

CHAPTER ONE

CHŎNGJIN, NORTH KOREA. A FEW YEARS AGO.

M AWRO REACHED OVER THE gallery rail and fumbled at the dogs holding the porthole's storm cover in place with his oversized forepaws. He managed to swing the thing clear and peer through the porthole window in time to spot Hana stepping off the gangplank. She hiked her duffel's strap up onto her shoulder and shuffled off across the pier toward the waiting taxicab. But she stopped short of where the driver stood beside the taxi's open trunk, his arm outstretched so as to take her bag and stow it. Mawro followed Hana's gaze toward a black sedan with tinted windows, racing up the pier until it screeched to a halt in front of the gangplank.

Hana turned back toward their ship and brushed her long black bangs away from the sides of her pale face. She met eyes with Mawro an instant later, then stole a glance over at Oh and Min Soo exiting the car. With a curt nod, she acknowledged the general and his hacker lackey as they stomped aboard. They made quite the pair—Oh with his slicked back hair, designer sunglasses, perfectly tailored suit; Min Soo dressed in shorts and a T-shirt and a surveyor's vest, looking as if

had just rolled out of bed before Oh summoned him. Which, to be fair, he might well have.

Hana turned back toward Mawro, one eyebrow cocked. Mawro shook his head then wagged his fur-covered chin toward the snowy peak of Mount Chilbo, rising in the distance beyond what passed for a skyline in Chŏngjin. *There. That's where you need to be.*

Her chin drooped to her chest as she handed the taxi driver her duffel. A moment later, the car sped off with Hana in the back seat. The taxi slowed to make its turn then darted between a pair of flagpoles. The North Korean standard flapped smartly atop each one from the stiff breeze blowing ashore. He glimpsed her sullen face staring back at him before the car disappeared behind the Chong Pol cargo ship berthed opposite the pier from their own.

Mawro sighed and stared down at the shaggy gray fur covering his enormous legs and feet. He appreciated Hana's reticence to leave him in what amounted to solitary confinement while their ship was cleaned and provisioned. Not like he could go ashore and take in the local color sporting, as he was, a gray spotted pelt and tufted ears and fangs grown out past his chin.

Regardless, Mawro had insisted Hana use their brief port-of-call in this rusted-out factory town to return to her birthplace near the Tumen River, in the remotest portion of Ryanggang Province. There she planned to observe a mountaintop vigil to honor her mother's memory on another lonely anniversary of her death. Mawro knew firsthand how badly it hurt being denied the opportunity to grieve the loss of one's family—that most of his loved ones were still very much alive notwithstanding. Because, as far as they knew, the man they knew and loved had died years before.

The clanking of deck plates above him announced Oh and Min Soo stepping aboard the ship. Mawro was in no mood for houseguests, but

he knew the best way to get Oh to go away was to give him whatever he wanted. Right, then. Time to get this over with.

A sudden *whoosh* of air through the porthole from outside launched stray strands of shed fur on the floor billowing upward into the compartment all around him. The bulkhead door across the hold slammed shut, indicating his visitors had arrived. "Through the door at the end of the corridor," he said in a raised voice.

Oh grunted by way of reply and began weaving his way through the crammed cargo hold toward Mawro's compartment. Mawro couldn't help but chuckle, imagining his guest pinching his nose as he passed pens lining either side of the narrow corridor hosting goats and sheep, turkeys and chickens, rats and rabbits. A pounding at his compartment door came a moment later. "Open up. It's me."

Mawro daintily took the handle between his thumb and forefinger to open the door. He glanced down as it swung open to find Oh there, alone, stowing his designer shades into a case covered in what looked like alligator skin. Mawro stepped back so his hulking form wouldn't take up the entire doorway. "Sorry if my accommodations strike you as...less than suitable," he said with a wry grin.

"My father was a Party official in South Hwanghae Province, the heart of farm country." Oh snapped his sunglass case shut and returned it to one of his suit coat's inside pockets. Then, from his other, he produced a small box made from lacquered ebony and pulled out a cigarette. "The smell doesn't bother me much. Though what *reeks* is how you let the MGS slip through your fingers. When your ship came within hailing distance, the Party apparat called me, insisting I return immediately. Didn't matter I was in Panama, deep into negotiations with our drug cartel partners at the time." The cigarette dangled between his lips as he reached for his lighter. "They'll be grilling me

straightaway as to our plans. So, this scheme of yours had better be good.”

