

Thirty Minutes After Midnight

By me

Chapter 1 – Sierra

“You’d do well not to ignore the protests, Admiral. I understand that you’re a military man and are focused on military threats, but, under your blind eye, they’ve grown beyond a few angry priests and businessmen. Young students are now giving up on the Directorate. I’ve had to sit and watch as we hemorrhage brainpower, and, if we don’t act decisively, we risk losing an entire generation of disaffected students to our rivals abroad.”

- Grand Marshal Archer Hamilton to Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster

Akiko couldn’t remember why she hated Montreal.

The city was still as industrious as ever, this much was true. Students graduating from the local university, her alma mater, continued to achieve great things, helping to rebuild the world after it was laid low by a wave of natural disasters. The United Nations’ “Provisional Directorate,” as the new world order was called, sold its schools as a true home for the student body, where a girl could cultivate and reimagine herself as whatever she wished, and Akiko was no exception. She had loved the city with all her heart – its sights, its sounds, and its smells. Even the feeling of the pavement beneath her feet was like a friend to her. As soon as she removed her cap and gown, however, the veil was lifted, and the illusion of comfort fell to the ground like the silken garments that had brought her so much pride.

And yet, try as she might, she couldn’t for the life of her remember why.

Of course, she had no shortage of minor grievances against the city. The more time she spent in the ivory towers of Montreal, the more she noticed its ugly imperfections: the sterile laboratories of the academic world, the manic fervor of researchers swarming the streets like ants, the loudmouthed protestors voicing their grievances against something or other, and, looming above them all, the militant hand of the Skywatch, whose heavily-armed airships made port in the city to be retrofitted by the Defense Administration. But these were inconveniences, nothing that should have made her hate the city above all others.

The irony was that those same airships she loathed proved to be her relief. The only job she was able to find was that of a stewardess aboard a government airship, which got her away

from Montreal at the very least. Her new, transient life did bring her back to that city every so often, but it was far more digestible in small doses.

Akiko's new job was considered a low-risk position. Most of her passengers were civil guardsmen, police in all but name, or Army officers, both of whom played second fiddle to the Skywatch and were unlikely to be targeted by hostile powers. Such an arrangement suited her well. She'd seen enough combat of during her mandatory year of student service. Even better, the company she kept onboard the *Sierra* was of a humbler stock than the high-ranking Skywatch officers, who tended to be pompous at the best of times.

As she waited to pass through security at the Montreal airbase, Akiko took a call from Jameson Reed, the captain of her vessel.

"Hello?" she asked.

"Hamilton's arrived on the tarmac and he wants tea. We're set to leave in thirty minutes, are you almost here?"

"On my way. Like Checkpoint Charlie over here," Akiko mumbled.

Reed laughed. "Security's that bad, huh?"

"Yeah. Been in line for, oh, half an hour already. Protests have 'em spooked, so they won't even let staff go through the fast lane."

"Well, what can you do? Get here as quick as you can; you know the drill." With that, the captain hung up and left Akiko in silence.

Reed made for an interesting captain, but he was good to her. He never asked more of her than she was able to do, and never asked her to speak more than required. Chief amongst his idiosyncrasies was his insistence that his staff wear casual attire, which was a blessing. Dressed only in a ratty jacket and red beanie, handcrafted by her grandmother, Akiko could disappear into the crowd waiting to crawl through security.

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The UNS *Sierra* stood on the tarmac, ready to lift off as soon as its crew were all aboard. Next to one of its engine nacelles, Akiko could see Captain Reed discussing business with Grand

Marshal Hamilton, the man they were to ferry across the Atlantic. It was the first time she had seen the Grand Marshal. He was an old man with tufts of grey hair and a gaunt frame, and a conspicuous mechanical hand protruding from his uniform's left sleeve. Many of the men and women who served the Directorate had some form of augmentations, although they were usually less obvious than an artificial limb. Akiko herself had been pressured to augment her senses with small implants, but had refused, even though she found the science behind them fascinating. With the Defense Administration campus so close by, the great scientific leaps could be observed from a safe distance. There was no need to put them in her body.

"I'm here, sir," Akiko whispered to the captain when she reached the group.

"Yes, I can see that," Reed replied. "Grand Marshal, sir? The young lady is ready to fetch your tea, if you so desire."

"Yes, please," Hamilton answered. Akiko curtsied, as was proper, and followed the group onboard, where she and her friends would accommodate them for the duration of the flight.

"Anyhow, I've heard rumors that Director-General Magnus won't be at the conference," the Grand Marshal continued, speaking directly past Akiko as if she did not even exist. "They told me that a representative would take his place. Probably. Grand Admiral Lancaster implied that such rumors were baseless, which I'm inclined to believe."

"I suppose he wouldn't want to be absent for something so significant," Reed muttered. "If he were, though, would this alleged 'representative' be accompanied by the Tower Guard?"

"According to Lancaster, no, and I've no reason to doubt him. The word I'm getting is that, if Magnus does not attend, he will be doing business in Stockholm with most of his elite troops, which I believe leaves us vulnerable. So I do hope he comes. Not only would his security officers give me more peace of mind in light of the recent unrest, but I should also like to speak to him in private about Lancaster's repeated interference in Army operations."

"Have you talked with the Commissars about this?"

"Cutler and Bucharest have my back. Karahan has offered the Navy's support as well, for what little that's worth. Hopefully Magnus will listen to all of us together, and there won't be an incident."

“Then I wish you luck when the time comes,” Reed said with a respectful nod.

Akiko enjoyed listening to them talk, even if the barrage of names went well over her head. She recognized Keller Magnus as Director-General, the leader of the UNPD. Jacob Lancaster was the famed Grand Admiral, and Marcus Fairchild was the Magnus’ pet scientist, scheduled to present his latest project at the upcoming conference. The others, though, must have been less distinguished personages, since she could not remember having ever heard their names.

Once she and the rest of the crew were settled, they began their journey to Athens, where the Provisional Directorate had made its capital. The *Sierra*’s precious cargo, Grand Marshal Archer Hamilton, would be staying there only for the Strategic Technologies Conference, after which he would return to Montreal to keep the protestors from becoming rebels.

Most of these dissidents called for the Directorate to lift its restrictions on organized religion, allegedly a response to the clash of faiths that culminated in the so-called League Crusade. Allowed to *privately* praise any gods of their choice though they were, the devout were prohibited from assembling in public in the hopes that this would prevent further conflict. Faith was not entirely out, but the Church was.

Public opinion of this policy varied widely, meeting with great approval from some and violent opposition from others, the loudest of whom by far were the outraged clergymen, but so it was. Centuries of turmoil and ruin had granted a lucky few the chance to mold a new sculpture. The Directorate’s current form was what they had chosen to sculpt, even if many did not appreciate its avant-garde style.

“Montreal Control, this is HPS *Sierra*, ready for departure,” Reed said into his radio once his entire crew was aboard.

“HPS *Sierra*, the skies are clear. Departure clearance granted. Proceed along your designated route,” came the reply from the tower.

“Roger that. Crew, prepare for liftoff,” Reed confirmed. The vessel’s thrusters surged into life, lifting it into the overcast afternoon skies.

From so high up, Akiko could see the whole of Montreal. It might have been beautiful once, she thought. The centuries-old photos still decorating the university’s halls certainly made

it look that way. Now, even the eponymous Mount Royal was obscured by a wall of skyscrapers, with a canopy of interlinking catwalks and platforms so thick that they were said to form a second city, hundreds of meters in the air. Rising even further was the ugly spire of the space elevator, the only one of its kind still operational, sticking out as if the city itself was giving her a rude gesture.

A few corvettes flew past, disappearing into a landing bay at the base of the elevator. The markings on their wings were that of the Civil Guard, just like the one ready to launch from the *Sierra* should they come under attack, although there was no expectation it would ever be deployed. Apparently, their usual pilot had fallen ill and been replaced on short notice by a pilot Reed assured her was a master aviatrix. Whoever the newcomer was, Akiko doubted she'd get a chance to assess her skills in person.

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Hours later, the ship drew ever closer to its destination, beginning to pass over the Mediterranean Sea. Akiko peeked her head through the doorway into the bridge to see Reed and his co-pilot, a short, round Turk by the name of Yusuf Fahri. The man was an amiable sort, if slightly aloof. Unlike the Captain, very little poking or prodding could convince Yusuf to talk if he didn't want to, so Akiko had long since learned not to try.

"Something the matter?" Reed asked, noticing his stewardess.

Akiko shook her head meekly. "Just some extra tea left, sirs, if you want any before it goes away."

"I'll be fine, doll, but thanks," the captain replied. Yusuf, nodded, and thanked the stewardess as she poured him a cup. Without another word, Akiko curtsied and left to put the tea back into storage.

There was only one person in the *Sierra's* cramped galley when she arrived – the new corvette pilot, Eirene. Hers was a graceful but unassuming figure, with wavy blonde hair framing her gentle face. The two women had never spoken, which didn't bother Akiko much. Nevertheless, she gave her a polite smile, which Eirene returned.

“You don’t look like you’re with the Army, or even a guardsman,” the pilot said, catching Akiko off guard. “What’s the deal with this crew?”

“Eh?”

Eirene gestured towards Akiko’s clothes, cocking her head ever so slightly. “The people here, they don’t dress like professionals, you know? Reed doesn’t exactly run a tight ship. Not at all like the Skywatch.”

“That makes two of us, then.” Akiko pointed back towards Eirene. “That hair of yours is a dye job, am I right? Your name says Greek but your face says...Chinese? Nowhere you’d find natural blondes, that’s for sure.”

“Heh. Half-Chinese, half-Greek, yes,” Eirene said, biting her lip.

Akiko nodded in understanding. Such a mix was not uncommon. Her own parents had fled Japan when it was devastated by quakes during the upheaval, and the Chinese seaboard had suffered much the same fate. Countless refugees from both countries migrated west, enticed by offers to help build the Directorate in exchange for new homes, or fallen in with fleets of wanderers that travelled the globe, never staying in one place for long.

“In any case, you’re right that I’m not really military,” Akiko continued. “A few of us are what I guess you could call civilian contractors. The Skywatch and the Army are stretched thin doing whatever it is they do, so the Transportation Administration’s been lending people like me to do manual labor. It’s not glamorous, but it’s work.”

“Civilians, hm?” Eirene said with a hint of alarm. “So, the rumors were true. If you came from Transportation, then you probably studied in Montreal or Madrid, yeah? I heard most TA staff graduated from the universities there.”

“Montreal. They taught me well, but I can’t say I’m sorry to leave. The whole city just makes me sick.”

“Had a bad time in school, did you?”

“Surprisingly, no. There must have been something, because right after I graduated, the whole place just started to seem...rotten. My memory around that time’s a bit of a blur; if there was a specific incident, I can’t say I remember it. Maybe I blocked it out.”

“Curious.” Eirene took a sip from the glass of water in front of her. “I went to Athens myself, studied ancient history and classical literature. Would have gone for my PhD, but during student service I started as a pilot, and found that I enjoyed flying more.”

Akiko laughed. “Took a few of those classes myself, as electives,” she said. “I can understand why you’d rather spend time in the sky than the library.”

Eirene smiled, and the two continued to chat for some time.

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As Reed focused on preparing the aircraft for its arrival, Yusuf watched the radar, tracking a single blip as it steadily approached the *Sierra*.

