

Cobalt Blue

PART I: THE RISE OF YURI KUBO

Chapter 1: Yuri Kubo, 18 Years Old, *Ronin*

It was a cold, snowy day when Yuri Kubo, looking for her name and qualifications on the Hokkaido University's annual selections board, found out she had effectively become a *ronin*.

That news had not been long in coming, not at all. After a relatively successful last year at high school and a long and exhausting season of hard studying for the university entrance exams, Yuri thought that enrolling at Hokkaido University, the most prestigious of her city, Sapporo, and indeed of all of the island of Hokkaido, was going to be well within her reach. Instead, those ambitions were crushed when she discovered she had not been selected for tuition that year.

Amongst the cheering students who were celebrating their next step in their academic life and sad ones hoping to be luckier the next time, Yuri slowly retreated from the board at Hokkaido University's campus and hopped on a bus which took her to the nearest train station, where she would take a train back to her neighborhood. During the way, she thought about how to tell her parents, who were living overseas, that she had failed to get to university and that she not only was a *ronin* now, but a NEET as well.

And that would more than likely not please Yuri's parents, who had moved out of Japan to the United States when she started attending high school three years before. They were a couple of deeply passionate, successful electrochemists looking for the next source of clean energy and were currently in the midst of a very high-profile multinational research endeavor sponsored by America's most prestigious universities and colleges. The time they had to put into the investigation meant that they had to leave Yuri behind in Hokkaido while they moved to the United States, in exchange of sending her money so that she could live comfortably. Now that Yuri had failed her entrance exam, she did not know how they would react.

"How can I do this?" – Yuri thought, nervously, while touching her short, silky cobalt blue hair.

Suddenly, her phone rang. It was her mother. Despite there being an almost 12-hour time difference between Sapporo and Boston, the American city where her parents lived, they had sacrificed some precious sleep hours in order to call their daughter to congratulate her on her new phase of her life. Instead, they were bewildered and disappointed to hear the true outcome of Yuri's application process.

"This isn't a joke, right?" – Yuri's mother asked.

"No, mom, it isn't. I failed at selection, and thus I won't be able to go to university this year" – Yuri replied. Yuri's mother sighed.

"Well, it seems that we were wrong with you. You certainly aren't ready to take on bigger challenges. It was our fault for having spoiled you so much. You forgot the meaning of the word 'effort'. I'm afraid that you'll have to learn it the hard way. We won't be sending you money any longer, Yuri" – Yuri's mother gravely said.

"What? No, you can't do that! What am I going to do for a living?" – Yuri asked.

“That’s your problem now, girl. We did our part in paying your high school’s tuition fees and giving you enough resources for you to manage your studies without worrying about money. Maybe that was a mistake by our part. So, we’ll correct it. You’re now on your own. Get a part-time job or something” – Yuri’s mother angrily said.

“But...!” – Yuri tried to say, before being interrupted by her mother.

“No buts, Yuri. You had your chance. And now you’re a grown-up. Deal with it. Don’t call us ever again for money. Now, if you’ll excuse me, your dad and I have to get some sleep for tomorrow. Goodbye” – Yuri’s mother finally said, before hanging up.

“Damn!” – Yuri thought almost brought to tears by her mother’s harshness.

When she got back to her apartment, she laid back on her bed, still wearing her school uniform, and tried to have a rest. The day’s appalling news and her mother’s bad blood towards her failure had exhausted her, as well as the thought of going through the hardship of working part-time at a convenience store or elsewhere. She had never done so before, instead being sure until the day before that her parents would take her hand financially speaking all the way through university until she had the necessary qualifications to be thrown into the Japanese society, a society which valued effort and qualifications above all else and which now promised to be quite the challenge for a *ronin* and NEET like Yuri. She had to not only work for a living, but also to pay for additional studies in order to prepare for next year’s entrance exams at another university. And the mere idea of that was appalling.

Fortunately for her, those sorrowful thoughts were eventually drowned by exhaustion, and so she quickly fell asleep, under the orange sunlight of that afternoon that went through the Persian slats that covered her window.

When Yuri woke up, night had already fallen. Despite her bad experiences during the day, the sleep had been sound, without being attacked by nightmares. However, she still felt fatigued and hungry, so she got out of her bed and walked to the kitchen in order to prepare herself an instant meal. Ramen was mostly her food of choice, as it was cheap and filling, and so she opened the pantry to get a pack of it, however, she could not find any.

“Seems like I can’t even have ramen to drown my sorrow. Screw this, I’ll have to go to the convenience store” – Yuri thought, angered by her lack of luck throughout the day.

And so, after grabbing some of the little money she had left, Yuri went out of her apartment and walked the streets towards the nearest convenience store, under the cold weather. She regretted not having dressed properly for that, as her school uniform and its short skirt left her legs bare and unprotected, and the blazer was thin and light, making for a bad winter jacket. Despite this, she managed to get to the convenience store safely.

Once there, she walked to the aisle where the ramen and other instant foods were located. She grabbed a couple of packs and also some bottles of water and walked to the counter in order to pay for it. She was served by a smiling convenience store girl who kindly took her money and packed the

goods into a bag. When she was ready, she proceeded to leave the convenience store, ready to return to her apartment and think about her dire situation and come up with a plan to deal with it.

As she was exiting the convenience store, it began to snow. Before continuing on with her journey, she decided to sit down on the seats in front of the storefront to gaze at the slowly falling snowflakes, just for some minutes, before it became too cold to be outside. She also stared at the convenience store itself for some seconds, looking at the employee who had just served her, and was now attending to another customer.

"I'll be working in a place like this very soon, huh?" – Yuri thought, with sadness.

After some minutes, it was time to go home. Before she could stand up, however, someone suddenly approached her seat and sat down beside her. It was an elderly bald man, who could barely walk and almost fell down if it were not for Yuri, who quickly stood up and helped the man sit down.

"Thank you, young girl" – the old man said, smiling at Yuri with a grandfatherly smile.

"You're welcome, sir" – Yuri said, as the old man sat down. For some seconds, the old man stared at her carefully, something which both amused and worried Yuri.

"Uh, sir, can I help you with something?" – Yuri asked, somewhat nervously.

"Oh, don't worry, young girl. I won't hurt you. Please, before you go, can you keep me company for a little while?" – the old man asked. It was cold and Yuri wanted to return home, and besides, something about the old man seemed a little off to her. However, because he seemed to be just a frail, helpless old man, and because Yuri was really a kind girl, she granted his wish.

"Alright, I'll keep you company" – Yuri said.

"Thank you again, young girl. What's your name?" – the old man asked.

"Yuri. Yuri Kubo" – Yuri replied.

"That's a nice name" – the old man said, and so, both stared at the slow and gentle snow fall.

"Snowflakes. Aren't they beautiful?" – the old man asked Yuri.

"Yes. They truly are. I would enjoy their grace if it weren't for my own troubles" – Yuri said.

"Troubles?" – the old man asked.

"Yeah. Today I discovered I will become a *ronin* this year" – Yuri said.

"I see. Sorry to hear about that. I'm sure you made quite the effort to make it into university" – the old man said.

"You bet I did. But apparently, it wasn't enough. And my parents told me that, as punishment, they won't support me financially any longer. Now I need to find a job in order to earn a living and also to finance my preparation to apply again next year" – Yuri said.

"I see. You aren't enjoying your life right now. I'm also in troubles that prevent me from enjoying it as well" – the old man said.

"How's that?" – Yuri asked.

"I used to be, well, I still are, the patriarch of my family, and I'm also in charge of the family business. We have strong connections to Hokkaido's business world and we're generally successful at what we do. However, because of my age, and because of a certain condition I have, I'm no longer able to perform my duties as required, and so I'm looking for a successor. But I can't seem to find the right one" – the old man said.

"A successor? Do you have children?" – Yuri asked.

"Yes, unfortunately. I have two sons and two daughters. But they have proved to be the worst children I have ever raised. Each of them has their own life, all of them out of Hokkaido. They never even call their father every once in a while, and they have never been interested in the family business. So, none of them qualifies to be my successor" – the old man said.

"Don't you have an advisor, or another associate, that could be named your successor?" – Yuri asked.

"I have advisors, and I have trusted them with my life. But none of them is fit to be the one in charge" – the old man said.

"I see. It's quite the predicament indeed" – Yuri said.

"Yes. A torment indeed. And I must solve it quickly, because I won't be alive much longer" – the old man said.

There were some seconds of silence.

"You know what? I have an idea" – the old man said.

"Really?" – Yuri asked.

"Yes. Why don't you become my successor?" – the old man asked, smiling. At first, Yuri thought it was a joke.

"Nice one, old man" – Yuri said, smiling. The old man suddenly became serious. Yuri then understood that he had really meant what he had said.

"Wait, are you serious? Me? Your successor as the leader of your family?" – Yuri asked, amused.

"Yes. Right now, you are in trouble, and I'm in trouble as well. Let's mutually help each other. I'm too old to keep going on as the patriarch, and there's no worthy successor in sight. And as a *ronin* bereft of money and in desperate need for a job, you're in a predicament as well. So, in exchange of lifting the burden off my shoulders and allowing me to live the rest of my days in peace, you'll get to run and manage my family and my business. No conditions, no trickery. What do you say?" – the old man asked.

At this point, Yuri thought that the old man, frail and vulnerable as he was, was simply talking senile verbiage. And out of kindness for the old man, she decided to go with the flow.

"Alright, old man, you convinced me. I will take over as the leader of your family while you retire and live the rest of your life in peace" – Yuri said.

“You really mean it?” – the old man asked.

“Yes, I do” – Yuri said.

“Magnificent, young girl. It is official then. From now on, you, Yuri Kubo, will be the leader of the Fujii Group of Sapporo, which, accordingly, will become the Kubo Group. Congratulations on your decision” – the old man said.

“Yes, sure, whatever, old man. I’ll take care of your family” – Yuri said.

“Alright then. You don’t know how much of a burden you have taken off my shoulders” – the old man said, standing up with a smile on his face.

“Where are you going now?” – Yuri asked.

“I’m going to have a well-deserved rest after all these years. I wish you good health and good luck, *oyabun*” – the old man said, before walking off and disappearing around the corner.

“Wait, what? *Oyabun*?” – Yuri asked, however the old man had already left.

“What was that?” – Yuri thought with confusion after that surreal encounter with that seemingly senile old man, who, in his ravings, had designated her as the leader of his family group. What did that exactly mean?

“Poor old man. He must have escaped from his care home or something” – Yuri said, standing up from the seat. She sighed.

“Time to return home then” – Yuri thought, and so, without further ado, she walked the short way back to her apartment, still amused about the weirdness and the randomness of her encounter.

Later, after a quick ramen meal and a shower, Yuri was lying on her bed, waiting to get asleep. She was still thinking about her new problems, albeit in a more down-to-earth way, and planned to look for a job the following day, immediately after breakfast. She was still sad and angry at her parents, though.

“How could they abandon me in such a way?” – Yuri asked herself.

Eventually, just like before, she fell asleep, with the thought that, whatever was to happen, it was to be challenging and tough.

As it turned out, she was not wrong.

Chapter 2: Wait, so I’m Oyabun now?

The sound of the alarm clock woke Yuri up the following morning. No matter the circumstances, she always woke up at seven o’clock in the morning, even during weekends and holidays. It was a small habit she had built up along the years, and it was one of those personal things of which she was proud of. After getting off her bed, brushing her teeth and dress into casual, everyday clothes, she turned on the TV and started preparing breakfast while watching that morning’s news. She planned to start looking for part-time jobs online just after finishing her food.

“In other news, police have reported that Kenkichi Fujii, the leader of the notorious Yakuza outfit, the Fujii Group, has been found dead this morning at a luxury hotel room” – the news caster said.

“‘Fujii Group’?” – Yuri thought out loud, and stared glaringly at the TV, which showed a familiar face.

“Fujii, a renowned figure within Sapporo’s organized crime network, is believed to have died of causes related to his terminal cancer and advanced age. The organization he led as *oyabun*, the small but powerful and respected Fujii Group, is suspected to be involved in arms trafficking from Russia and is also rumored to have an interest in Susukino’s prostitution rings according to the Hokkaido Prefectural Police Department” – the news caster continued, before showing a picture of Fujii. When Yuri looked at it, she was astonished, and frightened too.

“The old man from last night!” – Yuri thought, gaping at the TV.

“According to the police, Fujii had not named any known successors before his sudden death. His children, who are not believed to be involved in the family’s organized crime activities, all live relatively obscure lives outside Hokkaido. His advisors are reported to be currently arranging for the body to be released from custody in order to start preparations for his funeral” – the news caster added.

As Yuri was slowly trying to comprehend what had happened, someone knocked at her door.

“Who could be this early?” – Yuri thought. The knocking persisted.

“Just a minute!” – Yuri said, before turning off the TV and walking to the door.

After opening it, she found a group of three men, all dressed up in suits of assorted designs and colors, with combed, oiled hair and menacing eyes, scaring Yuri a lot. However, she still managed to keep it cool and try to speak with those people.

“Hello. What can I help you with?” – Yuri asked, in a kind but nervous way.

“Does a Yuri Kubo live here?” – one of the guys asked.

“Yes. I’m Yuri Kubo” – Yuri replied. The men stared at her with deep, distrustful eyes.

“Are you Yuri Kubo?” – the guy asked again.

“Yes, as I said I’m Yuri Kubo. What can I help you with?” – Yuri asked again. The guy sighed.

“Oh, old man, what have you done?” – the guy said, shaking his head.

“Is there a problem?” – Yuri Kubo asked.

“More than one, girl, more than one. You’ll have to come with us. Get dressed in your most formal attire and come with us. Now” – the guy said, authoritatively. Yuri immediately knew what the guy was talking about, which made her even more nervous. And she knew she could not resist, so she had no option but to comply.

“Alright. I’ll get dressed right away” – Yuri said, slowly walking back into the apartment and to her closet, where she picked her school uniform and then got into the bathroom to get dressed.

When she was ready, she walked out of the apartment and after locking the door, she followed the three guys downstairs to a very nice black Mercedes-Benz S-Class luxury car, where she was seated in the back row, escorted by two of the guys. The car took her on an almost an hour-long trip through the streets of Sapporo, until they reached the area around Mount Moiwa to the west of the city. During the whole trip, the mysterious guys stayed completely silent, almost as if they were not humans, but quiet robots instead. As the Mercedes cruised through Sapporo, lots of different thoughts crossed Yuri's mind. She thought she was very foolish for playing alone Kenkichi Fujii's game. Now, her fate was at stake, and with these intimidating guys, her optics were not good. Was she going to be killed? Was she going to be made to leave the city? Was she going to have her possessions and money taken away?

Her questions were soon to be answered when the car reached a compound located near Mount Moiwa. A spacious walled property which included a large main house built in the traditional Japanese style and other secondary structures following the same design, it was guarded by more guys in suits who also wore dark black sunglasses which completely obscured their eyes. When the gates were opened, the car slowly entered the compound. The gates were closed once the car was fully inside. The driver parked in front of the main building's entrance, and unlocked the doors, inviting its occupants to get off the vehicle with a hand sign.

"This is it. End of the line. Yuri Kubo, please, follow us" – one of the guys said, before opening the door. Yuri nodded, and so, the entourage got off the car and entered the mansion.

A group of more intimidating guys greeted Yuri and the others, standing in two rows around the entrance. They not only included men in classy, expensive suits, but also others which dressed in a less formal way, including leather jackets, open shirts which allowed Yuri to see the guys' elaborate body suit tattoos, and even yukatas and kimonos.

The men escorted Yuri through the house, up the stairs, into an office inside the house, which, despite its traditional Japanese appearance, featured modern furniture and equipment inside, with a large wall panel made of many LCD screens and a large desk, behind which there were three seats. Two of them, the right and left ones, were occupied by two other men, while the center one was empty. The man who was sitting on the right seat was old, being in his sixties or seventies, and was dressed in a dark blue kimono, while the one on the left was much, much younger, in the ballpark of a young adult in his late twenties or early thirties, dressed in an expensive business suit. With a hand sign, Yuri was ordered to sit down in a chair in front of the desk.

"Nomura-dono, Watanabe-dono, we have brought you the person who was named the successor to Fujii-sama as the *oyabun* of the Fujii Group" – one of the guys said.

"Very well, Hara-san. You can return to your duties" – the older man said.

"Yes, Nomura-dono" – the guy said, before exiting the room together with his men.

There was complete silence for some seconds in the room.

"So, are you the person called Yuri Kubo?" – the younger guy asked.

"Uh, yes. I'm Yuri Kubo" – Yuri replied, very nervously. Both guys stared at her for some seconds.

“This is quite the surprise. But not a pleasant one at all. I expected for you to be a wholly different person” – the older guy said.

“What do you mean?” – Yuri asked.

“We thought you would be a man. And a tough one too. Not some delicate schoolgirl” – the younger guy said in a rather harsh tone, which frightened Yuri.

“Tell me, Kubo-san, why do you think you are here?” – the older man asked.

“I’m here because I agreed to be Kenkichi Fujii’s successor as the leader of the Fujii Group” – Yuri said.

“I see. Why do you think that Kenkichi Fujii-sama, who was the leader of this family, of this organization, for over thirty years, and led a successful and prosperous career, would choose you as his successor as *oyabun*?” – the older guy asked.

“To be honest, I don’t know. He said that- “– Yuri was saying, before being suddenly interrupted by the younger guy.

“Stop. In this world, you must never say the words ‘I don’t know’ when you’re asked about something. You must give a clear and concise answer. Now, start again” – the younger guy said.

“Alright then. Last night, I met Kenkichi Fujii outside a convenience store near my house. We talked a little bit about how each of us had troubles we needed to deal with. He said he was tired of leading the Fujii Group and needed some rest. And I told him I had unfortunately become a *ronin* because I failed to get into university. And so, he offered me to be the leader of his business group in exchange of being relieved from that duty” – Yuri explained.

“And you accepted it?” – the older guy asked.

“I... I didn’t think he was saying it seriously. I thought he was just a senile old man, talking, well, talking nonsense. I thought it would be kind to just follow his game in order to not upset him” – Yuri said, trying to excuse her actions. The younger man shook his head.

“And because of that kindness, we’re in this precarious situation now. Nonetheless, as the humble subordinates of Fujii-sama that we are, we can’t disobey or betray his last will” – the older guy said with slight anger in his words.

“Wait, Nomura-dono, are you suggesting that...?” – the younger guy asked, worryingly.

“We have no choice, Watanabe-san. As the *wakagashira* of the Fujii Group, I’m bound to follow Fujii-sama’s will until the very end. And his last will before he succumbed to his condition was to name this girl, Yuri Kubo, as his successor. There is no other way” - Nomura said.

“But Nomura-dono, we can’t just accept this! Look at her, she’s... she’s a girl! And a very young and immature one too. We can’t just let her- “– Watanabe said, before being interrupted by Nomura.

“Orders are orders, Watanabe-san. That’s just the way it is. I suggest you accept it and embrace it” – Nomura tensely said.

“Yes, Nomura-dono. I apologize for my insolence” – Watanabe said.

“Listen, Yuri Kubo. Thanks to your irresponsible answer to Fujii-sama’s suggestion, you have been chosen as his successor, and neither you nor us can resist that will. From now on, you will be the *oyabun* of the Fujii Group, which, as you may have imagined, will change its name to the Kubo Group now. You will be entitled to the property of this compound and the businesses operated by the Group, and to the loyalty and services of the Group’s members and associates. However, because you’re so young and probably have little to no experience in this line of work, the Group’s actual control will rest on our hands. Watanabe-san, the *so-honbucho* of the Group, and I, the *wakagashira*, will now formally take control of the Kubo Group until you are mature enough to fulfill your duties. In order to prepare you for that, we will assign your training and preparation to one of our best members, who will train you in the various arts you will need to master” – Nomura said, pressing a button on the desk.

Some minutes later, the doors opened, and a third guy entered the room. He was aged similarly to Watanabe and was also dressed in a similar suit to his, albeit gray instead of black. But unlike Watanabe, who was serious and stoic, he had a much friendlier look on his face. Also, instead of having oiled, combed hair, this man was completely bald.

“Nomura-dono, Watanabe-dono, how can I help?” – the bald guy asked.

“Sakai-kun, this is Yuri Kubo, the heir to the leadership of our group designated by Fujii-sama himself. While we exert transitional control over the group, your mission will be to train her on the ways of the *ninkyō dantai*, including the handling of weapons, our politics, and the strict code we are bound to. You must also teach her on our background and about the general state of our line of work in Sapporo. You have a period of one month to do it, after which Yuri Kubo will officially take over the control of our operations and be formally announced as our new *oyabun*. Needless to say, you must put all your effort into this task. Anything less than perfect is not acceptable. Do you understand the nature of your work, Sakai-kun?” – Nomura asked.

“Yes, Nomura-dono” – Sakai said.

“Very well. Now, take her away, and show her the city” – Nomura said.

“Yes, Nomura-dono. Kubo-sama, please, come with me” – Sakai said, smiling at Yuri, who stood up, bowed before Nomura and Watanabe, and left the room with Sakai.

“Follow me, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said.

“Are we going to the city, uh, Sakai-san?” – Yuri asked. Sakai laughed.

“Come on. Don’t be so serious. You’re the *oyabun*, after all. You can call me Sakai, without the honorific. Or if you want, you can use my name, Issei” – Sakai said.

“Can I call you Sakai-kun?” – Yuri asked.

“Sakai-kun would be fine, yes” – Sakai said.

“Alright. As I was asking, Sakai-kun, are we returning to Sapporo?” – Yuri asked.

“That’s right. As the *wakagashira* ordered, you must be prepared to be the *oyabun* of this Group in a month’s time. And I intend to do the work and do it right. So, I will show you what our little

‘business’ here is all about, if you know what I mean” – Sakai said, as they exited the building and into the parking lot. They walked to Sakai’s car, a two-door blue Honda sports model.

“Won’t you ask why or how I’m here?” – Yuri asked.

“That’s none of my business, Kubo-sama. As of today, I’m one of your subordinates. And my job is to make this transition as smooth as possible. Come, get into my car. We’ll have a little ride” – Sakai said, inviting Yuri to step into the vehicle with a smile. Yuri complied, and sat down in the passenger’s seat.

“Let’s go, then. Put on your seatbelt. I like to run deep and fast” – Sakai said, starting the engine. Once again, Yuri obliged, and fastened her seatbelt.

And so, the Kubo Group’s new *oyabun* and Sakai left the compound. Yuri’s life as the new leader of the Group had begun. There was no way back now. Things would never be the same.

Chapter 3: Concrete Jungle

“First things first, we have to start with the city control. Understanding Sapporo’s territorial control can be very exhausting at first, so pay attention” – Sakai said, while they were driving through the city.

“Understood, Sakai-kun. I’m listening” – Yuri said.

“Thank you. Now listen. Currently, Sapporo is divided among several Yakuza groups, as well as other organizations. The most powerful of them are the Three Clans, which are the oldest and most powerful crime syndicates of the city, and by extension, of the whole island of Hokkaido” – Sakai explained.

“Is the Fujii Group one of those Three Clans?” – Yuri asked. Sakai smiled.

“No, of course not. We lag way behind in size and power compared to even the weakest of the Three Clans. And never forget, we’re not the Fujii Group anymore. We’re the Kubo Group. You’re the *oyabun*. You must never forget your place, even if you occupy the highest position. Keep that in mind” – Sakai said.

“Oh, yes, I’m sorry” – Yuri said.

“Don’t worry. It must be wholeheartedly difficult to be in your position now, Kubo-sama, so I understand. As I was saying, the Three Clans are the most powerful, and they include, from weakest to strongest, the Onishi Group, the Sakamoto Group, and the Harada Group. All of them are heavily involved in Sapporo’s seedier businesses and generally have a stake in all areas” – Sakai explained.

“So, they are the high-rollers of town?” – Yuri asked.

“You could say so, yes. They are the ones who are essentially in charge of the Yakuza system and command the largest territories. They also have the most important political connections. And they act as mediators should there be a war between other groups” – Sakai explained.

“War?” – Yuri asked.

“Yes. War. Groups sometimes engage in war between themselves or against other factions. When we talk of war we talk about hits on the other families. You know, business sabotage, assassinations, takeovers, and a lot of spilled blood. It’s not pretty, but fortunately for you, right now things are at peace, at least inside the Yakuza system. The Three Clans are at peace amongst themselves, and none of the independent or the affiliated groups are at war with each other as well” – Sakai explained.

“What’s the difference between an independent and an affiliated group?” – Yuri asked.

“An independent group is one which is not bound to another, larger one. The Three Clans are independent groups. Ours is an independent group too. In contrast, affiliated groups are essentially part of larger ones, mostly of the Three Clans. They are considered extensions of them and are bound by their same rules, but they are conferred a degree of autonomy. We won’t delve into the affiliated groups too much, as they are many, many of them, but I will talk to you about the independent ones, of which there is a smaller amount. They also tend to focus on a single main activity” – Sakai explained.

“Alright. Tell me about them” – Yuri said.

“There’s the Okamoto Group, whose territory is based mostly on the northern part of town. Their main activity is smuggling into and out of Japan, dealing mostly with electronics. You know, TVs, video game consoles, PC parts. They also smuggle cars, though that’s a relatively new activity for them. Then there’s the Morita Group, which is larger than Okamoto and specializes in drug and alcohol trafficking. Recently, they have been bringing hard drugs from China and Afghanistan. Their territories are located to the south. Because of the nature of their trade, other Yakuza groups look down upon them and there’s tension when they have to deal with them. There’s also the Ikeda Group, whose hands are heavily involved in night clubs and prostitution in Susukino and as such, most of their territory is placed right in the city center. They are known to recruit young, innocent schoolgirls short on money for their trade” – Sakai explained.

“Ugh. Sounds nasty and unpleasant” – Yuri said, being a former schoolgirl herself.

“We also have a share of that business line, and we also recruit young schoolgirls. It’s very profitable, and people like it. Keep that in mind, okay?” – Sakai said, once again reminding Yuri of her new role.

“Yes, I’m sorry” – Yuri replied.

“Alright, I think those are the most important independent groups outside of the Three Clans. There are others as well, but they are small and petty. Lastly, there are the other crime syndicates in the circuit, namely, the Chinese Triads, the Korean Khangpae and the Russian Mafia. They are subdivided in various groups, though the Triads and Khangpae tend to be more united than the Russians” – Sakai explained.

“What businesses do they engage in?” – Yuri asked.

“The Chinese Triads have a large presence here in Hokkaido, though they mostly operate independently and don’t interfere with other syndicates. Most groups operate relatively legitimate businesses in the retail area, though they also engage in money laundering, gambling, drug trafficking and, in the most extreme cases, human trafficking, though that is becoming increasingly

rare, as there have been important government crackdowns on that activity both in China and here in Japan. The Korean Khangpae is also present here, though not as the same extent as the Chinese, and they are usually hired as thugs and goons by other gangs, especially the lesser Yakuza groups. On the other hand, the Russian Mafia has a small but loud presence here. They control a stake in many areas, most notably arms trafficking, and in my opinion are very effective at what they do. However, these groups are considered to be dangerous and unpredictable, and they are in constant war among themselves” – Sakai explained.

“The news caster I was watching this morning mentioned that the Fujii, I mean, the Kubo Group, was involved in arms trafficking” – Yuri noted.

“And they were not wrong. It has been our main activity for years. We have an alliance with a Russian group in Vladivostok which supplies us with firearms. We bring them here, and then we sell them all over Hokkaido. Many people and organizations, even legit ones, buy their weapons from us, and our business is very profitable. That said, we have rivals, which include some Triad gangs which bring their stuff from China and also a few of the Russian Mafia clans operating in Sapporo. Currently, we’re in the middle of a territorial war with two Russian families, the Moskovsky Bratva and the Ivanov Bratva, which, despite being the two largest of them all, are rather small when compared to the Yakuza or Triad groups. Their main business is arms trafficking, and their Makarovs compete with ours on the black market” – Sakai explained.

“Makarovs? What’s that?” – Yuri asked.

“It seems like all of these is pretty new for you, Kubo-sama. The Makarov PM is a basic semiautomatic pistol. Millions were made during the Cold War, and as they are taken out of service and replaced by newer guns in Russia, they become available for sale in the black market down here. It is our main ware here in Sapporo, as well as the gun of choice for many gangsters outside the Yakuza system, which is still adapting into guns. We also bring Kalashnikov assault rifles and other guns from Russia and elsewhere, but none of them are as successful as our Makarovs” – Sakai explained.

“I will have to learn all of that stuff if I want to become the *oyabun* of this business” – Yuri said.

“You’ll soon have the opportunity of getting to touch and handle one yourself. After we get you some new threads, I’ll take you to one of our shooting houses so that you can learn the basics” – Sakai said.

“Oh, so I’ll have to carry one myself?” – Yuri asked, surprised.

“Didn’t you hear what the *wakagashira* said? Of course, you must know how to defend yourself. The *oyabun*’s life is in constant danger, you know” – Sakai said.

“I thought I would have bodyguards and thugs protecting me out” – Yuri said.

“And you’ll have them. But still, you must be able to fend off an attack should we fail. Remember, if the *oyabun* is killed by a rival gang, the group is condemned into oblivion as a symbol of failure, its members dishonored for life. Never forget that, you hear?” – Sakai said.

“Understood, Sakai-kun. I’m sorry” – Yuri said.

“Stop apologizing. It’s kinda cringy. Anyway, before all of that, you must get new clothing. You can’t be seen as the *oyabun* wearing a school uniform. In fact, you can’t be seen dressed in women’s clothing at all. This is a world for men. So, prepare to be dressed for the job” – Sakai said.

“‘Dressed for the job’. What does that even mean?” – Yuri asked herself, confused at how awkward it sounded for a girl like her.

After driving for around an hour, Sakai parked the vehicle in front of a luxury menswear store in a shopping district downtown. Yuri and Sakai entered through the glass doors and they were greeted by a couple of clerks dressed in black suits.

“Here we are. The shop owner is part of the group. Pick what you like and put it on” – Sakai said, inviting Yuri to help herself to the shop’s selection with a hand gesture.

“What am I supposed to pick?” – Yuri asked.

“Like I said, whatever you want, Kubo-sama. But try to pick something that looks smart and serious. Something which looks bold while at the same time being discrete enough. I’m sure you know what I mean” – Sakai said.

“Doesn’t sound too helpful, but I’ll try my best” – Yuri said, and started looking around the menswear store for something she liked.

It was quite the difficult task. Yuri was used to be dressed in simple, but feminine, clothing styles. Now, she had to choose something which was quite the opposite. Something formal and manly, which was how she had to be perceived and regarded not only by his future subordinates at the Kubo Group, but also by everyone else. Besides, as per Sakai’s recommendation, it was to be neither too glitzy nor too simple. After around fifteen minutes of looking through the shop, she decided she would settle for a complete outfit composed of a black suit and black shoes, featuring a long trench coat in a matching color. It also included a bluish gray shirt, a light violet parka vest and a dark purplish gray tie. Yuri thought about the practicality and thought that a trench coat would work the best in protecting her from the cold weather and also to conceal her pistol or other weapons she may carry. Besides, she also liked the classy Mafia-like look, which resembled the suit of a character from a movie she watched and liked.

When she was done choosing her new outfit, she walked to the dressers and tried it on. Dressing like a man was very awkward at first, and since she was a slender and rather busty girl, she had a bit of trouble getting the suit to look good on her. The trench coat felt heavy and unwieldy, but at the same time was unexpectedly comfortable and would prove useful during the winter days that were left ahead. In the end, she thought she would play her part just fine with the outfit and was more or less happy with how she looked.

Once she was ready, she exited the dressers and walked to Sakai.

“How do I look, uh, Sakai-kun?” – Yuri asked.

“Like a real gangster. Like one of us. From now on, this outfit will be part of your identity and persona. You ought to keep it in impeccable conditions, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said.

"I know. This stuff must have costed a fortune. I won't allow for it to get ruined" – Yuri said. Being someone with a highly developed common sense, Yuri knew that expensive and fragile stuff had to be handled with care, even if she had acquired it at no cost to herself.

"I'm glad to know that you understand. Nomura-dono and Watanabe-dono don't like when people don't care about how they dress. If you want to eventually earn their favor and trust, always pay attention at how you look" – Sakai said, as they were exiting the store to jump into the car again.

"Nomura-san and Watanabe-san... I think they don't like me at all" – Yuri worryingly said.

"Ah, don't worry about it. They have reasons not to like you, but if you play your part, they will fall into line and treat you well. They had a close relationship with Fujii-sama. Nomura-dono knew him from his high school days and was his most inseparable friend. And Watanabe-dono, the *so-honbucho* or chief administrator, arrived much later, but became sort of a protégé for Fujii-sama. He respected him as if he was his father. So, both of them are kinda heartbroken now that Fujii-sama is gone" – Sakai explained.

"They also mentioned that they were expecting a man rather than a girl" – Yuri said.

"Well, like I said before, this industry is a world for men. It was built for men, by men. Women have not much place in it, much less a young, inexperienced girl like you. Most of the women that do get involved in the Yakuza do it as the wives and consorts of members or, well, as the goods themselves, if you know what I mean" – Sakai explained.

"Yes, I get it. I guess optics will be bad for me from now on" – Yuri said.

"Not if you play the game fairly and effectively. Maybe Nomura-dono, Watanabe-dono and the others will look down upon you because you're a girl at first, but if you make us win big and keep the group's honor and pride intact, then people will learn to respect you. It's all on you for this one" – Sakai said.

"I guessed so" – Yuri thought, understanding that a great responsibility was now on her shoulders.

"Well, according to the checklist, next thing is getting you something to defend yourself. So, we'll go pay Oleksandr a visit, make him provide you with the right gun for you" – Sakai said.

"Who's Oleksandr?" – Yuri said.

"He's one of the group's armorers, namely, the one who provides weapons to the group's leaders, as well as senior enforcers like me. The *shateigashira*, the *so-honbucho*, the *wakagashira* and of course the *oyabun* are entitled to his services. He operates from a back-alley armory located not far from here" – Sakai explained.

"Are we going there now?" – Yuri asked.

"That's right. So, get on the car so that we can continue this journey of yours" – Sakai said.

And so, sporting her new threads that made her look much more mature and executive-like, Yuri returned to Sakai's vehicle and they drove off to Oleksandr's armory. There was still much to learn.

Chapter 4: Getting Strapped

“So, tell me about Oleksandr. I have never heard such a name before. Is he from Russia or something?” – Yuri asked, with curiosity.

“Almost, but no. He’s from Ukraine, which, if you don’t know, is a country on the Black Sea which was once part of Russia but is no more. In fact, if you go there and mistake the locals for Russians, they might as well kill you, as they kinda hate Russia because of... reasons. Mainly political ones. But anyway, Oleksandr is Ukrainian and has an interesting history” – Sakai said.

“Do you know it?” – Yuri asked.

“Yes, sort of. I heard it once from one of his guards. Apparently, he is a veteran from the Ukrainian Internal Troops who was discharged when that institution ceased to exist after the Euromaidan revolution. After being unable to find another job in Ukraine, he crossed the border into Russia and migrated from town to town until he finally reached Vladivostok, where he eventually met Dmitri, who was also a veteran from the Russian Airborne Troops and an underground boxer. They became good, inseparable friends. When Dmitri moved here to try his luck in boxing, Oleksandr came with him, and together, they established their armory. We first established contact with them when Fujii-sama decided to explore gunrunning opportunities from Vladivostok, and we recruited both him and Dmitri as advisors and translators and eventually as full-fledged members of the group. That was around eight years ago. He has served us faithfully ever since then” – Sakai explained.

“An interesting story indeed. I hope he doesn’t despise me because I’m a girl and the new *oyabun*” – Yuri said.

“Nah, don’t worry. Oleksandr and Dmitri may be tough-looking, but they are very courteous to women, as far as I’m concerned. Though they can be also kinda goofy at times” – Sakai said.

“Courteous and goofy at the same time?” – Yuri asked, confused.

“Yeah, I know it sounds weird, but you’ll see what I mean very soon” – Sakai said.

After driving for a short time, Sakai entered a dark alleyway and drove until he reached a small garage door in the middle of it.

“This is it. Oleksandr’s place. Let’s find a gun that suits you well” – Sakai said.

“I always thought that the Yakuza defended themselves with *katanas* and *wakizashis* and the like” – Yuri said.

“I mean, yes, because *nihonto* are not as heavily regulated as firearms are in this damned country and because, well, it is tradition. However, Fujii-sama always thought that swords were rooted in the past and that guns were the way of the future, so when the group started bringing in guns into the island many years ago before I even joined, he ordered for members to switch to the use of firearms as well. Unfortunately, Fujii-sama was never wholly successful, as the traditionalists in our group still use *nihonto*. Still, we are pioneers in the use of guns and that makes us far more lethal than the others. Since then, other minor Yakuza groups have copied us, though none to the extent that we have reached, only using guns for very special occasions. The Three Clans find the use of firearms abhorrent, so they don’t even touch them” – Sakai explained.

“I see. Well, I’m glad of being the force of the future then” – Yuri said.

“Yes, I’m glad of being there too. We better go inside, don’t you think?” – Sakai said, knocking on the door. A peephole soon opened, its sliding cover making a loud sound.

“Who’s this?” – a voice with a heavy Eastern European accent asked.

“It’s me, Dmitri. We need to talk with Oleksandr” – Sakai said.

“Is it true then? Did the boss name a successor before he died?” – Dmitri asked.

“Yes, and here I have her so that she can get properly equipped” – Sakai said.

“She’?” – Dmitri asked.

“It’s a long story. Please, open the door so that we can be done quickly” – Sakai said, with impatience.

“Oh, okay, okay. I’ll open the door right away” – Dmitri said. The metallic sound of a myriad of locks unlocking was followed by the thick steel blast door opening, revealing a large, very muscular guy with a military-style buzz cut and dressed in camouflaged combat trousers and a blue and white striped tank top. His arms were heavily tattooed, and he had a holstered pistol at his waist. He smiled when he looked at Yuri for the first time.

“So, this little girl dressed as a man is the chosen one?” – Dmitri asked, with a slight tint of disbelief in his voice tone.

“That’s right. She’s the face of the future” – Sakai said. Yuri tried to keep it cool and serious, in case Dmitri laughed at her, but he simply nodded in approval.

“Interesting. Very interesting indeed. Come, Oleksandr will be happy to see ‘the face of the future’. And he’ll probably have something nice prepared for you. This way, young girl” – Dmitri said in a rather friendly manner, before laughing.

After closing the blast door shut, Dmitri led Yuri and Sakai into the armory, which was located around two floors underground. He escorted the new *oyabun* and her enforcer through a corridor illuminated by flickering fluorescent lighting, until they reached the armory floor itself, essentially a room where there was a counter at the back, and behind it, many, many guns hanging on the wall. The room was also littered with ammunition crates, most of which featured Cyrillic writing on them. Behind the counter was another guy, who, like Dmitri, looked Eastern European. However, he was younger, less built, and muscular than Dmitri, and was also taller, with long blonde hair and a goatee. He had deep blue eyes, and was dressed similarly to Dmitri, however, he wore a striped long-sleeved t-shirt instead of a tank top, and the stripes were red instead of blue, covered by a dark green military jacket with unit insignia on the shoulders. He was cleaning an assault rifle when Dmitri, Yuri and Sakai entered the room.

“*Brother, Daisuke Sakai and the new boss is here*” – Dmitri told Oleksandr in Russian.

“*I see. Thanks, Brother. I’ll take care of them*” – Oleksandr replied, also in Russian, and then looked at Yuri. He smiled and bowed before her. As Dmitri returned to his guard post, Yuri and Sakai stepped forward to the counter and met Oleksandr.

“Welcome to our little armory. You must be our new boss. My name is Oleksandr Lyubchenko. We were expecting you” – Oleksandr said, in a less thick Eastern European accent than Dmitri.

“Were you expecting us? I didn’t call you beforehand” – Sakai said, surprised.

“I’ve just got a call from Watanabe. He said that the new *oyabun* would pay us a visit escorted by you, Daisuke. He didn’t sound pleased, though. Not a bit. I now see why. So, tell me, are you the new *oyabun*?” – Oleksandr asked, pretending to be serious.

“Uh, yes, I’m Yuri Kubo and I’m the new *oyabun* of the Kubo Group, and I’m here to get a weapon” – Yuri said, somewhat timidly.

“Yuri. Reminds me of home” – Oleksandr said.

“My name? How’s that?” – Yuri asked.

“Because believe it or not, Yuri is also a name in my homeland. And pretty much in all the Slavic world. It is a male name there, though, and it is very common. I never thought I would meet a girl named Yuri, however. I guess it is quite the discovery” – Oleksandr said, with nostalgia.

“Thanks, I guess” – Yuri said, feeling flattered in a way.

“You’re welcome. So, as you said, you were here for a weapon, right?” – Oleksandr asked.

“That’s right. I need one for this line of work” – Yuri said.

“And you better have one. But before that, you must learn how to use and handle it, don’t you?” – Oleksandr said.

“Yes, Lyubchenko-san” – Yuri said.

“Well, worry no more. Here we can teach you everything you need to know, and we also have many weapons for you to choose” – Oleksandr said.

“Uh, I think that something nice and easy to use would be fine for her at first. A Makarov or something like that” – Sakai said.

“Yes, we could simply give her a Makarov and hope for the best, but if she proves to be adept at handling weapons, it would be cruel to not let her choose for herself, don’t you think? Come, I have prepared the range for you to learn the basics and practice a bit. I have also assorted a variety of semiautomatic pistols for you to take your pick. Follow me” – Oleksandr said, exiting the counter and opening a side door on the room.

And so, Yuri and Sakai followed Oleksandr into a shooting range, where there were round targets lined up at different distances, as well as silhouettes depicting a variety of human targets. Over a metal table, there was a selection of various pistols of different countries of origin, including Russian, European, American, and even Korean examples. All of them were loaded and seemed brand new.

“Here we have examples of some of the best pistols available in the market. We have a Russian Makarov PM, a German USP and also a P7, an Austrian Glock 17, an Italian Beretta 92, an American 1911, and a Korean K5. Choose whichever you wish, and I’ll instruct you on how to use it” – Oleksandr said.

Yuri looked at the pistols closely. She did not have even the slightest idea about their differences or their strengths, so she picked up one at random. After thinking for some seconds, she put her hands on the Glock 17, being somehow attracted by its squarish and minimalist design.

“Ah, the Glock. A marvel of Austrian engineering. Being one of the first to make a liberal use of high-performance polymers, it is cheap, light and very easy to use and strip. The version you have there is the full-size version and it’s chambered in 9-millimeter Parabellum, though we also have them in other sizes and calibers. Want to try it for yourself?” – Oleksandr kindly asked.

“If you say it’s easy to use, then I guess I want it. Please, teach me how to use it, Lyubchenko-san” – Yuri asked.

“Very well. Get to one of the modules and we’ll see how you manage” – Oleksandr said.

During about half an hour, Oleksandr took the time to explain the handling and features of the Glock 17 pistol. He taught Yuri how to load the gun, how to aim it, and how to shoot it. He also field stripped it and showed her how to reassemble it afterwards. Finally, when Yuri demonstrated she was capable of reassembling the pistol and loading it correctly, Oleksandr allowed her to shoot it for the first time.

“Remember, this pistol has no safety. Instead, you must press the trigger with more force than usual in order to actuate its mechanism. I will activate the targets. Shoot at the round targets and the enemy silhouettes, while avoiding hitting the innocent ones. Ready?” – Oleksandr asked.

“Ready, Lyubchenko-san” – Yuri said.

“Live ammunition! Aim, three, two, one, fire!” – Oleksandr said, activating the targets.

When the first target, a round target, popped out, Yuri aimed and shot through it with surprising accuracy, hitting slightly offset of the bullseye. The target hit, it disappeared from her line of sight and was replaced with an identical one, which Yuri hit with a similar precision. After it, came a moving silhouette of an enemy gangster aiming a gun, which Yuri also hit. Because she hit it in the torso, it required an additional shot to be taken out, as silhouettes could only be killed in one shot if they were hit in the head or the heart. Still, it pleased Oleksandr, who in full honesty had very low expectations for the young girl. Two additional silhouettes of the gangster appeared, at different distances, and both of them were hit by Yuri. Lastly, another silhouette appeared, this time, of a schoolgirl, curiously drawn like an anime character. This silhouette was considered innocent, and so Yuri abstained from shooting it.

“Area clear!” – Oleksandr said.

“So, how did I do?” – Yuri said.

“To be honest, you did way better than I expected. Very few people manage to hit all the targets during their first time handling a weapon. You have quite the gift for this” – Oleksandr said.

“Yes, Kubo-sama. It seems you can take care of yourself with a pistol” – Sakai said.

“Thanks, though I guess I would like to practice more. My hands are really tense now” – Yuri said, with a slight shaking on her hands.

"I know. It's perfectly normal. After all, it is your very first time" – Oleksandr said.

"We still have a whole month for you to perfect your shooting, Kubo-sama. Don't worry" – Sakai said.

Suddenly, the door opened, and Dmitri entered the room, with a small briefcase in his hands.

"Brother, a courier has just brought this with him. Said it was the merch requested by you from Malaysia" – Dmitri told Oleksandr in Russian.

"Ah, yes! I'm glad it finally arrived. Please put it over the table so I can try it out, Brother" – Oleksandr replied in Russian.

Dmitri nodded, and he put the briefcase over the table together with the other pistols. Oleksandr opened the briefcase and looked at the pistol inside. It looked very similar to Yuri's Glock, except that it had been modified with a stainless-steel slide and it was equipped with a larger magazine and a flashlight. Some disappointment was visible in Oleksandr's face.

"Damn, they screwed it up big time" – Oleksandr said.

"What's wrong with that Glock?" – Sakai asked.

"There's nothing wrong with the pistol itself. In fact, its modifications have raised its street value considerably. But my client wanted it in standard military configuration for his collection" – Oleksandr said.

"Oh, so he wanted the standard black slide and such" – Sakai said.

"Exactly. Now I'll have to look for another one and, well, sell this one to someone else" – Oleksandr said, with resignation.

"Is that another Glock?" – Yuri asked.

"Yes, but it is no ordinary Glock. This is a Glock 18C. It is a selective-fire version, meaning that you can fire it in full-auto" – Oleksandr said.

"You mean like a machine gun? Like in the movies?" – Yuri asked, with sudden curiosity.

"Exactly. Put the selector in full-auto and you'll have a devastating barrage of around a thousand two hundred rounds per minute that would probably kill most targets in your way" – Oleksandr said.

"Sounds dangerous... and exotic" – Yuri noted.

"It is *too* exotic, I'm afraid. Very few are made each year and are mostly only sold to special forces around the world. As a matter of fact, I have only manipulated two of them myself before this one. Locating them is very difficult, and actually bringing one into Japan is quite the nightmarish hassle. I managed to find this one in Malaysia and made a series of quite tangled and expensive arrangements to bring it here for a client who has a collection of Glocks and wanted an automatic one that looked like the ones they use in the military. But for whatever reason, it was modified with that stainless steel slide, which despite being high quality, makes it unsuitable for this client. It probably belonged to a special forces officer" – Oleksandr said.

Suddenly, Yuri's eyes fixed on the Glock 18C, and she wondered how it would be to shoot it in fully automatic mode.

"Can I.... can I try it?" – Yuri asked.

"You liked it, huh? Don't deny it, I can see it in your eyes. Sure, why not?" – Oleksandr said, inviting Yuri to pick the machine pistol from its briefcase.

"Whoa, hold on. Isn't fully automatic fire a little bit advanced for Kubo-sama? I mean, most of us don't normally handle such firepower, much less from something as little as a pistol. And it could be dangerous. Things could quickly get out of her control" – Sakai said, concerned.

"Of course, I will teach her how to do it first, Daisuke. I'm not stupid. Handling these things can be exceedingly difficult even for the most seasoned shooters. But if she has the will, then I guess we should give her the chance" – Oleksandr said. Sakai nodded, albeit doubtfully.

"Come on, boss. Pick the weapon and walk to a module so that you can experience the power of a machine pistol" – Oleksandr said, so Yuri grabbed the Glock 18C from the case together with one of its long magazines and walked to the testing grounds. As its handling was almost identical to the Glock 17, she had not trouble loading it and preparing it for shooting.

"Okay, so we're going to try automatic fire. Here, you'll have to be able to control a machine which will sprout a thousand two hundred rounds per minute, so you'll require a strong, solid stance and a lot of grip with both of your hands to handle the extreme recoil of such a weapon. Normally, this isn't the way people learn how to fire fully automatic guns at first, but maybe you can do it just fine if your determination is high enough" – Oleksandr said.

"I'm ready for the challenge" – Yuri said.

"Glad to hear it. Alright, I will set the targets ready. This time, the silhouettes will fall with three shots. Try to fire short bursts of fire to take them out without losing control and without wasting ammunition. Put the selector down and prepare your stance" – Oleksandr said.

"Bring it on" – Yuri said.

"Live ammunition! Aim, three, two, one, fire!" – Oleksandr said, before activating the targets.

A silhouette of a gangster popped up, and Yuri opened fire with the machine pistol. A barrage of bullets was sprayed from the gun at an incredibly high rate of fire, which was difficult to control at first, and as such Yuri's accuracy suffered from it. Yuri failed to control the trigger pull of the first burst, and so around six bullets were fired in a split second, and just one of them hit the target thanks to the extreme recoil.

"Ugh!" – Yuri said.

"It's tough, it's tough. Try it again with another target. Tighten your grip!" – Oleksandr said.

Another target appeared, and Yuri tried her best to take it out in a more efficient way. This time, she managed to control the excessive recoil with more success, keeping her accuracy and hitting the target three times, however, she still could not handle the trigger pull correctly, and as such, seven or eight bullets were fired from the pistol.

“This is tricky” – Yuri said.

“We’re getting there. Remember not to keep the trigger pulled for a very long time. Try to balance the time you press it for a more efficient and controllable shooting. Keep it up” – Oleksandr said.

Yet another target began to slowly move to Yuri, and following Oleksandr’s advice, she pulled the trigger for a split second, allowing for only four rounds to exit the muzzle. Three of them hit and downed the silhouette.

“Much better. Your shooting is still a little bit sharp around the edges, but with some more practice, you can make it much more accurate and comfortable” – Oleksandr said. Two more targets popped out, and Yuri repeated the process, hitting the targets with four, and in one case, five, rounds.

“Oh, that was intense. My hands are all messed up” – Yuri said, shaking her hands to release some stress.

“Like I said before, it’s normal, especially after shooting a gun so demanding as the Glock 18C. But you’ll eventually get the hang of it. What do you think about it, Daisuke? Is our girl here ready for her gun license?” – Oleksandr said.

“Yes, I think she deserves it” – Sakai said, impressed after Yuri’s handling of the Glock 18C.

“Very good then. I’ll make the arrangements to have it delivered to the Fujii Estate soon” – Oleksandr said.

“Kubo Estate, Oleksandr. Kubo Estate. Remember that Fujii-sama is no more” – Sakai corrected him.

“Oh, yes, that’s right. Kubo Estate. I’ll have it delivered there soon. In the meantime, take the Glock 18C with you. You can come here to train your shooting skills anytime you want, boss” – Oleksandr said.

“Thank you, Lyubchenko-san. I’ll put it to good use” – Yuri said, flipping the gun’s selector back to semi.

“We better leave. It’s time for us to return home” – Sakai said, and so, Yuri and he proceeded to leave the armory, with Yuri’s new machine pistol closely guarded inside her trench coat.

“Will you take me back to my apartment?” – Yuri asked while walking back to Sakai’s car.

“No, of course not. You won’t live there anymore. It is located in another group’s territory, which can make it potentially unsecure for you. No, from now on you’ll live at the Kubo Estate. We must keep an eye on you at all times” – Sakai said.

“But, what about my belongings?” – Yuri asked.

“Don’t worry. They will be moved to your room at the Estate soon” – Sakai said.

“Will I even be safe inside the Kubo Estate?” – Yuri asked nervously. Sakai laughed.

“Of course, you will be, Kubo-sama. You’re the *oyabun*. Many will probably dislike that you’re a young girl and an outsider, but they will protect you with their lives. Their honor and pride depends on it” – Sakai said.

"I guess I can live with that" – Yuri said.

"You'll become used to it in no time. Now, let's go, we have still a lot to discuss" – Sakai said, starting the engine before driving through the alleyway back to the street.

Chapter 5: Meeting the Family

"Okay, we have returned to the Estate. I'll escort you to your room, where you can settle down for the day" – Sakai said, as they got off the car back in the parking lot of the Kubo compound.

"How is the room I'll use?" – Yuri asked.

"You'll be given Fujii-sama's personal room. Don't worry, all of his belongings have been already taken out. You'll be able to customize it as you see fit" – Sakai said.

"Speaking of Fujii-san, are you going to prepare a service for him?" – Yuri asked.

"I suppose so. He's probably going to be laid to rest soon after Nomura-dono and Watanabe-dono arrange for his body to be returned to the group. But we won't go to his funeral. Instead, you'll train and practice secretly under my watch. As Nomura-dono said, he and Watanabe-dono are the ones actually in control of the group now. It's too early for the Yakuza underworld to know that you're the actual *oyabun*. So, we'll keep it in secret until you're mature enough to assume that mantle" – Sakai explained.

"Makes sense" – Yuri said, thoughtful.

After entering the house again, Sakai led Yuri through the building, up the stairs, and finally across a corridor until they reached the sliding doors to Kenkichi Fujii's former room.

"It's smaller than I thought it would be" – Yuri said, finding herself in a moderately-sized room that included a bed, a closet, some drawers, and a desk. There was also an old CRT TV installed over a table.

"Fujii-sama was a very simple and austere person, and as such, he decided to live in a regular room, without many luxuries, other than the television set you see there. The room that was actually meant for the *oyabun* is actually used as a storage space, chosen because of its larger size. If you like, I can arrange for it to be reconditioned for your use" – Sakai offered.

"No, never mind. I actually like smaller rooms. They feel cozier. And it's still bigger than my small sleeping space at my apartment, so I'll do just fine. However, I'll get rid of that old TV, if you don't mind" – Yuri said, before entering the room in order to explore it.

"I thought so. Guess I'll deliver it to the aforementioned storage room later. In the meantime, have some rest. You surely must feel tired after that shooting session" – Sakai said.

"Yes, I will lay down for a while. I have a lot of things to think about" – Yuri said.

"Alright then, I'll leave you to it. When it's time for dinner, I'll come here looking for you. Be ready for it" – Sakai said.

"Understood" – Yuri said.

“Well, see you later, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said, before leaving with the obsolete CRT on his hands and closing the door. Yuri sighed.

“Well, it seems like this will be home for me from now on” – Yuri thought out loud. She put her new machine pistol over the table, took off her trench coat, jacket, and tie, and she laid down on the bed.

“So, I guess I’m the leader of all of this now. It escalated quickly, didn’t it?” – Yuri asked herself.

It had been quite the day. In less than 24 hours, Yuri had gone from being a simple former schoolgirl and Ronin to being the new *oyabun* of a Yakuza group in Sapporo which engaged in gunrunning and prostitution. While she obviously did not have the actual control of the group or acted as its decision maker, she still was entitled to the *oyabun*’s room, her own automatic weapon, and a legion of guards and enforcers to protect her. There was still a lot to learn and master, but if she could put the same determination and interest she displayed at the shooting range that day, then it was only a matter of time.

She also did not have any other choice. As Kenkichi Fujii’s words as the previous *oyabun* were considered sacred by the group’s members, she could not escape being his successor. Therefore, even if she disliked the idea, she understood that she had to adapt herself and survive. Besides, the job promised a lot of money, money she desperately needed now that her parents had abandoned her. Yuri was not a stupid person by any means, in fact, she was quite intelligent and had a perfectly grounded and reasonable common sense and disposition. And she knew that she would have to force herself to quickly go above the low expectations of Nomura and Watanabe. The way she saw it, she was between a rock and a hard place, and therefore had to put all her effort in the job, even if that meant that other people were to suffer or be killed, so it was her life versus the Kubo Group’s enemies’ lives.

