

THE WARNING

PROLOGUE

In his dream, he had a new life. In his dream, he became human.

Alpha Replica model 3007 woke to the piercing sound of an alarm. The dream world around him dissolved by the time he opened his pale gray eyes and came fully awake. He was designed to instantly wake from the deepest slumber. Nineteen other Replicas rose from their beds and straightened the thin sheets. They slept in one large room with nothing more than a bed and a dresser apiece.

Once he tucked in his paper-thin sheet, Seven went to his dresser next to the bed. He pulled out a light gray shirt, white socks, undershirt, boxers, and gray pants. Several other identical and neatly folded outfits filled his dresser.

He pulled the shirt over his hairless chest and slipped his feet into a pair of black slippers. Like the others—all without any hair on their bodies, regardless of gender—Seven was as hairless as a beach ball.

Tall, muscular, and with kind eyes framed by a hard, chiseled face, he mimicked the exact features of the soldier he'd been copied from. He looked at his fellow Replicas, and a warm but frightening feeling came over him. Since their return from the Saudi War, they have never been parted. That would change by day's end.

Each of them marched down the narrow hall, passing a room enclosed by glass. Inside, technicians studied different parts cloned from a human body. One of them had a pair of eyeballs on his desk with wires connecting the optic nerves to a computer. The eyes moved, looking at everything. Another had a severed arm clamped in an aluminum vise propped in an upright position. She shot tennis balls at it, testing its reflexes as it caught each ball.

In an adjacent room people studied bone density. One man bashed a skull against a rock, proving the bone was stronger when it left deep scratches on the stone. Seven was envious of this level of bone strength.

The hall opened into a large room where the Alphas walked over a catwalk. The Programming Room was where Replicas endured two stages of reconstruction applied to the four sections of their brain. Stripping the brain bare was the first stage; the second was infusing thought processes into it. After their so-called “birth”, they were injected with barbiturates to induce a coma before being put into storage for twelve months. After the year passed they'd reached adolescence and were ready for the first stage of their programming. Once they grew into their physical prime—one year later—the second stage of programming began. The program included training on how to fight, track and use any type of machines and weaponry. Seven secretly referred to the programming as “mind rape”.

As they headed across the catwalk, he looked at the three fully developed clones lying on steel recliners thirty feet below with plugs penetrating their temples. They were the Betas, the next generation of Replicas. Beside each Beta was a computer programming data into their heads. Seven remembered his day on the steel recliner, although he shouldn't have. It would have been the equivalent of an infant remembering its emergence from the womb.

But he remembered it; he remembered being born. Seven knew he wasn't alone in his independent thought. He'd learned over the years that nearly every Alpha had questions and dreams, yet they knew how dangerous it was to share them.

He'd once asked his creator, Doctor Linden, about it and it had almost caused his execution. He'd quickly turned the story around, saying he'd only wondered if it was possible to remember the programming process.

From that point on Seven kept his questions to himself, aware that if he asked anything again, he'd be led down to the Pit where defective models were shot and shoved into industrial-sized furnaces to be incinerated.

He learned something else that day: the ability to lie. It wasn't something Replicas were supposed to do.

In 2041, the President ordered that Replicas had to be kept on a tight leash. So on the first of each month, the Replicas were injected with a silver tracking chemical. The method was more effective than placing a tracking device somewhere under the skin where it could be excised.

* * *

Seven sat on a cold steel chair, waiting for the needle. With him sat Nine and Twenty. A technician approached from the side, holding the 25ml hypodermic. The needle itself was four inches long, and when it penetrated Seven's arm, he screamed inside. The needle prick, though, felt the least painful; the burning serum traveling through his veins like liquid fire tore into his nerves.

On the outside, he showed no emotion. Inside, though, he owned a treehouse with a sign reading *No scientists allowed*. In his mind, he lived and dreamt of a world other than this one.

The automatic doors slid apart and the founder of the Artificial Life Development walked in. "Good morning, Seven, Nine, Twenty."

"Good morning, Doctor Linden," they replied simultaneously.

Linden stood, stroking his neatly trimmed beard. "You three are part of my first triumph. You've served your country during wartime, but now your time has passed. We have newer models to take your place." His voice was as cold as the steel in the room. "We've come a long way since the day you were created, and we no longer have room for you now."

Seven's toes curled inside his slippers. None of them said anything, only listened indifferently as if Linden were speaking to inanimate objects.

Linden went on. "This will be your last month. In November, each of you will be taken to the Pit for execution."

