

“Your secretary made me wait forty five minutes,” said the minister, his English heavily accented. His face, long and tired, sketched an aggrieved expression.

Vikram knew he’d waited twenty minutes at most, and generously supposed that the minister’s prejudice was a result of being accustomed to such disrespectful treatment, and to treating his own clients with the same pomposity.

Vikram said nothing, only waited silently as his assistant Eugenia wheeled in the tea cart. He gave her a tight smile which she returned. She had been his companion through this strange turning of the world, and knew more state secrets than all the heads of the world’s intelligence services combined. Her job had been to insulate him and his activities, acting as an effective shield between his less than above board policy direction, and doing it remarkably efficiently with little more than a good attitude and strategic understanding of when to interrupt.

Minister Sokolov obviously wanted to continue his complaining, but Eugenia’s warm smile disarmed him utterly, forcing him to smile back as she went through the ritual of pouring tea, and then inquiring about his sugar and milk preferences.

“Anything else for you, minister?” she asked brightly, her English only faintly accented with Cantonese inflection. The minister licked his lips, shook his head.

Eugenia turned to leave, and Sokolov did not trouble to conceal his interest in her figure. He passed an inquiring look to Vikram.

“She’s married,” Vikram confirmed with a smile. “Two young sons. And I doubt she’s interested in the cup bearers of deposed tyrants.”

“I don’t know where Putin is,” Sokolov said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I swear to you.”

“I hope you aren’t lying to me,” Vikram said casually, switching to Russian. “Mariska Putin can either turn herself over UN forces or she can expect to finish like so many other tyrants... in a hole, surrounded by unscrupulous insurgents who have far less interest in humane remedies than we do.”

The minister hardened. He still had some face, and he all but spat in Vikram’s direction. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Kori? You’ve already humiliated my nation in the sight of the whole world.”

Vikram swirled his tea around his cup, then set it down, and fixed the minister with his most pacific smile. “I have worked to bring regimes in line with a common goal. Russia knows that she is wounded. And she knows who is responsible.”

“Are you going to arrest me?” Sokolov wanted to know.

Vikram sighed. “No, Minister Sokolov. I asked you here today because I want to offer you sanctuary. Your wife and children have already been exfiltrated and are waiting for you in London. What’s more, I want you to act as a liaison for what’s left of the Putin regime, to bring this chapter to a peaceful close.”

In the end, Sokolov couldn’t hold back his tears. He wasn’t a bad man, just a weak one. A bureaucrat in over his head. And a ready made target, which he well knew. He left Vikram’s office, aware of his debt. It was precisely how Vikram wanted him to feel.

Eugenia lingered by the door as she saw the minister out. She turned to Vikram, her dark eyes full of sober concern.

He gave her his most mild expression. “What?”

“You’re sure they won’t be able to get to you in Himalaya?”

“No,” he said with a grin. “But we’ve got our own security and they know what to look for.”

Eugenia pulled out her mobile, and scrolled through it. “I’ve changed your flight anyway. You’re leaving tonight after the interview. Go home and pack.”

He shouldered his bag, and gathered up his mobile and briefcase. “Will you miss me when I’m garroted by a *vory* assassin?”

She shrugged. “You’ve already written a memo suggesting me as your worthy successor.”

He grinned. “Backdated and automatic?”

She looked at him as though insulted. He laughed, unable to help himself. He’d had a few assistants in his working life, but Eugenia, ten years his senior, had brought a kind of congeniality to his subterfuge that had made it possible for him to undermine the nationalist foundations that prevented the United Nations from the primacy it deserved.

He could do the strategizing himself, Vikram knew. He had command of almost every language spoken in the world. He had plied his mind with a vast reservoir of information, every disposition, every weakness, every name and every face in the great network of power politics. But this woman had taught him, through her example, the power of gestures.

“You can charm people,” she had observed. “But it doesn’t mean anything if you don’t know how to be kind.”

“And you don’t resent that I’m a twenty-one year old man in a position of undeserved authority that you, with your talent and obvious qualifications, could reasonably expect to have?”

He'd said this to her in Keen's bar over pints, six weeks after the "company" had assigned her to his supposedly ceremonial office. Everyone knew that Vikram's UN office was really meant to act as a political clearing house, but it had been Eugenia who had hung the "Mycroft Holmes" sign on his door. He knew then that she was more than just a UN menial, even if there was such a thing.

"Of course I resent it," she said, a little thick voiced from the booze. "But you know what I've learned in my years in policy?"

"Tell me."

