie! Quickly!" he shouted down.

Tiffany moved to the edge of the seat, reaching for his hand. She heard the whine of a bullet before her face was splattered with blood. She looked up wide-eyed at her father.

"Dad!"

Elliot roared in pain. He had been shot clean through the palm of his hand, and blood was now seeping down his wrist in eddies from the fresh wound. He gritted his teeth, growling as he struggled to fight off the pain. Further up the staircase, Taeyeon reloaded and unleashed another volley of aimed fire. The windshield of one of the BMWs shattered, and the car dropped back.

Teeth gnashing together, Elliot tightened his grip on the railing with his good hand while he reached out with the other, offering Tiffany his forearm. Tiffany took it, and Elliot grunted as he pulled her across.

"Dad, are you okay?" Tiffany yelled over the noise of the rain and the whining jet engines.

"Don't worry about me! Just get into the plane!" he ordered, shoving Tiffany up the steps.

"But you're hurt!"

"Just get inside!" he yelled, a little louder than he'd intended. Tiffany gave him one last look before scrabbling up the stairs and into the jet.

He looked down at Yuri, who kept her eyes on the runway.

"Yuri!"

No response.

"YURI!"

Just then, he felt a jolt. He turned his attention to the front wheel. It was off the runway. The plane was taking off. Without Yuri. He looked back up the stairs in disbelief.

"Get into the plane!" Taeyeon called from above, finishing off her clip.

"But Yuri hasn't gotten across yet!" he yelled back, gesturing angrily.

Taeyeon fired her last round and retreated into the cabin without a word.

Elliot looked back at the M5. "YURI!"

Yuri simply looked up and smiled wanly.

Elliot now felt the staircase grind against the tarmac as the plane's incline increased. He knew what Yuri was thinking. She knew there wasn't enough time for her to get on the plane. She wanted them to leave without her. With a deep frown set into his face, Elliot turned and scrambled into the cabin. Moments after, the staircase jumped amongst a fiery display of sparks, metal screaming in protest, and with another jolt, dropped away from the Aerion's door. There was no way to get onto the plane now.

Below, Yuri slammed hard on the brakes and guided the M5 into a drift upon wet tarmac, moving in a perfect clockwise arc before stopping. The BMWs continued to approach at full speed.

"Let's see how well you do head-on."

"WHERE'S YURI? WHY ARE WE TAKING OFF WITHOUT YURI!?" Jessica screamed at Tae Woo, who was halfway inside the pilot's cockpit.

Tiffany was at the back with Elliot, using a first aid kit to tend to his wound as best she could. He winced as she emptied a sachet of sulfa powder on his hand. His hand was over his face, unable to fathom the fact that they had left without Yuri. He had no love for the woman, but this...this was simply a travesty. It was dishonorable, not even having given her a chance to try. Where would they go from here? His heart hurt, more so than his hand.

"There's not enough runway! We would've crashed into the bay if we hadn't taken off! We're leaving without her!" Tae Woo retorted.

Jessica pulled out her pistol, aiming it at Tae Woo's head. "The hell we are!"

"What are you going to do? Shoot me?" Tae Woo asked coolly.

"Turn this god damn plane around! You wouldn't be here if it weren't for Yuri! Only she knows where to go from here! Are you going to get out of this mess all by yourself?"

"She's right," Taeyeon added.

"Taeyeon, shut up."

"No dad, *you* shut up! We have absolutely no idea where to go from here. From what we've discerned,

the Doppelgangers and now someone else is after us. Someone with the power and means. We won't get far without Yuri!"

Tae Woo considered this as the jet continued to climb. His countenance darkened considerably.

"Shoot me if you want, but we're leaving. Without Yuri."

Yuri had always wanted to play chicken with the enemy. It was just that she hadn't gotten the chance. She tried her best to enjoy the moment as she approached one of the BMWs head-on at more than 120mph. Gunfire was still coming her way, but none too accurate to faze her. She ducked under the hail of fire and floored the accelerator, steadying her hands as she watched the black vehicle come closer by the millisecond. She wasn't going to budge. Ever. As she approached what she had called the 'breaking point', the distance at which either driver would make his decision, whether to break off or continue the charge, she locked eyes with the driver of the BMW. He had blonde salt and pepper hair, cut short to the scalp. The color of his eyes was indiscernible, but they looked back at her with determined intensity.

The distance was closing, fast. She wasn't going to budge, and neither was he.

Gritting her teeth, she picked up her pistol and held it forward, steadying it in a fraction of a second before firing.

Alpha Three stared in horror as the woman in the approaching M5 leveled a pistol in their direction. He blinked when the muzzle flash went off and heard the whine of an incoming bullet through the falling rain. His eyes widened as it struck Captain Alexandrov square in the forehead, blood spraying, and in a last twitch of movement, the dying man pulled hard toward the left. Alpha Three reached for the steering wheel, but it was too late. The car went into a high-speed drift, going perpendicular to the runway. Even in death, Captain Alexandrov's foot maintained a firm hold on the accelerator. A jolt made Alpha Three's heart sink as the tires finally caught the runway in friction, and suddenly, the world went spiraling.

Yuri looked in the rear view mirror, watching as the lead BMW hopped sideways off the runway and was tossed through the air, barreling out of control as it struck the wet ground again and again and again. The rear car, unable to turn effectively out of the lead car's haphazard hurtling on the wet tarmac, t-boned the lead car directly in the undercarriage. Yuri was sure it had punctured a fuel line or two. Now all she needed was a spark to finish things off...

Alpha Three's head was whirling. The car had stopped barreling, but continued to slide on its side across the length of the runway, aided by the momentum of the rear BMW. The crash had made him hit his head on the roof, and a concussion stirred amidst a gut filled with pure terror. Steel screeched and screamed, and then finally, friction caught. A single spark broke out beneath the car and the last thing Alpha Three heard was an ear-splitting explosion a split second before his own body was torn apart.

As Yuri made a beeline for the fence and the road from which she had come, she heard a familiar noise coming up from behind.

She glanced in the rear view mirror and was shocked by what she saw. The white Aerion SBJ was coming up on the left, landing gear up and flying dangerously close to the tarmac. She imagined there were less than a couple of meters between the fuselage and the runway. She smirked in both amusement and relief. She would have to shake the pilot's hand if she made it onboard. Yuri slowed, lining up with the jet, and was surprised to see Jessica kneeling at the jet's door, both hands on the interior for support.

"Missed me already?" Yuri yelled out the window.

"Shut up! We only came back because you're the only one who knows where to go!"

Yuri smiled. Good enough.

She inched the car closer to the jet, then opened the door and looked up. Jessica was bending over the

edge of the jet's door, one arm reaching downward. Taeyeon and Tiffany seemed to be holding her in from behind. The roar of the jet engines, cranked to maximum torque, matched that of the pouring rain, hammering Yuri's ears mercilessly.

She looked up and reached for Jessica's outstretched arm. She tried once, but her fingers slipped from Jessica's due to the rain. She retreated into the car, lined it up more closely with the plane and tried again. Staring into Jessica's pleading eyes, she reached up as far as she could and grabbed hold of her forearm, fingers clutching tightly onto the wet fabric of her suit. Before she knew it, she was out of the car, feet hanging precariously close to the tarmac. Rain pelted her face. Jessica leaned down and extended another arm outward, and Yuri caught it. She never took her eyes off Jessica, brown eyes wild and damp blonde hair flailing in streaks behind her head. Even like this, she looked perfect.

"Hang on! Don't let go!"

Yuri nodded, tightening her grip.

"Pull me in!" Jessica yelled over her shoulder, and was rewarded with a jolt that hauled her and Yuri upward, slowly but surely.

Soon, the edge of the door was within reach, and Yuri stretched to pull herself in.

Jessica reached out and pulled the door closed, and suddenly the world became significantly quieter. The deafening roar of the jet engines was reduced to a high-pitched whine. Yuri shivered as warmth enveloped around her. She wasn't sure if it was sweat or rainwater that was dripping from her chin. She looked around, registering the worn faces of Jessica, Taeyeon and Tae Woo, then glanced back to see Tiffany wrapping a bandage around Elliot's shot hand. A crimson patch had already formed where his palm was. Her eyes fell back on Jessica, whose back was against the closed jet door, huffing, catching her breath. Droplets of water fell from the ends of her hair.

Yuri stood up, using a nearby seat for support. She faced Jessica, who looked up at her tall form.

"Thanks," Yuri said softly.

Jessica simply nodded. The two women shared a bit of eye contact before Yuri turned away. Tae Woo was looking at her intently.

"Where to?" he asked, one hand on the door to the cockpit.

Before Yuri could answer, the pilot called out from inside the cockpit.

"Sir, there's an aircraft behind us, closing in fast. Three hundred meters out."

Tae Woo ducked into the cockpit. Yuri followed.

"What is it?" Tae Woo asked, looking at the radar.

"I'll activate the tail camera," the pilot said, and pressed a button beside a small LCD screen.

"What the hell?"

"It's a Hind," Yuri said, her voice thick with dread.

Bravo One nosed down on the Mi-34M Hind attack helicopter, borrowed from Santa Cruz Airforce Base. He glanced out the window in time to see the twisted, burning remains of two cars splayed across the runway, flames dancing amidst the torrent of rain. Bravo Squad had taken off from Santos Dumont airport as soon as Captain Alexandrov, Alpha One, had called. Plan B was in effect, and they were to provide close air support. Bravo One spotted the fleeing Aerion SBJ and locked it in his sights. Behind him, Bravo Two gave him the green light. Helicopter still surging forward, Bravo One flipped the cover on the collective and fired, feeling the weight of the Hind shift as a Hellfire missile dropped off its pylon and rocketed forward. An eye for an eye.

"Hellfire away."

Yuri watched in horror as she spotted the missile spiraling toward them. "Missile away!"

"Dropping flares," the pilot said calmly, reaching for and pressing another button. He then reached for the throttle and thrust it full forward. The engines roared.

Near the tail end of the Aerion, a tiny compartment opened and a large cluster of IR-decoy flares was jettisoned forth, bursting into streams of bright red and trailing smoke as they spread out in a fan behind the retreating aircraft.

The Hellfire, confused by the release of countermeasures, veered off course and flew harmlessly in a perpendicular direction.

Yuri and Tae Woo breathed a sigh of relief. That was close. Too close.

"*Vse zayebalo! Pizdets na khui blyad!*" Bravo One cursed, slamming a fist on the dashboard.

The Aerion, flying at full speed, was now too far away and going too fast to give chase.

Bravo Two tapped his shoulder and Bravo One answered with a curt nod, still fuming.

The Hind banked off back toward the city.

Mikhail Gorbachov slowly slipped the headphones off his head, unable to take his eyes off the computer screens. One of them was a satellite image of the conflagration on the runway, a twisted mess of Alpha and Charlie Squads being peppered by the storm. Flashes of red and white appeared near the bottom of the screen as fire engines and ambulances arrived at the scene, followed by bars of blue as police vehicles took up the rear. He held his breath. Impossible. Two handpicked squads of Spetsnaz operatives, all gone in less than five minutes. He had watched as each person boarded a jet travelling at high speed, and then a lone M5 play chicken with Captain Alexandrov's BMW and win. He had watched as the jet returned to retrieve the final member of their team, in a way that would be considered downright absurd. He had watched as they foiled even Bravo Squad in the Mi-35M.

Mikhail felt a pressure on his shoulder and looked up to see Andrei looking down at him.

"Who the hell are these people?" Andrei asked, his voice soft with dread and wonder.

Mikhail could only stare at the screens ahead.

"I don't know."

As the jet approached international airspace, the pilot throttled down and a sense of calm washed over the cockpit almost immediately.

"Where to?" Tae Woo repeated.

Yuri turned and looked far beyond the windshield. Rain continued to pour and stream down the sides, forced back by the jetstream that lined the Aerion's exterior.

"Saint Petersburg."

Interlude : Constellations

It was eight thirty in the evening on a cool – no – blasted cold night in Connecticut, and Jessica was freezing. Still, her dainty feet carried her forward in hurried, forced steps, dragged along by a gloved hand that belonged to the taller asian girl. It was a quiet night; the only sounds were the drawn-out whispers of the passing wind and the distant hum of traffic. Snow crunched under their footsteps. Jessica was so cold; she could even feel the iciness drifting up to the soles of her feet as she glided along the dark pavement. As she trudged along, her breath escaped through her mouth in puff after puff of visible vapor. Her throat was starting to get dry.

“Yuri, where are we going?”

“Just a little farther,” Yuri said without looking back, raising her other hand to check her wristwatch. “We’re almost there!”

Jessica huffed under her fur-lined hood. As grateful as she was to have been whisked away from the arduous task of writing her assignment proposal, she didn’t understand why Yuri had had to drag her all the way here. It had been a good twenty minute brisk walk, and the last time she recalled, Jessica didn’t like walking very much.

Still, she couldn’t hide the tiniest smile tugging at the corner of her lips. Underneath the oversized black coat that bobbed along in front of her was the slender form of Kwon Yuri, the rather eccentric Asian girl who always managed to plant an inexplicable feeling at the pit of her stomach. Kwon Yuri stood out as the only student she knew in Yale who was both Korean-American, and completely and utterly capable of behaving like a total idiot. Oh, the irony. That was another thing Jessica had been grateful for since she’d met Yuri just months ago. Yuri was, in a way, her personal reprieve from the omnipresent pressure from school assignments and overwhelming expectations placed upon her by both her parents and her teachers. Yuri was her escape from a world that seemed to close in on her as the seconds ticked by.

A small breeze blew past Jessica and she shivered. Yuri’s hand tightened its grip. Jessica’s smile grew.

A couple more minutes past, and as they made a final turn at the corner, their destination was suddenly in plain view. An iron fence topped by spikes separated them from the massive 216-foot tall structure on their right. Shrouded in the shadows of winter night, the gray stone structure rose in stages of intricate gothic design, displaying tall, yawning windows, carved balconies and jagged reliefs as it seemed to fall away into the sky, ending in a smattering of stone pinnacles.

Jessica felt their pace quicken suddenly. Yuri was homing into their destination.

“Yuri?”

“Come on!”

They stopped beside a square stone pillar, one of two that marked the entrance to Harkness Tower. Yuri motioned for Jessica to flatten her back against it. They crouched low, hands still entwined between them. Yuri poked her head around the corner, spying the guardhouse that stood just shy of the entrance. A uniformed security guard, clad in a large brown motorcycle jacket, had his legs propped on the table, eyes fixed upon a small television set into one of the guardhouse’s walls. Disembodied strings of laughter echoed from it, and they watched as the guard’s shoulders bobbed up and down as he giggled along. Yuri turned to Jessica, and the latter noted her features for the nth time, as she had every time Yuri graced her with the opportunity. The most prominent of all were her smile lines, set deep into the corners of her mouth. It was a small, endearing part of the perfectly oval face framed by long, flowing black hair. Bottomless pools of black stared back at her.

Jessica continued to stare blankly as a hand was waved in her face, then she snapped back to reality. Yuri motioned for her to follow as she crept forward.

The duo, still crouched low, inched across the entrance and up to the wall of the guardhouse, moving around and behind it to stay out of the guard’s view. Once on the other side, Yuri began to rise slowly, and her footsteps once again quickened into her earlier haste. In the trail of the security guard’s hearty laughter, they glided across the open plaza to the main entrance of Harkness Tower.

As they ducked into the building, a deep darkness seemed to engulf them. They both lowered the hoods of their jackets, spraying bits of snow onto the cool tiled floor below. With Jessica beside her, Yuri craned her neck up at the yawning space that rose above. The interior was no less impressive; the same gothic architecture shone in the spaces here. Grayish stone rose in endless tiers on all four sides, riddled

with carvings and reliefs. Yuri spotted the starting point of their journey in a dark corner.

Yuri checked her watch again. "Come on! We're running out of time," She said, pulling Jessica toward the staircase.

Jessica followed. "Running out of time for *what?*"

"You'll see."

Up and up they climbed. It was significantly warmer in the tower than outside, since they were out of the biting wind. Halfway up the tower, they passed the tower's main attraction. A huge steel frame made of woven I-beams rising in tiers stood in the center of the tower, carrying the tower carillon's 54 bells.

"So this is where it comes from," Jessica muttered to herself, remembering the carillon's lyrical pieces being played throughout the school year, twice a day. Now, the dark bells lay dormant.

Her attention focused on the engravings on the bells. She couldn't tell exactly what they were, given the surrounding darkness, but she was just able to make out a year. 1921.

Each bell was engraved with the year it was cast, the seals of its foundry and Yale, and the motto "*For God, For Country, for Yale.*"

Jessica couldn't help but feel a sense of nostalgia. Laid out in front of her was more than 80 years of American history, cast in thousands upon thousands of pounds of metal.

Outside, one of the four openwork copper clock faces on this level ticked the seconds away.

Jessica continued to let herself be tugged forward by Yuri's unrelenting hand. A couple of minutes and more than a hundred steps later, they reached a landing. Yuri stopped to look around, frowning.

“Over there!” she exclaimed, pulling Jessica towards a jade-green steel ladder attached to the far wall. It appeared to lead to the topmost section of the tower.

They stopped at its foot, craning their necks to follow the path of the ladder. The way up appeared to be open. Yuri let go of Jessica’s hand and began to climb, her heavy footfalls sending reverberating clangs through the old metal. She stopped to look down at Jessica, who remained at the foot of the latter.

“Yuri, are you sure about this?” Jessica said carefully, biting her lower lip. She clasped her hands in front of her.

Yuri simply smiled and bent down, balancing herself with one hand on a rung. She stuck the other out towards Jessica.

“Come on,” Yuri said simply, motioning with her fingers.

Jessica bit deeper into her lip, looking up at the girl from under her eyelashes. Slowly, she reached up and grasped Yuri’s hand. As their fingers met, that tiny smile appeared once again on Jessica’s face.

This feels much better.

Together, they clambered up the ladder and squeezed through the square opening at the top.

Love Theme [IRIS OST - Pretty Love]

They were now in the topmost section of the tower. All around them, the tower’s highest peaks reached skyward, as if to penetrate the impenetrable. A single exit lay to their direct front; a tiny balcony barely wide enough for two people to stand side by side in. Yuri stepped slowly forward, breaking through the threshold of the high arch above them. She rested her gloved hands on the stone balustrade that formed the balcony’s parapet, gazing far up into the sky.

Jessica was confused to say the least. Had Yuri made her come all the way here, climbed two hundred

feet into the air, just to enjoy the very same winter breeze she'd been trying to avoid all December? Her innocent smile devolved into a frown as she made her way towards the girl.

As she stepped beyond the threshold, the gentlest of breezes swirled around her, enveloping her in a cool embrace, tossing her shoulder-length hair gently around her jacket. She came to a rest beside Yuri. Their bodies were packed close together; so close that she could feel her left arm pressing against Yuri's side. The girl was looking high up into the sky, not bothering to look back at her.

"Yuri-"

"Shhh...", Yuri raised a hand from the parapet and pressed a finger to Jessica's lips. The latter flinched at the contact, eyes crossed as they focused on the hand pressed against her face. Her cheeks began to flush.

Yuri's hand dropped lower, turning to hold Jessica's chin, tilting it upward.

"Yuri, what are you-"

Jessica's own words were caught behind her lips as her chin reached the apex of its climb.

High above them, spread out in an unfathomable expanse, was the most magnificent spray of stars Jessica had seen in her entire life. The skies were perfectly clear and painted a deep purple, allowing them the breathtaking view. Jessica's mouth was agape. A smattering of stars was visibly brighter than the others, standing out like masterfully cut and polished gems.

"Wow," was all Jessica could manage. She drew out the word, unable to contain her awe.

Yuri simply smiled, removing her hand from Jessica's chin and pointing toward the sky.

"See that?"

Jessica tilted her head. "See what?"

"That's you."

"Me?"

"Aries."

"Huh?" Jessica tilted her head even further.

"You're an Aries. That's you, right up there," Yuri said, pointing toward a bright star low on the horizon. She traced the outline of the Aries constellation, going up, then left, then a sharper left.

"One, two, three, four, five," Yuri counted slowly as she pointed to each star in turn, her smile growing with each.

Jessica's eyes followed Yuri's finger as she counted. "That *is* Aries...I've never seen it before."

"Yeah, I bet you've never seen your own constellation in your whole life," Yuri said amusedly.

Jessica continued to gaze at the Aries constellation, the bright points in the sky unblinking in their luminous splendor. She could almost picture the original Ram over the constellation, the same one that had been sent by the god Hermes to rescue Phrixus and Helle, children of the King of Thessaly, from the abuse of their stepmother. It was from the same ram that the fabled Golden Fleece was produced and given to a dragon for safe-keeping, only to be retrieved by Jason and his Argonauts and returned to Thessaly.

Yuri looked at her wristwatch for the last time and smiled. "It's 9pm on a December night. Best to see the Aries constellation." She turned to Jessica. "Best night to see you."

Jessica blushed, her smile widening, and turned away slightly before looking back up at the sky.

“Wouldn’t it be nice to be a star?” she asked absently.

Yuri turned to face her. “Why?”

Jessica sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s because you stand out in the crowd. You shine the brightest, and planets revolve around you. You’d feel...important.”

Yuri’s lips tugged upward. “Your parents love you as much as they do Stephanie. Don’t let yourself think otherwise, Sica.”

Jessica cringed inwardly at the nickname with which Yuri had christened her, but felt a warmth rush through her at the same time, simply because the fact that Yuri gave her a nickname hinted at her affection for her. She shook her head, as she had a thousand times. She was reading too much into it, wasn’t she? But she felt comforted by Yuri’s words of assurance. As mature as she’d always thought she was, Jessica couldn’t help but feel overshadowed in her family. Her sister, Stephanie, was but a minute younger than she was, and she’d always had all the attention; all her wishes granted. So what if Jessica was a Yale student? Her sister’s endearing smiles and warm laughter never ceased to move hearts and manipulate minds.

Yuri noticed Jessica’s perpetual frown. “You know what, Sica?”

Jessica turned to Yuri, eyebrows quirked.

“I think you’re a star.”

Jessica cocked her head. “Excuse me?”

Yuri stepped closer, holding Jessica’s hands in hers. The latter gasped, but let her hands settle into Yuri’s. A rush of blood flowed through her cheeks, turning them a bright red. All Jessica wanted to do now was hide in the warm folds of her jacket and never come out.

“To me, you shine brighter than anyone else. You bring light into my life, and though you may leave sometimes, trailing darkness, I always know that you’ll return with your gift of warmth,” Yuri continued, grasping Jessica’s hands tighter. She let a smile grow on her face, accentuating her smile lines.

Barely a step away, Jessica’s heart was hammering in her chest.

What in the world is she saying? Is she...is she confessing? Wait a minute, when did it get so hot up here? It’s friggin five degrees out here! Oh my, I need...I need to sit down. Oh no, she’s opening her mouth again.

“And whether I can feel your light or not, I can’t help but revolve around you. It’s like you’ve pulled me in and I can’t let go.”

Oh my God, she’s confessing. I...I should say something, right? What should I...I mean, I can’t open my mouth! What’s wrong with me?

“And lastly...lastly,” Yuri said before closing her eyes to take a deep breath, then opened them again. “You’ll always be the most important thing to me, and nothing will change that fact.”

I...will?

Yuri chuckled. “Earth to Jessica, come in Jessica,” She intoned, lifting one of her hands. “Houston, we have a problem.” She flicked Jessica on the forehead, snapping the girl out of her stunned stupor.

“H-hey!” Jessica yelped, fixing Yuri with a glare.

“Jessica Jung, if you haven’t noticed, I just confessed to you,” Yuri said lamely, cocking an eyebrow.

Jessica drew in a breath and exhaled, trailing vapor. She gazed deep into Yuri’s twinkling eyes, drawn in by their beauty. Her lips formed a smile to match Yuri’s.

“In a cramped balcony at the top of Harkness Tower, Yale, under the stars...freezing our butts off. Very romantic,” Jessica said sarcastically, chuckling at the end.

“Hey, let's face it. This is original!” Yuri said, laughing along.

“Good enough,” Jessica pulled Yuri closer, tilting her head as she reached up...

And their lips met for the first time.

Chapter Twenty-Three : A Necessary Sacrifice

Mission Director Park Jaebeom returned to the Ops room, summoned by one of the support agents.

“Over here, sir,” one of the agents sitting at a workstation called out.

Jaebeom stepped over to the radio communications officer, a perpetual frown plastered onto his features.

“What is it?” He asked impatiently, arms crossed. He didn’t expect to be called back to Ops so early; the meeting had been scheduled for noon, and it was only a little past daybreak in Rio.

The communications officer looked up and over his shoulder at the Mission Director and pointed to the screen.

Jaebeom leaned forward, watching as a multitude of small windows pulsed with a continuous string of activity.

“We’re getting a lot of radio chatter from police and rescue units in Rio,” the officer explained. “They seem to be coming from within the vicinity of Galeao International Airport.”

“A runway incident?” Jaebeom asked.

“I’ve been running the chatter through the translation algorithms, and the incident seems to have involved what appear to be two destroyed black cars of indiscernible make, and another two which are relatively unscathed. The bodies found in the burning ruins are unidentifiable as of yet because they’re too charred.”

“Did you cross reference the chatter with other communications in the immediate area?”

The officer nodded. “They were multiple police reports citing a four-car chase down highway BR116 and then on the airport runways.”

Jaebeom stiffened. There they were, waiting for Yuri to make a move, and now they’ve discovered the aftermath of a deadly car chase upon airport grounds. He was not one to believe in coincidences.

“Sir?” the officer prompted, craning his neck to look up at Jaebeom, who seemed to be in deep thought.

Jaebeom snapped out of his reverie. “Anything else?”

“I picked up a string of transmissions from the airport control tower towards a helicopter intruding upon airport airspace,” the officer said, bringing up another window.

“A helicopter?”

“Yes, sir. It appears the helicopter did not respond to any of the control tower’s requests, including identification. I traced the transmissions back to the helicopter and was able to identify its make,” he said, bringing up another window. A full-color photo of a familiar attack helicopter came up onscreen.

Jaebeom’s eyes narrowed in recognition. “That’s a Hind.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jaebeom needed to know more. There were too many pieces of an unknown puzzle, and he had to figure it out.

“Did the control tower capture anything related to the incident from their vantage point?”

“I’ll tap into the runway-view cameras in the control tower,” the officer said, turning and typing quickly.

Within seconds, another window came up onscreen, and the officer entered the desired time into a box. The high-definition video rewound, then stopped at a frame. In the middle of a frame, a white-colored private jet could be seen. Beside it was a black car. Dark clouds hung low in the sky. A sheet of heavy rain obscured the view slightly.

“Bring it up on the main screen and play it. I want everyone to see this,” Jaebeom said quietly.

The officer did as told, and as the video began to play, the various operatives in the Ops room swiveled on their chairs to look at the screen, interest piqued by the sudden change.

Seohyun spun in her seat, noticing everyone had their attention turned to the main screen at the front of the Ops room. Her eyes widened as the video began to play.

“Yuri, what the hell are you doing!?” she mouthed to herself.

A torrent of rain continued to pour across the screen, punctuated by flashes of lightning and sharp cracks of thunder. They watched in silence as the jet nosed up and took off, leaving the black car on its side. The car continued to accelerate before suddenly braking, turning clockwise in a drift. At this point, the camera zoomed out, revealing two more black cars approaching fast from the rear. At the end of its drift, the lead car began charging towards the rear cars, and seconds later, one of the rear cars suddenly veered left before flipping and barreling through the air. The other rear car t-boned it, and in a sudden flash of light, both cars ignited in a bright explosion.

Jaebeom’s eyes grew.

Leaving the conflagration behind, the lead car surged down the length of the runway, and this time, the control tower camera panned upwards, revealing the white jet from earlier approaching the runway, as if to land. But it didn’t. It seemed to hover just above the runway, coming up beside the retreating black car. Jaebeom heard a murmur echoing throughout the Ops room. This was insanity. And if he knew one person capable of such mindless recklessness...

And then he saw it. The driver’s side door of the black car opened, revealing a figure clad in black. He watched as the figure leapt out of the car, latching onto the arms of another hanging from the open door of the jet.

“There! Freeze it and zoom in!” Jaebeom told the communications officer, a little too loudly.

The operatives in the room watched as the video was frozen and then zoomed in. A solid line moved across the screen, refining the image over and over again as it continued to zoom into the figure’s face. One last sweep, and the image was clear as day. More murmurs spread across the room.

Jaebeom stared at the screen, finding the woman staring right back at him.

He gritted his teeth, recognizing her at first glance.

“Kwon Yuri,” he growled, clenching a fist.

Suddenly, he felt all the alarms in his head going off. It was a familiar feeling; one that he got every time he found a connection.

He scanned the room, frowning.

“If that was Yuri, how is it that we were unaware of them leaving the villa?” he said, more to himself than to anyone else.

His roaming eyes settled on agent Seo Ju Hyun, the visual reconnaissance officer. Her eyes were still fixed on the main screen. His frown deepened as he studied her emotionless expression. Spinning on his heel, he approached her.

Seohyun felt a creeping sense of dread, forcing her to take her eyes off the main screen. She had been so bedazzled by the spectacular show Yuri had put up in Rio that she hadn’t noticed the Mission Director was marching straight toward her. Straightening in her seat, she pulled her lips into a tight line and braced herself, careful not to give anything away.

The Mission Director stopped a couple of steps away from her workstation, casting a curious look her way. “Seohyun.”

“Yes, sir?” Seohyun answered as neutrally as possible.

“We all saw the footage from the control tower at Galeao. You didn’t pick up anything from the villa vicinity earlier?”

Seohyun put on her practiced poker face, shaking her head. “No, sir. Everything was quiet.”

Jaebeom’s frown deepened. “That’s strange.” He shifted on his feet. “Could she have masked the signals

somehow?"

Seohyun deliberated for a split second. She'd have to think of something fast. She couldn't say there wasn't any way for Yuri to have blocked the standard, x-ray, infra-red and isotope tracking systems all at the same time. She hoped the Mission Director would buy what she had to say.

"Sir, I believe it would be possible to block all energy transmissions from the recon satellites by using a jammer of some sort. A jammer with sufficient power and tuned to the right frequencies would be able to at least scramble the signals in the area."

Jaebeom nodded, but the frown remained. "The only jammers I'm familiar with are the generators right here in HQ. But they're far too large to be portable," he said, remembering the banks of signal jamming generators positioned around the mountain, continuously releasing controlled bursts of energy to scramble any nearby scanners.

"Perhaps she found a way to miniaturize those generators with materials in Tae Woo's villa, sir." Seohyun paused. "If I may, Kwon Yuri is incredibly resourceful."

"That I concede, Seohyun...that I concede," Jaebeom said, nodding. He remained stoic for a moment, then began to spun on his heel. "Thank you, Seohyun. Carry on."

Seohyun swiveled back to her workstation, breathing a sigh of relief.

Thank God.

As Jaebeom made his way back to the center of the room, he was once again summoned, this time by his second-in-command. The agent's task was to oversee the activities occurring in the Ops room.

Jaebeom approached the man's desk, and the latter stood, moving close.

“Sir, I believe there’s something you should see,” his second-in-command said quietly.

Jaebeom arched an eyebrow, interest piqued. He stepped closer to the workstation.

Ok Taecyeon, the Mission Director’s second-in-command, took a seat at his workstation, typing in a series of commands. A group of familiar windows came onscreen. They were the visual recon feeds from earlier.

“What’s this?” Jaebeom asked, leaning closer.

“These are the satellite recon feeds from daybreak in the villa vicinity. I’m currently fast forwarding them in five-minute intervals,” Taecyeon explained, eyes still fixed to the screen.

Jaebeom stared at the four windows until they stopped fast forwarding, then straightened, eyes narrowing.

“Did you notice anything, sir?” Taecyeon prompted, clearly knowing the Mission Director had already understood.

“The shadows cast under the sunlight,” Jaebeom began, his eyes darkening. “They never moved.”

Taecyeon nodded. “Sir, the feeds were frozen.”

Jaebeom nodded, looking over his shoulder at the recon officer sitting at the far end of the room. “There’s only one way to do that,” he said quietly.

“And it can only be done from inside this room.”

Yuri slid the shower room door open and a plume of steam billowed outward. She adjusted her towel before stepping into the cabin, eyes roaming, trying to find her new clothes. She spotted them laid neatly across a sofa along one side of the cabin and made her way towards it.

She eyed the hooded sweater and cargo slacks, lips pulling into a tight line. They weren't flashy, as she would have preferred, but they'd have to do, since her suit was dirty and wet. She almost wished she could bring her personal wardrobe on each mission. Her suit was almost like her second skin. On the other hand, the plain-looking civilian wear would better help them blend into their surroundings.

Stepping toward the sofa, she let the towel slip off her body.

Just then, Yuri heard the sound of a latch shifting before she saw the cabin door open, a familiar oval face with blonde hair tied up in a ponytail popped into view.

"Oh my God," a voice squeaked, and Jessica covered her eyes with a hand before retreating and pulling the door shut.

Butt butt butt butt butt butt butt...

Yuri stood still, an amused grin spread across her lips. She glanced downward, well aware of the black satin lingerie that barely covered her 'vital' areas.

"What? I like these undies...Tae Woo sure does have good taste. And how he knows my size is still a mystery," she thought absently.

Yuri moved over to the table, spying a folded black mass sitting atop it. She picked it up and fanned it out, revealing it to be a matt black full body suit.

It was another Doppelganger creation. Based upon the US Army's development of liquid body armor about a decade ago, the LDBS-X1, or Liquid Diamond Ballistic Suit, was a full body suit formed by sections of advanced flexible polymerized fibers, containing an inner lining of reactive liquid diamond. Upon impact on an area by any foreign object, the liquidized diamond under that specific section would

harden within thousandths of a second, protecting the wearer from serious trauma. It was an armorer's dream come true: the modern equivalent of a suit of armor made entirely of diamond, the hardest substance on the planet, while allowing maximum mobility. The Doppelgangers had had to indirectly acquire a multitude of diamond mines across the world in order to provide all their field agents with this suit.

Yuri's was specially modified to hold two long, carbonized blades on the sides of her leg, as well as a multitude of smaller knives on her forearms. It was a perk of being a blade master.

Yuri slipped deftly into the suit, zipping herself up before putting on the sweater. She summoned a knife to hand and cut two tiny slits on the sides of the cargo slacks before putting them on. The knife disappeared as quickly as it had materialized.

Three knocks turned her attention to the door. She was still fiddling with her pants zipper.

"Are you decent?" came a muffled voice.

"Decent enough," Yuri said absently.

"I don't trust your definition!" the voice called back.

Yuri turned to the door and smiled. "Oh just come in, it's not like you've never seen me naked before."

The door inched open as Jessica made her way in, but she flinched when she spotted Yuri's hand on her zipper. Yuri noted her reaction and rolled her eyes, and finally managed to pull up her zipper. She turned and appraised the woman in front of her, similarly dressed in civilian clothing, having shed her wet suit. Likewise, Jessica eyed Yuri up and down, noticing how the latter seemed to appear a little...bulkier. Was she wearing something underneath that sweater? She shook the thought away.

"What's up?" Yuri asked, tying her hair up into a ponytail.

Jessica noted Yuri's shiny, flowing black hair as it was propped up and behind her head. Her shampoo wafted toward her, a sweet lemon scent, tickling her nose.

“Jessica?”

“Oh.” Jessica focused her eyes on Yuri. “Just wanted to check on you. You seemed to be taking a long time.”

Yuri shrugged and smiled. “Really now? I just enjoy hot baths...and since I had the time, I thought why not.”

Yuri arched an eyebrow. “But you didn’t come here to talk about that, did you?”

Jessica looked at her innocently. Yuri was incredibly difficult to read, but she could read almost anyone else like an open book. It was frustrating, yet helpful in a way that it gave Jessica no other choice than to simply speak her mind. She moved to the now empty sofa and took a seat, sinking into the beige leather. Yuri pocketed her hands.

“I don’t know how to say this, but...,” Jessica began, fiddling with her fingers. It was a well remembered habit of hers, one that presented itself whenever she was trying to get something off her chest.

Jessica looked up at Yuri. “I’m confused.”

Yuri’s eyes widened a little, then decided she should sit next to Jessica. The latter needed...comfort, of all things at this time, but somehow, she felt obligated to provide it.

Jessica hung her head low, sighing. “I can’t seem to accept the fact that I’ve met you before, that we were once friends...lovers...” She paused. “Soul mates.”

Yuri frowned slightly. Jessica had previously been so adamant in treating Yuri like a sworn enemy. Why was she opening up to her now?

“You’ve changed so much that I can’t even recognize you anymore, physically or characteristically. You’re just...not the same. And I know this shouldn’t matter to me given that we haven’t seen each other for almost a decade, but still I’m...lost.”

Yuri felt her heart clench. Even after all this time, even after she'd resigned herself to letting go of the one person she'd loved more than anything else in the world, Jessica still had her buried somewhere in the deepest reaches of her heart. Yuri had made a decision upon the completion of her training. Some sacrifices were worth making.

Jessica looked up at Yuri, eyes filled with pain. "I don't know you anymore. Why does that bother me?"

Yuri took a deep breath, feeling the still, cool air on her skin and hearing the low hum of the Aerion's jet engines. She steeled herself for the revelation.

She wanted to reach out and hold Jessica's hands, but thought better of it.

"Jessica," Yuri began quietly. "Back then, there was a reason why I left you."

Jessica seemed to flinch at the memory, but Yuri pressed on.

Yuri sighed audibly. "There is a group of people in our midst; an organization that looks out for the well-being of mankind. They're not soldiers, nor are they mercenaries or assassins. They watch over us with a dedication that has lasted for almost a century, weeding out the evil, eliminating the crooked." Yuri paused for effect. "I'm one of those people."

Jessica looked at Yuri intently, interested.

"They're called the Doppelgangers, an extremely secretive organization that operates in every major country in the world. Doppelgangers are not recruited. They're born. And I, like my father and mother before me, had to begin my training at the age of twenty-one."

Jessica's eyes flickered. Twenty-one. They were that age when Yuri had left her. So that was why...

"You don't know how hard it was, Jessica," Yuri's voice had grown softer, making Jessica strain to hear the words. "The hardest part wasn't the training, but knowing I was doing it without you."

Yuri closed her eyes, hearing the beating of her heart in her ears. She couldn't take it anymore. She reached forward and held Jessica's hands in hers. The latter seemed surprised at first, but allowed the contact.

"The only reason why I got through training was because of you. You were my strength. You were the air when I was scaling the peaks of mountains. You were the water when I was marching across the desert. I charged through my training because I thought that when it was all over, I could see you again and tell you how much I missed you...and how sorry I was for leaving you behind."

"Then why didn't you?" Jessica asked quietly.

"Because when I finally completed my training, I realized how truly dangerous this duty was. The people I've seen, the people I've killed...they had power beyond our wildest imaginations, and that same power gave them a heartless brutality that I couldn't bear to see used on anyone I cared about. These people were beyond the reach of the world's most capable intelligence agencies, because no one ever had the drop on them without having their loved ones tortured and killed in the most terrible ways."

Jessica's eyes widened, and Yuri caught the understanding.

"You know about the forgotten cases in your own department, Jessica. The ones they've given up on. It's the same with every other intelligence agency. The attrition was just too much. The reason why I never looked for you or contacted you was because I didn't want to put your life in danger. If and when my enemies manage to track me down, they will seek to exploit any weakness I have," Yuri said. "And you, Jessica, are one of my greatest weaknesses."

Yuri huffed a heavy sigh. It was time.

"I can't do this, Jessica. *We* can't do this," she said resolutely, squeezing Jessica's hands. "It's for your own good."

Jessica's eyes began to brim with moisture. She completely understood Yuri's argument, but somehow, she just couldn't accept it. It wasn't fair. During all those years of living alone in self-advocated hatred and conceited perfectionism, behind that perpetually cold exterior remained a sliver of a person she had

once dearly loved. And here that person was, right before her eyes, and there was nothing she could do.

“How do you know what’s good for me?” Jessica said stubbornly, a little louder than she’d intended. Tears threatened to escape at any moment.

Yuri let go of Jessica’s hands and stood up, turning her back to Jessica.

“If it means you get to live, it’s good enough,” she said, a sudden cold edge to her voice.

Yuri unlatched the door and half-stepped outside, turning to look over her shoulder.

“It’s time you forgot about me.”

And the first of Jessica’s tears fell.

Chapter 24 : Uncertain Alliances

Yuri kept her eyes on the road, navigating the dimly lit asphalt while she organized her thoughts. Flying at past supersonic speeds, the jet made good time and carried them across the Atlantic and to St. Petersburg in a little under six hours.

It had been a nerve-wracking flight. Jessica had found comfort in the solid mass that was Elliot’s shoulder, leaning deeply into the only bit of warmth she could find after the incident with Yuri. Perhaps that was all the reconciliation father and daughter needed. The events of the previous day had taken its

toll on everyone. They had come too close to death. Far too close.

Morale was low. They were indeed one step forward and yet at the same time, one step back. The only thing they could count on was Seohyun's information on Jin Young's whereabouts; a location derived from information more than a day old. Jin Young could be anywhere by now. They could only hope that he was still there. The fact that Seohyun hadn't contacted her with an update added to the discomfort. Yuri would have to consult her once she was on the ground. Immediately, she felt stupid. She knew better than to hope for something as foolish as that. Doppelgangers were trained to be ghosts. To be untraceable, unseen. He wasn't likely to stay in the same place for more than a few hours, much less a day.

Still, Yuri had to hold onto that foolish shred of hope. It was the only thing that drove her forward. It was the only common goal that could keep her team together.

The group had split into two teams upon debarking from the Aerion at a remote airstrip northeast of the city center, passing with the help of fake identification and swiftly changing into two unmarked cars, all courtesy of a contact Tae Woo had in the Russian Mafia. Tae Woo took the first car, with a wounded but still fighting fit Elliot in the back. Tiffany had done her best to take care of his wound, and though he could barely move his fingers, most of the pain was already gone. She had insisted on accompanying her father, a med kit having become part of her body once leaving the plane. Taeyeon drifted purposefully toward Yuri and Jessica in the second, keeping a distance from her father.

Jessica sat beside Yuri now, eyes looking far out the window at the cloudy sky. She had adamantly insisted on accompanying Yuri, and Yuri saw no benefit in arguing. She knew better than to try to change Jessica's mind once it had been made up. Further contemplation revealed more. Regardless of her intent to keep as safe a distance from Jessica as humanly possible, they had indeed been brought together once more, and it was a reunion she could not simply refuse. Yuri decided that when all this was over, she would leave, never to see Jessica again.

Winter in St. Petersburg was colorless and bleak. All around them, nondescript concrete buildings passed them by, their low roofs topped by thin layers of dirty snow and frost, like icing on a cake, warmly illuminated by the gentle rays of a low-sitting full moon. The sidewalks were nearly empty at this time of night; what few pedestrians there were hobbled about, stiff from the biting cold, their heavy greatcoats making them look like walking black blobs. The ancient city was tucked deep under the cover of shadow.

Yuri mentally zeroed in on the location Seohyun had pinpointed for her earlier; it was on the outskirts of the city, most probably a small outlying town. Park Jin Young had last made contact with Jaebeom from there. She could only hope he still remained. At a time like this, little else other than hope was left.

Her grip on the steering wheel tightened. They were *so* close.

Yuri's thoughts were interrupted by a familiar series of vibrations in her windbreaker. Taking one hand off the wheel, she fished it out, flipped it open and held it to her ear with practiced ease.

"Seohyun?"

"Guess again."

Yuri froze. Jessica seemed to notice the chill coursing through Yuri's veins and turned to look at her for the first time. Taeyeon leaned forward from the backseat.

"Jaebeom," Yuri hissed, more to herself than to the speaker on the phone.

The atmosphere in the car darkened instantaneously.

"Tsk tsk. I'm disappointed in you, Yuri. You were never one to need to guess twice...Much less end up with a liability on your hands."

Yuri cringed inwardly as her guts somersaulted, her already tense grip on her cellphone tightening. Jessica could see the whites of Yuri's knuckles as she continued to stare straight ahead, eyes dark.

"If you lay one finger-"

Yuri heard the dull thud of flesh against flesh, followed by a whimper. There was a crackling, then the voice came back on.

"Oh, we've already been way past that, Yuri. Let's cut to the chase. You had your orders. You know what I want."

"My orders were to locate and secure a high value object of interest, not hand it to a madman bent on accelerating the arrival of the apocalypse!" Yuri spat into the phone. The car roared as she leaned into the gas, pushing it faster.

"But you're the only person who believes that, aren't you Yuri?"

Yuri gritted her teeth. He was right. There was no way to expose Jaebeom without concrete evidence. In fact, even if she did, it would still be a long shot by any calculation. Somehow, she sensed Jaebeom smiling on the other side of the call, a grim display of satisfaction. He'd already had his little finger wrapped around her.

"Bring it to me, Yuri, or we are going to lose one very valuable agent."

"You wouldn't dare murder one of our own!"

"Try me."

Yuri pulled her lips into a tight line. Somewhere in the deepest regions of the transmission, she could still hear Seohyun's drawn, pained breaths. The girl's blood was on her hands.

The voice that came through the line was calm, with a hint of malice. *"You know what I want. Bring it to me, or the girl dies. You have twelve hours. It's your choice."*

Before Yuri could respond, the line clicked off, and she was once again drowned in both the roar of the car engine and the overwhelming consternation in her heart. Guilt welled up in the pit of her stomach, threatening to swallow her from within.

Twelve hours. That meant Jaebeom had no idea there were in St. Petersburg. He wouldn't have given

them such a generous time limit had he known. That was something they could take advantage of.

She knew there was no way either of them would be spared if she were to hand Jaebeom the data. She could not hold on to that false hope. Blood would have to be spilt, one way or the other.

No, it would not be theirs that will be spilt. Not if she could help it.

The floors would run free with the blood of Park Jaebeom and Park Jin Young. Of that, Yuri was sure.

15 minutes later

Somewhere outside St. Petersburg

“Yuri, say something,” Jessica said softly from the seat beside Yuri’s.

Taeyeon remained in the backseat, tracing a finger over her pistol. The subtle grooves and curves on the cold steel seemed to give her some form of comfort; a private solace from the world around her.

“Yuri,” Jessica prompted again.

Yuri kept her eyes on the road, swallowing once to find some source of strength. Determination alone wasn’t enough to hold her heart afloat. “Seohyun’s been compromised.”

Jessica clenched her jaw. She knew this would have happened sooner or later. Yuri was already putting so much at risk, and yet she had still wagered upon the life of another. Then again, there was no choice. They wouldn’t have gotten this far if it weren’t for Seohyun’s help. Though she didn’t know the girl, worry and guilt similar to Yuri’s began to take hold.

“He’s trading Seohyun for the data?”

"It's more likely that he's going to take the data and then kill us all. He probably already knows we're all in on this. We've been totally exposed." Yuri shook her head.

"Can't we just break her out?"

"Break her out of Doppelganger headquarters? We're more likely to have a black hole open up in front of us right now than have a chance of even reaching her."

This time, Taeyeon spoke up. "But you're not turning back, are you? What do you intend to do?"

Yuri drew in a deep breath, then expelled it in a huff. "We find Park Jin Young. Now. Jaebeom has Seohyun. We need something to bargain with, too. In fact, getting Jin Young might just be the end of this nightmare."

"We're chasing a ghost here. We don't even know if it's humanly possible to catch this guy," Taeyeon said.

"We have to try," Yuri replied determinedly.

Taeyeon leaned back into her seat.

"Getting Jin Young might just be the end...or it could just lead to a whole new maze of complications," she thought.

"How do you know for sure that Jin Young's in the location Seohyun pinpointed for us earlier?" Jessica asked.

Yuri turned to her, a deep frown set into her face. It was the same question that had been plaguing her for the entire flight here. The eye contact made Jessica shiver.

“I don’t.”

Seohyun struggled to open her eyes, dazzled by the bright lights glaring down upon her. The corners of her eyes stung, both from the piercing beams and the beating she’d had to endure earlier. She took comfort in knowing she’d let nothing out. She had already wiped the activity logs on her workstation in the Ops room. They would find nothing. No degree of torture would make her talk. There was too much riding on this for her to simply give in to mere pain. The Mission Director needed her. And for that reason, he would keep her alive. And as long as she lived, there was still hope.

Sucking in a breath, she felt her lungs burn before an uncontrollable cough took hold of her. Finally opening her eyes as she stared down at her lap, she spotted the dark splotches of her own blood caked on the surface of her pants. She tasted the coppery tang of fresh blood as it trickled down the side of her mouth. She worked her bruised jaw, wincing as the slightest shift was accompanied by dull pain.

“You’re awake.”

Seohyun stirred at the sound of the voice. It sounded familiar; smooth and buttery. She strained to lift her head toward the voice, only to be dazzled once again by the overhanging lights.

“Y-Yoona?”

Im Yoona pushed herself off the wall on the opposite side of the room, uncrossing her arms as she did so. She crossed efficiently to the center of the room, stopping a couple of steps before Seohyun, who was strapped to a steel chair.

Yoona, like Yuri, was a blademaker, one of the few in the Doppelgangers. As blademasters were a rare lot, they were naturally closer to one another, sharing the same talent. Being one year younger, her skills didn’t quite match up to the savant-like abilities of Yuri’s, but within her laid a potential that promised much, much more.

Lithe, agile, and incredibly supple, Yoona moved with an otherworldly grace that showed even while she

was simply walking. Her talent in the art of parkour coupled with great endurance and good old daredevilry allowed her to traverse any terrain with frightening speed and ease, striking fear into the hearts of her prey during any pursuit. And she had a long list of those to prove her skill.

Seohyun looked up at the perfectly shaped face staring down at her, sucking in deep breaths. She had so many things to say, but she couldn't find the strength to push them beyond her lips.

"What are you...d-doing h-here?"

"I followed you here while you were dragged out of the Ops room earlier," Yoona said, concerned. "Is it true? That Yuri's gone renegade and you're helping her?"

Seohyun swallowed, hard, almost gagging as she forced a thick wad of blood down her throat. She licked her split lip. "Yoona, it's not like that."

"Then tell me what's going on, Seohyun. We haven't had a Code Gold before...at least, not one that I know of. Why now? Why Yuri?"

Seohyun looked around, unsure.

"Don't worry. The Mission Director's probably in his office right now, and the rest are busy tracking Yuri down," Yoona said assuringly. She noticed Seohyun craning her neck toward the camera tucked into a corner of the room. "The camera feeds are on a loop. One of your favorite tricks, I believe."

Seohyun smiled weakly and seemed to finally find her strength, and her eyes adjusted to her surroundings as she lifted her head to speak. She decided that how Yoona had even gotten into this room, she would never know.

"The world has been hunting for one man for more than a decade. We're talking about CIA, Mossad, FSB, any intelligence agency you can think of, they've let him slip through their fingers over and over again."

"Who?" Yoona prompted.

“Park Jin Young. He’s North Korean...and an ex-Doppelganger agent, now the most powerful man in the criminal underworld.”

Yoona’s eyes widened. “Ex-Doppelganger? Why haven’t I heard of him?”

Seohyun shook her head. “Because someone among us has been keeping his existence a secret ever since Jin Young was expelled. Someone who was an obligation to fulfill the duties of blood and family.” Seohyun paused and looked straight into Yoona’s eyes. “Park Jin Young’s son, Park Jaebeom.”

Yoona could not hide her surprise. “The Mission Director?”

Seohyun nodded. She related the events of days past to Yoona, from Yuri’s assignment in Rio de Janeiro, to her discovery of Tae Woo’s quest and Jaebeom’s treachery, to her team’s hasty flight to St. Petersburg.

It was now Yoona’s turn to shake her head. “What would this Jin Young want with this...anti-matter containment data?”

“Yuri believes he’s going to use it to make anti-matter bombs and blow up a number of major cities around the world.”

Yoona frowned. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“A lot of things don’t make any sense, but happen anyway.” Seohyun shook her head, more to gather her senses than in disdain at the issue.

Yoona folded her arms, spreading her feet wider. “How do I know you’re not lying to me?”

Seohyun sighed deeply, shutting her eyes as a mask of frustration slipped onto her face. She looked up at Yoona with a look that said “Seriously?”

Yoona pulled down the side of her lip. "Good enough."

Stepping toward Seohyun, she summoned a small knife with a flick of a wrist.

"Now let's get you out of here."

The smooth asphalt gave way to a bumpier mix of gravel and sand as Yuri turned off the highway into the exit that led to the village below. Spying her rearview mirror, she saw Tae Woo following closely behind. As the car reached the apex of a small hill and began to descend into the yawning depths of a sunken landscape, Yuri saw that the entire village was drowned in darkness. No one was up and about at this hour; all the houses were dark and unlit, their roofs capped by a thin layer of snow.

Yuri reached for her earpiece.

"No headlights."

As she switched the headlights off, she spotted Tae Woo doing the same. Easing off on the accelerator, she let the car glide down on its own momentum down the gentle curve of the slope toward the main road below.

"It's too quiet," Taeyeon observed from the backseat.

Out of the corner of her eye, Yuri saw Taeyeon's grip on her pistol tighten.

Ignoring her, she continued forward. Then again, it *was* a tad too quiet, wasn't it? Even if it were this time of night, everything seemed too still.

The cars made their way down to a wider cobbled road at the bottom of the slope, crossing to an intersection past a collection of buildings built from mortared stone and dense wooden frames, fronted

by flower boxes made barren by the harsh winter. Oil lamps that hung from their exteriors lay unlit. They made a right turn, and Yuri glanced down at the GPS on her lap. Their target only lay fifty meters ahead. Looking up, she spotted the building she was looking for.

As she slowed to a stop, Yuri gave the building her first inspection. It looked exactly the same as the dozen other houses they had passed on the short way here: mortared stone, steep gabled roof and barred windows, except it was a little bigger.

"You guys all set?" Yuri whispered into the microphone

"Ready when you are."

Yuri turned to Jessica and Taeyeon in turn and nodded. "Stephanie, stay in the car with your father. Tae Woo, go around the back and cover any exits you can find. I'm going to send Taeyeon over with you. Jessica and I will go in the front."

Taeyeon forcefully expelled a lungful of air, not unnoticed by Yuri.

"Got it."

"Do not enter the house. I repeat, do not enter the house. We don't know if the place is booby trapped. I'll give you a heads up when all is clear."

Yuri turned to Jessica and Taeyeon, retrieving her pistol from her jacket. "Quietly," she mouthed. They both nodded their understanding.

Carefully, Yuri opened the door and stepped into the cool winter night. As she exited the car, she became even more aware of the silence that reigned here. Even the whispers of the wind eluded them. She perused her surroundings carefully, eyeing every detail with practiced scrutiny. Jessica came around the front, pistol in hand. Taeyeon glided away from them toward her father, who had disappeared into an alley.

Yuri gestured for Jessica to stay close, and the both of them moved close to the walls of the building. Flattening themselves against it, they stalked forward quickly but quietly. Upon reaching the window, Yuri lowered into almost a crawl and crossed to the heavy wooden door in the center. They duo took up positions on either side of the door.

Holding her pistol in one hand, she reached into her jacket and produced a pair of sunglasses. At least, they looked like sunglasses to Jessica. She slipped them on and raised a hand to a corner.

Yuri's field of view flashed into a digital sea of blue, green and red as she activated the mechanical x-ray view on the tactical shades. Doing a slow pass across the length of the interior, she made sure there were no booby traps lying in wait. She searched the main door for trigger devices, then the floor beyond for pressure mines and tripwires. Doing another pass, she was satisfied that it was safe. Slipping the shades off and depositing it back into her jacket, she nodded toward Jessica.

Rising into a crouch, Yuri reached a gloved hand toward the brass doorknob and gave it a small twist.

Unlocked.

"Yuri, the rear door is open."

Yuri frowned. No matter. She'd check the premises herself.

"Remain where you are. We're going in."

"Understood."

Yuri nodded once more to Jessica, who rose and gripped her M9 tightly in her small hands. Giving the knob a full turn, Yuri gave the door a quick push inward, and at the same time, Jessica darted inside, arms fully extended in a combat grip, systematically scanning the immediate area. Yuri followed closely behind, back toward Jessica, covering their rear. Her eyes remained sharp, already attuned to the dark surroundings. It was warmer inside the house, adorned with simple wooden furniture sitting atop a dusty carpet, nondescript paintings and the occasional vase of wilting flowers.

They continued moving deeper into the house, passing empty rooms and heavy furniture before coming to a stop at the corner of a wall.

The slightest of shuffles alerted Jessica, and she signaled for Yuri to hold. They flattened themselves against the wall, listening. This time, Yuri heard the distant footfalls of a boot and then more, sounding hollow against the oak flooring. The sound of the footfalls grew in volume. Someone was approaching. Yuri could discern at least three. Had they heard them coming in through the main entrance?

Jessica turned to Yuri. The latter nodded, signaling with her fingers.

Go out on three.

On the third count, Yuri stepped out of the shadows and found herself staring into the barrel of a Tokarev pistol. Beyond it lay steel-gray eyes set into a aged face with a multitude of lines, a Greek nose and heavysset jaw, topped by a grayed buzz-cut. Her Les Baer was pointed right between his eyes. Jessica, similarly, had a pistol leveled in her face. Behind the two men stood three more, pistols in hand. The faceoff lasted a good five seconds before the tall, bulky man standing in front of Yuri broke the silence.

“Who are you?” The voice was thick with a Russian accent. Yuri figured these men were more Spetsnaz.

Before she opened her mouth to speak, she heard a familiar whistle in the air, a rapid crescendo coming from outside.

“Down!” she yelled, instinctively throwing an arm around Jessica and lunging behind a sofa sitting to their right.

The five men in the room jumped back and scattered awkwardly as an RPG rocket came crashing through one of the windows, bursting into a mess of fire and shrapnel in a thunderous explosion that rocked the entire house. Puffs of dust were shaken free of the ceiling supports. The section of wall where Yuri and Jessica had been standing earlier had been reduced to a smoking pile of plaster and pulverized stone, and the floor was scorched pitch black in outward fanning streaks. The shockwave shattered what glass remained in the immediate area, shifting furniture and churning Yuri’s insides.

Yuri yanked Jessica up and ran forward just as another RPG rocket whistled through the broken window, sending the sofa from before flying through the air as another blast quaked through the building. The roof supports began to shudder ominously.

As Yuri skipped and slid through the scattered debris, she spotted four bodies sprawled awkwardly across the floor, limbs contorted, some missing, blood running free through the floorboards. In that split second, she recalled the macabre images she had conjured earlier: her teammates dropped in a similar fashion. Shaking the flashes away, she spotted the remaining Russian on his knees, coughing uncontrollably. He still held the Tokarev weakly in one hand. Their leader. Reaching down as she passed him, she pulled him to his feet and practically dragged him the next couple of meters before he regained his balance and hobbled close behind.

“Damn, I *hate* RPGs,” Yuri spat.

The trio made it to the back of the house, where Tae Woo and Taeyeon were peeking through the rear exit, startled by the twin explosions.

“Look high!” Yuri yelled at them, eyeing the rooftops of the buildings across the street from the rear of the house.

Father and daughter spun on their heels just as four men sporting MP5Ks rose from behind a parapet and opened fire. They stood their ground, hurling a volley of fire upward at the assailants, managing to drop a couple before a rain of bullets began pelting around their feet. Bits of concrete and tile cracked and gave way, crumbling to the snow below. All five turned and sprinted down the length of the sidewalk, with Jessica and Taeyeon moving sideways, firing toward the remaining gunmen. More began to rise on buildings they’d passed.

“The Russian cartel! Jin Young’s men!” Tae Woo shouted.

Yuri couldn’t care less if they were Martian shapeshifters. This wasn’t good. The entire village was a cacophony of gunfire now. They were too heavily outnumbered and were being fired upon from high ground. They needed to get inside. Yuri reached for her earpiece.

“Stephanie!”

"I'm in the car! I managed to pull out before they noticed me!"

"Thank God you're alright. Listen. It's a warzone here. We need to get out, fast. Can you skirt around the edge of the village and pick us up on the other side?"

"I'll be there."

"Be careful."

Yuri turned to the Russian as they continued their wild sprint. "Where's your car?"

"At the end of this road!" he shouted.

Suddenly, he raised his weapon hard to the left and fired. Yuri blinked at the muzzle flash and looked behind her to see a man toppling over the edge of a roof and falling to the ground below. She looked straight ahead and back to the Russian. Jessica suddenly made a mad dash across the street toward the fallen man.

"What the hell are you doing?" Yuri yelled.

Jessica dropped to a kneel beside the fallen man and picked up a couple of hand grenades from inside his jacket, along with the RPG lying beside his still form. Slinging the RPG across her back, she hurried back across the street.

"We'll need these," she said simply before looking straight ahead, searching for the end of the road.

Yuri was already moving. "It's too far! We'll need to move through the houses!"

"How-"

Before he could finish, Yuri dashed to the right and fired two rounds into each hinge of a door, using her

momentum to kick the door in. It gave easily, leaving behind a cloud of dust and splinters. The five of them poured into the house with Yuri in the lead. To their right, bullets began bursting through the windows, peppering the walls beyond. They ducked under the hail of fire, and Yuri held one elbow forward and dove through a window, clearing a path for those behind. They vaulted through the small space, cutting their hands on the glass as they passed through. Another RPG rocket exploded behind them, shattering the window of the next house. Yuri ploughed through, the others following closely, turning to return fire whenever they could.

This continued for another three houses, and by that time, most of their hands were torn and bleeding. As Yuri prepared to jump through the final window, she heard a screech of tires and saw the familiar silhouette of Tiffany's car swerve into sight. It drifted to a stop before an intersection, where a black SUV sat idling.

"That's it!" the Russian exclaimed, pointing toward the SUV.

Yuri turned. "Taeyeon. Tae Woo." She jerked a head toward Tiffany's car. They took off without hesitation.

Looking around, Jessica spotted more vehicles colored in black, parked along one side of the intersection. Time to break out the fireworks. Reaching into her pocket, she fished out the couple of hand grenades she'd pilfered earlier and pulled the pins on each, bowling them under two of the cars, wincing as her bleeding hands stung in protest. She then reached for the RPG, held it up to her shoulder, and counted.

One thousand, two thousand...

She fired.

Holding her feet steady, she felt herself shift forward as the rocket exhaust jetted out through the back of the launcher, propelling the rocket forward. It whistled in a tiny circle towards the middle car. Dropping the launcher, Jessica turned and sprinted toward the SUV.

The remaining three made the final dash toward the SUV. Behind them, all three cars went up in a

blustering explosion as the grenades and RPG went off at the same time, shattering windows and tearing metal. That would deny any pursuit. Ahead, the Russian hopped in the driver's seat, with Yuri riding shotgun. Jessica, cradling a bleeding hand, climbed into the back. Tiffany was already tearing down the length of the road in the lead car. The Russian shifted into gear and with a screech of tires, did a full u-turn and surged forward.

As the two cars merged onto the highway heading back to the city, Yuri looked in the rear view mirror and spied Jessica attempting to wipe her blood on her pants. Her hand was still bleeding profusely. They would have to look at that as soon as possible. Why had they brought only one med kit?

"You were great out there. Are you alright?" Yuri asked softly, turning over her shoulder.

Jessica nodded slowly and looked away.

The Russian slammed a fist on the steering wheel, jaw clenched tight.

"It was a trap! I knew it was too damn quiet!"

"It appears we're looking for the same person," Yuri said.

The Russian's tone changed dramatically. "Who?"

Yuri scoffed. "Oh, I think you know who. And guess what, I can help you find him."

This time, he looked to Yuri, fixing his stern gaze on her. Yuri, on the other hand, was unmoved. "Who are you?"

Yuri turned to him with a smile. "Kwon Yuri. Pleased to make your acquaintance. You Spetsnaz types are always an interesting lot. Now...how soon can you assemble more men?"

“Spetsnaz? I don’t know what you’re talking about. And what was that about more men?”

