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LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA



“Love is the most dangerous game in the world of spies.”

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“As a former flight attendant with 15,000 flying hours and 15 years in the skies, I’ve seen, heard, and experienced moments that linger long after landing. From the confined cabin of an aircraft—where the boundary between the ordinary and the unexplainable feels razor-thin—to the vibrant and mysterious layovers around the globe, every journey holds its own story. While this series is a work of fiction, it draws inspiration from the many faces, places, and whispers I’ve encountered throughout my years of flight.”



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Chapter 1: The Flight Into Shadows



AHMED STOOD JUST OUTSIDE the cockpit, his polished shoes gripping the narrow floor as the captain's voice crackled over the intercom. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are beginning our descent into Moscow. Please fasten your seatbelts and ensure all carry-on items are stowed securely."

Through the cockpit window, the city sprawled beneath them like a glittering web, its golden threads disappearing into a horizon veiled by a layer of mist and smog. From this altitude, Moscow looked serene—a city caught between the old world and the fiercely modern. Ahmed knew better. Behind the lights and towering skyscrapers lurked shadows, each one hiding secrets and dangers he could feel even now, before his feet touched the ground.

He adjusted his tie, its knot just tight enough to look proper but loose enough for comfort. A fleeting glance in the polished edge of a cabinet confirmed his appearance: calm, collected, and every inch the professional flight attendant. Yet beneath the neatly pressed uniform and composed exterior, his mind worked furiously. He wasn't here just for layovers and service smiles.

Stepping into the cabin, Ahmed scanned the rows of passengers. Many dozed, lulled by the soft hum of the engines, while others stared blankly at screens, lost in a world of in-flight entertainment. He moved

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purposefully, checking overhead bins and offering polite nods to anyone who met his gaze. The routine actions gave him a chance to assess the cabin with practiced subtlety.

“Ahmed,” a voice called softly from behind. It was Dalia, one of his fellow crew members, standing by the galley. Her auburn hair was neatly pinned, but fatigue showed in her eyes. “We’re set for landing. Everything okay?”

“Of course,” he replied with a faint smile. “Smooth skies and happy passengers. What else could we ask for?”

Her laugh was light, but her attention quickly shifted to a passenger flagging her down. Ahmed watched her for a moment longer before moving toward his seat by the emergency exit. From here, he had a clear view of the cabin—and any potential anomalies.

As the plane dipped lower, the details of the city came into focus. Apartment blocks stood like sentinels against the endless skyline, their identical façades marked with faint signs of wear. Ahmed’s gaze lingered on a river slicing through the city—a natural vein amidst the industrial sprawl. His chest tightened slightly, not from fear but anticipation. Moscow wasn’t just another destination. It was a battlefield, and he was walking straight into its heart.

The fasten-seatbelt sign blinked on above him, accompanied by the familiar ding. He took his seat, feeling the soft vibration of the landing gear extending beneath the floor. As the plane touched down, a barely perceptible shudder rippled through the cabin.

Ahmed exhaled, his fingers tightening briefly around the armrest. This was it—the point of no return. Whatever awaited him on the ground, he had no choice but to step into the shadows. The mission demanded it.



THE CABIN LIGHTS BRIGHTENED, casting a sterile glow over rows of weary faces. Ahmed moved with practiced ease, gliding past

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passengers adjusting their seat belts and gathering scattered belongings. The familiar sounds of rustling bags and muted chatter filled the space, grounding him in the mundane. But his focus sharpened with every step, scanning the cabin like a hawk circling its prey.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please remain seated until the seatbelt sign is turned off,” the captain’s voice echoed, polite yet commanding.

“Busy flight today,” Dalia muttered as she handed Ahmed a crumpled blanket left on a seat. Her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes, exhaustion pulling at the corners of her mouth.

“Always is,” Ahmed replied, folding the blanket with mechanical precision. “Moscow’s a magnet for adventure—or trouble.”

Dalia chuckled lightly. “Hopefully not for us.”

As she turned to assist another passenger, Ahmed glanced toward the back of the cabin. His movements remained deliberate, but his mind raced. Small details—a phone clutched too tightly, an unblinking gaze fixed on the galley door—etched themselves into his memory.

Near row 24, an elderly woman fumbled with a stubborn seatbelt. Ahmed crouched beside her, his voice low and reassuring. “Here, let me help you.”

She smiled warmly. “Thank you, young man. These old hands aren’t as steady as they used to be.”

As he clicked the belt into place, Ahmed’s peripheral vision caught movement three rows back—a man in a sharp suit rising from his seat, his hand lingering on the overhead bin. Something about the casual elegance of his movements set Ahmed’s nerves alight. He turned slightly, committing the man’s face to memory: graying hair, thin lips, and eyes that held the faint glimmer of calculation.

The man caught Ahmed’s gaze and offered a genial smile. Too genial.

“Busy day, isn’t it?” The man’s voice was warm, conversational. “You flight attendants have the patience of saints.”

Ahmed nodded, masking his unease. “Part of the job.”

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The man lingered a beat too long before returning to his seat. Ahmed straightened, his posture casual, though every muscle in his body coiled like a spring. Whatever lay ahead in Moscow had already begun to take shape.



THE OVERHEAD BINS CREAKED open as passengers retrieved their belongings, filling the air with a medley of clipped apologies and hurried footsteps. Ahmed navigated the narrow aisle, offering assistance where needed. His smile remained steadfast, but his thoughts were razor-sharp.

Near the exit row, an older man struggled with a suitcase wedged tightly in the bin. Ahmed stepped forward, gesturing with an open palm. "Allow me."

The man stepped aside, his gratitude evident in the quick nod. "Thank you, young man. These things seem to grow heavier every year."

Ahmed pulled the suitcase free, its wheels thunking against the floor. As he handed it over, he noticed the man's fingers linger on the handle, their grip firm.

"You must see all sorts of interesting places," the man said, his tone conversational but probing. His suit was impeccably tailored, the tie a shade too bold for a man of his age. "Travel broadens the mind, doesn't it?"

Ahmed's smile remained fixed. "It certainly does."

The man's eyes narrowed slightly, the warmth in his voice cooling. "And Moscow? What do you think of our city?"

Ahmed met his gaze, unflinching. "It's a privilege to visit such a historic place."

The man nodded, his expression unreadable. "Enjoy your stay."

As the man shuffled away, Ahmed's fingers grazed his phone, the vibration of a new message faint but unmistakable. He didn't need to check it to know its contents. Watched.

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He slipped the phone back into his pocket, his jaw tightening imperceptibly. Whatever this man wanted, Ahmed had already decided—he wouldn't be caught off guard.



THE FLUORESCENT LIGHTS in the customs hall cast a sterile glow over the bustling crowd. Ahmed moved with his crew, their polished uniforms setting them apart from the sea of weary travelers. His suitcase rolled smoothly behind him, the familiar rhythm grounding him as his eyes flicked over the lines of passengers and officers.

The line moved at a crawl, giving Ahmed ample time to scan the room. A woman with sharp cheekbones and a sleek black blazer stood a few paces away, her posture deceptively casual. Her presence felt deliberate, too poised for someone waiting in line. She held a passport in one hand, her fingers tapping it rhythmically, as her piercing gaze swept over the crowd.

When her eyes landed on Ahmed, the moment stretched. She didn't look away. It wasn't an accident. Her lips curved into the faintest semblance of a smile, more calculation than warmth. Ahmed's pulse ticked faster, but his expression remained neutral, his training kicking in. He glanced past her, pretending not to notice.

"Customs is always such a drag," Dalia muttered beside him, her voice pitched low. "Do they ever look happy to see anyone?"

"They're not paid to smile," Ahmed replied evenly, his tone betraying none of the tension coiled in his chest.

Ahead, an officer waved the crew forward. Ahmed stepped up, presenting his passport with practiced ease. The officer barely glanced at him before stamping the document and nodding toward the exit.

Behind him, the woman in the blazer was still watching. Ahmed could feel the weight of her attention even as he moved through the

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gate, his focus narrowing to the task at hand. Whoever she was, she'd made her mark.



THE MECHANICAL HUM of the baggage carousel filled the air, punctuated by the occasional clatter of a suitcase hitting the metal frame. The crew clustered together near the belt, trading light jokes to fend off the monotony of waiting. Ahmed kept his distance, close enough to seem part of the group but far enough to maintain his vigilance.

His gaze flicked over the passengers milling around the carousel. Most were absorbed in their own worlds, eyes glued to screens or darting nervously between bags. But one man stood out—a burly figure in a leather jacket, leaning against a support pillar just beyond the carousel. His posture was too relaxed, his gaze lingering too long on Ahmed's group.

"Think I'll need three layers to survive this weather," Dalia said, tugging her scarf tighter around her neck. "What do you think, Ahmed?"

"You'll be fine," he replied, his eyes not leaving the man by the pillar. "Just keep moving."

Dalia laughed. "Always so practical."

The carousel lurched, and suitcases began spilling onto the belt. Ahmed reached for his bag, the familiar weight of it grounding him. As he turned, the man in the leather jacket shifted his position, his eyes locking briefly with Ahmed's. It wasn't a coincidence.

Ahmed kept his movements deliberate, careful not to betray his unease. Whoever the man was, his interest wasn't casual. Ahmed filed the face away, the lines of suspicion etched deeper with every second the man lingered.

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When the crew began moving toward the exit, Ahmed made sure to walk last, his senses on high alert. Whatever lay ahead in Moscow, it had already begun.



THE COLD AIR FROM THE airport's wide entry doors swept over them as the crew stood waiting for everyone to gather near the terminal exit. A low buzz of conversation hovered around them, mostly lighthearted, masking the fatigue of the long flight. Ahmed positioned himself toward the edge of the group, scanning the hall without appearing too deliberate.

"Did you see that passenger who tried to stuff an entire backpack into the seat pocket?" Dalia's voice broke the tension with an exaggerated groan. "I swear, they think those things are black holes."

"Bet they left half their snacks in there too," another crew member added, grinning as they hefted their carry-on.

Ahmed offered a faint smile but didn't join in. His focus was elsewhere. The man in the leather jacket was gone, and so was the sharp-eyed woman in the blazer. Still, a lingering unease kept his shoulders tight. Moscow had that effect on him—too many eyes, too much silence.

"You okay, Ahmed?" Dalia tilted her head, her auburn hair falling loose from its clip.

"Just thinking about dinner." His tone was smooth, nonchalant, his gaze dipping to the suitcase handle in his grip.

"Dinner already? We just landed!" She laughed, her breath visible in the cold air streaming through the entrance. "But seriously, you should join us. We're going borscht-hunting. No excuses."

He nodded once, not committing. He shifted slightly, ensuring he had a clear line of sight to the terminal's exit. A large clock above ticked forward with a mechanical hum, marking the seconds like a countdown.

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The chatter around him rose and fell, the crew oblivious to the tension Ahmed felt pressing against his skin. He adjusted his tie, his mind already moving forward, piecing together the faces he'd seen and the signals he'd picked up. If this was the start, what came next would demand precision.



AHMED'S PHONE BUZZED in his pocket—once, then a longer pause, then again. The pattern hit him like a jolt of cold water, sharper than the draft blowing in through the doors. A prearranged signal. Watched.

He pulled the phone out, keeping his movements fluid, unhurried. The screen displayed a single word, confirming what his instincts had already told him: Watched. He pressed the button to lock the screen and slid the phone back into his pocket.

“Everything good?” Dalia asked, catching the faint movement.

“Fine,” Ahmed replied, his voice steady, as if nothing had changed. “Just making sure my driver’s ready.”

Dalia raised an eyebrow but shrugged, turning back to her conversation with the others. Ahmed’s gaze moved past her, landing briefly on the line of taxis waiting outside. The street beyond was a blur of motion—luggage carts, rushing travelers, and the cold sheen of Moscow’s early evening.

A shadow shifted near one of the distant columns. It wasn’t the man in the leather jacket this time, but the posture was familiar—too still, too deliberate. Ahmed’s pulse ticked up as he adjusted his grip on the suitcase. The signal wasn’t a warning. It was confirmation.

“Alright, let’s move,” the crew leader called, ushering them toward the waiting bus.

Ahmed fell into step with the group, his pace easy, his expression unchanged. Inside, his thoughts sharpened. Eyes were on them. This

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wasn't a drill. Whatever had brought him to Moscow was already in motion, and he had no intention of being caught unprepared.



THE CREW GATHERED NEAR the terminal exit, a cluster of uniforms amid the swirling crowd of travelers. Their leader, a composed woman in her mid-forties with a clipboard tucked under her arm, took her position at the center. Her no-nonsense tone cut through the chatter as she began to issue instructions for their layover.

"Alright, everyone, listen up. The bus will take us directly to the hotel. Room keys will be handed out in the lobby, so no need to dig around your bags. Be ready for an early call tomorrow morning; we'll meet in the lobby at six sharp."

The crew responded with nods and murmurs of acknowledgment. Ahmed shifted slightly to the side, keeping an eye on the exit and the edges of the terminal. The hum of rolling suitcases and muffled announcements filled the space, but his focus was elsewhere. His instincts prickled as he caught a glimpse of movement beyond the glass doors—a figure lingering just out of view, silhouetted against the dim light outside.

"Ahmed," the crew leader's voice broke his thoughts. "All good?"

He nodded smoothly. "Yes, all set."

Her sharp gaze lingered for a second longer than necessary, but she didn't press. She turned back to the group, continuing her instructions. Ahmed let his eyes sweep the area again, catching Natalia, the woman in the sharp blazer, walking briskly across the concourse. She wasn't looking his way, but her movements felt calculated, purposeful. Her earlier presence hadn't been a coincidence.

The crew leader clapped her hands. "Alright, let's move. Stay together."

The group began to filter toward the exit, their laughter and light conversation blending into the terminal's din. Ahmed stayed near the

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back, ensuring he had a clear line of sight to the group and the shadows moving beyond the glass.



THE BUS IDLED AT THE curb, its engine humming low, casting faint wisps of exhaust into the frigid Moscow air. The crew climbed aboard, their chatter subdued as fatigue from the flight began to set in. Ahmed stepped onto the bus, his suitcase in hand, and scanned the layout before settling into a seat near the middle. From here, he could see both the front and rear exits.

He glanced out the window as the last of the crew boarded. Across the street, Natalia climbed into a black taxi. Her movements were quick, efficient, and deliberate. For a fleeting moment, their eyes met through the tinted glass. Then she was gone, her vehicle merging into the steady flow of traffic.

“Guess I’m crashing early tonight,” Dalia announced from a seat behind him, her voice cutting through his thoughts. “Borscht can wait.”

“Shame,” Ahmed replied lightly, his gaze flicking to the driver. The man’s hands rested casually on the wheel, but his glance in the rearview mirror lingered on Ahmed longer than it should have. The driver’s expression betrayed nothing, but Ahmed felt the subtle weight of the look.

The doors hissed shut, and the bus lurched forward, merging into the stream of cars heading toward the city center. The crew settled into small clusters, their voices low. Ahmed leaned back in his seat, his posture relaxed, but his senses remained alert. Outside, the lights of Moscow blurred into streaks of gold and silver against the night.

The tension in his chest coiled tighter. The signal, the shadowed figures, Natalia’s calculated presence—all of it was leading somewhere. Whatever game was in play, he wasn’t about to let himself fall behind.

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THE BUS HUMMED STEADILY as it wove through the streets of Moscow, its interior filled with muted chatter and the occasional rustle of bags. Ahmed sat motionless, his fingers lightly drumming the armrest, his gaze fixed on the darkened skyline outside. The city lights reflected off the bus windows, creating fractured patterns of gold and white that flickered across his face.

From the corner of his eye, he caught movement. The driver's glance flicked to the rearview mirror, lingering on Ahmed for a fraction too long. The man's face was impassive, but the deliberate nature of the look set Ahmed's instincts on edge. He leaned slightly forward, his body shifting as though to stretch, his own reflection in the window masking his observation of the driver.

Behind him, Dalia laughed softly at a joke another crew member made, her voice carrying a thread of fatigue. The rest of the crew seemed oblivious to anything unusual, their guard lowered as the city rushed past in a blur.

Ahmed straightened and let his eyes settle on the reflection again. The driver's focus returned to the road, his hands steady on the wheel, but Ahmed couldn't shake the subtle tension in the man's movements. The way he scanned the road, the precise shifts of his shoulders—it all felt rehearsed, intentional.

Leaning back, Ahmed shifted his gaze to the front of the bus, his expression calm but his thoughts sharpening. The driver wasn't just another piece of the background. Not tonight.



“THINK THE HOTEL WILL have decent coffee?” Dalia's voice broke into Ahmed's focus, light and playful. She leaned over the seat in front of him, her auburn hair slightly mussed from the long flight.

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“You’ll be lucky if they have instant,” another crew member quipped from across the aisle.

Ahmed allowed a small smile. “That’s why you bring your own. Moscow’s not known for its baristas.”

“Ahmed, always the planner.” Dalia smirked. “Bet you’ve got an emergency kit in that suitcase too.”

“Only if you count snacks,” Ahmed replied, his tone dry enough to draw a chuckle from the group.

The banter circled, weaving through half-formed plans for exploring Red Square and complaints about the bitter cold. Ahmed contributed just enough to stay part of the conversation, his attention split between his colleagues and the view outside.

The bus slowed for a red light, the brake squealing faintly. Ahmed’s eyes drifted to the sidewalk. A man stood at the corner, hands shoved deep into the pockets of a dark coat. His build was unmistakable: broad shoulders, thick neck, and the same leather jacket Ahmed had seen at the baggage carousel.

Their eyes met briefly before the man turned, disappearing into the crowd as the light changed. The bus jerked forward, leaving the figure behind, but the unease remained.



THE STREETS NARROWED as the bus moved closer to the city center, the modern high-rises giving way to older, ornate buildings with crumbling facades. Ahmed’s gaze shifted between the shifting cityscape and the reflections in the bus windows. He caught glimpses of his colleagues—some chatting, others nodding off—but his focus remained sharp, cataloging details.

The bus slowed again, halting at another light. This time, the intersection was quieter, the sidewalks nearly empty. Nearly.

Ahmed’s eyes locked onto a familiar figure leaning casually against a lamppost. It was the man from the carousel. The leather jacket was

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unzipped now, revealing a dark sweater beneath. His stance was relaxed, but his gaze tracked the bus like a predator marking its prey.

“Ahmed, you with us?” Dalia’s voice pulled him back for a moment. She tossed a questioning glance over her shoulder.

“Yeah,” he replied, his voice steady. “Just watching the city.”

The man by the lamppost turned away, walking briskly down a side street as the light turned green. Ahmed shifted in his seat, his body tense despite the calm expression he maintained. If the man was tailing them, he was making no effort to hide it.

The bus rolled forward, the city’s lights glinting off wet pavement. Ahmed adjusted his position, his thoughts racing. The pieces of the night were beginning to connect—Natalia’s deliberate presence, the signal on his phone, and now the man who’d appeared twice in less than an hour. Someone was watching, and the game was unfolding faster than he anticipated.



THE BUS PULLED TO A smooth stop outside the boutique hotel, its headlights casting long, pale shadows across the cobblestone street. Ahmed stood, his suitcase in hand, as the crew began to disembark in clusters. The cold Moscow air rushed in as the door hissed open, biting against his face even through the warmth of his uniform.

“Finally,” Dalia groaned, hauling her bag down the steps. “I feel like I’ve been sitting for days.”

“Welcome to international flying,” another crew member teased, their voice light despite the late hour.

Ahmed let a faint smile flicker across his lips as he waited his turn, intentionally positioning himself near the rear. His eyes scanned the street, noting the dim streetlamps, the parked cars, and the subtle flickers of movement in the shadows just beyond the reach of the light.

The burly man in the leather jacket wasn’t visible, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t there. Ahmed’s grip on his suitcase handle tightened

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slightly as he stepped off the bus. The cold hit him fully now, sharp and bracing, as he let his gaze sweep the area one last time.

The crew gathered near the hotel's entrance, their chatter muffled by the thick stone walls and ornate ironwork framing the door. Ahmed lingered at the edge of the group, his posture relaxed but his attention sharp. His instincts told him the game wasn't over yet.

"Ahmed, you coming?" Dalia called, her breath visible in the cold air.

He nodded, falling into step behind the others. The warm light spilling from the hotel lobby seemed inviting, but Ahmed knew better than to let it lull him into a false sense of security.



THE HOTEL LOBBY WAS small but elegant, with polished floors reflecting the warm glow of brass chandeliers. The crew clustered around the reception desk, their exhaustion evident in the slump of their shoulders and the quiet of their conversations. The receptionist, a young woman with sleek dark hair, smiled warmly as she handed out room keys.

"Welcome to Moscow," she said, her accent crisp but pleasant. "If you need anything, please call the front desk."

Ahmed moved toward the desk as the group thinned, letting the others take their keys first. When it was his turn, the receptionist looked up, her smile faltering for just a moment. Her eyes flicked to his face, something like recognition flashing briefly before she handed him his key.

"Room 214," she said, her voice steady but her fingers just a little too quick on the keyboard.

Ahmed took the key card, his fingers brushing hers. "Thank you."

He stepped back, slipping the card into his pocket as he noted her subtle glance toward the office door behind her. The hum of voices from beyond that door caught his attention, low and indistinct but

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persistent. He moved away from the desk, his expression calm as he joined the crew milling about the lobby.



AHMED LINGERED NEAR a small seating area, his phone in hand as he scrolled absently through the screen. The crew had begun filtering toward the elevators, their fatigue taking precedence over any lingering conversations. Dalia waved briefly as she stepped into an elevator, her suitcase rolling behind her.

“You should sleep,” she called, her tone teasing. “Don’t overthink it.”

Ahmed offered a faint smile but didn’t respond. Once the elevator doors closed, he let his focus shift entirely. The lobby was quieter now, its warmth contrasting sharply with the tension coiling in his chest. He noted the placement of the cameras, their lenses swiveling methodically to cover every corner of the room.

The hum of conversation from the office door behind the reception desk grew more distinct. A man’s voice, low and measured, carried just enough for Ahmed to catch a few words—“crew” and “timing.” His pulse quickened, but he forced himself to remain still, his fingers tapping lazily against his phone screen.

He rose after a moment, moving toward the elevators with deliberate slowness. As the doors slid open, he stepped inside, his suitcase in tow, and hit the button for his floor.

The elevator ascended with a quiet hum, and Ahmed leaned lightly against the wall. His eyes stayed on the small display panel, but his mind churned. Whatever lay ahead, this layover had already proven far from routine.

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Chapter 2: The Honey Trap



AHMED STEPPED INTO his hotel room and let the door click shut behind him. The faint scent of lavender from the freshly laundered sheets mixed with the muted aroma of polished wood. The room was simple—just enough luxury to suggest care without being ostentatious. Beige walls framed a small desk, a single chair, and a neatly made bed with crisp white linens. A floor lamp cast a warm, inviting glow across the polished wood floors, though Ahmed's attention lingered on the shadows the light couldn't reach.

He placed his suitcase by the bed, the familiar sound of the wheels on the floor grounding him for a moment. Then he flicked on the overhead light, brightening the space in a way that felt too open, too exposed. Crossing the room, he approached the window and pulled aside the thick curtain.

The view overlooked a quiet side street, its cobblestone surface glistening faintly from melting snow. The streetlamp outside flickered intermittently, casting uneven light on the building opposite. Across the way, a man leaned against a lamppost, his collar turned up against the cold. Ahmed's gaze lingered for only a moment before he stepped back, the curtain falling neatly into place. The man hadn't moved—hadn't even looked his way—but Ahmed wasn't one to dismiss details.

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He set to work, his movements silent and methodical. Years of training had drilled it into him—no place was safe until you made it so. Starting with the air vent above the window, he ran his hand along its edges, feeling for any irregularities. Nothing. He moved to the desk, sliding out each drawer slowly. The tracks were smooth, the contents sparse. A standard notepad and pen lay in the top drawer, their placement too deliberate to seem natural. Ahmed flipped through the notepad's pages, feeling for impressions left by previous use. It was blank.

Turning to the mirror above the desk, he ran his fingers lightly along its frame. The glass reflected his sharp, focused expression, but no hidden devices revealed themselves. Still, he didn't stop. He knew better than to rely on the obvious.

Finally, he knelt by the bed, pressing his hands against the mattress edges and feeling for any bumps or protrusions. He lifted it slightly, glancing at the box spring and the space beneath. Clean. Satisfied, he stood and exhaled quietly, though the tension in his shoulders remained.

The vibration in his pocket startled him, though his face betrayed nothing. Reaching for his phone, he unlocked the screen with a quick swipe. A discreet notification from his secure app flashed across the display: One New Message.

Ahmed tapped it, the text expanding to reveal the words: "Surveillance active. Stay low. Wait for contact." His lips pressed into a thin line as he read, the weight of the message settling heavily in his chest.

Crossing back to the window, he parted the curtain just enough to glance outside. The man at the lamppost was gone. The street below was empty now, save for a light breeze stirring the snow along the curb. Ahmed let the curtain fall back into place, his mind already calculating next steps.

Whatever this night had in store, it had already begun.

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Ahmed sat at the small desk, his back to the window, the warm light overhead casting faint shadows on the walls. His phone sat in his palm, the black screen reflecting his own expression back at him—focused, composed, but with a flicker of unease just beneath the surface. He unlocked the secure app again, though he already knew what it would say. The same message glowed on the screen: “Surveillance active. Stay low. Wait for contact.”

He leaned back in the chair, his thumb brushing idly against the edges of the phone. The message didn’t surprise him. The signs had been there since the airport—the lingering glances, the subtle signals. Still, confirmation turned suspicion into something heavier, a reminder that his every move tonight would be measured.

He placed the phone face down on the desk and let his eyes drift toward the window. The curtain hung still, but his mind replayed the scene outside: the man leaning against the lamppost, his posture casual yet deliberate. He hadn’t looked up, hadn’t moved in any way that screamed danger, but Ahmed knew better than to dismiss a shadow that lingered too long.

The chair creaked faintly as he leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. He debated responding to the message, but the idea sat uneasily with him. Any reply could be intercepted, traced, used against him. No, silence was better for now. His thumb hovered over the app’s reply function before he locked the screen and slid the phone back into his pocket.

He stood, stretching his shoulders as his mind shifted to the next step. The weight of the message clung to him, not in its words but in what it implied. Surveillance active. Who was watching, and how close were they?

Unzipping his suitcase, he pulled out a neatly pressed shirt and a dark tie. This wasn’t the night for rest, no matter how inviting the bed looked. The hotel bar would already be filling with guests and crew members, their conversations a perfect cover for blending in. Too

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public for anything overt, but public enough to overhear something useful—or avoid something dangerous.

As he adjusted his collar in the small mirror above the desk, his reflection caught his attention. His movements were precise, practiced, but there was something in his eyes—a tension that wasn't there earlier. He straightened the tie, his fingers brushing the fabric lightly, and forced himself to take a steadying breath.

Approaching the door, Ahmed grabbed his room key and slipped it into his pocket alongside his phone. His fingers brushed the smooth surface of the device once before falling away. He had no illusions about tonight. The message hadn't been a warning. It was a reminder: the game had started.



DESCENDING THE GRAND staircase into the hotel lounge, Ahmed adjusted his tie, his polished shoes muffled against the plush carpet. The air carried the warm scent of wood smoke and faint traces of citrus from the drinks being served. The space buzzed with muted chatter, punctuated by bursts of laughter from a group near the hearth. A fire crackled softly in the stone fireplace, its flickering light reflecting off polished brass fixtures and casting elongated shadows across the walls.

Ahmed's eyes swept the room, taking in its details. A scattering of low tables held groups of travelers and locals alike, their faces illuminated by the amber glow of hanging lanterns. The bartenders moved with precision behind the sleek counter, pouring drinks and exchanging polite smiles. Everything about the lounge was designed to put guests at ease. For Ahmed, it had the opposite effect.

In the corner booth, Dalia spotted him and waved, her scarf looped casually around her shoulders. She sat with three other crew members, their posture relaxed, their drinks halfway gone. Exhaustion clung to them like a second skin, but it hadn't dulled their smiles.

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“Finally decided to join us,” Dalia teased as Ahmed approached, sliding into the booth beside her. Her hair was slightly tousled, loose strands framing her face in a way that gave her an almost carefree air.

“What’s your poison?” she asked, her grin playful.

“Water,” Ahmed replied smoothly, his faint smile polite but measured. “Need to stay sharp.”

“Boring,” one of the others chimed in, lifting their glass of amber liquid in mock disapproval. “But respectable.”

Ahmed nodded, letting the lighthearted banter flow around him without fully committing to it. His focus shifted, subtly scanning the room. A man in an overcoat stood near the bar, phone in hand. At first glance, he appeared absorbed in the screen, but his occasional, deliberate glances toward the entrance suggested otherwise.

The sound of clicking heels drew Ahmed’s attention. A woman in a sleek black dress entered, her confidence radiating in the way she carried herself. She paused just inside the doorway, her sharp eyes scanning the room. When her gaze swept past him, he felt the deliberate weight of it. She moved toward the bar, her pace unhurried, and leaned lightly against the counter as she ordered a drink.

“Ahmed, you with us?” Dalia’s voice pulled his focus back to the table. She raised an eyebrow, her tone half-curious, half-teasing.

“Always.” He lifted his glass of water in a mock toast, a faint smile gracing his lips.

But his thoughts lingered on the woman. Her presence felt intentional, every movement calculated. She was no ordinary guest, of that he was certain. And in a room designed to make its occupants relax, her arrival was anything but subtle.



THE LOW MURMUR OF THE lounge briefly shifted as the door swung open, letting in a gust of the cold Moscow night. Ahmed glanced up instinctively, his eyes narrowing slightly at the figure

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stepping in. A woman in a sleek black dress entered, her heels clicking softly against the polished floor. She carried herself with the confidence of someone who always knew they were being watched. Her blonde hair, swept neatly to one side, framed strikingly sharp features, and her eyes scanned the room with calculated precision.

She paused for only a moment, taking in the scene before moving toward the bar with unhurried steps. Ahmed's gaze lingered on her longer than he intended, a quiet alarm ringing in the back of his mind. Something about her seemed too deliberate, too poised.

Dalia's voice cut into his thoughts. "She's something, huh?"

Ahmed turned back to the table, his expression carefully neutral. "Who?"

Dalia grinned, tilting her head toward the bar. "Don't play coy. You noticed her the second she walked in."

"She's just another guest," Ahmed replied, his tone light. "The kind Moscow seems to specialize in."

"Sure," Dalia teased, but her attention shifted back to the others as they debated their plans for the next day.

Ahmed allowed himself another glance at the bar. The woman stood with one hand resting lightly on the counter, ordering a drink with the ease of someone who had done it a thousand times before. The bartender responded quickly, sliding a glass toward her. She lifted it to her lips, her movements precise, almost rehearsed.

