

CHAPTER ONE

ARABIAN SEA. A FEW YEARS AGO.

THE SPEED AND PRECISION of the two combatants surpassed even the human race's best martial artists and white arms experts. Time escaped Mawro's notice while he stared up at the flat-panel display above his head, rolling footage from the recent fight on a continuous loop. With a growl he leaned back in his rickety roller chair and tugged at the sides of his goatee with his thumb and forefinger. His stomach gurgled as his mind winnowed down the list of possible explanations for this spectacle. The probable ones no longer seemed so far-fetched.

He followed his operative's movements to and fro beneath the port's artificial daylight. Hana executed one technique after another, monolid eyes trained on her target while her jet-black hair bobbed about. Her fur-covered hands moved so fast their surveillance equipment managed to capture only an orange-and-white blur. Black stripes on her exposed forearms left artifacts behind, resembling speed lines following Hong Kong Phooey from the Saturday morning cartoons of his childhood. With neither misstep nor hesitation, the young woman

landed every strike exactly where he expected. Exactly as he had taught her.

But Mawro found the likeness of Hana's opponent captivating and chilling both at the same time. The other woman's digital camo uniform pattern confirmed what their Revolutionary Guard contact had barked out over their comm link before Mawro cut the connection. She resembled dozens of U.S. Navy sailors guarding the beachhead marking the start of Coalition supply lines into Afghanistan—violating Irani sovereignty all the while. To that extent he agreed with the smug bastard, handpicked from among the Ayatollah's staunchest zealots sent straight from Tehran to "advise" them. But no one had been able to account for the silver-gray fur covering the woman head-to-toe and the long white ruffs lining her neck on either side.

An instant after her utility cap flew off, a pair of long, slender ears poked forth from her disheveled rusty blonde mop. Mawro paused the video and chewed on one knuckle, not wanting to believe what he was seeing. The unmistakable black tufts at her eartips, however, dispelled any hopes of reasonable doubt.

The chair creaked under Mawro's weight while he pushed away from his workstation and got to his feet. He jammed his hands into the pockets of his field uniform trousers and shuffled over to the portraits of a smiling Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il bracketing his compartment window. The sun had begun its ascent over the Gulf of Oman's brilliant blue-green waters beyond where the ship's ensign whipped in the wind above the stern.

He glanced up behind him at the clock above the cabin door and scratched at the curly hair above his graying temples. Hardly an hour had passed since their operation had begun. He would have never conceived he and Hana might encounter one of his own kind in such

a godforsaken place like Chah Bahar. But now he had. An American at that, half a world away from her home.

Biting at his lip, Mawro returned to his console. The interloper's remarkable physique served as a conduit for raw, unbridled fighting talent. Being her mother's daughter, he would have expected nothing less. With a flurry of keystrokes, he magnified her cat-like face and gazed into the slits at the center of her eyes. Past the focused resolve there he saw the things he had hoped he would never see.

Anger. Pain. Forlornness.

Mawro reached over to one corner of his desk and picked up the small frame containing a battered and weathered family picture. A father and mother stood toe to toe in the center. He sported a bald pate and an orange goatee, beaming toward the photographer with his hands clasped behind his wife's waist. She smiled up at her husband, her arms thrown around his neck. Platinum blonde hair spilled down to the middle of her back. The couple's two teenage children stood next to them, one to a side. On the left, a lean and lanky boy with curly red hair flashed a toothy grin. On the right, a short and wiry wisp of a girl whose red-and-gold hair trailed down each shoulder in a long thick pigtail. The camera captured her glaring upward trying to blow her bangs out of her eyes.

By force of will he gazed up at the frozen image on his console. He puffed out his cheeks as he studied the woman's hair, the same color as the girl's from the photo. *Forgive me, Pawlina. Who knew we would ever come to this?*

The sound of the door opening gave him a start before the characteristic tinkling of Hana's earrings announced her arrival. "Say Chief Park you meet when I aboard come?"

"Yes, thank you. No witnesses save for...her?"