Without another word, he left.

"I can't believe he broke the news to them like that," one of the technicians said. "He acted like he was talking to a toaster."

"So? These things aren't like us. They don't have feelings. Don't think because they look like a person that they share our emotions."

Seven blinked.

* * *

The Alphas gathered in the yard where they could speak to one another freely, although discreetly.

"What are we going to do?" Ten asked. "They'll kill us all."

"Be quiet," snapped Fourteen. "Don't draw attention."

Although safe in the yard, cameras still rolled, and they could pick up any emotion not usually expressed by the Replicas which could cause suspicion that would lead to questioning, and not all Replicas possessed the ability to lie like Seven.

"I think we should overpower them," suggested Fifteen. "They're nothing against our strength."

"It wouldn't be wise," Seven warned. "They have the Betas to protect them now, and we don't have *their* strength."

"What do you suggest?" asked Six. "That we do nothing? That we allow them to take us to the Pit?"

"Certainly not. There's a way to escape."

"How?" Nine asked.

Seven had waited a lifetime for this moment.

"There is a matter in which concerns us." He told them about the secret he'd learned not long ago and what would be required to prevent it from happening.

"Why should we care?" Ten challenged. "Humans aren't our responsibility."

"I concur," Thirteen spoke up. "If there is a way out, I think we should get as far away from this place as we can."

Seven glared at her. "If you want to run, I can't stop you."

"How did you find this out?" Five asked.

"It's not safe to discuss it now. When we regroup, I'll tell you."

"What's your plan?" Eleven inquired.

"There's a sewer drain just outside the north wall, large enough for us to fit through."

"The north wall? That surrounds the yard where the fitness center is," Twelve offered unhelpfully.

“Indeed.”

“How are we supposed to sneak over the wall without being noticed?”

“We can’t; it’s impossible,” Seven said grimly. “We’ll run.”

“Run?”

“Yes, we’ll run out of the gymnasium and not stop until we’ve jumped the wall. Once we’re on the other side, we’ll go into the sewer drain and disappear.”

“What about the tracking?” someone in the back posed. “We can’t wait until the end of the month for it to wear out.”

“We don’t wait,” Seven said. “We’ll burn it up with exertion and bleed what we can out.”

“We could die.”

True. In fact, he expected some of them would. But the risk of injury didn’t concern him. He scanned each of their faces. This would be their first mission without human direction, and he wondered if they could handle it. “I’ll need those of you who survive to be there when I need you. Are you willing to stand by me?”

“When should we do this?” Eighteen asked. “Most of us are scheduled for execution before November.”

“Tonight.”

“Tonight?” Nine asked.

Seven nodded. “Yes.”

“I’m with you,” Nine said.

* * * * *

Dozens of closed-circuit television screens walled the inside of a circular room. Linden and a tall, slender African American woman watched the Replicas.

“What do you think they’re discussing?” Doctor Waver asked nasally.

“About their execution, I imagine,” he replied.

“Do you think they’ll try to escape? Or maybe rebel?”

Linden shook his head. “No. They have no fear of death. They don’t even know what it is. Without that, there’s no need for them to panic. They’re programmed puppets, nothing more.”

David Linden was sixty-six and a scientist of stem-cell research. As a young man he wanted to create humans with ten times the amount of strength and speed of any natural born person. He built his own laboratory in the basement of his late father’s estate to work in private. If word had leaked about his project, he would have been the target of pro-life fanatics and arrested for federal crimes.

Linden left the monitoring room and went to his office. On his way, he thought about what he’d said to Loren Waver. He didn’t really believe it himself. He recalled what Seven had told him about remembering the day of his programming. It made Linden wonder if there was more to Seven and the other Alpha series than he first believed. If humanity was stored within the clones it would make them the perfect subjects for his experiment.

He entered his office, where he planned to spend the rest of the day with his work. He approached a small wall safe and punched a code into the keypad. The thick titanium door opened, and he retrieved the only item inside. He admired the small memory card fondly. This new programming would change everything.

Oh, Hagley, if only you were here to witness this.

Doctor Greg Hagley II had been his partner and friend. He'd been a reproductive cloning researcher, and together they'd worked on his project. They were a pair of geniuses with a God complex.

When they'd first attempted cloning, Hagley had used a low-tech version called artificial embryo twining. The results had been disastrous.

Eight out of ten fetuses had been stillborn, the rest were disfigured and died shortly after birth. On their eleventh try, they'd brought their first healthy Replica into the world. Six years later, the FBI caught wind of their work. When the Feds discovered the extent of the cloning progress, they'd taken Hagley and him into custody.

