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# PERSONA

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# PERSONA

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# SUYANA SAPAKI PERSONAL ITINERARY

[Classified]

8:00 a.m.	<b>Breakfast</b>
8:30 a.m.	<b>UARC local news briefing</b> [Suyana, Magnus]
9:00 a.m.	<del><b>Rewrite speech for 9:30 a.m. appointment</b></del> Continue local news briefing [Suyana, Magnus] —SS
9:30 a.m.	<b>Breakfast Event: “P.O.L.Y.G.L.O.T. World Education Foundation”</b> (Your speech has been cut in half; the brought in France at request of press. See above editing session. —MS)
10:30 a.m.	<b>Roll call in chambers</b>
11:00 a.m.	<b>Vote on Prop. 16-SL</b> (The IA is voting Yes; vote is preapproved. —MS)
11:30 a.m.	<b>Lunch with Kipa Forsyth</b> [F, New Zealand]
12:00 p.m.	<b>Global news briefing</b> [Suyana, Magnus]
12:30 p.m.	<b>Nothing currently scheduled</b> (Note that Grace Charles [F, United Kingdom] is hosting an informal event at her flat in the afternoon and has extended an open invitation. Suggest you attend, if they’ll have you. —MS) Noted. —SS
12:30 p.m.	<del><b>Walk.</b></del> —SS (Canceled. —MS)
1:30 p.m.	<b>Dress for social call</b>
2:00 p.m.	<b>Car service for social call</b>
2:30 p.m.	<b>Social call</b>
6:00 p.m.	<b>Dress for cocktail event</b>
6:30 p.m.	<b>Cocktail event: South American Press Appreciation Reception</b> (Speech approved. —MS)
8:30 p.m.	<b>Dinner</b> (The reservation is for four, in case afternoon social call goes well or the Press Appreciation Reception yields company. —MS)
11:00 p.m.	<b>End of day</b>

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The International Assembly audience hall was half-empty—too empty, Suyana might have said, in her first year there, when she was still surprised by the distance between good public relations and good politics. Now, looking across so many empty seats just made her heavy to the bones.

“Georgia,” the proctor called. “Germany. Ghana. Gibraltar.”

Missed opportunity, Suyana thought, every time the proctor’s eyes fell on an empty chair. An open vote was one of the rare times Faces pretended at politics. You were voting the way you were told, but even pretending was something, and she couldn’t imagine giving it up.

The rest of your life was photo shoots and PSAs and school visits, and saying what your handler told you to say, and going to parties where you tried desperately to look like you belonged amid a sea of other Faces who were higher on the guest list than you were.

Suyana put up with the rest of it because three or four times a year, she got to raise her hand and be counted. And today was a vote, and only half were here.

Some—the ones who ranked above her on guest lists—didn’t bother. Some feared what would happen if they did the wrong thing in front of the Big Nine, and their handlers had advised them to steer clear.

Her stomach twisted.

“They might as well just decide without us and inform us how we voted by mail,” she muttered.

Magnus said without looking over, “Try to sound professional, please, on the incredibly slim chance a reporter has a camera on you.”

No chance. The United Amazonian Rainforest Confederation had only been interesting three years ago, when the outpost got blown to pieces. Cameras had watched her for six weeks, until some other story broke.

That was before Magnus had been installed; she suspected he’d have worked harder to keep her in the public eye.

She pulled the day’s agenda into her lap, and picked the corners of the page off one at a time, when no one could see.

Magnus glanced over, said nothing.

In the sea of middle-aged handlers always conferring just out of camera range, Magnus looked more like a Face—tall, slender, fair, with a sharp expression—and she suspected he’d washed out from Leadership training, once upon a time. Just as well—he cast glances at the Big Nine as if he couldn’t wait to cut himself free of her. Diplomats couldn’t be so nakedly ambitious.

Little pieces of paper came off in her hands.

She couldn’t blame him; sometimes people had different loyalties than they were supposed to.

Smooth it over, she reminded herself. Keep an even keel. Don’t let anyone catch you out. Some things you can’t afford.

“I’m just nervous,” she said, softly.

It was true, but it was also what Magnus wanted to hear from her. Sure enough, he looked over.

“Understandable,” he said, high praise from him. “I have the rental.”

The rental was a necklace that was supposed to make her look fashionable, prosperous, alluring. Suyana thought it was useless, since her owning a bib of semiprecious stones would seem either openly false or a monstrous luxury depending on how much you knew about UARC economics, but Magnus had set his mind on it, and she wasn’t going to let it matter.

“Not sure it will do much. In *Closer* last year, he said he liked natural beauties.”

Magnus raised an eyebrow. “How cosmopolitan.”

“Iceland,” the proctor called. “India.”

“I don’t like the non-compete clause,” Magnus said. “Six months is restrictive. They’re hoping to leverage the re-up option in case the public likes you.” From his tone of voice, that wasn’t likely.

“Exclusivity ends the day the contract ends. They have the physical clause; you can’t enforce a non-compete on that. If he doesn’t want me to go elsewhere, he can make his offer alongside everyone else.”

He frowned. Three years on, he still got surprised whenever she slipped and got honest. (Most of the time Suyana wanted to strangle him. She measured her success as a diplomat by how little he caught on.)

“Japan,” the proctor called, and at the Big Nine table, far down the chamber ahead of her, the Face from Japan raised his hand.

“Suyana,” Magnus said, as careful as with any stranger he was trying to persuade. “We’re not in a place to dictate changes. We’re lucky they’re interested. After what happened—”

“I remember what happened.”

There was a little silence.

She missed Hakan, a knife of grief sliding between her ribs. She held her breath, like it could bring him back from the dead. Smooth expression, she thought. Show nothing. Be nothing.

“Norway,” the proctor called, with no answer.