"It's going to sound obvious."

"Tell me anyway, I'm fascinated."

"A pretty, famous young wunderkind makes excellent cover."

Vikram thought, as he drained his pint, that it was a shame he was not the kind of man to go to bed with his assistant, even if he did not tend towards women. Eugenia's sparkling eyes invited him to ask, but he knew that he never would, and that even if he had, her no would be kindly meant.

"I see," he said, smiling. "You rank me."

"They pay me a lot more, too," she said with a grin, pushing her credit card towards the bartender.

Leon Callow's show was housed in one of the smaller CNN studios, but Vikram had been on television often enough to know they would make it appear larger using the slick surfaces, the blaring lights. He'd changed into a Givenchy suit, comfortable enough to tolerate an hour on camera, but not something he intended to wear home.

After Callow ran through the discussion program, Vikram would change out of the suit into a distressed NYU hoodie, and become just another pedestrian, maybe a computer science student on his way home from a hard day's typing. In New York City, he could fade into the crazy quilt of types, disappear beside the stockbrokers and the high school kids, and use his unlimited global vocabulary to paint himself into any kind of ethnically ambiguous foreigner.

To the East Indian bodega owners, he was a son of Delhi, which happened to be true. To Koreans, he was an intriguing anomaly, his fluency unexpected from a boy with brown skin. To the bakery owners of Coney Island, he might have been the product of a union between a domestic from Pakistan, and a Ukrainian commissar, which was less true, but his language was perfect. He was, as Eugenia said, capable of charm. His favoured weapon was the familiar sound of home. And he, Vikram, knew that underneath all of it, his ability to make people feel special in this way was an act of hypocrisy.

It had taken him a week to learn Korean, with concentrated effort. Ukrainian had been the work of an hour, after meeting with a delegation for drinks uptown. He had Russian, his mother's language, to build on. Hindi was the language of his birthplace, and the one he and Rachel spoke in when they wanted to be confidential in the West. He'd undertaken to learn the regional accent of New York City so he could drop out of British Received Pronunciation into the Yankee dialect, an adjustment that almost immediately put any curious individual attempting to place him right out of court. Vikram knew the power of sound, how an accent could be every bit as convincing as a physical disguise, and often more so.

Not tonight, though. He sat relaxed, slack in his chair as the makeup artist dusted his face with powder, and applied another layer of spray to his glossy black hair. The sound technician connected the microphone to the transponder, twitching his lapels to make sure they wouldn't rustle and disturb the lavalier.

The producer ducked her head behind the black curtain. "On in five, Mr. Kori."

"Thank you," he said, nodding with a thin smile.

Then, Leon Callow himself appeared from behind the sound baffles. He too wore a suit, a navy affair, his face powdered down in the same way, making him look aged and papery. The camera wouldn't catch it, but up close the effect was less than aesthetic.

Still, Callow, at fifty, was handsome even for the average cable news anchor. Not a blonde hair out of place, and his generous mouth was relaxed. The handshake offered was dry and firm, much like Vikram's own.

"I appreciate you making room in your schedule for me, Mr. Kori," Callow said, and Vikram sensed a hint of flirtation there. He wasn't sure if it was just the newsman's way of testing the tension, but Vikram was equal to that.

Vikram returned the mild smile. "We've met, actually."

Callow's brows came together slightly. "I don't recall."

"IR conference. Edinburgh. "Global Refugee Media Coverage Implications," Vikram confirmed. "You were still in diplomacy then."

The frown deepened. "That was at least fifteen years ago. You must have been... "

"Six," Vikram supplied. Then he patted Callow's shoulder. "Don't worry about it."

The lights on the set were thankfully newer models, and didn't give off too much heat. Still, Vikram felt primed, keen, one hand resting on the other on the canted black desk, which placed him at a bit of an unnatural angle to Callow, who sat at the head with his papers in hand.

"You've used the term 'war crimes' to describe recent events," Callow said, now using his reporter voice. "Does that mean you intend to deepen the UN mandate for Enforcement/Containment?"

"We tabled this policy months ago," Vikram said, his hands coming apart to conduct his orchestrated argument. "No one should be surprised that we're exerting ourselves on behalf of the people being victimized by regimes and terror organizations alike."

"The implication here," Callow said, consulting his notes. "Is that the United States caved to pressure to allow other nations to arm the UN due to our own internal crisis?"

"I think that's fair," Vikram conceded. "No one wants to use the term civil war, and the US doesn't want to be seen as inviting foreign powers to suppress homegrown insurgents, but they're not willing to..."