Charged with Reckless Endangerment and fearing a long prison sentence, Hagley lied and said it had all been Linden's idea. Since the experiments had been done in Linden's home and he'd made notes of the progress, the majority of the blame fell on him. Hagley even testified against him in court.

The key evidence against them, however, was their only successful clone. After the trial, the government seized the clone and sent him to a lab for study.

Hagley had been sentenced to four years in prison but served only half of that, getting released early for good behavior. Linden wasn't as fortunate. He was handed a ten-year sentence without parole. In his first year a visitor from Washington arrived, bringing a proposal from the President. Help them fight the war on dictatorship by cloning soldiers. Do it and the government would restore his assets and issue a full pardon.

Linden accepted the offer without delay. He'd built a laboratory on the island of Mill Rock, a small piece of land on the East River, between Manhattan and Queens. There he could work with better equipment and a team of skilled researchers.

Soldiers were selected as cloning subjects. The clones that resulted were sent to war immediately after their programming.

Sending clone soldiers into the field was supposed to remain top secret, but somehow word leaked. The newly elected President had ordered the Replicas to return to the laboratory and never leave the island. Linden was prohibited from producing anymore and had kept his word until years later.

Hagley remained in Linden's thoughts. The sting of his betrayal still pinched his heart, but the two would never make amends. Recently, Hagley had taken his own life. His body had been found in his West Nyack home, suffering from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

"Did you tell them, Father?" came the voice of a young boy. "Like we talked about?"

Linden jumped. The boy had opened the door and entered the room like a wraith. Letting out a frustrated sigh, he placed the memory card back into the vault and closed the door. “You need to knock before you enter a room. I’ve told you this.”

Tremors rocked his body whenever the boy—he’d cloned thirty-one years ago—came near him. Although he remained in the form of a child, Christos could twist his limbs like licorice if he wanted.

He’d donated his own stem cells for their eleventh attempt. Hagley had tried a higher level of artificial embryo twining. The results were a success. Christos was born as a healthy baby boy.

More than healthy, he possessed rapid healing abilities, thanks to a breakthrough stem-cell process that cured paralyzed rats. Christos was also given anabolic steroids to enhance muscle development. This resulted in increased strength, speed, and reflexes.

The child developed into everything Linden and Hagley had strove for, except for two problems. Their perfect child was still a child. Linden never intended to be a father; however, he’d raised the boy as his own.

The other problem was that Christos hadn’t been programmed to obey like the other Replicas. Instead, he possessed something dangerous—free will. Unable to tap into the child’s mind, Linden had taken the chance and injected him with a serum that slowed his growth after the government returned the boy to him. He’d hoped limiting the boy’s aging would lower the threat if he ever chose to rebel. A sharp-tempered teenager with super strength, experiencing hormonal imbalances, could be extremely dangerous.

“Did you tell them?” Christos asked again. “Did you tell them about the execution?”

Linden slid his hand off the smooth vault door and turned to the boy. With a deep sigh, he said, “Yes, Christos, they know. The plan is set.”

“The Alphas know they’re scheduled for execution? They *all* know?”

Christos possessed the sweet face Linden had had when he’d been a boy. Sometimes looking at him reminded Linden how easy it was to forget the child he’d outgrown.

“Each and every one,” he assured, walking to his desk. “Now, I have work to do.”

Without another word, Christos left, shutting the door behind him. When he was gone, Linden released his pent-up breath.

* * *

In the evening, the Alphas went into the fitness center where custom-made exercise equipment filled the gymnasium. Tonight, they stood by a sliding glass door, which lead out to a running track. Beyond it was the north wall.

Glass shattered when Seven smashed a fist through the door. Shards dropped and Seven caught one. He jabbed it into his wrist and slashed halfway up his forearm. The sudden hot pain jolted up to his skull. Others followed, cutting into arteries in their legs and arms. A mix of red and silver sprayed about the room.

* * *

A worker, monitoring the security screens, caught sight of them.

“Holy shit! What the hell are they doing?”

She pressed the alert button, triggering an alarm throughout the building. In no time, her phone rang.

“What’s going on?” Linden demanded.

“It’s the Alphas, sir! They’re cutting themselves!” She waited for a response and got none. “Should we call the guards?”

“No,” Linden retorted sharply. “Send in the Betas. I’ll be there soon.”