“It ought to suffice. So long as you don’t go near it with a lit cigarette.”

Oh frowned and plucked the cigarette from his mouth. “This way,” Mawro said, stepping over to a rollup door in the bulkhead wall. It opened as he approached. He glanced over his shoulder in time to see Oh wince and wrinkle his nose. Surely from the strong odor the stewards had complained about to the ship’s master whenever he sent them below to muck out the livestock pens.

Mawro knew the stuff had a powerful smell, but he wouldn’t have described it like a cross between pig manure and drain cleaner as the stewards had. Pungent, perhaps, but not what he would consider putrid. Oh, however, made a face as if to suggest his nose found it decidedly objectionable regardless. “We’re going in *there*?”

Mawro said nothing and stepped through the open doorway. Oh snarled and jammed the lighter and unlit cigarette into his pants pocket before pulling off his suit coat. He hung it on a hook fixed to the compartment wall beside the door frame and followed.

“I would have thought you would have been used to this stuff by now,” Mawro said as Oh strode up beside him. A moment later they approached a steaming vat of foul-smelling dark goo. “Most of its base compounds are also now being fielded to our mobile psychotropic drug production facilities onshore.”

Oh drew up beside the vat. He peered down at its contents, bubbling like tar in a roofer’s kettle. “But what is this stuff to us?” he asked, drawing back after a bubble popped a little too near to his face.

“To you, nothing.” Mawro strode over to the bulkhead and plunked down heavily into a makeshift chair made from two rolled-up lengths of canvas suspended from the compartment’s overhead by

steel cable. "Please," Mawro said, motioning to a normal-sized desk chair pushed in beneath an oversized display console.

"In answer to your question," Mawro said after Oh had taken a seat, "I guarantee this stuff will be irresistible to Kaczynski and his family."

Oh crossed his arms across his chest. "What makes you so sure of that?"

Mawro waved toward the vat with one arm. "These are catalyza-tion proteins. The foundation material required to perform morpho-genetic synthesis."

"What the MGS needs to run, you're saying?"

Mawro nodded. "Yes. Though on our voyage back from Gdańsk, I experimented with how to increase the morphogenetic yield of the material. This stuff here is a thousand times more potent than anything I've known the Opoworos to come up with."

Oh cocked an eyebrow at him. "Sounds to me you mean to bait them." He glanced over at the vat, wincing as more foul-smelling gas belched forth from the dark goo. "What would they possibly want with this...stuff?"

"To develop a tissue-replacement regimen with which to exorcise their family members of their bloodlust. Along with the entire Forest Clan."

Oh's eyes went wide. "They are in league? But how? Blaznikov shared at length the deep enmity between the Forest Clan and seafar-ing werecats like your family."

Mawro rubbed his chin. "And toward any other werecats for that matter, as Hana would be quick to point out. But they are a wily bunch," he went on, raking his claws through the thick ruff of white fur covering his neck. "If they weren't working together, the Forest Clan would've distracted the Kaczynskis by goading Hana into fighting them. But they ran her off themselves instead."

“So, you think that they’ll be interested in these...proteins of yours, is that it?”

“I do. This stuff ought to help Opoworo and his son keep their loved ones’ bodies from breaking down further. Which is also why I need the Party leadership to authorize Office 35 to leak intel that this stuff is aboard my ship.”

“And just what makes you think they’d be so inclined?” Oh replied with a sneer. “Without having delivered the MGS to them, you hardly are in a position of influence. Besides, they wouldn’t dare risk compromising their supply lines for their onshore drug production facilities.”

“They might if I promise them the werecat army they’ve been seeking.”

Oh narrowed his eyes at him. “Quite a claim. The last time you made it, you put out to retrieve the MGS. Then came back empty-handed.”

“Not entirely. I did suss out the youngling, as you’ll recall.”

“You plan to bring her to us?” Oh asked as he rubbed at his chin.

“No. Werecat clans are jealously protective of their own. The Kaczynskis and Opoworos have come under the protection of the Forest Clan. Pyongyang has no idea the whirlwind they would reap from us trying to kidnap her.”