However, she still did not know how she would react to the prospect of eventually killing someone with her high-powered machine pistol and prayed that such moment would take as long as possible to arrive. Besides, why she did not mind the gunrunning too much, she disliked the idea that girls younger than her were recruited by the group for prostitution but knew that she would have to eventually accept that idea.

“Ah, look at the mess I got into” – Yuri thought out loud, before laughing. She knew that hard times were ahead for her, but that she would be paid a lot of money in return, and maybe, begin a career that would perfectly compensate for her inability to get into university. She just had to adapt and persevere.

The tiredness of that first shooting session quickly made her sleepy, so Yuri took off her shirt and pants and then turned off the lights of the windowless room, which, as Sakai would later tell her, was windowless in order to protect a careless *oyabun* from enemy snipers. After this, she laid down on the bed again and took a nap.

“Let’s see how this plays out” – Yuri thought before falling asleep.

A gentle but noticeable knocking on the door woke Yuri up.

“Yes?” – Yuri asked.

“Kubo-sama, it’s Sakai. Dinner will be served in ten minutes, so get dressed and come with me” – Sakai said.

“Uh, right away” – Yuri said, still somewhat sleepy. She took her cellphone from the bedside table. Night had just fallen, and she had slept for around five hours.

After getting out of her bed, she dressed again in her suit, this time omitting the trench coat, and tried to comb her hair a bit with the help of a hairbrush she somehow found inside one of the drawers. When she was ready, she opened the door, and found Sakai waiting patiently outside.

“Are you ready for dinner?” – Sakai asked.

“Yes. Let’s go” – Yuri said. And so, both of them walked through the house towards the dining room, which was located on the first floor.

“Quick question: what do you guys normally eat?” – Yuri asked.

“Mostly Japanese food. A lot of fish and vegetables, and occasionally meat. And we have sake to drink as well. By the way, how old are you?” – Sakai asked.

“18” – Yuri replied.

“Ah, I see. Then you’re too young to drink sake with us” – Sakai said.

“I thought we didn’t care about legality” – Yuri said.

“It’s not about legality. It’s about moral and safety reasons” – Sakai replied.

“Speaking about that, how am I’m supposed to forge ties with new recruits? I mean, I have heard that, in order to do that, you have to share a cup of sake with one of them. Is that correct?” – Yuri asked.

“Yeah, well, that is a custom most families practice. And it’s part of the set of rituals that we engage in. But in your case, I guess Nomura-dono and Watanabe-dono will make an exception. After all, Fujii-sama himself wasn’t always a strict follower of such codes, instead favoring a strict pragmatism himself. Sure, Nomura-dono and Watanabe-dono are rather traditionalist in their ways, but Fujii-sama only followed things that he thought made sense. That is why he didn’t practice the *yubitsume* himself, as he believed it not only brought unnecessary suffering, but also made those who cut their fingers off obvious suspects of criminal activity in the eyes of the police” – Sakai said.

“*Yubitsume*. That ritual is done when you make an offense or wish to leave the group?” – Yuri asked.

“Yep, though like I said, Fujii-sama never accepted the ritual. It is practiced by the *shateigashira*, as well as by Nomura-dono, the *wakagashira*, to discipline those who had made an offense against the group, but as of lately nobody has chopped his finger off, if that’s what you’re asking” – Sakai said.

“I see. And tell me, Sakai-kun, how about the tattoos?” – Yuri asked.

“Ah, yes, the tattoos. If you have the money to spare and are spiritual enough to believe in that, then do it. If not, I think it would be wiser to invest in weapons or technology instead” – Sakai said.

“Do you have your body tattooed?” – Yuri asked.

“No, of course not. I don’t believe that inking my body will protect me or something. A good Kalashnikov will always protect me. An expensive tattoo? Uh, not so much. However, many around here, especially the older and most traditionalist, trust in their tattooed bodies with their lives, and they don’t take it kindly when someone has something to say about it” – Sakai explained. Yuri understood she ought not to dig in any further.

“Okay, let’s leave it at that. By the way, how many people will have dinner with us?” – Yuri asked.

“Only the senior enforcers and the group leaders eat together. The *shateis* have their own dining room elsewhere in the Estate” – Sakai explained.

“The *shatei* are the ordinary members, right?” – Yuri asked.

“Yes. They are the rank-and-file soldiers of the group. They are led by the *kyodai*, who act as middle-ranked members subordinate to the senior enforcers and share their dining room with the *shatei*” – Sakai replied.

“I saw many of them this morning. There were some dressed in kimonos and yukatas, others wearing black suits, and yet others dressed in assorted types of clothing, including less-formal suits and street casual clothing” – Yuri said.

“That’s because there are three, how do I put this, ‘cliques’ composing the Kubo Group. The first subgroup you described, the ones wearing kimonos and yukatas, are the traditionalists of the group and are aligned with the views of the *wakagashira*, the second-in-command, Raizo Nomura-dono. They are mostly bound to the old ways, are strict followers of *Bushido* and insist on celebrating rituals. They are the most likely ones to be tattooed and all that stuff, and like I told you before, they still use *nihonto* instead of guns, though they will still use a pistol or rifle if the situation merits it. Out of all the members, expect them to be even ruder and non-accepting of you than the rest” – Sakai explained.

“Ugh. I’ll have to be careful then. And, judging by the fact that these traditionalists are Nomura-san’s followers, my guess is that the ones wearing black suits follow Watanabe-san, am I wrong?” – Yuri asked.

“Exactly. They look up to Kazuki Watanabe-dono, the *so-honbucho* or chief of the Kubo Estate, which is a versatile, multifaceted command position which deals with administration, economics, control of the business and also the legal side of things. As such, these people tend to be more business-minded, and are for the kind of reforms that facilitate and optimize the business. Many of them are also collegiate, holding a degree on law or business to the service of the group. Don’t get me wrong: they are also bound by the same strict *Bushido* code as the traditionalists and are also quite ruthless in their presentation, but they are more pragmatic, and also more open-minded and willing to reform if it means that the group can take a larger cut. Hence, many know them as the reformists of the group.” – Sakai explained.

“That means I can expect for them to be kinder with me than the traditionalists, right?” – Yuri asked.

“Uh, no? It means that that you can expect for them to be a little bit less rude with you” – Sakai said, with a somewhat mocking smile.

“I see, I see. And, what about the last group? You know, the ones who dress with other types of clothing?” – Yuri asked.

“Those are the ones who don’t belong to any of the other two cliques, and as a matter of fact form the bulk of the Kubo Group’s manpower. Most *shateis* and *kyodais*, and even some of the senior enforcers like me are part of that group. They are the standard, ordinary if you will, Yakuza members, working to earn some money and also to please their *oyabun*, devoid of any other motivation, be it tradition or business pragmatism. They were very loyal to Fujii-sama, though I don’t know if they’re going to treat you the same way. So, I guess there will be an initial mixed reception, which, depending on how you do, will slowly get better” – Sakai explained.

“So, you belong to that group?” – Yuri asked.

“Yep. I’m a simple man. I’m too busy with my job to worry about things such as tradition or business optimization. I just do what they order me to do, shoot whoever I’m ordered to shoot, and take whatever cut they determine I’m entitled to. Nothing more, nothing less” – Sakai explained.

“Sounds fair enough. Tell me, Sakai-kun, is there any tension or rivalry between the cliques?” – Yuri asked.

“That’s a good question. Well, there is a hint of resentment between the Nomura-dono’s traditionalists and Watanabe-dono’s reformists. They view each other as way over their heads and consider they take themselves too seriously or entitle themselves to a cut larger than they deserve, but during my whole lifetime with this group, there hasn’t been any violent incidents as far as I’m aware of, as any ambition to challenge the other subgroup was quickly brought down by Fujii-sama. However, now that you’ll be the new leader, it is uncertain what will happen. My advice for you will be to always be on your guard. We never know what may be going on behind the scenes” – Sakai explained.

“I understand. Luckily, I have you to help me should anything happen” – Yuri said, winking at Sakai.

“Of course. Now, let’s go to the dining room. Nomura-dono and Watanabe-dono will be waiting and eager to receive the report of your first day with us” – Sakai said.

And so, Sakai escorted the *oyabun* to the dining room, where the Kubo Group’s senior members would meet to discuss the day’s events and offer their various perspectives while sharing some traditional, home-made Japanese food.

Dinner was about to start when Yuri and Sakai made it into the dining room. The table was already staffed by senior enforcers and by Nomura and Watanabe, along with their respective aides. The *oyabun*’s seat, located at the northern end of the table, was empty. Because Yuri was not officially the *oyabun* yet, she was not allowed to use that seat. Instead, Sakai escorted her to an empty seat in front of his own, surrounded by other senior enforcers.

“Sit down, Sakai-kun, Kubo-san” – Nomura ordered. Sakai and Yuri sat down at the table.

“Well, now that all of us are here, and while food is being prepared, let’s begin with our daily reports. Let’s begin with you, Imai-kun” – Nomura said.

“Yes, Nomura-dono. Most of the operations on our end worked smoothly. A new shipment of weapons coming from Vladivostok will arrive at the docks tomorrow. Mostly AK-type rifles and ammunition. They will be on our storefronts next week” – Imai, the senior enforcer, said.

“Very well, Imai-kun. Chiba-kun, you’re next” – Nomura said.

“Right away, Nomura-dono. Our front was also peaceful today, Nomura-dono. We have closely watched Ivanov movements around our sector, and we believe they are bringing in more men from Russia to compensate for their members lost recently in a firefight with the Yumashev Bratva” – Chiba, another senior enforcer, said.

“Excellent, Chiba-kun. Always keep your eye on our enemies’ movements” – Nomura said.

“Yes, Nomura-dono” – Chiba said.

“Right, right. Now, Sakai-kun, it’s time for you to report” – Nomura said.

“Yes, Nomura-dono. Today I began the training process for Yuri Kubo-sama. During the day, we visited one of our tailors to get her some clothing, and after that we went to Oleksandr’s for some training with guns. She has demonstrated she’s quite adept at handling a fully-automatic machine pistol” – Sakai explained. Both Nomura’s and Watanabe’s eyes opened wide.

“Excuse me, Sakai-kun, I think I haven’t heard well. Can you repeat the last part?” – Watanabe asked.

“Yes, Watanabe-dono. As I said, Yuri Kubo-sama has learned how to use a fully-automatic machine pistol, which was already given to her as her weapon, and will continue training with it in the days to come” – Sakai explained.

“‘Fully-automatic’, did he say?” – a senior enforcer asked one of his peers.

“Yes, he said fully-automatic! What a savage!” – another senior enforcer replied.

“I knew Fujii-sama wouldn’t led us in the wrong direction. This girl is what the group needed” – another senior enforcer said, and so, they all started discussing amongst themselves about Yuri’s feat with the Glock 18C, making her feel very anxious and a bit scared.

“Silence, everyone. Tell me, Sakai-kun, now that Kubo-sama has learned how to use a machine-pistol, how much time do you think she needs until she’s sent on her first mission as a member of our group?” – Nomura asked.

“With a bit of luck and dedication, I would say that she will be fully ready to accept that challenge in, shall we say, about two weeks. She still needs to perfect her accuracy and stance, and I’m sure Oleksandr will do an outstanding job with it, Nomura-dono” – Sakai explained.

“Thanks, Sakai-kun. We’ll be waiting for it. And we’ll be watching your training very closely, Kubo-sama” – Watanabe said, seemingly somehow not very pleased by the news that Yuri could handle a machine pistol. Yuri noticed it, and she gulped when she saw Watanabe’s eyes fixed on her.

During the rest of the dinner, Nomura and Watanabe asked the other senior enforcers about their respective days, all in a very serious and solemn manner. After the meal concluded, everyone left the dining room and returned to their rooms and chambers. Sakai escorted Yuri back to her room, where a new set of pajamas had been left over the bed.

“Well, I think that’s it for today. Tomorrow I’ll come here at 6 am so that we can continue our training right away. Remember to be awake and dressed for then” – Sakai said.

“Understood, Sakai-kun” – Yuri said.

“Excellent, Kubo-sama. Have a nice night” – Sakai said, before leaving the room.

After that, Yuri put on the pajamas and laid down on the bed, again. Because of her nap earlier, she took a while to fall asleep. Before that, though, she checked her cellphone to see if her parents had tried to communicate with her. Not surprisingly, they did not, which further alienated Yuri from them.

“They turned their back on me. It’s my turn then to do the same. And boy, it will be glorious” – Yuri thought, as she fell asleep.

Chapter 6: The First Job

During that month, Sakai invested his time and efforts in training and preparing Yuri for her ascension to *oyabun* of the Kubo Group. Apart from honing her skills with her machine pistol at Oleksandr’s, Yuri learned many more aspects of the Yakuza lifestyle. From the codes and the protocols derived from *Bushido*, to understanding how to negotiate with a tough opponent in simulations, to learning how to properly drive one of the group’s really expensive Mercedes luxury cars under pressure, Yuri quickly became adept in the Yakuza arts, and both Sakai and she believed that, once the month’s deadline arrived, she would be ready to assume the mantle, despite her lack of experience.

However, she still needed some of it, especially as a chance to put in practice all the skills she had learned so far, and also to see how cold her nerves and blood were when the time of actually killing someone arrived. And while Yuri knew how to handle her machine pistol, it was still unclear if she had the guts to take the life from someone for real. And so, Sakai needed an opportunity so that Yuri could demonstrate if she were really up to the job.

That opportunity arrived 20 days into her training. During the few previous days, the Kubo Group’s intelligence crew discovered that one of their rivals, the Ivanov Group, had brought a new shipment of weapons from Russia. However, according to the information they got, it was not a regular shipment of cheap surplus AKs and Makarovs, instead consisting of a smaller quantity of more sophisticated and expensive small arms designed for the Russian elite *spetsnaz* forces. Such exotic merchandise would sell very well among non-Yakuza groups, especially the numerous Chinese organizations in the city, and even among the higher-ranking members of some fellow Yakuza operations. And so, in order to capitalize on that opportunity, after a quick meeting, Nomura ordered an operation to requisition the shipment from Ivanov’s hands.

Sakai offered for him and his team to be in charge of the mission, and he proposed to take Yuri with him. Initially, both Nomura and Watanabe opposed to it, as they thought she would represent a

liability that needed to be protected, however Sakai argued that she was seemingly ready for such a job and that it was a valuable experience that Yuri ought to live. This did not convince Watanabe, but was enough for Nomura, who authorized Sakai to perform the heist with the future *oyabun* at his side. Once the order was given, Sakai waited for night to fall and then assembled his team and picked Yuri from her room – which had since been fully furnished with her stuff from her apartment – so that they could board one of the groups' Mercedes-Benz S-Class cars. Yuri was the designated driver, and she took the team through the city.

It was to be quite the night for Yuri. This was to be the test which defined if she had the stomach for the title of *oyabun* and the gangster life it offered. Everything was to go perfect, which made her feel a little pressed. Nevertheless, she trusted her training and the tricks Sakai had taught her and had faith that she could succeed.

"Alright, take this exit and follow the road until I tell you" – Sakai told Yuri, indicating her to exit the freeway they had been using.

"I thought we were going to seize a shipment, but we're still far from the docks" – Yuri said, taking the exit ordered by Sakai.

"No, not this time. The weapons brought by the Ivanovs have already been moved out of the port and are being stashed inside a safehouse. We're going to pay it a visit" – Sakai explained.

"Are we going to transport them back to the Estate using this car? Will they even fit inside?" – Yuri asked.

"Yes, don't worry. They are not many weapons. Only a handful of very fancy and expensive rifles and pistols, and their respective cans of magazines and ammunition. While they are not very numerous, these arms sell for a much higher price than your standard Kalashnikov, so it's well worth it for the group" – Sakai explained.

"How tough will be the enemy resistance, Sakai-san?" – one of Sakai's men asked.

"According to our spies, there's a small crew of Russians protecting the safehouse, but I don't think they will pose such big of a threat. They will probably be drunk on vodka and all, so they will fell prey to our stealth attacks. Everyone, did you bring your suppressors?" – Sakai asked.

"Yes, Sakai-san. We have our pistols suppressed and ready" – one of Sakai's men said.

"And you, Kubo-sama, did you bring a silencer?" – Sakai asked Yuri.

"Uh, yes. I got the one Oleksandr gave me the other day" – Yuri replied.

"Good. We're almost there. Get off the road and through the following alleyway, and park the vehicle there. Everyone else, ready up your pistols and prepare to exit the vehicle" – Sakai ordered. His three men replied by cocking their guns.

Yuri then proceeded to discreetly turn to the left from the road so that she could park the car on the alleyway as instructed by Sakai, located a short distance from the enemy safehouse. When the car's lights were off, Yuri turned the engine off and so the team quickly got off the vehicle.

“Everyone, follow me. We’re going through the alleyways” – Sakai said, before leading the team through the rather dark alleyway.

“What are we exactly looking for, Sakai-san?” – one of Sakai’s men asked.

“We’re looking for the back entrance to a small and old apartment block. The stash is located inside one of the apartments, I don’t exactly know which. But knowing the value of the goods, it ought to be protected by at least a couple of Russians” – Sakai said.

“That will give us a clue as to where the merchandise is located” – Yuri said.

“Exactly. So, be on the lookout for any door you see. If you see someone standing outside the door, then there’s the safehouse. Keep your eyes open and walk in silence” – Sakai ordered.

After some minutes, one of Sakai’s men spotted someone outside the backdoor of a small building.

“Look, Sakai-san, there’s someone” – he said, pointing at the guy.

“He has an AK on his hands” – Yuri said, spotting it from afar.

“Yep, he does. That’s our place. Let’s approach carefully so that we can take him out” – Sakai said, so the team moved slowly and quietly through the alleyway, hiding in the shadows, until they were located some meters apart from the Russian guard.

“Kubo-sama, take the shot. Remember how Oleksandr taught you to do it. See if you can score a headshot” – Sakai ordered.

“Right away” – Yuri replied, before getting into position. Holding her gun tightly, Yuri aimed at the enemy’s head, and after some seconds, when she felt comfortable with the aim, she pulled the trigger.

She had rehearsed a lot for that moment, both physically and mentally. After all, this was to be her first kill ever. It represented a huge moment in Yuri’s life. Not only she would become an actual criminal and a murderer for real, but she would also lose her entire innocence, with the blood of that Russian goon from the Ivanov Bratva being the ink which she would use to sign her waiver of candor. As the bullet cruised through the air for a fraction of a second, a very slight tint of repentance crossed Yuri’s mind, which was well aware that there would be no turning back once the bullet had hit the enemy’s head. However, such dissent was quickly put down by the fact that she ought to do it because it was now her responsibility to lead the Kubo Group as *oyabun*, and in order to do that, she would have to prove herself. Finally, the silenced bullet impacted the Russian’s head, killing him instantly and spraying a small quantity of blood around, sealing the pact Yuri had made with Death herself.

“He’s down. Nice shot, Kubo-sama” – one of Sakai’s men told her.

“Yeah, well done, Kubo-sama. Scoring a headshot for your first kill is quite the feat” – Sakai said, patting her in the back.

“Uh, thanks, I guess” – Yuri said.

“We’ll have a small celebration later. For now, let’s move inside the apartments” – Sakai said, and so he led the team towards the dead guard’s post, and slowly and quietly opened the door.

“Go, go inside” – Sakai ordered, so his team and Yuri quickly entered the place.

“The target apartment housing the stash must be up the stairs. Follow me” – Sakai ordered.

After advancing up the stairs, the team found themselves in a corridor with a couple of doors, each guarded by two goons armed with a pistol or an assault rifle. The team took cover behind the stair walls, so they were not seen by the Russians at first. With some hand signs, Sakai transmitted the information to Yuri and the men so that they could stealthily attack the enemies with their suppressed pistols. On the count of three, the team went out of cover and opened fire against the thugs, killing them almost instantly without making any loud sound. Yuri took out two goons herself, one with a headshot, the other with a strike which pierced the enemy’s heart.

“Area clear. Let’s move” – Sakai said, leading the team through the corridor.

“We’re going to breach both of these doors. Kubo-sama, with me. On three, I’ll kick the door and you’ll take out the Russians. Use your full-auto mode to suppress the enemies quickly” – Sakai ordered.

“Yes, Sakai-kun. Whenever you want” – Yuri said, putting herself at the right side of one of the doors.

“Okay, ready to breach” – Sakai said, placing himself in position.

“On three! One, two, three! Breach!” – Sakai said, kicking the door open and entering inside. Yuri followed him, aiming her gun with her finger in the trigger.

As they moved into the room, they were met by a couple of Russian gangsters taking cover behind the kitchen right at the entrance. Yuri responded by firing a barrage of rounds at them, riddling them with bullets and securing the kitchen. When they advanced, a third Russian screamed at her and tried to open fire with an AK rifle, but Yuri acted quickly enough to fire a single bullet at his head, killing him instantly. Finally, a fourth goon appeared from behind a door with a Makarov pistol, but Sakai managed to wound him, and Yuri finished him off.

“That ruthless, Kubo-sama. I like it. You’ll do an excellent job leading us” – Sakai said, as they cleared the room.

“Thanks” – Yuri said, opening the door, revealing a large stash of multiple rifles behind it.

Most of them resembled the typical post-Cold War Kalashnikov-pattern rifles with polymer furniture, but they also had a lot of distinguishing features that made them stand apart from the typical low-spec AK. As Yuri inspected them, the rest of the team entered the room and prepared to take the stash to the S-Class waiting outside.

“Look at all of this. These are the exotics. A-762s, AK-15s, heck, even some VSS snipers. There are also some types I haven’t even seen before. We have a gold mine in front of us” – Sakai said.

“There are a lot of them. Will they even fit inside the car?” – one of Sakai’s men asked.

“I don’t know. We have to take all of them, for sure. And also, all of the magazines and rounds too” – Sakai said.

“Perhaps we should request another vehicle, don’t you think, Sakai-san?” – one of Sakai’s men asked.

“No, we must do this quick before more Russians arrive. They won’t take long to realize their comrades have been gunned down. Come, let’s take these rifles to the car and get out of here as fast as we can” – Sakai ordered.

And so, Yuri, Sakai and the men started to pick the rifles and take them to the S-Class’ trunk. One by one, they quickly filled up that trunk, which, despite being a spacious S-Class, was filled up rather quickly by the rifles and the ammunition boxes. Soon, the trunk was completely full, and the men had to put the rifles in the back seat, raising questions as to how they would fit back to return to the Kubo Estate. Fortunately, Sakai’s men were rather small-sized, so they could sit back on the seats, albeit in a very tight and uncomfortable fashion. Finally, when all the weapons and ammunition were in the car, Yuri and Sakai quickly left the building, stepped back in the car with Yuri on the driver’s seat, and hastily took off.

“Well-done, gents. Now we have to return to the Estate so that the others can take this stuff to Oleksandr’s and to our lockups later” – Sakai said, as Yuri drove off the alleyway. As they did, another Mercedes, a heavily modified black E-Class, arrived at the scene. Three Russians were inside, with Makarovs in their hands.

“Shit, the Ivanovs have brought backup. Have they seen us yet?” – Yuri asked, scared.

“Nah, don’t worry. We’re too far for them to distinguish us. Just get us back to the Kubo Estate so that we can celebrate” – Sakai said. Yuri nodded, and stepped on the accelerator. Despite having a powerful V6 engine, the car struggled to accelerate due to the immense weight of the weapons and the ammunition combined.

“These Mercedes cars are kinda lousy, don’t you think?” – Yuri said.

“It’s not the car’s fault. We have loaded it to the limit, and we’re using it for something it wasn’t really designed for. Plus, this is the entry-level version of the S-Class. It only has a V6. We could have purchased the V8 or the V12 model instead, but Fujii-sama opposed the idea, arguing that it was too uneconomical” – Sakai explained.

“Even if we had more engine power, we would have still struggled, because of its limited seats. Four or five seats are not enough for Yakuza duty” – Yuri commented.

“Do you want more seats? What are you thinking about? Do you want for us to move around in vans?” – Sakai asked, in an ironic tone.

“No. I was thinking more about an SUV. Something not too big, not too small. Something which can stand everything we throw at it, with a powerful engine and the possibility of being armored. Something truly worthy of the Kubo Group” – Yuri said, thoughtful.

“I hope Mercedes has something like that. I would recommend other marques, but Fujii-sama insisted on having an all-Mercedes fleet for decades, because he really liked the brand. Heck, even

our panel vans are Mercedes. And I don't think Nomura-dono and Watanabe-dono will be pleased if you suddenly decide to change our brand loyalty" – Sakai said.

"Don't worry. I'll make sure we won't end this obsessive-compulsive sponsorship of them. Not that they need it, of course. But we'll still buy our vehicles from them. Just... no more sedans. They are heavy and inefficient. We'll use SUVs after I'm officially designated the *oyabun*. It will be in fact my first decision as the boss" – Yuri said, thinking about it very seriously.

"Okay, guess it's the right time. We have had these cars for almost 5 years now. Time for a fleet renewal" – Sakai said.

And so, Yuri drove the car with Sakai, his men, and the cache of weapons to the Kubo Estate. Once there, the weapons were quickly put into vans, which would transport them to the several lockups around the city, and finally, they departed, each escorted by a soon-to-be-sold Mercedes-Benz S-Class full of *shateis* to protect them in case of a Russian attack.

Meanwhile, Yuri, Sakai and his goons went inside the Estate and had a small celebration. While Sakai and his people drank expensive sake, Yuri just had a fizzy drink. Nevertheless, she enjoyed that small party. After all, it was to commemorate not just her first kill while serving the group, but also her first successful job. The Ivanovs had been dealt a hard blow, and the Kubo Group would enjoy a nice profit with the sale of the exotic Russian weaponry.

All in all, it had been an excellent night for Yuri, who after the celebration, as Sakai was relaying his report to Nomura and Watanabe, quietly went to sleep. Her days of training to be the Kubo Group's *oyabun* were drawing to a close, to instead pave the way for a life full of adventure, violence, excesses, and above all else, power. Many tests waited for her, including risky but seductive business opportunities, betrayals, revelations, and of course, the heavy hand of the law, but after that month of hard training, she thought she would be capable of handling them all. As she fell asleep, she thought about the future that laid ahead for her and the group.

"Time to grow-up, I guess" – Yuri thought, before falling asleep.

Chapter 7: Fleet Renewal

A week later, Yuri Kubo officially became *oyabun* of the Kubo Group.

In a very solemn ceremony, in front of a small group of *shatei*, *kyodai*, and even a couple of *shateigashira*, Yuri was formally given power from the hands of Nomura and Watanabe. After a short speech given by Nomura asking for respect and trust in the new *oyabun*, everybody returned to their duties, including Yuri, who, as the new boss, walked to her office together with Nomura, Watanabe, and Sakai, so that she could talk to them about her first decision as the *oyabun*: the replacement for the infamous Mercedes-Benz S-Class so disliked by Yuri and some of the group's men, who, during the previous week, had admitted to Yuri that they indeed disliked the car's lack of usable space.

It was to be an interesting meeting, in which Yuri would learn quite some things about Nomura's and Watanabe's true thoughts about her new status, and as a result, how difficult would they make things for her.

“So, what do you have in mind, *oyabun*?” – Nomura gravely asked Yuri.

“Ever since that job against the Ivanovs, in which our car was severely underpowered and most importantly, undersized, I have run a small investigation among the men, to learn what they thought about the idea of replacing our cars. After consulting with them, I have decided that we’re going to get rid of the S-Class and replace them with an SUV” – Yuri explained, so that she could have a reference to rely on if Nomura and Watanabe questioned her, which, as expected, they did.

“Get rid of our sedans? Nonsense, *oyabun*. We can replace them with the newest version of the S-Class, but I strongly suggest you reconsider your decision to purchase SUVs for us” – Watanabe immediately said.

“Might I ask why? The S-Class is an expensive, heavy, and inefficient vehicle. It is not practical for our day-to-day operations. I want to be able to transport more than four men inside it. In contrast, an SUV can take double that. And also, cargo. And besides, they can be cheaper in the long run. No, Watanabe-san, I won’t reconsider my decision” – Yuri said, with property and authority.

“But *oyabun*, it was Fujii-sama’s will to have that car as our mainstay. You would be insulting his legacy if you decided to change that. Think about that for a second, *oyabun*” – Nomura said, trying to challenge Yuri’s decision with a poisonous argument.

“No, Nomura-san. Not at all. Fujii-sama would not want his group to be an inefficient, poorly thought-out operation. Besides, it’s not that we’re going to change the marque. As my trusty *saiko-komon* Sakai-kun has explained to me, the Mercedes-Benz brand is an institution in this group, and I don’t intend to challenge it. So, we’re purchasing Mercedes SUVs. My decision is final, Nomura-san” – Yuri said, alluding to the fact that Sakai had been just named *saiko-komon*, or senior advisor, to Yuri.

“This is foolish, *oyabun*. Every respectable *ninkyo dantai* uses luxury sedans. We would be ridiculed by everyone else in the city should we decide to do otherwise” – Watanabe said, again trying to trip Yuri into changing her decision.

“I don’t see why we would be ridiculed, Watanabe-san. That’s absurd. Why we would be ridiculed by trying to be more effective in our jobs? Quite the contrary, we would be celebrated. Don’t try to convince me otherwise, gentlemen. We’re getting rid of those cars. And that’s it” – Yuri said, in a relentless fashion. Watanabe replied by angrily standing up and leaving the room, while Nomura stared at Yuri with indignation.

“So, I can see he’s quite the fan of the S-Class. Too bad for him” – Yuri said, with a smile.

“Please, reconsider this, *oyabun*” – Nomura said, with a lot of seriousness in his voice.

“Like I said, my decision is final, Nomura-san. Now, please, inform the *shateigashira* that their cars will be swapped very soon, so that they prepare them to be sold” – Yuri said. Nomura sighed.

“As you wish, *oyabun*” – Nomura reluctantly said, before leaving the room. Yuri sighed.

“That was exhausting, wasn’t it?” – Yuri asked Sakai.

“You better get used to it. Remember that I told you that Nomura-dono and Watanabe-dono were very traditional in their thoughts and ways. Changing them will be tricky for you” – Sakai said.

“Don’t worry, that was never my intention. And unless they become a liability, it will never be. Well, I think that’s it. Let’s go, Sakai-kun” – Yuri said.

“Where are we going, Kubo-sama?” – Sakai asked, as he stood up from his seat.

“We’re going to purchase the new vehicles. I want to see the models and choose by myself” – Yuri said.

“So, you’re going for the ‘up close and personal’ route, huh? I kinda like it. Alright, let’s go. I’ll tell you where the group gets its vehicles on the way” – Kenji said.

And so, Yuri and his new *saiko-komon* walked out of the office and through the Kubo Estate to the parking lots, where ironically, an S-Class was waiting for her.

“No thanks. These things are going to be replaced, after all. Take it to the garage and service it for the sale. We’re going in your car, Sakai-kun. I’ll drive” – Yuri said.

“Yes, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said, with a slight hint of distrust, as he normally did not allow for any other people to drive his beloved Honda sports car.

As Yuri and Sakai departed on the Subaru, Nomura and Watanabe were closely watching from above.

“What do you think, Nomura-san? Will we have to apply the ‘emergency protocol’ any time soon?” – Watanabe asked.

“Not for now. This is only a superficial change, Kazuki. We’ll have to wait and see if she makes undesired changes that demand for such action” – Nomura said.

“Understood. Let’s hope, for her own sake, that she does eventually fall into line” – Watanabe said.

“We shall see” – Nomura said.

“Tell me about the dealership where we get our vehicles from, Sakai-kun” – Yuri requested.

“Yes. The place is called *Deutsche-Nihon Motors*, or DNM. It’s the Mercedes dealership from where we have gotten all our cars for many years now. It’s almost exclusively used by high-rollers here in Sapporo, and all of their cars can be armored” – Sakai explained.

“Oh, so I guess they knew Fujii-san personally” – Yuri said.

“As a matter of fact, the owner, Inoue-san, was one of Fujii-sama’s friends within Sapporo’s legal business world. They often met each other during meetings. However, in regard to the relatively mundane chore of actually buying cars, they seldom saw each other, as the activity was handled directly by the *so-honbucho*, most recently, by Watanabe-dono” – Sakai explained.

"It may be mundane, but it is necessary. And important enough to be handled directly by myself. So, they knew each other well. That's good. Might earn us a hefty discount" – Yuri said.

"It will certainly do. Especially if we buy the SUVs in bulk" – Sakai noted.

"Yeah. Speaking of that, how many vehicles do we need to purchase?" – Yuri asked.

"Around thirty. Each *shateigashira* has around three of them at their disposal. The Kubo Estate needs to have at least four. And we also need some spares just in case" – Sakai said.

"Those are many cars. How much money do we have in our budget?" – Yuri asked.

"You're the *oyabun*, Kubo-sama. You get to decide how much money we'll spend on those cars" – Sakai said.

"Well, I have done my research on the S-Class we're currently using, and I've found out that it's almost worth eighteen million yen each. So, I guess we should spend around that same amount, less if possible, but if it's worth it, maybe even a little bit more" – Yuri said.

"Sounds so unreasonable when you put it that way. Who in their right mind would purchase an eighteen-million-yen car, less thirty of them?" – Sakai said, somewhat astonished.

"I know, I know. But I guess it is what it is. We ought to purchase the right car that aligns with both my vision and the group's preferences. And a Mercedes SUV seems like the right choice. I would purchase something cheaper, maybe even Japanese-made to further save in costs, but I also don't want to screw things up with Nomura-san, Watanabe-san and the rest of the men who have become used to the luxury Mercedes offers" – Yuri said.

"Let's hope we just don't overspend. Eighteen million yen is a lot of money" – Sakai said.

After driving through the city for a short time, Yuri and Sakai arrived at *Deutsche-Nihon Motors*, a medium-sized Mercedes-Benz dealership distinguished by a 'D.N.M' sign with kanji underneath. Yuri parked Sakai's car on the driveway in front of the dealership's entrance, and they both walked inside.

"Should we ask for Inoue-san directly, or one of his employees will do?" – Yuri asked.

"We better deal with him directly. It will make things much easier. Let me go there so that I can get him for us" – Sakai said, walking to the counter and talking with the clerk there. She exchanged some words with him and then walked through a door behind her. Some minutes later, she reappeared, along with a tall, old guy, who seemed in the same ballpark age as Nomura, perhaps slightly younger. The man walked to Sakai and Yuri, with a smile, and then he bowed before them.

"Welcome to *Deutsche-Nihon Motors*. May I ask what I can help you with?" – the man asked.

"Hello, Inoue-san. This is Yuri Kubo-sama, the new *oyabun* of the Kubo Group and successor to Kenkichi Fujii-sama" – Sakai said.

"You? An *oyabun*? That's hard to believe. I would have never imagined to ever deal with a female *oyabun* in my lifetime. But alas, here you are. My pleasure" – Inoue said, bowing before Yuri.

"Thank you, Inoue-san. Now, let's go to business" – Yuri said.

“Sure, sure, of course. What can we offer you? Do you have a problem with your cars?” – Inoue asked.

“Yes. As a matter of fact, we wish to replace them. The S-Class has proved to be inadequate for business, so we’re looking to replace them with an SUV” – Yuri said.

“‘Inadequate for business’. You’re the first person I have ever heard talking about the S-Class in that way. Really mystifying. I suppose if you want to replace the S-Class with a SUV, then you want something at the same level, am I wrong?” – Inoue asked, with curiosity.

“Yes. My men would not take it kindly otherwise, Inoue-san” – Yuri said.

“Then I guess the only vehicle we have that adjusts to your needs is the GLS-Class. Please, follow me, I’ll show you the model we have in exhibition” – Inoue said, and so, Yuri and Sakai followed the dealership’s owner into the showroom.

They walked amongst many cars in exhibition, including sedans, sports cars, and SUVs, until they got in front of the vehicle Inoue was talking about. It was a big, sporty SUV, mostly conventional in its presentation but far more luxurious than any other SUV around. Yuri walked around it, looking inside its windows, and noticed that, in total, eight people could be transported inside, including the driver. Perfect for her needs and vision of a well-planned, efficient Yakuza group.

“This is the Mercedes-Benz GLS-Class. It’s our largest vehicle currently in offer. We offer it in about five versions, each of which has its own extras, such as interior amenities and monoblock rims. It’s equipped factory-standard with a nine-speed transmission, and represents the best of performance, luxury and utility combined” – Inoue said.

“Okay, yeah, I want the most powerful model. Like, one which can tolerate both armor and cargo and still manage to pull out decent performance” – Yuri said.

“Then it’ll be the AMG version, which has a powerful twin-turbocharged V8” – Inoue said.

“Sounds great. V8s offer a nice balance. What’s the list price?” – Yuri asked.

“Twenty million yen, Kubo-san, including taxes” – Inoue said.

“Tell me, will we get a special price if we buy them in bulk?” – Yuri asked.

“Well, if you buy twenty of them, I can sell you the basic version for, shall we say, sixteen million yen apiece. All the options and the armor are extra” – Inoue said.

“If you round it to fifteen million yen apiece, then we’ll get thirty. Sounds good?” – Yuri asked. Inoue thought about it for some seconds.

“Alright, you got it. Fair enough. Which options will you add?” – Inoue asked, handing Yuri a catalogue. After some minutes of reading the catalogue, Yuri replied.

“We’ll take all the interior and performance packages plus the carbon-fiber interior and the black monoblock wheels. The exterior has to be jet black, naturally. Plus, I need for it to be armored. Heavily enough so that it can stand full-caliber rifle rounds but lightly enough so that it doesn’t

hinder performance. That would include power armored black-tinted windows and bulletproof tires. Can you get all of that done?” – Yuri asked, as Sakai stared at her perplexed.

“Wow, so you want the top-of-the-line, all-included model, huh, Kubo-san? I can’t remember the last time someone purchased this car with all of the options included, much less thirty of them. Fujii-san was more conservative with his S-Classes, only getting the base model with hardly any options and armor at all” – Inoue said, greatly amused.

“Things have changed, Inoue-san. I’ll strive to make my group more effective at what it does, and that includes getting the best, most versatile and complete vehicles available” – Yuri said.

“So, it’s obvious you know what you want. You don’t beat around the bush, you go straight to the point. I like it. That’s the kind of customer every high-level Mercedes salesman wants to serve. Alright then, it will be the top-class model for you then. We’ll work with our Israeli friends in order to source the armor you want. Along with all the options, then we’re talking a vehicle which costs around twenty-five million yen apiece, but with the discount, I can leave it to you at twenty million yen, the same price of the very basic version we talked at first” – Inoue said, very happy that he was about to make what amounted to the sale of the year.

“That’s a little more than Fujii-sama paid for the S-Class back in the day, but we’re getting all those extras. Sounds like a good price. You got the sale” – Yuri said.

“Perfect, Kubo-san. Let me get the paperwork done and then you can come to my office so that we can close the sale. In the meantime, you can wait here” – Inoue said, leaving with a smile to his office.

While Yuri was staring at the GLS in exhibition, Sakai approached her, looking bewildered.

“What’s going on, *saiko-komon*? You don’t seem happy” – Yuri asked.

“Well, it’s hard not to make this face after agreeing to spend all this money on cars. One thing is to get a basic SUV for work, the other is to basically give all of your men the same luxury and protection level afforded to the Prime Minister, perhaps even more. I was making the calculations as you were talking with Inoue-san. We’re going to spend around five million dollars just in cars” – Sakai said, worried.

“Yes, it sounds horrible when you put it that way. But I plan for these cars to last around ten years, if the boys take care of them like they deserve, of course. So, I think it’s not that bad overall” – Yuri said, trying to sound reassuring.

“I’ll have to think more about it in order to convince myself. You see, I grew poor, so I’m kinda frugal with my expenses. And I find it tough when I see such quantities of money being exchanged for something as trivial as a car. Or in this case, a mini luxury APC. Because that’s what it is, in the end” – Sakai said.

“Then see it not as a car, but as an APC. Makes more sense that way, don’t you think?” – Yuri asked with a smile.

“I hope I can eventually look at it that way, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said, with skepticism.

“Come on. You’ll like the new vehicles. Come, it’s time to close the deal” – Yuri said, and so, both of them walked to Inoue’s office to sign the purchase.

When Yuri finished autographing the dealership’s contract, she was ready to return to the Kubo Estate and tell everyone about their new cars. Inoue told them that, because of Yuri’s stringent requirements, the cars would take a little while to be delivered, but they would try to be done within a month. Finally, they shook hands over the five-million-dollar sale and Yuri and Sakai left the dealership to return home.

“I hope Watanabe-dono doesn’t panic when he finds out that six hundred million yen have suddenly disappeared out of the group’s account” – Sakai said.

“I don’t know why you’re so nervous, Sakai-kun. How much money do you think we would have spent if we had bought the S-Class instead?” – Yuri asked.

“Good point. But I don’t know. Maybe it was not the right time to renew the fleet after all” – Sakai said.

“How much did you say Kubo-sama spent on the cars?” – Nomura asked Watanabe, while on a meeting with Yuri and Sakai later that evening.

“Six hundred million yen, Nomura-san. That would be around five million dollars” – Watanabe said, with indignancy in his voice.

“How could that happen, Sakai-san? How could you let the *oyabun* engage in such irresponsible spending?” – Nomura angrily asked Sakai.

“Excuse me, Nomura-san. Sakai-kun’s got nothing to do with that. I took the decision personally to spend that quantity in vehicles, because I determined that they are what we need. So, you should not scold him for that” – Yuri said.

“But *oyabun*, you have spent a large portion of our monthly revenue in cars! We had that money allotted to invest in a new shipment of assault weapons. Now how we’re going to tell the *shateigashira* that the new merchandise won’t arrive at all?” – Watanabe asked Yuri, raising his voice.

“We’ll simply move some surplus weapons from our reserve lockups and give them that instead. We have a lot of them in our inventory” – Yuri said.

“Be careful, *oyabun*. You may be the boss around here, but there are some things that you ought not to change. The reserve lockups under Fujii-sama were only touched in emergency situations. And that’s something that’s not to be discussed” – Nomura said.

“Times have changed, Nomura-san. As you said, I’m the boss around here now. And I’ll decide how to best use our weapons reserves. Transmit the order to the keepers of the reserves to distribute some of their merchandise to the *shateigashira*. We’ll see how we refill them later” – Yuri said.

“But *oyabun*!” – Watanabe protested.

“No buts, Watanabe-san. That’s all. You can return to your duties now” – Yuri said.

As Nomura and Watanabe stood up and were beginning to leave, someone knocked at the door.

“Yes, you may come in” – Yuri said, instructing one of her guards with a hand sign to open the door.

“Kubo-sama, Nomura-dono, Watanabe-dono, Sakai-dono” – a *kyodai* said, bowing before Yuri and the others.

“Yes? What can I do for you?” – Yuri asked.

“One of the local *shateigashira* from Susukino needs extra help. He says one of his businesses was attacked by thugs from the Ikeda Group, and is requesting help from the Estate” – the *kyodai* said.

“Understood. Tell the *shateigashira* that we’ll send backup right away. Seems like another war is looming on the horizon” – Nomura said.

“Yes, Nomura-dono” – the *kyodai* said.

“Wait, *kobun*. This looks like a great opportunity to let the other Yakuza taste our group’s new leadership. Sakai-kun, prepare your men. We’re going to solve the *shateigashira*’s problem by ourselves” – Yuri said.

“*Oyabun*, please, let us take care of that. Stay here at the compound” – Nomura said.

“No, Nomura-san. I’m the boss here and I need to act as such” – Yuri said.

“It is too risky, *oyabun*! Reconsider your decision at once!” – Watanabe said, almost shouting.

“Didn’t you hear what I said, Watanabe-san? I want to make it clear to our rivals who they are messing with. I may be inexperienced, but I intend to do this job and I intend to do it right. Besides, I want to check how our clubs at Susukino are doing. Don’t try to stand in my way, Watanabe-san” – Yuri said, authoritatively. Watanabe sighed, with his head down.

“Yes, Kubo-sama. Please forgive my insolence” – Watanabe reluctantly said.

“Okay then, Sakai-kun, let’s go to Susukino and see what our *shateigashira* needs from us” – Yuri said.

And so, with both Nomura and Watanabe angrily staring at them, Yuri and Sakai left the Kubo Estate once more, this time with a job on their hands.

Chapter 8: Shock and Awe

“We’re almost at the Black Hearts Club, where the *shateigashira*, Riku Maeda-san, is waiting for our visit” – Sakai said while driving the car through Susukino.

“If I remember correctly, you said that this club is one of our main venues at the district, right?” – Yuri asked.

“That’s right. It’s our most luxurious nightclub in the city, and a place where our best girls work. It’s also the base of operations of Maeda-san” – Sakai explained.

“And this base of operations was attacked by the Ikeda Group. I hope the place isn’t completely trashed” – Yuri said, as Sakai was parking the car on the street outside the club. Waiting outside was a guy dressed in a black suit, which Yuri recognized as a *shatei* belonging to Watanabe’s faction. He approached Yuri and Sakai as they were hopping off their vehicle. After greeting them, he led them inside the club.

After stepping inside, Yuri could immediately see the signs that the club had been viciously attacked and would not be able to open its doors that night. The windows had been shattered, the tables and the bar were trashed, and the dancefloor’s audio equipment had been destroyed. There was also blood littering the site, indicating that the attack was violent with casualties among Maeda’s men.

Sitting on one of the tables, with a sake bottle in front of him, was a menacing-looking man with sunglasses dressed in a white suit. He was melancholically sipping from a cup of sake as Yuri and Sakai approached.

“Sakai-dono, Kubo-sama, thanks for coming” – Maeda said, standing up from his seat before bowing in front of Yuri and Sakai.

“Tell me, Maeda-san, what happened here?” – Yuri asked.

“We were preparing the club for tonight when a group of armed thugs forcefully made it into the place. They were armed with *katanas* and *tantos* and sliced my men open. Then they proceeded to destroy the club and escape. Now the club will require a costly and lengthy remodeling, which will cut off our stream of income for months” – Maeda said with resignation.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Maeda-san. But how do you know they belonged to Ikeda?” – Sakai asked.

“Because one of my men recognized one of them as being a high-ranking *kyodai* serving one of the Ikeda *shateigashira* here in Susukino. Apparently, they want to force us out of the business so that they takeover it for themselves” – Maeda said.

“And so, they have declared war on us. We ought to retaliate at once, lest we look weak. Can you tell me where this *shateigashira* is?” – Yuri asked.

“Yes, Kubo-sama. He operates out of the L&K Nightclub at the northern part of Susukino. What are you planning to do?” – Maeda asked.

“Simple. We’re going to punish the Ikeda Group for this insolence by murdering that *shateigashira* and claiming his business” – Yuri said.

“What? Are you serious, Kubo-sama? You know what killing such a high-ranking member means in the Yakuza world? The Ikeda Group would not take it kindly at all, and we would be in full-scale war against them. We can instead let this incident slide and quietly rebuild and bring more security to this club” – Sakai said, trying to stop Yuri.

“Come on. We don’t want to look weak and docile, do we? Besides, they attacked first. So, we’re already at war with them. Maeda-san, do you still have men under your command?” – Yuri asked.

“Yes, Kubo-sama. They are ready to strike against our enemies” – Maeda said, in a more bellicose tone.

“Excellent. Tell them to meet me at once. We’re going to pay that Ikeda *shateigashira* a visit” – Yuri said.

“Kubo-sama, are you sure about this? Are you sure you want a war right now?” – Sakai asked.

“I don’t want a war, Sakai-kun. At all. But if it’s necessary to hit the table a bit so that our interests are respected, then I’m more than willing to do it. Come, take your pistol. We’re going on a raid” – Yuri ordered Sakai.

After Maeda’s men readied up and prepared their Mercedes-Benz S-Class for the job, Yuri, Sakai, and the men departed the Black Hearts Club and quickly cruised through Susukino until they reached the L&K Nightclub, which was larger and more ambitious than the now trashed Kubo Group venue.

“Here we are. How are we going to strike? Are we going to do it silently or loud?” – Sakai asked Yuri.

“Loud. I want for this to be loud and clear. And I don’t care if we have trouble, Maeda-san and by extension our whole group was insulted, and Ikeda needs to pay for that. Prepare your pistols, we’re going in full Camorra-style on these people” – Yuri said, cocking her machine pistol.

“Camorra-style? What does that even mean?” – Sakai asked. But Yuri had already gotten off the vehicle with her machine pistol in her hands, followed by Maeda’s men who quickly exited their Mercedes wielding pistols and shotguns.

As soon as they entered the L&K Nightclub, the shooting started. Yuri and Maeda’s men did not even give time to the club’s staff to know what was going on before they found themselves riddled with bullets. The Ikeda guards tried to defend the place, but were quickly decimated by Maeda’s men, who employed all their accumulated anger at Ikeda and killed most of the enemy staff, including unaffiliated civilian people who had nothing to do with the gang itself. Having forgone the use of silencers, most of the shootout could be readily heard from outside the club, scaring the many civilians who were going about their business outside, and prompting them to quickly call the police.

During the limited time she had left until the police units arrived, Yuri walked through the club, shooting Ikeda enemies as she moved, looking for the enemy *shateigashira*’s office. She finally found it after some minutes of looking and tried to open the door. It had been closed shut, so she ordered one of her men to blast it open with his shotgun. The guy inside grabbed a *katana* and tried to charge at Yuri, but she was quicker than him and shot him in the head.

“What a savage. Nicely done, Kubo-sama” – one of Maeda’s men said, as he stared at the enemy *shateigashira*’s dead corpse.

“Thanks, *kobun*. Hopefully, that will serve to impose our will over these cheeky bastards. Now, let’s get out of here, before police arrives” – Yuri ordered, and so she, Sakai and the men hastily left the bloodied club littered with corpses for their cars, as people looked on shocked and in awe.

“That was really intense. I pray that it was the right choice” – Sakai said.

“I pray that too. I kinda overreacted, don’t you think?” – Yuri looked at Sakai, somewhat uneasily. It was quite obvious she was a bit stressed out.

“Well, what’s done is done. Now we have to wait for the fallout and deal with it” – Sakai said, a bit calmer now that Yuri understood she had potentially screwed up.

And so, both of them prepared to be scolded by Nomura and Watanabe. And of course, they were. But unknown to all of them, Yuri’s hit at the L&K Nightclub would have the opposite effect.

Over the few weeks that followed, the Kubo Group underwent an interesting metamorphosis. In such a short time, it went from being a relatively small and quiet arms smuggling and teen prostitution operation to being a loud and assertive organization, feared and respected by many inside the three lesser independent Yakuza groups and even in many affiliated groups of the Three Clans.

At least, that was the perception that Yuri had created. Almost immediately after the hit, amongst the news of police ineffectiveness at actually preventing the attack and then finding out the culprits, it was an open secret that the Kubo Group and its new young female leader had carried out the attack mercilessly. Despite Yuri’s realization that she had indeed overdone it with such a brutal Camorra-style attack and the guilt she felt over killing innocent employees, it put her group on the spotlight as a force to be reckoned with, as an organized crime outfit which was worthy of respect and fear, which was something that many in the group liked, especially the younger, more aggressive ones, who wanted to believe they were working for a formidable, well-established organization. The *shateigashiras* and the senior enforcers generally liked this approach too, as it made their intimidation jobs way easier. At the same time, the Ikeda Group was so shaken by the attack that it stopped its expansion plans in Susukino dead on their tracks, and the high-ranking members of the Three Clans were reasonably impressed. Overall, Yuri’s impulsive attack on the nightclub had brought her a lot of respect from both outside and inside the family and made her feel more comfortable when working with her *kobun*, despite the fact that she still partially regretted the attack.

Of course, not everyone was pleased by this aggressive and brazen approach to the ways of the *ninkyō dantai*. Sakai was not against the idea of getting more respect from Sapporo’s underworld; in fact, he enjoyed a lot of the heightened status of the group, but he lamented that Yuri could potentially be remembered as a ruthless leader rather than the effective, righteous one that she originally intended to be. Which, by itself, was an interesting premonition of the things that were to come. But the ones that felt the most offended by Yuri’s actions were, obviously, Nomura and Watanabe. Unlike most of the group, including even their own men, Nomura and Watanabe disliked the spotlight and the attention it gave to them. Nomura thought that it was against tradition and *Bushido*, while Watanabe was afraid that it could actually end up hurting the group’s business. In spite of Yuri’s as of yet short tenure as *oyabun*, they started to get tired of her attitude and impulsiveness, coming to the realization that maybe it was a huge mistake on their part allowing her to be in charge in the first place.

Therefore, while on the surface the group celebrated Yuri’s command, the *oyabun*’s underbosses’ minds started quickly being filled with treasonous thoughts. They agreed that Yuri’s leadership was, in their eyes, going to damage their brand in their long term, and thus started to think about a strategy to take her out of the way. However, in typical fashion among rivals, they strongly disagreed

about when to actually put their plan into action. Nomura thought that they had to wait and do it at the right time, while Watanabe was more impatient. He wanted to neutralize Yuri as quickly as possible in order to restore the group's previous calm and collected approach. And despite Nomura's best efforts to convince Watanabe that they had to strike coordinately and silently, he ironically decided to act as impulsively and as recklessly as Yuri had done before, quickly formulating a plan to get rid of Yuri. At first, Nomura tried to distance himself from such plan, however Watanabe was not willing to do it alone.

"We're together in this one, Nomura-san. We both want the best for this group" – Watanabe told Nomura.

"But what if it fails? I can't be held responsible if your plan doesn't work!" – Nomura said.

"Don't worry, old man. I'm sure it will work out. We'll take out that girl in a quick and clean fashion. Besides, you don't want for your pictures with underage girls be revealed to the public and the police, don't you?" – Watanabe said, trying to blackmail Nomura and his sex craze for young minors.

"Okay, okay, I got it. Tell me what we're going to do then" – Nomura angrily replied.

"I'm going to send in my best assassin, who will strike while she's sleeping. It's going to be quick, and it's going to be clean. When it's done, we'll simply blame another group" – Watanabe said.

"But we're going to be dishonored! We can't just simply let the *oyabun* die that way!" – Nomura said, alarmed.

"Don't worry about that, Nomura-san. Do you prefer to be left adrift under the actual leadership?" – Watanabe asked.

"No, of course not. But it would be an affront to our honor code" – Nomura noted.

"Think of it this way: you're defending the code by getting rid of this plight to our group. You're just defending the legacy of Fujii-sama" – Watanabe said.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe it's time to prematurely end Kubo-sama's career. Alright, you convinced me. What do I have to do?" – Nomura asked.

"For now, nothing. I'll take care of everything. I just need the backup of your men to suppress Kubo-sama's people once we have done our hit" – Watanabe said.

"You got it, Kazuki" – Nomura said.

"Very well. I'll make all the necessary arrangements and will inform you when we're about to strike" – Watanabe said.

And so, with the conspiracy against Yuri put in its tracks, Watanabe and Nomura celebrated, with the prospect of returning to normalcy very soon.

Little they knew, it was to be an ill-fated plan that would quickly end with their downfall.

Chapter 9: The Ninth Circle

A week passed since Nomura's and Watanabe's secret conversation started the gears of treachery. During those days, while Yuri's Mercedes-Benz GLS-Class SUVs were beginning to arrive at the Kubo Estate, Watanabe prepared what he thought would be his biggest move in his career. After pledging to pay her an incredibly high sum of money, Watanabe managed to enlist the services of his best assassin once more. Known professionally as the Black Fox, she was a master in the arts of the knife and the silenced pistol, and also a really expert infiltrator, with a long curriculum of political assassinations and hits on rival Yakuza clans all over Japan.

His plan would be to attack Yuri while she slept. The Black Fox would discreetly infiltrate the Kubo Estate, killing Yuri's men as she moved, and would quietly enter her room, so that she could put a quick end to her life by stabbing her in a stealthy and clean way. Nomura's and Watanabe's men would quickly take over the Estate afterwards, blaming Yuri's death on a rival group. It was a really nasty but good plan, which would cost Nomura and Watanabe some of their honor, but it would also preserve the group's integrity in their eyes.