* * * * *

Seven reached the twenty-foot wall and leapt to the top, leaving behind a thick trail of blood. The adrenaline made his heart pound harder than the run itself.

He dashed across the lawn, heading for the caged sewer drain. He grew weak from blood loss and became lightheaded. Colors exploded like fireworks in his vision. The more he ran, the faster his heart pumped out silver and red. Seven slid to a halt and grabbed the mesh. With a mighty heave, he ripped it from the ground and tossed it away. He turned his chin up. To his despair, less than half of the Alphas were coming. He jumped feet-first into the drain and was swept away by the rushing current.

Seven couldn’t breathe as dirty water rushed into his mouth, nor could he control where the current took him. He gasped for air whenever the water broke above him. He faded in and out of consciousness.

* * *

As the last eight Replicas scrambled for broken glass, the doors to the gymnasium burst open. The Betas rushed in ready to destroy. With no more time to escape, the Alphas attacked.

Violence erupted between them. The Alphas’ necks were broken, their heads torn off, and their limbs ripped from their bodies. A handful of Betas were already outside, chasing the last of the Alphas beyond the wall.

Waver’s stomach turned inside out as she watched from the monitoring room.

“Where are they?” she demanded.

A worker scanned the area by satellite, but he was unable to capture a view of anyone other than the Betas. “I can’t pinpoint them.”

“Doctor Waver,” called another worker. “It’s Beta model 4020. He says the Alphas have gone into a sewer and wants to know if he and the others should follow.”

Before Waver replied, Linden entered the room. “Absolutely not! Tell him to return immediately.”

“If they go after them now, they might catch them,” Waver argued, as the worker relayed the message. “That drain leads to—”

“I know where it leads,” Linden interrupted. “We can’t send newly awakened Replicas out on a mission. The Betas are like small children; reckless and unorganized. Have you seen the mess in the gymnasium? Imagine what would happen if they’re set loose in the city.”

She slumped in defeat. The Betas were too wild for a mission. Their brains needed time to absorb their programming before they could fully understand what was expected of them. “You’re right.”

The old man smiled. “I’m always right.” He turned to leave. “Don’t worry; in two weeks, they’ll be ready to go out and do the work for us.”

“Replicas are supposed to be obedient,” she returned. “Now they’ve escaped.”

Linden turned to her from the doorway. He wore a stony expression. “I never told the Replicas they *couldn’t* try to escape. They just never have until now.”

His composed attitude amazed her. Her dark eyes narrowed, her mouth puckering with suspicion.

She imagined herself to be an intelligent woman. She had a PhD from Harvard and her intelligence compensated for her lack of beauty. She’d been excited to produce the Alphas’ replacements when Linden had announced his project. He’d told the group that once the new models were complete, the execution of the Alphas would begin. She didn’t like the idea of destroying what she’d helped create, but the objective was to improve on the ALD project. In order to do so, they had to abide by the rules of the Replica’s permitted population limit and eliminate the first twenty in the Alpha series.

But her suspicions arose about what else might be taking place in the lab. Linden had closed off the East Wing, restricting anyone—even her—entry. She often speculated about the forbidden section yet kept her mouth shut after one of the researchers had been fired for simply inquiring.

* * *

The cool autumn breeze swept over his body. The bitter water of the East River slid over his bare feet as he lay on the rocky riverbank of Hell Gate. Seven opened his eyes; the dim glow of the night sky shone above him.

Am I alive? I must be.

Steadily, he rose. He felt woozy and his skin was pallid from blood loss. He checked his arm to discover the self-inflicted wound had already scabbed over. Human flesh would have taken weeks to reach that stage of healing; but for Seven it only took a matter of hours. His chest felt tight from his overworked heart, desperately trying to circulate blood back into his body. Dizziness caused him to fall backwards, and he threw his arms out to

catch himself. His hands sank in the wet ground. Balancing, he raised one and allowed the thick, moist soil to drip between his fingers. He hadn't touched mud since the war. He clutched it and laughed.

As his laughter echoed into the night, he moved his leg out of the river. His foot slid against something. Someone was bobbing in the water. When he removed his leg, the person drifted downriver and so he jerked forward to catch it. Grabbing hold, he pulled Six's body out and dragged it toward him. Her lifeless eyes stared into nothing. He assumed she'd died during the escape, either from blood loss or from drowning.

He was unsure on how to feel about her death, for never had he experienced a personal loss before. With what little strength he possessed, he pulled her from the water. He then stood to admire what lay across the river.