“Hey, Jamie,” he said. “Take a look at this.”

Reed leaned over and looked at the screen, noticing the incoming vessel. “Probably nothing,” he grumbled, until a message from the radio made clear his error.

“UNS *Sierra*, this is Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster. As per our security protocols for the conference, all vessels inbound to the capital must submit to inspection prior to landing. Please stop your vessel and prepare for aerial rendezvous.”

“*Sunset Serenade*, we are transporting Grand Marshal Archer Hamilton from Montreal on official orders from Samara Tower. Please transmit authority override code,” said Reed, looking over at Yusuf, who shrugged. They both knew that the man speaking to them was the real deal and easily outranked everybody on board, but procedure was procedure.

A few seconds passed, and a longer string of digits appeared on one of the *Sierra*’s many monitors. Reed sighed, and then re-opened the communication channel.

“Very well. Preparing to initiate rendezvous.”

The *Sierra* slowed to a mid-air crawl as its engines strained to keep the vessel in the sky, waiting for the flagship to come up alongside and begin boarding operations.

“Damnable Skywatch bastards,” Reed muttered once his headset was shut off. “We’ve got the Grand Marshal onboard, and everybody knows it. What could he possibly be hoping to find?”

“Nothing. You *know* he’s just doing this to make sure everybody knows he’s on top. And, of course, Magnus loves the Skywatch, so nobody’s going to stop him,” Yusuf replied.

“Yeah, well, let’s just hope he doesn’t take too long having his fun.”

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“What in the devil?” Akiko said, feeling the *Sierra* come to a halt. She stomped over to the galley window, looking out to see the *Sunset Serenade* extending a bridge by which the Skywatch inspectors would arrive. The flagship’s hull dwarfed the *Sierra*, completely obscuring the two women’s view of the horizon.

Eirene’s heart had yet to rise from the pit of her stomach. “We should go,” she said. “This isn’t going to end well.”

“Go? Go where?”

“My corvette. Whatever business the Skywatch has here, I don’t think either of us wants any part of it.”

“Hell no. Even if you’re right, and shit’s gonna go down, then I need to be with Captain Reed to help him out.”

Despite Eirene’s stammered protestations, Akiko turned and started towards the hall. Before she reached the door, however, it swung open to reveal a host of figures, led by two in grandiose uniforms. Both were old men with greying hair, one dark-skinned and the other ghostly pale, easily recognizable as Grand Admiral Lancaster and Administrator Fairchild.

The two women quickly snapped into a salute, a gesture which the older men ignored.

“Apologies for the interruption, but we have received information revealing the presence of terrorist elements onboard this vessel,” Fairchild said, his enunciation stilted and unsettling.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Akiko said as the Skywatch officers began to search both her and Eirene.

“Unfortunately, this is no joke,” the man replied. An officer stepped forward to conduct a brief but intrusive investigation, finally pronouncing both women free of weapons or contraband.

Lancaster nodded. “They’re clean? Fine. Keep searching the room. And if *this* one,” he said, pointing an accusatory finger at Eirene, “tries to take off, shoot her out of the sky.”

Eirene and Akiko were released, free to watch Lancaster and Fairchild disappear towards the bow of the ship, presumably to interrogate the Captain. They stood in awkward silence, reeling from the indignity of the pat-down.

“So much for your plan,” Akiko said, nervously checking the few investigators who had remained to secure the room. “Anyway, I’m heading to the bridge to make sure Reed’s okay, but if you wanna take off and get blasted, that’s your business. Good luck out there, Miss Eirene.”

“Y-yeah. Good luck to you too,” Eirene said.

* * *

The particular model of corvette that Eirene flew was not the latest in air combat technology, but it was fast. From inside the cockpit, she looked at the *Sunset Serenade*, trying to gauge whether her speed and what few missile countermeasures she had would be enough to escape the wrath of the Skywatch.

Lancaster and Fairchild had been right about one thing. There were hostile forces aboard the *Sierra* – forces that were under Eirene’s command. She and her crew had been placed there in order to steal sensitive intelligence that would help her compatriots infiltrate the upcoming conference, but Lancaster had evidently caught wind of their treachery. That she had not been arrested on the spot suggested his information was incomplete. A small mercy.

A blip from her computer told Eirene that one of her agents had uploaded a file. Though she was able to confirm that it contained the necessary data, she remained tense, still unsure whether the Skywatch was on her trail. It was then that she noticed the *Sunset Serenade* drifting away. Evidently, the investigation was to be a brief affair.

Before she could let herself relax, however, Eirene noticed a single one of the flagship’s railguns taking aim directly at the *Sierra*.

“Oh,” she whispered.

Eirene was loath to take off until the four empty seats behind her were filled, but Lancaster had given her no choice. The young woman strapped herself in and disengaged the clamps binding her to the transport. One shot hit its mark before she was fully clear of the condemned vessel, and a second shot sealed the *Sierra's* fate mere seconds after the corvette had launched, a final nail hammered violently into the flying coffin.

There was no time to reflect on the horrifying scene. All Eirene could do was evade the fire that was now drawn to her, the only survivor and the only witness to Lancaster's crime – not that the testimony of a rebel pilot would mean anything in a UNPD court.

It took every countermeasure she had, on top of a healthy amount of luck, but Eirene did escape, and the magnitude of her situation sank in. The four men who made up her own crew were dead. Akiko was dead. The former had always been a possibility, but for the Skywatch to shoot down a loyalist airship was unthinkable. While he was not known for putting much value on individual lives, Lancaster would have been well aware that his country lacked the infrastructure to mass produce such vessels as the *Sierra*, making its destruction an irreplaceable loss.

Eirene's priorities lay elsewhere. It was unclear why Lancaster had destroyed the *Sierra*, yet she knew that, whatever his plans may have been, Akiko didn't need to die.

Part of her wanted to believe that the technical success of her mission was enough, and that the collateral damage was unfortunate but inevitable. Lancaster was clearly playing his own game, and Eirene's seditious friends were playing theirs. With so many pieces on the board, what was the value of a single girl?

Chapter 2 – Fade to Blue

“An apocalypse? Don’t dramatize it. Do you know what the greatest cause of death was in the 23rd century, even including the storms? Old age, with disease and the war itself taking a close second. The Himalayan-3 virus was the real apocalypse if you must use that word, but everybody forgets about that because lowered fertility isn’t dramatic enough. Nobody wants to admit we died a slow death.”

- Ryan Mistle, editor for Archivist Victoria Cromwell

Istanbul was a city twice slain, first reduced to rubble by years of war, and then again during the apocalyptic storms that gave rise to the new world. By some great fortune, or by the grace of God, depending on who one asked, the iconic Hagia Sophia still dominated the skyline, but it was surrounded by a bleak graveyard bearing a century of scars.

On paper, the city – and the rest of the country that was once Turkey – were part of the Directorate’s demesne. So heavily had the land been damaged, however, that the state had little interest in governing it, leaving it in the hands of those whose family trees were so deeply rooted that they were loath to leave, and those with nowhere else to stay.

Over the years, a new community arose, an eclectic mix of natives, rebels, migrants from afar, and anybody else willing to trade a bit of comfort for liberty. It was there that the UNS *Peregrine* and its mutinous crew had found a home after refusing an order to slaughter innocents. This group, now known as the Peregrines after their infamous dreadnought, had joined the fledgling city-state in its tense cold war against the Directorate, sometimes engaging in a minor skirmish, but mostly keeping a low profile. The loyalists were equally content to ignore the defectors, but, if they proved worth of attention, the people of Istanbul knew they would not win the subsequent battle.

Inside the Peregrine fortress, Alexis Eliades and Teague Ironwall sat alone at a table by the window. She was a tall and strong young woman with a thin face and pointed chin, her short, reddish-brown hair lit up by the evening sunlight. He, by contrast, was a grey-haired elder, but

far from frail. It was easy to tell that he had, in his youth, been someone of considerable strength and power.

As the two of them spoke. Alexis toyed with a rough stone, tossing it into the air only to catch it once again and repeat the process like some kind of Sisyphean game. Her right hand, meanwhile, clutched her rifle that lay flat on the table. Once the type who'd rather make love than war, circumstances had forced her into battle alongside the Peregrines, where that old gun had served her well.

"It's not too late to join us," the young tomboy said. "Could be a chance to prove you're not just another armchair general sending young people to die for your ideals. God knows the world's had enough of those."

"God, hmm? I already paid my dues to God. As He is my witness, I spilt more than my fair share of blood during the Crusade," Teague said, wagging his finger at his younger counterpart.

"Fighting against many of our own people's parents and grandparents. Aunts and uncles."

"Things were different back then, but we're better now, I think. If nothing else, we're not one bad day away from extinction. My own body, though, hasn't fared as well, which is exactly why you *don't* want to rely on me if a firefight breaks out."

"I know, I was joking. Like, I'm not actually suggesting we send old coots like you and Hector into battle, because that would be ridiculous, but my point was that there are *some*, and I don't mean myself or the other commanders, who resent taking orders from men that don't assume as many risks."

"They don't take orders from me. They take orders from you. And Mayumi, and Ian, the so-called 'young people.' Hector and I may be the ones making strategies, but you execute them. Is that not enough? Or is this the three of you making a push for greater authority?"

"Me? No, not unless you and Hector both croak." Alexis shrugged. "Honestly, I shouldn't have brought it up. I'm just nervous with our move against Athens coming up so quickly."

Before Teague could offer his sympathies, the pair of them were joined by the other Peregrine strategist, Hector Pendleton. He was a tall, thin man of aristocratic stock, draped in the scent of cologne that trailed after him wherever he went. If Alexis represented the young idealists of the militia, and Teague represented the militant faithful, Hector was the economic muscle, acting as a face for all the capitalists who sought to regain control of the industries the Directorate had nationalized. The zealots and the idealists cared little for his cause, but he had connections to the surviving Istanbul factories that kept them supplied, so he was always welcome.

“Took you long enough to get here,” Alexis said. “Guess you didn’t miss me that much, huh?”

“Miss you? Were you gone, or something?”

Alexis smirked at Hector, giving him only a rude gesture in response

“Ahem,” Teague said. “While I’m glad that the esteemed Mr. Pendleton has decided to grace us with his presence, we have little to discuss until Eirene returns and informs us of her success.”

“Or lack thereof,” Hector said.

“Or lack thereof, yes. Alexis, since I’m sure you’ll be waiting for Eirene on the landing pad, can you escort her to the briefing room once she arrives?”

“Naturally,” Alexis said with a smile.

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The skies over Istanbul were clouded by the time Eirene landed, which did little to make the city seem any more welcoming. Those who called the ruins home had done what they could to make them livable, but from the air, all she could see was rubble and bits of green where nature had started to reclaim the land.

As expected, Alexis was there to greet her as soon as she stepped out of the corvette. Without a word, they embraced, their bodies providing a comfortable bit of warmth amidst the chilly air.

It was only a moment before Alexis realized what was wrong. “The others who went with you,” she said, stepping back but keeping Eirene’s hands in hers. “Did they not...make it?”

Eirene tried to remain stoic as she shook her head, but the trembling of her body and a single tear betrayed her feelings.