Only six of the Big Nine had deigned to appear. Grace, the best of the lot, was without her handler; she always looked more eligible sitting alone. Grace was number two on *Intrigue* magazine’s Most Eligible Faces list for the fourth year in a row.

Suyana had already planned an attack of nerves so she’d miss Grace’s party. She was wary of open invitations; felt too much like charity sometimes.

Norway’s seats were empty. They were voting on some potential additions to the IA’s Human Rights Declaration, but apparently Martine didn’t think that was something that needed her attention.

(“You should go talk to her,” Magnus said once at an afternoon reception, and Suyana said, “Yes, nothing raises your social stock like being ignored by your betters.”)

Ethan Chambers, the American Face, had sent one of his assistants as a proxy; the Big Nine had enough staff to have them in two places at once.

At least there she knew the reason why.

Ethan Chambers was sitting in a boutique hotel a few miles away, waiting to meet her and sign the contract for a six-month public relationship. There would also be discussion of the terms of the physical clause; they were rare enough that they required careful debate, which meant everyone was preparing for several awkward hours. Still, you did what you had to, to get someone’s attention—the physical clause was the reason the United States had taken her offer seriously.

Suyana suspected the American team thought that if Ethan got her in bed, she’d get emotional and be easier to pressure with PR fallout whenever they wanted the UARC to fall in line.

Everyone could dream, she supposed.

“New Zealand,” the proctor called, and a few rows in front of her, Kipa raised her hand for each count of the amendments. Each time, it was steady and sure, and Kipa locked her elbow as if to measure her vote was counted. Suyana tried not to smile. Her turn was coming soon enough, and she didn’t want to know what she looked like when she was pretending she made a difference.

After she’d exercised her duties, there would be lunch with Ethan. After lunch, they’d start mapping out the first place they’d be caught together “accidentally.”

After that—

“United Amazonian Rainforest Confederation,” the proctor called.

Suyana smiled for the cameras, raised her hand to be counted.

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Daniel wished he'd stolen a camera he actually knew how to use.

He huddled deeper into the restaurant alley and pried the long end of a paper clip into the lens assembly, trying to loosen whatever had jammed the thing in the first place before the sedan showed up and he missed his chance to shoot Suyana. His hands were shaking a little.

Suyana Sapaki was a risk for a shoot on spec. She'd barely escaped being burned out three years ago, she was on the verge of a comeback, but a verge is a tricky thing to measure. Too late and you're drowned in the tide, too early and the pictures go for nothing and get used as archive footage without royalties whenever they finally do something interesting.

But the alley was perfectly positioned across the street from the swank hotel where Ethan Chambers, Face of the United States, was waiting to meet Suyana Sapaki on business unknown. The bellboy Daniel bribed said Ethan had been there since yesterday while his empty car drove all over town.

The lens assembly slid back into place, and Daniel settled behind a garbage can—the poor man's tripod—to focus before Suyana's car showed up.

He hoped it was worth what he'd spent on intel to catch negotiations between the US Face and whoever Daniel suspected was his girlfriend-to-be. He couldn't afford to go home.

The sedan turned the corner—a cab, not one from the IA fleet. Daniel braced his hands. They still shook a little before a great shot. (It was embarrassing—he was twenty-two, not twelve, he knew how to take pictures—but sometimes the thrill got the better of him.)

Magnus got out first. He was the UARC's new handler, a pro from some Scandinavian country they'd brought in to help spin the disaster, and he looked like a man who was used to getting out of messes clean.

Magnus scanned the square for a moment before he reached back into the car, to call Suyana out.

*[Submission 35178, Frame 7: Magnus Samuelsson standing beside a black sedan sitting around the corner from the front entrance to the Chanson Hotel. Subject in profile and three-quarters length, hand extended into the backseat of the car, looking at something out of frame.]*

Weird, Daniel thought, risking a glance up from the viewfinder. Magnus didn't seem the type to get swept up in scenery, and it wasn't as though Ethan Chambers would be standing with flowers at the balcony to greet the girl he might be about to contract to date.

He didn't know much about most of the IA handlers—you weren't supposed to, that's why countries had Faces, to give you something to look at—but something seemed off. Had they fought in the war? Was Magnus just cautious? Had he arranged for official nation-affiliated photographers to catch the first moments of budding romance, and Daniel was going to be without an exclusive after all this?

But then Suyana stepped out of the car, and Daniel forgot everything in the queasy thrill of a scoop.

*[Submission 35178, Frame 18: Suyana Sapaki (Face UARC), sliding out of the backseat of a sedan. Large necklace—appears genuine (ID and trail of ownership TK). Face three-quarters, turned to the hotel. Has not taken Samuelsson's hand.]*

Daniel had, once or twice in his research for this, questioned why Suyana had been considered the best option for the Face of the UARC. She was Peruvian, and the Brazilian contingent had given her flak for it—they were a much bigger slice of that pie, and a Quechua was playing even harder against the

numbers, unless you were going after diversity points. She was a little stocky in a world that liked Faces tall and thin, a little hard around the eyes in an organization that prized girls who could fake when the cameras were going. Even from here it looked like she was suffering a punishment. No wonder that was true—if she could get Ethan to sign on the dotted line, it was a PR coup the UARC could only dream of.

But her brown skin and knotted black hair and sharp eyes made a decent picture when the light hit her, and she moved with more purpose than Daniel saw from a lot of IA girls. (Wasn't much purpose for her to have, except look good and do as she was told. Handlers did the real work. Faces just made it look sharp to the masses. Though nobody wanted a Face getting ideas, as they'd reminded him plenty back home.)

Once the car pulled away, Magnus looked Suyana over with the focus of an auctioneer. He lifted his chin as if inviting her to do the same; Suyana stared through him and didn't move. Magnus straightened the collar of her shirt, tweaked one of the careless gems on her necklace so that it lay right side up against her collarbone.