As she turned slightly, her gaze swept toward Ahmed's group. Their eyes met for the briefest of moments. There was no smile, no acknowledgment—just a fleeting connection that carried the weight of intent. Ahmed felt his pulse quicken but forced his body to remain still. He couldn't afford to reveal the slightest hint of suspicion.



THE WOMAN AT THE BAR didn't linger alone for long. With her drink in hand, she sauntered toward Ahmed's group, her steps

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unhurried but purposeful. Dalia, ever the extrovert, noticed her approach and waved her over with a broad smile.

“Join us!” Dalia called out, her voice bright with the ease of someone who had no reservations about strangers.

The woman hesitated just long enough to seem polite before stepping closer. “Thank you,” she said smoothly, her voice carrying a faint Russian accent. “I couldn’t help but overhear your lively conversation. You all seem like such a fun group.”

“We’re a crew,” Dalia explained, gesturing at the others. “Just touched down from Cairo. What about you?”

“Just visiting,” the woman replied, her smile faint but charming. Her eyes flicked briefly to Ahmed before returning to Dalia. “Natalia.”

“Dalia,” she replied, gesturing to each of the others. When she reached Ahmed, Natalia’s gaze lingered. “And this is Ahmed. Our very own silent observer.”

Ahmed offered a small nod, keeping his expression neutral. “It’s a pleasure.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Natalia replied, her tone smooth but unreadable. She raised her glass slightly. “To new acquaintances.”

As the others toasted, Ahmed studied her with the same careful detachment he reserved for potential threats. Natalia’s posture was relaxed, her tone disarming, but there was something in her eyes—a sharpness that felt out of place in the casual warmth of the lounge.

“So, Ahmed,” Natalia began, tilting her head slightly. “Do you always sit so quietly, or is it just tonight?”

The others laughed lightly, but Ahmed caught the glint of curiosity behind her words. “I prefer to listen,” he replied, matching her tone. “You learn more that way.”

“Wise,” Natalia murmured. Her gaze didn’t waver, even as the others continued their chatter. It was clear her interest was not casual, and Ahmed couldn’t ignore the weight of her attention.

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For the rest of the evening, Natalia's presence subtly shifted the group's dynamic. Ahmed kept his responses measured, deflecting her questions with practiced ease. But beneath the surface, his mind worked tirelessly, piecing together the threads of a game she hadn't fully revealed.



THE CONVERSATION FLOWED easily among the group, buoyed by Dalia's infectious energy. Natalia leaned slightly forward, her posture open but calculated, her drink balanced delicately in one hand. Her laugh, light and practiced, blended seamlessly with the others'. To anyone watching, she appeared to be just another guest, enjoying the moment.

"Cairo must be fascinating," Natalia said, her eyes landing on Ahmed. Her tone was conversational, but her gaze carried an edge of curiosity that went deeper. "The history, the culture—it must feel like stepping into another time."

"It's certainly unique," Ahmed replied, his voice even. "Never the same twice."

Natalia tilted her head slightly, as if mulling over his answer. "And the airline must keep you busy. You must see so much of the world."

"It has its perks," Ahmed said. "Though it's not all sightseeing. We're on the clock most of the time."

Her smile lingered, sharp at the edges. "Still, Cairo to Moscow is an interesting route. Not one I'd expect to be so busy."

Dalia jumped in, her voice breaking the tension Ahmed felt tightening in his chest. "It's all the tourists trying to escape the cold! We're doing them a favor."

Laughter rippled through the group, but Natalia's attention didn't waver. "Of course," she said lightly, her tone masking an undercurrent of intent. "And you must have a routine by now. Long layovers, hotel bars. It sounds glamorous."

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Ahmed took a measured sip of his water. “It’s work. Same as anything else.”

Natalia’s gaze lingered a beat too long, as if waiting for him to elaborate. When he didn’t, she turned her attention back to the others, her smile warm and inviting. But Ahmed could feel the unspoken questions hanging in the air. Her casual interest had been anything but.



AHMED ROSE FROM THE table, his empty glass in hand. “Getting a refill,” he said, his tone offhand as he stepped toward the bar. The low hum of conversation faded slightly behind him, though he could still hear Dalia laughing at some joke he hadn’t caught.

The bartender nodded as Ahmed approached. “Another water?”
“Please.”

As he waited, he felt it: the weight of someone’s gaze on his back. He didn’t turn immediately, keeping his movements deliberate. When the bartender placed the glass in front of him, Ahmed thanked him, then turned casually, his eyes scanning the room.

Natalia’s gaze met his from across the lounge. She didn’t look away. Instead, a slow smile curved her lips, subtle and knowing. It wasn’t an invitation—it was something far more deliberate. A test, perhaps. Or a warning.

Ahmed held her gaze for a moment before lifting his glass slightly, acknowledging her without committing to anything more. Her smile widened just a fraction before she shifted her attention back to the group, laughing at something Dalia had said.

Returning to the table, Ahmed felt the tension in his chest coil tighter. Natalia’s presence wasn’t accidental. She was here for a reason, and Ahmed had no intention of letting her dictate the terms of their unspoken game.



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THE CONVERSATION AT the table had shifted into lighter territory, with Dalia recounting a mishap on their previous flight. The group's laughter echoed softly through the lounge, blending with the low hum of other guests. Ahmed listened with half an ear, his focus still divided between Natalia's presence and the faint unease curling in his gut. She had settled into the group effortlessly, but it was her silence now that stood out. Natalia's sharp gaze flitted between the crew members as if cataloging them, her smile perfectly measured.

"Alright," Dalia announced suddenly, her voice cutting through the comfortable lull. "This place is cozy, but we need something more exciting. Live music. Moscow's got that covered."

One of the other crew members groaned. "Dalia, it's past midnight. Some of us like sleep."

"Sleep is for the weak," she shot back, grinning. Her attention shifted to Natalia. "You're from here, right? You must know the best spots."

Natalia tilted her head slightly, the movement graceful yet deliberate. "I might have an idea or two," she said. Her voice carried an undertone of amusement, as if she'd been waiting for the opportunity. "There's a lounge not far from here. Great atmosphere, excellent jazz."

"That sounds perfect," Dalia said, clapping her hands together. "Come on, Ahmed. You're not escaping this."

Ahmed leaned back slightly, considering his options. "You really want to wander Moscow at this hour?"

Dalia raised an eyebrow. "You scared of the cold?"

Before Ahmed could reply, Natalia's voice interjected. "It's safe. And it's worth it," she said smoothly. "I'll guide you all there. You'll see another side of the city."

Her words carried an edge, a subtle challenge wrapped in charm. Ahmed met her gaze, his thoughts turning rapidly. If she wanted him to follow, there was a reason. He couldn't let her control the narrative, not without understanding her intent.

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“Fine,” Ahmed said after a beat, his tone measured. “Lead the way.”

Natalia’s smile widened slightly, just enough to seem genuine. Dalia clapped her hands in victory, already reaching for her coat. The others groaned but stood, gathering their belongings with the slow resignation of the reluctantly convinced.

Natalia rose as well, her movements fluid. “It’s not far,” she said, slipping her coat over her shoulders. “Just enough to wake you up before the music does.”

As the group began to file out, Ahmed lingered a step behind, his eyes trailing Natalia as she led them toward the door. The way she moved, effortlessly commanding without being overt, sent another ripple of caution through him. She had invited them, but it felt as though he were the target.

His instincts told him this wasn’t an ordinary outing, but refusing would have drawn attention. He adjusted his scarf, the chill from the door meeting his face as they stepped outside into the crisp Moscow night. The cobblestone streets stretched ahead, glowing faintly under the golden light of streetlamps.

Natalia glanced over her shoulder, catching Ahmed’s eye. Her smile deepened, almost imperceptibly, before she turned back to guide them forward. Ahmed followed, his every step a calculated measure against the unpredictable path ahead.



THE GROUP STEPPED INTO the chill of the Moscow night, their breath fogging the air as laughter punctuated the otherwise quiet street. Dalia clutched her coat tightly, her scarf trailing in the breeze, while another crew member muttered complaints about the cold. Natalia led them, her strides confident and sure, the faint click of her heels echoing against the cobblestones.

“This way,” Natalia said over her shoulder, her voice carrying easily in the stillness. “The lounge isn’t far.”

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Ahmed lagged slightly behind the group, his steps measured as his eyes darted between shadows stretching across the old buildings. Streetlamps cast a warm glow, their light bouncing off patches of melting snow. The streets were nearly deserted, the occasional car slipping past like a phantom. His instincts hummed, the atmosphere too perfect, too controlled.

"You're awfully quiet back there," Dalia called, turning briefly to glance at Ahmed. Her tone was teasing, but her smile was genuine. "Don't tell me the cold's got you speechless."

"Just taking in the city," Ahmed replied, his voice even. He offered a faint smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Good," Natalia interjected, her pace slowing slightly as she matched Ahmed's stride. "Moscow has a way of revealing itself at night. It's quieter, more honest."

"Honest?" Ahmed asked, his brow lifting. He adjusted his scarf, his expression calm as he met her gaze. "I'd say the shadows hide more than they reveal."

Natalia's lips curved in a faint smile, her eyes glinting under the golden streetlight. "Only if you're looking in the wrong places."

She stepped ahead again, seamlessly rejoining the group as they rounded a corner. Ahmed followed, his mind dissecting every word she'd said. Her responses were measured, designed to provoke without giving too much away.

The group turned onto a narrow street, its cobblestones uneven and slick with melted ice. The faint strains of jazz drifted toward them, the low, soulful notes cutting through the night. Ahead, a small neon sign glowed faintly, marking the entrance to the lounge.

Dalia perked up, her pace quickening. "That must be it. I hope they have something warm to drink."

Natalia glanced back at Ahmed, her smile lingering for a moment longer than necessary before she turned toward the door. "You'll like it," she said to the group, her tone light but laced with certainty.

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Ahmed's steps faltered briefly as his gaze shifted to a parked car further down the street. Its windows were dark, its engine off, but its presence felt intentional. He tightened his grip on his coat, filing the detail away as they approached the lounge.

Inside, the glow of the streetlights faded, replaced by the muted ambiance of low-hanging bulbs and the steady hum of music. Natalia held the door open for the group, her expression unreadable as Ahmed stepped past her. He didn't miss the subtle glance she cast his way, the faintest flicker of amusement or perhaps warning.

Whatever game Natalia was playing, Ahmed knew he was already part of it. The question now was who held the advantage.



THE WARM, LOW HUM OF jazz washed over them as they stepped into the lounge. The dim lighting softened the edges of the room, casting shadows against walls lined with dark wood and glinting metal accents. A live band played near the far corner, their rhythm smooth, the trumpet's soft notes weaving through the murmured conversations of patrons scattered across small, round tables. The air carried a subtle blend of cigars, polished oak, and something faintly floral.

Natalia led the group, her pace slowing as she surveyed the room with a practiced eye. Her coat slid off her shoulders in one fluid motion, revealing the sleek black dress that seemed tailor-made for the dim ambiance. She handed the coat to a waiting attendant, her smile polite but distant. She turned to the others, her voice light but deliberate.

"Pick a table near the music. You'll want to feel it up close."

Dalia grinned, clearly enchanted by the space. "This is perfect. I knew you'd have the inside scoop."

The crew followed her lead, settling into a table at the edge of the band's spotlight. Ahmed held back, taking a moment to absorb the scene. The lounge was crowded but not chaotic, its energy humming at

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just the right level to hide whispered conversations while still feeling alive. His eyes flicked to the bar. A tall man in a tailored suit sat nursing a drink, his gaze focused on nothing in particular. A woman adjusted her seat near the far wall, her movements deliberate. Every detail mattered.

“Ahmed,” Natalia’s voice drew him back. She stood near the table, her head tilted slightly. “Don’t get lost already.”

He stepped forward, his expression calm. “Just taking it in.”

She smiled, a flicker of amusement in her eyes. “Good. This place deserves it.”

As the group settled in, Natalia signaled a server with a subtle lift of her hand. The man appeared quickly, his posture straight but deferential. Natalia leaned toward him, her voice low as she ordered. The crew chatted easily, their fatigue seemingly forgotten in the warmth of the room.

“You’re going to love this,” Natalia said, her tone carrying easily over the music. “Their signature cocktail is exceptional.”

Dalia laughed, tapping the table with her fingers. “I’ll take your word for it.”

When the drinks arrived, Natalia raised her glass, her smile widening. “To new friends and new places.”

The others echoed her, lifting their glasses with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Ahmed raised his glass of water, his movements smooth, his focus locked on Natalia. She sipped slowly, her gaze flicking to him as if to test his reaction.

“You don’t drink?” she asked, her voice soft but pointed.

“Not tonight,” Ahmed replied. He met her gaze without flinching. “I like to keep a clear head.”

“Admirable,” she said, her tone light. But her eyes lingered on him a moment longer before she turned her attention to Dalia, who was already gushing about the lounge’s atmosphere.

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The music shifted, the bassline deepening as the band moved into a slower, more melancholic tune. Ahmed leaned back in his chair, letting the conversation wash over him. Natalia moved seamlessly among the group, her charm effortless, her laughter soft but precise. She was drawing them in, and they didn't seem to notice.

Ahmed noticed. Every word, every glance, every subtle gesture felt like a thread being woven into a web. And he knew better than to let himself get caught.



AHMED STOOD AT THE bar, his fingers curled loosely around his glass of water. The band had shifted into a slower tempo, the notes of the saxophone winding through the room like smoke. The dim light from the low-hanging bulbs caught the faint shimmer of condensation on his glass. He let his gaze drift across the lounge, noting the subtle movements of patrons and staff. His instincts warned him to stay alert, though nothing seemed immediately out of place.

"Taking a break from the group?" Natalia's voice slid into the quiet space beside him.

He turned slightly, watching as she leaned against the bar, her posture relaxed but purposeful. The sleek lines of her dress caught the light, framing her with an elegance that felt deliberate. She gestured to the bartender with a slight lift of her hand.

"Just needed a moment," Ahmed replied, his voice calm. "Lively group."

"They are," Natalia agreed, her tone carrying a touch of humor. "Your friend Dalia has enough energy to light up Red Square."

The bartender placed a glass of deep red wine in front of her. She picked it up, her movements unhurried, her gaze still on him.

"You're quieter, though," she added. "Watching. Listening. It's intriguing."

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Ahmed took a sip of his water, letting the silence between them stretch for a moment. “Sometimes you see more that way.”

Natalia’s lips curved slightly. “A man of mystery. I like that.”

Her tone was playful, but Ahmed caught the sharpness beneath it. Her words felt like a test, each one designed to probe for a reaction. He kept his expression neutral, his body language relaxed, refusing to give her anything more than what she asked.

“Does the quiet come with secrets?” she asked, tilting her head. “Or is it just habit?”

Ahmed leaned back slightly, his posture mirroring hers. “Everyone has secrets. Some are just better at keeping them.”

She laughed softly, the sound low and measured. “Touché.”

Her gaze dipped to his glass, then back to his face. “No drink for you tonight? Seems a shame not to enjoy the local flavors.”

“I prefer a clear head,” Ahmed said. “Never know when you’ll need it.”

“Smart,” Natalia murmured, her voice thoughtful. She took a slow sip of her wine, her eyes lingering on him over the rim of the glass.

The music shifted again, the melody deepening. Around them, the murmur of conversation rose and fell. Natalia set her glass down and leaned slightly closer, her tone dropping to something more private.

“So, Cairo,” she said. “It’s an unusual starting point for Moscow. Not the most direct route.”

Ahmed felt the question buried in her words. He shrugged lightly, keeping his response casual. “It’s just work. Routes change all the time.”

“Of course,” Natalia replied, her smile returning. “But still, it makes me wonder. You seem... adaptable.”

“I’ve learned to be,” Ahmed said, his gaze steady on hers. “Comes with the territory.”

For a moment, neither spoke. The music filled the space between them, the faint hum of the lounge pressing in. Natalia’s expression

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softened, but her eyes remained sharp, studying him as if trying to peel back a layer he'd carefully constructed.

"Well," she said finally, her tone shifting back to something lighter. "If nothing else, you're good company for a quiet conversation."

"Glad I could help," Ahmed replied, his voice cool but polite.

Natalia smiled again, but this time, it didn't quite reach her eyes. She picked up her glass, her fingers brushing against his as she reached past him to grab a napkin. The movement was deliberate, her touch fleeting but unmistakable.

Ahmed didn't react, his focus narrowing as she stepped back into the lounge's low light. Her retreat felt like a move in a game he hadn't fully deciphered yet, but one he knew he couldn't afford to lose.



THE BAND PICKED UP its tempo, the rhythm swelling with an infectious energy that rippled through the lounge. Laughter bubbled from the crew's table as Dalia recounted another over-the-top story, her animated gestures drawing smiles from everyone around her. Ahmed, leaning slightly against the bar, kept his attention divided. His gaze swept the room in measured arcs, cataloging the faces, the exits, and the ebb and flow of movement.

Natalia, poised just within his peripheral vision, shifted closer. She placed her glass on the bar with an intentional softness, her presence a subtle gravity that pulled his focus. The delicate scent of her perfume curled through the space between them—light but unmistakable, as calculated as her every movement.

"You're good at this," she murmured, her voice low enough that it didn't carry beyond them.

"Good at what?" Ahmed's tone was mild, his expression unchanging as he met her gaze.

"Playing the game," Natalia replied, tilting her head slightly. Her smile was faint but deliberate, the kind that suggested she already knew

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the answer to her own question. "Staying just close enough to watch, but never too close to be seen."

Ahmed took a measured sip of his water, setting the glass down with precision. "Some games are worth watching."

"True," Natalia allowed, her smile widening just enough to reach her eyes. "But they're much more fun when you join in."

Before Ahmed could respond, she leaned in as though to emphasize her words. Her hand brushed against his arm, fleeting but deliberate, her fingers just grazing the fabric of his jacket. The contact was light enough to seem accidental, but the timing made it impossible to ignore.

Ahmed's response was immediate but controlled. He shifted slightly, a faint smile touching his lips as he glanced down at the brief contact. "Careful. People might think you're trying to distract me."

Natalia's laughter was soft and unhurried, a musical counterpoint to the band's quickening tempo. "And would that work?"

"It depends," Ahmed replied evenly, his gaze steady on hers. "What's the goal?"

She straightened, her posture as graceful as her smile. "Maybe it's just curiosity. Or maybe I like to test the waters."

Ahmed tilted his head slightly, allowing a faint chuckle. "You seem like someone who doesn't test anything lightly."

Her eyes narrowed, amusement dancing within them. "And you seem like someone who rarely lets their guard down."

He gave a small shrug. "I've learned it's better that way."

Natalia didn't press further, but the spark of intrigue in her expression remained. She picked up her glass again, her fingers lingering on the stem as though contemplating her next move.

"Smart," she said finally, her voice thoughtful. "But even the smartest can slip."

The comment hung in the air for a moment, its double meaning unmissable. Ahmed's pulse quickened, but his expression remained

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calm, unreadable. He shifted his weight slightly, maintaining his relaxed demeanor as he glanced toward the crew's table.

"They seem to be having a good time," he said, deflecting the conversation with a subtle gesture toward the others.

Natalia's smile didn't falter. "They do. But I think you're the one having the most interesting night."

She moved back toward the table, her steps fluid, leaving Ahmed to process the faint tension her words had left behind. Every interaction with her felt like a move in a game that neither of them had fully named. And yet, Ahmed couldn't shake the feeling that she was always one step ahead.



THE LOUNGE HAD SETTLED into a quiet rhythm, the lively conversations mellowing into hushed tones as the night deepened. The band's tempo softened, the jazz a slow undercurrent that matched the dim, golden glow of the lights. Ahmed leaned back slightly in his chair, his body language relaxed, but his mind remained sharp, cataloging details. The faint clink of glasses, the shuffle of a waiter's steps, the discreet movements of patrons—it all filtered through his senses.

Natalia remained near the center of the group, her presence commanding but unobtrusive. She laughed at a comment Dalia made, the sound perfectly calibrated to blend with the atmosphere. Yet, even as she engaged the others, her attention flicked toward Ahmed, subtle and fleeting, but impossible to miss.

"Tell me," Natalia began, her voice cutting gently through the lull. Her gaze swept the table before settling on Ahmed. "How does Cairo compare to Moscow? The heat must feel worlds away from this."

"It does," Ahmed replied, his tone light. "But every city has its own rhythm. Moscow's just colder."

Dalia chuckled, gesturing toward her scarf. "You're too polite, Ahmed. Just say it—the cold's miserable. I'm not made for this."

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“Adaptation is key,” Natalia said smoothly, her eyes never leaving Ahmed. “Isn’t that right?”

Ahmed inclined his head slightly, his expression calm. “It is. You learn to adjust.”

Natalia’s smile deepened, her tone sharpening just enough to cut through the conversational haze. “And you seem like someone who adjusts quickly. Cairo, Moscow, wherever you land—there’s no hesitation.”

Her words were casual enough to pass for idle curiosity, but the weight behind them struck Ahmed like a note out of tune. He met her gaze, careful to keep his expression neutral. “It’s part of the job.”

“Of course,” Natalia said, lifting her glass. She took a slow sip, her eyes thoughtful. “But not everyone does it so seamlessly.”

The faintest pause hung between them, subtle but loaded. Ahmed tilted his head, allowing a small smile. “You pick things up when you travel enough.”

“Or when you’re trained for it,” Natalia murmured, her voice low enough that the others didn’t catch it. The edge in her tone was as deliberate as the look in her eyes.

Ahmed held her gaze for a beat longer, his thoughts racing. The words were innocuous on the surface, but the implication beneath them was unmistakable. She was testing him, probing for a reaction, for confirmation of something unspoken.

He leaned back slightly, letting his smile shift into something faintly amused. “Travel is the best training.”

Natalia didn’t blink. “For some, maybe.”

Dalia, oblivious to the undercurrent between them, leaned in, her voice cutting through the moment. “Alright, Natalia, tell us—what’s the best place you’ve ever been? You must have a list.”

Natalia shifted her attention smoothly, her expression softening as she turned to Dalia. “It depends on what you’re looking for. Paris for beauty, Berlin for energy, Cairo for... secrets.”

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Ahmed stilled, though his expression didn't betray the quickening of his pulse. The comment felt deliberate, aimed directly at him. He watched Natalia as she continued, her tone airy, her words aimed at the table but carefully calculated.

"Cairo has layers," she said. "It's a city that hides its heart. Only those who know where to look can really find it."

Dalia laughed. "Sounds poetic. Ahmed, you agree?"

Ahmed glanced at Natalia, his tone even. "It's an old city. History shapes it."

Natalia's smile lingered. "And history always leaves traces, doesn't it?"

"Depends on who's looking," Ahmed said, matching her tone.

Natalia held his gaze for a fraction too long before finally turning back to the group. The tension eased, the conversation shifting to lighter topics, but the weight of her words stayed with Ahmed. She knew more than she let on, that much was clear. The game was no longer subtle, and Natalia was signaling she wasn't playing by chance.



THE LOUNGE HAD STARTED to thin out, with only a handful of tables still occupied. Glasses clinked faintly as the waitstaff moved through the room, collecting the remnants of the night. The band wrapped up another slow number, their instruments humming into silence before the pianist began an understated tune. The hour hung heavily, pressing down like a quiet signal for the evening to wind down.

Dalia stretched her arms over her head, her voice lilting with exhaustion. "Alright, I'm officially tapping out. Moscow nightlife is winning tonight."

One of the other crew members nodded, stifling a yawn. "Same here. If I don't get to bed now, I'll be useless tomorrow."

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Natalia leaned back in her chair, her posture still poised, her expression unreadable. "You've done well for tourists," she said, a trace of humor threading through her tone. "Moscow can be relentless."

"Dalia thrives on relentless," Ahmed said lightly, his voice cutting through the fading chatter. He kept his gaze on Natalia, watching for the faint shifts in her expression that might reveal her next move.

"Not tonight," Dalia groaned, pulling her scarf tighter. "I'm officially human."

The group laughed softly, the sound mingling with the lounge's fading hum. Ahmed remained seated, his focus steady on Natalia as she gathered her belongings. Her movements were smooth, deliberate, as though every gesture was part of a plan. She stood, sliding her coat over her shoulders with practiced grace.

"Thank you for trusting me with your evening," she said, her smile warm enough to charm but distant enough to remain elusive. "I hope it gave you a little taste of the city."

"It was perfect," Dalia said, her enthusiasm genuine. "You'll have to guide us again sometime."

Natalia inclined her head slightly. "We'll see."

Her gaze flicked to Ahmed, her smile sharpening at the edges. "And you? Did you enjoy yourself, Ahmed?"

"Every moment," Ahmed replied, his tone even. The air between them felt charged, the kind of tension that came from unspoken challenges. "You make an excellent guide."

"I'm glad you think so," Natalia said, her eyes holding his a beat too long. "I'd hate to disappoint."

Dalia, oblivious to the undercurrent, nudged Ahmed's shoulder. "You're always so formal. We'll work on that."

Natalia's smile widened faintly before she turned toward the exit, her heels clicking softly against the polished floor. The group began to disperse, their laughter echoing faintly as they made their way toward

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the coat check. Ahmed lingered, allowing himself a moment to observe Natalia as she moved toward the door.

She paused at the entrance, her hand resting lightly on the frame. Her head turned slightly, just enough to let her eyes meet his once more. There was something in her gaze—an unspoken warning, or perhaps an invitation. Then she stepped outside, the door closing softly behind her.

Ahmed's pulse steadied as he pushed his chair back, rising to his feet. The game had shifted again, the balance of power uncertain. As he moved toward the exit, the weight of her gaze lingered, a reminder that whatever lay ahead, Natalia wasn't finished with him yet.



THE COLD AIR OUTSIDE bit at Ahmed's skin as he stepped onto the street, the fading hum of the lounge's music disappearing behind him. The cobblestone streets stretched ahead, lined with the glow of antique streetlamps. His footsteps were measured, blending into the stillness of the Moscow night. He adjusted his scarf, his senses sharpened by the quiet.

Ahead, Dalia and the others walked in a loose group, their laughter rising occasionally, though subdued by exhaustion. They turned a corner, disappearing from sight as they neared the hotel. Ahmed lagged behind intentionally, his pace slowing as he scanned the street.

A black car idled at the end of the block, its headlights off, its engine faintly humming. The vehicle looked unremarkable, blending into the backdrop of parked cars, but Ahmed's gaze lingered. He noted the subtle shift of movement inside—someone adjusting their position, a faint glow from a screen. The vehicle wasn't waiting for just anyone.

He moved on, his posture casual but his mind calculating. The windows of the boutique hotel came into view, their soft light spilling onto the street. His breath fogged the air as he approached the entrance, his steps slowing. Behind him, the sound of a car door

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opening echoed faintly, followed by a soft click of heels on the pavement.

He glanced over his shoulder, catching a fleeting glimpse of Natalia. She stood near the black car, her silhouette sharp against the dim streetlight. Her posture was relaxed, one hand in her coat pocket, the other resting lightly on the car's roof. She didn't move toward him, but her presence felt deliberate.

Ahmed turned back toward the hotel, pushing the glass door open and stepping into the warmth of the lobby. The concierge at the desk glanced up briefly before returning to their paperwork. The space was quiet, the faint hum of a heating system the only sound.

Ahmed lingered near the entrance, his back to the door, his reflection faintly visible in the polished glass. His instincts hummed as he adjusted his scarf, watching Natalia's faint outline behind him. She hadn't moved, but her attention was unmistakable. The way she leaned against the car, her stance casual yet poised, made it clear she wanted him to know she was there.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, the sound muffled but insistent. He reached for it, his movements fluid, unlocking it with a quick swipe. A single message appeared on the secure app: "Observe. No engagement."

Ahmed locked the phone again, sliding it back into his pocket. He straightened, his gaze flicking to the reflection in the glass one last time. Natalia had shifted slightly, her head tilting in what might have been amusement—or a challenge.

He moved further into the lobby, his steps quiet against the marble floor. Whatever game Natalia was playing, it was far from over. And if her presence tonight was any indication, she intended to play it to the end.



Chapter 3: Interrogation and Intuition



THE FIRST THING AHMED noticed was the sound—the low, droning hum of fluorescent lights overhead. His eyelids felt heavy, his mind clouded, as though waking from a deep sleep he couldn't recall entering. The sharp chill of metal against his wrists brought him fully into consciousness. He blinked, his vision adjusting to the sterile, dimly lit room around him.

The walls were concrete, their cold gray surface devoid of any decoration. A bolted metal table and two matching chairs occupied the center of the space. Ahmed sat in one, his wrists restrained by thick, unforgiving cuffs that tethered him to the table. His jacket was gone, and the crisp white shirt he wore was wrinkled and stained with a faint smudge of dirt. The air was frigid, carrying the faint scent of disinfectant.

He flexed his fingers, testing the restraints. They didn't give, their edges biting into his skin. His breathing steadied as he scanned the room with practiced care. In the corner, a small surveillance camera hung from the ceiling, its red light blinking steadily. A single vent high on the wall let in the faintest whisper of air, its grille marked with rust. Everything about the space was utilitarian, designed to disorient and intimidate.

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Ahmed shifted slightly, the scrape of the chair legs against the concrete floor echoing in the otherwise silent room. He focused on his breathing, steadying the adrenaline coursing through his veins. He didn't know how long he'd been unconscious, but every detail mattered now.

The door to his left was heavy, its steel surface marred by scratches and scuff marks. There were no windows, no visible clock—just the relentless hum of the lights and the cold weight of the room pressing down on him.

Closing his eyes for a moment, Ahmed worked to piece together his last memory. The lounge. The walk back to the hotel. Natalia's lingering gaze as she leaned against the black car. Then nothing. The realization was a jolt: she had made her move, and now the game had shifted entirely into her control.

He opened his eyes again, sharpening his focus. His training kicked in, overriding any lingering haze. He counted his breaths, assessed his physical state. No sharp pain, no immediate injuries beyond the stiffness in his limbs. They hadn't harmed him—yet. That meant they wanted something.

Ahmed's gaze returned to the surveillance camera. He allowed a faint shift in his expression, just enough to convey composure. If they were watching, he wouldn't give them anything—not fear, not defiance. Nothing.

The faint creak of the door handle snapped his attention back to the left. The sound echoed like a gunshot in the otherwise silent room. He straightened his posture, his muscles taut as he prepared for whatever was about to come through.

The door opened slowly, the light from the hallway casting a sharp rectangle against the concrete floor. Ahmed's breath slowed, his gaze fixed on the dark figure stepping through. The real game was about to begin.

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA



THE HEAVY STEEL DOOR groaned as it swung open, slicing through the stillness of the room. Ahmed's eyes flicked toward the figure stepping inside, his pulse steady but his senses sharpened. Natalia moved with deliberate grace, her heels clicking softly against the concrete floor. Her crisp black suit fit like armor, exuding authority and control, every detail carefully curated to convey power.