“*Ne, apa!*” Hana replied in her native Korean as she closed the cabin door. Mawro cocked an eyebrow, and her fur-covered ears drew back alongside her head. “As you requesting,” she said in Polish, acknowledging his silent reprimand.

She was a mess. Blood stained the orange and white fur on her muzzle and forearms. Hana’s battle dress uniform, similar to his own but darker, was patched with dirt. The hand-to-hand melee, explosion and insertion team’s hasty retreat left her normally neat and tidy bob sticking out every which way like black straw. She appeared to have come straight from the ship’s hold after her crew berthed their go-fast boat. Exactly as he had asked.

Mawro stared at the floor. “How is the captain?”

“Medics on he working. Tough one is. I expect he fine! Brilliant plan, *ne?*”

“No! If you had both kept to plan the Americans would have never spotted you. Didn’t I say to leave the theater as soon as you released the gas?” Hana’s black-and-white striped tail drooped while Mawro breathed deep. “Look, I know the old man pulled rank after *she* showed up and you had to improvise. But goading the Iranians into detonating the shape charge was a damn fool thing to do and you know it!”

“But me live to—”

Mawro pulled her into a bear hug and ran his fingers through the fur on the back of her neck. “The Affliction has already taken our families from us, Hana-*ttanim*,” he said, staring over her shoulder toward his desktop and the photograph lying face up in its frame. “I couldn’t bear to lose you too.”

Hana laid her head on his shoulder and hugged him back. “We should check on our comrade,” he said after a long moment. “Maybe you should freshen up before we—”

“*Dongji!*” came a man’s voice the instant before the compartment door burst open. Hana and Mawro turned to where the away team’s boatswain leaned against the jamb, gasping for air. “*Blaznikova-sangjwa! Blaznikova-sangjwa!*”

Her dark brown eyes went wide an instant before Hana bolted from the cabin. The two men followed, led by her panicked cries reverberating off the passageway walls.



MINUTES LATER.

MAWRO PUSHED HIS WAY through the bulkhead door. He brought a hand to his eyes for a moment until they adjusted to the harsh glare from the sodium vapor lamps above. The medics’ equipment had been strewn about the ship’s hold in their frantic bid to stabilize their patient’s condition.

He snorted. The old fool had really gone and done it this time.

The medics raced about, working on Blaznikov as he lay unconscious on the gurney nearby. Their worrisome stink was thick enough to taste. The man’s lynx-like face was similar to that of the sailor from the video, but the fur hanging down the sides of his neck was far scragglier. His final instructions before the explosion played over and over in Mawro’s mind.

Harm not the Children of Affliction!

Hana stood a respectful distance away near one of the bulkheads, chewing on a chin-length tendril of her hair. She hung her head and sniffled after he walked up and began to rub at her shoulders.

Grotesque gurgling sounds emanating from the medics' charge punctuated the noisy cadence of their instruments.

"Commander!"

He glanced up and caught sight of the ship's surgeon waving him over. With a pat on Hana's back, he requested she stay put, for he would be right back. She nodded. "Blunt force trauma severe to internal organs," he pieced together from the stocky Russian's broken Polish. "Estimate Captain's survival below ten percent."

Mawro stared down at the deckplates beneath his feet. Hana's gambit had enabled her and Blaznikov to escape capture, but the blast had taken an enormous toll on his body. The crew aboard *Pe Gae Bong* monitoring their scrubbed offensive reported he had been at the epicenter. Mawro's mental calculations led him quickly to believe the shock wave would prove more than his kinsman's aged body could bear, ailuranthrope or not.

The shrill tone from the flatlined ECG snapped Mawro back to the present. Hana grabbed the first medic within her reach and began cursing at him in her mother tongue. Blood trickled down the front of the man's jumpsuit as she sunk her claws deeper into his shoulders with every word. Her native dialect was difficult to follow when she spoke quickly, though he understood enough. If he and his fellow medics failed to revive their leader, she would add them each and every one to the body count. By most gruesome means.

Mawro exchanged looks with the surgeon and approached her side. "Drop him!"