Daniel raised his eyebrow into the viewfinder, took a few shots as fast as he could.

He'd seen backstage prep on the Korean Face, Hae Soo-jin, when he was still apprenticing as a licensed photographer. Most of it looked like grooming animals for auction, if you were being honest. This was something different; some message passing back and forth through a necklace that was laughably out of place on her.

Suyana glanced at Magnus for a moment with a frown that was gone before Daniel could catch it. Then she turned her head, as if she was used to being altered by people she didn't look at.

That was about right. The ideal combination of *hanbok* and national designers a Face should wear to present the correct ratio of tradition and modernism had been a hot topic at home when he left. The news had a segment on it at least once a week. Historians were weighing in; fashion-industry insiders staged demonstrations. Hae Soo-jin hadn't been called on for an opinion. Decision making happened before anything ever reached them. You could measure the length of a Face's career by seeing how good they were at agreeing with other people's outcomes.

But Suyana had looked at Magnus so strangely. Maybe it bothered her to know how far on the sidelines she stood.

*[Submission 35178, Frame 39: Magnus Samuelsson, back to the camera (identified in Frames 1–13). Facing the camera, Suyana Sapaki. Samuelsson has his hand extended toward Sapaki's elbow. Sapaki looking off-frame (object of gaze unknown), hands in pockets. No acknowledgment.]*

"It doesn't matter," Suyana said. "He'll know it's not mine." Her voice floated a little around the square before it settled on Daniel.

"We're impressing an ally, not a jeweler," said Magnus. "You need all the help you can get. No use looking shabby first thing. Are you ready to be charming?"

She looked right at Magnus, and Daniel flinched at her expression (murderer, he thought wildly, like he was watching a movie) and wished for a concurrent video function so he could try to capture what the hell was even going on.

Then she blinked, and her eyes softened, and her smile broke wide and white across her face. "Of course," she said, in a voice that sounded barely hers. "Are you ready to chaperone?"

Magnus's jaw twitched—surprised, maybe, or put out—and he looked back toward the street like he was thinking of making a run for it. "Let's go."

Suyana pushed her shoulders back, licked her lips, and headed for the front door of the hotel like she was on her way to a prison sentence. Magnus followed a little behind; most handlers did when the Faces were onstage. There was no good in the policymakers hogging the spotlight.

Daniel should have kept better track of how the light was moving; shadows giving way to the flood of sunlight across the white hotel made him blink into the viewfinder, and he took pictures by reflex as he waited for his eyes to adjust.

He was still waiting when the gunshot rang out.

All the sound was sucked out of the square for a second in the wake of the shot. His finger never stopped moving. He hoped against all luck that he'd managed to catch the moment the bullet hit. There was a bullet.

There were publicity stunts like this, sometimes, when someone needed the sympathy. They made front pages, no matter how horrible and obvious a ploy it was.

As the shutter clicked, the sound washed back—people shouting behind the closed door of the restaurant, Magnus staggering back with one arm out toward Suyana, casting an eye around the rooftops (why wasn't he in front of her? Why wasn't he protecting his charge?).

And Suyana was scrambling up from the ground, favoring one leg but already trying to bolt for the nearest cover. She looked young, in her terror, but her jaw was set—she would live, if she could.

Too bad he'd missed that shot, Daniel thought as he pocketed his memory card and shoved the camera into the trash. He wasn't going to get arrested for unauthorized photography, and he sure as hell wasn't going to get shot in some publicity stunt. She was coming his way, and he knew when to exit the scene.

But as Suyana dove toward the alley, there was another shot. She staggered and cried out—once, sharp—and he saw she had a bloody hand pressed to her left arm, that now the right leg of her jeans was blooming dark with blood.

He had to get out of there.

But she was running for the alley—lurching, really. She wasn't going to make it in time to avoid a kill shot if it came, if this wasn't a stunt. It might be a stunt. Either way, snaps didn't get involved. The hair on his arms was standing up.

Magnus was shouting, somewhere out of sight (the hotel?). A car engine flared to life (the cab?).

Suyana was gasping for breath.

You're a sucker, Daniel thought, you're a sucker, don't you dare, but by then he was already out in the square, scooping her under her good shoulder.

There was a bottle-cap pop from somewhere far away that he knew must be a bullet. Then they were running a three-legged race into the safety of the alley.

He let go as soon as she was in the shadows, but she caught hold of his elbow with more force than he'd have guessed she could manage. The tips of her fingers were rough; they caught on his sleeve.

"Save it," he said, eyeing the street on the far side of the alley, to make sure it was clear when he ran for it, but then he made a mistake and looked back at her.

Either she was a damn good actress or she was tougher than he'd thought. Her mouth was pulled tight with panic, but she looked at him like she was sizing him up.

"Thanks," she said, and somehow it was a demand for information, which was funny coming from someone who was bleeding in two places.

He couldn't believe he'd gone out there. This was a handler's job, if the shooting was even real—where the hell was Magnus?—and not one damn second of this was his business except behind a lens. This story had played out, and he was in enough trouble. He'd come back for the camera later. Maybe.

He said, "I have to go."

~~Tires screeched around the corner, and from somewhere came the echo of footsteps, and the hair on~~  
Daniel's neck stood up—his heart was in his throat, this was amateur hour, this was chaos.

Who knew this was happening today besides me? he wondered, from some suspicion he didn't want  
to examine.

Suyana swayed, braced herself on her good arm against the wall like a sprinter on the starting line,  
her eyes fixed on the far end of the alley. There were footsteps, voices shouting. They're looking for us.  
Daniel realized, and his blood went cold.

Suyana looked up at him, and for a moment he remembered the footage from a few years back, right  
after terrorists hit the UARC, and she'd bored holes at any camera that crossed her like she was daring  
them to ask.

She said, "Run."

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He'd cased the neighborhood—it would have been a rookie mistake to go into something like that without an exit ready—so for thirty seconds he knew where he was going, and it was just another practice run.

