The Opposition Brief

by Evelyn Cross

Opposing counsel. One late night. Zero chance of keeping it professional.

MyTropes / RomanceBots

The Opposition Brief

The first time Nadia Osei walked into a deposition against Marcus Hale, she wore red just to annoy him.

It worked. She could see it in the way his jaw tightened when she entered the conference room — a fractional clench, like he was biting down on something sharp. He had the kind of face that was infuriating to look at: square jaw, dark eyes that missed nothing, the sort of bone structure that belonged on the cover of something glossy and unimportant. She hated that she noticed. She noticed every time.

"Counsellor," he said.

"Counsellor," she said back, and set her briefcase down hard enough to rattle the water glasses.

They had been opposing counsel for three years across six cases. He had beaten her twice. She had beaten him three times. The sixth case — Davenport v. Orin Industries — was currently undecided, a wrongful dismissal claim worth four million dollars, and they were both exhausted and filthy with it.

Tonight they were the last people in the Meridian building. 10:48 PM on a Thursday, the cleaning crew gone, the corridor lights on half-power, and a shared document on a shared server that neither of them could afford to let the other touch unsupervised.

MARCUS

She was going to find the internal memo. He knew it before she did.

He'd spent forty minutes watching Nadia work through the disclosure stack, her reading glasses on now — tortoiseshell, which he'd never seen before tonight — and he could see the exact moment she hit something interesting because her left hand went still. She always tapped a pen when she was reading routinely. When she stopped tapping, she'd found something.

He kept his face neutral. Fourteen months of depositions had taught him what her tells were. He suspected she'd mapped his with the same cold precision.

"This is interesting," she said, not looking up.

"I'm sure it isn't."

"The timestamp on the CFO's email is three hours before the board vote, not after." She set the document flat on the table and slid her glasses down to look at him over the frames. "You knew this was there."

"My client's communication history is—"

"Don't." She pulled the glasses off entirely and folded them in her fist. "It's eleven at night, Marcus. I'm not doing the dance."

He sat back. Looked at her properly, the way he didn't let himself during depositions. Nadia Osei at eleven PM, three years of combat between them, red blouse untucked on one side where she'd stopped caring an hour ago, and that expression she got when she'd won something — not triumphant, just exact. Like a key fitting a lock.

"What do you want?" he said.

"To know if you're going to make me file a motion or if you're going to give me the full chain."

"And if I say file the motion?"

She smiled then. Not warm. Sharp. "Then I'll enjoy watching you explain to the judge why it was produced at the twelfth hour."

The thing about Nadia — the thing he had never said to anyone, the thing that lived in the back of his chest like a splinter — was that she was the only lawyer he'd ever met who made him feel like he was actually working. Not performing. Not managing. Working. It was the worst kind of compliment he'd never given her.

"The chain is seventy pages," he said.

"I have time."

"It's almost midnight."

"I'm aware of what time it is."

He looked at her for a moment longer than was professionally defensible. She looked back without flinching — she never flinched — and there was something in the set of her shoulders that was different from a deposition. Looser. Or maybe he was just tired and projecting softness onto angles that had always been there.

"I'll print it," he said, and pushed back from the table.

NADIA

She was not going to think about the way he looked when he was actually paying attention. She had made this rule in year one and she was keeping it.

She waited until she heard the printer in the adjoining office start before she pressed both palms flat on the table and exhaled slowly. Three years. Seventy-two cumulative hours of opposing depositions. The precise geography of a man's frustration mapped across her memory whether she'd asked for it or not.

When he came back, he had his jacket off. She hadn't seen that before — he always ran formal right to the end. White shirt, sleeves rolled to the forearm, a stack of papers that he dropped in front of her with more force than necessary.

"Page forty-one," he said, and leaned over her shoulder to find it.

He was close. She was aware of it the way she was aware of weather — something in her peripheral nervous system registering data she hadn't asked for. The smell of him at nearly midnight: coffee, something clean, something underneath that was just him, and she had definitely noticed that

before and she was absolutely not thinking about it now.

"This one?" she said.

"Read the third paragraph."

She read it. It changed the character of the whole claim — not killingly, but meaningfully. A pre-existing condition in the dismissal process that her client's own manager had flagged two months before the vote. Her client hadn't told her.

She set the paper down.

"Your client knew about this," Marcus said, still close. His voice had dropped from deposition-formal to something that was almost just human.

"My client neglected to mention it, yes."