“Saddle up. We’re going to Switzerland.”

Chapter 25 : The Lion’s Den

“Sir...”

“I sense hesitation. Do not tell me you’ve failed.”

“Sir, I-...We...We managed to get a few of them, but the rest-“

“Hand the phone to Frederick.”

Luca’s insides began to twist and turn. Suddenly he felt as if his legs couldn’t support his body weight as he passed the cellphone to his second-in-command, Frederick, who was standing next to him.

“Sir.”

“Who was it exactly that you were able to take down?”

“Four Spetsnaz operatives, sir. None of which matched the description you provided.”

The words that he heard next were whispered, yet carried no less malice.

"Kill him."

Frederick's eyes shifted to Luca. In a flash of movement, he reached into his jacket and pulled out his Glock 26.

"Fred-"

A single gunshot silenced any further protest.

Frederick closed his eyes as he struggled to settle his racing heartbeat. Letting his gun arm fall to his side, he sucked in a deep breath, pushing the sight of Luca's still body lying in a growing pool of crimson out of his head. He had followed orders. He had done well. No one disobeyed *him*.

"You are now in command. I'll be in touch."

The line clicked off.

"Switzerland? What's in Switzerland?" Jessica inquired from the backseat. She winced at the pain in her hand as she shifted.

Yuri ignored her for the moment.

There was a crack in the darkness as Yuri began to spot the lights of St. Petersburg in the distance. Deciding that it was safe, she touched her earpiece.

"Tiffany, pull over."

"Why?"

"Jessica's bleeding pretty badly. We need that med kit."

"Oh gosh. Okay."

Yuri turned to look at the Russian in the driver's seat. "Pull over."

He pulled the side of his lip down, but complied anyway. Both cars trailed to a stop.

"You. What's your name?" Yuri asked, a bit of authority in her voice.

The Russian did not take the intrusion kindly. He stared back at her with a deep frown set into his face.

"Secrets, secrets," Yuri sighed. "Let me guess. Spetsnaz, sent by the FSB on a deep black operation to locate and capture or kill one Park Jin Young. FSB tells you it's a matter of national security, global security, even. That you're doing the world a favor."

The Russian's eyes widened, then he sighed in a similar fashion. It seemed as if no matter how hard he tried to disguise his identity, nothing escaped this exceptional woman. "How do you know all this?"

"Doesn't matter. What matters is that I'm also after Jin Young, and we can find him together. But I have a problem. You see, one of Jin Young's men has captured a very dear friend of mine. She's currently in a facility hidden in the Swiss Alps. She also happens to be the key to finding Jin Young. So this is what I'm proposing. Help me, to help you. I need your men to help us get her out. And in return, we'll help you find what you need."

The Russian weighed this for a moment. Who was this woman and what was her involvement in this situation? Was she luring him into a trap, getting him to summon all his men and go on a suicide mission? He had already lost too many good men in the operation in Rio de Janeiro. His heart skipped a beat, and his frown deepened. Had she had anything to do with that? What's more, if he intended to accept this partnership, he would have to report it back to the FSB and await further instructions. Something told him she didn't have the time to wait for all the bureaucratic bullshit to get through.

Jessica stirred at the mention of the Swiss Alps. Was that why they were going to Switzerland? To rescue

Seohyun? Were they actually going to Doppelganger HQ? Immediately she felt sick. There were terrible things coming. She could feel it.

Yuri spotted Tiffany walking over to them, med kit in hand. She turned over her shoulder and, with a smile, nodded to Jessica. The latter looked at her blankly for a moment, then reached for the door handle with her good hand and popped it open. Yuri then looked to the Russian. "I'm doing you a favor here. It's your choice."

Yuri kept her poker face on, to beguile him into thinking she had the upper hand. In actual fact, she didn't. There was no way in hell she could infiltrate Doppelganger HQ with her team alone. Even with a flawless plan, it would be her, an Interpol agent, an FBI agent, a druglord and his emotionally questionable daughter, and a cripple against dozens of highly trained field agents, and hundreds of support staff who have had completed at least half a dozen hours at the firing range.

Not very good odds at all.

She needed the Spetsnaz team as her muscle, and possibly as human shields. She immediately soured at the thought of manipulating them in this way, but she knew it was the only thing she could do. She needed every resource available to her, and she would not waste this opportunity. Seohyun needed to be rescued. Fast.

In fact, she had already thought of a way to expose Jaebeom...but it was risky.

The fool. He would be on his knees knowing his carelessness was the cause of his own downfall. And Yuri was itching to have front row seats to that scene.

Yuri exited the car and circled around to the back, where Tiffany was washing Jessica's wound with a bottle of antiseptic. She saw Jessica clenching her teeth, her entire body so tense it looked like it would snap at any moment. The frost beneath their feet was immediately colored a faint red.

"Sorry," Tiffany said softly.

Jessica shook her head, eyes shut.

Tiffany looked at the cleaned wound and swallowed. It was a deep laceration. Jessica must have really leaned her hand into a shard of broken glass whilst vaulting through one of the windows earlier. This one definitely required stitches.

“Let me do it,” Yuri said, moving toward the med kit sitting atop the car’s trunk.

Tiffany looked up at Yuri. They made eye contact for a moment, and Tiffany nodded, turning to leave.

“Where are you going?” Jessica asked, turning her head to Tiffany.

Tiffany offered a small smile. “I’m going to check on Dad and the rest. Don’t worry.”

Jessica sighed as Yuri approached her.

“What’s wrong?” Yuri asked softly. She knew she didn’t want to get too emotionally attached to Jessica, but the sight of her wrestling with her own emotions was too much for her to bear. She wanted to comfort Jessica, help shoulder her worries and concerns. Yuri couldn’t deny the fact that she still cared for the woman, even if it was only for the time being.

Jessica kept mum, eyeing her wound.

Yuri stepped forward and reached into the med kit, pulling out a needle and a thread. She washed the needle with a bottle of disinfectant and proceeded to hold it over the flame of a lighter, sterilizing it. After allowing it to cool, she turned to Jessica.

“Would you like something to bite on?”

No response.

“Suit yourself,” Yuri said, reaching for Jessica’s hand with the needle.

"Wait!" Jessica blurted. Yuri froze, fixing her eyes on Jessica's.

"Could I...hold you instead?" Jessica asked softly.

Yuri blinked. *How did she intend to- oh, nevermind.*

"Um, sure."

Jessica began to circle around Yuri; much to the latter's surprise. She stopped behind Yuri and closed the distance, wrapping both arms around her body and leaning her head into the crook of Yuri's neck. Yuri felt a squeeze around her midriff; wanting, pleading, even.

Unconsciously, Yuri's free hand reached to hold Jessica's good hand. This feeling...it felt so very familiar, and yet so distant, like a memory she couldn't fit anywhere in her subconscious. Her mind shifted and flashed, and in that instant she found herself standing in the middle of a restaurant ten years ago, surrounded by a muddled mix of disembodied voices, like listening to music underwater.

"Yuri, please don't leave me..."

"Please..."

"...don't..."

"Leave me..."

"I don't love you..."

"Please don't leave me..."

Yuri's eye shot wide open, and she found herself once again standing in the bitter Russian winter. She

felt Jessica's slender form snuggled deep into her back, and the luxuriously soft tresses that tickled the sensitive skin on the back of her neck. It was indeed...a familiar feeling. Releasing Jessica's good hand, Yuri turned her attention back to the wound.

"Let's get you fixed up," Yuri said.

Immediately, she felt Jessica's embrace tighten.

What Jessica couldn't see was the single tear that slid down Yuri's cheek.

Seohyun rubbed her sore wrists, having been cut free of the chair restraints. Now that Yoona had moved out of the way, she saw how the woman had gotten in, and possibly, how they would now get out. A single square-shaped panel in the ceiling had been removed, revealing a dark space beyond.

A ventilation shaft, though it didn't quite look like one. It appeared to just another square amongst the ceiling tiles.

She trailed her eyes from the ceiling to the floor, and decided that it was too high up to reach by jumping alone. Looking back down at the chair she stood up from, it appeared that it was too far away from the shaft to use as leverage. Her eyes moved back up to Yoona, who had just deposited the blade back up her sleeve.

The oval-faced woman merely smiled in acknowledgement of her worry. "No worries. Here, stand aside for a bit, will you?"

Seohyun did as told, and Yoona began to back up from the chair towards the shaft. Head down, she lowered her stance and, in the blink of an eye, burst forward in an impossible surge of speed. Seohyun watched in wonder as Yoona kicked off the floor and did a quick 180 degree turn in the air to face the shaft before landing on the ball of a single foot, leaning into the point of balance and then springing off it, sailing toward the shaft. She arched her body backwards and caught hold of the shaft opening with both hands, easily pulling herself up into the yawning space. It had taken all of three seconds.

Seohyun saw one of Yoona's hands extend from the black space, and she reached up to grab it. The smaller woman hauled her up with surprising ease. As Seohyun adjusted herself to the cramped surroundings, Yoona replaced the tile on the shaft opening.

"Follow me," Yoona said, a voice of surety and comfort. She led the way.

Seohyun followed.

Yuri stepped back into the car, grateful to be out of the cold. Keeping her emotions in check wasn't easy, but once she had, her face had reassumed its practiced nonchalant mask. Jessica sat quietly in the back, cradling her newly stitched and bandaged hand. Yuri could spot the faintest hint of a blush on her pale cheeks. Too pale. Fatigue was setting in. No matter; it would be over soon.

The Russian heaved a deep sigh and turned to face Yuri. She knew that look. It was the look of defeat and submission. Finally, they were getting somewhere.

"My name is Anton Fedoseev, Captain, Russian Spetsnaz," he said, extending a hand.

Yuri took it, feeling the crushing squeeze of his iron grip. "Pleased to meet you. I assume you've contacted your men?"

Anton nodded. "I have twelve men in St. Petersburg, ready to move. I also have eight men currently on a flight from Rio de Janeiro."

Yuri's blood froze. Eight men from Rio. She wondered if Anton knew she was responsible for the deaths of their eight other comrades. She decided that she would cross that bridge when they came to it. Things were sure to get prickly once they convened.

Anton seemed to read her discomfort. "Is something wrong, Miss Kwon?"

Yuri immediately shook the worry away. "Of course not, Anton. May I call you Anton? Right. Have the men in St. Petersburg meet us at the airstrip northeast of the city center. I'll make arrangements for their safe passage. You know, Russian mafia and all. As for those en-route from Rio, have them land in Geneva. We'll meet them there and coordinate afterward. And please, call me Yuri."

Anton nodded, if a bit sheepishly at the last.

Yuri reached for her earpiece.

"Tae Woo, I'll need you to arrange for the safe passage of twelve Spetsnaz operatives into the airstrip. Have them escorted to the hangar. Have the Aerion fueled for a flight to Switzerland also."

"Switzerland?"

"I'll explain later."

"Alright."

"You do have contacts in Geneva, right?"

"If it's a major city, then yes, naturally."

"How many helicopters can they acquire within a couple of hours?"

"Excuse me?"

"Choppers. Whirlybirds. Autogiros. We're going to need five, at least."

There was a long pause on the other side. Yuri imagined Tae Woo rubbing his temples with his fingers.

"I'll see what I can do."

"Great. Stephanie, let's go."

As the lead car roared to life and eased off the road shoulder, Anton followed closely behind, one hand wrapped around a cellphone to his ear. He spoke in rapid Russian, probably making the arrangements Yuri had suggested earlier.

Yuri closed her eyes and pondered. She was taking a huge risk here. She was risking everything and everyone by throwing themselves into the lion's den when she had only one thing she could fall back on. She just prayed that it would work. If it didn't...

Everyone was going to be sacrificed.

Thirty minutes later

Private Airstrip North-East of St. Petersburg

Yuri had just stepped out of the car, casting a keen eye over the sight in front of her. The hangar door stood open, revealing the sleek white form of the Aerion SBJ inside. Its sheer edges were accentuated by the illumination of overhanging lights. Fuel lines were plugged into its wings, supplying jet fuel to its tanks. Outside the hangar, men in suits kept a close watch.

Beneath the wings of the Aerion stood twelve men clad in black skeletal battle order, complete with combat fatigues, load-bearing vests brimming with equipment and combat boots. All of them carried AN-94 assault rifles, some fitted with reflex sights and GP-30 grenade launchers.

The AN-94 "*Abakan*", chambered in 5.45x39mm, offered a 2-round burst fire at a rate of 1800 rounds per minute, allowing pinpoint accuracy with every burst. It was the preferred weapon of the Russian

Special Forces.

A set of equipment and a uniform lay on a table near them, presumably for Captain Fedoseev.

As she watched the retreating form of Jessica drift toward the hangar entrance, trailing the footsteps of Tae Woo, Taeyeon, Tiffany and Elliot, her legs began to feel weak. They could all die in an instant. Shot, maimed, cleaved, even. Why was she putting them all at risk?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the vibrations of her cellphone. Her heart stopped for a second. She fished it out and flipped it open.

"Jaebeom," she said with surety.

"You got it right this time. Is it as cold over there in St. Petersburg as they say?"

Yuri froze.

"You think I wouldn't know that you went after him, especially since you left a trail of destruction behind? I told you to come here with the data, Yuri."

"I'm coming right now, Jaebeom."

"Save it! I gave you your chance and you blew it. Give me an address and I'll mail Seohyun's pieces to you."

"Jaebeom, wait--"

Before she could finish, the line clicked off. Her insides churned, and her blood felt thicker in her veins. Looking down with wide eyes, she stared at the cellphone in her hand.

Yuri, what have you done?

Jaebeom tossed his cellphone across the table and slammed a fist onto the heavy wood.

The trap in St. Petersburg had been meant for a few snooping Spetsnaz operatives. He hadn't expected Yuri to be in the same place, at the same time. In fact, he hadn't even known she was in St. Petersburg. That inferiority he felt in being kept in the dark coupled with his frustration with the incompetency of the Russian cartel threatened to burst a blood vessel. He needed an outlet for his angst.

Seohyun.

Taking a seat at his desk, he brought up the camera feed for Seohyun's holding cell. He stared down at the woman, sitting rock still in the chair. Probably unconscious from the trauma.

Time to pay her another visit.

10 Minutes Later
Acclimatization Level
Doppelganger HQ

Jaebeom nodded to the pair of guards standing outside the holding cell, and they parted as he stepped up to the authorization panel next to the door. He offered his palmprint, and the screen blinked a bright green upon confirming his identity. A shifting of heavy locks followed before the reinforced steel door sprang ajar.

He stepped in, but froze in half-step halfway through the door.

The chair was empty.

Immediately, he reached for his cellphone and dialed Taecyeon.

“Sir?”

“Raise the internal alarms. Agent Seo Ju Hyun has escaped.”

“She escaped? How?”

“I’m not sure, but someone had come for her. Two agents are on the loose.”

“Understood, sir. Raising the alarms now.”

Jaebeom stowed his phone away. He hurried in, looking around. Seohyun had escaped. But how?

He approached the chair, spotting the cut remains of zip ties. Cut. Someone had broken her out of here.

He craned his neck to look at the ceiling, observing everything just as the clamor of klaxons went off all around HQ.

How on earth had they gotten out? In fact, the more bothersome question was, how had her rescuer gotten *in*?

Seohyun started when klaxons suddenly began hammering her eardrums, hitting her head on the shaft ceiling. She paused to rub her head, looking over her shoulder at Yoona.

The woman urged her forward. “Keep going, Seohyun. Look sharp.”

Yoona’s countenance darkened considerably.

“We’re being hunted.”

Chapter 26 : Cliff Diving

Yuri stood with her back against a lavatory door, a low hum thrumming through her body as the jet shot toward Geneva at more than 1,500 kilometers an hour. Since the jet's seats could only accommodate up to 12 people, the Spetsnaz soldiers chose to stand, hard eyes never ceasing to scan the cramped space, forearms tense. They would be touching down in less than an hour. As much as she'd wanted to focus on the matter at hand, Yuri couldn't take her mind off her friend.

Seohyun.

Time and again she'd berated herself for dragging her into this mess, and although she'd rationalized that it was beyond her control and that worrying about it couldn't and wouldn't change things, she couldn't help but feel the guilt hit back every now and then.

She pictured the woman's easily adorable features: milky-white skin, ample cheeks, thin lips always ready to form a smile, and eyes that seemed to sparkle even in the absence of reflecting light. Absently, she wondered if those same eyes were now glassed over as the woman lay face up in a pool of blood...or worse. She shook the thought away for the umpteenth time, shutting her eyes and rubbing

her temples with her fingers. She needed to focus. There was still hope...was there?

In her perturbation, Yuri had not noticed Tiffany coming her way. Through her closed eyes, she had sensed someone was standing in front of her, but she didn't care to know who.

"Hey," came the usually smooth voice, now hoarse from fatigue.

Yuri opened her eyes to see the brunette taking up a similar position opposite her. Tiffany folded her arms across her chest, and Yuri could see she was trying to display some sort of positive outlook despite her apparent exhaustion. Her wavy brown hair had since lost its sheen, the wavy locks having become rebellious, tucked hastily behind her ears. Still, a semblance of a smile graced Tiffany's lips. Yuri felt obliged to return it.

"How are you holding up?"

Yuri simply nodded. She didn't want to add to the team's burden. Her worries were her own.

Still, Tiffany read the sincere worry in Yuri's eyes. Unfolding an arm, she reached across and grasped Yuri gently on the shoulder. The latter took on a look of surprise, tensing for a moment, but later softened, more in resignation than in gratitude for the offer of comfort. Tiffany was trying to make her feel better. She tended to do that, being someone who had grown up laughing and smiling, never brooding. Unhappiness sullies the gift of life. That's what she had told Yuri so many years ago. Sometimes Yuri envied her. How did Tiffany find happiness so easily? Or rather, why wasn't Yuri able to? Was she spoiled? Discontented? Yuri feared she would never know.

Yuri's smile broadened a bit in acknowledgment of Tiffany's effort. The latter smiled a wide, toothy grin, her eyes disappearing into a pair of half-moons. It was more than pleasing to see; it was heart-stopping enchanting. How did girls do that? Perhaps Yuri should ask her for a lesson or two after this was all over.

"I know a lot of us didn't take the idea of raiding Doppelganger HQ well," Tiffany began, surreptitiously glancing over at Taeyeon and her father. "And the odds aren't exactly comforting," she continued. "But we'll get Seohyun out. Together."

Seohyun. Yuri fought the urge to look away at the mention of her name. She couldn't risk giving away

the possibility that her friend was already dead. Letting them know would surely turn them against the plan. Why risk everything for something that might already be gone? But Yuri didn't know if Seohyun was dead, did she? Jaebeom could have been bluffing. He still needed her until Yuri gave him the anti-matter containment data. He wouldn't waste a card like that, would he? Yuri gritted her teeth at the single shred of longing sitting at the bottom of her heart.

Hope, possibly false.

"Hey," Tiffany prompted, snapping Yuri's attention back to her. The latter looked up, meeting her gaze. There. She saw it, hidden beneath the layer of concern filming her eyes.

"Jessica," Yuri said.

Tiffany looked a bit surprised, but she nodded, then looked over her shoulder at the skinny blonde ensconced within the depths of a leather-clad window seat, next to an empty space that belonged to Yuri. Yuri couldn't help but smile at the still form, arms folded across her chest. She looked so peaceful. Tiffany looked askance at Yuri and noted the upward turn of her lips.

"She needs you now more than ever."

Yuri's head dipped. She bit her lip. "I know. I'm still figuring it out."

"What's there to figure out?" Tiffany asked, a bit in a chiding manner. "She loves you. She's never stopped loving you even after all these years. All she wants you to do is to acknowledge that, and she needs you to do it now. Do you know why?"

Yuri looked at Tiffany intently, frowning. What good did Jessica see in Yuri acknowledging her love? Doing so gave them a connection deeper than they currently had; one that would only add to the grief should it be severed in the future. That same connection threatened to put Jessica in greater danger than she was already in. She would become a liability, and liabilities were made to be exploited. Yuri would have none of that. The poor girl had already suffered enough for one lifetime. She was only trying to protect her, wasn't she?

Tiffany sighed. "Jessica may seem cold, calculating and unfeeling to you. It was how she conditioned herself to be after she'd thought she'd lost everything. She thought that by blocking herself off from the world, nothing could hurt her again. But after she met you...again, all those walls she'd taken years to build just crumbled. The truth is, Jessica is someone who draws great strength from powerful feelings. Grief. Anger. Love."

Yuri's frown deepened, and Tiffany shook her head. "Jessica knows how fragile her life is. She knows she could die at any moment, starting from the time we all came together in Tae Woo's villa. But I believe that even if she were to lose her life, she would be content in knowing that you loved her. And from now until that point, your acknowledgment of her love will give her the strength she needs to see this through."

Tiffany sighed deeply. "You see that? How she's sleeping so peacefully?"

Yuri nodded slowly, looking longingly at the sleeping blonde.

"That's the only peace she's going to get...when she next opens her eyes, it's going to be hell all over again," Tiffany said darkly, pulling her lip down.

"Hell all over again," Yuri thought.

She pictured her plan playing out in the hours to come.

It would be Hell indeed.

"Here, take this," Yoona said as she passed a white capsule to Seohyun.

"What is it?" Seohyun accepted the capsule, eyeing it suspiciously.

"It'll mask the radioactive isotope in your body, so the Mission Director won't be able to track us."

“Ah.” Seohyun had almost forgotten about the isotope tracking. Best to shut off that mean of surveillance. By the way...how had Yoona gotten her hands on these?

She popped it into her mouth, squeezed her eyes shut and swallowed hard, not used to taking something without a drink with which to wash it down. Settling the frown that had creased itself onto her face as she forced down the pill, she continued onward.

Seohyun’s hands and knees were starting to go numb. The small framed woman ahead of her had set a quick pace right from the start, and with every corner they turned in the dim, cramped space of the ventilation shafts, Seohyun’s spirit began to wane.

“Where are we going?” she gasped out, still trying to keep up.

“Did you hear those alarms?”

Seohyun nodded, then mentally kicked herself. Yoona didn’t have eyes at the back of her head...did she?

“That’s an internal lockdown. All electronic entranceways are sealed indefinitely once it comes on. There’s no getting out of HQ now.”

Yoona didn’t slow, and Seohyun was beginning to pant.

“Then how are we going to get out?”

“We aren’t.”

They turned another corner, and Yoona’s pace somewhat slowed.

“What do you mean, we aren’t?”

“We need some place to hole up until the lockdown is lifted, and we both know that as long as we’re free, that’s not going to happen. Of course, we can always wait for the other alternative.”

“Yuri,” Seohyun said softly. Indeed, somewhere deep inside, she had hoped Yuri would come to her rescue. She had hoped that beyond all logical reason, her friend would arrive to bail her out of this mess. One could always hope.

“She’d better be on her way here right now,” Yoona snarled. “I’ve a score to settle with her.”

Seohyun raised an eyebrow, though she knew Yoona couldn’t see her confusion.

“What score? You two have a history?”

“No, because she almost got you killed. That’s reason enough for me to draw my blade.”

Seohyun’s eyes grew wide. Did Yoona actually care enough to reprimand Yuri for involving her in this? Poking her memory, she couldn’t recall having been more than good friends with Yoona. Unless the latter felt otherwise...She shook the thought away. No. That was just plain silly. It had to be something else. Yoona and Yuri probably had a history, something they hadn’t filled her in on. That’s right.

“It should be right about here,” Yoona said, more to herself than to Seohyun. She slowed, then stopped.

“What’s here?”

It was then when Seohyun became aware of a new flavor to the air in the shaft. The stale, cool air they had been enveloped in for the past fifteen minutes had given way to a fresher, muskier scent with a hint of moist warmth. Stilling herself to the silence, a distant white noise could be heard.

“Have you ever tried cliff diving?” Yoona said seriously, with a hint of genuine curiosity. It sounded ridiculous, but with a deep dread, Seohyun knew she wasn’t joking.

“Err, no...why?”

“Take my hand.”

“Huh?”

Yoona offered her hand, and Seohyun reached out reluctantly and took it. Her delicate fingers were immediately crushed under Yoona’s firm grip. She winced, then relaxed.

Yoona then summoned a knife with her other hand, and reaching across Seohyun, drove it into the steel beneath them, punching holes in a straight line. She repeated it on her side, then stowed the knife away. All the while, Seohyun looked at her with wide-eyed puzzlement. Yoona looked up to Seohyun, a deep seriousness evident in her gaze.

“Just hold on tight to my hand. And remember to hold your breath.”

“Hold my breath?”

Yoona simply smiled, a twisted sort of amused grin, and then she heaved herself up and stomped down hard on the weakened section of the shaft.

All Seohyun could hear next was the sound of her own screaming.

And it was Yoona’s turn to feel her hand being crushed.

Jaebeom paced the Ops room, anxious. Since his discovery of Seohyun’s escape, he had brought in additional support agents and assigned them the duty of tracking her down, along with whomever had orchestrated her flight. Those agents were crowded on the far side of the room, away from the area of main operations. They still had the bigger picture to think about. Kwon Yuri was still at large.

He knew it was impossible to contact the outside world during internal lockdown. A communications veil had been placed over the complex, blocking all communication to the outside, except the secure landlines, which could only be found in the Ops room and his own office. That meant Seohyun could not contact Yuri, who would in turn believe her dead, considering she and Jaebeom's previous exchange over the phone. In that case, he could still have the original group of agents focusing on tracking down Yuri as she continued her search for his father.

He scoffed inwardly. The fool. His father could never be found unless he wanted to. If only Yuri were smart enough to realize that by now. Jaebeom didn't need her to come to him. Agents were now on their way to St. Petersburg via jet. All he needed was to have Yuri step into another one of their traps...and they would be rid of her for good; the anti-matter containment data properly retrieved, and his father's wishes fulfilled.

Turning his attention to the screen ahead, he allowed himself a brief moment of satisfaction. Seohyun would be found. There was no escaping HQ during lockdown. It would only be a matter of time. He needed to focus on the matter at hand.

"Now Yuri...where in St. Petersburg could you be?"

Seohyun's heart threatened to explode in her chest as the rush of wind past her feet and right up to her ears refused to abate. She was falling. They were falling, and to where, she didn't know, for her eyes were squeezed shut.

"HOLD YOUR BREATH!" The words were yelled into her ear, and Seohyun obeyed.

Just as she sucked in a lungful of air, the emptiness beneath her solidified somewhat, then gave way again, and in under a second she was pulled under an amorphous blanket of cold.

Water.

How had they fallen into *water*? They must have had fallen more than fifty feet, at least. For the moment, Seohyun didn't care. She wriggled her fingers and was assured that they were still under Yoona's firm grip, and she kicked her legs in the direction in which she felt she was being pulled. She felt herself going higher and higher, and the muddled cacophony of upward rising bubbles and splashing slowly grew in clarity. The water above her head parted, and she opened her eyes as her mouth parted to breathe, gasping hungrily. Her heart still thudded in her chest, and the disorientation clouded her vision for a moment. Using her free hand to push the matted mess of her fringe aside, she finally realized where she was.

Beyond the length of Yoona's backward stretching hand, Seohyun cast a wide-eyed glance at the lushness that surrounded them. All around them, beyond this freshwater lake, stood an uninterrupted line of towering trees with thick barks and flowing buttresses whose branches sat heavy with leaves in different shades of green. The white noise that she had heard earlier in the shafts was now an ear-splitting mix of high-pitched clicks and screams: the omnipresent hum of the millions of insects that called this dense jungle their home.

Yoona's hand beckoned, and she kicked harder. Shore wasn't far away. Wiping another hand across her eyes, Seohyun realized where they were. They had dropped right into the middle of AC-03, or Acclimatization Chamber number three. The jungle phase of the field agent acclimatization course.

During their conditioning training, field agents had to pass an acclimatization course designed to accustom them to the rigors and hone the skills required to survive in a variety of vastly different environments. The phases were attempted in realistic chambers that encompassed such areas as tundra, desert, jungle, mountain and urban. Field agents were given complex solo missions to carry out in each environment, completing each phase within the allotted time and then refitting and resupplying and moving on to the next one with little rest. Passing the course required a score of at least 85% in each phase, including a 100% score in the live fire obstacle course during the urban phase. Not an easy task.

Seohyun began to feel solid ground under her feet, and with a stumble, gained her balance and made her way up to shore. Once the two were out of the water, Seohyun looked at Yoona, who still had that amused grin spread across her lips.

"What...the hell," Seohyun managed to choke out in between strained breaths, wringing her hair out and tossing it behind her ears.

Yoona's smile grew. "I'm assuming you already know where we are." She looked around, as if to find her

bearings. “Ah, sure brings back memories.”

“Of what?”

Yoona turned back to Seohyun and fixed her with a serious stare. “*Unimaginable* suffering.”

Seohyun tried to choke back a chuckle, but it escaped her lips despite her efforts. Her bruised jaw ached from the release. Yoona answered in kind, and for the first time in hours, Seohyun saw her first sincere smile.

“Come on, we’ve got to find a place to settle down and wait this out,” Yoona said, extending a hand.

Seohyun took it and let herself be pulled into the depths of the jungle.

Chapter 27 : The Impossible

Somewhere above Geneva, Switzerland

Jessica stared out the frosted glass window of the Aerion SBJ as thin stacks of widely spaced clouds passed them by. The plane was on its final approach to a private airstrip somewhere in Geneva, Switzerland. Her eyes, usually sharp and always observing, were now unfocused and uninterested, an indication of her lack of thought.

What else was there to think about? When things had begun spiraling out of control, when the one person she’d sought to shut out of her life had suddenly revealed herself to her, pistol in hand, her world had been turned upside down. What was there left to expect? What was the use of thinking

ahead when she didn't even know if she would last that long?

She squeezed her eyes shut, reprimanding herself for ever letting herself devolve into this pathetic state. What had happened to the cool, calculating Jessica who never let a detail escape her eye? What had happened to the veritable perfectionist who had always been in complete control of everything? If anything, the past few days had taught her that she wasn't the imperturbable master she'd thought herself to be. No training had prepared her for this. Nothing had prepared her for the hurricane of emotions the woman had forced into her. Nothing had prepared her for Kwon Yuri.

Kwon Yuri. She was the cause of all this. Why did she have to-

"Jessica."

Jessica jumped a little in her seat, startled by the sudden intrusion. She turned with wide, curious eyes and found her sister smiling at her. How could she be smiling at a time like this? Jessica forced a tiny smile, at least to not seem overly hostile.

"Hey Steph."

Tiffany looked over her shoulder at the slim form which had just disappeared behind a door at the tail end of the jet, then back to her sister. She sighed, wondering how this would turn out.

"Yuri wants to see you in the private quarters," Tiffany said carefully, topping it off with a sheepish smile.

Jessica arched an eyebrow. "Yuri? Yuri wants to see me? What about?"

Tiffany shrugged. "Don't know. Best you ask her yourself."

Jessica's curious expression devolved into a deep frown as she eased up and pushed herself off the seat. As she passed Tiffany, her sister placed a hand on her shoulder and whispered into her ear.

“Whatever it is, just be cool.”

Not knowing what it meant, Jessica nodded and stalked toward the room.

Behind her, Tiffany heaved another deep sigh. “Yuri, *please* don’t screw up.”

Her brow crinkled, and Tiffany instinctively shifted her eyes to the left. One of the Spetsnaz operatives was facing her, but his eyes were elsewhere. Frowning, she followed his gaze and ended up at...

Tiffany rolled her eyes, mentally facepalming herself. Arching an eyebrow with a slightly amused grin, she leaned forward ever so slightly, noting how the man’s Adam’s apple moved up and down as she did so.

Figures.

“Like what you see?” she said a little loudly.

The operative’s eyes snapped to hers, then he cleared his throat and shifted uncomfortably before turning to face a different direction.

Tiffany smirked.

Jessica stood at the foot of the door, one arm clutching the other in self-conscious uncertainty. She found herself staring at the doorjamb.

Just turn it and go in already.

But what if she’s going to say something hurtful again?

Maybe she just wants to talk about what's going to happen later.

Just open it.

Reaching out, she eased down on the doorjamb and stepped inside, turning around to close the door before-

Yuri had waited long enough. Now was the time to end this impasse. Everything was set, and once in motion, things would be so much simpler. Less awkward. All it needed was a little push. As Jessica turned around after shutting the door, she did the one thing she had kept herself from doing since her first night in Rio de Janeiro. She did the impossible.

Lunging forward, she crashed her lips onto Jessica's.

Jessica stood frozen, eyes gone as wide as she could ever open them, staring almost cross-eyed at Yuri's closed ones barely an inch away from hers. All she remembered was closing the door, and then Yuri had practically jumped on her.

What the hell is going on!? She's...she's...kissing me! Why would she kiss me? I mean, I have to admit I kind of like it but...but that's beside the point! She's...she's...

Jessica's delirium soon ebbed as she became more consciously aware of the physicality of the moment. As the jet lurched in its final descent, so did her heart. Her back was against the door, and Yuri's hands had moved from the sides of her head, down through her hair, around her shoulders and finally coming to rest around her waist. Her eyes began to close, slowly and with a certain uncertainty as, for the first time, she became aware of the warmth tickling the tip of her tongue and the thickness of Yuri's sinfully luscious lower lip. Unconsciously, her own hands lifted themselves away from her sides and traced the back of Yuri's firm thighs, earning a soft gasp from the woman as they slid over her behind and curled around her tiny waist.

Jessica's mind drew a complete blank. In that intense blackness lay a throbbing passion that ebbed and flowed inside and outside of her, swirling almost hypnotically around their bodies and drawing Jessica irrevocably deeper into their union. Her eyes slowly closed.

Her lips parted.

Yuri let the passion flow. The tears she'd cried, the primal anger, the loneliness, delirium and longing; she let it all out between her lips, forcing them into Jessica.

Feel what I've felt for years. Taste my longing for you. Time has changed us both irreversibly. But there is one thing it will never change.

Taste it.

After what seemed like an eternity, Yuri pulled back, brushing her lower lip against Jessica's upper, gently nudging her nose against hers. She felt Jessica's hot breath on her face. Their foreheads touched, reminiscent of the contemplative times they'd spent in this very same position so many years ago. Times they stood still and thought about the simple love they shared. They seemed so distant, dreams that were untouchable, but here, in this moment in time, Yuri was reliving those dreams again.

What she had just done...was it worth it? Would it save them? Would it deliver them from death?

She opened her eyes to look down at the blonde, her milky-white complexion having turned a shade of pink. Her eyes. She wanted to see her eyes...she wanted to know how Jessica felt.

And as if Jessica had heard her thoughts, her eyes opened, and Yuri felt herself drowning in those brown pools like she'd never done before. That sparkle, that tinge of hope and gratefulness and love. Yuri let her eyes roam lower and found Jessica's lips curled upwards in what seemed to be an uncertain smile. That smile soon grew, accentuating a distinctive crease on the right side of her mouth, a feature of Jessica's she'd found most endearing.

That one kiss. It would not save them. No, it would not block bullets and parry blades and blows. Their deaths were as certain as they'd been before.

But it *was* worth it.

Yuri gazed deeply into Jessica's eyes and from that moment and forevermore, she knew.

It was worth it.

Doppelganger HQ
Jungle Phase
Acclimatization Course

Seohyun was panting. She knew she should have spent more time on the treadmill. Yoona's pace was inhuman; moving through dense shrubs and across slippery streams with unbelievable ease, zig-zagging through treacherous mazes of thick, sprawling buttresses with grace and precision. Trailing decaying leaves and kicking up sucking mud, Seohyun just couldn't keep up.

"How much farther?" she gasped between breaths.

"If I remember correctly, there should be a cave of some sort right up ahead. We can seek shelter there for the time being," Yoona said, her voice clear and firm. Seohyun wondered if Yoona's heart rate wasn't above that when she was walking. "The damn bastards decided to make it storm in here whilst I was navigating through the jungle, so I had to hole up in there for a bit. How they made it rain, I still don't know."

"Wait, can't they see us in here? I mean, this is a field agent course. There are cameras in various places for evaluation purposes, right?" Seohyun choked out between huffs.

Yoona continued onward. “Sure there are, but they’ll only spot us if they know where to look. They can’t have a few people looking everywhere at the same time, can they?”

Seohyun nodded to herself. It made sense. Most if not all of HQ’s personnel were too busy trying to track down Yuri. They must have at best assigned a skeleton crew to track down Yoona and her. Besides, a good number of field agents had been ordered to shadow Yuri’s movement, so not many of them remained. Less than fifty. Not many.

Doppelganger HQ was a sprawling city of hundreds, if not thousands of individual rooms and spatially vast enclosed spaces, and considering they’d blocked off the isotope tracking, they were two needles in the figurative haystack. A sudden revelation hit Seohyun.

“What about thermal tracking?”

“Why do you think I’m in such a hurry to find the cave?” Yoona said as she bounded over yet another fallen log.

Seohyun swallowed, hard. It was the first time in her life she’d prayed for a cave.

Geneva, Switzerland

Jessica moved toward the large steel table off to the right side of the hangar with a newfound confidence. Not so much a spring to her step, but definitely a confidence. Behind her, Yuri watched as her lips unconsciously curled upwards.

“Not so hard now, was it?”

Yuri turned to see Tiffany looking at her with bright eyes. She smiled and shook her head.

“It’s amazing. It’s like she has a new sheen to her or something,” Yuri said, her voice almost incredulous. “I never thought something so simple and illogical could-”

“Give her strength?” Tiffany finished, beaming.

“I’m glad. For both of you,” Tiffany said earnestly before turning to follow Jessica.

For a moment, Yuri stood there, and for the first time in what felt like forever, felt a sense of satisfaction.

Taped to the large steel table was a topographical map scribed with countless lines and numerical markings. It was a map of the general area of the Swiss Alps, but Yuri had already marked out one particular mountain in a large red square. In it sat a medium-sized mass of rock and snow that looked not much different from the others along the range. Doppelganger HQ. It lay less than a hundred kilometers east from where they were now.

Beside the large map was a smaller sheet of paper that looked something like a crude blueprint. Yuri was explaining its contents to the large group huddled around the table. One of the Spetsnaz translated her words verbatim for the benefit of those who weren’t fluent in the language.

“The facility is impenetrable directly, but if we take the old mining shafts here, here, here, here and here, we’ll be able to blow through the natural rock and break into the interior,” Yuri explained, pointing to five downward sloping rectangular shafts that originated from entrances around the mountain.

Though Doppelganger HQ was a modern, state-of-the-art facility, its roots stemmed from an old maze of man-made mining shafts. Some of which had entrances still accessible today. These entrances, however, were remote and extremely difficult to see from a distance with the naked eye, and were thus left to succumb to the forces of time. Though old and derelict, Yuri believed they could still be traversed, and they led straight to the heart of Doppelganger HQ.

“We’re going to be entering on five different levels. The team taking the lowest level will have the

greatest responsibility. Those few will break through the walls after the initial attack and then make a beeline for the communications hub in the lowest sub-levels of the facility. For those taking the upper levels, our goal is to cause confusion and lure them into concentrating their forces on those areas, giving the final team the chance to reach the hub,” Yuri continued.

The men and women gathered around the table looked at each other, clearly debating on who should volunteer for the lowest level. They did not yet know what their task would be.

“I’ll go,” Tiffany and Taeyeon said together. They looked at each other with mild surprise, then nodded.

Yuri nodded to Captain Fedoseev, who was now clad in black and carrying an AN-94 assault rifle. He looked no different from his comrades. “Anton, kindly choose the men you would like to accompany Stephanie and Taeyeon.”

“My men will decide for themselves,” Anton said confidently, passing an eye over his men.

“Sir,” one reported, stepping forward and raising his rifle slightly. Anton nodded and the man moved over to stand with Taeyeon and Tiffany.

This continued for another three men. The group huddled closely around the two women, who nodded at each of them in turn in acknowledgment.

In the next ten minutes, the remaining four teams were formed. Tae Woo and Elliot each took four men. Yuri and Jessica and Captain Fedoseev would wait for the men flying in from Rio. They would be arriving within the next couple of hours. Yuri shifted uncomfortably at the thought. She still had the wrath of those men to deal with. Later.

She remembered the five helicopters sitting outside the hangar, fueled and ready to fly. Tae Woo’s contact had procured five of Switzerland’s best helicopter pilots along with their birds. Those same men were now gathered in a tight circle outside, puffing on cigarettes while sharing personal stories of their whirlbird escapades in the cool Swiss wind. Yuri absently wondered if their skill was enough for the task to come. Naturally, she could fly one herself, but she needed to be part of the team heading down the mining shaft.

"Alright," Yuri said, addressing everyone. "We'll wait for the rest of the team to arrive, give them a quick brief, and we'll be off. We want to get this done by daybreak. We'll let you know when to assemble" She paused, looking around. "I want to stress that what we're doing is pivotal in the big picture. I doubt most of you know what that is at this time, but I'd like you to focus on the matter at hand, at least for the moment. You will play a crucial part. Remember that." She earned nods from all around.

She nodded toward the group and at Anton, who then went about relaying orders to his men.

The men dispersed, forming small cliques in different corners of the hangar, discussing the mission. Some smoked. Some laughed nervously. Others stood alone, checking their equipment. Those were the more anxious ones; the ones probably more likely to get hurt. They were probably the youngsters who had just made it out of training. Captain Fedoseev moved about the small groups, offering words of encouragement, enquiring into doubts and the finer intricacies of the operation. Most men gained confidence from his efforts. Others responded with uncertain nods, and were then awarded with a firm grasp on their shoulder. Captain Fedoseev's words rang clear, his small smile assuring.

Stay strong. For Mother Russia. Her future depends on you.

Yuri looked at these exchanges and felt the guilt well up once again. These were good men, probably men with families, willing to risk their lives under the charge of some foreigner; a privilege granted to her by some trust the Captain had seen in her. She had no doubt in her mind that many of these men would lose their lives in the raid. Somehow, she sensed that Captain Fedoseev knew this as well.

She turned to see Taeyeon and Tiffany. The two remained at the table. Taeyeon seemed to be studying the maps on the table, searching for some sort of unseen solution among the words and numbers. Yuri watched as Tiffany raised a hand and placed it gently over Taeyeon's, wrapping it in a gentle squeeze. The latter finally pried her eyes from the table and looked at Tiffany. They shared a long moment of eye contact, and finally, Yuri spotted a smile growing on Taeyeon's face. She could almost hear what was communicated between them, though the words were unsaid. They were the same words she had said to Jessica after their rather unsettling encounter on the Aeron.

"We'll make it. Together."

Doppelganger HQ
Jungle Phase
Acclimatization Course

The ground beneath Seohyun's feet began to curve upwards, and she realized she was now climbing a gentle rise. The soil felt significantly wetter, giving more easily. They were probably approaching yet another body of water. Over the sounds of crushing leaves and beaten soil, Seohyun could hear a faint rush of water in the distance. Rapids, perhaps. She forged onward. Yoona's pace never slowed.

Minutes later, they'd climbed to the top of the rise and the ground flattened out, revealing a fast-flowing river that stretched more than ten meters ahead to the next bank. Seohyun came to a stop beside Yoona, panting, raising a hand to her forehead in a mock salute to look at the river ahead.

"How are we going to get across?"

"We're not," Yoona said, turning to the left and pointing.

About fifty meters to their left was a medium-sized waterfall, probably about fifteen meters tall. A constant torrent of water poured over its lip and crashed into the river below, fueling a strong current that ebbed away from the source.

"Come on," Yoona said, drawing Seohyun's attention. "The cave should be just behind that waterfall."

They crossed the distance, and soon they were at the edge of the waterfall.

"I don't see a cave," Seohyun said, frowning.

"Follow me." Without looking back, Yoona leapt in a single bound straight through the wall of falling water.

Seohyun edged closer to the bank, unsure. "Yoona?"

A hand stuck out from the wall of water, at its end a closed fist with a thumbs-up.

Seohyun smiled and hopped in, wincing as she passed under the torrent of falling water.

She found the familiar warmth of Yoona's hand as the latter led her deeper into the cave. It was significantly cooler and drier than outside. Visibility gradually grew worse as they continued inward, as light shining through the waterfall from the outside began to fade. She began to feel uncomfortable as claustrophobia began to set in. She felt the grip on her hand tighten in assurance.

They reached what appeared to be the deepest part of the cave and settled down. Seohyun found a stalagmite wide and smooth enough to sit on, while Yoona eased herself into a low crouch, as if searching for something.

"What are you looking for?"

"Supplies. Field Agent candidates usually leave a little something behind for the next person to discover and use."

"Don't other candidates have their own supplies?"

Yoona seemed to have found something, and she reached out and then turned back to Seohyun with something red and silvery in her hand.

"Yeah, but our rations taste like crap. Nutritious, yes, but still." Seohyun spotted a smile in the darkness. Her eyes had slowly grown accustomed to the lack of light, and she was now able to make out the glowing egg that was Yoona's finely molded face.

Yoona offered Seohyun the item in her hands, and the latter reached out to accept it. She held it closer, brow crinkling.

"A Kit-Kat bar?"

“Chocolate’s good for morale, amongst other things. We like to leave behind things that are actually edible,” Yoona laughed.

Seohyun’s expression softened as she peeled open the bar of chocolate. Breaking the stick into half, she offered Yoona one with an outstretched hand. “Share?”

Yoona felt a smile tug at her lips, and for some reason, she fought to keep it down.

So. Cute.

They spent the next couple of minutes nibbling on the luxuriously sweet milk chocolate wafers. Yoona was right. Seohyun did derive a certain satisfaction in feeling it slide down her throat. The seated woman’s eyes shifted to Yoona, and for a moment, their eyes met. Yoona had been looking askance at her as she ate. Yoona quickly averted her eyes and continued munching on her treat. Seohyun frowned. The reaction was no different from a crushing schoolgirl. And this coming from a Doppelganger field agent. Absently, she felt relieved that field agents did have an emotionally active heart. The idea of cold-blooded killing machines didn’t sit with her that well. But seriously, Yoona...was there something?

“Um, Yoona?”

“Hmmm?”

Seohyun decided to tread carefully. No point in egging the woman on. It might anger her. She didn’t want to upset Yoona. Not when her life depended on her...

“You like me, don’t you?”

Yoona blinked once, then twice, and then her eyes went wide and stayed there. For a moment, Seohyun was thought it was creepy.

All of a sudden, Yoona jumped up and a small tin can appeared in her hands.

“You must be thirsty! I’m going to go get some water. Don’t worry, I have Chlor-Floc tablets,” she chattered quickly, then spun on a heel and brisk walked toward the cave entrance.

Seohyun looked at her retreating form curiously, pursing her lips, eyebrows raised.

“Was I too direct?”

2 Hours later

Geneva, Switzerland

Yuri watched as the small jet taxied toward their hangar. There was no space for two aircraft; this one would have to debark outside. Looking higher, she saw a smattering of stars across the purple-black night sky. The clouds had cleared out, giving her a magnificent view. Unconsciously, she searched. She knew that at this time of year, it wouldn’t be there, but still, she felt compelled to seek out the constellation.

Just then, its earthly incarnation appeared beside her. Yuri sensed her presence, knew who it was, but didn’t turn to acknowledge her.

“You don’t have to look for me. I’m right here.”

Yuri felt cool fingers intertwine with hers. For a moment, she’d wanted to pull away, afraid that the others might see. She didn’t think lesbians sat very well with Spetsnaz. Then again, those guys were all vodka, tobacco and blind honor. She willed her tense nerves smooth and allowed her hand to relax into Jessica’s. How long had it been since she’d held her hand like this? Ten years? A deep nostalgia burst from Yuri’s heart, and as she continued to study the spray of stars in the sky, she fought to keep her emotions from overflowing. Finally, she managed to bring herself to look at Jessica.

The warm moonlight illuminated her face, giving it an angelic glow. Her smile made her look that much more beautiful. Yuri smiled.

“We’ll make it. Together.”

Looking back, Yuri realized that the other jet had already debarked, and the men were convening with the others inside the hangar. Jessica read her discomfort.

“Let’s go say sorry,” Jessica said.

Yuri smiled weakly and nodded.

As the duo approached the now 21-strong Spetsnaz team, Yuri overheard a man arguing with Captain Fedoseev in Russian. It appeared he wasn’t particularly happy to know they were now operating under a foreign power. The captain gave short, terse answers, maintaining an air of authority. The other men simply watched. It was then when the man turned to regard Yuri. His eyes grew, and he shot out an arm toward her, finger pointing. The seven men surrounding him eyed her, similarly inflamed.

“*Chyort!*” he exclaimed, then began speaking to the captain in rapid Russian.

Sensing his urgency and the content of his rambling, the captain quickly pulled him away, motioning for Yuri to join them. Yuri nodded to Jessica, who stayed behind.

“*You,*” the man growled to Yuri as she approached them.

“Mikhail here tells me you are responsible for the deaths of the other eight men from his delegation in Rio,” The captain said calmly, but behind his eyes lay a hidden fury mixed with uncertainty. “Is this true?”

“Yes,” Yuri answered without hesitation. “My team and I were in Rio at the time. We were trying to escape the country, to find Park Jin Young, when we were set upon by your men. We did what we could to survive...”

“So you killed eight of my most capable men, and now you expect us to help you?” Captain Fedoseev seethed. His eyes blinked more slowly as he tried to control his rage.

“What would you have done?”

The captain fell silent, calculating.

“What would you do when someone is trying to kill you and the ones you care about?” Yuri slammed it home. “Those men fought bravely, I give you that. I know, because I, too, am a fighter,” Yuri said, almost growling.

Captain Fedoseev’s jaw clenched and unclenched.

“And as a fighter, I defended myself at any cost. All of us did.”

Yuri decided to risk playing a card. “I know you care about your men. The same goes for me. But let’s look at the bigger picture here. I’m trying to help you. Fine, there’s mutual benefit. But realize this: we need each other to see this through. The prize is on the other side of that door, and the key is in the Swiss Alps!” Yuri raised her voice toward the end, pointing into the distance.

“I do not take lives unnecessarily, captain, nor do I take life lightly. I am sorry about your men. I truly am,” Yuri said softly.

Captain Fedoseev read the sincerity in Yuri’s eyes, but he was still unsure. Yuri watched Mikhail, looking for anything under those hard eyes. They stood in silence for a full minute before Mikhail extended a hand.

“I don’t yet know what this is all about, but I am willing to put this aside...for now. I watched you on the runways. You fought bravely as well,” Mikhail said, with a bit of respect.

Yuri took his hand, letting him shake it. “Kwon Yuri. If only we met under different circumstances.”

“Mikhail Gorbachov.”

As their hands parted, Yuri looked up at Captain Fedoseev. “Captain?”

The captain heaved a deep sigh, licking his cracked lips. To think his lips could still dry up like this after all the training he'd been through in the freezing depths of the Motherland...

"Since Mikhail has decided to let it go, I see no point in any animosity. I'll go brief the remaining men."

Yuri nodded, careful not to let her relief show.

"Thank you, captain." Yuri then turned to Mikhail. "And thank you, Mikhail."

Mikhail nodded, and he and the captain left to give their orders.

Still within earshot, Yuri heard what the captain next said to Mikhail.

"You will not speak of this matter to the others. Do you understand?"

Yuri was grateful. Nine moderately angry men were far better than twenty-one.

Ten minutes later

Yuri had had to yell over the whine of the five helicopter engines to drive her point home.

"Remember! We have to fly low! *Very* low! I don't care if you're grazing the fences on the ground! We have to stay out of their radar!"

The helicopter pilot nodded and gave a thumbs up, and satisfied, Yuri sat back and strapped in. Jessica sat directly opposite her. She gave Yuri a reassuring nod. Four Spetsnaz operatives took up the rest of the cargo space, rifles on their laps. Mikhail had volunteered to go with Yuri, and naturally, the rest of

his squad from Rio joined him.

Yuri mentally plotted the paths of the helicopters. Upon taking off, the birds would fan out, maintain a reasonable distance and head toward the mountain range. It didn't do much good to bunch up. Five helicopters flying in formation were sure to draw undesired attention. During the final approach to the mountain, all five helicopters would drop to the lowest altitude possible and hope to the heavens that they wouldn't be seen.

Yuri, Captain Fedoseev and Elliot's squads would fly to the far side of the mountain, the side closest to the town of Martigny. The remaining two squads would land on the side facing Geneva. In attacking from different directions, Yuri hoped to draw the Doppelganger forces away from Taeyeon and Tiffany as much and for as long as possible to give them a safe window. Tae Woo's squad would remain in reserve and serve as backup in case Taeyeon and Tiffany ran into any trouble.

Yuri had already warned everyone that communication between squads would be impossible before gaining entrance to the facility. With the array of signal jammers situated around the mountain constantly scrambling surrounding frequencies, their radios would be useless. One good thing that came out of it, though, was that once they came within range of the jammers, tracking them via radioactive isotope tagging was impossible. Still, Yuri had her team check that their pocket jammers were still functioning. Once inside, however, they were immune to the signal jammers' effects.

They had synchronized their watches and set the initial attack for 0400, with Taeyeon and Tiffany's at 0415. It was tight, but Yuri believed fifteen minutes was enough to get things going. She could only hope their ruse would work.

As the helicopters throttled up and lifted off the ground, Yuri felt something she had never felt in the longest time. It was a heart-racing mix of excitement, apprehension and hope. Her heart thudded in her chest, a constant reminder of the magnitude of the task they were undertaking.

Closing her eyes and shutting out the rest of the world, Yuri braced herself for the impossible.

Chapter 28 : The Storm

The chopper rounded a final snow-covered rocky outcropping and Tiffany felt her insides shift as the rotors cut through a thin swath of turbulence. As the helicopter steadied itself, she became aware of a new sensation upon her pinky finger. A smile tugging at her lips, she reached and linked her pinky with Taeyeon's, gaining some assurance from the contact.

She was well aware that what they were attempting was next to suicidal. The odds were ridiculous. The plan was ad-hoc at best, with no specifics on the layout of the base or what to expect in the mining shafts. They didn't know how many agents they would be facing. Their radios would not work until they got in. All she knew was this: when the charges went off at 0415, her team would have to make a run for the nearest stairwell, at the end of a long corridor to their left as Yuri had described it, pound their way down five levels and then blow through another access door to get to the communications centre.

Tiffany's eyes shifted down to her pants pocket, where Yuri's cellphone lay.

Plug this into the internal broadcast system. You'll know what to do next.

Yuri's hopes of success, and certainly theirs as well, seemed to be riding on this little piece of tech.

As her finger curled tighter around Taeyeon's, she felt her stomach rise in her throat as the helicopter dove to slip under the radar threshold. This was the final approach to the mountain.

To her, this was the beginning of the end.

Two men's hearts sat heavy with guilt and sin.

Tae Woo's fists clenched tighter, his jaw aching from the strain. The sunglasses remained, hiding the worry in his eyes. Kim Tae Woo was worried. Not for himself, but for the woman sitting in the helicopter

just ahead of his. He had let her down one too many times, allowed her to brush with death even more. And now, he was faced with the sudden realization that he could lose everything today, her included. How he wished to have been in the same squad as Taeyeon, to at least be within arm's length, to be with her, to protect her, even if he wouldn't show it outright. Tae Woo had been a terrible father. If he had known it would cause his children so much suffering, he wouldn't have chosen this path in the first place.

Elliot shifted in the plastic seat of the chopper, clutching his wounded hand. Thank God it wasn't his master hand, or he'd be next to useless in the hours to follow. Ten years of sin and regret trailed behind him in the helicopter exhaust; and still, that which filled him deep inside threatened to burst at the seams of his flesh. His daughters had surely forgiven him. But had he forgiven himself? The answer to that question remained unknown. He thought of Stephanie and Jessica, all grown up...with guns in their hands. Succeeding here would be worthless should one of them be lost. He stared straight ahead, watching as the lip of the outcropping gave way to a rising mass of craggy peaks covered with a permanent blanket of snow, all of which draped in a veil of darkness.

For these two men, their path to redemption began in the depths of that mountain.

Captain Fedoseev checked his weapon one last time, one hand roaming instinctively around his load-bearing vest as he mentally ticked off his equipment. He looked about the men in the chopper around him; the strangers who had arrived from Rio. Sure, they were Spetsnaz, but they were from another unit. And on the most fundamental level, he'd never worked with them before. He barely knew their names, much less had an idea of who to entrust with a task or rely on for support. All he knew was that if they were Spetsnaz, they could be relied upon to do their duty. He resigned himself to believing that pure battle instinct and years of hard training would carry him forward, as they have had since he'd been selected for Spetsnaz GRU, even if he did not know the man beside him.

He observed them carefully as the wind from the open doors buffeted their worn faces. Their eyes carried a hint of disquietude, a certain distrust. They'd placed this operation in the hands of a foreigner they'd just met. Something ground deep beneath their cool exteriors. The job had to be done, but by God, Anton knew they hated it to the core. That was it. Buried beneath the layers of distrust and anxiety was a deep hatred; a mourning of some sort. They'd lost their brothers to this woman. Men who would have given their lives for each other. Men they loved on a level more profound than even family.

Anton gripped his weapon tighter as the helicopter began to climb steeply to their rappel point.

He hated this as much as they did.

Yuri slipped on a pair of leather gloves, graciously provided by Captain Fedoseev back at the airstrip. They would be rappelling down from ropes as there would be no solid ground upon which to land. She turned and shared a short moment with Jessica. No words were spoken, just a brief period of eye contact, communicating their encouragement.

Seconds passed, and a rope anchored a winch in the back was tossed out the open door.

Yuri rose to her feet, and in the blink of an eye, she was out the door, thrust into the biting wind and billowing snow.

She was home.

The squads slipped down on ropes, one after another, touching down lightly upon the thin snow. The entrances to the mining shafts would be visible once they were on the ground, lying about twenty meters away from the lips of the outcroppings. In this darkness, though, there was close to zero visibility. To navigate the tunnels, they would have to use the Spetsnaz's night vision goggles. As they helicopters banked away and retreated, the squads scurried inside, out of the buffeting winds. There would be no pickup. This was a one-way trip.

[Lair of the Beast \[IRIS OST - Fight Factory\]](#)

Yuri pressed a button on the goggles fitted around her head, and the pitch-black emptiness of the

mining shaft began to glow a bright green. Blinking a few times to adjust her eyes to the sudden brightness, she moved quickly inside. Behind her, Jessica, Mikhail and the other three men followed.

It was much quieter here than outside; the strong winds having been cut off at the entrance. The only sounds that intruded upon the silence were the crunch of loose rock underfoot and the occasional drip of condensation. The slope downward was steep enough for Yuri to feel her calves ache on the way down. In another hundred meters or so, they would arrive at a dead-end: the wall of solid rock separating the old mining tunnels from the interior of Doppelganger HQ.

There was a sudden scraping of rock followed by a stifled whimper. Jessica lost her balance, slipping on a stray piece of loose gravel. She fell forward, but Yuri turned and caught her just in time, helping her regain her balance.

Mikhail frowned at the sight. Hadn't they held onto each other for a tad too long? Was there something between those two? A smile creased his lips. Onward.

Five minutes later, the team passed a branching tunnel and reached their destination. Directly ahead of them was a solid wall of rock about ten feet high, scribbled with jagged lines and eddies formed by decades of water erosion. At this deepest part of the tunnel, the dripping of condensation intensified. Beyond the sounds of falling water droplets, Yuri managed to pick out another intruding noise.

Sirens?

From the pattern of the blasts, it appeared to be the siren for an internal lockdown.

Had Seohyun gotten free? If she did, had she done so alone? Regardless, it could only mean one thing. She was still alive. Yuri breathed a small sigh of relief, closing her eyes and muttering her gratitude to whichever God who would hear it. They would have to find her, and quickly, before Jaebeom got his dirty hands on her again. There was no way out of HQ during a lockdown.

Yuri consulted her watch. 0354. They'd made good time. Nodding to Mikhail, she signaled for the directional charges to be brought forward.

Four large squares were passed forward; each comprising one square meter and an inch thick of mono-directional C4 explosives with primers tied to an electronic detonator. Mikhail helped Yuri shape the charges along the height and width of the wall.

Yuri checked her watch once more. 0358. She quickly waved for the others to retreat to the smaller tunnel back up the slope. She drew deep, calming breaths, remembering their objective. They needed to draw as much attention to themselves as possible, and as foolish as it might seem, try to be pinned down by any opposition for as long as they could. They needed to trick Jaebeom into thinking the attacks were focused on their end, and they needed his field agents to remain in this half of HQ. Taeyeon and Tiffany's side were at least five minutes away at a quick jog. For added assurance, their entrance point was five levels lower than Captain Fedoseev's, who was taking the lowest level on this side of the mountain.

Taking cover behind the wall that split the tunnel into two branches, Yuri glanced down at her watch and counted, the digitized numbers clearly etched in bright green.

03:59:58

03:59:59

04:00:00

Doppelganger HQ

Acclimatization Course

Yoona stirred. She'd been sitting on the cold floor of the cave, watching Seohyun sleep. The poor girl was exhausted, and she hadn't protested when her eyelids fluttered closed. Something had moved through the jungle. No, something had moved through *them*. She had felt it in her bones.

"Seohyun, wake up," Yoona whispered, nudging Seohyun.

The sleeping girl's eyes fluttered open, looking around dazedly.

"What's wrong?"

"Did you feel something?"

"No, why?"

"Because I just did. Wait, there it is again!"

Seohyun's eyes grew infinitesimally wider. "I felt that one."

Yoona climbed to her feet. She knew those shockwaves. There could only be one source.

"What's happening?" Seohyun said, concerned. She too had risen to her feet.

"I think that's our cue to leave."

Doppelganger HQ Ops Room

"Anything on Seohyun?"

"Not yet, sir."

"She's blocked off the radioactive tagging somehow, sir. It's going to take some time to track her down even with the thermal sensors."

“God damn it.”

Jaebeom’s feet tingled. “What was that?”

A new siren added to the klaxons blasting outside.

“Sir, we have perimeter breach on three levels in the north wing.”

“Perimeter breach? By whom? How?”

New windows appeared on the main screen. They were camera feeds from various corridors. Broken rock and debris lay scattered around, and men and women were pouring through the holes in the walls.

Jaebeom recognized one of them immediately.

“Yuri.”

“They’ve broken in through the old mining shafts, sir.”

“Have all the breaches covered.”

“Sir.”

As the rest of the squads shuffled in, he spotted men carrying the familiar AN-94s.

Russians. Why were the Russians helping Yuri? Suddenly, it hit him. Back in St. Petersburg, when Yuri and her team had run into the trap meant for the Spetsnaz snoopers. She must have recruited them, using a common objective as an excuse to acquire more manpower for this assault. Resourceful, just like Seohyun had said.

But no more. It ended now. He clenched his fists, feeling the bodysuit under his shirtsleeves bulge. His muscles twitched. Lengths of carbonized steel beckoned to him, begging him to draw blood with them.

“Taeyeon.”

“Yes sir?”

Jaebeom padded toward the door, motioning for Taeyeon to join him.

“Let’s go say hello to our guests.”

As Yuri and her team stormed the newly blasted opening in the wall, she felt the tiniest rumble in the ground. Shockwaves from below. They, too, had gotten through. Moving swiftly amongst the broken and scattered rock, she spotted the familiar silver sheen of steel on the other side. They had broken into HQ.

“Quickly!” She urged them forward as they passed through the shattered tunnel.

“What’s with the sirens?” Jessica asked, frowning at the noise.

“I think Seohyun might have gotten free...and our entrance has been noted. We have to find her, but only after Stephanie and Taeyeon have completed their part of the mission.”

Jessica nodded.

They emerged on the other side, feet finding new ground. The broken rubble had given way to solid steel flooring, and the corridor extended out toward both sides. Yuri recognized this level. It was one of the maintenance floors, used mostly for holding imperishable supplies and tools. The corridor left them too exposed. They needed to find a new position to fortify. As they moved along the corridor, Yuri

tested their radios.

“Elliot, Anton, can you read me?”

“Loud and clear.”

“Da.”