For thirty seconds he focused on the uneven pavement under his feet, on avoiding the tables that littered the sidewalk, on cutting across tricky intersections in a way that made it hard for, say, a police car to follow you.

They saw few people, thank goodness—a tabac owner who peered at them through the window, an old woman who saw them and startled, a musician who got one look at them and spun on his heels the other way, his black bag banging against his back in his haste. Otherwise, for thirty seconds, Dan could think.

He'd mapped out routes across three bridges, and angled toward the busiest (Notre-Dame tourists were easy to disappear into, if he could just get there), and they were on a narrow side street nearly at the main route to Pont Saint Louis when the panic set in.

It didn't even feel like panic, really—his knees just buckled between one step and the next like all the muscle had fallen out of them. He stumbled, reached for the nearest wall to keep from falling over.

Suyana pulled up beside him, and turned to keep her bad shoulder out of sight of the rest of the street. It brought them face-to-face. She was breathing hard, and her jaw was clenched like she was trying not to be sick.

Her eyes were wide and dark, but her eyebrows were fixed carefully without expression. Absently he thought about Halloween, streets full of masks.

She was losing blood. She couldn't run for much longer. He hoped she wasn't thinking of asking for his help to get to a hospital; things were bad enough without her trying some teary-eyed bid for sympathy the way IA girls did on TV when they were asking for humanitarian aid.

There were no tears. She looked him over a second, said, "If you can't keep going, I'll go on alone."

He nearly laughed. What diplomat talked this way to someone they'd barely met? What Face talked this way to anyone at all?

"I'm not the one who's been shot."

She flinched and looked over her shoulder as if people would hear and come running. "I'll make it."

"Make it where? You're bleeding all over your shirt."

She shrugged with her good shoulder, gritted her teeth against the pain. "I'm short on supplies and no one's offered me a coat."

Well, he wasn't about to do it just because she'd needled him. But he might have to change his appearance if things caught up to him, and it wouldn't matter much where his coat went after that—on her or in the garbage.

Under all the sounds of the crowd and his pulse banging against his ears, he was listening for someone following them. He'd outrun trouble before, plenty. It was always a matter of hearing them before they saw you.

He ran a hand through his hair as an excuse to look behind them. Two silhouettes passed, paused, and moved on. It could be anybody.

Suyana said, "I'll give you this necklace if you can get me to Montmartre."

That was interesting. At least it wasn't a sympathy ploy. Bald barter was unusual, but more honest.

"That thing looks like a fake," he said, shrugged. "Pass."

She looked at him, said, "You know it's not."

Suddenly all his breath was missing. He blinked, licked his lips.

There was a flicker of a smile at one corner of her mouth, but it vanished. "You were already in the alley when they shot me. You heard us."

When they shot me, she said, calm as if she were talking about cameras. But she wasn't entirely in control. Her face was sallow, and the hand pressed against her arm was starting to shake.

He didn't like how this was going. Maybe it was better to cut things off at the knees.

He leaned a little closer, pitched his voice low. "Maybe I was in on it."

She tensed up when he moved toward her, but there was no surprise, no moment of horror setting in. The idea must have already occurred to her. Not a lot of trust among diplomats.

But she was still looking at him, and she narrowed her eyes a little before she said, "Then why did you panic?"

Daniel wished he'd picked a dumber Face to follow.

It occurred to him to point out that this could all be a ploy to slow her down—it's not like he'd panicked, really, it was just that he had stopped to consider—but if she really believed that, she'd have run for it five turns back, going it alone halfway across the bridge by now. He could see her leaving a blood trail straight through the cathedral and out the other side.

Someone was coming up behind them—lightweight, carrying metal, in a hurry.

Her eyes went wide as saucers. She backed up two steps, grimacing against the pain, and turned a bolt.

"Hold it," Daniel hissed.

A moment later, a teenager raced past them, clutching a familiar camera tight by the strap as it rattled against his fist. (Daniel knew exactly what making a break for it with a stolen camera sounded like.)

After the kid rounded the corner, Suyana held still longer than she had to. Her eyes unfocused for a second; she blinked slowly, took a breath that sounded like it cost her. He wondered if this was one of the things they taught you to do—if diplomacy was half smiles and firm handshakes and the other half was pretending you were about to be sick to get out of a bad situation.

"Okay, I'm not in on it, you got me," he said, just to say something, and smiled just to have something for his face to do.

If he was lucky, she thought he was a busboy who went out for a smoke and got caught in the crossfire. If she figured out he was a snap, he was in trouble. For all the time they spent in the public eye, Faces didn't like the idea they were being watched, and the IA-approved national photographers didn't stand for competitive press.

And if she left him, he'd lose this chance. The next he'd hear about her would be on the news, with IA press taking portraits of her in blood-spattered clothes as she emerged from the alleys of Paris, having escaped the gunmen she'd hired for show. Or the gunmen were real, and she'd be dead. Either way, he'd miss the story.

"You need a hospital," he said.

She shook her head. "I'm fine. We need to get going."

Every sentence that came out of her mouth made her stranger. "Well, then let's call"—he bit off *your handler*, he wasn't supposed to know that—"someone."

"My handler can wait," she said, the way she'd talked about the necklace—sharp, angry at him for playing dumb.

He shrugged off his jacket and draped it across her shoulders. As he moved closer she tensed, but he stood beside her as though they were a couple, wrapped an arm around her to help hold her up. She w

solid as stone under his hand. He could feel her fingers still pressing tight against the wound. She seemed awkward more than afraid, as if it had been a long time since she'd hugged anyone.

"We'll have to keep to the small streets if you can't run," he said.

She tested her right leg. Her lips thinned. "Fine."

Wherever she was going, she was damn fixed on getting there. If he could manage this story, it would be the making of him. He was smarter than he'd been when he'd fled home. He could wring the truth out of Suyana Sapaki.