"Does that change your read of the settlement number?"

"It changes my read of several things."

Silence. She could hear the building's ventilation. The distant sound of a car alarm starting and stopping on the street below.

She turned, which was a mistake, because turning meant she was closer than she'd calculated. He hadn't stepped back. He was looking at her with that look — not the deposition look, not the courtroom look — the other one. The one she pretended she hadn't catalogued.

"We've been doing this for three years," she said.

"Yes."

"We're very good at it."

"Also yes."

"I don't like you," she said. It came out less firmly than she intended.

"I know," he said. "I don't particularly like you either."

Neither of them moved.

"This would be spectacularly inadvisable," she said.

"Professionally, yes." He lifted one hand and pushed a loose braid back from her jaw, slow enough that she could have stopped him at any point and they both knew it. "Personally, I've been watching you find the hole in every argument I've made for three years, and I'm tired of not doing something about that."

She looked at him for a long moment. The printer was still warm. The building was empty. Her client had lied to her and she was going to win this case anyway and Marcus Hale had his hand at the side of her face and was waiting.

"If this gets complicated," she said.

"It won't."

"It absolutely will."

"Nadia." Just her name. Low and direct, the way he spoke in closing arguments when he wanted a jury to feel the weight of something.

She kissed him first. She would always be glad she kissed him first.

It was nothing like she'd expected, which was to say it was worse, which was to say it was better. He kissed her back immediately and thoroughly, his hand moving from her jaw to the back of her neck, fingers finding the nape beneath her braids and gripping with a steady assurance that made her breath come shorter. Not tentative. Not testing. Like he'd been thinking about exactly this.

She pushed the document stack sideways without looking at it and he lifted her onto the table, stepping between her knees with a pragmatism that she found stupidly appealing — no fumbling, no overcorrection, just the clean vector of intention.

"The door," she said against his mouth.

"Nobody's here."

"I know nobody's here. Lock it anyway."

He did. She watched him cross to the glass door and flip the lock, and the walk back — she was going to remember that walk, the unhurried certainty of it, the way he looked at her the whole time like she was a problem he was very much looking forward to solving.

Her blouse was already untucked. He took advantage of that immediately, hands sliding underneath to her waist, her ribs, learning the geography of her with the same focused attention he brought to everything. She unhooked the first two buttons of his shirt because she had wanted to be annoying and instead found herself pressing her mouth to his collarbone.

"Three years," he said, into her hair.

"Don't make it sentimental."

She felt him laugh — a real one, surprised out of him — and it moved through his chest and into her palms where they were spread flat against his shirt.

What followed was thorough and mutual and very good, which she had privately suspected it would be and which she was never going to tell him. He paid attention the way he paid attention in court — to everything, to the small details, to the moment something shifted and required a change of approach. She was not quiet about it. The building was empty and she had three years of opposing counsel to work through.

Afterwards, they were both sitting on the table in varying states of professional dishevelment, her reading glasses knocked somewhere on the floor, his shirt untucked, the settlement documents in a pile to one side.

"Page forty-one changes the number," she said.

"By how much?"

"Ten percent. Fifteen if your client pushes."

"He'll push."

"Then tell him not to." She found her glasses. One lens had a fingerprint on it. "If he pushes, I'll find something else."

Marcus looked at her with that infuriating expression that was not quite a smile.

"You'll find something else anyway," he said.

"Obviously." She hooked the glasses on her collar. "That's not an argument for him pushing."

He picked up his jacket from the chair back and stood, and she watched him settle back into himself the way a courtroom lawyer does — the slight shift, the return of the structure. But he stopped before putting the jacket on and looked at her once more, direct and unguarded.

"Saturday," he said.

"What about Saturday?"

"Not here. Not connected to this case. Saturday."

She considered him. The empty building, the conference table, page forty-one of a disclosure document that was going to complicate her morning considerably. The way he'd laughed when she told him not to be sentimental.

"Saturday," she said. "But I choose the restaurant."

"You choose everything anyway."

"Correct." She picked up her briefcase. "Goodnight, Counsellor."

"Goodnight, Counsellor."

She walked out first. He watched her go. The building was very quiet.

They settled Davenport v. Orin Industries six weeks later for 2.3 million. Split the difference. Both clients were unhappy, which meant it was the right outcome. She bought a bottle of decent whisky and left it on his desk with a note that said *Don't be smug about this.*

He texted her a photograph of two glasses and the words *Come over then.*

She did.