

Operation: Uncover - Part 3

For Halima Abdi

By TheSpiralledEye

Ines is struggling to live her new life as a journalist thanks to her secret agent alter ego, L'ombre, who just wants to seduce or fight her way through life. After being dragged back to help with the kidnapping of a famous scientist she is paired with Dahlia, a beautiful transformed woman who seems to get along with her own passenger much better. Love and understanding blooms but danger awaits around every corner, threatening to take the happiness Ines fought so hard to achieve.

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Ines barely remembered the trip home, she was so tired it was all she could do to check in and report with her handler before falling into bed. When she woke, it was mid afternoon and she groaned; her sleep schedule was totally ruined.

'Sleep is for the weak.'

"I'd rather sleep for a week."

L'ombre actually giggled and Ines felt her lips quirk into a smile.

"You did pretty well today...yesterday I mean. Thank you."

'I told you using all our assets was the right move.'

"Okay, maybe a little seduction here and there is alright."

'You loved it, Ines. Don't lie.'

"Alright!" She laughed, "It was really fun, there I admit it, are you happy now?"

'Yes.' The alter replied smugly. 'And since you admit that I am right, it's time to trust me again.'

“Oh?”

‘We need to make sure Ethan isn’t linked to Watcher at all. He could have been a plant.’

Ines hadn't even considered that, she frowned. She usually had a pretty good judge of character, Ethan seemed too...green. Yes he'd fallen for L'ombre's charms easily but it didn't seem *too* easy. Just that he was young and eager.

“What are you going to do?”

‘Oh, just have a little chat with him. A forceful chat. He got the carrot, time for him to taste the stick.’

Ines' initial reaction was to say no, she had only just started to loosen L'ombre's leash, she wasn't sure if she should let her off it completely. But she had been right about a lot yesterday and Ethan was the most obvious person to have tipped Watcher off.

‘*Alright,*’ she agreed, floating back into her own head and letting L'ombre take control. ‘*But nothing too intense, deal?*’

“Deal!”

L'ombre was actually smiling, Ines could feel her excitement as she dressed them in fishnet stockings, thigh high boots, a beret and a short, stylish jacket. They looked like what films thought spies did; complete with sunglasses and bright red lips. L'ombre even took a few extra seconds to pose in front of the mirror before loosening the jacket to reveal more of their cleavage. Poor Ethan didn't stand a chance.

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Ines could feel L'ombre's pleasure as Ethan opened the door and immediately looked flustered.

“Ines! Y-you're back!” He smiled, “I uh, thought I wouldn't be seeing you again.”

He ran his hands through his hair a few times, clearly trying to neaten it. L'ombre smiled like a cat stalking a mouse; Ines could feel the power and authority coming off her in waves. The subtle way she held herself made them look so alluring and intimidating all at once and clearly it was working because Ethan was already off kilter. Exactly as L'ombre wanted. She stepped inside and closed the door.

"Ethan," L'ombre purred, her voice a seductive blend of silk and steel. "I need your help with something quite urgent."

Ethan's eyes widened and Ines could have been wrong but she was sure she saw his pupils dilate ever so slightly. He fidgeted, clearly equal parts intimidated and aroused.

"Uh, sure, anything I can do to help," he stammered. "T-thank you for the notes you left as well. I finished the story and my editor thinks it's something special."

"Oh I am sure it is." L'ombre said smoothly, "You're a very smart man, you know to take an opportunity when it presents itself to you."

Raven leaned in closer, her eyes locking onto his with an intensity that made Ethan shiver.

"Yeah I do." He said proudly, puffing out his chest.

L'ombre ran a finger down the centre of that chest and up again, before stabbing the sharp nail right into his clavicle just a tad too hard.

"I'm wondering if you have taken any other opportunities lately." L'ombre continued, her tone turning harsh. "You see, there's a matter of grave importance that concerns me. I need to know if anyone—perhaps unintentionally—shared information about a certain individual I've been tracking."

Instantly the flirtatious air in the room disappeared and the blush vanished from Ethan's face.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about, I swear," he blurted out, his voice cracking with nervousness.

"Are you certain?" L'ombre's tone turned even colder, her demeanour shifting from allure to full intimidation. "It would be unwise to withhold information from me, Ethan. You seem nervous."

"Because you're making me nervous!" He insisted, L'ombre pressed the sharpened nail down enough that it was threatening to break the skin.

Ines studied him for a moment longer, evaluating his demeanour, the sincerity in his eyes. In that intense moment of scrutiny, she recognized a genuine innocence, a lack of deceit.