She carried a slim folder tucked under her arm and a steaming cup of tea in her other hand. The delicate porcelain seemed almost absurd in the stark sterility of the room. Without hesitation, she placed both items on the metal table, her movements precise and unhurried.

Ahmed didn't speak. He studied her instead, noting the faint flicker of amusement in her eyes, the way her lips curved into a subtle smile that gave nothing away. She pulled out the chair across from him, the scrape of metal on concrete loud in the confined space, and sat down. Her posture was relaxed, her body language open yet unyielding.

For a moment, she said nothing. She opened the folder, her fingers brushing over the papers inside as if savoring the anticipation. Ahmed kept his expression neutral, his body still, waiting for her to make the first move.

"You're awake," Natalia said at last, her voice smooth and calm, as though greeting an old friend. She picked up the teacup, taking a small sip before setting it back down. "I trust the accommodations are... adequate."

"Charming," Ahmed replied, his tone polite but edged with dry humor. His wrists shifted subtly against the restraints, a calculated display of discomfort. "Though I don't recall booking this particular room."

Her smile widened slightly, but her eyes remained sharp, assessing. "Memory gaps are common. Perhaps the stress of travel?"

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Ahmed tilted his head, meeting her gaze with measured composure. “Unlikely. I tend to remember key details.”

“Of course,” she said, leaning back in her chair. “A man like you must be very detail-oriented.”

The compliment was a trap, he knew. She was testing his reaction, probing for cracks in his demeanor. He responded with silence, letting her words hang in the air. She tapped a manicured nail against the folder, the sound rhythmic, almost hypnotic.

“You must be wondering why you’re here.” Natalia leaned forward slightly, her voice dropping just enough to make the space between them feel smaller. “But I suspect you already have a theory.”

Ahmed held her gaze, refusing to take the bait. “Is this the part where you explain, or do I have to guess?”

She chuckled softly, a sound that held no warmth. “Guessing is a dangerous game, Mr. Aziz. Accuracy is far more valuable.”

She reached for the teacup again, taking her time as she sipped. Her movements were slow, deliberate, designed to unnerve. Ahmed let the silence stretch, knowing it was his best defense for now.

“Tell me,” she began, placing the cup back on the table. “How does a flight attendant find himself in such an... unfortunate situation?”

Her phrasing was casual, almost conversational, but the weight of her question hung heavily between them. Ahmed measured his response carefully, his mind already working several steps ahead.

“Unfortunate situations come with the territory,” he said, his voice calm. “Though I imagine you’re better equipped to explain this one.”

Natalia’s smile lingered, but her eyes sharpened. She opened the folder, her fingers sliding over the edges of the papers inside. “Let’s not waste time, Mr. Aziz. We both know there’s more to you than meets the eye.”

Her words carried the first edge of what he knew would become a blade. Ahmed met her gaze evenly, bracing himself for the game she was about to begin.

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NATALIA FLIPPED OPEN the slim folder, her manicured fingers trailing over the crisp edges of the documents inside. She glanced at Ahmed, her expression unreadable, before selecting a single sheet and sliding it in front of him. The paper was blank, an obvious feint. Her lips twitched, a hint of amusement breaking through her practiced composure.

“Let’s start simple,” she began, her voice measured, as if addressing a subordinate rather than a detainee. “Flight AZ341. Cairo to Moscow. Routine journey, I assume?”

Ahmed leaned back slightly, keeping his wrists still to avoid the clinking of the restraints. His eyes flicked from the blank page to Natalia’s sharp gaze. “As routine as it gets. Passengers complain, the coffee runs out, and we get blamed for turbulence. Typical day in the air.”

“Humor. Interesting choice.” She tapped the blank paper with her pen, the rhythmic sound filling the room. “You’ve been with the airline for, what, four years now? Quite a stable career for someone who’s... well-traveled.”

Ahmed’s jaw tightened, though he allowed his expression to remain neutral. “That’s the nature of the job. You see the world one layover at a time.”

She leaned forward, her pen stilling. “The world. Yes. Quite a bit of it, in your case. Cairo, Istanbul, Casablanca, Berlin.” She listed the cities like a litany, her tone deliberately casual. “But Moscow. This isn’t your usual route, is it?”

“Flight schedules change,” Ahmed replied, his voice smooth. “I go where I’m needed.”

“Needed,” Natalia echoed, her gaze narrowing slightly. “And yet, here you are. A detour, let’s call it. One I don’t think you anticipated.”

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Ahmed allowed a faint smile to surface, knowing it would irk her. “If I knew what you were getting at, I might be able to help.”

Her pen tapped again, the sound sharper now. She pulled out another sheet of paper, this one covered in what appeared to be flight logs. “Help,” she repeated, her tone shifting to something colder. “It’s funny. You’re not the first person I’ve interrogated who offered help.”

Ahmed tilted his head, his smile fading. “Interrogation? I thought we were just chatting.”

“Call it what you like.” She folded her hands on the table, her body language calculated to appear open yet dominant. “But let’s be clear—this is not a conversation between equals.”

The silence that followed was deliberate, a weapon she wielded with precision. Ahmed met her gaze, his heart steady as he calculated his response. She wanted him to speak, to overplay his hand. He wouldn’t give her the satisfaction.

When the silence stretched a beat too long, Natalia leaned back, her expression softening just enough to unsettle him. “You’re calm. I’ll give you that. But calm only lasts until the pressure builds.”

Ahmed’s gaze flickered to the folder, then back to her. “Pressure is part of the job. You should know that.”

Her smile deepened, an acknowledgment of the verbal jab. “Indeed. Let’s see how well you handle it.” She tapped her pen once more before flipping to the next page, a glint of challenge in her eyes.



NATALIA LEANED BACK in her chair, the legs creaking softly against the cold floor. Her pen tapped rhythmically on the folder, each sharp click cutting through the stifling silence. Ahmed sat across from her, his hands resting lightly on the table. His expression remained composed, but his eyes betrayed a constant awareness, flitting briefly to the folder, her pen, then to her face.

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She didn't speak. The air between them thickened, heavy with unspoken intent. Ahmed felt the silence as a deliberate tactic, an invisible noose tightening with every passing second. He refused to fill it.

Natalia's gaze bore into him, calculating. Her pen stilled.

"You must find this all very tedious," she began, her tone measured. "Sitting here, saying nothing, while the clock ticks away. It must be exhausting for someone who thrives on action."

Ahmed didn't answer. Instead, he shifted in his chair, letting the cuffs around his wrists scrape faintly against the table. The sound was minor, but in the silence, it carried weight. He let it hang.

Natalia smiled faintly, though it didn't reach her eyes. "Silence can be an ally," she continued, leaning forward slightly, her elbows on the table. "But it can also betray you. Every twitch, every glance, tells a story. Wouldn't you agree?"

Ahmed met her gaze head-on, his expression neutral. "Depends on the story."

Natalia's smile widened, a predator's grin. "Touché. But stories can be rewritten. Facts, however, remain." Her fingers danced across the folder, tapping it like a metronome. "Would you like to correct the record before I decide which story to believe?"

Ahmed's jaw tightened imperceptibly. His silence was no longer passive—it was defiance. He'd learned early in his training that words often gave away more than silence ever could. Natalia knew this too, and she was waiting, hoping to exploit any opening.

Her pen resumed its rhythm, slower this time, almost hypnotic. "You know," she said, her tone casual, "most people crack around the twelve-minute mark. They think they can outlast the silence. They never do."

Ahmed exhaled slowly, allowing the barest flicker of a smile to cross his lips. "Maybe you're asking the wrong people."

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Natalia tilted her head, her amusement genuine now. “Interesting. You’re not like most people, are you?”

“Depends on who you ask,” Ahmed replied, his voice calm. The subtle shift in dynamic wasn’t lost on him. The tension between them hung in a precarious balance, like a blade poised to tip.

Natalia set her pen down and folded her hands. “Then let’s stop wasting each other’s time. You’re a man of action, Ahmed. Let’s act. Who do you work for?”

Ahmed leaned back slightly, feigning nonchalance. “Aeroflot.”

Natalia’s laughter was soft but laced with steel. “Clever. But you and I both know this isn’t about your airline. So, I’ll ask again—who do you work for?”

He didn’t answer. The silence returned, more pointed now, but Ahmed let it stretch. Words were Natalia’s weapon. His silence would be his shield.



NATALIA’S SMILE FALTERED. She leaned forward, sliding the folder open. A single photograph lay inside. Grainy, black and white, but unmistakable. It showed Ahmed leaning against a café wall in Cairo, a nondescript man handing him a small envelope. The image was cropped too tightly to show context, but its implications were clear.

She placed the photo on the table, sliding it toward Ahmed with deliberate precision. “Care to explain this?”

Ahmed picked up the photo, studying it intently. His face betrayed no emotion, but his mind raced. The café had been neutral ground, a handoff designed to appear inconsequential. Whoever had taken this photo had been close. Too close.

“Nice angle,” Ahmed remarked, placing the photo back on the table. “Whoever took this has an eye for composition.”

Natalia’s eyes narrowed. “You met him three days ago. Received something. What was it?”

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Ahmed shrugged lightly. "I meet a lot of people. Occupational hazard."

"You expect me to believe this was casual?" Natalia tapped the photo. "An exchange this deliberate doesn't happen by accident."

"Your definition of deliberate must differ from mine," Ahmed replied. "I was asking for directions."

"To where?"

Ahmed smiled faintly. "The bathroom."

Natalia's composure didn't waver, but her fingers pressed harder against the table. "You're stalling."

"No," Ahmed said evenly, his tone calm. "I'm waiting for you to ask the right question."

The challenge hung in the air. Natalia studied him, her eyes sharp and searching. The tension between them crackled, unspoken but undeniable.

"You're clever," Natalia said finally. "Too clever to be sitting here if you were innocent. Which tells me you're hiding something."

Ahmed leaned forward slightly, his voice dropping. "If I'm so clever, why do you need to ask?"

Natalia's expression didn't change, but the air in the room shifted. For the first time, Ahmed felt the weight of her authority, the razor edge of her intent. She wasn't playing games anymore.

"Ahmed," Natalia said, her voice soft but laced with menace. "I will find out the truth. Whether you cooperate or not is irrelevant. But it will determine how comfortable this process is for you."

Ahmed met her gaze, unflinching. "You do what you need to. So will I."

The room fell silent again. This time, Natalia let it. The photograph remained between them, a silent reminder of the stakes.



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NATALIA LEANED BACK, arms folded, her sharp eyes watching Ahmed like a predator sizing up prey. The faintest hint of amusement flickered across her face. She tapped her nails against the table, the sound deliberate, drawing Ahmed's attention with every sharp click.

"You travel often," she began, her voice smooth and conversational. "Far more than most in your profession. That must be lonely."

Ahmed didn't respond immediately. He measured her words, the cadence of her tone. The question wasn't about his travels; it was about his isolation. He let a faint smile form as he shrugged. "You'd be surprised how much company you can find at 30,000 feet."

Natalia tilted her head, studying him. "Meaningless company, though. Faces you forget before the seatbelt light turns off."

"Some faces are hard to forget," Ahmed replied lightly. His voice betrayed nothing, but he didn't miss the subtle narrowing of her eyes.

She leaned forward slightly, her elbows resting on the table. "You don't strike me as someone who forms attachments. A man like you values freedom too much. Independence."

Ahmed met her gaze, unflinching. "Some might call that adaptability."

"Adaptability," Natalia repeated, her tone laced with skepticism. "Or avoidance. Which is it, Ahmed? Do you adapt, or do you run?"

The question hung in the air, pointed and precise. Ahmed allowed a beat of silence before answering, his tone casual but firm. "I go where the job takes me. No running involved."

Natalia's lips curved into a faint smile. She tapped the folder in front of her, letting her fingers linger on its edge. "And yet, your movements suggest otherwise. Cairo, Casablanca, Istanbul. Always moving, always... avoiding."

Ahmed leaned back slightly, crossing his arms. "If you think a passport full of stamps proves anything, you're reaching."

Her smile widened. "Perhaps. Or perhaps it proves you don't stay long enough to be remembered. To be trusted."

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“Trust is a luxury,” Ahmed countered. “One not everyone can afford.”

Natalia’s eyes flickered with something—interest, or perhaps calculation. She shifted gears, her voice softening. “Doesn’t that ever get tiring? Never letting anyone close? Never being... known?”

Ahmed shrugged, his smile faint. “You don’t miss what you’ve never had.”

The words landed heavier than he intended, and he saw Natalia seize the moment. She straightened, her expression shifting to one of curiosity. “That’s an interesting perspective. Detached. Almost mechanical. Is that how you see the world?”

Ahmed uncrossed his arms, leaning forward slightly. “I see the world as it is. Chaotic. Impermanent. You adapt, or you don’t survive.”

Natalia’s smile faded, her eyes narrowing as she studied him. For a moment, neither spoke, the tension between them palpable. She finally leaned back, her expression unreadable.

“You’re good,” she admitted, her voice quieter now. “But I wonder—how long can you keep that mask in place?”

Ahmed didn’t respond. The mask she spoke of was there, carefully constructed and unshakable. He wouldn’t let her see behind it. Not yet.



NATALIA OPENED THE folder, her movements deliberate and precise. She slid Ahmed’s passport across the table, the worn leather cover catching the dim light. “Let’s talk about this,” she said, her voice calm and controlled.

Ahmed glanced down, his face betraying nothing. “What about it?”

Natalia flipped through the pages, her fingers lingering on specific stamps. “Cairo. Istanbul. Casablanca. Marrakesh. Quite the frequent flyer, aren’t you?”

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"It's called a career," Ahmed replied evenly. "Flight crew tend to move around."

She stopped on a page marked with an entry to Cairo. "This one. January 15th. A brief layover, yet you managed to visit the market, meet a contact, and return in under twelve hours. Efficient."

Ahmed's brow lifted slightly. "Is efficiency a crime now?"

Natalia ignored the comment, tapping the stamp with her nail. "And this? Casablanca, February 10th. An unusually long layover for a commercial flight. Three days."

"Rest periods are regulated," Ahmed said, his tone clipped. "Fatigue is dangerous at altitude."

"Of course," Natalia said, her voice dripping with mock understanding. "But the timing is interesting, don't you think? Casablanca, February 10th. Istanbul, February 12th. Cairo, February 15th. A pattern, wouldn't you agree?"

Ahmed leaned forward slightly, his expression hardening. "The only pattern here is your fixation on my schedule."

Natalia's lips twitched into a faint smirk. "Fixation implies intent. I'm merely following the evidence."

"Then maybe you should focus on real evidence," Ahmed countered. "Not assumptions."

Natalia's eyes glinted with amusement, but her voice remained steady. "Assumptions are only dangerous when they're wrong. Tell me, Ahmed—are mine wrong?"

Ahmed leaned back, his composure unshaken. "That depends on what you think you know."

For the first time, Natalia hesitated. It was brief, but Ahmed caught it—a momentary crack in her façade. She quickly recovered, closing the passport and placing it back in the folder.

"You're a difficult man to pin down," she admitted. "But everyone leaves a trail. Even you."

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Ahmed met her gaze, unflinching. “Then you’d better start looking harder.”

Natalia’s smirk returned, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Don’t worry, Ahmed. I intend to.”



NATALIA’S FINGERS BRUSHED the delicate locket around her neck, a movement so subtle it could have been unconscious. Ahmed’s gaze followed the gesture, catching the faint glint of the locket in the dim room. It wasn’t the type of accessory he would have expected on someone like her. It was too personal, too ornamental for someone so calculated. But then he noticed how her hand lingered, the deliberate way her fingers pressed the clasp before resting on the table. His instincts sharpened. It wasn’t just jewelry.

“Let’s pick up where we left off,” Natalia said smoothly, her tone light but edged with purpose. “Tell me about your time in Cairo.”

Ahmed leaned back, feigning nonchalance, but his mind worked furiously. “Which time? I’ve been there more than once.”

Her lips curved into a faint smile. “Of course. February, specifically. A busy month for you.”

He folded his hands on the table, his tone calm. “If you’re going to accuse me of something, just do it. Or is this the part where you hope I’ll incriminate myself?”

Natalia tilted her head, her eyes gleaming with amusement. “Not at all. This is the part where I listen.”

She tapped the folder with her pen, an unspoken reminder of the evidence she claimed to have. Ahmed’s focus remained on her face, avoiding any unnecessary glances toward the locket. If it was recording their conversation, he couldn’t afford a slip. His words needed to be calculated, his tone measured.

“Listening’s a start,” he replied, his voice steady. “But if you’re hoping for a confession, you’ll be disappointed.”

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“Confessions are overrated,” Natalia murmured, her fingers toying with the pen. “They lack authenticity. It’s the slip-ups I’m interested in—the little details people reveal without realizing.”

Ahmed smirked faintly. “Then you’ll find I’m not much of a storyteller.”

“Everyone’s a storyteller, Ahmed,” she said, her tone softening. “Even you. It’s just a matter of knowing which story to tell.”

She shifted, her gaze locking onto his. The room felt smaller, the air heavier. He didn’t blink, didn’t flinch, but inside, he assessed every word, every movement. The locket’s presence nagged at him, its potential danger undeniable.

“I think you’ll find I’m a very boring subject,” Ahmed said, leaning forward slightly. “Flight schedules, hotel rooms, layovers. Hardly the stuff of intrigue.”

Natalia’s smile widened, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Boredom is often a mask for something deeper. Don’t you agree?”

Ahmed didn’t respond. He let the silence stretch, watching as she waited for him to fill it. When he didn’t, she straightened, the locket glinting again as she moved. The faintest flicker of annoyance crossed her face before she recovered.

“I suppose we’ll find out,” she said finally, closing the folder with a sharp snap.



THE DOOR CLICKED SHUT behind Natalia, leaving Ahmed alone in the sterile room. The sudden silence felt oppressive, the hum of the fluorescent lights grating against his senses. He exhaled slowly, rolling his shoulders to ease the tension that had built during their exchange. But his mind didn’t rest.

His eyes drifted to the restraints on his wrists. The steel cuffs were snug but not unbreakable, though testing them too aggressively might draw attention. Instead, he studied the room again. The camera in the

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corner loomed like a silent sentinel, its unblinking lens fixed on him. He glanced at the vent near the ceiling, noting its size and position. An escape route, perhaps, though not an immediate one.

Ahmed leaned back, his fingers brushing against the edge of the table. Beneath the surface, he felt the faint grooves of something scratched into the metal. A message? A code? He filed the detail away, keeping his expression neutral.

The door swung open suddenly, and a guard stepped in. Without a word, the man set a bottle of water on the table and stepped out again, the door locking behind him. Ahmed stared at the bottle, its presence almost mocking in its simplicity. It wasn't trust—they wanted him hydrated, alert, ready for whatever came next.

He reached for the bottle, unscrewing the cap with deliberate slowness. As he took a sip, his gaze shifted back to the vent. The faintest draft escaped through the slats, carrying with it the distant murmur of voices. He strained to catch the words but couldn't make them out. Still, it was something—a hint of life beyond the sterile walls.

Ahmed placed the bottle back on the table, his mind already racing through possibilities. The restraints were secure, but the chair wasn't bolted down. If he could leverage its weight against the cuffs... He stopped the thought before it could spiral. Patience was his ally now, not force.

The sound of footsteps approached, heels clicking with a measured rhythm. Natalia. Ahmed straightened, his features schooled into calm anticipation. The door opened, and she stepped in, her expression as unreadable as ever. She carried nothing this time, no folder, no tea—only the sharp edge of her presence.

"Miss me?" she asked lightly, her voice laced with amusement.

Ahmed met her gaze, unflinching. "Not even a little."



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THE AIR SHIFTED BEFORE the door opened. Heavy footsteps approached, unhurried and deliberate. Ahmed's instincts prickled, his gaze fixed on the door as it swung open with force. Dmitri Sokolov entered, a looming figure with broad shoulders and a glint of authority in his sharp, icy eyes. Unlike Natalia's calculated grace, Dmitri radiated brute force.

He stepped into the room, his boots echoing against the concrete floor, and threw a thick folder onto the table between Ahmed and the empty chair across from him. The sound was sharp, jarring, and meant to unsettle.

"You've caused quite the stir," Dmitri announced, his deep voice filling the room. He didn't sit. Instead, he loomed, his hands resting on the back of the chair. "I've reviewed your file, Ahmed. A lot of travel for someone so... unremarkable."

Ahmed leaned back, keeping his face carefully neutral. "Unremarkable is part of the job. Airlines value efficiency, not drama."

Dmitri's lips twisted into something between a smirk and a snarl. "Is that why you met with a known GIS operative in Cairo? For efficiency?"

Ahmed's brow furrowed, just enough to appear genuinely confused. "GIS operative? I think you've got the wrong guy."

Dmitri's fist slammed onto the table, making the folder jump. Ahmed didn't flinch. He met Dmitri's glare, his heartbeat steady despite the tension crackling in the air.

"You think this is a game?" Dmitri growled. "We know what you are. We know who you're working for. Don't insult my intelligence."

Ahmed allowed a small, calculated smile. "If you knew anything, I wouldn't be sitting here, would I?"

Dmitri's jaw tightened, his knuckles whitening as he gripped the chair. He leaned closer, his presence oppressive. "You think you're clever. That arrogance will be your downfall."

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The door opened again, cutting the tension. Natalia stepped in, her calm demeanor a stark contrast to Dmitri's intensity. She glanced between the two men, her expression neutral but her eyes sharp.

"That's enough, Dmitri," she said, her tone firm but measured. "We agreed I would lead this interrogation."

Dmitri straightened, his scowl deepening. "He's wasting our time."

"Leave us," Natalia instructed, her gaze never wavering. Dmitri hesitated, his frustration evident, but he relented, throwing one last glare at Ahmed before stalking out.

Natalia took the seat across from Ahmed, smoothing her suit as if nothing had happened. "I apologize for Dmitri. He's... effective in his way, but his methods lack finesse."

Ahmed tilted his head slightly. "I suppose you're the finesse?"

Her lips curved into a faint smile. "I like to think so."



NATALIA LEANED BACK in her chair, her fingers interlaced on the table. The locket around her neck gleamed under the fluorescent light, its presence no longer subtle but commanding. She exhaled lightly, studying Ahmed as though she were reading an intricate piece of art.

"Dmitri thinks you're a spy," she began, her voice calm, almost conversational. "I think he's wrong."

Ahmed raised an eyebrow, letting silence hang between them before speaking. "How generous of you."

She didn't react to the sarcasm. Instead, she tilted her head, her gaze steady. "Generosity has nothing to do with it. You're too polished to be careless, too composed to make the mistakes we've seen."

"Or maybe I'm just a flight attendant who knows how to handle irate passengers," Ahmed replied, his tone light but edged with steel.

Natalia leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. "I prefer to think of you as someone... complicated. Someone who understands the importance of leverage."

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Ahmed's eyes flicked to the folder in front of her, then back to her face. "Is that what this is? Leverage?"

"Perhaps." She opened the folder, pulling out a page and sliding it toward him. "Do you recognize this?"

He glanced at the document—a list of names, some familiar, some not. His expression remained neutral. "Should I?"

Natalia studied him, her lips curving into a faint smile. "You're good. I'll give you that."

She retrieved the page, tucking it back into the folder. "But let's not waste time pretending. You know things, Ahmed. Things that could help us."

"And what's in it for me?" he asked, his tone sharp but curious.

Her smile widened slightly. "Your freedom, for starters."

Ahmed laughed softly, the sound devoid of humor. "Freedom? Is that what you call this?"

Natalia's gaze didn't waver. "Freedom is relative. Cooperate, and you'll walk out of here intact. Resist, and... well, Dmitri isn't known for his patience."

Ahmed's jaw tightened, but he didn't respond immediately. The room fell silent, the tension heavy. Natalia's calm was unnerving, her calculated words leaving no room for error.

"You think you can scare me into talking?" he asked finally, his voice low.

"I don't need to scare you," Natalia replied, her tone soft but firm. "I just need to remind you of what's at stake."



THE ROOM FELT COLDER, as though the walls themselves had drawn closer. Natalia adjusted her posture, resting her elbows on the table, her fingers steepled. The smile she offered Ahmed didn't reach her eyes—it was calculated, predatory.

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"You've been quiet," she said, her voice soft, almost coaxing. "But silence has a way of revealing just as much as words."

Ahmed's expression remained neutral. "You seem to be enjoying this more than you should."

Natalia's smile widened slightly. She reached for the folder, extracting a single sheet of paper, and slid it across the table. "Recognize this?"

Ahmed's gaze dropped. The paper was a grainy printout, a list of phone numbers, names, and locations. One name, near the middle, jumped out: Mahmoud Asiri. He kept his face composed, but the tension coiled in his gut like a spring.

"Should I?" His tone was flat, disinterested.

Natalia leaned forward, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Mahmoud Asiri. Known GIS operative. Ring any bells?"

Ahmed shrugged, feigning ignorance. "I work with passengers. Names blur together after a while."

"Don't insult me," Natalia snapped, her calm demeanor fracturing momentarily. She regained control just as quickly, smoothing her expression. "This isn't random. We know you've spoken with him. Cairo, three months ago."

"I serve drinks at 30,000 feet. You think I have time for international conspiracies?"

Her eyes narrowed, scanning his face for cracks in his facade. "You underestimate how much we know, Ahmed. Your linguistic skills, your travel routes... they don't align with the average flight attendant."

"Perhaps I'm overqualified," he replied evenly, folding his hands on the table.

Natalia tilted her head, studying him like a chessboard she was intent on mastering. "Perhaps. But overqualified also means capable of... other things."

Ahmed's silence this time was intentional, measured. He could feel the weight of her scrutiny, the air thick with unspoken accusations.

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“You’re clever,” she admitted, sitting back and crossing her legs. “I’ll give you that. But clever only gets you so far.”

“And what’s your next move, Natalia?” he asked, his tone laced with mock curiosity. “You’ve laid out your hand, but you’re still fishing.”

Her smirk returned, faint but deliberate. “Who says I’ve shown my full hand?”



THE TENSION SHIFTED, subtle but tangible, as Natalia leaned closer. She clasped her hands together on the table, her demeanor softening just enough to make Ahmed wary. Her gaze held his, steady but laced with something new—an illusion of vulnerability.

“Do you know why I’m here, Ahmed?” she asked, her voice low, almost intimate.

“To interrogate me. Obviously,” he replied, his tone sharp enough to cut through her act.

Her lips twitched into a faint smile. “It’s more than that. This isn’t just another assignment. I chose to be here. I requested it.”

“Should I be flattered?” His response was sardonic, his guard unyielding.

Natalia ignored the jab, her expression growing solemn. “I’ve seen betrayal up close. People you trust, people you build your life around, turning against you without warning. It changes you.”

Ahmed’s eyes narrowed slightly. “And this relates to me... how?”

“Because I see the same patterns,” she continued, her tone soft but pointed. “The lies, the calculated moves. You remind me of someone I once trusted—a mistake I won’t repeat.”

Her words hung in the air, and for a moment, Ahmed considered the possibility that there was truth in her story. But he quickly dismissed it. This was a ploy, another layer of manipulation designed to pull him off balance.

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

"I'm not your ghost," he said finally, his voice firm but calm. "And I don't owe you anything."

Natalia's expression hardened, the mask of vulnerability slipping. "No, you don't. But if you think staying silent will save you, you're mistaken. This isn't a game, Ahmed. The longer you resist, the worse it will get."

"Is that your betrayal talking?" His words were measured, a calculated deflection.

Her eyes flashed with something fleeting—anger, perhaps, or a twinge of respect. "You're playing with fire. And fire burns."

Ahmed leaned back, exhaling slowly. "If that's the best you've got, Natalia, you'll need to do better."

For the first time, she hesitated, her facade cracking just enough to reveal a sliver of frustration. But she recovered quickly, standing and smoothing her suit.

"We'll see," she said, her voice cold again. "This isn't over."

Ahmed watched as she exited the room, the door clicking shut behind her. The momentary quiet left him alone with his thoughts—and the ever-present hum of the surveillance camera in the corner.



NATALIA TAPPED THE edge of the folder with her pen, a deliberate rhythm that punctuated the tension between them. She leaned forward, her piercing gaze locking on Ahmed as though she could dismantle his defenses with sheer force of will.

"You've been remarkably composed," she said, her voice smooth but carrying a subtle edge. "Most people crack by now. They talk too much, eager to prove their innocence."

Ahmed shrugged, his expression unreadable. "Maybe I've got nothing to prove."

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Her lips curled into a faint smirk. “Or maybe you’re just better at lying than most.”

He tilted his head, letting the silence stretch, refusing to rise to the bait. Silence unnerved people, made them reveal more than they intended. Natalia was too skilled to slip easily, but Ahmed knew cracks could appear in even the most unyielding facades.

She adjusted her posture, flipping open the folder again. “Let’s revisit something,” she said, sliding another photo across the table. This one showed him exiting a nondescript building in Cairo. “You walked out of this place three times in two weeks. What was inside?”

Ahmed studied the image briefly before looking back at her. “A travel agency. They print our itineraries. You should try them—might help with your vacations.”

Her smirk deepened, though her eyes betrayed a flicker of annoyance. “Clever. But that building isn’t a travel agency. It’s a front for something else.”

“Then maybe you should ask whoever owns it,” Ahmed replied, his tone casual but firm. “I’m not responsible for their shady bookkeeping.”

Natalia exhaled sharply, pushing the photo aside. “Deflection works in the short term, Ahmed. But the truth has a way of surfacing.”

“And yet, you’re still fishing,” he countered, leaning forward slightly. “If you had anything solid, we wouldn’t be sitting here.”

Her fingers tightened around the pen. For the first time, her confidence seemed to falter, the calculated veneer slipping just enough to reveal frustration. Ahmed pressed on, sensing an opportunity.

“Your evidence has holes, your questions lack precision,” he continued, his tone calm but cutting. “Either you’re not as good as you think, or you’re grasping at straws.”

Natalia’s jaw tightened. She stood abruptly, smoothing her jacket. “Enjoy your confidence while it lasts,” she said, her voice cold. “Because it won’t.”

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

As she walked toward the door, Ahmed leaned back, his own sense of control quietly settling into place.



NATALIA RETURNED MOMENTS later, her expression unreadable, yet her movements carried a newfound deliberateness. She placed a thick, sealed envelope on the table, its weight symbolic as much as physical.

“I’ll make this simple,” she began, her voice firm. “What happens next is entirely up to you.”

Ahmed arched a brow. “Let me guess—an ultimatum?”

“An invitation,” she corrected, sliding the envelope toward him. “Inside is a document detailing your alleged connections to hostile networks. Sign it, cooperate, and things become easier. Refuse, and... well, Dmitri isn’t known for his patience.”

Ahmed glanced at the envelope but made no move to touch it. “You mean the man who thinks shouting is an interrogation technique? He’s predictable. You, on the other hand, are... creative.”

Her expression remained neutral, though he caught a flicker of acknowledgment in her eyes. “Flattery won’t save you.”