And so, during one of that year's winter's last nights, the plan was put in action. Thanks to her excellent infiltration skills, the Black Fox swiftly and easily got into the Estate, evading Yuri's guards and killing them if necessary with her handy German-made combat knife. Before long, she arrived at Yuri's door, slowly opening it, and getting into the dark room. She looked at the seemingly defenseless Yuri, who was sleeping with a slight smile on her face. Knowing that she had limited time, the Black Fox picked her knife and approached Yuri, with her throat in sight.

"What a pity. Such a beautiful girl. How tragic" – the Black Fox thought, as she had her knife over Yuri's throat, ready to slit it.

As she was about to make the move which would end Yuri's life, she suddenly opened her eyes and, in a matter of mere seconds, grabbed the Black Fox's silenced pistol from her waist and shot her in her stomach a couple of times, making her scream in pain and fall to the floor. Yuri then got off the bed and walked to the now heavily wounded Black Fox before quickly executing with her a headshot. A quick *coup de grace*, so as to end the suffering of a dying animal.

When the ordeal was done, with the Black Fox's corpse heavily bleeding and staining much of the room, Yuri got dressed and phoned Sakai.

"Hello? Kubo-sama?" – Sakai asked.

"Yes, it's me. It has happened. Apparently, Hara-san wasn't wrong" – Yuri said calmly.

"So, you were attacked by the assassin? What happened to her?" – Sakai asked.

"Don't worry, I've dealt with her. Now it's time to put our own plan in action. Tell the senior enforcers to secure the Estate. I don't want for Nomura-san and Watanabe-san to escape" – Yuri said.

"Understood, Kubo-sama. The men will cover all the exits. What are my orders if Nomura-dono and Watanabe-dono realize their plan failed?" – Sakai asked.

"I hope they won't, but if they try to escape, bring them to the office" – Yuri ordered.

“Yes, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said, before hanging up.

After relaying her orders to contain the coup, Yuri picked the Black Fox’s smartphone and texted Watanabe, who, according to Hara, was eagerly waiting for the news of success.

Suddenly, while waiting inside his room with Nomura and a couple of guards, Watanabe’s phone rang.

“That’s surely my girl” – Watanabe said, taking his smartphone out of his suit. A large smile appeared on his face as he read the news.

“It’s done. Yuri Kubo’s dead” – the Black Fox seemingly wrote.

“Understood. Escape through the designated route. Your payment will arrive at the account of your choice tomorrow” – Watanabe texted.

“Is it done?” – Nomura asked.

“Yes. I’m sorry to report that our dear *oyabun*, Yuri Kubo-sama, is no longer with us” – Watanabe mockingly said.

“So, it’s finally over?” – Nomura asked.

“Yes, old man. We can reclaim the control of the group” – Watanabe said.

“Thank goodness. We have to put things in order once again. Hara-san, please, inform our men that the plan has been successful, and that they can start hunting Kubo-sama’s men in our name” – Nomura said.

“Yes, Nomura-dono” – Hara said, leaving the room.

“Well, now that Kubo-sama is gone, who will be the new *oyabun*?” – Nomura asked.

“You’re talking to him right now, Nomura-san” – Watanabe said.

“Wait, what are you talking about? I agreed to support you with this coup, but I never said that you had my approval to replace Kubo-sama!” – Nomura angrily said.

“It’s inevitable. You’re too old and frail, Nomura-san. This group needs a fresh young face for the future” – Watanabe said triumphantly.

“I agree” – a young female voice suddenly said. Nomura and Watanabe slowly turned their heads to the room’s entrance, and, frightened, looked at Yuri, who had entered the room followed by Sakai, Hara, and their men. They quickly disarmed the traitors’ guard and let them away.

“Uh, Kubo-sama! What an unexpected pleasure. Please, what can we do for you?” – Watanabe asked, trembling as he spoke.

“Is he the one?” – Yuri calmly asked Hara.

“Yes, *oyabun*” – Hara replied.

“Thanks, Hara-san” – Yuri said, before shooting Watanabe on his head with her Glock 18C, killing him instantly and paralyzing Nomura out of extreme fear. Yuri then pushed Watanabe’s corpse out of the chair and sat down there instead.

“Calm down, Nomura-san. Calm down. It’s over. He’s dead. And you are still alive” – Yuri said, smiling.

“Kubo-sama, I...” – Nomura started to say, before being interrupted by Yuri.

“It’s okay, Nomura-san. It’s okay. I know you didn’t plan this” – Yuri said.

“But then, what will happen with me?” – Nomura-san asked, fearful as a little child.

“Tell me, Nomura-san, do you believe in a warrior’s honor?” – Yuri asked.

“Yes, Kubo-sama. That is what has given me strength all my life serving this group” – Nomura said.

“I see. Then you know what to do, Nomura-san. Sakai-kun, please, give it to him” – Yuri said. Sakai asked, and he took a very sharp, traditionally forged, Japanese *tanto* knife and handed it to Nomura, who was shaking as he accepted the knife.

“Sakai-san, please, can you help me? Can you do it for the good old times?” – Nomura asked Sakai, with tears in his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Nomura-dono, but I can’t betray my master. That was one of the first lessons you taught us back in the day” – Sakai said. Nomura nodded somberly.

“I apologize for my insolence, Kubo-sama. Allow me... allow me to offer my life to you in exchange for my treason” – Nomura said. Yuri nodded.

“You can proceed” – Yuri said, standing up from her chair and placing herself a short distance from him, along with Sakai and the rest of the men.

Faced with such a gloomy prospect, Nomura chose to abide by the laws of honor he had followed with so much zealotry during all his life, abandoning only briefly at Watanabe’s insistence. This of course, had costed him his life, and now, with Nomura’s own life before the abyss, it was time for punishment. And so, after loosening his *kimono*, exposing his hairy, wrinkled old man’s chest, Nomura picked the knife and placed it in front of him. Finally, he remembered the key moments in his life: how he started as a bullied high-school student who was protected by Fujii, how he eventually joined his small-time operation, how the group evolved to finally enter the Yakuza circuit, and how he was named as *wakagashira*, before sliding the sharp *tanto* through his torso from left to right, staining the room’s floor with the stream of blood that followed before quickly joining his partner-in-crime and rival Watanabe in what Dante Alighieri denominated the Ninth Circle when writing down his *Inferno*, a place reserved for the treacherous and the disloyal.

“I never thought I would actually witness someone committing *seppuku* in my lifetime” – Sakai said, with some revulsion in his voice after having seen his former boss commit suicide in such a ritual and gory fashion.

“That old bastard is now rotting in hell. I’m glad we took him out, Kubo-sama” – one of Sakai’s men said.

“Yeah. He won’t bother us with his bull crap again in the future, Kubo-sama” – another of Sakai’s men said.

“May this lesson be useful to all of the members of this glorious group who may be thinking of betraying one of their brothers. Please, clean this room and take their bodies outside. We must get rid of them as soon as we can” – Yuri said, before leaving the room.

And so, that night’s coup attempt ended unsuccessfully. Or rather, it ended before it even started. It was a good thing for Yuri that Nomura and especially Watanabe misjudged their men and their loyalty in such a disastrous fashion. Because, for all their love for their *kimonos* and suits, they also enjoyed the fame and the awe that Yuri inspired for the group, which made their loyalty to her grow dramatically. And Hara, the senior enforcer who was part of Watanabe’s clique and the very person who made the first contact with Yuri, was not the exception.

Days before the Black Fox attempted to murder Yuri, Watanabe had a meeting with Hara and his men, where he told them about his plan to take Yuri out and then take over the group for himself. Watanabe did not even question Hara’s true colors when he spoke about sending in the Black Fox to murder Yuri and then use him and his men to take over the Estate. He was sure that Hara and his men were as dissatisfied and angry with Yuri’s leadership style as he was, and readily assumed that he would just play along. As it turned out, he was wrong.

Immediately after the meeting, Hara visited Yuri and Sakai, and spilled the beans about the plot against the *oyabun* in full detail. He informed Yuri about the way she was going to be killed, about the plan to take over the Kubo Estate, and about who were the main perpetrators. And so, armed with that information, Yuri could anticipate the coup and planned a way to castigate the traitors, as well as to fend off the attack from the Black Fox, both of which ultimately proved successful.

Now, with both Nomura and Watanabe dead, the positions of the *wakagashira* and the *so-honbucho* became vacant. Yuri knew that she could not work without the presence of those two underbosses to help her out, but she also did not know where to get replacements. So, a couple of days after the Kubo Estate was cleaned up, the three bodies of the perpetrators disposed of, and their guards expelled from the group, Yuri met with Sakai in order to discuss the future of both of those positions, which was an issue that had to be prioritized and solved as soon as possible.

“So, what do you recommend me to do with the *wakagashira* and the *so-honbucho*, Sakai-kun? I need people to occupy those positions at once” – Yuri asked.

“There are two possible course of action that I can think of Kubo-sama. One is looking among the senior enforcers for candidates. The other would be to instead approach the *shateigashira* and propose it to them. Personally, I would recommend the latter, as a *shateigashira* has more experience with leadership and their replacement is not the Kubo Estate’s direct responsibility. If we recruit people from the senior enforcers, then we’ll have to look for replacements ourselves and it will be hard to train their leadership skills” – Sakai opined.

“Yeah, it sounds like that’s our shot. Alright then, we’re going to look from replacements from our *shateigashira*. Remind me, how many of them we have around the city?” – Yuri asked.

“There are six *shateigashira* around the city, each commanding their own force and based off a specific district” – Sakai said.

“Alright. Do we have files on them?” – Yuri asked.

“Yes, Kubo-sama. I’ll get them right away” – Sakai said, standing up and walking to a cabinet full of archival folders. He grabbed six of them, and handed them to Yuri, who placed them over the table and started checking them one by one.

After reading the files for a while, Yuri set aside two of them and gave the other four back to Sakai and instructed him to return them to the cabinet with a hand sign.

“So, I see you have made your decision” – Sakai said.

“That’s right, my dear *saiko-komon*. I’ve chosen two guys who I think have the best qualities required for being my second-in-command and to administrate the Kubo Estate” – Yuri said.

“Okay, let’s hear about it” – Sakai said, sitting back on his seat.

“The first of them is the *shateigashira* based in the industrial area of Nishi, Atsushi Tanaka. He is in charge of our cluster of weapon lockups and distribution warehouses in that sector. According to the files compiled by Nomura, he is a very professional and cold-blooded leader with no fear of getting his hands dirty, while at the same time being cautious enough. It also says that he managed to drive out most of the Ivanov Bratva’s interest in the area single-handedly, without help from the Kubo Estate. I’ve decided that this guy will be my second-in-command. He has balls of steel, and I like that” – Yuri said.

“Understood. I’ll contact his men so that I can arrange a meeting between you two. What about the candidate for *so-honbucho*?” – Sakai asked.

“The other one will be... let me see... ah, yes, Eichi Hirano. He’s the *shateigashira* of a subgroup which operates out of Chuo, more specifically, out of the government’s district. He has extensive connections inside the city hall, which could prove useful for us. Here it says that he is a very pragmatic and efficiency-oriented individual who has a college background: he majored in Business with a minor in Corporate Law from the University of Hokkaido. Someone like him could work wonders with our finances and also lead the legal team here at the Kubo Estate. I think he’s the perfect candidate for *so-honbucho*” – Yuri said.

“Okay then. Again, I’ll manage to get you a meeting with him. Just to check, are you sure you want these guys to be your underboss and the administrator of the Estate?” – Sakai asked.

“Yes, *saiko-komon*. Please, proceed with your arrangements as soon as possible” – Yuri ordered.

“Excellent. We can adjourn our little meeting now. Let’s get back to work” – Yuri said, and so, Sakai exited the office and walked to his own.

Thoughtful, Yuri reflected on what had happened during the last 72 hours. Her *wakagashira* and *so-honbucho*, supposedly her most trusted subordinates, had betrayed her and tried to oust her from her leadership in a violent and lethal way. After they failed, they left their positions vacant, and now Yuri was to be in charge of her first recruiting of high-ranking members since he

ascended to *oyabun* a little under a month before. More than a crisis, it represented a new opportunity for Yuri to guide the group towards a new chapter of its history, now that the high-ranking old guard of the Fujii era was gone. At least, Yuri tried to see it in that way. Under any other circumstance, losing both the *wakagashira* and the *so-honbucho*, especially in a failed coup, would leave the group disadvantaged and weak before other groups. But even if it meant that her group would be temporarily weaker, she felt more comfortable now that they were dead.

“It’s my own world now” – Yuri thought, looking at the city from a window on the second floor of the Estate.

Chapter 10: Industrial Action

During the few days that followed, while Sakai made the necessary calls to arrange for Yuri to meet with the two *shateigashira* that she had selected to succeed the deceased traitors Nomura and Watanabe, Yuri took her time to get fully into running the operation. She performed a couple of jobs for the group, namely, working with a renowned interior designer to remodel and renew the destroyed Black Hearts Club, and she also had dinner with a couple of minor politicians who could help her with keeping the police off her back for a modest sum of money. At the same time, she enjoyed testing one of the group’s new Mercedes SUVs, and she took a drive around Sapporo in order to experience the power and the comfort that the car offered.

This streak of miscellaneous and relatively ordinary activities ended when, a full week after Nomura’s and Watanabe’s death, Sakai managed to get Atsushi Tanaka, the *shateigashira* of Nishi, to meet with Yuri. Once a time and a place had been set for the meeting, Yuri, Sakai, and a couple of armed *shatei* drove to the venue for a lunch with Tanaka, in a Chinese restaurant located not far from Nishi’s industrial zone.

“A Chinese restaurant. Curious” – Yuri said, while she was parking the car in front of the Happy Tiger Chinese Restaurant.

“According to what I’ve heard, Tanaka-san once had a close alliance with a small Triad outfit here in Nishi, but they were all wiped out by the Ivanovs and forced out of Hokkaido. Before the leadership left, though, some of their businesses and their personnel, including this restaurant, were granted to the Kubo Group to avoid them from being destroyed by the Russians. And so, they have been run by Tanaka’s crew ever since” – Sakai explained.

“Oh, okay. Didn’t know we had a Chinese restaurant in our portfolio. It’s quite fitting though, since I like Chinese food a lot” – Yuri said.

“Then you’ll enjoy this. Come, Tanaka-san’s waiting for us” – Sakai said. Yuri nodded, and turned the Mercedes’ engine off, after which all four occupants got off the vehicle and walked inside the restaurant.

A waitress dressed in a Chinese dress walked up to them and bowed before them.

“Hello, welcome to the Happy Tiger Chinese Restaurant. Table for four?” – the waitress asked.

“No, babe. We’re looking for Tanaka-san. Can you lead us to him?” – Yuri asked.

“Oh, you’re Yuri Kubo-sama! We were expecting you and your people. Please follow me, I’ll lead you to Tanaka-dono’s table” – the waitress kindly said, before walking off through the restaurant to a staircase.

Yuri, Sakai, and their escorts followed her up the stairs until they got to the second floor, which was more lavishly decorated, and had bigger tables. Unlike the first floor, though, it was almost completely empty, save for Tanaka, who was sitting alone in a table facing a large picture window that allowed a nice view of Nishi’s industrial area in an overcast day. The waitress led Yuri and her entourage to Tanaka’s table. There, Yuri encountered him for the first time. A tough-looking guy in his late thirties, with a buzz haircut and some scars in his face, dressed in a gray suit with an orange shirt. He smiled when he saw Yuri for the first time.

“Well, well. So, this is the face of the future. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Kubo-sama during these dark times” – Tanaka said, bowing with his head before her.

“They are dark times indeed. But I know that, if we can work together, we can get out of them unscathed. Pleasure is mine, Tanaka-san” – Yuri said, before sitting down in the table together with Sakai and the crew.

“What would you like to eat, Kubo-sama?” – Tanaka asked.

“Some spring rolls would be fine, Tanaka-san” – Yuri said.

“Alright them. Sweetie, can you bring each of us a portion of spring rolls?” – Tanaka kindly asked the waitress.

“Of course, Tanaka-dono, right away” – the waitress said, with a smile, before leaving to the kitchen.

“So, Sakai-san here contacted my crew and asked me for a meeting with you, Kubo-sama. I’m listening” – Tanaka said.

“Well, as you surely have heard by now, we were betrayed by our closest collaborators. Nomura-san and Watanabe-san tried to stage a coup at the Kubo Estate and assassinate me. They failed, but as they died, they left their positions vacant, and as you may imagine, the Kubo Group can’t do without a *wakagashira* and a *so-honbucho* for too long” – Yuri explained.

“Okay, I see. Yes, we were informed by the Estate that you had been attacked within hours. A sad matter indeed. But what does it have to do with me, Kubo-sama?” – Tanaka asked, intrigued.

“After a discussion with my *saiko-komon*, Sakai-kun, we have chosen you as the candidate be my second-in-command, the *wakagashira*. We have read your file, and it’s impressive compared with the other *shateigashira*. You’re the kind of, and well, I’ll be blunt, tough and aggressive guy who at the same time is cautious and calculating, and that’s exactly the kind of person we need at the Kubo Estate” – Yuri explained.

“Me? The *wakagashira*? This I didn’t expect” – Tanaka said, surprised.

“That’s correct. You’ll be the second-in-command of the Kubo Group. You’ll be entitled to a place inside the Kubo Estate and all the associated privileges. You’ll also take part in important decisions

taken at the highest level, and you'll cooperate with the *so-honbucho* and the senior enforcers in running the operations smoothly. What do you say?" – Yuri asked.

"Well... I'm flattered by the proposition. And I'm very confident in my abilities to do the job. Unfortunately, you have come at quite a bad time. I'm afraid I can't leave my force just yet, as we're busy trying to drive out our rivals out of the industrial district and I would like to end that job before thinking of anything else" – Tanaka gravely said.

"Oh, really? Would you like some help with that so that we can expedite the process of getting you to the Kubo Estate?" – Yuri asked, with a smile.

"Now that's... unexpected. Prior to this, the Kubo Estate hardly helped us with anything. Fujii-sama was not exactly known for centralizing. He had a mostly "fend-off for yourselves and I'll pay you for it" attitude. And the truth is, yes, we could probably do with some help" – Tanaka admitted.

"Okay then. Tell me what you need, and we'll have it done as soon as possible" – Yuri said. Tanaka nodded, and took out his smartphone. He looked for a location in a map of the area and showed it to Yuri.

"This warehouse is under the control of the Moskovsky Bratva. Formerly the property of a certain fizzy drink company, it's their last major asset in this sector. According to our information, it is full to the brim with weapons and drugs. And it's also heavily defended by the Russians. We need to seize it from those guys in order to run them off here for good" – Tanaka explained. Yuri looked at the map and saw a large warehouse with many white trucks in front of it.

"So, do you need for us to assault and capture it for your crew?" – Yuri asked.

"Exactly. When that's done, my force here will be the undisputed owners of this neighborhood. And we would have access to our enemies' merchandise to sell. If that happens, then I think I would consider your offer" – Tanaka said.

"Understood. We'll go and get it for you" – Yuri said, standing up from the table, with a hand sign ordering Sakai and the two *shatei* to stand up as well.

"Where are you going, Kubo-sama?" – Tanaka asked, perplexed.

"We're going to take over that warehouse at once. Sakai-kun, please, call for reinforcements. Tell them to meet us near the target. And tell them to bring their heavy weapons with them" – Yuri ordered Sakai.

"Yes, Kubo-sama" – Sakai said, before making the call.

"Are you seriously going to take care of this by yourself? I thought you would simply send some men to do it for you" – Tanaka said, surprised.

"Important things must not be delegated, Tanaka-san. Much less if the recruiting of the *wakagashira* is what we're talking about. That warehouse will belong to your force in no time. Now, if you would excuse me, we have turf to take over" – Yuri said, leaving Tanaka's table before the spring rolls arrived.

"Before you go..." – Tanaka said.

“Yes, Tanaka-san?” – Yuri asked.

“Call me before you attack. In this way, I can talk with my contacts inside the police department so that they don’t interfere” – Tanaka said.

“Oh, that’s great. Yes, sure, Sakai-kun will give you the call. Let’s go, boys” – Yuri said, and so, the team left back to the parking lot.

Back in the SUV, Yuri plotted the location of the Moskovsky warehouse and turned the engine on for a quick cruise towards the Russian-held building. Once there, Yuri drove around the block to discreetly inspect the building and plan the attack while her reinforcements arrived.

“How are we going to do this, Kubo-sama?” – Sakai asked.

“The place seems to be empty, which means that its defenders must be hidden somewhere. That doesn’t leave us many options. I think that, if we want to get done with this quickly, our only chance will be to do a direct assault through the gates, using our armored vehicles as cover and advance towards the warehouse, so that we can finally mop up the resistance and capture the place” – Yuri said.

“Doesn’t sound like a sophisticated plan, but it doesn’t sound like a bad plan either. And I guess that it is, effectively, our only choice” – Sakai said.

“Yeah. Let’s wait for our comrades to arrive so that we can get this done. Meanwhile, tell Tanaka-san to ask his contacts to cancel the police response so we can do this smoothly” – Yuri said, stopping the engine at the designated place.

“Understood, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said, picking up his smartphone for another call.

Hardly twenty minutes later, reinforcements arrived from the Kubo Estate in another Mercedes SUV. Once both groups were together, they moved up the street towards the warehouse, and then through the conveniently open gates.

They were greeted by an elderly Japanese watchman, who slowly approached the SUVs. Yuri and the others got off the vehicles with their guns on their hands and started to take positions of the assault.

“Old man, where are the Russian gangsters?” – Yuri asked. The watchman pointed to the warehouse’s second floor windows before being shot dead by a sniper.

“Shit, they have seen us! Take cover!” – Sakai ordered, so Yuri and the men ran to protect themselves behind the SUVs.

A shootout began, with the Moskovsky gangsters opening fire at the Kubo Group’s team. Thanks to the decent cover that the armored Mercedes SUVs provided, Yuri’s team had just to wait until the enemies had to reload, so that they could take them out with their assault rifles. Once the last of the second-floor defenders fell after around fifteen minutes of fire exchange, Yuri prepared a team to enter the warehouse and secure it, with her machine pistol in her hands, placing themselves at the side of the double doors to the warehouse.

“Let’s go!” – Yuri said, kicking open the double doors, with her gun pointing forward and her entourage of *shatei* close behind.

They found themselves in a wide, open storage space, with a catwalk around the second floor filled with Russians firing at them.

“Take cover behind those crates, quick!” – Yuri ordered, so her men ran and placed themselves behind the several crates and containers that presumably housed weapons and drugs.

“*You will never take over our warehouse, Yakuza trash!*” – a Moskovsky Bratva thug cried out in Russian before being shot by one of Yuri’s men.

“Shoot the ones hiding in the catwalk!” – Sakai ordered. A Kubo Group sniper took cover behind a crate and aimed his high-powered semiautomatic scoped rifle at the enemies, taking out a couple of them with quick shots. However, one of the Russians shot him in the arm, taking him out of action.

“Damn, they hit Abe! Someone, pick up that sniper rifle!” – a Kubo Group *shatei* said.

“I’ll do it! Take him outside while I handle this!” – Yuri said, picking up Abe’s rifle and reloading it for more kills.

Up until then, she had never used a rifle at all outside Oleksandr’s practice range, where she was trained to use an assault rifle. This stolen Howa 64 semiautomatic battle rifle equipped with a scope was not that different in its handling, but after Yuri scored her first kill with it, the recoil impulse from the full-powered cartridge shook her greatly.

“Fuck!” – Yuri said, somewhat hurt by the kick.

“The first shot with one of those is always hurtful, I know! But keep it up!” – Sakai said, shooting at the enemies.

Yuri understood that sniper support was to be vital in taking over the warehouse, so she steeled herself and aimed the weapon to find more targets. One by one, she slowly killed most of the Russians hiding in the catwalk behind the sheet metal covers, and by the time her magazine was empty, she had taken a slight liking to the rifle. When the last of the enemy defenders was down, Yuri and her team advanced and started neutralizing the remaining Moskovsky thugs.

“*Shit, the Yakuza are too strong! Let’s run out!*” – an enemy ordered in Russian, and so, the remaining goons started to retreat through a back door, so that they could get into their vehicles and escape. Yuri and her men ran behind them, but they could not stop them from leaving, merely denting their armored cars with their bullets.

“They ran away! Fucking cowards!” – Sakai cried at them, as he watched the last of their cars leave.

“Area clear!” – Yuri said, so her team lowered their weapons.

“Whew. That was relatively quick” – one of Yuri’s men said.

“Yeah. The warehouse is ours” – another of Yuri’s men said.

“Excellent job, gentlemen. You’ve proved once again who’s the boss in this town. Sakai-kun, call Tanaka-san and inform him that the warehouse is his. Tell him it will need a little cleaning, though” – Yuri ordered.

“Right away, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said.

“Great job. How’s Abe-san?” – Yuri asked one of her men.

“He’s by the cars. One of our men is treating his wound” – the goon replied.

“Very well. I think we didn’t suffer any casualties. That’s remarkable” – Yuri said.

“It is indeed, *oyabun*” – the goon said.

With the job done, Yuri, Sakai and the men stayed in the warehouse, providing security until Tanaka and his force arrived. Around an hour later, the *shateigashira* made it there, together with a couple of large panel vans, which carried his men, and also would serve to transport the dead enemies into a secure location where they would be disposed of safely. During all that time, not a single police car showed up, a testament to the effectiveness of Tanaka’s contacts inside law enforcement.

“Impressive. Your contacts will be very useful for the Kubo Estate in the days to come” – Yuri commented to Tanaka, already sitting in the driver’s seat, and preparing to leave the warehouse.

“There’s nothing in this country that can’t be done, as long as you have the right amount of money” – Tanaka said.

“Well then, now that the warehouse belongs to your people, will you accept our offer?” – Yuri asked.

“Of course, I’ll accept it, *oyabun*. I’m a man of my word. Just give me a day to pack up my stuff and designate a successor, and I’ll be at your service” – Tanaka said.

“Glad to hear that. See you at the Estate” – Yuri said.

“I’m looking forward to it” – Tanaka said, before bowing before Yuri and leaving into the warehouse.

“Time to leave, isn’t it?” – Yuri asked Sakai.

“Yeah. We made quite the mess here with the Russians” – Sakai said.

“But you can’t deny it was fun” – Yuri said.

“Fun? I don’t know if I would qualify a shootout and the murder of Russian goons as ‘fun’, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said.

“Maybe I’ve become a psychopath, but I consider this type of stuff to be very stimulating” – Yuri said, with a smile.

“Let’s hope we all can keep a little sanity by the time we have taken over this city” – Sakai said. Yuri and he laughed.

“Come, let’s return to the Estate” – Yuri said, before starting the car for their return trip to the Kubo Estate.

Chapter 11: A Date with Hell

Now that Yuri had managed to recruit Tanaka for the position of *wakagashira*, she could focus on solving the second half of the problem, or rather, the opportunity, that Nomura and Watanabe had created for her when they betrayed her and paid the price for it. While Tanaka settled in the Kubo Estate and prepared to issue his first orders as the second-in-command, Yuri and Sakai were busy trying to contact Eichi Hirano, the man from the government district and of collegiate background that Yuri had selected to be his *so-honbucho* or administrator of the Kubo Estate.

After a couple of calls to his staff, they managed to arrange for a meeting between the two so that Yuri could put her proposal over the table. They agreed to meet at Hirano's home and base of operations, a penthouse located at the top of a building not very far from the city hall. However, a surprise was waiting for them when they arrived there, after a short cruise from the Kubo Estate.

"This is it. The building where Hirano-san lives" – Sakai said.

"Cool. Call and tell him that we're going up there" – Yuri said, turning the SUV's engine off.

"Yes, Kubo-sama" – Sakai said, dialing Hirano's home phone number. It took quite a while for the call to be answered.

"He's taking his good deal of time" – Yuri said, intrigued.

"I know. Something's kinda off" – Sakai said.

Eventually, the phone call was answered.

"Hello? It's Sakai. I have brought the *oyabun* for the meeting, Hirano-san" – Sakai said.

"Uh, hello, Sakai-san. Hirano-dono is... not feeling well today. Please come back another day" – a male voice said.

"Who's this? What do you mean Hirano-san is not feeling well?" – Sakai asked in a loud voice.

"I'm sorry, Sakai-san. Please return another day" – the voice nervously said.

"What? I have the *oyabun* waiting her for him!" – Sakai angrily said.

"He's not available at the moment. Just... leave" – the voice said.

"We're not leaving anywhere! We're going upstairs now!" – Sakai said, before hanging up.

"That sounded suspicious" – Yuri said.

"I know. These guys must be hiding something. We must check it out" – Sakai said, opening the door of the vehicle and getting off. Yuri nodded, and followed him out of the car so that they could enter the building and get on the elevator.

After they crossed the glass doors, a security guard tried to get on their way.

"Halt. This is a restricted area. State your business" – the guard said.

"We're here to see Eichi Hirano-san. Do not try to stop us" – Sakai menacingly said to the guard.

"Oh, so you're Hirano-dono's friends? Thank goodness you're here" – the security guard said, relieved.

"Why do you say that? Do you know Hirano-san?" – Sakai asked.

"Of course, I know him. I work for him, after all. But he has disappeared, and his men are panicking because of it" – the guard said.

"Really? How much time has passed since you last heard of him?" – Yuri asked.

"He didn't come home last night. I last saw him leave yesterday morning, but he hasn't returned yet. I've called him time and time again, but his cellphone is switched off. I fear something could have happened to him" – the guard said.

"Great. Now we have a new problem we need to deal with" – Sakai angrily said.

"Let's go upstairs and interrogate his men. Maybe they can provide us with more information" – Yuri said, pressing the elevator button.

And so, after the elevator got to the first floor, Yuri and Sakai stepped into it and pressed the button to reach the last floor, where Hirano lived. Once the elevator stopped, Yuri and Sakai walked at a brisk pace towards Hirano's door, and Sakai knocked on it.

"Open the door! Now!" – Sakai shouted. The door slowly opened, revealing a small team of very scared *shatei*, with a somber expression on their faces.

"What's happening? Where's Hirano-san?" – Yuri asked.

"Hirano-dono is..." – a *shatei* began to say, before they were interrupted by Yuri.

"Don't say it. We know he's disappeared" – Yuri said.

"You know it? Who spilled the beans?" – a *shatei* asked.

"That doesn't matter. Tell us about Hirano-san and where we can find him" – Sakai asked, looking at the *shatei* in a cold manner.

"We... we don't know, Sakai-san. Our boss left yesterday morning and hasn't returned since. Please, you got to believe us! We're scared, and we don't know what to do!" – a *shatei* nervously replied.

"I think they're telling the truth, Sakai-kun" – Yuri said.

"Really? I'm not so sure about that, Kubo-sama. They are acting like they're hiding something" – Sakai said, while the *shatei* stood there paralyzed.

"Look at them. They are just kids. I don't think they're involved with Hirano-san's disappearance" – Yuri said.

"For someone who's a kid herself, you talk with a lot of property, Kubo-sama" – Sakai said.

“Please, *oyabun*! I swear we don’t know where Hirano-dono is! You got to believe us!” – the *shatei* desperately said. His colleagues looked at Yuri and Sakai with extreme fear, with eyes pleading for mercy.

“I believe you. But you need to help us to find Hirano-san” – Yuri said.

“Thank you, *oyabun*! Thank you, thank you!” – the *shatei* said, clumsily smiling.

“You’re welcome, I guess. Sakai-kun, I think we should register the apartment to find a clue as to where Hirano-san is” – Yuri said.

“Playing detective, huh? Yeah, I think we should start there. The three of you, stay here. And don’t try anything while we’re registering Hirano-san’s room, or you’ll regret it” – Sakai coldly said.

“Yes, Sakai-san!” – the three *shatei* all said in unison, after which Yuri and Sakai went upstairs.

“You seem very tense, Sakai-kun. Is there something wrong?” – Yuri kindly asked.

“Nothing wrong, Kubo-sama. I just don’t like being lied to. Especially with concerning matters like this. I’ve been lied tmany times in my life. And I don’t want to pay the price for it again” – Sakai said.

“I see. They’ve also lied to me many times in my life too. Perhaps I can share with you some tips to deal with that” – Yuri said, trying to calm her *saiko-komon*.

“Maybe. But for now, let’s concentrate on the task at hand” – Sakai said. Yuri nodded, and they walked through the corridor until they reached Hirano’s bedroom.

Inside, they found themselves on a quite untidy room, with the bed’s sheets and clothing all over the floor and an overall messy table with a TV on it, beside of which there was also a Makarov pistol.

“Looks like a high school student’s room” – Sakai said.

“Kinda, yes. Let’s look for evidence” – Yuri said, and so both gangsters started to search for clues that hinted something about Hirano’s whereabouts.

While Sakai opened the drawers and emptied their contents, Yuri took care of looking over the table and besides the bed. After searching for some minutes, Yuri found, amongst all the junk, a peculiar instant photograph, which depicted Hirano and a mysterious Japanese girl in front of what appeared to be a nightclub. The couple were smiling, and they looked very happy. Yuri then looked at the date of the picture: it had been taken merely two days before.

“Sakai-kun, look” – Yuri said, calling his *saiko-komon*.

“Yes?” – Sakai asked, walking to Yuri’s position. Yuri then showed him the photograph.

“Do you think that girl might have something to do with Hirano-san’s disappearance?” – Yuri asked.

“Maybe, I’m not sure. But I know that place. It’s, in fact, one of our clubs at Susukino. The Studio 11” – Sakai said.

“Perhaps the folks over there may have an insight as to who’s that girl and what may have happened. Let’s go there” – Yuri said.

“Okay. Should we take Hirano’s men with us?” – Sakai asked.

“They may prove useful, yes. Perhaps we’ll need backup. And we have a lot of space for them in the SUV” – Yuri said.

“Alright. I’ll tell them to follow us them. And also, to not try anything stupid” – Sakai said. Yuri laughed.

“Come on, *saiko-komon*! You need to relax a little. I’ll invite you a drink once we are done with this one” – Yuri said, winking at him.

“But you can’t even buy alcohol, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said.

“I’ll find a way to do it. Now let’s go” – Yuri said.

And so, with that clue, Yuri, Sakai and Hirano’s men left the apartment and returned to Yuri’s Mercedes. Then, with the help of Sakai’s instructions, Yuri plotted the way to the nearby Studio 11 Club in Susukino and drove there, arriving at the location a few minutes afterwards.

“Now that we’re here, we should talk with the staff in order to find more clues. Get off the vehicle and follow me” – Sakai said, and so, the five people stepped out of the SUV and walked inside the club, which was preparing itself for the night.

“Gentlemen, the club is closed” – a staff girl said.

“We’re from the group, and we’re here for business, sweetheart. Can I ask you guys a couple of questions?” – Yuri asked.

“Okay, I hope I can get you some answers. What do you want to know?” – the girl asked. Yuri took out the photograph from her jacket and showed it to the staff girl.

“This girl here. Have you ever seen her?” – Yuri asked.

“Sure. That girl is Yoko Sasaki-san. She’s a call girl who works here” – the staff girl replied.

“A prostitute. Do you know where she lives?” – Sakai asked.

“I don’t know if I should give you her address. I... I don’t want for her to be harmed because of it” – the staff girl said nervously.

“Don’t worry, we’re not that way. Please, we need to know her address. It’s very important” – Yuri said.

“Very well. Let me check the records and I’ll tell you where she lives” – the staff girl said, so while Yuri and the men waited, she went inside the office and looked for the information on a computer. When she found it, she wrote it down in a piece of paper and gave it to Yuri, who then looked it up in her smartphone.

“This address is located in Shinkotoni” – Yuri said.

“That’s not far from here. We should go now” – Sakai said.

“Please, don’t harm Sasaki-san. She’s a pretty kind and sweet girl” – the staff girl said.

“We’ll do what we have to do, girl. Let’s return to the car” – Sakai said.

With the address in her hands, Yuri and the team got on the SUV once more, and they drove off to Shinkotoni, a large residential area located to the north.

“Who controls this area of Sapporo?” – Yuri asked Sakai as they drove through the city.

“I’m not sure. Because it’s mostly a residential zone, there isn’t much gang presence over there. But I may be wrong” – Sakai said.

“We’ll soon find out, I guess” – Yuri said.

Around half-an-hour of driving later, the Kubo Group team arrived at Shinkotoni, and started to get around the district in order to find Yoko Sasaki’s address. After driving slowly through the serene, quiet neighborhood, among the several houses of varying size and appearance, they finally managed to find the address – a large, Bauhaus-inspired three-story house.

“Sasaki-chan must be quite the rich bitch if she can afford a house like this” – one of Hirano’s men said.

“Yeah. She must have slept with politicians or millionaires to afford it” – another of Hirano’s men said.

“I don’t know. It seems suspicious. No call girl would buy such a house, much less in this neighborhood, in my humble opinion” – Yuri said.

“Well, what should we do now?” – Sakai asked.

“I’ll try ringing the bell, see if that girl can open the door and come clean with us” – Yuri said, pressing the bell located just under the sign that read “Sasaki”.

“Who’s this?” – a young female voice said.

“Uh, is this the house of Yoko Sasaki-san?” – Yuri asked.

“Who’s asking?” – the female voice asked.

“Uh, I’m here from the Post Office” – Yuri said. Some seconds passed.

“Please, wait a minute. I’ll be there right away” – the young female voice said. Around a couple minutes later, the house’s door opened, and a young, black haired Japanese girl appeared.

“She’s the girl from the photo. She’s Yoko Sasaki” – Sakai said.

Yuri started to approach the gate, however, before she could reach it, another person appeared. It was a tall, bearded guy who did not appear to be Japanese.

“Shit! I know that guy! He’s the Butcher, a high-ranking mobster from the Ivanov Bratva!” – one of Hirano’s men whispered. The team responded by suddenly taking out their pistols from their jackets.

“What? What is this?” – Sasaki asked, frightened.

“The Yakuza... you treacherous dirty bitch! You brought them here!” – the Butcher shouted at Sasaki in a thick Russian accent.

“No, I didn’t! Please, what are you going to do? I don’t want to die!” – Sasaki asked, scared for her life.

“You’ll die now, whore!” – the Butcher screamed, taking a revolver out of his waist and pointing to Sasaki.

“No, no!” – Sasaki said, before being shot in the head by the high-powered revolver, splashing brain matter and skull pieces all over the place.

“*You won’t catch me alive, Yakuza fucks! Your friend will die!*” – the Butcher said in Russian, before running into the house and closing the door.

“Damn, this guy is deranged. Let’s go, people. We need to find our friend” – Yuri said, shooting at the gate’s lock and kicking it open. The men followed her with their guns in their hands and entered the house, which, as it turned out, was populated by many Russian gangsters.

The only option for Yuri, Sakai and Hirano’s men was to pummel their way through the house, under enemy fire from assault rifles and pistols. Taking cover behind pillars, walls and furniture, the team slowly advanced, killing enemy goons as they moved. Before long, most of the enemies on the first floor, including the Butcher, had been taken out, which meant that the two floors above and the basement had to be checked out and cleared.

“We’ll divide in two teams. Sakai-kun, take two of our men and check out the two upper floors. I’ll clear the basement. You’re coming with me” – Yuri told one of Hirano’s men.

“Yes, *oyabun*” – Hirano’s *shatei* said.

“Excellent. Let’s do this. If you find Hirano-san, tell me at once” – Yuri said.

And so, both teams separated and checked out their respective areas of the home. Yuri and the *shatei* slowly walked down the staircase, with their handguns pointing forward, until they reached the basement. The lights were turned off, so the *shatei* turned on his smartphone’s light, revealing a couple of Russians that were hidden, waiting for the precise moment to strike. Yuri quickly dispatched them with well-placed headshots. And then, after lighting up the place, they discovered a naked man, only dressed in his traditional *fundoshi* underwear, exposing his heavily tattooed body. He was unconscious.

“Hirano-dono! Hirano-dono!” – the *shatei*, running to try and reanimate Hirano, who, after some seconds, suddenly woke up.

“Where... where am I?” – Hirano slowly asked.

“You’re okay, Hirano-dono, you’re okay. We’ve come for you” – the *shatei* said.

“Where’s Sasaki-san?” – Hirano asked.

“She’s dead. She was killed by the Russians” – Yuri said.

“Poor girl. May she rest in peace” – Hirano said.

“Can you stand up and walk? We must get out of here before police arrives” – Yuri said.

“Yeah, I can handle it. Let me get my clothes and we’ll exit this wretched place” – Hirano said, standing up and walking to a table where his suit, was located. After dressing up, the three escaped from the basement.

“Kubo-sama, we’ve killed all the Russians in the upper floors, but there’s no sign of Hirano-san” – Sakai said.

“Don’t worry. We got him. Let’s get out of here. Police will arrive soon” – Yuri said.

“Hello, Sakai-san. I’m sorry for all of this” – Hirano said.

“You’ll explain to us what happened when we’re on the road. Come on, move” – Yuri said.

And so, the six Yakuza got out of the house. All around it there were very scared people who had heard the several gunshots and had called the police.

“Hurry, come on” – Yuri said, opening the doors of the Mercedes. Sakai, Hirano, and the three *shatei* hopped into the car as Yuri started the engine, so she could finally drive away.

“Gosh, that was intense” – Yuri said.

“You bet it was. You must tell us how you got there, Hirano-san” – Sakai said.

“It’s a long story. A couple days ago I met this beautiful girl, Sasaki-san, at the Studio 11 Club. She was a sweet and kind girl who approached me. We danced. We kissed. We made love. And we started dating. Turns out, during our first date, she tricked me into going inside that house, where the Ivanovs were waiting for me. Apparently, she was working for the Ivanov Bratva as a spy inside our clubs in Susukino, and was ordered by The Butcher, one of the guys who you killed back there, to seduce me and capture me. Damned bastards wanted to ask the group for ransom” – Hirano explained.

“She betrayed you and paid with her life” – Yuri said.

“Yeah. I feel very sorry for her. She was probably just a desperate young prostitute who unfortunately got indebted to them and was forced to work for them. I should have foreseen it. She always acted weirdly, to be honest, so it was pretty obvious in retrospective. Could have saved her and the lives of many other people. But whatever. What’s done is done” – Hirano said, resigned.

“It’s a good thing we could rescue you, Hirano-san. Now that we got you, I can offer you the position of *so-honbucho*. The Kubo Estate needs an administrator, and you’re perfect for the task. Would you accept that challenge? You’ll be handsomely rewarded” – Yuri said.

“If that keeps me safe from the Ivanovs and keeps me out of the nightclubs for a time, then I’m in. It’s the least I can do for you after rescuing me, *oyabun*” – Hirano said.

“Ha, ha, that’s what I wanted to hear. Let’s go back to your apartment so that you can pack your stuff. You’ll also need to designate a successor” – Yuri said.

“Yeah. And I also would like to have some sleep” – Hirano said, yawning.

“We’ll make sure you can sleep soundly at night, Hirano-dono” – one of the *shatei* said.

“Thank you, guys. I owe you one too” – Hirano said.

After Yuri and Sakai dropped off Hirano and his *shatei* at his apartment, they proceeded to leave back to the Kubo Estate. It had been a long day and both Yuri and Sakai wanted some rest.

“Whew. What a day, huh?” – Yuri said, while parking the SUV at the Kubo Estate’s parking lot.

“Yes. Just like yesterday, we went in full psycho-mode against the Russians. I hope they do not take retribution against us or else we’ll be in trouble” – Sakai said.

“About that...” – Yuri said.

“Yes, Kubo-sama?” – Sakai asked.

“Now that the positions of the *wakagashira* and the *so-honbucho* are occupied again and the Kubo Group is operating at full efficiency once more, I thought that it’s time to get rid of our little Russian problem” – Yuri said.

“What do you mean?” – Sakai asked.

“What I’m saying is that we should wipe them out and take over their businesses” – Yuri said.

“Us? Against the whole Russian Mafia here in Sapporo? That seems a little farfetched, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said, alarmed. Yuri laughed.

“I didn’t mean all the Bratvas here in the city, *baka*. I meant only the Moskovsky and the Ivanov Bratvas. They are our main rivals and should be dealt with as such” – Yuri explained.

“Oh, I see. Sounds more reasonable, but still will be quite the challenge” – Sakai said.

“Really? I don’t think so, *saiko-komon*. We have the numbers. We have the weapons. We have talented people like you, Tanaka-san and Hirano-san running the show. I bet we’re more than capable of taking them both out in one go” – Yuri said.

“Now that I think of it, our recent operations have weakened them considerably, especially the Moskovsky Bratva, who has lost many of their lockups and merchandise” – Sakai said.

“You see what I mean now? It’s time to grow. To expand. Of course, we don’t have what we need to ascend to the major leagues – yet -, but we can aspire to play in the middle leagues. I’m sure you know what I mean. We have to create our brand and make it grow” – Yuri said.

“I agree with you. We have to make it clear to all the smaller groups that we’re not to be messed up with. Still, I suggest caution. If you really want to wipe out those Russians, we should start with the weakest of them. The Moskovsky Bratva. Their holdings in Sapporo had been reduced to almost nothing. It will be easy to eliminate their threat. As for the Ivanovs, they are a bit stronger, but I think that, with coordination and a bit of effort, we can take them out as well in the near future” – Sakai said.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought too. We should start planning our final assault against the Moskovsky Bratva as soon as possible” – Yuri said.

“For now, however, it’s time to rest, Kubo-sama. I’m sure you’re as tired as I am” – Sakai said, with a little bit of impatience.

“Oh, yes, sure, I’m sorry. Let’s get out of this thing” – Yuri said, opening the doors of the vehicle so that Sakai and she could get out of it.

“Let’s discuss this tomorrow morning” – Yuri said.

“Yes, Kubo-sama. I’ll arrange for Tanaka-san and Hirano-san to be there” – Sakai said.

“Thanks, my dear *saiko-komon*. I’ll be waiting for it” – Yuri said, before parting ways with her trusty advisor for the day.

Chapter 12: *Blitzkrieg*

The day after Eichi Hirano was rescued from the Ivanov safehouse in Shinkotoni, the *oyabun*, her *saiko-komon*, the *wakagashira* and the *so-honbucho* of the Kubo Group met at the Kubo Estate to plan out their strategy against the Moskovsky Bratva. According to their information, the only neighborhood still controlled by them was a small area around the docks at Otaru, a satellite city which was located outside Sapporo proper but was still considered part of the sphere of influence of the Sapporo gangs, as well as being a strategic point for any smuggled good into the city, including firearms. The Russians controlled a pier over there, which received weekly weapons shipments from their motherland. And it was time that it fell into the Kubo Group’s hands.

“So, what are we going to do, people? We have enough men and resources to take over their operation and wipe them out for good. But we need a strategy” – Yuri said.

“Let’s see. First we have to decide if we’re going to do this in a complicated, stealthy, and sneaky manner, or in a straightforward, aggressive way. When we have that decided, we can continue on with the details” – Tanaka said.

“The Moskovsky Bratva is almost finished. I don’t think investing in a complicated strategy will be worth the hassle. I think we should adopt a simple, quick and devastating tactic in order to take them out, and to show to this city that we’re going all in” – Yuri said.

“Right, I like it. Then, we should do a lightning strike at their facilities. Attack with so much speed and boldness that they will be rapidly overwhelmed. To that end, I suggest a conventional, large scale shock assault with vehicles at their dock facilities. We go there, kill them as we move, and find their boss. Cheslav Moskovsky must be there, directing the operation. If we kill him, or in the least, if we force him out of the business, then the Bratva will be done, and we can concentrate on the Ivanovs next. We can do it today if you want” – Tanaka explained.

“So, you mean a *blitzkrieg* attack?” – Hirano asked.

“*Blitzkrieg*? What is that?” – Tanaka asked, confused.

"*Blitzkrieg* is a German word. It means "lightning war", and it refers to the shock tactics used by Nazi Germany at the start of the Second World War, when they invaded Poland and France and all that stuff" – Hirano explained.

"Always presuming of your collegiate background, huh, Hirano-san?" – Tanaka acidly asked.

"It's not college stuff, it's high school stuff, my dear Tanaka-san. Everyone should know it" – Hirano said, in a similarly acid way.

"Well, call it whatever you want, but yeah, it will be a lightning strike, so hard and so fast that the Moskovsky Bratva will be quickly disintegrated. What do you think, *oyabun*?" – Tanaka asked.

"I think it's a good plan. As for you, *saiko-komon*, what do you say?" – Yuri asked.

"I agree with the strategy. It'll send a clear message to everyone in town" – Sakai said.

"Alright then, it is decided. We're going to assault the Moskovsky Bratva's holdings in Otaru and end their career. I'll lead the assault, and you'll watch my back, Sakai-kun. Tanaka-san, tell the men to prepare their weapons and body armor, and to get into the vehicles as soon as possible" – Yuri ordered.

"Yes, *oyabun*. I'll also notify my contacts inside law enforcement so that the police doesn't interfere" – Tanaka said.

"Perfect. Come, Sakai-kun. We have to strap ourselves for the fight" – Yuri said.

And so, while the *shatei* and *kyodai* prepared for the assault, Yuri and Sakai left for the Kubo Estate's armory to pick up some high-powered equipment. This included grenades, body armor, and of course, AK-pattern assault rifles. When they were ready, they quickly moved to their vehicle, which was crewed by a squad of *shatei* ready for a fight. Finally, after Yuri gave the order, a large convoy of around six black armored Mercedes-Benz GLS-Class SUVs got out of the Kubo Estate and took the moderately-long trip to Otaru.

It was to be Yuri's first large-scale assault, and her first important conquest. Conquering or wiping out another gang was considered a huge accomplishment. So, it was a great opportunity to show the rest of the Yakuza and foreign gang world of Sapporo what was she made of.

"We're almost at the Moskovsky pier. As we discussed previously, we're dividing in three groups of two teams each. Each group will attack simultaneously from one of the three exits from the pier and push through into the facility until all the enemies have been wiped out" – Yuri said over a radio.

"Understood, *oyabun*. Preparing to assault the pier" – a *kyodai* replied over the radio.

"Everyone, are you ready?" – Yuri asked. The team replied by cocking their weapons.

"That's what I wanted to hear. Let's get on it" – Yuri said.

With the plan clear, Yuri and the SUV following her accelerated through their entrance to the port, shooting a couple of Russian defenders who could not even manage to draw their weapons. They

aggressively parked the SUVs and got off the vehicles, taking cover behind and besides the vehicles as the Russians showered them with rounds, and attacking them with assault rifles in turn.

“Push, push! We have to get through these guys!” – Yuri said, firing and killing a couple of Moskovsky Bratva thugs with her AK.

“You heard the boss! Move, move!” – a *kyodai* said over the radio, before directing his *shatei* on the assault.

Quickly and decisively, Yuri and her men managed to pummel through the beleaguered Russians, shooting them mercilessly, until they reached the warehouse area of the pier. Then, they entered each of the warehouses, clearing them of goons and claiming them for the group. As they moved, Yuri noticed that some of the Russians would try to surrender, only to be executed by her vengeful Yakuza members, who knew that, in the world of organized crime, there’s always a place for a *vendetta*. Yuri knew that as well, and so she thought what to do with Cheslav Moskovsky once she found him. Would she kill him? Or would she spare his life and risk having to deal with him later? That was a question that stayed in her mind during the whole assault.

Suddenly, as they were clearing the last portions of the pier, Yuri and her men heard the sounds of a helicopter quickly approaching to the pier. Yuri looked at the sky and could see a small chopper approaching to the pier, with Russian gangsters firing at them from the doors. The helicopter aligned itself with an empty space on the pier and started to land, signaling it was either going to bring in reinforcements or it was going to evacuate the remaining Russians, including Cheslav Moskovsky. Yuri knew she needed to act quickly if the latter was the case.

“Quick! Moskovsky will leave in that chopper! Take him out before he has the chance!” – Yuri ordered, moving forward towards the helicopter’s position.

As they ran there, Yuri could see a group of Russians running to the aircraft.

“There he is! That’s Moskovsky!” – Sakai shouted.

“Kill him before he hops into the chopper!” – a *kyodai* ordered.

“Protect the boss! If he falls, we’re done!” – an enemy goon ordered his mates in Russian.

Despite Yuri’s best efforts, her men could not manage to hit Moskovsky, who got into the chopper. In a desperate attempt to stop his escape, however, Sakai and his force shot the tail rotor of the aircraft before it could take off, destroying it and making it impossible for the helicopter to escape the pier.

“Well done, Sakai-kun! Everyone, follow me! We have to reach Moskovsky before he finds another way to escape!” – Yuri ordered, leading the charge against the remaining Russians.

Once they reached the helicopter, they killed the pilots and searched for Cheslav Moskovsky, finding him still sitting in the machine, but with a gunshot to his head. Apparently, he became so desperate and anxious at the prospect of being executed by the Yakuza, that he decided to end his life, relieving Yuri of the responsibility of doing it herself. The remaining Russians scattered and hastily left the pier, either in some of their Mercedes luxury executive sedans or in speedboats they had moored there, never to return. Yuri theorized later that many of them quickly returned to Russia, after seeing

their organized crime project being completely destroyed. Sakai entered the helicopter and turned the engines off to kill the deafening noise produced by the broken machine, marking the end the assault with a victory for the Kubo Group.

And so, after leaving behind a garrison to clean up the mess and inspect the merchandise that the Moskovsky Bratva had left behind, Yuri and her men returned to the Kubo Estate. They had suffered light casualties, losing a couple of *shatei*, and having some wounded, but it was nothing compared to the quantity of Russian gangsters that lost their life to the Kubo Group that day. It was a time for celebration, a time when Yuri could show off the prowess of her organization to other gangs in the system, maybe through throwing a large party at the Kubo Estate, but in spite of that, when they returned to the Estate, only some *shatei* and *kyodai* celebrated with sake, sushi, and hot women. The group's leaders instead left for Yuri's office, where they would start to immediately plan their *blitzkrieg* offensive against the Ivanov Bratva. Yuri did not want to lose the momentum they had earned with their efforts, and so decided that the attack against all remaining Ivanov assets would begin very soon.

* * *

"Now that the Moskovsky Bratva is no more, we have to take care of the Ivanovs. And I mean as soon as possible. We generated a lot of steam with our successful assault, and I want to employ it as a way to earn us even more respect" – Yuri said that evening.

"Agreed. We should attack at once in order to keep up the streak. But the Ivanovs have more territories than just a single pier, so we would have to simultaneously attack them all at once" – Tanaka said.

"Then we'll do just that. Tell me, *saiko-komon*, how many assets are being currently controlled by the Ivanov Bratva as of today?" – Yuri asked.

"Let me see... they control a couple of warehouses in Shinkominami where they store their stash. They also have presence in Kawashimo, where they own a large drugs distribution center. And of course, there's the Ivanov Manor, located not very far from here near Gotenzan Park, where Gavrilovich Ivanov and his family live. It is heavily protected" – Sakai explained.

"We'll attack all of those locations at once. And we'll do it immediately, in fact, tonight" – Yuri said. Tanaka, Hirano, and Sakai seemed complicated with that suggestion.

"Shouldn't we let the men rest before that? I mean, tomorrow would be a good day for the raid, but tonight?" – Hirano asked.

"We need to catch the Ivanovs by surprise. Once they realize that the Moskovsky Bratva are no more, they will get reinforcements which could potentially make it harder to wipe them out. Remember, this is *blitzkrieg*. There's no time to lose" – Yuri said. After that explanation, her previous words made more sense, and the men agreed to it.

"You're right. We have to end this while there's still time" – Tanaka said.

"See? We shall attack the Ivanovs at their three areas of influence and control then. I'll lead the charge against their Manor near Gotenzan. Sakai-kun, you'll take your men to Shinkominami, while

Tanaka-san will attack and capture the drugs distribution center in Kawashimo. Each of us will take a large, heavily armed force in order to properly capture those assets. Once the Ivanovs have been dealt with, we will celebrate like we ought to do when victory is at hand” – Yuri said.