'L'ombre, he's telling the truth.' She insisted, 'He has no idea who Walker is or his significance. Let him go.'

L'ombre's disappointment was palpable, she clearly wanted to drag this out longer, maybe even draw a little blood. But to Ines' relief and surprise, she stepped back. A faint, almost imperceptible smile played at the corners of L'ombre's lips as she leaned back, her posture relaxing slightly.

"Very well, Ethan. I believe you," she said, her voice returning to its earlier seductive timbre. "Thank you so much for your time."

Ethan let out a breath and L'ombre gave him a little wave before seeing herself out. Ines felt the tension she'd been holding back melt away as the Alter gave her back control of their body.

'See, wasn't that fun?'

"It got us what we needed." Ines admitted, "Let's call Dahlia, we have to focus."

'Do me a favour? Keep the outfit?'

Ines giggled a little, looking down at her body and smiling. It was a bit more showy than she usually liked but she had to admit, it was very effective. She sighed dramatically, acting all put upon as she agreed.

"Fine."

In the back of her head L'ombre laughed. Ines continued down the street with guilt gnawing at her. Using Ethan that way was wrong, wasn't it? It felt wrong to enjoy it so much, even if she was just an observer.

'Stop being a baby.'

Ines ignored her; she had gotten into this mess with the hopes of getting rid of L'ombre for good but now she wasn't so sure. They were working so well together at the moment and she was enjoying the thrill of spy work from the side lines. Would it even be right to erase L'ombre from existence when she was essentially a whole person in her own right?

Confusion and indecision swirled inside her. And like so many women, no matter how old they were, in her vulnerable moment there was only one person she could think to call. She grabbed for her phone, hit speed dial and lifted the phone to her ear. Grateful when it was answered quickly.

"Ines?" Her mother answered, "you don't normally call on work days, is everything alright?"

She didn't have time for small talk, Ines took a page out of L'ombre's book and cut to the chase.

"Mama...do you ever think about who you were, before you were my mother I mean?" Ines asked, bunching the fingers on her free hand into a fist.

"Life before you, cherie, was very dull. Japan is so rigid compared to-"

"Mama, that's not what I am talking about and you know it."

There was silence for a beat and Ines waited, listening to her mother's breathing on the other end of the line.

"Not really." She admitted, "I don't like to. It was a long career with many...bad times. I prefer this life, a simple life. I wish I'd lived it from the beginning, of course some things, like bearing a daughter would have been difficult but still."

"You were a man?"

Her mother hummed.

“Not really, only in body, much like you I imagine.”

Ines didn't like to think about that; Roanoke was repressed in almost every way but even she had wondered why it had been so easy for him to accept this new female body. At the time she'd considered herself a tool, an agent first and foremost so what should it matter what body she was in. She'd ignored just how much more comfortable she was as a woman; refusing to let herself dig into it until...now really. That couldn't be true though, could it?

'Roanoke was a coward.' L'ombre taunted.

Hearing L'ombre say it so matter of factly made everything seem stark and obvious.

“I am much happier now.” Mama insisted and Ines believed her. “Are you?”

“Yes, I just wish I could forget I was ever anybody else.”

Her mother gave a sympathetic sigh.

“The longer you spend dwelling on it, the harder that will be. Just focus on who you are now Ines, make the best of every day.”

Ines nodded, feeling affection bloom in her chest. It felt good to have a mother figure to go to for advice; something L'ombre and Roanoke could never appreciate. It was small, but it made her realise that while her past may have been fake, at least she had this now. These warm, maternal memories were as real as the ground beneath her feet. And she had plenty of time to make more as the years went on, sooner or later the 'real' would outweigh the fake.

“Thank you Mama, I needed to hear that.”

“Of course cherie, anytime.”

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When Ines returned to her apartment she was surprised to find the door unlocked. Immediately, L'ombre was on edge, opening the door silently, ready to pounce on the would-be intruders only to instantly deflate in disappointment when she saw Dahlia sitting on the couch.

“There you are!” She smiled, “I bought pastries...but then you weren't here so there is only one left. Well, half of one. You can still have it if you don't mind that I picked all the berries off!”

She held out a small pastry covered in tiny divots where blueberries once sat in the icing and Ines raised an eyebrow. After their failure yesterday she expected Dahlia to be pissed off, or at the very least more serious about knuckling down and catching Watcher. Instead, Ines could almost believe they were two normal women, catching up on their day off.

“You're relaxed.” She smiled, sitting down on the couch beside her.

“And you're quite overdressed.” Dahlia teased, making Ines blush and L'ombre chuckle.