Hana turned and glared at him a moment before her arms went limp. The frightened medic pulled free from her grasp and scampered off. Tears streamed down the sides of her face, leaving damp trails in her cheek fur resembling another pair of stripes. "But Kindred, *apa!* How we Kindred find do?"

He took her into his arms. “I...I don’t know,” he whispered into her ear.

The Russian man drew a hand back and forth across his neck, ordering his medics to stand down. They killed power to the ECG unit and packed up their crash cart. An eerie silence permeated the ship’s hold like a damp chill. It was over.

Blaznikov’s eyes stared lifeless up at the overhead until the surgeon drew a sheet over his fur-covered face. He and one of the medics rolled the gurney into the passageway while the weight of the old man’s burden settled upon Mawro’s shoulders. The survival of his clan—of his entire race—was now his responsibility. And his alone.

He could research those dimensions of their Affliction the old man would have never allowed. He could step boldly forward onto a world stage, confident any link to his tumultuous past had died with Blaznikov. The old man had spooked generations of their clansmen into isolation, aided and abetted by the reclusive regime bankrolling their entire operation. No longer would Mawro avoid scrutiny’s white hot light like a cockroach scurrying for cover to avoid being crushed underfoot. Nor could he. The Americans would surely seek them out, intent on settling the score.

And Pawly will be with them!

One corner of his mouth slowly turned upward. Now he saw his path ahead, one he could use to at last set his clan’s course right. To set *everything* right.

He hardened his gaze at the medics and nodded toward the bulkhead door. With ashen faces they made a hasty exit, leaving Mawro and Hana alone in the hold.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FOLLOWING DECEMBER. SAN FRANCISCO.

PAWLY BALANCED HERSELF ATOP the fire escape handrail and stared up into the night sky. The Transamerica Pyramid towered over the thick fog bank enveloping the vacant warehouses and run-down tenements stretching out around her in every direction. She glanced out over the harbor after a ship somewhere out in the soup blew its foghorn. Though radar, GPS and dynamic positioning instruments had long made their use unnecessary, she knew first hand ship captains from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Oman were sticklers for tradition. Likewise among her own family of seafarers, especially at Christmastime.

She twiddled at the tuft of fur atop one ear and took in the sight of the Crown Jewel shining brilliantly atop the Pyramid, a grim reminder of the half continent separating her and her loved ones. This year's rapidly approaching holiday marked the first time since her first deployment they would have been able to celebrate together like normal people. Lenny had been anxious to meet her family, staunch Blackhawks fans all, surely to talk up his beloved Bruins. Though grateful having been spared any drama after Boston thrashed Chicago

in the Stanley Cup playoffs this past summer, her heart ached at the thought of missing them all this Christmas. And for God-only-knows how many more to come.

An approaching vehicle's rumbling engine helped squelch her dark thoughts. Pawly looked down to the alleyway beneath her feet to find a black late-model muscle car rolling toward a sharp corner between two buildings. She tugged at the strap of her bracer covering her watch and set her jaw. Right on time.

The driver stopped short of the turn and killed the lights. Sobs of the girls tied up in the back seat echoed upwards as the driver and his passenger climbed out. One manhandled the girls out of the car while the other yanked a massive cooler free from behind his seat with a grunt. It landed on its side, spilling ice cubes and soda cans all over the pavement at his feet. The man pulled the cooler's false bottom free and tossed one of the sawed-off shotguns stored inside to his partner. One by one the girls emerged from the back seat, blindfolded, gagged and bound. Their captors forced the three of them to sit down on the car's rear bumper dressed in only halter tops, hot pants and stiletto heels. Their long black hair had been pulled into fat pigtailed draped behind each shoulder. None could have been a day over fifteen, and they were shivering.

Her fangs bit into the fur below her lower lip. Pawly fell forward and thrust out her legs against the railing. With a flick of her wrists, her claws sprouted forth from the tips of her fingers. She dove toward the car and yowled to goad the driver into turning her way. Her claws sank into the skin above the bridge of his nose as she slid across the car's hood on her butt. With a grunt she yanked her hand free, tearing both of the man's eyes from their sockets. He screamed and crumpled to the pavement cradling his ruined face, weapon all but forgotten. His partner whirled around, shotgun in one hand, chest wide open.