"Put boots on our own ground?" Callow suggested.

"Yes."

"What about your part in unseating Russia from the UN security council?" Callow pressed, obviously hoping to raise a bit of a reaction.

"I don't know about 'my part'. I was a conduit of negotiation, surely, but I don't think any of the major nations, including the Russian polity, wanted to see the Putin legacy into the new decade."

"Sources suggest you were instrumental," Callow said, now leaning forward slightly. "Issues of transparency have been raised. And concerns with the whereabouts of Mariska Putin."

Vikram straightened, keeping his shoulders loose, his elbows balanced on the edge of the desk, one palm upturned.

"If you can't name your sources, Leon," he began smoothly. "Then you can hardly complain about my lack of transparency. It's all a matter of public record. We don't do closed sessions any more."

"The voting body doesn't," Leon conceded. "That's to say nothing of this new civil service, or its information offices. There is mounting evidence that the UN worked with the CIA to destabilize the Chechen elections."

“There's mounting evidence that CNN shareholders count on a pro-Russia point of view, but again, transparency,” Vikram rejoined with vicious pleasure. “Look. It's not my job to take sides on the grounds of nationalism.”

“You're Russian yourself, on your mother's side,” Callow feinted. “Would you say that increases your qualifications to make policy?”

“I'm a linguist and I am the communicant for this policy, not its author.”

“A linguist,” Callow repeated. “That's modest for the all time record holder. You speak what, eighty languages?”

Vikram smiled. “Sixty-three on a good day.”

“You can understand,” Callow pressed. “Why you're viewed as a prime mover in these negotiations.”

“You'll find many qualified linguistic talents at the United Nations, I promise you,” Vikram said drolly. “But I will concede my recognizability is a factor. And yet, it would make me awfully conspicuous for all this back channel dealing you're accusing me of.”

Now Callow was on the back foot. “Mr. Kori, I was not making an accusation, I only --”

Vikram leaned forward, hands apart on the table, as though spreading his hand and showing nothing but colour cards.

“Let's get this straight, Leon. The Americans, the Russians, the Israelis, the Turks, they all thrive on conflict economies, and they all do it on the premise that the people they victimize will always fight, but won't ever win. Well, go look for the Putin family now. And if Russia can't now protect its citizens from the legacy of unlawful expansionism, then it is up to the rest of the world to secure their future safety.”

Leon blinked at him, a little stunned by the sudden force of passion, but recovered quickly. “Well. That's a *precís*, but I won't deny your point.” He smiled, moved another sheet of paper to the top of his pile to buy time. “I'm sure you have comments on concerns that the UN is exceeding its brief. New world order has been mentioned by some --”

“Cyber-terrorists,” Vikram said flatly. “Malcontents and insurrectionists. The people they murder and abuse hardly require the UN to appear as an enemy next to the kind of friends they've already got.”

“Fair,” Leon agreed. “We've got a few minutes left. If you can, please elaborate on this New Geneva Convention, if you can.”

“Well, it’s a misnomer,” Vikram said with a grin. “Not being held in Geneva, but we can’t seem to get rid of it.”

“The New York City Convention doesn’t roll off the tongue.”

“Exactly.”

“So tell me --”

“Phase one has been in place for over a year now. Global draw down of nuclear weapons, but also reduction of powerful ordnance, ships, submarine power, air power, so on. Restrictions on the destructive capability of new technology. Policy compliant retrofitting. Every major country supplies to one global armed force. The Security Council governs as before.”

“Without Russia,” Callow affirmed. “And there are rumours we, the United States, might lose our seat as well.”

“I can’t confirm or deny that,” Vikram said. “Russia can regain eligibility when she’s met the standard of human rights for her people. With regards to the US, I can only say that bombing your own citizens is a delegitimizing act. Your government knows that the Heartland insurgency does not have the terrorist server farms claimed, but the drone strikes continue. It looks to the rest of the world like you’re trying to destroy the arable land to force the issue of produce outsourcing that began all of this in the first instance.”

“How,” Callow said, now looking directly at him. “Would you address this, if it comes to your office?”

Vikram sat back, gave a little sigh. “I would hope that the US valued its seat and its global reputation more than that, but it’s part of an existing pattern of decline that will take many years to reverse.”

“But if the US loses its seat?” Callow pressed, clearly wanting Vikram to commit, to give him something, any kind of hint of what the policy might be.

“Then that,” Vikram said with the utmost earnestness. “Would be a great tragedy for one the UN’s founding members.”