“We went out to make sure Ethan wasn't a leak.” She admitted and Dahlia wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

“Not like that...again.” Ines said nervously, “but uh, the outfit did help.”

“I bet it did.” Dahlia said as her eyes raked over Ines' form.

Ines felt her chest heat slightly and quickly changed the subject.

“So what have you been up to? Get any new intel?”

‘Nice one, I thought you wanted to flirt with her? Just so you know, that was your chance.’

“Well, first I slept. Then Doll forced me up and we broke into a security tower to acquire some passwords so we can watch some CCTV footage.” Dahlia replied casually, as if doing all that was an everyday occurrence.

“But didn’t Watcher escape via the tunnels?”

“Yes, but we might catch him or some of his accomplices entering the building from the street beforehand.” Dahlia pointed out, “We might get some new leads or faces.”

They spent the day watching the very boring footage; alternating between focused stares at the screen and getting distracting chatting. Roanoke had always worked alone in silence, it felt nice to have somebody else to talk to. Somebody who wasn't a voice in her own head.

“So the agency gave you a family and everything?” Dahlia said with wide eyes. “Parents and everything?”

Ines nodded.

“They implanted them with the same memories I developed so sometimes I can actually forget that Ines didn't exist before a little over a year ago. Honestly this life feels more real than Roanoke’s did.”

Dahlia whistled, clearly impressed.

“That’s so cool. I wish they’d done that for me but I have been left to make my own family.”

For some reason that line made Ines feel awkward.

“So...have you? Made a family?”

“Not yet.” Dahlia sighed, “Honestly, I struggle to make friends, I get this sort of imposter syndrome, you know? I feel like I am lying to them.”

“Me too!”

“I’m so glad I’m not the only one.” Dahlia said relieved, “You know, I am really glad they paired us up Ines, it’s nice having somebody who understands the weirdness of having two sets of memories...and two personalities.”

“I know exactly what you mean.” Ines leaned forward eagerly, this was exactly the connection she had hoped for!

Suddenly both of the women seemed to realise how close they were, it would only take one of them leaning in an inch or two for their lips to brush. Ines couldn’t help herself, her eyes darted to Dahlia’s dark, full lips and her tongue darted out to brush against her own. She watched as Dahlia swallowed before leaning in just a fraction only to dart backwards; clearing her throat awkwardly.

“We uh, we haven’t been paying attention, we should rewind.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

“It’s getting late and we’ve been at this most of the day anyway, why don’t I go home and finish it myself, or have Doll do it? You already did extra work with Ethan anyway.”

That was probably for the best, so Ines nodded, feeling forlorn as she watched her new friends close the door as she left. With a sigh she waited for the taunts from L’ombre, calling her a coward for not just leaning forward and taking what they both so clearly wanted. Instead though, the Alter was oddly serious.

‘I don’t trust her Ines.’

Ines blinked in surprise.

“Why not? She’s been nothing but helpful, she even saved our lives back at the Louvre that night.”

‘Yes, convenient that.’ L’ombre replied, ‘Ines, she knew about the hideout, it was her idea to stake it out for several hours before going in. Not only that but she conveniently missed that trap door. If we had gone in earlier and found it we might have been able to follow Watcher and his goons, maybe even finish this there and then.’

Ines didn't like where this was going.

"It took you a few hours to find it."

'Only because I searched that area last, because she was searching there first.'

"Everybody makes mistakes."

'I'm just saying we need to be careful. Once upon a time we trusted Watcher and look where that got us. What if all that flirting was to distract you from the footage, footage she took with her and didn't leave us a copy of?'

Ines didn't reply and L'ombre dropped the topic. Ines couldn't help but feel a stab of irritation at her Alter though, she liked Dahlia, she didn't want that seed of doubt placed in her mind. But now that it was there, there was nothing to stop it taking root. She remembered Dahlia's light, airy attitude around their failure to find Watcher quickly. It had been something to respect at the time, a woman less anxious and tied up like Ines was. She'd admired her resilience, now she couldn't help but wonder if that's really what it was.

'I'm just speaking my mind.' L'ombre said after a long while. *'These last few days working together, properly I mean, they've been good. Don't get me wrong, you're still a little wimp, but you're my little wimp and I don't want you to get your fragile little heart broken. If only so I don't have to deal with you moping around afterwards.'*

It was about as close to offering an olive branch as L'ombre was capable of. For the first time in a long while Ines felt genuine affection bloom inside her chest for L'ombre. In this moment she could see that sisterly bond Dahlia had mentioned; maybe, just maybe she and her Alter could be if not friends then at least close. If she could admit, in her own harsh way, that she cared, the least Ines could do was return the favour and show her some more kindness.