Mawro walked over to a table full of aquarium tanks nearby. He knelt down beside them and peered into each one in turn, studying the features of the organs growing in the clear, bubbling liquid—here a lung, there a kidney, another a pancreas. “I do plan to detain the girl for a short while, though, to harvest samples from her. Given she is still growing, we will be able to morph her samples into ailuranthropic starter tissues.”

“With which we can finally complete our human augmentation program,” Oh replied, a lilt in his voice.

Mawro nodded but kept his gaze fixed on the organ tanks. “Yes, that was the alternative scenario I came up with during Hana’s unfortunate rage episode. Which is why I allowed Kaczynski and the Americans to make off with the MGS rather than risk Hana being captured.” *Or shot.*

He turned away from the tanks and locked eyes with Oh. “Kaczynski and his family get what they want, the Party leaders in Pyongyang get what they want. So, the latter need not ever engage the former again. Are we agreed?”

Oh stood and stepped quickly through the bulkhead door. “I shall have that cigarette now, thank you very much,” he muttered as he pulled the door closed behind him.



PARTY HEADQUARTERS, PYONGYANG. LATER THAT DAY.

OH CLOSED HIS EYES and leaned back in his chair as the lights in the conference room came up. He listened for a moment while the ten highest-ranking members of Office 35 chatted amongst themselves. They marveled one to another about the images which had flashed across the conference room’s screen moments before—footage of Mawro’s aborted Gdańsk harbor operation, featuring a young weretigress fending off their operative Hana’s savage attack. The girl’s

collapse had elicited a collective gasp from the Party apparat. The American lyncean woman drawing Hana away and out of the camera frame resulted in a relieved sigh from all of them.

He breathed a relieved sigh too. No one was calling for Oh to be fitted for a blindfold anytime soon—requisite equipment for either a one-way van ride to Kaechon prison camp or before being stood up in front of a firing squad. Far from condemning him, in fact, the general tenor in the room was one of jubilation. Oh made out snippets of conversation like “miracle girl” and “promised child.” News of the youngling’s existence would surely spread across Pyongyang like wildfire through a dry forest. Years before, the birth of Lim’s stillborn child had caught them all unawares. DPRK’s top doctors, after debriefing the field medics that had tended Lim following Mawro’s flight from the Chinese, had assured Party officials the young woman’s self-inflicted uterine damage would preclude her from ever again bearing children. As far as Office 35 was concerned, Lim’s birth name—and Pyongyang’s hopes of creating an army of ailuranthropes at the beck and call of their Great Leader—had died with her baby. She had been known to them simply as “Hana” in the years since.

After a moment, Chairman Ryuk stood and waved his hands so as to restore order. “Director Yin,” he said, nodding toward a bald man leaning up against the wall in the opposite corner. “Is this the sort of ‘fresh stock’ you were talking about?”

“Yes. Yes, exactly,” the man replied, nodding toward Oh. “And I’m eager for the General to brief us how he and Captain Mawro figure how we might secure the youngling’s genetic material for ourselves.”

The youngling. Oh couldn’t help but crack a sly smile; Yin was barking like a trained seal. Referring to the girl as if she were a thing—an *it*—rather than a human being. Which befitted her life station being the granddaughter of that traitor Rhim Seon-Yeong. The

same woman who had permitted herself decades before to succumb to the charms of a dashing young Polish doctor, Nikodemos Opoworo. Not only marrying him, but then running off with him to America.

Ryuk waved toward Oh and took his seat. "So, General, is it the captain's assertion that drawing samples of this the girl's DNA obviates the need for that morpho-...morphogen-...oh, what was it now?"

"We have come to know it simply as the 'MGS,' honorable chairman.

"Yes, this MGS thing," Ryuk replied, nodding. "The one he was on about before he left."

"The same, honorable Chairman. Captain Mawro and I discussed that very subject well into the evening aboard his ship in port at Chōngjin. Then I ordered my driver to bring me straight here."

Ryuk pursed his lips and turned toward Yin. "You've read Mawro's brief?"

"Just the abstract. But our own prior calculations and experiments appear to be in line with his conclusions. Distillation and reproduction of this youngling's DNA ought to yield sufficient quantities of catalyzed reversed-enzyme transcriptase. With it, we can begin large-scale production of the ailuranthropazine we'll need for..."