“That sounds good, *oyabun*. I’ll transmit the orders to the *kyodai* right away. I just hope they don’t get angry at the prospect of attacking once more” – Tanaka said.

“They won’t, when you tell them that, if everything goes out well, they’ll earn a bonus in cash from the coffers of the Kubo Estate” – Yuri said.

“Ha, ha, that will be a nice motivation for them! Well thought, *oyabun*” – Hirano said.

“Thank you, *so-honbucha*. Without further ado, let’s prepare ourselves for the party” – Yuri said, ending the meeting.

With Yuri’s intentions now clear, all she had to do was to wait for the night to fall. When that happened, the men returned to their vehicles and started getting out to the city in order to bring an end to the Ivanov Bratva. Tanaka and Hirano managed to get some of the *shateigashira* to send their own forces as backup. There was no way the assault could end in failure, which was something that Yuri could not afford nonetheless, if she wanted to fulfill her ambitions of consolidating her leadership and her group’s operations in Sapporo. She had come too far to fail now.

“From tomorrow on, things will be different. This city will be ours” – Yuri thought, as she drove her SUV out of the Kubo Estate.

The night was young when Yuri and his forces arrived at the Ivanov Manor. True to Sakai’s words, the mansion, modeled after the late 19th Century Romanesque-revival style, was heavily guarded, with a lot of men patrolling the roofs with AKs in their hands, and a couple of cars blockading the entrance. This time, a different, but equally quick and deadly, approach was required, and so Yuri decided to split his force in two. They had brought sniper rifles with them, so while Yuri led her team into the manor, her snipers would quickly take out the Russians protecting the home.

And that is exactly what happened. As Yuri’s men assaulted the house, the snipers did their job, killing many goons protecting the house, who sometimes fell down the roof and landed on the yard, leaving large pools of blood on the stone floor and the grass. Before long, the outside of the manor had been secured, and Yuri and her people quickly found a way into the luxurious mansion itself.

“Everyone, on me. We must find and neutralize Ivanov before he has a chance to escape. Kill anyone who stands in your way” – Yuri said.

“Yes, *oyabun*” – Yuri’s *shatei* said in unison.

“Excellent. Let’s go inside!” – Yuri said, kicking open one of the mansion’s large crystal doors, shattering the glass and allowing the men to step inside.

Various shootouts ensued around various locations of the house, as the Ivanovs tried their last stand to defend their boss from the Yakuza. Thanks to being equipped with powerful shotguns, it was easy for the Kubo Group’s men to kill the Russians at close range, messing up the house in a bewildering

fashion, destroying much of the furniture and leaving pieces of human remains scattered all over the place.

“This place will need some redecoration once we’re done” – Yuri said, going upstairs, looking at the mutilated corpse of a Russian goon.

Once at the second floor, Yuri’s team slowly pushed their way through the corridors in order to reach the staircase that led to the third floor, encountering countless goons, each time armed with more powerful weaponry. On one occasion, when they reached an intersection, they were pinned down by a couple of enemies actually manning a machine-gun nest. They were responsible for hitting and wounding quite a few Kubo Group members. It took a couple of grenades to take out the goons and their PK machine gun. When that was clear, Yuri and her men advanced and went upstairs to the last floor, where Ivanov’s quarters were to be found.

Here, Yuri encountered goons heavily armed with hand-held light machine guns and automatic battle rifles, responsible for taking out a pair of her men. These thugs were also armored with heavy ballistic vests, requiring well-placed shots to the body or even headshots to be taken out effectively. Despite those gripes and the casualties, Yuri eventually managed to puncture through the Ivanov defense and reached what seemed to be the mansion’s master room, which she entered together with her men after killing the two bodyguards protecting the doors.

Inside, Yuri found an exquisitely designed bedroom, complete with very expensive and antique-looking furniture, a large Bang & Olufsen TV set and even paintings depicting important people from the Russian Empire. More importantly, she found a blonde and bearded man in his early forties, who was trying to pack valuable things and, as Yuri found out, money into backpacks and bags. Yuri knew exactly who this guy was and pointed her machine pistol at him.

“It’s over, Ivanov! We’re going to take over this place!” – Yuri said.

“Yes, yes, you can keep everything you want! Please, don’t harm me!” – Ivanov said, pleading for his life.

“What a coward! You should finish him off here and now, *oyabun!*” – one of the *shatei* said.

“Kill him and claim his possessions in the name of the Kubo Group!” – another *shatei* said.

“No, please!” – Ivanov said, raising his hands.

Yuri aimed at him, and was about to press the trigger, the glory of taking out an enemy boss by herself at her fingertips, when, suddenly, she heard a voice.

“*Papa!*” – a child said. Yuri turned her head and saw a very little girl, about three or four years old, running to Ivanov and hugging him. She was so little, she barely could hug his leg, but it was enough for Yuri to lower her weapon.

“*I told you to keep hidden, Tanya! Go back into the closet with your mother!*” – Ivanov told the little child in Russian.

“Please, have mercy! Don’t harm us!” – Ivanov said.

“Okay, okay, I see” – Yuri said.

“What? Are we going to spare him?” – a *shatei* asked, surprised. Yuri sighed.

“That child deserves to grow and be happy. We can’t be responsible for her misery” – Yuri said.

“Are you serious, *oyabun*? But he’s the leader of the Ivanovs! We can’t just let him live!” – another *shatei* said. Yuri looked at him and smiled.

“Unfortunately for you, I’m the one calling the shots here. Everyone, go secure the mansion. And ask Sakai-kun and Tanaka-san if they are done with their objectives. I will share a couple of words here with Ivanov-san” – Yuri said. The *shatei* nodded, and slowly left the room.

“Pack your things. You guys are leaving for Russia. I’ll make sure you can reach the airport unimpeded” – Yuri said.

“Why didn’t you pull the trigger?” – Ivanov asked.

“Because that was the right thing to do. Now, finish packing your stuff and get to your car. I’ll escort you to the airport personally. Come on” – Yuri ordered.

When Ivanov finished placing their personal stuff, which included pictures, clothing, and a bit of money to pay for the transport back to Russia, Yuri and her men escorted him, his wife, and his daughter into their Mercedes-Benz E-Class car, which was driven by one of the *shatei*, and she escorted them to the airport. Once there, she stayed with them until they had their tickets to Vladivostok in their hands. Finally, they left, never to return to Japan again, after which Yuri went back to her SUV and drove back to the Kubo Estate, where Sakai and Tanaka, both of which had fulfilled their tasks, were waiting for her. They were puzzled when Yuri revealed to them the outcome of their assault.

“I didn’t know Ivanov had a wife nor a daughter” – Sakai said back in the Estate.

“Me neither. The assault should have been terrifying for them” – Hirano said.

“Yeah. We actually had to blindfold the child temporarily so that she didn’t look at all the dead and mutilated Russians all over the house” – Yuri said.

“So, Cheslav Moskovsky died. And Gavrilovich Ivanov lived. Smells like a *vendetta* is on the works for the future” – Tanaka warned.

“Nah, I don’t think so. Ivanov lost his businesses. He lost his house. He lost countless men. But his family is alive. And that’s what matters the most to a man after all” – Yuri said.

“Good point. Let’s hope we don’t have to encounter him again” – Sakai said.

The meeting over, each of the Kubo Group’s leaders left to their room to sleep. It had been a hard and tough, but very rewarding day. Now that both of their rivals were gone, the Kubo Group was free to take over most of the gunrunning operations in Tokyo, quickly growing to control more than eighty percent of the trade, the rest being divided between the Chinese Triads and the Russian Mafia.

In the weeks that followed Yuri’s twin victories, the group experienced another evolution. Yuri and her subordinates sought to establish a brand which would be recognizable all over Hokkaido, and

later, Japan. They institutionalized their organization by joining a variety of mutual-help consortiums formed by mid-size Yakuza clans all over Japan, and even designed their own logo, which consisted of a very aggressively stylized cobalt blue cube silhouette on a white background. Since the pronunciation for “Kubo” meant “cube” in a variety of languages, Yuri thought it would be original and very appropriate. They also optimized their businesses by streamlining and simplifying the hierarchical structure, and also invested in rebuilding the assets acquired from the Moskovsky and the Ivanov Bratvas. Lastly, Yuri ordered for the clique system inside the group to be dissolved, since Nomura and Watanabe had betrayed the group and paid with their lives for it. In this way, she finally standardized the group, fulfilling Fujii-sama’s vision that every one of his gangsters should use firearms instead of swords.

Now it was time for celebration. Now it was time for real expansion. And Yuri was willing to exploit every grand opportunity available. The best days for the Kubo Group were ahead. A golden era had started.

The only question was: how long would it last?

PART II: THE EXPANSION ERA

Chapter 13: The Motherland Calls

Three months passed since the death of Cheslav Moskovsky and the escape of Gavrilovich Ivanov and his family from Japan, and around five months overall since Yuri Kubo left her life as a failed high school graduate and *ronin* to become one of the most effective, ruthless, and powerful figures of Hokkaido’s middle-level criminal underworld. Her criminal organization, the Kubo Group, was in the process of an aggressive expansion, with their sights on not just other areas of Hokkaido, but also on other areas of Japan and even out of the country, with a lot of potential in various Asian nations. Many growth opportunities would show up, some of them very successful, others not so much, which would see the exchange of millions of dollars for merchandise. And some of them would turn out to have long-lasting consequences. The expansion era was here to stay, and Yuri was confident in her intellect and prowess and those of her men to get the job done.

The first of those opportunities materialized during the middle of the Summer season, when Yuri and the fellow leaders of the Kubo Group were visited by Oleksandr and Dmitri, who were part of the Kubo Group’s extensive gunrunning operations and close friends of the leadership of the group. Apparently, they had a new contact in Russia who could provide them with countless firearms at a very discounted price and was willing to establish a working relationship with an organization in Japan who could distribute them not only in the domestic market, but overseas as well.

At first, Yuri thought it would be another local gang from Vladivostok who ran gunrunning operations themselves by stealing the goods from Russian military arsenals or factories. But when Oleksandr told her the real nature of their contact, she was really, really intrigued.

This is the story about Yuri’s first visit to Russia.

“So, let me see if I heard correctly. You’re saying that your contact in Russia, who claims he can provide us brand-new AKs at a very low price, is a Counter Admiral of the Russian Navy?” – Yuri asked Oleksandr, astonished by such surprising idea.

“That’s right, Kubo-sama. Counter Admiral Yuri Kurbatov, Commander of the Kamchatka Flotilla of the Russian Pacific Fleet. He’s basically in charge of the various Russian naval forces in the peninsula and has access to the Naval Infantry’s arsenals in Petropavlovsk” – Oleksandr explained.

“Is he called Yuri? Like the *oyabun*?” – Tanaka asked.

“Yes. But the Russian name Yuri is not the same as the Japanese name Yuri. One is for male and the other is for female. And they have different meanings as well” – Dmitri said.

“I see. The more you know. Anyway, what exactly does this Counter Admiral offer to us?” – Yuri asked.

“His people told me that they’re looking for an organization who’s willing to purchase their vast stockpiles of AK-pattern rifles. And I’m not talking about ordinary, run-of-the-mill, surplus-class Kalashnikovs. These are upgraded AK-74Ms that use a smaller and more accurate caliber and they’re also equipped with polymer furniture which is way lighter. They are, as a matter of fact, the exact same type of rifle that most of the Russian Armed Forces use today. Very deadly stuff that I’m sure the most adventurous people around here will love” – Oleksandr explained.

“Why would the Russian Navy be selling their precious AKs?” – Yuri asked.

“I don’t exactly know. But it’ll probably be because they’re upgrading their stocks into something more modern. Or maybe it’s because they’re downsizing. I’m not sure about that. Oh, and by the way, our contacts told us that he’s willing to sell other stuff as well. Armored cars, patrol boats, submarines...” – Oleksandr said. Tanaka laughed.

“Come on, Oleksandr. Why would we want to purchase armored cars, Oleksandr?” – Tanaka asked.

“Now that I think of it, it would be a nice option. Perhaps we don’t need them here in Japan, but as we were talking yesterday, there are many places around Asia and the world where people need weapons in a hurry, which is a ripe business opportunity very few people around here even think about. Imagine delivering armored cars to places like Southeast Asia, or the Middle East, or Africa. We would take quite the slice of such action” – Hirano said.

“Being part of such operations would mean rising up in the food chain. We’ll need the right connections, but I’m sure it can be done, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said, excited about the idea.

“Something like that would be great in the future, but for now, let’s focus on the AKs. It’s a very interesting opportunity. Getting the merchandise directly from the military would mean more stability and lower prices. And remember that, besides the Russian Mafia, the Chinese Triads and us, not many people around here use guns, so the local market is still ripe for expansion. You know what? I’m really interested. I would like to meet with this Counter Admiral Kurbatov, Oleksandr. Can you arrange a working session between us, my friend?” – Yuri asked Oleksandr.

“Of course. My contact said he would be very happy to meet us too. Let me make some calls and I’ll have the exact date ready for you tomorrow, boss” – Oleksandr said.

“Thanks, Oleksandr. This means a lot for the future of the group” – Yuri said. Oleksandr nodded, and he and Dmitri left the room in order to return to their gun shop.

“In the meantime, we should prepare to go over there. Oleksandr will come with us, as he’s our Russian-speaking firearms expert. Sakai-kun, you’re coming too” – Yuri said.

“Me? Are you sure?” – Sakai asked.

“Yes, of course. I need my *saiko-komon* to provide me intelligence and advice at all times. You should know that by now, Sakai-kun” – Yuri said.

“Yes, Kubo-sama. I’m sorry. It’s just that I’ve never been outside of Japan in my whole life. This will be quite the revelation for me” – Sakai said. Yuri smiled.

“I’ve never been outside Japan too, my dear *saiko-komon*. It’ll be a new experience for both of us. But don’t worry. Perhaps we can find you a hot Russian chick over there. Think about it” – Yuri said. Everyone in the room laughed.

“Thanks, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said.

“You’re welcome. Anyways, Hirano-san, how do you think we can get over to Russia? I’m not sure if there’s any flights from Chitose to Petropavlovsk” – Yuri said.

“I’m afraid you’re right, *oyabun*. Such commercial flight doesn’t exist. But I can get you a charter flight. Don’t expect a luxury business jet, though. Too expensive and troublesome. An unsuspecting and cheaper cargo plane, though, sounds more compelling, if you know what I mean” – Hirano said.

“Understood. Any plane will do. Please, make the necessary arrangements so that we can travel safely to Petropavlovsk” – Yuri ordered.

“Right away, *oyabun*” – Hirano said.

“Excellent. And as for you, Tanaka-san, you’ll be in charge of the group while I’m gone. Are you up to the task at hand, *wakagashira*?” – Yuri asked.

“Of course, *oyabun*. I’ll keep the group running as one of those expensive Swiss watches. You can rest assured” – Tanaka said.

“Magnificent, gentlemen. Now, let’s return to our duties. It seems like I’ll need some baggage for the trip” – Yuri said, standing up from his chair.

“Seems like I’ll need them too” – Sakai said.

A couple of days later, during that relatively warm Summer dawn, Yuri, Sakai, and Oleksandr found themselves on the tarmac of New Chitose Airport, waiting for their plane to be ready for boarding. Thanks to Hirano’s excellent demarche, he managed to find Yuri a company willing to carry them to Petropavlovsk. Being Yakuza was not a problem: that company had worked for criminal organizations before, as well as for other shadowy clients, most notably, a certain American intelligence agency, so Yuri, Sakai and Oleksandr could board the aircraft with their weapons and other equipment without the risk of being reported. Besides, they conveniently took care of all the

paperwork and the customs procedure, meaning Yuri did not even have to show her passport, never used before, in order to fly.

Around an hour before daylight, the Kubo Group team boarded the plane, an old, ex-military, propeller-driven C-130 Hercules transport aircraft, which would leisurely fly them on an almost four-hour long trip to the Russian city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, the largest and most important city in the Kamchatka Peninsula, as well as a strategic place for the Russian Federation's military forces. It housed an entire naval infantry brigade, naval aviation squadrons, and of course, ships and especially submarines, the latter being located in the nearby city of Vilkovo, a closed city zealously guarded by the Russian military.

After landing at Elizovo Airport, Yuri, Sakai and Oleksandr got off the Hercules and walked through the tarmac. It was a reasonably colder morning than it was in Hokkaido, and Sakai lamented he had not brought a thicker jacket with him. Greeting them was a small team of Russian naval infantry soldiers and sailors, all armed with AKs and wearing their military uniforms, along with a couple of Russian Navy officers who walked towards the Kubo Group delegation.

"Who is Yuri Kubo?" – one of the officers, dressed in the standard navy black uniform with a white peaked cap, asked in a thick Russian accent.

"Here. I am Yuri Kubo. Those are my advisor Issei Sakai, and my firearms expert, the Ukrainian national Oleksandr Lyubchenko. We're here to see Counter Admiral Yuri Kurbatov" – Yuri said, walking to the officer.

"Please, I need your passports and weapons" – the officer said. Yuri, Sakai and Oleksandr handed them their pistols and documents so that the Russian officer could look at them. After carefully scanning the passports, they returned them to their owners, but kept the weapons.

"Alright. Welcome to Russia, Miss Kubo. The Counter Admiral has ordered us to escort you to the naval base here at Petropavlovsk. Please, follow me to the vehicles" – the officer said, inviting Yuri, Sakai and Oleksandr to get into one of the military vehicles sent to fetch them. The designated vehicle was an all-terrain military mobility vehicle, similar in concept to a large, very square SUV, with visible armor and weapons. Yuri, Sakai, Oleksandr and one of the officers got into one of them, while the rest of the military team boarded the others.

The convoy drove off and transported the Kubo Group's delegation to the Russian Navy Pacific Fleet's military base, located across the city of Petropavlovsk. During the approximately one hour-long trip, Yuri looked through the window and contemplated the city, which had a slight picturesque character to it, but was mostly an industrial port city very blunt in its presentation, with abundant Soviet-era architecture and a heavy police and military presence. There were some fishing boats over the grayish North Pacific waters, and the place seemed overall quiet and peaceful, albeit also very dull.

Arriving at the naval base located at the south end of the city, Yuri could see several military ships moored at the piers, some very rusty and poorly maintained. There were also many structures which looked like warehouses, which, as they would be later told, housed the base's impressive arsenal of land weapons. Once they got to the base's inner area, they had to go through a gate, where a guarding officer took quite some time checking everyone's passports. When he was done, the

vehicles were allowed inside the heavily guarded perimeter. Yuri, Sakai and Oleksandr got off the vehicle, and, escorted by an officer and two enlisted men, went through the building until they got to Counter Admiral Yuri Kurbatov's office, guarded by an AK-wielding infantryman.

"Tell Counter Admiral Kurbatov that Yuri Kubo and her staff have arrived" – the officer told the soldier in Russian, who entered the office and announced the arrival of Yuri and her tea, again, in Russian.

"Please, go inside. The Counter Admiral is waiting for you" – the officer said, opening the office's door and letting Yuri in.

"Excuse me" – Yuri said, as she went through the door of the office, which, compared to the rather decrepit and cold outside looks of the base, was rather charming, with very nice wood paneling, a fireplace, a golden chandelier, an expensive-looking ebony desk with a computer and some papers, and, strangely, a miniature wooden bust of Vladimir Lenin, which seemed odd, considering that the Soviet Union had fallen more than thirty years prior.

Sitting behind the desk was a tall man in his early sixties, with hoary hair and a hoary moustache, dressed in a Russian Counter Admiral's uniform, which, instead of featuring the Russian Federation's insignia, curiously enough still had Soviet-era designs on it. The man looked at Yuri, Sakai and Oleksandr, and smiled, standing up to greet them.

"Ah! You must be Yuri Kubo, from Sapporo, Japan. Welcome to Petropavlovsk" – the man said, in a heavy Russian accent.

"Yes, my name is Yuri. Just like you, Counter Admiral Kurbatov" – Yuri kindly said, before both Yuris shook their hands.

"I'm very glad to see that you got here safe and sound. I imagine those two fine men that are following you are your staff, right?" – Counter Admiral Kurbatov asked.

"Yes, Counter Admiral. This is Issei Sakai, my chief advisor, and this is Oleksandr Lyubchenko, my firearms expert" – Yuri explained.

"Oh, a Ukrainian. *Hello, comrade. How's life treating you?*" – Counter Admiral Kurbatov asked, curiously, in Ukrainian, not in Russian.

"Fine, very fine, Counter Admiral. Thanks for asking" – Oleksandr replied in his home language.

"You know, Ukrainians are fine people. I've worked with them a lot back when I was in the Black Sea Fleet as a Captain and made great friends. So much time has happened since then. It is unfortunate that things are the way they are now" – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said, referring to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine that had occurred since then.

"I thought that Russians and Ukrainians didn't get along" – Yuri said.

"Ah, that's some muscovite thing, Miss Kubo. The thing is, we in the Far East are so far away from there that we only have good memories. Back from when we were all together in the same team. How nostalgic. Oh, but let's not distract ourselves from what you came to do here. Please, sit down"

– Counter Admiral Kurbatov said, inviting Yuri and the others to sit down in the wooden chairs in front of the desk.

“Would you like something to drink?” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov asked, grabbing a bottle of vodka from his desk.

“Not for me, thanks. I’m legally underage in my country after all” – Yuri said.

“Oh, I see. How about your friends?” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov asked.

“I could do with some vodka” – Oleksandr said.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t mind have a glass too” – Sakai said.

“Here you are, and here you are. Enjoy” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said, handing them a glass of vodka each.

“Thanks, Counter Admiral” – Sakai said.

“You’re welcome. So, let’s discuss business now. You’re here because my agents have been talking with your people for some time now. They have told them that, as you probably may now, we’re putting a large part of our weapons stockpiles on sale. We originally contacted a couple of our compatriots operating in the island of Hokkaido, but they suddenly went off the radar. If I remember correctly, the name of the patriarch was Ivanov, I think” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“Gavrilovich Ivanov. Yeah, he was, shall we say, ‘relieved him from his duties’” – Yuri said.

“I understand. Anyways, now that they’re off the picture you’re the lucky ones, and I have a feeling that we’ll have a long and prosperous business relationship” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said, before sipping from his glass of vodka.

“I hope so too. Show me your inventory, and we’ll see how we work it out” – Yuri proposed.

“Yes. We’ll visit each stockpile, and then you’ll decide what you’ll take with you. We have assault rifles, amphibious personnel carriers, attack and transport helicopters... the decision is yours” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“That’s very nice to hear. We’ll check them out and then we’ll negotiate a price” – Yuri said.

“Oh, yes, sure, sure. Now, if you please, follow me. We’re on an unofficial base tour” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said, standing up and walking to the door. Yuri, Sakai, Oleksandr and an officer followed him.

Chapter 14: Arms Bazaar

“So, tell me, Counter Admiral, why are you selling all of this stuff?” – Yuri asked, as she and her team rode a military jeep with Counter Admiral Kurbatov towards the stockpiles.

“The Kremlin has ordered a complete modernization of the equipment used by the Kamchatka Flotilla and the Naval Infantry stationed here. As it turned out, our beloved and trusty equipment is not good enough in Moscow’s eyes, despite the fact that it is practically brand new and has never been used, except for the ships and submarines, but that’s another story. Our past generation

Kalashnikov rifles will be replaced by next-generation Kalashnikov rifles, our old BTRs will be replaced by new BTRs, and so on and so forth. It's a waste of money, in my opinion, but thanks to it we have this opportunity. Instead of sending this old equipment into reserve or even into decommissioning, we can make business out of it" – Counter Admiral Kurbatov replied.

"I see. Have you been approached by other organizations or groups before we came here?" – Sakai asked.

"By a small number of them, yes. They were all from other parts of Russia, though. Our deals fell through because they didn't provide me enough guarantees" – Real Admiral Kurbatov explained.

"Guarantees'?" – Oleksandr asked.

"Yes. Guarantees that the equipment would be safely transported to their destinations inside Russia. You see, getting caught trafficking arms inside our country is dangerous, not because you fear being arrested by the authorities, but because the one who catches you will then want to participate as well. Everyone would like to have an arsenal of Kalashnikovs to sell. And they will try to kill you and your people in order to get it. Those groups' security measures were not enough for me, so I declined their offers" – Counter Admiral Kurbatov explained.

"I hope we can provide enough guarantees" – Yuri said.

"Oh, don't worry about that. We're sending the cargo offshore, so they will not be a risk of being caught in my end. It's all up to you" – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said, laughing.

"What if the Kremlin finds out you're doing this?" – Yuri asked.

"Ah, don't worry about them. They have much more important things to worry about than some insignificant supplies mysteriously disappearing off the stockpiles. And if they do manage to find out, we'll simply include them on the payroll. Problem solved. That's how things are worked out in Mother Russia" – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

The jeep arrived at the first arms bunker. Two Naval Infantry troopers opened the blast doors, and the jeep moved inside the bunker. When the lights were turned on, they revealed that the bunker was filled with dozens, perhaps hundreds, of large wooden boxes and crates. Counter Admiral Kurbatov got off the jeep and walked to one of them, taking the lid off it and taking an all-black AK-74M out of it. He loaded a magazine and cocked the weapon.

"How many of those you have here?" – Yuri asked.

"The Naval Infantry brigade stationed here has access to thirty thousand of these assault rifles. They fire the 5.45-millimeter cartridge, of which we have hundreds of thousands of rounds available. We'll soon replace them with the new AK-12s, so we have to make these disappear for when they arrive, if you know what I mean" – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

"We used the same rifles when I served in Ukraine. Though these seem to be brand-new in comparison to what I carried" – Oleksandr said.

"That's because they are. They had never been used in combat before, and most of them are in reserve. Only quality stuff here" – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“What price do you put to these babies?” – Yuri asked.

“Well, just because you’re my first clients, I’ll ask for, shall we say, seven hundred and fifty U.S dollars apiece, which includes two magazines. Ammunition is sold separately” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“Okay, write it down, *saiko-komon*. Let’s see what else you got in stock” – Yuri said. And so, after Counter Admiral Kurbatov returned to the jeep, the group continued on to the next bunker.

There, Yuri found even more wooden crates, however these were way smaller. After an officer opened one of them, Real Admiral Kurbatov took out a compact black pistol and showed it to Yuri and the team.

“This is a GSh-18 pistol. We’ve had around twenty thousand of these for years now when they were shipped here to replace our Makarovs. And now we’re replacing our pistols again, with the Grach pistol which will arrive soon. Still an excellent handgun, though, with a high capacity for extended gunfights. These we could sell them for, let me think, around four hundred dollars apiece, including a magazine. As always, you can buy ammunition separately” – Real Admiral Kurbatov said, handing the pistol to Yuri so that she could analyze it.

“Seems like a good pistol. Uses nine-millimeter ammunition, right?” – Oleksandr asked.

“That’s correct. Nine-millimeter Parabellum for universal compatibility with the most used pistol cartridge in the world” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“Sounds good. Let’s go see the next one” – Yuri said, before the jeeps went to the next bunker, a much larger affair which, instead of containing small arms, housed armored vehicles.

“These rugged BTR-80 APCs are in excellent conditions. We have around fifty of these, armed with either heavy machine guns or full-size autocannons, according to your needs. They are amphibious, and they can carry ten people in total, with a powerful diesel engine providing two hundred sixty horsepower. We’re soon replacing them with the upgraded BTR-82, so these beasts we have here could do with new owners. We’re offering them at two hundred thousand dollars apiece, which does include some ammunition” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov explained.

“We could invade Hokkaido and claim it for our own with these things! Ha, ha!” – Oleksandr joked.

“Don’t know. The Self-Defense Forces wouldn’t take it kindly. I was thinking more about taking these outside Japan. You know, locations where actual wars take place” – Sakai said.

“Yeah, we should do some market research on the area. I’ll call Hirano-san later so that he can get to work. For now, let’s go to the next bunker” – Yuri said.

Rather than a bunker, the last location that Yuri was shown was a hangar that housed a squadron of armed utility helicopters.

“Ah, the Mi-8. What a classic” – Oleksandr said.

“Do you know these things?” – Yuri asked.

“Of course, I do. My uncle flew one of these as a mercenary during the Nagorno-Karabakh War. And they were extensively used by my country. Too bad most of them are rusty wrecks now” – Oleksandr lamented.

“I remember seeing one of these in a movie a while ago. It was about a war in Africa” – Sakai said.

“I wouldn’t be surprised. This is the most-produced helicopter in the world, after all. You can literally find them everywhere. I would bet that there are even some in your country” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“What does it offer, Counter Admiral?” – Yuri asked.

“Well, there’s almost nothing the Mi-8 can’t do. With the proper adjustments and modifications, it can perform any mission you throw at it. Transport, utility, special forces insertion. We have access to armed attack versions as well. In its standard configuration, it can carry about twenty-four soldiers or four metric tons of cargo, and it can be either equipped with clamshell doors or a ramp capable of loading a vehicle” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov explained.

“Sounds like something I would own. Not an armed version, but one which can carry one of our SUVs. Might be useful when travelling inside Japan” – Yuri said.

“Or we can sell them elsewhere. Utility helicopters are always wanted” – Sakai said.

“Right, how many of them you have, and which price do you ask for them, Counter Admiral?” – Yuri asked.

“We have around thirty of these, mixed between assault versions, attack versions, and regular transport versions. Regarding the price, well, the cheapest would be the barebones transports, at a million dollars apiece, followed by the multipurpose assault versions, which I’ll price at two million dollars apiece, and then there’s the attack versions, priced at five million dollars apiece. Ammunition for the latter, including rockets and machine-gun rounds sells separately” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“Whew, that’s a lot of money, even for a single one of them” – Yuri said.

“Yes, it is quite the investment, but trust me, they will sell like hot cakes anywhere you take them” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“We have to think carefully about it. Again, when Hirano-san presents us with the results of his research, we’ll have a clearer insight about the market for these things. Is there anything else you’d like to show us, Counter Admiral?” – Yuri asked.

“No, I think that’s all we have for sale now. Let’s return to my office so that we can negotiate the deal” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“Great. Have you written down the prices given to us by the Counter Admiral, Sakai-kun?” – Yuri asked.

“Yes, Kubo-sama. Everything is here” – Sakai said.

“Very well then. Let’s go back” – Yuri said.

And so, after finishing the tour of the facilities and the armories, Yuri, Sakai and Oleksandr returned with Counter Admiral Kurbatov to actually sign the deal. Some of the prices asked by the Russians made sense to Yuri, while others could be haggled a bit, so while she travelled back to the command building, she thought how to carry the negotiations out. Luckily, she had Sakai and Oleksandr to help her out.

Once the group returned to the Counter Admiral's office, they sat down again in front of his desk and started planning out the final deal of weapons.

"First things first, how much stuff do you intend to buy? And what is your price?" – Counter Admiral Kurbatov asked.

"I have thought about it, and I believe we can start with a medium-sized order. We have a budget of around ten million dollars, and we'll pay via secure offshore banking. Regarding the modernized Kalashnikovs, I think we can begin with five thousand of them, but I won't pay seven hundred fifty dollars for them. It is too expensive compared with standard AKs, and I would have to sell them for outlandish prices in order to recoup that cost. I was thinking more about four hundred and fifty dollars for them apiece, with a hundred rounds and four magazines for each one bought separately" – Yuri said.

"Remember that these are the M version. They are newer and lighter. Four hundred and fifty dollars is a little too low for what they're worth. How about six hundred and fifty dollars?" – Counter Admiral Kurbatov asked.

"Try five hundred and fifty and we'll close that deal" – Yuri said.

"Five hundred and fifty? Yeah, I think that's more like it. Okay, then it'll be five thousand AK-74Ms for five hundred and fifty dollars each. With the magazines at fifty dollars each and a box of a hundred rounds for a hundred dollars per box, that would total, let's see... four million two hundred fifty thousand dollars in total" – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

"Yes, we'll pay that with pleasure. If they sell well, then we'll purchase more" – Yuri said.

"Excellent. Let's move on. Next are the pistols" – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

"I don't know if the GSh-18 offers enough value, especially considering that our market is already saturated with Makarovs and also Chinese pistols" – Yuri said.

"Consider that the GSh-18 has more than double the capacity of the Makarov, Miss Kubo. Any gangster would appreciate that" – Counter Admiral Kurbatov noted.

"Yes, but so does the Glock 17 we already sell" – Sakai said.

"Yes, but the GSh-18 does it for half the price of the Glock 17. Your customers will be pleased with such a cheap and capable combat pistol" – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said with a smile. Yuri thought about it for some seconds.

“You know what? We can buy some of them to test the waters. We’ll try with a small lot of two thousands of them, and we can pay three hundred dollars for each, plus two magazines and fifty rounds of ammunition per pistol” – Yuri said.

“Alright, we can take three hundred dollars. I can leave you the magazines at twenty dollars each, with, and the box of a hundred rounds at fifty dollars each. So, in total, it would be seven hundred thirty thousand dollars for the pistols. Is that okay for you?” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said. Yuri nodded.

“Okay, then. Let’s go now to the vehicles. Are you interested in the BTRs and the helicopters?” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov asked.

“Regarding the armored cars, we still have to do our research in order to have an idea about its viability for us, so we’ll pass for now. Regarding the helicopters, well, it’s the same case, as we first have to explore the market opportunities outside of Japan, but I would purchase a couple of the simple transport versions for our use back home” – Yuri said.

“Understood. That will be a million dollars for each helicopter. As a special gift for my first client, we’ll include the auxiliary fuel tanks as standard. That will give you a range of more than a thousand kilometers to play with” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“Thanks, Counter Admiral. Do you know where we can get crews for them?” – Yuri asked.

“For the humble price of a hundred thousand per chopper, I can get you a fully certified and trained crew for each” – Real Admiral Kurbatov offered.

“Seems like we don’t have any other choice. And I don’t like to haggle the price of qualified personnel who deserve each yen of their pay. So, I’ll accept that offer too” – Yuri said.

“Nice. Then let’s calculate the totals. It would be four million two hundred fifty thousand for the rifles, seven hundred thirty thousand dollars for the pistols, and two million two hundred thousand dollars for the helicopters. That would add to a grand total of seven million one hundred eighty thousand dollars, Miss Kubo” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“That’s about seven hundred eighty-five million yen, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said, having made the conversion with his smartphone.

“That’s a lot of money. I hope this merchandise is worth it” – Yuri said.

“You won’t regret it, Miss Kubo” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“Well, if you say so, it’s a deal then” – Yuri said, standing from his seat and shaking hands with her new main supplier.

“Thank you, Miss Kubo. I’ll arrange for the weapons to be securely delivered to a port in Hokkaido of your choice” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“Excellent. We have a pier in Otaru. My people will handle the details with your agents. Tonight, we’ll transfer you the agreed amount. Please provide my *saiko-komon* with the necessary data, and tomorrow you’ll be a very rich man” – Yuri said.

“I’m looking forward to it, Miss Kubo. I’ll be able to purchase my wife the car she so desperately wants, and also send my children to college overseas” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said, very pleased with the deal.

“That’s good to hear. They will be decent people. Unlike us” – Yuri said.

“Yes, well, I want them to grow and have their own lives outside of this environment. And I’ll work hard for it. So, is there anything else I can do for you, Miss Kubo?” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov asked.

“Not for now, no. But if this deal works out for us, then I can assure you we’ll do business together for a long time” – Yuri said.

“Once again, I’m looking forward to it” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

And so, after a final handshake, Yuri, Sakai and Oleksandr left the Counter Admiral’s office escorted by officers and troops so that they could return to their vehicles and make the long trip back to the airport. While on their way, Yuri instructed Hirano via a secure hardline provided by the Russians to prepare the payment for Counter Admiral Kurbatov. It turned to be quite the hassle divesting the money from the group’s Japanese account into the Counter Admiral’s secure offshore account, located very far from there in a certain island country in the Caribbean. So, for future purchases of weaponry, soon after her return from Russia, Yuri would send up a delegation to Europe so that they could set up a bank account with a Swiss bank, in order to handle any financial transactions otherwise considered as “suspicious” by outsiders in a more expeditious and secure way. This Swiss account, while meant for the sole purpose of trading with foreign gunrunners, would prove to be vital for Yuri in the future, in a curious, unforeseen way.

But that was still a long way from coming, and by then, after a successful business trip, the first of many, many deals that were to come, once the officers gave them farewell and returned them their weapons, Yuri and her team proceeded to board the C-130 Hercules aircraft once again in order to return to Japan. While they were boarding, however, a text message from Hirano made them change their course completely.

“We can’t go to Japan yet” – Yuri said.

“Why? Where are we going?” – Sakai asked.

“Hirano-san texted me. Said that a group located in Khabarovsk has a business proposition for us, and that they wish to meet with me as soon as possible” – Yuri said.

“Where’s Khabarovsk?” – Sakai asked.

“It’s a city located near the Russian border with China. Dmitri’s family is from there” – Oleksandr said.

“Is it a nice city?” – Yuri asked.

“It’s a very old city, with a lot of history and really picturesque places” – Oleksandr said.

“Okay, I’m sold. Anything that is livelier than this place. I’ll go and talk to the plane’s crew, tell them about our new destination” – Yuri said, walking to the aircraft’s cockpit.

“Great. There go my plans for tonight in Susukino” – Sakai lamented.

“Captain, change of plans. We need to go to the Russian city of Khabarovsk. We’ll pay all the additional expenses” – Yuri said.

“Okay, understood. We’ll need another flight plan and more fuel, but we can do it. Please, go back to your seat and relax while we handle the details” – the plane’s pilot said.

The change in destination forced the plane to stay in the ground for an additional hour while the plane’s crew arranged the new documents and approvals needed to travel inside Russia. When that was done, they finally took off, leaving Petropavlovsk and the Kamchatka Flotilla Base behind. It would be another four hours for them to reach the city of Khabarovsk, by which time night was about to fall.

Yuri would not return to Petropavlovsk again for business purposes, as everything else from that point on would be negotiated remotely by her trusty subordinates in order to mitigate the risk. She would eventually return there, however under a different set of circumstances and with a wholly different objective.

Chapter 15: The Madam

“Thank goodness we landed. That was an awful flight” – Sakai said, as the plane was taxiing to the tarmac under the early night after landing at Khabarovsk.

“Yes. Couldn’t close my eyes due to that unbearable propeller sound. Let’s hope we can find a good hotel to stay for the night” – Yuri said.

“Ah, you guys are so delicate. I like this type of rugged, rudimentary air travel. Makes me remember the old days” – Oleksandr said, nostalgically.

“That’s because you were a soldier. You were used to this stuff, Oleksandr” – Sakai said.

“Exactly. This is the life for me” – Oleksandr said, as the plane stopped.

“Whatever you say, my Ukrainian friend. Let’s get off this thing and see if we can find a place to stay in the city so that we can start our business deals tomorrow” – Yuri said, standing from her seat and walking with her bag to the plane’s door, which was opened by the co-pilot.

“Have a good night, Kubo-san” – the co-pilot said, as Yuri and her team got off the plane.

As they exited the aircraft, they found out that someone was waiting for them. A couple of black BMW Series 5 cars crewed by Russians dressed similarly as how the Bratva’s members dressed back in Hokkaido were just outside the spot where the plane landed, and as Yuri, Sakai and Oleksandr moved, one of them, a blonde guy with a buzzcut and a leather jacket, approached them with a smile.

“Hello, Yuri Kubo. We were expecting your arrival” – the guy said, as always, in a heavy Russian accent.

“You were expecting me? Who told you we were going to arrive at this time and at this place?” – Yuri asked.

“Our boss. She was contacted by your people from Sapporo, and she ordered us to pick you as soon as possible to discuss business downtown” – the goon said.

“Your boss? It’s quite an honor, but can’t it wait for tomorrow? You see, we’re kinda tired- “– Yuri began to say, before being interrupted by mockingly laughter from the goon.

“I suggest you enter the car and let us take care of all for you. Our boss doesn’t like to waste her time if you know what I mean. So please, board the vehicles in silence as we escort you to her place” – the guy said, with a hand sign for them to get in one of the BMWs.

“Okay, guess we can accept that. Let’s get into the car, people” – Yuri ordered, knowing that otherwise, the night would get complicated. The three Yakuza complied and once they were inside the vehicle, it took them out of the airport and into the city.

During the around twenty-minute drive to the boss’ place, Yuri took her time to take a short nap. She had been awake for many, many hours at this point, and the effects of the exhaustion were getting to her. She could simply not resist closing her eyes and falling asleep during that ride in the BMW. She woke up violently, however, when the BMW stopped forcefully at the parking lot of a large, old Russian Imperial-style mansion, and the guy who had driven them asked them to get off the car in an abrupt, loud way.

“We’ve arrived. Off the car, Yuri Kubo” – the goon said, so Yuri, Sakai and Oleksandr exited hastily exited the vehicle and followed the goons inside the mansion, which was exquisitely decorated, with a regal and elegant style that evoked the time of the Tsars, and also guarded by a couple of guys with AKs.

After walking through the manor for some minutes, they made it to the main living room, where a tall blonde woman was sitting in front of a fireplace, facing the same way as Yuri and her team so that they could not see their face. She was wearing a black dress which left her arms bare, revealing a series of very bleak and stylized black flower tattoos, which intrigued both Yuri and Sakai.

“*Madam Lebedeva, Yuri Kubo from Sapporo has arrived as per your instructions*” – the goon said in Russian.

“*Well done, Ilya. As I promised, you can have your reward. Go to one of the rooms and enjoy it for the night*” – the woman replied in Russian, in a sensual, yet authoritarian, voice.

“Please, sit down and listen to our boss” – the goon said, before leaving and disappearing through a corridor. Yuri, Sakai and Oleksandr sat down in one of the antique-looking sofas, and after that, the woman stood up from her chair in front of the fireplace and walked to the opposite sofa, revealing her face, half of which was that of a beautiful middle-aged woman, half of which was heavily scarred and disfigured, complete with a black patch over her left eye, a striking look that scared Yuri a bit.

“Greetings. You must be Yuri Kubo, from Japan. Welcome to my little place” – the woman said, smiling.

“Hello. You must be the leader of the organization my people were talking about. And your name is...?” – Yuri asked.

“Lebedeva. Anya Lebedeva. You can call me Madam Lebedeva. Everyone around here seems to” – Lebedeva said, with a cheeky smile.

“Alright. So, tell me, Madam Lebedeva, what is the business proposition you wanted to discuss with us?” – Yuri asked.

“First of all, let me tell you, Yuri, that you’re a beautiful, beautiful girl. Those gray, almost white eyes with that blue hair of yours. That pale white skin. And boy, that gorgeous body. Quite the delicious treat. I’m sure men fight to the death in order to be with you. Poor creatures” – Lebedeva said. Yuri felt a little blushed. It was the first time in a very long time someone told her she was beautiful.

“Uh, thanks, Madam, I guess” – Yuri said.

“You deserve it, girl. Now, let’s talk business. According to your man Hirano, one of your group’s specializations is, shall we say, the ‘leisure activities sector’. Am I wrong?” – Lebedeva asked.

“Well, I wouldn’t say we specialize in that area. We have a couple of clubs and some girls working the nights for us, but it’s not an area which we have explored completely” – Yuri said.

“I see. Then you have an excellent opportunity in your hands to make it grow exponentially” – Lebedeva said.

“What do you mean?” – Yuri asked.

“It’s better you see it for yourself. Please, follow me, dear. And bring your boys with you. They’ll like what they’ll see” – Lebedeva said, with a suggestive look on her single eye. And so, Yuri, Sakai and Oleksandr stood up and followed Lebedeva deep into the manor, going through a corridor and then down the stairs, until they reached what seemed to be a very thick armored door guarded by a couple of men.

“Open the doors, my dear. I have some new clients who want to see the merchandise” - Lebedeva said in Russian.

“Yes, Madam Lebedeva” – one of the guards replied in Russian, using one of the numerous keys in his round key ring to open the blast door.

“If you please, come with me” – Lebedeva said, so the three Yakuza followed her inside.

A couple of things called Yuri’s attention once inside that bunker-like zone. First, the place was barely illuminated at all. Secondly, what little light there was a reddish light emitted from a few lamps hanging from the ceiling every now and then. Third, the area was impregnated in a peculiar smell of intimacy, mix of sweat, bodily fluids, and certain body parts. And fourth, as they walked into the place, they could hear the moaning of various girls at the same time, leading Yuri to understand that she was, indeed, inside a well-hidden brothel of sorts.

Lebedeva led Yuri and her team into a central room located in the center, similar to the living room they had been just before but larger and bathed in that red light, and also far more decadent in its feel and presentation. There was a strip pole in the center, where a beautiful girl was working to entertain the numerous men sitting in the sofas, and there were also other naked or barely clothed girls moving around. As Yuri looked around, she noticed there were not only Russian girls working

in the place: some of Asian descent were there too, leading her to theorize that, judging from the city's location, they were in fact Chinese girls. Lebedeva and the Yakuza moved past the living room until they reached another guarded door. Before they could enter the room, though, Lebedeva turned around and looked at Sakai and Oleksandr.

"You two, I wish to have this business conversation with your boss in private. Why don't you go around and have fun? It's on the house for tonight, just for you" – Lebedeva invited.

"Uh... those are my advisors. I'll need them for the negotiations" – Yuri said.

"Don't worry. I may look horrible, but I don't bite. You won't need them" – Lebedeva said, winking at Yuri with her only eye.

"Okay, if you say so. Go, boys. Pick up a girl and give it all" – Yuri said. Sakai and Oleksandr, who had until then discreetly peeped around looking for beautiful girls, gladly accepted, before leaving Yuri and Lebedeva behind. After they were gone, Lebedeva ordered the guard to open the door.

Inside, they found themselves in a more conventional office, properly illuminated and with a desk, behind which Lebedeva sat down and invited Yuri to sit in front of it as well.

"By now I'm sure you know what all of this is about" – Lebedeva told Yuri.

"Yes, Madam Lebedeva. I can see it very clearly" – Yuri said.

"This is my little enterprise. I'm just a humble entrepreneur of the night who knows what men want. And I know what you and your organization wants as well" – Lebedeva explained.

"How's that?" – Yuri asked.

"You see, we are not just any other underground luxury brothel, my sweetheart. We also take care of recruiting and transporting the merchandise. In layman's terms, human trafficking of girls. Most of the workers you see here are not locals at all. We have carefully chosen them from all over Russia and beyond. We bring them here and pay them handsomely for their ever-popular services. But we wish to expand and spread the gospel of the world-class Russian-style prostitution into another countries, for a reasonable price of course. And after doing our research, we decided that Japan represents a ripe opportunity for our girls to work in" – Lebedeva explained.

"Sounds good. But why us?" – Yuri asked.

"Well, I have done my homework, sweetie. I know that your organization has expanded aggressively ever since you took power. And I know that you kicked some of my compatriots' asses in the process. One of them, in fact, told me about your existence. It was bewildering to hear that all that growth and respect had come out of an organization led by a woman, much less by an eighteen-year-old girl. I'm very impressed, to be honest. And I have a feeling that you're the right person to do some seedy business with" – Lebedeva explained.

"Thanks, I suppose. Out of mere curiosity, who was the person who told you about me?" – Yuri asked.

"One of the high-ranking partners of Cheslav Moskovsky. But he doesn't matter. What matters now is the business proposition I have for you and your organization" – Lebedeva said.

“It would be insulting for you to ignore it after all the research that you have done into us, so please, go ahead” – Yuri said.

“I appreciate your courtesy, girl. Now listen. We have a new shipment of merchandise coming into our city very soon. We’re talking of twenty girls of multiple origins. They are all eighteen-year-old very healthy and very beautiful virgins, with a docile personality, ready to make money working at clubs or in the streets of your city. For a reasonable sum of money, each of them can be yours, and we’ll take care of delivering them to your country safely and securely. You just have to put the money and the necessary information over the table, and they are yours” – Lebedeva explained.

“Can we see these girls? Do you have, like, pictures of them?” – Yuri asked.

“Yes, of course. Here you are” – Lebedeva said, handing Yuri a file archive with twenty different files, each with a photograph of a naked girl and her details.

Most of the girls were Russians, recruited at various cities. But there were also Belarusians, Ukrainians, Moldovans, and even Chinese girls offered. All of them were very beautiful, with perfectly modeled bodies and angelical faces, so Yuri immediately knew they would be very successful on the streets of Susukino as exotic, high-class prostitutes and call girls working for the group.

“This is top-quality merchandise indeed, Madam Lebedeva. What price do you put on them?” – Yuri asked.

“Ten thousand dollars each, either by cash or by secure wire transfer. That price includes the transporting and smuggling of the girls into Japan, along with all the necessary expenses incurred. You know, bribes and such. It may look like an expensive price, but these girls will repay it to you many times within just a few weeks” – Lebedeva said, with a reassuring voice.

Yuri thought about it for some minutes. Considering that she had just spent more than seven million dollars in Russian weaponry, two hundred thousand dollars more seemed like nothing, and was well within her reach. However, deep inside her heart, she knew that what she was about to do was wrong not only at a legal level but also at a moral and philosophical level. Unlike selling weapons, which seemed totally fine for her as long as they were inanimate products, human and sex trafficking seemed like something so unethical and despicable in her eyes, that she felt ashamed only at the mere suggestion that she and her group could be involved in it. She shivered at the idea of smuggling girls that were her same age and offering them to the decadent and abusive people that quoted such services, as if they were sacrifices given to a hungry and cruel beast. At the same time, she felt pressed by the circumstances. What if she declined? How would Lebedeva act? Would she be in danger? Would Sakai and Oleksandr be in danger? She had amassed a lot of power and money, but she was still inexperienced enough so as to lack the ability to say no to something she did not agree with. So, in the end, she accepted, seemingly gladly in Lebedeva’s eyes, but in reality, she felt terrible about it.

“Okay, seems like a good deal that we can work out” – Yuri replied.

“You made a wise choice, sweetheart. How do you intend to pay for them?” – Lebedeva asked.

“We’ll transfer you the necessary funds. After we get out of here, I’ll authorize my people in Sapporo to pay via offshore banking. Give me the necessary information and we’ll work it out” – Yuri said.

“Understood. Here is our account number and data” – Lebedeva said, handing Yuri a printed piece of paper with the necessary codes for the payout.

“Thank you, Madam Lebedeva” – Yuri said.

“It’s been a pleasure doing business with you, sweetie. If everything goes well, we can provide you with even more girls. You just have to call” – Lebedeva said.

“Right, thanks” – Yuri said, not willing to do it ever again.

“Guess it’s time for my boys and I to return to Japan” – Yuri said.

“Do you really have to go now? Why don’t you better go tomorrow? You wouldn’t want to interrupt your advisor’s pleasure session now, would you? Besides, you seem tired. You need some sleep” – Lebedeva seductively said.

“I think you’re right. I will go spend the night at a hotel, and then I’ll come to fetch my people tomorrow. I leave them in your hands” – Yuri said.

“Don’t worry. They will have an experience they will never forget” – Lebedeva said, before chuckling.

And so, with the deal for the girls done, Yuri was escorted by the Lebedeva’s guards out of the brothel. One of her goons took her in his BMW to a nearby hotel, where she would spend the night. During the trip, she asked the goon a little bit about the history of Lebedeva, and he revealed that she used to be a high-class teen prostitute herself during the last days of the Soviet era, serving important and high-ranking corrupt members of the Communist Party. After the Soviet Union fell, thousands of girls found themselves out of work and life opportunities, and Lebedeva learned to exploit it to the fullest extent. She soon built her own sex empire at Khabarovsk, and during the past thirty years, she had profited from it. However, as the goon explained, she had suffered a lot in the past, having been viciously attacked by a cruel and very corrupt KGB agent with acid for reasons that were still unclear to that day, and she was also abused in other ways, which the goon refused to explain.

Once at the hotel, Yuri phoned the pilots of the Hercules aircraft and told them they would leave the following day. Then, she took off her clothes and immediately went to sleep. She was not only exhausted, but also full of grief for having acceded to the trafficking of those girls, something which caused her to take quite some time to fall asleep and also gave them very strong nightmares. The way she saw it, she was a horrible person who had done a horrible thing.

“I should be punished for what I’ve done, shouldn’t I?” – Yuri thought, with some tears in her eyes, as she finally managed to get some sleep.

The ringing of her smartphone woke Yuri up after an awful and anguishing night.

“Hello?” – Yuri asked.

"Kubo-sama, it's Sakai. Where are you? I can't remember anything of what happened last night" – Sakai said, somewhat confused.

"I'm at a hotel. I'll send you the address right away. Meet me here so that we can leave for home" – Yuri said.

"Understood, Kubo-sama. Oleksandr and I are on our way" – Sakai said. Yuri quickly got dressed and waited for Sakai and Oleksandr on the lobby of the hotel. They arrived soon after, with their clothing and hair very untidy.

"I see you had a nice night" – Yuri said.

"I'm not so sure. The girl I chose was beautiful, but she drugged me while we kissed. As a result, I can't remember anything. And my head hurts a lot. This is an experience I won't repeat ever again" – Sakai angrily said.

"What about you, Oleksandr?" – Yuri asked.

"I loved every minute of it. It brought me so many memories from home" – Oleksandr said.

"Were you drugged as well?" – Yuri asked.

"Yes, but I'm used to that stuff. It was just a bit of ecstasy. Hardly enough to harm a fly" – Oleksandr said.

"I wish I could be as drug-resistant as you are, my friend. I could have had a lot of fun weren't for that stupid pill" – Sakai complained. Oleksandr laughed.

"Come on. You have to admit it was a unique experience. This type of stuff doesn't happen in Japan" – Oleksandr said.

"Then I guess we'll introduce it" – Yuri said.

"What are you talking about, Kubo-sama? And how did the business conversation with Lebedeva go? We haven't talked about that yet" – Sakai said.

"I'll explain it to you when we're on the plane. Let's return to Japan now, shall we?" – Yuri asked.

"That's good for me. I've had enough of Russia already" – Sakai said.

And so, with the help of Lebedeva's men who had escorted Sakai and Oleksandr out of the brothel, the Yakuza finally left for the airport, so that they could conclude their adventure to Russia and return to their lives running the Kubo Group. After boarding the plane, Yuri revealed the deal she had cut with Lebedeva, which surprised and worried Sakai.

"I thought you didn't like teen prostitution, Kubo-sama" – Sakai asked, perplexed.

"And I don't like it. I feel terrible for agreeing to such a deal. But I had no choice. Lebedeva didn't seem like someone who would take a refusal kindly. And you weren't there to help me out, *saiko-komon*" – Yuri admitted.

"I know. I'm sorry. I should have never left your side, Kubo-sama" – Sakai said, apologizing for his negligence.

“Don’t worry. I’m a wimp too for not knowing how to refuse things I don’t like. To amend my mistake, I will make sure these girls are treated well at all times. I won’t tolerate any cruelty done to them” – Yuri boldly said.

And so, as the plane took off, the team put an end to their trip to Russia, their first major expansion trip. It had been quite the experience for Yuri, both from a business and a growth point of view. The results of the two deals that had been agreed upon would do wonders for the Kubo Group’s coffers and would open further opportunities for Yuri and her group. But it also served as a reality check for Yuri and taught her that she would often have to get her hands extremely dirty in order to succeed in that line of work. It also taught her that her advisors would not always be there for her. And that was something she had to learn to adapt to.

Chapter 16: Are we going to Tokyo?

During the weeks that followed Yuri’s trip to Russia, the Kubo Group experienced nothing but growth and success for the group’s businesses. True to Counter Admiral Kurbatov’s word, once the modernized Kalashnikov models hit the streets, they were an immediate success among gangsters from all sides. Being lighter, more controllable, and more modern-looking, most non-Yakuza gangsters, even the Russians themselves, exchanged their existing weaponry for the newest offerings from the Kubo Group, spending hundreds of thousands of yen which went directly to the accounts of Yuri’s organization. Some Yakuza members from the minor families also got a piece of the action, purchasing the guns for their use by their senior enforcers. The GSh-18 pistols were less successful, as they were less novel and exotic, but also sold relatively well, especially among younger non-Yakuza gangsters who purchased them as their first pistol. Altogether, the deal cut with the commander of the Kamchatka Flotilla had been an immense homerun, sealing his place as Yuri’s premier supplier of firearms, and in turn, Yuri’s place as Hokkaido’s premier supplier of firearms. Over time, more and more weapons would be purchased, and as the Kubo Group’s leadership explored more business opportunities, new markets would emerge.