“The sirens. Seohyun is on the loose. We’ll find her after Stephanie and Taeyeon have reached the communications room. For all we know, she might find us.”

“Seohyun?” Anton asked.

“My colleague, and part of the reason why we’re here.”

“I understand.”

“You’ll know when Stephanie and Taeyeon have done their job. We’ll regroup after that. For now, get yourself somewhere defensible and hunker down. They’re coming.”

“Good luck, Miss Kwon.”

“And to you, Anton.”

Seohyun let Yoona pull her through the final copse of trees, almost tripping over a stray root. The exit lay ahead; a set of blast doors that led into a decontamination chamber and then to the main corridor of the acclimatization level.

They approached the airlock, seeing what they had expected to find. The access panel next to the doors blinked red. It would not respond to a regular pass key during an internal lockdown.

“Can you open this?” Yoona asked.

“I can try to rewire the circuit, see if it responds. They didn’t cut the power yet.”

Yoona approached the panel, a small knife appearing in her hand. She reached up and pried the panel cover open, exposing a tangle of multi-colored wires over a circuit board. She stepped back, shaking her head. “Woah. Good luck.”

Seohyun stepped forward, reaching a hand out toward Yoona. “Knife.”

The cold steel in her hands seemed to give her a bit of confidence. Perhaps she should’ve trained to be a blademaker...Maybe not.

Seohyun’s eyes moved expertly over the circuit, recognizing key placements. Immediately, she knew what to do. Slicing a few wires free, she eased them around carefully with her fingers and crossed a few, and they sparked to life. The LCD screen turned a bright green, and she was rewarded with a shifting of hydraulics. With a loud bump, the locks disengaged and the blast doors eased open slowly but surely. The sound of klaxons from outside rose in volume.

As they stepped into the airlock, a control room rose to their left. The final pair of blast doors lay directly ahead. The path ahead of them stretched perhaps twenty meters. As they made their way in, the doors behind them eased shut, locks shifting into place, and with another loud bump, the sounds of the jungle were shut out.

“Where’s the other access panel?”

Seohyun’s eyes grew wide. “Oh no.”

Yoona turned to face her, eyebrow raised. “What do you mean, ‘oh no’?”

“The only ways to open the outer blast doors are from the outside,” Seohyun looked to her left, “and from the control room up there.”

“So what you mean to say is...we’re *trapped* in here?”

“Unless you can get into the control room.”

Yoona craned her neck to look at the control room towering over them. It stood at least ten meters high. “I don’t remember learning to fly as part of my training.”

“Wait a minute.”

Yoona looked at Seohyun curiously.

“This is an airlock, right?”

Yoona nodded.

“Then how much oxygen do we have left in here?”

Yoona’s eyes grew wider. “Oh crap.”

Overhead, Yoona caught the chatter of automatic weapons fire.

“Looks like the party’s started.”

Yuri peeked her head around the corner, snapping back around cover when a bullet pinged against the solid steel inches from her face.

"Damn it."

They had to be up against at least five agents, and more would be on the way. It wouldn't take long for them to be overwhelmed.

"We're getting pinned down," Jessica hissed.

"That's the idea. We have to give Taeyeon and Tiffany enough time. You felt the explosion. They've just gotten through," Yuri explained tersely before zipping out and squeezing off a couple of shots.

Mikhail and the other Spetsnaz were huddled around the corner opposite from theirs, contributing with bursts from their rifles. The AN-94s spat a continuous hail of fire toward the agents, two at a time. They hadn't lost any men. Yet.

"We are going to get mopped up if they come to surround us!" he said in his lowest possible voice over the noise.

Yuri's frown deepened. More bullets ricocheted off the wall, throwing sparks into the air.

"Come on, Taeyeon. Hurry up!"

Taeyeon led the way through the opening in the blasted rock, Glock 26 at the ready. She'd always derived strength from feeling the power of good old 9x19mm encased within her fingers, but now, she'd gained a new source of fortitude.

Tiffany stepped in close behind, Glock 30 in hand. She moved back to back with Taeyeon, covering their right flank as the rest of the squad took up the rear. The duo shared a look, and Taeyeon nodded.

"Emergency access should be down this way. Come on."

They moved swiftly down the corridor, flanked by walls of stainless steel on either sides, ears throbbing from the whine of klaxons blaring overhead. They'd heard the sirens whilst waiting behind the wall of rock earlier. Something had been going on before they'd broken in. Taeyeon brought a hand to her ear.

"Yuri, we're in."

"We're having a lot of trouble here. Make it quick."

"We're already heading down the emergency access. We should be there in another couple of minutes. Hang in there."

"Oh, we're not going anywhere."

Taeyeon urged her team forward, ducking into the emergency access stairwell at the end of the corridor. From here, they would have to descend five levels to reach the communications floor. They would be just one level below her father's squad. Absently, she thought of him sitting out of the action. She allowed herself a small smile.

"He should be so bored right now."

"What was that?" Tiffany asked, overhearing.

Taeyeon turned and smiled. "Nothing. Let's move quickly. Yuri and the others are counting on us."

Tiffany stumbled a moment at Taeyeon's grin. She'd spotted a bit of mirth behind that smile. It wasn't like the half-hearted ones she'd been giving for the longest time. A smile growing on her own face, she

followed Taeyeon, moving down two steps at a time.

The cellphone felt heavier in Tiffany's pocket.

What exactly did Yuri have up her sleeve?

Jaebeom and Taeyeon moved quickly, their shoes clicking against the steel floor in a steady tattoo. They had taken the south wing elevator down to the acclimatization level, and were now moving toward the other end of HQ to reach the breach points.

As Jaebeom approached the blast doors leading to one of the acclimatization phases, he felt a strange acidity in his gut. He frowned, eyes fixed on the closed doors.

Someone was in there. He could feel it in his bones.

He slowed.

"Sir?"

"You go on ahead, Taeyeon. I have something I have to take care of first."

Taeyeon frowned, eyeing the blast doors beside them with uncertainty. "Sir, are you alright? You seem a bit distracted."

"HQ is under attack. I believe I have every reason to look distracted, Taeyeon. Now go."

Taeyeon nodded reluctantly, noting a new edge to the man he'd never seen before. He spun on his heel and took off in the direction of the north wing.

Jaebeom turned to face the massive blast doors, unfurling and wriggling his fingers.

“Yoona...what are you doing here?”

“Ugh!” Yoona grunted as she slipped off the slick steel wall for the thirtieth time.

Frustrated, Yoona collapsed to a heap, her back against the blasted wall. It was hopeless.

She’d tried everything her training allowed: running up the wall, tic-tacs from an adjacent wall, and finally, relying on Seohyun to give her a boost. Nothing worked. She considered using her long blades as icepicks, but the thin steel wouldn’t be able to handle her weight. The mere thought of her precious blades snapping ran a shiver down her spine.

Another distant explosion rumbled underneath her skin, and she looked up instinctively at the closed blast doors. Seohyun looked down at her, a pained expression on her face.

“It’s not your fault, Seohyun.”

“If I had just remembered that there would be no way to get out...”

“It’s not your fault,” Yoona repeated, shaking her head.

“There’s no getting out of here, is there?”

“Not unless someone comes over here and opens the doors...and as much as I’d love to believe otherwise, I don’t think anyone will find us...not alive, at least.”

Seohyun shivered at the thought. In a macabre reflection, she wondered how it would be like to suffocate to death, to find herself breathing heavier and heavier, desperate for whatever air there was left before her body finally gave out. It would certainly be slow and painful. Not exactly how she'd wanted to die.

She sat down beside Yoona, putting an arm around the exhausted girl. "At least we tried."

Yoona turned and gave her a weak smile. "Still, we have about three minutes' worth of hope left for Yuri to find us."

"I'm sorry."

Yoona perked up at the sudden apology. She sat straighter, moving closer into Seohyun's half-embrace.

"Whatever for?"

Seohyun looked down, both in embarrassment and in consternation. "I'm sorry I can't...reciprocate...you know."

Yoona chuckled lightly, a hearty laughter that, for some reason, eased the fear in Seohyun's heart.

"Don't be silly. I knew what I was getting into when I felt that way...and HQ doesn't approve of same-sex relationships, so I guess this is all on me!"

Seohyun nodded slowly. Was she blushing?

"But still, could I..."

Seohyun looked up with innocently curious eyes. "Hmm?"

"I mean, since we're probably going to...well, die and all...I just thought maybe, you know, just to know how it...feels."

Seohyun's already wide eyes grew wider. "Huh? O-oh...t-that...Um, well, I guess?"

Yoona looked up at Seohyun from under her eyelashes. "Really?"

Seohyun nodded, smiling. "Sure. I don't think we have enough time...or oxygen...and I'm not sure how to do it since we're both girls...but yeah, I guess we could have sex."

"WHAT!?"

Seohyun jerked back, surprised. "What?"

"*WHAT!*"

"What?" Seohyun's eyes grew wider, then she cocked her head to the side. Yoona's face was a mask of infinite horror.

"YOU THOUGHT I WANTED TO...TO..."

"But I thought-"

"Nooooooooo! No no no no no no! What I meant was a...a kiss! You know? Lips on lips? With our clothes...on?"

Seohyun's lips formed an 'O'. "Ohhhhhhhhh."

Yoona brought a hand to her forehead. Why was it so hot in here? She began fanning herself.

“Oh goodness, Seohyun. Seriously.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing! Just kiss me.”

“You still want to-“

“Yes, I do, so come here.”

Yoona snuggled closer, inching her face closer to Seohyun’s. The latter moved forward, unsure of how to proceed. It was, after all, her first time kissing anyone in her twenty-seven years of life. One would find that rather strange, but Seohyun was Seohyun. She had better things to worry about than boys...or girls.

Less than an inch separated their lips, and both closed their eyes, waiting to make contact.

A shifting of locks startled them, and both snapped their heads toward the outer blast doors.

“THEY’VE FOUND US!” Yoona cried, jumping to her feet.

Seohyun remained seated, eyes switching back and forth between the doors and Yoona, feeling rather...disappointed? Why was she disappointed that they hadn’t been able to finish what they were doing? In fact, they hadn’t even gotten started! She pouted, not understanding why she’d actually wanted to kiss Yoona.

The doors eased open, and a stream of fresh air billowed through the widening crack.

But Yoona’s smile turned to a frown as she recognized the figure slowly being revealed by the opening doors.

This wasn’t Yuri.

Seohyun straightened and then climbed to her feet.

“Hello, Yoona.”

Chapter 29 : Blood, Ashes and Raging Steel

Taeyeon kicked open the door to the communications level, checking her flanks and then moved forward, the rest of the squad following closely behind. They’d not run into any resistance so far, and she hoped for a clear path to the room.

As they approached a crossing of corridors, that hope was shattered. A pair of agents spotted them, drawing their weapons in a blink. Taeyeon darted to the right, firing a couple of bullets at the lead agent’s chest. The man staggered backward a couple of steps from the fire, then straightened with a grin.

What the hell?

Before Taeyeon and Tiffany managed to squeeze another shot off, the agents fired a trio of bullets each. Taeyeon dove. The shots pinged off the wall where she had just been. The Spetsnaz soldiers huddled over to the left. As quickly as they had appeared, the agents disappeared behind the corner, surely to take cover.

“I shot that guy! *Twice!* Is he made out of steel or something?” Taeyeon hissed to Tiffany.

“Maybe it’s body armor.”

“I’m packing FMJ’s here. That’s got to be some serious body armor.”

“Try aiming for their heads.”

Taeyeon steadied her aim at the corner into which the agents had disappeared, locking her sights on the very edge of the steel. She spotted a fringe inching toward the open space, and squeezed gently on the trigger, drawing a steady breath. At the first sight of skin, she popped off a shot, and was rewarded with a spray of blood and bone. One down.

“Come on.”

They moved up, the Spetsnaz mirroring them on the other side of the corridor.

Taeyeon nodded to one of the men, who had a flashbang in his hand. He nodded back, pulled the pin and tossed it to Taeyeon. She caught it with one hand, and not wasting the momentum, flung it across into the corner where the remaining agent hid.

Turning, Taeyeon shut her eyes whilst covering Tiffany. She squeezed her palms into her ears. Tiffany nestled her head in Taeyeon’s chest, squeezing her eyes shut.

The blast was a muffled thump, but they each felt the shockwave course through their bones. Taeyeon’s ears rang despite having covered them earlier. A searing pain bit into the back of her eyeballs as the burst of light from the flash engulfed them.

Shaking her head, Taeyeon did her best to find her senses and pushed forward, hauling Tiffany behind her. The latter stumbled on the first step, but got up to speed. They turned the corner, expecting to see a dazed agent on the ground, blind and deaf, but the next thing Taeyeon knew, she had been disarmed. A leg shot out from nowhere, striking Tiffany square in the chest, tossing her backward like a ragdoll. Her pistol clattered to the floor in the middle of the corridor.

Turning back to face the agent, Taeyeon ducked under a hook punch that seemed to materialize out of nowhere. Shifting her weight onto her right foot, she thrust herself upward in an attempt to palm the agent’s chin upward, leaving his neck vulnerable, but was denied as he slipped backward on a heel, using the momentum to twist his body in an arc and throw a jab right into Taeyeon’s abdomen. Taeyeon’s eyes grew wide, feeling the air knocked right out of her. She dropped to a knee, finding her breath while at the same time spotting the agent running toward her. She had mere milliseconds left.

Ignoring the pain and defying the screams for recovery by her lungs, she sucked in a breath leapt outward, using a foot to trip the agent while a hand grabbed firmly onto the back of his head. Out of balance, Taeyeon saw her opportunity. She leaned into his fall, slamming his face right into the ground. Something cracked. Taeyeon expected him to be incapacitated by now, but the man flipped over with an unexpected burst of strength, tossing her and then pinning her onto the ground. He flicked his wrist and a knife appeared in his right hand. Face wrought with fury and streaked with fresh trails of blood, the agent brought the knife down right above Taeyeon's heart. She could only gasp.

Taeyeon's ears rang as she struggled to register what had just happened. The last thing she'd remembered was seeing the agent impale her with his knife. That same agent now lay to the side, half his face gone. She looked down and failed to spot a knife sticking out of her chest. Flipping onto her stomach and staring up, she found her savior.

Tiffany held a smoking Glock in her hands as she knelt on the ground. Her eyes were hard, but underneath the layer of solidity, Taeyeon saw pain swimming behind her eyes. The kick must have cracked if not broken something.

"Th-" Taeyeon coughed uncontrollably as her lungs protested her whim to speak. She caught her breath, one hand over her chest. "Thanks."

"I'm not done with you yet, Kim Taeyeon. I shan't have you taken away from me till then," Tiffany said, tucking her Beretta away before helping Taeyeon up.

Taeyeon could only smile.

"Let's go. The room's just up ahead."

A shuddering explosion drew their eyes to the ceiling. The lights flickered for a beat.

Tiffany looked at Taeyeon with a hint of curiosity.

Taeyeon's smile widened. "Looks like dad got tired of sitting on his ass."

Yoona drew her blades, stepping over to stand protectively in front of Seohyun.

“Of all the people...,” Jaebeom said mockingly.

“You’ll never touch her.”

“Is that a challenge?”

Yoona lowered her stance, brandishing her long carbonized blades. “Seohyun, get back.”

Seohyun didn’t need to be told. She retreated backwards to the inner blast doors, watching with wide eyes.

What was she doing? The Mission Director was a blademaster with years more experience than her. She wouldn’t stand a chance.

“I’m disappointed in you, Yoona.”

“Shut up and draw your blades.”

“I taught you everything you know. But if you wish to fight...,” Jaebeom paused and thrust his arms outward. A pair of long triangular blades shot out from his sleeves. “Then I’ll gladly accept.”

The two blademasters circled each other in the confines of the airlock, Seohyun mirroring Yoona’s back.

Yoona wasn’t delusional. She knew she wouldn’t stand a chance against Jaebeom. She’d heard stories about him from his field agent days...that he was faster than light, and invisible as a shadow in pitch blackness. His twin kataras didn’t give him much reach or flexibility, but what he lacked in striking distance, he made up for in speed and agility. Many might think that his muscular body was a natural impediment to his skill with the sword, but those were the ones who had never faced this man before. Whether these stories were true or not, Yoona was about to find out. But first things first...

When Yoona's back finally faced the outer blast doors, she knew she had to act.

"Run!"

Seohyun spun on her heel and took off, not looking back.

"Let her run. I will find her later. And I will make her suffer."

"Why are you doing this? What's gotten into you?"

"Seohyun betrayed us. And by saving her, so have you. The punishment for treason is death, Yoona. You know that."

"Treason? Listen to yourself. Seohyun told me everything. Have you gone mad?"

"Oh no, I haven't gone mad, Yoona. You see, I have a purpose to fulfill...and I won't have the likes of you standing in my way."

"What purpose? Tell us. We can help. I can help."

"Tell you?" He chuckled darkly. "Tell you what? That this century-old organization has no respect for loyalty and life? That the single-track mind with which our ancestors lived by justified the killing of innocents?"

Yoona shook her head. "I don't understand."

Jaebeom smiled. "You'll never understand. No one ever will."

"Jaebeom--"

“You were treading on thin ice, little Yoona.” Jaebeom paused, clenching his fists tighter around his kataras. “This is what happens when it all gives way.” And then he blinked out of space.

Yoona was startled.

“This speed...”

She had bore witness to the man’s inhuman speed during their sparring sessions in the previous years, but she’d never imagined that he would have maintained the same level of proficiency even now after having moved away from field agent life. No, in fact, he was *faster* now.

Feeling the weight of her world shift as the air moved, she spun to her left, feeling a twinge of familiarity, bringing up her blades to parry. A sharp clash of metal confirmed the swiping inward strike of Jaebeom’s kataras, and the impacts shook Yoona to the bone. Just as quickly as he had appeared, he leapt up and over her, striking out once again before landing. Yoona ducked, spun and drove her blades upward, parrying his blow. His feet touched the ground, and suddenly, he was out of sight again.

“I can’t even begin to strike at him. He’s too fast...how is he still so fast?”

Another clash of steel shattered her thoughts, and she heaved against the weight of the kataras, willing him away as he stepped and blinked away.

Yoona knew that being on defense for the entire duration of a blade fight was suicide. Soon, he would whittle down her will to stand her ground and strike when he saw any point of weakness. Furthermore, she was at a great disadvantage due to the fact that he was donning liquid diamond armor. Slashing weapons were useless. She fought to cover all her bases, not giving him a window to land a debilitating blow. She had an obvious advantage over him in terms of range, but he was just too fast to even see, much less hit at. The frustration dug at Yoona. As she parried blow after blow, little by little, she became more vulnerable. Her entire body burned from just the effort of keeping him away, and her breaths grew steadily heavier.

It would be over soon.

Just then, a strike materialized out of nowhere, crashing into Yoona's crossed blades. The force of the impact knocked her clean off her feet, throwing her out through the outer blast doors and sending her body skidding across the floor. Yoona coughed. The blow had been so strong that she'd felt it surge through her blades and all the way to her core. She looked up and saw the approaching form of Jaebeom, arms held out and wide, kataras gleaming in the overhead lights. Sucking in a deep breath, she elbowed her way to her feet and ran.

Jaebeom's smile grew. "Little Yoona...running will not save you."

"Yuri!"

"What is it, Elliot?"

"We're being pinned down by about ten agents here. We can't move at all."

"It's the same story here, Elliot. Where are you?"

"I don't really know. There're a lot of large doors here. They look like vault doors of some sort."

"...You're on the acclimatization level."

"The what?"

"Nevermind. Can you hold out?"

"We'll do our best...Yuri, there's something else."

“Something else?”

“We keep hearing this clanging of metal coming from one of the nearby rooms. Like people swordfighting.”

“Swordfighting?”

“I know it sounds cra- DAMN IT!”

“Elliot? Elliot!”

“I’m here. God damn bastards almost took my head off!”

“You mentioned swordfighting?”

“Yeah, hey, wait. Someone just got thrown out of a room!”

“What? Elliot, what the hell is going on?”

“She’s on the ground, and she’s holding...swords? Some guy is walking toward her.”

“Wait. She? What does she look like?”

“I don’t know, fair-skinned, Asian. Hair’s tied up in a ponytail. Egg shaped face, if you could call it that.”

“Yoona.”

“Who? Wait, she’s running toward us now! That guy is chasing her. He looks like he’s holding some kind of blades too.”

“Oh crap.”

“I don’t like the sound of that, Yuri.”

“Listen, that’s Jaebeom. You need to clear out of there as fast as you can. Retreat, you hear me? We’re coming down to you right now. Anton, are you getting this?”

“Da. We’ll- chyort!... We’ll be there soon.”

Yuri turned to Jessica, and the latter nodded, understanding immediately.

“Mikhail!”

“Da!”

“Emergency access behind you! Go!”

Mikhail finished off his clip, slapped in a new one and pulled back as his men provided covering fire for one another. Bursting forth from her corner, Yuri’s Les Baer barked intermittently as she ran for the emergency access stairwell on Mikhail’s side.

They disappeared into the stairwell, pounding down the steps. Anton and his men were already heading in their direction, clearing two steps at a time.

The combined squads burst through the door to the acclimatization level, bumping into Elliot on the way out.

“Where is she?” Yuri shouted.

Elliot raised a finger to her right, and she turned to see a familiar figure sprinting toward them.

“Yoona!” A smile grew on Yuri’s face.

Yoona looked up to the familiar voice, and opened her mouth to shout in reply, but her words stopped short in her throat as she felt cold steel penetrate her suit and deep into her midsection. She gasped, looking down to see a good length of Jaebeom’s katara protruding from her midriff. It had passed clean through her diamond suit. She gasped again, frozen still, her legs crumbling beneath her weight. She saw Yuri’s flabbergasted expression, saw her lips curl as she screamed the word that reached her ears as a mere muddled distortion. Finally, her knees gave out, and she slumped off the blade onto a nearby wall, trailing blood as she sank to the ground.

Breathing became difficult. Her vision dimmed.

“Seo...hyun...”

“Isn’t there any way we can open this door!?” Taeyeon shouted, slamming her fist against the locked door in front of her.

They had arrived at the communications room, but had no way to get in. They’d needed to use extra shaped charges to get into HQ, and they had since run out. They’d already pried loose the access panel, but neither she nor Tiffany or the Spetsnaz operatives knew their way around the circuitry. So near, yet so far. The gunfire from the upper levels had died down. Had something untoward happened to the rest of the team?

“I can open it.”

Taeyeon swung around, leveling her pistol at the source of the voice. An oval Asian face with bright eyes stared back at her. Those eyes had since turned frightened.

“Taeyeon, wait,” Tiffany said, lowering Taeyeon’s gun with her free hand. She winced in pain and instinctively brought a hand to her cracked rib before she could speak. “Are you Seohyun?”

“Yes, I am.”

Tiffany closed the distance between them and scooped her up in a hug, ignoring both the pain and the stare from Taeyeon. She breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank God you’re alive. Yuri told us Jaebeom had you.”

Seohyun’s heart clenched. That same man was surely pummeling Yoona into the ground by now. And there was nothing she could do. She didn’t know how to fight. She shut her eyes, berating herself. Why hadn’t she learned how to fight? She could have helped Yoona. She could have...No, there was no point in blaming herself now. What she needed to do was to help as best she could. Starting here. At the same time, she was surprised. Who was this woman who would embrace a total stranger in hostile territory? People were getting stranger by the day.

“You look hurt.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Tiffany dismissed with a wave of her hand, then motioned toward the locked door. “The door, please?”

Seohyun approached Taeyeon, who fixed her with a suspicious glare. “May I?”

Taeyeon dipped her head and stepped aside, scowling but grateful.

Seohyun expertly crossed a few wires and repositioned a few, and the door clicked open. She stepped aside, motioning for the team to enter.

“Wow,” Tiffany said as she passed Seohyun.

“I know my way around electronics. Anyway, why do you need to be in here?”

Tiffany shrugged and held Yuri’s cellphone to the light. “Beats me. But we’ll soon find out.”

“YOONA!”

Yuri watched helplessly as Jaebeom backed away from Yoona’s body. Taecyeon and the other field agents emerged from the corridor separating them, moving to stand behind Jaebeom. Taecyeon had stopped in mid-step to see the girl slide off his superior’s katara. He immediately pointed to a nearby agent.

"Get her down to the-"

"Leave her!" Jaebeom interrupted, jabbing a katara in Taecyeon's direction. His eyes remained fixed on Kwon Yuri.

Taecyeon's mouth opened in mock horror, then he closed it. Still, he could not understand why Jaebeom would hurt Yoona like that, even if she’d gone rogue. And now he was just going to leave her to bleed to death? The wounded girl coughed and spasmed, fresh blood trickling from her lips. Questions would have to come later.

“She’s going to bleed out very soon, Yuri,” Jaebeom taunted.

Yuri stepped forward, but a hand held her back. She turned to Jessica, who looked at her with questioning eyes. It wasn’t so much a ‘don’t go’ as an ‘are you sure about this’. Yuri turned to look at the three squads assembled around her.

“Stay out of this. This is my fight.”

Taecyeon and the rest of the agents already knew this. No sane person would stray into a blademaster duel. They could be quartered where they stood and still not know what was happening; at least until they began to feel themselves fall apart.

Captain Fedoseev nodded for his men to stand down, and they took up an uneasy post behind Yuri, fingers at the trigger guards, but no less itchy. Things were escalating out of control, and they knew it. Still, this was clearly Yuri’s turf, and that fact was unsettling at best. Captain Fedoseev had pondered this as the hour unfolded. Was Yuri one of these people? Was that why she seemed to know the grounds so

well, why the enemy seemed to strike a common chord within him as Yuri had the day before? If she was, what on earth was she hoping to gain by turning against them? These men and women were relentless. An incredibly deadly fighting force. He wondered what treachery might have transpired that could have forced the woman into this course of action.

Yuri stepped out of Jessica's reach, drawing her blades. She heard the digitized chatter of Tiffany's voice on her communicator. Something about having found Seohyun. She pushed it to the back of her mind. Right now, she didn't care.

Jaebeom looked around the corridor, pulling the side of his lip down in distaste. "Come to collect Seohyun's body?"

"No, I'm here for yours."

A dry laugh escaped Jaebeom's lips.

"Jaebeom, you're insane. Do you have any idea what you're trying to do?"

"*Trying* to do? After I'm done with you, it would have already been done."

"You'll never get away with something like this. You've betrayed all of us!"

"Betrayed? It's *you* who has betrayed us, Yuri," Jaebeom spat, turning to look at a gasping Yoona, holding her midriff with her hand. "She was my first example. Now it's your turn." The last thing Yuri saw was a smirk on Jaebeom's face before he folded into nothingness.

Yuri's lips curved into a smirk of her own.

This should be fun.

Jessica couldn't help but let her jaw go slack. The two of them moved so fast, the only thing she caught from the fight were the sounds of clashing steel and shadows flitting about erratically. Occasionally, she could pick out the faintest glimmer of the sharp edge of a blade when it swung upwards against the overhead lights.

Behind her, Mikhail watched closely, but not the fight between Jaebeom and Yuri. He noticed how Jessica's brow creased with worry, how the grip on her pistol tightened, as if to draw a bead on Yuri's opponent. She knew better than to try. He knew there was something about these two women that transcended a normal relationship. His lip curved upwards.

Yuri and Jaebeom were fighting on an entirely different level, one unnoticeable by the untrained human eye. While those who watched only saw flitting shadows and the occasional clashing of their blades, Yuri saw every movement, read every thought, predicted every blow. Bladewielders were trained to elevate themselves beyond the normal plane of perception, and were thus able to see things happen in what regular people regarded as slow motion. And just as Yuri had predicted Jaebeom's every swing and step, he had only been doing the same. Five seconds into the fight, and they were at a stalemate, with neither able to land a blow on the other.

Yuri knew she was good. Not out of arrogance, but because she spent every waking hour making sure that she was the best.

But Jaebeom had experience. And although he had left the life of a field agent years ago, she was sure he still made the effort to keep in top form. Just in case.

At this point, they were evenly matched. Yuri knew it was only her prodigious skill with the blade that had kept her alive thus far. Her blades had reach and agility, but lacked the dense penetrative stabbing power of the kataras that proved more useful against the liquid diamond armor. She needed something to gain an edge over the man, or risk being impaled on his twin kataras. She needed Tiffany to do her job. Now.

Those kataras now came stabbing toward Yuri, quicker than the jabs of a professional boxer. Some, she dodged, and others, she parried with the flat of her blades. Steel clashed. With another successful parry, she drove him back with one blade and swung downward with the other, feinting and then slashing

down diagonally across his chest. Or at least, where his chest had been just a moment before. Jaebeom disappeared once again, and Yuri found herself spinning, straining to pick out the slightest movement of shadow in her periphery.

She caught the next landing of his feet on the ground and turned, swinging one blade in a wide arc to knock away his kataras whilst at the same time slashing in the opposite direction with the other, just underneath the level of his forearms. The blade made contact, but shuddered to a stop at the side of his body as the diamond suit underneath his clothes came to life. Still, that should have at least bruised a couple of ribs. She needed an opening to use her stabbing attacks. Having her blade stopped short like this only cost her precious milliseconds.

As if unaffected by the force of the blow, Jaebeom flitted away. Their shadows continued to dance.

Tiffany had finally found the connector she had been searching for, just as Tae Woo's squad arrived at the door. They shuffled into the room, and Tae Woo moved purposefully toward Taeyeon and Tiffany.

Tiffany plugged the cellphone in and followed Yuri's specific instructions. The sirens that had pummeled their ears since their entrance suddenly died down.

"Come on, let's go find Yuri!"

Yuri's eyes flicked skyward as she noticed the sirens around them die down in volume. In her periphery, she also spotted the rest of the crowd gathered around them stirring, their attention having shifted to the ceiling above. Ahead of her, Jaebeom paused and straightened, kataras out to the sides.

"What is this?"

Yuri smirked. "The beginning of your end."

"Tsk tsk. I'm disappointed in you, Yuri. You were never one to need to guess twice...much less end up with a liability on your hands..."

"If you lay one finger..."

"Oh, we've already been way past that, Yuri. Let's cut to the chase. You had your orders. You know what I want..."

"My orders were to locate and secure a high value object of interest, not hand it to a madman bent on accelerating the arrival of the apocalypse..."

"But you're the only person who believes that, aren't you Yuri..."

"Bring it to me, Yuri, or we are going to lose one very valuable agent..."

"You wouldn't dare murder one of our own..."

"Try me..."

"You know what I want. Bring it to me, or the girl dies. You have twelve hours. It's your choice..."

Behind Jaebeom, Taecyeon shifted uneasily on his feet, a deep frown settling onto his face.

"What is this? What's going on?" he asked.

"Doesn't that voice sound familiar? Oh wait, there's more," Yuri answered.

"Lies! I don't know how you fabricated all this, Yuri, but no one-"

"You think I wouldn't know that you went after him, especially since you left a trail of destruction behind? I told you to come here with the data, Yuri..."

"I'm coming right now, Jaebeom..."

"Save it! I gave you your chance and you blew it. Give me an address and I'll mail Seohyun's pieces to you..."

Yuri saw Taecyeon's frown deepen. She knew as much as he did that there was no way to fabricate evidence like this. If they wanted, they could run the audio data through a frequency check; compare it with their own voices. Yuri felt the weight of the situation tilting steadily into her favor.

Just then, Tae Woo, Tiffany, Taeyeon and Seohyun arrived behind Yuri, trailed by the final two squads of Spetsnaz operatives. Jessica acknowledged their arrival and motioned for them to stay well back. Seeing the standoff in the middle of the corridor, they didn't need to be told.

"Seohyun?"

Seohyun looked over at Taecyeon at the other end of the corridor. It was then when she saw the crumpled figure against the left wall.

"Yoona!" She started forward, but Jessica stood and held her back.

"Not now, Seohyun," Jessica said, trying to sound assuring. She figured it hadn't worked.

"No!" Seohyun tried to wiggle out of Jessica's grasp, but to no avail.

Hot tears began to well up in the corners of Seohyun's eyes, and with a final futile push against Jessica's embrace, she staggered back, finding a wall for support. She brought a hand up to her mouth, struggling to keep the tears from flowing. She saw the look on Yoona's face. The woman was suffering. And it was all her fault.

“Yoona...”

Taeyeon clenched his jaw. “Sir, what’s going on? What object of interest?”

Jaebeom stood his ground, leveling his eyes at Yuri. They had taken a newer, angrier shade, very much different from the cool, arrogant color from earlier. “I tasked Kwon Yuri with securing an article of high value in Rio, a new primary objective.”

“And what kind of article might that be, sir?”

“You don’t have the clearance to even be asking that, Taeyeon!”

“I see you were handling this all by yourself, Jaebeom. What, couldn’t even trust your closest buddies with your misdoings?”

Jaebeom seethed.

Yuri smiled. Jaebeom was losing it. Time to take things up a notch. She turned her head over to Tae Woo. The man’s eyes widened beneath his sunglasses and hesitated, unsure. He then nodded, reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a small rectangular object. He held it up high and tossed it to Yuri as Jaebeom’s eyes grew wide.

Yuri seemed to shift infinitesimally, and suddenly one of her blades had disappeared into a calf sheath. She caught the hard drive in her hand and felt its weight in the middle of her palm.

“Anti-matter containment,” Yuri announced as she held the hard drive high, watching as Jaebeom’s eyes followed the movement of the drive closely.

Taeyeon couldn’t help but inch forward. “What?”

“It’s been ten years since your father began his grand plan, Jaebeom. It’s almost pitiful to see it all turn

to dust today...when he came so close.”

“Shut up!” Jaebeom shifted forward, but Yuri stood her ground.

Yuri’s eyes now shifted to Taecyeon and the agents standing behind him.

“The Mission Director sent me to Rio de Janeiro to oversee the capture of Kim Tae Woo and Kim Taeyeon, both of whom are standing behind me at the moment,” Yuri began.

Behind her, Tae Woo and Taeyeon shared a look.

“The primary objective was then changed to the procurement of this,” Yuri shook the hard drive in her hand, “which was in Tae Woo’s possession.” Yuri shook the drive again. “This...is the final step in achieving Park Jin Young’s endgame.”

Jaebeom’s eyelid twitched.

“Park Jin Young?” Taecyeon asked, frowning deeper.

“The Mission Director’s father.”

“Lies!” Jaebeom spat.

“You can confirm the connection,” Yuri said, raising her voice. “All the data you need is in his office...that is, if he hasn’t wiped it yet.”

Taecyeon stepped to an agent to his side and lifted a hand to whisper in his ear. The agent took off in the opposite direction with another in tow.

Yuri nodded her approval. He must've sent the agent to secure Jaebeom's office.

"The data was due to be smuggled into Russia to complement their ongoing anti-matter research, which, by the way, had also been made possible courtesy of Jin Young," Yuri continued. "This was one of the final steps in Jin Young's plan. It allowed the Russians to supply him with anti-matter bombs."

"Bombs?" Taecyeon said, shocked. "For what purpose?"

"To destroy the world and recreate it anew under the Communist banner," Jessica said.

Yuri nodded. "But then the Russians got smart. They realized the foolishness of this scheme and decided not to keep their end of the bargain. That's when cleaners like myself and the Spetsnaz men you see behind me came in. Their goal was to eliminate Jin Young and ensure the data got to their contact in Rio, and mine was to eliminate Tae Woo, retrieve the data and bring it back here...for Jaebeom to hand to his father."

Captain Fedoseev felt as if he had been kicked in the gut. It all made sense now. This was how they were all connected. His task had been to locate and eliminate a high value target designated by the FSB back home. He did not know the details, but he also knew that his counterparts in Rio were involved in some sort of escort detail, to ensure the success of some transaction there. It had all been for the same purpose. That purpose now stood wedged between Kwon Yuri's fingers.

Yuri closed her eyes for a moment. She told herself she was making the right decision by choosing to do what she did next. She tossed the hard drive onto the ground beside her.

"Unfortunately, that data isn't going anywhere," she said as her hand disappeared into her jacket.

"Wait! What are you-"

Jaebeom could only stare with the words caught in his throat as Yuri pulled out her Les Baer 1911 and fired three times into the hard drive, perforating it. The blasted metal skittered across the steel floor and clattered against the far wall. Jaws dropped all around. Tae Woo shifted uncomfortably. The drive came to rest, and then Yuri shot it once more. Tae Woo jumped.

Yuri calmly replaced the Les Baer in her jacket, not taking her eyes off the destroyed drive.

“So ends the source of a terrible, *terrible* week,” she said bitterly.

“What have you done?” Jaebeom said in disbelief.

“I think we’ve heard enough,” Taecyeon said, stepping forward. “Sir, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to drop your weapons and follow me.”

Jaebeom half turned to regard Taecyeon’s determined face, then laughed. Hard.

Taecyeon didn’t budge. “Sir, until we’ve ascertained everything Yuri has claimed, both of you are going to be taken into custody.”

“Custody.” Jaebeom chuckled while saying the word. “You are a fool, Taecyeon.”

Taecyeon bristled.

“There is no stopping my father...this...this is but a setback. He has the rest of his life to see the world burn...but just for today,” He flipped out a small thumbdrive shaped object from underneath his sleeve, balancing it and one katara in a hand.

“Jaebeom, no!” Taecyeon reached out with an arm despite knowing the futility of it. His eyes grew wide.

No...

It was too late. Jaebeom thumbed a button on the transceiver and half a second later, a new alarm broke out.

“Let the fire start right here.”

Yuri had stepped off at the exact moment when Jaebeom flipped out the transceiver, but the distance between them had been too great. She couldn't reach him with her blades before he'd activated the countdown, but when she did, she felt the full extent of the carbonized steel sink deep into his flesh. Pushing it deeper through his heart and feeling it break through the surface of his back, she twisted the blade and he gasped as he leaned into her, bright red arterial blood trickling from the side of his lips. She could feel his hot breath on her ear, but it wasn't words that she had heard.

Jaebeom was laughing.

She twisted her blade further, but it only made it sound deeper. Then she heard the words that would haunt her for the rest of her life.

“The world will burn, Kwon Yuri...and there's nothing you or anyone else can do about it.”

Disgusted, Yuri took a step back, lifted her free leg and kicked his limp body off her blade. Jaebeom collapsed, unmoving.

Yuri didn't waste a moment. “Taecyeon!”

“Yuri, get to the helipads!”

Yuri knew what he meant. The helipads were only two floors up on this wing, and they had not a moment to spare. They wouldn't want to be here when their ten minutes were up. Taecyeon turned to start down a corridor to their left. But that was away from the helipads. Yuri stopped him by the shoulder.

“Where are you going?”

“I'm going back to the Ops room. The blast doors to the mountain exterior can only be opened from there. Every internal door is locked open after the failsafe is activated. I'll seal the entrance to the

helipads using a manual bypass so the firestorm doesn't reach you should you run out of time," Taecyeon said quickly, and turned to run again, but was once again stopped by Yuri.

"Wait, then what about you?"

Taecyeon's lips pulled into a tight line. She knew the answer as much as he did.

"Just go, Yuri. You know what to do. Get them out of here."

Yuri nodded slowly, lifting her hand off Taecyeon's shoulder. He nodded back, eyes pained, as if in apology for Jaebeom's trespass more than the fear for his own life. He took off toward the Ops room.

Yuri motioned toward the agents at the end of the corridor. "Move!"

They did as instructed. Seohyun, wound tight as a spring, burst toward a semi-conscious Yoona, scooping her up in one arm. Her mouth worked endlessly, but Yuri could not make out the words from her distance away. One agent came to help Seohyun pull Yoona to her feet, and they shuffled off. Seohyun turned to give Yuri one last look. The latter nodded.

Be right with you.

Yuri turned to the rest of her team and the Spetsnaz operatives, ready to have them on a dead run to the helipads. Jessica was already motioning everyone forward, and Elliot, Tae Woo and Tiffany, supported by Taecyeon, were closing the distance toward Yuri.

"One last loose end to tie up!" Mikhail said, forcing a pause on everyone's movement.

Jessica half turned, but her grasp on the world was suddenly ripped free as she heard a sharp blast. She took a half step backward, blinking, uncomprehending. And then she coughed blood.

Shot through the lung.

Tiffany was the first to turn.

“Jessi!”

Elliot was next to turn and bounded toward her crumpling body, cradling her in his arms on one knee. She regarded him with unfocused eyes. He looked up at Mikhail, a smoking pistol in the Russian’s hand. “What the hell are you doing!?”

“Blood for blood,” Mikhail said through gritted teeth, and spat onto the ground. “I wanted your Kwon Yuri to feel the pain I felt when I saw my comrades burn to death. The pain one can only feel by having your most beloved taken from you.”

His fellow soldiers looked at him with varying masks of surprise. Sure, they hated Yuri, and they had each fantasized a different kind of painful torture for the woman, but this? Now?

Captain Fedoseev descended upon the man, face wrought with fury. “You fool! What have you done?”

“They were not *your* men, captain. You wouldn’t understand,” he spat back disdainfully.

Mikhail disregarded the captain and turned his head sharply to look at Yuri, holstering his pistol. “So how do you feel, Yu-“

The words had caught in his throat. As he locked gazes with Yuri’s, he felt as if she were choking him by power of will alone.

The next few seconds were surreal, passing almost like a slideshow. A dark pall had fallen over the corridor as Yuri fell deathly silent. What frightened everyone wasn’t the fact that she seemed to be unaffected by what had happened, but because her eyes appeared to have turned a dozen shades darker. Nothing, not even light could penetrate those infinitely black pools. Her fists were locked in their

clenched position, the whites of her knuckles contrasting with her dark skin.

Those she faced could not find the strength to move nor speak; as they looked into those black orbs, they were chilled to the core. They knew it in their bones. They were looking at death itself.

Some transformation was occurring within Yuri. As the final shreds of her humanity chipped away, she felt something growing from deep inside, clawing and climbing, digging poisonous talons into her flesh. She was being taken over.

It was a power she had discovered she had during her long years of training with the blade. Through focused meditation, she could will herself to slow time, seeing things for what they were inside; their tendencies, their thoughts. It gave her the equivalent of an inhuman burst of speed imperceptible by the human eye. In this state, she fought on an entirely different plane. It gave her an enormous advantage when fighting against opponents with firearms.

She discovered a darker facet to this power late one night whilst meditating in her room. As she stared beyond the confines of her mind, calming her body and conditioning her focus, something intruded. Something that flowed unbidden and undeniably into her mental periphery, and then straight into her core. She remembered that feeling, that sensation of violation, and she fought to control it; to push it away. Then she realized what it was.

Blood.

Blood of the lives she had taken. Blood of the sinful, the wretched, those who damned her for relieving them of their power and their hold over life. Blood had seeped into her mind, and threatened to contaminate her soul.

For the rest of the night, she found herself embroiled in a mental battle against the invasion of blood, and by the time she'd opened her eyes an hour past dawn, cold sweat and a massive headache reminded her of how close she'd been to giving herself over to the darkness. The lights above her head had gone out. She was sure she'd left them on when she sat down the night before.

But it was different now.

It didn't come to her unbidden. What had just transpired had triggered the blood. It flowed within her, and she felt it course through her veins, having forcibly replaced her own. The darkness swelled and growled, and Yuri felt as if she were suppressing a roar in her throat.

No, it wasn't just the blood. This was darkness, surely, but it had a certain twist. This wasn't a haunting. It was a reaction fueled by her heart. She wanted this. In some part of her mind, she had summoned this.

It spoke to her, and as it continued to grow within her body, she heard the words spoken clearly in her mind. The words were her dictator.

"His blood will not suffice...they will all die."

They will *all* die.

As Yuri felt the remnants of her humanity slip away, she closed her eyes, feeling her heartbeat slow to a crawl, and for a moment, it stopped. What remained of the world drowned out into a mere echo. She took a single breath, the cool air filling her mind instead of her lungs, and suddenly, her heart burst back to life, racing at more than 180 beats a minute. Her pupils dilated, and her muscles twitched.

When she next opened her eyes, a single tear escaped.

It was done. She had given herself over. She embraced the darkness and folded into space, calling upon a power that gave her the gift of unimaginable strength, dexterity and speed.

Bloodrage.

Mikhail could only stare with his mouth wide open as the flitting form of Yuri ravaged the ranks of his comrades. She was a mere shadow, folding in and out of space. Splattered blood and stifled cries accompanied cleaved flesh and bone every time she reappeared, and then just as quickly, she was gone, moving on to her next target. Mikhail's finger twitched on the trigger even as the men around him fired frantically at the fleeting shadow, trying to land a shot. His eyes searched deliriously. He had never seen someone move so fast; kill so quickly, so...*savagely*. Kwon Yuri couldn't have been human. He knew it was useless.

And he knew he would be the last to fall.

Yuri found herself confused even as she blinked amongst the hapless Spetsnaz men effortlessly. She was fully aware that she was in complete control of her body, and at the same time...she wasn't. It was as if every movement, every step, every thrust and swing of her blades had a mind of its own.. She wasn't just acting out the rage pouring out of her; she was living it. She vividly remembered the expressions of the men she'd passed during her flight: confused, frightened, desperate. She remembered the sounds of their screams as her blades tore them apart. They fed the hunger. It made her faster, stronger. Some had been mute; too struck by the sheer terror.

And with every step she took, more tears escaped. What emotion that hadn't gone into fueling the bloodrage was escaping through them. Gone were the practiced motions involving targeting weak points in the human anatomy. Yuri stabbed and slashed wildly at every target, focusing her rage into every blow. At one point, she plunged both blades deep into a man's body and then pulled outwards, ripping him apart from the center out.

More men fell in blood-streaming heaps. The AN-94s continued to futilely fire their two-round bursts into spots where she'd just been. Helmets split. Rifles and pistols were cleaved in half, clattering to the ground in pieces.

Then she arrived at Mikhail. She stopped, the blurred shadow of her form settling into place behind her and then into her. Her blades flowed from her hands in a backhand grip, dripping with fresh blood. Mikhail stood a full head taller than she, and yet he seemed to cower in her presence. He could not bring himself to step back, to turn and run. Those eyes froze him in place. She paused there and then, if only for a second, as if to shove the sheer enormity of his trespass down his throat. The AN-94 fell from his hands, clattering to the floor. His heartbeat thundered in his ears. He stared down with

uncomprehending eyes at the face of the devil, streaks of tears flowing from those lifeless orbs. He remembered the question Peter had asked him back in the safehouse in Rio.

“Who are these people?”

Mikhail wasn't sure he had been asking the right question at the time.

“What are you...?” Mikhail stuttered between his lips.

Whether or not the devil had answered, Mikhail was left to ponder as he felt a flash of intense coldness flow through his body, and then his whole world went sideways.

All of it was over in eight seconds.

The echoes in Yuri's head began to take form, and her senses began to return. She felt the iron grip of her hands on her blades, and as her normal vision returned, looked down to see herself standing in a pool of blood. Mikhail now rested in two piles at her feet. Breathing deeply, she half turned and saw the massacre she had wrought upon the Spetsnaz operatives. None remained. All twenty one of them lay sprawled awkwardly on the ground, crimson pools growing steadily underneath. Bits of gore lay scattered about, the result of hasty evisceration. The walls on either side were splattered with blood, gravity having pulled vertical lines of red down to the floor.

She sharply exhaled, and a new form of darkness began to intrude upon her vision.

She collapsed, letting her blades clatter to the ground, feeling warm blood soaking into her hair and clothes.

Tiffany was the first to come to her side, clutching her injured chest.

“Yuri!”

Yuri’s lips moved as if to speak, but no sound emerged. Her eyes were fixed on some point far away.

Tiffany followed her gaze and traced it back to Jessica, lying in her father’s embrace. One blood-streaked arm hung limply from her side.

Were they already too late?

One Man's Sacrifice [The Last Samurai OST - The Way of the Sword (till 1:04)]

Taeyeon stood at the main console, hands planted firmly on the cold steel. The dreaded sweet scent plagued his nose. The outer blast doors to the outside were open, and he’d already sealed the inner doors once he’d confirmed everyone was inside via the thermal sensors. The helicopters had moved out twenty seconds ago. As those sensors continued to sweep the base, he saw a lone red dot on the screen.

Himself.

He squeezed his eyes shut in self-condemnation. If Yuri was right, and he would never know, the precursors to the past week’s events had been set in motion ten years ago. Events that could have led to unimaginable disaster. Ten years at the Mission Director’s side...and he hadn’t suspected a thing.

Above and to the right, he saw the countdown timer ticking down. In another ten seconds, a massive electrical spark originating from the middle of each level of the base would set off a chain reaction, igniting the sweet-smelling gaseous accelerant that had been filling the air since Jaebeom activated the failsafe. The countdown was set to thirty minutes by standard protocols to facilitate proper evacuation, but according to the digital display on the transceiver Jaebeom held earlier, it had been shortened to ten minutes. The resulting firestorm would sweep through Doppelganger HQ, burning and melting everything...erasing all evidence of their existence. It was the organization’s last resort in case HQ was

compromised by an enemy presence. The irony was that the one who had activated it today was the enemy himself.

"It's the least I could do...for being a fool for so long," Taecyeon consoled himself.

He remembered the Doppelganger creed; a single line engraved into every agent's weapon of choice, and said it softly. "For justice, which humanity may provide none."

For justice, there sometimes had to be sacrifice.

It was then when he heard the roaring crescendo, a deep trundling that groaned in the pit of his stomach. The flames were coming for him.

He turned to face the imminent fire, making his peace.

Mountain Escape - Beyond the Flames [The Last Samurai OST - The Way of the Sword (1:05 - 2:36)]

Yuri felt a cool wind licking her cheek, caressing the curves of her face ever so gently. She turned and found her love lying by her side.

Jessica's face was a mask of tranquility, eyes closed in bliss, lips curved upward. The soft rays of the sun accentuated what had already been milky fair skin.

She reached over and entwined her fingers with hers, feeling the subtle curves of the digits molding easily with her own.

And then suddenly, they were standing. A new sound intruded; a deep, gurgling roar that seemed to

approach them from behind. Yuri turned and saw a wall of flames jetting toward them, swallowing everything in its path. She screamed at Jessica to run, but no sound escaped her throat. She pulled and pulled on Jessica's hand, but the more she tried to move forward, the farther back they seemed to slide. It was getting closer.

"Run!" she screamed, and still, Jessica did not respond. Her face remained impassive.

Then the wave of fire hit them, and she saw Jessica turn to flames.

Yuri awoke with a start, jumping in Tiffany's arms. She struggled to open her eyes, but the piercing daylight would not let her. The whine of a helicopter engine filled her ears. She stirred uncomfortably.

"Shhh...shhh," Tiffany cooed. "It's okay. We're on our way to...wherever it is we're going right now."

"Jessi-...Jessica," Yuri muttered woozily.

"Shhh...she's alright. She's okay. Go back to sleep." Tiffany ran a hand over Yuri's bloodied hair, calming her.

It was a lie. Tiffany didn't know if Jessica was even alive, or if she had bled out in her father's arms. Still, after seeing what this woman had gone through...after all that blood, she simply had to offer what she could to make things better.

Yuri shook her head, then went back to sleep.

"Jessica..."

Chapter 30 : Ground Zero

One Day Later

1800 CET (Central European Time)

Yuri's eyes darted toward the sound of the opening door just as Tiffany was stepping in. Underneath her loose shirt, Tiffany's chest was wrapped with a series of stabilizing bandages. The savage kick to the chest she'd taken back in HQ had cracked a rib and bruised a few others, though it wasn't anything serious.

Yuri's hand never left Jessica's, continuing to unconsciously rub them gently. Yuri's eyes met Tiffany's, and never in all of the latter's life had she seen someone so thoroughly exhausted. The eyes that casually regarded her had lost their edge of scrutiny and calculation. But it wasn't defeat she had spotted in those eyes. Was it something else?

Tiffany had been shuttling between Jessica and Seohyun for the past day as Taeyeon and Tae Woo were up in the Ops room, offering what they could on this entire mess.

With the Mission Director dead, Dr Yoo Jae Suk, Director of Science and Technology for the organization, had been nominated to take over his post, at least for the time being. He was now heading the agents in the Ops room in the search for Park Jin Young. A cleanup crew was already heading back to the primary base.

Her thoughts drifted to Seohyun, who was still badly shaken by the loss of Yoona. She didn't know either of them intimately, but what she had seen was enough for her to conclude that there was something between the two...enough to have torn Seohyun apart. She offered the broken woman what she could, praying silently for her heart to be at ease.

Yuri had declined to leave Jessica's side as soon as they'd touched down on the secondary Doppelganger base, not even to pay her last respects to the fallen Yoona, keeping their proximity close thenceforth. She had also declined to receive any medical attention despite her collapse back at HQ. It appeared as if she was trapped in a trance-like state of catatonia. Tiffany shivered at the thought. She had stopped recognizing Yuri since her...outburst. She dared not relive the moment of staring into the dark pools of death that were Yuri's eyes when her sister was shot. The Yuri that sat beside Jessica now looked more

like an empty shell than a living, breathing person.

As Tiffany crossed to Jessica's bed, she spotted her father dozing on a chair in the corner of the room. Elliot had had his hand looked at and a bandage plastered over his right cheekbone, where a ricochet had grazed his face during the firefight back at HQ.

Tiffany found a seat beside Yuri and let her eyes rest on the sleeping figure. The dominant image of her tough sister was gone now. Jessica looked so...fragile. According to the surgeons, the steel penetrator from the Russian pistol round had gone right through her lung and out her back, making the operation a simple affair of stopping the bleeding and removing the accumulated blood in her chest cavity. They'd also checked and tinkered a bit with the shin wound Jessica had sustained earlier back in Rio, which Yuri had expertly cleaned and stabilized at the safehouse. She'd have to stay away from exhaustive activities from now on, but she'd live. Tiffany chuckled silently. Somehow, the thought of Jessica reading books or doing Yoga sat better with her than chasing down criminals with a pistol in her hands.

Her eyes drifted toward Yuri, whose gaze was fixated on the sleeping blonde. Tiffany knew no words could comfort Yuri for her failing. She'd be lucky to even receive a response from the woman. So she offered the only thing she could. Reaching down, she intertwined her fingers with Yuri's. She gave it a few seconds, and she felt Yuri's fingers tighten over hers.

She'll be okay. We'll be okay.

Tiffany allowed herself a small smile. They were all exhausted beyond imagination, but the important thing was that they were all alive.

At least...most of them.

Blademaster's Death - A Savior's Demise (The Last Samurai OST - The Way of the Sword (2:37 - 5:20))

Seungyeon watched helplessly as the woman beside her sat with her head buried within her hands. She reached up to pat her back, thought better of it, and let it fall with a quiet sigh.

Seohyun had been in that position for the past day, and there was nothing Seungyeon could do but offer her company. But she knew it wasn't any help at all. As she watched Seohyun sob endlessly, she felt her own heart clench. Though death and killing were part and parcel of an agent's life, this was the very first time she had even come close to the concept of personal loss.

In the remotest sense, she could understand what Seohyun was feeling. She was the one who had helped her carry Yoona to a waiting helicopter, and she had watched as Yoona's life slowly but surely slipped from their grasp. The blood just wouldn't stop flowing no matter how much pressure they applied on the massive wound. She remembered Seohyun's infinitely pained expression as she gently stroked Yoona's soft hair, how she thumbed the tears that had escaped from the dying woman's eyes. As she grasped Yoona's other hand, Seungyeon had a front row seat to a scene of tragedy. Just before Yoona's eyes glazed over in death, Seohyun leaned in and over her ear, whispering words unheard over the thundering rotors above.

I don't love you, but I wish you'd given me the chance to learn how to.

The calm, bright-eyed Seohyun she'd known for years was gone now. What remained was this empty shell of a person who seemed to care no longer for the world and for herself. Evidently, one never really understood the idea of love until faced with the life-changing gravity of loss, and Seohyun's loss was compounded by the knowledge that she had never really known that love to begin with. In her mind lay a future distorted by the stark truth of reality; the ever-colliding dreams and fantasies of what could have been, what *should* have been.

Nothing could possibly explain the regret.

Seungyeon reached to carefully place an arm over Seohyun's shoulder, unsure if the woman would deny her and pull away. To her surprise, she didn't. The latter let herself fall onto Seungyeon's shoulder, her tears beginning to stain the woman's shirt. Seungyeon's hand moved to gently smooth the crying woman's hair.

"She's okay now...Just cry it all out."

2 Hours Later

The vibrating cellphone disrupted Yuri's thousandth mental reproach concerning Jessica's injury. She could've sensed Mikhail's intent earlier. She could've had Jessica stand in a less compromising position in relation to Mikhail or the other Spetsnaz operatives. She could've...-

Yuri squeezed her eyes shut and reached for her cellphone. As she was doing so, she stole a look around the room and noticed for the first time that Tiffany and Elliot had left. Perhaps they had joined the rest in the Ops room. She sighed, frowning. How long had she been moping like this? How much time had she wasted when she could have been contributing productively to the effort? She shouldn't be this weak. Looking down at her cellphone, her frown deepened. It was Dr Yoo.

"Sir?"

"Yuri. We need you up here right away."

Yuri shifted uncomfortably, struggling to clear the fuzziness from her head. Something required her attention, and she had to get her head straight. Still, she couldn't quite keep her voice from sounding tired. "What happened?"

The voice on the other line was serious. *"We've just lost all contact with our field agents in Seoul."*

"Seoul?"

Yuri slowly stood. Her eyes drifted to Jessica, whose face remained impassive. "I'll be right there."

Taeyeon was the first to acknowledge Yuri's entrance to the Ops room. "There you are!"

Yuri nodded, scanning the room. Tiffany and Elliot were absent. She shook her head. No matter. They

would all have to convene later. She stepped up to the main console, where Dr Yoo was standing with Taeyeon and Tae Woo, who acknowledged her with a nod.

Dr. Yoo couldn't help but notice Yuri's state of exhaustion, both physically and mentally. He understood Yuri's plight; Taeyeon had told him that Jessica Jung had been a 'close friend', and had decided to allow Yuri a bit of respite, but the matter at hand was urgent. Even more discomfortingly, it was worrying. Something was wrong, and even if he hadn't required Yuri's opinion, she at least needed to know.

“What’s this about?”

“Intelligence lost contact with all agents stationed in Seoul, South Korea a few minutes ago, all within the span of a few seconds. Isotope tracking, radio frequencies, they’re all gone,” Dr Yoo explained.

“Satellite malfunction?” Yuri offered.

“They checked. The uplinks are working fine. Tapping into external sources didn’t work either. And...” Dr. Yoo paused, turning to face the main screen. A number of windows partitioned the wide expanse. “There’s been another worrying development. Communications is seeing a total EM blackout in Seoul right now.”

Tae Woo seemed to shift infinitesimally.

“Perhaps there’s been an EMP attack?” Yuri said, straightening. An EM blackout *was* strange. That could have only been the result of the use of an electromagnetic pulse weapon attack...or the use of a nuclear weapon.

“Wait,” Taeyeon suddenly said, stepping forward slowly.

Dr. Yoo and Yuri turned to face her, curious.

“You’ve been viewing your agents through isotopic tracking and telecommunication, but have you

actually seen where they were with standard ground imaging satellites?" Taeyeon asked, her tone grave.

"She has a point," Yuri concurred, though she sensed a disturbing unease radiating from the woman.

"Bring up a satellite image of Seoul," Taeyeon said, her voice strangely quiet.

Dr. Yoo instructed an intelligence agent to do just that, and the main screen was replaced by the said real-time image.

"Good Lord," Dr. Yoo breathed, stepping back.

Taeyeon brought a hand to her mouth and nodded slowly, as if the image she had just seen had confirmed her prior suspicions.

Yuri felt her heart race.

What...is this?

All activity in the room seemed to cease at the same time, and chairs were spun as agents turned to fix their eyes on the main screen in front. Gasps were heard all around.

Stretched across the screen that spanned the length of the front wall was a chilling image of Seoul...in a mass of smoking ruin. What remained of towering skyscrapers were a broken mess of smoldering debris, and the entire cityscape was colored in varying shades of black and grey. Something had completely decimated the megacity, and the scene looked chillingly familiar to anyone who had seen images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki towards the end of the Second World War.

It was then when they felt a deep rumbling beneath their feet. It seems the aftershock from whatever force had leveled the city had finally reached them.

One agent began typing at his station, and the image of Seoul was obscured by a few windows. Yuri saw the watermarks at the corners of those windows. BBC, CNN, CNBC. An anchorman stood in each of those windows, backed by walls of varying colors, but the same image of a smoking Seoul. Detached, professionally clinical voices spoke through the speakers in the room.

“What we are seeing here is a real-time satellite image of Seoul, South Korea from the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency... ...in what appears to have been a nuclear attack of some sort... ...US officials are currently discussing the cause... ...world governments are unable to make successful contact with Seoul at this time... ...death toll is estimated at twenty million and rising... ...recent updates have reported no detectable radioactive fallout from the explosion...”

Yuri drowned out the muddled mess of agitated reports and the random murmuring going around the Ops room. Of one thing she was sure. Seoul had come just come under attack, and the scale of the destruction was unprecedented in its kind. The roiling unease in her stomach grew. Something didn't fit...or rather, something did. Yuri remembered Jaebeom's last words as he was impaled upon her blade.

“The world will burn, Kwon Yuri, and there is nothing you or anyone else can do about it.”

Her eyes widened with realization.

Yuri spun toward Tae Woo, her Les Baer 1911 suddenly in her hands. The weapon was pointed at his temple.

“You gave Jin Young the data,” Yuri spat, teeth clenched.

Three Nights Before
Private Airstrip
North-East St. Petersburg

A massively built man in a dark suit regarded Tae Woo's approach and casually slipped into the alleyway between two hangars. Tae Woo followed him through, and in moments, they were shrouded in a blanket of still, cold air and a suffocating darkness.

The man said nothing, standing ramrod straight with his hands behind his back. Tae Woo reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a familiar hard drive, making sure it was the correct one before offering it forward. The man accepted and pocketed it, and without uttering a word, spun on his heel and stalked off.

Tae Woo leaned back against the cool metal exterior of the hangar, sighing.

"What other choice did I have?"

Present Day

Taeyeon recoiled away from her father in shock.

Tae Woo calmly turned to face Yuri, his features expressionless. "You know there's no way you can stop Jin Young, Yuri."

Taeyeon took another step back, shaking her head. "No...Dad...you didn't..."

"I did it for you," he said quietly.

Taeyeon's eyes darkened. "For *me*? We've been through hell for the past week, and just when things

started to take a turn for the better, you threw everything away! And you say you did it for *me*?”

“He promised us a new life! A fresh start after the end of the storm!” Tae Woo stepped toward Taeyeon, but was stopped by Yuri’s Les Baer.

“Stop doing things ‘for me’, Dad, because every time you do, you just make things worse!” Taeyeon shouted.

“You naive *idiot*,” Yuri hissed. “Do you realize what you’ve done?”

Tae Woo remained silent, jaw tight.

Dr. Yoo’s expression had darkened considerably. “You’ve just given a madman access to the most powerful weapon on the planet,” he whispered menacingly.

“I was taking responsibility for myself and my daughter,” Tae Woo argued.

“Now you have to take responsibility for the lives of everyone who was in the killzone of that blast,” Yuri said with a deep loathing, jabbing one finger at the screen.

“You’re disgusting,” Taeyeon spat.

Dr. Yoo motioned for a couple of agents to step forward. “Take him. Bring him down and lock him up. Give him nothing.”

The agents stepped forward, each a little shorter than Tae Woo’s giant frame, and took his arms. Tae Woo shrugged them off angrily, spun on his heel and followed them out the door.

Just then, Tiffany and Elliot stepped in, heads half turned toward the three leaving men.

“What happened?” Tiffany asked from across the room.

Yuri shook her head and turned around. As she lowered her pistol, she noticed Taeyeon with her head in her hands. She approached the shorter woman, moving to place a hand on her shoulder.

“We’ll get him,” Yuri said assuringly.

“We’d better,” Dr. Yoo said.