Yin's voice trailed off after Ryuk held up one hand. "The same material in quantities Captain Mawro originally sought out the MGS to replicate?"

"That is correct, honorable Chairman," Oh answered before Yin could reply.

Ryuk leaned forward and steepled his fingers. "Suppose we discuss how we might effect such a procurement then, hm?"

Oh rose and shot Yin a look. The scientist gulped and looked down at his feet. Oh knew that the other man knew who was really in charge of this enterprise. "Mawro is sure that he can lure in Katczynski and

his family with these catalyzation proteins he's cooked up, so long as we broadcast it via our subterfuge networks."

"That represents a sizeable investment of material, compounds that ought to have gone to our on-shored psychotropic drug production facilities in the US." Yin took his cheek in one hand and rested his elbow on the conference room table in front of him. "Our contracted operators there may not be able to keep to their production schedules given such an interruption in their supply chain, temporary or no."

"I expect it to be but a momentary one. Mawro and I will allow Kaczynski's people access to the ship before docking so they can see the container with the catalyzation proteins inside is indeed aboard. Then we'll toss the container overboard at a set of predetermined coordinates and put ashore an empty decoy for them to chase down."

Ryuk snorted. "I thought you said the supply chain interruption would be only momentary, General."

"But it *will* be, honorable Chairman," Oh replied, his open palms at his shoulders. "We will dispatch another vessel to fish the container from the water under cover of darkness, one already outbound from Chicago so as not to arouse suspicions. Put the container ashore at Detroit or Cleveland and a private drayage provider can have it back to Chicago in under a day's time."

"But what about the samples we need?"

Oh sighed and rubbed his forehead. "I would have thought that would be obvious, Director," he said as he met Yin's gaze. "But, anyway. With the family caught up in our fire drill, Hana moves in and subdues the youngling. Then she spirits her away so Mawro can collect them."

Park, Office 35's head of counterintelligence, rubbed at his chin. "We just saw Hana go feral during her previous encounter with the

girl. If she takes point on this operation, won't she be at risk for doing so again?"

"Captain Mawro showed me a prototype breathing unit he'd rigged up from what he could scrounge in his ship's firefighting locker. Hana will wear it whenever she's in theatre." Oh covered his mouth with his fist. "The fitted face mask is connected by a hose to a small tank in a pouch on her utility belt," he went on, tracing an invisible line with his finger between his mouth and his waist. "Most of the time, it vents in air from the surrounding atmosphere. But Mawro has coined a way to sense the youngling's scent in the air. The apparatus will blink an indicator light inside Hana's field of vision to indicate it has detected the youngling. Then it will switch over to cannister air."

Ryuk rubbed at his chin. "How long will that last her?"

"Right now, about five minutes. Any larger cannister would likely encumber her too much. But Captain Mawro is working on a belt pouch-sized reactor to produce oxygen and nitrogen chemically, enabling Hana to sortie longer."

"For what we need her to do, that will be plenty."

Oh cocked an eyebrow. "I'll grant you that she's fast, honorable chairman, but five minutes is barely enough time for her to deliver the youngling to Mawro. He'll surely need more time than that to collect the samples before she takes the youngling back to—"

"The youngling isn't going anywhere, once we have her."

Oh blinked. "I'm not following you," he said, turning to face Yin. "You made it sound like your people could synthesize whatever we would need from mere samples of the youngling's genetic material."

"We're not keeping the youngling for the Director's benefit," Ryuk said before Yin could answer. He waved toward a man sporting a graying mullet, seated opposite the table from Park. "Isn't that right, Chong?"

“I don’t understand,” Oh replied as he glanced over toward Office 35’s propaganda director.

“The girl will be a sensation! We’re going to invite representatives from sovereign states and NGOs from around the world to show off our ailuranthropoc stock.”

“Which we’ll be glad to share with anyone,” Ryuk added. “Anyone who places the high bid at our auction, that is.”

Oh drew back and eyed Ryuk and Chong each in turn. “You’re going to parade the youngling around like some kind of show pony?” He waved an arm toward the remaining Party officials gathered around the conference room table. “Every man here knows that Captain Mawro would never go for that.”

“We agree. Though, by then, he and Hana will both be extraneous. Which is why we need you to disposition them.” He nodded toward a white-haired man seated to his right. “Befitting of honorable Li-Ok’s replacement as Office 35’s new director after his forthcoming retirement, don’t you think?”