“Damn. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” Alexis said, looking deeply into the young woman’s deep brown eyes. Holding Eirene close under such circumstances was a guilty pleasure. She felt a queer satisfaction in giving her friend the love and comfort she needed, and in the intimate trust they shared, although she could never be truly happy under the circumstances.

It was but a short walk to the briefing room wherein Teague and Hector could be found, waiting patiently for the women to arrive. Though together they were only four, there was room at the lacquered wood table for ten, seats left unfilled by agents out preparing for the big day.

“Now, I couldn’t help but notice,” Hector began, “that only one of the five people we sent to the *Sierra* has returned. Did you at least get the data we were after, or were you intercepted before you could acquire it?”

“I got the data. They suspected that something was up, but never knew it was me. Even though Jacob Lancaster himself stared me in the face, nothing came of it. It was afterwards that...that...” Eirene said, her voice wavering.

Hector blinked, trying and failing to conjure a response.

“That seems...unusual,” Teague continued in Hector’s stead. “None of our intelligence indicated that Lancaster would be anywhere near the *Sierra*. I don’t doubt you, of course, but perhaps we should start from the beginning.”

As Eirene recounted her story, the others listened in solemn silence. It was clear to each of them that something was very wrong, and all of their heads were racing to make sense of it.

“Well, I should start by notifying the families of the deceased. Memorial services will need to be arranged as well,” Teague said once she had finished.

The others agreed.

“Now, what I can’t understand,” he continued, “and what I imagine the rest of you are also wondering, is why Lancaster would attack a loyalist airship like that. Everyone knows that Skywatch and the Army have something of a rivalry, but such brazen murder of the Grand Marshal is insanity. As much as Director-General Magnus loves the Skywatch, he can’t overlook this.”

“Unless he doesn’t have to,” Alexis said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Were you even listening to Eirene? When Lancaster arrived, she said that he claimed to know about some kind of terrorist plot against the *Sierra*, right? You’d think that he’s talking about us, and yet he didn’t seem to know that Eirene and her crew were said ‘terrorists’, nor did he stick around to conduct a thorough investigation. Odd, don’t you think?”

“You mean to say that he wasn’t aware of our plan at all,” Hector said. “Which would in turn suggest his terrorism charge was completely fabricated, and it was mere coincidence that our people happened to be there at the same time.”

“It’s possible he just had bad intel, but, yeah, that’s what I’m getting at. If Lancaster makes a big show about holding up the *Sierra* because of some rebel plot, then he has a plausible excuse when it fails to arrive in Athens. It looks bad that he didn’t stop the fake terrorists, sure, but taking out his main rival might be worth it.”

“I’d considered that, but surely the flight recorder from the *Sierra* would expose his lies.”

“Guess who’s in charge of analyzing those black boxes,” Eirene said.

“Of course,” Hector sighed. “Well, he’d have to guarantee the loyalty of quite a few people in order to maintain the lie, but I suppose it’s possible.”

“Including Marcus Fairchild, apparently. Gotta wonder what his role in this mess is,” Alexis mused.

The table fell silent once more as the four rebels considered this, but they came up with no answer in light of the available evidence. Fairchild was, of course, an important figure. In addition to his office as Overseer of the Defense Administration, he was the CEO of Madelyn-

Rash Technologies, a company allowed to remain private in exchange for its loyalty to the Directorate. The man had never shown any inclinations towards factionalism as long as he was allowed to play with his toys, but if that privileged position were to be threatened, then perhaps he would throw in his lot with whomever let him keep it.

Perhaps. There was too much they did not know.

“Anyhow, as much as I’d love to continue this wild speculation, we can’t act based on mere conjecture,” Hector finally said. “We *can* act upon the intelligence Miss Baros has retrieved for us, however, which brings me to an urgent matter. While we would be on track to prepare an infiltration of the conference, I regret to inform you all that we have encountered certain complications.”

“Oh?” Alexis asked.

“While you and Eirene were taking your sweet time getting here, I received some rather unfortunate news from our spies in the field. A fugitive from UNPD law recently sought refuge at one of our outposts on the Athenian outskirts. Regrettably, the commander there granted it to him, and now it seems that some hot-headed little shit in the Skywatch is going to try and capture him during the conference, presumably in a misguided attempt to curry favor with the Director-General.”

“That’s...yeah, that’s unfortunate. Is there a plan to deal with it, yet?”

“One’s in the works,” Hector answered. “Teague and I had little time to discuss – minutes, really – so the details aren’t quite there yet. But we think we can turn this to our advantage. Consider what might happen if we let this man seize his target, only to ambush and encircle him with our reinforcements, which we can easily prepare thanks to our forewarning of the attack. He’d no doubt call for reinforcements of his own, which would have to be drawn from Athens in order to get there on time, making it even easier for our teams in the capital to do their jobs. Best of all, since this would be an ostensibly defensive maneuver, it’s unlikely to provoke a retaliatory strike. Once our own mission in Athens is complete, we’ll hand over the fugitive and chalk it up to a terrible misunderstanding.”

“That’s all well and good, but deliberately escalating the conflict means even more people are going to die,” Eirene said, her fingers tapping hurriedly against the table. “We’re likely sacrificing these reinforcements you propose. It could end up with a massacre if we’re not careful.”

“It could, and it will, careful or not. But the loyalists forced our hand. if you went into a war, even a ‘cold’ war, expecting to keep your pretty little hands clean, then I don’t know what to tell you.”

Alexis scowled at Hector. “Nobody here’s fool enough to think we’ll all make it out, but I’m with Eirene – nothing we could learn at this conference would be worth this sacrifice.”

“What a surprise, you defending Eirene’s naivete. Do you ever *not* side with your favorite piece of eye candy?” Hector replied.

“I side with who I think is *right*.”

“I don’t doubt it, but I’m not sure it’s your head doing the thinking this time.”

“Okay, that’s enough. We’re all friends here,” Teague said. “Hector has the right of it, though. The UNPD has left us alone only because their resources are needed elsewhere, so if the new war machines free them to march against Istanbul, we *must* be prepared. I understand your concern, but we may never get another chance like this, and you can rest assured that we’ve no intention of making a mess of it.”

“I’d say it’s already a mess, but fine. Point taken,” Alexis said.

Although she could see Eirene fidgeting uncomfortably in her chair, Alexis wasn’t ready to start a fight. For now, she would just have to do what she could to care for her friend.

“In any case, we should have a new, fully-detailed plan well in advance of the Strategic Technologies Conference,” Teague continued. “When it’s ready, we’ll inform everybody of their new duties. Go now and get some rest, and God be with you.”

* * *

Though the days that followed were hectic, the final stages of the plan were set in place. Teague and Hector seemed full of confidence that it would succeed, and their agents would

obtain the knowledge they sought from the Strategic Technologies Conference with an “acceptable” number of casualties.

“Looks like it’s starting to rain. Wonder if that bodes ill,” Alexis said in her native Greek, staring out the window of her bedroom on the day they were set to depart. Alone with Eirene, she could speak the language freely, which was a comfort. Directorate schools were taught in English, but Alexis’ mother had made sure to pass on her own tongue, and so Greek words now reminded her of home.

“Rain’s good,” Eirene replied. “Helps plants grow, and all that. No rain, no farms, no food, and I doubt you’d want to go to Athens on an empty stomach.”

“Consider for a moment where I’m going to be spending most of tonight.”

Eirene laughed. “Alright, that’s fair,” she said.

That night, Alexis had been given a simple part to play. With a pair of binoculars, she would set up a nest on a rooftop near Samara Tower, where the conference would be held. Hector’s agents had ensured that it would be clear of guards, giving her a clear view of the goings-on that night in case anything happened that a listening device could not detect.

Eyes, though, were not enough. The Peregrines needed ears as well, and so two other parties would go to Athens that night. One was Hector’s proposed diversion, who would bolster the defenses at the outpost known as Hotel India, in the hopes of drawing security forces away from the capitol. As strong as this defense would be, everybody knew that the Directorate’s army would be stronger still, and so, with their victory far from guaranteed, those who volunteered had already bid their loved ones goodbye.

Taking advantage of this distraction would be the third and final player, a single man whom Hector had arranged to pose as maintenance worker. With help from a few sympathetic assets within the tower, he would plant a bug within ‘earshot’ of the conference, which would relay every word back to the Peregrines.

Reflecting on the battle to come, the two women sat in silence for a moment, looking about the room they shared. It was a small, cozy little place with just enough room for two beds with a wardrobe and desk each. With what space they had, Alexis and Eirene had made it theirs,

adorning the walls with Eirene's charcoal sketches, and the desks with cheap plastic vases and a radio that spat out more static than music. Such was their home, and they were determined to come back to it.

"What worries me," Alexis said, "is what comes next. Like, say we get in and steal all their secrets. Say we all get back alive. How can we turn that intel into something *real*?"

Eirene just shrugged, continuing to watch the heavy rainfall. She stuck a single hand out the window and felt the droplets tapping against her palm.

"Take what you were saying about the diversion to Hotel India tonight. I know that people are gonna die, that's what happens, but this whole willingness to trade human lives like money is why I left the Civil Guard in the first place, and we don't even know what we're going to buy with those lives! Certainly not peace. Not now."

"Don't you always say you trust Hector and Teague?" Eirene asked.

"I do. It's just...I trust them to do what they think is right, and that they'll try not to get us killed in the process. So, when they say we need to know what happens at this conference in order to survive, I believe them, but that's short-term. Nobody around here seems to have a plan to effect real change, or even an idea of what kind of changes we want! What if, when the Directorate starts to falter, Hector starts pushing for an oligarchy, or Teague wants to set up a Catholic theocracy? I doubt that'll happen, but just pretend for a moment. What would we do?"

"Hold elections, I'd assume."

"Yeah, I'd hope so as well. But we need to make sure we're in a position to have them – revolutions are fertile spawning grounds for dictators."

"I wish I had an answer for you, Sunshine," Eirene said.

As if to decisively mark the end of their discussion, there came the sound of three quick, heavy knocks on the door. Alexis immediately knew what it meant – at least one of her fellow commanders had arrived.

“Good to see you, Mayumi,” she said, gently pulling the door open. In front of her was, as expected, a svelte Japanese woman whose piercing eyes and charming smile never failed to draw attention.

“Hi, hi, good to see you too,” Mayumi said, running her fingers through the dark hair she had arranged into a tidy undercut. She quickly barged her way into the room and made a show of sitting down on the side of Alexis’ bed.

“Just here to say hello?” Eirene asked.

Mayumi paused, smirked, and pointed at her blonde compatriot. “I knew you’d make it back safe. Good show,” she said, giving Eirene a tight hug from the side. “Has Alex been giving you the royal treatment you deserve?”

“I’ve no complaints.” Eirene said, reciprocating the hug.

“Splendid! Hey, so I’m here ‘cause I had a little, little idea. Given that I’m leading the Hotel India team, I gotta figure that I’m not coming back from this one, right? I mean, odds are...well...” Mayumi made a dramatic thumbs-down gesture to show her point. “So, I figure I’d go have some fun in the city in the last few hours before we head out. Not getting drunk or anything, because duh, but just fucking around for a bit, maybe hitting up one of those kebab places the locals set up. Or maybe gyros? You two are Greek, or at least half in ‘Rene’s case, so do you...”

“Mayumi, what exactly do you want?” Alexis asked.