Regarding the girls that Yuri had reluctantly bought from Madam Lebedeva, they quickly arrived within a couple of weeks, smuggled into Hokkaido through various means. Almost all of them quickly lost their precious virginities for a hefty price to the immoral society of gangsters, corrupt politicians and police officials, and other, less glamorous rich perverts, and began to work the streets and clubs as regular assets of the Kubo Group’s ever-expanding portfolio. One of them, however, was saved from such an indecorous fate when, after a long and tiring week of work, Sakai visited one of the group’s clubs at Susukino to dance and relax. He was somehow completely captivated by the sheer beauty and kindness of Nadzeya Arkhipienka, an exotic and gorgeous blue-eyed platinum blonde teen who had been smuggled all the way from Minsk in Belarus, after her mother died and she found herself in great debt. That night, after dancing and losing her virginity, while they were cuddling on the bed of a love hotel, Nadzeya revealed to Sakai, in a very broken English, that she was very frightened of being there, far from home, unable to speak the Japanese language and feeling alone and defenseless. Sakai felt so overwhelmed with grief and sorrow for the girl, that he proposed her to date him so that he could protect her personally, and she gratefully accepted. Soon, the dating became a full-fledged romance, tender and playful, as Sakai took Nadzeya to live with him at the Kubo Estate and struggled to learn the Belarusian language and, in turn, teach her the Japanese

language and the Japanese way of life. This would bring great happiness to his rather dull and boring life but would also give him a manly obligation to her which would eventually have consequences.

And so, a month passed. Yuri enjoyed prestige and power, Sakai found the sweetheart who would become his soulmate and life companion, and the Kubo Group's business flourished. It also enjoyed a relative peace, with few spats with fellow Yakuza groups and other criminal entities. However, that streak of victories would be interrupted during one of the last weeks of that Summer, when a delegation from another Yakuza group in another city surprise visited the doors of the Kubo Estate, with a proposition.

"*Oyabun*, a delegation from the Yokoyama Group of Tokyo has arrived and demands an audience with you" – a *kyodai* told Yuri.

"Yokoyama Group? Tokyo?" – Yuri asked.

"Yes, *oyabun*. They are waiting in the lobby. Should I bring them in?" – the *kyodai* asked.

"Why would a family from Tokyo want to speak with us?" – Tanaka asked himself.

"Perhaps is because we've been making headlines within the underworld. Perhaps they want a piece of that action too" – Hirano said.

"We won't know until we talk with them. *Kobun*, let them come here. Let's hear what they have to say" – Yuri said.

"Yes, *oyabun*" – the *kyodai* said.

Some minutes later, the *kyodai* and a couple of guys in suits arrived at Yuri's office. Their suits seemed exceedingly expensive when compared to what her men usually wore, something that only the wealthiest of gangsters would own. They also carried nickel-plated pistols, which conferred a higher status because of their rarity and price. These guys were the real deal, and Yuri had to be up to the task at hand.

"Gentlemen, welcome to the Kubo Estate. I'm Yuri Kubo, *oyabun* of this group. What can we do for you?" – Yuri asked.

"Allow me to introduce ourselves, Kubo-san. I am Akemi Ito, negotiator, and advisor to Fujio Yokoyama-dono, the *wakagashira* of the Tokyo division of the Yokoyama Group, and this is Jin Nakamura, senior enforcer. We have come here, Kubo-san, with a business proposition that will mutually benefit both of our groups" – Ito said, with a lot of formality in his words.

"Talk to us about the Yokoyama Group. Never heard of them before" – Sakai said.

"It does surprise us that you have not heard about us before, since, well, since we are one of the largest *ninkyo dantai* organizations in the country, controlling assets, businesses and affiliated groups in every main island of the archipelago except for Hokkaido" – Ito explained.

"That explains it all then. That's why we have never heard of you guys. You simply are not here" – Sakai said, laughing.

“Well, yes, but I do not see why this would be an impediment for a business relationship. As we previously mentioned, our group has a proposition that we think will be very fruitful for both of us” – Ito said.

“Let’s hear it then. It’s always good to do business with, as you say, one of the largest groups. Bring it on” – Yuri requested.

“Thank you, Kubo-san. As we said, we are one of the largest organizations in the country, and we have a presence in all major business sectors in Japan. However, one area that we surely would want to explore and invest in more is arms trafficking, specifically in Tokyo. As *ninkyo dantai* organizations are slowly opening up to the use of firearms besides our traditional *nihonto* for defense, a new black market is showing up, which means tremendous opportunities for growth and enormous potential for profit. That market is waiting to be exploited, but we believe we are not ready yet to contact arms suppliers outside Japan by ourselves, and so we would like to work with a fellow local organization in Japan that has extensive experience with firearms to work out the business while we learn and adapt to that nascent market” – Ito explained.

“I understand. And I’m sure that your research told you that we’re one of the only Yakuza groups in Japan that are actively bringing military-grade weapons in large numbers into the country and that regularly use such weapons. Is that correct?” – Yuri asked.

“Exactly, Kubo-san. Our contacts here in Sapporo have been talking a lot about your activities lately. They said that you recently struck a deal with a major Russian military leader to bring in assault rifles and combat pistols. They also said that gunrunning activities in Hokkaido have been consolidated under your leadership, having essentially eliminated your competition found in Russian Mafia syndicates. With all that evidence of your superior handling of this line of work, we believe that you are the right type of organization that Fujio Yokoyama-dono is looking for” – Ito explained.

“Okay, sounds like an excellent opportunity to sell weapons outside of this island. What exactly do you have in mind, Ito-san?” – Yuri asked.

“We would like to purchase a certain amount of Russian-made, military-style firearms from your organization to resell in Tokyo. We are still laying out the final details for the exact quantities we will require and the budget we will have for such operation. To that end, I formally invite you to discuss the details with the *wakagashira* Yokoyama-dono in Tokyo tomorrow night. We will provide a safehouse for you and your people to stay during your visit” – Ito said.

“What do you think, *saiko-komon*, *wakagashira*, *so-honbucho*?” – Yuri asked his advisors and underbosses.

“Like Ito-san said here, it is a great opportunity for us. Our guns will find their way into the Tokyo market” – Tanaka said.

“I agree with Tanaka-san. We can reach unexplored regions with our weapons if this deal comes to fruition” – Hirano said.

“And you, Sakai-kun, what do you think?” – Yuri asked.

"I also think that the initiative has a lot of potential. That said, I hope that the Yokoyama Group makes its due diligence to explore the market opportunity adequately in order to mitigate the risk, so as to say" – Sakai said, more cautiously.

"Do not worry, *saiko-komon*. We have been researching the market for months now. The demand exists and it is not being currently satisfied by the very limited supply currently being offered in Tokyo. We just needed the right group for the job. And now that we have it, we can proceed to get to know each other and negotiate a deal" – Ito explained.

"Understood. Then, we shall travel to Tokyo within the next few days" – Yuri said.

"Thank you, Kubo-san. We'll make sure negotiations are carried out in a peaceful and fluid way" – Ito said.

"One last thing, Ito-san, before you return to your city" – Yuri said.

"Yes, Kubo-san?" – Ito asked.

"Can you provide us with a helipad in the city? We'll travel by our own air means to Tokyo, and as such we'll need a place to store and service our aircraft" – Yuri said.

"Yes, Kubo-san. A helicopter landing platform will be provided to you at Tokyo Heliport" – Ito said.

"Excellent. Expect for us to be arriving to Tokyo tomorrow morning" – Yuri said.

"Yes, Kubo-san" – Ito said.

"Very well. We'll see you then" – Yuri said.

The conversation finished, Ito and Nakamura bowed before the Kubo Group's leadership and proceeded to leave the Estate so that they could fly back to Tokyo.

Later, Yuri was in her room preparing her stuff for the trip with the help of Sakai.

"You'll come with me for this one, *saiko-komon*" – Yuri told Sakai.

"Of course, Kubo-sama" – Sakai replied.

"You don't mind leaving your girl behind a couple of days, do you?" – Yuri asked.

"Why are you asking that, Kubo-sama?" – Sakai asked.

"Uh, for nothing. Sorry for asking" – Yuri replied, somewhat weirdly.

"I love her with my life, Kubo-sama, but my loyalty to you will be always first. I can guarantee you that" – Sakai said.

"I don't doubt your loyalty, *saiko-komon*. But I know you're a human being. Just like I am. Just like everyone else. That's why I had to check it with you" – Yuri said.

"Don't worry, Kubo-sama. I'll be there to help you out as long as you need it" – Sakai said.

“Okay, that sounds reassuring. Now leave for your room and prepare your luggage. And tell your team to get themselves ready too. And also tell the vehicle pool crew to prepare one of our SUVs. We’re taking it with us on the chopper” – Yuri ordered.

“Oh, so we’re going in with everything we got, huh?” – Sakai asked.

“Come on. We’ll need a transport. And I don’t think any rental will let us carry our AK-74Ms in them. Besides, they are expensive. Now go” – Yuri said, with a smile.

And so, Yuri and Sakai spent the rest of the day preparing themselves for the trip ahead. It would be the first time Yuri would actually work together with a Yakuza group on the issue of arms trade, with one of the largest Yakuza organizations in the country, no less. So, she had to make a good first impression.

“We’re approaching Tokyo, Miss Kubo. Landing at Tokyo Heliport in ten minutes” – Captain Vladimir Yahontov, one of the pilots Counter Admiral Kurbatov had provided for the Kubo Group’s new ex-military Mi-8MTV-5 helicopters, said, after yet another four-hour flight from Sapporo.

“Thank you, Captain Yahontov” – Yuri said.

“So, have you ever been to Tokyo before, *oyabun*?” – one of the *shatei* of Sakai’s team asked.

“Nope, never. My parents worked in Tokyo for quite some time before they left for the United States, but they never took me with them. They said it is an awesome city, though” – Yuri said.

“It is amazing, indeed. There are a lot of beautiful places. A lot of impressive high-rise buildings. I’ve been there a couple of times. And I enjoyed it a lot” – the *shatei* said.

“I don’t think it’s that amazing, really. It’s just a boringly enormous city full of people everywhere. It is also devilishly expensive compared to Sapporo” – another *shatei* said.

“Yes, it is expensive. But you can’t deny it is beautiful” – the first *shatei* said.

“And you, *saiko-komon*, have you ever been to the city?” – Yuri asked.

“No. But I hope that, after this long flight on this noisy and rattly thing, it is worth it” – Sakai said, in a moody way, as he did not like military-style helicopter travel at all.

“Look, there’s the Skytree!” a *shatei* said, pointing to the Tokyo Skytree, one of the tallest buildings in the world. Yuri looked through the rounded windows of the Mi-8.

“It must be expensive to go to the last floor” – Yuri said.

“Yes. But no more expensive than the cost of this dreadful thing” – Sakai said, referring to the helicopter and its one-million-dollar cost.

Some minutes later, the chopper landed at the Yokoyama Group’s helipad at Tokyo Heliport. Immediately after, the pilots opened the rear ramp, allowing for Yuri to unload her Mercedes-Benz AMG GLS-Class SUV, raising some eyebrows among the other people around the heliport, who were not used to seeing a vehicle being unloaded from a Russian helicopter. Once the SUV was outside,

Yuri, Sakai and the four escorting *shatei* got into the vehicle and drove off, towards the address Ito had sent them the previous day.

The first thing Yuri noticed that she did not like about Tokyo was the heavy traffic. She took a while to figure out the right route on the GPS, and it was difficult to her to handle the frequent turns the GPS required. Routes were less direct and demanded for various road changes. Once she crossed the beautiful Rainbow Bridge, though, she managed to get the hang of it, and the rest of the road trip was more expedient. The Yokoyama Group's designated safehouse was located in Shinjuku, one of the city's busiest wards, in a tall mixed-use tower. When Yuri arrived there, she parked the SUV in an underground parking lot and met Ito and a few of his subordinates there. It was striking to Yuri and, in fact, a couple of her *shatei* used to gun handling to see Ito's own *shatei* carrying *katanas* instead of guns, and, in turn, Ito's men were very impressed when they saw Yuri's people carrying the AK-74M.

"Welcome to Tokyo, Kubo-san. How was the trip?" – Ito asked.

"Slow, but fine. But the Russians know how to build helicopters, so we arrived safely" – Yuri said.

"Glad to hear, Kubo-san. Please, follow me, I'll escort you and your men to your safehouse" – Ito said.

"Very well. Everyone let's go with Ito-san" – Yuri ordered. And so, the Kubo Group Yakuza were escorted by their Yokoyama Group counterparts. They entered one of the building's elevators, which took them to a loft located on the twentieth floor. The loft was similar in design to Hirano's penthouse, though more regal and more luxurious in design, featuring more upscale furniture and electronics, fitting for an organization such as the Yokoyama Group. It also provided a nice view of the surrounding city through its large glass picture windows.

"Here we are. You can use this apartment for the time the negotiations last. I hope you find it pleasant" – Ito said.

"Thank you, Ito-san. We'll settle down and we'll wait for your call" – Yuri said.

"Seems good to me. The meeting will be tonight at ten o'clock, at one of the group's conference sites. This is the address" – Ito said, handing Yuri a piece of paper with the address written down, later revealed to be somewhere in the luxurious Ginza district of the Chuo Ward.

"Okay, we'll be there" – Yuri said. Ito nodded, and bowed before leaving the apartment with his men.

While Sakai and the *shatei* settled in, Yuri stood in front of the glass windows and looked outside. The view was marvelous, full of tall buildings, but something about it was a little off in her eyes. She was not used to being in such a large city and felt somewhat out of place.

"What a view, huh, *oyabun*?" – a *shatei* asked.

"Yes, it's astonishing. But I don't know, I kinda prefer Sapporo's more modest skyline" – Yuri said.

"It's kinda nostalgic to be here. My high school sweetheart was from here, and I visited her often back then. Good old times" – another *shatei* said.

"I don't know about you, but I want to get this done quickly. I've been here for hardly over an hour and I already know this city is not my kind of town" – Sakai said, evidently uncomfortable.

"What is it that you didn't like, *saiko-komon*? – Yuri asked.

"This place it's too massive. Too many people around, too many cars. Too many everything. Feels claustrophobic" – Sakai said.

"Don't worry. We won't dabble around too much. As soon as we have reached a deal, we'll quickly return to Sapporo" – Yuri said.

"Glad to hear that, Kubo-sama" – Sakai said, relieved.

The Yakuza hanged out during the rest of the day in the apartment, taking the chance to get some sleep and watch local television, until the time came for the meeting.

Chapter 17: Meeting with the Jet-Set

Before long, night began to fall in Tokyo, and the moment for the meeting between Fujio Yokoyama, the *wakagashira* of the renowned Yokoyama Group, and Yuri and her men arrived. After dressing up in their best outfits, combing their hair, and of course, preparing their AKs for the show, the Kubo Group Yakuza left the Yokoyama safehouse in their SUV bound for their conference site. Located in the top floor of a world-class Yakuza-owned luxury hotel in Ginza, it was used by the Yokoyama Group's leadership for special meetings with other organizations. However, that night it would be used for something more than that.

As Yuri and her men armed with assault rifles were escorted through the hotel, Ito told them something he had so far forgotten to tell.

"One last thing. This meeting you will now attend to negotiate with Yokoyama-dono is actually a special Council Meeting. The leaders and underbosses of all major Yakuza groups in Tokyo will be present" – Ito said.

"You didn't tell us that when we agreed to the meeting, Ito-san" – Yuri said, worried.

"Please, forgive me. I forgot to tell you. But do not worry, they will not be allowed to disrupt the negotiations between Yokoyama-dono and you. They will only be spectators at the meeting. You know, taking notes and witnessing the course of the dealings. At the end of it, they will be asked their opinion of the outcome, but regardless of what they think, it will not have an effect on the outcome of the negotiations. Is that alright for you?" – Ito asked.

"If you say that the deal won't suffer because of it, yeah, no problem" – Yuri said.

"Very well, I am glad you say so. Let us proceed" – Ito said, before opening the double doors to the meeting room.

"Now gentlemen, before we conclude this great monthly gathering of ours, I have a surprise for you" – Arata Yokoyama, the *oyabun* of the Yokoyama Group, said.

“What could this be about, Yokoyama-san? We have covered all the items of the agenda that we had to discuss for today” – Kazuhiko Murata, the *oyabun* of the Murata Group, said.

“Not all of them, Murata-san. Not all of them. As you may surely know by now, our group is exploring the possibility of entering the arms trafficking business. Tokyo’s underworld has a growing demand of assault-class firearms, and obviously nobody can satisfy it under today’s rules. But thanks to the efforts of my dear brother and *wakagashira*, we have managed to get a fellow *ninkyō dantai* organization, based in Sapporo, Hokkaido, that can help us with the business. They have extensive experience both operating and selling this type of merchandise” – Yokoyama explained.

“Sapporo? That’s far out of our reach, Yokoyama-san. I’m surprised that you had the will to explore a location so far from our home turf” – Kenji Takagi, the *oyabun* of the Takagi Group, said.

“We spent a good deal of our time researching and looking for the right organization to handle the job, gentlemen. We can assure you that this group and their leader can take care of it. Now please, let’s give the welcome to Yuri Kubo-san and the Kubo Group” – Yokoyama said, before the doors opened, allowing Yuri, Sakai, and their entourage of heavily armed *shatei* to enter.

That moment was surreal both for Yuri and for the people witnessing her grand entrance. The so-called Council was composed of eight different Yakuza families, so there were eight *oyabun*, eight *wakagashira*, and numerous guards in the room. Each *oyabun* and *wakagashira* were sitting in a different spot on the long, illuminated table, with two to four guards immediately behind them. Yuri could see that the different groups were dressed differently. Some of them wore expensive suits. Others wore *kimonos* and *yukatas*. And yet others were dressed in informal clothing like leather jackets and party suits. It reminded her of the very first time she entered the then Fujii Estate. Similarly, the guards were of heterogeneous appearance and gender. Most of them employed men, but there were a couple of cases where women were actually guarding the meeting and there was even a case where three schoolgirl teens, dressed in school uniforms and all, were employed as guards. The one common factor every one of them had, though, was their armament, which was composed exclusively of *nihonto*, be it *katanas*, *wakizashis*, or *tantos*. No firearms apart from the AK-74Ms carried by Yuri’s *shatei*, an assault rifle which was a novelty for most of the people present, some of which had never even seen such a class of firearms before. Eyebrows were raised, and surprised and perplexed expressions formed in the face of many of the men and women present in the meeting, and as Yuri sat down in the seat designated for her, the questions started to arise.

“What is this, Yokoyama-san? Have we suddenly become Mexico or Colombia, where people carry assault rifles instead of proper, respectable weapons?” – Mamoru Kobayashi, the elderly and conservative *oyabun* of the Kobayashi Group, asked.

“Yes, Yokoyama-sama. This is, to put it mildly, unacceptable. A girl, as *oyabun*? And followed by people armed with weapons used by terrorists? I can’t believe it!” – Naoko Ogasawara, *oyabun* of the Ogasawara Group, said.

“Please, gentlemen, please. Let’s not rush and instead, let’s give Kubo-san and her people the welcoming they deserve, after which they will negotiate directly with the *wakagashira*. We won’t interfere during the course of the negotiations. Not even I will do it. I’ve just invited to deal here, in the monthly Council meeting, so that you can get a first taste of what the future will look like. But before that, talk to us about yourself and your group, Kubo-san” – Arata Yokoyama said.

“Yes, Yokoyama-san. Basically, we’re a medium-sized organization from Sapporo, Hokkaido, which specializes in the use and the sale of firearms in the black market. We’re pioneers in that most of our members carry handguns and are authorized to use rifles if necessary, protected by our extensive connections inside the police in Sapporo. Under my leadership, which has just turned six months, we have managed to consolidate around eighty percent of the arms trafficking business in Hokkaido under our wings, expanding and taking over the operations of a couple of Russian Mafia rivals. Our clients include most non-Yakuza groups, such as the Chinese Triads, the Korean Khangpae, and what remains of the Russian Mafia, as well as certain members of certain Yakuza clans, a market which we’re still trying to exploit to the fullest extent. Most recently, we have found a new major supplier of firearms, which can provide us monthly with thousands of Russian-made, military-issue assault rifles and pistols, as well as the appropriate ammunition, of course. I think that’s mostly it. Not much else to talk about it” – Yuri explained to the Tokyo Council.

“Very well, Kubo-san. So, as you can see, gentlemen, the Kubo Group and its leader don’t beat around the bush. They have experience, and they’re willing to use it to achieve big earnings. They are serious people, just like us. Now, without further ado, let’s begin the negotiations. Fujio, please, you can proceed. Meanwhile, gentlemen, we’ll just sit down and watch” – Arata Yokoyama said.

“Thank you, *oyabun*. Let’s begin with our proposal then. After exploring the market opportunities for handguns and assault-class firearms in Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya, we’ve decided that we would need at least eight thousands of each type of weapon in order to satisfy the rising demand. To that end, we have destined a budget of a two thousand million yen for the purchase of such merchandise” – Fujio Yokoyama explained.

“First of all, for the sake of convenience and simplicity, let’s use the US Dollar as currency when discussing these deals. Two billion yen would translate to, according to the current rate, eighteen million four hundred thousand dollars, which, in my opinion, is a decent budget to begin with” – Yuri said, using her smartphone to calculate the dollar value.

“Okay, we’ll use the dollar as currency. How much firearms can we purchase with that budget?” – Fujio Yokoyama asked.

“Let’s see. You said you needed eight thousand rifles and eight thousand pistols. With that budget, according to our current prices, you could get the eight thousand rifles you need, priced at a thousand dollars per rifle, as well as eight thousand pistols, priced at six hundred dollars per pistol, as well as three million seven hundred thousand dollars in ammunition and magazines for the guns. We sell rifle magazines at a hundred dollars each and pistol magazines at fifty dollars each, and as for ammunition, they are sold in boxes of one hundred rounds, with the rifle ammunition costing two hundred dollars per box and the pistol cartridges costing a hundred dollars per box. We recommend the purchase of two magazines and a box of ammunition for each weapon, which would make for, let’s see, four million eight hundred thousand dollars. So, with a total of eight million dollars for the rifles, four million eight hundred thousand dollars for the pistols, and the same amount for magazines and ammunition, the grand total would be seventeen million six hundred thousand dollars” – Yuri explained, with her calculator in hand, wishing to simplify the prices as much as possible while obtaining a large margin of profits. While she did so, one of Fujio Yokoyama’s guards wrote the prices down, and presented them to the underboss, who thought about it for some seconds.

“Well, Kubo-san, to be honest, it sounds great, in fact, sounds better than we’ve imagined. We can proceed then to the demonstration phase of the merchandise. Do you have examples here that you can show us?” – Fujio asked. His unwillingness to haggle the price meant that either he thought the prices of weapons were much higher than they really were, or that the Yokoyama Group was terrible at negotiating. In any case, it made the negotiations easier and kept Yuri’s target profit margin intact.

“Of course, Yokoyama-san. My guards always carry both of the weapons” – Yuri said, and with a hand sign, ordered one of her *shatei* to give her his rifle and his pistol, which he placed over the table.

First there was the GSh-18 pistol. Yuri took it and demonstrated to Fujio Yokoyama how it worked, by first loading the pistol, cocking it, dry firing it, and finally disassembling it to a basic level.

“As you can see, it is a very easy to use pistol, and its disassembly is simple and straightforward. Perfect for the gangster who’s been recently introduced to the world of firearms. Its frame is made of polymer compounds, making it light and easily concealable. It uses an eighteen-round magazine, giving it a very high capacity for extended duty” – Yuri explained. While she did, most of the people present, including the Yakuza leaders and their guards, paid close attention.

“Alright, Kubo-san. A very nice and useful tool indeed. Now, let’s see the rifle” – Yokoyama said. Yuri nodded, and picked up the AK-74M from the table.

Just like before, she showed Yokoyama how the gun worked, by loading it, cocking it, dry firing it, and disassembling it.

“Like the pistol, this assault rifle is heavy-duty and extremely easy to use and disassemble. It has been designed to be simple, rugged, and powerful. It never jams, overheats, or breaks down, capable of resisting unrelenting punishment and dirtiness. Weights around three kilos and a half, and unlike its previous versions, its furniture is made of glass-filled polyamide. It features a very nice folding stock for use in vehicles and for easier carrying, and thanks to the smaller caliber, it has less recoil and thus is more accurate than ever. It is loaded using a thirty-round magazine, and in full-auto mode, it fires at a rate of fire of about six hundred and fifty rounds per minute” – Yuri explained, again, catching the interest of everyone else in the room.

“So, this is the famed Kalashnikov, huh? They say it is so simple that even a little child can use it” – Fujio Yokoyama said.

“And they do, Yokoyama-san, they do. This version of the rifle has been the standard-issue of the Russian Armed Forces since the 1990s, but they are being replaced by the newer AK-12, which is unfortunately out of our reach, for now. As the new rifles arrive to bases, the older ones are put into reserve stockpiles, within the reach of our suppliers within the Russian military who can provide us with the merchandise. Our contacts have access to bases in the Kamchatka peninsula, and said they could use their influence get future access to other bases and arsenals in the Russian Far East region” – Yuri explained.

“Impressive. Most impressive, Kubo-san. We are certain that such weaponry will sell like hot cakes among the gangster population of the three cities I mentioned previously. It seems like our deal is almost done, but before we can strike it definitely, we need to talk about transport. As you may

surely imagine, we don't have experience in transporting weapons. We can talk with our advisors and insiders within the police and customs to see what we could do, but we're otherwise in the dark regarding their transport. As such, we would like for you to take care of it in its entirety" – Fujio Yokoyama explained.

Yuri thought about it for some minutes and asked for Sakai for advice with a hand sign.

"It is too risky. They should take care of at least a portion of the transport. We can take the goods to Niigata or Sendai, and then they take care of the rest" – Sakai whispered to Yuri's ear. Yuri nodded.

"Well, as much as you don't have experience with transporting handguns, we don't have much experience with the Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya authorities. So, I propose that we should split and share the risk" – Yuri said.

"What do you mean?" – Fujio Yokoyama asked.

"We can guarantee the delivery, shall we say to Niigata or Sendai. There we'll hand it to you, and you can oversee the distribution to the three cities you have as target markets" – Yuri proposed. Yokoyama nodded, and in turn consulted it with the *oyabun* and one of their advisors. After around five minutes of whispering, they had an answer.

"Kubo-san, we accept your offer. Splitting the risk is the best way to mitigate it. We would like for you to transport the goods to Niigata, where we will take over at our facilities there. As such, now that we have discussed the price, the demonstration, and the transport, we can wrap up these negotiations which, as I would like to point out, have been the fastest and smoothest we have performed in a while. Now, *oyabun*, I want to ask our fine gentlemen over here their opinion. And just to reassure Kubo-san, I shall remember you that, no matter your opinion, they won't have any impact on our deal. We only want them as part of our market study" – Fujio Yokoyama said.

"Understood, *wakagashira*. What do you think of this, gentlemen?" – Arata Yokoyama asked.

"I think that, with this deal, you are demonstrating once more that you care a lot about the future of the *ninkyo dantai* as the premier syndicate in Japan's underworld, Yokoyama-san. You have my approval" – Kazuhiko Murata said.

"Thanks, Murata-san. Any more opinions?" – Arata Yokoyama asked.

"This deal will bring modernization to the ways of the *ninkyo dantai*, keeping us relevant in a world where the Chinese and the Koreans are gaining more and more turf every day. We'll be feared when our men have access to such weapons, so I also approve of this" – Kenji Takagi said.

"Well said, Takagi-san. Is there more opinions?" – Arata Yokoyama asked.

"This is preposterous! How can we tolerate the corruption of our noble and sacred way of life with these 'Kalashnikovs'? It is against *Bushido*, and against honor. We will never approve of this!" – Mamoru Kobayashi angrily said.

"Kobayashi-san is right. Today is this, tomorrow, what will it be? The militarization of the *ninkyo dantai*? The rise of paramilitary groups? Terrorist attacks? This is outrageous, and we won't approve

becoming like those filthy countries where everybody uses one of these things!” – Naoko Ogasawara said, in a tense voice tone.

“Thank you Kobayashi-san and Ogasawara-san for your ‘interesting’ opinions. Anything else?” – Arata Yokoyama said.

“No? Well then, *wakagashira*, you can proceed to finalize these negotiations” – Arata Yokoyama said.

“Yes, *oyabun*. Kubo-san, we accept your offer in its entirety. We believe it will bring enormous profits both for you and for us. In some hours, the money we have agreed on will be deposited in your accounts via a secure financial transaction, so that we can get the merchandise on the streets as soon as possible” – Fujio Yokoyama said.

“Thank you, Yokoyama-san. We’ll talk with our suppliers in Russia and with our contacts in Niigata to deliver for you in time. The deliveries will start a week after the payment has been received” – Yuri said.

“Sounds great. Thanks, Kubo-san” – Fujio Yokoyama said.

“You’re welcome. This will be the start of a glorious business relationship” – Yuri said.

And so, Yuri and Fujio Yokoyama shook hands, while the leadership of the supporting Yakuza clans applauded and opposing ones stood there, silently. Finally, the Yakuza groups started to leave, and Yuri, Sakai and their men were the first to do so, boarding their Mercedes SUV and leaving for the loft.

“Well done, *oyabun*. We’ll earn millions in cash for this sale” – one of Yuri’s *shatei* said, as Yuri drove back to the loft through Tokyo under the night.

“Exactly. Thanks to the fact that Yokoyama-san didn’t contest my prices, we’ll earn double of what we invested. A great business, for sure” – Yuri said.

“That’s right, Kubo-sama. You’ll made us earn lots and lots of money. Fujii-sama would be proud of you” – Sakai said.

“‘Proud of me’” – Yuri thought out loud. It was the first time someone told her that her predecessor would be proud of her. Somehow, that made her very happy, and eager to continue on with yet more such deals in the future.

“We’ll celebrate this when we make it back to Sapporo tomorrow, you hear?” – Yuri said.

“Yes, *oyabun*! We’re looking forward to it!” – a *shatei* proudly said.

As it turned out, they would indeed celebrate. However, it would not happen the following day, as another hammer was yet to fall, forcing them to stay in Tokyo for a little longer than they had expected.

Chapter 18: Brain Games

The following day, Yuri, Sakai, and the men woke up early in the morning, so that they could get back to Sapporo in their helicopter for midday. They packed up their clothes and weapons and took

care to leave the Yokohama apartment as tidy as they found it the day before. Once that was done, they proceeded to vacate the apartment, however, before they could board their Mercedes-Benz SUV, a black S-Class car arrived at the parking lot, with its tinted windows hiding its occupants, and parked besides Yuri's SUV. Ito, Nakamura, and a couple of their *shatei* descended from the car and approached Yuri and her men.

"Ito-san. We're leaving for the Tokyo Heliport. We've took care to tidy up the apartment before we left" – Yuri said.

"Thank you, Kubo-san. Uh, it is very nice that you care for us. However, before you go, we would like to ask you for one last thing" – Ito said.

"Sure, what can we do for you?" – Yuri asked. Ito looked at Nakamura, who nodded, and then, with a hand sign, ordered for someone else to get off the Mercedes S-Class. Its door opened, and a middle-aged man dressed in an expensive suit got off it, with visible sadness and anguish in his face.

"This last favor we need to ask for you is a personal one in the name of our *oyabun*, Arata Yokoyama-sama. Please, come forward, Miura-san" – Ito said, and the man walked to Yuri and bowed before her.

"Kubo-sama, please, I humbly ask for your help" – Miura said, bowing and bending his knees before her, making her feel very nervous.

"Okay, okay, man. Please, stand up and tell us what it's troubling you, and we'll see how we can work it out" – Yuri said.

"Thank you, Kubo-sama. Thank you!" – Miura said.

"You're welcome. Now, let's hear it" – Yuri said. Miura nodded, and took out of his jacket a picture of a beautiful teenager girl. He handed it to Yuri.

"This is my daughter, Asami-chan. She's a sweet, kind, and innocent girl. But she has disappeared. I need someone to rescue her" – Miura said.

"Really? I'm very sorry to hear that. What can we do in order to find her?" – Yuri asked.

"It is really simple. After investigating for months now, we have managed to find out where she's being held. We only need for you to go there, fight your way to her, and perform the rescue" – Ito said.

"Talk to me about those who has kidnapped her" – Yuri said.

"They call themselves the Faith of Hope. They are a new religious cult located in a remote location within the Mount Tanzawa area. According to what little we know about them, they are known for randomly recruiting people and indoctrinating them against their will, attracting them with low-cost, self-help seminars. They effectively kidnap people, and Asami-chan fell victim to them" – Ito explained.

"Please, you got to go there and get my little Asami-chan back! Who knows what those beasts have done to her?!" – Miura said, with tears in his eyes. Yuri felt so bad for him, that she accepted right away, determined to help him find her daughter. She just could not tolerate such abuse, especially

after contributing to it herself with the sex trafficking stunt she had agreed to participate in. In her eyes, this was a chance to redeem herself.

“Okay, don’t worry, Miura-san. We’ll go there and try to look for your girl. The sole idea of her being abused by the cult is unbearable. But I can’t promise we’ll be able to bring her safely. We don’t know what these guys will do when they feel threatened” – Yuri said.

“Try to bring her alive, Kubo-san. If she can’t make it, we’ll understand, but do it for Miura-san. He has gone through a lot lately” – Ito said.

“I know. We’ll see what we can do” – Yuri said.

“Thank you, Kubo-san!” – Miura said.

“Do you have the exact location of this cult?” – Yuri asked.

“We will send it to your smartphone right away. Like I said, it is a very remote location, accessible only through a dirt road” – Ito explained.

“I understand. We’ll leave right away” – Yuri said, walking to the door of her Mercedes SUV.

“We will be waiting for news from you, Kubo-san. Now go” – Ito said.

“You heard him. We need to go to Mount Tanzawa” – Yuri said, getting into the vehicle. Yuri looked on as Ito’s car left before leaving the parking lot herself.

“So, what do you think, Sakai-kun?” – Yuri asked, trying to find the nearest path to Mount Tanzawa.

“I don’t know. Looks like something out of a very dark horror movie. Or even a very twisted hentai anime. Let’s hope we can find her alive” – Sakai said.

After an almost two-hour long trip across the vast Tokyo metropolitan area, Yuri and her team finally made it to the road to Mount Tanzawa. Following Ito’s instructions plotted on the GPS, they made it through the mountain roads surrounded by beautiful, green landscapes, completely isolated from the nearby city. While she was trying to find the dirt road that led to the Faith of Hope compound, Yuri was asked about how they would carry the operation out.

“How are we going to do this, Kubo-san?” – Sakai asked.

“I’ve been thinking about it for a long time, and I can only say we should do it the only way we do: an all-out assault” – Yuri said.

“Isn’t that a bit risky? And I mean, we’re just six people. It’ll be difficult for us to take on an entire cult with what we got” – Sakai said.

“Yeah, I know, but we can’t go with stealth either. We didn’t bring silencers with us, and the AK-74M can’t be silenced anyways. Besides, I don’t believe that these cultists will be armed with firearms, so if they take out those so-called *nihonto* to defend themselves, we simply riddle them with lead bullets until we have wiped out all of them” – Yuri said.

“That sounds straightforward and savage, *oyabun*. I love it” – a *shatei* said.

“Yes, we’ll succeed” – another *shatei* said.

“Allow me to press the doubt button. I still think we should take a subtler approach. If we attack them straight on, they may become desperate and threaten to kill the girl or something like crazy that, like they do in the movies” – Sakai warned.

“Come on, my dear *saiko-komon*. You’re exaggerating. Maybe they are unarmed and all we’ll need to do will be to point our AKs at them and they will hand us the girl” – Yuri said.

“I’m not so sure. Remember the Aum Shinrikyo? They were armed. Not just with firearms, but with sarin. They killed many with that gas back in 1995. And two years prior, in Waco, Texas, an extremist Christian cult razed their house to the ground, killing dozens, when the FBI and the ATF sieged them. Cults are destructive and unpredictable. We should be cautious” – Sakai warned.

“First of all, I wasn’t even alive when those things happened, and I barely know the story of the Aum Shinrikyo, so I can’t speak for sure. Secondly, if you say that cults are so destructive, then we should be as destructive as them. You know, terror is only broken by terror. If they try to do anything, we will kill them before they do it. I know we will be victorious in this one” – Yuri said. Sakai felt uncomfortable, as it was the first time he heard Yuri speak in such an authoritarian and ruthless way.

“Be careful what you wish for, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said, worried.

After some minutes, Yuri finally found the dirt road, and drove through it for a while until he reached an old gate, who was guarded by a strange guy dressed in a gray uniform-like outfit composed of short-sleeved shirt and cloth trousers of the same color, with sandals. His face expression was unsettling, and he had a *katana* sheathed in his waist. He approached Yuri’s vehicle with suspicion.

“Is this the compound of the Faith of Hope?” – Yuri asked.

“I don’t know what you are talking about. This is private property. Beat it” – he said in a harsh tone of voice.

“We would like to talk with one of you guys about Asami Miura” – Yuri said.

“Like I said, I don’t know what you are talking about. Beat it or I’ll call the police” – the cultist said.

“Come on, you don’t have to be like this. Just tell me where Asami-chan is and we’ll go” – Yuri said.

“Okay, you asked for it. I’m calling the cops” – the cultist said.

“We’ll see about that” – one of Yuri’s *shatei* said, before shooting and killing the cultist with his AK-74M.

“See? There’s no place for subtlety these days. Open the gates so that we can go through” – Yuri ordered.

“Yes, *oyabun*” – one of Yuri’s *shatei* said, getting off the vehicle to quickly open the wire and wood gates before getting on the SUV again and allowing Yuri to move into the compound.

“Listen, when we reach there, we’ll assault through the front door. You have permission to kill anyone who stands in our way. We go in, find Asami-chan, and get out of there. Any questions?” – Yuri asked. Her *shatei* replied by cocking their rifles.

“Very well then. Let’s go on the assault” – Yuri said.

Some minutes later, the team and their SUV arrived at the front of a large compound, made of a dull gray building well-hidden by the foliage. After aggressively parking in front of the place, Yuri, Sakai and the men quickly got out of the vehicle with their weapons at hand, and Yuri kicked the main doors open.

“Alright, let’s go!” – Yuri said, entering the compound.

The first person that came across the Yakuza team was a young adult girl, who screamed for help, took out a *tanto* knife and tried to charge at Yuri, but she was quickly shot dead by a *shatei*. The sounds of the gunshots provoked that dozens of knife-wielding cultists of all-ages got out of several rooms in the corridor and tried to attack the Yakuza, however, they were too slow and no match for automatic fire.

“Let’s kill these guys and move on!” – Yuri ordered, before shooting a cultist girl with her Kalashnikov.

A massacre thus ensued. As Yuri and the team moved through the large compound in search of Asami, they encountered wave after wave of gray-dressed cultists with *tantos* and in some cases, *wakizashi* short swords. The people screamed as they charged against the team, dying like flies as the *shatei* shot them from afar. After going through a couple of rooms, Yuri entered one where she could smell the same aroma of pleasure and lust she smelled at Lebedeva’s brothel in Khabarovsk, leading her to theorize that the cult engaged in some sort of massive erotic rituals, which was confirmed when they entered another room full of naked cultists, who, unarmed, put their sweaty hands in the air. Yuri executed them, nevertheless, arguing that it would be dangerous to leave them alive, and also to eliminate any witnesses.

“That was so ruthless, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said, looking at the corpses of dozens of naked cultists.

“We can’t risk it. Let’s continue on” – Yuri ordered, kicking yet another door open and continuing through the compound.

“Maybe it wasn’t a good idea to have accepted this job” – Sakai thought, following Yuri and the *shatei* inside the upper chambers of the cult house.

Going up the stairs, Yuri and the team encountered yet more cultists. These were dressed in a black uniform, indicating further status within the Faith of Hope cult. However, their armament did not change, and therefore they were mostly defenseless against the Yakuza’s bullets. One of Yuri’s *shatei* had come equipped with a short-barrel pump-action shotgun, which he was carrying in his back, and decided to use it to full effect. In the carnage that ensued, he killed dozens of cultists single-handedly, sometimes various at the same time with the cartridge’s shrapnel, spraying the area with mangled human remains and splashing blood in the team’s faces.

“Alright, maybe that was a little too violent” – Yuri said, cleaning some of the blood from her face.

“This is a disaster. Will need to take my suit to the dry cleaner when we return to the city” – Sakai said.

Finally, the team reached the third floor of the cult house, where the highest-ranking members were housed. They were dressed in all-white clothing, and they had *katanas* at their disposal. That did not save them from certain death, though. With the same brutality and savagery that they had displayed so far, Yuri took care of these elite cultists, some of which tried to surrender by laying their swords down, but Yuri had them killed anyways. As they moved inside the last room, which housed the cult leader, Sakai noted that Yuri was being more and more brutal and cruel as they cleared each room. It was like something was clicking inside her, something bleak. The fact that the *shatei* obeyed her unquestionably and executed all those cultists was also bewildering in Sakai’s mind, but there was nothing he could do.

“I’ll have a conversation with her later” – Sakai said, as the team prepared to breach the cult leader’s chambers.

“Ready? One, two three!” – Yuri said, shooting the door’s locks and breaching the room, which turned out to be infested with more cultists, among which there was the cult leader.

“Clean this up!” – Yuri ordered as the team sprayed bullets at the attacking cultists. Soon, she ran out of magazines for her AK, so she resorted to using her beloved Glock 18C machine pistol to kill the remaining cultists.

Before long, all of the cultists had been killed, except for the cult leader, dressed in a red outfit, which was cowering under his desk. Yuri walked to him and dragged him out at gunpoint.

“Where’s Asami Miura?” – Yuri asked. The cult leader shook his head. Yuri replied by hitting him with the stock of her rifle.

“Where’s Miura? Tell me now or I’ll shoot!” – Yuri said.

“I don’t know what are you talking about? Our Faith has never recruited someone with that name!” – the cult leader said.

“That’s a fucking lie! We know that she is here, somewhere! Tell us where she is, now!” – Yuri ordered.

“I told you, we never recruited someone with that name! Please, don’t hurt me!” – the cult leader said, pleading for his life. Yuri replied by shooting him dead.

“Fuck, Kubo-sama!” – Sakai said.

“Great, now we’ll never know where that girl is. Maybe we have killed her already and she’s among the dozens of corpses we have left behind” – Yuri said.

“That is impossible. Nobody of them resembled the girl in the picture” – a *shatei* said.

“Shit, then, where is this girl? Why is she not here?” – Yuri asked, angrily.

“That is because that girl does not exist” – a familiar voice said over a loudspeaker.

“What? What is this?” – Yuri asked.

“Congratulations, Kubo-san. You have passed your test with outstanding results” – the voice said.

Suddenly, the sounds of a helicopter could be heard, and Yuri ran to the balcony of the cult leader’s room. She could see a small chopper approaching the area. The helicopter hovered over the cult house’s yard, and when it landed, a group of men dressed in suits and carrying *katanas* got off it, followed by who seemed to be Ito and the Yokoyama brothers.

“What? Why are they here?” – Yuri asked herself.

Some minutes later, the Yokoyama Group team reached them in the cult leader’s room.

“Ito-san? Tell me what this is” – Yuri asked tensely.

“Nothing. You have passed the test. And you have made the *oyabun* and the *wakagashira* earn a whole lot of cash by winning the bet they had made against the leaders of the groups who opposed you during yesterday’s negotiations” – Ito said.

“What? We don’t understand” – Sakai said.

“I can explain this to you” – Arata Yokoyama said, walking into the room.

“What happened, Yokoyama-san? I thought we were sent into this cult house to look for Asami Miura” – Yuri said, confused.

“Yes, we told you that. But it wasn’t true. You see, last night, after you left, the leader of the Kobayashi Group, Mamoru-kun, was angry that we had negotiated with you the sale of the weapons. He said that it was unconceivable that a girl like you, innocent and defenseless as she looked, could hold such power, and have struck such a deal. I argued otherwise, so in order to settle the dispute, I bet a large sum of money to him and the other *oyabun* who opposed the deal that you were fully capable of being ruthless to your enemies. Seems like I won the bet” – Arata Yokoyama said.

“Wait, so you’re saying that all of this was a farce? But we killed dozens, if not hundreds of cultists!” – Sakai said, alarmingly.

“Of course, you did. It was part of the plan. We wanted to show the rest of Tokyo’s underworld who questioned you that you were a serious, uncompromising leader. To that end, we tricked you into clearing this cult house from its occupants, who had been a threat to the civilian population of Tokyo for a long time. We hacked into the house’s extensive network of closed-circuit cameras, and we witnessed the carnage in real time. All of Tokyo’s *oyabun* saw the livestream and were shocked and horrified by the results. We also had the opportunity of watching the weapons you sold us last night in action for the first time. And we’re far from disappointed, Kubo-san. Now nobody will question your resolve, nor they will question our decision to put our trust in you” – Arata Yokoyama said.

“But, what about Miura-san?” – Yuri asked, still trying to comprehend what had just happened.

“Miura-san? He’s my *saiko-komon*, who used an old picture of his daughter, who is currently living safely in Europe, to trick you into believing she was kidnapped. Convincing him of helping us wasn’t easy, but he will be marveled when he hears of the results” – Arata Yokoyama said.

“So, in short, we did all this for nothing?” – Yuri asked.

"It wasn't for nothing. Thanks to this job you have made, you have earned our trust. I had my doubts about doing business with you, but they have disappeared by now. You have shown us that you are a serious and ruthless leader. And that's exactly the kind of person my group wants to negotiate with. You clearly deserve all the money we'll pay for your weapons" – Arata Yokoyama said.

"So that explains why you guys didn't even dare to haggle the price" – Yuri said, thoughtful.

"Exactly. Oh, and by the way, we'll also pay you a little extra for having gotten rid of the thorn in the city's side that the Faith of Hope represented. We'll add it when we transfer the funds for the weapons. Excellently done, gentlemen. You can rest now before you return to Sapporo. That is all. Ito-san, please, order my men to clean up this place and get rid of the bodies" – Arata Yokoyama said, before leaving through the door.

"Yes, *oyabun*" – Ito said.

Shocked and distraught over the fact that she was deliberately conned into murdering an entire cult, Yuri walked to the former cult leader's seat and sat down. Sakai walked to her.

"Aren't you going to say anything, Kubo-sama?" – Sakai asked.

"What is there to be said, *saiko-komon*? What's done is done" – Yuri said.

"These guys played it big on us" – a *shatei* said, placing his gun in his back.

"Yes, they did. But at least, we've gained an ally here in Tokyo. Might be useful in the future" – another *shatei* said.

"And I was desperate to save that girl. All of my senses, my aggressiveness and my brutality flourished during the assault. I was very anxious and very angry. It was like I wasn't myself" – Yuri said, before giving a long sigh.

"I'm such a weak person, aren't I? Falling prey to trickery like this one" – Yuri asked Sakai, visibly upset.

"Don't worry about that, Kubo-sama. All of us were victims of their deception. Pretty much anyone would have bought it" – Sakai said, trying to calm Yuri down.

"When we return to Sapporo, I'll take some days off. I need to think about myself in private. I don't want for this weakness of mine to be exploited again. By nobody, you hear?" – Yuri said with determination.

"Take all the time you need, Kubo-sama. It was difficult day" – Sakai said.

"Yeah. Let's get out of here and return to our city" – Yuri said.

And so, the duped Yakuza team slowly left through the cult house, walking among the hundreds of mutilated corpses, until they reached their parked vehicle. A couple of hours later, with the vehicle loaded into the Mi-8, they took off from Tokyo Heliport for the long trip back to Sapporo, leaving the capital city of Japan and their Yakuza families behind.

It had been an overall successful couple of days. However, that last day's events finally left a bittersweet taste in Yuri's mouth. She negotiated a huge deal and also earned an ally among Tokyo's

large Yakuza scene. However, she felt that she had been manipulated and cheated on by guys who essentially exploited her inexperience and naïveté as a Yakuza leader. She felt terrible, a little defiled even, and swore she would never show such weakness again.

“Fujii-san must be laughing at me” – Yuri thought, before falling asleep during the long helicopter trip back home.

Chapter 19: Laos

In the time that followed the interesting resolution of Yuri’s interesting business trip to Tokyo, the Kubo Group and the Yokoyama Group put their joint plan and deal in practice. After a couple of phone calls and hefty secret financial transactions, the armament purchased to the Kubo Group by Fujio Yokoyama began to be gradually shipped from the Kamchatka Peninsula in Russia to Yuri’s storehouses in Sapporo and Otaru, after which they were transported through the Sea of Japan to the city of Niigata, so that the local Yokoyama gangs could take over and distribute the guns accordingly.

In the several weeks that followed, hundreds of firearms formerly in Russian military service found their way to the streets of Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya, giving the Yokoyama Group a huge amount of revenue. Fujio Yokoyama’s gamble had paid off, which, together with Yuri’s bloody and impressive performance at the Faith of Hope’s cult house, earned her and the Kubo Group a strong and renowned reputation among other Yakuza gangs in Tokyo and elsewhere in Japan, which now knew with whom they had to talk to if they needed firearms. All the possible backlash Yuri could have received for using firearms, for being a girl, and for being an underage leader of a Yakuza group quickly disappeared. Likewise, the morale inside the Kubo Estate and among the Kubo Group’s members was at an all-time high, and despite knowing that the attack on the cult had been a blatant play on Yuri, the rest of the members, including Tanaka and Hirano, viewed both of her scores in Tokyo as a huge hit and accomplishment inside the Yakuza scene, meant to increase their reputation and respect. These men believed their group was in its highest point yet and were willing to follow her into the nether if necessary.

Of course, Yuri herself did not share that opinion. She still believed that falling prey to the Yokoyama Group’s deception had been a show of weakness rather than strength, and that a more experienced *oyabun* would have seen through the trickery and would have taken a better course of action. Despite the millions of dollars that the Kubo Group had earned, she could simply not reconcile the anguish and the idea of being a weak leader and, one day, being manipulated into losing everything she had worked so hard to obtain. The mere thought of finding herself in that situation was devastating to her and was responsible for awful nights full of nightmares, so she needed to find a way to regain her resolve and, above all else, relax, which she luckily quickly found in gardening with the help of Sakai.

During the few days that she took off after the trip, she spent time doing relaxing stuff, such as painting, gaming, driving, and target practice at Oleksandr’s, but none of them seemed to work. One early Autumn overcast day, she found herself at one of the balconies, looking at the Estate’s back garden, and noticed that something was off with the order in which the plants and Bonsai trees were laid out. She suddenly became obsessed with rearranging the plants so that they looked better, so, with the help of Sakai and Nadzeya, who coincidentally also liked plants, they did some deep

gardening during the course of a week, just in time for the colors of Autumn. Yuri discovered that such interaction with nature was graceful and very heartwarming, and so her dark thoughts slowly faded into obscurity, though she was still determined to, in the near future, show her true strength in order to convince herself she was indeed a titanic leader, be it by taking over another, larger gang, or by finding a new, exotic market outside Japan for her weapons. As it turned out, the latter would come earlier, when, during a meeting with Sakai, Tanaka and Hirano, a new frontier of expansion came into her mind.

“Laos?” – Yuri asked Hirano.

“Yep. I know that it sounds weird and random but hear me out. After all these months of research into Asia’s weapon markets, we’ve determined that there are not many options out there. Most of the Southeast Asian countries within our reach have well-established underground arms trafficking markets, with suppliers importing large quantities of firearms from China, so it will be very difficult for us to penetrate it. Likewise, on the more belligerent side of things, most of these countries are also very stable, lacking warlords or insurgent forces which would purchase things like armored cars, and the armed forces themselves only work with legit weapons makers, so they are a no-go too. However, there is one country, just one, which represents our best chance to exploit Counter Admiral Kurbatov’s offer of weapons made for war, and that is Laos” – Hirano explained.

“Why Laos? Is there a war over there that we have not heard about yet?” – Yuri asked.

“Not yet. You see, Laos is one of the least developed countries in Southeast Asia, and it’s also considered a pariah nation by some circles, as it is a one-party Communist state which has a very poor human rights record and regularly oppresses and crushes any opposition to the ground. For that reason, the only countries supplying that country with weapons are the other autocracies around the world. You know, countries like China or Russia. In spite of that, sometimes there’s not enough money in Laos to procure brand new materiel, and thus a lot of equipment of the Lao People’s Armed Forces is obsolete and in urgent need of an upgrade. That is where arms traffickers come in” – Hirano explained.

“Are you suggesting for us to start supplying the Laotian government with weapons? That sounds difficult. Can you imagine the logistics required for such plan to work?” – Tanaka said, with skepticism.

“I know. But the rewards could be tremendous. According to our research, the Lao People’s Army is currently looking for a way to replace their decades-old BTR-60 armored personnel carriers acquired during the Cold War. They are in poor conditions and suffer of perpetual breakdowns and widespread unserviceability, and certainly not in shape to face the resurging Hmong insurgency in the north of the country. Then I thought about the barely used, almost new BTR-80s that Counter Admiral Kurbatov offered to you when you first met him, *oyabun*. They would be perfectly adequate to replace those old Soviet-era husks, as they are basically the same vehicle, only greatly upgraded. And so, I put my people to work in contacting someone in the Laotian forces or in the Laotian government to discreetly present our potential offer, and, very surprisingly, they responded. Here is their official response” – Hirano said, taking a paper out of a suitcase and handing it to Yuri.

“Dear representatives of the Kubo Group: after considering your offer for fifty armored personnel carriers of the BTR-80 class, we have decided to include it in our plans to modernize the Lao People’s Army during the fiscal year 2025. Therefore, we are extending our invitation to one of your group’s leaders to visit our headquarters located in the capital city of Vientiane to take part in the negotiations for the sale of the requested materiel. We are looking forward to hearing from you, Major General Ikaika Dedthanou, Head of Procurement, Lao People’s Army” – Yuri read.

“I’m amazed at how institutionalized that response was, as if we were a legal weapons manufacturer or something like that” – Tanaka said.

“So, what should we do, *oyabun*? This reply was received a couple of days ago. If we’re going in, we should send in our letter at once” – Hirano said.

“I’m really interested in reaping rewards from the sale of war materiel. It would bring us to a whole new level. But I would like to know your opinion, *saiko-komon*. What do you think of this opportunity?” – Yuri asked.

“Well, I imagine that selling to authoritarian governments would mean higher rewards than selling to someone like the Yokoyama Group. Besides, we can sell them a more extensive portfolio of weapons. Today it could be armored cars, tomorrow, maybe assault helicopters. But like Tanaka-san said, we will require a large logistic capacity, and I don’t know if we currently have it” – Sakai explained.

“That’s true. The goods would need to be transported to Laos directly from Russia. We can’t, you know, just come and store BTRs around the city like we do with Kalashnikovs. So, in order to make sense financially for the Russians, we would have to provide the transport ourselves as the intermediaries” – Hirano said.

“Are you still in contact with the air freight company that transported us to Russia earlier this year, Hirano-san?” – Yuri asked.

“Yes, *oyabun*. They said they would gladly offer us their services again” – Hirano said.

“Then this is what we’ll do: because we don’t have much time, we’ll write down a response letter at once telling them we’ll visit Vientiane soon in order to discuss the details. At the same time, contact this company and ask them if it’s viable to transport armored cars into continental Southeast Asia. Depending on their response, we’ll see if we can move on with the deal or not. Tell them it is of utmost priority that they respond quickly” – Yuri said.

