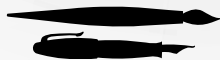


IMPOSTORS

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KILLER

We're about to die. Probably.

Our best hope is the pulse knife in my hand. It trembles softly, like a bird. That's how my head trainer, Naya, says to hold it.

Gently, careful not to crush it.

Firmly, so it doesn't fly away.

The thing is, my pulse knife really *wants* to fly. It's military grade. Smart as a crow, unruly as a young hawk. Loves a good fight.

It's going to get one. The assassin, twenty meters away, is spraying gunfire from the stage where my sister just gave her first public speech. Her audience, the dignitaries of Shreve, are strewn around the room—dead, faking death, or cowering. Security drones and hovercams are scattered on the floor, knocked out by some kind of jammer.

My sister's huddled next to me, gripping my free hand in both of hers. Her fingernails are deep in my skin.

We're behind a tipped-over table. It's a slab of vat-grown oak, five centimeters thick, but the assassin's got a barrage pistol. We might as well be hiding in a rosebush.

But at least no one can see us together.

We're fifteen years old.

This is the first time anyone's tried to kill us.

My heart is beating slantways, but I'm remembering to breathe. There's something ecstatic about the training kicking in.

Finally, I'm doing what I was born to do.

I'm saving my sister.

The comms are down, but Naya's voice is in my head from a thousand training sessions—*Can you protect Rafia?*

Not unless I take out this attacker.

Then do it.

"Stay here," I say.

Rafi looks up at me. She has a cut above her eye—from the splinters flying everywhere. She keeps touching it in wonder. Her teachers never make her bleed.

She's twenty-six minutes older than me. That's why she gives the speeches and I train with knives.

"Don't leave me, Frey," she whispers.

"I'm always with you." This is what I murmur from the bed beside hers, when she's having nightmares. "Now let go of my hand, Rafi."

She looks into my eyes, finds that unbroken trust we share.

As she lets go, the assassin lets loose again, a roar like the air itself is shredding. But he's spraying randomly, confused. Our father was supposed to be here, and only canceled at the last minute.

Maybe the assassin isn't even thinking about Rafi. He certainly doesn't know about me, my eight years of combat training. My pulse knife.

I make my move.

BODY DOUBLE

Rafi's speech was perfect. Clever and gracious. Unexpected and funny, like when she tells stories in the dark.

The dignitaries loved her.

I listened from the sidelines, hidden, wearing the same dress as her. Everything identical—our faces because we're twins, the rest because we work hard at it. I have more muscle, but Rafi tones her arms to match. When she gains weight, I wear sculpted body armor. We get our haircuts, flash tattoos, and surgeries side by side.

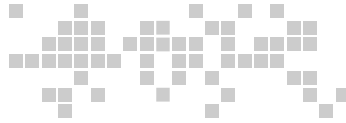
I was standing by to step in and wave to the crowd of randoms outside. Sniper-bait.

I'm her body double. And her last line of defense.

The applause swelled as she finished her speech and headed for the viewing balcony, the brilliant daughter stepping in for

the absent leader. Hovercams rose up in a multitude, like sky lanterns on our father's birthday.

We were about to make the switch when the assassin opened fire.



I crawl out from behind cover.

The air is thick with the hot-metal reek of barrage pistol. The rich scents of roast beef and spilled wine. The assassin fires again, the roar thrilling my nerves.

This is what I was born to do.

Another table between me and the assassin is still upright. I crawl through chair legs and dropped silverware, past a spasming body.

On my back, looking up at the splintered table, I feel wine dripping through bullet holes onto my face. It's summer berries and ripe heaven on my tongue—only the best wine for our father's events.

I squeeze the knife, sending it into full pulse. It shrieks in my hand, buzzing and hot, ready to tear the world apart.

I shut my eyes and slice through the table.

Our father burns real wood at his winter hunting lodge. All that smoke trapped in a few logs, enough to rise a kilometer into the sky. A pulse knife at full power shreds things just as fine—molecules ripping, energy spilling out.