"L'ombre, can I ask you something?"

'I can't really stop you.'

"Why are you a woman? Roanoke wasn't, why did you give yourself a female name and start going by 'she'?"

L'ombre's disbelief was so strong that Ines' eyes rolled without her even taking over.

'Seriously? You don't know?'

Ines shrugged.

"Ugh, maybe I was wrong, maybe you are just as repressed as our former self. We were always a lady, Ines. Why do you think you took to it so easily?"

Ines actually snorted.

"You're saying we were trans? As Roanoke? The guy never even thought about his own masculinity, let alone indulged in a feminine side."

'Gee I wonder why?' L'ombre replied dryly, 'Could it be that maybe, repressing everything so much you turn into a sociopath might have, I don't know, had some side effects? You just admitted it yourself, he never even indulged his masculine side, he just didn't want to think about it.'

Ines just shook her head in disbelief, it didn't make any sense...except that it did. She had even suspected it herself earlier. Having L'ombre spell it out only confirmed the suspicion.

'We were always a lady, dipshit.' L'ombre added for emphasis but there was no malice in her words, just exasperation, like a teacher explaining something obvious to a five year old. *'Now if we can stop talking about old history and get back to work, that would be great.'*

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The next few days were a constant tug of war in Ines' mind. She and Dahlia continued sifting through CCTV footage, investigating leads and interviewing potential leads. Ines found herself drawn to Dahlia in a way she'd never been drawn to anybody; her being there filled an empty space in her life she hadn't realised existed.

Yet L'ombre's suspicions infected her mind, the Alter was always on guard and the wedge that formed between her and the other woman was undeniable. Ines wanted so badly to ignore it, ignore L'ombre, but she couldn't. Mostly because everything the Alter said made sense.

But how Dahlia made her feel made sense as well, it made the world feel right. When their hands brushed over lunch, or she hugged her close in excitement when they made a breakthrough Ines could feel her cheeks getting hot. Not even L'ombre's chastising could make that go away.

It had been another long day of work when they flopped down on Ines' couch with a sigh. It had been fruitful, a little flirting with some sanitation workers had revealed plans to build a sort of structure beneath the city on private contract. It had to be Watcher. Now all they had to do was wait for the email from Bob, a lovely silver fox of a man whom L'ombre had managed to sweet talk into revealing its location, breaking his NDA.

The impatient agent sat at Ines' emails, refreshing it each time waiting for Bob's clue. Once they had that, they could move in.

"The email will give you a phone alert." Doll pointed out. "Refreshing does nothing but waste your mental energy."

"There is nothing better to do."

Doll quirked her head to one side and Dahlia's warm eyes took over.

"Ines and I can relax, you two can rest up ready for the confrontation, I have a feeling you'll be taking charge."

L'ombre grimaced but relented when Ines pushed forward; any excuse to spend time with Dahlia while not working was welcome.

'Watch yourself Ines...'

Dahlia smiled widely as Ines took control, L'ombre's stiff posture melting away.

"Right then, this can be our first night off and we don't know how long it'll last." She clapped her hands together. "What shall we do? Pizza?"

"Do you always think with your stomach?" Ines giggled.

"Only when possible. Doll thinks of food as fuel, if it were up to her we'd eat nothing but gruel. I spent my entire life as an agent eating rubbish, now that I am a woman of refined taste, I want to enjoy as much as possible."

“Refined taste eh? Well, it may not be as fancy as pizza but I do make a lovely seafood pasta and I had groceries delivered today.”

“Bring it on!”

Ines' heart danced with a nervous excitement as she prepared the ingredients. With a determined focus, she chopped fresh vegetables, minced garlic, and carefully cleaned the seafood. She even used some of her white wine to deglaze the pan and smiled as Dahlia leaned over and sighed happily at the smell.

The savoury aroma of sautéed onions and garlic filled the air, adding to the cosy ambiance of the apartment. She could almost forget they were technically in the middle of a deadly mission, they could just be two women having a normal romantic night. And the air certainly was romantic, nobody could deny that.

They sat and ate on the couch, slowly creeping closer with each bite until their bowls were empty and they were left with nothing to distract them from the tension in the air. Dahlia slowly reached over, gently placing her hand over Ines' and the woman felt her pulse quicken.

‘Ines, the computer.’ L’ombre reminded, ‘check the email, she’s trying to distract you.’

Ines ignored her.

“I really like you, Ines.” Dahlia whispered quietly, “I...just wanted to say that before we dive back into the frying pan later.”