Yuri turned to look at the man. His expression was the gravest she’d seen in all her life in the Doppelgangers. She heard a gasp from behind. Tiffany.

Dr. Yoo’s eyes were fixed on the screen. More news updates were pouring in by the minute. His next words marked the beginning of a race against time in which Yuri was desperate to finish first, or risk losing everything she had ever known.

“This is only the beginning.”

Chapter Thirty One : Countdown

10 Minutes Later

Ops Room

Secondary Doppelganger Base

“What do you think it is?” Yuri asked, though she very well already knew the answer.

Dr. Yoo pinched his brow, glancing between a data sheet handed to him by one of the support agents just moments before and the main screen, which still showed the smoldering remnants of Seoul. News reports and data feeds continued to pour in at the sides, and other agents were busy chattering away at their keyboards, requesting more data and running more scans.

“Zero radioactive fallout, immense thermal bloom, lack of telltale mushroom cloud...” Dr. Yoo paused, shaking his head, as if to confirm a previously growing fear. “There’s no doubt about it...it’s a large scale anti-matter explosion.”

Yuri nodded slowly, frowning. “Then it’s really begun. Park Jin Young has access to weaponized anti-matter and a viable storage medium...There’s no telling when or where he’ll strike again. We need to stop him as soon as possible.”

Unable to breathe amidst the growing tension of the Ops Room, Tiffany approached Taeyeon, touching the woman’s elbow. The latter turned, and Tiffany was taken aback by Taeyeon’s expression. It was a mask of deep pain and disquietude...much like guilt. She needed to know more. Tiffany held Taeyeon by the forearm, tugging her toward the door. The shorter woman dazedly followed. Just before they stepped through the door, Tiffany looked back at Yuri, who fixed her with a purposeful look.

Take care of her.

Tiffany nodded.

Dr. Yoo continued to shake his head as his eyes became fixed on the data sheets in his hands. “Blast

radius reports indicate an output equivalent to roughly 43 megatons of TNT. If I recall correctly, that's about a kilogram or so of pure anti-matter. Such a small quantity is easily transportable...in addition to anti-matter being non-detectable-

"Sir," Yuri interrupted impatiently, yet with a recognizable tinge of respect, "We need to get moving. Now."

Dr. Yoo looked up at Yuri, whose expression had turned determined. He had known that face since he'd met her years ago after her inception into the organization. The first thing he had noticed about Yuri was an unusually pronounced mental fortitude and will. Usually, such traits could and would amount to stubbornness, which tended to hinder an agent's actions and capabilities, but Yuri was different. Special. Yuri lived on her emotions, the result, at least according to his analysis, of a profound attachment to something or someone prior to the beginning of her training. Emotional fortitude and mental fortitude, coupled with simple logic and razor-sharp wit in Yuri became an effective and decidedly deadly compound to serve as a foundation for her prodigious talents honed during training. Once Yuri set her mind on something...there was no turning back; no stopping her.

He nodded once.

Just as he raised an arm to begin giving orders to the support agents in the room, Seohyun stepped through the threshold with Seungyeon. Yuri turned to acknowledge her.

Seohyun's face was still a mess of deep pain and dried tears, but in her eyes shone willpower not much different from Yuri's. Seungyeon stood a bit awkwardly by her side, appraising the room with uncertain eyes.

"I tried to stop her-

"It's okay, Seungyeon," Seohyun interrupted, turning her head halfway toward the woman and giving a reassuring nod before facing Dr. Yoo. "I heard the news. Sir, with your permission, I'd like to resume my post."

Dr. Yoo's eyebrows rose in slight surprise, then a small smile broke out on his lips. "Juhyun, it's alright. Take this time to rest. You're not in the most stable emotional state right now." His words faltered a

little toward the end, the ends of his smile curving downwards as he was suddenly and painfully reminded of the loss of Yoona, one of the Doppelgangers' few talented blademasters. He let out a short sigh. Mourning would have to come later. The world came first, no matter what.

Seohyun closed her eyes and shook her head resolutely. "I'm fine, sir. Please. Let me continue." She looked up at him with renewed strength.

"Time's wasting, sir," Yuri reminded softly.

Dr. Yoo's smile slowly returned. "Well...if you insist, how can I refuse?"

A relieved albeit tired smile grew on Seohyun's face, though Yuri noticed that it wasn't as wholehearted nor sincere as before. At that moment, she knew. She knew that Seohyun was eager to get back in the game because she felt she owed Yoona. Her fallen colleague and friend would have wanted justice and the restoration of peace, as did all other Doppelganger agents. As did Taecyeon. Seohyun's renewed faith and determination was her own tribute to those who had fallen to the rise of a long forgotten evil.

"Thank you, sir," Seohyun said, turning to face Seungyeon once more with a smile, this time brimming with gratitude, and then she moved toward her station. As she did so, she made brief eye contact with Yuri.

"I'm okay."

Yuri nodded unconsciously.

Dr. Yoo turned to face Yuri. "The agents down below reported Tae Woo as saying he'd passed the data to Jin Young via a member of the Russian Mafia at the airstrip in St. Petersburg. We need to find out who that was, and where he went afterward."

Yuri nodded. At that moment, she felt rather uncomfortable. The loss of Jaebeom, though fitting, was sudden, and Dr. Yoo being Mission Director felt...out of place, at the very least. The post was usually reserved for seasoned field agents who were intimately familiar with the intricacies of deep-black

espionage and combat. What was more discomforting was that she felt like she had become the de facto second-in-command after Taecyeon, in a sense. Leading wasn't something she did very well. Neither was replacing someone without prior official approval or appointment. She decided that she would provide her ideas, but it would ultimately be up to Dr. Yoo to make the decisions on how to execute their plans.

"We have an extensive database of individuals tagged with the isotopic trackers. Since the transporter was part of the Russian Mafia, we should have him on tracking too. The problem is, we don't know who he is, and the Mafia numbers in the thousands," Yuri said.

Dr. Yoo considered this for a moment. "It could help to determine where the data should have gone. We can gather a list of possible locations and then cross reference them with the isotopic tracking data, see what matches we can find."

A voice called over from one of the stations in the room. "Sir, I'm picking up a massive spike in military comms traffic worldwide. They're more pronounced in major countries. It seems armed forces everywhere are mobilizing."

Dr. Yoo nodded. "This is the first step in Jin Young's plan. Chaos. Increased global military activity makes for both diplomatic tension and confusion and fear in the global populace. It's not every day when an entire major city is wiped off the face of the planet."

Another voice from across the room. "Sir?"

Dr. Yoo acknowledged the man, urging him to continue.

"The President of the United States, the Director of National Intelligence, the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff are convening in the White House."

"Looks like the US is getting jumpy. They know they're involved...apparently they still think they're the only ones capable of producing anti-matter," Yuri explained.

"And the public want to know what exactly went down in Seoul. Tens of thousands of American troops

and civilians were within the killzone of the blast...And I don't think the President knows about the anti-matter program," Dr. Yoo said skeptically.

Yuri's eyes were still glued to the tactical screen. "Well, if he doesn't, something tells me he'll soon find out."

White House
Washington D.C.
United States of America

"Director Bennett, are you telling me that the US has to do with what just happened in Seoul?"

The Director of National Intelligence, John Bennett, also the current serving Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, was a brilliant man of quick wits and astonishing foresight, as expected of someone who had served for almost a decade in the US Armed Forces' acclaimed 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta, or Delta Force as is more commonly known. A tall, athletic native of the southern state of Georgia with an Ivy League degree in Psychology, Bennett began his military career as an officer in the United States' renowned 75th Ranger Regiment, an elite light infantry unit based in his home state, before he was handpicked for Delta Force selection.

Having served tours in Afghanistan and engaged in both front-line combat and then clandestine cover-of-night unconventional warfare in the Middle East, his finely-tuned senses, impeccable leadership and strong character attracted the attention of head hunters from the CIA in what was the beginning of a life of strict secrecy, uncompromising precision and perpetual stress.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, all senior generals and admirals of the US Armed Forces exchanged uncomfortable looks. Accomplished, ageing men in their late sixties who had been through more than a handful of wars and looked well past their retirement age, burdened by heaps upon heaps of medals, decorations and honors on their starched dark blue uniforms, they understood the gravity of the predicament they were currently in, and that they had kept more secrets from their own President than any of them would have preferred.

The joint Fermilab-CIA anti-matter program of the last decade was a closely guarded secret, privy only to those who were essential in its execution. The Chiefs of Staff and the CIA had gone to astronomical lengths to procure funding and infrastructure for the progress of a program they had deemed indispensable to the United States' military and technological arsenal.

But with Seoul in smoking ruins and the telling signs of the use of weaponized anti-matter, the product of that very same program, something had obviously gone terribly wrong, and it was time to spill the proverbial beans.

The President looked in disbelief at the men seated around him. "You *knew*? All of you?"

More uncomfortable expressions.

"Mr. President-" the DNI began, but was just as quickly silenced.

"Gentlemen, we are at DEFCON 2 and a major capital city has just been dropped off the map, and you're telling me that the *United States* is responsible? What the hell is going on?"

"Mr. President," the DNI began more resolutely this time, earning the President's attention. "What happened in Seoul was the result of an anti-matter bombing."

"Anti-matter? What are you talking about?"

"Anti-matter, the opposite of matter, with which it annihilates, liberating-"

The President slammed a fist on the heavy mahogany table, eliciting a loud thud. "God damn it John, I know what the hell anti-matter is! What I mean is, how in God's name did *that* happen?" He pointed to a screen behind him, a satellite feed of Seoul.

The DNI shifted uneasily in his seat, then chose to stand and began pacing the length of the table. "The CIA has been working with Fermilab over the past decade on a viable way to make the shift away from

nuclear weapons without losing our hold on power with the Russians and North Koreans. That decade's worth of research and funding culminated in a stable and tested solution for weaponized anti-matter and anti-matter storage." The DNI gestured toward the screen behind the President. "Seoul was the victim of an attack based on weaponized anti-matter."

The President's expression darkened markedly. "So an American, one of our own countrymen did this?" He said in a tone thick with skepticism.

The DNI shook his head. "No, sir. It's absolutely impossible to move a storage container holding anti-matter out of Fermilab...so we believe one or more data leaks occurred at some point between the start of the program and a few months ago...providing one or more countries with the means with which to produce weaponized anti-matter themselves."

The room went deathly silent. In seemingly slow-motion, the President eased his chair back and stood from his seat. The Secretary of Defense and Joint Chiefs of Staff immediately sat straighter and then scooted to stand, but the President forced them back down with an outstretched hand.

"So, John...what you're saying is, someone got to the data of a maximum-security project of a national laboratory, and now the Russians and North Koreans could be in possession of this...weaponized anti-matter?" he said slowly.

The DNI stood straighter. "Yes sir, and...that's a possibility, sir."

A heavy silence descended upon the room once again.

The President scanned the room with intense eyes that seemed to bore into each and every one of the men present. In those eyes burned a nervous rage and purpose uncharacteristic of the man that struck fear into the hearts of even the most senior of the group, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; a man even older than he was.

"I want to know everything related to this anti-matter program. When I walk out of this room, I expect to be privy to anything and *everything* in its scope. Do I make myself clear?"

All eight men nodded.

“Taeyeon, what happened? What’s gotten into you?” Tiffany asked softly, keeping a hand on Taeyeon’s arm.

Taeyeon simply shook her head. “It’s all my fault...I shouldn’t have existed...then none of this would have happened.”

Tiffany’s grasp on Taeyeon’s forearm tightened, her brows scrunching, uncomprehending. “What’s your fault, Taeyeon? What’s going on?”

Taeyeon looked up at the taller woman, eyes brimming with moisture. But these weren’t tears of guilt. Her eyebrows were pinched in anger. “That was Seoul you were looking at back there, Tiffany. Seoul, South Korea. Gone. My father! My father...he...he gave Jin Young the containment data.”

Tiffany’s eyes widened in shock. “He *what?*”

“And he says he did it for me. For me! He just killed millions of innocent people to save *my* pathetic life. I don’t deserve this...How could he do that after what we’ve all been through?”

Tiffany stood shell-shocked, unsure how to react. Park Jin Young had just made his first move, and her beloved had just told her that it was her father who had paid the biggest contribution to that effect. She wished she could say something to comfort her love, to tell her that it was alright...but was it truly alright that over twenty million people had just been incinerated, vaporized or crushed to death by falling debris as a result of her father’s actions? Tiffany knew it didn’t make sense to blame Taeyeon at all, but she couldn’t help but feel that slight reluctance, enough to make her hesitate in her reply.

She struggled to grasp for something, anything that she could use to answer Taeyeon’s needs. Tiffany knew all too well that while Taeyeon always tried to put on a strong front, deep down she was someone who needed constant assurance, a promise of belonging and of being needed, not merely wanted.

Tiffany lifted her other hand to hold Taeyeon's fingers and lifted her chin to look into her eyes.
"Taeyeon, he made a mistake. But he did it to protect you."

"By harming other people? By betraying our trust?" Taeyeon's tears had spilled over and were now rolling down her milky-white cheeks. Tiffany frowned at the sight. Such beauty shouldn't have been marred by streaks of pain and grief.

"I've never wanted this!" Taeyeon burst out, shaking her head vigorously. "I've never wanted any of this from the start! Everything back in Rio, back in the States...I've regretted almost every moment of my life from the time I began following in my father's footsteps. I went to school! I had friends! I had a *life*! Why? Why couldn't I have just led it like everyone else? Why did people have to die because of *me*?"

Tiffany gasped, if only slightly. All those years of ordering hits and running the cartel with wit and cunning back in Rio...Tiffany had never imagined that Taeyeon had been feeling this way. The Harvard graduate turned drug lord had always demonstrated an infallible cool and complete lack of guilt. Now she knew all that had just been a carefully and painstakingly practiced facade. Just how much had Taeyeon been holding back all these years?

"I've *killed* people, Stephanie. Directly or not, I've done it, and I'm not proud of it. I've never been proud of taking a life."

Taeyeon began pounding on Tiffany's shoulder, hot tears continuing to fall from her eyes. Tiffany had never seen Taeyeon burst out like this before and quickly closed the distance between them, scooping the shorter woman up in a hug. She ignored the sharp stab of pain in her chest from the contact. She offered nothing, for no words could possibly have any effect on Taeyeon in this state.

Taeyeon continued to sob in the depths of Tiffany's shoulder. "I wish I were never born...not to a father like him."

The words struck Tiffany like a freight train. Could she have imagined a life without Taeyeon? In fact, she probably could have, but that would have been a life without the adventure of discovery and survival; a life without the lessons which taught Tiffany doubt, caution and most importantly, love. A life without Taeyeon would have been colorless; purposeless and meaningless. Her own tears began to spill over.

Elliot decided he had heard enough. He emerged from behind the doorway, obviously having overheard

the entire conversation.

“Taeyeon, Stephanie.”

Both women looked up at him, eyes bloodshot, somehow in their degenerated condition realizing that they had been eavesdropped upon.

“Follow me. I want to show you something.”

30 Minutes Later

Ops Room

Secondary Doppelganger Base

The clock was ticking, and with each passing second, Yuri felt an uncontrollable roiling fear building from the pit of her stomach, threatening to consume her whole. With each passing second, another city could be approaching unimaginable disaster, the aftermath of which almost impossible to recover from. Her duty, her purpose in the organization suddenly became startlingly apparent in all of its simplicity.

Their job was to save the world.

And Yuri had the intention of doing just that. She and Dr. Yoo had decided that China and North Korea were their best bets in determining the final destination of the anti-matter containment data, and the support agents were now sifting through thousands of flight manifests containing records of any known members of the Russian Mafia traveling to those countries over the past handful of days. They both knew that it was like searching for a needle in tens of thousands of haystacks, especially with China given its massive geographical size, but they had to try.

Moments later, they had the breakthrough they’d been searching for. An agent hurriedly presented a printed sheet to Dr. Yoo, who shared it with Yuri.

They'd found a match.

One Nikolai Reznev, a member of the lower rungs of the Russian Mafia, just tagged with isotopic tracking a couple of years ago. The report showed that he had been on a flight to Pyongyang from St. Petersburg just hours after Yuri and her team had arrived at the airstrip for their journey to Geneva.

"It's North Korea," Yuri said.

Dr. Yoo nodded absently, still studying the printed sheet. There was a long list of geographical coordinates, starting from the time he left Russia till he'd returned from Pyongyang a day later. It acted like a map, showing exactly where he'd been during his journey. The problem was, those coordinates ended in Pyongyang's Sunan International Airport, about twenty five clicks from the city's center. That means he'd handed the data over to a third party, who presumably would have carried it the rest of the way to its final destination.

"Was there another tagged subject in contact with Nikolai in Pyongyang?" Dr. Yoo asked the agent from before. The latter shook his head.

Dr. Yoo frowned.

Seohyun offered something from her station nearby. "Sir, if it isn't possible to determine the third party via isotopic tracking, perhaps we could study satellite feeds of key installations in the North Korean peninsula for any abnormal change in logistical patterns. The North Korean scientists and engineers wouldn't have known what materials were required to synthesize the anti-matter containment vessels before the data reached their hands, so that would have to have arrived some time later, and in significant quantities."

Yuri nodded eagerly. "That does make sense."

Dr. Yoo nodded at Seohyun and smiled. "As a matter of fact, it does. Looks like you're back in the game, Juhyun. I'll leave the satellite feeds to you, then."

Seohyun returned the smile and began typing furiously at her workstation.

Yuri was getting more and more surprised by Seohyun with each passing moment. This was definitely a new side she was seeing to the woman. Seohyun seemed to have found the strength to dam the floodgates of grief that had burst open with Yoona's passing. Now, she was glowing with the signature intellect Yuri had always known her for. The woman was determined to see this through just as she was, and Yuri was proud.

Yuri turned to Dr. Yoo with a serious expression. "If the anti-matter weapons are being made in North Korea, we're going to have to infiltrate the facility and put them out of action. There could be a way to deactivate existing bombs as well."

"There is no doubt in that. But we lack the resources to do so on such short notice and with so little intel," Dr. Yoo said, seeming to trail off at the end.

"You have an idea, don't you?" Yuri asked knowingly.

"I have a pretty good idea whose resources to borrow for a task such as this," he said confidently, moving over to the communications officer at the end of the room.

"It's best to make a grand entrance, don't you think so Yuri?" Dr. Yoo called over.

Yuri frowned, a strange unease forming inside of her.

Dr. Yoo leaned over the communications officer.

"Get me on a direct line to the President of the United States of America."

Chapter 32 : Revenge By Proxy

0550 CET

Infirmary

Secondary Doppelganger Base

Elliot pushed through the door to Jessica's ward, moving to sit beside her bed. The blonde remained unconscious, her features peaceful and undisturbed. Elliot smiled. Though she had gotten hurt, he decided that it would have been better this way, to be put out of action and out of further danger. The past week had taken its toll on all of them, both physically and mentally, and his heart ached each time he looked into Jessica's eyes and saw nothing but pain and doubt.

Tiffany and Taeyeon trailed in behind, and the former drifted towards the bed, reaching down to hold Jessica's hand in hers. Taeyeon chose to keep her distance, unsure. The fact that she was partly responsible for everything that had transpired since their first meeting had implanted a deep guilt within her, and now, with an unresponsive Jessica and the presence of her family, that guilt had grown worse.

Tiffany turned and noticed Taeyeon's unease. She moved to stand beside Taeyeon, reaching for her hand. The latter pulled away, shaking her head. Still, Tiffany pressed on, finally intertwining her fingers with Taeyeon's, giving them a light squeeze. The shorter woman's head hung low, unable to meet Tiffany's eyes.

An exaggerated sigh drew their attention to Elliot, whose eyes were fixed on his sleeping daughter. Taeyeon bit her lip.

"Too many things have happened...for me more than any of you," He began, turning to look at the couple. He took in the picture and smiled, shaking his head. "I still can't believe you two are a couple, you know? It's ironic...and nothing short of a miracle."

Tiffany frowned. "Dad, what are you talking about?"

Elliot sighed again. "Stephanie, do you know why you're still standing here," He turned towards Jessica, "Why your sister is still alive today?"

Tiffany shook her head. "I don't understand. We got through everything that was thrown at us, and we did it together. Why does it matter?"

Elliot shook his head. "No, Stephanie." He took a deep breath, steeling himself to break the news. "If it weren't for Taeyeon's father, you two would have been dead by now, long before you'd gotten involved in all of this."

Taeyeon looked up, carrying the same frown as Tiffany.

"Eight years ago, I received a message from an anonymous sender asking me to meet him at a café back in LA," Elliot began. "Do you remember, Stephanie? That was the time I had begun working for months at a time without coming home. That was when I became involved in the US anti-matter program. It was top secret; I couldn't tell any of you. But then I was back for a short break. It was the week I was supposed to take you guys to Disneyland."

Tiffany considered this for a moment, then nodded. "I do."

"Curious, I went. That sender turned out to be Kim Tae Woo himself."

Taeyeon's frown deepened.

"He said nothing to me when I first took my seat, but instead pushed a thick dossier toward me from across the table. I took it, and when I looked inside...that's where everything began." Elliot paused, as if to compose himself. "Inside were photographs of you, Jessica, Krystal and your mother."

Tiffany gasped. "You mean--"

"Tae Woo knew what I was doing. He knew I was involved in the anti-matter program with Fermilab and the CIA. And he wanted something from me. He told me to retrieve the anti-matter production data for him, or he would kill all of you."

Tiffany took a half-step back, her hand still holding Taeyeon's. "He what? T-then, why didn't you call the

police? Tell the CIA someone was threatening you?"

Elliot shook his head. "The dossier he gave me. It was so detailed, it was horrifying. He had all your schedules, right down to when your mother would stop by Starbucks for her double chocolate frappe every Tuesday evening. The thoroughness of his surveillance led me to believe that he had people watching your every step. No stone was left unturned." He rested an elbow on the bed, placing his forehead on his hand. "I couldn't say no, not when he was this convincing."

Tiffany shook her head. "But I don't understand. You said Kim Tae Woo was the reason we're still alive. How does that fit in?"

"Our fates were more closely intertwined that I'd ever imagined. As you all know by now, Tae Woo was actually working under Park Jin Young. Long before I had gotten involved with the anti-matter program, I was the commanding officer of INSCOM, or Army Intelligence. That was my job. The CIA recruited us under executive order to do a lot of digging on Jin Young, a man not even they understood. Apparently, during the time I spent working to retrieve the data, Tae Woo had made discoveries of his own. He'd found a reason to turn against the man. He realized that giving the anti-matter data to the Russians didn't just stop there. Jin Young was planning something."

Tiffany nodded, urging her father to continue. Inside, something was twisting and turning, transforming, needing. This was the first time since this entire mess began that she'd realized how small a player she was in this game. Everything that had been going on had been the result of almost ten years of planning, killing, and subterfuge. In that moment, she felt insignificant. Taeyeon's expression was gradually changing from doubtful to curious.

"After I handed the data to a contact working for Tae Woo, I snitched to the CIA out of guilt. That prompted Jin Young to order a hit on our family...a hit from which I was saved by Tae Woo's own men," Elliot's face darkened considerably as his mind dove back through the haunting memories he'd had to live with for almost a decade.

"That night...before you and Jessica made it home for Christmas, Jin Young's men broke in and...and killed your mother and Krystal," Elliot's voice cracked a little towards the end, and he took a deep breath to calm himself. The sense of profound guilt from many years ago had begun to engulf him. "One of them was about to chop my arm off with an axe when Tae Woo's men arrived and took them out and knocked me unconscious, replacing me with a body double to make it look to Jin Young that the hit was at least a partial success. I awoke a couple of days later in one of Tae Woo's hideouts, and later learned

that Tae Woo had intended to save us in exchange for my help in tracking down Jin Young. He knew about the work I was doing previously in INSCOM under the CIA. He'd wanted to take advantage of that."

Taeyeon looked up, mouth slightly agape. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Her father had intended to save Tiffany and her family? During that time, she had still been studying in Harvard, and was oblivious to her father's true nature.

"I did, and at the same time, he promised to have you and Jessica under constant protection for as long as required. Jin Young knew you were alive, and more hits would certainly have been ordered on you during all those years. Tae Woo saved the both of you, Stephanie. Possibly more than once," Elliot continued.

"Tae Woo has been...protecting us? For all these years?" Tiffany asked, astonished.

Elliot nodded.

Taeyeon began to shake her head. "I don't understand, Elliot. Why are you telling us all of this? Why now?"

Elliot stood slowly, turning to look Taeyeon deep in the eyes. "Because I want you to know that even though your father has made one too many mistakes and jeopardized far more lives, I'm thankful to him because without his promise, Stephanie and Jessica would have been dead by now."

Taeyeon looked back at him, eyes glassy from tears.

"I worked with him for years, Taeyeon. Up till the point where he faked his death in the US, suffered the loss of your mother and was forced to induct you into the trade. During all of that time, he worked with fervor that I, as a father myself, could only interpret as being motivated by a deep love. Even faking his death; he did it so he could bring you and your mother away and start afresh, to escape from Jin Young. He hadn't wanted any of this for you, Taeyeon. He did it all because he cared for you, even if he didn't show it. Even if he'd made the wrong choices in trying to prove it."

The tears that Taeyeon was trying so hard to hold back finally spilled over. “He’d never once told me that he loved me.”

Elliot smiled weakly. “Sometimes, when you love someone...some words just don’t need to be spoken.”

Taeyeon next found herself buried in the crook of Tiffany’s neck, hot tears streaming down her cheeks and staining the taller woman’s shirt. Tiffany could only hold her close.

“Why didn’t he just tell me...”

“As a father, I can tell he needs you now more than anything, Taeyeon. Go talk to him. Tell him you’re okay. That’s all he needs to know.”

Taeyeon looked up from Tiffany’s shoulder and nodded slowly.

1400 KST

**Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility
Somewhere in Central North Korea**

“Everything is prepared and in order, Dear Leader.”

“Very good. Return to your station and await further instructions.”

“Yes, Dear Leader.”

Park Jin Young turned to face the person instrumental to the success of his decade-long endeavor and fellow countryman, Supreme Leader of North Korea, Kim Yong-guk. The short, rotund man was dressed in an impeccably pressed military uniform, shoulders bearing the brass decorations of the Supreme Commander of the Korean People’s Army, chest brimming with medals bestowed upon him not by personal accomplishment, but rather by default.

Jin Young, having met a dead end with the Russians' betrayal of their former agreement over the anti-matter program, had approached North Korea with a proposition that made the North Korean government lick its lips with delight. They had agreed on Jin Young's proposal, with only one condition.

That Seoul was made his very first example.

And what a resounding success it was. With Seoul obliterated, South Korea in disarray and the rest of the world on its toes, Jin Young and Yong-guk, together with North Korea's brightest nuclear scientists and engineers, had front row seats to the biggest display of total destruction the world had ever seen.

"You are indeed a man who has been greatly disturbed, comrade Jin Young. It's too bad our fellow countrymen in the South had to suffer such a horrible fate. We are all Korean after all, are we not?" The Supreme Leader began, a small smile playing upon his lips.

Jin Young nodded and smiled. "Is it not representative of North Korean philosophy, Dear Leader, that one man with the desire to overcome all odds, without conscience or compassion to hinder his aims and means, can effect great change upon our world?"

The Supreme Leader's smile grew, and a short chuckle escaped his lips, and he raised a hand to pat Jin Young's shoulder. "It is indeed, comrade."

They turned to face a massive screen at the fore of the control room, a map of the world peppered with numerous red dots surrounded by larger concentric circles of a lighter shade, marking various major cities across the world. Beside these dots were green boxes filled with numbers that changed with each passing second.

"Ashes to ashes," Jin Young said softly, clenching his fists so tight he felt the warm flow of blood break through his skin. His voice grew steadily quieter and more strained, until it sounded like a low growl. "The world...shall be..."

"...in flames."

0600 CET
Ops Room
Secondary Doppelganger Base

Seohyun searched her computer screen with intense eyes. Adrenaline ran free in her blood, and she used the excitement to spur herself further. The excitement was difficult to explain, but she'd attributed it to a deep-seated determination to do her best not for herself, not for the world, but for her fallen love, Yoona.

She didn't deserve to die that way.

Her jaw tightened as she continued to type furiously at her workstation.

I could have loved her. I should have. But I wasn't given the chance. Why?

Numbers scrolled down the screen in endless streams, information pouring in from the various sequences she'd invoked to gather data from satellites everywhere. She couldn't stop now.

You can kill her, but you can never kill her spirit.

Matches were made. The map on her screen shifted and rotated. A crosshair drifted about, sometimes settling upon one spot, then jerking and moving again.

Her spirit lives on within me. And with her spirit comes strength.

The crosshair continued to shift, then finally settled permanently.

I will not end you.

Seohyun turned to look at Yuri, who was watching Dr. Yoo from afar.

But she will. And she will ensure you suffer more pain in an instant than you have had in your entire life.

Feeling eyes on her, Yuri turned and locked gazes with Seohyun. Her eyebrows rose slightly in curiosity.

Evidently, she had never seen this side of Seohyun before. Behind those big black eyes...something burned. As if she were talking to her. No, commanding her. Yuri frowned.

Yuri, I want him to suffer. Promise me. Promise me now.

For some reason...Yuri felt her chin dip in a nod.

At the other end of the Ops Room, Dr. Yoo stood close by to the communications officer.

"Is it ready?"

The officer nodded. "Encryption is up, along with the audio frequency manipulator."

Dr. Yoo nodded and accepted the receiver. He put it to his ear, hearing a series of clicks in place of a regular dial tone. Looking down at the communications officer's console, he saw a bar slowly being filled from left to right. The connection to the White House was being made. He reached down and pressed the button to activate the speakerphone, which allowed everyone in the Ops Room to hear the conversation, yet betrayed no sound from the room to the other side.

"Annie, I thought I told you I'm not to be disturbed!"

"Good evening, Mr. President."

0015 EST
White House
Washington D.C.
United States of America

The President held the receiver away from his ear for a moment, frowned deeply, then placed it back on his ear. The voice that had greeted him was a deep bass and distorted, like a kidnapper's voice on the phone on television. Who was this? No one in the White House would even dream of pulling a prank like this, especially during the crisis they were now facing.

"Who is this?"

"An interested party, Mr. President. The discussion with the DNI and the Joint Chiefs of Staff is going well, I presume?"

The President's frown deepened. How did he know who he was with? Out of paranoia, he began scanning the ceiling and corners of the room, as if expecting to find a hidden camera of sorts. He shot a look at the DNI, who was already phoning CIA headquarters back in Langley, Virginia.

"Get me the Intelligence Office. Run a trace on the President's office phone in the White House," the DNI chattered quickly in a hushed voice. "Don't ask questions, damn it! Do it! Now!"

The deep voice drew the President's attention back to the receiver. *"You can put the phone on speaker, Mr. President. I believe everyone with you will be interested in what I have to say."*

Another look toward the DNI. John nodded, and the President pressed a button on the phone, placing the receiver on the desk.

"Now will you tell us who you are?"

“As I’ve said before, Mr. President, I am merely an interested party. One who is familiar with your unease with Seoul’s destruction...and the US anti-matter program.”

The nine men in the room gave each other startled looks. How was it possible that an outsider was privy to the anti-matter program? Unless he wasn’t an outsider? Could he be a scientist or engineer, or perhaps someone on the military side who is involved in the program? Was he the mole who had smuggled out the anti-matter data? The President looked to the DNI. The latter shook his head. Still no trace on the call.

“Why are you calling?”

“To guide your focus to the crux of the problem. Seoul is the first of multiple targets around the world; targets of anti-matter bombings. The global crisis we are now facing can be partially attributed to your anti-matter program, but what’s important, Mr. President, is who’s responsible.”

“Mr. President, we don’t have to listen to some lunatic-“

The President held out a hand, silencing an Army general who thought he’d heard enough. The aged man sat back, deep lines creasing his already wrinkled forehead.

“I believe the DNI is intimately familiar with this man. Are you listening, Mr. Bennett?”

The DNI looked at the phone with contempt. “Yes. I’m listening.” He decided that his first order of business once this was over was to search this very room a thousand times for bugs, then do the same for the rest of the White House. And the Pentagon. And CIA HQ. For starters.

“Do you recall an individual by the name of Park Jin Young?”

The DNI did a double-take, momentarily forgetting the voice coming through his own cellphone and the frustration building inside of him. The mere mention of the name had caught his attention, but still he decided to play it safe.

“Doesn’t ring a bell. What about him?” he lied.

"Do not play dumb with me, Mr. Bennett." The voice paused for a few seconds, and the caller took the time to imagine the DNI's smoldering face. "Park Jin Young is the one man the CIA hasn't been able to track down nor successfully profile for over a decade. He's a ghost, and the CIA doesn't like chasing ghosts, do they?"

The DNI kept his cool. He was indeed intimately familiar with the name. When the CIA repeatedly hit dead ends in the search for this man, it wasn't hard to remember his name. And this caller...was it possible that he knew more about Jin Young than even the CIA? The DNI ignored the hurried string of words pouring through his cellphone, useless updates on the failing progress of the call trace. Who was this caller and what kind of resources could have to have evaded a CIA call trace for this long? What was his involvement, his motivation?

"I'm listening."

"Glad you've remembered, Mr. Bennett. Park Jin Young is the one responsible for your anti-matter data leaks at Fermilab. He's also someone who, according to our own profilers, will stop at nothing to see the world reduced to dust. Make no mistake. His actions have reached the point of discounting logical reasoning. And he has found the perfect tool with which to further his goal."

The Secretary of Defense spoke for the first time. "What?"

"Not what, but who. Kim Yong-guk, Supreme Leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea."

"The North Koreans are involved in this?" the President asked.

"But they don't have the resources, the manpower," one of the Joint Chiefs offered.

"Or don't they? The world would do well to never underestimate the most misconstrued country on the planet."

One last look toward the DNI, and he shook his head in frustration. Still no trace. He pocketed his cellphone.

"Are you proposing something, then?" the President asked, having clearly given up on holding back.

"I thought you'd never ask, Mr. President. We believe there will be a 24 hour grace period before the next attack, to let the world simmer and devolve into panic...Jin Young and the North Koreans will strike when we are at our weakest. Remember that the attack is not an act of war, but of terrorism. They seek to feed on our fears, and their actions are impossible to predict with any reasonable accuracy. Mr. Bennett, I've heard that Skunk Works has just finished finalizing its latest project for the CIA. As I recall, it's a specialized aircraft outfitted with stealth technology, designed for high-altitude Special Forces insertions deep within enemy territory."

The DNI's eyes grew wide with horror and surprise. How did he know? Even the names of CIA projects were top secret. And this man even knew what the project entailed. He didn't know who to trust anymore, or who was more dangerous; this mysterious man on the phone, or the one responsible for the unprecedented destruction in South Korea.

"Time is short, gentlemen. Seoul is in ruins, and Washington could very well be next. And Park Jin Young will sit and watch as the world collapses into chaos and anarchy. You don't know Park, but we do. And we know where he is. But we need your help to stop him. We have agents of our own waiting to go into action, Mr. Bennett. I believe the time has come to put Skunk Works' skills to the test."

The DNI looked toward the President for direction. The latter simply nodded with an expression that said *"do what you must."*

John Bennett let out an exasperated sigh. "Have your agents rendezvous with our operatives at Misawa as soon as possible."

Chapter 33 : Promises

She had to find her.

Jessica's feet brought her forward, slowly and agonizingly, her arms out in front of her, fingers reaching and scrabbling for something that wasn't there.

One more step. One more breath. She was delirious; confused. Her eyes searched everywhere, but as far toward the horizon as she could see, every direction she turned, she could only see flames.

"Yuri!"

Her voice cracked. Not by strain, but with immense pain. Every inch, every fiber of her being screamed as she was scorched right to the bone. She did not know if she was crying, for there were no tears. The fire engulfed her, splitting her a thousand times over, and yet she could not die. There was no escaping the pain.

"Yuri! Where are you?"

Her lungs felt as if they were twisting and turning themselves inside out. The left side of her chest seemed to hurt more, though she didn't know how she knew that considering how much pain she was in. The flames continued to burn.

Then she heard the screaming. Voices coated with a terror so deep and profound, each of them seemingly stifled, yet together resonated in a cacophony of pure agony rang in the air. Suddenly, the voices grew in volume, and just for a second, Jessica felt a sense of violation, of surprise and of despair, as if she had just had her life snatched away from her in an instant. The flames grew infinitely hotter, searing her skin and yet burning nothing.

Just for a millisecond, Jessica was given her own baptism of fire.

“Yuri? Please...please help me! It hurts!”

Yuri was nowhere to be found. Jessica remembered holding Yuri’s hand, staring into eyes filled with love and confidence and promise...and then Yuri screamed and she felt a starburst of pain as the flames took her.

“Yuri...why have you abandoned me?”

0610 CET

Infirmary

Secondary Doppelganger Base

Tiffany sat by Jessica’s bed, dabbing away the tears that remained on her cheeks. There was a wet patch on her shoulder, where Taeyeon had just cried into before. Her love was now on her way to the Ops Room to seek permission from the Mission Director to see her father.

Tiffany allowed herself a small smile as she held Jessica’s hand. She allowed herself the solace that no matter how overdue, even in the impending doom they all seemed to be charging headlong into, some things could still be saved.

Her moment of peace was interrupted when she felt fingers squeeze hers. She started, sitting ramrod straight. She shot a look at her father who was sitting on the opposite side.

“She’s awake!” Tiffany looked at the blonde expectantly, watching as her eyelids twitched.

Then she felt her fingers being crushed. Tiffany frowned. Something was wrong. Her sister’s eyelids seemed to quiver and squeeze shut, her brow scrunched up in what Tiffany saw as pain. She looked to her father in confusion.

“What’s wrong?”

Elliot shifted to stand, perplexed.

Then the screaming began.

0608 CET
Ops Room
Secondary Doppelganger Base

“I’m the only one going in?” Yuri asked as she approached Dr. Yoo.

“I think a lot of us know that you work best alone.”

Yuri frowned. “I work perfectly fine in a team.”

Dr. Yoo shrugged. “You’re all we need, really. The Americans seemed really spooked. I wonder if it was something I said,” he mused with a rather playful smile.

Yuri scoffed, and then smiled. She couldn’t believe Dr. Yoo could still fool around at a time like this, but then she felt grateful for at least that bit of relief from the tension. She guessed that all of them needed a little break even when the world was facing imminent destruction.

“Well, it’s not every day the Director of National Intelligence gets his own secrets handed to him on a silver platter. You may as well have reminded him of where he lives, too,” Yuri said.

Dr. Yoo chuckled and shrugged. "I'd honestly considered that briefly, but I sensed he was already dealing with enough for one night Anyway, Misawa...I suppose the DNI liked my idea of an aerial insertion.

They'll probably spend a couple of hours prepping the prototype and calling in and briefing their operatives, and then send them over to meet you at Misawa Air Base. I just hope they've got the right fuel for the prototype at Misawa. It uses a special formulation to reduce heat signature from its exhaust."

"Spare me the details, please. It's certainly been a while since my last-" Yuri stopped suddenly, eyes growing wide.

Dr. Yoo looked at her curiously. "Yuri? What's wrong?"

"I'll be right back," she said hurriedly, spun on her heel and dashed out of the room.

Dr. Yoo's eyes wandered toward Seohyun, who shared his perplexed expression.

Something was definitely wrong.

0612 CET

Infirmary

Secondary Doppelganger Base

Jessica thrashed violently on the bed, flailing her arms at one time and arching her back as her body locked up in pain the next. Her chest heaved as she continuously sucked in deep breaths of air and expelled them in blood-curdling screams.

Tiffany was standing now, holding onto Jessica's forearm, trying to hold her down. "What's wrong with her!?"

"I don't know!" Elliot said frantically, similarly trying to hold Jessica down. The woman's normally milky-

white skin was now deeply flushed. “We need help!” He looked to the ward door. “Is there anyone out there?”

Jessica’s high-pitched screaming finally began to carry intelligible words.

“Where’s...Yuri...I can’t...find...her!” Jessica seemed to growl the words, punctuating the end with another scream of pain. Her eyes remained scrunched closed.

“Yuri?” Tiffany said, more to herself than to anyone else.

The door to the ward burst open and a slender figure slid to a halt, appalled by what she was seeing.

“The...fire...it hurts! It hurts!”

Yuri sprinted to the bedside, sharing a brief look with Tiffany, who could only communicate her confusion and need.

Please...help her.

Tiffany stepped aside for Yuri, who grasped hold of Jessica’s wildly gesticulating hand. Her touch was gentle, and yet she commanded a firm authority that guided the hand down to the bed. She leaned down beside Jessica’s ear and whispered the words.

“Jessica, it’s okay.”

Jessica’s surroundings transformed in an instant. She looked around, seeing nothing but wispy clouds that spread out in an indeterminate expanse both above and beneath her. The flames were gone, and so was the pain that had her in teeth-splitting agony.

"Jessica, it's okay..."

Jessica craned her head upward, eyes searching. "Yuri? Yuri! Where are you?"

She reached with her arms, further and further as the light beyond her hands grew bigger and brighter until it consumed her whole.

Yuri watched as Jessica's eyelids fluttered open, eyes glazed over with a layer of tears regarding her with disinterest. As the tears spilled over the corners of her eyes, Jessica's vision focused, pupils enlarging and shifting. She relaxed into the bed, breathing normally.

"Yuri?" The blonde said weakly, reaching up to hold Yuri's face. The latter supported the trembling hand, placing it on her cheek.

Elliot breathed a sigh of relief at his daughter's return.

Yuri nodded, reaching to hold the hand that curved and molded so perfectly with her jaw. For just a second, she paused to savor the feeling.

"I'm here. It's okay now."

Jessica breathed, fresh tears spilling over to roll down her cheeks. She had never seen Yuri smile like that since ten years ago, and in that moment in time, memories of their long lost love flashed by. In that moment, she remembered every brush of Yuri's lips against hers, every minuscule sensation as their bodies molded together in perfect union, and every cherished memory they shared together with the same heart and soul.

That smile had brought her back.

Jessica reached up and wrapped her arms around Yuri's neck, and the latter allowed herself to be dragged down to the bed, her face buried in the warmth of her pillow.

"Please don't leave me ever again, Yuri. Please..."

Yuri smiled at the irony. She was going to say yes, but she knew that she was about to plunge into her final foray in the battle against Park Jin Young.

Yuri pulled back from the embrace to look at Jessica's face, a mixture of pain, longing and relief.

"I'm sorry, Sica...but I'm going to have to leave one last time."

Jessica smiled at the mention of her pet name; a name she hadn't heard for so long, then Yuri's words began to register. She frowned and shook her head. "Why?"

Yuri smiled. "To make sure that nothing can ever separate us ever again. When I come back, I will never, *ever* leave your side."

Jessica's lips trembled, hot tears still flowing. "Promise me you'll come back."

Yuri cupped Jessica's face with one hand, tracing her jaw line lovingly.

"I promise."

Jessica nodded, holding Yuri's hand as she brushed her cheek against her fingers.

"I have to go," Yuri said softly, with a tinge of reluctance.

Jessica nodded again. "I'll be waiting."

Yuri displayed another dazzling smile. "I've been waiting for eight years, Sica."

Giving Jessica's hand one last squeeze, she turned, nodding at Elliot and Tiffany before striding out the door. She could not look back, for if she did, she wasn't sure if she could muster the strength to leave again.

"Yuri!"

Yuri turned to see Tiffany jogging towards her. She lifted an eyebrow at the woman as she came to a stop, huffing slightly.

"What's up, Steph?"

"You're going out to find Jin Young now, aren't you?"

Yuri nodded.

"Can't I come with you?"

Yuri's surprise mounted. "You?"

Tiffany nodded, but remained unsure. "Yeah. I want to come. I want to help."

Yuri shook her head dismissively. "I don't believe you've had combat jump training before, Stephanie."

"C-combat jump?" Tiffany stuttered, rubbing the back of her neck. "Why, of course I had! They put me through a course back in Interpol. Regulation and all. Pretty routine."

Yuri gave her a knowing look. "Really? And what did you learn in that course, exactly?"

"Combat jumps, of course! You know, jumping from a height, rolling to break fall...things like that."

Yuri let out a soft chuckle.

"Hey! What's so funny?"

Yuri stopped laughing and crossed her arms. "A combat jump, Stephanie, is an aerial insertion from a height exceeding thirty-five thousand feet, with full equipment load...and a parachute. I don't recall Interpol training their agents to jump from planes."

Tiffany couldn't mask her shock. She felt her confidence deflate rapidly.

"O-oh..." The floor became of sudden interest to her.

Yuri smiled and lifted a hand to place on Tiffany's shoulder. "I know you want to help, Stephanie, but your place is here with Jessica. She's been through too much, even as a seasoned FBI agent. She needs her family's support."

"But I-" Tiffany began, but Yuri cut her off with a nod and a wave of her free hand.

"I know why you became an Interpol agent."

Tiffany looked up at Yuri in surprise. "What did you just say?"

"You and Jessica share a few similarities. You're both smart, passionate about the things you do and incredibly determined once you've set your mind on something. You also share the similarity of having the need to express yourself after what happened back in 2010."

Tiffany's eyes wavered for a moment. Yuri's words had hit home, and she felt her heart lurch.

"You took different paths. Jessica's was more...destructive, in a sense. But both of you believed in the same thing. You felt that in your line, the more you did, the harder you tried, the deeper you dug, perhaps one day, just maybe, you'd come across the killer who did this to your family. And when you did, you'd bring him to justice. Am I right?"

Tiffany bit her lip. She nodded slowly.

"Well now we've found him. We have him, Stephanie, but you're not ready to deal with him." Yuri paused for a moment and closed the distance between Tiffany and she, lowering her voice to a whisper. "Jin Young is a psychopath, the likes of which even I don't understand. But I've been trained for this. I will end him for you. For all of you who have suffered under his trespasses, for those who have died fighting against him."

The words chilled Tiffany to the bone, and the tone with which Yuri said it didn't help any.

"You have to trust me, Stephanie."

Tiffany closed her eyes, then stepped forward and leaned against Yuri's shoulder. The latter hugged her, patting the back of her head gently.

"I'll come back. And when I do, we'll all be a family."

Tiffany pulled back immediately and looked at Yuri in shock. Her tear-glazed eyes carried a spark of hope and innocent surprise.

Yuri smiled. "Yes, Stephanie. When all of this is over...I'm going to propose to Jessica. I don't want to be apart from her ever again."

0605 CET

Detention Level

Secondary Doppelganger Base

Taeyeon approached the two agents flanking either side of a steel door, meeting their eyes briefly. She'd decided to drop the tough guy act, already having poured her soul out to Tiffany and Elliot earlier.

Elliot was right. No matter what, Tae Woo was still her father, and even she saw that his intentions were good...though his methods bordered on foolish. All those years. She wondered how much pain he'd gone through when her mother was killed by Jin Young, and how much more he had to endure when he'd had to make her work in his trade. She closed her eyes in shame. She'd been selfish, and unrightfully so.

The agents acknowledged her and stepped aside, nodding. One of them punched an access code into a keypad beside the door, eliciting a soft beep and the shifting of locks. The door eased ajar with a chuff of hydraulics.

"Just give us a shout and we'll be right in," the agent assured her.

Taeyeon shook her head as she stepped through. "I don't think I'll be needing any help, thanks."

Tae Woo looked up at the opening door, temporarily blinded by the sudden intrusion of light from the outside. Solitary confinement was supposed to be nerve-wracking for the common man. Tae Woo, however, was anything but. A silhouette stood limned in the light, pausing at the threshold. Its presence felt familiar. He shifted inquisitively, then his suspicion was confirmed as the lights in the cell came on.

An arm was brought up to shield his eyes against the light, but he let it fall and his eyes adjusted, he finally saw the one person he'd wanted to see all this time.

"Taeyeon?"

Taeyeon remained silent. She stepped toward him slowly, eyes fixed on the floor in front of her until she stopped at his feet. Without a word, she took a seat beside him on the hard bench, meeting his eyes for the first time.

Tae Woo reached to take off his sunglasses. He needed to have an unadulterated view of his daughter.

“Taeyeon...”

Her expression became suddenly belligerent, lips curving downward in apparent distaste.

“You idiot. You’re the worst father a daughter could ever have,” she spat.

Tae Woo’s eyes shifted away from her gaze for a moment. He looked like he’d just taken a stab to the heart.

Then Taeyeon’s eyes softened, her lip trembling with emotion.

“But you’re still my father...and I love you,” she said softly, reaching up to embrace her father with both arms.

Tae Woo recoiled in shock, and then eased back into the hug. It was a feeling he’d forgotten since Taeyeon was a mere child. And he regretted that he did.

“I love you, Dad,” Taeyeon said again, burying her head in her father’s shoulder.

“I love you too, Taeyeon...and I’m sorry.”

For the first time in her life, Taeyeon saw her father cry.

Six Hours Later
Somewhere over Russia

Yuri gazed out the window of the private jet, watching absently as a sea of clouds passed by under her. She was alone on a plane again for the first time since her flight to Rio de Janeiro, but instead of confidence and excitement, she was now feeling lonely. Her mind drifted from place to place, settling sometimes on Jessica, where her heart felt lighter, imagining the joyful days ahead after their marriage, and then on the danger she was now heading into, where the only thing that was certain was the chance that she could die, leaving everything behind.

There was one other thing that bothered her.

Jin Young. What was his motivation? Why was he doing this? Yuri decided that if she could defeat him, she would get those answers from him before she relieved him of his wretched life. She deserved to know. Everyone did. And then...what kind of opponent would he be? What were his strengths? Did he have any weaknesses? She shook her head. Why was she feeling suddenly nervous? Was it because she was about to do battle with a man nobody understood? Or was it because she was unsure if she could keep her promise to Jessica?

"I'll be waiting."

Yuri took a deep breath, expelling it in a long, steady sigh.

Years of training. Years of being away from the love of her life. Years of deceit and subterfuge. Of death and vengeance. Hours away from global collapse.

Her questions, answers, victory or defeat...lay in a remote mountain range in the world's Hermit Kingdom.

Chapter 34 : Special Activities

0430 JST

Misawa Air Base

Misawa, Japan

Yuri was greeted by a rush of cool air she descended the final step of the Gulfstream G650 onto the runway of Misawa Air Base. The sun had yet to rise over the horizon at this wee hour of the morning, and the only light came from the landing lights lining the runway and the brightly lit control tower up ahead.

A column of military policemen donning sunglasses and straight faces and carrying M16 assault rifles lined an imaginary path leading to a black limousine with dark tinted windows. If they had been surprised to see that only one VIP had arrived, or that she was a woman, they didn't show it.

She sighed. Sunglasses. At night. Was any of this really necessary?

She dismissed the guard standing off to the side, presumably the one who would be 'escorting' her to their next destination, and spent a moment to take in her surroundings.

Misawa Air Base was a US military facility located in the small city of Misawa, some 680 kilometers north of the capital city of Tokyo. As the only combined, joint service installation in the western Pacific, it housed all three services of the US military, as well as the Japan Self-Defense Forces.

Before the outbreak of World War Two, Lake Ogawara, a massive body of water north of the air base, was used as a practice ground for pilots in preparation for what would be the attack on Pearl Harbor, the very event that irrevocably pulled the United States into a war it had no prior interest to be involved in.

Many would call the attack a tragic, condemnable mistake, but many more would come to accept that the attack on the United States was in fact blessing in disguise. December 7 1941 was a day to be remembered not only as the day where thousands of American lives, military and civilian alike, had been lost, but as the beginning of a massive reversal of the fate of the world. Had the Americans not joined

the war and forced Hitler to fight on an additional front, Nazi Germany would have reinforced its hold on Europe while concentrating most of its offensive forces on the total domination of Soviet Russia. The fascist and anti-Semitic dogma of Nazi Germany would have spread throughout the known world. Indeed, the modern world thereafter would have been a very different place.

Nearing the end of the war, rather ironically, Misawa was devastated by American fighters and bombers, with about ninety percent of its infrastructure destroyed, and with Japan's surrender, it came under the occupation of US forces. Upon reconstruction by US Army engineers, Misawa Air Base continued to serve the US Air Force on green and black missions alike throughout the ensuing Korean and Cold Wars.

Now it stood as a joint military-civilian airport with domestic flights to Tokyo and Osaka International Airports and a major staging ground for the US 35th Fighter Wing and the JASDF 3rd Air Wing, as well as many other units from the US Army and Navy.

Not quite.

Yuri looked toward the western corner of the Air Base, where a smattering of alien-looking rounded domes stood silhouetted against the night sky, limned by soft internal lighting. She smiled. The radomes belonged to a US National Security Agency network called ECHELON, an intercontinental effort with Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom historically used for monitoring military and diplomatic communications of the Soviet Union and its Eastern Bloc allies, and later for hints of terrorist plots, large-scale crime organizations and political and diplomatic intelligence. Technically, it intercepted communication made using radio, microwaves and satellite transmissions.

With the shift away from communications based on electromagnetic waves to fiber-optic cable systems in the recent years, however, ECHELON had just about run its course in its usefulness as a potent intelligence collector and disseminator. Interception was now limited to satellites, whose use in global communications were also largely replaced by fiber-optics.

Yuri knew exactly who ECHELON was being used to watch in the recent years. With its strategic position in north-eastern Japan, it was in close proximity to its closest belligerent nation.

North Korea.

Misawa Air Base was nothing more than a staging ground for US tri-service support missions into Korea, and ECHELON was a covert listening station directed at Pyongyang. Like other military facilities based around Japan and in South Korea itself, it served as a springboard from which American forces could 'join the fray' should there be a resurgence of the 1950-1953 Korean War. With North Korea's ongoing nuclear program and development and testing of nuclear-capable ballistic missiles despite global condemnation, along with the fact that its armed forces was one of the largest in the world despite its geological size and perpetual state of widespread poverty, the US would do well to keep their friends in Seoul and Tokyo close, and their enemies in Pyongyang even closer.

Still, mystery abounded when it came to the Hermit nation. Yuri wondered just how much the US intelligence services knew about the shady country. More so, she wondered if they knew anything that could help the imminent operation.

"Ma'am?" The military policeman's deep voice brought Yuri back to her senses.

She turned, gave him a slight nod and began making her way to the waiting car. Another guard standing at the end of the line stepped from his spot and swiftly opened the rear door in crisp military fashion, ushering her inside.

As the door was slammed shut, Yuri was immediately alerted to a presence at the far end of the car. Her eyes focused, sizing the man up. His airy voice confirmed her suspicions on his identity.

"I find it rather strange that only one agent was made available for this rather sensitive operation." The voice carried a thick Southern accent, making the spoken words sound deliciously smooth. Yuri found no trace of surprise in that sentence in spite of its content.

"I was told that I'm all you needed."

"You intrigue me, miss...", he trailed off.

"Kwon Yuri."

"Kwon Yuri." John Bennett paused, as if to roll the name around in his mouth, tasting it.

“This...organization you are working for. It interests me. And believe me, Miss Kwon; it takes a lot for me to be interested in something.”

Yuri flashed a dazzling smile. “I believe working in the CIA is just as interesting, Mr. Bennett...What with all the behind-the-scenes action, secrets and cool gadgets. I wonder...will we be using those today?”

John looked out the window at the radomes Yuri was scrutinizing earlier and smiled as well. He knew that she was talking about them in particular.

“I’ve been doing a lot of reflecting during my journey here, Miss Kwon, and if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that there’s probably no benefit in keeping anything more from people who have your deepest, darkest secrets in the palms of their hands.”

Yuri lounged deeper into the luxurious leather seat as the limousine smoothly set off, seemingly gliding upon the smooth surface of the runway. Just for that moment, her body reminded her of how truly tired she was, having forgone fitful sleep for a week. Her training would help her see this through, but Yuri knew that no matter how hardy an agent could possibly be, sleeplessness still had the potential to cloud judgment. She tented her fingers over her black suitcase, which carried a standard issue Doppelganger laptop. She’d had to abandon her previous one in the BMW M5 during the scuffle back at Galeao International Airport.

“As the Director of National Intelligence of the United States of America, against all logic and instinct, I am asking for your help. Perhaps one day the United States might have the privilege of being able to better understand those whom you work for. But let’s put that aside for the moment...,” he trailed off again.

Yuri nodded with a hint of sincerity. “I appreciate your willingness to work together on this. Believe me; I think we need you guys more than you need me.” Yuri paused. John seemed to blend deeper into the shadows. Strange. She knew that he was right there, and yet, there was something amiss about this man. “As for the latter...” It was her turn to trail off.

John eased forward from his seat into the light that shone from the middle of the ceiling, casting a weak glow on the floor of the limousine. He had moved just enough to reveal the color of his suit: it was a pinstriped charcoal gray. Beneath it laid a white shirt and dark tie tucked neatly underneath the blazer.

What struck Yuri most was his bright green eyes not dissimilar to her own, though hers were just contact lenses. Even though she could make out the bags around them, clearly from fatigue, she could not discount the sheer strength of his gaze. In that span of five seconds, she felt herself being sized up in more ways than she could have ever imagined; it was as if he were picking at her very brain just by looking at her.

“As I said before, let’s put that aside for now,” he finally said. There was a slight glint to his eyes as he smiled warmly. He then retreated back into the shadow of his seat.

Yuri felt a chill run down her spine, and she clutched the armrests on her either side to keep it from showing. If there was one thing she knew, it was that she could never trust a man who kept secrets for a living.

0435 JST

Though the hangar was dark and eerily quiet, Yuri could feel the presence of multiple entities lingering about the massive space. Even more so, she could just barely make out something large; very large, sitting still in the center of the great steel structure.

Their quiet footfalls against the cold tarmac was punctuated by a resounding screeching and banging of metal as the hangar doors were slid closed, and they were swallowed whole into an infinite darkness. Yuri stopped walking, preferring to remain still until her eyes adjusted-

There was another loud bang, and the lights in the hangar came on. Yuri felt herself take a half step back as she craned her neck to look up at the black monster staring down at her.

She was not one to be easily surprised, but this time, she could not suppress her wonder. Yuri was standing before the front wheels of what seemed to be an aircraft of some sort. As she retreated, keeping her eyes on the silent bird, she was finally able to make out the aircraft’s shape and determine its size.

Sharp, jagged angles criss-crossed throughout the body of the aircraft, forming awkward dead-ends and strange geometrical shapes along its length. It had a canopy that looked large enough to hold a single crewman, presumably its pilot. As Yuri backed away further, she made out a pair of tail fins that jutted out from the rear of the aircraft in a 'V'. A pair of wings swept back at a large angle provided lift. The entire aircraft was painted jet black, making it look intimidating and aggressive.

Yuri stopped. This was not a new aircraft. She was familiar with its sharp corners and telltale triangular shape, along with the design of its tailfins.

This was a Lockheed F-117 Night Hawk...with some discreet differences invisible to the untrained eye.

"The culmination of years of research and development by the CIA in conjunction with Lockheed's famed Skunk Works division," John said, noting Yuri's wonder with unsuppressed pride.

"Development of new, revolutionary aircraft is expensive and time-consuming. This, Miss Kwon, is the result of our engineers' goal to put the traits of our best aircraft into a single body."

In truth, Yuri knew that if this newest development was anything; it was astronomically expensive. The US did have an affinity for runaway costs wherever military research and development was concerned.

Yuri backed up to join John, who waved an arm over the length of the aircraft sitting before them.

"The SI-71 or Stealth Insertion-71 Ghost: Lockheed's finest creation, or rather, combination. We've combined the revolutionary stealth capabilities of the F-117 Night Hawk with the high-altitude flight ceiling of the SR-71 Blackbird. This is what will allow us to fly subsonic high-altitude insertion missions deep into enemy territory inviolate. For the first time in military history, US Special Forces troops can conduct HAHO missions at an altitude in excess of seventy thousand feet. The new design features greater shrouding of its twin turbofan engines within its wings, with special fuel additives to reduce exhaust plume visibility and temperature. It's also painted over with a newly developed radar-absorbent material. Even with advancements in radar technology today, the Ghost maintains a radar cross-section of a ball bearing. Virtually undetectable."

Yuri remembered enough about the original F-117 Night Hawk to know that it contained an internal bomb bay behind the pilot's canopy. Was it still there? "Where will the troops be carried?" Yuri asked.

John smiled. "The original Night Hawk carried a split internal weapons bay in its fuselage, able to carry up to five thousand pounds of ordnance. This was converted into a pressurized cabin to hold up to ten fully-equipped operatives. As such, the Ghost is unarmed on its own."

"And where will those operatives jump from?"

John's smile grew. "It's actually a running joke amongst the engineers back in Skunk Works. The old Night Hawk dropped bombs. Now it drops people." He pointed toward the middle of the aircraft. "Doors open outwards on the underside of the cabin in the same way its bomb bay doors would have operated in the past. I think you know the rest."

Yuri nodded in approval. "Very impressive."

A door opened somewhere in the hangar and Yuri heard the familiar sound of approaching boots.

"Ah, they're here," John said.

Yuri said nothing, following closely behind as John led the way toward an area off the center of the hangar, where a row of chairs, a whiteboard and a large table stood. Probably the briefing area. Yuri guessed that since she was the one with the information, she would be the one giving that briefing proper.

As the two groups converged, Yuri eyed each man carefully. There were six in total. All donned an advanced-looking orange colored full pressure flight suit, but only one did not carry a weapon, gear or a parachute. She guessed that this one was the Ghost's pilot. The other five's suits were overlapped with myriad straps and buckles that undoubtedly led to the parachutes on their backs. They had no reserve chutes. They carried helmets under their left arms, and all but one had the familiar M4 carbines with various attachments strapped flush to their chests. The other carried an Mk 14 Enhanced Battle Rifle, a variant of the more popular M14 rifle. The rest of their equipment must have been secured to tactical suits worn underneath the flight suit. These were most probably the men she would be working together with. Physically, they were lean, tall and well built, sporting short haircuts with little or no facial hair. All were strong-jawed and white.

She sized up each one, careful to meet their eyes, studying their intent and trying to read their

emotions. They appeared to be in their late thirties, but their intense gazes seemed to betray greatly aged wisdom and calculation. There was no doubt that these men were Special Forces types. There was no surprise there. Yuri was sure that the US would send only their best into an operation such as this. The only thing she was curious about was the services and units from which they came.

As she continued to examine the men, she found no trace of emotion, no pronounced physical traits or quirks, no distinguishing feature. She frowned. These were hardened men; incredibly so, seemingly accustomed to going on deep black missions such as the one at hand. Perhaps they weren't Special Forces after all. No...something greater. Something more sinister; more effective.

Yuri knew of such men. Each was, in a way, psychopathic to an extent, be it attributed to a higher than normal intelligence, a relatively deviant moral or psychological compass, or otherwise. These were men who were individually unique, yet as a whole, still could not be fairly compared to those of the general military population. They were men who volunteered to enlist for an additional tour in a warzone while their peers sought every excuse to return home.

They could not survive in the civilian world, save perhaps as hired mercenaries; contract killers. Still, money could not quench their thirst. They thrived on the adrenaline rush of action and the thrill of suspense. More disturbingly, they had no conscience; at least, not one that was in any way relative to that of the common man. Killing, to them, was a game that was played in its finest form.

The men stopped in front of the DNI, standing at ease. Truly, the days where they paid due respect to a higher authority were long gone. This came with the fact that they knew they were the very best. They certainly would not have been summoned here otherwise. Still, ill-disciplined as they appeared to be, they were undeniably incredibly disciplined soldiers; highly efficient men who could count on each others' strengths, weaknesses and skills to get the job done.

John waved a hand over the men standing in front of him. "I introduce you to the men of the CIA Special Activities Division."

Yuri nodded to each of them in turn. No words were spoken. If there was anyone she would sincerely respect, it would be someone from SAD.

