

This is war, son.

My grandfather had told me with a toothy grin, as he slowly beat me at Risk- his red pieces occupying forty territories to my measly two. *Sometimes all it takes is one army on the side*, he said. And he would know, as a decorated spy from the Cold War.

I wasn't sure why that game had stuck in my mind through the years. My mother had knocked the board away before grandfather had taken my last territory, declaring it too violent for my childish mind. But his words drummed through my head over and over like a drill command as I enlisted to fight in the Third World War.

My mother –a child refugee who had escaped the Russian nuclear crisis and married an American soldier, thinking she could protect herself from it all– cried the entire way there. But it was my unique parentage that made me the ideal candidate to become a spy- just like my grandfather.

The regiment I had infiltrated was assigned to Vyazma, a small town outside of Moscow, to defend the capital against invading American troops. It had been ravaged by bombs and gunfire, leaving little more than empty shells of buildings where life had once been.

It seemed ironic that it was in the middle of the last territory I'd held in Risk when I was younger.

The first few weeks were slow, though I was able to pass information along several times to my commander. It was lonely, though, few of us talking, until another regiment arrived. Supplies took longer to arrive, so we were short on food that night.

As I sat down without my portion, someone sat down beside me, holding two wrapped sandwiches. I looked up to see a girl, with long dark hair and bright blue eyes. I glanced down at her collar as I took one of her offerings.

There was a symbol, for us spies. Every soldier had a pin in their collar button. It was barely noticeable, but we pinned ours a little further down on the left, whereas the enemy soldiers kept theirs on the right.

Her pin brushed against the left side of her jaw.

"Hi," she said with a small smile. "I'm Ana. Ana Vasiliev."

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The next few weeks passed in flurries of gunfire and waves of bombs. Ana became the only person I wished well before a battle and the first face I searched for upon returning to camp. Our numbers dwindled, but progress and information from the capital was slow. To pass time between the stalemates –that dragged on, but were surely better than fighting– we shared stories.

She told me about how her mother had made her favourite comfort food for two weeks straight after her first breakup, and how she could never go on rollercoasters without throwing up. I told her about my mother switching languages in the middle of a sentence when she was angry and how I'd crashed my first car the day I got it by accidentally pressing the accelerator instead of the brake when pulling into my driveway.

It wasn't until a month later that I managed to secure a line to contact my commander.

"I found the other button," I said.

"The other button?"

"It was in my pocket."

He fell silent. "What's their name?"

I startled as his sudden break in code. "Ana Vasiliev."

Another silence- this one so long I almost hung up, believing the line had been compromised, when he returned. "That's not possible. She was killed four weeks ago." *The same time Ana had arrived.*

"But the pin-"

A sharp intake in breath. "Kill her."

"Sir?"

"We've been compromised. Kill her before she kills you. An extraction unit will arrive in five days."

"I'm not sure-"

"This is war. Am I understood?"

"Yes Sir."

"Maintain cover but stay alert, soldier."

I kept my guard up when I returned to camp, but nothing was amiss. Ana even walked over to me as I came back.

"How was your mother?" she asked, falling into step with me.

"Well. Worried by the reports." I stared at her as we walked, trying to understand how my ally, my closest friend here, had suddenly become the enemy. Perhaps my commander was mistaken, or there was some other kind of mix up in the system. She could've been falsely reported as dead, or she had replaced the other and the paperwork hadn't caught up. Hell, maybe I'd pronounced her last name wrong or the commander had misheard.

She bumped me with her shoulder, a small smile on her face. "We'll send her a selfie after dinner so she knows you're alright."

There were plenty of other explanations. As she gripped my hand and pulled me toward the dinner lineup, enemy seemed the least likely.

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In the next few days, I crafted my plan.

I could bring Ana with me to the extraction site, bring her back and explain the situation. We had the space to hold her until it was all cleared up.

The day before the extraction, we were free to leave the compound for a couple hours. Ana told me to pack a bag for the day, saying she had somewhere to show me. We hiked to the outskirts of the town, with only a backpack of food and a gun each in case of trouble.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked after we passed the town marker.

“Just a little bit farther,” she replied. A couple seconds later, a towering structure came into view in the distance.

“The cities might not be safe,” I warned her.

“It’s not a city,” she told me, speeding up now. The structure began to take shape, a large circle with rectangular blocks- a Ferris wheel? Within minutes we reached a faded metal gate, coloured with rust. We slipped through a hole between two of the bars and before us lay an odd mixture of nature and old metal. Naked trees reached up to wrap around a copper grid ceiling, small tufts of grass grew between abandoned carts.

I turned in a circle. “What is this place?”

“It was an amusement park before the bombs hit,” Ana replied. “I think.”

She took a seat on a bumper car whose colour was indistinguishable. Perhaps it had once been blue and faded in splotches to a mottled yellow, or perhaps it had been a yellow on top with a blue edge but the colours had melted into each other. She handed me a wrapped sandwich. “Ham and cheese,” she said, with a small smile.

“It’s sad,” I replied, as I took a seat beside her. “To think children used to play here, but now it’s this.”

She nodded absentmindedly, taking a bite of her own sandwich. “I used to come here all the time when I was-”

We both realized her mistake at the same time.

“I mean-”

I had my gun drawn before she could correct herself. Our food fell to the ground, buried along with decaying leaves and rubber pieces, to lay along with the abandoned dreams that war had shattered.

“We don’t have to do this,” she said, even as she leveled her own gun at me. We faced each other, across the tarnished car, a game of who make the shot first.

“You lied,” I ground out. I had spent the past few days, hoping, certain the commander was mistaken.

She shook her head. “Everything I told you was true. We’re the same, you and I.”

“How can you say that?”

“We’re on different sides, but- I never lied to you.” Her hands shook.

“Drop the gun, Ana.”

“It doesn’t have to be like this,” she cried, though there was no other noise, just chilling silence. Her blue eyes filled with tears, shining brighter than ever before. “We’re not enemies.”

“Yes, we are.” It was the truth.

She shook her head again. “No, I lov-”

I pulled the trigger before she finished. Red blossomed on her forehead, her mouth still stretched open in a cry as she slumped to the ground. And even as the shot rang in my ears, I could hear my grandfather’s voice above it all.

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