“Yes, *oyabun*, right away” – Hirano said.

“Very well. We’ll be waiting for it” – Yuri said, ending the meeting.

And so, after Sakai, Tanaka and Hirano left her office, Yuri picked her satellite phone and contacted Counter Admiral Kurbatov, to discuss the potential terms of sale of his surplus force of BTR-80s.

A week later, Yuri, Sakai, and his team of *shatei* found themselves once again in the tarmac at New Chitose Airport, waiting for their plane to arrive. A streak of good luck mixed with the Kubo Group’s

good negotiation skills meant that both the air freight company and Counter Admiral Kurbatov offered to support their operation to provide Laos with new armored personnel carriers, and thanks to Yuri's savvy, she managed to negotiate an ultimate price of a hundred fifty thousand dollars for each BTR-80, fifty thousand dollars down from Counter Admiral Kurbatov's initial offer.

The sun had not risen yet when the chartered plane provided by the shadow air company arrived to pick the Yakuza up. This time, though, it was a newer L-100 Hercules aircraft, a civilian version of the C-130 with a larger capacity and range, which would take them to the Laotian capital of Vientiane, and which, according to the company, would be used to deliver the BTRs from Russia to Laos if a deal were reached. Once the team boarded the aircraft, they braced themselves for a harsh, very spartan eight-hour flight in a noisy, rattly, and very uncomfortable aircraft, which surely contributed to Sakai's moody attitude during the whole journey.

"Next time we'll travel around in a business jet. I'll pay it if you want. Anything that it is not one of these lousy things!" – Sakai said, trying to get some sleep.

In the end, after such a long flight, thanks to the difference in time zones between Japan and Laos, the eight-hour flight felt like a six-hour flight, and by midday, the plane had landed at Wattay International Airport in Vientiane. Because they were supposedly on a mission to sell weapons to the state, the plane left them at a portion of the airport used by the Laotian military, where the Yakuza team got off. There was nobody there to greet them, though.

"Where are these people?" – one of the escorting *shatei* asked.

"Maybe we arrived a little earlier than what we agreed. I'll call our contact inside the Army" – Sakai said.

Suddenly, the loud sounds of an old vehicle could be heard. Yuri looked from afar, and she could see a small convoy composed of three old military jeeps approaching their position.

"Don't be impatient, *saiko-komon*. Here they come" – Yuri said, pointing to the convoy, which quickly approached and parked in front of them.

Some soldiers descended from one of the vehicles. These were dressed in combat fatigues, with green camouflaged designs and garrison caps, wearing bulletproof vests and wielding old AK rifles in their hands. Among them was a Laotian officer, with a more traditional all-green officer's uniform and a holstered pistol in his waist. They walked towards the Yakuza, with the officer in front of his troops.

"Which of you is Yuri Kubo?" – the officer asked.

"That would be me" – Yuri replied.

"Your passports and weapons" – the officer forcefully asked.

"Right away. Everyone, you heard him" – Yuri ordered, and so the Yakuza team gave the officer their passports and their pistols. Like the Russians had done before, they returned their passports, but kept the pistols.

“Alright, get on second vehicle, and we’ll escort you to the Ministry of National Defense where you can speak with Procurement. Let’s go” – the officer ordered, so Yuri, Sakai, and the two *shatei* they had brought with them stepped into the designated jeep, and they drove off.

Just as it had happened at Petropavlovsk before, Yuri and the team were driven across the city of Vientiane, where Yuri could experience the city’s hot tropical weather and the various sights she could look at from the jeep’s window. For her, it was a strange experience. Some portions of the city were rural and underdeveloped. Others were much more picturesque, with beautiful traditional-style buildings and lively streets which mixed well with the vegetation. The convoy took them through the Patuxai Park area and the government district, dominated by the mighty Arc de Triomphe, a peculiar monument which mixed French-style neoclassicist architecture with beautiful Laotian designs, which Yuri took the chance to photograph as the jeep moved through the surrounding avenue.

“Listen, we’re almost arriving at the Ministry of National Defense. When we make it there, you’ll have to give your cellphones and cameras to one of our guards. Their use is strictly prohibited” – the Laotian officer said.

“Understood. Everyone, prepare your phones to be handed in” – Yuri ordered, as the jeep drove through the last leg of the half-an-hour road trip through Vientiane.

Finally, they arrived at the large complex of the Ministry of National Defense, composed of numerous buildings, and fenced off from the rest of the city. As they went through the gates, the Yakuza had to hand in their smartphones, and in the case of one *shatei*, a small reflex camera, and they entered the facilities, heavily guarded by troops with AKs and other assault rifles. The vehicles went around a plaza and parked in front of the main building.

Once they got off the jeep, Yuri, Sakai and the *shatei* followed the Laotian officer and troops into the main building, and they were escorted through it, going through corridors, staircases, and a couple of rooms, until they reached the office of Procurement.

“*Inform Major General Dedthanou that the bidders from Japan have arrived*” – the officer told one of the guards in Laotian, who entered the room. Less than a minute afterwards, he returned to the door and talked with the officer in Laotian.

“Please, go inside. Major General Dedthanou is waiting for you” – the officer said, and the guards opened the doors to the Major General’s office.

This office was much less regal than Counter Admiral Kurbatov’s office back in Petropavlovsk, instead being more utilitarian in design. There was a desk used by Major General Dedthanou, behind which he was sitting in a hydraulic office chair, with a couple of large maps behind him. One of them was a geographical map of Laos, and the other was a political one, the latter depicting the location of military land bases and airfields scattered across Laos. Over the desk, there were a couple of scale models, including one of a Mi-8 helicopter, which was a hint of his position as Head of Procurement for the military. Besides the rather old computer over the desk, there were some files, and besides each map, a couple of file archives. The Major General himself was an old, short man, with scarce hair on his head and glasses in front of his eyes. He looked seriously as Yuri, Sakai and their *shatei* entered the room.

“Sit down, please” – the Major General ordered, so Yuri and Sakai sat down on chairs in front of the desk.

“First of all, welcome to Laos. I hope you have liked what you have seen so far. Second, let’s not waste any time and get straight to business. What do you have in store for us?” – Major General Dedthanou asked in grave voice.

“Major General, as we detailed in our previous letter, we’re here to offer you a fleet of BTR-80 armored personnel carriers as replacements for the older BTR-60s currently in use by your force. The BTR-80 is-” – Yuri said, before being interrupted by the Major General.

“There’s no need for you to explain me about the vehicle. We know that, apart for a couple of mechanical and weapon differences, it behaves very similarly to the BTR we already use. I want to know why we should purchase your units over the many other arms traffickers who have come here offering theirs. Talk to me about the price, availability, and the time it will take for us to field the new vehicles” – Major General Dedthanou said. Apparently, he wanted to skip the small talk and go straight to the conversation, which Yuri somehow liked.

“Very well. If you choose to purchase our BTRs, there will be several advantages. These are vehicles formerly in service with the Russian Naval Infantry, meaning they have been well maintained for years, so they’ll be in pristine condition when they arrive here. Our supplier has offered to sell us the complete suite of weaponry, as well as to provide you with all the spare parts you may need. Finally, these vehicles have been seldom used, so they will be almost brand-new for you to use” – Yuri explained.

“That’s basically the same offer other gunrunners have proposed to us with their vehicles, girl. You have to make it better” – Major General Dedthanou said, impatiently.

“This will be tough” – Sakai thought.

“In respect to the price, we’re offering them up at four hundred thousand dollars per unit, which includes the weaponry and some ammunition. You can’t beat that” – Yuri said.

“It’s true, the price is good. But you must understand that we’re not a rich country. We can’t and we won’t pay the price you are asking for those vehicles. Try another price” – Major General Dedthanou said.

“Understood. We can reduce the price to three hundred fifty thousand dollars per unit” – Yuri said.

“Too much. Try another” – Major General Dedthanou said.

“We can leave it at three hundred thousand dollars per vehicle, but we can’t go any lower” – Yuri said, making her last offer, forfeiting much of the profit margin in the process.

“Okay, the price is good for us now. However, it is not better than what the others offer” – Major General Dedthanou said.

“That’s what we can offer for your army, Major General. That’s our limit” – Yuri said.

There were some seconds of silence where the Major General seemed to be thoughtful.

“Listen, you seem to be good-willed and relatively decent people when compared to others in this game. Your offer is not bad but, like I said, you’re not better than your rivals. However, I’m willing to let you demonstrate your merchandise. In about three days’ time, there will be a competition between a handful of arms traffickers from all over the world, where they will demonstrate the vehicles they offer in what we call an ‘armored car biathlon’, inspired in the legendary tank biathlons organized by your Russian friends. There, you’ll have the chance to prove your merchandise’s worth by taking part in that series of tests. The winner will be able to sell their vehicles to us, and as an added benefit, for fifty percent more than what we agreed upon. The competition will take place near the city of Phonsavan, located to the north of here. What do you say?” – Major General Dedthanou asked.

Yuri thought about it for some seconds. She had never formed part of the crew of a BTR before, much less drive one of them. Besides, she did not know if she could even bring one of the BTRs in time for the competition. But if winning the biathlon meant that some money could be earned, then she was willing to do it.

“Alright, Major General. We’ll participate on the competition. But if we win, we want for you to keep your word” – Yuri said.

“We will. You should call your suppliers as soon as possible so that they can send you one of the BTRs if you want to take part in the competition. In the meantime, I’ll arrange for a chopper to take you to Phonsavan” – Major General Dedthanou said.

“Thank you, Major General” – Yuri replied.

“Very well. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have other matters to deal with. My people will take you back to the airport so that you can board the helicopter. That’s it” – Major General Dedthanou said, ending the meeting.

As they left the Major General’s office escorted by the officer and his troops, Sakai approached Yuri.

“Are you sure it was a good idea? We don’t even know if the Russians will be able to give us a vehicle in time. And I have never crewed one of them before” – Sakai said.

“We’ll be able to do it. I’m sure. I’ll speak to Counter Admiral Kurbatov as soon as they give us our phones back” – Yuri said.

Finally, the Yakuza exited the building of the Ministry of National Defense and drove off from the complex after the soldiers returned them their phones and weapons. Yuri then proceeded to call Counter Admiral Kurbatov with her portable satellite phone, in order to arrange for the BTR to be delivered as soon as possible.

Chapter 20: BTR Challenge in the Land of a Million Elephants

And so, two days later, Yuri, Sakai, and the two accompanying *shatei* somehow found themselves as the crew of a BTR-80 in the countryside, in the middle of rural Laos, preparing to compete in the so-called armored car biathlon against other gunrunners and their machines.

It had been a very hectic couple of days. Yuri managed to contact Counter Admiral Kurbatov and explained the circumstances to him. He told them the idea had delighted him, but that he would

have difficulties in providing the BTR-80 vehicle in time, as he had no transport planes available at the time. Yuri then called the shadow air freight company they had been working with, and they quickly acceded to take part in the plan, though for a hefty price. The very same Hercules aircraft that had taken the Yakuza to Laos then had to take-off bound for Petropavlovsk, where the best BTR-80 Counter Admiral Kurbatov could find was loaded and transported all the way to Laos. However, during the trip, the aircraft suffered from engine problems, and was forced to land in China to repair them, delaying the delivery for many hours. Yuri became very nervous, and Sakai tried to convince her to pull the plug on the whole endeavor. Luckily, the Chinese managed to repair the aircraft in no time, and it could take-off again, finally handing the BTR to Yuri at the Xieng Khouang Airport in Phonsavan the day before the tank biathlon was to take place.

This ensured the Kubo Group's place in the competition but gave them very little time to train their hand at actually crewing a BTR-80. It was quickly decided that Yuri and the *shatei* would be the drivers for the armored personnel carrier, while Sakai would be the gunner of the thirty-millimeter autocannon included with the vehicle. During that afternoon, the team managed to get some practicing in operating the machine, driving around the beautiful Laotian countryside, and shooting at some targets. Despite it being all very new for all of them, they managed to pull out a decent performance, though nothing special. Sakai's accuracy with the autocannon was not bad but not great, Yuri still needed more finesse at the driver's seat, and the *shatei* still had to understand the more advanced controls at the vehicle. Still, they determined it was enough to try their hand at the biathlon.

In this way, the following day, the Yakuza woke up very early and were transported to the site of the biathlon, where their vehicle was ready for the test. Besides them there were a variety of arms traffickers coming from other parts of the world, crewing assorted types of vehicles, totaling four teams in total. There was a Pakistani team, driving a Type 07P APC sourced from China. There were two different Ukrainian rival teams, one using a BTR-3 and the other employing the newer BTR-4, both of them designed and manufactured in Ukraine. And then there was Yuri's team, with their BTR-80 provided by the Russians. All of the vehicles were armed with very similar thirty-millimeter autocannons, however, Yuri's BTR was around three thousand kilograms lighter. This made the vehicle slightly nimbler and more maneuverable, however, she also was at a disadvantage in its lower engine power, which meant a more modest maximum speed. In order to compensate for that, they had to be extra accurate when targeting obstacles and fast when maneuvering through the course.

The biathlon, inspired by the Russian tank biathlons celebrated each year with some modifications, consisted in three laps around a six-kilometer-long circuit track. Each of the laps would present different challenges for the competitors. The first of them mandated that they shoot static targets, placed at long distances, using their autocannons. The second also required the use of their weapons, but to shoot moving targets at shorter distances while also being on the move. The last of them was an obstacle course, where the APCs had to maneuver around several barriers, including natural ones such as fallen trees, or artificial ones, like fences. The team which had managed to score the most hits at the targets and do the laps in the shortest amount of time would be crowned the winner and awarded the contract for the APCs, while missing targets would add penalties to the overall time of the course. The biathlon was turn-based, meaning that one team would do its lap,

then another one, and so forth until everybody was done with the first lap, before continuing on two the second one and the third.

Only one of the four teams, the Ukrainian group bidding for the BTR-4, had any real experience in actually crewing and operating the vehicles, as two of them used to be military drivers before. As of the other three teams, they had little to no experience, although the Pakistanis and the Ukrainians driving the BTR-3 had practiced for various days before the actual event. This put Yuri's team at yet another disadvantage, but she still had faith in Sakai and her *shatei* in order get the job done, even if it was in a half-assed, improvised way.

Finally, when all the teams and their vehicles were ready, the event started. The first team to transverse the course would be the Ukrainian BTR-3, the next would be the Pakistanis and their Type 07P, the third would be the Ukrainian BTR-4 and finally Yuri's BTR-80. The latter's crew was nervous as they saw the first contestants drive off and perform their first laps.

Before long, it was Yuri's and her team's turn. After a less-than-good performance from the BTR-3, a relatively moderate one from the Type 07P and a remarkable one from the BTR-4, it was time for the BTR-80.

"Are you ready for this, boys? Remember that we're gambling a twenty-two-million-dollar contract on this one" – Yuri said.

"Ready for action, *oyabun*" – the *shatei* said, sitting beside Yuri.

"Autocannon's loaded and ready for shooting, Kubo-sama" – Sakai said.

"Very well. Let's wait for the order and there we'll go" – Yuri said.

"Team Four, are your engine and weapon ready?" – the voice of a Laotian officer said.

"Everything ready to go. Just give us the order" – Yuri said.

"Ready to go in three, two, one, go!" – the Laotian officer said, so Yuri accelerated forward and moved the vehicle out of the starting line.

It was a heavy vehicle to drive, and also to maneuver. Despite being lighter, it was also less powerful than their counterparts, which translated to sluggish speeds. Some few but long minutes after taking off from the starting line, they found themselves against their first targets, which were metal silhouettes located around a kilometer and a half from their position. The team had to forego using the electronic targeting systems, and instead trust in their optics to get the targets shot.

"Do you have them in your sights?" – Yuri asked.

"Yes, I got them" – Sakai replied.

"Okay. Fire now" – Yuri ordered, so Sakai pulled the trigger and fired a barrage of three shots from the autocannon, the minimum required in order to successfully take out the target. Two out of three shells hit it, the first of them narrowly missing.

"Shit, one of my shots missed!" – Sakai said.

“Then shot it again. Just a single shot and we’re ready to go” – Yuri said. Sakai nodded, and when he was on the target once again, he actuated the cannon and fired a single round, which luckily, managed to hit.

“Target is down” – Sakai said.

“Good, but we lost quite a deal of time in it. Next time, try to be more accurate” – Yuri requested.

“Yes, Kubo-sama” – Sakai replied. He knew it was to be very difficult.

The team traveled to the next target, which was located even farther away. Just like before, Yuri ordered for it to be taken down, and again, just like before, Sakai could not manage to do it first-go, requiring another volley of autocannon fire to take it out. Yuri was worried that they were losing many seconds of the precious time in destroying the targets, but was not angry at all, as she knew it was their first time doing it under pressure, and the second time out of them all. So, they continued to the third target, which was located the farthest, at around two kilometers away.

“I got an idea. Maybe you could try to fire one shot at a time. In this way, you can better control the fire of the autocannon and maybe be more accurate” – Yuri said.

“Got it, I will try to fire a single round each time” – Sakai replied.

“Open fire now” – Yuri ordered. Sakai pulled the trigger three times, and the three shots managed to hit the target, though one of them almost missed. It was enough for Yuri, though, who congratulated Sakai for having taken out one of the targets in one-go for the first time.

“Excellently done, *saiko-komon*. Let’s finish this lap” – Yuri said, driving to the finish line so that the teams could perform the second lap.

Once they arrived there, the Laotian organizers told them the results of the first lap. The BTR-3 team managed to pull out a meager twenty-five minutes in the first lap, plus six misses, adding six minutes to the overall time. The Type 07P performed better, at twenty-one minutes for the lap, but missing three times, adding three extra minutes to their total lap time. The BTR-4 team, the most experienced, did a very nice job, doing it in nineteen minutes and missing zero shots. And so, it was fairly obvious that this Ukrainian team was to pose the most trouble to Yuri, whose BTR-80 managed to do the lap in twenty-two minutes but was penalized with two extra minutes for having missed two times.

And so, with the BTR-3 at thirty-one minutes, the Type 07P at twenty-four, the BTR-4 at nineteen and the BTR-80 at twenty-four, Yuri found herself at a tie with the Pakistani crew, and so the challenge now was to overcome them first, a chance the team got after the three other teams performed their second laps, with the BTR-3 doing it better than the Type 07P this time, and the BTR-4 giving an exemplary show just like the first lap, putting a lot of pressure on Yuri and her team.

“Alright, it’s our turn now. Again. Prepare the cannon, Sakai-kun. This time, it’ll be moving targets, so you have to be extra careful” – Yuri said, as she was turning the engine on for the second lap.

“Cannon ready, Kubo-sama!” – Sakai said.

“The vehicle is ready to move, *oyabun*. We just have to wait for the order” – the *shatei* said.

“Team Four, are you ready to continue?” – the Laotian officer asked.

“Ready and running” – Yuri replied.

“Very well. Ready to go in three, two, one, go now!” – the Laotian officer replied. Just like before, Yuri accelerated and started the second lap.

As they moved, a group of targets appeared at a relatively close range. They were moving unmanned vehicles controlled by a simple and rudimentary remote system. Most of those vehicles were old cars and military jeeps, and there were even derelict BTR-60s that would spend their last moments as targets for their potential replacements. This time, though, the rules were slightly different. Instead of receiving penalties for missing shots, they would receive them for missing targets instead, meaning that they could spend whatever shots they deemed necessary to take out the moving targets, and as long as they hit them, no penalties would be received.

One of the BTR-60s suddenly popped out from behind the trees and tried to make a run for it. As the rules of the competition established that the contestants would be disqualified if they did not fire while on the move, Yuri had to slow down a bit, enough for Sakai to successfully take aim while also sufficient not to allow the enemy vehicle to escape.

“Take out that BTR! Remember: three shots!” – Yuri ordered.

“Right away. Firing!” – Sakai replied, pulling the autocannon’s trigger three times, obliterating the enemy BTR with no shots missed.

“Well done, *saiko-komon*! Let’s move on to the next one” – Yuri said, accelerating the BTR through the course.

Their next target were a pair of jeeps approaching from opposite sides. This was to be far trickier than hitting the BTR-60, as the jeeps moved very quickly and offered a small target, so it was difficult for Sakai to aim and fire at them.

“Destroy them. Only one shot is needed for them, so be careful” – Yuri ordered.

“Aiming. Firing at the left one!” – Sakai said. His shot hit the jeep and stopped it dead.

“That’s how you do it! Now try to take out the other!” – Yuri ordered. Sakai nodded and tried to aim at the other jeep, but it was too late: it had already escaped his line of sight. Firing at it would only mean a certain miss, so Sakai decided not to risk it.

“It’s gone too far. Let’s forget about it and move on” – Sakai said.

“Yes, trying to hit it from this distance will be disastrous. I hope we don’t get such a big penalty for missing it” – Yuri said, driving on to the next targets.

These were essentially moving silhouettes on rails which mimicked enemy platoons. They moved quickly and were very agile, again doubling the challenge for Yuri’s crew.

“Try to hit them. Only one shot and they’re gone. If you feel like it’s not going to hit, don’t risk it!” – Yuri ordered.

“Yes. Aiming!” – Sakai replied, and he aimed at one of the silhouettes before opening fire. The shot missed.

“Damn! They move too quickly!” – Sakai said.

“Try again! We must destroy at least one of these targets before ending the lap!” – Yuri ordered.

Sakai, under heavy pressure, moved the turret and found another target. He shot at it, luckily hitting it.

“Direct hit! Enemy squad down!” – Sakai said.

“Good kill! Try to hit another one before we go!” – Yuri ordered. By that time, there was only one surviving platoon in their line of sight. Sakai aimed at it and shot it, and it almost missed, but managed to destroy it.

“Target down!” – Sakai said.

“Okay, well done. Let’s hope it counted” – Yuri said, before moving the BTR back to the finish line, in order to prepare themselves for the final lap.

There, the results of the second lap were presented. This time, the BTR-3 managed to pull a decent time of twenty-two minutes, but they missed the two jeeps, each of which added two minutes to their overall total of twenty-six minutes. The Type 07P performed the worst of all, making it in twenty-three minutes and managing to only hit their BTR-60 target. Again, each of the two jeeps added two minutes to their total, and each of the four silhouettes gave them one minute each, for a poor overall score of thirty-one minutes. Conversely, the BTR-4’s performance was stellar, taking twenty-two minutes like the BTR-3, but hitting most of their targets, only missing one of the platoon silhouettes, for a total time of twenty-three minutes. Finally, Yuri’s BTR-80 surprisingly did it in the shortest time, taking just twenty minutes, but because they missed one of the jeeps and two silhouettes, they ended with a total time of twenty-four minutes.

Up to then, for the two first laps combined, the BTR-3 had scored fifty-seven minutes, the Type 07P fifty-five, the BTR-4 forty-two, and the BTR-80 forty-eight.

“Not bad overall. We may just be able to make it” – Yuri told her crew.

“I don’t know. The Ukrainian BTR-4’s crew has been almost perfect. I’m afraid that we won’t be able to win if we just don’t kill at it” – Sakai said.

“That is why we need to pull out our best performance yet” – Yuri said.

Luckily for Yuri and their team, pulling out a perfect performance would not be necessary. During the final lap, the BTR-3, and the Type 07P pulled a very similar overall good performance, with the latter doing it slightly better. They paled in comparison to the BTR-4, whose crew had many experience in the Ukrainian battlefields and could maneuver successfully around the various obstacles. However, a couple of hundred meters before triumphantly crossing the finish line, the BTR-4s suspension somehow completely collapsed, essentially disabling the vehicle, and disqualifying its team. As Yuri would later discover, it was known that these APCs’ quality control

was far from the best, and that it had been rejected by a couple of countries who had purchased them previously due to these types of flaws. This gave Yuri and her team a very real shot at winning the competition, and also relieved them of quite some stress during their last lap.

“Let’s wrap this up, boys!” – Yuri said, as their BTR-80 prepared to run the final obstacle course.

“Team Four, final lap! Three, two, one, go!” – the Laotian officer ordered, so Yuri moved their BTR through the track one more time.

This time, it was completely up to her, as they were no targets to be shot, so as the driver, she needed to make sure to have a good enough speed and maneuver correctly through the obstacles. The first of them were a series of fences placed at various points along the track, requiring Yuri frequently to turn to the right side or to the left side. Tumbling a fence would cost Yuri’s overall time dearly, so she made sure to maneuver carefully but quickly. Once the fences were over, there came a series of fallen trees, which she had previously ran over, but which now required to go around them, as penalties would be issued if she did otherwise. Luckily, it did not present a major challenge, as there was plenty of room around the trees to move. What was more difficult was to go around the destroyed BTR-60s from before, which had been moved to the last portion of the track and almost completely blocked the way, requiring a tricky approach to go between two of them, which Yuri, with a lot of patience, managed to do without a scratch. The last obstacle, though unofficial, was going around the disabled BTR-4, whose Ukrainian commander was scolding his crew around the vehicle, amusing Yuri, and her team.

Finally, Yuri’s BTR-80 crossed the finish line, ending the competition. The lap times were then calculated, with the BTR-3 doing it in twenty minutes, the Type 07P doing it in nineteen, and the BTR-80 in just sixteen minutes. With that information, the grand totals for the three remaining teams were calculated, with seventy-seven minutes for the BTR-3, seventy-four for the Type 07P, and sixty-four for the BTR-80, which was crowned the winner of the APC biathlon, its crew duly awarded the contract for fifty of such vehicles for the modernization process of the Lao People’s Army.

“Congratulations. It was an impressive performance for a rookie crew like you. When we return to Vientiane, we’re going to take care of the payment details and delivery schedules for the BTR-80s, and of course, we’ll respect the price we agreed on” – Major General Dedthanou said.

“Thank you, Major General. It was fun” – Yuri said.

“Yes, it was really entertaining, Major General” – Sakai said.

“Shall we go to Vientiane now?” – Yuri asked.

“As a matter of fact, we would go right now, if we didn’t have a job for you. Please, go talk with my superior officer, Lieutenant General Ulani Inthisane. He’s over there” – Major General Dedthanou said, pointing to another officer, similar in appearance to him, but taller and with the appropriate insignia.

“Is this required to continue our negotiations? You didn’t tell us that before” – Yuri said, confused.

“No, it isn’t. Our negotiations will go on as I promised. However, this is something extra, something for which you’ll be paid for handsomely” – Major General Dedthanou said.

“Okay, let’s check it out. We don’t want to close the door for future cooperation, do we?” – Yuri said, before walking with her team towards the Lieutenant General.

Chapter 21: Pest Control

“Greetings, Miss Kubo. Uh, you did it well on that BTR. It was a fantastic performance indeed” – Lieutenant General Inthisane said.

“Thanks, and I guess you’re Lieutenant General Inthisane” – Yuri said.

“That’s right. I’m Lieutenant General Ulani Inthisane, Chief of General Staff of the Lao People’s Armed Forces. I asked for your cooperation because I have a problem, and as I was reading the research report our people made on you and your operation in Japan, we would like to ask if you’re up to the task at hand” – Lieutenant General Inthisane said.

“Oh, so you’re compiling intelligence on us. I suppose everybody does that these days. What can we help you with, Lieutenant General?” – Yuri asked.

“I need you to go to a remote airbase located to the south of the country, near the borders with Vietnam and Cambodia, and eliminate a high-ranking officer who has gone rogue” – Lieutenant General Inthisane.

“Sounds like we’re back in the 60s, huh? Why does he need to be killed?” – Sakai asked.

“Colonel Palani Keodara, of the Lao People’s Liberation Army Air Force, is currently engaging in heavily militaristic activities that have alarmed our two neighbors. He’s also rumored to be trafficking with opium and ivory. He’s refusing to back down and has ignored our authority. If he’s allowed to continue on with his mobilization and his criminal activities, we could have serious diplomatic and military trouble. So, we need him killed” – Lieutenant General Inthisane explained.

“Well, we’re no special forces operators. Don’t you have such a unit that can take care of him?” – Yuri asked.

“No. Laos doesn’t have a dedicated military special forces team. We would have used it if we had one. But instead, we only have access to regular recruits who are fine, but not appropriate for this delicate operation. I’ve read the report on you, Miss Kubo. You have been part of the Yakuza for less than a year, but you surely impressed everyone with your skills. I’m sure your men and you can handle this. Of course, we’ll pay. If you manage to complete this task, Laos will pay you and your organization five million dollars in addition to what you have already agreed with Major General Dedthanou for the BTR-80s. What do you say, then? Would you mind being commandos for a day?” – Lieutenant General Inthisane asked.

“Five million dollars in exchange for killing this guy. Sounds like a good deal to me” – Sakai said.

“Yes, it really sounds tempting. How much resistance should we expect if we go forward?” – Yuri asked.

“Not much. A platoon of soldiers. But they are very well-trained and loyal to Keodara’s efforts. They will do anything to defend his operation. He also has a couple of helicopters at his disposal and may try to escape in one of them if given the chance” – Lieutenant General Inthisane explained.

“Right, so the first thing that should be done is taking care of those choppers. Otherwise, it seems simple enough” – Yuri said.

“So, you’ll take the job?” – Lieutenant General Inthisane asked.

“Yes, we’re taking it. Just tell us how and when we’ll reach this airbase” – Yuri said.

“Very well. The base we’re talking about is the old Attapeu International Airport, officially closed down by the authorities because of low traffic. Since then, Keodara took it over and has been using it for his activities. My recommendation would be for you to attack during the night. A helicopter can take you from Vientiane to the vicinity of the airport, which you can then infiltrate under the darkness. Find Keodara, kill him, and then get out of here. Kill as many of his rogue soldiers as you can, but don’t worry if you don’t manage to eliminate them all – we can take care of it later” – Lieutenant General Inthisane explained.

“Right. Sounds like a plan. Okay, seeing that we can’t plan an alternative strategy by ourselves since we don’t even know where this airport is located, I suppose we’ll do it your way” – Yuri said.

“I’m glad to hear you agreed to do this. Now come, we must return to Vientiane to prepare you for the night assault” – Lieutenant General Inthisane said, and so, the Yakuza team walked with the Lieutenant General towards a jeep, which would take them to a nearby airport, leaving their BTR-80 behind, as it was to be prepared to be pressed into Laotian military service.

“Control, this is Moonglow. We’re almost at the designated LZ. Preparing to drop the cargo” – the Laotian Mi-8 pilot said in his mother language, in the middle of the night.

“Copy. Once you’re done, keep a stand by pattern until further notice” – the Laotian command said over the radio.

“Yakuza, prepare your weapons. We’re almost there!” – the Mi-8’s cabin crew chief said.

“This trip has become very curious, don’t you think? First a challenge with BTRs, now a commando raid to take out a rogue colonel” – Sakai said, preparing the assault rifle given to him by the Laotian military in Vientiane.

“Indeed. I never imagined it would turn out like this” – Yuri said, cocking her pistol and then her own rifle.

“You two, are you ready for the action?” – Sakai asked the two *shatei*.

“Ready to do what is needed to be done, *saiko-komon*” – one of the *shatei* said.

“Armed and ready, *saiko-komon*” – the other *shatei* said. Both of them cocked their weapons as the helicopter descended to land.

Once the chopper reached the ground, the Yakuza team led by Yuri got off the aircraft quickly, and they started to move to the airport, just as planned.

Hours before, at the military section of Wattay International Airport, the Laotian military on orders of Lieutenant General Inthisane provided Yuri and her team the necessary equipment for the raid. This included standard-issue Laotian combat uniforms, complete with a tactical ballistic vest and helmet, and bullpup QBZ-95 rifles, as they were supposed to disguise themselves as Laotian soldiers. They were also given explosives and grenades, something Yuri, Sakai, and pretty much the rest of the Kubo Group were not particularly experts with, so they decided to at most use them sparingly and at the very least not use them at all. Once they were ready, they were moved to a helicopter and told from where they would strike: the countryside located at the north of the airport.

Now that the helicopter had transported them there, they had to find a way to enter the facility in silence and quickly kill Colonel Keodara, so that they could hastily evacuate for extraction. In order to do that, the team walked through the rural fields under the moonlight for about two kilometers, getting exhausted in the process, until they reached the area near the runway of the airport.

“That was quite a walk. I’m tired” – Sakai said, gasping for air.

“I know. But we must take care of our little problem first before being able to rest. How do you think we should enter the place? We cross the runway and that’s it?” – Yuri said.

“The Lieutenant General said there was a platoon of enemies patrolling this area. We should be careful with them. Remember that we don’t have silencers, so if we find one of them and kill him, we’ll have the whole base on our asses” – Sakai said.

“Right. That doesn’t help too much. I’d say we simply employ a straightforward tactic and simply attack them. A platoon is not that much of a force, really” – Yuri said.

“But what if he tries to escape in one of his helicopters?” – Sakai asked.

“As soon as we find the choppers, we’ll break off their tail rotors. In that way, they won’t be even able to take off” – Yuri said.

“Good plan. Well, it’s not good, but it’s what we do best. Let’s go on the attack then” – Sakai said.

And so, the four-member Yakuza team disguised and armed as Laotian soldiers moved through the runway on the assault. Foregoing stealth and willing to make use of their all-out attack capabilities, they ran through the dark runway, using flashlights attached to their Chinese-made rifles, and looked for the parked helicopters. Eventually, they found them in front of the main building, and proceeded to shoot their tail rotors in order to disable the aircraft, which made a lot of noise and woke up the base security, which sounded the alarm.

“Great. Like I said before, the whole base is after us now” – Sakai said.

“Yes, but their choppers are useless now. Let’s get inside the base and kill Keodara” – Yuri said.

“Those intruders have shot our helicopters! Kill them now!” – a rogue Laotian soldier said in Laotian.

The Yakuza team started to move under the fire of the Laotian rogue troops, firing and killing them if they had the chance, until they reached the main building. Yuri hastily shot the lock of a side door open, allowing them to go inside.

“So, how does Keodara look?” – Sakai asked.

“Don’t know. Probably like all of the other Laotian officers we have seen so far” – Yuri said.

“Dressed in the same uniform and all?” – Sakai asked.

“I believe so, yes. Look for him and shoot him dead” – Yuri said.

After moving through a corridor, the team arrived at a small command center, defended by a small group of soldiers which managed to close the door shut before Yuri could enter the place.

“Seems like we’ll have to use our grenades. When I open the door, you’ll launch a couple of them inside” – Yuri said.

“Yes, *oyabun*” – a *shatei* said, taking the grenades out of his tactical vest.

“Opening the door in one, two, three, now!” – Yuri said, opening the door. The *shatei* nodded and threw the grenades inside. Yuri then quickly closed the door.

“*Grenade!*” – a Laotian rogue said in his language, followed by two explosions and some screaming.

“Let’s go!” – Yuri said, kicking open yet another door and firing at the wounded enemies inside. One of them was an officer, who Yuri executed with a headshot. Upon closer inspection, the team found packages containing a certain substance inside, which Yuri theorized were the drugs Keodara was responsible for trafficking, and with it, the identity of the dead officer.

“I think we got him. Colonel Keodara is history” – Yuri said.

“Nice shot, *oyabun*” – one of the *shatei* said.

As Yuri was checking Keodara’s body, she found a peculiar possession: a curious AK pattern rifle, shorter and more compact than usual, with a weird handguard which did not cover the gas tube and included a vertical foregrip. But the most striking aspect of the weapon was its nickel-plated finish and furniture seemingly made out of ivory. Yuri was so attracted to the firearm that she picked it up and took it with her as a trophy and memento of her first, and so far only, military operation.

“This is great. When we get back to Sapporo, I’ll show it to Oleksandr” – Yuri said, before taking out her radio.

“Command, Colonel Keodara is down. Requesting extraction” – Yuri said.

“Roger that. Extraction is on their way. *All Moonglow units, proceed to attack the former Attapeu International Airport and extract our friends*” – the Laotian command ordered the helicopter units in Laotian.

“We should fend off for ourselves until the choppers arrive” – Yuri said.

“What do you mean by that?” – Sakai asked.

“This” – Yuri said, shooting an enemy soldier with her newly-acquired AK.

The team thus proceeded to survive the few minutes left for extraction by killing the few remaining enemy soldiers of Keodara’s platoon. When the choppers made it into the airport, friendly helicopter troops got off them and proceeded to capture the place by mopping up the enemy forces, while Yuri and her team were quickly airlifted out of there.

A couple of hours later, after they landed back at Vientiane, they met Lieutenant General Inthisane and presented him with the good news.

“Masterfully done, Miss Kubo. Now that you have gotten rid of our little pest down south, we can proceed to finish the negotiations. Tomorrow you can go to the Ministry of National Defense and wrap up the deal with Major General Dedthanou” – Lieutenant General Inthisane said.

“Thank you, Lieutenant General” – Yuri said. The Lieutenant General focused his eyes on Yuri’s captured AK.

“Ah, so you have found Colonel Keodara’s rifle. He always liked to presume his wealth and power as an illegal ivory poacher. Good job taking him out” – Lieutenant General Inthisane said.

As the team took off their loaned Laotian military equipment, Sakai commented on the relative boringness of the mission.

“That was simple enough. Thought it was going to be more exciting” – Sakai said, taking off his bulletproof vest.

“What? Going into an isolated base and dealing with a platoon of rogues in the middle of the night wasn’t exciting enough for you?” – Yuri asked, laughing.

“I mean, we were never in danger. Danger needs to be present in order for things to be fun” – Sakai reflected.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. We’re experts in no-nonsense, direct attacks after all. At least, I got this baby with me” – Yuri said, caressing her new rifle acquisition.

“That is the rifle of a dictator. Didn’t know you liked such things” – Sakai said, amused.

“I didn’t know it either. But once I saw it, I couldn’t imagine leaving it behind. Now it’s part of my collection” – Yuri said, referring to what was to become one of her more precious and also infamous possessions.

The following day, with their equipment and weapons already loaded into the plane, Yuri, Sakai and the *shatei* visited the Ministry of National Defense one last time to negotiate the final aspects of the deal. After a short conversation, Major General Dedthanou and Yuri agreed on a three-month modernization phase during which the BTR-80s would be readied up in Russia and transported to Laos by plane. The data for the discreet and secure financial transaction to the Kubo Group’s Swiss account provided, Major General Dedthanou and Yuri shook their hands one last time before the Yakuza left the Ministry, so that they could board the plane and take-off for Sapporo.

Yuri left Laos having cut a twenty-two-million-dollar deal, half of which would go straight into the Kubo Group's accounts as pure profit, together with the five extra million earned for taking the rogue Colonel Keodara out. As Yuri made it to the Kubo Estate after a really long and exhausting spartan flight, she was greeted with a small party in order to celebrate such successful business outcome. By that time, the Kubo Group had accumulated enough capital and had recruited enough new *shatei* to essentially be at the same level as the least powerful of the Three Clans, the Onishi Group, which had recently been severely weakened after suffering a couple of decisive blows by a coalition of Triad gangs rising up in the food chain.

Yuri knew that the only way to be part of such exclusive triumvirate would mean warring against and defeating the Onishi Group in order to take its place inside the Three Clans, and therefore needed to plan an effective and quick shock tactic to take them out before the year ended. But before that, she took her new nickel-plated rifle with ivory furniture and drove to Oleksandr's armory. She was curious to know the rifle's exact model and country of origin. Luckily, Oleksandr, always the gun expert, had the answer.

"Wow, it's the first time I see nickel-plating in such a weapon. Usually, you only see it in pistols and the like, but this is a compact AK-type assault rifle with a lot of modifications, both factory-standard and custom-made. And the carved ivory, which I have never even seen before, is the frosting on the cake. It's really beautiful" – Oleksandr said.

"Cool. But what model is it?" – Yuri asked.

"This is a Hungarian AMD-65 assault rifle, a paratrooper variant of the regular AK made in that particular European country during its Communist era. You can easily identify it by its shorter length, its nearly useless folding stock, and this perforated handguard with foregrip, which only covers the barrel, and which would be originally manufactured of simple sheet metal, but in this case, is made of very fine custom-designed carved ivory, probably from the tusk of an Asian elephant, judging from the place you got it" – Oleksandr explained.

"How bold and daring. It'll be perfect as my assault weapon of choice" – Yuri said.

"Yeah, I don't see any reason why you wouldn't want to use it. Unless you value stealth and subtlety, which by the way you have never done, anyone would like to use such a weapon, worthy of any dictator or despot out there" – Oleksandr said.

"Sakai-kun told me something similar" – Yuri noted.

"Of course. This gun is a symbol of your power as a Yakuza leader, the same way as it could symbol the power of a dictator or drug lord. Think of it as one of those very expensive *katanas* with golden inscriptions and details on their hilts. You'll get the same respect and awe of those with such weapons by using this rifle" – Oleksandr said.

And he was not wrong. By employing the heavily modified AMD-65 as her primary assault firearm during the future battles against the Onishi Group, Yuri would quickly become a feared and revered figure among the highest levels of the criminal underworld Sapporo and in the whole island of Hokkaido, and one of her most recognizable signature symbols would be that infamous rifle.

Such notoriety would bring would both bring her more money that she could count and would also lead to severe consequences in the not-too-distant future.

Chapter 22: Hostile Takeover

A further month passed since Yuri's adventures and business deals in Laos. In those days, Yuri, Sakai, Tanaka, and Hirano carefully planned their accession to the Three Clans, which could be only possible by taking out the Onishi Group, the smallest and weakest party to the triumvirate which governed Sapporo's, and by extension the whole of Hokkaido's Yakuza underworld. In order to do that, Yuri would need to take advantage of the fact that the Onishi Group had lost the entirety of their prostitution and gambling businesses to an aggrupation of Triad groups and was in such a weak point that they had their extensive drug trafficking network as their only standing point, and as such, she had to attack them when they were already down bleeding on the floor.

Like she had done before with the Moskovsky and Ivanov Bratvas, the plan was to hit at the heart of the Onishi Group's leadership, headquartered in the Onishi Tower, a thirty-story building located near Odori Park, in downtown Sapporo. The building's top floors were covered in glass, featuring a world-class restaurant with panoramic views of the city, and also the *oyabun's*, the *wakagashira's* and the *so-honbucho's* headquarters. The building also included a built-in helipad on its rooftop, which was seldom used, as the Onishi Group did not own helicopters of any kind and thus the only times where a chopper actually landed there was for the meetings with the other member groups of the Three Clans.

Under such conditions, Yuri thought that the most effective way to deal with them was an all-out air assault using choppers, of which the Kubo Group had two. After studying Vietnam-era helicopter tactics, Yuri, Sakai, and Tanaka determined that the best course of action would be to use one of the aircraft as an attack helicopter to spray bullets at the glass façade of the building and thus kill any enemy resistance on those two top floors, while another would transport Yuri, Sakai, and a large team into the helipad so that they could proceed to kill the Onishi leadership and take over the building.

This plan was formulated a few days after Yuri returned from Laos, but it was prepared over the course of the entire month, including training and the acquisition of the necessary weapons from Russia. Their AKs would not be enough to spray the building with, so a bunch of PKM general-purpose machine guns from the Petropavlovsk arsenals were quickly purchased and attached to the doors of each helicopter. The *shatei* also spent quite some time learning to use them, and the Russian helicopter crews practiced the maneuvers by discreetly flying around the city, near the target building. As for Yuri and Sakai themselves, they also honed their skills with their Kalashnikovs at Oleksandr's firing range, in order to be as efficient as possible during the attack. After all, the tower would be brimming with Onishi goons, and well-placed shots would be necessary to take them all out.

Finally, the day of the assault came, or rather, the night of the assault, as Yuri would attack the tower under the cover of darkness. A convoy of Kubo Group vehicles therefore left for the small Okadama Airport, located to the north of Sapporo, and the place where the Kubo Group had its helicopter base. Yuri, Sakai, and the large group of *kyodai* and *shatei* boarded the two heavily armed helicopters, and they quickly took off for the assault to the Onishi Tower.

It would be a night to remember, as it represented Yuri's boldest and most extreme step yet to rise up in the ranks of the criminal underworld. She was risking a lot with this, and so she could not afford for it to end up in failure.

"Listen everyone, tonight the Onishi Group will fall. We need to attack decisively and aggressively in order to ascend to the Three Clans. To that end, we'll assault and hunt down the leadership of the Onishi Group, as well as any other subordinate present at the Onishi Tower. Your mission will be to protect Sakai-kun and I as we go into the building to find and kill the enemy *oyabun*. You are authorized to kill anyone that stands in our way. If we let the Onishi *oyabun*, *wakagashira* and *so-honbucho* escape, this mission will be a failure. Anything less than their death is not acceptable. Do you understand the challenge at hand?" – Yuri asked, as the helicopter was cruising above Sapporo.

"Yes, *oyabun*!" – the *shatei* replied in unison.

"Good, very good. Prepare your rifles. This is going to be fun" – Yuri said.

"We're approaching the Onishi Tower" – Captain Vladimir Yahontov said.

"Okay, boys! This is it! Open doors" – Yuri ordered. Sakai nodded, and opened the side sliding doors of the helicopter in order to deploy the PK machine guns.

"Gunners, take positions, and rain fire at the Onishi building on my signal" – Yuri ordered.

"Yes, *oyabun*" – one of the *kyodai* tasked with handling one of the PKs said.

"Everyone else, when the enemies firing at us from the windows and the rooftop have been taken down, we'll land on the tower and proceed with the assault. Are you ready?" – Yuri asked. The *kyodai* and *shatei* replied by cocking their AKs.

"Good. Let's begin then" – Yuri ordered.

Both helicopters descended until they were at the same level as the two top floors of the tower, with their large crystal picture windows, and the rooftop, respectively. At the time, the restaurant was full of high-class, wealthy patrons who included many high-ranking Onishi enforcers. When they were in their right position, the machine guns locked and loaded, Yuri ordered them to fire.

"Now! Rain fire!" – Yuri ordered. The order given, the gunners pulled the trigger of their weapons and unloaded a devastating barrage of high-caliber fire on the guests at the restaurant, killing many of them and forcing the survivors to leave. The barrage was also responsible for the thrashing of the large glass panels and windows, which would mean a costly refitting for Yuri should they succeed in taking over.

Because the Onishi Group, like its two counterparts of the Three Clans, did not use firearms at all, it was very easy for the chopper gunners to take out the *nihonto* wielding Onishi *shatei* at the two upper levels and on the rooftops. Their *katanas* and *wakizashis* offered them very little protection against the enemy guns. However, there were a lot of them, so the gunners had to be very accurate with their weapons so as to not waste their precious and limited quantities of ammunition. After

most of the enemy defenders at the rooftop were taken out, Yuri's helicopter proceeded to land on the helipad, with its occupants willing to take the fight inside the Onishi Tower.

"Go, go, go!" – Yuri said, as the rear ramp was opened, allowing the team to get off the chopper and continue their fight on foot. Yuri left the helicopter as she was cocking her new AMD-65, and within seconds of leaving the aircraft, she started putting her rifle to good use, killing a couple of high-ranking Onishi *kyodai*.

"Everyone let's get inside! On me!" – Yuri ordered after the Kubo Group's team ended the lives of the last rooftop defenders. Once again, she kicked the door open, revealing a service staircase, and they went down it, arriving to the level where the luxurious restaurant was located.

"We need to get to the Onishi headquarters before they can escape. Come on!" – Yuri said, moving through a corridor into the restaurant.

There, the Kubo Group mopped up the last of the Onishi *shatei*, using their shotguns and rifles to take them out from range. If they were within striking distance of the enemies' swords and knives, they used their pistols, which were easier to handle.

"These ridiculous fools. They will wish to have bought their weapons from us before fighting us" – Yuri said, as they pummeled through the destroyed restaurant, receiving air support from the helicopter flying around the building.

When Yuri and her team reached the other end of the restaurant, where the staircase to the lower floors was located, they quickly went down it, shooting enemies as they moved, to finally get their access to the Onishi Group's leadership offices.

"Let's clear these rooms. If you see anyone important, shoot him. Sakai-kun, cover me" – Yuri ordered Sakai, who had been participating on the assault as well.

Most of the offices, built with glass walls and with bay windows around them, had been completely trashed by the Kubo Group's helicopter fire, and most of their occupants were already dead by the time Yuri and the team managed to reach them. A couple of high-ranking senior enforces had survived, but they were very heavily wounded, and were quickly finished off and executed by Yuri's *shatei*. Clearing the offices was, therefore, very easy. When that was done, all that remained was the central conference room, which had been secured by closing their doors shut and locking them up, so Yuri had to breach into the room.

"The enemy leaders are inside. On me. Prepare to breach" – Yuri said, and so her team put themselves at both sides of the door and formed up to forcefully enter the conference room.

"Breach! Now!" – Yuri ordered one of her *shatei*, who shot the doors' locks with a shotgun.

After kicking the door open, the team entered, and shot everyone dead with their rifles. One of the Onishi Group leaders suddenly pulled out a pistol to shoot at Yuri, but she was quicker than him and killed him instantly with a couple of shots from her AMD-65. Once every enemy inside was dead, Yuri started identifying the bodies with the help of pictures in her smartphone to see if they had indeed killed the Onishi *oyabun*, *wakagashira*, and *so-honbucho*, who she had never seen before.

Following the pictures, Yuri discovered that the three of them had indeed been shot, though only two had actually died instantly. The third one, an old bald man dressed in a dark brown suit, the *oyabun* himself, the one Onishi Group member armed with a firearm, had been instead mortally wounded, struggling for his life in one side of the room. The bullet had hit him in his stomach, and he was bleeding out. Yuri walked to him and shared a brief conversation with him before his time was up.

“You got me... I surrender...” – the Onishi *oyabun* said, spitting blood.

“Yeah, I got you. And I’ll take good care of everything you built so far” – Yuri said.

“Ah, screw you... Sakamoto-san and Harada-san won’t take this kindly...” – the Onishi *oyabun* said.

“We shall see” – Yuri said, before executing him with a headshot. The visage of such execution would soon become a street legend among the Yakuza, with everything from Yuri’s suit to her nickel-plated rifle being part of the almost mythological reputation she was to earn after killing the *oyabun* from the Onishi Group.

“We’re done. Let’s begin securing the rest of the building” – Yuri said, before the team split up in order to take on the other twenty-eight levels. But for Yuri and Sakai, the blow had already been struck. The Onishi Group’s leadership and senior enforcers had been all wiped out, and the rest of that organization would soon follow, having been completely disintegrated by the next day.

With them gone, it was time for Yuri to visit the *oyabun* from the other two families, the Sakamoto Group, and the Harada Group, to negotiate her formal accession into the Three Clans.

That following morning, as the Onishi Group’s assets were being secured by the Kubo Group’s men, and as the news reported about the destruction and death caused by the helicopter assault and the police’s apparent indifference to it, Yuri, escorted by Sakai and a group of men, drove to the headquarters of the Harada Group, the most powerful Yakuza outfit in Sapporo, where the *oyabun* of said group, Izanagi Harada, was having an emergency meeting with his Sakamoto Group counterpart, Haru Sakamoto, to discuss their course of action now that the Onishi Group had been violently dismantled.

It had taken them completely by surprise, as neither Yuri nor anyone else in the Kubo Group’s leadership had warned them about the attack in advance. So, when Yuri showed up in the doors of Harada’s enormous traditional Japanese property located on the hills between Sapporo and Otaru, they were even more surprised, but also eager to get an explanation from Yuri herself. After a tense greeting, Yuri and her men were escorted by Harada Group *shatei* into the property, which was divided in several buildings and areas staffed by dozens of Harada employees and goons. After around twenty minutes of just going through the place, Harada’s subordinates finally led Yuri into their conference room, where, in addition of Izanagi Harada and Haru Sakamoto, there were also the *wakagashira* from both families and a number of Harada senior enforcers present.

“*Oyabun*, Yuri Kubo-san, leader of the Kubo Group, has arrived” – a Harada *kyodai* nervously said after opening the double doors to the conference room.

“Let them in” – Izanagi Harada said, so the Kubo Group was allowed to enter the room. It was the first time, out of very few, that Yuri could see Izanagi Harada’s and Haru Sakamoto’s faces.

Harada was a tall and slender old man who however looked far younger than he actually was, with hoary white hair but also a relatively youthful face, while Haru Sakamoto was an old and bearded fat man with a skin so pale that he resembled the *samurai* commonly depicted in drawings of old. Both of them were perplexed when they saw Yuri enter the room, and a little bit scared, as it was also the first time they saw the beautiful, and seemingly delicate and innocent, Yuri Kubo in person. The same Yuri Kubo that, until then, had killed hundreds of people single-handedly without any semblance of remorse or mercy.

“Welcome to my house, Kubo-san. Please, sit down” – Harada said, smiling. Sakamoto looked on silently as Yuri nodded and sat down in the conference room, opposite Harada, and Sakamoto.

“Tell me, Kubo-san, why have you come here?” – Harada asked.

“I think you perfectly know why, Harada-san. Is it necessary for me to tell you?” – Yuri asked, defiantly.

“No, it’s not. I know why you’re here. You are seeking your group’s membership in the Three Clans now that you have attacked and defeated the Onishi Group, and also killed their *oyabun*, Kitaro Onishi. Is that correct?” – Harada asked.

“That is correct, Harada-san. I’m currently seeking my group’s legitimate place as the third most powerful *ninkyo dantai* organization in Hokkaido in the Three Clans” – Yuri said.

“This is outrageous! You took out Onishi-san and his family without warning us first. That’s against *Bushido* and every other code of honor imaginable. You don’t deserve to be part of the Three Families!” – Sakamoto said. He was quickly corrected by Harada.

“Sakamoto-san, let me handle this. As I was going to say, you are in fact the third most powerful group in Sapporo and by extension, Hokkaido. You are well-entitled to your place inside the Three Families. Faced with that prospect, we have no choice but to let you be part of our little guild here” – Harada said, with a smile.

“Harada-san, are you seriously saying these Kubo rats are going to form part of our glorious council?” – Sakamoto asked, alarmed. Harada looked at him and nodded.

“Like I said, Yuri Kubo’s organization has demonstrated it has the power and the guts to bear the responsibility of forming part of our council. It would be against our dearest traditions to ignore our duty to concede them the position they deserve. Listen to me, Yuri Kubo. From now on, your family will form part of the Three Clans. As tradition demands, we’re going to celebrate your rise in your home in two days’ time. Make sure you plan a celebration worthy of this incredible feat” – Harada said.

“I understand. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to return with my men to inform them of the news and continue to consolidate the Onishi business under our brand” – Yuri said, standing up.

“We’ll continue our talk at your house in two days. I see great potential in your organization, my friend” – Harada said.

And so, with the formalities finished, Yuri exited the conference room followed by her men. They had a lot to do now that they were officially part of the Three Clans, including making a shopping list for the food they would need for their induction party. As they left, Sakamoto approached Harada to express his discontent.

“For the record, I don’t approve and will never approve of this, Harada-san. Onishi-san didn’t deserve to be taken out in that way” – Sakamoto said. Harada stared at him seriously.

“What?” – Sakamoto asked.

“I guess you didn’t hear me saying that I see a great potential in her organization, Sakamoto-san. Just wait and see...” – Harada said, with a devilishly smile forming in his face.

As she stepped back into her vehicle, Yuri felt great. Now she had managed to go further than her predecessor, by building a brand, making it grow, and finally earning her deserved place at the side of Sapporo’s most powerful gangsters. It had been a huge feat, a remarkable accomplishment, and she had done it in less than nine months. It was as if the gods and goddesses of organized crime had aligned themselves to help Yuri and her men and concede them this huge prize.

Two days later, a huge celebration was thrown out at the Kubo Estate, with high-ranking Yakuza from all the groups, from all over Sapporo, visiting Yuri to pay their respects and enjoy the delicious food her chefs had prepared. During the party, one of the *shatei* took a picture of the whole Kubo Group family, including Yuri, Sakai, Tanaka, Hirano, and then the rest of the senior enforcers, *kyodai* and *shatei* from the Kubo Estate. It was an icon of success for Yuri, and she would carry a copy of the picture in her wallet to constantly remind herself of the huge power she had amassed and that she needed to work even harder in order to keep it.