If his heart was still pounding, that made sense. If the worst of his panic had vanished while he was talking to her, he didn't think about it.

"What is there in Montmartre, anyway?"

She smiled. "I'll show you."

It was the smile she'd given Magnus, wide and false, when she was right in the middle of a lie. Oh, he thought, we'll see about that.

"All right," he said. He squeezed her shoulder against the flow of blood. The fabric under his fingertips was damp.

They turned onto the avenue, ducked into the narrow street across the way, and headed north, where the sun was just beginning to set on Montmartre.

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Suyana weighed her options.

It was difficult—she was light-headed from bleeding, and a stranger was steering her through the streets of Paris as fast as she could manage, which was more frightening than being shot at.

When you signed up for the IA, they told you over and over to think about the possibility, just to get you used to the idea that someday you'd be facing down the barrel of a gun. They never told you to expect help; not something you got much of.

She was letting it happen because she needed to get to Montmartre more than she needed to breathe free, just now. She had to make it to the apartment without bleeding to death on foreign soil. The IA would have a field day with that.

Maybe not. The IA might have ordered it; maybe writing up her untimely end on the soft focus streets of Paris was just what they were hoping for.

It was terrifying just to imagine it, but you couldn't shrink from the truth if it illuminated what needed to be done. It was the IA, or the Americans, or Magnus acting on orders from home.

(She'd made the list as soon as she registered what was happening. Then she'd thought, I have to go north and warn them, with a twinge like homesickness. Then pain.)

If it was the Americans or her own country, it would be messy. Her own country she might be able to handle; accusing the Americans would mean some serious diplomatic incidents for not a lot of gain—the Americans had a way of avoiding consequences.

If the IA had moved against her, she was probably a dead woman, but she fought it. You rose to the need. She took a breath, counted her pulse like Hakan had taught her when she was thirteen and hadn't even seen the floor of the IA yet.

("Some of them are born into this. They'll see weaknesses—they're bred on arguments. Think about whether your anger is productive.")

"My anger's why you brought me here," she'd said.

He'd smiled. He had laugh lines, which surprised her: How could you be happy inside a machine? But he was. "Then make the most of your chances," he'd said, "so you live long enough to be back home again."

It was good advice; advice he hadn't followed.)

Suyana had lost the advantage of anonymity to the stranger, which was too bad. Even when it was necessary, it was a shame to give first. But you had to weigh the cost of anything, and it had been more important to take his measure than to feign ignorance. Now she knew two things: what he looked like when he was lying, and what he looked like when he was truly surprised.

"You all right?" he asked. They were nearing an enormous intersection.

She glanced toward the pavement at their feet. "How much blood am I trailing?"

"I'm surprised you have any left," he said. His jaw was set, and he didn't look down.

That meant he'd already looked at her and she hadn't seen it. No good. She needed to stay sharp. She could lay out her options later, when she had any options besides Live or Mistake.

"I just need to make it to the stairs on rue Foyatier," she said. Her voice was light—she was dizzy—and she didn't like it. To make it come off more girlish than weak, she gave him half a smile, as if the stairs were a whim in which he'd be kind enough to indulge her, and later they'd go out for coffee and laugh about it. Grace used it sometimes, when she was in front of the full Assembly.

He flexed his fingers around her shoulder absently, the sort of reflex you had when you remembered



a hidden weapon you were planning to use. “So you wanted to jog your way up to the church?”

~~It was a false question, just filling space.~~

The first time she'd really met Ethan—a party at Terrain—he'd done the same thing, so when he lurched forward with his elbows on his knees and knuckles bumping the table and asked, “So what's like to live so close to the rainforest?” she thought he knew more than he should.

But he was just a diplomat, trained not to leave empty space in a conversation unless he was trying to intimidate. She'd laughed and explained where she was really from, ghosting her fingers on his knuckles as she sketched the mountains with her hands along the table.

He'd dropped his gaze to her fingers, taken a second too long to answer. Later, she'd wonder if this was the moment she began to think about the contract—the moment he'd been caught off guard, and she'd had considered it quietly without pushing back. It was unexpected; it was promising.

She'd left before he could get restless. (If the Americans had arranged the hit, that would probably be the answer to the question of dating Ethan.)

But Ethan asked empty questions because he had nothing else to say. This one was asking empty questions to distract her.

Thieves, the people who skim across things that way; thieves and people who are lying to you. Fair enough. It wasn't as though any of this had been a humanitarian gesture, and there was no future in it. Even as he'd yanked her out of the line of fire, he had the face of someone who regretted it. This one was out for himself.

She understood. She could handle that.

They were nearly at Foyatier now—she recognized the neighborhood from the pictures in her dossier. Almost there, she thought, as if it were home.

She took a breath, counted her pulse, and set about planning the best way to lose him.

A few blocks later he turned them abruptly down a side street—what had he seen? No way anyone could have followed them through this labyrinth in dusk—and she pivoted on her bad leg, grinding her foot into the ground for balance.

There was a burst of pain; her vision clouded. She moved faster, so he couldn't tell anything was wrong.

“We're almost there,” he said. “There were just police that way. We're going up the next street.”

Good. The last thing she could afford was to be seen by police. They'd send her back to Magnus.

She didn't know where Magnus was when the first shot came—those memories were muddled. But by the time she was scrambling from the gunfire, she'd seen the little square. Magnus had vanished. No use, trusting some.

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It was almost too dark to read by the time they finally reached the stairs.

“You're not going to actually try to climb them, are you?”

She'd take it as a compliment that he thought she still could. “Hang on,” she said. “My ankle.”

He glanced down and shifted his grip on her shoulders (pain lanced down her arm), but she ignored it and scanned the flat cobbles that framed the stairs until she had what she needed. It was white chalk, hard to see if you weren't looking, and she'd have been in trouble if it rained.