Before reaching the wall Pawly raked the toe claws on both feet across the man's abdomen. She pushed off with her legs and landed past the front bumper. When she spun around she found the wide-eyed man attempting to stuff his own entrails back inside him with both hands. Pawly responded to the man's horrified whimper with but a shrug before he collapsed.

She reached into her pocket and pulled forth a rust-colored handkerchief. Pawly darted her eyes from one dying man to the other to ensure their weapons lay well outside of their reach. While wiping their blood from her fingers and claws she cocked her head to listen. Once their death throes subsided, she heard only the soft sobbing of the terrified girls, still seated on the bumper.

Pawly stuffed the handkerchief back into her pocket and stepped over to the girl nearest her. She drew one claw across the rope binding the first girl's wrists together, tearing it neatly in two. Likewise, she cut through the cloth holding the gag in the girl's mouth. With the tattered fabric, she grabbed the trembling teen's wrist and gently guided her toward the alley entrance. "No, no. Not yet," she said in Korean as the girl reached up toward the blindfold tied behind her head. "If I'm to help more girls like you, I can't risk anyone seeing what I look like."

The girl nodded and said nothing while Pawly removed her companion's bindings and gags. "Now, the three of you, take one another's hands and follow me," she continued, her tone firm as she lined the girls up shoulder-to-shoulder next to the alley wall, careful not to let any part of her fur brush against their bare skin. "When I tell you, pull off your blindfolds and run as fast as you can away from the car toward the street. Turn right and go two blocks until you see a big neon cross on the left above a shelter for runaways and battered women. Someone who speaks your language will get you a shower, a hot meal and a

place to sleep. You'll be safe there until the staffers can get you back to your—"

"What the fuck? We had a deal!"

"Yeah, bring back those girls!"

Pawly whirled around and saw another pair of thugs running toward them from up the alley through the fog, each toting a shotgun. She glanced down at her watch and swore. Rival gang's mooks arriving for their pickup just *had* to be early, didn't they?

The men raised their shotguns and took aim at Pawly. She glimpsed her reflection in the car's rear window and turned back toward the deserted street beyond the alley. Though the fog had grown thicker as the night drew on, it didn't camouflage the gray-and-white fur covering her face and hands nearly as much as she would have liked. But there was no time left.

"Now! Run! And don't look back!"

Pawly turned and broke into a sprint. She leapt for the fire escape an instant before the first shotgun blast. Two more followed, eliciting screams from the teens as they ran. But each pinged harmlessly off metal and brick behind the spot Pawly had occupied an instant before. In three bounds she was on top of them. She dove for the pavement with arm outstretched to catch one of the thugs in his neck. Gritting her teeth, she rolled through her rough landing and jumped back up to find the man thrashing about on the now-slippery concrete all around him. He grabbed at his neck with both hands to staunch a torrent of blood gushing from where his Adam's apple had been.

The second man let go of his shotgun and raised his trembling hands in front of him. Pawly closed the distance between them in a heartbeat's time and kicked the weapon beneath a nearby dumpster. She pursed her lips and fixed him with a searing glare while he dropped to his knees, begging for his life in both Korean and English. "I don't

play around,” she whispered in kind. “Especially not with rats like you.”

Pawly slashed upwards and flipped the man head over heels into the trash cans behind him. With a pained shriek, he clutched his now useless arm to his chest. Blood from gashes cut clean to the bone quickly stained his white shirt red. She stepped calmly over to him and hauled him up by the knot in his tie, bringing his nose to within an inch of her muzzle. A smile spread across her face after glancing down at a dark area growing around the groin of the man’s light-colored khakis.

She snarled and bore her fangs. “You chose to pimp little girls,” she said in even tones brandishing the claws on her free hand beside his face, where she knew he could see them. “Now *I* will choose which part of you to slice off and cram down your—”

Fssst!