These were the famed superspies of the United States; ghosts recruited from the very best of the United States' Tier One units: Navy DEVGRU, Delta Force, whose recruits were in turn previously chosen from

the best of Tier Two groups. The elite of the elites, these men carried degrees from notable Ivy League institutions and were trained in and excelled at an exceptionally wide range of disciplines, from foreign languages and unconventional warfare to high performance driving and extreme outdoor survival. They were also known for their deniability, which meant that the US government had the right to deny their existences should they be exposed in enemy territory. To Yuri, they were the closest men of the outside world came to a Doppelganger. A single operative behind enemy lines could cause unimaginable devastation.

Nothing more needed to be said. These men were ready to go into action; to face any kind of danger or challenge.

“Let’s get to work,” Yuri said as she lifted her suitcase to the large table to the side.

2025 CET
Ops Room
Secondary Doppelganger Base
Somewhere in Switzerland

“Yuri and the others have convened,” Dr. Yoo began. “Do you have the location, Seohyun?”

Seohyun nodded. “I have everything in order. I’m just waiting for her to come in.”

Dr. Yoo nodded approvingly. The past fourteen hours had been spent gathering more information required for the insertion into North Korea. He looked around. Night had already fallen, and it had been almost a full day since the agents in the Ops Room had begun working, but not one of them showed any hint of fatigue or distress.

His eyes came to rest on the recon officer, Seo Juhyun. She had been contributing the most to the planning of the operation, going beyond locating the drop zone to calculating flight paths and jump locations and attempting to put together a better visual picture of the area. This last effort was not as straight-forward as the Rio mission, where a satellite had been conveniently in place to survey the immediate area. They had no such privilege this time. Even if they did, it would be unlikely that it would

be any help since according to Seohyun, most of the North Korean facility was based underground, out of reach of even the most advanced ground penetrating satellites. Once Yuri landed in North Korea, she would only be able to maintain audio communication with the Ops Room. There would be no visual guidance.

He frowned. Something in his gut was bothering him, but he couldn't exactly place what it was. Something was off.

He'd considered the possibility of having rogue agents in their midst; those who had been turned over time either by Jaebeom or by Jin Young himself. If that were true, how many would there be? Were there truly others whose will would fall sway to their wishes? No. He'd decided not. He knew Jin Young's story, perhaps a little more than anyone else...perhaps a lot more than he'd have preferred. Jaebeom, the puppet master, was himself his father's puppet, and those he had manipulated were fooled rather than turned. Jin Young only had access to the organization's agents through his son. Even if there were those with questionable loyalties, they would still be the minority, would they not? He shook the unease away. He needed to focus on the task at hand.

The man the world had been chasing for years had been cornered...a man who had been wronged so gravely that this secret had been lost in the Doppelgangers on purpose for two decades, except to those who knew where to look.

He clenched his fists as he stared at the screen in front of him, which was now displaying a map of North Korea, peppered with bits of information and markings essential to the operation.

His peers had made a terrible mistake in crossing the man before his expulsion from the organization. Little did they know that he was capable of such vengeance.

It was time to end this once and for all.

2030 CET

Infirmary

Secondary Doppelganger Base

Taeyeon and Tiffany stood outside Jessica's ward, fingers intertwined. They had broken from their earlier hug and were now leaning against the metal wall of the corridor in silence. Tiffany was content enough to be in Taeyeon's company.

The shorter woman finally broke the silence. "Tiffany."

The taller woman turned to face her, curious. "What is it, Taeyeon?"

"I was just thinking," Taeyeon began, then paused.

"What's wrong? You can tell me," Tiffany pressed.

Taeyeon sighed and reached to take hold of Tiffany's other hand. "It's just that...even though I never liked it, before the past week, I was accustomed to believing that I could get anything I wanted, do anything I wanted. And then all this happened, and I realized that I actually had so much to lose. I just..."

Tiffany let go of Taeyeon's hand reached up to cup the woman's jaw. "You don't have to apologize for anything, Taeyeon. I know you're not a bad person. It's why I fell in love with you in the first place."

Taeyeon shook her head. "It's not that." She paused again, then looked up to meet Tiffany's eyes. She took the time to savor the moment, then spoke again. "I never knew that just one week could change a person so much. I never knew that I could learn so many things, feel so many new emotions. It made me even surer of some things I'd constantly doubted in the past."

Tiffany cocked her head a little to the side, more to better look at Taeyeon's troubled expression than in curiosity. She found her thumb tracing Taeyeon's jaw in a gesture of assurance.

“I realized that I’m such a small person in a huge world I can’t even begin to understand.”

Tiffany simply nodded, listening.

“But more so I’ve realized that there are people who truly care about me.” Taeyeon nodded to herself. “My idiot father,” she said with a smile while shaking her head, and then looked back up at Tiffany, “and you.”

Tiffany couldn’t suppress a smile. Her eyes slowly but surely disappeared into Taeyeon’s favorite pair of upturned crescents.

Taeyeon stepped closer toward Tiffany, gazing deeply into her eyes. “For years, I loved you as Tiffany Hwang.” She tiptoed to kiss Tiffany gently on the lips, never taking her eyes off hers.

“But now, the woman I truly love is Stephanie Jung.”

Inside, Jessica lay wide awake on a propped-up pillow, holding the hand of her father, who was sitting beside her bed. She took a deep breath.

“Is something wrong, Jessi?” Elliot quickly asked. “Are the pillows too high up?”

He stood and reached to adjust them, but Jessica shook her head and gestured for him to sit back down. “It’s okay, Dad.”

Elliot sat back down, looking at his daughter curiously. Something was obviously bothering Jessica.

“What’s the matter?”

Jessica fixed gazes with him, and felt an overwhelming surge of guilt engulf her. Tears welled up in her eyes and spilt over as her lips trembled.

Elliot was alarmed this time. "Jessi? What's wrong? Why are you crying? Does it hurt somewhere?" Elliot stood up again to call a doctor, but Jessica tugged on his hand, shaking her head, sobbing.

"No, Dad...I'm just...I'm so sorry," she cried, squeezing her father's hand. "I'm so sorry for everything. I shouldn't have acted the way I did. You didn't deserve that kind of treatment from me. I'm terrible..."

Elliot's expression softened as he realized what was going on. He shifted his chair closer to his daughter and reached over to thumb away her flowing tears.

"Oh, dear," he said lovingly, stroking her cheek. "You don't have to apologize for anything. You know that."

Jessica continued to sob. "I...I miss mom," she said hesitantly.

Elliot's felt a stab to his heart. His gaze fell. "I know, dear...I miss her too. I know Stephanie misses her and Krystal, too." He looked back up and was torn to see Jessica's pained expression. He stood up and sat back down on her bed, lifting her off the pillows to hold her in a warm embrace.

"It's going to be all over soon, Jessi." He felt Jessica nodding into his shoulder.

"Do you think Yuri will come back?"

Elliot closed his eyes. He wasn't one to give anyone false hope, but he felt that at this time, hope was one thing Jessica needed above all else.

"Yes," he said as he nodded, holding her neck as he hugged her.

"She'll come back for you."

Chapter 35 : Waiting For A Train

0545 KST

SI-71 Jump Bay

Somewhere over North Korea

Yuri looked up from under her damp eyelashes, out of the slightly tinted visor of her flight helmet and then down at the M4 strapped to her chest. Not exactly her choice of weapon – she would've preferred something smaller for close quarters combat, perhaps an MP5SD-N – but it would get the job done.

They were already in North Korean airspace, heading steadily toward their jump location, some forty kilometers from the anti-matter control center. The facility was nestled in the middle of a series of mountain ranges that dominated western North Korea, in the Pyongan-namdo region just west of the county of Pukchang.

Yuri and her team would execute a HAHO or High Altitude High Opening jump over a mountainous area north-west of the county of Yangdok, breaking open their parachutes roughly thirty-plus seconds into freefall, navigate through the air by compass and land in a forested area in the highlands just south of the facility, then make their way down to where the facility sat on the southern bank of the Taedong river.

Frankly, Yuri was not as worried about them getting in as she was about getting out. After completing their task, they had to procure transport of some sort and make their way across the breadth of the North Korean peninsula to their extraction point off Kumya, where an American Ohio-class nuclear submarine would be waiting in the Sea of Japan. That meant a drive of more than a hundred kilometers on open ground, then a boat ride to the submarine's location, all in broad daylight. It was a covert agent's worst nightmare.

Yuri had imagined a more comfortable jump bay due to the fact that it was designed by Skunk Works, but she was wrong. Creature comforts that were supposedly widespread in the US's finest military creations were also absent from the SI-71. There was no air-conditioning, and they were sitting on steel benches facing each other; three on one side, three the other. Clearly what was surely a multi-billion dollar overhaul was spent with no consideration for those who would actually be using the platform.

The design was cruelly practical; the interior sported a variety of gauges and indicators showing internal and external temperature, pressure and altitude amongst others, and was dark. The bomb bay doors had been redesigned to function as a sort of ramp that opened downwards, allowing the jumpers to exit the aircraft via the rear.

She was sweating profusely due to the fact that she was wearing three layers of clothing: polypropylene underwear, her tactical suit, and finally, the full pressure flight suit. The underwear was necessary since they were jumping from 70,000 feet, where the temperature of the air hovered around fifty degrees Celsius below freezing.

An hour ago, as the SI-71 climbed steadily to jump altitude, she and her team had been breathing one hundred percent oxygen from a separate tank in the pressure suit for about forty-five minutes, to flush out any nitrogen in their bloodstreams. This mandatory pre-breathing period, as it was called, was necessary to prevent decompression sickness. After which, they switched to breathing from oxygen bottles within the suit.

At the same time, the jump bay in which they were was pressurized to match the air pressure of the aircraft's exterior, which would allow the bomb bay doors in the fuselage to open without the team being sucked out of the aircraft due to the sudden decompression.

"Estimated two minutes to jump," a digitized voice came through a pair of speakers nearest to the forward area of the bay.

"Good," Yuri thought. They needed to rehydrate themselves as soon as possible what with all the sweating.

She looked around. Yuri had been more formally introduced to each member of her team before the flight, learning each of their names, probably false identities in any case and of the units they served in before being selected by Special Activities.

Yuri was at the front of the stick at the rear of the aircraft. Sitting directly opposite her from left to right were agents Robert McNamara, Thomas Wilson and Mike Sanders, all formerly Delta Force operators. Those sitting next to her were agents Adam Winters and Luke Savage, both from SEAL Team Six. They had all been surprisingly chatty, apparently due to their interest in Yuri due to her mysterious origins. Yuri had taken some comfort in that; somewhat relieved to know that there were some men in the

world who showed interest in something other than her body. And she had a body to die for.

They had shared nothing of their professional careers or past lives, instead talking animatedly about the task at hand. The ex-Delta men, more experienced at military freefall, were looking forward to the jump more than their SEAL counterparts, who joked that they would have rather swum across the Pacific from the West Coast to get to North Korea.

Yuri considered the reason for the amicable atmosphere. It felt...*too* friendly. Why had the men appeared to take an interest in her profession and in her as a person? If anything, they should've been suspicious, especially when told that they had to work with someone whose boss and organization was unknown to the US government.

Granted, trust was a wholly different issue in Special Forces units and in Special Activities. The men and women of the CIA encountered and kept secrets in their everyday work. Information was compartmentalized to a certain extent, with different levels of security clearance and hence access to sensitive information within the organization. Since field operatives were trained to lie and to know when they were being lied to, one couldn't be sure if anything an SAD agent said was the truth or something he wanted you to believe as such.

Were they playing her? Were they softening up the atmosphere, making Yuri comfortable for the pursuit of some ulterior motive? Was there something else to this operation entirely?

Yuri reminded herself to stay wary.

"One minute to jump."

A pair of red lights came on near the ramp. Yuri pushed herself off the steel bench, taking up her position just aft of the doors. Moving to cover even such a small distance felt incredibly awkward due to the sheer amount of gear she had on. There were horizontal railings running along the ceiling from here to the back of the aircraft, giving the jumpers something to hold on to before they stepped through the open doors. The rest of her team filed up behind her, with McNamara forming the end of the stick.

"Thirty seconds."

A few inches away from the toes of her boots, the bomb bay doors began to ease open with soft puffs of hydraulics, and there was a slight hissing noise as the interior and exterior air pressures equalized. A jet of freezing cold air engulfed them all, and Yuri was immediately grateful for the amount of clothing she had on. As the doors locked out, she looked down and saw nothing but an endless field of cotton passing by below at nine hundred kilometers per hour.

“Ten seconds to jump. Godspeed, Task Force Eleven.”

Task Force Eleven. It had been the DNI’s idea to give their team a name, if only for record’s sake. He had also given one to the mission: *Operation Morning Glory*. Yuri scoffed. She knew that the CIA used words generated at random to name their operations. Fitting though, since they were jumping just before daybreak. It was a race against time, denying the possibility of a night insertion.

Yuri waited, gripping the railings on either side of her with excessive force. She was not nervous; she had made dozens of combat jumps during her training and she was quite comfortable with the procedures involved, although this time it was a little different. Yuri was merely preparing herself for the primal surge of adrenaline that flow through her entire body once she stepped off the Ghost. Combats jumps did begin to feel routine after the first few, but she knew that few things could surpass the pure thrill of diving headfirst through the air at over two hundred kilometers per hour.

She pulled back one hand to look at the altimeter strapped to her wrist. Seventy-one thousand feet. She almost laughed. This would be one hell of a jump.

For a moment, she forced herself not to care. The last thing she saw in her mind was the image of herself slipping a diamond onto Jessica’s ring finger at the top of Harkness Tower, Yale.

“Jessica Jung...I’ll be back soon.”

The green light came on, and Yuri stepped off into the beyond, letting the wind take her into its delicate arms.

2145 CET

Ops Room

Secondary Doppelganger Base

Somewhere in Switzerland

Dr. Yoo watched the SI-71's flight path closely on the tactical screen. It had flown in roughly a straight line after taking off from Misawa Air Base, entering South Korea from its eastern border and passing over the Korean DMZ on its western end. Now it was the end of its starboard turn, and was making a pass over the stipulated jump location as plotted by Seohyun. They had all heard the radio chatter from the cockpit.

On a multitude of smaller screens, news reports and updates continued to pour in. The repercussions of Seoul's destruction were slowly but surely beginning to take shape. The European markets had just closed a few hours ago, a couple of hundred points lower than it had the previous night. London was no different, and there was no doubt the US market was already declining toward the end of its trading day.

Government officials around the world gave statements, as did a variety of established scientists from various institutions, giving opinions, facts and most of all, assurances. He had watched the President of the United States himself deliver his emergency morning statement at daybreak in Washington hours ago.

Dr. Yoo scoffed, if only to himself. All of them were lies. The world had absolutely no idea what was going on, save for the Americans and Russians, whose statements were by no doubt based on what their administrations wanted the world to hear; not the truth. He shook his head. Just as well. Damage control was of utmost necessity, lest the world devolve into anarchical panic.

But there was one thing he had to admit: everyone was scared, and that meant at least one objective met for Park Jin Young.

Somewhere over North Korea

Yuri's heart was thudding so hard in her chest she could hear it in her head despite the deafening torrent of wind rushing past her ears. The early morning sky was still a deep purple, and she had forgotten just how many clouds she'd passed through. This was the longest jump she'd ever made.

She had gone into a headfirst dive a second after stepping off the Ghost, quickly accelerating to over a hundred kilometers per hour in less than ten seconds. Then she leveled out, spinning onto her back for a moment to see if the rest were following. Much to her surprise, the simple action had prompted the Delta men to go into a series of somersaults and spins, ending with a thumbs-up directed back at her. A smile broke out across her lips, which she quickly smoothened out. Damned raging adrenaline.

Checking her altimeter on her wrist reminded her that her fingers were still numb from the cold. They were currently at around forty thousand feet, and it would only continue to get warmer towards the surface. They would freefall for perhaps another ten seconds, and then their parachutes would open automatically at the preset altitude of twenty-five thousand feet.

That gave her about ten seconds to get her head straight. Her mind had been a blank since she'd stepped off the aircraft, and now, something was finally beginning to take form. And it worried her.

She had not been joking when she told Stephanie about marrying Jessica. Admittedly, she'd not given it much thought, but she knew it was something she truly wanted. Jessica had come a long way since their youth; both of them had. But over the past week, the blonde had gone through much more than Yuri would have ever preferred. She remembered the moment when Jessica had almost been killed. She remembered when the surgeon at the secondary base had told her that had Mikhail aimed a couple of millimeters to the right, he would have sealed Jessica's fate. Yuri wanted to give Jessica a life of comfort and security, with precedence on the latter.

But would they let her? Yuri was well aware of Doppelganger protocol. Jessica wasn't Doppelganger, and therefore Yuri technically did not have the organization's blessing to be with her, much less marry her. Would tradition make an exception for two women who had been through so much together in the course of saving the world? Yuri wasn't sure, and that bothered her.

A series of clicks and a deafening flurry of flapping and rustling noises brought Yuri back to the present, and a second later her entire body was shocked silly as her parachute deployed. She took a moment to

be thankful for the fact that her parachute hadn't malfunctioned. She half-expected a body to drop right past her in the event of a catastrophic parachute failure, and then slapped herself mentally for having such morbid thoughts. Of course everything was functioning properly.

Now she had to find a place to land.

0615 KST
Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility
Pyongan-namdo
North Korea

Jin Young and the Supreme Leader stood in the middle of the control room, watching the timers count down. They, too, had been following the news, and the Supreme Leader had enjoyed every second of them. Jin Young's face remained impassive, quietly watching the rotund man wallow in his self-entertainment.

Ignorant fool. World domination, he says? In about an hours' time, there wouldn't be anything left in this world to 'dominate'.

A junior officer came running up to the Dear Leader, snapping to attention as soon as he came to a stop. Jin Young eyed the man with interest.

"Great General, radar scans have detected six unidentified bodies heading toward the highlands south of here, about two thousand feet up."

Jin Young was the first to speak. "They're here," he said almost in wonder.

The Dear Leader turned to him, frowning. "Who, comrade Park?"

"They who are worthy of my revenge...," he whispered with a strange hint of relief.

“Inform the men-“ the Dear Leader began, but was cut off by a wave of Jin Young’s hand.

“Let them come. That way, they will know that they were so close...yet were unable to stop it.”

The Dear Leader continued to frown, and then waved the officer off. The latter saluted, then spun on his heel and marched away. He turned back to Jin Young.

“Do you intend to stop them yourself, comrade? If they manage to obtain access to this room, they may be able to disable the system. It was not designed without a means a deactivate it,” he said with concern.

At this time, Jin Young broke into a wide smile, his eyes glistening with a mixture of assurance and more ominously, a hint of dark enjoyment. He clenched and unclenched his gloved fists, wriggling his fingers, stretching his tense forearms. The sleeves of his dark gray suit jacket began to feel tight. He needed to relieve himself of the pressure building underneath the layer of silk. He took a deep breath, and in a swift motion, crossed his forearms and threw them out to the sides. With the sharp sounds of grinding metal, two matte black triangular blades shot out from the sleeves of his suit.

The Dear Leader staggered back a step, eyes growing wide and mouth half-agape.

What is he doing? What are those...

Jin Young’s smile never wavered as his gaze rose from his blades to match that of the confused dictator.

“Not if there isn’t anyone left to help them do it,” he growled.

The next thing the Supreme Leader knew, he was lying on his side, choking on his own blood. How he had ended up on the floor, he did not know. All he knew was that he was watching with wide-open eyes as a madman blinked with inhuman speed across the entire space of the control room, chilled to the bone by terrified screams and a maniacal laughter that just would not stop...

0630 KST

Woodlands South of Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility

Yuri slid to a halt behind a fallen tree trunk, signaling the others to gather around her. She was panting. They had made a hard landing in a copse of trees fifteen minutes earlier in the highlands behind them, shed their parachutes and flight suits, and double-timed the rest of the two kilometers downhill to this spot just shy of the tree line. From her vantage point, she could just barely make out a short, windowless, bluish colored building just beyond a fence on the far side. On its roof were a variety of antennae and satellite dishes. They had approached the facility from the side. A lone door broke the monotony of the wall facing them.

She pressed a finger to her ear. "Seohyun, give me a sitrep."

"The facility is bordered by a single layer of non-electrified fences topped by concertina wire on all four sides. No patrolling vehicles. There's a watchtower at each corner manned by a single soldier. There's an elevator in the middle of the complex that should lead you down to the business end of the facility. How far down exactly, we don't know. Chances are you're going to have to obtain a security pass to use it. Try getting one from the staff on the ground floor."

"Got it."

Yuri relayed the information to the men kneeling around her. They all nodded. Security seemed a bit lax for a facility as important as this, but then again, they probably weren't counting on being found in the first place. At most, they would have assigned a few additional infantry or intelligence service details to the facility. That would mean the lower levels were probably crawling with armed guards. Not that they would be any trouble. Rules of engagement agreed upon by the CIA and Doppelgangers were simple: all non-essential personnel expendable.

"There's a side entrance nearest to your position that you can use. It'll probably be electronically locked. Nothing you can't handle, right?"

Yuri's hand went up to her ear again. "Nothing at all, Seohyun. Thanks. I'll let you know when we're in."

She turned to two of the Delta men, Wilson and Sanders. "Have your wire cutters ready." They nodded.

She then turned to Savage, the team's sniper, who carried the Mk 14 EBR. "We'll need to take out the two watchtower guards nearest to us."

He nodded. "No problem." He began fitting a suppressor to the muzzle of his weapon. He'd brought special subsonic rounds made specially for use with one.

"We'll move up to a few bounds short of the tree line so that Savage can take his shots. Once the second guard is dropped, we move up to the fence and then through," she said to everyone.

With that, the team rose and moved forward in a half-crouch, careful to stay out of the moonlight.

Savage took up a position nearest to the tree line and went prone. His weapon, the Mk 14 EBR, was the result of a request by the US Navy SEALs for the development of a more compact version of the popular M14 battle rifle. Made of a lightweight aluminum alloy, it weighed just over 5 kilograms, light by sniper rifle standards. The Mk 14 was chambered in the 7.62x51mm NATO cartridge, a common choice for sniper rifles and machine guns after the shift toward the newer 5.56x45mm NATO round for the M16 and beyond. For this particular operation, Savage chose a match-grade custom subsonic version of the 7.62mm for use with a sound suppressor, since the normal supersonic rounds would still generate an unacceptable amount of noise due to their sonic boom. This reduced the effective range of the weapon to about 500 meters, but that was fine considering only short-range engagements would be made.

He looked through the 10x Zeiss magnifying scope, drawing a bead on the first guard tower over to his left. It was only a couple of hundred meters away, and there didn't appear to be any crosswinds for which he had to compensate. The soldier was in his sights, standing still, body facing Savage but looking toward his right. Savage then swiveled his aim toward the other guard tower to check the guard's line of sight. That one was looking the other way. He would take this one out first.

Slipping his index finger into the trigger guard, he thumbed the fire selector switch from safe to semi-automatic and shifted his body slightly to align it with the rifle, centering the crosshair over the center of the unsuspecting soldier's helmet. The bullet would drop a couple of inches during flight due to gravity, striking the man in the temple just below the lining of his steel helmet. Perfect.

Breathing calmly through his nose, Savage held his breath and gently squeezed the trigger, waiting...

Pewt!

Savage didn't blink as the round went off, startlingly loud to him and his team, but surely inaudible to anyone not within the immediate vicinity. As soon as he spotted the guard's head whip back and a spray of blood burst from the other side, he swiveled his aim back to the guard on his left, shifted his body and then took the shot.

Pewt!

Another blood spray. Two clean kills. Savage looked back and gave the team a thumbs-up.

Yuri nodded. There was no time to be wasted. She waved the team forward, Wilson and Sanders at the fore. They broke the tree line, moving quickly across the dry grass on open ground before coming to an abrupt stop in front of the fence. Wilson and Sanders wasted no time. Working quickly with their wire cutters, the team was inside within seconds.

From there, they split into two lines of three, advancing steadily toward the main building. They came to a stop on either side of the side entrance. Yuri spotted an electronic scanner and keypad just next to the doorjamb. She eased herself closer to the keypad, setting down her M4. Reaching into a pocket on her left upper thigh, she fished out a familiar handheld device. It was the PDA she had used back in Rio to infiltrate the villa in which Stephanie was being held hostage. Back when Jessica was by her side, sarcastic and clueless of her identity.

Jessica.

Yuri shook the thought of Jessica away.

Focus!

Tapping a series of buttons, she tuned into the software within the keypad and worked her magic. Within seconds, the red light on the keypad flickered and switched to green, and she heard a soft click. Stowing the PDA away, she picked up her weapon and nodded to McNamara, kneeling directly opposite her. She would take point. Winters tapped her shoulder twice from behind, and she reached up and

pulled on the doorjamb, throwing the door wide open and slipping inside.

Yuri pressed a finger to her ear. "We're in."

"The elevator is in the middle of the building. I'm picking up infra-red signatures in the corridors leading up to it. Six of them in total. Three pairs. Probably guards."

"Got it."

Yuri held up her hand, giving out a series of commands with a sequence of hand signs. She and the two men behind her would head straight to the next corridor and then head left. The three at the back would take the first turn. They would regroup at the elevator. Then came the last sign.

Kill them all.

0637 KST

Control Room Level

Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility

Deep below ground, nuclear physicist Kwon Yong San scampered about wildly, bouncing off the walls of the corridor, one arm clutched over a gaping wound in his gut. Blood poured unhindered from the gash, and he was sure that if he so much as moved his arm, his intestines would spill out. Try as he might to move forward, his feet didn't seem to be listening to him.

Ten minutes ago, the man he knew only as Park Jin Young had lost his mind and gone on a killing spree using a pair of strange blades protruding from his shirtsleeves. He had looked up just in time to see the man sever three quarters of the Dear Leader's throat before somehow materializing before him. The next thing he knew, he was holding his stomach as a starburst of pain burst forth from it. As Jin Young flitted about the room, murdering his other comrades, Yong San had managed to slip outside. He had since become numb to the pain, but he knew that with every second that passed, he was dying.

Lost his mind...the irony. The moment he'd learned of this strange man, he knew that he was insane. Destroying the world? That was madness. Still, it was a madness everyone came to accept as crucial to the regime. How wrong they were.

So eager had he been to see the fruits of his labor; the fulfillment of his Dear Leader's dream. He knew he had been doing a great service to his country, beginning with the destruction of Seoul and the culling of the imperialist pigs that resided within the godforsaken capitalist city. They had been so close...and then madness had descended upon them, a tempest of steel brimming with such evil he could never have imagined it in all his life.

All he knew now was that he needed to alert the others. He needed to let Pyongyang know of the man's treachery and the death of the Dear Leader.

His vision was about to fail, his eyes glazing over with tears, eyelids heavy due to the strain he was putting on himself. But then he saw it. Dragging himself over to the small fixture in the wall just up ahead, he broke the glass with an awkward swipe of a closed fist and read the words above it.

Emergency Alarm

With his final ounce of strength, he reached up and jammed his fist against the button, staggering backwards and slamming his back against the far side of the corridor before his legs gave out under him, and he slid slowly to the floor.

Yong San did not hear the wailing sirens that had begun to echo throughout the entire facility. Neither did he care that within an hour, the compound would be swarming with men from the Korean People's Army Ground Force.

As the arm clasped over his wound lost its strength and slid onto the ground, he was finally relieved of the burden of life that he had been carrying for fifty-three years.

There was one thing that comforted him. With the death of him and his colleagues, the fate of the world was sealed. The secret of disarming the system required action on their part as well as Jin Young's, and their part had died with them. He looked at his watch one last time. Forty minutes left.

Kwon Yong San had done his duty, and now it was time for him to serve the Dear Leader in the afterlife.

0638 KST

Ground Floor

Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility

Yuri, Winters and Savage were halfway to the next corridor when the sirens came on.

What the hell?

Sprinting to the corner and dropping to a high-kneel, Yuri held a finger to her ear. "Seohyun! What's going on?"

"The facility's emergency alarm just came on. Hold on a bit...it was triggered from inside the facility, Yuri. You haven't been exposed."

"Then what gives?"

"Something must have happened down below. You'll find out soon enough. Heads up. Guards coming your way."

Yuri's hand rose and gave the signal to engage. Rising and bursting out of the corner, she raised her M4 and put two bullets through each guard's chest. They crumpled to the floor. The team moved forward, urged along by the wailing sirens. Yuri stopped at one of the bodies, pulling a security pass from around his neck.

"Jin Young," she growled to herself. It must have been him. There was no other explanation.

As they approached the far side of the corridor, Yuri heard another pair of stifled cries. The Delta men

had taken the other guards out. They emerged from the corners at the same time at opposite ends of the elevator corridor. Two more guards stood between them, raising their AK-47s. Yuri and McNamara fired at the same time from both ends. The guards fell. The teams closed in towards the center.

“What the hell is going on?” McNamara shouted over the sirens, jerking his chin toward the ceiling.

Yuri stepped into the waiting elevator. “Let’s find out.”

With the security card, Yuri had access to all levels of the facility. Clearly, the North Koreans weren’t as sensitive about clearance when it came to matters such as this. All the better. She had picked the lowest level, and the elevator was now descending quickly; she felt significantly lighter as it accelerated downwards.

“Seohyun, do you read?”

“Lou-...-lear.” The response was interjected by static. Reception was getting weaker by the second.

“Seohyun, I’m losing you. We’re going too deep and might lose contact. I’ll report in again when I’m back up.”

“Affir-...tive. Stay sa-” Apparently the signal was weaker on the receiving end.

Yuri looked around. The SAD men looked as calm as could be.

“We’re officially blind and deaf now. Be on your toes.”

“Yeah,” McNamara answered curtly.

"Got it," Winters said.

The rest simply nodded their response. Savage slung his Mk 14 across his back, choosing instead to use his sidearm, a Springfield Armory custom M1911, similar to Yuri's own Les Baer custom.

As the elevator began to slow, Yuri gripped her M4 more tightly. With a shudder, it came to a stop, and the team raised their weapons to their shoulders. The doors opened, and no one was there to oppose them.

Yuri and Wilson stepped out at the same time, covering each end of the corridor simultaneously. The walls and ceiling were several shades darker than that on the ground floor, and the lighting that came from fixtures above was harsh and uncomfortably bright. Yuri spied a plate with the Korean words for 'control room', with an arrow pointing in the direction she was facing. She waved the team forward, and they proceeded to move behind her in a straight line, with Sanders taking up the rear, walking backwards to cover their six.

They came to an opening on the left wall, and Yuri signaled for the team to halt. There were bloodstains just past the opening and on the walls of the corridor ahead. This had to be it. She turned to face the man behind her, pointing to the opening and nodding. They were at the control room. The team shuffled up and came to a rest just shy of the open doorway.

Yuri wasn't sure if Ops could hear her, but she decided that there was no harm in trying. She brought a hand to her hear, speaking softly.

"We're at the control room. Something's definitely wrong, and I think I have a good idea what. I'll report what I see inside."

There was a long silence before a response came that surprised Yuri. It was strangely clear.

"Be careful."

Yuri was startled by the voice which spoke in her ear. It was Dr. Yoo, and if Yuri hadn't known any better, she would have thought he'd sounded...fatherly. She nodded to herself, not responding.

Yuri's fingers tightened around the forward assault grip of her M4, taking one last moment to steel herself for what was to come. There was no doubt that beyond this door laid the greatest challenge to her physical and mental faculties that she would encounter in her entire career. Her knee suddenly felt heavy against the cold linoleum floor. She was itching to get up and inside.

One more breath.

"I'll be back."

A tap on her shoulder was the signal to move. Thrusting herself off the ground, she slipped into the control room, scanning all its corners with her weapon, eyes keen. The SAD officers filtered in behind her, spreading out as they crept further inside.

The room was colored in dull shades of blue and gray, and the lighting had been dimmed. To their right, a massive tactical display rose, spreading across the length of the forward wall. Yuri could not make out what was on it due to her angle from the screen. Extending toward the back of the control room were three straight rows of computer consoles on stepped platforms. At the very back was a room separated from the rest of the area by a floor-to-ceiling glass screen.

A sharp smell punctuated the sterile air in the room.

Blood.

Yuri paused, still holding her weapon high. She only allowed her eyes to wander. Sprawled across the floor of the room and on top of a number of computer consoles were bleeding corpses clad in flowing white coats. Only then did her eyes register the trails and splatters of blood on the walls. A massacre had occurred here.

Even from this far away, she recognized the wounds on the bodies. They were made by blades. Jin Young was definitely here, and he had killed the scientists, surely to deny Yuri and her team any hope of disabling the anti-matter bomb control systems.

Yuri paced toward the center of the room, where a body clad in brown lay face-down on top of an

emblem of the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea painted on the floor. Around her, the SAD officers spread out, moving to cover the entire area.

With her foot, she carefully turned the body over.

It was the Supreme Leader, his head semi-detached from his neck by means of a gaping wound.

Somehow, that didn't bother her as much as the tactical screen to her right. She felt her skin crawl; a strange summons to turn her head to look at the screen. For some reason, she felt herself resisting this urge. But she couldn't.

As Yuri turned her head to look at the tactical display, her heart stopped.

On A Razor's Edge [Inception OST - Waiting For A Train (8:19 - end)]

In an alien, disconnected fashion, Yuri's body turned to align itself with her head, and she felt the M4 in her hands sink to her stomach. Her hands left the weapon, settling at her sides, numb. Her hearing seemed to dull; the wailing sirens became a diminuendo. Her eyes; they were malfunctioning. She was seeing things. She blinked once, but the image didn't change. She blinked again with mounting disbelief.

"Yuri? What's wrong?" Seohyun's voice crackled in her ear, the signal getting through just barely.

Yuri couldn't respond immediately.

"Yuri? Can you hear me? What do you see? What's going on?" The voice was more urgent this time, but still, Yuri could not hear the words.

Yuri's eyes inched across the length of the screen, and she felt the dread building from the deepest reaches of her core as those eyes passed over the smattering of red dots surrounded by concentric

circles that littered the screen. Circles that were superimposed over the map of the world, covering every conceivable city across the planet. But those weren't her concern.

Beside each dot was a small box with a countdown timer.

Yuri and her team had less than half an hour before every city in the world was annihilated en masse.

Chapter 36 : On The Brink Of Destruction

2245 CET

Ops Room

Secondary Doppelganger Base

Switzerland

"Yuri? Yuri, can you hear me?"

Seohyun had been repeatedly trying to reach Yuri, but there was no response. Yuri had not gone deeper into the lower levels of the facility, if there were any at all, so Seohyun was put off by the radio silence.

Dr. Yoo's eyes were fixed on the tactical screen with unwavering intensity. He knew he couldn't see Yuri on it, but he couldn't shift his gaze away. Anger swelled within him. He knew that something was wrong, and yet he knew that he couldn't do anything about it.

"Come on Yuri. What's happening?"

Behind him, Taeyeon and Stephanie stepped through the doorway, hand in hand.

0645 KST
Control Room
Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility
North Korea

Yuri's muscles tensed and her eyebrow quirked in surprise. Something had shifted behind her; she had felt the characteristic disturbance in the balance of the room. There was a soft gurgling noise, and as she turned, her hands finding purchase on her M4, she saw agent McNamara slump forward from his post at the upper right corner of the control room. His body disappeared from sight behind a bank of computer consoles.

The other SAD agents turned to McNamara, startled.

Suddenly, there was another noise. It was the distinctive sound of flesh being cleaved, this time from the upper left corner of the room. Yuri spun on her heel, training her holographic sight on agent Sanders, whose headless body swayed from side to side before collapsing to the ground.

"What the hell!" Winters yelled from the other end of the room, shifting frantically on his feet and holding his weapon high.

Yuri's eyes scanned the room, which had fallen into a deep, terrifying silence. The gloom was broken by a menacing laughter that seemed to be coming from everywhere.

"Jin Young," Yuri whispered to herself, flexing her fingers and gripping her M4 more tightly. "Everyone stay where you are!" she next shouted.

"What the hell just happened? I didn't even see what hit them!" Wilson yelled back, eyes searching and eyebrows creased in concentration.

Yuri ignored him. She knew exactly what was happening. Jin Young was stalking them, playing on their fears, slowly but surely gnawing away at their psychological defenses, leaving them weak in the knees. He was making everyone drown in adrenaline, clouding their faculties by forcing them to search almost everywhere at once out of terror rather than of habit. She gritted her teeth. She was sure the SAD agents couldn't be saved. Jin Young would continue playing his little game before all that was left was the two of them in this dark room.

Yuri's eyebrow twitched. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught something shift from the corner of the room where Sanders had just fallen. Raising her M4 toward the center of the room, she fired a burst across the length of the open space just beyond the furthest row of computer consoles. Caught off guard, the other SAD operatives turned and fired bursts of their own in the direction in which Yuri was aiming. The torrent of bullets shattered the glass screen of the back room. The cacophony of breaking and falling shards of glass and bullets striking steel walls was accompanied by yet another taunting string of soft laughter. It was just barely audible, but enough to make Yuri's skin crawl.

"What the hell was that!?" Savage cried next, reloading his 1911. He had fired all of its seven rounds at nothing at all.

"Shut up and listen! Watch the goddamn shadows!" Yuri scolded, eyes still searching the room.

She knew it was futile. From what she had gathered, she guessed that Jin Young's blades were short, possibly the same as those used by his son, Jaebeom.

His son.

Yuri remembered the duel with Jaebeom back in HQ. Her mind played back the scenes of the fight, recalling every detail, every dash, jump and stab of his katars. Jaebeom had been incredibly quick and agile, and was the first person in her entire career whom she'd had any difficulty in besting. In fact, she hadn't even bested him. He had been thrown off by the broadcast over the PA system, the result of Taeyeon and Stephanie's efforts. He'd been jeopardized by his own emotions.

And now she was facing his father, possibly his mentor, a person she was certain to be emotionless. Yuri wondered what kind of skill Jin Young possessed. Surely it was not limited by the speed she had just borne witness to.

The hairs on the back of Yuri's neck suddenly stood on end. Something was passing behind her!

Yuri spun, feeling herself follow Jin Young's shadow as she turned, eyes wide. The next thing she saw was a black blade protruding from Savage's gut, and then another through the middle of his throat. His 1911 clattered to the floor, his hands clutching at his neck, choking and gurgling as blood poured from his mouth. His body jerked in pain and shock as the blades were turned a full ninety degrees, widening

the sickening gash in his throat. At this time, Yuri confirmed that Jin Young was using katars as his son had.

“Where is he!?” Winters yelled from behind Yuri, training his M4 on Savage’s convulsing body but seeing nothing beyond it. He would not fire through Savage’s body though he knew the man was beyond salvation.

Yuri felt a roar on her lips as the blades disappeared from Savage’s body, now limp from death. He collapsed to the floor, a pool of crimson growing from underneath him.

“Jin Young, show yourself!” she screamed.

Only she, Winters and Wilson remained.

“Such anger. Good. Very good.”

What was he playing at? The voice was almost a whisper, purposefully just loud enough to hear. Yuri spun, trying to make out any shifts in the shadows of the room, straining to see Jin Young. The man had a talent for hiding in plain sight; a talent that she herself had yet to master.

Winters found himself hyperventilating. His mind was a whirl as his eyes darted back and forth from each of his fallen teammates and then searched hopelessly around the room. Who...or what was this man? How did he move so quickly and how on earth did he keep invisible? Winters contemplated making a run for it. The doorway was a mere ten meters from where he stood. It wasn’t too far away...

“I see you’re considering escaping. Tell me...do you think you could cross all of ten meters before I can intercept you?”

Winters breathed harder. This was insane. How did he know that? He felt cold sweat break out on his neck and forehead. Nothing in his career had prepared him for something like this. This...this was not a man they were facing. How was that possible?

Yuri decided that she'd heard enough. "Enough of your games, Jin Young. Stop hiding like a coward and show yourself!"

"Kwon Yuri."

Again, Yuri's skin crawled. Hearing her name uttered from the mouth of the devil himself...it was humbling as much as it was horrifying.

"Do you...care for these men?"

Yuri frowned. *Care* for them? Why would he ask? What did it mean to him?

"Do you care for men who have ulterior motives against you?"

The voice seemed to drift about the room, like surround sound panning from one end of a cinema to the other. It made Yuri feel trapped. She knew that Jin Young could have been anywhere...and perhaps even everywhere at a given time. Yuri chose silence as her answer.

"You know they would have turned against you eventually, Yuri. And you know that they would've died by your hand if that came to be."

Winters and Wilson were careful not to reveal anything through body language, but Yuri saw it in their eyes. There was indeed something there.

She'd been considering this since they'd been on the Ghost, and constantly reminded herself to watch her back since they had landed. The DNI had some sort of dirty trick up his sleeve, and she figured it involved kidnapping her and bringing her back to the US for interrogation. It was only a matter of when and how. The CIA loved secrets, and the Doppelganger organization was one huge fish they were not about to let go of. Again, Yuri was bothered by Jin Young's words. How did he know? Could he read the thoughts of the men around her, somehow seeing through their guarded emotions, picking out their intentions as if they were ripened fruit on a tree?

Jin Young's whispered words broke her out of her reverie.

"I am merely doing you a favor."

"You would do me a favor by facing me now," Yuri retorted.

To her right, Winters was eyeing the doorway in anticipation. If there was one thing he was feeling at the time, it was spooked. He needed to get out of there. He leaned forward and took his first step.

"Run while you still can," the mysterious voice whispered somewhere behind him.

It was enough to get him moving. Winters broke into a mad dash past Yuri, who looked at him in surprise and amazement.

"Winters, no!"

But it was too late. Just two steps short of the open doorway, Winters found himself flying through the air before he landed flat on his face, spread eagled. He looked up and saw the foot of the doorway before him, and began to stand up, clawing at the ground as he did so, only to slip and fall back down onto the cold floor. His eyes widened in realization. He flipped around and turned to look down at his feet, and screamed.

Yuri stared wide-eyed at Winters, swallowing hard. Both his legs had been chopped off at the knees, leaving two blood-spurting stumps within the layers of his pants. Winters reached down to grab either one of his dismembered legs, then recoiled, shifting about and looking around awkwardly. The poor man had no idea what to do. He continued screaming as fresh blood pooled beneath his stumps.

"Two more steps and you would've made it," the voice said almost pitifully as Winters stopped screaming to catch his breath. In a few minutes the man would go into shock from blood loss and later die. Yuri figured that he wouldn't have preferred to live anyway.

Near the center of the room, in between two rows of consoles, Wilson looked on in horror. He, too was hyperventilating, and Yuri saw the sheen of sweat that covered most of his face. The man was terrified,

and he wasn't afraid to show it. He had just seen four of his teammates mutilated, and he knew with a growing dread that he was next.

"This is why you will never be a true blademaster, Yuri. Your skills are marred by useless emotions."

Wilson was turning every second, looking for something that wasn't there. Yuri could only look on helplessly, unsure whether to feel pity for the man. She had no doubt he would be dead very soon. Unconsciously, she was also reminded of the tactical screen behind her and the countdown timers that littered it. How much time had passed since McNamara had fallen? How much time did the world have left? To her left, Winters had stopped moving.

"I'll let you choose for this man, Yuri...will you shoot him and let him die quickly and painlessly...or you would you prefer to watch him die by my hand?"

Yuri's heart beat harder. Jin Young had just put her between a rock and a hard place. What kind of choices were those? She saw Wilson breathing harder, clutching his M4 for dear life. These men probably had neither families nor children, living only for the thrill of the mission. They had nothing more to lose than themselves. She knew that she probably would have killed him afterward anyway if they were indeed going to bring her in, but it was different now. Yuri just couldn't choose, not when she had no reason to kill him.

When Wilson turned to look at Yuri, eyes pleading with her to kill him, she was too late.

"She has chosen for you."

Yuri heard a sickening crunch of bone before Jin Young's katars emerged from Wilson's eye sockets, cleaving them in half from the back out. Blood poured from his eyelids. Wilson's body convulsed, mouth agape in a gasp, dropping his M4. His hands reached up to his eyes then fell and flailed about. His knees gave out under him and he slumped forward to the floor and tumbled halfway down the steps as Jin Young withdrew his katars.

Five more men now lay dead around Yuri.

"Yuri? Talk to me, Yuri," the earpiece continued to sing in her ear. Yuri reached up and plucked the device out of her ear, placing it on the console behind her. At the same time, she spied one of the countdown timers on the tactical screen.

Twenty-five minutes left.

She turned back, scanning the room one last time before she tossed her M4 toward her left. It skittered across the floor and slid to a stop near Winters' body. Leaning into a half crouch, her fingers lingered around her calves before she pulled out her twin blades in a backhand grip. She straightened, holding them out to the sides. The blades, seen as an extension of her arms, looked like the forbidding scythes of the Grim Reaper.

"Are you curious as to why the world is on the brink of destruction, Yuri?"

Yuri's eyes narrowed. She had expected to listen to his reasons as he lay bleeding on the ground, but she figured that now was as good a time as any. What she saw next made her step back.

A figure emerged from the shadows of the back of the room into what little light illuminated the area. Her eyes followed the black leather-encased feet that casually stepped over Wilson's motionless body, up long legs and a strong torso and wide chest to a face she had been waiting to see for days. He had a strong, square jaw, narrow eyes and lines that sat deep in the creases and curves of his small face. He looked exactly the same as in the file Seohyun had sent her when she was in Tae Woo's command center back in Rio. His katars were matte black, protruding from beneath his forearms. Blood and gore dripped from their edges, falling to the floor in drips and splatters.

Yuri lowered her stance instinctively. "Jin Young."

"Doppelgangers," Jin Young breathed. "For justice, for humanity may provide none." He scoffed and then burst into a fit of laughter as his body shuddered uncontrollably. "Justice? Did they presume that what they had done to me was justifiable in any way?"

Jin Young descended a single step, and Yuri's stance lowered further. He chuckled. "To preserve the sanctity of human life, to destroy evil that humankind may live, advance and prosper..."

Jin Young's foot hung in midair, and in the blink of an eye he covered the entire distance between Yuri and himself, stopping so close that his nose was barely inches away from Yuri's. She couldn't move. She should've cleaved him in half by now; it was the opportunity of a lifetime. But she didn't. Yuri stood still, eye to eye with Park Jin Young, taking in all of the rage he projected from his body, feeling it course through her veins the same way it did in his. When he yelled in her face, she felt his hot breath licking her cool skin.

"Were they destroying evil when they killed her thirty years ago?"

Before Yuri could react, Jin Young had retreated to the spot he was before, five meters away. She was suddenly aware that she had forgotten to breathe, and parted her lips to suck in a hasty breath, expelling it with a slight shudder she struggled to conceal.

"Jin Young could've killed me in that very instant...but he didn't. Why?"

Then she registered the words he had just said. Killed her? Who? Had the Doppelgangers of previous generations killed someone dear to Jin Young? Who was responsible, and why?

Jin Young closed his eyes, as if to calm himself. Memories of decades past flowed back into his mind unbidden, and the comfortable expression he wore soon devolved into an aggrieved frown. His hands found their way to the sides of his head, and he clutched his fingers over his short hair. Blood from his katars dripped onto his forehead, forming deep red trails down to his stubble-peppered jaw. He opened his eyes to look into Yuri's. For some unknown reason, Yuri felt the faintest pull of her heartstrings. Jin Young's eyes were filled with pain and longing. There was no madness there, Yuri thought, at least, that was not what reached out to her the most. This was not a madman. This was suffering personified.

"Where was justice when they took her from this world? Where was justice when they tortured her and shot her before my own eyes?" he whispered, almost pleading. "I was taught to seek out and defeat men with evil hearts, but the very people who preached that to me were nothing but the same!"

2251 CET
Ops Room
Secondary Doppelganger Base

Seohyun could not mask her amazement. Neither could she believe what she was hearing. The Ops Room had gone deathly silent since five minutes ago, and everyone could see that Dr. Yoo was feeling uncomfortable.

When Yuri removed her earpiece, she had put the 'Send' button on hold before placing it on the control room's main console. Everyone was now listening to her conversation with Park Jin Young.

What they had heard was vague, but one thing was certain: Park Jin Young had apparently been the victim of a great injustice dealt by their own organization many years ago. The question was what?

The only Doppelganger standing in the Ops Room, Dr. Yoo, knew that answer more than anyone else. But now was not the time to share it. It would make no difference to the task at hand. Of one thing he was sure. Victim or not, Park Jin Young had to be stopped, or the world would pay for the sins of the very people sworn to protect it.

"In twenty-three minutes, the Doppelgangers will come to realize the incontrovertible..."

0652 KST
Control Room
Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility

"...that no matter how hard they may try, they cannot protect everything in this world," Jin Young finished.

Jin Young spread his arms out wide, and his katars disappeared back into his sleeves. In one swift motion, he shrugged out of his suit jacket and tossed it aside. He then crossed his arms and flicked them outwards, and the familiar katars returned.

“And you, Kwon Yuri, will experience that failure...,” he paused, lifting an eyebrow, “firsthand.”

Yuri saw Jin Young extend his foot out to his left before he disappeared. Her stance lowered further. She knew Jin Young wasn't blending into the darkness to turn invisible. Instead, he was using his speed, shifting continuously and sinuously from place to place to create the illusion. He was, in a sense, everywhere at once. Yuri closed her eyes, for they would be next to useless in this fight. She had to depend on her sense of hearing, to pick out the positions at which he stopped briefly to change directions, where his shoes scraped, tapped and skidded against the floor, and her sense of touch, to feel changes in the balance of the air, the spots in which the air rushed in to occupy the empty spaces where he had just been.

There, to her left. She felt the weight of the world shift ever so slightly as he propelled himself toward her; the almost inaudible tap of his shoes as he used the floor as leverage to lift himself off the ground. She turned, keeping her center of gravity low, and brought up her twin blades to parry. She opened her eyes, catching the faintest glimpse of black as a pair of razor-sharp katars approached her like shadows through the air. Metal clashed against metal. Her calves and quadriceps burned as they worked to maintain her balance after the initial shock, and an instant after she heard Jin Young's feet touch the ground, he was gone again.

Yuri felt blood rushing through her veins, an ominous reminder of the haunted power that sought to be released from within her. She fought the temptation back. She knew that if she embraced it once more, she could possibly draw enough strength and speed with which to defeat Jin Young, but she also knew the dangers of giving herself over to sin. Embracing the power meant sacrificing herself to the blood. The frightening encounter in Doppelganger HQ against the Spetsnaz traitor and his unfortunate comrades was simply a slip-up. Her wildly thrashing emotions had masked its approach, and in a way, dulled its malevolent psychological effects. Who knew what it would do to her mind if she did it willingly? What kind of monster would she become?

“Do not resist the blood,” Jin Young's voice echoed throughout the control room.

Yuri scowled. The man could read her thoughts and she didn't like that one bit. Again, silence was her answer.

"I can smell the rage within you. All you need to do is embrace it...and with it, you may just be able to kill me."

Suddenly, Yuri's senses locked onto a single spot directly in front of her. Jin Young appeared an instant later, rushing toward her with his katars extended. She brought up her blades to meet him, a growl upon her lips. Jin Young stabbed once with his right arm, and Yuri slipped to his left to avoid the blow. His second stab, she parried with the flat of her inch-wide blade, driving his arm back and giving her the space to move in and swing her left blade across his neck. He ducked, moving underneath her slashing attack and burst upward, aiming a katar straight for her throat. Yuri spun on her right heel and out of the way, the bottom of her chin just giving way to the path of the blade. As her left foot landed and restored her balance, Yuri leaped forward and slashed again at his back, but he had already disappeared. She spun around, facing the back of the room once more. She realized she was breathing heavily, and for good reason. The little duel had taken all of three seconds, and she knew the man was merely provoking her by making himself visible.

A satisfied laugh from somewhere in the control room confirmed this suspicion. Jin Young was teasing her. If he could be this quick in plain sight, who knows what he was capable of unseen?

Yuri risked a quick glance at the tactical screen behind her. Twenty-one minutes. The urgency began to kick in. She had to defeat him and still have enough time left over to figure out how to disarm the system. She couldn't afford to waste anymore time.

"Anxious, Yuri?" the voice continued to taunt her.

There wasn't any way to pick up the pace of the fight. For all she knew, Jin Young could continue playing with her as a cat would with a mouse until there was not enough time left to disable the bombs. Relying on her hearing and touch was slow and could only tell her his approximate location; not enough information for her to use offensively. She needed to be able to see him. But how could she? Unless...

2252 CET
Ops Room
Secondary Doppelganger Base

Dr. Yoo had heard the clashes of metal like everyone else. Yuri and Jin Young were fighting. Right now, Dr. Yoo wished Yuri were still wearing her earpiece so he could tell her what to do. He knew Jin Young relied on speed, and he knew exactly how to counter that.

“Fight speed with speed, Yuri. Match his speed and you’ll be able to see him!” he thought furiously, as if he could drive the idea into Yuri’s head thousands of miles away.

Seohyun, on the other hand, was in a dilemma. She didn’t know whether to worry more about the fact that Yuri was fighting Park Jin Young, or the fact that an entire North Korean mechanized infantry regiment, over five thousand strong, was heading straight for the facility.

0652 KST
Control Room
Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility

Fight fire with fire.

Or in this case, speed with speed. Yuri realized that by matching Jin Young’s speed, she could alter her own inertial frame of reference to match his own and be able to see him. It was simple physics, as far as she was concerned. She decided offhandedly that if she fell here, she’d search out Isaac Newton in Hell and thank him anyway.

Gripping her blades tighter and finding new confidence, Yuri reached deep within and readied herself. Slowly, she raised a foot, inching it forward, and when she next set it down, she was gone.

From there on out, it was a matter of endurance. Moving around with such speed took a heavy toll on one's endurance, and Yuri knew that the last man standing, quite literally, would emerge victorious. She felt her leg muscles tighten under the stress, and as she accelerated even further, moving effortlessly over and through obstacles that stood in her way, her blades cutting smoothly through the air, she finally began to make out Jin Young's shadow. That was the first step. It seemed to soar above the ground, changing directions rapidly and erratically, testament to Jin Young's phenomenal balance.

It was then when Yuri realized that Jin Young's speed had its own limitations. Because the frame of reference had been changed, the world passed by in a blur when Yuri moved. Only when she stopped briefly to change directions was the original reference frame restored. The world would settle into place, allowing Yuri to make a mental note of her surroundings and the obstacles in her way. In effect, Yuri could only see either the control room or Jin Young, but not both. She wondered if this limitation applied to him as well.

Yuri pushed herself further, changing directions and stopping more frequently to check her surroundings. In her next burst, she finally saw Jin Young moving through the air. They locked gazes.

"Very good," he said in an astonished tone, sounding like an echo. Then he taunted, "But can you strike at me?"

Yuri smirked. It was all a matter of predicting his movements and plotting a course in advance. Once she established a pattern, she made her first move. Stopping briefly, she leaned her entire body forward and shot toward a position just left of Jin Young's, swinging out with both arms in a wide arc. She felt her blades contact Jin Young's, but since she was in midair, that was all she could manage. Off balance after the strike, Yuri fell out of speed and tumbled painfully across the floor, slamming shoulder-first against a wall. The impact jarred her.

Another laugh reverberated throughout the room.

Yuri looked up from the ground, seeing Jin Young stop in the middle of the room, standing over the Supreme Leader's body.

"I've had decades to perfect this art, Yuri. Do you honestly think you can master it within a couple of minutes?"

Yuri scowled, rising to her feet and resuming her attack stance.

“You probably could,” he said tentatively, “with a little help, of course.”

Yuri knew what he was referring to. “I’ll never embrace the blood. Not again,” she spat.

Jin Young’s face suddenly became austere. “Kwon Yuri, as a blademaster, killing is in your blood. Sin lives within you. You cannot escape it. Embrace it. Summon it. Can’t you hear it calling out to you? Without it...you can never defeat me.”

“I do not need the blood to kill you, Jin Young,” Yuri declared menacingly.

“Oh? Then what will you use, Yuri?”

Yuri said nothing, and with another burst of speed, she rocketed toward Jin Young, zig-zagging in an erratic path toward him, blades held out wide. Her face was a mask of rage. When she next landed, she unleashed a flurry of lightning-fast swipes, all in different directions. Jin Young reacted in kind, dodging some, parrying others by knocking her blades away with his twin katars. Yuri could see his face, a sea of calm, as he inched backward with every attack. His lips curved upwards in a smile.

“That’s it, Yuri. Feel the rage! Use the blood against me!” He taunted as he struck away yet another of Yuri’s furious swings.

Yuri gritted her teeth. She knew she was getting angry, and she knew that was exactly what Jin Young wanted. The surge of raw emotion was difficult to suppress; try as she might, she just couldn’t get past Jin Young’s defenses. Katars were terrible for such a task, but he was parrying her attacks with greater ease than one would have done with the help of a shield. He seemed perfectly comfortable being on the defensive. With one last parry, Jin Young lowered his stance, gathering strength from his rear leg, and struck out at Yuri, driving her a few feet back. Yuri slid across the floor, pushed back on a leg and leapt toward Jin Young again.

They exchanged a dozen more blows, the crashing of steel against steel ringing in Yuri’s ears. She had tried everything. Aerial attacks. Flanking attacks. Feinting. Jin Young defended against all her moves

flawlessly, as if he'd known precisely what she had intended to do a second before she did it, and she felt herself burning out. She stole another glance at the tactical screen as she was driven back once more.

Eighteen minutes left. She was running out of time. Everyone was.

Summoning all her strength, Yuri launched herself toward Jin Young a final time, striking with a speed she had not mustered in all her life, an enraged battlecry escaping her lips.

“Yes...yes!” Jin Young cried, laughing now as he parried Yuri’s every blow.

Park Jin Young was convinced that he didn't need to kill this girl. The fool was vulnerable to her own emotions. She was weak. And so, he would continue to toy with her until she decided to summon the rage. Only then would she be worthy of fighting him, and at the same time, he would have already succeeded in corrupting the heart, mind and soul of someone he knew to be the best Blademaster in Doppelganger history. Effectively, she would kill herself. Even if she survived, she would return to the organization embodying the same taint of revenge he held in his heart. This was, in itself, a victory so great and profound that he cared little if the anti-matter bombs were deactivated, though he also knew that that outcome would be impossible to achieve.

Jin Young would win this battle either way. The smile behind his blades continued to grow.

Half a dozen strikes in, Yuri’s heart began to beat faster, and her muscles contracted as her blood pressure rose. Her vision became clouded, not by fatigue, but by a dark, aqueous veil that seemed to be approaching from all directions. Her neurons began firing furiously, making her more sensitive to changes in the surrounding world. She felt her senses heighten. In a few seconds, her heart would stop briefly, filling with the blood before expelling it to the rest of her body, consuming her whole as it had back in Switzerland.

Kwon Yuri’s humanity hung by a thread.

The blood was coming again.

2257 CET

Infirmary

Secondary Doppelganger Base

Elliot Jung awoke with a start as he felt Jessica's fingers twitch within his. He sat ramrod straight, looking for the cause of Jessica's discomfort.

The woman began to shift uncomfortably in her bed, eyebrows scrunched as her eyes remained closed in a haunted sleep. Her lips trembled, from them escaping unintelligible words that sought to be heard.

Elliot stood up, frowning, and leaned over, placing his ear over his daughter's lips.

"Yuri, don't. Don't give in, Yuri...please...don't leave me. Don't give up."

Elliot recoiled, suddenly worried. Jessica was probably having a nightmare. He decided to get her out of it. Reaching for her shoulder, he shook her a few times. "Jessica? Jessi dear, wake up."

Jessica didn't respond. Instead, her breathing began to deepen and her hands clutched the bedsheets, pulling at them, as if to pull someone away from something. Her previously inarticulate mumblings began to take the form of clear words. Jessica was crying now, begging as she continued to toss and turn in her bed.

"Don't let it take you away, Yuri! Please! Don't leave me!"

Elliot became alarmed. He continued to shake Jessica, desperate to save her from the nightmare in which she was suffering. "Jessica, wake up!" He looked around frantically. "Stephanie? Doctor? Anyone?"

"Don't give in to the blood!"

0658 KST

Control Room

Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility

Something awoke within Yuri, alerting her to the blood which threatened to intrude upon her consciousness. Her dilated pupils returned to normal, and her heart rate slowed some. Her mind snapped back to work.

The blood was overwhelming her. She fought it back as she continued to strike out against Jin Young, but it was too much. The veil continued to close over her vision, and her heart rate surged again. Yuri began to panic, but her limbs wouldn't listen to her. She wanted to back down, to collect herself, but she couldn't. Her feet continued to move in Jin Young's direction, who appeared pleased to see Yuri in this state. She opened her mouth, as if to say something that could stop the blood, but no words emerged. Her subconscious continued to hammer into her mind the thoughts and an infinitely deep loathing she struggled to push away.

Kill him! Make. Him. Bleed!

Seventeen minutes left. The blood could not be stopped, and Yuri knew it.

In a last ditch effort to save her soul, Yuri focused her mind on the one thing she wanted more than anything else in the world.

We have crossed oceans, we have spent years surviving the torment of living separate existences...

Images flashed past in her head, taking her far away where snow fell upon streets unadulterated by the passing of traffic. It took her past worn, stone-gray walls into a dark building, where old metal steps led round and round up the inside of a craggy gothic tower, past banks of giant bells and old clock faces and up a heavy wooden ladder to a balcony that overlooked a sprawling suburban landscape twinkling with lights. She now stood, arms propped on top of a cold stone balustrade, gazing at a cloudless night sky smeared with countless stars winking down at her, fiddling with her fingers a silver band with a gem that glittered in the soft moonlight.

The truth, the undeniable and yet astonishing reality is that these fragile hearts had never really ceased to beat to the same rhythm even after all that time...even after all that heartbreak...

A voice called to her from behind, but she could not make out the words. She turned to see a beautiful angel dressed in a flowing white gown that accentuated her flawless, creamy fair skin. The angel's face was framed with wavy, dark brown tresses, and was formed of a breathtaking collection of smooth curves and attractive angles, shy lips and brown eyes so deep they seemed to be able to hold the entire universe within them. Never had humankind come so close to absolute perfection. The angel's lips moved again, but still, Yuri could not hear the words. Not in her stunned state. Not in her heart-thumping trance. It was like watching a silent movie, where everything was left to the interpretation of the audience; a movie that could tell a million different stories with the same actions and settings. Tonight, the stars above were the audience, and Yuri could imagine a million different words to describe this very moment in time.

And here we are again, standing together at a crossroads, trapped in a dimension sandwiched between reality and fantasy in which I would give anything to remain for all eternity...if only to remain in your embrace, to speak the words so superficially spoken throughout history...

Yuri saw herself standing with the angel behind the stone balustrade, holding her white-gloved hand as she herself whispered the words she could not hear. She saw herself slipping the silver band solemnly over the angel's ring finger, and saw the angel's lips curve upwards in a smile so beautiful that no poem or prose in all of history could possibly describe it.

To reclaim what is and has always been ours from the very beginning...

The angel's lips moved amidst a shy smile. This time, Yuri could read the words right off her lips. Even if she hadn't heard her, she'd still know what she'd said. But no. This time, Yuri *heard* her, and that very fact ensured that this moment would be forever etched into her soul.

"I love you."

Everything shuddered and collapsed into itself, converging on a blinding singularity in space and time.

If all the truths of the universe were discredited, let the truth of our love remain, in a world between

worlds where only the two of us remain...as one.

Yuri was yanked violently back to the present, and she found herself roaring as she had never done before. Her pupils dilated as the cry only grew in volume and tenacity, and the veins on her forearms grew taut beneath the sleeves of her tactical suit. Her lungs screamed for air, and yet she couldn't stop.

Then it came. Her overworked heart finally stopped, if only for a second, and everything in her body ceased. Her breath caught and her vision blurred, not from the veil of blood that had completely covered her sight, but from a failing body that wanted nothing more than to collapse upon itself in a finality of defeat.

Inches in front of her, Jin Young continued to laugh. The poor girl had burned herself out. And he hadn't even struck at her yet. This was too easy. A rather disappointing outcome for the lack of a real challenge, but nevertheless acceptable.