Especially during the times ahead when her biggest tests would take place. Tests designed to destroy her in every rule and way. Only time would tell if she would be up to the task of passing them.

PART III: THE FALL AND REVENGE OF YURI KUBO

Chapter 23: Calm Before the Storm

Three months passed since the Kubo Group became part of the exclusive Three Clans guild of Sapporo, and a full year since its leader, the now nineteen-year-old Yuri Kubo, accidentally rose to power, succeeding her predecessor, Kenkichi Fujii of the Fujii Group.

Since assuming the mantle of the *oyabun* of a small-sized Yakuza group specializing in arms trafficking, Yuri had led the Kubo Group through immense growth, by quickly defeating their scarce competition in Hokkaido and consolidating gunrunning operations under her brand, so that they could then forge lasting business relationships both corrupt Russian military suppliers and fellow Yakuza organizations in other parts of Japan. Her products completely saturated the underground black arms market and managed to reach as far as the Southeast Asian country of Laos. And besides all of that, her ruthless and resourceful personality and orientation for efficiency made her a renowned and respected figure in the Sapporo underworld, not only among the Yakuza, but also among other criminal circles such as the Chinese Triads and the Korean Khangpae.

And so, Yuri found herself at the height of her criminal career, right in the summit of the mountain as the third most powerful Japanese criminal figure in Sapporo, virtually controlling the totality of Hokkaido's underground arms trade, with considerable interests in the city's seedier nightlife and also the drug trafficking business, the latter inherited from the Onishi Group's takeover and essential to the Kubo Group's coffers, which, up until then, had amassed more than two hundred million dollars, distributed among several accounts in Japan and abroad.

But Yuri's ambition was not to stop there. She knew that being the third place in the guild that controlled the Yakuza world in Sapporo still meant she was the weakest of the three leaders, so after her first anniversary at the helm of the Kubo Group, she started making plans to quickly continue the group's expansion, this time, outside Hokkaido. Her eyes were in the city of Sendai, which was her nearest major city, located in the northern part of the island of Honshu. In a first for the Kubo Group, her expansion strategy included the formation of an affiliated group which could establish and control businesses in Sendai. An affiliated group, with its own *oyabun*, *wakagashira*, and *so-honbucho* would mean an autonomous and efficient way of managing the Kubo Group's future interests in Sendai.

However, as Yuri was now part of the Three Clans, she had to inform the other two-member *oyabun* whenever she planned to do such a big expansion. The way she saw it, that could be an advantage, as the Harada Group and the Sakamoto Group were both well-connected organizations that could help her dearly.

"So, as you see, my group is currently considering expanding down south, and we have decided that, should we carry out the plan, our target city will be Sendai. For the record, I'm not seeking your approval, but rather, I'm just informing you, so as to avoid any potential conflicts of interest" – Yuri told Izanagi Harada and Haru Sakamoto at the Harada compound.

"Of course, my dear, of course. Even if you were not seeking it, you have our full approval for your expansion plans to Sendai. More than that, because here at the guild we care for our fellow members, I'll throw a bone at you. Have you ever heard of Yuichi Taniguchi?" – Harada asked.

"Maybe. Why don't you remind me who he is?" – Yuri asked.

"Taniguchi-san is one of the nationalist representatives from the Miyagi Prefecture, you know, where Sendai is located. Out of all of them, he's certainly the wealthiest and the most powerful, and according to some of our associates, he will make a serious bid to run for Prime Minister during the next general elections. But what very few people know is that he is very well-connected with the local *ninkyo dantai* gangs and has traded a lot of favors with them. He's a renowned fixer in the government side of things among we Yakuza. I'd suggest talking to him before pushing for your expansion" – Harada said.

"That sounds convenient, thank you, Harada-san. Do you know how I can contact him for a meeting?" – Yuri asked.

"I have an associate who is in regular contact with him. I can tell him to arrange a meeting between you two. Sounds good?" – Harada asked.

“Yeah, I’ll take that. Thanks a lot, Harada-san. I’ll find a way to compensate you for this soon” – Yuri said.

“Don’t worry. Remember that here at the guild we take care of one another. Anything you need, just ask me or Sakamoto-san” – Harada said.

“Excellent. Let me know when you have a date for the meeting” – Yuri said, standing up from her seat.

“Understood. The meeting is adjourned” – Harada said, standing up together with Yuri and Sakamoto.

The three *oyabun* then proceeded to bow before one another and Yuri left through the door with Sakai and her escorts.

“That insolent bitch. Expanding to Sendai while we’re trapped in this island!” – Sakamoto complained.

“Easy, Sakamoto-san. It’s all part of the plan. Be patient while I arrange for this meeting between our little friend here and Taniguchi-san. She’s going to be delighted by the experience” – Harada said, taking his smartphone out and proceeding to make a call.

Yuri, Sakai, and their team walked through the large property to the entrance, where they picked their vehicle and drove off.

“Well, that was a great meeting. I kinda like Harada-san’s style and disposition” – Yuri said.

“Yeah, but there’s something strange in him” – Sakai said, thoughtful.

“What do you mean?” – Yuri asked.

“I don’t know. Like, something’s off with him. I don’t have motives to think about it, because Harada-san has always had a reputation of being helpful and humble with his counterparts. He hasn’t engaged in open war against other Yakuza groups for years now. And yet, I perceive that he’s thinking about something behind the scenes, but I don’t know what thing yet” – Sakai reflected.

“I do admit he looks and talks kind of strange, but he looks like a decent person. We should trust in him” – Yuri said.

“Always be on your guard, Kubo-sama. You know that in this business, you can’t trust anyone. It’s just business” – Sakai said.

“I know that. But at the same time, Harada-san’s offer of talking with a representative will work wonders for our plans. So, I say we take it” – Yuri said.

“Alright. But let’s be careful” – Sakai said.

Once they were back at the Kubo Estate, Yuri relaxed in her garden accompanied by Sakai and Nadzeya, who had a surprise for both of them.

“I’m... I’m pregnant” – Nadzeya said, in a low and sweet voice.

“What? Say that again?” – Sakai asked.

“I’m pregnant. It’s yours, Issei-kun” – Nadzeya said in a slightly louder voice.

“Do you realize what you’re saying, my dear Nadzeya-chan?” – Sakai asked, worried.

“I’m not lying, Issei-kun. Yesterday I performed the test. It was positive. And I’ve been thinking about how and when to tell you ever since. And I decided to tell you in Kubo-san’s presence so that she understands that you now have a responsibility” – Nadzeya said. Yuri’s face was thoughtful and serious.

“Are you angry about this, Kubo-sama?” – Sakai asked.

“Angry? Of course not, Sakai-kun, of course not. I can only wish you the best for you two. A child is always a blessing and a bundle of nothing but love” – Yuri kindly said. Some tears of emotion, and also relief, sprouted from Sakai’s eyes.

“Thank you, Kubo-sama. You don’t know how happy I am about these news. I’ll be a father!” – Sakai said, cleaning his tears.

“Yes, I’m sure you’ll be an excellent father. But before that, you got to help me with our plans for Sendai, and also to find a worthy successor for you” – Yuri said.

“Successor?” – Sakai asked.

“Yes, obviously. You need to adequately parent your child to be a better person than us. And being part of a criminal syndicate is inherently antithetical to that” – Yuri said.

“Kubo-sama...” – Sakai said.

“Look, I’ll hate to let you go as my *saiko-komon*, because you’re the best of the best of all of these guys around here. You have been with me since day one, through the highs and lows, and I owe you for all what you have done for me. But as Arkhipienka-san has just said, you have a new responsibility now. And so, from the day your child is born, you’ll relinquish your position. And you’ll have a regular life elsewhere. Of course, I’ll take care of everything. I’ll find you a beautiful house for the three of you, and you’ll regularly receive a portion of the group’s earnings, so that you can live comfortably. It’s the least I can do for you” – Yuri said. This made Sakai even more emotional.

“I don’t know what to say, Kubo-sama. I... I’m in debt to you” – Sakai said, crying a bit.

“Don’t worry. It is me who is in debt to you, my dear *saiko-komon*” – Yuri said, smiling.

And so, after this promise that Yuri made to Sakai and Nadzeya, she left back inside the main building, deciding to leave them alone to finish processing such huge and life-changing news. None of the three knew it yet, but in the coming days, their lives would radically change, and not precisely for the best.

Some days passed since Nadzeya’s revelation to Yuri and Sakai, and Yuri was very busy trying to figure out how to begin with her expansion plans to Sendai. Together with Sakai, Tanaka, and Hirano, they had long discussions about how and where to start. Should she send a *shateigashira* and his

men to establish an outpost and slowly grow to be their own affiliated group? Should she go there personally and takeover an already existing organization by the means of force? Or should she takeover said organization through the power of money instead? This was to be her first experience in expanding to another city in Japan, and she had no clue as to how exactly do it.

“You better speak with that representative before moving our chips, *oyabun*” – Tanaka suggested.

“Yeah, you’re right. He should advise us first” – Yuri said, at the end of her latest meeting with her underbosses.

She could not wait for the meeting. Despite having proved to everyone in the Sapporo underworld that she and her group were made of steel, she still wanted to continue to grow her group’s business network, and to do something unique and big, something that the other two groups of the Three Clans had not done yet. Expanding to Sendai, and then to the rest of Honshu, was her best chance to quickly ascend to the position of Hokkaido’s most powerful Yakuza lord. Her ambition to prove herself that she was a strong leader would lead to unexpected consequences, though.

The following day, early in the morning, her phone rang. It was Harada.

“Hello, Harada-san?” – Yuri answered.

“Hello, Kubo-san. How are you today?” – Harada asked.

“Fine. I’m preparing for today’s challenges, like always at this time of the day” – Yuri said.

“I’m glad to hear that. Hey, I managed to arrange a meeting between you and Taniguchi-san” – Harada said.

“Really? That’s great. Where and when, Harada-san?” – Yuri asked, anxiously.

“Today, as a matter of fact. It will be in one of my restaurants in the city, at four o’clock. Don’t worry, I’ve arranged for the whole place to be empty, just for you, your security, and then Taniguchi-san and his own security. Not even a fly will be allowed to be there” – Harada said, trying to sound reassuring.

“Thank you, Harada-san. I’ll find a way to thank you later” – Yuri said.

“Don’t worry, child, don’t worry. You just go there and do what you have to do. Then, let me know how things went so that we can celebrate a bit, you hear?” – Harada said.

“Very well. I’ll call you when the meeting is done” – Yuri said.

“Sure thing” – Harada said, before hanging up.

Satisfied with Harada’s favor to her, Yuri spent the morning preparing herself for the meeting with Taniguchi. She picked her best clothes and asked Sakai to do the same. She also took care that the *shatei* who would be escorting her be dressed accordingly. This was to be one of her most decisive meeting in her career, after all, so everything had to be perfect.

When the time came for the meeting, Sakai, the two *shatei* and her left in one of the Mercedes-Benz GLS-Class SUVs to Harada’s restaurant downtown, the place arranged for their meeting with

Taniguchi. Yuri was very excited and eager to have that conversation. Her ambition had blinded her a bit, and she believed she had everything under her utmost control.

Little she knew, that was to be the last time she left the Kubo Estate as *oyabun*.

Chapter 24: The Coup

After a relatively short drive to Harada's restaurant, located near the University of Hokkaido's Botanical Garden, Yuri parked the SUV on the restaurant's dedicated parking lot and got off the vehicle with her men. The restaurant was a majestic, traditional Japanese-style building three stories high, and according to Sakai's information, was one of the very best Japanese restaurants in the island, offering high-class food at prohibitively expensive prices.

"Definitely worthy of the meeting we'll celebrate today, my *saiko-komon*" – Yuri said, opening the doors to the restaurant.

A hostess dressed in a *kimono* greeted them.

"Greetings. Are you Yuri Kubo?" – the hostess asked.

"That's correct. We're here for a meeting with Yuichi Taniguchi. Has he arrived already?" – Yuri asked.

"Yes, Kubo-dono. His security and him are waiting for you at our VIP lounge. Please, follow me" – the hostess said, and so Yuri, Sakai and their two escorts followed her into the inner portion of the restaurant, more specifically, to an area closed-off from the rest of the place.

Behind one of the sliding doors, there was a small, private dining room, with five people inside. There was a young man, dressed in a suit, who looked just barely older than Yuri herself, flanked by four guards, two per side. The young man looked at Yuri and Sakai as they entered the room and smiled and bowed before them.

"Welcome, Kubo-san. Harada-san told me to meet you here" – the young man said.

"You must be Taniguchi-san, the representative from Miyagi, aren't you?" – Yuri asked.

"That's right. I'm Yuichi. Please, sit down" – Taniguchi said, inviting Yuri to sit in one of the seats of the table. Yuri nodded, and Sakai and she sat down while their *shatei* stood back and guarded the meeting.

"Let's talk business then. Harada-san told me you were planning an aggressive expansion into my jurisdiction, into Sendai. Is that correct?" – Taniguchi asked.

"Yes, representative. That is what we intend to do. We have a bunch of possible plans and strategies in order to do that. But Harada-san advised me to seek your approval and your advice. That is why we're here today. And I'm grateful that he could manage to get me a meeting with you in such a short time" – Yuri said.

"I see. Yes, he managed to take advantage of the coincidence that I would come here to Sapporo to formally invite him and Sakamoto-san to my wedding in three months' time" – Taniguchi said.

"Are you getting married, representative? Well, congratulations" – Yuri said.

“Thank you, Kubo-san. We’re going to get married in a private cruise ship. Everyone in your line of work, from the Yakuza Council of Tokyo to the Three Clans of Sapporo, will be invited to attend to it. And that includes you. We’ll do a beautiful cruise from Tokyo to Okinawa following the coasts. It will be marvelous” – Taniguchi kindly said.

“I’m looking forward to it. It would be my first time at sea” – Yuri said.

“You’ll love it. I’m sure about that. Anyways, let’s continue our discussion. You were saying that you want to expand to Sendai” – Taniguchi said.

“Yes. Like I was saying, we have planned many possible courses of action. But before we take any of them, we would like for your advice” – Yuri said.

“Well, the first thing you got to understand- “– Taniguchi said, interrupted by his phone ringing.

“Excuse me for one second. I’ll be right back” – Taniguchi said, before standing up and leaving through a door behind his seat.

“Well, I suppose we’ll be on a ship in three months. Sounds very exciting, doesn’t it, my *saiko-komon*?” Yuri asked Sakai.

“Yes, I guess. Never navigated on the seas before, though. So, it’ll be as new for me as it’ll be for you” – Sakai said.

Suddenly, their conversation was interrupted dead when Taniguchi’s guards took out their guns and quickly shot Yuri’s and Sakai’s *shatei* dead with silenced pistols. As they stood there, shocked, and distraught about what had just happened, they proceeded to shoot Yuri and Sakai, but they were quicker than them and killed them all, in the case of Yuri, with automatic fire from her Glock 18C. Immediately afterwards, an alarm started to sound.

“What the hell just happened?” – Yuri asked.

“Doesn’t matter, we need to get out of here at once!” – Sakai said.

“Where’s Taniguchi?” – Yuri asked.

“I don’t know, but we don’t have time to figure it out! Let’s go, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said, so they proceeded to hastily exit the VIP lounge and walk through the restaurant to the door, quickly finding out that it was full to the brim with Special Unit elite police officers, with assault rifles at the ready.

“You have tried to murder Representative Yuichi Taniguchi! Surrender now and prepare to be detained!” – one of the SAT officers said over a loudspeaker.

“It’s a trap! Harada and Taniguchi played it on us!” – Sakai warned.

“We need to fight it up then. Let’s pummel our way out of here” – Yuri said, firing her machine pistol and killing a SAT officer.

“Fire! Now!” – the SAT leader ordered, and the elite officers fired their semiautomatic assault rifles at Yuri and Sakai.

“SAT, take them out!” – Yuri ordered, and so Sakai and she slowly advanced through the restaurant floor, killing many SAT officers as they moved.

“This is actually my first-time fighting Sapporo’s special police forces” – Yuri said.

“It is my first time too. I never thought we would have to do this!” – Sakai said, kicking a SAT officer down the stairs to his death.

After a quick shootout, Yuri and Sakai disposed of a large number of SAT officers and ran to the parking lot, which still housed their Mercedes SUV. They quickly got into the car, and Yuri stepped on it to get out of the place as soon as she could before more police would arrive.

“Call Tanaka-san and Hirano-san! Tell them we were ambushed! We’ll have to retaliate at once!” – Yuri said, while driving at full-speed back to the Kubo Estate.

Sakai nodded, and tried to contact Tanaka and Hirano. The first of them did not answer the call.

“I can’t contact Tanaka-san. His phone is switched off!” – Sakai said.

“Try with Hirano-san!” – Yuri ordered. Sakai then dialed Hirano’s phone number and called him. Again, it was impossible to contact him.

“Hirano-san’s phone is off too!” – Sakai said.

“Shit, this doesn’t look good at all! We got to return to the Kubo Estate. If this is what I think it is, we got to move our forces quickly!” – Yuri said.

And so, Yuri and Sakai accelerated through the Sapporo streets in order to get back to the Estate at once. However, Harada’s coup against them was just starting. And they were bewildered at what they saw once they arrived at the Estate.

“What the hell?!” – Yuri said, after seeing a huge column of smoke rising from the Kubo Estate’s location. When they turned around the corner, they discovered that the whole complex was being consumed by flames.

“Shit! The place is on fire!” – Sakai said, as Yuri moved into the Kubo Estate’s parking lot.

“Who could have done this?” – Yuri asked herself, distraught.

“Doesn’t matter! Nadzeya-chan is still inside! We need to get her!” – Sakai said, desperately.

“Yeah, let’s go!” – Yuri said, getting off the vehicle. As they were walking into the compound, someone started shooting at them. Yuri was horrified to see one of her own *shatei* in arms against her and was even more horrified when she saw that he was not the only one.

“What the hell is happening?!” – Sakai asked, firing his pistol against the traitors.

“I don’t know! Just kill those treacherous bastards! We need to get Arkhipienka-san and get out of here!” – Yuri said,

“There she is! Waste her!” – one of the Kubo Group’s former *shatei* said, emptying his magazine against Yuri and Sakai before being shot by the latter.

As Yuri and Sakai went into the main building on fire, they discovered that more and more former subordinates had joined the coup and were forced to kill them. This not only included *shatei* and *kyodai*, but also some high-ranking senior enforcers as well, who viciously attacked Yuri and Sakai, calling them “traitors to the ways of the *ninkyo dantai*”. They also found out Tanaka’s and Hirano’s corpses, indicating that they had been disposed of by the traitors. Yuri and Sakai were still very confused as to what was happening, but they knew for sure that Harada and Sakamoto were behind it, and somehow managed to convince her own force to mercilessly hunt her down. After killing around a dozen of her former comrades, Yuri finally managed to reach Sakai and Nadzeya’s room, where they found the girl hiding behind the bed, almost unconscious due to smoke inhaling.

“Issei-kun, Kubo-san, what on Earth is happening?!” – Nadzeya asked.

“This is a coup! We need to get out of here as fast as we can!” – Yuri said, helping Nadzeya get back on her feet. Before leaving, Yuri ran to her room, which was almost completely filled with flames, and grabbed her nickel-plated AMD-65 rifle. She was not willing to leave behind her symbol of power and respect in the city, and she also needed some heavier firepower to fight her way out of there.

“Let’s get out of this damned building!” – Yuri said, and they quickly ran out of the house, among the debris of the collapsing building, killing many more former *shatei* as they went.

When they finally exited the compound, they found themselves in more trouble. The entrance had been barricaded by two of her Mercedes SUVs, and the *shatei* and *kyodai* had taken positions to ensure Yuri, Sakai, and Nadzeya could not leave the Kubo Estate alive.

“Kill them all or Harada-sama won’t be happy!” – one of Yuri’s former senior enforcers said.

A large firefight soon ensued, where the AK-74M-wielding traitors riddled what remained of the Estate’s façade with bullets, leaving Yuri, Sakai and Nadzeya no option but to run from cover to cover until they reached the parking lot, killing goons as they moved. By that point, Yuri was furious, and wanted to kill all and every one of the traitors with her guns. Unfortunately, she understood she did not have much ammunition, so she hastily ran through the parking lot until they reached their car. Sakai and Nadzeya quickly got into the back seats, while Yuri stepped up to the driver’s position and quickly started the engine. As everything she had worked so hard to build burned down in the distance, she accelerated the vehicle and ran over many of her former colleagues and comrades, going around the entire Estate until she reached the secondary entrance, which was not barricaded, and finally managed to exit the Kubo Estate, for the very last time.

“Whew! That was a close one!” – Yuri said, relaxing a little.

“It still is! Look in the mirror!” – Sakai said. Yuri looked through the rear-view mirror, and saw a couple of enemy SUVs giving chase, with goons firing their assault rifles from their windows.

“Shit! They’re after us! Pick up one of the rifles in the back and make them bleed, Sakai-kun!” – Yuri ordered, and so, as Nadzeya cried in horror, Sakai used one of their own AKs to fire at the enemy SUVs from his door. Unfortunately, as the Mercedes SUVs were so well armored, his attacks initially had little effect.

"It's useless! There's nothing I can do to stop those bastards!" – Sakai warned.

"Try shooting at the engine! That'll stop them! Shoot through the grilles!" – Yuri ordered, while taking out her smartphone in order to call Yokoyama from Tokyo. She needed a place to go, and she hoped he would help her out.

"Hello? Yokoyama-san?" – Yuri asked.

"Yuri Kubo" – Yokoyama said.

"It's good to hear you! We're in a bit of trouble! The *oyabun* of the Harada Group has betrayed me and convinced my forces to betray me as well! We need help!" – Yuri said.

"Did he? I thought it was the other way around. My sources have told me that it was you who tried to kill not only Harada-san, but Taniguchi-san as well. And if you didn't know, Taniguchi-san is a very old and dear friend of mine, Kubo-san" – Yokoyama said.

"No, that's not right! He tried to kill me! His security ambushed us at our meeting place! It was trap! You have to believe me!" – Yuri said.

"I'm sorry, Kubo-san, but my sources have never provided me with wrong information. I'm afraid this is where our business relationship ends. From now on, I'll make my deals with Harada-san. If you interfere, then you'll be our enemy and we'll have to hunt you down" – Yokoyama coldly said.

"What?! You can't be serious!" – Yuri angrily said.

"Goodbye, Kubo-san" – Yokoyama said, before hanging up.

"Well, there go our Tokyo allies!" – Sakai said with irony, shooting at the pursuing SUVs, before finally disabling one of them.

"Harada and Sakamoto must have bamboozled them! They surely knew that Taniguchi was a friend of his!" – Yuri said.

"That's awesome to hear! Where are we going now, Kubo-sama?!" – Sakai asked, reloading his rifle. Almost overwhelmed, Yuri tried to think about a solution to their huge predicament.

"Kubo-sama! What are we going to do?!" – Sakai insisted.

"Let me think, goddamnit! Keep shooting at those vehicles while I come up with an idea!" – Yuri angrily ordered.

"Motherfuckers!" – Sakai screamed, as he dumped his last magazine at the enemy vehicle's engine, which, luckily, was killed by the unrelenting barrage of bullets from the AK-74M.

"Yay! There goes your SUV, idiots!" – Sakai screamed at the traitors.

"The enemies are down, Kubo-sama. Now, what are we going to do?" – Sakai asked once again. Yuri replied by taking her smartphone. She dialed a number, and then proceeded to call.

"Kubo-sama?" – Sakai asked, confused.

"Hello. I need a plane down at New Chitose Airport. Now" – Yuri said over the phone.

“This is your lucky day: one of our Hercules aircraft is preparing to take-off now. Should I tell them to wait for you?” – the shadow air company operator asked.

“Yes, please. Tell them we need to go to Petropavlovsk in Russia at once” – Yuri said.

“Okay, Kubo-san. They’ll be waiting for you” – the operator said, before Yuri hanged up.

“Thank goodness they have one plane for us” – Yuri said.

“What? Are we going to Russia again? Why?” – Sakai asked, perplexed.

“We need help. And the only one that I believe can help us is Counter Admiral Kurbatov” – Yuri said.

“Are you serious? What, do you think he will send his *spetsnaz* to hunt and kill Harada and the others?! You got to be kidding!” – Sakai said.

“That’s not what I said, *baka*! What I meant is that he can provide us with shelter for a while until we figure out what to do next. He can protect us if we pay up a little” – Yuri said.

“I guess you’re right. But how are we going to pay him? Our bank accounts and our precious money are probably being seized by Harada as we speak!” – Sakai warned.

“Not the Swiss account. Only you, Hirano-san and I ever knew of its existence. I bet it is still untouched. And half of our profits were stored there, so we still have more than a hundred million dollars in our pockets” – Yuri said.

“Even if we get Counter Admiral Kurbatov to protect us, how can you be sure that he won’t eventually betray us to Harada in the name of business?” – Sakai asked.

“I’m not sure. But we have to try somewhere. Counter Admiral Kurbatov may be a corrupt military leader, but he is still a military leader. He is bound by military honor and all that stuff. I’m willing to believe in him” – Yuri said.

“Guess he’s our only choice then. Hokkaido, no, the whole of Japan is no longer safe for us now that the Yokoyama Group is working with Harada. Let’s go to the airport and get out of here” – Sakai said.

Yuri nodded, and she accelerated her SUV, now heavily riddled with bullets, to take the road to New Chitose Airport. She needed to escape Sapporo. And fast.

Once at the airport, after a long trip from Sapporo, Yuri discreetly drove through a service area unattended by security, going through the cargo terminals until she arrived at the tarmac, where the L-100 Hercules aircraft that had helped her transport the BTR-80s to Laos was ready and waiting for her to take-off.

“Here you are. We’ve been waiting for you” – the Hercules pilot told Yuri.

“Yes, it’s been quite the day. We need to take off now” – Yuri said.

“Roger that. Let’s get this baby running” – the pilot said, walking to the plane and getting inside it in order to start the engines.

“Let’s go” – Yuri told Sakai and Nadzeya, who quickly boarded the plane.

As Yuri was boarding it herself, she saw in the distance a large helicopter approaching. It was one of her Mi-8s, except that it was no longer hers, as the side door opened and a gunner manning one of the PK machine guns rained the area with high-caliber bullets.

“Shit! The *shatei* have found us! Let’s get out of here before it’s too late!” – Yuri ordered the pilots, who quickly started to move the plane through the taxiways in order to reach one of the runways.

Soon, as the plane was taxiing, the enemy helicopter placed itself behind it, trying to shoot their rudder and wings off in order to prevent their escape.

“Dammit, they’re going to shoot us down before we even take off!” – Nadzeya said.

“I’m not going to let them. Open the ramp! I’m going to end this!” – Yuri said. The pilots complied and opened the rear-loading ramp long enough so that Yuri could be allowed to take aim at the enemy chopper with her AMD-65.

As the aircraft was preparing to take-off, Yuri started shooting her last magazines with her nickel-plated rifle. Because the helicopter moved too quickly, she missed most of her shots. However, just as she was loading her very last magazine, she decided it would be best to shoot at Vladimir Yahontov, the Russian pilot who had betrayed them as well.

“Die, you rat!” – Yuri said, as he emptied the rifle at the cockpit. A volley of shots hit Yahontov right in the head, provoking the helicopter to spin out of control and violently crash on the runway. The heavy vibration made Yuri slip to the floor and drop her prized AMD-65, which in turn fell from the plane.

“Fuck!” – Yuri said, as the plane finally managed to take-off.

“We need to close the ramp!” – the pilot said, before pressing the button to close the rear ramp shut.

By then, Yuri was exhausted, and so, breathing heavily, she sat down in the plane together with Sakai and Nadzeya, who were hugging each other out of extreme fear. They were still processing what had happened that fateful afternoon, when, out of nowhere, Yuri’s entire Kubo Group had betrayed them and tried to hunt them down.

“How could this happen?” – Yuri asked herself.

“Don’t overheat your brain trying to think about it, Kubo-sama. Relax. We’ll have plenty of time to think about this when we’re in Russia” – Sakai said.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. But I promise you. Harada, Sakamoto, Yokoyama, and everyone else involved in this insolence will pay. I can assure you that” – Yuri said, angrier than ever before.

“I know they will. But for now, rest. And think about what we’re going to tell Counter Admiral Kurbatov once we arrive” – Sakai said. Yuri nodded, and sat down.

Her smartphone's battery had died, so she could not call Counter Admiral Kurbatov in advance to tell him what had happened. And so, she did not know how the Russians would react to her unexpected visit.

* * *

"Hello. Did you get her?" – Harada asked one of Yuri's former *shatei* by phone.

"No. She escaped on a plane. We have her rifle, though" – the traitor told Harada.

"Excellent. I knew she would find a way to escape. She's better than all of us, after all. But the rifle will work. Bring it to my office" – Harada said.

"Right away, *oyabun*" – the traitor said, before hanging up.

"Our coup has failed, Harada-san. With Kubo out there, she will find a way to exact revenge against us one way or another!" – Sakamoto said, worried.

"No, she won't. She knows that she can't afford it with the little money and men she has left. The way I see it, she's been completely neutralized. We won't have to worry about her again, my dear Sakamoto-san" – Harada said.

"I hope you're right, Harada-san. I hope she doesn't have the guts for a *vendetta*" – Sakamoto said.

"And she won't. When we locate her, we'll go after her with full force. In the meantime, let's help ourselves to the huge business empire she left, Sakamoto-san" – Harada said.

"Sure thing, Harada-san" – Sakamoto said, with a smile.

Now that Yuri had been neutralized and Harada had her rifle, symbol of her power, he could claim the whole of her criminal empire. All of Yuri's assets were quickly transferred to the Harada and Sakamoto Groups, and most of her *shateigashira* pledged their alliance to them. Oleksandr, Dmitri, and the few other autonomous associates of the group who refused to serve Harada were also ousted from their positions and forced into hiding, sometimes in other cities. The Three Clans thus became the Two Clans, or rather, the One Clan, as Sakamoto was really nothing but a puppet for Harada.

And so, Yuri Kubo's fall from power and grace was consummated. Harada was so successful in duping the rest of the Yakuza in Japan that she would be remembered in Sapporo and in the rest of the country as an over-ambitious and power-hungry leader who rose unfairly and had a sudden and spectacular downfall barely a year after she entered the game. Now that she was seemingly gone, Harada was free to continue with her ambitious expansion plans, and he would quickly prepare to take over Sendai. Nobody questioned his authority. Not even Yuri's friends in the Triads and the Khangpae, who seemed indifferent to her vanishing and instead prepared to wage their own wars against the Yakuza.

Yuri's survival, though, would turn out to be a costly mistake on Harada's part. As he quickly defiled Yuri's businesses and Yakuza forces, the gears of revenge had started to move in Yuri's angry mind.

"They will pay. All of them" – Yuri thought, as she flew away from Japan and into Russian airspace, never to return to Japan again.

Chapter 25: An Old Friend

“Wake up. Kubo-sama. Wake up” – Sakai told Yuri, who had fallen asleep during the long four-hour trip to Petropavlovsk.

“Are we there yet?” – Yuri sleepily asked.

“We’re almost there, but we have some trouble. Look” – Sakai said, pointing to one of the plane’s windows. Yuri stared out of it and could see an armed Russian MiG-31 interceptor flying alongside the plane.

“This is no good. Let me go to the cockpit” – Yuri said, before walking to the Hercules’ cockpit.

“Kubo-san, the Russians are demanding we tell them why we’re requesting to land at Petropavlovsk” – the pilot told Yuri, somewhat scared.

“Let me talk to them” – Yuri said. The co-pilot gave her a headset with a microphone and opened the communication line.

“Hello, this is Yuri Kubo. We’re requesting to land at Elizovo Airport in order to speak with Counter Admiral Kurbatov” – Yuri said.

“Roger that, Hercules aircraft. We’re currently communicating with command. Do not deviate from your current path” – the MiG-31 pilot said, surprisingly, in a very neutral Russian accent.

“I hope we can make it unscratched. Those missiles seem deadly” – the Hercules’ co-pilot said, looking at the MiG-31’s array of missiles.

“I know they will leave us alone. It would be really savage from them to shoot down a humble transport like us” – the pilot said.

After some minutes, Yuri and the crew heard back from the interceptor’s pilot.

“Attention, Hercules aircraft. You’re cleared to land at Runway 34L. Prepare for inspection and have your documents at the ready” – the MiG-31 pilot said, before flying away.

“See? I knew they would let us land. Everyone, seatbelts on. We’re descending” – the pilot said. The problem solved, Yuri walked back to the cargo hold and met Sakai and Nadzeya, who had woken up too from her sleep.

“What happened then?” – Sakai asked.

“Nothing. The Russians were asking for our reason for being here. I told them we needed to meet Counter Admiral Kurbatov personally. They let us land at Petropavlovsk, so I guess everything will be fine” – Yuri said.

“Let’s hope it turns out to be as smooth as you make it sound” – Sakai said, fastening his seatbelt.

As the L-100 began its landing run, over at Elizovo Airport a heavy security contingent was being prepared to greet them. Unknown to Yuri and the others, the Russian authorities had been alerted by their Japanese counterparts that a L-100 Hercules aircraft violently took off from New Chitose Airport, requesting that they arrest and extradite its occupants back to Japan for questioning by the

police. The Russian command believed that the aircraft's occupants were something like a threat to national security, so they mobilized a whole *spetsnaz* company to secure the runway and tarmac, including troops, helicopters, and even infantry fighting vehicles. When the Hercules touched down and started to taxi towards the freight terminal, the vehicles and troops were placed in front of the aircraft's stopping position so that they could be prepared to storm the plane if necessary.

Once the plane stopped, Yuri, Sakai, Nadzeya and the pilots got off it, only to find themselves at gunpoint by the *spetsnaz*, with their own AKs at the ready for a shootout.

"Occupants of the Hercules aircraft! You're completely surrounded! Drop your weapons and get off the plane with your hands in the air!" – a *spetsnaz* commander said over a loudspeaker with a heavy Russian accent.

"Great. I knew this wasn't going to work" – Sakai said, dropping his pistol to the floor. Yuri followed suit, gently placing her Glock 18C on the floor of the Hercules.

"Move forward! Hands in the air!" – the *spetsnaz* commander insisted.

"Let me handle this" – Yuri said, and the team walked forward down the ramp. Among the *spetsnaz*, a Russian Navy officer appeared, which Yuri recognized as the same officer that had greeted them during their first time at Petropavlovsk. Now he was there, in the middle of the night, observing as Yuri, Sakai, Nadzeya and the pilots were being held at gunpoint. The officer walked towards Yuri.

"You got to have a good reason to be here disturbing our night, Miss Kubo" – the officer said.

"I need to talk to Counter Admiral Kurbatov urgently. We need his help" – Yuri said.

"Are you sure about that? The Japanese authorities told us a different story. Said that you had escaped and were trying to attack us" – the officer said.

"That is a blatant lie! We have been ousted from our city by our worst enemies, and we're humbly asking for some help from the Counter Admiral. Please, you have to believe us!" – Yuri told the officer, who thought about it for some seconds.

"How can we be sure that you're telling the truth?" – the officer asked.

"Come on, ask the Counter Admiral. He'll tell you that we have been purchasing merchandise from him for months now, and that we're trustworthy" – Yuri said. Once again, the officer thought about it for some seconds, until he took a decision.

"*Commander, order your men to put down their weapons! These are our friends!*" – the officer told the *spetsnaz* in Russian. The commandos immediately lowered their rifles.

"Get off the plane and let me see your passports. You'll see Counter Admiral Kurbatov, but not now. He's busy at the moment. Come, we're escorting you to a hotel in the city" – the officer said.

"Thanks. We owe you one" – Yuri said.

"Don't even mention it. And you owe the Counter Admiral, not me" – the officer said, before using his radio to request a vehicle for Yuri, Sakai, and Nadzeya.

While the aircraft's crew prepared their plane to return to the skies, the former Yakuza and Nadzeya got on one of the vehicles, which took them to the city of Petropavlovsk. It was the middle of the winter and it was snowing, which, strangely, gave the dull industrial city a jovial and romantic vibe in Yuri's eyes. The vehicle left them in front of a medium-sized hotel based around an old, Soviet-era building complex.

"You'll stay here from now on until you leave Petropavlovsk. It is a very cheap hotel, and the service isn't bad either. Tomorrow morning, a vehicle with Navy personnel will come looking for you. For now, have some rest. And Yuri Kubo, remember, we're watching you" – the officer said, before leaving with its vehicle.

"He's right, we need some rest. Come, Kubo-sama. Let's go" – Sakai said, walking with Nadzeya towards the hotel. The Belarusian girl had suffered a very stressful day, and so she needed to relax and rest a little. Yuri stared at the night sky for one last time before following her *saiko-komon* and his beloved partner into the hotel.

Once inside, both Yuri and Sakai came to the realization that, probably, the hotel staff talked neither Japanese nor English, and that communicating would be difficult. Luckily, they had Nadzeya, who was fluent in Russian, Belarusian and Ukrainian, to do the heavy lifting for them.

"Hello. We need a room with three beds" – Nadzeya told the hotel staff in Russian.

"How many days do you expect to stay?" – the hotel's female clerk asked.

"For now, a week. We will renovate the stay if necessary" – Nadzeya said.

"Please, I need the passports of every guest" – the clerk asked.

"Issei-kun, Kubo-san, your passports please" – Nadzeya asked. The three of them gave their passports to the clerk, who checked them visually for some seconds.

"Two Japanese citizens and one Belarusian national. What a mix. Come, I'll take you to your room" – the clerk said, standing up from her seat. Yuri and the others followed her into an old elevator, which took them slowly into the building's third floor. The clerk escorted them through a hallway into a room and handed them the electronic key.

"Breakfast is at eight. It is included with the standard rate. The room is equipped with satellite TV and a nice view of the city" – the clerk told Nadzeya in Russian.

"Thank you" – Nadzeya said.

"You're welcome. Enjoy your stay" – the clerk said, before leaving back to her position.

"That was smooth as silk. We're lucky to have you here with us, Arkhipienka-san" – Yuri said.

"You're welcome, Kubo-san. Now let's enter the room, shall we? I think we all deserve some good rest" – Nadzeya said. Yuri opened the door with the electronic card, allowing for them to enter the room and settle. They were so tired that, as soon as they saw the beds, they got undressed and laid over them to sleep.

Later, with Nadzeya already enjoying her sleep, Yuri and Sakai talked and reflected about the day's events, each from their bed.

"I guess we're fugitives now" – Sakai said.

"Yeah. Everything we built, everything we fought for... gone in seconds. Damn. I suppose Harada must be now thinking what to do with all the money he stole from our coffers. And all the weapons. And all the good men he brainwashed into joining him. If I only had seen through his plan..." – Yuri said.

"Don't think about that now, Kubo-sama. You'll have plenty of time to think about it from tomorrow onward" – Sakai said.

"You warned me. You told me that something was off with Harada. I should have listened to you instead of being so ambitious" – Yuri said, anguished.

"Don't say that. Nobody could have seen it coming, Kubo-sama" – Sakai said.

"You told me the same thing when Yokoyama duped us into murdering those cultists. I should have seen through the trickery then, and I should have seen through it now. I'm such a wimp, stumbling twice on the same stone. Perhaps this is what I deserve for such weakness" – Yuri reflected. Sakai turned his head around and looked deeply at Yuri's eyes.

"Yes, you did stumble twice on the same stone. But that has nothing to do with you being a weak ruler. Sometimes, things turn out like this. That's how this business is. You never know who will stab you in the back or when" – Sakai said.

"I swear to you, all of them will pay. We'll have our revenge" – Yuri said.

"Yes, we will. But right now, it's time to plan what our immediate future will be. We can't afford to exact our revenge right now. We need resources and people. And we don't have them right now. So, for now, let's relax, and have some rest. Tomorrow we'll talk about it in more detail once we visit Counter Admiral Kurbatov" – Sakai said.

Yuri nodded, and turned the lights off, so that they could have some well-deserved sleep.

The following day, Yuri, Sakai and Nadzeya woke up early in the morning. After getting dressed, they quickly got down to the breakfast hall to eat. True to its nature as coming from a cheap hotel, the breakfast was sparse and not very filling, but was enough for Yuri as their first breakfast outside the luxurious space offered by the now destroyed Kubo Estate.

While they were finishing the meal, the doors of the breakfast hall opened and the Russian Navy officer appeared, followed by two *spetsnaz* troopers. They walked to Yuri's table.

"Miss Kubo, we are here to take you to Counter Admiral Kurbatov's office. He's waiting for you" – the officer said.

"Right away. Let us finish our breakfast and we'll go right away" – Yuri said.

"Only you. Your friends will have to stay" – the officer gravely said.

“But...” – Yuri said, before being interrupted by Sakai.

“It’s okay, Kubo-sama. Nadzeya-chan and I will check out the city” – Sakai said.

“Okay. Let’s go, then” – Yuri told the officer, before leaving with him through the hotel’s main hall into the streets, where the military jeep was waiting for them. As they walked to the car, Yuri coughed. It was really cold outside.

“Some advice, my friend. You ought to get some new threads, otherwise you’ll become sick in this weather” – the officer said.

“After the meeting with the Counter Admiral, please tell me where to go buy some new clothes” – Yuri said.

“Sure. Let’s got to the base” – the officer said, and both of them got into the jeep.

The vehicle took them through the streets of Petropavlovsk until it reached the coastal road into the naval command headquarters of the Kamchatka Peninsula. As usual, Yuri kept herself entertained by looking through the windows. The city was very snowy, and she could see people dressed in very warm Russian clothes, which included the fur hats they called *ushankas*, as well as heavy coats and jackets.

“I have to get one of those” – Yuri thought, realizing that her trusty Yakuza era outfit would no longer be adequate.

After around half-an-hour, the car made it into the base, which, as usual, was heavily guarded by Russian Navy troops. Yuri got off the vehicle and was escorted through the base to Counter Admiral Kurbatov’s office. Almost nothing had changed since she last was there. However, there was something different that Yuri could see when she entered the Counter Admiral’s office, and that was a new scale model of a submarine on his desk.

“Counter Admiral Kurbatov, Miss Yuri Kubo has arrived to see you” – the officer told the Counter Admiral in Russian.

“Let her in” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov replied in Russian.

“Here. Good luck, Miss Kubo” – the officer said, before exiting the room, leaving the former *oyabun* and the Commander of the Kamchatka Flotilla alone once again.

“Yuri! Yuri! Nice to see you here again!” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said. By that time, even if this was the second time they met physically, there was so much trust between them as businesspeople that Yuri allowed Counter Admiral Kurbatov to call her with her name.

“Nice to see you too, Counter Admiral. Uh, thanks for agreeing to receive me once again” – Yuri said.

“Don’t worry, Yuri. I apologize for the way my men treated you last night. The Japanese authorities called us yesterday to warn us about a rogue aircraft coming to our territory. We feared the worst, and I ordered for them to prepare for an attack. If I only knew it was you. You should have called me in advance” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“You’re right, I should have called you. But my phone died. You know, we had a very hectic day yesterday” – Yuri said.

“Oh, yes, my men have told me about it. What happened to you is a true tragedy. Come, sit down, let’s talk about it” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said, offering Yuri a seat.

“Thank you, Counter Admiral” – Yuri said, sitting down while the Counter Admiral poured himself a glass of vodka.

“So, tell me, what can I do for you, Yuri?” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov asked.

“I’m here humbly asking for protection, Counter Admiral. As you know, I was ousted from the leadership of my group. Most of my men betrayed me and joined an enemy formerly disguised as a friend. I lost almost everything I worked so hard to build. And now, Japan is not a safe place. Not for me, nor for my chief advisor and his partner, the only members of my family who stayed loyal to me. So, until I manage to come up with a plan to get revenge on the ones who did this, I would like to ask you for protection. If you require money, we’ll pay you whatever you need, as I managed to keep half of my savings intact. You just have to set your price” – Yuri said, pleading. Counter Admiral Kurbatov laughed.

“Come on, Yuri. We’re friends, right? Of course, I can protect you and your people. And I won’t charge you a cent for it. Just give me some time to talk to the local government and to find you some house in the city, and you can move in there. Help you get back on your feet. Start over from zero. Live a peaceful life here in the Kamchatka Peninsula until you’re ready to return to the action” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“Thank you, Counter Admiral. I... I don’t know what to say” – Yuri said.

“There’s nothing to be said. Now tell me, how did this happen to begin with?” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov asked.

“It’s a long story. Basically, we were planning to expand into another city, and I foolishly asked the wrong person to advise me. He told me to speak to a politician, a wealthy representative, and when I went there and met him, they ambushed me. My men were brainwashed into thinking I was the traitor. And they hunted me down, burned my home, and forced me out of Hokkaido” – Yuri explained.

“Must be devastating, isn’t it?” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“Yeah, it is. The worst part of it is that, just before betraying me, this representative was talking about how he was getting married in a cruise ship in three months, when he was going to invite every big shot in the Yakuza underworld to celebrate with him. It was such a hopeful moment. Now I only want to go into that cruise ship and slaughter every one of them myself” – Yuri acidly said. This new information made Counter Admiral Kurbatov think for some minutes.

“Cruise ship, you said?” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov asked, thoughtful.

“Yes, Counter Admiral. They will be meeting on a cruise ship. All of them” – Yuri said.

“Then I have exactly what you need to get the revenge on these guys you so desperately crave for” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“What do you mean?” – Yuri asked, suddenly interested.

“Look, Yuri, I like you. You have made me earn a lot of money, and I mean a lot, selling those AKs and BTRs. With all that check I got from those deals, I have enough cash to send my kids to college in the United Kingdom, managed to buy my wife that expensive Mercedes car she wanted, and have enough change left to peacefully retire with all expenses paid. You made my quality of life so much better, and now that I see that yours has considerably worsened, I’ll try to help you out” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“Are we going to attack the bastards in the cruise ship?” – Yuri asked.

“No. You’re going to attack them. Yes. You” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said to Yuri’s surprise.

“How much will it cost me?” – Yuri asked.

“A lot. But I know you could afford it, if you said that you kept half of your savings intact. And you will be marveled when you see it. Please, come with me. I’ll show it to you right away” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said, standing up from his seat.

“Where are we going?” – Yuri asked.

“We’re going to Vilkovo, a neighboring city. Only there you’ll find what you need. Come, let’s not waste any time and get to it” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said, suddenly very excited.

“What is he talking about?” – Yuri asked herself, as she exited the office.

Chapter 26: The Day of the Akula

And so, after that strange conversation, Counter Admiral Kurbatov and a couple of officers and soldiers took Yuri to the geographically nearby city of Vilkovo, a closed city housing some of the Kamchatka Flotilla’s most deadly weapons. However, because it was located at the other side of the bay, reaching it required an almost-two-hour long trip, during which Yuri stayed silent, only wondering what Counter Admiral Kurbatov could be talking about. Just before reaching the city, Yuri dared to ask.

“What is this thing you want to show me, Counter Admiral?” – Yuri asked, confused.

“Wait until you see. The only hint I will give you is that, with this thing, you’ll be able to attack and kill your enemies in the cruise ship without firing a single shot from your assault rifle” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said, mystifying Yuri even more. How could she manage to achieve such feat?

The vehicles stopped, and Yuri was escorted by Counter Admiral Kurbatov and the officers into another complex of the Russian Navy, which included a lot of piers where long, black submarines were moored in. Yuri and the Russians walked over to one of the piers, and then moved through it until they reached the place where a submarine was moored. It was a relatively big submarine. Not the biggest out of the many that were anchored there, but still big. It also looked brand-new, with a streamlined sail that blended well with the rest of the vessel, and a curious and bulbous pod over her rudder.

“You asked about how you were going to get your revenge? This is how” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said, pointing to the submarine.

“A submarine? You can’t be serious” – Yuri said, incredulous.

“I know how it sounds but hear me out. Let’s begin with a little history. Back in the Cold War, the Soviet Union competed with the United States to build the best, most sophisticated, and quietest nuclear attack submarine in the world. During the last years of the Soviet era, most precisely in 1984, our designers and shipbuilders came up with Project 971 *Shchuka-B*, most famously known as the *Akula*-class nuclear attack submarines, which were to be the last of their kind ever designed by the Soviet Union. They were the finest attack submarines in the world at the time, employing advanced quieting systems and heavy weaponry. Today, they are still in use, though like other Soviet-era war materiel, they are being increasingly retired by the Kremlin, which, like we know, is implementing an aggressive modernization plan of its military forces. That brings us to *Ivanovo*, one of the only Project 971U, or *Akula II*-class submarines ever completed, and the vessel you see here. This was a longer and more advanced version of the *Akula*, which was itself superseded by the even more advanced Project 971M, or *Akula III* some years later” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov explained.

“Talk to me about it” – Yuri said, suddenly interested in the submarine.

“This submarine was built during the early days of the Russian Federation and has been in service ever since. However, recently she was stricken from service because she was woefully outdated and poorly maintained compared with both others of its class and the most modern submarines in the new Russian Navy. So, in order to bring it up to par with, say, the all-new *Yasen*-class submarine, we sent her to our shipyards for a complete restoration and upgrade, which took one full year, mind you. Her weapons, sonar, and electronics were completely replaced and updated, her nuclear reactor was refueled and given a complete service, and everything that could be damaged or broken was repaired. The result is a submarine that can perform any mission you throw at it in a stellar fashion. However, no matter how much effort we put into it, it was a lost cause” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov explained, with a little bit of nostalgia.

“Why? Isn’t it one of the most capable submarines in the world right now?” – Yuri asked.

“It is. But it isn’t enough for the Kremlin and their modernization program. A couple of months ago, we were notified by Moscow that a new *Yasen*-class submarine fresh from the shipyard will be assigned to replace *Ivanovo*. That submarine will arrive relatively soon, and because our space here at the base is limited, we have no choice but to mothball *Ivanovo* so that she can be afterwards sent into the scrapyards. And well, as you can imagine, we don’t want to do that. This submarine is too good to be destroyed just because some admiral at the Kremlin thinks so, and so, for weeks, we have been thinking about what to do with her. Then, you came up with your troubles, and your thirst for revenge on those guys who will meet in a cruise ship in three months. And the idea of, well, selling it to you immediately crossed my mind” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov explained. Yuri gaped at the very idea of having her own nuclear-powered attack submarine.

“Are you for real? I mean, isn’t selling a sophisticated and powerful nuclear-powered submarine to some criminal out there a little bit... irresponsible?” – Yuri asked.

“Maybe it is. But I assure you, you won’t regret purchasing this baby. And as a matter of fact, it is one of your only choices if you want to kill those guys when they are all together in that infamous cruise ship” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“I suppose this thing will not come out cheap” – Yuri said.

“Not at all. In its prime, these submarines costed around one and a half billion dollars each” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“One and a half billion dollars? Okay, I hope you realize I don’t have – and I never had – that huge quantity of money” – Yuri said, astonished as to the cost of the vessel.

“I said in its prime. Not today. Because of its age, despite all the upgrades we gave it, this submarine’s value has been reduced considerably. Today it costs less than a half of what it once did. But like I said, because I like you and because I want for you to succeed in your plans, I’m willing to sell it to you for, shall we say, a hundred million dollars, which includes the submarine, its armament, and most importantly, its crew. What do you say?” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov asked.

“A hundred million? That’s still a lot of money” – Yuri said.

“I know it is. But you need it if you want to exact that revenge of yours. Besides, you need a home now that your Estate has been burned to the ground. This submarine may be uncomfortable at first, but like everyone else, you’ll be quickly used to it. Think about it” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

Yuri thought about it very seriously for some minutes, something which in other circumstances, would have taken many days in order to figure out. Spending a hundred million dollars on the *Akula* II-class nuclear attack submarine would mean spending almost all of the cash she had in her Swiss account. She would have to deal with all the implications of actually owning a submarine, nuclear attack submarine no less, including maintenance and crew pay. And above all else, she had to become used to the idea of living inside it. But in exchange, she would get to own a powerful weapon of war, one which nobody else in the world had access to, at least, nobody who was not a world power. With it, she could destroy everyone who had caused her so much pain and loss and would also be able to do that in an elegant, silent, and decisive way. Finally, the submarine would allow for her to travel the seas of the world in search for opportunities to rise again as a criminal underworld figure. So, after calculating the pros and cons in her mind, she quickly came up with a decision. Maybe it was because of her naiveté or her utter desperation and crave for revenge, but that decision would change the lives of many, many people, including hers.

“You know what? I’ll buy this submarine from you” – Yuri said.

“You will? You really will? That’s very good news indeed” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“Yes. I will soon order for the money to be transferred into your account. But I think you’ll need a bigger one if you want to hold so much money” – Yuri said.

“Don’t worry about that. Just a quick call to my local bank, and they will solve it. Ha, ha!” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said, jovially, after making the biggest sale of his life.

After Yuri and Counter Admiral Kurbatov shook hands, Yuri called her bank account executives in Switzerland to give them instructions for the transfer. Minutes after that, a hundred million dollars

were securely and discreetly transferred electronically to a secret bank account located in an undisclosed location. It had been Yuri's largest, most expensive, and most sophisticated purchase ever. It almost emptied Yuri's Swiss bank account, and in the process, made Counter Admiral Kurbatov one of the richest military commanders in the whole world. When Sakai, who until then had been visiting Petropavlovsk with Nadzeya, got notice of it, he was alarmed and called Yuri, believing Harada and the traitors had discovered the existence of the Swiss bank account and had emptied it. Instead, he was bewildered – and dismayed – by the truth.

"Did you just say you have bought a nuclear-powered attack submarine, Kubo-sama?" – Sakai asked, incredulously.

"Yes, Sakai-kun. That is correct" – Yuri said.

"How? Why?" – Sakai asked, still not believing it.

"If I want to kill those who betrayed me to the devil, I have to attack them when they are all together in a same place. And I have only one shot at doing it, and the only way I can do it is with a submarine" – Yuri explained.

"Okay, I suppose. But what about us? How are we going to live?" – Sakai asked.

"Don't worry. There are still around ten million dollars in the account. We can still live like respectable people with that" – Yuri said. Sakai sighed.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Kubo-sama" – Sakai said.

"To be honest, I don't know what I'm doing. But I also have no other choice. The Kubo Group may be dead, but we live. And Harada and the others will curse to the skies when they realize the mistake they made, when it is too late for them" – Yuri said.

"So, talk to me about the capabilities of this submarine. I have purchased it, but I don't know anything about what it can do" – Yuri asked Counter Admiral Kurbatov that evening, as the *Ivanovo* was being prepared.

"Very well. This is a one hundred thirteen-meter length, thirteen thousand eight hundred-tons displacement submarine designed to hunt and sink enemy ships and other submarines. It is powered by a pressurized water nuclear reactor capable of outputting a hundred ninety megawatts and will be able to keep the submarine going for at least another thirty years. This huge amount of power also allows it to run at really high speeds, with a maximum of thirty-five knots underwater and ten knots surfaced. The hull is constructed of superior AK-32 steel, granting it a maximum operating depth of six hundred meters, and it includes a complex sonar array capable of detecting even the slightest of blips. Armament includes four five hundred thirty-three-millimeter torpedo tubes and four six hundred fifty-millimeter torpedo tubes, ideal for sinking aircraft carriers. It also carries a complement of land attack cruise missiles and even has an air-defense system built into the sail. At full capacity, it can operate for around a hundred days before needing to move into port to restock its supplies, and its crew is composed of sixty-two people" – Counter Admiral Kurbatov explained.

"Talk to me about the crew" – Yuri requested.

“In your case, the crew will be an all-mercenary crew, half of them enlisted, half of them officers. They will be all elite former servicemen of the Russian Navy, with extensive experience in submarine operations. I’ll make sure they speak Russian and English fluently, and also try for some of them to actually speak Japanese, though I can’t promise it for sure. They will be in charge of running all the operations inside the boat, as well as maintaining its weapons and its nuclear reactor, and as long as you pay them what they deserve, which, to be honest, is a modest amount compared to what a Western mercenary would charge, they will be loyal to you and only to you. You will be their commander. If everything goes out well, you can take them with you on your adventures around the world. Oh, and in addition to the standard crew, I’ll include a small but masterfully trained *spetsnaz* squad, to help you should you ever decide to venture outside the waters into unknown lands” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov explained.