“I don't see your friends.” He was setting her down on a bench, more gently than she would have expected.

“They'll be here,” she said. “Thank you so much for everything. I need to pay you before you go.”

Except—I can't reach, sorry." She ducked her head. "You'll have to do it."

~~She watched his feet. He shifted his weight, moving forward and pulling back. There was a pause that was longer than it should have been. Then his fingers brushed against her neck, and the necklace swung free.~~

It was a relief; she didn't realize how heavy it had been. When she looked up, she caught a strange expression on his face. She was reminded, just for a second, of Magnus as he'd pushed the last stone along her collarbone so she'd look presentable when she met the Americans.

"Well." He frowned at the necklace, slid it into his pocket. "I can't just go. I wouldn't feel right leaving you. For a tip like this, you should get full service." He gave her a smile like when he'd bullshitted her about what he'd heard in the alley, some old chestnut he knew would work.

He couldn't be serious. Who wouldn't take a prize like that and run? Someone who wasn't in it for the money, she thought, and her fingertips went cold. Who was he?

She'd never had to work to get rid of people—in the IA, it was always work to keep them talking. She had to get him out of the way long enough to disappear.

"Well," she said, "you can wait with me if you feel like being a gentleman."

He took a seat, settled in. She thought about her angle. The place was close enough—three blocks, the marking indicated, three or four, she could walk three or four still. All she needed was to get there, and she'd be taken care of. She'd crawl that far, to be safe.

"So," he said, "what do you think of Paris?"

He wasn't filling the silence now; now he was glancing at her sidelong, and she heard the hundred questions behind the question.

"Lovely city to get shot in," she said.

He laughed once, real and surprised.

She had to put some distance between them. What she had to do now was too dangerous for anyone else, even if she did trust him farther than she could throw him. She closed her eyes, swayed a little (not too much—just closing her eyes made the street spin).

"Shit, hey," he said, one hand on her shoulder. "You have to get these looked at."

"No hospitals," she said, sharp. Hospitals meant police and Magnus, and she couldn't risk either.

He didn't push it, and she wondered if he guessed that she didn't want to make herself known to his handler. Somehow that was worse than anything.

"Are your friends medics, at least?"

Some of them had better be. "Could you—" She looked around the square. "I need water, I'm so dizzy."

There was a moment's hesitation before he nodded—not stupid, this one. "Will you still be here when I get back?"

"No, I'm going to jog the stairs a few times to get the blood going."

He half smiled. "Be right back."

Why she should feel guilty about this, she had no idea. He'd been paid more than enough for his labors. He had to know this was temporary.

He took off at a good clip, dodging tourists who were passing, and ducked into a tabac at the corner. He'd be back in two minutes. Less. She'd have to make a run for it.

She gritted her teeth and lurched off the bench. Her leg was burning, and there was a starry jolt though she'd been punched in the nose, but she put as much weight on it as she dared, tried to walk normally.

Her jeans were crusted with blood—it was too dark for anyone to tell now, but they'd gone stiff, and

scratched the wound with every step. She crossed her arms as if she was cold, wrapped one hand over her sleeve as hard as she could. She hoped the guy had another jacket at home; he was never getting that one back.

Two blocks. She'd made it two blocks. She could make it. She just had to keep an eye out for the right street—they knew who she was, they would have as much to lose as she did. She'd be all right, as soon as she was with them.

Something moved in the corner of her eye.

Tourists, three of them, holding up their phones and taking pictures of the skyline. Harmless, but she couldn't be seen in pictures. She turned away, walked faster. Her head really was swimming—as she squinted up at the street sign, the letters ran together—but she couldn't risk slowing down.

There were footsteps closer behind, moving quickly. She couldn't look behind her—no windows with a good enough reflection. Out of nowhere the thought slammed into her: the stranger's here to finish me off. But it felt hollow, like there wasn't enough blood left for her to really panic.

That's probably for the best, she thought.

Then she passed out.

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Daniel knew she'd run. He moved fast, carefully not looking at the magazine rack—some Faces had gone to Milan for Fashion Week to support their national designers, and *Closer* had a snap of Philip Arnaud walking hand in hand with a model. (It was a small picture, and the caption hadn't even bothered to identify the model. Guys usually got away with flings outside the IA—if he wasn't under contract with someone, there wasn't much story there.)

He'd been gone only a couple of minutes, but he wasn't surprised when he turned the corner to an empty bench. She wasn't the type to wait around and debate her options. Still, his throat went tight. The reflex of losing a story, probably. Her necklace was in his pocket, heavy, still warm from her neck.

But he pulled himself together. She couldn't go far in the state she was in. He scanned the thin early evening crowd for anyone struggling to stay upright.

He saw something move—fall?—and vanish from sight just as two tourists jumped down from the stairs right in front of him, gasping and clutching at each other for balance as they held up their phones to record what they'd descended.

As they passed him (he was edging around them, head down and turned away from the cameras), he saw a pair of shadows kneeling over someone, too far away to distinguish.

There were people still in the streets, he thought—nothing could happen to her, not in front of so many people.

But then one of them was on the phone relaying details, and whatever carrion birds he'd imagined hovering over her became just another pair of tourists calling an ambulance for a stranger.

They reached down (Daniel started moving, they couldn't just start jostling her, something could be broken), but he was too far away and one of them was already holding up Suyana's wrist, saying something to his friend, who repeated it into the phone. Her hand was limp, he could see it even from here. Out cold. Did they know who she was? Had the news gone out about her?

If Daniel had an ounce of sense he'd turn around now, take what he had to the black market, and try to catch the eye of an agency. A frame of a Face getting shot was enough to go on. He'd get plenty of offers. He closed his hand around the necklace until the stones bit.