“Mmm, right. I was just wondering if you wanted to come with, ‘cause there’s no fun having a last meal all on my lonesome. We don’t have to do anything too crazy if you don’t want to.”

“Far be it from me to deny you your last wish. If Eirene’s in, then I’m in.”

Eirene said nothing, but nodded her assent.

“Then it’s a date! Meet me at the front gate in, say, ten minutes? That enough time for you to get ready?” Mayumi asked.

“Should be,” Alexis replied. “I mean, it’s not like we need to change, unless you’ve got a problem with us going out in uniform.”

Mayumi tugged at her own baggy jumpsuit. “Not exactly sexy, but it’s not like I’m gonna be hooking up with anyone tonight, so, yeah, no trouble. See y’all in ten!” With that, she backed out of the room, making a cutesy finger-gun gesture at them as she did so.

Alexis shut the door after her and leaned against the wall, visibly more tired than before.

“Is she alright?” Eirene asked, keeping her voice down lest Mayumi still be in earshot. “Something about all that seemed...off.”

“She seems to be doing as well as she could, considering the circumstances.”

“I’m just not sure why she seems to be so...okay with all this. I’m not okay with it and I’m not even on the mission! The Hotel India team was a volunteer thing, so I guess it’s commendable that she’d put her life on the line for us, but I can’t imagine she’s not at least a little anxious.”

“Maybe she isn’t okay with it. She doesn’t have to like the mission, but she knows it has to be done and she’s brave enough to do it. Besides, it’s not like she’s a literal kamikaze – there’s at least a sliver of hope she and her crew will come home after tonight. I know I’ll be praying for her.”

“She seemed pretty sure of her own death, though,” Eirene said.

“Hope for the best but expect the worst, I guess,” Alexis replied. “It’s a fair enough philosophy. Nobody knows what’s really gonna go down tonight, so the best thing we can do for now is to be there for her.”

“Of course. I’ll keep an eye on her until you all leave.”

* * *

The mood in the city was upbeat that afternoon. Merchants peddled their wares, and craftsmen worked around the clock building towards their visions of a better future. There was a long road between them and the old glory their elders remembered, but they would walk it all the same.

As the trio walked down the dusty street, Mayumi stopped to gaze at a quaint bistro.

“Something up?” Alexis asked, turning around a few paces ahead of her.

“Yeah. Yeah, look. Is that...”

Alexis turned her head to see where Mayumi was pointing, where she saw the countenance of a familiar man, seated at an outdoor table with a stack of papers in front of him. That man was Ian Barrow, the lucky chosen who would be heading into the Tower that night. Of the four of them, he was the eldest at thirty-five years, his concentrated expression and athletic build easily recognizable.

“Ian! Ian!” Mayumi shouted, waving at the young man. He turned to look at the group with a mouth full of roasted lamb as they walked towards him, his eyes obscured by a pair of expensive sunglasses.

“What do you have there?” Alexis asked, gesturing towards his paper once she arrived at the table.

Ian swallowed his lamb and took a drink of water before responding. “Maps of Samara Tower,” he said. “I’m preparing for tonight, as you all ought to be.”

“My job is just to go to an old warehouse and break things,” Mayumi said with a shrug.

“True, but...actually, never mind. I’m sure you’re all here looking to have a good time, so go ahead and take a seat. I can spare a few minutes.”

“Fantastic!” Mayumi said with a big smile on her face, already sliding into the seat opposite Ian. Alexis and Eirene followed suit, and, before long, all of them were partaking in a hot, delicious afternoon meal.

“Is there anything in there that’s got you worried?” Alexis asked, taking a look at the impressive stack of schematics Ian had assembled.

“Other than nearly a thousand civil guardsmen and hundreds of Skywatch officers patrolling every floor of the tower? Certainly not,” Ian said.

“No faith in Hector’s disguises?”

“Getting in won’t be hard, especially if Mayumi does her job right. But if anything at all goes wrong...see all these red lines on this map, here? Blast doors on every arterial hallway or stairwell. If we do get detected, all of them are going to get sealed off, preventing any traffic in or out of the building. The Skywatch rapid-response teams can override them, but without their codes, you want to guess my only way out?”

“Outside the building,” Eirene said.

“Right on target. If all goes to plan, we’re golden, but if it doesn’t, I’ll have maybe a few seconds to make our way out the window. Luckily, the ledges are built in such a way that we can map out an escape route, but if that one path is cut off, then we’re done for.”

“Fuck, this is depressing,” Mayumi interrupted. “I thought we were coming here to relax before the end comes. Well, Ian wasn’t there when we decided that, but he never stops thinking about work anyway, so whatever.”

“If you have another topic to propose, then, by all means, speak.”

Mayumi opened her mouth, but no words came out. Instead, she just smiled, shook her head, and took a large bite out of her kebab.

“You okay?” Eirene asked.

“What? Oh, oh, I’m fine,” Mayumi replied. “Ian put me on the spot and I kinda, you know, shorted out.” She shrugged and smiled, returning to her meal.

“If you say so,” Eirene said. The table was quiet from then on out, as the foursome took their time enjoying the last of their meals in comfortable silence. They basked in the winter sun before its descent over the horizon signaled that it was time for them to go.

Chapter 3 – Running Like Clockwork

“The new world was built on lies. The claim that humanity is on the brink of annihilation? A lie. The claim that religion was the source of our ancestors’ sins? A lie. The very name of the regime, intended to make you believe it derives its authority from the United Nations? A lie. The UNPD is neither provisional nor does it represent the global community.”

- Mayor Besim Ozcan of Istanbul

The water was calm as an inconspicuous boat drifted up to Widow’s Walk, a foul-smelling, waterlogged port district surrounded by a formidable concrete levee that was built to keep back an ever-rising sea. Most coastal cities had such structures, and those that did not were steadily being overtaken by waters bolstered with melted polar ice.

The boat came to a rest near the levee, just close enough for the passengers to jump onto a weathered platform that was conveniently devoid of prying eyes. Hector had leveraged his connections to ensure that the dockworkers were enjoying well-earned time off that night, and so Alexis and Ian remained unmolested as they disembarked and bid the captain farewell. All was quiet but for the gentle stirring of the sea.

“God, this place is foul. If only we could have flown straight there, but, alas,” Ian said, breathing in the scent of salt, fish, and oil, all blended together into a maritime cocktail. Their journey to Athens had first taken them by airship to the deserted island of Makronisos, and then by boat to Widow’s Walk for the sake of secrecy. It was an inconvenient but necessary extra step.

“Watch it – I grew up here,” Alexis said, feigning offense.

“My condolences.”

“Shame we’re on such a tight schedule. Would’ve liked to go see if my old house is still standing. Those old cannons are still there, so it’s not like they’re being proactive about demolition.” She gestured down the levee towards a series of crumbling gun emplacements, long since abandoned in favor of more sophisticated weaponry.

“If we get out without raising any alarms, we’ll have all the time in the world. I’ll make a stop wherever you want.”

Alexis smiled. “That’s a big if, but thanks,” she said.

For the last leg of their journey, the Peregrines would travel to the heart of the UNPD in an old van, at which point Ian and Alexis would separate. They would never be more than a block away from one another, but that little distance was enough to prevent any kind of support. Each would have to run on their own.

After a short journey made in solemn silence, the van arrived in the capital proper. Despite the dominating presence of the UNPD’s new skyscrapers, it was still a beautiful city, one of which Alexis had many fond memories.

“I was talking with Hector a little bit before you ladies met up with me at the bistro,” Ian said. “He was going on about how many strings he had to pull to smuggle us and our gear into the Tower, but one thing really stood out to me.”

“What’s that?” Alexis asked.

“In order for him to pull strings, those strings first have to exist. You’d think that the loyalists have the capital locked down tight, that there’s not a single soul within the city limits who doesn’t toe the party line, right?” He shook his head. “Nope. This place is a goddamn hotbed of revolutionary activity. The loyalists need a constant supply of fresh blood to keep the capital well-oiled, but this isn’t a burger joint – they also need a particular set of skills, so they *educate* the kids, make ‘em smart enough to know what the hell they’re doing. And now that they’re armed with knowledge, grads start to wonder *why* things are the way they are. They’re asking questions, and the government sure isn’t providing answers, so they turn to their peers, whom the UNPD’s so graciously brought together in one place. They form clubs, which become parties, which become revolutions, just like us. We’ve got more allies in this city than you think.”

“A tale as old as time; an educated populace is the tyrant’s worst nightmare. But how can you be certain these ‘allies’ will come to the same conclusions we did? Or at least come close enough that we can work together?”

“Ah, and therein lies the rub,” Ian said, taking one hand off the driver’s wheel to snap his fingers. “And exactly what the Directorate did wrong. Sure, they could try and keep people dumb so they don’t ask questions, but they’re so arrogant that they think theirs is the only answer. So why not let the young blood ask questions if they’ll inevitably realize that the government is right? The idea that someone might be smart and still disagree with them is unfathomable.”

“Then we just need to make sure we don’t fall into the same trap. For now, ‘smash the state’ is something we can all agree on, but when we ask what to put back in its place...”

Putting a stop to Alexis’ line of thought, a column of armored cars rushed through the intersection in front of their van, sirens blaring as they hurtled eastwards.

“That’d be Mayumi’s work, I imagine,” Ian said. “Ten cars, ten guys each. One hundred cops that we don’t have to deal with.”

“And one hundred more that Mayumi *does*.”

“She can take care of herself. Focus on doing your job, and have faith – she and her troops’ll be okay.”

With the armored cars gone, Ian took his foot off the brake, only to realize that the cars were but the vanguard of a larger convoy. More transports, a handful of main battle tanks and a squadron of helicopters came after, all presumably bound for Hotel India.

“...Just try not to think about it,” Ian said once the intersection was clear.

* * *

Yet to be completed, the Science Administration Tower – where Alexis would set up her nest – was all but empty, and the unfinished upper levels gave her an adequate view of her target. The thin, cold air stung her skin and her cloudy wisps of breath mingled with drops of rain falling from above. As soon as this job was done, she resolved, she would return to Istanbul and take a hot shower to cleanse this misery.

The chamber where Magnus was to hold his conference was known more commonly as the Grand Balcony, a ledge protruding from the western side of the tower lined with enormous glass windows, windows that Alexis could only assume were lined with kinetic shield barriers to

deter snipers. Presumably, she mused, this is why they seemed unconcerned with securing spots like hers, where a sniper might position herself.

What did warrant some degree of concern, however, was the airship lurking above the tower, the design of which she did not recognize. If she were to guess, Alexis would have called it out as the Director-General's personal conveyance. Such a ship would not be much of a threat in battle, but if its crew somehow spotted her, the game would be up, and so she quietly thanked God that it seemed ill-inclined to activate its searchlights for the moment.

"The bug's in position," Ian's voice came to her over the radio. "Looks like Magnus and company will arrive in five minutes."

Alexis took a second to confirm that her scouts were still in place around her, ready to cover their escape when the time came. "Understood," she replied. "I've got eyes on the conference room. No unusual activity in the street, either."

After a short, silent interlude, the attendees emerged from deeper within the tower, just as Ian had predicted. Collectively, the group was known as the Administrative Council, a gaggle of twenty-one men and women with important-sounding titles whose job it was to vote on government policy. On some occasions, the Director-General would even take these votes into consideration when he decided what laws to pass.