Her ears pricked up as she glanced around, trying to pinpoint from where the familiar sound had come. *Thirty yards away...no, twenty five. Shit, he’s within range already!*

Her brain barely registered the shrill hiss approaching before instinct took over. Pawly dropped to all fours and pulled the man’s body over hers an instant before she heard the fleshy *thwack*. The man moaned and clutched at the blaze orange fletchings of a tranquilizer dart sticking out of his back, unable to reach them.

The muscles in her neck tensed. She knew the company he kept would have used bullets if he had been their intended target. Someone wanted her. Alive.

She tossed him into the side of a dumpster and ran. After nearly a year, hostiles from Chah Bahar had at last tracked her down. Pawly had dreaded this very moment since stepping aboard the train at Union Station. Would she ever be able to return to Chicago and her family

without fearing for their safety? And would she—*could* she—ever tell Lenny the truth about them? The truth about her?

Catch me if you can, motherfuckers.

She sprang atop a trash compactor after another brightly colored dart whizzed past her ear. It struck the utility pole behind her as she landed in a wide stance.

That's two.

The tip of her short tail swished back and forth while she scanned the rooftops. Pawly lunged to her right and glimpsed another dart fly over her shoulder.

Three!

She executed a tuck and roll and coiled into a crouch. With a grunt, she jumped for the rungs of the fire escape ladder stowed overhead. It couldn't end like this. Not before she saw Lenny again. Not before he *knew*.

One hand over the other, she made her way along, eyes focused on the roofline opposite her. In a sense, her pursuers had done her a favor by tracking her down. She had run to protect her family, had run to protect that idiot Lenny from himself. Forcing herself to satiate her bloodlust month in and month out had done little to make her longing for him every moment in between any less unbearable. But now she would fight, would fight them head-on. She wouldn't have to run anymore.

Fssst!

Pawly grinned. With the shooter's second adjustment of his weapon's firing pressure, she could now confirm both bearing and range. Only twenty yards away...

There!

Through the murky darkness, she made out a trace of movement. Though the fog would have surely obscured the shooter's ducking

behind the parapet high above the alley opposite her from a normal human, it was all she needed. By muscle memory, developed after years of her mother's punishing instruction, she swung up onto the landing and launched herself toward the next flight. On the other side of the alley.

Pawly shot out her legs as she drew near the fire escape and pushed off. She flew back in the direction she had jumped from, now two stories higher. Over her shoulder she glimpsed a hooded man stand and take aim. She slapped the bottom of the platform with her hands to thrust herself downward, landing on all fours on the grating below. A dart lodged itself into the wooden window casing above her.

Four down. She sniffed at the air, recognizing a familiar stink. Worry. *One to go, I'll bet!*

With an indulgent chuckle, she hopped atop the third story railing and leapt across the alley. Body tight to the building beneath the shooter's position, her wannabe captor would have to lean over the edge to sight her in. That would take time, more than she planned to give him. This would end. Now.

Pawly took hold of the railing and twirled her body upward to close the gap between them. The weathered metal creaked in response to her acrobatics before it failed spectacularly with a tinny *ping*. She cursed and catapulted herself away from the wall with her legs. Forty feet above ground and she was losing altitude fast. Along with her confidence.

"Everyone around you will die, Pawlina," boomed Blaznikov's mocking voice in her mind. It had done so every day since her and Lenny's detachment was torn to shreds. "Just like when you—"

A sharp pain accompanied the explosion from her memory while the sniper's dart bored into the base of her neck. Pawly bit her lip to stifle a squeal and reached out toward a downspout an instant too late.

She slammed headlong into the brick wall and tumbled like a rag doll to the concrete below. Cats fled in all directions from the stand of trash cans she upended, screeching in anger having had their late night snack so rudely interrupted.

With a long groan, she propped herself up to one knee. The damned streetlight at the end of the alley taunted her, spinning no matter how much she squinted.

No! Gotta keep moving! Mom, Tommy...Lenny...

Her arms hung from her torso as if made of lead. Gravity soon won out and Pawly collapsed into a pile of refuse face first. She turned her head and smirked toward the hissing cat closest to her. “Thorry ta crath yer party, cuth,” she said before passing out.