New York City. Millions of lights beckoned him. It was more than he could ever imagine. The island of nightmares lay behind him. Before him there was a new world. With the tracking serum washed from his system, he was free to go anywhere he pleased.

He stayed alongside the river until reaching the Wards Island Bridge, wandering right into his newfound freedom.

Chapter 1

The longest and most terrifying night Nikolai Crowe ever experienced started the moment he found her dead.

While on the subway train headed for home, Nikolai received an urgent text message from his ex-girlfriend, saying she wanted them to meet. He immediately switched trains for Central Park, where she'd told him to go.

He kept his mind occupied on the crowded train by watching the news on a small flat-screen television embedded in the wall. Robbers were holding hostages at the First National Bank on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Reporter Sakura Yoko was on the scene, reporting live, with the flashing blue lights of police cars surrounding the building behind her.

The sound was mute, but the subtitles read that thirty-five hostages remained inside. The story began getting interesting when an automated voice announced Nikolai's stop. The moment the train eased into the station; he forced his way through the swarm of tired nine-to-fivers.

Nikolai followed the steps up to the street level where the cool autumn air brushed against his face. The shadow of the evening crept over the city like a skillful thief, making no sound. Thousands of lit windows of skyscrapers pierced the dark like artificial stars. October's chilly breath blew over the city.

For Nikolai it had been a long day, but he was ecstatic to see her again.

Why does she want to meet with me? Last week, she told me we couldn't be together anymore.

Before switching trains he'd texted her, but her only reply had been to hurry. When he'd tried calling, he was sent to voice mail.

"You've reached Jade. I can't answer right now. If you want to speak to me, you'll have to leave a message."

He left one message.

Reaching Central Park, he rushed to the Greywacke Arch Bridge, where she'd instructed him to meet her. The park streetlamps came to life as night settled in. He jogged over the path anxiously.

Maybe she's changed her mind. Maybe she wants to get back together. She didn't seem too sure about the break-up in the first place.

His heart beat harder from both the run and his nervousness. By the time he reached the bridge, his lungs were burning. He peered over the iron railing to the path below and called her name. When no answer came, worry came over him. Central Park wasn't a safe place when the sun went down.

He clambered down an overgrown embankment and entered the underpass. It was dark beneath the bridge, with limited help from a single streetlamp on the other side.

“Jade?” he whispered. “Are you here?”

As he neared the center of the bridge, the silhouette of a person on the ground appeared in the dim light. At first he thought a hobo might’ve fallen asleep or had passed out drunk. He made no sound as he approached.

The outline shaped into a woman’s figure, and she wasn’t asleep. “Jade?”

His bottom lip quivered, and his palms dampened. He didn’t want to believe it was her. It was a woman, but he could make out no distinct features. As he knelt beside her, he recognized the sweet lily fragrance of the woman’s perfume.

Please, don’t let it be her.

He reached over, almost too afraid to touch her. The soft fabric of her sweater revealed that she wore no coat.

Nikolai moved his hand across her back, toward the shoulder, to turn the body over, when his hand slid over something wet and cold. His shock forced him to snatch his hand away. The darkness didn’t allow him to distinguish what it was, but the coppery scent told him what it was.

A sudden burst of light struck him.

“Hold it right there!” yelled a man standing west of the bridge.

Nikolai jumped and nearly fell over. The intense brightness of the flashlight prevented him from seeing the man.

“Put your hands where I can see them!”

If the man was a police officer, it would be best to cooperate. Nikolai raised his hands and shielded his eyes from the light. Blood painted his fingertips. He slid his eyes over the woman. The light gave only a partial view, but it provided more detail than the streetlamp.

Her head lay to the side, her long brunette hair draped over her face. Thick smears of blood covered most of her sweater. Like the perfume, he recognized the sweater; he’d bought one just like it for Jade last month. He felt cold and hollow.

“Stand on your feet and put your hands behind your head!”

He stood on wobbly legs. He didn’t even try explaining himself. If he kept his cool and explained everything at the appropriate time, he’d be all right, he told himself. He interlocked his fingers behind his head and blood seeped through his hair, touching his scalp. He remained motionless while the officer called in for backup.

The man aimed a gun at him as he closed in. Nikolai said nothing, even when he was thrown against the wall and handcuffed. “What are you doing here? What did you do to that girl?”

“I didn’t do anything to her,” he said. “I got a message from my girlfriend to meet her at the bridge, and I found this woman here.”

The officer searched his pockets and found his wallet and cell phone. He placed them both into his own pocket, yanked Nikolai away from the wall, and led him out where two other officers appeared.