“It’s not flattery. It’s an observation,” he replied, folding his hands. “And one that tells me you’re not as certain as you pretend to be.”

Natalia stepped closer, her shadow casting a long stretch across the table. “You think you’re untouchable. But I promise you, Ahmed, everyone breaks. Even you.”

“And you think I’m afraid of breaking?” His voice carried an edge now, his calm exterior cracking just enough to reveal the steel beneath. “Fear’s a tool, Natalia. One you’ve sharpened, no doubt. But it cuts both ways.”

She leaned in, her voice a whisper. “This isn’t a negotiation. It’s survival.”

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“For both of us,” he shot back, his gaze locking with hers. The weight of their words lingered, the air heavy with unspoken challenges.

Natalia straightened, retreating toward the door. “You’ve underestimated me,” she said, her tone icy. “Don’t make that mistake again.”

The door shut behind her, the sound echoing through the room. Ahmed exhaled slowly, his senses on high alert. The envelope remained untouched, a silent reminder of the stakes at hand. Whatever came next, he knew the game between them had only just begun.

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA



Chapter 4: Threads of Deception



The door creaked open, heavy and deliberate. Ahmed sat up straighter, masking his exhaustion with a calculated calm. Natalia entered, her heels clicking against the cold cement floor. She carried a tablet under one arm, her suit jacket tailored to perfection, exuding control.

“Comfortable?” Her tone matched her appearance: sharp, precise, and indifferent.

Ahmed leaned back, feigning indifference. “As much as one can be under these... unique circumstances.”

Natalia set the tablet on the table, its screen dark. She didn’t sit. Instead, she leaned against the edge, crossing her arms as she studied him. “You and I both know this stalemate serves no one. So, let me offer you a way out.”

“Sounds promising.” He motioned toward the restraints. “Does it come with a key?”

Her lips curved ever so slightly, though her eyes remained cold. “Cooperation has its privileges. Work with me to dismantle an Israeli spy ring in Moscow, and your... accommodations might improve.”

Ahmed’s face remained impassive, though his mind raced. Israeli network. Moscow. He hadn’t expected this, but the opportunity was impossible to ignore. Still, he couldn’t show eagerness. “And if I refuse?”

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Natalia's gaze didn't waver. "Then you'll face indefinite imprisonment. Or worse." She picked up the tablet, tapping the screen. Grainy surveillance footage flickered to life. "You have resources we need. I have the authority to ensure you use them wisely."

Ahmed tilted his head, watching the screen intently without giving away too much. "It's quite the offer. Though I notice it lacks the usual sweeteners. Immunity? Safe passage? An apology for the hospitality?"

"You're not in a position to negotiate, Mr. Omran."

His silence stretched. Then he shrugged. "I'll consider it."

Natalia straightened, her sharp eyes narrowing. "You'll do more than consider. Time is short, and my patience is shorter." She turned, leaving the room without another word. The faint hum of the lock sliding into place echoed as Ahmed leaned back again. The bait had been set, and Natalia's confidence suggested she thought he'd already bitten.

But Ahmed knew better than to trust appearances.



HOURS LATER, THE RESTRAINTS were gone. Ahmed stood in a stark, windowless briefing room, the air thick with unspoken tension. Natalia sat across from him at a long steel table, a tablet in front of her, flanked by a wall of monitors displaying fragmented data streams.

"This truce," Ahmed began, "is fragile, at best."

Natalia looked up, her expression unreadable. "That depends on how well you follow instructions."

"And how much I trust you," he countered, folding his arms.

"You don't have to trust me." She tapped the tablet, pulling up a map of Moscow, dotted with red and blue markers. "You just have to follow orders. Our target is an operative embedded in a key financial sector. I need information on his network, his methods."

"Need, not want." Ahmed smirked. "You're desperate."

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

She didn't rise to the bait. "What I am, Mr. Omran, is efficient. Your insight will be valuable. If—" she paused, leveling him with a pointed stare—"you cooperate."

Ahmed sat, resting his arms on the table. "Let's be clear. I'll work with you. But information flows both ways. If I'm taking the risk, I want access to anything relevant to my safety."

Natalia's lips pressed into a thin line. "Your safety is a secondary concern."

"I'll take my chances, then." He stood, letting the weight of his decision settle between them.

Natalia didn't move. Her steely gaze followed him, but after a long pause, she spoke again. "Fine. Limited access. But step out of line, and this arrangement ends."

Ahmed turned, one eyebrow raised. "Conditional truce, then?"

Her nod was barely perceptible. "Don't make me regret it."

Their eyes locked, a silent clash of wills. The tension in the room didn't ease, but Ahmed's smirk returned as he leaned back against the wall. "This might almost be fun."

Natalia didn't answer. But as she turned back to the monitors, she allowed herself the faintest smile, hidden in the glow of the screens. For now, necessity tethered them together. How long that tether would hold remained to be seen.



THE ROOM BUZZED FAINTLY with the hum of equipment. Natalia stood by the wall-mounted screen, her arms crossed as she gestured for Ahmed to sit. He complied, leaning back in the stiff chair, his expression veiled.

The screen flickered to life, showing grainy black-and-white footage of a bustling café. People came and went, some pausing at the counter, others disappearing into the background. Natalia picked up a

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remote and froze the image. Her finger hovered over a figure seated at the far corner, their face obscured by the brim of a hat.

“Recognize him?” Natalia’s tone was neutral, but her eyes bore into Ahmed, looking for cracks.

Ahmed tilted his head, studying the image with feigned disinterest. “Looks like half the people you’d find in a Moscow café. Vague. Conveniently so.”

“Stop playing coy.” She advanced the footage, zooming in until the pixels blurred into abstraction. “This man has ties to the network we’re investigating. He met with one of your Cairo contacts two months ago.”

Ahmed’s jaw tensed, but his voice remained steady. “A bold assumption, considering your evidence is half a step above a Rorschach test.”

Natalia smirked faintly, sensing the subtle shift in his posture. “You’re good at this, Ahmed. But not perfect. That pause? It tells me you know something.”

Ahmed leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, eyes locked on hers. “And if I did? What makes you think I’d share it with you?”

“You don’t have a choice.” Natalia pressed another button, and a new image filled the screen—a clearer shot of the man walking alongside someone Ahmed immediately recognized. The flicker of recognition in his gaze didn’t go unnoticed.

He leaned back, masking his reaction with a shrug. “So what? A lot of people walk around Moscow.”

Natalia tapped her pen against the desk, a subtle rhythm that grated against the silence. “You ask questions, Ahmed. A lot of them. Like you’re fishing for something.” She paused, her tone sharpening. “So, let me save us time. Do you or do you not recognize this man?”

Ahmed’s smirk returned, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I might. But if you want answers, you’ll have to share more than breadcrumbs.”

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA



THE BAR'S WARM AMBER glow reflected off crystal glasses, the soft murmur of conversations blending with the faint hum of jazz. Ahmed adjusted his tie in the mirrored back of the bar as he surveyed the room. His role as a bartender gave him a perfect vantage point to observe the target without drawing suspicion.

Natalia entered moments later, draped in a sleek black dress that turned more than a few heads. She didn't glance his way, heading instead to a table near the center, where the target, Kirill Markov, sipped a dark drink.

Ahmed poured a glass of whiskey, sliding it toward a customer. "Classy choice," he murmured, watching Kirill from the corner of his eye.

Kirill scanned the room, his gaze briefly landing on Natalia before moving on. Ahmed couldn't help but admire her ease. She blended in flawlessly, her confidence masking the tension simmering beneath the surface.

From her table, Natalia reached for her glass, speaking softly into her comms. "He's clocking everyone. Stay subtle."

Ahmed smirked, replying under his breath. "Subtle's my specialty."

The door swung open, letting in a gust of cold air. Ahmed barely glanced as two men entered, their movements sharp and purposeful. They sat near Kirill, their brief exchange charged. Ahmed's hand tightened on the towel he was holding.

"He's meeting someone," Ahmed muttered. "Two men, left corner. Looks like muscle."

"Focus on Kirill," Natalia countered. Her gaze never wavered from her target, but Ahmed caught the slight tension in her grip on the glass.

Kirill stood suddenly, his drink unfinished. He pulled his coat tighter, his movements quick and decisive. Ahmed tapped the comms discreetly. "Our friend's on the move."

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Natalia rose, slipping through the crowd with practiced grace. Ahmed followed her lead, his role as the observant bartender discarded as they stepped into the cold Moscow night. The chase had begun.



THE BAR QUIETED AS the jazz band shifted to a slow, melancholic tune. Ahmed wiped down the counter, his movements fluid and precise, his eyes tracking Kirill's every move. From her seat across the room, Natalia noticed his focus. His hand barely paused between tasks, his gaze flicking only briefly to each patron before settling on Kirill again.

Kirill leaned closer to his companions, his voice low and urgent. Ahmed adjusted his stance to get a better angle, his body language casual but deliberate.

Natalia lifted her glass to her lips, her voice breaking through Ahmed's earpiece. "Your cover's good, but you're standing too stiff. Relax."

Ahmed's lips curved faintly as he reached for another glass. "Funny coming from the ice queen. Maybe try smiling—it'll sell your disguise better."

Natalia didn't reply, but Ahmed noticed her shift in her chair. She straightened her spine, her legs crossed at a more elegant angle. The flicker of a smirk danced across her lips, gone almost before it appeared.

Ahmed's voice dropped, his tone all business. "Kirill's wrapping up. He keeps glancing at the door. If he bolts, we'll lose him."

Natalia glanced over her shoulder, scanning the room. Kirill's posture grew tense, his eyes darting toward the exit. She placed her glass down with calculated ease, signaling Ahmed with a brief glance. "Be ready."

Ahmed nodded once, slipping around the bar with a tray in hand. His route brought him closer to Kirill's table, the picture of a busy

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

bartender. As he moved, his gaze met Natalia's across the room. A moment passed between them, unspoken but clear: they were in sync.

Natalia's hand brushed her hair, her fingers grazing her concealed earpiece. "Stay sharp. He's watching."

Ahmed's voice hummed low in her ear. "Always."



THE NIGHT AIR BIT AT their faces as Kirill slipped out of the bar. Ahmed and Natalia followed at a calculated distance, weaving through the bustling streets. The glow of streetlights cast long shadows, giving the chase a surreal, almost theatrical quality.

Ahmed kept his voice light as he muttered, "You call this stealth? You're sticking out like a sore thumb in that dress."

Natalia shot him a glare, her voice sharp. "Focus. He's turning left."

They quickened their pace, keeping Kirill just within sight. He glanced over his shoulder, his eyes scanning the crowd. Ahmed grabbed Natalia's wrist, pulling her into the shadow of a storefront.

"He's spooked," Ahmed murmured. "We're too close."

Natalia yanked her wrist free, her glare piercing. "I had it under control."

Ahmed smirked, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Sure you did."

Kirill disappeared into the entrance of a metro station. Natalia cursed under her breath, darting after him. Ahmed followed, his long strides matching hers.

The station buzzed with activity. Commuters moved in every direction, their faces blending into a blur of anonymity. Ahmed scanned the crowd, his pulse quickening. "We lost him."

Natalia whirled on him, her voice low but cutting. "Because you slowed me down."

Ahmed crossed his arms, his tone calm but laced with irritation. "Or because you didn't think this through."

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The tension between them crackled, neither willing to back down. Finally, Ahmed let out a dry laugh, breaking the stalemate. “Look, we lost him. No point arguing now.”

Natalia’s jaw clenched, but she nodded reluctantly. “Fine. But next time, follow my lead.”

Ahmed leaned against a nearby column, his expression unreadable. “Whatever you say, boss.”



THE SAFEHOUSE SMELLED of damp plaster and old wood. Ahmed paced the narrow living room, his expression unreadable as Natalia leaned against the far wall, arms crossed. The tension between them thickened the air.

“You lost him,” Natalia started, her tone as cold as the fluorescent light overhead.

Ahmed stopped mid-step and turned to her. “I lost him? Let’s talk about your brilliant strategy of walking straight into his line of sight.”

Her gaze didn’t waver. “You were supposed to cover me. Instead, you decided to play hero.”

“Hero?” Ahmed scoffed, stepping closer. “I was the one keeping track while you strutted around like you owned the place.”

Natalia pushed off the wall, her voice low and sharp. “You withheld information.”

Ahmed raised an eyebrow, his hands spreading out in mock disbelief. “What information? You’ve told me nothing useful since this started.”

For a moment, the only sound was the faint hum of the radiator. Natalia’s lips pressed into a thin line as she studied him, her eyes flickering with a mix of frustration and calculation.

“You’re hiding something,” she said finally, her voice softer but no less dangerous.

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

Ahmed folded his arms, his tone laced with sarcasm. “And you’re a paragon of transparency, right?”

Natalia stepped closer, the space between them shrinking. “You forget you’re not the one in charge here.”

Ahmed’s smirk widened. “You think you’re in charge? If you were, we wouldn’t be back here empty-handed.”

The silence that followed felt heavier than any argument. Natalia turned away first, grabbing the leather jacket she’d draped over a chair. “This isn’t over,” she muttered, her voice taut.

Ahmed watched her go, his jaw tightening. “Not by a long shot.”



LATER, AS THE NIGHT deepened and the safehouse fell quiet, Natalia sat at a makeshift desk, her laptop open in front of her. The faint glow of the screen illuminated her face, the strain in her eyes betraying her exhaustion.

Ahmed leaned against the doorway, a cup of tea cradled in his hands. “Burning the midnight oil, are we?”

Natalia didn’t look up. “Some of us work to solve problems instead of causing them.”

Ahmed stepped into the room, setting the cup on the edge of the desk. “Well, if you’re done blaming me for everything, I have something you might find interesting.”

She glanced at him, skepticism written across her features. “Go on.”

Ahmed pulled a slip of paper from his pocket and unfolded it carefully. “Kirill’s not just some low-level operative. I’ve seen his name before—linked to a classified file I came across in Cairo. Your people probably know more about it than you’re letting on.”

Her expression flickered, a crack in her otherwise impenetrable demeanor. “Why didn’t you mention this earlier?”

“Because you didn’t ask,” he replied smoothly. “And let’s face it, trust isn’t exactly our strong suit.”

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Natalia's eyes narrowed, but she didn't challenge him. Instead, she reached for her tea, her voice quieter now. "If you're lying—"

"I'm not," Ahmed interrupted. "We're in this together, whether we like it or not."

The weight of his words hung between them. Natalia held his gaze for a moment before turning back to her laptop. "Fine. But this changes nothing."

Ahmed smirked as he moved toward the door. "Whatever you need to tell yourself."



THE KETTLE'S LOW WHISTLE filled the silence of the safehouse kitchen. Ahmed leaned against the counter, pouring steaming water into a chipped ceramic teapot. The simplicity of the moment contrasted with the day's chaos, though his thoughts churned relentlessly. He placed two cups on the counter, his movements deliberate, measured.

Footsteps approached, soft but confident. Natalia appeared in the doorway, her arms crossed, her expression guarded.

"Couldn't sleep?" Ahmed didn't look up as he asked, focusing instead on pouring the tea.

"Unlike you, some of us have work to do," she retorted, stepping into the room.

Ahmed smirked, setting the teapot down. "And yet here you are. Tea?"

Natalia hesitated before accepting the cup he handed her. The faint aroma of chamomile drifted between them. She took a cautious sip, her eyes studying him over the rim of the cup.

"Still playing the role of the perfect host, I see," she murmured, lowering the cup.

Ahmed leaned against the counter, his relaxed posture at odds with her tense frame. "Even spies need a break."

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

“Is that what you are?” Her tone was sharp, probing.

He met her gaze, unflinching. “Depends on who’s asking.”

The corner of her mouth twitched, almost imperceptibly. She glanced down at the tea in her hands, her posture softening slightly.

“You work hard,” Ahmed said after a pause, his voice lighter now. “Too hard, if you ask me.”

“Good thing I didn’t,” Natalia replied, but the edge in her tone had dulled.

Ahmed chuckled, his smile faint but genuine. “Still, it’s impressive. You’re relentless. I’ll give you that.”

She glanced at him, her expression unreadable. For a moment, the weight of their roles seemed to dissipate, replaced by something fragile and fleeting. Then she straightened, her composure snapping back into place.

“You’d do well to focus on the mission, Ahmed,” she said, her voice clipped.

“Always,” he replied, lifting his cup in a mock toast.

Natalia turned and walked toward the doorway, but she hesitated there, glancing back. Her eyes lingered on him for a moment before she disappeared down the hall.



THE GRAND LIBRARY HUMMED with quiet activity, its high ceilings and endless rows of bookshelves casting long shadows in the dim light. Ahmed stood near a display of historical texts, thumbing through a book he wasn’t reading. His sharp gaze tracked the movement of a balding man in a trench coat weaving through the aisles.

Natalia’s voice crackled softly in his earpiece. “He’s heading toward the back corner. Stay casual.”

“Casual is my specialty,” Ahmed muttered, sliding the book back onto the shelf. He adjusted his jacket and moved toward the target, his steps unhurried.

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The man stopped near a secluded reading nook, glancing around before pulling out a folder. Ahmed approached, his expression disarmingly neutral.

“Mind if I join?” Ahmed’s tone was light, friendly. He gestured toward the empty chair across from the man.

The man stiffened, his eyes darting toward Ahmed. “I’m not sure this is—”

“Relax,” Ahmed interrupted, lowering himself into the seat. “We’re both here for the same reason, aren’t we?”

The man hesitated, his grip tightening on the folder. “Who sent you?”

Ahmed leaned back, his smile easy but his eyes sharp. “Does it matter? What matters is what’s in that folder.”

The man’s gaze flicked toward the entrance, then back to Ahmed. He set the folder on the table, his fingers twitching nervously. “You have two minutes.”

Ahmed opened the folder, his face impassive as he scanned its contents. Maps, surveillance photos, and a list of names filled the pages. His pulse quickened, but he remained calm, turning each page with deliberate precision.

“You’ve been busy,” he remarked, sliding the folder back. “This could be useful.”

The man leaned forward, lowering his voice. “You didn’t hear it from me.”

Before Ahmed could respond, Natalia’s urgent whisper cut through his earpiece. “You’re not alone. Second target, closing in from the west side.”

Ahmed stood smoothly, offering the man a tight smile. “Pleasure doing business.”

As he walked away, his eyes scanned the rows of books, his senses on high alert. The second operative moved through the shadows, their

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

pace quickening. Ahmed slipped his hand into his jacket, brushing against the concealed blade hidden there.

“Time to go,” Natalia’s voice urged.

Ahmed ducked into an adjacent aisle, his movements fluid, silent. The cat-and-mouse game had begun.



THE AIR INSIDE THE library felt thicker now, charged with an unspoken tension. Ahmed moved toward the exit, his pace unhurried but deliberate, as Natalia’s voice crackled through the earpiece.

“Incoming from your right,” she warned, her voice low and steady.

Ahmed didn’t glance over, but his peripheral vision caught the figure cutting through the shelves, his movements too precise for a casual browser. The second operative was closing the distance, his dark coat brushing against the edges of the bookshelves.

“On my mark,” Natalia whispered.

Ahmed reached the end of the aisle and paused, his fingers brushing the spine of a thick book as though debating whether to pull it from the shelf. The operative slowed, his steps careful, measured.

“Now,” Natalia snapped.

Ahmed spun, the heavy book in his hand slicing through the air. It struck the operative’s arm, forcing him to drop the pistol he’d been drawing from his coat. Ahmed surged forward, his momentum driving the man into the nearest shelf. Books tumbled around them in a cacophony of thuds, drawing startled gasps from the other patrons.

The operative recovered quickly, shoving Ahmed back with a grunt. His hand darted for the weapon on the floor, but Ahmed was faster, kicking it out of reach.

“Clock’s ticking, Ahmed,” Natalia’s voice cut through the chaos.

The sound of pounding footsteps echoed across the library as Natalia emerged from her concealed position. Her pistol was drawn,

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her steps quick but controlled as she moved to intercept a third figure approaching from the far end of the room.

“You could’ve mentioned there were three,” Ahmed muttered, twisting to dodge a punch aimed at his jaw.

“I assumed you’d figure it out,” Natalia shot back, her tone sharp.

Ahmed caught his opponent’s wrist, twisting it sharply before delivering a solid knee to the man’s midsection. The operative staggered, but Ahmed didn’t relent, landing a swift kick that sent the man sprawling to the ground.

“Exit, now,” Natalia barked.

Ahmed didn’t hesitate, weaving through the scattered patrons and fallen books to reach Natalia’s position. She fired a warning shot into the air, sending the remaining operatives scrambling for cover.

“Show-off,” Ahmed remarked, his breath short as they burst through the library’s side exit.

Natalia didn’t reply, grabbing his arm and pulling him into the shadowed alley.



THE COLD NIGHT AIR bit at Ahmed’s skin as they sprinted through the labyrinth of Moscow’s side streets. Natalia led the way, her movements swift and precise. Behind them, distant shouts and the occasional crack of gunfire echoed through the narrow alleys.

“Left,” Natalia ordered, barely glancing over her shoulder.

Ahmed followed, his steps pounding against the uneven pavement.

“You’ve been shot at before, right?”

“Why, worried I’ll panic?”

“Just making sure you don’t slow me down.”

She didn’t dignify the remark with a response, leading him through another sharp turn before ducking into a darkened doorway. Ahmed joined her, his chest heaving as he pressed his back against the cold brick wall.

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

“Lost them?” he asked, peering down the street.

“For now,” Natalia replied, holstering her pistol.

Ahmed winced as he adjusted his jacket, the sharp sting in his side betraying an injury he hadn’t noticed in the heat of the chase. Natalia’s eyes flicked to him, her brow furrowing briefly.

“Let me see,” she demanded, stepping closer.

“It’s nothing,” Ahmed protested, but she was already pulling his jacket aside to reveal a gash just above his hip.

“Nothing?” Natalia arched an eyebrow, her expression cold but focused.

Ahmed smirked faintly, leaning against the wall. “I’ve had worse.”

Natalia didn’t respond, pulling a compact first aid kit from her bag. She worked quickly, her hands efficient as she cleaned the wound and pressed a bandage against it.

“Try not to get yourself killed,” she muttered, securing the dressing with a strip of medical tape.

“Was that concern I heard?” Ahmed teased, his grin lopsided despite the pain.

Natalia straightened, her eyes hard. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

Their proximity lingered a moment too long before Natalia stepped back, her professional mask slipping firmly into place.

“We need to move,” she said briskly, adjusting her coat.

Ahmed pushed off the wall, his movements slower now. “Lead the way, partner.”

Natalia shot him a sharp look but turned and began walking. Ahmed followed, a faint smile tugging at his lips despite the pain. The night was far from over.



THE GLOW OF AHMED’S laptop cast faint shadows across the safehouse walls, illuminating the intricate codes and encrypted files they had retrieved. He leaned back, stretching his shoulders, his eyes

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catching movement across the room. Natalia stood by the window, her arms crossed, the distant city lights reflecting in her calculating gaze.

“You’ve been staring at that screen for hours,” she remarked, her tone neutral.

“Dedication pays off,” Ahmed responded without looking away from his work. “Or did the SVR train you to rely on intuition alone?”

Her lips twitched, almost imperceptibly. “We were trained to rely on results.”

“And here I thought you’d be impressed.” He gestured toward the file names. “Who else could crack these so efficiently?”

Natalia didn’t reply, stepping closer instead. The tension in the room shifted, less hostile, more charged. She placed a cup of tea beside him—a rare gesture.

“Fuel for your brilliance,” she muttered, her voice softer than usual.

Ahmed glanced up, his smirk fading as he studied her expression. “You’re full of surprises tonight.”

“I could say the same,” Natalia quipped, sitting across from him. Her gaze lingered on his hands, deftly navigating the keyboard. “You don’t strike me as the type to thrive under pressure.”

Ahmed leaned forward, his voice lowering. “And you don’t strike me as someone who lets her guard down.”

Their eyes locked, and for a moment, the unspoken tension between them thickened. Natalia’s expression softened, though the flicker of vulnerability was fleeting.

“Focus on the files,” she said, breaking the silence. “I’m not paying you to analyze me.”

Ahmed chuckled, shaking his head. “You’re not paying me at all.”



THE FILES REVEALED their secrets in layers, lines of code unraveling to expose encrypted communications between Israeli

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operatives. Ahmed's fingers paused on the keyboard as a familiar name surfaced.

"Look at this." He turned the laptop toward Natalia, pointing at the decrypted message.

Her brows furrowed as she read. "A mole."

"Not just any mole," Ahmed added. "Someone in your agency. They've been feeding intel to the Israelis for months."

Natalia's jaw tightened. Her posture stiffened, but beneath her professional exterior, the betrayal was palpable.

"Do you recognize the name?" Ahmed pressed, watching her closely.

Her hesitation was brief. "I do."

He leaned back, his tone careful. "This changes everything. If they're compromised, you'll need me more than ever."

Natalia's gaze sharpened, but she didn't deny it. "And I suppose you expect me to trust you now?"

"Trust?" Ahmed tilted his head, a faint smile playing on his lips. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. I'm just saying our interests align—for now."

Natalia exhaled, the weight of the revelation pressing down on her. "If this is true, we're both targets. They'll eliminate anyone who knows too much."

"Then it's a good thing we work well together," Ahmed replied, his tone light but his expression serious.

She didn't respond immediately, her mind racing as she considered the implications. "We'll confirm this lead before making any moves. No mistakes."

"Of course," Ahmed said, rising from his chair. "I'll even let you take the credit."

Natalia shot him a warning look, but the tension in her shoulders eased ever so slightly. For the first time, they stood on equal footing—not as adversaries, but as reluctant allies bound by necessity.

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The room fell into silence, the flicker of mutual respect and understanding lingering between them. Neither spoke, but in the quiet, an unspoken agreement settled: they would face whatever came next together, for better or worse.



THE NARROW SAFEHOUSE corridor was dim, lit only by the amber glow of a desk lamp in the adjoining room. Ahmed leaned against the wall near the door, arms crossed, his posture deceptively casual. Natalia stood a few feet away, the tension between them as palpable as the quiet hum of the city beyond the curtained window.

“Tomorrow, the mission gets riskier,” she said finally, her tone cool but laced with something unspoken. “If we’re not precise, we could expose ourselves and the operation.”

Ahmed tilted his head, studying her. “Funny, I thought precision was your specialty.”

Her eyes narrowed, but instead of firing back, she nodded. “It is. Which is why I expect you to keep up.”

He smirked, letting the silence stretch a moment too long. “I always do.”

Natalia crossed her arms, mirroring his stance. “This isn’t about your charm, Ahmed. Lives are at stake. You can’t just improvise your way through this.”

“I think you’ve noticed by now,” he said, pushing off the wall, “improvisation is where I excel.”

Her expression remained unreadable, but there was a flicker of something in her gaze—reluctant admiration, perhaps, or irritation. Maybe both.

“You’re playing a dangerous game,” she said quietly, turning her focus toward the map spread across the nearby table. “But it’s worked so far. I’ll give you that.”

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Ahmed stepped closer, his presence commanding without effort. “You don’t trust me. I don’t trust you. Yet here we are, planning our next move together. Doesn’t that strike you as... curious?”

Natalia glanced up at him, her features softening just enough to reveal the faintest crack in her armor. “Curious isn’t the word I’d use.”

“What would you call it, then?” His tone was lighter now, teasing, but his eyes remained sharp, watching her every move.

“A necessary alliance,” she replied, her voice firm, though the faintest curve at the edge of her lips betrayed her.

He chuckled softly, shaking his head. “Always so clinical. You make it sound like a business transaction.”

“In some ways, it is.”

“And in others?” He stepped closer, lowering his voice.

Her jaw tightened, but she didn’t pull away. “In others, it’s survival. Nothing more.”

“Nothing more,” Ahmed echoed, his tone dipping into something closer to skepticism.

Their gazes locked, the space between them heavy with words unsaid. Natalia broke the moment first, brushing past him toward the desk. She reached for her coat, pausing just before slipping it on.

“For the record,” she began, her back to him, “you’re not as unpredictable as you think. I see right through you.”

Ahmed’s grin widened. “And what do you see?”

She turned halfway, just enough for him to catch the glint in her eyes. “A man who doesn’t know how to quit. And maybe—just maybe—that’s why you’re still alive.”

With that, she walked toward the door. Ahmed didn’t stop her. He watched her go, a mixture of curiosity and something deeper stirring in his chest.

As the door clicked shut behind her, he exhaled slowly. No words had been exchanged to solidify their partnership, but it was clear. Their fragile alliance was no longer about survival alone. Whether they liked

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it or not, their fates were now tangled, and neither could afford to untangle the threads.

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA



Chapter 5: Enemies Under the Iron Curtain



THE AIR IN THE TUNNELS was stale, laced with the metallic scent of rust and damp concrete. Ahmed crouched low, his hand brushing against the grimy wall as he gestured for Natalia to follow. The narrow beam of his flashlight skimmed the graffiti-laden surface, pausing on a faint arrow pointing deeper into the labyrinth.

“Do you think they’re this obvious?” His voice was low, clipped, yet it carried an edge of curiosity.

Natalia leaned closer, her sharp eyes narrowing at the symbol. “Or it’s a trap.” Her hand rested on the holster at her hip, her fingers poised, ready. “Keep moving.”

The tunnels stretched endlessly, dim light bulbs flickering like dying stars overhead. Pipes snaked along the ceiling, dripping occasionally onto the ground where puddles mirrored their distorted reflections. The sound of distant machinery hummed faintly, masking their muted footsteps.

Ahmed glanced back at her. “You’re tense. Didn’t think someone like you would flinch in the dark.”

“Spare me the psych evaluations.” Her tone was as cold as the damp air surrounding them. “Focus on the task.”

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He smirked but pressed on, the faint tension between them a constant undercurrent. It wasn't hostility, not entirely. Something about her calculated steps, the way she seemed to measure every breath, fascinated him in a way he didn't care to admit.

The tunnel forked ahead, one path sloping downward, the other narrowing to a crawlspace. Ahmed stopped, scanning both routes. He tilted his head toward the slope. "Down there."

Natalia's eyes darted between the paths, her instincts battling with logic. "And if they're waiting for us?"

"They'd expect hesitation. So we don't give them any." He stepped forward, his stride confident, almost daring her to argue.

She hesitated for the briefest moment, then followed, her jaw tight. "This better not get us killed."

The slope descended into a chamber where rusted metal doors lined the walls, each marked with peeling numbers. Ahmed knelt, examining a patch of disturbed dirt near the closest door. "Someone's been here recently. See the prints?"

Natalia crouched beside him, her proximity bringing a subtle charge to the space. "Fresh," she murmured, brushing her fingers across the faint outline of a boot. "Size nine. Military."

"Israeli?" He met her gaze, his expression unreadable.

"Possibly." She stood abruptly, the sound of her boots echoing faintly. "Let's check the next corridor."