He casually slipped back a step, expecting Yuri to fall forward on her face. Then he felt a chill run down his spine, a feeling he had not felt in decades, as Yuri's eyes suddenly rolled back from the top of their sockets to meet his. He gritted his teeth in surprise. That was impossible. What was happening? Yuri had clearly burned out from a catastrophic failure of the bloodrage.

Technically, bloodrages could result in two things. Either the user would receive a great boon of inhuman strength and speed, or his body would go into shock and then total shutdown from being physiologically overwhelmed. Jin Young thought the latter had just occurred. Now he was staring into eyes filled with a rage so powerful he felt himself shrink back. This was not the bloodrage.

What was it, then?

Yuri's heart burst back to life, beating so wildly she thought it would explode at any moment. Her muscles were injected with a tremendous surge of energy. Her body was so eager to move; like a spring wound up a thousand times too many. Most of all, she felt moist streaks upon her cheeks as tears rolled down her face. They were not tears of anger, but tears of sincerity, for she was not experiencing a bloodrage of sin.

It was a bloodrage of *love*.

With a resounding howl, Yuri shut her eyes and thrust herself toward Jin Young, now completely oblivious to danger and pain, hurling dozens of devastating blows against his katars a thousand times faster than she had before. He was still defending against them, but not as effectively as he did before. Her limbs blurred as her body shifted imperceptibly in space, pushed to their physiological limits, her razor-sharp blades feeling weightless within her clenched fists. What she did not see was the look on Jin Young's face: he was, for the first time in decades, afraid.

Death *itself* had come to claim him...at long last.

At the apex of her outburst, she swung her blades with colossal strength so great that it cleaved right through Jin Young's katars, at the same time sacrificing half the length of her own blades. Yuri's eyes snapped open, her vision blurred by tears and a primal rage. Loose shards of broken steel clattered to the floor, and with a final cry that she felt right down to her bones, Yuri thrust what remained of her blades deep into Jin Young's unprotected chest, coming face to face with the man as he was shocked into stillness, his wide-eyed expression one of surprise and incomprehension. Behind the film of tears in Yuri's eyes, he saw the wild flames of death and destruction, but even further behind that, there throbbed something else he couldn't quite place. What was it?

Yuri calmed down somewhat, looking Jin Young straight in the eye as she delivered her final words to the man.

"Not everyone has to give in to sin," she snarled through her teeth, enunciating each word before pulling her blades out to the side, ripping him apart in a spray of blood and bone.

Park Jin Young collapsed to the ground in a broken, bleeding heap.

Yuri struggled to stand on shaking legs, then threw her blades down as her legs gave out from underneath her.

No...there isn't much time left. I have...to stop it...

She fought to keep her eyes open; the fatigue came crashing down upon her, and almost immediately her muscles had all but lost their responsiveness. After the bloodrage, she was drained of energy, and her body was shutting down temporarily to recover. She dragged herself to the main console, picked up her earpiece and stuffed it into her ear.

“Seohyun...can you hear me?” Yuri said weakly.

2300 CET
Ops Room
Secondary Doppelganger Base

The entire room burst into cheer as soon as they heard Yuri’s voice come over the speaker system. That could only mean one thing: she had defeated Park Jin Young and had lived to tell the tale. It was as if all the built-up tension of days past had snapped in an instant.

Dr. Yoo allowed himself a small smile, relief washing over him like a warm shower after a night out in the cold. But this wasn’t over yet.

“Yuri, you made it!” Seohyun said excitedly.

“There’s fifteen minutes left before the bombs go off,” came the tired, clinical reply.

“Which ones?”

“All of them.”

Seohyun gasped and then collected herself. She had to handle this with finesse, and that tended to elude people when they allowed themselves to get too excited. “Yuri, listen to me. There has to be a main console where the release mechanisms for the bombs are controlled from. Can you find it?”

There was a short pause.

"I think I've found it."

"Alright. There should be a panel of some sort that gives way to a motherboard, wires and other internal components. I need you to open it and identify that motherboard for me."

"Hold on."

There was a short silence before Seohyun heard something being ripped open and the sound of metal clashing with the floor.

"Alpha-golf-zulu, two-three-four-seven-five-eight-eight-four-nine-five-two, yankee-echo-echo."

Seohyun worked quickly. All she had to do was run the motherboard's serial number through the database, searching within a pre-isolated geographical region for quicker filtering. A motherboard's serial number was unique, much like a person's fingerprint, and could be traced to anywhere in the world. The motherboard down in the facility could not be reached via satellite due to its depth below the surface, but Seohyun could access it via cyberspace, which it had to be connected to in order to control the detonation of the bombs positioned worldwide.

A few moments later, she had it. A command console appeared on her screen. Dr. Yoo came up behind her.

"Can you crack it?"

Seohyun's fingers worked tirelessly. "It's what I was born to do, sir," she said without looking back. Dr. Yoo smiled, both with relief and pride.

Seohyun's screen was projected onto the command console for all to see. With a few quick commands, she accessed the system disarm protocol, which appeared to be made up of two separate phases, one

heavily encrypted, and one not. She finally turned to face Dr. Yoo.

“Sir, I need to shut down all non-essential systems in the base to dedicate all of our processing power to running a decryption algorithm.”

Dr. Yoo nodded. “Approved. Do whatever it takes, Seohyun.”

Seohyun nodded. With another series of commands on a separate screen, all the other workstations in the room were shut down, along with a multitude of non-essential systems all over the base. Seohyun was careful to make sure the medical wing was still online. Switching back to the system disarm protocol, she began running the decryption algorithm.

“Yuri?”

“Can you disarm it, Seohyun?”

“I can, but this system comes in two phases. I need you to input the command for the second phase yourself.”

“You can’t do it from there?”

“No, it looks like it was designed to be disarmed physically on-site.”

“Got it.”

Behind her, Taeyeon and Stephanie looked at each other uncomfortably. They didn’t know it, but they were holding each others’ hands tighter than before. Stephanie could feel it. Taeyeon was scared; probably scared of being denied a future which included her. But if there was one thing Stephanie had more than anything else, it was faith.

And she had faith in Seohyun and Yuri.

0710 KST

Control Room

Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility

Yuri sat with her back against the main console, her nose constantly assaulted by the sharp coppery scent of blood that had begun to blanket the room. Ten agonizing minutes had passed, and there was still no reply from Seohyun. Five minutes remained, and the fate of the world still remained on their shoulders.

Yuri pulled her thoughts away from the dead men in the room, toward the living who still walked the streets of the world, clueless of their fate. She imagined them feeling a sudden shockwave before being vaporized by a hurricane of pure energy, or being bludgeoned by falling debris and by vehicles flying through the air. She imagined children being burned into the ground as they played innocently. She imagined her own parents who still lived in the States.

Three more minutes passed without consequence.

Silently, Yuri began to cry. She felt helpless and useless. Was this truly how it was going to end?

2313 CET

Ops Room

Secondary Doppelganger Base

Seohyun wanted to smash the screen of her workstation. Only two minutes remained, and the algorithm had come up with nothing, even with all the processing power dedicated to it.

She was about to give up when she saw the numbers on her screen stop scrolling. The algorithm had run its course and broken the code. The screen on her workstation changed abruptly.

They had gotten through.

The screen she now saw, though, puzzled her even more than the first. All she could see were seven boxes. She turned to Dr. Yoo.

"It looks like a seven-letter alphanumerical password."

Dr. Yoo consulted his watch. Even though the password was simple, there was not enough time to run another algorithm to find all the possible words, in any and all possible languages. And then they'd have to try them one by one and risk detonating the bombs prematurely if the system was designed to shut down in the event of being given the wrong one.

"There's not enough time," Dr. Yoo said.

"Justice."

Seohyun and Dr. Yoo turned to see Stephanie walking slowly toward them. "Justice," she repeated. "I'm sure of it." Stephanie then nodded resolutely.

Seohyun and Dr. Yoo shared a look. There was only a minute left on the clock.

0714 KST
Control Room
Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility

"Justice."

"What?" Yuri asked incredulously.

Seohyun spelt out the word. *"Its justice, Yuri. Think about it. Actually, think about it later. There's no time! The password is justice. Now hurry!"*

Yuri sensed the urgency. There was indeed no more time, and even she knew the impossibility of finding the correct password out of the countless permutations of choices.

Thirty seconds left.

Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, Yuri keyed in *JUSTICE* on the main console...

...and tapped 'Enter'.

Chapter 37 : Wrath Of The Hogs

0714 KST

Control Room

Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility

North Korea

Kwon Yuri waited five seconds for any sort of reaction from the console. Somehow, she knew that she had been holding her breath from the moment she'd begun typing the code.

Twenty-five seconds left.

Yuri closed her eyes. Nothing was happening. The numbers were still counting down.

00:00:24

00:00:23

00:00:22

“Jessica...I’m sorry,” Yuri whispered to herself, feeling her weakened heart slowly close in on itself as the rest of her tears began to run freely down the sides of her cheeks. For some reason, she welcomed the warmth of the flowing liquid on her cold, clammy skin.

Yuri sobbed as the last of the strongest bricks of the walls she had been building around her heart and mind for years crumbled into dust. Unconsciously, she slipped down to her knees, arms still propped onto the computer console as she sought some semblance comfort in her wet shirtsleeves.

All this...for nothing.

A soft beep sounded in the murky depths of her drunken haze. She took control of her sobbing, lifting her head as her eyes parted to reveal a blurry image. She blinked the last of her tears out, and the image began to come into focus.

00:00:14

It wasn’t moving.

The timer had stopped.

2314 CET
Ops Room
Secondary Doppelganger Base
Switzerland

Thousands of miles away and underneath hundreds of feet of solid snow and rock, Stephanie Jung felt the weight of the world being lifted off her shoulders.

She and the dozen other people in the room had watched in silence as the timer counted down to fourteen seconds and stopped. They didn't know exactly how to react. Was it a trick? Would the timer begin counting down again once they allowed themselves to breathe and celebrate? Nobody took the chance.

Five seconds, a minuscule sample of time that seemed to stretch into all eternity, passed without incidence.

They had done it.

Stephanie felt a familiar presence entwine itself smoothly into the spaces between her fingers, and turned her head to see the love of her life. Kim Taeyeon, a quarter of a head shorter than she, looked up at her with eyes that sparkled with pride and love, and lips that curved upwards in a heart-grabbing gesture Stephanie accepted as her rightful reward.

Death had passed within seconds of them, but there they were, standing hand in hand together.

Alive.

All around the room, there was neither applause nor cheer. Everyone seemed to have been humbled by the fact that they had almost certainly cheated death.

Dr. Yoo felt no different. The Doppelgangers had wagered the entire world in this bet of most grandiose proportions; a bet made decades ago, and won. Deep in his heart, he felt more gratitude than relief, thankful that he had been given another chance to make things right.

And he would not fail this time.

Remembering Our Fallen (The Last Samurai OST - The Way of the Sword (5:21 - end))

Seo Juhyun sat motionless in her chair, unable to tear her gaze away from the frozen picture of the doomsday map on the tactical screen of the Ops Room. Unconsciously, her fingers curled into fists. She closed her eyes, releasing the breath that she had been holding for longer than she'd ever thought she could. Her mind wandered through distorted, unfocused depths and rubber-banding stretches of time, coming to rest on a scene which held the familiar figures and faces of herself and the one who had given her life to protect her.

"Take my hand...and hold your breath..."

Her vision shifted, dimming out and flashing to other scenes she had encountered since that day, until finally settling on another. She could almost feel her hair whipping about as she saw herself bent over the prostrate form of a thin woman whose blood would not stop flowing from her abdomen. She saw hands pressed against the wound, how streams of scarlet continuously seeped through the gaps between the fingers. She heard whispered words, drawn and distant, into an ear draining of the color of life.

"I don't love you...but I wish you'd given me the chance to learn how to..."

Seohyun remembered the exact moment when Im Yoona's blood ceased to flow between her fingers. She remembered how the woman's lifeless eyes continued to stare blankly at her in death; how she had refused to close them because Seohyun was the last thing she wanted to see before she left. She remembered the tears that had frozen at the edges of her eyelids amidst the roaring cold wind.

Seohyun felt her own tears brimming at the edge of her eyes, but she fought them back. Opening her heart to whoever would hear her, she spoke, not with her lips, but a mind which roamed to seek out the soul of the one who had been her strength for the past two days.

"It's over, Yoona. We did it. I did it. For you...Aren't you proud?"

Somewhere, Seohyun heard a string of light-hearted laughter. It was familiar and as painful as it was beautiful. But it was one of countless memories she would continue to hold close to her heart for as long as she lived.

0715 KST
Control Room
Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility
North Korea

The ground seemed to rumble ever so slightly beneath Yuri's feet. She raised a finger to her ear and gathered the strength with which to speak. "Everyone still alive back there?"

"We did it, Yuri." Seohyun's voice was hesitant. Yuri could read that even in her state of exhaustion. "But it's not over yet. There's an entire KPA mechanized infantry regiment waiting for you topside."

Yuri smiled, though she did not know why. She decided that she didn't really care at this point. "Yeah, I heard. Nobody's ever going to leave me alone, are they?"

"Afraid not, but there is a bright side to this."

"Really, now?" Yuri's eyebrows quirked in tired surprise. She listened for a few moments, then nodded with a thin smile. "Alright." The ground rumbled beneath her feet again. It was time to get moving.

Yuri took a series of deep breaths, summoning energy back into her body. It didn't help much, but it did tell her that she wasn't as weak as she had been before at Doppelganger HQ. The bloodrage could tire, but it wouldn't kill. At least, not someone who understood how to use it.

Using the console for support, Yuri turned and went down on a knee to collect her twin blades. More shattered bits scattered as she lifted them off the ground. She half-crouched on shaky legs and slid them smoothly back into her calf sheathes. She hadn't bothered to clean the blood off this time.

Straightening fully, Yuri cast one last glance around the room at her fallen teammates. She shook her head and sighed.

"It didn't have to be this way. But you will be remembered, even if you won't be acknowledged."

Finding a bit of new strength, she began dragging herself toward the door, the lazy steps growing steadily back into her regular strides as her body began to respond. She was about to step through the threshold when she noticed something out of the corner of her eye.

Sprawled dead across the floor was the body of Park Jin Young, fingers still wrapped stubbornly around the handles of his broken katars. The sides of his ribcage had been torn from the inside out. There was a lot of blood. But what drew Yuri's attention were his still open eyes. Something sparkled next to them under the harsh fluorescent light.

Yuri went down on one knee next to the corpse, taking a closer look at Jin Young's frozen face. Then she discovered the source of the sparkles.

Tears.

Moving closer, Yuri saw the grayish streaks down the length of his temples, and a film of tears laying still over his eyes.

The man had been crying in his final moments of life, Yuri reflected. She recalled his emotion-driven words during their earlier duel.

"Where was justice when they took her from this world? Where was justice when they tortured her and shot her before my own eyes?"

Park Jin Young was not the deranged sociopath everyone had thought or condemned him to be. A madman couldn't possibly have so carefully executed a decades-long plan on such a scale as to entail global destruction. A madman couldn't have had the mental capacity to slip past all the world's intelligence agencies, to manipulate the hearts and minds of the people around him to his whims. His frightening wit, sharpened intuition and instinct and sheer skill could only have been the painstakingly nurtured and practiced qualities of one of the Doppelgangers' finest field agents.

In Yuri's eyes, he was a victim just as much as anyone else. This elaborate grand plan was the brainchild of a tortured man who was desperately reaching out to find something, *something* that could put his mind at rest, to make him accept the soul-wrenching fact that he had lost someone he probably loved with all his heart. Revenge truly was powerful, and Jin Young had set his mind on affecting his own

revenge of the highest order, to make those who had wronged him pay so dearly that they would recall their heinous crimes with terror. Vengeance, after all, was vengeance; no matter how large or small the means.

"I was taught to seek out and defeat men with evil hearts, but the very people who preached that to me were nothing but the same!"

Taking a deep breath, Yuri reached over with a trembling hand to close the eyelids of a man who had changed her life forever. Park Jin Young had awakened a source of fortitude within her so strong she knew that nothing she would ever encounter in life could bring her down if she would only reach out with a sincere heart and seek it for comfort. As Yuri's fingers left Jin Young's skin, she promised herself that she would find out who had done this to him, and why.

Kwon Yuri picked up an M4 carbine nearby and rose to her feet.

Hundreds of feet above, dozens of armored vehicles and thousands of armed men lay in wait.

0716 KST

Somewhere over North Korea

United States Air Force Major Bill Carr, 42, had always wanted to be a tank driver. As a full-blooded native of Houston, Texas, he'd grown up reading such books as *Tom Clancy's Armoured Warfare* and *Jane's Tank Recognition Guide*, amongst others. He'd studied World War II tank tactics in his youth and ogled at the M-1 Abrams tank for longer than anyone else at the dozen defense industry shows he'd been to with his father. Tanks weren't a fascination. They were an obsession.

Never did he expect to end up flying one.

Major Carr gave a cursory glance to his left and right. The morning sun was low on the horizon, and an endless carpet of clouds rolled beneath him. Two ugly-looking solid gray aircraft flanked him, the twin turbofans just ahead of their twin tails sticking out like sore thumbs. He was in a flight squadron of five

A-10 Thunderbolt II aircraft, widely known rather unaffectionately as the Warthog. The name seemed to suit the less-than-pleasing appearance of the flying tank.

And a flying tank it was.

Built around its main weapon, the GAU-8 Avenger, a multiple barreled automatic cannon that held over one thousand 30mm depleted uranium rounds and capable of firing at a rate of 3,900 rounds per minute, the Warthog's job was to get in close to enemy armored vehicles and shred them to pieces. The aircraft's front landing gear had even been built off-center to accommodate the centralized housing of the weapon. Blowing things up was another perk of flying the Warthog. It had eleven hardpoints under its wings with which to carry a wide range of weapons from missiles to bombs. Equipped with multiple-redundancy flight and hydraulics systems and carrying over five hundred kilograms of titanium armor, it could withstand small arms and cannon fire, lose part of its wings, be missing all of its landing gear and still make a safe landing back home.

Major Carr loved flying the Warthog, having served more than one tour in Afghanistan doing close air support. It was just like piloting a tank, with the added thrill of flying at over five hundred kilometers per hour. Oh, and just like any other man, he *loved* blowing things up.

Ten thousand feet above and ten miles ahead of his squadron, four F-16D Fighting Falcons were flying in escort. He knew that they were exact reason why they had gotten so far into North Korean airspace, despite the fact that the country had one of the most dense air defense networks in the world. The F-16s were each carrying highly advanced ECM, or electronic countermeasure pods under their wings, and the fighters were constantly identifying, isolating and jamming the radar systems of anti-aircraft batteries all along their flight path. Even if the North Koreans could see them, they simply couldn't do anything about it with their targeting systems in utter disarray.

They had all been activated at Osan Air Base, about sixty kilometers south of Seoul, since the shocking attack on the capital city. Just twenty minutes earlier, an order had come down from above that sent ripples of surprise through the pilots. Their orders were to fly directly into North Korean airspace to an area in the western region and provide close air support for an unknown United States asset.

"Well, unknown to us, at least," Carr thought sourly.

What was even more discomforting was the fact that they hadn't even been told where to go. They

were to navigate to the exact location via explicit instructions regularly updated from the command center back in Osan. So much for adequate intelligence. He also remembered the stern warning that had come at the end of the briefing.

"This mission is top secret. You didn't see nothin', you didn't hear nothin', and most of all, you damned well better not say nothin'."

Major Carr had an idea of what was going on. Some damned CIA black ops types had probably screwed up big time and needed an extraction, or at least, a window to get away. Must have been some kind of shit they had gotten into, he thought. His Warthog was armed to the teeth with Maverick air-to-surface missiles and cluster bombs, enough to wipe out an entire armored company all on his own. They also needed help quickly; the A-10s were flying almost flat-out. He knew what that meant. He was sure he would've been loaded with more weapons if not for the pair of external fuel tanks he'd had to carry for the sake of range. They had no idea how long they needed to remain in combat before they could return home.

Carr deliberated for a moment. If they were providing close air support for American black ops, then did they have anything to do with what just happened in Seoul? Were the North Koreans responsible for the attack? He blinked the idea away. A soldier was trained to think, but always within his means. There was no sense sticking his nose where it didn't belong, especially when it meant poking into an intelligence agency's business. Carr would do his job and nothing more.

"Tango leader, confirm flight path on bearing three-one-seven, speed five hundred and fifty knots," his radio intoned.

"Roger, command, confirm bearing three-one-seven, speed five hundred and fifty knots."

"Tango leader, your distance to target area is six-zero miles, maintain bearing."

"Distance to target area six-zero miles, roger command. How's the sky looking?"

"Clear for as far as she goes, Tango Leader."

Major Carr considered this uneasily. They had been flying in North Korean airspace for more than ten minutes now. Why hadn't their fighters come to stop them? Was the North Korean air force this slow to respond? As far as he knew, the Korean People's Air Force was outfitted with a sizable number of Russian MiG-21s and MiG-29s, most of them used to protect Pyongyang's airspace, which they were now quickly approaching. He had no idea if the North Koreans had gotten their hands on the newer MiG-35s. If they did, it was all the better that they hadn't been scrambled. He wasn't sure if the technologically older F-16s could handle them. His Warthog could withstand bullet and cannon fire, but not a direct hit from a missile.

Sixty miles separated him from the target location. At his speed, that meant about another ten minutes of flight time. Major Carr decided that no matter how much he loved blowing things up, he would be content with getting the job done and getting out as fast as he possibly could.

0716 KST
Control Room
Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility

Yuri was about to step through the door when she heard a telephone ring at the main console. She turned lazily over her shoulder to locate the source of the noise. A small red telephone continued to ring loudly in the enclosed space.

Sighing dejectedly, Yuri moved over to the main console and picked it up in contempt.

A voice laced with worry spoke rapidly in Korean. *"Dear Leader, we have detected a squadron of American aircraft closing in on Pyongyang's airspace. We suspect that they are on a direct course to the Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility. Our anti-aircraft defenses are unable to lock onto them because some of their aircraft appear to have jamming capabilities. What do you advise?"*

Yuri frowned in disgust, held the phone away from her and stared at it for a couple of seconds before holding it to her ear again.

"Dear Leader? My apologies. What do you advise?"

"I advise that you shut the hell up. You're hurting my ear talking so loudly like that," Yuri replied in fluent Korean...well, at least she'd thought it was fluent enough. The thing about the Korean language was that words could mean many things in as many different contexts, and she'd thought up her response in English before translating it on the fly.

There was a brief silence before the voice spoke again, even louder now.

"Who is this? I demand to know your rank and name! I will have you-"

"My name is Kwon Yuri, mister general-of-all-the-freaking-world *sir*, and my rank is sufficiently high to kick the fat ass of your Dear Dead Leader!"

"Well, technically, I wasn't the one who killed him...but I damn well could have!" Yuri thought before continuing.

"Kim Yong-guk, may he burn in hell, is as much alive as your rotting ancestors, so you can take your empty threats and *shove it!*" Yuri slammed the phone back into its receiver and turned to leave.

"Bloody idiots."

2317 CET
Ops Room
Secondary Doppelganger Base

"Sir, it looks like they've sent a company down to the facility to investigate. The rest of the regiment has the facility surrounded on both sides of the Taedong river," Seohyun said quickly to Dr. Yoo.

Activity in the Ops Room was back in full swing. They had all allowed themselves to breathe a sigh of relief, but now they had work to do. Kwon Yuri was surrounded by an entire regiment of the KPA, and they would not rest until they could get her out.

“How far away are the Warthogs?” Dr. Yoo asked.

“About fifty miles or so. They’ll be there in less than ten minutes. The USS George Washington and her battlegroup are already fast approaching their designated location in the Sea of Japan. If Yuri can make it to the east coast, there shouldn’t be a problem getting her out.” Seohyun turned to look at Dr. Yoo, who was staring at the tactical screen, watching the blips of the American fighter squadron approach the facility to the west and the blue dots of the naval battlegroup to the east. “Do you think Yuri can make it out?”

Dr. Yoo looked at her curiously. “Pitting a company of crack North Korean soldiers against Kwon Yuri?” he chuckled.

“They should’ve known better.”

0718 KST

Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility

Yuri came to a stop just in front of the single elevator that serviced the entire facility. She’d considered taking the stairs, but the ground was too far up and she imagined that getting trapped and then surrounded in the cramped spaces of the stairwell was something she’d rather not risk. She stared at the LED display above the double doors. Someone was coming down.

Moving off to the side and pressing her back against the wall, Yuri reached into a grenade pouch on her tactical suit and fished out a flashbang grenade. Pulling the pin, she kept a firm hold on the safety lever and waited. Candidly, she recalled the countless Hollywood movies in which actors pulled grenade pins with their teeth. She scoffed. Hollywood and their indestructible teeth.

The sound of shuddering metal told her that it was time. Taking her fingers off the safety lever, she allowed it to spring off to the opposite wall while the fuse was ignited. She next heard the sound of the elevator doors opening.

Yuri spun on her right foot to face the opening doors, spotting the first of the dozen or so men packed into the elevator as she tossed the flashbang underhanded through the small space. She watched for a moment as the first man's eyes grew in surprise and then flicked downwards to follow the path of the flashbang. One second left. Yuri twisted her torso back in the opposite direction, once again standing with her back to the wall. She closed her eyes and gripped her M4.

She saw the flash of light sear through her closed eyelids as her ears were hammered mercilessly by the deafening explosion. Her ears were still ringing when she moved out in front of the elevator doors once more, brought her M4 up to her shoulder and sprayed a hail of bullets into the blinded and panicked group of men. They burst into a mess of shattered flesh and bone, faces unrecognizable as their lifeless bodies were thrown against the back of the elevator and slid to the ground. A fine crimson mist lingered a while longer in the confines of the elevator.

Yuri stepped in, tossing her empty M4 out the door. She pressed the button for the ground floor.

0719 KST

Ground Floor

Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility

Lieutenant Kim Hee Sun led a squad of men along the narrow corridor of the ground floor to the only elevator that serviced the facility. He had just lost contact with the squad he sent down moments earlier. He had placed two other squads at either end of the corridor just in case. The rest of his platoon were scattered throughout the level, and just outside, thousands of others laid in wait. The men of the 806th Mechanized Corps had been on duty since two days ago, operating out of a hastily prepared forward base just west of this facility. They were to act as the Dear Leader's personal guard as he spent most of his time in the facility and were required to respond quickly in the event that things went awry. Exactly that had happened, and Lieutenant Kim was determined to find the cause of the problem.

He imagined that an imperialist agent had somehow infiltrated the building and wreaked havoc in the lower levels in hopes of foiling the Dear Leader's Great Leap Forward, a grand plan the man had himself publicly announced over the country's secure television network just a day earlier. The Great Leap Forward, a term coined by the Dear Leader himself, promised universal brotherhood, greatly improved standards of living for the Korean People and the acceptance of *Juche*, the country's Great Philosophy, all over the world. It was something Lieutenant Kim looked forward to, as did all his other countrymen.

The LED display above the elevator doors indicated its approach. He and his men brought their rifles to their shoulders. Whoever this imperialist pig was, he would not escape the wrath of the 806th Mechanized Corps.

The elevator doors opened with a soft chime.

“Fire!”

The soldiers unleashed a storm of 7.62mm rounds into the elevator, firing without pause. It was then when Lieutenant Kim saw the bodies.

“Hold fire! Hold fire!” he shouted over the deafening flurry.

It was the squad he had sent down earlier. They were all dead, and he was sure he and his men weren’t the ones who had shot them. Stepping forward, Lieutenant Kim kept his rifle at shoulder level and stepped through the open doors. The sharp scent of blood immediately sent a wave of nausea through him.

Yuri watched as the soldier passed under her. On the way up, she had gone up through the emergency hatch of the elevator, kneeling at its edge. A small knife was clutched in her left hand. She waited for a second. The man would inspect the bodies of his fallen comrades, then turn and shout orders to the men waiting outside. There.

Yuri stepped through the hatch, eyes locked onto a single spot in the crook of the man’s neck. His feet shifted slightly to turn as he heard her coming down, but he was too late. Before Yuri’s feet had even touched the ground, she had already driven the knife all the way to its hilt, eliciting a surprised gasp. Her right hand quickly snaked its way around his shoulder before her fingers found the trigger housing of his weapon. As she ripped the knife out of his neck toward her, her face sprayed with fresh blood, Yuri jammed her finger onto the trigger of the AK-47, spraying the length of the wall beyond. Surprised faces either went slack or were simply blown away as the remainder of the weapon’s bullets was emptied into their bodies.

As the Lieutenant's knees gave out from under him, Yuri slipped her right hand down to his waist and plucked a Makarov PM pistol from his holster. He was still choking. She stepped out, flicking the bloodied blade in one direction as she fired the Makarov in the other. As the blade left her fingers, she fluidly reached down to her thigh holster and retrieved her Les Baer .45. The blade caught a soldier in the eye, and he fell backwards, firing his weapon wildly into the men around him. To her right, the hail of bullets from the Makarov punctured the flesh of the five men at the end, who had just begun to raise their rifles. To her left, only three remained standing. Their AK-47s were already at shoulder height. Ninety bullets capable of passing through whole tree trunks would soon be headed her way. Yuri launched herself toward her right, twisting her body so that her arms were toward the standing men, just as the first man opened fire. She gritted her teeth as a stray bullet streaked past her cheek, just barely grazing the skin. She fired both pistols at once, hearing the distinctive click of the Makarov as its slide locked open. It was empty. She let it fall out of her hands, shifting her now free hand to support the retort of her Les Baer. Five more barks from the pistol and the men at the left end fell. Yuri hit the ground on her right shoulder, skidding across the floor. Turning to stand, she walked briskly along the length of the corridor. As she passed the fallen squad of men, she put the remaining two bullets in her Les Baer into the chest of a soldier who was struggling to get up. The slide of her pistol locked open. Empty.

She thumbed the magazine catch of her pistol, reaching into a slim magazine pouch to retrieve a new one.

Three squads and twenty-five men down. Four thousand to go.

0721 KST

Somewhere over North Korea

"Tango Leader, revise bearing to zero-four-three, please acknowledge."

"Roger that, command. Tango Squadron, revise bearing to zero-four-three, speed five hundred and fifty knots on my mark. Three, two, one, mark."

The five A-10 Warthogs rolled to their new bearing in perfect formation. Above them, the Falcons began to fly in a large circle, beginning to loiter in the area to provide air support for the Warthogs.

"Command, my bearing is zero-four-three, speed five hundred and fifty knots."

"Tango Leader, your distance to target location is one-eight miles. Recommend that you descend to attack altitude to acquire targets."

"Tango Squadron, commence dive to eight hundred feet and go weapons free on my mark."

Two minutes remained.

0722 KST

Ground Floor

Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility

Yuri moved stealthily from room to room. She needed to stretch this out for as long as possible before she stepped out of the facility. She knew there was no way she could escape with an entire regiment waiting just outside. There was one thing she knew, though, and she would use that to her advantage. The North Koreans would prefer to have her captured rather than killed, and they were counting on her surrender upon seeing that she was hopelessly surrounded. She would do just that.

Yuri holstered her Les Baer. She wouldn't need it anymore. She touched her earpiece.

"Seohyun, I'm going dark for a while."

"Be careful."

She was about to remove her earpiece when another voice intruded.

"Come home, Kwon Yuri." It was Dr. Yoo again.

Yuri dipped her head, a small smile forming across her bloodied lips. She nodded to herself. "Yes, sir."

Reaching up, she plucked the earpiece out of her ear and stashed it in her pocket.

Yuri went very still. What she was about to do was madness, and for the first time in years she would place her trust in people she had never worked with.

With a final deep breath, Yuri stood and stepped out of the shadows into the light of the main corridor.

To her right, someone began yelling. Calmly, she placed her hands over her head and dropped to her knees.

0724 KST

Somewhere over North Korea

"Tango Leader, do you have visual on targets of opportunity?"

"Affirmative, command." Major Carr almost laughed. Oh, he had a visual all right. Less than a thousand feet below and about five miles away, he could see huge columns of men and vehicles surrounding what appeared to be some kind of military facility. Four tiny squares at its corners denoted guard towers. He let his eyes roam over the men and machines ahead and below. There had to be an entire regiment out there.

"Tango Leader, you are cleared to engage any and all non-friendly personnel and vehicles."

"Roger that, command. Tango Four, Tango Five, break off and acquire targets on the south bank of the river. Tango Two and Three, remain with me. Stay in formation, everybody. Let's give em' hell."

Two A-10s broke off from the squadron, flying in formation toward the south bank of the river. Major

Carr began acquiring targets using his Helmet Mounted Integrated Targeting, or HMIT system, which provided multiple independent locks for his Maverick air-to-surface missiles with just a brief look in a given direction. The Lockheed Martin Sniper XR targeting pod beneath his fuselage aided this.

“Tango Two, lock acquired.”

“Tango Three, lock acquired.”

“Command, we have positive lock on targets.”

For the first time, the voice over the radio carried a bit of mirth. *“Have fun, boys.”*

0724 KST

Courtyard

Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility

Yuri moved with her hands behind her head in the middle of a ten-man escort, an AK-47 pressed into the small of her back. The courtyard of the facility was a vast expanse of packed dirt. Apparently the people who had designed this facility had meant for its infrastructure to appear primitive in order to divert attention away from the building.

They were now headed toward a truck which would take them past the main gate of the facility to wherever she was destined to be. She could already see the dozens of armored vehicles parked just outside the fences extending from the main gate; with hundreds more uniformed men milling about busily. She heard the low rumble of vehicle engines thrumming in neutral. She noted that the regiment had not brought anti-air capabilities with them. They would soon regret that dearly.

She should have been nervous, if not for the three tiny specks of gray she spotted in the sky just northwest of her. They would have been invisible if she had not known to look for them. The early morning sun was blinding.

Yuri smiled.

Now the fun begins.

The A-10 Warthogs closed within a mile of the column, throttled back and went into a thirty-degree dive, the optimum angle of attack for their Avenger autocannons.

Major Carr was in his element. He and his squadron mates had flown missions just like these dozens of times before, and this was no different. He jettisoned all four of his AGM-65 Maverick missiles, feeling the aircraft shift as it became 1.2 tons lighter. Eight others joined in behind his, solid fuel blazing, rocketing to over one thousand kilometers per hour as they closed in on their targets. To his far right, he spotted Tango Four and Five beginning their attack dive as well.

The regiment hadn't even heard them coming. Before they could even react, twelve massive explosions rocked the ground as a dozen eight-wheeled BTR-60 armored personnel carriers went up in a conflagration of twisted metal. Men around them scattered in panic. How the hell had they come under attack?

At the same time, Carr's 30mm cannon spun up, its seven barrels morphing into an unbroken dark ring. The three Hogs approached the clustered regiment at five hundred kilometers per hour, raining down depleted uranium death upon men and vehicles alike as they strafed the length of the column.

Neither Carr nor his wingmen could see it from their height, but the 30mm rounds literally tore men apart, blasting chunks of meat and bone clean from their bodies, turning the long dirt path into a scarlet orgy of blood and entrails. When the rounds hit armored vehicles instead, they ripped through their thin armor as if they were tissue paper, striking ammunition banks and igniting them. More BTR-60s blew up from the inside out, shredding their crew in the process. It was only the Hogs' first pass, and the column was already a broken, burning mess. Those men who were lucky to escape the first volley scattered, and officers shouted unintelligible orders as more vehicles exploded around them, hurling flaming chunks of shrapnel into the soft bodies of the surrounding men. There was simply nowhere to hide. They were sitting ducks. As the Hogs passed over the column, they dropped their cluster bombs, which exploded upon contact with the ground and the vehicles around it, peppering the infantry with more shrapnel.

Carr and his wingmen pulled up, feeling a lot lighter after having cleared most of their hardpoint-mounted weapons, completing their first pass. How many kills had they made? Three hundred? Four? He was assuming each BTR-60 carried three men as crew. They were barely two hundred feet above the ground. They would make a climbing turn about a mile ahead, ascend back to eight hundred feet, and rain hell upon the regiment once again, and continue to do so until not a single man remained standing.

At the same time the Hogs were making their pass, Yuri took advantage of the surprise that left the soldiers around her frozen to draw the twin blades from her calf sheathes. The fact that they were broken didn't hinder her efficacy. Now half their original length, the jagged edges of her blades promised to inflict more pain than ever. Before the man behind her could react, she had already spun and sliced his legs off at the knees. The next two seconds was a bloody dance of death as Yuri spun, ducked and slashed with her blades at the men around her, compensating flawlessly for the lack of reach of her broken blades, efficiently putting down the terrified soldiers. It was a mentality that Yuri had just begun to abhor: *when you're pushed, killing is as easy as breathing.*

As the last of the men surrounding her fell with a gurgling noise, clutching his half-severed throat, Yuri replaced her blades and jogged around the truck to the driver's side and pulled out her Les Baer. The driver noticed her approach, and as he turned to look at her, his head was blown apart with a single bark of her pistol. Climbing onto the metal steps leading up to the cabin, Yuri pulled open the door of the dirty green truck and yanked the dead driver out. He fell to the ground with a thump.

Yuri looked around for a moment to examine the dashboard and controls of the truck. It was an antique, probably Cold War-era Russian, redlining at just over a hundred and twenty kilometers per hour. She scowled. This was all the North Koreans could afford with their massive defense budget? She shook her head. No use complaining. It would get her out of here, and that was what mattered. Her eyes drifted to the rear view mirror just outside the cabin. Blood flowed down her left cheek from where the bullet had grazed her earlier. She wiped the blood away with her sleeve and decided with fury that she would be damned pissed if it left a scar.

"Damn it, I've always prided myself upon clear skin. What now!?"

Yuri replaced the earpiece in her ear before she stomped on the clutch, shifting into first gear just as she spotted the three Warthogs from before begin to make their second pass over the column stationed outside the main gate. She also spotted intermittent muzzle flashes coming from the armored personnel

carriers just beyond the gate. The idiots were attempting to shoot down the fighters with their heavy machineguns. They wouldn't have much luck, she was sure.

"Like your backup, Miss Kwon?"

Yuri froze. It was John Bennett's voice.

"How did you get on this frequency?"

"We're not all that helpless, you know, Miss Kwon?"

Yuri's eyes widened in realization. "ECHELON."

A short string of laughter. *"Draw your own conclusions."*

Yuri almost smiled. "How long have you been listening?"

"Long enough to know that my men are dead. But as you can see, Miss Kwon, the United States didn't just come for her own warriors. Their sacrifice will be honored, but till then, we're getting you out. Of course, you'll be very thoroughly debriefed. The President is very interested in you."

Now Yuri couldn't help but smile, even at the last sentence. She just wanted to get home. "Thank you, Mr. Bennett. Can my people hear this conversation?"

"Yes, we can." It was Seohyun's voice now. She sounded a tad irritated.

Yuri opened her mouth to speak, but another slew of earth-shaking explosions rocked the ground, masking her words. In the upper registers of her hearing, she could just barely make out the familiar sound of flesh being torn. The Hogs had just made their second pass.

"Miss Kwon, we have a Super Stallion from the USS George Washington in the Sea of Japan coming to get you. There are F-16s loitering around the east coast, but we'll still need you to get as far as you can before we can pick you up."

"Tell your fighters I'm commandeering a green KPA transport truck from inside the facility, please. I don't want to be blown up the moment I make a run for the main gates."

Another string of laughter. *"Will do. Godspeed, and I'll see you very soon."*

Yuri waited a few seconds for John to relay the information. She had no intention to stray into the Hogs' field of fire before they knew not to shoot at her.

"Seohyun, you got all that?"

"Looks like we're going to have to look for a new frequency to broadcast on. Anyway, he isn't bluffing. The USS George Washington is waiting in the Sea of Japan along with a small battlegroup. It also seems that the Chinese have the same suspicions as we do. They're likely to know that there are American aircraft in North Korean territory, but they haven't breathed a word."

"Right. How's everyone back there?" Yuri felt it strange to ask about her friends back in base while men were being slaughtered barely a hundred meters ahead of her.

"Everyone's worried sick for you, Kwon Yuri, so you'd better get your ass back here asap."

Yuri cocked an eyebrow. Had Seohyun just said the 'a' word?

"Tango Leader, we have intel coming down from above. Asset is escaping in a green transport truck from the middle of the facility. Can you acquire him?"

Major Carr looked out the canopy toward his left. A lone truck was sitting in the middle of the facility's courtyard. "I have a visual, command."

"Roger that. Is the way clear?"

"If he can see through the smoking mess just past the gate, then yeah it is," Carr laughed.

"Damage report."

Carr's eyes next shifted downwards. "Estimated ninety-five percent enemy casualties. Those remaining seem to be pulling back. We have zero damage on friendly aircraft." Of that, he was proud. What small arms fire the regiment could put on them would be akin to throwing pebbles against rocks, anyway.

"Fuel and ammunition?"

"Enough for another ten-minute loiter before we have to head home, command. We should still have a couple thousand 30mm's between us, but the rest have been expended."

"Mop up the rest as best you can, then come back home Tango Leader."

As he prepared to make his third and final pass, Carr spotted the transport truck pulling out of the main gate.

Damned CIA spooks. He'd better make it.

"That's a solid copy, command."

0730 KST

Somewhere over Pyongyang

“Comrade, your distance to target is eight-two kilometers, bearing zero-three-two. Enemy aircraft have been classified as five ground attack fighters and four F-16s.”

Captain Lee Kim Yang pulled back on the stick of his MiG-29A as he took off from an air base at the eastern fringes of Pyongyang. Behind him, four more MiGs were lining up for takeoff. He remembered the hasty briefing he and his squadron mates had received at the command center. Orders were being brought down by the Chief of the Air Force himself, and apparently, he had been extremely furious at the time. Something had gone very wrong at the Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility just northeast of the air base, and it involved nine American fighter aircraft who had strayed into the country.

The imperialist pilots actually had the audacity to infringe upon North Korean airspace, and if what he had heard were correct, they had been the cause of thousands of deaths at the Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility. Captain Lee gritted his teeth under his flight helmet. Why hadn't the air defense squadrons responded to their intrusion? How could they have let the arrogant fools fly unmolested hundreds of kilometers into the country?

It didn't matter. In minutes, he and his comrades would show the American pigs just how wrong they were to have thought they could get away unscathed.

Captain Lee and his squadron would not rest until every one of their birds was turned into flaming bits of twisted metal.

Chapter 38 : Speed In Slow Motion

0734 KST

The ancient Russian truck bumped and bounced along the rugged dirt path, jarring Yuri with every violent protest of its abysmal suspension system. It had been only a minute or so into the drive, and Yuri's butt also already beginning to hurt from constantly bouncing up and down on a cushioned seat that anyone else would have otherwise mistaken for a hastily smoothened rock.

Yuri was heading east along the Taedong river, where at some point it would meet a small highway that would take her east towards the coast. She knew that the Stallion was already on its way, and that she probably didn't have to take the truck all the way east for the pickup. She was glad for that. The mere thought of travelling a hundred clicks exposed upon open ground in a bumbling transport truck scared her more than having a rifle pressed to her back. In a vehicle, she thought, she was vulnerable. There was always that strange paranoia of some missile coming down from between the clouds and blowing you to smithereens. Yuri didn't like that idea.

She remembered the incredible mess she'd passed through whilst exiting the facility. As the truck trundled slowly through the intestines and debris, Yuri was bathed in the scent of burning oil and flesh, melting metal and boiling blood. At least she was familiar with the last one. She'd passed by destroyed armored personnel carriers, morbidly recalling one whose hatch was occupied by a dead soldier whose head had been almost completely blown off. Would've been easier to look at if the entire head were gone, she thought. The Hogs had done an impressive job, and all in just a few minutes. Like the pilot of the Aerion SBJ back in Rio, the pilots of the A-10s were some people she'd definitely want to shake hands with after this nightmare was over.

Behind her, she heard more explosions, probably from the other side of the river. The Hogs were making their final pass, mopping up any remnants of the KPA regiment that had not joined in the full retreat.

"Should've brought your little rockets, comrade," Yuri thought with amusement.

Her reverie was shattered when she heard a tremendous blast to her immediate right. Whipping her head toward the sound, she found a gigantic chunk of burning metal tumbling and skidding across the grassy field. Resounding crashes and popping explosions accompanied every bounce and roll. Then she

saw the familiar pair of gnarled engines aft of the cockpit, just forward of the rear vertical fins, just before they broke off the crumbling fuselage.

A Warthog.

Her eyes grew wide. *"Damn, had the stragglers finally managed to nick one?"* She thought.

Her attention was brought back to the front as a deafening sonic boom thundered overhead. She squinted her eyes against the harsh morning sunlight as she struggled to make out an object in the middle of the windshield, gradually becoming smaller and smaller as it rocketed away.

She'd caught it for just a fraction of a second, but its profile was unmistakable.

It was a MiG.

0735 KST

"God damn it! Command, Tango Three is down, I repeat, Tango Three is down," Major Carr spat through his radio just before he yanked hard left on his control stick.

The squadron had just come under attack moments earlier when an air-to-air missile came out of nowhere and struck one of Carr's wingmen. The pilot had detected the incoming missile before it hit, but flying at its maximum speed of over four times the speed of sound, there was nothing much he could do. Just before the missile hit, Carr saw the pilot eject, but it was too little, too late, and he was caught in the ensuing conflagration just as his ejection seat cleared the open canopy.

Tango Three; both the aircraft and her pilot, was dead.

"Tango squadron, break off formation and take immediate evasive action. Fox squadron, where the hell

are you!?”

Major Bill Carr's worst nightmare had become a startling reality. The North Koreans had unleashed their MiG-29s upon them; six in total, he counted. The Hogs, being nowhere comparable with the jets in terms of speed and agility, were helpless. To make matters worse, none of the Hogs had been equipped with anti-air missiles or the operational ability to engage in air-to-air combat. Now they were the sitting ducks.

“Tango Leader, this is Fox Leader, we are diving to your altitude to acquire bogeys, ETA ten seconds. Do what you can to stay out of their sights,” his radio chattered into his ear.

“God damn it!” Carr knew everyone could hear him, but he didn't care. Ten seconds in a supersonic dogfight was far too long and Fox squadron knew it. He knew Fox would've come to their aid sooner if they'd detected the MiGs. He knew he shouldn't blame them. But he was furious, and he let it show.

High above him, the four F-16s had already accelerated out of their loitering circle and begun diving to the Hogs' altitude. It wasn't their fault they had allowed the Hogs to come under attack. The fighters had been relying on passive detection systems in order to evade enemy radar detection. Those systems were lacking in range, and that had allowed one of the MiGs to acquire and neutralize Tango Three using its long range AA-12 Adder missiles well before it could even be seen.

Now, however, they would not allow another fellow pilot to fall to the North Koreans.

Far to Major Carr's east, Tango Two was sweating underneath his flight suit. He continuously worked his control stick and throttle, pushing the beast to its limit, but he just couldn't shake the MiG on his tail. The little bastard had gotten right behind him just moments earlier, and was lining his aircraft up with his, trying to get a lock. If Tango Two was going to go down, he thought, he wasn't going to make it easy.

Slamming hard forward on the throttle, Tango Two took a deep breath through his oxygen mask and went into a dive, clearing more than half of the distance between himself and the ground within seconds. Behind him, the MiG followed, trying to keep a straight line. Tango Two smiled.

"Like a lamb to the slaughter."

The Warthog was made for low-altitude flight, given the nature of its regular job, which was to provide close air support. As such, it could handle the task of flying dangerously low to the ground better than a supersonic fighter jet...as long its pilot had the skill to do so.

Tango Two had confidence in his ability. Nosing down further, he rapidly descended. Once he saw his altitude hit a thousand feet, he pulled up hard on the stick, allowing the cumbersome aircraft to level out on its own time. It was nerve wracking, knowing that if he'd pulled up too late, he would effectively end up landing the aircraft without its landing gear. But he'd reacted soon enough, and the Hog leveled out at a toe-curling 200 hundred feet, just over sixty meters.

This was where things got tricky. At this altitude, the combination of overflowing and underflowing wind currents wreaked havoc on an aircraft's attitude, requiring careful control of the control stick and speed. One wrong move and a catastrophic combination of wind currents would cause the aircraft to roll or pitch out of control and send it plummeting to the ground. Also, the pilot needed to keep an eye on both the ground ahead of him and his altimeter, trimming the aircraft's altitude ever so slightly to prevent himself from hitting the ground.

But Tango Two had confidence. He was the better pilot. He was an *American airman*. His homebrewed Hog did it better than a Russian jet fighter. Pride was a trait difficult to soften in the fighter pilot realm. Behind him, the MiG had leveled out at around six hundred feet, and was slowly descending to meet his Hog's altitude.

"Steady...steady," he reminded himself. There could be no sudden moves, and he needed to look far at the ground ahead of him to predict his next course of motion. Every change to the aircraft's attitude had to be very, very smooth and slow.

Behind him, in the hot seat of a North Korean MiG-29A, the pilot kept his eyes on the HUD, or heads-up display, ahead of him. The American fool had thought he could lose him by flying low over the ground. It was either that, or the arrogant bastard had thought he hadn't the courage or skill to fly that low in a supersonic fighter. He scoffed. Whatever the American fighters could do, he thought, his Fulcrum could do better, and damned if he hadn't the guts to fly it! No matter what tricks the Warthog had up its

sleeve...it was going down. At the same time, his targeting system was already locking onto the American fighter. He smiled. Indeed, his training had paid off. Today, he would make his very first kill...and an imperialist, no less.

The MiG pilot needed just a bit of correction to the left. Carefully, he pulled his control stick to the left, and the ailerons on his wings responded, allowing the aircraft to roll slightly.

That was enough for the winds to sink their teeth into the MiG.

With a startling shudder, the Fulcrum jerked and began to climb, and then descend just as quickly before starting to roll in the opposite direction. The pilot reacted immediately, trying to reverse the situation and regain control of his aircraft, but each step he took only made the matter worse. His aircraft was completely out of control. Just as the fighter's nose began to tip down in a catastrophic descent, a series of short beeps signaled a lock on the Warthog ahead of him. Gritting his teeth, the pilot flipped the plastic cover off the top of his control stick, shifting his thumb to take the shot...just a moment too late. The view of the clear horizon suddenly turned a stark green, and before he even thought to engage his ejection seat, he heard the sickening crunch of twisting metal before his vision was glazed over by the infinite orange of fire.

"Yeehaw, that's one motherfucker down, and five to go!"

Major Carr almost smiled. He really did. But he had problems of his own. A MiG was tight on his tail, and it wouldn't be long before the bugger had a lock on the massive infra-red emissions emanating from the pair of heat-spewing turbofans strapped to his back.

"Damn it! I wish I were on a god damn Raptor right now!" He thought with rage. At least the F-22 Raptor's shrouded engines would make for a much more difficult target to acquire. Add to that the ability to actually turn around and engage the MiG. Carr wasn't used to running, and he hated it.

A massive explosion to his rear threatened to rock his Hog out of control, but Carr kept a steady hand on his stick. Eyes wide, he glanced to the upper left of his canopy just in time to see the familiar sight of an F-16's rear end before he heard its deep sonic boom.

Behind him and out of sight, a MiG-29 had exploded into a dazzling display of haphazardly scattering steel shards and flaming fuel. It began its final descent to the woods below.

"He looked a little too close for comfort, don't you think, Tango Leader?"

Major Carr smiled. "Hallelujah, Fox Leader. Took you damned long enough!" He laughed.

"Well we're here now and you know it! From what we can see, your Hogs are in the clear, Tango Leader. Fox squadron, we are now four-on-four with enemy aircraft. Let's make em' wish they were planting rice instead."

"Tango squadron, form up on my point. Let's get out of Fox's way, shall we?"

0736 KST

Yuri stepped on it. A massive dogfight was happening right over her head, and she wanted nothing to do with it. Never had she felt more vulnerable with missiles going loose all over the place.

Just as she was negotiating a gentle bend in the road, another enormous chunk of burning metal crashed down on her left less than thirty meters away. She was immediately buffeted by the scorching heat radiating from the tumbling wreck.

"God damn it! I can survive a seventy thousand foot freefall without a reserve parachute, a hail of bullets and the threat of total destruction, but I'm going to die by being crushed by stuff falling out of the damn sky!"

Little did she know that she was being watched this very second.

Captain Lee had just lost two of his wingmen, and he was not happy about it. He'd even lost one to a ground attack fighter, a Warthog as they called it. Ugly little things, those were. How in Kim Il Sung's name had that happened? The Americans had proven to be challenging adversaries, and their 'air superiority fighters', the F-16 Fighting Falcons, had already joined the fray.

One of them was now in his sights. He smirked. He'd always enjoyed being the hunter. His training had taught him many things, and one of them that sat easily with him was the fact that American fighters, no matter how advanced, were no match for their North Korean counterparts...simply because they had the better pilots. The imperialist fool was flying in a straight line, making no effort whatsoever to avoid being locked onto. Was he really going to be this easy?

He was just about to confirm the lock when the F-16 suddenly went into a climb...but it wasn't heading into one. To his confused horror, the distance between his Fulcrum and the F-16 was diminishing rapidly. Captain Lee suddenly recognized this maneuver. But that was impossible. He'd always been told that American aircraft were incapable of this maneuver. The American pilot was attempting an advanced air combat stunt, *Pugachev's Cobra*.

To do this, the pilot had to manually disengage the angle of attack limiter built into the flight control system, allowing him to nose up into a steep angle of attack akin to that used to initiate a vertical climb. This results in a drastic loss of speed due to the increased aerodynamic drag and a very slight gain in altitude. All this had already happened in the previous second. The F-16 was now in the middle of the maneuver, and in just another fraction of a second, the aircraft would pass over Captain Lee's canopy, level out his fighter, increase his thrust to compensate for the lack of speed, and come up directly behind Lee's Fulcrum. Another couple of seconds, and the maneuver was complete.

Now, Captain Lee was in the F-16's sights, and *he* was the hunted. He swore under his breath.

"Comrade, new orders have been issued," his radio crackled. Captain Lee frowned. This was no time for-

"Priority has been shifted to a target on the ground. A friendly troop transport is currently heading east on Route 36. Intelligence suggests that it is carrying the American agents responsible for the incident at the facility. Your orders are to destroy that transport immediately."

Captain Lee's warning signal began to shrill in his helmet. The F-16 was getting a lock on his Fulcrum. Pushing down hard on the control stick, he went into a dive that allowed him a temporary escape. His mind was whirling, trapped between two worlds. American agents? What could be so important that their destruction took precedence over these aerial intruders?

"Command, my squadron is currently engaging the American fighters. We are in no position to--"

The voice on the radio changed. *"Captain Lee, they assassinated the Dear Leader."*

Captain Lee's heart dove. He recognized that voice as that of the Commander of the Air Force. "What?"

"You heard me, Captain. Now I want you and your squadron to terminate those American scoundrels with extreme prejudice!"

Captain Lee pulled his lips into a tight line. His hands trembled even as they maintained strict control over his aircraft. They killed the Dear Leader. He checked his multi-function display, scrolling through his weapon payload. He was equipped with a pair of Kh-25 air-to-surface missiles. Strange, since his squadron had been scrambled for an anti-air mission, but it was something he was grateful for.

"Yes, sir! They will not escape my wrath!"

He orientated himself, momentarily detaching himself from the fact that an American F-16 was right on his tail, maneuvering to get a lock on him and blow him out of the sky. Once he was headed in the right bearing, he pushed the Fulcrum into another dive.

They killed the Dear Leader.

Captain Lee snarled under his oxygen mask. If he couldn't blow the bastards to pieces with his Kh-25s, he'd be happy to fly his multi-million dollar Fulcrum right into them. He knew his country and family would be proud either way.

0737 KST

Behind Captain Lee, Fox Leader was puzzled. He was recovering from the adrenaline rush of having just pulled off one of the most difficult aerial combat maneuvers there was, and was getting his head back into the game. He'd been very lucky. His bird was going too fast to pull off the stunt safely, and he'd ran the risk of going into total blackout from the excessive *g* forces acting on his aircraft and his body.

The thing about supersonic flight was that everything happened so fast; decisions were made and actions and reactions were undertaken within fractions of a second, and people burst into flames just as quickly. In fact, dogfighting, or aerial combat, was so fast that time seemed to slow down during its course. Fighter pilots, Fox Leader included, would emerge victorious from a dogfight, feeling as if they'd spent hours drowning in wave after wave of adrenaline while evading and engaging the enemy over and over again, only to check their watches and realize that mere minutes had passed.

The MiG had gone into another dive, and he couldn't see any way the North Korean intended that as a combat maneuver. His multi-function display showed tactical information about the MiG-29, detected by the electronic warfare suite and fire control system built into his F-16. This gave him essential details such as flight speed, direction...and weapon payload. Fox Leader frowned. The MiG had armed his air-to-surface missiles, Kh-25s by the looks of it.

Then he knew.

"Tango Leader, command mentioned a friendly asset pulling out of the facility to his exfil point earlier?"

"That's an affirmative, Fox Leader."

"I think one of our comrades here is heading straight for em'."

The voice became significantly urgent. *"Fox Leader, that asset is the whole reason we're here. You have to stop that MiG before he gets to em'!"*

That surprised Fox Leader. His squadron's orders had been to provide air support for the Hogs. Evidently, the two squadrons had been given two entirely different sets of orders. God damn

information compartmentalization, he thought. How did the higher-ups expect the pilots to pull off a successful operation when they didn't know what the hell was going on? That was the problem with under-the-table missions. They expected you to do your duty even when you didn't have any idea what it was!

But it seemed his orders had changed. His Slammers, a pair of wingtip-mounted AIM-120 AMRAAM air-to-air missiles, had already been armed. Pushing down and right on his control stick, Fox Leader dove in pursuit of the escaping MiG.

0737 KST

Yuri's butt had been subjected to a lot less punishment in the last thirty seconds or so as her truck finally made it onto the highway which would lead her toward the coast. Still, she was certain it was bruised in several locations. The tarmac wasn't perfectly smooth, but it was a lot better than the pothole-covered fields surrounding the Taedong river.

She still hadn't been smashed by a falling fighter jet, and for that she was grateful.

All around, highlands and forests flanked the narrow highway, with no signs of life; animal nor human. There were no streetlights or reflectors along the road. For the first time since she'd left for Misawa Air Base, Yuri felt just a little bit of peace make its way through the seams of her tactical suit, soothing her tense muscles and caressing her body. She sighed, a sound inaudible amidst the roaring engine of the transport truck, which was trundling along at a little over a hundred kilometers an hour.

"Damned truck can't even run at its indicated speed," Yuri thought sourly before glancing at the rear view mirror, something she did every three seconds. She saw nothing approaching. *"Well, at least I'm safe. For now."*

Another thought intruded. She remembered the fight with Jin Young, at the point where she had just begun to lose control and gone into the bloodrage. Something had held her back, even for that infinitesimal span of a second. Something had called out to her, words that acted like strong yet comforting arms which held her steady and calmed her soul, beckoning her away from the darkness,

trying to pull her away from the edge.

Was it her conscience? Was it her own aversion to the bloodrage, her own decision to shun its malevolent temptations? Something had kept her sane, even if it were just for that moment.

Perhaps even someone.

Her thoughts were interrupted as she caught something out of the corner of her eye. A tiny dark gray object was hovering at the top left corner of the windshield, growing larger with each passing second. It was approaching too slowly to be a fighter. She could just barely make out the cylindrical shaped objects hanging off the sides of a larger cylinder. Sunlight reflected off an invisible surface, giving the object an intense sparkle. Seconds later, she heard the unmistakable chopping sound of helicopter rotors slicing through the air.

The Super Stallion was here.

0738 KST

The CH-53E Super Stallion had taken off from the USS George Washington, a nuclear-powered supercarrier, in the Sea of Japan, over eighty kilometers away. After its sortie almost twenty minutes earlier, it was flying almost flat-out at over three hundred kilometers per hour. The pilot didn't complain. The order had come down from the highest echelons of command there was, and their instructions were very clear.

Someone was in deep shit, and the Stallion was to get him out of it, fast.

Down below, the pilot spotted his charge, a dark green KPA transport truck headed in his direction.

"Carrier command, we have visual on the asset."

“Stallion, we have on radar one MiG-29 aircraft headed your way. Friendly fighters are currently converging on its position. Maintain your course and get him out of there.”

“Roger, carrier command. Out.”

0738 KST

Captain Lee leveled out and maintained focus on his target. His targeting system worked to acquire a solution to the transport truck just over five kilometers ahead of him. In seconds, he would have a lock and seal the fate of the American agents.

There. A series of beeps alerted him to the opportunity. Captain Lee flipped the cover off his launch button.

“Payback.”

At the same time, Fox Leader’s head was ringing with the constant beeping in his helmet. His Slammers had acquired a positive lock on the MiG, and not a moment too soon. His multi-function display showed that the North Korean pilot, too, had acquired a lock on the surface asset. Not wasting a beat, Fox Leader thumbed the launch button, watching as the AIM-120s rocketed toward the MiG.

He could only hope the missiles reached their target before the MiG unleashed its own.

Captain Lee smashed his thumb against the launch button, feeling the Fulcrum shift infinitesimally as a pair of Kh-25 air-to-surface missiles dropped off its wing pylons and rocketed toward the ground.

His satisfaction was short lived, however, as he was immediately alerted to a series of warning alarms going off in his aircraft. He eyed his multi-function display. A pair of American air-to-air missiles was closing in on its final stages to his jet.

There would be no time to eject.

Captain Lee closed his eyes, content with knowing that his death would not be in vain. The Kh-25s required no further input from the Fulcrum to maintain its lock on the transport truck.

The American agents stood no chance of escaping the fiery death that was headed their way this very instant.

To the west, Major Carr watched in horror as a pair of missiles were jettisoned from the stray MiG. His eyes traced their depressed trajectory.

They were on a direct course to the truck, and there was nothing anything or anyone could do.

“Woah, carrier command, we have missile launch, repeat, we have enemy launch!” The Super Stallion pilot exclaimed, watching as a pair of missiles rocketed away from the approaching MiG.

“Maintain your course, Stallion!”

The co-pilot frowned. The missiles seemed to be headed in a depressed trajectory. “Sir, those missiles aren’t for us.”

The pilot's eyes widened with realization. The Super Stallion was already within a kilometer to the truck.

"Carrier command, is there any way we can speak to the asset?"

No answer.

He turned back to the squad of four armed sailors ensconced within the rear cabin of the massive helicopter.

"Lower the winch! Do it now!"

He nosed down on the chopper. He would need all the additional speed he could get.

"Yuri! We've detected a missile launch five kilometers behind your position!"

Yuri felt her blood go cold. "Say again?" Just as she spoke the words, she heard a distant explosion behind her. Her eyes darted to the rear view mirror, but she saw nothing; the angle was all wrong.

Keeping a steady hand on the wheel, Yuri threw the cabin door wide open and poked her head out to get a better look. There was the familiar sight of a destroyed aircraft plummeting towards the ground, and lower than that, she saw a pair of tiny orange-gray circles hurtling towards her, exhaust fumes trailing like an angry dragon's wake.

"Shit!"

Yuri's head shot back to the scene in front of her. She could see the Stallion clearly now, its massive bulk thundering toward her with all its might.

A voice shouted in her ear. *"Task Force Eleven, Task Force Eleven, this is the Super Stallion headed your way. Come in, over!"* She could hear helicopter rotors humming in the background.

It took a moment before her mind settled on the fact that she was part of Task Force Eleven.

Damn the CIA and their codenames!

Yuri answered quickly. In just seconds, she would be blown into a million unrecognizable pieces. Not exactly the way she'd wanted to go.

"Super Stallion, this is Task Force Eleven! I have a pair of missiles on my tail!"

"We noticed." There was a brief pause. *"There's only one of you?"*

"Just me!"

"Listen to me carefully. I've lowered my winch, and I'm going to get down as close as I can to come and get you, but we don't have much time. I'm not going to land the chopper, so you're going to have to jump from the truck at the same time the winch passes it. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly." Yuri couldn't hear the missiles' approach, but she knew they were well on their way, and she didn't have a whole lot of time left. The Super Stallion was looming larger and larger. A thin black cord of some sort was hanging off its port cabin door.

