

Mid-Credits Scene
“Too Long Gone”

Two Months Earlier

Monday, February 22, 2038

Ürümqi, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Western China

"Thank you, Ms. Diana," said nine-year old Jun as he was handed his paper, "See you tomur..."

Diana put her index finger up to correct her pupil. "tomo..."

Jun stopped for a second and looked down at his polished black shoes as he gathered his thoughts. He tried again, slowly, "See. You. To. Mor. Row."

"Good!" Diana clapped her hands and switched back to Mandarin, "You're learning fast!"

The boy smiled broadly and responded in English. "Cool Beans!"

That hadn't been in the curriculum, but after seven years teaching English, Diana felt comfortable making little additions.

Jun walked contentedly down the hallway, and Diana started packing up. Her tablet went into the beaded hemp bag in which she stored half her life. The winter coat went on, followed by gloves, cap, and scarf.

She greeted her school colleagues in their respective languages on the way out. Mandarin. English. Mandarin. Mandarin.

Oh, and Ms. Saltamartini was on her way out as well. Diana quickened her pace to catch up to the Italian expat.

"*Buona serata*, Giulia," she said with an exaggerated hand-flourish that made the other teacher laugh.

"*Buona serata*, Diana," Giulia gave her a wink of Italian solidarity, "*Ciao!*"

“*Ciao!*” Diana responded with a giggle. This was who she was. A free-spirited Italian-American who loved beadwork, had an insatiable sense of wanderlust, and got overly excited about anything related to Mother Italia!

At least, that’s who she was until she charged out into the freezing desert wind.

That wind was what always brought her back to herself. In all her time abroad, Diana had never dreamed she'd miss winters in North Wisconsin. When she'd been stationed in Sichuan, the warmer climate had made home feel like a drab, cold relic. After three years in Ürümqi, however, she'd grown nostalgic for snowy Appleton Christmases.

The cold here was different. Maybe she'd just been away too long or gotten too close to her hippie alter-ego, but Diana would have sworn the place felt cold in spirit. Here, winter meant frigid, bone-dry winds that whipped off the Mongolian desert and slammed into the growing industrial city. Every time it blew, it felt like a million tiny needles driving straight into her face.

At home there was snow. Here there was just biting, incessant cold that held down a layer of lung-choking smog.

Luckily, it was only a few blocks to the nearest metro station. Not that the air was any better underground, but it was a tiny bit warmer, especially given how many people crowded into the downtown stations. Diana crammed herself into a claustrophobic train car packed with commuters and did her best not to glare at any of the cameras. She knew where all of them were, how much data each of them collected on Diana Mantegna, and how she couldn't compromise her perfect, well-behaved image.

There wasn't far to go - four stops. Out past the first ring road but not quite to the second. Somewhat of a safe neighborhood, but not what might be called 'nice.' A good place for an expat teacher without a lot of disposable income.

The train came to a halt and Diana pushed her way back up to the street and the cold and the wind. The one-block trek to her building felt like an eternity in this weather, but the drafty lobby of her concrete apartment block felt like a tropical paradise by comparison. In summer, the door to her first floor flat reminded her of the entryway to a prison cell, but this time of year it was the most welcome sight in her life.

She slid the key into the lock and tried to shove open the faded door – which stuck, as always. She gave it a kick, and it flew open to reveal her studio in all of its glory. Yellowed carpeting, creaky bed, some Buddhist prayer flags she'd brought back from

Tibet. That, and there was that hideous psychedelic Beatles poster she'd picked up - if only to convince people that she was the flower child she claimed to be.

“Every expat’s dream,” she mumbled. It was a lie, but one she tried to tell herself at least once a day. After all, this place was nothing if not an adventure, and that was what she wanted. Right?

The fridge was close to empty, but there was half a takeout box of red Laghman stew and hand-pulled noodles - leftovers from last night’s dinner at the Grand Bazaar – and a half-eaten can of lychees.

She dumped the stew in a pot and shoved it in the tiny microwave. While it heated, she booted up her tablet on the counter.

It was time for her nightly check of what was going on back in the real world, and she dutifully plugged in a web address. It would have been less tedious if she just followed Nina on social media, but that would require her to exist on social media.

Of course, Diana Alessandra Mantegna was all over the internet. She had to chronicle her travels, after all. She’d even been given *legal* authorization to use Twitter from the Chinese government – which they did for model foreigners.

Diana Rodanthi Constantinos, however, had no such luxury. That person only existed as a memory and a record in an agency database. It was risky enough to visit her family’s social media sites at all, but after seven years, she wanted to see home more than she wanted to eliminate risk.

That, and half the world followed Nina now. Nobody here would even notice.

Nina’s Weibo account – which was just WWN forwarding her Twitter to the Chinese audience - popped up onscreen.

The latest tweet displayed a photo of Nina and a friend sipping glow-in-the-dark Slurpees at a movie theater. The caption read:

Movie night with the new roomie @VinyaJain! #CalculatingStars #LadyAstronautMovie

Diana chuckled. It was good to see Nina having fun again. The move to DC looked to have done her some serious good, if for no other reason than that it put her hundreds of

miles from Isaiah Trotman, and this Vinya character looked like a walking excuse to party.

The microwave dinged, shaking Diana out of her reverie. She grabbed her dinner and made her way to the bed, where she pulled up her sister-in-law's mommy-blog. Kayleigh posted more pictures of her kids than anyone Diana had ever known. It was still a head-trip for Diana to think of her brother as a married father of two, but she'd always figured that "Skate Park Barbie" would eventually whip him into shape.

Soon, the clock on the wall was telling her she'd stayed up too late again, and she powered down the tablet with a sigh. When she'd first come over here, she'd dutifully avoided checking on anyone back home. Now it was becoming an every-night risk.

"You're gettin' soft, old girl," she said to the air, shutting down the tablet, "and you need sleep."

She drew the blinds, slipped into her pajamas, and pulled down the covers - but there was one more nightly chore.

Reaching under the sink, Diana removed the false back from the cabinet and pulled out a small rectangular box. Inside were a stack of fake passports, wads of cash in several currencies, and a Glock G42 subcompact pistol with three full magazines of ammo. Diana grabbed the gun, shoved in a magazine, and racked a round into the chamber. Then she made dead sure the safety was on.

Carefully placing the box back where it belonged, she returned to her bed and slipped the Glock under her pillow, where it had been every night for the last seven years.

Then she clicked off the lights.