Before they could move, a distant clatter broke the stillness. Both froze, hands instinctively on their weapons. Ahmed gestured to the far side of the chamber, signaling for her to take cover. Natalia slipped into the shadows, her movements as fluid as the water dripping from the pipes above.

The sound grew louder—footsteps, deliberate but not hurried. A flashlight beam sliced through the darkness, sweeping across the chamber. Ahmed pressed himself against the wall, his breathing steady.

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His eyes darted toward Natalia's position, her silhouette barely visible in the gloom.

The figure entered the chamber, their steps crunching on loose gravel. Ahmed's grip tightened on his weapon, his pulse steady but heightened. The figure paused near one of the doors, keys jangling faintly. As the lock turned, Ahmed moved swiftly, his footsteps silent as he closed the distance.

Natalia emerged simultaneously, her gun leveled, her voice low and firm. "Don't move."

The operative froze, their flashlight clattering to the ground. Ahmed stepped into the light, his expression calm but commanding. "Who are you working for?"

The operative's face, half-obscured by shadows, twisted into a defiant smirk. "You're too late."

Before either could react, a flashbang rolled from the operative's hand, erupting into blinding light and deafening noise. Ahmed stumbled back, his vision swimming, the world around him dissolving into chaos.



THE LABYRINTH PRESSED in on them, its silence broken only by the occasional drip of water echoing through the dimly lit tunnels. Natalia walked slightly ahead, her steps precise and deliberate, while Ahmed's flashlight swept methodically over the rough-hewn walls.

"You're too rigid," Ahmed muttered, his tone carrying more amusement than malice. "It's a tunnel, not a chessboard."

Natalia glanced over her shoulder, her jaw tightening. "And your improvisation got us cornered last time."

"Cornered, but alive," he countered smoothly. "I'll take that over marching into a trap because it fits your strategy."

She stopped abruptly, turning to face him. "If you've got a better idea, let's hear it."

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Ahmed stepped closer, his gaze steady. “The layout isn’t random. Someone mapped these routes with purpose.” He gestured to a faint groove etched into the wall, almost invisible beneath the grime. “This mark—signal for a secondary path.”

Natalia studied it, reluctant to admit she hadn’t noticed. “You’re sure?”

“Enough to bet our lives on it.” His smirk deepened. “Unless you want to keep following dead ends.”

Her eyes narrowed, but she nodded curtly. “Lead the way.”

They moved in tense silence, the unspoken shift in authority palpable. Ahmed’s pace quickened as he navigated the twists and turns with an ease that belied the oppressive surroundings. Natalia followed, her hand hovering near her weapon, her wariness extending as much to him as the unseen threats lurking in the shadows.

“You’re good at this,” she said finally, her voice low but grudgingly sincere.

“Surprised?” Ahmed’s grin flickered in the faint light. “I told you, improvisation has its perks.”

“Just don’t get cocky.”

“Noted.”

The tension between them softened, though neither would admit it. For now, necessity bound them tighter than suspicion.



THE TUNNEL WIDENED, revealing a junction with faint traces of dust disturbed on the floor. Ahmed’s flashlight swept the area, catching a faint marking carved into the wall at eye level—a triangle bisected by a line.

He stopped abruptly. “Wait.”

Natalia moved closer, her gun drawn. “What is it?”

Ahmed gestured to the symbol, his expression unreadable. “Israeli operative code.”

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Her eyes flicked between the mark and Ahmed. “And how exactly do you know that?”

“Let’s just say I’ve seen it before,” he replied, his tone even but evasive. “It’s not random.”

“Convenient,” Natalia muttered, suspicion flickering in her gaze. “What does it mean?”

“Possible safehouse ahead,” Ahmed answered, running his fingers lightly over the symbol. “Or a drop point. Either way, we’re not alone.”

Her fingers tightened on her weapon. “And you expect me to believe you didn’t know about this?”

“You think I’d lead us here if I was working against you?” He stepped back, meeting her gaze squarely. “Your trust issues are showing.”

Natalia’s lips pressed into a thin line, her silence speaking volumes.

Ahmed turned back to the symbol, his voice softening. “If they’re here, they’re watching. Move carefully.”

They pressed forward, their movements slower now, every sound amplified by the cavernous space. Natalia’s gaze remained on Ahmed, her instincts torn between wariness and the uneasy realization that his insight was keeping them alive.

At the next bend, Ahmed raised a hand, halting abruptly. The faintest sound of shuffling echoed ahead, accompanied by the metallic clink of something being dragged. His eyes met Natalia’s briefly before he pressed a finger to his lips.

She nodded, her weapon raised as they crept forward. Whatever lay ahead, it was no longer just the tunnels testing their uneasy partnership.



THE SOUND OF BOOTS on concrete cut through the silence. Ahmed froze, holding up a hand as Natalia instinctively pressed her back against the rough wall. The dim light barely illuminated the

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tunnel ahead, but the echo of voices left no doubt—guards were approaching.

“How many?” Natalia mouthed, her pistol drawn and steady.

Ahmed tilted his head, listening. The rhythm of footsteps suggested at least three, maybe more. He gestured toward a narrow alcove further down the passage, just wide enough to squeeze into.

She hesitated for only a second before following his lead, her steps careful and deliberate. They slid into the cramped space, their shoulders brushing in the tight confines. The rough stone bit into Ahmed’s back, but he ignored it, focusing on the shadows moving closer.

“Stay still,” he whispered, his breath barely audible.

The guards’ voices became clearer—a mix of Russian and Hebrew. Natalia stiffened at the language shift, her grip tightening on her weapon. Ahmed caught her expression and shook his head, a silent warning not to act rashly.

The first figure appeared, a hulking silhouette outlined by the weak light from the tunnel. A second followed, then a third, all armed and alert. One carried a flashlight, its beam sweeping the walls in slow, deliberate arcs. Ahmed’s heartbeat quickened as the light passed inches from their hiding spot.

The lead guard stopped, turning to his comrades.

“Nothing here,” he muttered in Russian. “Move on to the next sector.”

The others nodded, their boots clacking against the concrete as they moved past. Ahmed exhaled slowly, his tension ebbing only slightly as the sound of footsteps faded.

Natalia shifted beside him, her voice low and sharp. “You understood them. How fluent are you?”

“Enough,” Ahmed replied, his tone neutral.

“That’s not an answer.”

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"It's the only one you're getting right now." He stepped out of the alcove, scanning the passage to ensure it was clear. "Let's go before they double back."

Her glare burned into his back, but she followed without argument.



THE MARKING AHMED HAD spotted earlier led them to a recessed doorway half-concealed by debris. He brushed aside loose bricks, revealing a rusted metal handle.

"This is it," he murmured, tugging the door open with a faint creak.

Inside, the air was stale, heavy with dust and disuse. Natalia entered first, her flashlight sweeping across the room—a small, windowless space with a single wooden table at its center. Papers were scattered across the surface, along with a map pinned to the wall.

She moved to the table, her eyes narrowing as she examined the documents. "Operational plans," she muttered. "They're targeting high-ranking officials."

Ahmed joined her, scanning the map. Red circles marked key locations across Moscow, connected by a web of lines. He traced one path with his finger, noting its proximity to the Kremlin.

"This isn't small-scale," he said, his voice grim.

"No, it's not." Natalia's frustration boiled over as she slammed her fist on the table. "How the hell did they get this far without anyone noticing?"

Ahmed leaned back, arms crossed. "Maybe they had help. You're not the only agency with a mole problem."

She shot him a sharp look but didn't respond. Instead, she focused on the papers, flipping through them with practiced efficiency.

"These codes," she said, pointing to a series of numbers and symbols scrawled in the margins. "Can you decrypt them?"

"Given time."

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“Then start.”

Ahmed smirked faintly, pulling a chair closer to the table. “You really know how to ask nicely.”

“Just do it.”

As he got to work, Natalia moved to the door, her weapon still drawn. The safehouse had given them a lead, but she knew better than to assume they were safe. Outside, the faint echo of footsteps reminded her just how thin their margin for error had become.



BACK AT THEIR BASE, Natalia paced in front of the map pinned to the wall, the faint glow from a desk lamp casting sharp shadows across her face. The safehouse discovery had left a bitter taste—plans for an operation of this magnitude meant their enemy had been operating undetected for far too long.

“How did they get this far?” Her voice carried an edge that sliced through the quiet. “Weeks—no, months of planning. And we’re only now finding breadcrumbs.”

Ahmed leaned casually against the edge of the desk, arms crossed, watching her unravel. “Maybe it’s not about the breadcrumbs,” he said evenly.

“Then what is it about?” She stopped pacing, glaring at him.

“Control,” Ahmed replied, tilting his head toward the map. “You can’t control a leak that’s already out there. But you can control how you respond.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line. “You think I don’t know that?”

“I think you know, but you’re too busy being pissed off to act on it.”

Her hands clenched into fists, but she forced herself to breathe. The calm in Ahmed’s tone grated on her, yet it grounded her. “Fine. What’s your brilliant solution, then?”

“Cut the noise. Focus on what’s actionable.” Ahmed straightened and stepped closer to the map, tracing one of the red lines with his

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finger. “These aren’t just random targets. There’s a pattern here—look at the timing, the locations. They’re building toward something bigger.”

Natalia followed his hand, her brow furrowing. His analysis was sound, but acknowledging it felt like giving him too much credit. “And what do you suggest we do with that?”

“Get ahead of them. Use their own playbook against them.”

Her frustration didn’t dissipate, but it shifted, redirected. She studied him for a moment, searching for cracks in his calm exterior. “You’re awfully composed for someone whose life depends on this.”

Ahmed smirked faintly. “I’ve had worse days.”



HOURS LATER, THE BASE was silent except for the faint hum of a laptop and the scratch of pencil against paper. Ahmed sat hunched over the desk, eyes scanning rows of symbols and numbers. The dim light made the room feel smaller, more suffocating, but he didn’t let it distract him.

Natalia leaned against the doorframe, arms folded. She hadn’t intended to watch him work, but the intensity in his focus held her there. His movements were deliberate, confident, each line and keystroke chipping away at the code’s complexity.

“How long has it been?”

Ahmed didn’t look up. “Long enough for you to get some sleep.”

“I don’t sleep when there’s work to be done.”

“Clearly,” he muttered, his lips quirking into a faint smile.

She moved closer, her gaze flicking to the pages scattered across the desk. “Are you close?”

“Close enough,” he said, pushing a sheet aside to cross-reference a line of text. “This isn’t amateur work. Whoever encrypted this knew what they were doing.”

“That’s reassuring.”

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He glanced at her, catching the sarcasm in her tone. “If you’re going to hover, at least make yourself useful.”

Her brow arched. “And how would you suggest I do that?”

“Coffee. Black.”

For a moment, she considered leaving him to fend for himself. But instead, she turned toward the small kitchenette. Minutes later, she returned with a steaming cup, setting it beside him without a word.

Ahmed looked up, surprised. “Didn’t think you’d actually do it.”

“Consider it a momentary lapse in judgment.”

He picked up the cup, savoring the warmth before taking a sip. “You’re full of surprises, Natalia.”

She didn’t respond, but her gaze lingered on him for a moment longer than she intended. Then, without another word, she turned and walked back to the shadows, leaving him to his work.



AHMED’S FINGERS PAUSED over the keyboard. The code had unraveled enough to reveal a name buried deep within the encrypted lines. He leaned back, rubbing his temples as he read it again to ensure he wasn’t imagining things.

“Alexei Orlov,” he muttered under his breath, though the weight of the discovery lingered like an unspoken threat.

From across the room, Natalia’s gaze snapped up from the reports she’d been studying. She stood, her movements stiff, as if bracing for a blow.

“What did you say?”

Ahmed turned the laptop toward her, gesturing to the decrypted section. “It’s right there. Orlov. Looks like he’s more involved than anyone would’ve guessed.”

Natalia’s jaw tightened, her eyes scanning the screen with practiced efficiency. For a moment, her expression was unreadable, but her clenched fists gave her away.

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"You recognize him," Ahmed said, his voice even but probing. She hesitated. "He's a prominent figure. Ties to several industries. Oil, banking..."

"And?"

Natalia's shoulders stiffened, her poker face cracking just enough for Ahmed to catch the undercurrent of unease. "And... my family."

Ahmed raised an eyebrow, leaning forward slightly. "Care to elaborate?"

"No." Her response was quick, clipped.

He let out a low whistle. "You're really going to make me connect the dots, huh? Family friend? Business partner? Or something worse?"

"Drop it, Ahmed," Natalia snapped, but her voice lacked its usual authority. She turned away, pacing toward the window as if the view outside might somehow clear her thoughts.

"Interesting. You accuse me of holding back, but when the shoe's on the other foot..."

She spun around, her eyes sharp. "This isn't about me."

"Isn't it?" He folded his arms, his tone calm but unrelenting. "If Orlov's tangled up in this, and you have history with him, that's relevant. To both of us."

Natalia's silence stretched, tension thickening the air. Finally, she exhaled sharply, crossing her arms. "He was close to my family. My father, specifically. They had dealings I wasn't privy to."

"And now he's mixed up with an Israeli network targeting Russian officials." Ahmed's voice softened, but the edge of curiosity remained. "That's a hell of a coincidence."

"It's not a coincidence," she admitted quietly. "But it complicates things."

Ahmed tilted his head, studying her. "Complications are part of the job. The question is whether you can handle it."

Her glare returned, though it lacked venom. "I can handle it. Don't question that."

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“Good,” Ahmed replied, his tone lightening as he gestured to the laptop. “Because this lead just became a lot more interesting.”



LATE THAT NIGHT, THE safehouse was quiet except for the faint rustle of papers and the occasional clink of a coffee mug. Ahmed lingered in the doorway of the small living area, his gaze landing on Natalia seated at the worn sofa.

She held a small locket in her hand, its delicate chain glinting in the dim light. Her thumb brushed over it absentmindedly, her eyes fixed on a tiny photograph inside.

Ahmed cleared his throat softly, stepping into the room. “Burning the midnight oil, or just reminiscing?”

Natalia snapped the locket shut, her mask of composure sliding back into place. “Neither.”

Ahmed smirked, settling into a chair across from her. “You’re a terrible liar.”

She stared at him for a moment, debating whether to push him away or let the silence stretch. Finally, she opened the locket again, her gaze softening. “It’s my mother. She passed when I was young.”

Ahmed leaned forward slightly, his usual sarcasm replaced by something gentler. “She looks kind. I can see where you get it.”

Natalia let out a dry laugh, shaking her head. “Kindness isn’t exactly my defining trait.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” Ahmed quipped, his tone light but sincere.

Her lips twitched, almost forming a smile. “Don’t read too much into it. Sentimentality isn’t my style.”

“Noted,” Ahmed replied, leaning back. “But it’s okay to let it be, just for a moment.”

Natalia’s grip on the locket tightened, but she didn’t respond. Instead, she closed it again, tucking it beneath her collar. “Get some rest, Ahmed. Tomorrow’s another long day.”

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He stood, pausing at the door. “For what it’s worth, I think your mother would be proud. Even if you’re insufferable most of the time.”

Her sharp glare met his smirk, but this time, she didn’t retort. Instead, she turned back to the empty room, letting the quiet settle around her.



THE SAFEHOUSE LIGHTS flickered, casting eerie shadows on the peeling wallpaper. Ahmed had barely finished securing the last of the decrypted files when a faint shuffle outside the window stilled him. He leaned closer, his instincts sharpening as he noticed the subtle glint of movement—a shadow slipping through the dark.

“Natalia,” he whispered, his tone low but urgent.

She didn’t need to ask. Her hand reached for the pistol she kept holstered at her side. Her eyes locked onto his, and for a split second, they exchanged an unspoken understanding.

A crash shattered the silence. The front door splintered inward as black-clad operatives stormed in. Ahmed dived behind the sofa, grabbing the Glock he’d stashed beneath a loose floorboard. Natalia crouched by the corner of the desk, her gun already raised.

“Move left,” she barked, her voice steady despite the chaos.

He obeyed, firing a quick round to cover her as she darted toward the kitchen for better vantage. The room exploded into a flurry of gunfire, the sharp cracks of bullets echoing in the confined space.

“They’re blocking the back exit!” Ahmed called out, his voice strained as he ducked behind an overturned table.

“Then we make a new one,” Natalia snapped, shoving a chair through the kitchen window.

Ahmed fired again, dropping one of the attackers before they could reload. The remaining operatives pressed forward, their formation tight and calculated. He felt the sting of glass shards on his arm as bullets tore through the table.

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“Now, Ahmed!” Natalia shouted, her voice cutting through the chaos.

He didn’t hesitate. Sprinting toward the shattered window, he vaulted over the counter, landing beside her in the narrow alley.

More footsteps approached. Natalia grabbed his arm, pulling him toward a stack of crates. “We can’t stop here. Move!”

The alley felt suffocating, every corner a potential ambush. Ahmed glanced back, firing a warning shot to slow their pursuers.

“You’re a little too comfortable with this, aren’t you?” he said, his breath ragged.

“You’re welcome to stay behind and test their hospitality,” Natalia retorted, her tone sharp despite the faint smirk tugging at her lips.

Another round of gunfire erupted as they rounded the corner, disappearing into the shadows of the empty street.



THE SAFEHOUSE WAS A smoldering ruin when they finally stopped to catch their breath. Natalia crouched behind a dumpster, wiping a streak of dirt from her cheek. Ahmed leaned against the wall beside her, his hand pressed against his side where a bullet had grazed him.

“Could’ve been worse,” he said, his tone laced with dry humor.

Natalia shot him a sideways glance, her brow furrowing as she noticed the blood seeping through his shirt. “You’re hurt.”

“It’s nothing. Just a scratch.”

“Stop being an idiot and let me see it,” she snapped, reaching for him.

Ahmed raised an eyebrow but relented, lifting his shirt to reveal the shallow wound. “Satisfied?”

“Hardly,” Natalia muttered, pulling a small first aid kit from her jacket. She worked quickly, her hands steady despite the faint tremor of adrenaline still coursing through her.

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"You're surprisingly gentle for someone who's usually barking orders," Ahmed teased, wincing slightly as she pressed a bandage against the cut.

"Don't push your luck."

He smirked, leaning back as she finished. "I think you owe me a favor after this."

Natalia arched a brow, her expression skeptical. "For what?"

"For saving your life," Ahmed replied, gesturing vaguely toward the safehouse. "You're welcome, by the way."

Her lips twitched, the closest thing to a smile he'd seen from her since their partnership began. "You're delusional. I saved you."

"Details," he said with a shrug.

For a moment, the tension between them softened, replaced by a flicker of mutual respect. Natalia stood, brushing off her hands as she scanned their surroundings.

"Let's move," she said, her voice firm again. "We've lost too much time already."

Ahmed pushed off the wall, his movements slower but steady. "Lead the way, boss."

As they disappeared into the night, the faintest trace of a smile lingered on Natalia's face, though she'd never admit it.



THE SAFEHOUSE WALLS felt closer than they had an hour ago, though Ahmed knew the room hadn't shrunk. He leaned against the edge of the kitchen counter, arms crossed, as Natalia paced the small space, her heels clicking on the wooden floor with deliberate precision.

"Someone tipped them off," Natalia said, her voice sharp, cutting through the stillness. "This wasn't random. They knew exactly where we were."

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Ahmed tilted his head, his expression calm despite the tension crackling between them. “You’re assuming I had something to do with it.”

She stopped mid-step, turning to face him. “It’s not an assumption. It’s a fact that someone fed them intel, and you’ve been less than forthcoming since we started this mess.”

“Interesting logic,” Ahmed replied, his voice measured. “Your agency is crawling with leaks, but sure, blame me. That makes perfect sense.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line, and for a moment, she didn’t respond. Instead, she grabbed the edge of the table, her knuckles whitening. “You had a clean chance to run back there. To disappear. Yet you stayed. Why?”

“Because running isn’t my style.” Ahmed’s eyes narrowed. “But while we’re airing suspicions, let’s talk about how they seemed to know our exact escape route. That wasn’t guesswork.”

Natalia bristled, her posture rigid. “You’re accusing me now?”

“I’m stating facts, not pointing fingers.” He stepped forward, closing the gap between them. “But if you want trust, it has to go both ways. Right now, you’re holding all the cards, and I’m still playing blind.”

Her jaw tightened, but she didn’t pull back. The space between them felt charged, the silence heavy with unsaid words. Finally, she exhaled, the tension in her shoulders easing slightly. “You’re right. We need to figure out the source. But if you’re lying to me—”

“I’m not,” Ahmed interrupted, his voice firm. “And I don’t think you are either. But someone’s pulling strings, and we’re the ones tangled in the web.”

Natalia held his gaze, searching for something in his expression. When she found no cracks, she stepped back, creating a sliver of distance. “Fine. Let’s focus on the mission. But if you have anything else I need to know, now’s the time.”

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

Ahmed's lips curved into a faint smirk. "What you see is what you get. Trust me, I'd be a terrible liar."

She almost laughed but caught herself, turning away before he could see the flicker of amusement in her eyes. "Get some rest. We'll regroup in the morning."



MORNING LIGHT FILTERED through the gaps in the curtains, painting soft streaks across the safehouse walls. Natalia sipped her coffee, her eyes scanning the scattered files on the table. The tension from the night before still hung in the air, but it had dulled to an uneasy calm.

Ahmed entered the room, his movements slower than usual. He glanced at the coffee pot but didn't reach for it. Instead, he leaned against the doorframe, his gaze settling on Natalia. "Any breakthroughs?"

"Not yet." Her tone was clipped, though her earlier anger seemed to have faded. "But the decrypted data points to a rendezvous. If we move quickly, we can intercept them."

Ahmed nodded, his expression thoughtful. "I'm in."

She looked up, her eyes narrowing. "Just like that?"

"Just like that," he said simply. "I told you, I want this network dismantled as much as you do."

For a moment, she studied him, weighing his words. Then, with a sigh, she extended a hand across the table. "Truce?"

Ahmed hesitated, not because he doubted her, but because the gesture felt strangely significant. Finally, he stepped forward, taking her hand in his. "Truce."

The handshake lingered, neither pulling away immediately. There was a weight to the contact, an unspoken agreement that went beyond words. When Natalia finally withdrew, she picked up her mug and turned toward the window, hiding the faint warmth in her expression.

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“Let’s get to work,” she said, her voice steady again.

Ahmed watched her for a moment longer before grabbing his own mug. “Lead the way, partner.”



THE DECRYPTED FILES lay scattered across the table, a chaotic mess of dates, coordinates, and encrypted names. Ahmed leaned back in his chair, arms crossed as he observed Natalia’s sharp focus. Her eyes darted from document to document, piecing together a puzzle only she seemed to comprehend.

“This gala,” Natalia began, tapping a manicured finger against a highlighted entry. “It’s not just a social event. It’s where the network will finalize their next move.”

Ahmed tilted his head. “And how are you so sure?”

She didn’t look up. “Because the man hosting it is a known associate of theirs. A financier with deep ties to illegal arms trades. If they’re planning anything significant, it’ll start there.”

“Convenient that your agency knows so much about him yet hasn’t acted,” Ahmed said, his tone deliberately light but carrying an edge.

Her jaw tightened. “We’ve been watching him for months. Moving too soon risks exposing deeper connections.”

“And now you’re hoping I can waltz into his gala and charm my way into their circle?” His smirk was teasing, but his eyes studied her reaction carefully.

Natalia finally glanced at him, her expression unreadable. “Something like that. You’ll need to blend in seamlessly, which means following my lead.”

Ahmed chuckled softly, shaking his head. “I hate to break it to you, but blending in isn’t your strong suit. You carry yourself like you’re always on edge.”

Her gaze narrowed. “I’m not the one who draws attention with smug grins and constant quips.”

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

“Touché,” Ahmed replied, the smirk returning. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. “So, what’s the plan? Do I play the charming diplomat, or are we going for mysterious foreign investor?”

Natalia slid a dossier across the table. “You’ll be Dr. Lucas Wright, an American energy consultant with ties to renewable initiatives in Eastern Europe. Your background’s been fabricated, and I’ll be your handler, posing as your Russian liaison.”

He flipped through the pages, raising an eyebrow. “Dr. Wright? Sounds fancy.”

“Try not to ruin it with that smug attitude.” She stood, walking to the window. “This isn’t a joke, Ahmed. One slip, and we’re both dead.”

Her words carried more weight than usual, and he sobered slightly. “Don’t worry. I’ve done this dance before.”

She turned, her gaze meeting his. “Good. Because this time, the stakes are higher than you think.”



THE SAFEHOUSE BUZZED with quiet activity. Natalia stood in front of a mirror, adjusting the sleek black gown that hugged her figure. She scrutinized her reflection, ensuring every detail was perfect. Ahmed lounged nearby, already dressed in a sharp tuxedo, his bowtie slightly askew.

“You clean up nicely,” she remarked without turning.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” He adjusted the bowtie, his movements casual yet precise. “But I think you’re stealing the show tonight.”

Natalia’s reflection flicked him a glance. “Focus, Ahmed. This isn’t about impressing anyone.”

“Speak for yourself. Half of this job is making them believe I belong,” he quipped, flashing a grin.

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She walked over, her heels clicking softly against the floor. Without a word, she reached for his bowtie, fixing it with swift, efficient movements. He stood still, watching her with quiet amusement.

“Do you always have to be in control?” he asked.

Her hands paused briefly before finishing the adjustment. “Someone has to be.”

He chuckled, low and smooth. “Well, don’t let me get in the way of your master plan.”

Stepping back, she folded her arms. “Just remember the protocols. No improvising unless absolutely necessary.”

“Improvising is my specialty,” he said, his grin widening.

“Exactly what worries me,” she shot back, her voice dry.

Despite the banter, there was a tension in the air, a mix of anticipation and something unspoken. Natalia grabbed her clutch, checking its contents one last time. “Let’s go. The car’s waiting.”

Ahmed followed, his usual confidence tempered by an edge of seriousness. As they stepped into the cool Moscow night, the weight of what lay ahead settled over them both. The gala wasn’t just a mission—it was a test of their fragile partnership, and the outcome would shape everything to come.



Chapter 6: The Betrayer Within



The opulent ballroom shimmered like a dream, its golden chandeliers spilling warm light over Moscow's elite. Glasses of champagne clinked softly amidst the hum of conversation, while the string quartet played a delicate waltz in the background. Ahmed adjusted his cufflinks, the borrowed tuxedo fitting him like a second skin. He walked beside Natalia, who glided across the marble floor with an effortless grace that belied the storm brewing beneath her composed exterior.

"Try not to look so impressed," Natalia murmured, her lips barely moving. "You're supposed to belong here."

Ahmed let his lips curl into a faint smile. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were enjoying this."

Her eyes, sharp as a blade's edge, flicked to him briefly. "Focus. These people are dangerous, and they don't make mistakes."

"I'm here, aren't I?" Ahmed countered, his tone light but tinged with an undercurrent of seriousness. "Relax, Natalia. We've got this."

She didn't answer, her gaze already sweeping the room, cataloging every exit, every guard, every potential threat. Ahmed let her work, using the time to study the crowd himself. The gala was a microcosm of Russian power—politicians, oligarchs, and shadowy figures who thrived in the murk of espionage. Beneath the surface charm, he could feel the tension coiling in the air.

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As they approached the bar, a man with a thick mustache and an even thicker accent greeted Natalia with a broad smile.

“Natalia Sergeyevna,” he said, bowing slightly. “A pleasure, as always.”

“Andrei,” Natalia replied smoothly, her voice icy but polite. “I didn’t expect to see you here tonight.”

Andrei’s eyes flicked to Ahmed, curiosity sparking. “And this is...?”

“A friend,” Natalia said quickly, her tone firm enough to halt further inquiry.

Ahmed extended a hand, his smile disarming. “Osman Yilmaz. Pleased to meet you.”

Andrei shook his hand, his grip firm. “A bold move, bringing a friend to such an exclusive event. I hope you’re as trustworthy as you are charming.”

Ahmed’s grin widened. “Trust is earned, Andrei. I’m happy to start tonight.”

Andrei chuckled, his attention already drifting elsewhere. As he walked away, Ahmed leaned closer to Natalia.

“Friendly crowd,” he muttered.

“They won’t be if you keep talking,” Natalia replied, her voice low. “Follow my lead.”

She moved toward the center of the room, her movements precise and purposeful. Ahmed trailed her, his casual demeanor masking the way he scanned every face. They were hunting tonight, and the predator in him was ready.



AHMED CAUGHT SIGHT of Dmitri Sokolov before Natalia did. The man stood near the far corner of the room, holding court among a group of suited men. His laughter boomed over the subdued conversations, a performance as much as a sound.

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

Ahmed leaned closer to Natalia, his voice a whisper. “Your handler’s here.”

Natalia’s body stiffened, her gaze snapping to the corner. She spotted Dmitri instantly, her eyes narrowing.

“He wasn’t supposed to be here,” she muttered, more to herself than to Ahmed.

“Do you think he knows?” Ahmed asked.

She didn’t answer, her jaw tightening. Dmitri’s presence was a complication they didn’t need. If he was here, it meant one of two things: either he was monitoring her every move, or he was involved in something far worse.

Ahmed studied her carefully. “What’s the play?”

For a moment, Natalia didn’t reply. Then she exhaled sharply, her mask of calm snapping back into place. “We proceed as planned. Keep an eye on him, but don’t engage.”

“Understood,” Ahmed said, though he didn’t miss the faint edge of unease in her voice.

As Natalia resumed her calculated sweep of the room, Ahmed found his attention drifting back to Dmitri. The man was an enigma—arrogant, calculating, and ruthless. He had the air of someone who enjoyed control, and Ahmed had no doubt he’d crush anyone who threatened to unravel it.

But tonight, Ahmed thought with a grim smile, control was going to be hard to come by.



THE ARRIVAL OF VIKTOR Orlov was as understated as the man himself. A wiry figure with thinning hair and an impeccably tailored suit, he moved through the crowd like a shadow, his presence barely noticed by the untrained eye.

Natalia noticed him instantly. She touched Ahmed’s arm lightly, a silent signal.

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“Orlov,” she murmured, nodding toward the man weaving through the crowd. “That’s our target.”

Ahmed’s eyes followed hers. “Subtle.”

“He has to be,” Natalia replied. “He’s dangerous because he doesn’t draw attention. Stay close but don’t spook him.”

Ahmed nodded, adjusting his posture as he moved toward a nearby cluster of guests. Orlov’s path was deliberate, his interactions brief but calculated. Every handshake, every exchange of pleasantries seemed designed to hide something deeper.

From across the room, Natalia tracked him like a hawk, her body coiled with tension. Ahmed caught her gaze and gave a slight nod, signaling he had Orlov in view.

For now, the game was unfolding exactly as planned. But Ahmed couldn’t shake the feeling that the real danger hadn’t even begun to reveal itself.