Strangely enough, the idea of Yuri jumping out the cabin door and grabbing hold of the helicopter's winch reminded her of the stunt she'd pulled off during the car chase in Rio, where she stuck her body out to shoot the wheel off an unfortunate tanker.

Except this time, she wasn't all that confident.

“Are you sure about this?” the co-pilot voiced beside him.

The Super Stallion’s pilot shrugged, keeping his eyes on the fast approaching truck.

“Nope, but *she’d* better be.”

Yuri heard another distant explosion behind her; probably another MiG going down. But she had bigger problems.

A helicopter dangling a thin rope off its side was now approaching her at over two hundred kilometers per hour. Taking into account the speed of her truck, that meant a combined speed of more than three hundred kilometers an hour. She scowled. It would take a miracle for her to be able to catch that winch!

The Stallion didn’t slow, diving towards her, its tremendous bulk growing larger and larger. Behind her, the pair of Kh-25 air-to-surface missiles was doing the same.

Quickly, Yuri slid out one of her broken blades and jammed it between the seat and the steering wheel. Throwing the cabin door wide open, she twisted around and dragged herself onto the roof, her flowing black hair whipping about in the buffeting wind as she did so. To her right, she could now see the pair of approaching missiles with frightening clarity. She had only seconds left. She turned, watching the helicopter approach. Just a couple of seconds until it reached her. She cursed her luck. There was no time to prepare; no time to calculate a solution.

Remember your training.

She remained on a high kneel on the top of the cabin, feeling the passing wind curve over her sticky skin, embracing her in its delicate trails of gentle touches. She felt the truck slowing. Her pupils dilated, eyes focused on the approaching gray hulk and the thin winch swaying in the turbulence. She took a deep breath and held it in, calming herself, feeling her heartbeat slow.

Time waits for no man...but you can wait for time.

In an instant that seemed to last forever, the world around Yuri morphed into a detached mix of distorted images, blurring and stretching. Sound became a distant echo, and every gust of wind that blew past her felt like an overwhelming force threatening to throw her right off the roof of the truck. Beneath her chest, her heart thudded a steady rhythm, the only thing that reminded her that she was still alive.

To wait for time...you must slow down.

Yuri saw the helicopter nose up, an image so surreal in slow motion. After another agonizing span of eternity, she could see its belly rise up and the winch continuing in its forward motion, swaying towards her, beckoning to her.

And once you slow down...you control time.

Expelling the breath she'd been holding, Yuri gathered all her strength and launched herself off the roof of the truck, feeling the world shift and the winds accelerate as she did so. Detached images congealed into a cohesive picture. Sound returned as a rush of air pummeled her ears. Weightless and hopeless, Yuri's outstretched arms came within inches of the black rope that whipped about in front of her.

She missed.

The Super Stallion pilot yanked back hard on his control stick, pulling the helicopter into a climb while using its entire frame as a giant airbrake. It wasn't as spectacular as *Pugachev's Cobra*, but it was close. The missiles were on their final leg to the truck below, and he knew he was out of time.

Just then, he heard a shout from behind.

"She's got it! Let's go! Let's go!"

At the same time the pilot worked the altitude controls, climbing rapidly away from the impending blast zone, the entire Super Stallion was savagely rocked by a massive shockwave that he felt right down to his bones. Then he looked down and saw the flames.

Impact.

Yuri held on for dear life as the Kh-25 missiles homed in. She'd pulled out her other blade just as she missed the winch, using its jagged edges to pull the rising and retreating rope toward her in a final act of desperation. It had worked.

Not a moment later, the missiles slammed right into the back of the truck with an earth-shattering explosion, the tremendous shockwave throwing her body around as she held onto the rope. Her limbs threatened to give way, but she held on with all that was left of her.

Yuri had a promise she needed to keep, and she would not break it when she was so close.

Her stomach churned, and the last thing Yuri remembered was throwing up into the open air and coughing uncontrollably as she held on, ascending without pause into the blue skies, muddled voices shouting at her, and then everything went black.

Chapter 39 : Homecoming

0100 CET

Secondary Doppelganger Base

More than an hour had passed since the Ops Room had last made contact with Yuri, and edgy didn't even begin to describe how everyone was now feeling. What was worse was the fact that everyone in that very room knew exactly where Yuri was.

Dr. Yoo gritted his teeth as his eyes fixed upon the large blue dot in the Sea of Japan, inching ever so slowly toward the Japanese peninsula. A separate screen displaying data from the isotopic tracking systems displayed another marker in the exact same location, moving in tandem with the blue dot. And Bennett hadn't yet contacted them. It wasn't that hard to figure out what had happened.

The Super Stallion had picked Yuri up just before she was blown to smithereens, and physiological data from the isotopic tracking systems suggested that the woman had blacked out from shock; probably the result of being within the blast zone of a pair of Russian air-to-surface missiles as they sent the North Korean transport hopping ten feet into the sky.

That very same helicopter then turned back toward the USS George Washington, which was already backing away from the North Korean coast.

The American fighters had made their hasty retreat next, not before a separate pair of F-16s from the east swooped in and dropped a couple of precision-guided bombs on the Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility. Apparently the Falcons loitering near the eastern coast hadn't been for security purposes.

Dr. Yoo had seen the explosions, or implosions to be precise, himself, and watched as the building collapsed upon itself from the outside in. At first, he had been worried that the bombs might set off any excess anti-matter stored in the facility, but he decided that having it destroyed would be all the better. Plus, it would only enhance the bombs' destructive capabilities.

The bombs appeared to have carried thermobaric explosive, designed to literally disintegrate everything within its blast radius. Not much could have survived a blast wave with three million pascals of overpressure and a temperature of three thousand degrees Celsius.

The CIA had effectively cleaned up their mess and erased all traces of their involvement with a ton of explosive.

"And then they kidnapped the person who saved the world," Dr. Yoo thought with fury. His thoughts then shifted to Park Jin Young. *"Decades of waiting and scheming...and when he'd finally been defeated, there wasn't even a body left to prove it."* He shook his head. Nothing was fair in this world.

Behind him, Stephanie and Taeyeon were quick to pick up the tack.

"They can't do this!" the taller woman protested, stepping forward and dragging Taeyeon with her.

Dr. Yoo turned toward her and sighed. "I'm afraid they can. They got her out of that mess, and now she's at their mercy."

"Can't we do anything about it? I mean, we can't just let them take her like that!" It was Taeyeon who spoke now. She unconsciously squeezed Stephanie's hand tighter, and didn't feel the latter squeeze back.

Dr. Yoo shook his head, his expression a mix of loss and an incipient anger.

At her computer console, Seohyun frowned. Her heart was a complete mess, and her mind was still whirling from the overwhelming influx of emotions that had accompanied the previous day. Just as things had begun to wind down; just as the hope that Yuri would actually make it grew stronger, she had been hit by the same memories that were her source of fortitude since the beginning of this operation.

Seohyun was well aware that her love now lay less than a couple hundred meters away, resting peacefully in a carefully refrigerated compartment no different from the one used in hospitals or a police station's scientific headquarters. The meticulously regulated temperature and a mixture of specially made chemicals would ensure that Yoona's...body would be preserved until she could be given a proper funeral.

The girl's parents still hadn't been notified. Having been capable field agents themselves, Seohyun knew that they would understand...but who truly accepted the death of a child, especially one so young; one

who had yet to experience all the good things in life? They were still parents after all; parents who had birthed Im Yoona and loved and groomed her carefully before introducing her to this cruel trade. All things considered, Yoona had paid the ultimate price carrying out her duty. Would her parents be proud? Or would they crumble just like anyone else would? Seohyun didn't know.

It was thoughts like that which had hit Seohyun the hardest. While she worked, those thoughts were forcefully pushed to the back of her mind, but now, when there was nothing to do – nothing she *could* do – they came crashing back down onto her, chewing mercilessly at what remained of an already fragile heart.

Surprisingly, even to herself, Seohyun was feeling the same anger Dr. Yoo felt. Yuri had almost certainly delivered the world from total destruction, and now, when she deserved to come home to a hero's welcome, she was instead in the dirty hands of the very people indirectly responsible for the disaster they'd almost had to face.

"Justice," she thought sourly. *"Where's the justice in this?"*

Stephanie's adamant voice broke her reverie.

"Dr. Yoo, you have to do something. Couldn't you raise the Americans? Demand her return?" Stephanie immediately felt it strange that she had called them the Americans, considering the fact that she was one herself.

"And tell them what? That we'll come for them if they don't give her back? What good would it do to threaten an entire nation? We're not made for that!" Dr. Yoo snapped back, then calmed himself somewhat. "There's nothing we can do for now," he concluded quietly.

Seohyun turned to face Stephanie and Taeyeon. "All we can do now is wait."

0900 JST

USS George Washington

Somewhere in the Sea of Japan

Yuri took careful steps toward the edge of the cliff, taking in the pungent sea salt laden air as the wind licked at her skin. It was a dark night, and a half moon sat high in a clear yet starless sky. She looked down from the edge, a small outcropping that extended from the solid mass of rock that led outward from the trees. She was still in her tactical suit, and a distant wetness reminded her of her still-bleeding cheek wound.

Past the toes of her boots, she saw the merciless torrents of churning black water crash thunderously against the jagged rocks jutting out of the bay. Even from this height, she could very clearly make out the whitecaps that topped the roiling waves.

The air was gentle and smooth despite the smell, and her lungs and mind felt refreshed, a soothing escape after more than a week of hardly being able to breathe through all the action.

Yuri took a deep breath. Reaching forward with one arm, her fingers wiggled as they extended past the edge of the outcropping, feeling the cool breeze waft over their slender curves.

She took a step forward.

The wind was so nice, Yuri thought. So nice that she wanted to give herself to it, to let it carry her in its soft arms, to bring her to a place far away where none of the pain she'd experienced existed. A place where she could open her heart to dream, to feel, to take her time to savor that which she loved the most.

The wind was *so nice*.

Yuri took another step forward, and then she was falling through the air, waiting for the wind to take her. Her eyes remained closed even as she realized she was still falling. The soft breeze had morphed into a frightening, buffeting gust as it tore past her ears, deafening her.

Seconds later, she felt her face impact the bone-chillingly cold surface of the water.

Yuri awoke with a start, gagging slightly. Her eyelids fluttered open and then closed again as the harsh light intruded upon her pupils, blinding her. That would take a few more seconds to get used to. Something was trickling down the middle of her forehead. That sensation suddenly became more pronounced, and when she next tried to open her eyes, they were stung by something she couldn't yet identify. The whole world seemed to be swaying ever so slightly.

She moved her hands, only to find that they'd been secured behind her back. It only took a second for her faculties and her vision to return. Water continued to drip down from the top of her head. Her cheek stung. She tasted her mouth with her tongue and almost gagged again when the smell of bile came back up her throat. She swallowed hard, forcing the acrid flavor down.

Yuri shifted her head slowly to the left and right, taking in her surroundings. A single lamp shone on her from the ceiling, and the room she was in appeared to be small and steel gray in color. It looked exactly like an interrogation room, minus the two-way mirror. Pipes of various sizes extended from one end of the room to another, and the doorway looked strange; the bottom opening was a few centimeters above the ground, and its edges were outlined with something she couldn't make out. A small table sat in front of her. She looked to her right, and made out the shape of a man holding what appeared to be a bucket in his right hand.

The dripping continued.

Yuri groaned when she realized what was happening. As her vision returned fully, she locked gazes with the man who had just tossed the green bucket toward the corner of the room.

"Bennett," she groaned.

I knew it was too good to be true. Damn it!

"You're awake," came John Bennett's smooth Southern drawl.

Yuri blew a jet of water from her lips as her hands squirmed in the handcuffs. "Guess I didn't have much of a choice." She looked around again, rolling her eyes and sighed audibly. "I really have to stop blacking out." She made a show of checking her abdomen before looking back to Bennett. "You didn't steal my kidneys, did you?"

Bennett slammed an open hand on the table. Yuri didn't flinch.

"You sure don't look very grateful for the fact that we came to get you. As soon as we spotted the KPA headed your way, we scrambled the fighters from Osan and got the George Washington out of port."

"I suppose I should thank you then, but that's a little hard to do with my hands cuffed to a chair, don't you think?"

Bennett jabbed a finger at her. "I lost six good men because of you!"

Yuri scoffed. "And saved about eight billion more. Women too, of course." She observed the Director of National Intelligence carefully. Why was he using this tack? It was obvious he wanted information, and he could get it from her in a couple dozen other ways. It wouldn't matter, of course. He wouldn't get it.

"Do you think we got you out of there out of goodwill?" he asked quietly, moving closer to the table.

"Do you think I killed Park and averted a global catastrophe out of goodwill? Come on, John. Don't play games with me. You want information. Reality check. You aren't getting it," Yuri said calmly.

Bennett moved even closer. "Kwon Yuri, you have something we want, and trust me, we want it badly enough that I would take your brain apart myself to get to that information."

Yuri didn't like being threatened. "And to do that, Mr. Bennett, you'll have to get me out of this chair. And I assure you, the moment these cuffs are off, my hands will be around your neck, then *in* it."

Bennett didn't know why, but he felt himself starting to sweat. There was something about those eyes of Yuri's...they'd never shifted from their lock onto his own ever since this conversation began, and they seemed to be boring into him as he stared on.

As a CIA agent, Bennett had handled countless interrogations during his time. He'd worked on and broken all sorts of people: terrorists; drug dealers; political assassins; spies; fanatics of all kinds. He'd seen their eyes. There were the soft ones; the ones who hadn't the strength to focus their eyes on a single spot. They looked around constantly, as if to find a way out, as if anywhere other than the interrogator's eyes was comfortable. Those men and women, he broke within an hour or two. And then there were the hard ones; people who placed all of their heart and soul into their beliefs...or those who had no heart or soul to begin with. Their emotionless eyes would stare straight into the interrogator's, or fix them on a spot just behind him. Those would take weeks or even months to break. Most of them would squeal eventually, but only when Bennett chose to employ his more...persuasive techniques. The human body could only take so much, and there was no way they could take the suicide route while in custody.

Yuri had those eyes. That already spoke volumes of her mental fortitude, though it seemed as if it was not so much Yuri believed strongly in something as she was merely being defiant. Perhaps it was something else. Behind the film of anger, Bennett saw...fatigue. Yuri was tired, and though Bennett felt it strange, he suspected that she had something or someone to go home to, and she wanted it enough that she was damned pissed to be in his captivity.

Mental fortitude aside, Bennett also recalled with some respect that Yuri had most probably killed the most dangerous man on the planet singlehandedly; even when five of his best field officers could not. The screams he'd heard through Yuri's earpiece, the cries of terror and death as Park Jin Young put them down one by one...Bennett wondered just what kind of skill Yuri had in order to accomplish that.

But he needed the information. He needed to know who this Kwon Yuri truly was, and who she worked for.

He knew for a fact that he was dealing with an incredibly dangerous organization; one that had its tendrils in the deepest echelons of the United States government, and who knows what else? The ability to spy on the President himself without even having to be there...Bennett couldn't even fathom the implications. Add to that the fact that the government had already spent tens of millions of dollars in executing the last-minute rescue mission, and the political repercussions that were sure to follow. All for this one woman and the premise of uncovering one of the most secret, prolific and effective independent organizations history has ever seen. He and the President had already discerned that the

Russians would be easy to deal with, but the Chinese were of another brain altogether. And then there were the Iranians who've had ties with the North Koreans...One thing was for sure: the White House would be very, *very* busy in the coming months.

Kwon Yuri would be a tough one to break. Bennett knew it. But she would be broken, as with all the others. If he couldn't do it here, there *was* that experimental technique nearing completion that he could use back at Langley...

Bennett was about to retort when there was a loud clang, and the door behind the DNI swung open. Two men dressed in dark suits stepped in, taking up posts on either side of the door. Even from this distance, Yuri could make out the small circular pins attached to the lapels of their blazers.

United States Secret Service.

And that could only mean one of very few things...

A pair of long legs stepped through the threshold, wrapped in perfectly tailored pants colored in light gray. Yuri's eyes moved upward, past the matching gray blazer, white shirt and red tie before they rested on the worn face of the President of the United States of America.

Following closely behind the initial look of surprise came the slightest upward curve of Yuri's lips at the DNI which simply said "*Busted.*"

The Director of National Intelligence didn't flinch when he turned to acknowledge his boss.

How the hell did he get here?

John hadn't meant to be rude in thinking that, but he was indeed surprised by the President's arrival. None of his intelligence officers had warned him beforehand. In fact, the President was still in the White House when he'd left for Misawa, and he'd expected his boss to still be there.

Outside of work, they were close friends who had worked together on various issues regarding national

security and intelligence. But the President's voice didn't carry a friendly tone.

"What the hell is this, John?"

This time, Bennett flinched. "Sir, I'm interrogating--"

"You're *what*?" The President stood beside the DNI, eyes narrowed into an angry frown as he looked at Yuri. He raised an arm to point at her. "This woman saved the goddamn world, John, and you're doing *what*?"

"Sir, I thought--"

"I know what you're thinking, but this is hardly the time, and hardly the means!" The man locked eyes with Yuri. They looked apologetic, and Yuri immediately felt awkward. "Please forgive Mr. Bennett, Miss Kwon. I should have made my instructions more explicit when I told him to secure and debrief you."

Yuri's jaw dropped for a moment. Was the President of the United States apologizing to her? Well, technically, he was asking her to forgive John Bennett, but it was close enough. Her awkwardness was serious enough that she tried to stand, but fell back down into her seat before she could think to do otherwise.

"Please, Mr. President. It's not necessary--"

"We owe much to you, Miss Kwon, and this is certainly not how the United States repays her heroes." The President apparently had a knack for cutting people off. He turned to the DNI with furious eyes. "I want her out of that chair and out of this room. The chopper's waiting for us topside. We're going back to Misawa."

Bennett had the sense not to argue. "Yes, sir."

As the group exited the room, Yuri couldn't help but feel lighter. She closed her eyes briefly. Of course. Bennett had had the wisdom to search her body for the knives she'd hidden all over before cuffing her to the chair. She then remembered that she'd completely forgotten to use them back at the research facility. Not that she'd needed them, anyway. Luckily for Bennett, she hadn't hidden them anywhere private. She figured she'd also lost her earpiece when she jumped for the Stallion.

Yuri's eyes shot down to her empty holster, which she touched with her hand before looking up to the DNI.

"Where's my gun?"

Bennett sneered derisively at her. He'd relieved Yuri of her Les Baer as soon as she'd been brought aboard the ship. He liked 1911s, though he preferred Wilson Combat and Springfield Armory's models to Les Baer's. He also thought it strange for a woman to carry a full-sized .45 caliber pistol. Well, she was a strong woman with larger-than-average hands, he later thought.

"I'm not returning it to you while you're in the President's presence."

Yuri wanted to roll her eyes, but thought better of it.

"I could break your necks sooner than you could-" Yuri shook the thought away. She couldn't believe that she had just imagined snapping the neck of the President of the United States.

The next few minutes were spent navigating the confusing mass of bulkheads and passageways that made up the underground city that lay beneath the surface of the supercarrier. The two Secret Service agents took point, and Yuri walked between the President and an elderly man in an immaculate white uniform adorned with an Admiral's shoulderboards and too many military decorations to count. John Bennett walked behind Yuri, with two armed sailors bringing up the rear of the group.

The entire structure seemed to hum as a distant roaring noise drifted down from above.

"The Rhinos are on duty, squadrons of three or four flying in a loose circle around the ship to keep watch on things. Don't want anyone sneaking in too close for a shot, you know," the Admiral explained,

noting Yuri's curiosity. His voice was loud and clear, contrary to his obvious age.

The term 'Rhino' was an informal name for the Navy's F/A-18F Super Hornet, which had been the staple fixed-wing aircraft of American carriers since 2006, replacing the legendary F-14 Tomcat. Interestingly, the Super Hornet was an evolution of the F/A-18 Hornet, whose prototype had been designed at the same time as that for the F-16 Fighting Falcons Yuri had seen hours earlier. Bigger, twin-engined and less agile than the relaxed-stability Falcon, the Hornet had been adopted by the US Navy instead of the Air Force.

Yuri nodded, eyes still roaming the interior of the passageway they were walking through. She had never been on an aircraft carrier before, but she somehow managed to recall that these nuclear-powered monsters used by the US for power projection and control of her surrounding seas were easily a thousand feet – over three football fields – long. It was also home to more than six thousand Navy crewmen for months at a time. Somewhere deep within the recesses of the ship, a pair of Westinghouse A4W nuclear reactors provided the virtually unlimited power to propel the massive one hundred thousand ton carrier at over fifty kilometers per hour – pretty fast for a surface ship.

"Impressive, isn't it?" the President mused. "This is one of the reasons why people around the world still carry the hope of freedom...and another reason why those who already are can still enjoy it." The President knew that he was bragging, but figured that it wouldn't hurt to share such thoughts. Besides, he could see the Admiral suppressing a grin.

It was the work of an additional ten minutes to get topside. As the group exited the 'island', which was the term for the superstructure that sat atop and near the rear of the carrier's flight deck, Yuri saw yet another Super Stallion helicopter, its blades still spinning, probably since the President debarked earlier.

Looking around, Yuri was awed by the array of fighter jets and reconnaissance aircraft sitting in neat rows along both lengths of the flight deck. There were more, she knew, down below in the innumerable decks. Further away, she spotted one of the missile cruisers escorting the carrier. Several other ships were dispersed loosely around the ship, though she couldn't see them at the moment. They would accompany her back to port in Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan.

The Admiral remained at the island, saluting the President as the group stepped into the mid-morning sunlight. The President returned the gesture and went on his way.

“We’re about six hundred klicks west of Misawa Air Base! This baby will get us there in about a couple of hours!” the President shouted over the noise. The Super Stallion’s three engines whined as they powered up, adding to the general noise of the taxiing aircraft and waves crashing against the mountain of a ship.

“I’ll need to contact my people!” Yuri replied, hoping for a positive answer. She’d had enough of Bennett’s games, and judging by the President’s earlier intervention, she had some confidence that she would receive one.

The President nodded just as he stopped at the Stallion’s rear door. He waved away the sailor who was holding it open for him and motioned for Yuri to enter. “You can do that when we get to Misawa! After you!”

Yuri climbed aboard without argument.

1115 JST
ECHELON
Misawa Air Base
Misawa, Japan

The ride in the Super Stallion was smooth and incredibly noisy. No words were spoken, and all Yuri remembered was the intense nervousness as she itched to re-establish contact with the Ops Room back in Switzerland. John must have noticed this nervousness, since he’d had his eyes on the woman throughout the entire flight, surely trying to come up with something to persuade the President to take her in and wring her dry at the CIA. Somehow, Yuri felt safe.

They’d arrived at Misawa Air Base just ten minutes earlier, and were taken by open-top jeeps to one of the radomes that made up the ECHELON listening array. The DNI had objected to allowing an outsider with no security clearance whatsoever being allowed to enter the secret facility, but once again, he couldn’t argue with the President. They all passed through the requisite security checks, with Yuri being patted down the most scrupulously. She wasn’t sure if the man was checking for weapons or feeling her legs up. Either way, she’d been too tired to care.

Yuri watched as John Bennett held a pair of headphones around his ears, waiting as a signals officer worked a series of dials and switches and typed commands using a keyboard. Behind them, the President was seated at another terminal. His two bodyguards were situated at both ends of the small room. The space surrounding them was small, filled with computer terminals with a separate server room that whirred ceaselessly.

John turned, slipping the headphones off. "We're connected."

Yuri took the headphones and put them on, keeping her hands on them as she waited. There was the usual series of clicks, beeps and static as ECHELON homed in and plugged into the secure channel. She was sure Seohyun or some other could see this being done at this very moment, and they would know that she was calling. They could probably already see her on the isotopic tracking systems.

"Yuri?"

Bingo.

"Seohyun! I'm back at Misawa Air Base."

"Don't say you know. Don't say you know," Yuri thought furiously.

Yuri heard a relieved sigh, or maybe it was her own. *"We've been worried sick, Yuri. Is everything all right?"* Everyone could hear the conversation they were having; Seohyun's voice was coming in through speakers all over the room.

Yuri chose her words carefully. "I'm in good hands." She knew that the DNI and the President were showing up on the Ops Room's tactical screen as bright colored blips. They, on the other hand, didn't. She turned to face the two men. "I'm coming back." She nodded at them. "With some company."

"What? I'm not- hold on."

There was a brief pause.

"Alright. We'll fly you in from Geneva. How soon can you get here?"

Yuri's eyes shifted to John, who had already done the math in his head. They were about eight thousand kilometers away from Switzerland. He lifted eight fingers.

"Eight hours, Seohyun. Have a couple of choppers ready," Yuri said.

"You get your ass back here asap, Kwon Yuri!" It was Stephanie. Yuri suppressed a grin. Obviously she hadn't noticed that one of the yellow blips on her screen was her own President.

"I will, Steph, I will. Alright. See you guys." The line clicked off.

Yuri slipped the headphones off and handed them back to the signals officer, who returned to his console and continued working the dials. She knew that ECHELON had already locked in on the Doppelganger frequencies, but they could just as easily change them, and they'd drop off the map once again. Anonymity wasn't much of a problem when an organization had already practiced it for decades.

"I'd really like to meet your colleagues, Miss Kwon," the President said with a smile as he stood from his chair.

Yuri smiled sheepishly. "You will, Mr. President, and I think they'll be as honored as I've been. I bet you're damned curious about what the hell has been going on this past week and more." Yuri suddenly wasn't sure of her choice of language, but the President's expression extinguished those worries as quickly as they came.

"In eight hours and change, we'll all be filled in."

"And I'll finally know Park Jin Young's story," Yuri thought.

Chapter 40 : Full Circle (Part One)

Ministry of Defense

Moscow

Russia

The GRU Colonel stepped through the threshold of the Minister of Defense's office, saluting before he was waved to a seat across the massive table. The stately room was paneled in dark heavy wood, polished to sheen. Outside the frosted glass windows, dawn was beginning to rise upon the expanse of Arbatskaya Square.

"Minister, the Americans have pulled out of North Korea. They have by now retreated to their bases further south."

The Minister of Defense was an aging man who had once served with Russian intelligence for his entire life; from the KGB to the Central Intelligence Service to the SVR, all different names for essentially the same organization, before moving up to positions in the government. As a man who was privy to all that occurred within the armed forces, he was well aware of the situation at hand.

When Seoul had been reduced to rubble just a day before, he had no doubt in his mind that Pyongyang had been responsible. The fact that Seoul had been chosen was evidence enough. Those foolish deviant imbeciles were brave and stupid enough to try anything, he thought. First it had been Russia's job to steer the misguided souls after the end of the Great Patriotic War, and then later during the Korean War. But when the job of guidance became one of placation and control, as a master would tug authoritatively on the leash of a misbehaving dog, they'd left the responsibility to their Chinese counterparts, who apparently had more of an affinity for the like-colored people more than they. And now the Americans had taken care of their mess, apparently, and he had no reason to argue.

But those immature goons in North Korea did turn up something good once in a while, as demonstrated by the opportunity which had presented himself to the JINR years earlier. A mysterious man named Park Jin Young had come forth with technology so advanced and so terrifying that at first he had not known what to do with it.

At first the SVR had identified him as the same man who had been on every intelligence agency's most

wanted list for years, but arresting him meant forfeiting whatever he had to offer. It had disgusted the Minister that that technology had come from the Americans, and it was the very same one that the foreign espionage agents from SVR had had their eyes on for years and yet could do nothing about. The security was just too tight, they said. And now this man came before them, dangling the prize before their eyes as a man would tempt a donkey with a carrot...

How could he have said no? Of course, his associates at the SVR had plans of their own; plans that their incompetent Spetsnaz had screwed up one too many times. Now those men were all dead, and neither their bosses nor the Minister had anything to show for it.

And just as well. After the attack on Seoul, it was for certain that Russia would do well to look the other way. After decades of progress, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, they could not allow a scandal like this to destroy everything they'd worked for.

"Close the case, Colonel. Your men will not rest until everything is found and taken care of accordingly."

The Defense Minister would sever all connections they have had with this man; destroy all evidence that any collaboration had taken place. That meant looking into years of correspondence and erasing an equal amount's worth of trails, but it would be done. As the history of Russia had proven, nothing was impossible. He had faith that his men would take care of it.

Even if it meant killing every scientist and engineer at the JINR.

"Yes, Minister."

2 hours later

Somewhere above India

The comfort of the Gulfstream jet provided no solace for Yuri and the men around her as it shot across Asia's breadth at near-supersonic speeds. The President of the United States, as it was, hadn't flown Air Force One into Misawa; there simply wasn't enough time to brief the regular crew before he'd left the

States.

Two hours had already passed, and Yuri had spent every second of that sitting at the edge of the seat just opposite the President's, going over everything that had transpired in the past week. She was incredibly tired and felt sticky all over - the air-conditioning had done nothing to help with that – but the sheer intrigue she felt as she recounted everything chronologically was enough to put those out of her mind.

It seemed as though that very same intrigue had found its way into the President and Bennett. The latter had taken one shock after another as Yuri went on, especially when she'd explained how Kim Taeyeon and her father had fit into the picture, and the unexpected discovery that ex-US Army General Elliot Jung was still alive. Like Dr. Yoo had said before: the CIA didn't like chasing ghosts.

She was careful to leave out some details, but didn't bother to hold back on the rest; including the part about Jaebeom's betrayal and Russians' involvement. The moment the word 'betrayed' came through her lips, eyebrows were raised all around. The President, so calm and collected whilst listening to her story before, leaned forward with full interest. It was not that he hadn't been interested before, Yuri noted. She could see in his eyes that he fully appreciated the many connections that peppered the story she'd told. Apparently the President enjoyed the intelligence game of connecting-the-dots.

Throughout Yuri's debrief, neither he nor Bennett interrupted, and Yuri was compelled by the power of their eyes alone to explain every section in satisfactory detail before she moved on. That was not before Yuri noted the exceptional twinkle in Bennett's eyes. She could almost read his thoughts as they percolated in his mind.

So this was the result of a conspiracy within her own organization...they're more dangerous than we'd thought them to be.

As Yuri moved on to the Russians, she saw the look in the President's eyes change ever so slightly. A question, one of many to come, she was sure, was swimming around those wisdom-filled pools. She paused and leaned back a little, allowing him to ask it.

"So what you're saying is, this Park Jin Young had been conspiring with the Russians to further his goals, but their interests clashed and they wanted to take the data by force?"

Yuri was surprised that the question hadn't been about Jaebeom's betrayal, but did her best to hide any stray expressions and nodded. The President was obviously more interested in the bigger picture. The DNI could handle the details. "Park wanted global destruction. The Russians couldn't stomach that, but at the same time, they wanted the political and scientific power that came from acquiring the anti-matter research data. So they sent in Spetsnaz to extract it, and we crossed swords."

The President leaned back. "And then what happened?"

Yuri went on for a few more minutes, outlining their encounter with the Russian men in Rio before she got to their second encounter in St. Petersburg. The President leaned forward once more.

"So you teamed up with the Russians to take down your own organization?" he asked with a bit of astonishment.

"Not the whole thing; just one man, as I mentioned earlier," Yuri replied.

"And I'm assuming you succeeded. So what of the Spetsnaz men who were with you? Where are they now?"

Yuri knew what he meant. "I know it's a little morbid to put it this way, Mr. President, but don't worry. They're all dead."

"Dead?" The President frowned.

Yuri nodded. "Killed in the assault." She'd had no intention of telling these people that she alone was responsible for their deaths. Moreover, how could she possibly explain to them how she did it without their looking at her like a strange animal?

Yuri could see that both Bennett and the President had the briefest look of relief in their eyes. The issue here was not whether twenty men had died; it was the fact that they obviously knew too much to be allowed to live. If they had been allowed to return to their country, what would the ramifications be? They'd borne witness to the headquarters and prowess of an independent organization as effective as any state-funded entity in the world. What would the Russians do? And if they did decide to do

something about it, what would the Americans stand to lose?

What if they managed to get these people to work for them?

Both Bennett and the President considered this well and shuddered at the thought, and decided that it had indeed been better that those men hadn't been allowed to leave alive. The Spetsnaz, like any other soldiers sent on black operations, were deniable by their country. It was a fact as well known in the intelligence community as it was in the special forces of any country, and those who understood the need for deniability respected it.

Yuri went on. "From the moment Park Jin Young knew of the Spetsnaz' involvement back in Rio de Janeiro, he knew that the Russians had gone back on their word. They couldn't be trusted, ironically because they didn't share his goal of total destruction. And so Park turned to the North Koreans."

John spoke next. "We're talking about the scientific breakthrough of all time here, and it's not one that can be understood overnight, much less implemented within just a few days. How did the North Koreans manage to churn out those bombs so quickly?"

Yuri had thought about this herself, though it had never occurred to her to ask Dr. Yoo or the others this very same question before. She turned to Bennett. "This is my own opinion, but I believe that Park had been collaborating with the North Koreans before or at the same time he began contacting the Russians. Having two candidates meant that they served as contingencies for one another, although somehow I'm inclined to believe that he knew the North Koreans were more likely to go through with it than their friends up north."

"Then why go to the Russians at all? Sure, they could provide some insurance, but why risk everything by letting them in on it?"

"Because the Russians are more stable; both politically and economically. Can you imagine a world under North Korean rule? They'll have the power, of course, but it'll be a disaster. They can't even handle their own country; much less the entire world. Park Jin Young isn't stupid."

"But that was going to happen, wasn't it?" Bennett observed thoughtfully.

Yuri shrugged. "Nobody knows how long Park had been planning this. Maybe a decade. Most probably more, considering the resources and connections involved. He couldn't let all that effort go to waste, could he?"

Yuri's eyes sparkled playfully. The President caught it.

"What aren't you telling us?" he asked evenly, looking Yuri straight in the eye.

Yuri smiled ominously. She hadn't expected herself to react that darkly. She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper just loud enough for the two men to hear. "When I was down there, I could see where the bombs would go off, and when." Yuri paused for effect.

"And?" Bennett pressed. He didn't like being played, though some part of him did enjoy the building suspense. He had to admit; being in the CIA too long and knowing too many things had the tendency to make the job a little...boring.

Yuri's dark smile grew. "Moscow was on that list, and I'm pretty sure Pyongyang would have taken its place if the Russians had agreed to do things Park's way."

If the President and Bennett had tried to mask their shock, they did a terrible job. Yuri had just made the jaws of the two most powerful men in the world go slack. She took some pleasure in that fact as she leaned back in her seat, feeling the soothing comfort of the luxurious leather molding sensually into her back. It was then when she realized that her back hurt. Then again, everywhere seemed to hurt right now.

Bennett spoke slowly. "The Russians thought that with their men dead, and especially with Seoul in ruins, they could simply look the other way and everything would be fine...nothing would be traced back to them."

The bastards.

Yuri made a dramatic popping motion with her right hand as she looked wistfully out the window. "And then...boom."

The conversation ended there, and Yuri was left to her own thoughts. More discussion would surely come later when they rendezvoused at the secondary base. She considered that for a moment.

She was bringing outsiders into Doppelganger territory; exposing her family to the very people who would likely seek to subjugate them and use them for their own interests. She had seen the look in the President's eyes; heard his words as he spoke to her, and from them drew a strange sense of comfort. Was the man playing her? Were they all playing her? There was no doubt in her mind that they knew how to do so; one didn't rise to such ranks without having a bit of skill in that respect. Politicians and intelligence officers had one thing in common: the ability to manipulate people at will.

But Dr. Yoo had granted permission, hadn't he? Seohyun had given her the green light. What did that mean? Did Dr. Yoo trust these men? Did he know enough about any of them to come to the conclusion that they wouldn't do any harm to the organization; to the family?

And then there were the anomalies: Stephanie, Taeyeon, Tae Woo, Elliot...Jessica.

Jessica.

An Interpol agent, two underground mobsters, a man who was supposed to be dead...and...Jessica. How would they react to the President's presence? How would the latter react to them?

What would happen to them when this was all over?

Yuri let out an audible sigh and rose from her seat. The pair of Secret Service agents were within a meter of her in half a second, but the President stopped them with a raised hand.

"I'm just going to wash up a bit," Yuri said carefully, knees still bent.

The President turned to look at the agents and nodded, waving them off.

Seconds later, Yuri found herself staring into a mirror in the aircraft's lavatory. She almost smiled.

You look like a damn mess, Kwon Yuri.

The reddish-brown streak across her left cheek had been covered by a bandage, courtesy of a corpsman aboard the USS George Washington. Other than that, Yuri noted the bags under her eyes earned from more than a week of little or no sleep, and her skin looked paler than usual.

Yuri turned the water on and splashed her face a few times, pausing to look back up in the mirror as the water flowed down from the sides of her face to drip down from the bottom of her chin.

A little longer, Yuri. Just a little longer, and it'll all be over.

Outside, The President tented his fingers and leaned back in his seat. Even though one final essential piece of the puzzle was still missing, everything that this Kwon Yuri had related to them was enough to make it the conspiracy of the century. The world had come close; too close to its own destruction one too many times before, but none of those scenarios were as profoundly terrifying as this.

As the President of the United States of America, this man was privy to the most sensational and the most horrific stories in history; tales of heroic sacrifice for the good of the free world; legends of intercontinental espionage; the truth behind the carefully constructed façades of men and women of decades past.

It was just too bad he couldn't tell them to anyone.

In less than half a day, he would bear witness to a force of nature the likes of which neither he nor any other had ever seen.

And he already knew exactly what he had to do.

1105 CET
Ops Room
Secondary Doppelganger Base
Switzerland

Seohyun watched as the blips on the Gulfstream made their final approach to the airport. She turned to Dr. Yoo. "They've arrived."

Dr. Yoo nodded, hands on his hips as he surveyed the Ops Room. His agents were in various states of catatonia, mostly attributed to the fact that they'd had nothing to do since Yuri had been picked out of North Korea. Some leaned back in their chairs, twiddling their thumbs. Others continued to stare hard into their computer screens even though there wasn't anything to look at. None had asked for permission to leave. Dr. Yoo gave the room one last inspection and decided that for their part, the war was over.

This last battle was for him to fight alone.

"Listen up."

All heads turned to Dr. Yoo.

"You've all done a great job," he began as he looked around. "Mankind was a step closer to self-destruction, but once again we've managed to pull him another two steps back. I'm certain that all of you now understand the brevity of your mission here, and how the will of but a single person is enough to doom us all. I want you to think about that. All of you."

As Dr. Yoo scanned the room, he spotted slight nods, mostly unconscious reactions, from all around. They were tired, but alert nonetheless. They were listening.

"You're dismissed. Indefinitely. Have a good rest."

1110 CET
Geneva
Switzerland

It was late morning in Geneva, and the Sun was already high on the horizon, casting a rich orange glow over the vast expanse of land that bordered the airport.

The two black helicopters were waiting for them once they'd touched down. Immigration had been handled flawlessly, as usual, and there was especially no need for the Swiss authorities to know that the President of the United States was in attendance. It wouldn't do anyone good to attract any unnecessary attention. As far as the airport was concerned, they were just a group of wealthy friends and a couple of bodyguards. The bodyguards, however, did not tag along. This effectively turned the other helicopter into a wingman. The Secret Service agents would wait at the airport until the President returned. Bennett had advised against this, of course.

"John, if what I think about this woman is true, not two or twenty Secret Service agents will be enough if they decide to kill us in there," the President had said with some mirth.

The DNI merely grunted as the two agents trotted off toward the terminal. The Director of Secret Service had already thrown a fit when the President had left for Misawa without a fully staffed and fully briefed security detail. John wasn't sure if the man could stomach the fact that he and the President were now diving into uncharted waters alone.

They lifted off minutes later, heading east toward the secondary Doppelganger base. The pilots in Yuri's bird had exchanged greetings with her. After all, all field agents were trained to fly most modern helicopters, and these agents were just two of many who were well aware of Yuri's recent exploits, and only too happy to have her back.

Another half hour passed before they were greeted with the sight of the mountain in question. Of course, neither man in the passenger cabin had known what to look for, and almost jumped out of their seats when the chopper dove to duck under the shelter of an icy valley before slipping inconspicuously into a rather inconspicuous opening on the side of the mountain. Before either man could figure out what was going on, the roaring wind outside the cabin doors had subsided, and the only sound they could hear was that of slowing helicopter rotors and disengaging engines as they touched down in a cavernous man-made space. Behind them, a massive pair of blast doors slid closed on hinges whose size they didn't dare to fathom. That blocked out any remaining semblance of sound, and everything seemed

to diminish into a faint series of indistinguishable echoes.

The cabin doors slid open thunderously in the overwhelming silence, and Bennett was the first to step out, his dress shoes clicking against the metal flooring. He looked about the gigantic space, adjusting the lapels of his suit jacket as he did so.

All around him, perhaps three or four dozen helicopters of different make, model and color sat in silence. He looked up next, marveling at the impossibly high ceiling. The walls and floor were colored in a shade of blue, outlined with the edges of individual metal squares.

How did they accomplish this?

Yuri came up behind him, her boots clunking instead of clicking against the floor. She took a moment to breathe in the scent of the place, and savored it even if it was tainted by the stench of fuel and lubricant. The air here was moister than the dry, piercing wind she'd inhaled in the helicopter. She, too, took the time to look around, and decided that be it here or a few mountains away, it was the same.

It's good to be home.

One of the field agents came up to Yuri. "The Mission Director will meet you in the Ops Room."

Yuri nodded, and waved for the two men to follow. "Right this way, gentlemen."

It was the work of ten minutes to get to the elevator that would lead to the Ops Room from the helipad. Here, the two places were on opposite ends of the mountain, and the Ops Room was a few floors up.

The four field agents from the helicopters had left them alone, and now only the three of them stood in the enclosed space as it moved upward.

Yuri's eyes followed the light as it shifted upward from button to button, swallowing as it passed a certain level. That was the infirmary.

Jessica.

She was so close, but...

When she next opened her eyes, the doors had opened and instinct took over. Her feet carried her forward to the middle of the corridor, just shy of the entrance to the Ops Room. Yuri took a deep breath and expelled it slowly, clenching and unclenching her fists.

Did she want to know? Would she need to know?

Yuri turned over her shoulder, motioning for the men to come forward. "We're here."

Together, they stepped through the double doors of the Ops Room, and in its center stood the figure of Dr. Yoo Jae Suk. Yuri looked around. Everyone had left. Where were Taeyeon and Stephanie?

Yuri sighed again. What was more important?

"Yuri, welcome back."

Yuri looked up at Dr. Yoo, drew herself to attention for some reason, nodded, then stood at ease of her own accord. Her mind was clearly out of it. "Sir." She stepped aside to allow the President and Bennett to step forward.

Now it was Dr. Yoo who stood straighter. He held out a hand. "Mr. President, it's an honor."

The President took his hand, shook it once while he put on his best smile, if a bit wary.

Why is that voice so familiar?

“Mr. Bennett.” Dr. Yoo shook John’s hand next.

The President’s smile wavered, then brightened again as he studied Dr. Yoo closely. He waited.

“My name is Doctor Yoo Jae Suk, Mission Director of this organization,” Dr. Yoo said smoothly.

The President’s smile never faltered. “Dr. Yoo, tell me...do you watch many kidnapper movies?”

Dr. Yoo returned the smile. “It seems we have much to talk about, Mr. President.”

“Excuse me sir, if I may?” Yuri said, interrupting whatever game was being played through the eyes of both men.

Dr. Yoo turned to Yuri, genuinely concerned. “Yes, Yuri?”

Yuri was frank. “I’m not so sure anymore if I want to hear about Park. I...I have something more important to do.” Her voice was sincere and honest.

Dr. Yoo gave a knowing smile. “I understand, Yuri. Go ahead.”

Yuri smiled from the heart for the first time in what felt like forever. “Thank you, sir.”

She turned and headed off for the infirmary, leaving the three men behind.

1150 CET

Infirmary

Secondary Doppelganger Base

Yuri paused at the door to Jessica's room. She didn't need to look inside to know that Taeyeon and Stephanie were with her, along with her father, who had never left since the minute she'd been admitted there.

She looked down at her boots, suddenly feeling hesitant. Why was she reluctant to see her? Hadn't she come all this way, sacrificed so much, almost lost her soul, all just to be reunited with her one true love? Yuri felt herself breathing faster and deeper. What was this strange hesitance, the little voice in her head that told her to stay away from the door that separated them? Was it because of the way she looked? Or was it because somehow, somewhere, she knew that once she'd laid her eyes on Jessica, she would hold her and never let go?

There was only one way to find out.

Yuri stepped to the door, pausing in the threshold. Three pairs of eyes shot toward her. Jessica was asleep. One pair of eyes lit up especially brightly, accompanied by a wide smile, but in the other two, Yuri could still see genuine joy mixed with relief.

She took one step forward, and then another, her footsteps gradually feeling lighter and lighter as she closed the distance between herself and the angel who rested upon the infirmary bed. Elliot stood, and as Yuri locked eyes with him, he simply smiled and nodded. They would give her some privacy. As Stephanie and Taeyeon moved past, the former stopped to put a hand on Yuri's shoulder.

"Welcome back," she said with a smile that soon turned into a frown. "You stink."

Yuri couldn't help but smile, and frowned maliciously at the shorter woman, willing her to get out of the room before she made her. Stephanie giggled silently, turned to kiss Taeyeon on the cheek, and then dragged her out of the room. The shorter woman had been stunned silly by the unexpected move. Elliot came next, and Yuri felt inclined to turn and face him. His eyes were deep, old and sincere.

“Thank you, Yuri. Thanks for keeping your promise,” he said softly.

Yuri simply nodded with a thin smile, and watched as his back retreated out the door and away.

She turned back to see Jessica still asleep on the untainted white sheets, her blonde tresses framing her delicate face perfectly. Her skin seemed to have regained a lot of its color; it had been pale the day she left. Yuri stepped to the bedside, raising a trembling hand to reach for Jessica’s hair. She was about to stroke it when a hand suddenly shot up and grabbed her forearm, and Yuri found herself staring into the deep brown eyes of Jessica Jung.

“Y-you’re awake,” Yuri stuttered.

Jessica turned her body to face Yuri and smiled. Yuri’s heart stopped for a moment right there and then. She was so *beautiful*. The words that came out of her mouth were the sounds of Heaven wafting down to her; the most beautiful music she had heard in her entire life.

“You know how I always like to sleep so much?” Jessica asked softly as she gradually pulled Yuri closer toward her.

“Y-yeah.” Yuri was still stuttering, and she hated herself for it, but could she blame herself? Her heart was galloping along as her stomach performed gymnastics for her other organs to enjoy, all for this one woman who seemed to be able to put her under a spell at a whim.

“Sometimes...I just pretend, so that you’ll come over and touch my face, smooth my hair...and tell me that you love me even when you think you know I can’t hear it.”

Yuri’s heartbeat grew faster. She didn’t know it, but her fingers were now clasped onto Jessica’s, and her lips began to tremble. Before she knew it, Yuri had burst into tears, and stepped forward to scoop Jessica up in a hug.

“I thought I’d never see you again,” Yuri sobbed into Jessica’s hair as one hand buried itself into her luxurious locks.

Jessica began crying as well, pouring her tears into the shoulder of Yuri's already dirty tactical suit. It seemed a little strange, since this was the first time she'd seen Yuri allow herself to show this side of weakness. Yuri had always tried to put on a strong front for Jessica for assurance's sake, but Jessica could always see the mental battle raging behind those determined eyes.

"I knew you'd come back, Yuri. I just knew it."

There were two meanings in that statement. Aside from the obvious, Jessica knew that the Yuri who had returned was the same as the one who had left her. She remembered the nightmare she'd had, when she saw Yuri transform into a monster she hadn't the courage to behold...she remembered how she'd cried with all her might to her love, begging her not to give in, not to trade her soul, not to leave her. Jessica had seen Yuri's eyes. The love of her life had not changed one bit, and for that she was grateful.

Yuri held Jessica still closer, not able to find the words to express her gratitude for being reunited with her.

"And Yuri?"

"Hmm?"

Jessica pulled back to look at Yuri and lifted a finger to her nostrils.

"You stink."

Ops Room

Secondary Doppelganger Base

"We're called Doppelgangers, Mr. President," Dr. Yoo began. "Behind that name lies a certain symbolism that's a little different from the literal sense of the word."

The three men were seated in a loose triangle in the Ops Room. Dr. Yoo was beginning to understand how the game was being played and adjusted to it accordingly. He would give out as much as he could to win the President's approval, but not too much that the DNI could use it against him. From what he'd gathered, the President showed a genuine curiosity in the organization and its roots, while the DNI was more interested in its structure, manpower and assets. For the latter, he wouldn't budge.

"How so?" the President asked.

"A doppelganger, as believed in many cultures, is a double of a person which is meant to signify an omen of bad luck or death. In that context, a doppelganger is essentially evil."

The President nodded.

"We are the harbingers of death for those who are evil. Essentially, we are an organization which seeks out evil, traces it back to the source, and eliminates it. A darker way to perceive it would be the fact that a Doppelganger – one of us – is the last thing a target would see before he or she dies."

"Interesting," the DNI said, nodding. "Just how widespread are you? I mean, you're effective, but how so?"

So, it's begun, eh?

Dr. Yoo put on his best genuine smile and shook his head. "Can't say."

The DNI returned the smile. "You do realize that this 'organization' does not operate within the laws of—"

"Do not play that card on me, Mr. Bennett." Dr. Yoo's voice was firmer this time. "We have codes of secrecy not dissimilar to those you practice assiduously in the CIA." That earned him a scowl, much to his satisfaction.

The President held out a hand. "John, let's not go there. Don't insult the man on his own turf." He turned back to Dr. Yoo. "Please, go on."

“Thank you, Mr. President. We go back to the 1920s, a time where a group of like-minded individuals in Switzerland and its surrounding countries were well aware of the possibility of a Second World War. During a time when even the most primitive true intelligence agencies had yet to be born, the Doppelgangers, as the name was coined by a German member, recognized the need for an independent, well-funded and well-connected organization that could prepare for and contribute to the war effort if it were to happen. It did, as you know, and by then, almost two decades later, the Doppelgangers had recruited dozens of operatives from all over Europe, most of them close friends and relatives whom the founders knew they could trust. During that time, they’d pulled strings with various companies all over Europe, especially the mining ones, and set up their first base of operations within a mountain in the Swiss Alps not far from here.”

“This is not the place? What happened to it?”

“Let’s just say things got complicated in the past week.”

“What about training? Where did you get it?”

Dr. Yoo decided that it was okay to share this bit. Besides, he wasn’t giving any details. “Bits from here and there, from various armies of various countries, courtesy of members who served or used to serve in the military. Having operatives well placed in military hierarchies helped a lot, too. Bloodline is something we consider very important in this organization.”

“Why so?”

“Because we need only the best. We train our agents hard, and when their time is up, they meet another agent to start off the next generation. The good genes keep getting better, shaped by endless hours of training, practice and personal reflection, are passed on throughout the years, growing stronger, sharpening skills and awareness and endurance. You could call us a warrior class; a separate cabal of men and women born and bred to do what we do best.”

“So what you’re saying is, you only reproduce amongst yourselves?”

“That’s right.”

The President caught the slightest twinge of reluctance in Dr. Yoo's two-word answer. "And this has to do with Park?"

"You're a very sharp man, Mr. President."

The President smiled. "I like to think that that's the reason why I got elected, Dr. Yoo."

Dr. Yoo sighed and rose, turning to face the tactical screen behind him for a few seconds before turning back to the two men.

"You've heard about Park Jaebeom?"

Both men nodded.

"Kwon Yuri gave us a rough idea, of sorts, on the way here," the DNI said.

"Did she tell you that he was Park Jin Young's son?"

That drew a couple of surprised expressions.

"Guess not."

"She told us that Park Jaebeom was under Jin Young's command, but she never mentioned that they had a familial relationship," the President recalled.

"I wouldn't exactly call the relationship 'familial', Mr. President."

"What do you mean?"

“Park Jaebeom was the result of a forced impregnation of another agent. Jin Young had been exposed with a woman outside of the Doppelganger bloodline, and that was deemed...unacceptable.”

The President frowned. “Wait, what are you trying to say?”

Dr. Yoo stepped closer, his voice serious. “I’m trying to say that Park Jin Young was in love with an outsider, and for that, his lover was killed to serve as an example to breaking the rules, and he was forced to impregnate another agent before he was expelled.”

Seohyun had barely managed to crawl into her quarters before she found herself curled up in a ball on her cot, hugging her knees as if their proximity to her face could provide her with the least bit of comfort.

The tears flowed freely now, both from relief in knowing that the greatest challenge in her career was over, and from the heartbreaking fact that no matter how well she had performed, no matter how hard she tried, Yoona was still dead.

“I can do everything except bring you back...even though that’s the thing I want to do most.”

Han Seungyeon stood in the corridor, listening to her friend weep and feeling her heart clench at the same time. She knew there was nothing she could do for the poor girl; grief was as personal an issue to an individual as religion, and one had to face up to it herself if she was going to make it through as a stronger person.

All Seungyeon could do was be there for her in spirit, and try her best not to let her own tears fall.

Chapter Forty-One : Full Circle (Part Two)

Infirmary

Secondary Doppelganger Base

Yuri cradled Jessica in her arms as she sat at the edge of the bed, trailing fingers through the frail woman's delicate hair. She was careful not to jostle her too much; the stitches on her chest and back might reopen if subjected to too much stress. They sat in silence, reveling in the warmth of each others' touch and the sound of their soft breathing...and for Jessica, the rather strong scent of a hard day's work emanating from the seams of Yuri's clothes.

As she traced a finger down Jessica's jaw, Yuri let out a long sigh filled with contentment and relief.

This...this is what I've wanted since the day I touched down in Rio.

Jessica cuddled deeper into Yuri's chest, unmindful of the odor; she was just glad to be in her lover's strong yet comforting arms. After a week of going through the very worst hell she could imagine since that fateful Christmas night, Jessica took comfort in the fact that peace, no matter how fleeting, had finally graced her with its tranquilizing presence.

"You know," Yuri began softly, still tracing Jessica's sharp features.

"Hmmm?"

"The President's here," Yuri said as casually as she could.

Jessica pulled back from the embrace and fixed Yuri with a flabbergasted look. "Who?"

"The President."

“Of the *United States*?”

Yuri smiled. “Yup. The boss of your boss’ boss!”

Jessica’s eyes widened, her voice picking up a notch. “You!” She punched Yuri on the shoulder. “Why didn’t you tell me!”

Yuri shrugged. “Why, does it matter?”

Jessica’s jaw dropped. “Of course it matters! My God! The President of the United States is here!” She looked around in mock paranoia before lowering her voice. “Wait a minute, what’s he doing here?”

“I brought him here.”

Jessica’s jaw dropped again. “You *what*?”

Yuri shrugged for the second time. “What’s the big deal? I figured since he’s seen almost everything since I left for North Korea, what’s a little more? Besides, the Mission Director authorized it.”

Jessica couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Yuri had brought the most powerful man in the free world to a place that shouldn’t even exist, and she wasn’t even the least bit worried! Sometimes she just didn’t understand the woman, and this was definitely one of those times.

“Anyway, why are you so worried?” Yuri asked, cocking her head to the side.

Jessica frowned. In truth, she didn’t know. She dipped her head, unsure.

“You’re worried that he’s going to cause more trouble?”

Jessica bit her lip and nodded her head.

Yuri chuckled and reached forward to hold the woman close. She patted her head. "Don't worry...I bet he and Dr. Yoo are working something out as we speak. I don't know...but when I was on the George Washington and then on the plane coming here with him, I had a good look in those eyes of his, and my gut told me he could be trusted."

Jessica shook her head. "That's exactly how politicians come to power, Kwon Yuri. I know you're probably not familiar with politics in this line of business, but this is ridiculous!" Then a curious look. "And you were on the USS George Washington?"

Yuri smiled. It was kind of cute for some reason that Jessica knew of the supercarrier. "Yup. Biggest chunk of floating metal I've ever seen, though I never did get the full tour; just a face full of water."

Jessica looked up at Yuri in confusion. "Huh?"

Yuri's smile only grew. "It's not important. Say, since you're so excited about the President being around...why don't we go meet him?"

"W-what? But I--"

"Hey, you played a part in saving the world! That's gotta count for something, including the privilege to meet the man who helped make it possible too."

Jessica looked down. "I...um..."

Yuri lifted Jessica's chin and gazed deeply into her eyes. "Look, there's nothing to worry about, okay? I'm here, and everything's going to be fine."

Jessica's eyes wavered. "Well, actually...I was worried about having to see him in this tacky little gown."

Yuri frowned and then looked down at the white hospital gown Jessica was wearing. She could hardly believe it.

“You’re actually worried about...not being dressed up properly to meet the President?” she asked incredulously.

Jessica grinned sheepishly. “Well, he is the President. And I sure as hell am not going to wear *this* for our first meeting!”

Yuri’s eyes narrowed. “And here I thought it was an emotional worry. We’ll cover you up with a towel or something.”

“A *what?*”

Elliot’s feet was moving before his mind even processed what his eyes had just seen: the image of his daughter wrapped up in a...towel...emerging from the door of the infirmary ward. His hands found hers in a split second, only to realize that Yuri was already supporting her from the side.

“I’m fine, Dad,” Jessica said assuredly.

“Sorry Mr. Jung, we’re heading up to meet the President. All of us,” Yuri announced.

Three heads snapped toward her the moment Yuri mentioned the word.

“Who? Stephanie asked, disbelief in her eyes.

“The President.”

“Of the *United States?*”

Yuri held her forehead with her hand. “There’s no doubt about it. You really are twins.”

Jessica snickered in amusement, while Elliot and Taeyeon's faces went deathly pale.

"The President..." Elliot muttered.

He didn't quite know what to feel, but one thing was for sure: he was about to come to face with the President of the United States of America; a man he had betrayed just as thoroughly as he did his country so many years ago. Almost immediately, all the shame came crashing back down onto him.

Jessica reached out to hold her father's arm. "Dad, are you okay?"

Elliot shook his head slowly. "I can't...I can't see him."

Yuri nodded to herself. She knew what Elliot was thinking; saw the fear and guilt in his eyes. "Mr. Jung, the President already knows you're here." She turned to Taeyeon, whose normally pale face was now blanched beyond recognition. "You and your father too, Taeyeon."

They all stood in silence for a few moments before Yuri spoke again. "He wants to meet all of you, so don't worry. It's going to be okay."

Elliot took a few deep breaths to calm himself and clear his mind. Dead or alive, Elliot Jung had always been a US Army General. Though his skin wasn't white or black, and though he didn't descend from a purely American lineage, he knew where his loyalties lay; knew where his heart lay. It had been almost a decade since he'd last seen the country he so dearly loved and once so dedicatedly served. Deep inside, he knew he had to face his shame in order to redeem himself; in order to earn the right to love the United States of America as he once had. And to do that, he had to face the very man he'd sold out.

Taeyeon, on the other hand, had a very different set of worries. She and her father were two of the most wanted criminals in the world. How would that knowledge sit with the man who advocated the very agencies which dedicated their resources to hunt them down? It was not so much a matter of loyalty and respect as a matter of simple consequence.

The analytical mind she'd so carefully molded at Harvard got to work, its switches and gears jerking and stuttering along as they struggled to break free of the emotional wreckage that cluttered their spaces.

Yuri had brought him here. That meant something, didn't it? Would she have done it if he couldn't be trusted? Would he have been allowed to come to this very place if the Doppelgangers hadn't stood to gain anything from it?

She decided that those thoughts weren't relevant at all, and that frustrated her. The politics of the President's presence in this place didn't apply to her situation. There was a very good chance that the man could order the arrest of her and her father...and there was no guarantee that anyone here would stand up to that request. Her tired eyes moved to Stephanie, who returned the meaningful gaze as their fingers wound tightly together. She would fight for their freedom, but what authority did she hold to argue with the President of her country? It was a lost cause.

Stephanie nodded, a small smile spreading across her lips. Taeyeon honestly didn't know what to make of it at the time, but she figured that it was a simple gesture of assurance. She sighed. She had been on the run with her father for years, and was quite sick of it. She had gone through enough for the past week, and there was nothing left in her to provide the incentive to go any further. Taeyeon moved into Stephanie's embrace. She would leave her fate in the hands of whoever had the power to shape it.

At almost the same time, both Taeyeon and Elliot looked to Yuri and nodded slowly. Yuri nodded back, grasping Jessica's hand.

"Let's go."

Dr. Yoo's mind raced even as the words continued to leave his lips in the presence of the President of the United States and the DNI. There was a reason why he'd allowed the two men to come here, and why he'd revealed so much about the organization and the events that culminated in today's brush with Armageddon. He'd known his options from the moment Yuri had taken off from Misawa Air Base in Japan, and carefully plotted the course of his actions from that moment until she returned just hours earlier. He knew that he had to play his cards meticulously, but also knew that if he did it just right, he could save everything.

Behind his reasoning lay a very simple foundation; that secrets and lies were the source of all suffering, and only the truth could set people free. It was a concept as cliché as the cries for world peace and an end to poverty, but it was one Dr. Yoo thought he could rely on to save the Doppelgangers from utter

destruction. The one mission of the Doppelgangers as a whole was to ensure the survival of mankind, and they had almost failed that mission because of the secrets and restrictive traditions that his peers before him had insisted on keeping. All because of the denial of one man's right to live and love, the entire planet had stared death in the eye...and didn't even know it.

That was going to change, Dr. Yoo was sure, and this was the very first step. For the first time in almost a hundred years, change would come to the Doppelgangers.

As Dr. Yoo's dissertation came to a close, both his heart and mind found the peace they'd been denied of since Park Jaebeom's death just days ago. That peace came from the knowledge that he'd told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

And the truth will set you free...hopefully.

The President stood, followed by the DNI.

"I believe we've heard enough, Dr. Yoo. Would you mind giving us a couple of minutes alone to discuss a few things?" the President asked.

Dr. Yoo nodded. He knew that the President would make his decision here and now. The next couple of minutes would decide the fate of everyone under his charge. He could only hope that he'd done what was right. He turned on his heel and exited the room, leaving the two men behind in silence.

The President turned to Bennett. "I think you know how this is going to end, John."

"Mr. President, surely you don't believe...you're not just letting them go, are you?"

"And what do you mean by that?"

"I mean just leaving them be, after everything that's happened! These are the people responsible for what's occurred within the past week, Mr. President, and I believe you can see that as well as I do."

"I didn't say we should leave them be, John...but I'm not keen on any ideas you have up there in your head."

"Mr. President, these people are savages. You heard him yourself. They *inter-breed*. Their population is based on genetics. These are the very things that caused World War Two, sir! We can't just let them have their way."

The President frowned. "*Savages*? Look around you, John. Savages don't know how to apply the most advanced technology this world has to offer. Neither do I believe that mere *savages* can operate as efficiently as or better than our own CIA. You can't deny that. And these people are a far cry from the Aryan Race the psychos in Germany were trying to cultivate!"

"Sir, these people are too dangerous to leave alone. We need to bring them under our control; input the right codes of conduct, the rules of engagement. What if they turn against the United States one day? What if they present us with the very same endgame we've seen today?"

"And you think they will be any less dangerous when they're forced to bend against their will? History is rife with catastrophic upheavals and mutinies resulting from subjugation. You've seen for yourself how effective and deadly these people can be. God knows if there's more to see than that! And I know what you're thinking, John. You want to threaten them into submitting to our control, and if they don't, well, I don't think they would stand a fair chance against all the troops and materiel we can throw at them, would they?" Actually, the President wasn't really sure of that last point. Who knew just how many field operatives they had, and what they were capable of?