The council members took their seats, arranged in a semicircle around a central podium. On one side sat the regional governors, and opposite them sat the heads of the UNPD's core administrations. At the center were the spots for Director-General Magnus himself, as well as the Grand Marshal and Grand Admiral.

From her perch, Alexis saw that several seats remained empty that night. Grand Marshal Hamilton's absence was expected, but the other vacancies were evidence of a worrisome trend. As core administrators retired or were ousted, rather than elect replacements, their peers had scrambled to claim the open positions for themselves. Marcus Fairchild alone had come to lead the Science, Defense, and Transportation Administrations.

That each office an individual held granted an extra vote on the Administrative Council was the least of anyone's concerns. After all, the Director-General still had the final say. More

real than the votes, though, was the concentration of power. Marcus was able to dictate what technologies the UNPD pursued, how its weapons were used, and how its people could travel. He was an especially dangerous cog in the machine, one by which far too many others were driven. Alexis was partially convinced that Ian should have put a bullet in Marcus' head while he was there that night, but it was far too late to change their plans.

Once everybody else was in place, Magnus stepped up to the podium and held his hand high to silence the assembly, calling attention to himself as an attendant quietly took roll. "No doubt you are all aware that there has been some degree of violence near the capital tonight" he began. "The situation is under control, but everyone should remain on guard all the same."

The crowd muttered in agreement.

"Thank you all for your understanding. Without further ado, while I'm sure he needs no introduction, it's my honor to present our first speaker, Administrator Marcus Fairchild. Mr. Fairchild, why don't you tell all these kind ladies and gentlemen what I mean? I'm sure they're all excited to hear what you've been working on for so long."

Marcus nodded and replaced Magnus at the podium as the Director-General returned to his seat. "Time to begin the main event," he said with a knowing smile, already sure that his peers would be suitably impressed. "Now, I assume you are all familiar with the Rho AI, and the Nicaea Agreement that followed its birth?"

The assembly seemed to nod in unison, to his apparent satisfaction.

Marcus making a reference to Rho was unsurprising. Developed not long before the Crusade, it had been the first AI deemed sufficiently self-aware to deserve human rights, as ruled by a similar UN gathering near the ancient city of Nicaea. The subsequent war saw all of the factories producing Rho's hardware destroyed or repurposed, but some few copies of the AI itself were rumored to remain 'alive,'. As far as Alexis knew, none of these could be found within the Directorate.

"As my more erudite colleagues are likely aware, most of the dissent against Rho and the Nicaea Agreement came from religious groups, save for one," Marcus continued. "A small group of heretics, the Technologist faction, believed that, because man was created in God's image, it

was our destiny to create life, just as He did. This was obviously a radical re-interpretation of scripture, so they were heavily outnumbered by their Luddite peers, who unequivocally condemned this research. All were excommunicated from the Catholic Church.”

“Unsurprisingly, men of the cloth disapprove of playing God,” Lancaster said.

“Indeed. The Technologists had begun work on their own AIs, the sacrilegiously-named ‘Holy Spirits’, but were forced into hiding before their dreams could be realized. Most of my own work is based on the research they left behind.”

“Work that you’ve now completed, I assume?” said one of the governors, a portly young man.

“Completed, no, but we *have* made a breakthrough. The Rho technology is well-documented, and we could reproduce it, but the hardware it requires is inefficient, requiring an enormous computer and a lot of power. Thinking we could do better, we turned to the Holy Spirits, which are far more advanced.”

“Are?” asked an older woman sitting amongst the crowd.

Marcus smiled. “Very perceptive, Madam Hanson. What I, alongside Messieurs Magnus and Lancaster, learned during a foray into the ruins of Vatican City is that the Technologists were able to produce a working copy of the Holy Spirit AI. The Luddites sought to destroy it, of course, but the Holy Spirits can run on a computer no larger than a consumer laptop, making it easy to hide backups right under their noses. In fact, we found ours lurking inside the computer system of a Crusade-era air destroyer, indicating that the Technologists infiltrated the Papacy in order to use its ongoing war as a sort of test bed. The poor thing was serving as a glorified targeting computer, ensuring that all the destroyer’s shots found their marks up until the war ended, and the ship was mothballed, trapping him inside for twenty years.”

“And the ‘Luddites,’ as you call them, never found...him?” The portly governor asked.

“It would seem so. They may have assumed themselves lucky or blessed by God, never realizing that they were being aided by a heretical abomination.”

“Given that they survived, perhaps they *were* blessed,” Lancaster added. “Not many of us did.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but that’s beside the point. What I’m trying to say is that, by studying the Holy Spirit, we were able to reverse-engineer it, applying what we learned to our own AIs. My dear Lena, if you would?” Marcus asked, beckoning someone forth from the assembly.

A tall woman stood up from next to Marcus’ empty seat. She was well-dressed, but Ian didn’t recognize her attire as either a governor’s or an administrator’s uniform.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Administrative Council, I present to you my daughter, Lena Fairchild.”

The councilors nodded in acknowledgement, a low murmur filling the room as they realized who – and what – she was. Lena bore no resemblance to her father. Different skin, different hair, different eyes. This discrepancy could have stemmed from adoption, but, in the current context, could only have meant one thing.

“They’re called Mourners,” Marcus said, his face full of pride. “My late wife once joked that, because we’d forsaken our personal lives for this project, the AIs would be the only ones to mourn our passing, and the name stuck as a bit of dark humor. In any case, Lena here is the result of that experiment. No more house-sized computers. An entire, self-aware AI contained in a superior android chassis. Nigh indistinguishable from a living human...on the outside, at least.”

The room was silent as Lena curtsied before them, with as much grace as even the strictest finishing school could have instilled.

“Pleasure to meet you all,” she said with a reassuring smile.

“That’s all well and good,” a stern-looking governor said, scanning Lena with a critical eye, “but what exactly is the *point*? This seems like a lot of expense for little practical benefit.” Listening in, Alexis was wondering the exact same thing.

“Maybe he’s about to reveal that we can upload our own minds into these ‘Mourners’,” Hanson said, a sly smile on her face.

Marcus laughed. “For a time, we were excited by the idea of digitized human consciousness, but it was not to be. No matter how we approached the problem, we were unable

to answer the obvious question: How you know it's really *you*? Until we can bridge that gap, we're at a bit of an impasse."

"Ah. Pity. I was looking forward to becoming an immortal cyber-woman."

"One day, perhaps. But I digress. No, Governor Ren, the main advantage of our Mourners is that they can be mass-produced, making them...viable substitutes for a human military force." There seemed a hint of disgust in his voice, Alexis thought.

"Unmanned drones have been used for centuries, but, unlike those robots, Mourners can actually hold territory like regular infantry," Lancaster said, joining Marcus at the podium. "A single AI 'program' has enough processing power to remotely control an entire squad of bodies like Lena's, without any risk to itself, assuming that their primary body stays off the field. We would, of course, only utilize willing volunteers, enforce strict and regular psychological evaluations, and afford all Mourners full constitutional rights in accordance with the Nicaea agreement, lest you worry about provoking some sort of robot uprising."

"You needn't worry about our loyalty any more than one of your human soldiers," Lena added.

Ren eyed her with suspicion. "That may be so," he said, "but Lancaster just stated that one Mourners can control multiple bodies. Doesn't that increase the damage a single one of you can do if it *does* go rogue?"

"You're not wrong, especially since Mourners aren't limited to android chassis like my own. They can control all kinds of vehicles as well, as long as we install the proper interface, but it's not like we haven't dealt with mutinous airship crews before. Remember the *Peregrine*?"

"I do. I also remember that we never actually destroyed it."

"But the Skywatch did force it to run off with its tail between its legs. I believe it's hiding in Istanbul, now? The point is, Mourners aren't any riskier than human soldiers, and the extra manpower will give us a huge advantage against our neighbors – Istanbul included, if need be."

"Fair enough. And yet I'm guessing the lot of you have more grandiose designs than marching east with an army of *plastic people*," Governor Ren said.

Lancaster nodded. “The obvious next step is to upgrade ASPIS. Right now, it’s controlled by a Rho AI, but maintaining an obsolete system like that is increasingly problematic. Replacing it with a Mourner would help us future-proof the weapon.”

Alexis didn’t know much about ASPIS, a less cumbersome name for the Automatic Safeguard Protocol with Intelligent Subsystems. Other than its name, the allegedly defensive superweapon’s specifications were highly classified. All she and her friends knew was that it involved several military satellites, and that it had never once been used.

“Of course, many of you are likely, and rightly, concerned about the cost of this endeavor,” Magnus said. “I won’t lie. It will be expensive. Just ferrying ammunition to the ASPIS batteries is a major undertaking, to say nothing of a comprehensive retrofit, and that’s *after* cost of the Mourners themselves. So, a question for the audience – how would you propose we fund this little project of ours?”

“Well, we’d have to raise taxes,” the portly governor said, without waiting to be called upon. “We could increase the tax rate in developed urban centers, which might also encourage emigration to frontier regions we want to settle.”

Magnus nodded. “Certainly a possibility. Yet, our citizens might not react favorably towards a tax unless they believe they’ll see some benefit, and this project must be kept secret. To them, it will look like we’re simply sucking up their hard-earned cash.”

“And even if we were forthcoming, I can envision some degree of skepticism,” Ren added. “We might be able to get more support by claiming it goes towards national defense, which isn’t exactly a lie, but we would need to prove that we face sufficient threats to justify it.”

“What about the attack on the *Sierra*?” Lancaster asked.

“If you can find evidence linking it to a major power, then that might be a start,” Magnus said. “A *start*. Cowardly acts of terror won’t require mobilization of our forces to the extent that upgrading ASPIS would be seen as necessary. No, we’d need a convenient invasion by someone like the Tehran Pact or Kasimira to serve as a *casus belli*.”

“The Pact has been expanding into North Africa. If they cut off the Tunis-Highveld corridor...”

“Should that come to pass, then by all means, go have your fun with them, but Amirmoez is smarter than that. We shouldn’t count on unchecked aggression. I was actually going to propose something of a trade deal...”

Magnus stood up, ready to make an emphatic point, but was interrupted as the building’s power went out. There was a moment of loud confusion, and then the room exploded.

* * *

His one job having long since been completed, Ian was already making his way out of Samara Tower when his ears filled with the sounds of the building’s descent into chaos. Alexis, meanwhile, could only sit and stare at the bloody spectacle before her. Any view she had of the Grand Balcony was obscured by thick black smoke. The curious airship above her remained still and silent. Was it responsible for the attack? Certainly not, she concluded, although that left its identity an unresolved mystery. Regardless, there was no time to think; she needed to move.

The gravity of the situation had yet to sink in by the time Alexis reached the ground floor atrium. Beyond one last set of doors was the vehicle that would convey her and Ian to freedom and safety, and her mind could spare no room for thoughts other than that. There was only one problem, however: The doors were gone. In their place was an armored blast shield preventing any egress, and what few windows she could see were similarly sealed, an automatic response to the ongoing crisis.

Alexis cursed her misfortune. As her only hope of escape was now to find a security office and pray that she could override the lockdown from there, she began to see Ian’s wisdom in committing the Tower’s blueprints to memory. Wherever he was, she hoped that he was faring better.