AHMED ADJUSTED HIS position near a cluster of diplomats, keeping Orlov within his peripheral vision. He’d mastered the art of blending in—just enough charm to deflect suspicion, just enough stillness to remain forgettable. His glass of champagne remained untouched in his hand as he tracked Orlov’s movements, subtly glancing at Natalia across the room.

Out of nowhere, a faint voice murmured near his ear.

“You’re not safe here.”

He turned sharply, his instincts flaring. A woman in an emerald-green dress was already disappearing into the crowd, her back straight, her strides purposeful. Her voice, though soft, had carried a weight that clung to him. Ahmed’s eyes darted to Natalia, who was still focused on Orlov and Dmitri.

He slipped closer to her, lowering his voice. “A woman just warned me. Said we’re not safe.”

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

Natalia's brow furrowed, though her gaze didn't leave Orlov. "Who?"

"Don't know. She was gone before I could ask."

Her jaw clenched. "Did anyone else notice her?"

"Not that I could tell. She looked... deliberate. Like she wanted me to hear it, but not anyone else."

Natalia's lips pressed into a thin line, her hand tightening briefly around the stem of her glass. "We're already assuming the worst, Ahmed. Stay sharp, but don't let it distract you. If it's a trap, we'll spring it on our terms."

Ahmed nodded, though his instincts told him this was more than a fleeting anomaly. He scanned the room again, but the woman in green had vanished.



ORLOV DRIFTED TOWARD the shadowed edge of the ballroom, where a man stood with his back to the crowd. Ahmed's focus sharpened as Natalia approached, her movements fluid and controlled. She barely needed to speak; her presence alone carried the command for Ahmed to follow her lead.

"That's Petrov," Natalia said under her breath, her tone flat but underpinned with tension. "Oleg Petrov. Mid-level SVR. He's not supposed to be here."

Ahmed glanced at the man, who wore a stiff suit that didn't quite fit him, his posture far too rigid for a gala like this. "One of yours?"

"He was." Her voice dropped lower, almost imperceptible over the murmur of the crowd. "If Orlov's meeting with him, we have a bigger problem than we thought."

Ahmed didn't miss the way her fingers curled slightly, as though resisting the urge to reach for her concealed weapon. "What do you want to do?"

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“Watch. For now.” Her eyes didn’t leave Petrov as she added, “But be ready.”

Ahmed moved to the edge of the room, aligning himself with a mirrored pillar. From this vantage, he could see Orlov and Petrov exchange a brief handshake, their lips moving in hushed conversation. Natalia’s posture tightened as she followed their interaction, her mind no doubt racing through a cascade of possibilities.

Petrov handed Orlov a small, folded piece of paper. It disappeared into Orlov’s jacket as seamlessly as their handshake had begun. Natalia’s hands twitched at her sides.

“Confirming an operation?” Ahmed asked, his voice just above a whisper.

“Or worse,” Natalia replied, her expression hardening. “If Petrov is involved, he’s the leak. That means Dmitri’s deeper in this than I feared.”

Before Ahmed could respond, Natalia began moving toward Petrov. She cut through the crowd with surgical precision, her path unmistakable. Ahmed followed at a distance, his focus split between Orlov and the man Natalia was now closing in on.



AS AHMED MOVED, HE noticed Orlov’s gaze flicker briefly toward Natalia. The operative’s face betrayed nothing, but Ahmed saw enough to know the man was spooked. To keep Orlov from bolting, Ahmed made a bold decision.

He crossed the room quickly and caught Natalia by the arm. She turned, eyes flashing with irritation, until she realized his intent.

“Dance with me,” Ahmed murmured, his hand already guiding her toward the ballroom floor.

“You’re kidding,” she hissed, though she didn’t resist.

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

"This keeps Orlov from running," he said, positioning her in the slow waltz as the orchestra struck up another tune. "You're scaring the room."

Her glare could have melted steel, but she allowed him to lead. As they moved, Ahmed leaned closer, keeping their conversation confined to the space between their faces.

"What's the plan, then?" he asked. "You were about to go after Petrov."

"Eyes on Orlov," Natalia said tightly. "If we lose him, none of this matters."

Ahmed spun her gently, keeping his movements deliberate. "He's watching us now. You've got his attention."

"I don't care about his attention," she snapped, though her voice softened as she added, "Just keep this up until I say."

For a brief moment, the tension between them shifted. Their movements fell into an unintentional rhythm, her precision balancing his natural ease. Around them, the other dancers blurred into irrelevance, the world narrowing to just the two of them.

"You're not terrible at this," Natalia muttered grudgingly.

Ahmed smirked, his voice low. "And you're almost tolerable."

Her lips quirked, just barely. Then her focus sharpened again, her gaze darting toward Orlov, who had resumed his conversation with another guest.

"Now," Natalia said softly. "We split."

Ahmed released her, his fingers brushing hers for half a second longer than necessary. Then they parted, each vanishing into the crowd with purpose. The dance floor emptied behind them, but the real game was just beginning.



AHMED SLIPPED BETWEEN a pair of servers carrying trays of champagne, his movements as fluid as a shadow. He spotted Orlov

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heading toward the far corner of the ballroom, where the grand windows overlooked Moscow's sprawling city lights. Orlov's deliberate pace confirmed Ahmed's suspicion—this wasn't a casual stroll.

From the corner of his eye, Ahmed saw Natalia veer toward the opposite side of the room, her sharp gaze locked on Petrov. He admired how she navigated the space with calculated precision, her poise disguising the tension coiled beneath her calm exterior. She'd taken the lead on Petrov, leaving Orlov in his hands.

Orlov slowed, stopping near a small cluster of guests. Ahmed adjusted his approach, snagging a drink from a passing tray to blend in. He stopped a few feet away, pretending to admire the view through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

He didn't have to wait long. Orlov leaned slightly toward a balding man with a heavy mustache, their hands brushing as a small envelope passed between them. The exchange was so quick Ahmed almost missed it.

His heart quickened as Orlov straightened, tucking the envelope into his jacket. The balding man walked away, vanishing into the throng of elegantly dressed guests. Orlov, however, remained, scanning the room as though ensuring no one had seen the interaction.

Ahmed raised his glass slightly, hiding his lips as he spoke into the tiny microphone concealed in his cufflink. "Orlov made a handoff. Something small—likely documents."

Natalia's voice crackled softly in his earpiece. "Understood. I have Petrov in sight, but I can't intercept yet. Keep eyes on Orlov. Don't engage until I give the signal."

Ahmed's gaze followed Orlov as the man turned and began weaving toward a side corridor. He set down his glass and moved casually, keeping enough distance to avoid raising suspicion.



LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

THE CORRIDOR WAS QUIETER, lined with oil paintings and gilded sconces. Ahmed's steps softened as he trailed Orlov into the smoking lounge, a dimly lit space with plush armchairs and the faint scent of cigars lingering in the air. A few guests lounged nearby, their attention on idle conversations rather than the man slipping deeper into the room.

Orlov paused near the fireplace, his back partially turned. Ahmed saw his opportunity. He stepped forward, his voice low and casual.

"Nice evening for business, wouldn't you say?"

Orlov stiffened, his shoulders tightening before he turned to face Ahmed. His expression was composed, but his eyes flickered with recognition—and caution.

"I'm sorry," Orlov said smoothly, his Russian accent thick. "Have we met?"

Ahmed smiled, keeping his posture relaxed. "Not officially, no. But I couldn't help noticing your... connections. You strike me as someone with influence."

Orlov's lips twitched, his guard rising. "And you are?"

"Let's just say I'm someone who admires efficiency," Ahmed replied, his tone even. "Especially when it comes to navigating... delicate matters."

Orlov's eyes narrowed. "You're wasting my time."

Ahmed stepped closer, his voice dropping. "Am I? Because I think you're carrying something far more interesting than a glass of vodka tonight."

For a moment, Orlov's mask slipped, a flicker of unease crossing his face. Then he straightened, his composure returning. "I don't know what you're implying."

Ahmed shrugged. "Of course you don't. But let's be honest—we both know you're not here for the hors d'oeuvres."

Orlov's hand twitched toward his jacket, but Ahmed's focus didn't waver. He leaned in slightly, his voice cutting through the tension.

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“Who are your friends in the SVR, Orlov? Or should I guess?”

The question landed like a blow. Orlov’s jaw tightened, his gaze darting briefly toward the door. Ahmed caught the movement and stepped into his line of escape.

“I don’t have friends,” Orlov said, his tone sharp. “And you’re dangerously close to overstepping.”

Ahmed smirked, his confidence unwavering. “That’s the thing about danger—it always seems to find me. But I’m guessing you’re no stranger to that either.”

Orlov’s eyes flashed, his calm cracking just enough to reveal the truth: he was hiding something. Before Ahmed could press further, the faint buzz of movement in his earpiece caught his attention. Natalia’s voice followed, urgent but steady.

“Petrov’s on the move. I’m following him toward the back. Keep Orlov contained, but don’t blow your cover.”

Ahmed didn’t respond aloud, but his stance shifted slightly, blocking Orlov’s path more deliberately. He smiled again, though this time the edge in his expression was unmistakable.

“Well,” Ahmed said, his voice smooth, “if you’re not going to talk, I suppose I’ll have to keep guessing.”

Orlov’s lips curled into a sneer. “Do what you want. It won’t matter.”

Ahmed’s smile widened, his instincts sharpening. “We’ll see about that.”



THE CORRIDOR WAS DIM, lit only by faint overhead lights and the occasional glimmer of a chandelier at the far end. Natalia’s heels clicked softly on the marble floor as she shadowed Petrov. He moved quickly but not hastily—he thought he was ahead of her. That assumption would be his first mistake.

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

Petrov glanced over his shoulder, his expression tightening when he saw Natalia. He ducked into an adjacent room, but Natalia kept her pace steady, confident he had nowhere meaningful to go.

The room was empty save for an ornate wooden desk and a few scattered chairs. Petrov had stopped near the far wall, fumbling with his phone. Natalia shut the door quietly behind her, the sound of the latch clicking causing him to flinch.

“Trying to call for help, Oleg?” Natalia’s tone was deceptively calm, but her eyes held none of her usual detachment.

Petrov shoved the phone into his pocket, his hands trembling. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m here for the gala, just like everyone else.”

“You’re not very good at lying,” Natalia replied, taking a step forward. Her voice hardened. “Why were you meeting Orlov? What’s in the envelope?”

Petrov pressed his back against the wall, his breath quickening. “You’ve got it wrong! I don’t know anything about Orlov or—”

“Enough,” Natalia snapped, cutting him off. Her voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. “We trusted you. I trusted you. And now I find you colluding with foreign operatives at a gala meant to honor your loyalty to the SVR. Do you have any idea what kind of position that puts me in?”

Petrov’s eyes darted around the room, searching for an exit, but Natalia stepped closer, blocking his path. Her sharp gaze pinned him in place.

“If you want to walk out of here with your life intact,” she said, her words razor-sharp, “you’re going to tell me exactly what you’ve been feeding Orlov. And more importantly, who put you up to it.”

Petrov hesitated, his face pale. His lips parted, but no words came. Natalia’s patience, already threadbare, snapped. She grabbed the lapels of his suit jacket, yanking him closer.

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“Talk,” she hissed, her voice low and venomous. “Before I stop asking nicely.”

His composure crumbled. “It’s not what you think!” he blurted. “I had no choice—Dmitri—”

Natalia’s grip tightened. “Dmitri? What about him?”

Petrov swallowed hard, his eyes wide with desperation. “He’s been working with them—protecting their network. He told me if I didn’t cooperate, I’d be the one they framed. He has leverage on everyone, Natalia. Everyone.”

The revelation hit her like a punch to the gut, though she didn’t let it show. She stared at him, her expression unreadable.

“And the envelope?” she demanded.

“Details of their next operation,” Petrov stammered. “He said they’d keep it safe, keep it out of SVR hands. I was just—”

“You were just betraying your country,” Natalia interrupted coldly. “To save your own skin.”

Before she could press further, the phone in Petrov’s pocket buzzed. His eyes widened, his panic intensifying. Natalia’s instincts screamed at her to act, but before she could reach for the phone, Petrov shoved her aside, bolting for the door.

She recovered quickly, drawing her weapon as she pursued him. But Petrov had already disappeared into the corridor, leaving her with a chilling sense of betrayal—and a dangerous lead.



NATALIA STRODE OUT of the room, her movements sharp and calculated as she scanned the corridor for any sign of Petrov. He couldn’t have gone far—she knew this venue, its twists and exits, and none would lead him to safety.

Her earpiece crackled. Ahmed’s voice came through, low and focused. “We’ve got a problem. Orlov’s moving fast. Heading toward the rear exit.”

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

"I'm aware," Natalia replied, her voice clipped. "Petrov's in play as well. He just admitted Dmitri's working with the Israelis."

There was a brief pause. "Well, that complicates things."

Natalia turned a corner, her hand still gripping the cold metal of her pistol, concealed but ready. Her heart pounded, but her face remained stoic, her breathing even. She wouldn't let Petrov's betrayal—or Dmitri's involvement—shake her now. There was no time.

She spotted movement near the stairwell at the end of the hall. Petrov, glancing over his shoulder, took the steps two at a time, his footing erratic. He wasn't running with a plan; he was running in desperation.

"Petrov's heading for the west stairwell," she relayed into her comms. "Intercept Orlov. I'll handle this."

"Copy that," Ahmed responded. His tone carried a weight she didn't have time to dissect.

Natalia pushed forward, her focus narrowing as she followed Petrov's frantic escape. The stairwell was dim, the light from ornate sconces casting jagged shadows on the walls. She took the steps quickly but with purpose, her every movement controlled.

Petrov stumbled into the second-floor landing, crashing into a storage cart before regaining his footing. He turned, his face slick with sweat, as Natalia emerged at the top of the stairs. For a moment, he froze, his back pressed against the wall like a cornered animal.

"You don't want to do this, Oleg," Natalia said, her voice calm but unyielding. She kept her weapon lowered, a calculated gesture of control. "There's still a way out of this for you, but running isn't it."

Petrov shook his head, his breaths shallow and uneven. "You don't understand. Dmitri—he'll kill me. You don't know what he's capable of."

"You think he'll protect you if you keep running?" Natalia took a slow step forward. "If you cooperate, we can deal with Dmitri. Together. But you need to tell me everything. Now."

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Petrov's hand twitched toward his jacket, and Natalia stiffened, her grip on her weapon tightening. "Don't," she warned, her voice cutting through the tension like a blade.

"I can't," he whispered, his voice barely audible. "You don't get it—"

Petrov moved suddenly, pulling a small blade from his pocket. Natalia reacted instantly, her training taking over. She sidestepped his desperate lunge, twisting his arm and sending the knife clattering to the floor. Petrov cried out, his knees buckling under her precise maneuver.

She pinned him against the wall, her forearm pressed against his throat. "Last chance, Oleg," she said, her voice low and dangerous. "Who else is involved? What does Dmitri have on you?"

Petrov's eyes filled with panic. "It's bigger than you think," he choked out. "Dmitri's protecting someone—someone higher up. You're not safe. None of us are."

Before Natalia could respond, footsteps echoed from below. Reinforcements—or worse. She hesitated for a fraction of a second, and Petrov used the opening to shove her back. By the time she steadied herself, he had bolted down the stairs and into the night.

Natalia stood there, her chest heaving with restrained frustration. Petrov's words lingered in her mind like a bitter aftertaste. Whatever this conspiracy was, it ran deep—deeper than she had anticipated. And Dmitri wasn't just a traitor. He was a lynchpin.

Her comms crackled again. "Natalia?" Ahmed's voice brought her back to the moment. "What's your status?"

She inhaled sharply, steadying herself. "Petrov escaped. But we have a bigger problem. Dmitri's not just a pawn—he's pulling strings."

There was a brief silence on the line before Ahmed replied. "Then we'll cut them." His voice was calm, but she could sense the determination behind it.

Natalia glanced toward the stairs, her jaw tightening. Whatever happened next, it wouldn't be clean. But she wasn't about to let this betrayal go unanswered. Not now. Not ever.

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA



THE FRIGID MOSCOW AIR bit at Ahmed's face as he sprinted through the narrow alleyways. Orlov was fast, but fear made people sloppy, and Ahmed counted on that. His own movements were calculated, each stride measured. He could hear Orlov's labored breathing ahead, the sound of boots crunching on fresh snow.

"Orlov's heading east, toward the market district," Ahmed relayed into his earpiece. "How's Petrov?"

"Escaped," Natalia's voice crackled through. Her tone was sharp, but there was an undercurrent of frustration she couldn't quite mask. "I'll catch up. Focus on Orlov."

Ahmed pushed forward, dodging around a stack of wooden crates that Orlov had shoved into his path. His breath clouded in the air, the adrenaline dulling the sting of the cold. The alley opened into a side street bustling with late-night vendors, their stalls illuminated by strings of yellowed bulbs. Orlov weaved through the crowd, knocking over displays and scattering pedestrians.

"Out of the way!" Ahmed barked, his tone urgent but controlled. He followed Orlov's chaotic trail, using the crowd's startled reactions to track his prey.

Ahead, Orlov glanced back, his face slick with sweat despite the cold. His eyes widened when he saw how close Ahmed had gotten. He reached into his coat, fumbling for something. Ahmed closed the distance in three long strides, grabbing Orlov's arm and slamming him against a metal support pole.

"Going somewhere?" Ahmed asked, his grip ironclad.

Orlov thrashed, one hand clawing at Ahmed's wrist while the other tried to retrieve the object in his pocket. Ahmed twisted his arm, forcing Orlov to drop a compact pistol onto the pavement. The weapon skittered across the icy ground, out of reach.

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“You don’t want to do this,” Orlov gasped, his voice hoarse. “You don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

Ahmed leaned in closer, his expression calm but cold. “Enlighten me.”

Orlov snarled, his fear turning into defiance. “If you kill me, you’ll never stop it. Dmitri’s just the beginning. You think you’re clever, but you’re already too late.”

The words struck a nerve, but Ahmed didn’t flinch. “What’s Dmitri planning? Who’s pulling the strings?”

Orlov spat on the ground between them. “Ask your partner. She’s the one who’s been blind to it all.”

Before Ahmed could press further, a commotion erupted behind him. He glanced over his shoulder to see Natalia emerging from the crowd, her movements precise as always. The moment of distraction gave Orlov his opening. He drove his knee upward, narrowly missing Ahmed’s ribs but breaking his hold.

Orlov bolted toward the edge of the market, his movements erratic but fueled by desperation. Ahmed cursed under his breath and started after him again, but Natalia grabbed his arm, her gaze intense.

“There’s a vehicle waiting beyond the main street,” she said, piecing together Orlov’s plan. “He’s not running blind.”

“Then we cut him off,” Ahmed replied without hesitation. “You take the main road. I’ll circle around.”

She nodded once, her expression unreadable, before disappearing into the crowd. Ahmed turned, veering into another alley, his boots crunching against the frozen ground. The sounds of the market faded behind him, replaced by the low hum of distant engines and the occasional bark of a stray dog.

The alley spilled into a side street just as Orlov scrambled toward a black sedan idling near the curb. The driver saw Ahmed closing in and revved the engine, but Orlov wasn’t fast enough. Ahmed lunged,

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

tackling him to the ground just as the car sped away, tires skidding on the icy pavement.

Orlov grunted in pain, pinned beneath Ahmed's weight. He twisted, trying to throw Ahmed off, but Ahmed's grip held firm. "You're not going anywhere," Ahmed growled, his voice low and dangerous.

Natalia appeared seconds later, her weapon drawn and her gaze icy. She leveled it at Orlov without a trace of hesitation. "You have two choices," she said, her tone lethal. "Talk, or you won't make it to a cell."

Orlov froze, his eyes darting between Ahmed and Natalia. For the first time, the defiance in his expression wavered. The cold bit into the silence that followed, the weight of his decision pressing down on all of them.

"Fine," he muttered, his voice shaking. "But you'll regret this."

Ahmed and Natalia exchanged a glance, unspoken tension passing between them. Whatever Orlov revealed, it would only take them deeper into the web of lies and danger they were unraveling.



THE SMALL, ABANDONED garage where Ahmed and Natalia dragged Orlov was eerily quiet. The dim, flickering light from a single bulb cast long shadows across the oil-stained concrete floor. Natalia stood at the entrance, scanning the street for any signs of the black sedan that had sped off. Ahmed pushed Orlov into a rusted chair, his movements deliberate and firm.

"Start talking," Ahmed commanded, his tone stripped of any charm.

Orlov's lip curled, his eyes darting between Ahmed and Natalia. "You think you've won because you caught me? You're amateurs playing at a game you can't possibly understand."

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Ahmed exchanged a glance with Natalia, whose icy demeanor betrayed nothing of the tension simmering beneath her surface. She stepped closer, her heels clicking softly against the floor.

"You're buying time," Natalia stated, her voice calm but razor-sharp. "Which means you know more than you've said."

Orlov smirked, but it faltered when Natalia raised her pistol, the barrel leveled at his knee. "You don't scare me," he spat. "You're not going to shoot me. You need me alive."

Natalia tilted her head, an almost imperceptible smile flickering across her lips. "Alive, yes. Comfortable? No."

Before Orlov could respond, she slammed her free hand onto the table next to him, the impact reverberating in the cold, empty space. The sound made Orlov flinch, but his defiance held.

"Who's protecting Dmitri?" Ahmed cut in, stepping closer. "The network you're feeding—it's bigger than we thought. Who's coordinating it?"

Orlov leaned back, his confidence returning. "You don't get it, do you? This isn't about the SVR or Israel or any of the games you think you're playing. This is about survival. Dmitri saw the writing on the wall, and he chose wisely."

Ahmed's jaw tightened. He glanced at Natalia, whose grip on her pistol remained steady. "Survival from what?" Ahmed demanded.

Orlov laughed, a hollow, bitter sound. "You're the one chasing shadows. All I'll say is that when the house of cards falls, no one in Moscow will be safe—not you, not her, not your precious agencies."

Ahmed didn't give him time to elaborate. He grabbed Orlov by the collar and hauled him out of the chair, slamming him against the wall. "Names. Operations. Coordinates. Talk."

For the first time, real fear flashed in Orlov's eyes, but he managed a sneer. "You're not ready for this, little spy."

Natalia moved swiftly, pressing the barrel of her pistol to his temple. "We're done playing games."

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

The tension in the room was electric. Orlov hesitated, his breathing shallow. Finally, he muttered, "There's a safehouse. Dmitri uses it to pass intel to his handlers."

"Where?" Natalia demanded.

Orlov hesitated, then croaked, "Arbat. An apartment on Kropotkinsky Lane."

"Apartment number?" Ahmed pressed.

"Three," Orlov choked. "But you'll never make it there. Dmitri knows you're onto him."

Before Ahmed or Natalia could respond, Orlov moved suddenly, his hand darting toward the waistband of his coat. Ahmed reacted on instinct, shoving Orlov back as the glint of a concealed blade flashed in the dim light. The knife grazed Ahmed's arm, the fabric of his jacket ripping, but the wound was shallow.

Natalia didn't hesitate. A single shot rang out, the sound deafening in the confined space. Orlov's body slumped to the floor, the knife clattering from his hand. Ahmed straightened, holding his arm as blood seeped through the torn fabric.

Natalia's face was unreadable as she holstered her weapon. "He wasn't going to talk anymore."

Ahmed nodded, his expression grim. "And now we know where Dmitri will be."

The silence in the room was heavy as they processed what had just happened. Natalia glanced at Ahmed's arm, her cool facade briefly giving way to concern.

"You're bleeding."

"I've had worse," Ahmed replied, brushing it off. "We need to move before Dmitri knows we're coming."

Natalia's gaze lingered on him for a moment before she turned toward the door. "Let's finish this."

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The two of them stepped into the icy Moscow night, leaving Orlov's lifeless body behind. The storm brewing around them was about to reach its peak.



THE DRIVE TO KROPOTKINSKY Lane was tense, the air in the car thick with unspoken thoughts. Ahmed maneuvered through the quiet Moscow streets, his knuckles white against the steering wheel. Natalia sat beside him, her gaze fixed out the window, her jaw clenched.

"Orlov was right about one thing," Ahmed finally broke the silence. "This isn't just about the SVR or Israel. Whatever Dmitri is into, it's bigger than we thought."

Natalia didn't look at him, her voice clipped. "Speculation doesn't help us right now. We need proof."

Ahmed glanced at her, noting the tension in her shoulders. "Proof doesn't come with a neat bow. We're walking into the lion's den."

The car stopped a block away from the address Orlov had given them. They stepped into the biting cold, the faint smell of snow in the air. Natalia adjusted the scarf around her neck, her eyes scanning the area.

"Stay sharp," she muttered. "If Dmitri's expecting us, this could be a trap."

Ahmed gave her a faint smirk. "You don't trust me to have your back?"

She shot him a sharp look but didn't respond, her focus shifting to the apartment building ahead. It was an unassuming structure, its facade blending into the quiet elegance of the Arbat district. A single light glowed in the third-floor window.

"Third floor," Natalia confirmed, her breath visible in the cold air.

They approached the building cautiously, their movements synchronized. Ahmed kept to the shadows, his eyes scanning for signs

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

of movement. Natalia's hand hovered near her concealed weapon, her instincts finely tuned.

The building's entrance was unlocked, the faint creak of the door breaking the stillness. Inside, the narrow stairwell was dimly lit, the sound of their steps muffled by the worn carpet. Each step heightened the tension, their breaths shallow as they ascended.

At the third-floor landing, Ahmed stopped, his hand raised to signal Natalia. They both froze, listening. Faint voices drifted from behind the door of apartment three, too muffled to discern the words. Ahmed leaned in, pressing his ear to the door.

"It's him," he whispered, glancing at Natalia.

She nodded, her expression cold and focused. With a swift motion, she drew her pistol, signaling Ahmed to step back. He nodded, taking position on the opposite side of the door.

Natalia knocked, three sharp raps that echoed down the hallway. The voices inside stopped abruptly, followed by the faint sound of shuffling. A moment later, the door creaked open, revealing Dmitri's broad frame. His eyes widened at the sight of Natalia, and for a split second, panic flashed across his face.

"Natalia," Dmitri greeted, his voice forced and calm. "What are you doing here?"

"We need to talk," Natalia replied, stepping forward and forcing Dmitri to back into the apartment. Ahmed followed, closing the door behind them.

The apartment was sparsely furnished, its decor unremarkable. A table in the center of the room held a laptop and a scattering of documents. Dmitri's posture was tense, his hands lingering at his sides.

"What is this about?" Dmitri asked, his voice steady but his eyes darting between Ahmed and Natalia.

"Orlov," Natalia said, her tone sharp. "He gave us your name."

Dmitri's jaw tightened, his facade cracking. "Orlov's a liar. You can't trust anything he says."

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“Then explain this,” Ahmed cut in, pointing to the table. “You’ve been funneling intel to Orlov, haven’t you? Selling out your own agency.”

Dmitri’s gaze flicked to the table, then back to Natalia. “You’re making a mistake. You don’t understand—”

“Then help us understand,” Natalia interrupted, stepping closer. Her voice was low, dangerous. “Or I’ll assume you’re guilty.”

Dmitri hesitated, his hands twitching. “I didn’t have a choice,” he admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. “They have leverage—on me, on my family.”

“Who?” Natalia pressed. “The Israelis?”

Dmitri shook his head. “No. Something bigger. They’re everywhere. You think it’s just Israel? It’s not. They’re playing all sides, and we’re just pawns.”

Ahmed exchanged a glance with Natalia, his expression grim. “You’re saying there’s another player?”

Before Dmitri could answer, his phone buzzed on the table, breaking the tension. All three of them froze, their eyes locking on the device. The screen lit up with an incoming call—no caller ID.

Dmitri’s face paled. “It’s them.”

Natalia grabbed the phone, holding it up to his face. “Answer it. Put it on speaker.”

Dmitri hesitated, but the look in Natalia’s eyes left no room for argument. With trembling hands, he accepted the call, his voice shaking as he spoke.

“This is Dmitri.”

The voice on the other end was cold, mechanical. “You’re compromised. You know what to do.”

The line went dead.

Dmitri’s shoulders slumped, his face ashen. “They’ll kill me,” he whispered. “They’ll kill all of us.”

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

The weight of his words hung in the air, the reality of the danger they faced sinking in. Natalia's grip on her pistol tightened, her expression unreadable.

"We're not done here," she said, her voice steady but laced with urgency. "You're going to tell us everything you know."

But before Dmitri could respond, the faint sound of footsteps echoed from the hallway outside, growing louder with each passing second.



THE SAFEHOUSE WAS DAMP and shadowed, a claustrophobic silence lingering over its cracked walls and warped wooden floors. Natalia sat near the only window, her silhouette framed against the faint glow of Moscow's distant lights. Her hands were clasped tightly around a half-empty glass, but she hadn't taken a sip in minutes. She stared at the frost gathering on the edges of the glass pane, her mind elsewhere.

Ahmed leaned against the opposite wall, his jacket slung over the back of a broken chair. His sharp gaze studied Natalia, noting the stiffness in her posture. She hadn't spoken much since they left the scene, and that worried him. The usually unshakable Natalia looked smaller, weighed down by something heavier than exhaustion.

"Talk to me," he said, his voice soft but firm.

She didn't move. For a moment, Ahmed thought she would ignore him, but then her grip on the glass loosened. "It never ends, does it?"

"What doesn't?"

"The betrayals." Her tone was bitter, almost self-mocking. "Every time I think I understand the game, someone shifts the rules. I trusted Petrov. I worked with him for years. And Dmitri... Dmitri trained me. How many more will it be before there's no one left?"

Ahmed stepped closer but kept his movements deliberate, unthreatening. He pulled out the chair beside her, the wood creaking

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

under his weight. “That’s the nature of this world, isn’t it? Trust is a luxury we can’t afford.”

She turned to him, her eyes sharp. “You’re different, Ahmed. You don’t play by the same rules we do. You don’t have to constantly look over your shoulder, wondering if your own people will slit your throat.”

His jaw tightened. “Don’t I? You don’t think I’ve seen betrayal? Friends who sold me out for a quick escape, allies who vanished the moment things got difficult. I’ve lived it, Natalia. We all have.”

Her gaze softened slightly, the fire in her expression dimming. “Then why don’t you seem weighed down by it? Why don’t you—”

“Because I learned not to carry it.” His interruption was calm, but the edge of steel in his voice silenced her. “You hold onto that anger, and it’ll destroy you. I’ve seen it happen to people I cared about. You’re too smart to let it happen to you.”

For a moment, they simply stared at each other, the weight of unspoken truths pressing down on them both. Finally, Natalia set her glass on the windowsill and straightened her shoulders.

“We’ll find Dmitri,” she said, her voice steadier now. “And when we do, I’ll make sure he answers for what he’s done.”

Ahmed nodded. “We will. But don’t let revenge blind you. We still need to know how deep this goes. If Mirage is involved, Dmitri might just be the beginning.”

She didn’t reply, but the tension in her posture eased slightly.