Still, it would be a shame not to follow her. The more complete your story, the better the money was. He needed the money; he needed enough to buy himself out of trouble. She would understand, if she knew. She hadn't been home in a long time either.

She hadn't wanted to be taken to a hospital. He could guess why.

The hardest thing was staying out of the way until the ambulance came—those tourists hovered, and they didn't take pictures of themselves with an unconscious woman, but it came close. (Daniel was nearly on top of them by the time the first guy talked the second guy out of it. He vanished around the corner for a little while just in case they'd noticed.)

After the authorities had her it was easier. He was no stranger to tailing someone, and traffic was bad enough that it was no trouble keeping the red van in sight all the way to the hospital.

Daniel stood outside the emergency-room doors as night crept over him, wondering what the hell was happening, and how he was ever going to get to her.

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Even if they required a little more groundwork first, Daniel found that the best lies always came in pairs.

so they could rest on each other.

~~For the first round he feigned flower delivery, walking up and down the halls with the ugliest lilies he'd ever seen, peering at room numbers and marking exits for fifteen minutes, until he overheard one of the nurses mention needing blood for "Mlle Dupont" as she passed an orderly.~~

He couldn't tell if they'd recognized her yet. They'd have called the police, so he'd have that to worry about, but if they knew she was IA, no flower-delivery act was going to cut it. He could rule out sneaking in with a lab coat, too—wherever she was, that floor would be locked.

He glanced at the emergency boards. She was already in a recovery room, so whatever had been necessary to patch her up wasn't serious. Good. Bones splintered under bullets, sometimes. She'd been lucky.

Now he had to get in with her and buy them some time. Not that there was a *them* (there was a hit and a story), but you didn't half drag someone to a mysterious meeting place just to give up on your chances. Really, he was her best option. He had no idea where Samuelsson had been when the shooting started. And if anyone else showed up looking for her, he was pretty certain it would be bad news. If she was leaving, best she leave with him.

He set the bouquet in the corner of an empty nurse's station where he could, in an emergency, come back for them and pretend he'd just been in the men's room. They were safe—no one would want to claim these. Then he went back outside, to gather courage and steal a coat.

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He'd known people back home who could really run cons like this—they got into parties, press conferences, hotel suites. It had been for money or blackmail, most of the time, but a skill was a skill.

He understood being shameless (of course he did), but he'd never been able to mirror the people who pulled it off. They always acted as if whatever they were asking for was the dullest, most necessary chore in the world. He could spin a decent story, but every once in a while he'd overdo it. The trick was in the boredom.

He could stop letting this matter. He could stop letting Suyana Sapaki have any hold over him at all. Why should he care? Once you cared, you had something to lose. This was just the most necessary chore.

He came in through the front entrance, stolen coat on, jaw set, not looking left or right. He'd watched enough footage of the IA to know how people acted when they knew they could move mountains. The few people in the waiting room glanced over from the TV, just for a moment, like people do when someone important passes by.

He went up to the reception station and rested the tips of his fingers on the desk, leaning in just slightly, the way handlers sometimes did when they were taking something off the record.

"I'm here for your nameless mademoiselle," he said in deliberately awful French, half an order, half bored out of his mind.

The administrator started with recognition and blinked before she could summon the lie. "I'm sorry Monsieur, I don't know who you mean."

"Good," he said in English, "and we appreciate your discretion. Now tell me where she is."

She cleared her throat, glanced at the computer. "Sir, I'm very sorry, I don't—"

"All right. I was warned about a lack of critical thinking, but I was hoping you'd surprise me. I'm not here because I like leaving in the middle of a state meal. I need to see her so we can clean up this mess before half of Europe's IA Peacekeeping forces descend on Paris. Now, please."

She frowned and looked him over. He wondered if it was too late, and Magnus had come in while she was gone, and Suyana would be going right back into the sights of whoever had tried to kill her.

Don't care, he thought, don't care, don't care.

"Do you have ID?"

Withering, he said, "In my division, it wouldn't be my real ID anyway, would it?"

Behind him, Daniel heard a familiar voice (on television, he realized, just after his heart dropped in his stomach).

"—under fire," Magnus Samuelsson was saying. From the stone silence that followed, Daniel couldn't tell if it was a studio recording or a press conference, and he didn't dare turn around.

"Today," Samuelsson went on, "Suyana Sapaki suffered a grievous injury at the hands of parties unknown, here on Paris soil."

Daniel felt a little sick. But the receptionist had blanched, so he raised his eyebrows at her, spread his hands. What did he care if the IA descended? It wasn't his hospital.

"Just a moment," she said, reaching for her phone.

He glanced at the television. He wanted to know what the man's face looked like when he was giving a party line like this. He'd probably been in on it.

Samuelsson looked utterly calm, the front of one of his three-piece Impressive Suits utterly smooth, and he was reading off a piece of paper to a room of stone-faced photographers wearing their national colors and dutifully recording.

"Due to the nature of her injuries," Samuelsson read, "Ms. Sapaki's prognosis is, at the moment, unknown."

He glanced up into the camera, just for a moment, then back at the paper. He kept going, and there was a murmur through the audience, but as Samuelsson was talking the receptionist was hanging up and telling Daniel a room number and waving him through a door that needed a buzzer, and Daniel was trying to keep his voice even as he asked her as archly as possible to let him know when the police had arrived, and his pulse was so loud in his ears he probably wouldn't have heard whatever Samuelsson had to say.

*[ID 29963, Frame 7: Daniel Park in black coat, walking through security doors of Hôpital François du Lac, looking over his shoulder at broadcast of Magnus Samuelsson giving press conference regarding the shooting of Suyana Sapaki.]*

Daniel couldn't afford to look worried and he'd forgotten what being casual looked like somehow, so he walked the length of the corridor without turning his head until he reached Suyana's room, and he pushed open the door without knocking. Seemed like the kind of thing an IA type would do.