“I like you too, I feel like you understand me, L’ombre too.”

“Same with you. Just having somebody who knows about Doll around...feels nice.”

Fuck it.

“You know what else would feel nice?” Ines whispered, leaning in. “This.”

She pressed her lips to Dahlia's and moaned, they were just as soft as they looked. Full too, they glided against one another as if they were made for each other. Dahlia's hands found

their way into Ines' long hair and tugged her closer, chest to chest so that their bodies were crushed against one another.

It was so different to when L'ombre was in control. These touches were gentle, a give and take with no fight for dominance. Ines gently stripped the clothes away from the fellow spy, laptop forgotten as they began to explore one another's bodies.

Somehow, they managed to stumble, naked to the bedroom and fall into Ines' silk sheets. Dahlia grinning wickedly as she slowly lowered herself down Ines' lithe body to lick at her folds. It had been so long since Ines had felt anybody touch her so lovingly and it made the orgasm all the stronger.

She returned the favour with her fingers, watching Dahlia's beautiful face twist and her body shiver in delight as Ines' fingers plunged in and out of her. Ines lost track of time and orgasms. They were making up for lost time, all the sexual tension that had been building since the night they met coming out in one long evening of love making until finally they flopped exhausted into bed, curling around each other like lovers who had known one another for years.

Ines was right on the edge of sleep when felt her body stirring as L'ombre took over. The Alter slipped them out of bed and crept silent as a cat across the room.

'What are you doing?' Ines asked sleepily.

"Making sure we didn't just sleep with a spy." L'ombre whispered.

'We absolutely did.'

L'ombre rolled her eyes and didn't bother answering, Ines giggled but her entertainment disappeared the instant L'ombre began to fiddle with Dahlia's phone.

'Stop it! She isn't a traitor! We don't even know if there is a traitor for sure!'

L'ombre didn't reply, she was in full focus mode, hacking away and grinning as she gained access to the device and began flicking through messages and emails. Nothing even remotely suspicious. L'ombre dug deeper as Ines got more and more nervous.

'See, nothing here, none of this even looks like it could be cold now stop it before she wakes up.'

"We need to be thorough."

'You've been plenty thorough now please, L'ombre I am asking nicely.'

"Let me just check for any hidden software..."

"The only hidden software is the usual agency apps."

If Ines had been in control she would have jumped in surprise, L'ombre merely froze in place. Instantly Ines was back and jumped into damage control as she spun around. Dahlia was sitting, naked at the edge of the bed with her arms crossed beneath her breasts. She didn't look impressed, eyes moving between Ines' guilty expression and the phone in her hand.

"I...can explain?"

"I'd love to hear it." Dahlia said sternly, "because from where I'm sitting it looks like I just fell for the oldest trick in the Ines and L'ombre handbook, seduce, exhausted and then take what you want."

Ines swallowed, she hadn't even taken into account how similar this situation looked to Ethan's.

"That wasn't my intention!"

'It was mine.'

"Well then? I am waiting?" Dahlia bounced her leg atop the other and raised an eyebrow.

"I meant everything I said before." Ines insisted truthfully, "I had no idea what L'ombre was planning."

"You could have stopped her."

"Yes but...she had a point, we just had to be sure."

"What? That I wasn't this imagined traitor?"

“Or Doll!” Ines added, instantly realising that accusation only made her look worse. “Look, Watcher didn’t know he was a traitor and I experienced memory loss before thanks to the procedure. I just had to know. So when L’ombre started looking...”

“You decided to just come along for the ride.”

Ines hung her head in shame, it was like accusing your partner of cheating only to find out they’d been faithful all along and now the trust between you was shattered. Anger burned in her veins, she wanted to blame L’ombre entirely but deep down she knew she couldn’t. She was just as guilty, at the very least she had been suspicious enough not to force L’ombre to stop.

Weakly, she held out the phone and Dahlia took it back. Getting up without a word and dressing herself.

“I’ll sleep on the couch.” She said quietly, her face shifting from angry to hurt. “We’ll finish this mission but after that, I don’t think we should see each other. In any capacity.”

“Dahlia-”

“No, partners, no matter what kind, need to trust each other. How can I know you have my back as an agent if you secretly doubt my intentions and being more than that is out of the question as well.”

Ines didn’t expect that to hurt quite so much as it did, she could feel her heart breaking. Finally, she’d found somebody who truly understood her and with one stupid decision she had ruined it. Even L’ombre seemed awkward, but said nothing.

Suddenly, Ines’ phone pinged. Bob had finally come through, they knew where to go.

It was time to face Watcher.