THE SAFEHOUSE WAS EERILY quiet as Natalia and Ahmed prepared for their next move. A stack of encrypted files sat on the rickety table between them, a chaotic mix of maps, reports, and photographs. Natalia meticulously laid out the evidence, her sharp mind piecing together the fragments of their mission.

Ahmed leaned back in his chair, watching her. “You’ve been awfully quiet. Still thinking about Petrov?”

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

“Always.” Her hands paused over a set of photos. “But Petrov’s done. It’s Dmitri we need to focus on now. He’s the key to everything.”

Ahmed tapped the edge of the table, his expression thoughtful. “You think he’s working for Mirage willingly?”

Her hesitation was brief but telling. “Yes. Dmitri isn’t someone you can force into anything. He’s too calculating for that. If he’s involved with Mirage, it’s because he sees something to gain.”

Ahmed frowned. “And you’re ready to face him? After everything?”

Her gaze snapped to his, cold and unwavering. “I don’t have a choice.”

“Fair enough,” he replied, leaning forward. “But if this confrontation is going to work, we need to be smarter than him. He knows how you operate, Natalia. He trained you, remember?”

Her lips pressed into a thin line. “Then it’s time to show him I’ve learned more than he ever taught me.”

Ahmed smirked faintly. “That’s the spirit.”

The faint tension in the air shifted, replaced by a shared determination. Despite their differences, their partnership felt stronger now, forged by the fires of shared danger and betrayal.

Natalia gathered the files into a neat stack and handed them to Ahmed. “Let’s move. Dmitri won’t stay in one place for long, and we can’t afford to lose his trail.”

He took the files, their fingers brushing briefly. The contact was fleeting, but the unspoken understanding between them lingered.

As they exited the safehouse and stepped into the icy Moscow night, Ahmed glanced at Natalia. “You know, for someone who claims to trust no one, you’re surprisingly good at working with me.”

“Don’t let it go to your head,” she replied, a faint smirk tugging at her lips.

He chuckled quietly, and together they disappeared into the shadows, their mission far from over.



Chapter 7: Shadows Collide



THE SVR ADMINISTRATIVE office loomed ahead, an unassuming concrete block tucked into the heart of Moscow's sprawl. Snowflakes swirled in the night air, catching in the harsh glow of overhead lamps. Ahmed scanned the perimeter from the shadows, his sharp eyes tracing the patrols of guards and security cameras. Beside him, Natalia adjusted her coat, her jaw set with determination.

"Your credentials are solid?" Ahmed whispered, his tone low but steady.

Natalia glanced at him, her gaze icy. "Of course they are."

"Good. I'll handle the eyes on us. You focus on getting us inside without raising alarms."

Her lips twitched, almost a smirk, but not quite. "Try to keep up."

Before he could respond, she strode forward, her steps precise and confident. Ahmed lingered a moment longer, ensuring the nearby cameras were momentarily disabled by the signal jammer in his pocket. The lights flickered briefly—a calculated distraction—and then he followed her inside.

The building's lobby was sterile, the air thick with the scent of disinfectant. Natalia approached the security desk, her SVR badge in hand. The guard barely glanced at her credentials before nodding her through.

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“And him?” the guard asked, gesturing at Ahmed.

“He’s with me,” Natalia said curtly, her tone brooking no argument.

The guard hesitated, but the weight of her authority won out. Ahmed offered a tight smile, falling into step behind her.

“Nice work,” he muttered once they were out of earshot.

She didn’t reply, her focus already on the next checkpoint.

They moved through the labyrinthine corridors with purpose, each turn bringing them closer to Dmitri’s office. The tension between them crackled like static, unspoken words hanging heavy in the air.

As they reached the door, Natalia produced a keycard, sliding it through the reader. The lock clicked, and she pushed the door open.

Ahmed stepped inside first, his gaze sweeping the room. It was sparse but functional, the desk cluttered with files and a sleek laptop. He moved to the window, ensuring the blinds were drawn, while Natalia began searching through the drawers.

“Encrypted,” she muttered, her fingers flying over the keyboard of Dmitri’s laptop.

“No surprise there,” Ahmed replied, crouching to inspect a small device tucked under the desk. His expression darkened. “Camera. We’ve been seen.”

Natalia froze, her eyes narrowing. “How much time do we have?”

“Not long,” he said, disabling the camera with a quick twist of his wrist. “We need whatever we can get before they come for us.”

Her jaw tightened, but she nodded, returning her attention to the laptop. “Cover me.”

Ahmed positioned himself by the door, his hand hovering near his concealed weapon. Outside, faint voices echoed down the hall, growing louder with each passing second.



LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

NATALIA'S FINGERS MOVED with practiced precision, bypassing layers of encryption faster than Ahmed had thought possible. Her focus was absolute, her expression hard as steel.

"There," she whispered, pulling up a series of files. The screen illuminated her features, casting sharp shadows across her face. "These confirm it. Dmitri's been funneling intel to the Israelis for months. Look at this."

Ahmed leaned over her shoulder, his eyes scanning the documents. "Operational details. Deployment schedules. Names."

"Enough to dismantle entire units," Natalia said, her voice low but trembling with anger. "He's not just a mole—he's a damn architect."

Before Ahmed could respond, a faint click sounded behind them. He turned sharply, his gun already in hand.

The door swung open, revealing a man in a dark suit. His face was hard, his eyes sharp with suspicion.

"Who's there?" the man demanded, his hand hovering near his holstered weapon.

Ahmed didn't hesitate. He surged forward, disarming the man with a quick twist of his arm. The man grunted in pain, his weapon clattering to the floor. Natalia rose from her seat, her own gun trained on the intruder.

"Who sent you?" Ahmed demanded, his grip tightening on the man's wrist.

The intruder snarled, his teeth bared. "You're too late. They're already on their way."

Ahmed's jaw clenched. He slammed the man against the wall, his voice low and dangerous. "Answer the question."

Before the man could respond, a sharp beeping sound filled the room. Ahmed's eyes darted to the source—a small device clipped to the man's belt.

"Grenade," Natalia said, her voice sharp with urgency.

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Ahmed released the man and grabbed Natalia's arm, pulling her toward the window.

"Out!" he barked, shoving her forward.

The explosion rocked the room as they leapt through the glass, shards slicing through the air. They hit the ground hard, the impact jarring but survivable. Smoke billowed from the office above, the sound of approaching footsteps growing louder.

Natalia groaned, pushing herself to her knees. "Damn it."

Ahmed hauled her to her feet, his grip firm but not unkind. "Move. We're not sticking around for the clean-up crew."

She nodded, her expression grim. Together, they disappeared into the shadows, leaving the chaos behind.



THE NARROW ALLEY THEY ducked into was dark and damp, the cold air biting at their faces. Natalia's breathing was labored, her left hand clutching her side where a jagged piece of glass had grazed her during their escape. Ahmed glanced at her, his expression unreadable but tense.

"You're slowing down," he said, his voice clipped as he scanned the area.

"I'm fine," Natalia snapped, brushing him off.

Before he could argue, a faint sound—a footstep—echoed behind them. Ahmed raised a hand, signaling her to stop. They both froze, their senses on high alert.

From the shadows ahead, figures emerged, their weapons glinting faintly in the dim light. Ahmed counted five, each one moving with professional precision. These weren't standard SVR operatives. These were Dmitri's personal enforcers.

"Drop your weapons," one of them barked, his voice steady and commanding.

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

Ahmed stepped forward, his gun raised, his movements calculated. “We both know that’s not happening,” he said, his tone low and measured.

The leader hesitated, clearly sizing Ahmed up. Behind him, Natalia shifted her stance, her gun steady despite her injury.

“You have one chance,” the man growled.

Ahmed smirked faintly. “Funny. I was about to say the same thing.”

The silence broke like a taut string snapping. The first shot rang out, its crack echoing through the alley. Natalia took cover behind a dumpster, returning fire with precise bursts. Ahmed moved in sync, his aim unerringly accurate as he downed one of the attackers.

The firefight was brutal and fast-paced, the confined space amplifying the chaos. Sparks flew as bullets ricocheted off metal walls, the sound deafening.

“Flank them!” Natalia called out, her voice sharp and commanding.

Ahmed didn’t need further instruction. He darted to the side, weaving through the shadows like a predator. He caught one of the enforcers off guard, disarming him with a swift kick before delivering a devastating blow to the man’s throat.

Natalia, meanwhile, held her ground, her shots precise and calculated. Despite her injury, she moved with lethal grace, each motion deliberate.

One by one, their attackers fell until only the leader remained. He hesitated, his gun trembling slightly as he realized he was outmatched.

“Drop it,” Ahmed said, his voice cold.

The man’s jaw clenched, but he obeyed, his weapon clattering to the ground. Natalia approached, her gun trained on him, her expression icy.

“Where’s Dmitri?” she demanded, her voice low and deadly.

The man spat at her feet, his defiance palpable. “You’ll never find him in time. He’s already won.”

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Without hesitation, Natalia struck him across the face with the butt of her gun. The man crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

Ahmed stepped beside her, his gaze lingering on her bloodied side. “You’re hurt worse than you’re letting on.”

“It’s nothing,” she said, her tone clipped.

“Don’t be stubborn,” he replied, his voice softening just enough to catch her attention.

She glanced at him, her expression momentarily faltering. “We can’t stop now. Dmitri won’t wait.”

He nodded, knowing she was right. But the faint concern in his eyes didn’t fade as they moved further into the labyrinthine streets of Moscow, their mission far from over.



THE ENTRANCE TO THE service tunnels was barely visible, hidden beneath a rusted metal grate that blended seamlessly into the cracked pavement. Ahmed knelt, his fingers finding the latch.

“Help me with this,” he said, his voice strained.

Natalia crouched beside him, her movements slower than usual. Together, they wrenched the grate open, the sound of metal scraping against concrete grating in their ears.

The tunnel below was dark and smelled of damp earth and decay. Without hesitation, Ahmed dropped down, his boots landing softly on the ground below. He turned, reaching up to help Natalia.

“I don’t need—” she began, but the protest died on her lips as her balance wavered.

Ahmed caught her, his grip firm but careful. “You’re welcome,” he muttered as he steadied her.

She shot him a glare but said nothing, the faint flush in her cheeks betraying her frustration.

The tunnel stretched ahead, narrow and dimly lit by flickering overhead lights. The air was heavy, each step echoing softly.

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

"They'll follow us down here," Natalia said, her voice low but steady.

"Let them," Ahmed replied. "It's easier to deal with them in tight spaces."

"You sound confident."

He glanced at her, a faint smirk tugging at his lips. "I'm good at what I do."

She rolled her eyes but didn't argue.

As they moved deeper into the tunnel, the tension between them shifted, the adrenaline giving way to a quieter, more introspective energy.

"You didn't have to stay," Natalia said suddenly, her voice softer than before.

Ahmed glanced at her, his expression unreadable. "What makes you think I'd leave?"

"You had your chance to walk away," she continued, her gaze fixed ahead. "You don't owe me anything."

His steps slowed slightly, his tone lowering. "You're right. I don't. But I'm here, aren't I?"

She looked at him then, her eyes searching his face. Whatever she saw there, she didn't comment on it. Instead, she nodded and kept moving, the silence between them charged with unspoken words.

The faint sound of footsteps echoed behind them, snapping their focus back to the present.

"They're close," Ahmed said, his voice sharp.

"Then we keep moving," Natalia replied, her hand tightening around her weapon.

The tunnel stretched on, the shadows growing deeper. Together, they pressed forward, their partnership forged in the crucible of danger and necessity.



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THE TUNNEL VEERED SHARPLY to the right, opening into a wider space lined with rusted pipes and abandoned equipment. Natalia slowed, leaning briefly against the wall as her breathing grew heavier. The dim light flickered, casting uneven shadows across her face.

Ahmed stopped, turning to her with a frown. "You're not fine," he said, his tone firm but not unkind.

"I said I'm fine," Natalia bit out, though her voice lacked its usual conviction.

Ahmed stepped closer, his gaze unwavering. "You're bleeding through your coat."

She glanced down, her coat sleeve soaked crimson where her hand pressed to her side. "It's nothing. We don't have time—"

"Make time," Ahmed interrupted, his tone leaving no room for argument. He set his weapon aside and pulled a small med kit from his jacket pocket.

Natalia hesitated, her expression torn between frustration and resignation. She finally relented, lowering herself onto a discarded crate. "Make it quick," she muttered.

Ahmed crouched in front of her, carefully unzipping her coat. His movements were methodical, but his eyes darted to her face as she winced. "You should've told me earlier."

"And what would you have done?" she countered, her voice sharper than intended.

"Exactly what I'm doing now," he replied without missing a beat.

The wound was shallow but jagged, running along her ribs where the glass had torn through her shirt. He tore open an antiseptic wipe, his fingers steady despite the urgency of their situation.

"This'll sting," he warned, dabbing at the wound.

Natalia hissed through her teeth, her fingers gripping the edge of the crate. "You think?"

Ahmed's lips twitched, the faintest hint of amusement breaking through his focus. "I've seen you take worse."

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

“That’s not saying much,” she replied, her tone dry despite the pain.

He finished cleaning the wound and applied a bandage with practiced efficiency. As he worked, the tension between them shifted, the charged silence filled with an undercurrent of something unspoken.

“There,” Ahmed said, standing and offering her a hand. “You’ll live to fight another day.”

Natalia stared at his hand for a moment before taking it. His grip was firm, steadying her as she rose. Their eyes met, and for a brief moment, the walls between them seemed to waver.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, the words carrying weight.

Ahmed nodded, his expression softening slightly. “We’re not done yet.”

They moved on, their steps more in sync than before. The unspoken trust that had been growing between them solidified in that moment, a bond forged in the crucible of danger and necessity.



AS THEY PRESSED DEEPER into the tunnels, Ahmed’s comm device crackled to life. The faint static was followed by a voice that sent a chill down their spines.

“Natalia,” Dmitri’s voice drawled, smooth and mocking. “I see you’ve brought your little friend along.”

Natalia froze, her grip on her weapon tightening. “Dmitri.”

“Did you really think you could slip away unnoticed?” Dmitri continued, his tone laced with condescension. “You should know better. I taught you everything, didn’t I?”

Ahmed’s jaw clenched as he exchanged a glance with Natalia. “He’s stalling,” Ahmed muttered, his voice low.

Natalia raised the comm to her lips, her voice cold. “What do you want, Dmitri?”

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

“Ah, always so direct,” Dmitri said with a chuckle. “Here’s the deal. Leave your little companion behind and come to me. Alone. I’ll make sure you walk away from this alive.”

Ahmed’s eyes narrowed. “He’s bluffing.”

“Is he?” Natalia countered, though her voice lacked conviction.

Dmitri’s voice turned sharper, more menacing. “Think carefully, Natalia. Do you really trust him? Ahmed has no loyalty to you, to Russia, to anything. He’ll leave you the moment it suits him.”

Natalia’s gaze flickered to Ahmed, who stared back with unwavering intensity. “You’re wasting your breath,” she said finally, her tone like ice.

“Suit yourself,” Dmitri replied, his voice dripping with false cheer. “But remember, Natalia, I always win in the end.”

The comm went silent, leaving a heavy tension in its wake.

Ahmed stepped closer, his expression hard. “You’re not seriously considering his offer.”

Natalia shook her head, her voice firm. “I don’t betray my allies.”

For a moment, the weight of her words hung between them. Ahmed nodded, his expression softening. “Then let’s finish this.”

Together, they moved deeper into the shadows, the echoes of Dmitri’s ultimatum fading into the darkness.



THE AIR IN THE HIDDEN SVR bunker was thick, a damp chill creeping through the concrete walls. Natalia and Ahmed crept forward, their steps muffled by the worn soles of their boots. Ahead, a faint hum of voices echoed down the corridor. Ahmed motioned for Natalia to stop, his hand raised as he strained to listen.

“Dmitri’s got guards posted,” Ahmed whispered, his voice barely audible. “Three... no, four of them. Armed.”

Natalia nodded, her jaw tight. “We can’t risk alerting them all at once. We take them silently.”

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

Ahmed smirked, his confidence cutting through the tension. “I thought you didn’t like my methods.”

Her lips quirked in response. “Prove me wrong.”

They split up, Natalia hugging the shadows along the right wall while Ahmed took the left. The corridor opened into a larger space, dimly lit by overhead fluorescents. Four operatives stood around a table, their attention focused on a set of monitors.

Ahmed moved first. In one fluid motion, he swept behind the nearest guard, silencing him with a precise strike to the neck. Natalia followed suit, her blade glinting as it caught the faint light before it found its mark. The third guard turned too late, his expression frozen in shock as Ahmed disarmed him and rendered him unconscious. The fourth spun toward Natalia, raising his weapon—but she was faster. A single, suppressed shot ended the threat.

The room fell silent except for the faint hum of the monitors. Natalia exhaled sharply, wiping her blade on a discarded rag.

“Efficient,” Ahmed remarked, his tone impressed. “I’m almost convinced you don’t need me.”

“Almost?” she retorted, her eyes sharp but carrying a glint of amusement. “Stay focused.”

The monitors displayed live feeds from various parts of the bunker. Natalia scanned them quickly, her heart sinking as she spotted Dmitri seated in a fortified room at the center of the facility. He looked far too relaxed, sipping from a glass of something dark and amber.

“He’s waiting for us,” Natalia muttered, her hand tightening on the console.

Ahmed leaned closer, studying the setup. “He’s cocky, but that means he’s confident in whatever trap he’s set.”

Natalia’s gaze hardened. “Then we spring it on our terms.”



THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

THE REINFORCED DOOR to Dmitri's chamber loomed before them, its edges glowing faintly with the red light of the security locks. Natalia keyed in a series of commands on the nearby panel, her fingers flying over the keypad. Ahmed stood behind her, his weapon drawn, his senses attuned to any movement in the corridor behind them.

With a hiss, the locks disengaged, and the door slid open. Dmitri sat at a sleek metal desk, his posture casual as though they were there for a friendly chat. Two armed guards flanked him, their weapons already trained on the doorway.

"Ah, Natalia," Dmitri greeted, his tone dripping with mock warmth. "And you brought the outsider. How quaint."

Natalia stepped inside, her weapon aimed steadily at Dmitri's chest. "Your games are over, Dmitri."

He chuckled, raising his hands in mock surrender. "Games? Oh, Natalia, everything I've done has been for the good of our country. You should understand that better than anyone."

Ahmed stepped forward, his voice cutting through the tension. "Save the patriotism speech. We have the files. We know about Mirage, about your deals with the Israeli network."

Dmitri's smile faltered for a moment before he leaned back, his expression darkening. "And what will you do with that information? Hand it over to your superiors? To Mossad? To the CIA?" His gaze flicked to Natalia. "Do you even know who your true allies are anymore?"

"Don't deflect," Natalia snapped. "You betrayed the SVR. You betrayed me."

Dmitri's eyes narrowed, his voice hard. "I taught you everything, Natalia. Without me, you're nothing. And now you stand there, thinking you can outmaneuver me? Let me show you just how wrong you are."

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

He pressed a button beneath the desk. The lights flickered, and a low, ominous beep filled the air. Natalia and Ahmed exchanged a sharp glance.

“Explosives,” Ahmed muttered. “He’s rigged the bunker.”

Dmitri’s grin returned, cold and triumphant. “If I go down, you go down with me.”

Natalia took a step forward, her aim unwavering. “Turn it off, Dmitri. Now.”

“Or what?” he taunted. “You’ll shoot me? Go ahead. You’ll never escape in time.”

Ahmed’s eyes darted around the room, landing on a panel near the far wall. “I’ll handle the explosives,” he said, his voice low. “Cover me.”

Natalia hesitated, her focus torn between Dmitri and Ahmed. Finally, she nodded, her jaw set. “Do it.”

As Ahmed moved toward the panel, Dmitri’s guards sprang into action. The room erupted into chaos, gunfire echoing off the walls as Natalia engaged the operatives. Dmitri ducked behind his desk, shouting commands over the din.

Ahmed reached the panel, his hands moving quickly to disarm the device. Sweat beaded on his brow as he deciphered the intricate wiring, the timer ticking down ominously. Behind him, Natalia fought with brutal efficiency, her movements precise despite the chaos.

“Almost there,” Ahmed muttered, his voice steady despite the pressure.

“Make it fast,” Natalia snapped, firing a clean shot that dropped one of the guards.

Dmitri lunged from his cover, aiming his weapon at Natalia. She turned just in time, her expression fierce as their gazes locked.

“Not this time,” Natalia said, her voice cold as steel.



THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

THE BUNKER'S STERILE fluorescent lights buzzed faintly overhead, their cold illumination casting sharp shadows on the walls. Natalia paced the small space, her boots echoing with each step. Dmitri leaned casually against the far table, his smirk unwavering, as if daring her to act. His confidence grated on her nerves, yet she forced herself to stay composed.

"Tell me," she began, her voice a measured calm that belied the storm within. "Why did you do it? After everything we've fought for, everything we've sacrificed—why betray your own?"

Dmitri chuckled, low and bitter. "You're still so naive, Natalia. You think loyalty is a virtue? It's a currency. And Mirage pays better than patriotism ever could."

Her lips tightened, but she refused to take the bait. She reached into her pocket and retrieved a slim USB drive. Tossing it onto the table between them, she watched Dmitri's gaze flicker, his mask of confidence slipping for the briefest moment.

"Recognize this?" she asked, her tone icy.

Ahmed, leaning casually against the doorframe, observed the exchange in silence, his dark eyes tracking every flicker of emotion on Dmitri's face.

Dmitri's jaw tightened. "You've been busy," he muttered.

"Not busy enough," Natalia snapped, stepping closer. "I should have seen it sooner. The false leads, the misdirected missions—every time we got close to shutting down Mirage, something went wrong. You were always there, weren't you? Pulling the strings."

He straightened, his smirk returning with a touch of venom. "And you played your part perfectly. Do you know how easy it was to manipulate you? The loyal protege, so eager to prove herself. You were my puppet, Natalia."

Her fist clenched, her nails biting into her palm. Before she could respond, Ahmed's voice cut through the tension.

"He's trying to rile you up," he said calmly. "Don't let him."

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

Dmitri turned his attention to Ahmed, his smirk widening. “And here’s the charming outsider. Tell me, Ahmed, how does it feel to be a pawn in her game? Or is it the other way around? I wonder—who’s using who?”

Ahmed’s expression didn’t change, but his eyes sharpened. “You talk a lot for someone who’s cornered.”

The tension in the room was palpable, thick as smoke. Natalia leaned forward, her hands pressing flat against the table as she glared at Dmitri.

“This isn’t a game,” she said, her voice low and dangerous. “You sold us out. You sold me out. And for what? Money? Power?”

Dmitri shrugged. “You wouldn’t understand. You’re too busy clinging to your ideals.”

Ahmed moved closer, his presence a quiet but steady force beside Natalia. “Your ideals might be flawed,” he said, his tone directed at Natalia. “But they’re worth more than anything he stands for.”

Dmitri’s smirk faltered, his confidence cracking under the combined weight of their resolve.



THE SHARP CLICK OF a door unlocking shattered the tension. Dmitri’s gaze darted to the side as two of his operatives burst into the room, weapons raised. Natalia moved first, shoving the table into Dmitri to knock him off balance.

“Take cover!” Ahmed shouted, diving for the nearest console as bullets sprayed across the room. Sparks flew as rounds ricocheted off the metal walls, the sound deafening.

Natalia dropped to one knee, her weapon already drawn. She fired two quick shots, her aim precise. One operative dropped instantly, his weapon clattering to the floor. The second returned fire, forcing Ahmed to duck behind a workstation.

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“Any bright ideas?” Natalia shouted over the chaos, her voice edged with frustration.

“Working on it!” Ahmed replied, his hands moving swiftly to disarm a nearby console. He pulled a handful of wires free, creating a makeshift tool in seconds.

Dmitri scrambled for the exit, using the chaos to his advantage. Natalia’s eyes narrowed. “Not so fast.”

She fired again, the shot grazing his leg. Dmitri stumbled, clutching his thigh as he collapsed near the door. “You’ll regret that,” he growled, his voice strained with pain.

“Get in line,” Natalia snapped, rising from her cover to pursue him.

Meanwhile, Ahmed lunged at the remaining operative, engaging him in brutal hand-to-hand combat. The fight was swift and unrelenting, their movements a blur of strikes and counterstrikes. Ahmed ducked a wild swing, using the momentum to slam the operative’s head into the wall. The man crumpled, unconscious.

“Clear,” Ahmed called out, his breathing heavy.

Natalia reached Dmitri, her weapon aimed squarely at his chest. He glared up at her, his defiance unbroken despite the blood seeping through his pants.

“Go ahead,” Dmitri taunted. “Finish it. Show me the ruthless killer you’ve become.”

For a moment, the room fell silent. Natalia’s finger tightened on the trigger, her breathing shallow. Ahmed approached slowly, placing a hand on her arm.

“Don’t,” he said quietly. “He’s not worth it.”

She didn’t lower the gun, her gaze locked on Dmitri’s sneering face. But Ahmed’s words cut through the haze of anger and betrayal. With a sharp exhale, she stepped back, holstering her weapon.

“Get up,” she ordered, her voice cold. “You’re going to answer for everything you’ve done.”

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

Dmitri's smirk returned, but there was a flicker of fear in his eyes. Ahmed grabbed him by the arm, hauling him to his feet.

"Let's move," Ahmed said, his tone firm.

As they dragged Dmitri toward the exit, Natalia glanced at Ahmed. For the first time, she allowed herself a small, fleeting smile—a silent acknowledgment of his unwavering presence.

They were far from safe, but for now, they had won. Together.



THE ROOM SHOOK WITH the distant rumble of an explosion. The detonation was close enough to vibrate the walls of the bunker, dislodging dust and causing a low hum to resonate through the reinforced steel. Natalia exchanged a sharp glance with Ahmed, their unspoken understanding kicking into overdrive. Dmitri had been prepared for everything, including a scorched-earth retreat.

"The explosives," Ahmed muttered. "We need to disable them. Now."

Natalia nodded and moved toward the central console, where Dmitri's encrypted files glowed on a flickering screen. Her fingers flew across the keyboard, navigating the SVR systems with a precision born of countless hours in the field. Ahmed crouched low, scanning the room for signs of any additional traps.

"Can you do it?" he asked, his voice steady despite the chaos threatening to spiral around them.

"Not without a manual override," Natalia replied, her tone clipped. "There's a secondary control panel somewhere in the bunker. Dmitri wasn't bluffing—this entire place is rigged to blow."

Ahmed's eyes darted to Dmitri, who sat slumped in the corner, restrained but smugly defiant. "Where's the override?"

Dmitri chuckled, shaking his head. "You think I'd make it that easy? You've got two choices, Ahmed: save yourselves or go down with the ship. Either way, I win."

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Ahmed stepped closer, crouching down to Dmitri's level. His calm demeanor made the threat in his voice all the more chilling. "Here's a third choice: I make you tell me. And trust me, you'll wish you hadn't made me ask twice."

Dmitri's smirk faltered, the flicker of fear in his eyes betraying his bravado. He opened his mouth to retort, but Natalia cut him off, her voice icy.

"Don't waste time," she said, still working the console. "I'll find it myself."

Ahmed straightened, moving to the opposite end of the room. He scanned the walls, his sharp eyes catching the faint outline of a panel recessed into the steel. "Here," he called.

Natalia abandoned the console and crossed to him, her movements quick and precise. Ahmed helped her pry the panel open, revealing a tangle of wires and a manual control interface. The setup was rudimentary, a deliberate failsafe against digital sabotage.

"This is it," she said, her voice tinged with both relief and urgency. "But it's wired with redundancies. If we cut the wrong circuit—"

"I get it," Ahmed interrupted. He grabbed her wrist gently but firmly, his gaze locking with hers. "Can you do this?"

For a moment, Natalia hesitated. The vulnerability in her eyes was fleeting, but Ahmed caught it.

"Yes," she said, steeling herself.

Ahmed nodded, stepping back to give her space. As Natalia worked, he kept an eye on Dmitri, whose smirk had returned despite his predicament.

"You two make quite the team," Dmitri remarked. "How long until one of you betrays the other?"

"Shut up," Ahmed snapped, his tone leaving no room for argument.



LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

NATALIA'S FINGERS MOVED deftly, separating wires and cross-checking schematics from memory. Each second felt like an eternity as the tension in the room thickened. Finally, she let out a sharp breath.

"Done," she said, standing back.

Ahmed stepped forward, glancing at the control panel. "Are we clear?"

"Clear enough," she replied, her tone laced with caution. "But we need to move. If there's a secondary trigger, it's not here."

Before they could act, Dmitri surged to his feet, lunging toward Natalia. She sidestepped instinctively, her elbow catching him in the ribs. Ahmed reacted instantly, slamming Dmitri back against the wall.

"Enough games," Ahmed growled, pinning Dmitri in place.

Dmitri struggled, his composure unraveling. "You don't understand," he hissed. "You're both out of your depth. Mirage isn't just a network—it's an ideology. Even if you stop me, you'll never stop them."

"We'll see about that," Natalia replied coldly.

Dmitri's wild gaze flicked between them. Desperation seeped into his voice as he spoke again, this time directly to Natalia. "They'll come after you. You, your family, everyone you've ever cared about. If you walk out of here, you'll never be safe."

Ahmed's grip tightened, but Natalia stepped closer, her icy demeanor unwavering. "I've lived in the shadows my entire life," she said, her voice low and firm. "If you think your threats will make me hesitate, you're more of a fool than I thought."

Dmitri snarled, his desperation giving way to anger. "Then you're signing your own death warrant."

Without another word, Ahmed slammed Dmitri against the wall one last time, effectively silencing him. Natalia turned away, her expression unreadable as she surveyed the room.

"Let's go," she said, her tone curt.

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Ahmed hauled Dmitri to his feet and followed her out of the bunker. The tension between them crackled like static, unspoken but undeniable. As they stepped into the frigid Moscow night, Natalia cast a quick glance at Ahmed.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, her voice almost lost in the cold wind.

Ahmed didn’t reply immediately, his gaze fixed on the horizon. When he finally looked at her, his expression softened. “We’re not done yet.”

Their mission wasn’t over, but for the first time, they both felt the stirrings of something more than duty—a fragile but growing bond forged in the crucible of survival.



THE AIR INSIDE THE bunker was suffocating, thick with the stench of sweat, gunpowder, and adrenaline. Dmitri sat on the cold concrete floor, bound and bloodied, his breath coming in short, shallow bursts. Natalia stood over him, her gun aimed at his chest, her jaw set tight. Her face was a mask of cold fury, but her eyes betrayed the storm raging beneath.

Ahmed stepped into her line of sight, his hands raised, palms out, as though approaching a wild animal. “Natalia, think this through.”

Her gaze snapped to him, sharp and accusing. “He betrayed us. He betrayed me.”