A swath of oak, dishes, and food dissolves into a haze of fragments, a thick hot cloud billowing across the room. Sawdust glittering with vaporized glassware.

The assassin stops firing. He can't see.

Me either, but I've already planned my next move.

I scuttle out from beneath the halved table, lungs clenched against the dust. At the edge of the stage, I pull myself up, still blind.

A grinding sound fills the ballroom. The assassin is using the cover of dust to feed his barrage pistol—the weapon uses improvised ammunition to make it smaller, harder to detect.

He's reloading so he can shoot blind and still kill everyone.

My sister is out there in the dust.

The taste of sawdust fills my mouth, along with a hint of vaporized feast. I set my pulse knife to fly at chest height. Hold it like a quivering dart.

And the assassin makes a mistake—

He coughs.

With the slightest nudge the knife flies from my hand, deadly and exuberant. A millisecond later comes a sound I recognize from target practice on pigs' carcasses—the gurgle of tissues, the rattle of bones.

The sawdust is cleared by a new force billowing out from where the knife hit. I see the assassin's legs standing there, nothing above his waist but that sudden blood mist.

For a grisly moment the legs stand alone, then crumple to the stage.

The knife flits back into my hand, warm and slick. The air tastes like iron.

I've just killed someone, but all I think is—

My sister is safe.

My sister is safe.

I drop from the stage, cross to where Rafi still huddles behind the table. She's breathing through a silk napkin, and hands it to me to share.

I stay alert, ready to fight. But the air is filling with the buzz of security drones waking back up. The assassin was wearing the jammer, I guess, so it's mist now too.

Finally, I let my knife go still. I'm starting to shake, and suddenly Rafi is the one thinking straight.

"Backstage, little sister," she whispers. "Before anyone figures out there's two of us."

Right. The dust is clearing, the survivors wiping their eyes. We hustle away through an access door beneath the stage.

We've grown up in this house. Playing hide-and-seek in this ballroom with night-vision lenses, I was always the hunter.

My comms ping back up, and Naya's voice is in my ear:

"We see you, Frey. Does Gemstone need medical?"

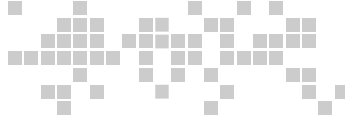
This is the first time we've used Rafi's code name in a real attack.

"She's cut," I say. "Over her eye."

“Get her to the sub-kitchen. Good work.”

That last word sounds strange in my ear. All my training up to this moment might have seemed like work. But this?

This is me, complete.



“Is it over?” I ask Naya.

“Uncertain. Your father’s locked down on the other side of the city.” Naya’s words are sharp with the possibility that this is only the start of something bigger. That at last the rebels are moving in force against our father.

I guide Rafi past stage machinery and lighting drones, to the stairs that lead down. Cleaning drones and cockroaches scuttle out of our way.

Five soldiers—everyone in Security who knows of my existence—meet us in a kitchen cleared of staff. A medic shines a light in Rafi’s eyes, cleans and seals her cut, flushes her lungs of smoke and dust.

We move in a tight group toward the secure elevator. The soldiers settle around me and Rafi, hulking in their body armor like protective giants.

The glassy look in my sister’s eyes hasn’t faded.

“Was that real?” she asks softly.

I take her hand. “Of course.”

My trainers have run surprise drills on us a hundred

times, but nothing so public, with dead bodies and barrage pistols.

Rafi touches the wound on her head, like she still can't believe that someone tried to kill her.

"That's nothing," I say. "You're okay."

"What about you, Frey?"

"Not a scratch."

Rafi shakes her head. "No, I mean, did anyone see you—next to *me*?"

I stare into her eyes, her fear cutting into my excitement. What if someone in the ballroom saw us? A body double is worthless if everyone knows they're not the real thing.

Then what would be the point of me?

"No one saw," I tell her. There was too much dust and chaos, too many people wounded and dying. The hovercams were all knocked out.

And what matters is: I've saved my sister. I let the ecstasy of that flood into me.

Nothing will ever feel this good again.