“Okay, sounds good. I’ll bet they will be a marvelous complement to my new submarine. Speaking of it, I have a question” – Yuri said.

“Sure, what else would you like to know?” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov asked.

“Can I by any chance change the name of the submarine? I mean, *Ivanovo* sounds cool and all, but for one I don’t even know what it means, and for another I would like for it to have a more menacing, more symbolic, name, if possible” – Yuri said.

“Of course, you can do that. The submarine is yours now, after all. We can take care of the details, including taking out that crest in the sail and replacing it with a design of your own, once you give us the name you want” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

“I have to think about one. When I return to the hotel, I’ll take a day to research a good name. I want something that embodies the art of revenge in an ethereal and majestic way” – Yuri said.

“That sounds really ambitious. I’m sure the men would love to form part of the crew of a submarine with such a name. It always helps boost morale” – Counter Admiral Kurbatov said.

And so, with the deal closed and Yuri’s new *Akula II*-class nuclear attack submarine to be prepared for their mission three months later, Yuri returned to the hotel at Petropavlovsk. Sakai and Nadzeya had already arrived at their room and were cuddling together, tightly hugging due to the unrelenting cold and living their romantic fantasy of being escapees in a foreign country. When Yuri entered the room, she used her smartphone to connect to the internet and start researching the name of her new submarine right away.

“What are you doing, Kubo-sama?” – Sakai asked with a smile.

“I’m looking for a name” – Yuri replied.

“A name?” – Nadzeya asked.

“Yep. I need a name for my new submarine. I want something original and badass-sounding” – Yuri said.

After spending the whole afternoon researching, she eventually found the name she was looking for. It belonged to an ancient god of justice and revenge of the Serer religion from West Africa. His

name sounded very menacing, and Yuri believed it was wholly adequate for the submarine and her new purpose.

“*Takhar*. From now on, you’ll be known as *Takhar*” – Yuri said.

“‘*Takhar*’? What is the origin of that name?” – Sakai asked.

“West African. It is a god from the Serer religion. He represents justice and revenge” – Yuri replied.

“What a name. I thought you would name the vessel with a symbolic and poetic Japanese name like it has always been done. I never expected you would go that far” – Sakai noted.

“These are ruthless times, my dear *saiko-komon*. And with them, come ruthless names” – Yuri said.

And so, KGS *Takhar* was born.

Chapter 27: The Final Overture

The following day, Yuri returned to the Vilkovo submarine base on request by Counter Admiral Kurbatov, for the beginning of what would become two and a half months of arduous and brutal training. It was not enough for him that Yuri had purchased such expensive submarine. He wanted for her to live and learn the experience of being an actual submarine commander, which she would definitely need in order to adequately lead her mercenary crew in the future. As such, while the newly christened KGS *Takhar*, “KGS” standing for “Kubo Group Ship”, was being prepared to set sail, Yuri was sent into *Orsk*, a smaller *Kilo*-class diesel-electric attack submarine, in order to learn how to operate, and eventually command, such a vessel.

With that new training program, which was to be fast paced in comparison to the regular submariner’s training due to the limited time they got, came a new outfit. It was obvious that Yuri’s elegant and expensive Mafia-style suit would not be adequate, so she was instead given the standard Russian Navy submariner’s uniform, which consisted in an all-blue outfit with trousers and a jacket made of a special, water-resistant cloth, together with a navy-blue raincoat and a *pilotka*, or garrison cap, with the Russian Navy’s insignia on front. Her old suit, symbol of a tragic, deceptive, and ultimately failed era in her eyes, would be never worn again: instead, it would be sold to a used clothing store in Petropavlovsk, and it would quickly disappear from Yuri’s eye.

After she was dressed in her new outfit, Yuri boarded *Orsk* and joined her crew on a series of voyages around the Russian Pacific coast. Meanwhile, Sakai and a Russian Navy intelligence crew tried to get the necessary information for Yuri’s mission in three months: the name of the cruise ship that was to be used, its schedule, and most importantly, its route, in order to understand when and where to attack it most effectively. Such planning for seafaring was done months in advance, and so Sakai and the Russians believed it could be quickly and easily obtained by hacking some Japanese server. It would be a little more complicated than that, though, but they had faith in their capacity to get the job done.

“Wake up, Kubo” – a fellow Russian sailor told Yuri, who was sleeping at her berth onboard *Orsk*, during the first day into their voyage.

"Is it time?" – Yuri asked.

"Yes, Kubo. Time for the daily briefing. Come on, you won't want to miss it" – the sailor said, before leaving. Immediately afterwards, Yuri got off her bed and dressed accordingly, and together with the other sailors, met in the command room of the submarine, where Captain Andrei Khanin, a cultured and experienced Russian Navy commander, would issue the instructions of the day.

"Is everybody here?" – one of the aides to Captain Khanin asked.

"Aye, sir" – one of the sailors replied.

"Very well. Captain Khanin will now issue the orders for today" – the aide said.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Now listen. We're just beginning our patrol voyage between Vilkoovo and Vladivostok. I need for you to follow the drill and perform your duties as required by each of your manuals of service. Nothing special to take care of today. Except for you, Seaman Kubo. You'll be one of my junior aides for the voyage. I need you to help me in every task I'll have to do during the trip. Everyone, do you understand your task at hand?" – Captain Khanin asked.

"Aye, sir!" – the sailors said in unison.

"Good. You can return to your duties now. And as for you, Seaman Kubo, come here" – Captain Khanin ordered, so Yuri walked to the Captain.

"Attention, Seaman" – Captain Khanin said.

"Aye, sir!" – Yuri said.

"At ease. So, Seaman Kubo, I've talked personally with Counter Admiral Kurbatov before we set sail. He said that you needed to learn and master the art of the submarine commander in no more than two and a half months, in order to take command of an *Akula II*-class submarine. I don't know why he would assign someone as young and inexperienced as you to take charge of such position, but I intend to train you for the task in these two and a half months we have. Which, if you don't know, is a fraction of the time necessary to prepare someone for such position. Do you understand the severity of the challenge at hand?" – Captain Khanin asked.

"Aye, sir, I understand" – Yuri said.

"Good. Then, let's get to it. In this voyage I'll teach you the basics of crewing a submarine. I'll show you the different parts and operating rooms of this vessel, and I will tell you which tasks you need to do with each. I suggest you have a notebook and a pen to take note of everything that I'm going to say" – Captain Khanin said.

"Aye sir. Got the notebook and pen ready, sir" – Yuri said, taking out a standard-issue notebook and pen.

"Okay, then. Let's begin" – Captain Khanin said.

And so, the Captain and his young apprentice moved through the different parts of the boat. During the course of the day, Yuri was shown the command room, the torpedo room, each of the different service rooms and also the engine room, which in the *Akula* would have been replaced with a

nuclear reactor, but also something which Yuri would not have direct control of. That task would be up to the team of engineers and mechanics that Counter Admiral Kurbatov was preparing for the KGS *Takhar*. Still, Captain Khanin, who had served in nuclear submarines in the past, explained the basics and differences between diesel-electric and nuclear propulsion to Yuri in detail, and she duly took notes accordingly in her notebook, which, more than anything else, would become a journal of sorts for her. After that, Captain Khanin went over each of the various controls of the submarine in detail and explained their use and function to Yuri, as part of the general framework of things she had to learn in order to become a submarine commander herself.

By the day's end, Yuri had a basic understanding of what being a submariner was all about, but she still had a long way to go. As she had a night meal with the rest of the sailors in the mess hall, she studied her notes and reflected on the day's teachings and tips given to her by Captain Khanin, reading her writings again and again in order to memorize everything. Finally, she went back to her berth in the crew quarters and quickly fell asleep. The following day would be even harder according to Captain Khanin, as she would be tested in her ability to actually operate most of the rooms and functions the submarine had to offer. So, Yuri had to make an effort and wake up early that morning.

* * *

Three days into the voyage, Yuri had become immersed in the Russian submariner's culture. Despite being a little bit rough around the edges since she was just beginning to learn, she had managed to develop a cool, easy-going attitude with the sailors and with Captain Khanin, and assisted him thoroughly during each day. It was during that third day when Yuri would learn something important, and that was, realize that, before even attempting to sink Taniguchi's and Harada's cruise ship, she first had to come close to it, and that meant circumventing the extensive and tight Japanese sea control system.

"Attention, we're approaching the La Pérouse Strait. All officers, go to your command stations" – the submarine's loudspeaker operator said in Russian.

"What did he say?" – Yuri asked.

"We're going through La Pérouse Strait. You know, the one which separates our island of Sakhalin from the Japanese island of Hokkaido" – a sailor told Yuri.

"So, we're nearing my homeland, aren't we?" – Yuri thought out loud.

"It is necessary if we want to reach Vladivostok. The Japanese archipelago stands in our way, and the best and most expeditious way to reach the Russian coast is to go through this strait" – the sailor said.

Suddenly, the loudspeaker sounded again.

"Attention, Seaman Yuri Kubo, Captain Khanin is requesting your presence. Report at the command room" – the loudspeaker operator said again, this time, in English, so Yuri could understand.

"You better go, Yuri. Don't leave the Captain waiting" – one of the sailors told Yuri.

"Aye. I'll get going" – Yuri said, before quickly moving from her position at the engine room to the submarine's command room, where Captain Khanin and a couple of officers were meeting.

“Oh, here you are, Seaman Kubo. How are things going back there?” – Captain Khanin asked.

“Everything’s alright and working, sir. No problems for now according to the engineers” – Yuri said.

“Very well. We’re currently going through the La Pérouse Strait. Very close to the island where you used to live” – Captain Khanin said.

“Will we go through the strait surfaced like this, or will we submerge?” – Yuri asked.

“Because we’re in the mid of a peace exercise, out of transparency, we won’t submerge. Besides, we’re still on Russian territorial waters. However, the Japanese are not stupid and will likely be watching us the whole way. In fact, I want to show you something. Let’s go up to the sail” – Captain Khanin said. And so, Yuri followed Captain Khanin up the stairs, and the latter opened the hatch, allowing her to see the daylight for the first time in three days. They stood up over the *Orsk*’s large sail, and the Captain took out his binoculars.

“Look, there’s Sakhalin, to the right. And your island is to the left” – Captain Khanin told Yuri, who looked at both sides and could see masses of land at both angles. However, she could also see a gray armed warship located not far from them to the left, flying a large Japanese military flag.

“A Japanese ship?” – Yuri asked.

“Yep. A destroyer, to be exact. An *Atago*-class or a *Maya*-class, I can’t say for sure, as they are very similar looking. But anyways, those ships will be one of three main obstacles for you to penetrate the tightly controlled Japanese territorial waters. They carry potent sonars and powerful anti-submarine weaponry, including helicopters, and an encounter with one can be deadly, or in the very least, very, very troublesome. In order to avoid them, you’ll have to be very patient and use your own sonar at all times to detect them, submerging at high depths so you can evade their detection scans. Sinking them is not an option, as, well, you can get into serious trouble if you do that” – Captain Khanin explained.

“Got it. Be patient and use sonar constantly. Never attempt to sink them. Which are the other two major worries I have to watch for?” – Yuri asked.

“The second one are planes. Anti-submarine warfare planes constantly patrolling the Japanese coasts from above. They are not that hard to evade, but they can pop-up suddenly and can alert other Japanese forces to hunt you down. It is very important for you to immediately dive if you ever encounter one of those things” – Captain Khanin explained.

“Dive right away when encountering one of those things. It’s written down. What about the third main obstacle?” – Yuri asked.

Suddenly, just besides them, another submarine surfaced. After it did, one of its officers got off the sail, and saluted *Orsk*, as it was usual when submarines from two different counters met. Captain Khanin saluted the Japanese submarine, as did Yuri.

“Oh, so they’re showing off now. That, Seaman Kubo, is the third and in my opinion the most dangerous threat to submarine operations” – Captain Khanin said, pointing to the passing Japanese submarine.

“Other submarines?” – Yuri asked.

“Yes. There’s nothing more dangerous to a submarine than a rival vessel looking to destroy you. And in the case of Japanese submarines, things are a bit harder. If my knowledge is correct, Japan currently operates three classes of highly advanced and quiet diesel-electric submarines. You have the *Oyashio*-class, the *Soryu*-class, and the most recent of the three, the *Taigei*-class. All three are newer than the *Akula*-class design, and the latter two have access to air-independent propulsion, which allows them to stay submerged for far longer. These submarines are equipped with state-of-the-art sonar, weapons and electronics, and because they are so quiet, it can be difficult to discern whether you’re being followed by one or not, until it is far too late” – Captain Khanin explained.

“So, what tactic should I use if I ever encounter one?” – Yuri asked.

“The Japanese submarines may be newer and more advanced than the *Akula*, but there are two things which make our nuclear submarines better, and that’s the top speed and diving depth. Most Japanese submarines operate at around two hundred fifty meters under the sea level, while their maximum depth is no greater than five hundred meters, and their top speed while submerged is around twenty knots. The *Akula* has around the same operating depth, but its maximum depth is six hundred meters, so you have safe zone of around a hundred meters to play with should you be detected by a Japanese submarine. And also, the *Akula*, being one of the world’s fastest submarines, can reach thirty-five knots when submerged, almost double the speed the Japanese submarines are able to reach. So, if you ever encounter a rival submarine, you need to dive under the maximum depth that these submarines are capable of reaching or go full speed ahead, and you’ll be able to evade them. Ideally, you should do both” – Captain Khanin explained.

“Dive under five hundred meters and go at full speed. Got it. Never thought I would have to run away from my own country’s submarines, though” – Yuri said, writing the lesson down.

“Life changes so damned fast, doesn’t it?” – Captain Khanin reflected.

“It surely does” – Yuri said, with her eyes fixated on the Japanese submarine going in the opposite direction, knowing that, eventually, she would have to escape from one such vessel.

“Don’t despair. Evading the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force will be difficult, but it’s not impossible. We ought to know. We penetrate their waters all the time, sometimes with the humblest of submarines. The Japanese may be well equipped, but they are also very predictable. Most of their actions are based in manuals and procedure. They don’t think outside the box as much as we Russians do” – Captain Khanin said, sounding reassuring, and pointing to his head. That relieved Yuri a bit, as her crew would be a skilled mercenary Russian crew.

“We better go back inside. After we’re out of the strait, we’re going to submerge so that we can arrive quickly to Vladivostok” – Captain Khanin said, so Yuri and he descended back into the command room and closed the hatch, allowing the submarine to dive some minutes after.

And so, during the whole day that lasted that first voyage to Vladivostok, Yuri continued to learn the ins and outs of the submariner trade. During all that time though, she could not shake the fact that, eventually, she would be encountered and pursued by her fellow nationals, who used technology more advanced than what was available to her. She tried to imagine possible scenarios and their

courses of action. What happened if a destroyer showed up? Or if an anti-submarine plane suddenly appeared out of the sky? Or if a submarine popped up in her sonar screen? How would she react? Those questions would torment her during the rest of her training and would only be answered once she commanded her own submarine. Only then she would know if she was up to the task.

Before long, the two months and a half passed, and Yuri participated in many voyages and military patrols onboard *Orsk* under the supervision of Captain Khanin, who managed to teach her most of the aspects of the submarine life in a simple and limited way, so that Yuri, while not as skilled as a freshly graduated officer from a Russian Navy academy, could still fend off for herself as a submarine commander, and Counter Admiral Kurbatov theorized it would be more than enough to perform the operation that would lead to her ultimate revenge.

At the same time Yuri was training hard onboard *Orsk*, Sakai and the Russian intelligence team managed to obtain the necessary details that Yuri needed to sink Taniguchi's private cruise ship. By hacking into the ship's owner line servers, they determined that the vessel which was going to be chartered by Taniguchi for his wedding was going to be the *Asian Jewel*, a relatively small, ten-thousand-ton ultra-luxury, high-tech cruise ship designed and built in Germany, capable of accommodating up to two hundred passengers in top-class conditions, with a crew of about a hundred and fifty people. It was more like a slightly oversized superyacht than an actual cruise ship. It had been previously owned by a boutique cruise line, then was purchased by the wealthy owner of an undisclosed Japanese *keiretsu* who was probably one of Taniguchi's close friends.

According to the passenger manifesto that the Russian Navy intelligence could obtain, the ship would be operating at full capacity, meaning that all two hundred passengers would be on board the day of the wedding, along with a full crew to service them. They would surely not only include Taniguchi, Harada, Yokoyama, and their friends, but also their families, who were innocent people oblivious to all the conflict between the ship's most powerful occupants and Yuri and would be forced to pay the price for it. It was a feeling that devastated Sakai, but also one that he knew would give him trouble should he question Yuri about it.

After the last of Yuri's training voyages onboard *Orsk*, in a small, solemn ceremony early in the morning, very similar in character to that she had when she officially became *oyabun*, Yuri was officially named as a Submarine Commander and granted the symbolic rank of Captain Second Rank, the minimum required to serve as the commanding officer of such vessel. Along with it, came a new officer uniform and the official roll-out of KGS *Takhar*, which had been repainted and given the crest of the Kubo Group to decorate its sail, which was a white shield with the logo of the group in cobalt blue. The mercenary crew was also presented, with sixty-one sailors and officers, all of them impeccably dressed in elegant modified Russian Navy uniforms, but with the Kubo Group's insignia. Yuri posed for a photo with them, which would replace her old photo with her underbosses and subordinates in front of the Kubo Estate, which fell from grace after most of the people who appeared in that photo betrayed her.

Finally, a date was set for Yuri's departure from the base, which would occur two days from then. With Yuri's destiny now written, just after the end of the ceremony, Sakai and Yuri had a conversation, which, as it would turn out, would be their last one as *oyabun* and *saiko-komon*.

“So, you’re going to finally have your revenge” – Sakai said.

“Yes. Nobody will be alive to control Sapporo’s, and by extension, much of Japan’s Yakuza underworld when we’re done. Because Japan will be a hostile place for me after the act has been consummated, I will disappear into the blue waters of the ocean, looking for my place to be onboard *Takhar*” – Yuri said.

“We’ll have quite the adventures together, Kubo-sama” – Sakai said. With a serious and sad look in her face, Yuri shook her face.

“What is it?” – Sakai asked.

“Sakai-kun, my dearest *saiko-komon*, I’m afraid that this is a road that I must walk alone” – Yuri said.

“What do you mean, Kubo-sama? I don’t understand” – Sakai said.

“This endeavor of mine is a battle I must fight for myself. And you, Sakai-kun, must not be part of it” – Yuri said, with a tear in her eye.

“What? Aren’t you taking me with you?” – Sakai asked, stricken by what he was hearing.

“Listen, my *saiko-komon*. You have been the noblest and most loyal being I have ever known. You have been with me through thick and thin, helped me rise as a leader, then to expand and reach to heights where Fujii-san would have only dreamed of reaching. And most importantly, you were there with me, to defend and protect me, when everything came down on our heads. I would love for you to keep going with me at my side. But now, you have a bigger and more important responsibility. In just some mere months, you will father a child. The girl who is carrying it needs your help now more than ever. And you both need a peaceful, tranquil, and easy life, which you won’t find inside the hull of a submarine” – Yuri explained, shedding some tears.

“Kubo-sama, please, no...” – Sakai started to say, also dropping tears, before being interrupted by his *oyabun*.

“It will be hard for you to become used to life outside the glitz and the glamour of the Yakuza lifestyle. But it is necessary if you want your kid to be better than we will ever will. To that end, half of the money remaining in my accounts is yours. Here, take this. They are the codes to a secondary account in Switzerland I ordered to be opened, just for you, Arkhipienka-san, and your child. And take these too. These are the keys and the deed to my old apartment in Sapporo and a SUV which I had parked there in case of emergencies. Use it to lay low and live a good and healthy life, at least until you can get a new, nicer place for yourselves. It is cramped and it hasn’t been cleaned in a while, so you’ll have to take care of it, but I know with your and Arkhipienka-san’s efforts, it will be a homy place once again” – Yuri said, this time on the verge of crying.

“Kubo-sama don’t say that. I... we will go with you and continue to protect you wherever you go!” – Sakai said, crying.

“No. This *vendetta* of mine, and whatever happens next, is not something you will take part on. You’re too good of a person for it. After the ordeal is over, return to Hokkaido. Hide down until things calm down. Raise your child in good, safe conditions. Make love to your girl again and again. And enjoy your life. I only ask for you to remember me and the glory days we lived together. This is

my final order to you as your *oyabun*, my *saiko-komon*. I wish you a long and prosper life” – Yuri said, finally breaking down in tears.

“Kubo-sama!” – Sakai said, and the two comrades shared their one and only embrace.

“I’m no longer ‘Kubo-sama’. I’m just ‘Kubo’” – Yuri said, officially renouncing to her title of *oyabun*.

The ways of the past, the ways of the *ninkyo dantai*, were gone. Now Yuri had transcended all of that. And she was willing to embrace this new phase of her life and take it by storm.

Chapter 28: The Ultimate Revenge

Finally, the day Yuri had been waiting for almost three months arrived. The day, in which her newest home, weapon and asset, the *Akula II*-class nuclear attack submarine KGS *Takhar* would set sail for the first time under its new ownership and command. That morning, the crew of the submarine, a mercenary crew composed of highly trained personnel selected from the elite ranks of the Russian Navy to become mercenaries at the service of Yuri, boarded the vessel and took their positions.

After a last meeting with Counter Admiral Kurbatov and his officers, Yuri exited the command building of the base at Petropavlovsk and was taken to the piers at Vilkoovo, where she boarded the vessel herself, dressing her new uniform as the commander of her submarine, and with the help of the crew, she got to settle down in her submarine commander’s cabin, which was as small as it could get, but also felt strangely cozy and comfortable, including a nice bed and a medium-sized smart TV.

“Home sweet home, I guess” – Yuri said, as she left her few possessions inside her cabin, before moving to the command room. She was the Commander, after all, so she had to be there at almost all times.

Some minutes later, with the final inspection complete, the crew of *Takhar* turned the propulsion system on, and the submarine started to leave the port, escorted by two Kilo-class submarines, as Sakai, Nadzeya, Counter Admiral Kurbatov and other officers looked on.

“Good luck, Yuri” – Sakai said, giving farewell to her comrade and boss for the last time.

The three submarines sailed closely to each other until they left the Avacha Bay into the Pacific Ocean, after which they separated, with the two *Kilo*-class vessels returning to their base at Vilkoovo, leaving KGS *Takhar* alone in the high seas.

Under Yuri’s direction and command, the submarine had to reach its target destination in five days, so that they could be there when the *Asian Jewel* passed through. According to the Russian intelligence, in two days, the cruise ship would leave Tokyo on a route which would take it besides the Japanese coasts on a five-day voyage to Okinawa. During most of the voyage, the ship would stay well within Japanese territorial waters, making reaching it a bit tricky.

During the first four days, Yuri went through a smooth, if uneventful and relatively boring, submerged sailing, first through international waters, and then within Japan’s exclusive economic zone. As per international law, foreign military vessels, including submarines, could travel through another state’s EEZ, and Japan generally observed such norm, so that portion of the trip was nice and easy for Yuri and the crew. They encountered no Japanese vessels in their route, and even if they had encountered one, they would have just assumed that it was just another Russian

submarine embarking on yet another pointless extended and harmless sea patrol. Nobody would have guessed the true nature of the occupants of KGS *Takhar*.

Thanks to an excellent synchronization, it was calculated that Yuri's submarine could manage to intercept the *Asian Jewel* right as it passed in front of Shikoku Island, however, doing so required penetrating the inflexibly defended Japanese territorial waters. Because the visage of that mighty Japanese submarine had been engraved in Yuri's mind, she felt nervous and tried to be as cautious as possible when penetrating the zone. Everything had to be perfect, as one little mistake that allowed themselves to be detected by a Japanese ship, plane or submarine could be costly.

This was to be Yuri's final test before revenge was at hand. She just had to be careful and silent, and everything would be alright.

"Commander, we're entering Japanese territorial waters" – one of the officers of the KGS *Takhar* told Yuri.

"Excellent. We better be very careful. Lower our speed to twenty knots and increase our diving depth to three hundred meters" – Yuri ordered.

"Aye, ma'am. Lowering speed to twenty knots and increasing diving depth to three hundred meters. Turning on quieting measures" – an operator said. The submarine therefore began to enter the Japanese territorial waters slowly and quietly, operating at a higher-than-usual depth to mitigate the risk of being detected.

"So, what is the plan of action, Commander?" – the officer asked Yuri.

"We're going to approach to the coordinates laid down on the table. According to the Russian Navy intelligence, that's where we're going to intercept the target ship. Once we make it there, we're going to ascend to fifteen meters, so that we can fire our Futlyar torpedoes at the target and sink it. Once we're done, we'll quickly descend to four hundred meters and turn around so that we can escape at full speed. I'll consider any idea you have for where we should go then" – Yuri explained.

"Aye, ma'am. Kurbatov told us that you're still not sure where to go next. So, we'll be patient and walk with you" – the mercenary officer said.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Let's continue our approach" – Yuri said.

Suddenly, some minutes after, one of the operators detected something in the sonar.

"We have trouble. There's an enemy submarine approaching" – the operator warned. Yuri became very nervous but tried her best to hide it.

"Let me see that, sailor" – Yuri said, walking to the sonar screen. An object that barely resembled a submarine was perfectly visible.

"That's a Japanese submarine. It is approaching from the east" – the operator said. Yuri remembered everything Captain Khanin had taught her, and she decided she would not take any chances.

“Change of plans. Increase our depth to four hundred meters and our speed to twenty-five knots” – Yuri said, tensely.

“Aye, ma’am, increasing depth to five hundred meters and speed to twenty-five knots” – the operator said. The submarine quickly started to descend into the sea, while Yuri’s eyes were fixated on the sonar’s screen.

As *Takhar* descended, the other submarine’s blip appeared slightly bigger on the screen, but it did not show signs of having detected *Takhar*.

“What’s the situation, sailor?” – the officer asked.

“It’s not clear. The blip is still there, and it’s a bit bigger, but it’s speed hasn’t changed” – the operator said.

“That means they have not detected us yet. They are simply moving towards this position at a constant pace. Probably in transit to somewhere else” – the officer said.

“We can’t assume anything yet. What is our current depth?” – Yuri asked.

“We’re at four hundred fifty-one meters and counting, Commander” – the operator said.

“Very well. Keep it steady until we make it to the five hundred. Once that blip is gone, we can return to our original depth” – Yuri said.

“Aye, ma’am” – the operator said.

The problem solved for the time being, Yuri sat down for a short while. Even if it ultimately had been nothing, those few but long minutes had stressed her out, and she needed a bit of rest before continuing.

“Are you alright, Commander?” – the officer asked.

“Yes, Lieutenant, yes. Don’t worry” – Yuri said.

“That’s what I should say to you, Commander. Don’t worry. We have your back. If we get into trouble, we’ll know how to escape it” – the officer said.

“Thank you, Lieutenant” – Yuri said.

Some minutes after, Yuri checked the sonar screen once again. The blip was gone, and Yuri sighed.

“See? I bet they were in transit. If they had been on an actual sea patrol and they had detected us, they would have acted much more aggressively, quickly increasing their speed” – the officer said.

“I hope you’re right and that we don’t have to encounter them again. Still, I would like to keep diving at five hundred for some time until we’re a short distance from the target coordinates” – Yuri said.

“Aye, ma’am, understood. We’re almost at five hundred” – the operator said.

“Good. Maintain constant speed and trajectory. At this pace, we’ll be at the target coordinates in fifteen minutes” – Yuri said.

“Fifteen minutes to die. Sounds like the title of a movie” – the officer said, as KGS *Takhar* continued its deep-diving approach.

“Yuichi, my friend. Do you realize that, in fifteen minutes, everything will change for you?” – Arata Yokoyama asked a nervous Representative Yuichi Taniguchi, who, dressed for his wedding, was living his last minutes as a single man.

“Yes, I do realize that Arata-kun. Please, don’t say the obvious” – Taniguchi said, looking at his expensive Rolex watch.

“Don’t be nervous, Taniguchi-san. You’ll get married to a beautiful and kind princess of a woman. You’ll be very happy with her” – Harada said, sipping from a costly, exotic drink.

“Yes, Taniguchi-san. Soon you’ll be able to enjoy all the virtues of married life” – Sakamoto said.

“Thanks, everyone. I’m very happy and grateful that all of you are here to accompany me through this really big moment of my life” – Taniguchi said.

“You’re welcome. That’s why we’re your friends” – Harada said, before Taniguchi was requested by another one of his close wealthy friends inside the ship.

“So, Harada-san, have you known something recently about ‘her’?” – Yokoyama asked.

“No, nothing. My sources have told me that she escaped to somewhere in Russia, but I can’t seem to find any more information about her” – Harada said.

“She’s pretty good at hide-and-seek, isn’t she? We must redouble our efforts to find her and take care of her. If not, then I’m afraid we’ll never be truly safe” – Yokoyama said.

“That’s the same thing I told Harada-san three months ago after it happened” – Sakamoto said.

“Come on. You guys are exaggerating. That girl was obliterated. All of her forces joined us. And we took every cent out of her pocket. There’s nobody who could help her hit on us. At least, not in a long time” – Harada said, trying to sound reassuring.

“I don’t know, Harada-san. Everyone in the Council believes that, if allowed, Yuri Kubo will come back and stronger than ever. And she will have no mercy with those who betrayed her” – Yokoyama said.

“The Council... are they on the ship today?” – Harada asked.

“Yep, all of them. All of the major *oyabun* and *wakagashira* from Tokyo are here, celebrating with Taniguchi-san” – Yokoyama said.

“Good. I’ll go to talk to them later. I have a couple of very nice business opportunities that they would like to hear” – Harada said.

“Yeah, now that we have taken over Sendai, we need some additional ‘investors’-” – Sakamoto said, before being interrupted by Taniguchi.

“Come on, guys. The deal was that we ought not to talk about the business during the duration of the trip” – Taniguchi said.

Suddenly, some children approached Harada and Sakamoto.

“Dad! When will Taniguchi-san get married?” – a very young girl asked Harada.

“In some minutes, Akane-chan, in some minutes. Say ‘hi’ to Yokoyama-san and Sakamoto-san” – Harada told Akane, his little daughter, who was playing with her friends, all sons and daughters of Yakuza members.

“Hi!” – Akane said to Yokoyama, who grinned at her, making her smile.

“Your daughter is a beautiful child, Harada-san. What a little bundle of love!” – Yokoyama commented.

“Thank you, Yokoyama-san. Yeah, I’m very proud of her. She has done nothing but bring us joy” – Harada said.

“Attention all guests, the wedding ceremony is about to begin. Please, go into the chapel and take your seats” – the ship’s loudspeaker operator said.

“Got to leave, I guess. Please, wish me luck, guys!” – Taniguchi said.

“Good luck, Taniguchi-san” – Harada said.

“Yes, good luck, Yuichi! Remember: act naturally when the time comes to kiss her!” – Yokoyama said. As Taniguchi left, the Yakuza walked through the ship to the chapel, where the Representative’s wedding ceremony would occur in some mere minutes.

His wedding day would be quite the day to remember indeed.

“Five minutes to reach the target coordinates, Commander” – one of the *Takhar’s* operators said.

“Very well. Proceed to ascend to fifteen meters” – Yuri ordered.

“Aye, ma’am” – the operator replied. The submarine started to slowly ascend towards the attack position.

“When we have ascended, I’ll use the periscope to determine if our target is here yet or not. If it’s not, then we’ll submerge again to two hundred and wait a little longer” – Yuri said.

“Aye, ma’am. Have you decided how many torpedoes will we use to sink that ship?” – the officer asked Yuri.

“We’re going to fire two torpedoes at once. If the target ship is still afloat after they hit, we’ll launch a third one in order to finish it off. When we have reached our attack depth, order the torpedo room to prepare a couple of Futlyar torpedoes” – Yuri ordered.

“Aye, ma’am. Two torpedoes will be perfectly adequate to sink that ship with all hands. They will be fired at the ship’s fuel compartments, and they will explode on impact” – the officer said.

As *Takhar* was reaching its periscope depth, Yuri started to think about how far she had come. From that fateful day when she met an old and frail Kenkichi Fujii, to the present day, where she was commanding a submarine with the mission of destroying her old comrades. It was a surreal, almost startling feeling, to think about the height she had reached with this operation, and it also was very satisfying. But at the same time, she felt anguished at the fact that, after she was done, she would be forced to abandon everything she ever knew. And she did not have the slightest clue about where she would be headed after the ordeal was over.

Those thoughts were put on hold, however, when *Takhar* finally reached a depth of fifteen meters, perfect for Yuri to use her periscope to peep the area around her.

“Periscope!” – Yuri ordered, so her assisting officer prepared the device for her. Yuri looked through it, and after some seconds, she spotted a white and slender cruise ship sailing some distance away.

“I think I got it. Let me confirm it is *Asian Jewel*” – Yuri said. She zoomed in and could clearly see the name written in blue on the bow.

“It is. We got our target, boys. Proceed as planned” – Yuri ordered.

“Aye, ma’am. Attention in the torpedo room, we need two Futlyar torpedoes to be prepared for launch at once, with a third one loaded to be used if necessary” – the officer ordered the sailors in the torpedo room.

“Torpedoes ready!” – one of the torpedo room sailors said over the radio some minutes after.

“Torpedoes ready, Commander. Awaiting your orders” – the officer said.

Without the slightest remorse or semblance of doubt about what she was about to do, or the lives she would waste, Yuri proceeded to get her revenge.

“Do it. Fire now” – Yuri ordered.

“Aye, ma’am, firing now” – the operator said, pressing the button to fire two torpedoes at once.

That order, and that push of a button, would seal the fates of the three hundred and fifty people on board the *Asian Jewel*. Now there was no going back. Two advanced Futlyar torpedoes were launched from two of the eight torpedo tubes. Now everything that Yuri could do was to wait, and to watch how her ruthless attack was being carried out through the periscope.

“Do you, Suzuka Takahashi, take this man as your wedded husband?” – the minister asked the bride.

“I do” – Takahashi said.

“Do you, Yuichi Taniguchi, take this woman as your wedded wife?” – the minister asked the groom.

“I do” – Taniguchi said.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife” – the minister said, before the couple kissed and everyone in the chapel applauded.

“Congratulations, Taniguchi-san!” – many people said to the young, nationalist representative.

“Now we’ll be together for the rest of our lives, my dear” – Takahashi told Taniguchi.

“Yes. We’re going to be the happiest couple of them all” – Taniguchi said.

As they began to triumphantly walk out of the chapel, escorted by Harada, Yokoyama, Sakamoto, and the other high-ranking mobsters, it happened.

The two torpedoes fired by KGS *Takhar* hit the *Asian Jewel*’s hull right in the middle where the long and highly explosive fuel tanks were located. The twin initial explosions rocked the ship, and immediately afterwards, provoked the whole vessel to start exploding. Dozens of powerful explosions tore the *Asian Jewel* apart, compromising the hull’s integrity within seconds and making the superstructure collapse, killing most passengers instantly. The few who survived died when a last explosion, more powerful than all of the previous ones, destroyed what remained of the ship, leaving behind a charred husk which sank some minutes afterwards.

All of it was being watched by Yuri on the periscope, who was a little bit shocked by witnessing all that effective and unrelenting destruction, but at the same time, felt like a huge weight had been lifted off her back. Now she could walk with her head up and say that she was a great leader who they should be afraid of, someone who did not commit mistakes. Someone who had proved her worth after all this time.

“Target... destroyed” – Yuri said. Immediately afterwards, everyone in the submarine started a small and jovial celebration, full of applause and cheers.

“We did it! We did it, Commander! At last, you had your revenge!” – the officer said.

“Yes. We did it. Thank you all of you. But we’ll celebrate later. The JMSDF will have surely detected the explosions by now and will quickly come over here to check what happened. Let’s turn around and descend to four hundred meters. Once we’re there, increase our speed to thirty knots” – Yuri ordered.

“Aye, ma’am, descending to four hundred meters” – the operator said.

And so, as they left what little remained of *Asian Jewel* behind, and with the knowledge that, in all probability, nobody survived such a savage attack, KGS *Takhar* and its crew submerged and hastily left Japan’s territorial waters, encountering no forces which could impede their escape. Now that Yuri managed to check her revenge off her list, she wondered, what would she do next? Where should they go now that their main objective had been accomplished? Where would new opportunities arise?

Later, as they were preparing to enter international waters, Yuri was in her Commander’s cabin, watching a Japanese news TV channel. They were reporting on the sinking of *Asian Jewel*.

“Today, at around eleven o’clock in the morning, near the coasts of Kochi Prefecture in the island of Shikoku, the private cruise ship *Asian Jewel* suffered a catastrophic set of explosions which destroyed and sank the ship. *Asian Jewel*, a small-displacement luxury cruise ship, was being chartered for a private cruise between Tokyo and Okinawa, having set sail from Tokyo harbor two days ago. Because of the extensive destruction incurred by the vessel, which is now located on the

seabed it is believed that there are no survivors among the two hundred passengers and a hundred and fifty crew members. The Japan Coast Guard and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force are currently cooperating on the site in order to salvage what remains of the vessel” – the news caster said.

“No survivors...” – Yuri thought.

“Among the passengers being carried by *Asian Jewel* was Representative Yuichi Taniguchi from Miyagi Prefecture, who is believed to have been celebrating his wedding ceremony with the model, socialite, and former idol Suzuka Takahashi, when the explosions tore the ship apart. They had been engaged for over one year. Taniguchi, a controversial figure due to his inflammatory nationalist rhetoric, had invited many alleged members of Japan’s organized crime scene, including Arata Yokoyama, who was rumored was the boss and president of the notorious Tokyo Council, and Izanagi Harada, said to be the leader of a large Yakuza outfit in Sapporo, which, as we have reported previously, was the scenario of numerous Yakuza-related crimes last year” – the news caster said.

“Good old days...” – Yuri thought.

“Because of the high-profile passenger list and of the way the ship exploded, we can’t rule out anything at this time. A JTSB team will be investigating the wreckage to determine if this was a really unfortunate accident or if it was a terrorist attack, supported by teams from the Coast Guard and Self-Defense Forces. Should they consider this to be a terrorist action, the PSIA will help us out as well. I want to assure anyone who is seeing this, including the families of those who perished, that together we’ll work hard to discover what or who was responsible for this tragedy” – a Japan Coast Guard commander said from the site of the sinking.

“You can only dream, my friend...” – Yuri thought out loud.

Suddenly, someone knocked on the door.

“Come in” – Yuri said.

“Commander Kubo, we’re about to enter international waters. Have you thought about our course of action?” – the officer said.

Yuri thought about it. She wanted to get as far away from Japan as possible. Go to a land of opportunities in her trade, in which she was devilishly good at. After researching some interesting places, she had come up with an idea.

“We’ll sail east for the time being. When we touch land, I’ll let you know where we are headed” – Yuri said, winking at the officer.

“Aye, ma’am. Sailing east until further notice” – the officer said with a smile, before leaving the quarters.

And so, KGS *Takhar* continued its course east, submerging into the deepest fathoms, with a Commander who, despite causing so much death and destruction, was happy that she had made the difference. And above all, she was glad that she finally got what she wanted. With much of the Yakuza world now decapitated, and the corrupt politicians who enabled her downfall dead, she was free to do whatever she wanted to do with her life, free from the trauma of her past blunders and

the fear of being hunted. At last, she had honored Kenkichi Fujii's legacy, or at least, that was what she believed.

"Many have fallen. But one remains" – Yuri thought, as her submarine quietly and discreetly disappeared into the ocean.

EPILOGUE

Two years later...

It was a cold, snowy day, when Hachiro Kubo and Misa Kubo returned to Sapporo.

After finishing their successful participation in a multinational renewable energies project in the United States, the couple of young renowned electrochemists decided to return to their home city in the island of Hokkaido, Japan. They felt like they had done an enormous contribution to mankind, and so wanted to take a year off to reconnect with their homeland and especially with their daughter, with whom they had a tense fallout three years before due to her failure at being selected for college. Soon after the quarrel, they realized the error of their ways, but their attempts at communicating with her failed, understandably, and now, after three years of not knowing anything about her, they would visit her at her apartment. The couple was full of excitement and sorrow and wanted to apologize to her daughter for what they had done to her.

"In other news, today is the second anniversary of the tragedy of the *Asian Jewel*, a private cruise ship which violently exploded in front of the island of Shikoku, sinking with all hands. After a controversial investigation where much of the evidence was restricted and the reports heavily redacted, it was determined by the JTSB that the sinking had been in fact a catastrophic incident where the engines exploded due to poor maintenance, which led to the subsequent multiple explosions of the fuel tanks. This judgement has since been highly questioned by independent agencies and NGOs working both inside and outside of Japan, accusing the Japanese government of a cover-up and pointing their fingers to a terrorist action..." – a news caster said over the radio of the Kubo couple's car.

"We're almost at the apartment, my dear. Have you thought about what exactly you will tell Yuri?" – Hachiro asked Misa.

"I'll tell her that I'm deeply sorry, and that it is our responsibility that we have not talked to her in three years now. And I'll propose something to compensate her for it. I don't know, maybe we could buy her a car with all the money we earned in the U.S" – Misa said.

"Sounds like a good place to start. I'm very concerned about her, though. We literally have not known anything about her in three years. Not a call, not an email, no nothing. We don't even know if she's either studying or working" – Hachiro said.

"I guess all those answers will come once we reach the apartment. It'll be a very emotional reunion, my dear" – Misa said.

When they arrived at the building, they parked their vehicle on the street and walked to the block. Right from the start, something caught their attention. In the parking spot that belonged to Yuri's

apartment, there was a very nice and luxurious all-black Mercedes-Benz GLS-Class SUV parked. The vehicle was not the latest model, but it looked brand-new.

“What the...? Why is such an expensive car parked in our spot?” – Hachiro asked.

“It could be that Yuri is renting it to someone else. She needed money after all” – Misa said.

As they walked up the stairs and through the corridor to Yuri’s door, they noticed another weird thing when they looked at the apartment ownership sign in front of the wall. Instead of saying “Kubo”, there was another surname they had never heard of before.

“‘Sakai’. Who is Sakai? Have you heard that name before?” – Misa asked.

“Nope, never. What is going on here?” – Hachiro asked himself.

“We better ring the bell and find it out for ourselves” – Misa said, pressing the doorbell.

“Just a minute!” – a female voice said, with a slight foreign accent. The door was opened, and behind it, a beautiful platinum blonde, blue eyed girl, around the same age as Yuri would be at the time, appeared. She was obviously not Japanese judging from her looks and was holding a very cute-looking baby in her arms.

“Greetings. What can I help you with?” – the girl asked, with a slight Slavic accent.

“Who are you? We’re looking for our daughter” – Misa said.

“Your daughter? I don’t know if I can help you, but I can call the police to help you if you want” – the girl said.

“No, no, you aren’t understanding. Our daughter used to live here. She’s a girl around your age, with cobalt blue hair and grey, almost white, eyes” – Hachiro said.

“Could you be...?” – the girl said, suddenly surprised.

“What?” – Misa asked.

“Excuse me for one second” – the girl said, before entering back to the apartment.

“My dear, her parents are here” – the girl told another person.

“‘Her parents’? You mean ‘her’? No, it can’t be” – a male-sounding voice said.

“It is true, and they are in the door. What do I tell them?” – the girl asked, worried.

“Don’t worry, my sweetheart, I’ll go and talk to them” – the male voice said. Seconds later, another person walked to the door. It was a tall and muscular bald man in his thirties, dressed in a casual outfit. He smiled as he looked at Hachiro and Misa and bowed before them.

“So, you are them, right? You are Kubo-sama’s parents?” – the bald man asked.

“‘Kubo-sama’? What is this?” – Hachiro asked, confused.

“I knew this day would eventually come. Let me introduce myself. I’m Issei Sakai. Now please, tell me your names” – Sakai said.

"I'm Hachiro Kubo, and this is my wife, Misa Kubo. Look, tell us please, what is going on? What happened to our daughter?" – Hachiro asked, impatiently.

"Your daughter... Yuri Kubo-sama... I was her chief advisor. She was my boss... a cool person... and a cool friend too" – Sakai said.

"Boss'? What does that even mean?" – Misa asked.

"Well, it is complicated. It is a very, very long story. But it's a good one. Please, come in, and listen to me carefully while I tell you. Nadzeya-chan, my beloved sweetheart, could you prepare us some good tea and snacks?" – Sakai asked the girl.

"Of course, my dear, right away" – Nadzeya said.

"Now if you please, follow me. I warn you: some of the things you will hear now may sound bewildering and improbable, but everything is true. Also, there are some things that you ought not to talk to anybody else out of here, for the sake of Kubo-sama's safety" – Sakai said, before closing the door of the apartment. Nadzeya took out some chairs for Hachiro and Misa to seat down and served them green tea and some mochi.

"Now, everything started around three years ago..." – Sakai began to tell.

"Are you ready, Dmitri?" – Oleksandr asked, looking at his empty and lifeless armory.

"Yes, Brother. I'm ready" – Dmitri replied in Russian. Oleksandr nodded, and he turned the lights off for the last time.

Ever since Yuri Kubo was ousted from power as the *oyabun* of the Kubo Group in Sapporo, Hokkaido, things had gone down for the couple of Eastern European arms dealers and friends. After Izanagi Harada of the Harada Group took over most of Yuri's assets, he decreed an anti-firearms policy for the Two Clans in Sapporo, ending the former Kubo Group's massive illegal imports of firearms from Russia and effectively killing Oleksandr's and Dmitri's business. With no more stocks to sell, they formally protested before Harada, but they were only given a cold shoulder, and the warning that, should they continue protesting, they would be considered enemies of the Yakuza in Sapporo and disposed of. Hardly three months after Harada took over, he was killed when the cruise ship he was sailing in mysteriously exploded. This gave Oleksandr and Dmitri some hope that their business would be restored, and so they decided to patiently wait, doing a variety of other jobs for many gangs, in order to gather capital to eventually reopen.

Now, two years later, that possibility completely failed to materialize. The deaths of the leaders of the Harada Group and the Sakamoto Group created a vacuum of leadership and the destabilization of the Yakuza system in Sapporo, as the two large families descended into infighting and the three lesser groups each tried their own power grabs. At the same time, the Chinese Triads expanded their arms trafficking interests in the city, and soon controlled and consolidated most of the business, extinguishing any hope Oleksandr and Dmitri had of eventually returning to the trade under some Yakuza group's wings. And when they offered to work for the Triads, they politely turned them away, as the Chinese preferred to handle the activity only by themselves. Under such daunting conditions,

Sapporo suddenly became a barren wasteland for Oleksandr and Dmitri, and, after thinking about it, they decided to cut their losses and leave the city. They researched other options in Japan, but it was prohibitively expensive to move to any of the big cities, so in the end, they had no option but to return to Russia and explore opportunities over there.

After finding a buyer among the Triads who agreed to take care of the armory and the firing range, Oleksandr and Dmitri packed their things and abandoned the business they had run together for years. While they were on a taxi on their way to the airport, they reflected about the Kubo era.

"How much money did we make while Yuri was the boss?" – Dmitri asked Oleksandr.

"I don't know. But it was millions and millions of yen, especially when Yuri brought us the AK-74Ms" – Oleksandr said.

"And to think that it happened two years ago. It seems like it was only yesterday when that girl entered the armory to learn how to fire a pistol" – Dmitri said.

"Yeah, and out of all the pistols I offered her, she chose the Glock. A full-auto Glock 18C, no less. God, those were good days. We were invincible with Yuri at the helm" – Oleksandr said, with nostalgia.

"In the end, we never knew what happened to her" – Dmitri said.

"I hope she managed to escape the city alive. Maybe she's settled down somewhere in Japan and she's laying low until the time comes for her return" – Oleksandr said. Because Sakai thought they had joined Harada, he cut off all contact with Oleksandr and Dmitri, and as such, never told them about Yuri's escape.

"I know she escaped. She was too skilled at what she did to let herself be killed like that" – Dmitri said.

"Who knows? Maybe she has been here in Sapporo all the time and we just didn't know it. But no matter, she's gone, and very soon, we'll be gone too from this city" – Oleksandr bitterly said.

"Whew. We're returning to the Motherland after what, almost ten years?" – Dmitri said.

"Yes, but don't count on it being a whole different world than it was back then" – Oleksandr said, a bit disappointed.

"Come on. It will be fun. When we get there, let's go to Madam Lebedeva's place in Khabarovsk for a crazy night with some girls!" – Dmitri said, jovially. He had taken Yuri's fall from grace and the two years that followed in a much more optimistic way.

"You're right, my brother. Let's do it" – Oleksandr replied in Russian.

And so, after the two friends made it into the airport, they got on their plane and took off from Sapporo, never to return to Japan again. For Oleksandr, it was the end of an era. For Dmitri, it was the beginning of another. Their future was uncertain, and they were certainly many challenges ahead for them in Russia, but as long as they were together and supported each other, they were sure they could face them all.

“Vice Admiral Kurbatov, the delegation from Bangladesh has arrived” – an officer said in Russian to the then Vice Admiral Yuri Kurbatov, who had since been promoted in rank and named the Deputy Commander of the Pacific Fleet of the Russian Navy and relocated to Vladivostok.

“Tell them to come in” – Vice Admiral Kurbatov said. “Delegation” was just a euphemism for yet another arms trafficker who came before the Vice Admiral to look for a business partner.

Since selling the *Akula II*-class nuclear attack submarine KGS *Takhar* to Yuri Kubo and witnessing her sail off with the boat, Vice Admiral Kurbatov had done business with many, many arms traffickers from around the world who craved for his growing stockpiles of weapons being replaced by newer materiel as part of the Kremlin’s extensive modernization program. Now that he was in Vladivostok, the quantity of weapons he had access to skyrocketed, and so he became very popular among weapons traffickers looking for low-cost, highly sophisticated war material. The gunrunners he greeted were Bangladeshi looking to purchase a small fleet of *Kilo*-class diesel-electric attack submarines to sell to a certain African country.

“So, gentlemen, let’s talk business. Do you know something about the Kilo-class?” – Vice Admiral Kurbatov asked the gunrunners.

“We know everything about it, old man. Let’s just discuss the price, shall we?” – one of the Bangladeshi traffickers aggressively told the Vice Admiral, who knew they were lying and did not take it kindly. He sighed.

“Okay. Set your price and we shall see” – Vice Admiral Kurbatov said.

He was actually a bit tired of cooperating with so many gunrunners at the same time. During the era in which Yuri was his sole client, both of them treated the art of gunrunning with mutual respect and culture, talking about things like the history of the arms in question. Now, the arms traffickers that visited him were less and less respectful and merely viewed gunrunning as a means of earning money in the short term, not as an opportunity for growth and expansion like Yuri did. They did not talk about complicated, interesting strategies or haggled the price strategically: now, most of the time, he let the traffickers set the price and he mostly obliged to that price, as most of the time, his profit margin was very high, nevertheless. Conversations were short and more of a formality than a chance to get to know each other as business partners. The whole activity became less attractive and more boring for him.

In the end, he agreed to supply the traffickers with three older soon-to-be-replaced *Kilo*-class submarines for a meager twenty-five million dollars per submarine. He could have negotiated a higher price, especially since these Bangladeshi traffickers were amateurish, but he decided not to. In his mind, the class of cool and sophisticated arms trafficker of which Yuri Kubo was a member was a very rare breed which was not easily encountered, and which probably was in danger of extinction.

“You seem exhausted, Vice Admiral. Were the negotiations so difficult?” – an officer asked Vice Admiral Kurbatov in Russian.

"Not at all. Quite the contrary. Those guys barely knew the merchandise I sold them. They just wanted to set the price and purchase the stuff. That's why I'm exhausted" – Vice Admiral Kurbatov said.

"I see. Well, another delegation, this time from Iran, will arrive soon to your office this afternoon. Maybe they can make up for a more challenging conversation" – the officer said, trying to cheer up the Vice Admiral.

"Maybe you're right. But it will surely be only to haggle the price. Nothing more, nothing less" – Vice Admiral Kurbatov said, standing from his seat and walking to his window. He looked at the vast sea under the horizon.

"I hope you're doing well, Yuri" – Vice Admiral Kurbatov thought, before returning to work.

"Se partió en Nicaragua otro hierro caliente, se partió en Nicaragua otro hierro caliente" – Silvio Rodríguez, the famous Cuban revolutionary artist, sang through a radio as a BMW car moved through a rural road in a certain Central American country.

"So, Martínez, talk to me about this trafficker we're visiting today" – a VIP asked his bodyguard.

"Ah, yes. I don't remember her name, but she's really the big deal. Ever since she arrived in the country two years ago, she has been quickly building a very profitable drug and arms trafficking empire which today controls the whole Pacific coast and has ties to powerful cartels from Mexico and Colombia" – the bodyguard replied.

"Arrived"? You mean she's not from here?" – the VIP asked.

"Nope. She came from a certain Asian country, don't know exactly which or exactly how" – the bodyguard replied.

"Interesting. A powerful Asian crime lady. Tell me more about her" – the VIP asked.

"Well, for all the power and money she has, there's actually little information about her. It is rumored that she was once a ruthless and implacable crime leader who was eventually ousted, and that exacted her revenge against all of them before escaping her country. They say that, when she came here, she bribed the government for a modest sum before settling in an old and isolated, but heavily protected compound, from where she operates, specializing in the use of submarines. She employs the good old narcosubs everyone uses, but, and this is a very wild rumor I don't actually believe, she supposedly has an actual naval combat submarine hidden somewhere that she uses to deliver and bring merchandise from places very, very far away" – the bodyguard explained.

"Sounds excellent. Someone with resources such as her is exactly the type of business partner I'm looking for my own organization" – the VIP said.

"We're almost at the compound" – the driver said.

"Good. Slow down as you approach. We don't want her security to overreact when they see us" – the VIP said.

The BMW car approached through a hill road until they reached the compound, which was a big and really beautiful, old Spanish Colonial-style mansion on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. It was barred from the rest of the area, with tall, steel fences guarded by tough guys wielding AR-15 rifles and wearing body armor. As the car entered the complex, two of the guards approached the driver's seat.

"What are you doing here?" – one of the guards asked in Spanish.

"We're looking for your boss. We have a business opportunity for her" – the VIP replied in Spanish.

"Please, hand me in your weapons. They will be returned to you once you leave" - the guard said. The VIP, the bodyguard and the driver all handed in their pistols to the guard.

"Very well. You can pass. The boss will be at the terrace" – the guard said, opening the electrically-operated gate to allow the BMW car to go through.

As they moved through the road into the complex, the VIP realized that whoever was the boss around there cared a lot for security. There were heavily armed guards and SUVs which were probably armored, as well as security cameras installed in most places. When they got off the car, the VIP could see snipers guarding the rooftops and the upper levels, as well as the helipad.

Finally, they entered the house, and walked through it, seeing more guards, some of them not Latino in origin, but apparently of Slavic roots, and wielding AKs instead of AR-15s. As they walked, they could see some of them transporting suitcases, which were either probably full of money or full of drugs. After moving through the extensive property, they arrived at the balconies of the terrace, where a peculiar-looking person was facing the ocean, looking at the sunset, with a glass of *macúa* cocktail in her hand. Judging from her svelte and well-sculpted body, it was a girl, dressed in jeans, white sneakers, and a very colorful Hawaiian shirt. But the most striking aspect of her was her cobalt blue hair.

"Boss, someone here is looking to have a business conversation with you" – one of her guards told her in Spanish.

"Excellent. Let them in then" – the girl replied in Spanish, and she turned around, revealing a young, delicate face with gray, almost white, eyes.

"Welcome to my house, gentlemen" – the girl said.

"Thank you, uh..." – the VIP said.

"Yuri Kubo. The name's Yuri Kubo. Let's get to work" – Yuri said, with a smile.

THE END.