“I know,” Ahmed said, his voice steady, though his pulse thundered in his ears. “But putting a bullet in him doesn’t solve anything. It doesn’t end Mirage.”

Dmitri laughed weakly, the sound bitter and mocking. “Listen to him, Natalia. He’s right. I’m just a cog in the machine. Kill me, and someone else takes my place. That’s how this works.”

“Shut up.” Natalia’s voice cut through the air like a blade, silencing Dmitri instantly.

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

Ahmed moved closer, his movements deliberate and unthreatening. “He’s stalling, trying to get under your skin. Don’t let him win. If we take him in alive, we can use him. Expose him. Bring the entire network crashing down.”

“And if he escapes? If Mirage gets to him before we can?” Natalia’s voice wavered, the weight of her decision pressing down on her. “I can’t take that risk.”

Ahmed closed the distance between them, his hand lightly brushing her arm. She didn’t flinch but didn’t lower her weapon either.

“We’ve come too far to lose control now,” Ahmed said, his tone low and persuasive. “We do this the right way. Not for him. For you. For us.”

For a moment, there was only silence. Natalia’s finger hovered over the trigger, her breaths shallow and uneven. Then, with a sharp exhale, she lowered the gun, her arm dropping limply to her side.

Dmitri let out a shaky laugh, but it died in his throat when Natalia crouched down, gripping his collar and pulling him close.

“You’re going to wish I’d killed you,” she hissed, her voice ice-cold.

She shoved him back, standing abruptly and turning to Ahmed. “Let’s get him out of here before I change my mind.”

Ahmed nodded, relief flickering across his face. Together, they hauled Dmitri to his feet, his weight sagging between them as they prepared to leave the bunker.



THE SAFEHOUSE WAS DIM and quiet, the only sound the low hum of the laptop as it processed the files Natalia had extracted from Dmitri’s systems. Dmitri himself was locked in the adjoining room, unconscious after a dose of sedative.

Natalia sat on the edge of the couch, her posture rigid, her gaze fixed on the screen. Ahmed leaned against the wall nearby, his arms crossed, watching her.

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“You did the right thing,” he said finally, breaking the silence. She didn’t look at him. “It doesn’t feel like it.”

Ahmed pushed off the wall, moving to sit beside her. “Because it’s not easy. But that’s what makes it right. Taking him in alive gives us leverage. A chance to end this for good.”

Natalia’s shoulders slumped, the weight of the day catching up to her. “I should’ve seen it sooner. Dmitri’s lies, his manipulation... I trusted him.”

“Everyone gets burned in this line of work,” Ahmed said quietly. “What matters is how you rise from it.”

For the first time, she turned to look at him. Her eyes were tired, but there was a flicker of something else—gratitude, maybe even trust.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

Ahmed smiled faintly. “Anytime.”

The moment stretched, the tension between them shifting into something deeper. Without thinking, Natalia reached out, her fingers brushing against his hand. Ahmed didn’t pull away.

“You’ve been a constant in all this chaos,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I didn’t expect that.”

“Neither did I.”

Their eyes met, and for a brief moment, the walls between them crumbled. Natalia leaned in first, her lips brushing against his in a tentative, searching kiss. Ahmed responded, his hand cupping her face, his touch gentle but firm.

The kiss deepened, a shared release of the tension, fear, and unspoken feelings that had built between them. When they finally pulled apart, their foreheads rested together, their breaths mingling in the quiet of the room.

“Whatever happens next,” Natalia said, her voice steady despite the tremor in her hands, “we face it together.”

Ahmed nodded, his resolve mirroring hers. “Together.”

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

Outside, the first light of dawn began to creep over the city, a fragile promise of a new beginning.



THE SAFEHOUSE WAS QUIET, save for the faint hum of the heater kicking against the Moscow cold. The room carried a sense of uneasy calm, as though the tension of the past few hours had coiled in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to strike. Natalia sat at the small wooden table, her fingers skimming over the encrypted files on her laptop. Her jaw clenched slightly as she scrolled through the documents, her focus absolute but her emotions teetering on the edge of exposure.

Ahmed leaned against the far wall, his arms crossed, watching her with quiet intensity. The dim light softened the sharp angles of his face, but his dark eyes remained calculating. He had been observing her since they'd returned, noting every flicker of emotion she fought to suppress.

"Find anything?" His voice broke the silence, low and even, but his question carried more than professional curiosity.

Natalia didn't look up. "A lot of pieces. No full picture yet."

Ahmed pushed off the wall and crossed the room, his footsteps deliberately soft on the hardwood. He stopped just short of her, glancing over her shoulder at the screen. "He wasn't lying about Mirage. These files... they're bigger than the SVR, bigger than him. This is a global network."

"Which makes this mess harder to clean up." Natalia closed the laptop with a decisive click, her hand lingering on the lid. "Dmitri was just another pawn. But someone else is moving the pieces."

"And now we have the board." Ahmed pulled out the chair opposite her and sat, his body leaning slightly forward. "We're not fighting shadows anymore. This is something we can take apart, piece by piece."

THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

“For now,” she said, her voice quiet but sharp. “But every step we take will paint a target on our backs. You know that.”

He gave a half-smile, the kind that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I’ve been a target before. Nothing new.”

Natalia’s lips twitched in response, not quite a smile, but the closest she’d allowed herself to show in days. “You always this reckless?”

“Only when it’s worth it.” Ahmed’s tone softened, and the air between them shifted, thickening with an unspoken weight. “And this? This feels worth it.”

She held his gaze, her blue eyes searching his for something she wasn’t sure she could name. Trust, maybe. Or perhaps the fleeting hope that she wasn’t alone in carrying the burden of what lay ahead.

“I don’t trust easily,” Natalia admitted after a moment, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I know.” Ahmed leaned closer, his voice dropping lower. “But you do trust me. Don’t you?”

Her chest tightened, the vulnerability of the question slicing through her defenses. Slowly, she nodded. “I do.”

The words hung in the air between them, heavy and undeniable. Ahmed reached out, his fingers brushing against hers on the table. She didn’t pull away.

“Natalia...” He said her name softly, as though testing its weight on his tongue.

Her breath caught as she looked at him, the lines between duty and desire blurring in ways she couldn’t untangle. She stood abruptly, the chair scraping against the floor as she moved toward the window. The cold air seeped through the glass, grounding her, but it didn’t quiet the storm raging inside.

Ahmed followed, his footsteps purposeful but unhurried. He stopped just behind her, his presence a steadying force against the whirlwind in her mind.

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

“You don’t have to do this alone,” he murmured, his voice a low, steady rhythm that matched her pulse.

Natalia turned, her back against the window, her eyes locking onto his. “This isn’t the life I wanted.”

“No one chooses this life,” Ahmed said, his tone gentle but firm. “But we choose how we fight it. And we don’t have to fight alone.”

For a moment, the world fell away—the danger, the betrayal, the ghosts of choices made in the name of survival. All that remained was the unspoken connection between them, fragile but undeniable.

Ahmed raised a hand, his fingers brushing a strand of hair from her face. The touch lingered, soft but deliberate, as though daring her to pull away. She didn’t.

Their lips met in a tentative kiss, a slow collision of conflicting emotions—fear, longing, trust. Natalia’s hands found their way to his shoulders, anchoring herself against him as the kiss deepened. It wasn’t frantic or hurried; it was deliberate, the culmination of everything they had endured and everything they had yet to face.

When they finally broke apart, their foreheads rested against each other, their breaths mingling in the quiet space between them.

“No turning back now,” Natalia whispered, her voice trembling with equal parts fear and resolve.

Ahmed smiled, his hand still cradling her face. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The first rays of dawn began to filter through the window, casting the room in soft, golden light. It felt like a promise, fragile but hopeful, as they stood together, ready to face whatever came next.



Chapter 8: The Cost of Loyalty



THE STERILE CONFERENCE room buzzed with tension. Ahmed leaned against the far wall, arms crossed, while Natalia stood at the head of the table, her posture as sharp and unyielding as the glare from the overhead lights. Across from them sat three SVR officials, their expressions an impenetrable mix of curiosity and judgment. Dmitri's betrayal, laid bare through files and confessions, was scattered across the polished table in the form of reports and digital evidence.

"This is... comprehensive," one of the officials finally said, his voice heavy with hesitation. He adjusted his glasses and flipped through the file in front of him, his frown deepening. "But your proximity to Sokolov complicates things, Agent Ivanova."

Natalia's gaze didn't waver. "My actions speak for themselves. Dmitri's ties to the Israeli network ran deep, and I was instrumental in severing them. Whatever questions you have about my loyalty, let me remind you who brought this to your attention."

The official leaned back, the chair creaking under his weight. "You'll understand why this raises questions. Sokolov was your mentor."

"And I was the one who took him down." Her voice cut through the room like a blade. "Is my loyalty really in question here? Or is this about cleaning up the mess Dmitri made under your watch?"

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A second official cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably. “Your point is noted, Ivanova. Your decisive actions are commendable. However, this will require a full internal review. You understand.”

Ahmed observed the exchange in silence, his expression neutral but his mind racing. The SVR’s cold detachment was nothing new to him, but seeing Natalia stand her ground against her own superiors was a rare sight. She was formidable—unyielding in her defiance, even as the weight of suspicion bore down on her.

The third official, older and more composed, gestured to the stack of evidence. “For now, this will suffice. Your actions have disrupted a significant threat to national security. That cannot be ignored.”

Natalia gave a curt nod. “I expect no less.”

The room fell into silence again, the tension thick as smoke. Finally, the officials gathered their files, murmured a few dismissive words, and left the room, leaving Ahmed and Natalia alone.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Natalia remained at the table, her hands braced against its surface, her head bowed slightly. Ahmed stepped closer, his voice low. “You handled that well.”

She let out a quiet scoff. “Spare me the pleasantries. This isn’t over.”

“No,” he agreed. “But you just made it harder for them to doubt you.”

Natalia straightened, her eyes meeting his. “And what about you? Do they doubt you where you’re from?”

Ahmed’s lips twitched in a faint, humorless smile. “Doubt isn’t part of the equation. Obedience is.”

Her gaze lingered on him, and something unspoken passed between them—a shared understanding of what loyalty demanded and what it cost.



AHMED STOOD IN THE building’s marble lobby, flanked by two SVR operatives who made it clear he was no longer welcome. Their

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

rigid posture and lack of conversation mirrored the chill in the air, a silent reminder that his usefulness to them was over.

Natalia appeared at the edge of the lobby, her presence commanding despite the exhaustion she tried to conceal. She crossed the space with measured steps, her expression inscrutable.

“You’re being escorted out?” Her voice was flat, devoid of the warmth they had shared hours ago.

“Standard protocol,” Ahmed replied, his tone deliberately light. “They don’t want foreign agents lingering too long.”

Her jaw tightened, but she didn’t respond immediately. When she finally spoke, her words were clipped. “You’ve done your part.”

“So have you.” His gaze was steady, piercing through the mask she wore. “But this doesn’t feel like an ending.”

“Because it isn’t,” she said softly, her tone shifting. “There’s always another mission, another threat.”

“Is that all this was to you?” His question hung in the air, heavier than he intended.

Natalia’s lips parted as though to answer, but instead, she turned away. “You should leave, Ahmed. While you still can.”

The operatives ushered him toward the exit, but he glanced back once more. Natalia remained where she was, her figure framed by the harsh light of the lobby. She didn’t move, didn’t speak, but the weight of her gaze followed him out the door.



THE CABIN CREW DISGUISE was second nature by now—the uniform crisp, the ID badge convincing. Ahmed sat on the edge of a plastic airport seat, watching as travelers bustled around him. The chaos was a stark contrast to the stillness in his chest, the quiet ache he couldn’t quite name.

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His phone buzzed, and he pulled it from his pocket. A message from his GIS handler lit up the screen: “Return to Cairo immediately. Debrief at 0900.”

He stared at the words, the command as unyielding as the life he had chosen. But as he pocketed the phone, his thoughts weren’t on Cairo or his handler. They were on the woman he had left behind.

The overhead announcement called his flight, and Ahmed stood, his steps purposeful but his heart heavy. He approached the gate, handing over his boarding pass with mechanical precision.

But as he reached the jet bridge, a vibration in his pocket made him pause. Another message.

His breath hitched when he read the sender’s name. Natalia.

“They’re not finished. I need your help.”

Ahmed stared at the screen for a long moment. Then, without hesitation, he turned away from the gate, heading back into the airport’s labyrinth of corridors.



NATALIA SAT IN THE dim light of her apartment, her fingers brushing over the locket that hung around her neck. Inside, the hidden recorder remained silent—a relic of a life built on secrets and shadows. She opened it, staring at the tiny device before snapping it shut again.

On the table before her lay a photograph of her mother, a woman whose sacrifices had defined Natalia’s understanding of loyalty and duty. But as Natalia stared at the familiar face, her thoughts drifted to Ahmed—the man who had challenged everything she thought she knew about trust.

For the first time in years, she wasn’t certain where her loyalty lay. Russia, Ahmed, or something in between.

When her phone buzzed, the sound startled her. She reached for it, her heart pounding when she saw Ahmed’s name on the screen. She opened the message.

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

"I'm still here."

A faint smile touched her lips, but it didn't erase the storm brewing in her chest. They weren't finished, not by a long shot.

The airport terminal buzzed with the usual rhythm of departures and arrivals. Ahmed, seated in a quiet corner of the waiting area, stared at the flight monitor displaying his departure gate. His thoughts swirled, a storm of conflicting emotions he couldn't seem to quiet. His handler's message still glared at him from his phone screen: "Return to Cairo immediately. Debrief at 0900."

He closed his eyes, willing himself to focus on the mission's completion. Dmitri was neutralized, Natalia was safe, and Moscow was behind him. Yet, as much as he tried to convince himself, it didn't feel like an ending.

His phone buzzed again. Another message.

The sender's name froze him in place: Natalia.

His thumb hovered over the screen before he tapped it open. Her message was brief but heavy with meaning: "We're not finished. New intel. I need your help."

Ahmed's heartbeat quickened. He read it again, slower this time, parsing the weight of her words. Against protocol, against reason, he stood. His path to the boarding gate blurred, replaced by one he knew he shouldn't take. And yet, his steps were deliberate as he walked away from the terminal, back into the labyrinth of Moscow's shadows.



THE CAFÉ WAS TUCKED into a quiet Moscow alley, its faded sign swinging lazily in the breeze. Ahmed pushed the door open, the smell of strong coffee and worn leather chairs washing over him. It was the kind of place meant to swallow secrets whole.

Natalia was already seated at a corner table, her back to the wall, her eyes scanning the room with practiced precision. Her gaze softened, almost imperceptibly, when she spotted him.

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“You came,” she said, her voice low and measured.

“You left me little choice,” Ahmed replied, sliding into the seat across from her. He leaned forward slightly, his tone edged with curiosity. “What’s so urgent you’d risk sending that message?”

She placed a folder on the table, sliding it toward him. “A fragment from Dmitri’s files. It didn’t mean much at first, but the deeper I dug, the clearer it became. There’s another player—someone high up, embedded in this network.”

Ahmed flipped open the folder, his eyes scanning the documents. Names, locations, encrypted communications—each detail painted a chilling picture. “This can’t be right,” he murmured, his fingers lingering on one name in particular. “They’re targeting an Egyptian diplomat?”

Natalia nodded. “In Moscow. If they succeed, it won’t just be political fallout. It’ll ripple across the region. That’s why I need you.”

“And your superiors?” Ahmed asked, closing the folder and leaning back.

Her lips pressed into a thin line. “They can’t know about this. Not yet.”

“Do you realize what you’re risking?” His voice dropped, his tone edged with disbelief.

“I do,” she replied, her gaze unwavering. “But if we don’t act, lives will be lost. I’m asking you to trust me, Ahmed.”

He studied her for a moment, the air between them thick with tension. Finally, he exhaled. “One last time.”



THE SNOW CRUNCHED UNDER their boots as they walked down a quiet street, their breath visible in the freezing air. Natalia handed him another document from her coat pocket. “The files point to a safehouse in the city’s industrial district. It’s sparsely guarded but heavily surveilled. We’ll have to move quickly.”

LAW OF MOTHER RUSSIA

Ahmed scanned the details, his brows furrowing. “And the target? The diplomat?”

“Attending a conference tomorrow,” Natalia explained. “The safehouse is their staging ground. If we strike tonight, we can cut this off before it begins.”

He stopped walking, turning to face her. “Why didn’t you hand this over to your agency?”

“Because it’s not just about the mission,” she admitted, her voice quieter now. “This... this is personal. My mother taught me to be loyal, to protect what matters, no matter the cost. But the longer I do this, the more I question what loyalty really means.”

Ahmed’s eyes softened, his hand brushing hers briefly. “And what does it mean to you now?”

Her lips parted as though to answer, but she hesitated. “I don’t know. Maybe that’s why I called you.”

For a moment, they stood in silence, the world around them fading. Finally, Ahmed broke it. “Then let’s finish this. Together.”

Natalia nodded, her expression resolute. “Together.”

The path ahead was clear—dangerous but necessary. As they walked toward the unknown, their shared purpose forged a bond stronger than words, stronger than duty.



THE CAR ENGINE IDLED softly as Ahmed adjusted the rearview mirror, watching the empty street outside the safehouse. Snow fell in thick, heavy flakes, blanketing the darkened Moscow neighborhood in silence. Natalia sat beside him, her gloved fingers drumming against the leather armrest, her sharp eyes fixed on the dilapidated building across the street.

“Nothing so far,” she murmured, her voice cutting through the stillness inside the car.

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Ahmed glanced at her, noting the tension in her posture. “You expected them to roll out a red carpet?”

“Caution isn’t their style,” Natalia replied, her gaze unwavering. “If they’re still inside, they’re planning something. Or worse, they already know we’re here.”

Ahmed leaned back, adjusting his jacket to reveal the handgun holstered beneath. “Then we wait. If they slip up, we’ll know.”

For a while, silence filled the cabin. Natalia’s focus never wavered, but Ahmed could feel the weight of unspoken words hanging between them. Finally, he broke the tension.

“You don’t have to do this alone, you know.”

She turned to him, her expression unreadable. “You think I don’t know that?”

“Just reminding you,” he said, his tone even. “In case you forgot.”

Natalia allowed a faint smirk to tug at her lips. “You have a habit of stating the obvious.”

Ahmed chuckled softly, shaking his head. “And you have a habit of pretending you don’t need anyone.”

The moment lingered, their usual guardedness slipping away in the quiet of the stakeout. It wasn’t trust exactly, but something close enough.

Natalia’s eyes flicked to a faint movement in the distance. Her expression sharpened. “There.”

Ahmed followed her gaze, spotting the shadow of a figure moving past the window of the safehouse. He nodded, his voice low. “Looks like the party’s starting.”



HOURS HAD PASSED, AND the car’s interior was beginning to feel claustrophobic. Outside, the snowstorm intensified, the wind rattling against the windows. Ahmed’s fingers tapped against the steering wheel, his impatience simmering just beneath the surface.

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Natalia broke the silence first. "This isn't just about the mission, is it?"

Ahmed turned to her, caught off guard by the directness of her question. "What do you mean?"

She tilted her head, studying him. "You could have left. You should have left. But you stayed."

He held her gaze, searching for the right words. "You asked for help. I don't walk away from that."

Her expression softened, the steel in her eyes giving way to something more vulnerable. "You're risking everything."

"So are you," Ahmed countered. "Why?"

Natalia hesitated, her jaw tightening. "Because... loyalty isn't just about countries or missions. Sometimes it's about the people you choose to stand with."

Ahmed leaned closer, his voice dropping to a near whisper. "And who are you standing with now?"

She didn't answer, but the look in her eyes spoke volumes. The weight of her words hung between them, unspoken but undeniable.

Before either of them could say more, the faint glow of headlights appeared down the street. Natalia straightened, her focus snapping back to the mission. "That's them."

Ahmed nodded, his grip tightening on the steering wheel. "Time to move."



THE SAFEHOUSE WAS QUIET, the air thick with the smell of damp wood and stale cigarette smoke. Ahmed and Natalia moved through the shadows, their footsteps muffled by the threadbare carpet.

In the main room, voices carried in hushed but urgent tones. Natalia signaled for Ahmed to stop, pressing herself against the wall. She peeked around the corner, catching sight of three operatives huddled over a table littered with maps and electronic equipment.

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She leaned closer to Ahmed, her breath warm against his ear. "Three targets. Weapons visible. We'll need to take them out quickly."

Ahmed nodded, pulling his handgun from its holster. "I'll take the left. You handle the right."

On her silent count, they moved.

Ahmed's first shot was clean, the sound suppressed as it found its mark. The operative dropped without a sound. Natalia's precision matched his, her bullet striking the second target squarely. The third man spun around, reaching for his weapon, but Ahmed was faster. He closed the distance, driving his fist into the man's jaw before disarming him with a practiced efficiency.

The room fell silent, save for the faint hum of the equipment on the table. Natalia moved to disable the communications network, her fingers flying over the keyboard.

Ahmed crouched beside the unconscious operative, yanking a phone from his pocket. The screen glowed with a series of messages, each more damning than the last. "Got it," he muttered, standing. "This is what we need."

Natalia glanced at him, her expression grim. "Then let's finish this."

As they moved to exit, the faint creak of a floorboard behind them made Ahmed spin. Another operative emerged from the shadows, weapon raised. Time slowed as the gun fired, the bullet slicing through the air.

Before Ahmed could react, Natalia moved, her body slamming into his. The impact sent them both to the ground, her sharp gasp the only sound he registered.

His vision blurred with adrenaline, Ahmed raised his gun, firing twice. The assailant crumpled, his weapon clattering to the floor.

"Natalia!" Ahmed turned to her, his heart pounding. Blood seeped through her jacket, staining the fabric.

"It's not bad," she muttered, her voice strained. "Just... a graze."

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Ahmed didn't hesitate. He tore the sleeve from his shirt, pressing it against her wound. "Stay with me."

Her fingers brushed his hand, her touch steady despite the pain. "I'm not going anywhere."

Their eyes locked, the gravity of the moment pressing down on them. For the first time, there were no barriers between them—no mission, no duty, just two people bound by something neither could define.

"Let's end this," Natalia whispered, her resolve unbroken.

Ahmed nodded, his grip tightening on hers. Together, they stood, ready to face whatever came next.



THE ROOM WAS CHAOS. Shouts, gunfire, and the acrid stench of burning electronics filled the air. Natalia crouched behind a toppled desk, her fingers flying across the keyboard of the operative's confiscated laptop, the screen displaying the live decryption of crucial files. Ahmed, just a few feet away, exchanged rapid fire with the last two operatives barricaded at the far end of the room.

"We need two more minutes!" Natalia called out, her voice barely audible over the noise.

"We don't have two minutes!" Ahmed barked, his voice sharp as a bullet ricocheted off the metal cabinet next to him. He fired twice, forcing the remaining operatives to duck behind their cover.

The encrypted files on the screen inched toward completion. Natalia's hands trembled as she worked, but her focus never wavered. Another shout came from across the room, and Ahmed darted from his position, sliding behind a heavy wooden table that shuddered under a spray of bullets.

One of the operatives broke cover, aiming his weapon at Natalia's exposed flank. Ahmed saw it before she did, his instincts snapping into overdrive.

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“Natalia, move!” His voice cut through the chaos.

She turned just as the operative fired. Ahmed lunged toward her, tackling her to the ground. The bullet struck him instead, grazing his arm as they fell into a tangled heap. Natalia gasped, her hands immediately reaching for him.

“You’re hit!” she said, her voice laced with panic.

“It’s nothing,” Ahmed grunted, pushing himself up. “Focus on the files.”

The final operative made a desperate charge, his weapon raised. Natalia grabbed her handgun, aiming with cold precision. One shot, and the room fell silent. The operative collapsed, his weapon clattering to the floor. For a moment, only the hum of the laptop filled the air.

Ahmed winced as Natalia ripped a strip from her scarf, tying it tightly around his bleeding arm. Her hands were steadier than her breathing, which came in shallow gasps.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she said, her voice soft but firm.

Ahmed looked at her, his expression unreadable. “Neither did you.”



THE SAFEHOUSE WAS EMPTY now, the bodies of the fallen operatives left for the SVR cleanup team. Ahmed and Natalia stood in the cold night air, their breaths forming misty clouds. The city’s lights flickered in the distance, a stark contrast to the darkness that had consumed the mission.

The files had been successfully decrypted and transmitted to both the GIS and the SVR. The evidence implicated not only the remaining Israeli network operatives but also high-ranking officials who had covertly supported their operations. It was a victory—but it didn’t feel like one.

Natalia leaned against the black SUV waiting to transport them back to the SVR headquarters. Her gaze was distant, her hands buried

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in the pockets of her coat. Ahmed stood a few feet away, flexing his injured arm as if to test its mobility.

“They’ll scrutinize you,” he said, breaking the silence. “The SVR doesn’t take kindly to agents who challenge their own.”

Natalia’s lips curved into a bitter smile. “They won’t have a choice. The files speak for themselves.”

Ahmed studied her, his dark eyes searching hers. “And you? Will you be all right?”

She met his gaze, something unspoken passing between them. “That’s not the question, is it?”

Ahmed frowned slightly. “Then what is?”

Natalia pushed off the SUV, closing the distance between them. Her voice dropped, tinged with something raw. “The question is, will this be worth it?”

For a moment, Ahmed didn’t respond. His jaw tightened, his expression guarded. Finally, he said, “It has to be.”



THE SVR BUILDING LOOMED like a monolith, its cold steel and glass façade a reflection of the organization’s rigid structure. Ahmed stood near the entrance, his suitcase at his side. A GIS escort waited by the car that would take him to the airport.

Natalia emerged from the building, her coat draped over her shoulders. Her heels clicked softly against the pavement as she approached him. Her expression was neutral, her posture impeccable, but her eyes betrayed the storm beneath.

“So, this is it,” Ahmed said, his tone measured.

“For now,” Natalia replied, her words clipped. “Your part in this is done. The SVR will handle the fallout.”

Ahmed exhaled, his breath visible in the frigid air. “And you?”

“I’ll manage,” Natalia said, her voice steady but lacking conviction. “I always do.”

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Their gazes locked, and for a moment, the world around them faded. The weight of unspoken words hung heavy between them, each struggling to find the courage to speak.

Finally, Ahmed broke the silence. "I don't regret staying."

Natalia's lips parted slightly, as if to respond, but no words came. Instead, she reached out, her gloved fingers brushing against his uninjured arm. It was a fleeting gesture, barely more than a whisper of contact, but it carried the weight of everything they couldn't say.

"You should go," Natalia said, stepping back. Her voice was firm, but her eyes glistened in the dim light.

Ahmed nodded, his jaw tightening. He turned toward the waiting car, his steps deliberate. But just as he reached for the door, Natalia called out.

"Ahmed."

He turned, his heart pounding.

Her voice softened, almost breaking. "You were right. About not doing this alone."

Ahmed's throat tightened, but he managed a faint smile. "Neither of us have to."

With that, he climbed into the car, the door closing with a muted thud. As the vehicle pulled away, Natalia watched until the taillights disappeared into the distance. Her hand instinctively reached for the locket around her neck, her thumb brushing over its smooth surface.

For the first time in years, Natalia felt the faint stirrings of something she thought she'd buried long ago. Something fragile. Something worth holding onto.



AHMED STOOD AT THE boarding gate, his suitcase by his side, the polished airport floor reflecting the muted lights above. The announcement of his flight's final boarding call echoed over the PA system, its cold, clinical tone in sharp contrast to the storm brewing in

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his chest. He glanced at his watch, though he wasn't really checking the time. His thoughts were elsewhere—on Natalia, on everything they'd been through.

He tightened his grip on the suitcase handle, his steps deliberate as he approached the jet bridge. Each one felt heavier than the last, like he was leaving more behind with every stride. His mind raced, replaying their last exchange outside the SVR headquarters. She had been distant, professional to a fault, but there was something in her eyes—something unsaid.

"Ahmed."

The voice stopped him in his tracks. He turned, his heart pounding as Natalia strode toward him. She moved with her usual poise, her coat draped over her shoulders, her expression unreadable. But as she drew closer, he saw the crack in her façade—the vulnerability she fought so hard to hide.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, his voice low but steady.

Natalia stopped a few feet away, her eyes locking with his. For a moment, she didn't speak, as though she were wrestling with the words. Finally, she broke the silence.

"I couldn't let you leave without saying this."

Ahmed waited, his gaze unwavering. The world around them seemed to blur, the bustling terminal fading into the background.

"I don't know how this happened," Natalia began, her voice softer than he'd ever heard it. "But I don't see you as an enemy anymore. Not as a rival, not as a tool for the mission. You're... more than that."

Her words hung in the air, fragile but powerful. Ahmed took a step closer, his suitcase forgotten. His expression softened, the tension in his shoulders easing.

"Natalia—"

"Let me finish," she interrupted, her voice trembling slightly. "I don't know what this means, and I don't know what happens next. But I had to tell you. You deserved to hear it."

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Ahmed studied her, his chest tightening. “You think I don’t feel the same?” he asked, his tone tinged with disbelief. “Every moment we’ve spent together, every risk we’ve taken—it’s because of you. I stayed because of you.”

For the first time, Natalia looked away, her composure faltering. But Ahmed reached out, his fingers brushing hers. She met his gaze again, and in that instant, the distance between them disappeared.



THE PLANE’S ENGINES roared as Ahmed settled into his seat, the weight of the moment still pressing heavily on him. He gazed out the window, the lights of Moscow twinkling below like scattered embers. Natalia’s face lingered in his mind, every detail etched into his memory—the way her voice had wavered, the way her touch had lingered.

He glanced at the locket in his hand, the one she had slipped into his palm just before he boarded. It was warm from her touch, its surface smooth but imbued with meaning. He opened it carefully, revealing a tiny photograph of her mother. Beneath it, a folded scrap of paper bore a single line of text: “This isn’t goodbye.”

Ahmed closed his eyes, his grip tightening on the locket. He didn’t know what the future held, but he knew one thing for certain: Natalia had become a part of him, and no amount of distance could change that.

In the terminal below, Natalia watched the plane ascend into the night sky, her breath fogging the glass. She clutched her coat tightly around her, the chill seeping into her bones. The city’s lights reflected in her eyes, but her thoughts were far away.

She reached for her own locket, her fingers brushing against its familiar contours. Inside, a second photograph rested—a candid shot of her and Ahmed during the mission. She hadn’t meant to keep it, but now, it felt like an anchor, a reminder of what they had shared.

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Natalia turned away from the window, her steps purposeful as she headed back into the heart of Moscow. The mission was over, but the battle within her had just begun. She didn't know if she'd see Ahmed again, but she knew she couldn't forget him. And perhaps, in some unspoken way, that was enough for now.

As the city swallowed her figure, the plane carrying Ahmed disappeared into the clouds, leaving behind only the faintest trace—a promise that their story wasn't truly over.

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The End