* * *

Ian breathed a sigh of relief as he stepped onto the asphalt outside Samara Tower. As a mercy, the Peregrine van was still parked in the old lot, although Alexis and her team were absent. Looking left, and then right, he confirmed that he was alone and allowed himself a moment’s rest.

“Alexis?” he asked into his handheld radio, panting heavily. “Alexis, are you there?”

When no response came, Ian feared the worst, only to realize that his handheld radio was entirely non-functional. Recalling how the lights throughout the tower had darkened just before Magnus' death, he began to put together the pieces of the puzzle. Anyone of any importance at the conference would have been wearing an energy barrier that might protect them from attacks, just as the Balcony itself was shielded. If this explosion was indeed an attempt upon the life of one of the attendees, the assassin would have had to remove that obstacle before detonating their bomb – for instance, by using an electromagnetic pulse to disable nearby electronics.

“Well, if I’m right, that’s twice now this assassin screwed us over tonight,” Ian muttered. With Alexis unaccounted for, there was a chance that he would have to leave her behind in order to survive. Ian hoped it would not come to that.

Behind him, Samara Tower was in an uproar, and the ambient city noise was drowned out by the cacophony of sirens wailing in the distance. Although Hector had arranged for a secure route out of the city, Ian was worried that he would find it blocked if he did not act fast.

Minutes passed. With the clock ticking down, he had two choices. He could run to the van and leave his comrade to her fate, or he could linger and risk being intercepted. The choice was clear.

“Hell with it. Sorry, Alexis,” Ian said as he climbed inside and gunned the engine without bothering to put on his seatbelt. The wheels turned and the van lurched into the street.

Ian never even saw the truck that smashed into his flank.

By the time he realized what was happening, his head was already engulfed by the airbag, and he could scarcely summon the energy to move. The only thoughts running through Ian's mind as he lay inside the wreckage were a torrent of curses at whatever clown of a driver had just destroyed his only chance of escape. A small part of his mind knew that he was that selfsame driver, though he would never have admitted it.

Through his ringing ears, Ian could hear a feminine voice from outside, speaking rapid French. Parisian, based on the accent. He was capable speaking the language on a conversational level, but was hardly in any condition to parse his native tongue, much less a foreign one.

When the woman finally switched to English, he recognized but a few words: *You were at the Tower, weren't you?*

If this stranger could link him to the bombing, however falsely, then Ian knew the game was up, and he and Alexis were doomed to die in Athens. As one small comfort, at least his allies listening from Istanbul had heard what they needed to know. That the survivors would be able to capitalize on his success was enough for him to die content.

Much to Ian's surprise, when she finally wrenched open the door, the stranger helped him onto his feet. Slowly, he regained some of his senses, and saw the woman before him. She was perhaps a few inches shorter than he was, with brown skin, eyes, and hair, and a frantic look about her. Hers was not the visage of someone in control.

"Do not worry, you are safe with me," she whispered in soft but stilted English. "I have no loyalty to your enemies. Can you walk? I know a place where we can hide."

Ian groaned and stood up straight. It took more effort than he would have liked. This person, whoever she was, could have been luring him into a trap, but that seemed unlikely, given that his current injuries would have made him easy to subdue without resorting to trickery. Confident that her non-allegiance to the loyalists, at least, had not been a ruse, and lacking any viable alternatives, Ian slowly followed the French woman into the darkness. He prayed to a god he did not believe in that some good would come of this.

* * *

The door swung open, and Alexis smiled. After too many minutes spent scouring the lower levels of the building, she had found a maintenance tunnel in the underground parking garage, sealed only by a regular lock that was easy enough to pick. Soon, she was outside, and everything seemed perfect.

It wasn't until she saw the van – or what was left of it – that Alexis' mood soured.

"You have got to be *fucking* kidding me!" she seethed, kicking a piece of debris across the pavement. She looked left, then right, seeing no sign of Ian or anybody else.

"Okay, okay, new plan," Alexis said after taking a deep breath. Her best chance now, she figured, was to lay low for the night and rendezvous with her friends in the morning, once

everything had settled down somewhat. Once they were together again, they could try to make sense of the night's events.

Ian, she surmised, would likely have retreated to Widow's Walk, assuming he had not already been captured and killed. Lacking any means to contact him, though, Alexis changed her plans: Instead of returning to the Walk and then to Istanbul by sea, she would instead travel north, where Mayumi and any surviving Peregrine soldiers were holding the line at Hotel India. As long as they, too, had not been wiped out, Alexis knew she would be safe there.

Chapter 4 – Hotel India

“Display of religious iconography in public is prohibited, unless mandated by the tenets of a religion recognized by the state, in which case it may be displayed, provided it meets the standards of PLC 4.04.03. Religious gatherings must be limited to no more than twenty persons, and must be administered by a licensed Religious Official.”

- *Excerpt from the Provisional Law Code of the UNPD*

The nighttime tranquility shrouding Hotel India would have encouraged Alexis, were it not for the loyalist air destroyer hovering in the skies above. Unlike the strange vessel she had sighted at Samara Tower, the destroyer was clearly marked as a Skywatch warship, leaving no doubt as to its intentions.

So far was Hotel India from Athens proper that it was nestled amidst the desiccated skeletons of old commercial buildings rather than anything resembling a city, its brutalist architecture overtaken by moss and vines. After the end of the old world, the UNPD had been diligent in its reconstruction, but there were still many places yet to receive its blessed touch. In that respect, the outskirts were not unlike some parts of Istanbul.

Making use of the rubble to hide herself from the airship’s searchlights, Alexis crept closer to the old warehouse, noting the suspicious dearth of loyalist soldiers outside. As she deemed it unlikely that the Skywatch was in retreat, Alexis surmised that they had either breached the outpost’s walls already, or had decided to starve out the defenders. Neither scenario seemed pleasant, but the latter at least offered a chance that Mayumi might be saved.

Not far from her destination, Alexis saw the first corpse. It was a civil guardsman, young and freckled and very dead, slumped against a wrecked APC with a bloody hole in his chest.

“Part of the Directorate’s reinforcements,” she whispered under her breath.

Alexis stopped for a second to close the young man’s eyes, saying a quick and silent prayer for him as she did so. The lifeless bodies, however, only grew in number as she approached the entrance to Hotel India, both Peregrines and loyalists. There wasn’t enough time to give all of them their rites. Alexis could only hope that the fallen guardsmen had been

veterans, there of their own free will, rather than student service conscripts. Surely not even Lancaster would send green recruits on a dangerous mission like that.

Then again, she realized, it had not been Lancaster who ordered this attack. There was no telling what the hot-shot officer running the show might do, if he were desperate enough to prove himself to his superiors.

Grief would have to come later, Alexis decided. Mayumi needed her now.

To Alexis' disappointment, the echoes of conflict past did not fade when she slipped inside Hotel India. Everything seemed sick and wrong – even when shots were fired between Istanbul and Athens, the situation had never deteriorated so far and so rapidly, and nothing happened that a few honeyed words over a conference table couldn't fix. Hector had assured them that the Peregrines would claim self-defense, and that this would ensure the conflict did not escalate further. Alexis wasn't so sure.

She finally found Mayumi alongside six Peregrine soldiers, all of them haggard and dirty and sickly in the dim green light, resting amidst piles of old crates and the bodies of their fallen comrades. Mayumi stared at her for a second, cogs turning in her mind before she finally lifted a hand and bid Alexis come closer.

"Hey, Alex, good to see a friend. Not sure why you're here, though. Thought you and Ian would've been off to Istanbul by now," Mayumi said.

"You haven't heard the news?" Alexis asked, to which Mayumi shook her head. "We were watching the conference like we were supposed to, when a goddamn bomb went off. Not sure who planted it. Everything fell apart after that, and I lost track of Ian, so I figured my best bet was to come here."

Mayumi let out a grim laugh. "Not sure that was the best choice. We're a little bit fucked, if you hadn't noticed. But, hey, this is what we signed up for. We all knew we weren't making it home."

"Is this all that's left?"

"Not the only survivors, but the only ones left in Hotel India? Yeah. We've been having people sneak out one-by-one the same way you came in, since a big retreat would be easy for

that destroyer up there to spot, and, you know...boom.” Mayumi made an explosive gesture with her hands to emphasize the point. “Not sure why they haven’t bombed us to bits already, though. They totally could, but, no, no, they must want to take a few of us alive for interrogation, or whatever.”

“Well, I know it’s not much consolation, but the diversion worked. We can all go home.”

“Not all of us, I’m afraid,” Mayumi said, gesturing towards the bodies on the floor, which had been respectfully arranged into more dignified positions.

“True. I’m sorry.”

A solemn silence filled the room.

“Anyway, you’re right, though – I was totally ready to give my life if it helped you with your objective, but now that that’s done, there’s no point sticking around. Dying now would just be a waste.”

“I certainly agree. God, this whole operation’s been a disaster,” Alexis said. “You wouldn’t even be here if the loyalists hadn’t chased that fugitive into our hands, and now the conference gets bombed? I wonder if the two are related.”

“Uh, maybe?” Mayumi said. “If we get out of this alive, we can always interrogate him later. Not now, though. The guy wasn’t in great shape when he showed up, so we had a medic take a look at him in that back room over there. After the doc said he wasn’t gonna die, he *somehow* managed to fall asleep during all the fighting, so we figured ‘eh, why not let him rest?’ and it seemed like he needed it, ‘cause as far as I know, he’s still sleeping back there.”

“Any idea what his crime was? We’re not harboring a serial killer or something, are we?”

Mayumi shrugged. “Heck if I know. Kid wasn’t exactly talkative when we found him, just said that Lancaster himself had him locked up. Figure that’s why one of the Grand Admiral’s cronies thinks it’s a good career move to get him back.”

“Mind if I go take a look?”

“Sure, sure, might as well before we all get bombed to bits. I’ll be staying until the last of my guys is clear of the building, so, you know, take your time.”

Alexis nodded, and gently stepped into the side room where the fugitive lay asleep. He was a pale boy who looked about her age, with messy brown hair and flecks of dirt still on his face where the medic had neglected to clean. His clothes were unusually high-quality for someone who claimed to be a fugitive from justice, although they were torn and stained with mud.

All in all, the boy didn't seem to be anything special, so Alexis returned to the group, noting that it was one member smaller, another Peregrine soldier having fled to safety.

"Hector said we were gonna hand him over once you'd done your thing, but I don't know if I'm about that," Mayumi said. "At least not until we know what he did. At this point, I'm not sure just returning their prisoner is gonna make the UNPD forgive and forget, especially considering what's going down in the capital right now, and I'm not super into the idea of condemning an innocent man to save our own skins."

"If he hasn't actually committed a crime, then yeah," Alexis said. "It's not like the loyalists are strangers to killing innocent people. Pretty sure most of us who defected to Istanbul did so because we were ordered to kill someone who didn't need killing, like Teague and the original *Peregrine* crew with that 'militant' church they were supposed to bomb."

"Or you with Eirene," Mayumi added.

"Mmhmm. If they'll paint a scared, lonely girl as a dangerous war criminal because she's 'inconvenient,' there's no telling what they might have pinned on this guy. I mean, he could still be guilty, I guess. It's not like crime isn't a thing anymore. But since Lancaster himself is after him, and we *know* Lancaster's plotting something, considering what Eirene saw with the *Sierra*, I'm inclined to believe our new friend's innocent."