The corners of Oh’s mouth turned upward. “Why yes, honorable Chairman. I indeed think it would.”

CHAPTER TWO

NAVAL CONSOLIDATED BRIG, CHESAPEAKE, VIRGINIA. DAYS LATER.

LENNY SNAPPED TO ATTENTION and saluted sharply as soon as the Master-at-Arms attending him removed his handcuffs. He wasn't sure what exactly he had done to earn himself a trip to the Commander's office, aside from grouching about the barely edible chow. Nor was he looking forward to finding out, either. The guard gave the Commander a salute of his own and shuffled out the door, closing it behind him. All Lenny could do now was play along in hopes he wouldn't make a bad situation worse.

"At ease, Lieutenant." The man sat down heavily in his desk chair and rubbed at his face with both hands. "Please," he said at length, motioning toward another chair opposite the desk from him. "Sit."

Lenny did as he was told. He sat with his palms flat atop his thighs, twiddling at the fabric of his brig-issue brown trousers while the Commander leafed through the contents of an open manilla folder lying on his desk. "I've seen countless Sailors and Marines come through my office during my tenure, Reintz. Many surprise me by just how long they were out in the Fleet before finding their way here."

The Commander slid back in his chair and stood before clasping his hands together behind his back. “I read their files, ask them a few questions, quickly make up my mind they’re nitwits or wanna-bes or ne’er-do-wells,” he said and strode over to his office window. “Your garden-variety fupid stuckers.”

The clock hanging on the wall opposite the Commander’s desk ticked away the seconds while the man gazed out upon the recreation yard. “No accounting for you, you know?” he said at length without making eye contact. “From what I’ve read and been told you were a model Coast Guardsman before you shot your partner. So, the real question is this, Reintz—did you *really* shoot him under duress?”

“Yes...yes, sir,” Lenny replied slowly.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick.

Lenny bit his lip, hoping the Commander wouldn’t press him for details. Humanoid cats from rival states duking it out in some sort of cloak-and-dagger grudge match? Because even if he could have dished to anyone without a need to know, he was certain no one would have believed him.

“I’ve listened to a lot of people lie to me. And I have reason to believe you’re telling the truth. It’d be a damned shame for this to scuttle your entire life, wouldn’t it?”

That very question nagged at Lenny day and night in the weeks since he had left Poland in handcuffs, no matter how many books he borrowed from the brig’s tiny library to try and keep from thinking about it. Over a year before, Pawly had gone on the run after their Chah Bahar operation ended in disaster. And only shortly before being taken into custody by the Marines from the embassy in Warsaw had Pawly herself told Lenny his command had sought to use him as their fall guy. Seeking to send him to lockup at Leavenworth for who

knows how long by Pawly's testimony—but only if they could find her. Which Pawly made good and well sure they wouldn't.

Now, not only was Lenny's Coast Guard career surely over, but he also once again found himself staring down military incarceration's long barrel. How long would it delay his return to civilian life? Would Pawly wait for him? Would he even *have* a life to speak of with a dishonorable discharge on his service record? Would he ever be able to find a job paying more than minimum wage?

Not that any of it would matter to Latharo. Or to whatever family the man still had left. *I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I...*

The snap of a finger jarred Lenny back to the present moment. He blinked and stared up into the Commander's face. "An old shipmate of mine wants to talk to you," the man said, nodding toward the door. "He's a civilian employee with one of the alphabet soup agencies now. Apparently, you and your background spark a fair bit of interest with his team. I'll send him in." He leaned forward toward Lenny and fixed him with a penetrating stare. "And I humbly suggest you take whatever deal he offers you. Unless you've come to *like* your three hots and a cot here while you learn woodworking."

Lenny's head swam. "Wait, just who is this guy?" He looked at his bare wrists and then back to the Commander. "And aren't you going to put my shackles back on before you let him in?"

"Nah, he'd rip a leg off the chair you're sitting in and shank you with it if he thought you posed any threat," he replied as he opened the door. "Besides, his security clearance is way higher than mine." He stepped through the door and pulled it shut behind him before greeting another man with backslapping, laughing, cutting up. A moment later the knob turned and a dark-skinned man wearing a leather bomber jacket entered. With a brown *ushanka* atop his head.