She was already sitting up, and he recognized her expression—the flash of ambivalence before she went in to romance the Americans, resigned but desperately thinking of a way out—before she saw him.

Then there was an expression he couldn't place, just for a second, before her face closed shut like it always did when cameras were on her.

It occurred to him that she might have been making alternate plans, and she'd call out to the nurse any second to get rid of the guy she'd blackmailed and who wouldn't leave her alone.

But she didn't call out. She didn't say anything. She watched him, eyes narrowed, braced for the worst.

A lot of questions fell out in front of him, any of them worth a hundred thousand euros if he got an answer. Who shot you? Do you think Magnus Samuelsson knows who shot you? Who's the friend you

never met? Are you so short on friends that you're surprised I came back?

~~Are you all right? Do you know what's happened to you, while you were in here alone?~~

He settled on, "There's something you need to see."

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This channel was predictable—they were replaying the whole statement with inconvenient breaks and studio commentators who had no idea what was happening could talk with great authority about it.

Suyana watched the introductions with no expression. If Samuelsson had arranged to have her killed, it must not upset her much. Maybe they'd worked together after all, setting up the publicity stunt of the year. Maybe she'd set it up herself and cut Samuelsson out of it. He was beginning to think she had it in her to arrange quite a bit.

Eventually, they watched as Samuelsson, unflappable behind the safety of the mic, issued his sentence.

"Due to the nature of her injuries, Ms. Sapaki's prognosis is, at the moment, unknown."

When Magnus glanced at the camera and down, Suyana sucked in a breath through her teeth. Daniel watched a dozen things flicker across her face and vanish.

Then she said, "I have to get out of here."

Daniel blinked. It sounded like Samuelsson was spinning his wheels, which was useless but seemed reasonable enough when you didn't want to admit you'd lost the person you were responsible for. What had she seen?

"I don't—"

But she'd already swung her legs over the side of the bed and was struggling out of her hospital gown.

"I know that look on Magnus. He's about to cut his losses. I have to go."

She didn't elaborate, but the hair stood up on Daniel's neck. He thought of Samuelsson saying, "Are you ready to be charming?" and the flicker of sympathy that had gone through him, even then, that this was the person Suyana was stuck with.

Before he could think better of it he said, "What do you need?"

She looked like she was debating sending him on another errand, like she knew this was her last chance to shake him before he got to be trouble. Not that he could convince her otherwise. He tried a smile. (Don't care, don't care.)

"Your name."

It felt like giving in, which was strange. "Daniel."

A moment later, she said, "And clothes."

He let out a breath that sounded more relieved than he'd meant it to. "Sure."

It wasn't difficult. The hall was nearly empty, and most of the patients unconscious. By the time he came back, she'd wrapped her IV puncture to keep it from bleeding—it matched the wide white bandage on her left arm and her right calf—and had two rolls of gauze in hand.

Planning to be on the run for a while. He wondered where she thought she was going, with half of Paris out to find her for one reason or another.

She slid into the pants and shirt, and it wasn't until she was looking at the boots that he realized she must have been nearly naked before.

He said, "Here," dropped to his knee to help her into them, hoped she couldn't see him flushing. He wondered if snaps had an ethical line they shouldn't cross. If you drew the line at underwear, or if there were snaps just for lingerie shots. "Can you stand?"

There was pressure on his shoulder as she pushed off the bed, and her hand shook, but she said strained, "I'll make it."

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"Then let's go."

She pulled back. "No. I can go alone."

She couldn't disappear on him again. "Tonight I'm working on retainer," he said, just shy of flirting. "I'll show you right to your door. Whatever door."

She looked at him. Her eyes got hard at the edges sometimes. "Can we stop pretending that you're not working for someone?"

His face stung hot, like she'd slapped him.

"I'm grateful for the help," she said. Her voice sounded different; honesty, maybe. "But this isn't your problem, and it isn't your business. Don't get involved where you don't have to."

It was sound advice—from her face it seemed she meant it, and he knew she'd lost people—but he was frustrated.

"I didn't just impersonate IA Ops for laughs, you know. I came to make sure you were all right after the gunfire I pulled you out of." He put some weight on the last words—he wasn't above guilt-tripping her.

"Get out while it's an option. Cut your losses."

She was right, if he were a normal person. But there was still a story here, and it wasn't as though she was rich in friends at the moment. She needed him. He could kill two birds with one stone; he'd keep his conscience out of it until later.

"Too late," he said, shrugging. It wasn't quite true, but it wasn't a whole lie. And he wasn't out to kill her, which was more than some could say. He just wanted to know how all this shook out. Any snafu would.

She thought something over, frowned. "Onca?"

"Pardon?"

She shook her head, coughed. "Sorry. Sometimes when I'm tired, my first language—you know how it is."

He did. He'd been so exhausted a week ago that he'd fallen into Korean with the busboy at the hotel and gone a full sentence before he corrected.

"Who knows you're here?"

"Just the receptionist, who thinks I'm one of your handlers. Police are coming, though."

"You might regret the first one," she said, buttoning the last button on her too-big shirt. "I have to go to a restaurant. Café de Troyes."

"All right," he said. He knew better than to ask why. She wasn't in the habit of overinforming.

She looked much better for a couple of hours' rest and some painkillers, and she limped out of the room under her own power. He fell in behind her.

The buzzer sounded at the end of the hallway as the doors opened.

"Let's go," she said, glanced over her shoulder. (To see if he was there, he thought, and tried not to be pleasantly surprised.)

He started to make a joke—of course he was still here, who was he, Samuelsson?—but something about that wasn't very funny.

As they neared the doors, she said, "People might recognize me now that my picture's been on the news. I might need your coat."

"Forget it," he said. "You get one coat a night. That's it."

As they turned onto the street, he could have sworn that, just for a second, she'd smiled. It felt better than it should have; the pang of guilt felt worse.



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