"You could be right about this being linked to the bombing," Mayumi said. "The Grand Admiral is next in the line of succession, and Lancaster's clearly got no qualms about gunning down government officials for whatever weird agenda he has. Maybe this 'fugitive' has some kind of evidence?"

“We should be so lucky. Would explain the kid’s fancy clothes, I guess, if he was, like, some capitol page who overheard something he wasn’t supposed to. Until he wakes up, though, guessing isn’t gonna do much for us.”

“True. We’ll just have to wait.”

The remaining Peregrines continued to bide their time, waiting for opportunities to sneak away from Hotel India. But a single person had managed to escape, bringing their number down to six, when the distinctive sound of railgun fire began to punctuate the air, alongside no small number of explosions. Alexis, Mayumi, and their remaining comrades instinctively took up defensive positions, only to realize that the cacophony was coming from above.

“Another airship?” Mayumi wondered aloud. “If it’s one of ours...oh, oh, this isn’t good. I thought the plan was to de-escalate once you were clear of the Tower?”

“We don’t know it’s Peregrine. Could be Tehran Pact, or some other separatist faction.”

“Right. Yeah, you’re right. Alright, people, let’s get some eyes on that thing!” Mayumi barked.

All six survivors dashed towards the old warehouse’s loading bay, from which they had a clear view of the skies. What they beheld was equal parts relieving and terrifying.

The new contender was not just *a* Peregrine ship, but the eponymous dreadnought *Peregrine*, its distinctive manta ray-like silhouette setting it apart from the thinner Skywatch warships. If their friends had deployed the flagship, both women knew it could only mean something serious had happened.

Faced with so intimidating a foe, the crippled destroyer used what little power it could still muster to turn and flee. The *Peregrine* declined to give chase, and the skies were quiet once again.

“I mean, I’m glad they came to our rescue, but...” Alexis said, her voice trailing off as she watched the end of the battle.

“Yeah, this isn’t right. We’d better just ask Teague and Hector what the hell’s going on,” Mayumi replied. “Damn, tonight was supposed to be so simple. But if this is the start of a *proper* war, then things are gonna get real ugly, real fast.”

Alexis shook her head. “No, there can’t be a war. ‘Cause if there is, we’ll lose, and Hector and Teague both know that. Even now, they’ll be working on a diplomatic solution, I’m sure of it.”

“I dunno, Alex, this looks a lot like a war to me.”

“There’s still time to stop things from getting worse. Like you said earlier, more death now would just be a waste, and even if the UNPD doesn’t care much for individual lives, it’s not wasteful. I’m sure they’ll come to the table if we ask.”

“That’s not what...you know, never mind,” Mayumi said before pointing toward the *Peregrine*. “Look, they’re sending out a dropship for us. Time to get some answers, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. Let’s see what they have to say.”

* * *

Alexis and Mayumi walked into the aft conference room of the *Peregrine*, the fugitive now conscious enough to walk, although not without Mayumi’s support. There to greet them were Hector, Teague, and Eirene, all of them just as weary as the crew from Hotel India. Before any of them could talk, Eirene leapt forward and embraced Alexis, who gently stroked her friend’s head.

“I see Ian didn’t make it back,” Hector said once Alexis and Eirene had separated.

“I wasn’t able to find him. Just the wreckage of our car, so I linked up with Mayumi instead. No body, though, so he could still be alive,” Alexis replied.

“I see. We’re not in any position to dispatch a search party now, but I will look into it later, so, please, take a seat. We have much to discuss.”

“Obviously. So, let’s be clear – are we at war with the UNPD or not?”

“Not anymore. Istanbul surrendered.”

Alexis' heart dropped into her stomach. "Excuse me?" she said. "*Malaka*, you'd better start from the beginning. What happened after the bombing?"

"To begin, Magnus died in in the blast. As far as we can tell, he was the only fatality. A suspiciously short time the bomb went off, we were contacted by loyalist officials accusing us of the murder. They cited our ongoing conflict at Hotel India as evidence that we were involved in the assassination plot."

"What bullshit! They attacked us first!" Mayumi exclaimed.

"They also claimed to have found the remains of a vehicle containing Peregrine equipment near Samara Tower. I doubted the veracity of this claim, but, according to your report, it's true. Circumstantial evidence at best, but the possibility that we had a hand in their leader's death was enough cause for them to mount an invasion of Istanbul."

"In a matter of hours? No, no, this had to be prepared beforehand, 'cause there's no way even the Skywatch could act that fast. Between the *Sierra* and this, Lancaster's obviously trying to set us up. It's lunacy!"

"And Istanbul gave up that quickly?" Alexis asked.

"A few pockets of brave but foolish resistance are still being bombed, but we expect them to yield before long," Hector said. "Our own forces either scattered or were wiped out, and the civilian leadership in Istanbul signed a peace treaty shortly afterwards."

"I'm guessing the terms weren't favorable."

"Certainly not," Hector said with clear disgust in his voice. "A provincial governor will be installed in Istanbul to root out any remaining 'terrorist elements,' namely, us. Local officials were allowed to retain their office, but are expected to comply with this investigation or be replaced. Harsh taxes will also be imposed as 'reparations' for harboring enemies of the state. That's the quick version, at least."

"Oh, that sounds fun," Mayumi said.

“The one blessing is that Mayor Ozcan and his administration acknowledged that the charges against us were fabricated, and that he has no intention of helping the UNPD,” Eirene added. “I just hope they don’t endanger themselves on our behalf.”

“I hope so, too.” Alexis paused, racking her brain for anything she could possibly say that might help. “Now, I’m not necessarily, uh, seriously suggesting this,” she said, “but you don’t think that turning ourselves in would save Istanbul any trouble, would it?”

Hector looked as if he was about to slap Alexis. “What the *fuck* do you think?” he said. “They were willing to lie get the invasion started, so what kind madmen would they be to give up their gains just because we surrender and ask nicely? But, yes, let’s throw away the lives of everyone on this ship just because it *might* spare Ozcan and his friends some trouble...although I thought you and Eirene were opposed to gambling with lives.”

“Fine, fine, I get it. It was just, you know, an idea, but you’re right. Diplomacy’s off the table for now. They wanted something and they took it.”

“Which is strange, is it not?” Mayumi said.

Teague looked askew at her from across the table. “I beg your pardon?” he asked.

“What I want to know is why they wanted Istanbul so badly. It’s an old wreck, right? So why go to all this trouble just for us? Based on what we learned in Athens, the councilors were wanting a war with the Pact or something so that they could tax everyone into space; wouldn’t it make more sense to blame it all on them, go to war, and win an actual empire instead of a bunch of poor refugees living in a bombed-out city?”

“She’s got a point,” Alexis said. “Like, the whole reason we survived this long was because they had no interest in our land. We’ve got the Bosphorus strait, but with their air fleet being what it is, that’s not *that* useful.”

“Well, we are right in-between the UNPD and the Tehran Pact. Maybe they just needed us out of the way before they started the real war?” Eirene asked. “Or maybe they think we have one of those Technologist black sites they were talking about.”

Before anybody could respond, the fugitive, who had up to that point rested silently in his chair, raised his hand aloft. “I believe I might have some information you’ll find useful,” he said, catching the attention of all present.

“Well, go on, then,” Hector said after a brief pause.

“For all my many qualities, I am unfortunately not omniscient,” the boy began, waving his hand in the air nonchalantly. “I can’t tell you what Lancaster may or may not be planning. But I know who *does* know – my father, Marcus Fairchild.”

“What.”

“I should introduce myself. Jackson August Fairchild, at your service.”

“You’re seriously saying that you’re Marcus Fairchild’s...son?” Mayumi asked.

“Yes, that’s what him being my father means. Have I been rescued by dullards? Small wonder you lot lost the war so quickly.”

“Wow, rude. We could just as easily send you back, you know.”

“Ah, yes, you could. But can you afford to toss out the key to your salvation like yesterday’s garbage?”

Mayumi crossed her eyes and frowned. “Fine, fine, whatever. But considering how many of my people died because of your little stunt, you’d best have something worthwhile to say now that you’ve conveniently gotten better.”

Jackson stood up and stumbled slightly, using Mayumi’s shoulder to stabilize himself. She pulled away in disgust as he coughed and began to speak.

“My dear, I always have something worthwhile to say,” he said. “You see, I had a simple but important role within the company. I was to go undercover and keep *them* from plundering the wealth of knowledge my father holds.”

“And who is ‘them?’ The UNPD?” Alexis asked.

“Anyone and everyone! My father’s brain is a delicious tart, and absolutely everybody wants to stick their fat, hairy fingers into it. The Directorate, the Pact, every flavor of separatist, communists and capitalists alike! *Never* trust a capitalist, mark my words.”

“Your father was a capitalist himself, wasn’t he?” Mayumi mused.

“Indeed he was! If there’s one thing capitalists love, it’s eating their own. It’s how they get stronger.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But in fulfilling this vital role, I made a rare error, and found myself captured by Lancaster and his flying blackguards, presumably to get me out of the way. They put me under house arrest in an admittedly luxurious estate, and they treated me well, but it is human nature to yearn for freedom, so I planned my escape, and ended up running into you. I dare say that was the greatest fortune you’ve had in some time, as my father will surely give you all the information you require once you return me to him. Like you, he has no love for the Grand Admiral.”

Eirene’s face lit up. “That explains why Marcus was helping Lancaster onboard the *Sierra*!” she exclaimed. “His son was being held hostage to ensure his cooperation. Doesn’t tell us what Lancaster’s end game is, but everything Jackson just said checks out. If we bring him back to his father, the Admiral loses his leverage, and Marcus is free to tell us everything we need to know.”

Though it was difficult for Alexis to feel any sort of confidence in light of the current situation, she couldn’t help but feel inspired. Despite Jackson’s eccentricity, if what he said was true, he could indeed be the “key to their salvation”, as he’d phrased it. Marcus Fairchild would be a powerful ally, and if he was amenable towards their cause, he could be just what they needed to rise above the ongoing crisis.

The key word, of course, being *if*. There was no guarantee that his story was true.

“How can we be sure this isn’t a trap?” Hector asked, giving voice to Alexis’ thoughts. “Given Lancaster’s clear disposition towards false flag attacks, he could have sent this ‘Jackson Fairchild’ to us to both provoke a conflict at Hotel India and lure any survivors into an ambush.”

“I need only one person to go with me to my father’s headquarters, a base in northern Italy called Bright Lighthouse. Once they’ve confirmed my identity, they can report back, without ever putting your pretty little heads in danger.”

“I can chaperone the kid. Not like I was supposed to survive tonight anyway, so I’m basically disposable,” Mayumi said.

“Don’t talk like that,” Eirene replied.

“Well, someone’s gotta do it, right? Everyone else here has families or an important job already. It’s just the truth, and, besides, I’ve got better odds now than I did at Hotel India.”

“I guess, but you don’t have to be so pessimistic about it. You’re one of us, and we’ll take care of you. Nobody here is disposable.”

“Well, if Mayumi’s volunteering, then I think we at least have a plan to move forward,” Hector said. “She and ‘Jackson’ can go meet with Marcus, and if she doesn’t end up in a shallow grave, she can come back and tell us if she thinks the deal we’re being offered is legitimate. We don’t have very much to lose, at least.”