"There's a reason why Dr. Yoo told us everything. That's because he trusts us; trusts that we'll make the right decisions that will be beneficial to both sides. Truth was his best asset; his only asset, and he's thrown out that card. On top of that...there's a debt of honor to be paid, John. These people might have indirectly instigated the world's destruction, but they also helped save it; something that was impossible for us to do alone. Perhaps they've saved us more than once, but we'll probably never know."

Bennett sighed in defeat.

"John, we've been working together for years, and I've always trusted your judgment. That's how we've gotten this far in the intelligence business; how our own agencies have grown under your leadership. Now I'm just asking you to trust me instead."

Bennett nodded slowly. "Alright." He nodded again, more determined this time. "Okay, sir. What do you propose, then?"

The President filled him in.

"Pat's not going to like this, especially since we haven't consulted him or the DDI," Bennett observed, referring to the Secretary of Defense and the Deputy Director for Intelligence of CIA.

"He doesn't have to like it. Not right now, at least, but the results will show. I'm sure of it." The President let out a long sigh and put his hands into his pockets. "Damn, I could sure use a good stiff right about now."

Bennett nodded. "Me too, sir. Let's go meet Dr. Yoo, then."

Together, they turned and moved toward the double doors.

Dr. Yoo had his back against the wall of the corridor, doing his best impersonation of a statue. His eyes traced a continuous circle on the ground at his feet. He had since stopped thinking; the activity would serve no purpose now that he'd already left the fate of the Doppelgangers to somebody else. He pondered that for a moment. Had he just disgraced himself and the family for doing that? These people had placed their faith in him, and there existed as good a chance of honoring it as squandering it. Perhaps he should have used a different approach. Perhaps he shouldn't have authorized Yuri to bring them here in the first place. Perhaps-

He squeezed his eyes shut. No. Deep in his gut, he knew that he'd done the right thing. To keep them away was to run away from the problem, and that course of action never ended well. To his left, he heard the distinctive clicks of dress shoes against the metal flooring.

Never before in his life had Dr. Yoo seen fate itself walk toward him on its own two feet.

“Dr. Yoo?”

Dr. Yoo straightened and turned to face the two men. “Yes, sir.”

“It is the position of the United States of America that the Doppelgangers have done her and the world a tremendous service; one that we lack the means to reward in any sufficient way. It is also her position that this organization remains to ensure the well being of her people from now until such an unfortunate time when it would be disbanded for circumstances above and beyond our control. You will retain your current autonomy and freedom of operation, but I would request for a degree of information transparency between this organization and our agencies in the United States.”

Dr. Yoo nodded, scarcely able to believe what he was hearing. “Thank you, sir. I am deeply honored...and relieved.” This last he said with a small smile.

The President nodded, returning the smile. “As a gesture of goodwill, the United States will provide a military funeral with standard honors for all of your agents who have perished in the pursuit of this most recent operation. They will be buried in the same ground as those who’ve given their lives for the country’s preservation.” He was referring to the SAD operatives and the Warthog pilot who had died in North Korea.

“But sir-“

“There shall be no argument in that, Dr. Yoo. Your agents deserve that honor just as much as our men do. It’s the least we could do...for starters, at least,” the President said sincerely.

Dr. Yoo sighed. For a moment, he was worried about the implications for intelligence; having agents of his own buried in a public place open to everyone, but he decided that there was no harm in it after all. The dead held no secrets. Inside, he was ashamed that he’d thought of his fallen agents as merely assets to be exploited by intelligence elements from elsewhere. They deserved more dignity than that, even if they’d been trained to believe otherwise. Agents as they were, they were also people. They were family.

And then there was the issue of being given a military funeral in the United States itself. This was unprecedented as far as Dr. Yoo knew, as military funerals were reserved only for American civilians and those in the US armed forces. To have been presented with such an honor by the President of the

United States himself...

"When?" Dr. Yoo asked finally.

"I think a week would be enough to brief both sides and inform the families. We'll do it at Arlington Cemetery in Virginia."

"Thank you, sir. Truly." Dr. Yoo gave a half bow, reminiscent of his Korean heritage.

"If there is anything else I can do before we head back--"

"I think I know where you could start, Mr. President."

Dr. Yoo's head snapped toward the voice. Yuri, Jessica, Elliot, Taeyeon, Stephanie and Tae Woo were walking their way.

Seconds later, the group of three had grown to nine, and they stood in a loose circle.

The DNI looked a tad annoyed by Yuri's apparently disrespectful intrusion, but the President seemed to think otherwise. He smiled, looking at each of them in turn, watching as their eyes wavered when his eyes fixed onto them. They were obviously feeling uncomfortable, though they had no reason to be. The light surrounding them seemed to turn a different shade as he inspected each individual, identifying a few of them by sight. The DNI recognized a couple of them too, his eyes narrowing upon seeing them, but kept his mouth shut.

Kim Taeyeon, the infamous American drug cartel leader. Apparently, for what the woman lacked in height and tan, she made up for in wit and cunning. This one wasn't afraid to look him in the eye.

The President traced her arm down to her fingers which were intertwined with those of the woman beside her. This one, he didn't recognize, though he was sure she'd played as significant a part as anyone else in this group.

His eyes moved next to Kim Tae Woo; Taeyeon's father, a man who was supposed to already be dead. He'd heard of this man before during a few of his offhand discussions with various intelligence officials; he hadn't yet been in office when Tae Woo was actively involved in the American cartel.

Next to him stood the legendary Elliot Jung, ex-General of the US Army's INSCOM. This one was also supposed to be dead. He'd heard much about the man who'd given up classified beyond-top-secret information to the Russians years ago, and at the time wondered what kind of person had the heart to sell out his own government and country to further his own means. Elliot didn't dare look him in the eye, and for good reason. Treason was as low and unforgivable a crime as murder, even if his own family had been at stake.

And the last...he didn't recognize this woman either, though she shared the same eyes as the one who had been holding Kim Taeyeon's hand. She was covered in a towel, and his eyes caught the familiar fabric underneath. Then it came to him. He remembered Yuri having told him of someone who had been wounded in the assault on the Doppelganger base. What was her name again? Jessica. That was it. Jessica Jung. Another bell rang in his head. That made Taeyeon's companion...Stephanie Jung. Wait a minute. *Jung*? He looked back to Elliot Jung, then to Stephanie, and then back to Jessica again. He couldn't help but grin. Two sisters and their traitorous father. He'd have to request for a file on this family when he got back to the White House. It was then when he saw that Jessica was holding Yuri's hand in the same way Taeyeon was holding Stephanie's.

So Kwon Yuri did have someone to come home to.

Yuri broke the silence, and with it, the air of unease that had settled over the group. "I believe you've acquainted yourself with everyone here, Mr. President?"

"That I have, Yuri."

Yuri saw the look in his eyes and didn't like it. But that would soon change.

"Sir, I know what you're thinking. Elliot Jung, Kim Taeyeon and Kim Tae Woo all have their debts to pay, as I'm aware, but please understand that they were merely Park Jin Young's tools in securing his endgame."

Now the President was truly puzzled. He had heard most of the entire story, but connecting the dots wasn't an easy task without the right details in the right contexts, and he hadn't been provided with them given the conciseness of Yuri's and Dr. Yoo's debriefs.

Yuri explained. "You see, sir, Kim Tae Woo and his daughter may have been at the head of one of the biggest cartels to operate in the world, but they had to answer to Park Jin Young, who controlled similar cartels elsewhere. As for Mr. Jung, Park had Tae Woo blackmail him for the anti-matter production data after Fermilab got it through its beta phase. As you know, Mr. Jung was involved in the anti-matter program at the time. The point is, Mr. President, that despite all that they've done to deserve the hatred and condemnation of your country, they were the ones who found and connected the dots. They were the ones who dedicated their lives to hunting Park down. They're the reason why we're still standing here today, sir."

This drew surprised looks from Tae Woo, Taeyeon and Elliot. Neither of them had expected Yuri to speak up for them, even more so since they barely even knew her. Each tried to find an ulterior motive, but found none. Kwon Yuri was helping them.

Stephanie gripped Taeyeon's hand tighter, willing her to believe.

Just have a little faith...

The President nodded slowly, digesting what he'd just heard. That Park Jin Young had established himself as the leader of an international group of cartels was surprising, but not impossible for a man of his intellect and drive. That also explained the capital and connections he needed to further his plan. He would have to check up on that with the agencies back home, but somehow he knew that only the Doppelgangers knew the truth.

As for Elliot...he still didn't know what to think.

Treason had been around for as long as history went back, but only became a significant threat to the world at large since the start of the Cold War, as the US and Russia embarked on what became the greatest and most horrifying arms race in recorded history. Russians sold information to the Americans; and Americans to the Russians. Espionage entered a new era, and the only thing certain was the omnipresent lie that tainted almost everything.

As a person who loved and served his country, could Elliot have resisted coercion, no matter how grave, and honored his code of secrecy? Was provoking the start of another arms race almost culminating in global destruction worth saving the lives of his family members? But then that only served to prove that Elliot Jung loved his family; loved them enough to risk everything to save them from whatever fate threatened their existence. The President didn't know whether to despise or admire the man.

"And what would you have me do?" the President asked finally.

"Pardon them. Give them a clean slate and a clear conscience. It's the very least you could do for the people who risked everything for the greater good, sir," Yuri said.

The President wanted to sigh, but that was a display of weakness; of indecision, and it was a side of him he rarely even showed to his closest associates at the White House. He would not show it here.

If these people had given mankind a second chance...why shouldn't they deserve it too?

He shared a look with the DNI, who simply dipped his head. As one of his closest colleagues, John could read his mind as well as he could read his, and it seemed obvious enough that even though he didn't like whatever decision he had come to...he wouldn't argue. The President nodded with a thin smile, folding his hands.

"I'll have it in writing by the end of the day." He looked at each of the three in turn. "And we'll make the necessary arrangements for you to return to your normal lives in America, that is, if that is your wish."

Surprisingly, the first person to show any reaction was Stephanie, who broke out into a huge smile and moved to hold Taeyeon around the waist, bringing her in close and burying her lips in the shorter woman's hair. Taeyeon let out a breath she didn't even know she'd been holding, though she didn't quite know whether to laugh, smile or cry. Perhaps it was a mixture of all three.

Elliot's reaction was even more bizarre. He brought himself to attention and saluted, but the President merely stared at him, not returning the gesture. Elliot's hardened expression wavered, then he let his hand fall limply to his side. One thing was for sure: he would never again be in the service, nor did he believe he could hold his chin high in the country he'd been estranged from for too long.

There was one other thing that had been bothering Yuri for some time. There was no way in hell that she would allow Jessica to continue her job at the FBI. There was absolutely no way. She'd considered asking the President to make sure of that, but something told her that that had already been done. As a field officer who had failed to report back to her superiors for more than a week, Jessica was sure to receive a royal reprimand upon her return to the States...perhaps royal enough for her to lose her job. As for Stephanie...Yuri would let her make her own decisions. She put that thought aside for now.

"So it's settled, then," the President said to Yuri. "I'll see you in a week."

"Thank you, sir," Yuri replied with a genuine smile.

With that, the President nodded to Bennett.

"I'll send for a couple of agents to fly you back to Geneva," Dr. Yoo offered.

"Of course, doctor. I hadn't been intending to huff it there," the President chuckled.

"Oh, Yuri?" It was Bennett.

Yuri looked at him curiously as his hand disappeared into his jacket. She tensed.

All her alarms started ringing furiously, and she kicked herself mentally for being unarmed, but her heart stopped thudding when she saw him hold out her Les Baer between his index finger and thumb, well away from the trigger.

"I believe this is yours," he said simply, holding up his other hand to show that he meant no harm.

Yuri breathed a sigh of relief before she stepped forward to receive it. "Thanks."

Bennett nodded.

The three men turned and made for the elevator, and when the doors closed shut, what tension had been building in the area even since the group convened cleared like a jet of escaping gas.

Taeyeon was in Tae Woo's arms now, and the latter whispered words of comfort and relief into her soft hair. They were the words he had wanted to tell his daughter ever since he'd staged his own death so many years ago; the very same words he'd dreamed of telling his family when he'd decided that enough was enough, for himself and for those who risked their lives by being by his side. Today, those words would mean something.

"Everything's okay now. We're going to start afresh, you and me...and I promise I'll never let you down ever again."

Taeyeon sank deeper into his embrace, burying her head in his wide chest. She simply nodded, letting the pent up tears fall.

Tae Woo turned to Stephanie and Elliot. "Looks like we're going to be in-laws."

Stephanie beamed and Taeyeon looked up with eyes glazed over with tears, while Elliot tried and failed to wash the sullen look from his face. The shame was just too much, but then again, he, too, felt the immense relief that had washed over everyone. It was over. After ten long years, it was finally over, and he could now fulfill the promises to his daughters that he'd never been able to keep. Elliot let out a long sigh and nodded, draping one arm across Stephanie's shoulders. He then looked to his left, where Jessica stood, and the woman squeezed Yuri's hand before snuggling into her father's other arm. Before she did, she turned, smiled and mouthed two words to her lover.

"Thank you."

Yuri nodded with a bright smile, watching as the group of five huddled close together, enjoying what appeared to be their very first moment together...as a family.

Something twisted and knotted in her heart, and then Yuri felt for the first time in a week that she could breathe easier. She'd felt relief before, whenever she'd gotten in and out of a mission safely. It was a different kind of relief from that she'd felt in her youth, where it came from successfully lying – or so she thought – to her parents, or when she managed to make it to school just before the gates closed. The

kind of relief a person got from emerging from life-or-death situations alive was vastly different. And yet, what she felt now was different as well. It felt familiar, and also unfamiliar in the way that it felt a tad...fuzzy. She shuddered. She hadn't used that word since she'd left civilization to begin training.

Perhaps it was relief from knowing that she could finally be with her one true love again; that nothing would ever separate them again.

"But you don't know that," she thought with a hint of fear. *"Dr. Yoo hasn't-"*

The elevator doors reopened with a chime, and Dr. Yoo came through and walked towards Yuri. He waved her over to the side, away from the others.

"Yes, sir?"

Dr. Yoo threw a surreptitious look at the other five before turning back to Yuri. His eyes took on what Yuri had judged to be a...concerned look, like that from a worried father.

Oh no, here goes.

"Yuri, I know about you and Jessica Jung."

For a brief moment, Yuri was brought back to the scene with her father in her home, when he'd first told her about having to break up with the girl.

Please, don't do this.

"As you know, we've been keeping with tradition for almost a century, and although doing just that almost cost us the world, I have no intention of changing it."

Yuri's hopes deflated in an instant. She wanted to look away, to not have to look into Dr. Yoo's eyes while he handed down the sentence, but she couldn't. Her mind became akin to a thunderstorm as it

ran through every possible scenario she could think of in order to be with Jessica, too fast for any of those to make any sense to her. She had nothing left but this one moment to hear Dr. Yoo tell her that-

"But I can always change something else."

Yuri's expression switched to one of surprise. "Sir?" she sputtered after a moment.

Dr. Yoo sighed. "I think we'll have to start recruiting again, Yuri. Too long have we kept the family to ourselves."

"You mean you're going to let them join us?" Yuri asked more incredulously than she'd intended to.

"Not all of them, Yuri, Just Jessica. For now, at least. I believe the rest can be trusted to keep our existence a secret." Dr. Yoo looked away for a moment. "As it is, our numbers are dwindling due to our institutional isolation, but that's not something to worry you about right now."

"Sir, I know it's strange of me to ask, but...why?"

Dr. Yoo stepped closer. "Yuri, what do you think you would do if I told you that you had to leave her? "

Yuri looked down almost immediately.

"I cannot risk having another agent going renegade, Yuri. Neither can I afford to expel someone like you. And a relationship with her will be impossible if she's not within our ranks. This may sound rather clinical, but we need you to ensure the efficacy of the next generation. You have demonstrated an astounding prowess in combat, and that is not something that can be merely taught. You were born with it, as your parents had, and that fact won't change; *can't* change for the next in line."

Yuri looked up and frowned. "But that means..." She looked back at Jessica and then back at Dr. Yoo. "But we're both-"

Dr. Yoo nodded, his tone serious. "You will still need to bear a child, Yuri, and you know what that means."

Yuri bit her lip. She knew exactly what that meant, and she didn't like it. And neither would Jessica...

She closed her eyes, willing the worry away, at least for the moment. That didn't matter. Not right now. Yuri shook her head and looked back at Dr. Yoo.

"You have my word. I don't care, sir. I really don't. All I know is that I want to be with Jessica for the rest of my life," she said sincerely.

Dr. Yoo nodded. "I understand. But when the time comes--"

"You have my word."

He sighed again, taking on a look of contemplation. "I'm giving everyone a short break. They deserve it. Things are going to change here, Yuri. I'm not entirely sure how I'm going to handle it, but all things take time."

"They do, sir." Yuri nodded and deliberated for a moment. "Where's Seohyun?"

Dr. Yoo gave her a curious look. "She should be in her quarters." His expression then turned solemn. "I imagine she's going through a lot right now."

Yuri nodded. "She must be. I'm going to go talk to her."

"That you should. I'll go tell them the news...and brief them a little bit on what they should and shouldn't say once they get out of here."

Yuri nodded, took one last look at Jessica, then stepped into the waiting elevator.

It was the work of fifteen minutes to get to the proper wing where the agents' quarters were, and then another five to locate Seohyun's bunk. Not surprisingly, she shared one with Seungyeon, who'd been a close friend ever since Yuri began leaving frequently on missions.

Yuri was about to step through the threshold when she heard voices coming from within the room. She paused in mid-step and backed up to the wall, listening.

"But she died because of me, Seungyeon. I don't know, I just can't seem to get over it. She owed me nothing, and yet she put herself between me and certain death. How could I ever live with that?"

"Sometimes love does that to people, Seohyun. She traded her life for yours, and I think the last thing she wanted was for you to be like this. She didn't die so you could become a nervous wreck."

Yuri padded silently to the edge of the open doorway and peered inside. The two women were seated at the foot of a bed. Both of them were facing the rear wall. Seohyun, she could see, was sobbing.

"Maybe things could've been different. Maybe I shouldn't have ran and left her there."

"Then you would have both been killed, Seohyun. You know that."

Seohyun shook her head. "I should've known how to fight. I should've helped in some way! These hands...they're *useless*! The guilt...Seungyeon, it's swallowing me whole."

Seungyeon moved closer and placed her hand over Seohyun's, grasping it tightly. "Seohyun, I'm your friend, and I'm going to help you get through this, okay?"

From her vantage point, Yuri saw Seohyun nod and rest her head on Seungyeon's shoulder.

The same guilt that was overwhelming Seohyun seemed to course right through Yuri, and she began asking herself the same questions Seohyun had.

What if I'd found Yoona instead of Jaebeom?

What if I were there in time to help her?

What if I'd gotten to him before he...

Yuri shut her eyes, both in shame and to will the thoughts away. Asking what ifs wouldn't change anything. Self-reproach couldn't raise the dead.

Nothing could bring her friend back...and it was something everyone had to deal with.

Yuri spun on her heel and began making her way back up to the Ops Room. She'd tell Seohyun about the funeral another time.

Love Theme [IRIS OST - Pretty Love]

The next week passed uneventfully, and everyone was thankful for that. Yoona's remains had already been shipped off to Virginia for the upcoming funeral; a procedure watched by everyone.

The team, or what had been, had had the chance to go out and get some fresh air, to explore the surrounding hamlets and towns.

Taeyeon and Stephanie visited churches and other ancient fixtures. Stephanie hadn't been in one in earnest for the longest time, and she felt immediately at peace as she stepped into each one, sat on a pew with Taeyeon and clasped her hands together, giving thanks to her God for delivering them; all of them, from evil.

With each visit, her Christian faith was renewed, and she took the time to carefully talk about that aspect of her life with Taeyeon, who had never believed in a higher being since the day she was born.

Like Jessica, Taeyeon understood how truly cruel life could be; how it was virtually impossible to believe that a God who had created the Heavens and the earth had allowed His people to suffer at the hands of murder, hunger, disease and disaster. Stephanie had hoped to change that belief, as she constantly had with her sister in their youth. She could only hope Taeyeon wasn't as stubborn.

Unknown to Stephanie, Taeyeon had been doing some spiritual thinking. She remembered mentioning how fate had brought them together, and how it had seen them through the impossible collection of adversities that had been thrown at them one after the other over and over again. What was fate, truly? Was it a force separate from the laws of nature; an intelligence of some sort that subtly guided the lives of humankind? Did it determine the direction of the universe at large? If it did all those, then how different was it from a divine being? How different was believing in fate from believing in God?

Kim Taeyeon didn't know it, but that very moment in time, sitting beside Stephanie on hallowed ground and looking up at the statue of Jesus Christ on the Cross, was the beginning of her own journey in the Christian faith.

Tae Woo and Elliot, the two brothers-in-law to be, had spent their time in the base, having no interest in seeing the sights...or leaving its safety. The two men, as they were, had a healthy dose of paranoia running through their veins given everything that they'd been through, and they passed the time by using the base's firing range. Men were, after all, men, and they took some joy in trying almost every weapon in the Doppelganger armory – the varieties numbered in the high hundreds.

That was not to say they hadn't talked. In essence, they had been two very different men with very different motivations, working for the same objective. Now that objective had been met, and both found themselves left with nothing more than the grievances they had toward each other.

Tae Woo apologized; it was the first time he had said 'sorry' to anyone other than his own family. He recognized what he had put Elliot through, and truly regretted it. Even he was surprised to know that he could still feel regret. One thing was for sure, though. It was a good sign.

Seohyun began to come out of her shell, guided by Seungyeon's steady hands and Yuri's attempts at comforting her. The nightmares had been coming less frequently. Everything took time, and though Seohyun was nowhere near over what had happened to Yoona, it was a start. The strawberry tea back in Martigny did its part, too. The special had been extended for a week due to popular demand.

Seohyun would exhale deeply into the cup of piping hot fragrant tea, feeling the steam lick her face. It had a way of calming her. But every time she looked out the window of the tea house at the cobbled streets lined by old shophouses, she would somehow catch a fleeting glimpse of a familiar silhouette at the corner of her eye, and would turn to see that nothing was there.

Jessica was healing well, and Yuri spent almost all of her time by her lover's side, grateful for nothing more than the company. It was strange what years of separation could do to soulmates, as Yuri had experienced in the previous week. It was also strange what euphoria she could feel by simply standing under running water after having been deprived of a shower for days.

She spent her time walking with Jessica – in tiny steps in consideration for Jessica's single lung and legs numbed by days of inactivity – around the base, not caring about the drab interior and stale air because her only comfort was found in the warmth of their fingers clasped around each other.

Yuri had offhandedly made a list of things she'd have to keep Jessica from doing – rather, the things they wouldn't be able to do together - because of her collapsed lung. That included swimming, jogging, mountain climbing, skydiving, hiking, cycling, skateboarding...Yuri did want to do a lot of things with Jessica, she realized. She'd also have to be careful not to overexert Jessica in-

Kwon Yuri, you haven't even settled down and you're thinking about...

"What are you thinking about?"

Yuri turned to see Jessica looking at her curiously. "Nothing."

"You're blushing," Jessica prodded, nudging Yuri in the ribs with a wide grin on her face.

Yuri shook her head and laughed nervously. "I'm just...thinking about us. Living together as a family."

"You liar."

"And I thought I'd had good training." They both laughed at this.

Yuri stopped, coming face to face with Jessica. Her heart began to beat faster as she saw Jessica fix her with a curious stare. This was as unromantic a place as it could ever get, but Yuri just...felt the need. How long had it been since she'd last done this? It was easy. She just had to look her in the eye, calm down a bit and say-

"I love you," Jessica said softly, looking up at Yuri from under her eyelashes.

Damn, she beat me to it!

Yuri blinked for a second, flustered. Her heart was racing now...

"I love you too, Sica," she finally answered, closing the distance for a kiss. It wasn't the same kind of kiss she'd given Jessica on the plane...but it was damned close.

Yuri pulled back, feeling Jessica lean forward to prolong the contact for just a bit longer before she pulled back as well. They locked gazes, and at once Yuri knew it was time.

"Marry me, Jessica Jung."

Two Days Later
Arlington National Cemetery
Virginia
United States of America

“...and that their souls may find peace in Heaven.”

It was a cool spring morning in Virginia, and the many trees that dotted the cemetery were in full bloom; verdant shades of color that provided some contrast to the carefully tended green grass that surrounded them. To their right, over the treetops and across the width of the Potomac River, sat the white dome of the Jefferson Memorial.

Yuri sat with her fiancé – she would present her with a ring soon - at her side, listening attentively as the military chaplain gave his service. Taeyeon, Stephanie, Elliot, Tae Woo and Dr. Yoo sat down the row, with Yoona and Taecyeon’s parents beside them.

Taeyeon and Stephanie were inarguably uncomfortable; two of the caskets before them were for the agents they’d killed during the assault on the main base. Dr. Yoo had assured them that their parents would be told that their sons had been killed by Spetsnaz agents, but that did little to ease their guilty hearts.

Yuri had met the fallen agents’ parents briefly before the procession began, and found that if any of the parents had been upset, they didn’t show it. She understood why. They had been field agents once, and had accepted the possibility of the loss of life when they carried out their duties. They had also accepted that fact when they’d brought their children into the service, and now all of them believed the same thing: that their son and daughter had given their lives for the greater good, and that they would honor that sacrifice by staying strong.

Yuri had also considered the possibility that the Americans here didn't like the idea of burying strangers here, but figured that the word of the President himself should have sufficed to quell any misgivings.

All around them, Secret Service agents were alert and on patrol; the President was in attendance, as were the Secretary of Defense, the DNI, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and various elements from different service branches, including those from Major Bill Carr’s outfit. Even though it was a funeral, security was extremely tight. All the main roads leading into and out of the cemetery were under local police

supervision. A Secret Service communications vehicle was waiting on the access road a hundred meters behind them, surrounded by black government sedans and another van near a clearing which Yuri suspected held a SWAT team or some other equivalent. For those in attendance, this was a solemn event. For those who protected them, it was a tactical situation like any other they'd handled dozens of times.

The truth was that anyone foolish enough to try anything at the time would have something else coming. Behind Yuri sat two dozen Doppelganger field operatives; friends of Yoona and Taecyeon. Among them sat Seohyun and Seungyeon. An attack there and then would stir the blood of more than twenty of the deadliest people to walk the earth, not counting the President's own security detail. They, including Yuri, all carried concealed sidearms. God help whoever had the guts.

Yuri's eyes moved from the chaplain to the ten oak coffins draped with the flag of the United States of America, and the ten wreath-lined color photos that stood beside each one. This had to be one of the biggest military funerals in American history. Then again, Yuri didn't really know. Of the ten caskets, only one was filled, and that one belonged to Yoona. The remains of the others could not be recovered, and the other Doppelganger agents, Taecyeon included, had been completely vaporized in the fire that melted almost everything in the primary base.

Five of the large photographs had the CIA Intelligence Star draped around them; a tribute to the five Special Activities men who had perished by Park Jin Young's hand. Tango Three, one of Major Carr's wingmen, had the Air Force Cross around his picture. The remaining four, belonging to Yoona, Taecyeon and two other Doppelganger agents also had the Intelligence Star around them.

The day has finally come.

Thirteen Folds [The Last Samurai OST - Red Warrior]

"Let us pray."

Everyone present dipped their heads; some in prayer, some merely in respect as the chaplain recited the commonly heard Prayer from the Book of Matthew.

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”

“Amen.” Yuri’s eyes shot open, wondering how she’d known to say it at the right time.

“I ask everyone to stand,” the chaplain said, and everyone rose to their feet.

A detail of seven men from the United States Marine Corps in impeccably prepared dress blues and whites marched in from the left, M16 rifles with ceremonial white slings at order-arms position. A senior non-commissioned officer marched beside the platoon, holding his Mameluke sword upright with his elbow bent at a perfect ninety degrees. The honor guards were already in their positions at the sides of the coffins; six men to each.

“Detail, *halt!*”

The detail came to a stop in perfect dressing.

“Left, *face!*”

“Present, *arms!*”

The seven men brought their rifles up to their shoulders, preparing to initiate the 3-volley salute in the direction of the ten caskets. As if on cue, everyone including the Doppelgangers brought themselves to attention and raised their right hands in a salute.

“Fire!”

Seven rifles barked in unison, followed by a brief pause.

“Fire!”

Again, and a pause.

“Fire!”

And again, and Yuri then heard the unmistakable sound of an approaching fighter aircraft. High above and directly overhead, five A-10 Thunderbolt II fighters passed slowly, and seconds later, the lead aircraft broke off suddenly into a climb away from the V-formation. Yuri didn't know what it meant, but they had been performing the 'missing-man formation', an aerial salute used by Air Forces to honor the memory of a fallen pilot. She had no doubt that the men in the air were the same ones who had ensured her escape from the Kim Il Sung Special Research Facility back in North Korea; the ones who had lost a comrade and friend to the missile of a North Korean MiG-29 fighter. The passing Warthogs caused the ground to tremble, and Yuri, too, felt her heart rumbling beneath her chest.

As the deep trundling receded into the distance, a bugler standing at the far end began playing '*Taps*', recognized by many as the familiar woeful tune of death and loss.

The chaplain returned to his place in front of the caskets as the honor guard men marched off, and the men standing around each casket prepared themselves to carry out their duty. All sixty of the men stepped toward their assigned caskets at the same time, picked up the edges of the flags draped around them, and lifted them off. The flag folding ceremony was now in order, and the chaplain projected his voice out toward the standing congregation. With each line he spoke, the honor guard folded the flag with reverence and respect.

“The first fold of the flag is a symbol of life.”

“The second fold of the flag is a symbol of the people's belief in the eternal life.”

“The third fold of the flag is made in honor and remembrance of the Veteran departing ranks who gave a portion of life for the defense of the country to attain peace throughout the world.”

“The fourth fold of the flag represents the people's weaker nature. For as American citizens trusting in

God, it is to Him the people turn to in times of peace as well as in times of war for His divine guidance."

"The fifth fold of the flag is a tribute to the country, for in the words of Stephen Decatur, "Our country, in dealing with the other countries, may she always be right, but it is still our country, right or wrong.""

"The sixth fold of the flag is for where people's hearts lie. It is with hearts that people pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

"The seventh fold of the flag is a tribute to the Armed Forces, for it is through them that the people protect the country and flag against all enemies, whether they be found within or without the boundaries of the Republic."

"The eighth fold of the flag is a tribute to the one who entered into the valley of the shadow of death, that people might see the light of day, and to honor one's mother, for whom it flies on Mother's Day."

"The ninth fold of the flag is a tribute to womanhood, for it has been through their faith, love, loyalty and devotion the character of the men and women who have made the country great molded."

"The tenth fold of the flag is a tribute to father, for he too, has given his sons and daughters for the defense of the country since he or she was first born."

"The eleventh fold of the flag, in the eyes of Hebrew citizens, represents the lower portion of the seal of King David and King Solomon and glorifies, in their eyes, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

"The twelfth fold of the flag, in the eyes of a Christian citizen, represents an emblem of eternity and glorifies, in their eyes, God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost."

"Upon the thirteenth and final fold of the flag, the stars are uppermost in remembrance of the United States' national motto, "In God We Trust.""

As the final fold was made, Seohyun watched as the next-of-kin of each of the fallen moved forward to

receive their folded flag, wondering if Yoona was right there with her, watching everything. Perhaps she was, and perhaps she wouldn't mind that she was holding Seungyeon's hand in hers. There was nothing romantic in that, Seohyun knew. Maybe not for the time being, but she could not deny that Seungyeon had been there for her for as long as she'd remembered, and if nothing else, was a dear friend to cherish with whatever heart she had left.

Time would heal all wounds.

In the span of little more than a week, Seohyun had been baptized in what had been the greatest challenge in her life. During that time, she had gained friends, discovered a new source of strength, and tasted bitter loss. It was curious how a mere week could change so many things; could show her a side of herself neither she nor anyone else had ever seen. In a week, she had experienced paranoia, dread, fear, relief, physical pain, revelation, and unimaginable heartbreak mixed with an inkling of love, all in that order. Her heart was on the verge of giving up and out.

But for now, her heart was with Yoona.

She watched as Yoona's father accepted the folded flag from a Marine officer in silence. Seohyun found it strange, but she could not cry; she'd already spilled all her tears in the past week. All she had left was a prayer and a hope for the woman she hadn't the chance to treasure, and the knowledge that Im Yoona had taught her more things than she could have ever learned on her own.

"Be at peace, Yoona...wherever you are."

For the first time in her life, Seo Juhyun felt something she had never felt before, and she welcomed it as it placed a comforting hand over her weary soul.

Closure.

Epilogue : Peace

3 Months Later

2230 EST

White House

Washington D.C.

United States of America

The President of the United States of America stared out the southern end of the White House at a brightly lit fountain in the south lawn, a half-empty glass of brandy in his right hand.

Behind him sat three of his most trusted men: Patrick Robinson; the Secretary of Defense, James Grover; the Deputy Director for Intelligence, and John Bennett; Director of National Intelligence and Director of CIA.

Between them, laid across the 138-year old Resolute Desk, were several opened manila envelopes and their contents. Each of those envelopes were sealed with a red stamp and marked with a small triangle, designating them as classified beyond-top-secret.

The President stepped away from the window and set his glass down beside his personal telephone, looking at the three men seated across from him.

“Three months. Three months and the Chinese have already come up with all this?”

“Makes me think they’ve been planning this for a long time,” Grover observed.

“Maybe they have,” Robinson said.

Bennett shifted in his seat and pointed to the envelopes. “Something tells me they’re going to go ahead with this with or without our help or blessing.”

The President nodded. "I agree."

Laid out in front of them were formal letters from the government of the People's Republic of China. Such correspondences were common, except that these contained something other than the day-to-day discussions of economics and politics. In a collection of five thick booklets, the men had found detailed battle plans, power projection models, cost analyses and political proposals amongst others. They hadn't needed to go through all of them to know what the Chinese intended to do.

"Invading North Korea after protecting them for half a century. What kind of good can they possibly see in that? Anyone who's seen the North's love for their warheads knows that attacking them is next to suicide," Robinson said.

"I seem to recall we did just that three months ago, and if they'd wanted to retaliate, we would've been at war by now," Bennett observed.

Grover nodded. "You're right. The reason why they haven't done anything is because their government is still in a damned mess after their leader got popped. Funny how their officials can't make decisions on their own, but that's to our advantage nonetheless. And the Chinese are asking us because we're the ones who had the guts to rile up the North's asses rescuing that *Doppelganger* agent."

The President smiled at Grover's uncomfortable use of the word. "Still not used to it, huh?"

Grover scoffed. "You tell me, sir. It's not everyday we have an independent intelligence agency pop up from nowhere."

"And that they're better than our own," the President finished for him. The DDI did have a bit of a pride issue when it came to US intelligence agencies.

"I didn't say that, sir," Grover replied defensively.

The President simply chuckled.

Bennett smiled darkly and changed the subject. "Besides, they still don't know how far we're along with our anti-ballistic missile program."

"A dozen tests simulated in ultra-realistic conditions and with a hundred percent success rate in each. The Air Force's really outdone itself this time. Tens of thousands of nuclear weapons on the other side of the Pacific, and they're all useless," Robinson laughed.

"And that's exactly why we went through with the rescue mission," the President said. "But that doesn't mean we have to stick our noses where it doesn't belong now."

There was a brief silence at this before Bennett spoke up.

"Maybe if we don't lend a hand, they won't make good on the promises they stated in the letters."

The President thought on that for a moment. In one of the documents, there was mention of extending the North-South Korean Demilitarized Zone and a shift of the historically defined 38th Parallel about a hundred miles northward, effectively creating a buffer zone over a hundred miles wide. That was a sensible move. The Chinese knew how much the Americans and South Koreans would hate that their new neighbors were just a stone's throw away after they secured the Northern peninsula, and were seeking to ameliorate that threat. They also promised to keep their armed forces well behind of their side of the peninsula, leaving the DMZ completely manned by Southern troops. And then there was the promise of allowing North Korean civilians the right to choose between joining them or crossing South over the border. Every North Korean that defected to the South was a political and humanitarian victory, of sorts.

Nuclear weapons were out of the question, of course. That was an unsaid agreement shared between all nuclear-equipped countries in the world, and it was one that the Chinese would not break or risk global condemnation. Then again, invading the North would draw a lot of undesirable attention...or would it? It was clear that the Chinese were tired of babysitting the stuck-up isolationists, and the rest of the world had already given up long ago. To have their biggest and closest ally turn around and bite them would be the greatest and final blow to North Korean history. And would anyone care?

"If we do help, what do we stand to lose?" the President finally asked.

“Tangibly? Virtually nothing. We don’t depend on them for trade...come to think of it, we don’t depend on them for anything. They’re just a thorn in everyone’s side,” the Secretary of Defense replied. “That only leaves to cost of the operation, which comes up to...”

“About a couple hundred million dollars, at least. We’re looking at about a hundred different military installations with two cruise missiles dedicated to each, and then there are logistical costs and the works,” Bennett finished for him.

“After the invasion, the Chinese will dispose of any remnants of the Tomahawks. It’ll be like our subs were never even there. I kind of get the feeling they’ll even offer to pay for our missiles should we decide to decline their proposal,” the DDI added.

The plan proposed by the Chinese was to have a submarine fleet secretly stationed off eastern coast of the peninsula, which would fire their Tomahawk cruise missiles at a designated target and time as confirmed by the Chinese military. This would constitute the first phase of the invasion; crippling the North’s critical military facilities, denying them the abilities of defense and counterattack and leaving the country vulnerable. That would be the only part the Americans would play in the invasion. The rest of the fight would be left to the Chinese.

It also said that the Americans needed to move fast; with their recent operation in the North, it was all too easy to pin the blame for Seoul on the North Koreans. In actual fact, it was indeed their doing, but no one would truly know what happened save for those who were directly involved. And those people were already sworn to secrecy.

“And we gain nothing,” the President added.

“Not necessarily,” Grover corrected. “It’s only a matter of time before the North gets their head straight, and their thumbs are going to be all over their shiny red buttons once that happens. Sure, it’s stupid, but who knows what they’re capable of? For all we know, they wouldn’t mind starting a nuclear war even if they knew it would mean their own demise. The only way to make sure that doesn’t happen...is to take them out of the equation. That’s what the Chinese are proposing.”

Robinson nodded. “You have a point.” He turned to the President. “Sir, we got ourselves into this mess when we sent our jets into their country. This seems like a way out of it.”

The President sighed, picked up his drink and emptied his glass before setting it down again. Robinson leaned forward to pick up the bottle of brandy, but the President stopped him with a hand.

“And what about the anti-matter issue?” he asked.

Bennett shook his head emphatically. “Clean. Nothing will ever be traced back to us. Even if anyone did find any evidence of anti-matter use, the bombs were of unique North Korean construction, and the technology could very well belong to anybody. Fermilab hasn’t announced the capability yet. Besides...everyone thinks it’s the North who did it.”

“So this is a move to prevent an outbreak of nuclear war...by helping the Chinese steamroll right through their friends down south...,” the President muttered more to himself than anyone else.

He turned to look back out the windows, stuffing his hands into his pockets. After what seemed like an eternity, he spoke again.

“Ten nuclear-powered subs with two hundred missiles...Well the Chief of Navy’s always been a trigger happy sort of guy. Let’s fill him in on the details and call our friends in red.”

The Secretary of Defense sat up. “So it’s a go then, Mr. President?”

The President nodded at the windows, sighing.

“God help us all.”

0900 EST
Los Angeles
California
United States of America

The warm honey-colored streaks of sunlight filtered in through the blinds; the first signs of a merciless Californian sun beginning its course over the horizon.

Stephanie Jung awakened with an enormous yet deliciously satisfying yawn as she stretched her arms in bed, feeling her cheek sink into the pillow. After spending a moment or two in absolute bliss, she turned to wrap an arm around the little one, only to find her sitting at the edge of the bed in a robe, head lowered as if reading or thinking about something.

“Good morning,” Stephanie called out sweetly, reaching to tug lightly on Taeyeon’s bathrobe.

Three months had passed since the end of their nightmarish journey, and much had happened.

The first order of business for Stephanie was to answer to her superiors at Interpol, who not surprisingly had given her a years’ worth of hell for not attempting to make contact with them for the past week and a half. Someone had put the pieces together well enough to know that the disaster in Seoul and the shenanigan with the American air force and navy in the North had something to do with her assignment in Rio. Of course, it would’ve been suicide for her to have admitted she had anything to do with it. So she lost her job...which was her objective of going to work in the first place, anyway.

She, Jessica and their father had made use of the President’s promise of ensuring them normal lives and moved back to the States, settling down once again in their home city of Los Angeles with new identities – birth certificates; passports; social security cards, the works. There wasn’t any money involved in that deal, of course; the President knew as much as anyone else how ridiculously wealthy Taeyeon and Yuri were, and knew that everyone would find their own peace...with their own cash.

And so the two couples had purchased two modest – albeit very fashionably furnished – homes in the suburbs, just a couple of streets away from each other to keep everyone nearby. Tae Woo and Elliot had gotten separate studio homes nearer the city. As a direct consequence of the trials they had all been subjected to together, family had taken new meaning in each of their hearts, and they wanted to honor that revelation...at least for the time being, since Yuri and Jessica were due to return to Switzerland in

less than a year. Stephanie and Taeyeon would have none of that. They - Taeyeon - *did* have enough money to retire early, though.

Before settling down, they'd gotten engaged. Yuri, of course, had made the first move on Jessica, honoring her promise and adrenaline-fueled vision of proposing to the love of her life under the stars at the edge of a quiet balcony in a certain gothic-inspired building near Yale.

Stephanie, on the other hand, was dumbstruck the day Taeyeon had proposed to her – also under the stars – on the breeze-swept shores of a quiet beach on the western coast. When Taeyeon popped the question, Stephanie herself had had her fingers around a ring in her pocket.

She smiled as she recalled the heartwarming memory, almost feeling as if between her toes the soft white sand, her senses bathed in the scent of salt water and the occasional perfume from Taeyeon's hair.

They held hands that night – the entire night – neither willing to let go for the immature yet illogically firm belief that should anyone let go, the other would be swept away by the winds as punishment for her neglect. No, they would not let that happen. Not after everything they'd been through together.

Not after they promised each other an eternity of love.

Stephanie remembered how Taeyeon's porcelain-white skin almost seemed to glow in the muted darkness of the night at the beach, and what she saw this morning only affirmed that vision. In the rays of the rising sun, Kim Taeyeon looked as if she were encased in a glorious film. Stephanie got up and shifted across the bed, sitting beside her love. It was then when she saw the small book in Taeyeon's tiny hands.

"I've been reading it since dawn," Taeyeon said softly, a hint of melancholy in her voice.

"You've been reading the Bible very often, dear," Stephanie said with a smile, lifting a hand to shift a stray tuft of hair behind Taeyeon's ear.

Taeyeon had been reading the Word of God for about a month now, and each time she had doubts, she

would turn to Stephanie for guidance. The thing about the Bible was that it was a collection of narratives based on a true story; various perspectives on the lives and works of Christ; his apostles, and those related to him in some way. The problem was that many people, Christians included, tended to read it as though it were merely a recollection of events; not taking the time to truly open their eyes and ears to see and hear the meaning and messages in the verses. It took not only the physical senses to digest its content, but also a heart to understand it. Taeyeon wanted to *understand* the Bible.

Taeyeon shook her head. "It speaks so much about sins, sinners and the wrath of God upon those who don't live life the proper way. Even though it also takes about love and forgiveness...I don't see how such a terrible person like me could ever inherit the kingdom of Heaven, Steph. I just don't see it."

Stephanie looked at Taeyeon for a moment and saw the pain in her eyes. Those were the eyes of despair and guilt. This woman had connived against others and killed for the furtherment of her own kingdom, and now, apparently, those were things she weren't proud of. It was the guilt that really touched Stephanie, and she gently took the Bible from Taeyeon's hand, closed it and placed it on the bedside table.

She next took Taeyeon's hand and turned her towards herself, raised the shorter woman's chin to level their gazes and spoke from the heart.

"Taeyeon, your journey has just begun, as has mine, even though I've been on this path for far longer. There will be doubts. There will be the pain that comes along with it. But through it all, I know one thing, and it's also something you should know."

Stephanie closed the distance and enveloped Taeyeon in a warm hug, taking her time to allow their bodies to fit comfortably together. Her hand automatically found the top of Taeyeon's neck, where her fingers played with the luxuriously soft hair.

"God looks upon us sinners all the same, no matter what we've done. No matter how small the crime, we've sinned enough to be condemned forever. That's because God doesn't tolerate sin. Ever. But God also has a way. He made his offer when he sent his son to die for us, and that offer still stands to anyone and everyone to this day. All we need to do is accept that offer, and everything will be forgiven. Everything, Taeyeon. You need only believe."

Taeyeon began to sob; not tears of sorrow or joy, but tears of guilt and repentance. It was the always

the first step: repentance. "I want to. I want to, Steph. I hate what I've done. I want it all to go away."

"That's already half the battle won, dear," Stephanie said with a small smile as her own tears escaped, running down her cheeks into Taeyeon's shoulder. "I love you too, and until the day we're reunited up above, we'll have each other by our sides."

She pulled back, holding Taeyeon upright with both hands on her shoulders, smiling widely. "Come now, don't cry. We've a long day ahead of us, and it's going to be fun!"

Taeyeon nodded with a thin smile.

It always began with repentance.

"I can't believe I'm actually doing this," Yuri groused.

If there was a word to describe Kwon Yuri right now, it would've been 'cute'.

Jessica adjusted the tiny crown on Yuri's head and stepped back from her creation, clapping her hands together with glee. "It's perfect!"

"It's horrifying."

Jessica frowned. "Oh you, stop being such a spoilsport!"

Yuri cocked an eyebrow. "You tell me who's the spoilsport when *you're* the one sitting here on a pumpkin carriage wearing a medieval frock with a crown on your head!" she cried while pointing to the intruding prop sitting off-center on top of her head. She had purposefully removed a few profanities from her sentence for fear of offending the youngsters who had begun gathering around her. Perfect.

“But you look so pretty!”

“Pretty da-...Pretty hilarious, if you ask me,” Yuri spat.

Jessica held up a camera, trying to obtain just the right angle to take a picture of her little princess, only to find that it wasn't the angle that was the problem. It was the princess.

“You need to smile, Yuri.”

“Make me.”

A little girl came up to the carriage and looked up to Yuri. “Miss, could I sit up there with you? I've always wanted to sit with a princess,” she asked sweetly.

Something snapped right at that every moment, and Yuri didn't know why, but she felt as if a huge dam had just broken inside of her. Reaching down, she picked up with girl with inhuman ease – still surprising to Jessica after all she'd seen – and sat her down opposite herself in the carriage. Unknown to her, Yuri carried a small smile as she kept her eyes on the little one.

Jessica smiled.

Now that's a new side.

She snapped a few pictures, and as she was about to take the final one, she spotted something off in the little girl's eyes.

Too late.

The little girl plucked a tiny rubber band from her pocket and shot it right in Yuri's face, and the woman recoiled with a cry.

"Ouch! What was that for?" she wailed, holding a hand over her right eye.

The girl stuck her tongue out at Yuri before hopping out of the carriage and scurrying away. The children gathered around the carriage scattered after sensing a sudden wave of infinite darkness emanate from Yuri.

"Why you little!"

Jessica hurried forward, grabbing Yuri just as she stepped down from the carriage, looking for the girl with her good eye.

"Not a good time for one of your bloodrages, Yuri! America doesn't take too kindly to child killers. Calm down!"

"But she! And I! But my eye! *Argh!*" Yuri stuttered in frustration. "I believed that little devil for one second! One second! And she stabs me in the...in the eye!"

"She's just a kid, Yuri. Don't worry about the little brat," Jessica laughed. Yuri was kind of cute when she was flustered, and that didn't happen very often.

"I swear, kids are evil! I'm never gonna have a—" Yuri stopped a second too late and saw Jessica's expression darken.

Before she could say anything, Jessica spun on her heel and stalked out of the room and out onto the street.

"Jessica! I didn't mean to- *argh!*" Yuri ran off after Jessica, cursing herself for her carelessness.

Elliot Jung ran a hand through his short gray-black hair as he approached the small weather-beaten stall that stood just beside the iron gate that stretched across the gap between two lengths of stone walls. A cool breeze swept through the area; a welcome respite from the sweltering Californian summer. An old Caucasian lady in a flowery dress sat behind the stall, smiling as she watched Elliot approach with his hands tucked into the pockets of his faded blue jeans.

“Come to visit a loved one, young man?” she asked sweetly.

Elliot nodded with a small smile that widened slightly as he decided that the lady deserved the effort considering her age and the place they were in.

“What does she like?” she asked, smiling.

Elliot took a deep breath, realizing a second too late as always that that was a terrible mistake. As the air filled his lungs and opened his mind, it also left his consciousness vulnerable to the wave of dagger-tipped memories that threatened to fill every empty space in his heart. Like most people who had been through similar tragedies, the nightmares never stopped; not even now, not even when he knew that everything was truly over.

The images came unbidden; soul-rending high-resolution flashes of scenes he’d seen a decade ago. In them he saw the cold sweat and hot tears of Carmen and Krystal...before those were replaced by the endlessly flowing crimson trails that snaked around their wide-open eyes. And then he saw their distraught faces, their panicked voices pleading, hoping, wailing; denying the reality that hung upon their heads as surely as a guillotine hung above a condemned man. Then he saw himself on his knees, his own eyes begging for mercy, knowing that his family was going to die because of his own misdeeds, and that there was nothing he could do about it.

“Dad, help me.”

Elliot’s breathing quickened, and he felt the cold sweat building on his brow as the voices came to reinforce the terrible images he fought to purge from the swirling pit that was his mind.

“Please, dad...please. Help me. Don’t...don’t let them kill me.”

“Young man?”

“Don’t let them kill me! Dad!”

“Young man?”

Reality yanked Elliot back to the present, and he found himself standing at the foot of a cart with his hands clasped like vices around its lengthwise edge. His eyes moved down to his shoulder, where he found a wrinkled hand. They shifted forward again, finding the concerned eyes of the flower stall owner.

“Young man, are you alright?”

Elliot raised his left hand to hold the old lady’s and shook his head, blinking the aftertaste of the panic attack away as best he could.

“Yes...yes. I’m sorry, ma’am,” he said shakily.

“Are you sure?”

He nodded, bringing his breathing back under control. His eyes met hers again.

“And I’d like a dozen lilies, please. She...They love lilies.”

“Two full-day passes, please.”

“Just a moment.”

“Thank you!”

Stephanie turned to the shorter woman beside her, who was too busy sticking her head out of the queue, trying to peek into the enormous space beyond the line of gates.

“Taeyeon.”

“Hmmm.” She continued to balance on her toes, stretching her neck to look inside while she held onto Stephanie’s arm for balance.

The taller woman grinned and took half a step toward her, causing Taeyeon to lose her balance and almost end up being the star attraction for the retard circus.

“Hey!”

Stephanie’s grin widened. “Do I have your attention now, little one?”

Taeyeon scowled and stepped up to Stephanie before making a face. “You know, the short jokes really aren’t funny. And you’ve never said things like that to me before!”

Stephanie laughed. Taeyeon was absolutely adorable when she was peeved. She decided that she would make it her mission to tease the ‘little one’ as often as she could today, to cheer her up as much as to have her own bit of fun. “That’s because we were living under very different circumstances. You know, I really didn’t want to tell you another one for about a minute or so...but I think your ticket is discounted.”

Taeyeon looked at her curiously. “Why?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s because you’re too short to ride anything in there...”

Taeyeon’s eyes widened. “You!” She pounded on Stephanie’s shoulder and then squeezed her eyes shut in frustration. “I can’t believe I didn’t see that one coming!”

“Neither did you see this one.” Stephanie held out a hand just above Taeyeon’s head. The latter looked up at it then shut her eyes in shame upon realizing she’d been duped. Again.

“Argh!”

Stephanie burst out into laughter, and a digitized voice called out from behind her. “Here are your tickets, miss.”

She turned around while doubled over in gasping laughter to accept the tickets while Taeyeon seethed with vertically challenged fury behind her.

As they got out of the queue, with Stephanie dragging the little one behind her, they were greeted with a sight that shouldn’t have amazed people of their age. And yet it did. Stephanie stopped giggling and took a moment to simply savor the reality of the moment as she held onto Taeyeon’s hand.

“He never brought us here in the end,” she said nostalgically.

Taeyeon looked up at her – she was beginning to hate that she had to – and squeezed her hand tighter. “Where is your dad, anyway? He was supposed to join us today, wasn’t he?”

Stephanie looked at her with a smile. “*Your dad*”? Come on, he’s going to be *our* dad soon enough.”

Taeyeon blushed. “Well...he’s not our dad officially yet, so I’m going to stick with that formality for a bit.”

Stephanie let out a soft chuckle and turned her head back to the interior of every American child’s material fantasy. Taeyeon’s previous question still hung in the air. “He’ll be here. He said he needed to take care of something first.”

Taeyeon cocked her head to the side. “What’s he doing?”

Stephanie shook her head, the smile still hanging on her lips. She looked over at Taeyeon, whose curious expression didn't change. Her smile changed infinitesimally, adding a bit of flavor to the already-present warmth.

"I don't know, but something tells me he's making peace with someone or other."

By the time Elliot had gotten to the right section, his shirt was damp from sweat. There weren't enough trees in the cemetery to shade him from the Californian sun, and the wind only came in broken breezes. Looking up from the asphalt, he craned his neck to look over at the large expanse to his left.

There were white-gray headstones of all shapes and sizes as far as the eye could see, spaced evenly across the carefully tended green grass. The last time Elliot had looked up the exact location, it had been almost ten years ago, locked up in Tae Woo's underground lab. But it was something he would never forget.

Holding the lilies close to his chest to shield them from the sun, Elliot made his way inside, stepping carefully through the hallowed ground, dipping his head in respect for the dead buried around him. He didn't bother looking at names; he kept his eyes forward until at last he arrived at two lots side by side, each adorned with a simple cross over a flat rectangle of green grass. Another breeze came, as if to tell him that this was the right spot. He didn't need the reminder.

On the left headstone read: *"Carmen Jung, June 10 1970 – 24 December 2010"*, and on the right: *"Krystal Jung, October 24 1994 – 24 December 2010"*.

Elliot had intended to kneel, but on one knee; not both. He remained in that position for a few minutes, clasping the white lilies in one hand.

"It's over," he finally said. "I don't know if I'll meet you on the other side...but what I do know is that I have sinned, and because of what I did...because of what I did..." The tears began to fall. It had been a long time since he'd allowed that to happen. But now, alone with his family, he wasn't afraid to let his feelings show.

Elliot tried to calm himself, taking short, quick breaths to quell the sobbing. "I don't know if you can forgive me for what I did, but I know that if you're in the right place, then you probably have already. But I promise you, Carmen...Krystal. I will repent and earn the right to be with you again."

Elliot separated the lilies into two small bunches, placing one bunch each on the graves. He then stood, walked over to Carmen's headstone and rubbed the weathered off-white surface for a moment.

"Happy birthday, Carmen."

"Jessica!"

Yuri closed the distance quickly, seizing Jessica by the arm and spinning her around. "Hey, stop, okay?"

Jessica kept her mouth shut, focusing her angry eyes on Yuri's feet.

"Look at me."

No response.

Yuri tried to hold Jessica's chin, but the latter jerked away. Still, Yuri found a firm hold and lifted Jessica's chin to meet her eyes. They still burned with jealous fury...or was it insecure fury?

"Sica, I know you don't like the idea, but we've talked about this before," Yuri said carefully.

Jessica looked just about ready to rebuke her, but bit back on her words and sighed instead. "I know."

Yuri lifted her other hand now and cupped Jessica's cheeks. "I know it's hard for you to accept, but it's something I have to do. It's something you have to do too, baby. You know that. But you also know that

I love you and I won't ever love anyone else, don't you?"

Jessica's lips trembled, but she kept silent.

"Don't you?" Yuri prompted.

Jessica closed her eyes and nodded slowly, and allowed herself to be pulled into Yuri's firm embrace.

"I love you, Jessica Jung, through it all. No matter what comes, I'll protect you."

Yuri held Jessica out in front of her, thumbing away a tear. "And whenever you need me, you call, and then you just need to believe. And I'll be there. I promise."

Jessica wore a small smile now, and nodded again, stepping forward to plant a chaste kiss on Yuri's lips.

"Now, I'll make it up to you," Yuri said. "What would you like?"

Jessica's innocent smile soon transformed into a conspiratorial grin, and she simply lifted a finger to point at something to Yuri's right.

Yuri looked up and wondered why she hadn't noticed it before.

"I wonder if Dr. Yoo would have been proud or disappointed to see me like this," Yuri thought as the wind swept past her hair and her insides churned. She looked down and saw a hand gripping hers for dear life and was once again reminded of where exactly that supernaturally high-pitched screaming was coming from.

The roller coaster went into another toe-curling dive before banking steeply to the right and rising again,

and Yuri felt herself swaying left and right as much as her conscience allowed. Honestly, she knew she was supposed to have fun. The screaming blonde next to her appeared to be, even though she looked like a blonde banshee trying to rip her hand off.

She wants me to make it up to her by making her scream her guts out? I swear she's bipolar or something.

She sighed as the roller coaster mounted yet another climb and dove into yet another banking turn, keeping her eyes on the track ahead of them as the maze of steel-reinforced wooden beams passed over their hands and by their sides.

"All it needs is one bump. One lousy little bump; a precise enough imperfection in this...this thing...and we'll all be flung off and separated into little blobs of flesh and bone," she thought cynically before sighing again.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!"

It must have been her training. It taught her how to look out for details; to avoid as much as possible anything that was perceived as a threat to her life and her mission; and apparently, to forget how to enjoy herself on one of Disneyland's most thrilling attractions.

Her insides fell into a more uniform arrangement as the roller coaster slowed and began making its final approach to the station.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!"

Yuri frowned, turned, and saw that Jessica had her eyes closed. And the idiot was still screaming.

"Erm, Sica...Sica? It's over, baby."

Jessica had stopped screaming, but was still shaking like a leaf. She opened her eyes, and the first thing she noticed was the slightly wet feeling around her fingers. She turned in shock to see that she had

gripped Yuri's hand so hard that her fingernails had dug right into the skin which had now given way to blood.

"Oh my God! I'm so sorry, Yuri!" she shrieked, turning to see Yuri's perfectly placid face.

Yuri simply smiled. "It's okay. Man, I haven't seen you scream like that since the last time I stuck a cucumber in your face."

Jessica ignored the apparent insult. Offhandedly, she wondered if the cafeteria worker back at the FBI building still remembered her murderous eyes when she snarled "no cucumbers" every time she ordered a sandwich. Not that she'd ever have to say it again. Not to the cafeteria worker, anyway.

She hated the little green oblongs of death. How could mankind ingest such a thing? She shuddered a little as the smell of the repulsive vegetable came back to haunt her.

As the restraints were lifted with a hiss of hydraulics and they exited to the right, Yuri stood Jessica over to the side and gave her a thorough lookdown.

"Yuri, I'm fine. I really am! See? My breathing is perfectly normal." Jessica had already rehearsed sentences like these a million times before, built around the same template.

Yuri frowned. The woman had one lung. One lung! And she still insisted on going on all the rides. She sighed again. After all, the doctor did say that exertion was fine, as long as it wasn't for an extended period of time.

Jessica grabbed Yuri's non-bleeding hand and pulled her down toward the exit. "Come on, let's get that hand washed up and bandaged!"

Yuri couldn't help but smile as she allowed herself to be led by what appeared to be a girl all but deprived of her childhood. Her eyes traced Jessica's red-black plaid shirt folded up to the elbows and slim-fit dark jeans. It was so different from the sharp-suited all-business woman she'd first met all over again back in Rio. So wonderfully different, and so wonderfully perfect.

And then she saw the glittering stone sitting on Jessica's ring finger. It was a cheap little thing, Yuri thought, a five-carat 'masterpiece' she'd found after combing every nook and cranny of Switzerland for two straight days. It wasn't perfect in her eyes, but she decided that it was the best out of everything that she'd seen. It only set her back a couple hundred thousand dollars; hardly a dent by her standards. After all, her line of business did pay well. Her equivalent was a less flashy version of about three and a half carats, costing about three-quarters as much.

The whole point of the engagement wasn't the rings, of course. Yuri had made sure she kept the promise she made to herself back in North Korea, when she'd almost lost her soul in her fight to save both herself and mankind.

Jessica turned just in time to see Yuri's reflective expression. "What are you looking at?"

"You."

Jessica cocked an eyebrow. "Pervert."

Yuri's expression turned into one of shocked innocence. "What? I was just admiring how different you look!"

Jessica snickered and turned to walk backwards while she flipped her blonde tresses with her free hand. "You mean like this?" she asked playfully.

Yuri cringed, not out of disgust, but to will self-control unto herself. "Please don't do that."

Jessica continued walking backwards and grinned widely before flipping her hair again. "Do what?" she asked innocently.

A dozen things happened within the next two seconds, and Jessica found herself with her back against the wall of the exit ramp, staring into the bright green eyes of her lover. Two strong arms had found their way around the small of her back, pulling her close to the body in front of her. She almost gasped as she realized how close they were standing; that their stomachs and hips were touching ever so slightly, and Yuri's breath was a swirling cloud of mysteriously sweet chocolate over her lips and nose.

"Please don't do that, or I'll have to find a quiet spot to tell you just what I think about your impossible beauty," Yuri said with a thin smile, holding her lips just an inch away from Jessica's.

Jessica's eyes were locked wide. She wanted to just...to just...

"Hey! Get a room!"

Both women looked over to see Stephanie standing with Taeyeon at the foot of the ride's exit, hand in hand. Stephanie had a hand cupped beside her mouth.

"PDA much!" she shouted again, breaking into a chuckle. Taeyeon, who stood beside her, giggled with a hand over her mouth.

Yuri turned back to Jessica and whispered in her ear. "Tonight, you're mine."

Jessica shivered at the hot breath on her ear. They'd had their fair share of wild nights, but every experience always felt new and refreshingly...mind-blowing...and the words that just came out of Yuri's mouth were enough to make her feel as if she were still on the roller coaster, climbing over the edge just before the next heart-stopping dive...

The Illusion of Peace [The Last Samurai OST - A Small Measure of Peace]

One Month Later

**Secondary Doppelganger HQ
Switzerland**

"Sir, is this what I think it is?" Seohyun called from her workstation.

Four months had passed. The primary base had already been cleared of debris, but current estimates projected that it would take at least a couple of years to restore the base to its original glory. For now, they continue operating out of the secondary base, and that called for quite a bit of improvisation. Certain modules of training had had to be outsourced to carefully chosen and monitored locations; the newfound connections with the United States helped in that regard. Other than that, agents would have to seek out creature comforts in the surrounding towns; the secondary base only provided the basic necessities for operation.

Seohyun knew that Yuri had been given a year off to get things settled with her family, courtesy of Dr. Yoo. Many agents, like herself, were waiting for the inevitable marriage invitation cards. She also knew that that privilege had been extended to herself as well. But after two months of rest for both body and soul, lesser nightmares...and some quality time with Seungyeon, Seohyun decided that it was enough and both agents got right back into the game. Dr. Yoo hadn't stopped her.

The man walked over to her workstation, peering over her shoulder. "What is it?"

"This is a tactical map of China. See these?" She pointed toward clumps of data on the screen. "They're the estimated positions of Chinese troops. All kinds." She next typed in a series of commands, and the blips disappeared, reappearing in different parts of the map. Another series of keystrokes instructed the computer to plot the positions of the Chinese forces against a specified time frame, making the map move like a video.

"They've concentrated their troops near to and along the Chinese-North Korean border," Dr. Yoo observed.

"Something's happening," Seohyun said grimly. She'd already had a good idea what that something was.

Dr. Yoo sighed with a sort of finality that spoke of both understanding and hopelessness.

"Peace is but a fleeting illusion in this world."

- The End -