“We have a body,” the first officer said. “See if she has any identification on her.”

The police officers rushed under the bridge, while the other forced Nikolai to sit on a bench under the streetlamp. He planted a foot on the seat and loomed over his prisoner, exuding the stench of cigarette smoke.

“You need to be straight with me,” the officer said, keeping sharp eyes on him. “I need you to tell me what exactly happened here.”

Nikolai took a deep breath. “I got a text message from Jade—my ex—to meet her here, just like I told you. And when I got here, I found . . .”

“You found your ex-girlfriend’s body?” the officer prompted.

Nikolai shuddered and turned away. “I don’t know if it’s her. I don’t know who that is.”

Although the evidence pointed to it being Jade—the sweater, the hair color, and the lily-scented perfume—he walled himself in denial. He held onto the thin thread of hope that it was someone else.

“Mason,” one of the officers called as he emerged from the underpass.

“What is it?”

“I need to speak to you.”

Mason went to him. Nikolai watched as he listened to what they said. In the younger officer’s hand was a red velvet wallet, which he had opened to show Mason the driver’s license. Nikolai couldn’t hear what they whispered, but knew it was bad.

Mason studied the driver’s license before turning back to him. “Watch him, Cooper,” he ordered before disappearing under the bridge.

To Cooper, Nikolai asked, “What’s going on?”

“If you know what’s best for you, you’ll keep quiet.”

Being in no position to argue and having the common sense to realize it, he did.

Moments later Mason reappeared with the third officer, his eyes targeting their suspect. “D’you know who that is?” he asked, referring to the body. “Do you?” His tone was caught between anger and shock. When Nikolai shook his head, he glared viciously. “Don’t lie to us!”

Nikolai stood up. “I’m not lying about anything!”

“He killed her,” Cooper said.

“I didn’t kill anyone!” he exclaimed, surprised by their quick accusation.

Mason took out his nightstick and approached him. The other officers held him back.

“Whoa, whoa! Calm down, Mason. Easy!”

Nikolai sidestepped away from the officer, confused as to why he wanted to suddenly attack him. The thought of running crossed his mind, but a couple of reasons came to him why that would be a mistake. For starters, he was cuffed. And if he ran, he would blow his one chance to set things straight.

“All right! I’m all right,” Mason said, backing away. He turned to Cooper and said, “Call in more backup. I want this entire area sealed off.”

Cooper nodded and got on his radio.

“Geiger, call Homicide.”

“On it.”

Mason faced Nikolai. “You’re coming with me.”

He grabbed Nikolai by the arm and yanked him forward. He didn’t say a word as he was led out of the park. He knew he was innocent, but to keep his head from getting bashed in, he didn’t debate the issue any further.

* * *

In his apartment, Hiroshi Sho and his wife watched the evening news. The top story was the armed robbery of the First National Bank, where gunmen held thirty-five hostages inside.

“What do you think they’ll do?” Claudia asked. “The police, I mean.”

Sho took a sip of his scotch and soda. “They’ll likely raid the building.” He spoke with a thick accent. “I’ve already given the captain permission to use any force necessary if the perpetrators don’t surrender.”

“What about the hostages? Won’t they be in danger?”

He rubbed his forehead and exhaled a long breath. He’d had this conversation with her before. “There may be casualties, but we have to make examples of these people and show them we aren’t going to bow to their demands anymore.” Then he added. “Even if hostages are involved.”

His phone rang in his pocket.

“Are you going to answer it?” she asked.

“What?” he said, hearing the muffled trilling. “Oh, yes. It might be Charles. He’ll want to know about tomorrow’s speech.”

“Are you all right?” she asked as he reached into his pocket.

“You’ve seemed distracted lately.”

Instead of answering her, he studied his cell phone and scrunched his face. He didn’t recognize the number but put the phone to his ear anyway. “Mayor Sho.”

Claudia continued to watch the news but turned back to him when the leather of the armchair creaked as he stood.

“How?” he asked in a trembling tone.

“What is it?”

“When did it happen?” he asked the caller, louder and angrier. “Where is she now?”

“Who?” Claudia asked, standing.

Sho’s narrow eyes went wide. He stood motionless, and although he stared directly at his wife, she was invisible to him. The world around him vanished. Finally, he lowered the phone. He didn’t say anything else to the caller.

“For God’s sakes, Hiroshi, what happened?”

His surroundings slowly reappeared as he muttered, “She’s dead. My daughter is dead.”

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