As much as they didn’t like to admit it, Alexis and Eirene both knew Hector was right. This was the Peregrines’ best opportunity to recover from such staggering losses, and to not pursue it could doom them all.

“Just be careful, all right?” Alexis said to Mayumi.

“You don’t need to mother me,” Mayumi replied, “but thanks.”

* * *

There was silence inside the Hagia Sophia save for the tapping of two men’s feet upon the stone floor. Morning sunlight poured in through the stained-glass windows as they approached the apse, whereupon they stopped to gaze at the antiquated mosaics.

“My, isn’t this rather quaint?” Governor Yevgeny Sokolov said, peering into the eyes of the Virgin Mary. “You’d never see anything like this today.”

Behind the young, golden-haired governor stood the newly-ascended Director-General, Jacob Lancaster. Unlike his relaxed associate, Lancaster stood straight with his arms folded in front of him, unaffected by the surrounding art.

“A great deal of blood has been spilt over this city,” the old man said.

“Yes, well, hopefully we’ve put an end to that today. It’s unfortunate that things escalated the way they did, but no more bombs will have to fall while this city’s under my care.”

“And when you’re gone?”

“I’ll have laid the foundation for lasting peace. You can be sure of that.”

“Magnus put a lot of faith in you. I trust you’ll not disappoint.”

Yevgeny smiled. “He was my mentor, and a good friend. While we’re here, do you mind if I say a prayer for him?”

“It’s just the two of us here, isn’t it? Go ahead.”

Yevgeny knelt. In silence, he offered his sincerest wishes to God that Magnus’ soul rest in peace, and gave thanks for the opportunities presented to him. In the short time since his arrival in Istanbul, the governor had seen the dismal state of the city – which had admittedly not been helped by the preceding invasion – and knew that there was much that both he and God could do to help. Surely, Yevgeny thought, with enough time and effort, these good people could become productive, happy citizens of the UNPD, enjoying the same luxuries as he.

With his prayer done, he rose to his feet and turned to face Lancaster.

“Done?” the Grand Admiral asked.

“Done,” Yevgeny replied. “As much as I’d like to continue this sightseeing tour, I’m sure you’d agree that I should be checking into my office by now, and we shouldn’t keep our escort waiting. I’ll need to have people go out and inform the locals as soon as possible that it’s safe to come out of their bomb shelters. Assuming they have those.”

“Very well. Just remember that you can always call upon the Skywatch for support if the situation gets out of hand.”

“Of course, but I don’t think it will come to that.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Lancaster said with a frown. “Nonetheless, I should leave you to your work. I trust you and your guards can make it to your office yourself while I return to the *Sunset Serenade*?”

“Yes, we shouldn’t have any trouble. Thank you again for your support, Grand...I mean Director-General.”

“Of course,” Lancaster replied as he quit the building. Yevgeny remained in place for a minute more, standing alone amidst thousands of years of history.

Chapter 6 – We Fight On

“Obviously, there are plenty of folks who’ll reject the truth the first time we tell it. They’re not important. What’s critical is that we reach the next generation, make sure they know all the great things our country’s done for them before any other biases sink in.”

- Education Administrator Ethel Grayson

Ian awoke to a dull agony, every movement causing his joints to creak and a fierce, caustic pain to sting his muscles. Keeping his eyes closed, the injured man probed the surrounding area with one lethargic hand, finding only coarse wooden floors and a sweatshirt folded into a makeshift pillow beneath his head.

“Goddamnit,” he groaned, trying and failing to sit himself up. Just doing that in his current state would have been an accomplishment of its own.

“It is always worse when you wake up afterwards, yes?” came a woman’s voice that Ian recognized from the night before. “At the time, you think perhaps it is not so bad, but in the morning, you realize your folly. Or my folly, in this case. I am sorry.”

“Both our folly. Mine more than yours,” Ian said.

“That is kind of you. Here. You must be hungry.” The woman handed Ian a wrapped protein bar, which he gladly accepted and bit into, savoring the comfortable mix of granola and dried fruit. Around him, the room came back into focus. Sunlight was seeping in through boarded-up windows, and there was little else to be found save for a few tables and chairs, some papers scattered about, and an old television caked in dust.

“Eat up. Today is a long day,” the young woman continued. Ian could see her more clearly now. She was young, petite in stature with an outwardly cool demeanor, but a host of nervous tics – a twitch of the feet, a lip bite, a twirl of the fingers through her silky brown hair – that betrayed a supreme lack of confidence. Her name, Ian had learned, was Charlotte Aucoin, and she hailed from Kasimira, an isolationist state that had been forged from the ruins of central and eastern Europe. That was all he knew of her; much and more remained a mystery.

“I’m sure it will be. It’s a long way home,” Ian replied. The safehouse to which Charlotte had spirited him away was on the western coast of the Attican peninsula, exactly opposite Widow’s Walk and the boat back to Istanbul, if said boat was even there. Alexis surely would have taken it herself if she yet lived.

Charlotte’s nervous demeanor was suddenly masked by a solemn pall. “I can take you to your home if that is what you want,” she said, “but...”

“But what?” Ian asked.

“Last night, not long after you fell asleep, I reached out to my contacts at home, and learned that the UNPD invaded Istanbul before the dust had even settled in Samara Tower. The city capitulated, and your friends either scattered or...died. If I could offer more than my condolences, I would.”

Ian didn’t react at first. When he tried to speak, he choked on his words. Nausea overtook him, born as he felt the connection between himself and his comrades sever itself, leaving him with nothing but loneliness and guilt.

“I assume this means they blame us for the bombing,” he finally said, not making eye contact with Charlotte.

“It would seem that way, yes. The UNPD only announced that it was ‘working to bring the perpetrators to justice,’ and my fellow agents could find no information to the contrary. If you want to see for yourself, just look here.” Charlotte switched on the television, cycling through channels until a live feed of Istanbul appeared to verify her tale.

“Fuck me. I have to wonder if they somehow, I don’t know, noticed me planting that bug and figured I’d also planted the bomb.” Ian looked at his new companion, saw her quizzical expression, and then continued. “We were just there to listen,” he explained. “Obviously, we don’t have the best relationship with Athens, so we figured we needed to know if they were planning anything that might affect us. I swear, if I fucked up somehow and it turns out this whole war is my fault, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“It is not your fault,” Charlotte said. “It was mine.”

Ian laughed grimly. “Listen, you hit my car, but that’s hardly...”

“I knew this would happen. It was my job to stop it. I failed.”

“What?”

“Apologies, it is difficult for me to explain,” Charlotte said, twisting her hair around her finger once again.

“If it’d be easier to tell me in French, go ahead. I speak it well enough.”

Charlotte smiled and nodded. “In Kasimira, there’s an organization called the Inquisition,” she said in her mother tongue, with a touch more confidence than before. “It’s not as scary as it sounds; we have quite a few duties, but none of them involve burning heretics at the stake, believe me. One of them is, however, the investigation and containment of any technologies that violate ‘natural law.’ No playing God, in other words.”

“Marcus Fairchild called such people Luddites,” Ian said.

“No doubt to disparage us, but we’ve seen what such technology can do. Some, if not all of the storms that destroyed the old world were spawned by misguided – some might even say sabotaged – attempts to end the climate crisis through terraforming. Nobody wanted to solve problems the right way, so they slapped a scientific band-aid on a gaping wound and paid the price for that. But that’s beside the point. I’m sure you can understand why we’d also be keeping an eye on that conference last night.”

Ian nodded.

“During our planning, we caught wind of the bomb threat from what we previously believed to be a fairly passive resistance group. When our anonymous tip to the UNPD was ignored, I was sent to Athens to prevent the bombing, for fear that Magnus’ death would destabilize our southern neighbor. They were right to worry, but wrong to send me, it seems. I wasn’t able to find the bomb in time, so I fled, at which point I ran into you.”

“None of that changes the fact that my friends got blamed for this mess,” Ian said. “I don’t know if it’s my fault. Maybe it was, or maybe this is all a big loyalist conspiracy. But even if it’s an honest mistake, and even if we somehow show your evidence to the UNPD, they’re not going to un-invade our city. They can’t bring back our dead.”

There was a pause as Charlotte leaned back in her chair. She sighed, and, for a moment, all that could be heard was the rush of wind outside, and the muffled clamor of a distant train. Everything almost seemed normal.

“We can’t bring them back,” she eventually said, “but we can learn the truth. We can avenge them, and, hopefully, find any survivors.”

Ian looked at her with raised eyebrows. “We?” he asked.

“I mentioned that the group responsible for the bombing, a small collective of Greek nationalists, was once pretty quiet. It’s out of character for them to take such direct and destructive action, so the Inquisition believes they were manipulated somehow, especially as they haven’t yet taken credit for the incident. Could be Lancaster, could be someone else, but it’s clear to me that *someone* was behind all this, and it’s in the Inquisition’s interest to find out who. If you’re willing to help us, some of our leads may well point you to your friends. I don’t mean to be presumptuous, but it might be the best chance you’ve got.”

As loath as Ian was to put his faith in a girl he had just met, not to mention one who barely seemed an adult, she wasn’t wrong. Still, he needed to know exactly what his helping this “Inquisition” would entail, and he asked as such.

“Our day-to-day operations differ little from the Civil Guard you know so well, except that instead of arresting people who dare to pray in public, we go after anyone who commits one of the three heresies,” Charlotte answered. “The first is willful misrepresentation of history. The second, as you now know, is forbidden research, and the third is violence against a fellow citizen. Any other laws are enforced by the local magistracy.”

“Misrepresentation of history?” Ian raised an eyebrow.

“Vague, I know. Not many people get brought in for that one since it’s so hard to prove intent. As an example, though, the UNPD refers to the whole Second Pact War as the League Crusade, even though the Crusade was only one part of a larger conflict. By making sure people wrongly think of the war as a purely religious affair, they generate support for their anti-clerical laws. That’s the kind of thing we’d like to avoid.”

“And what happens to people convicted of these crimes?”

“Fines or prison sentences, depending on severity. We’d never ask you to kill anyone except in self-defense, which I’ll admit is more common than I’d like. Our work takes us to dangerous places.”

A dozen different alarm bells were sounding in Ian’s head, but, once again, he reminded himself that there wasn’t a better option for him to find his friends, or, indeed, to survive. If even half of what Charlotte had told him was true, then surely, he thought, the Kasimirans couldn’t be all bad.

“Fine, I’m game,” he said, throwing up his hands.

A sly smile crept onto Charlotte’s face. “I am glad,” she said, switching back to English. “Sadly, like I said, today will be a long day. The Kasimiran border is far from here. Do you know how to ride a motorcycle?”

Ian nodded.

“*Bien*. There are several in a nearby garage for situations such as this. We will drive west and spend the night at a safehouse not far from the city of Patras. Afterwards, a private airship to Brenner Pass, on what was once the border between Italy and Austria, and is now the border between the UNPD and Kasimira. Once we clear the pass, we are home.”

“That simple?”

“That simple.”

“I suppose an organization called the Inquisition *would* have layers of contingencies for situations like this. You do exfiltration often?” Ian asked.

“Me? No.” Charlotte shook her head. “As far as sticky situations go, however, this is not the worst I have been in. Even so, I would prefer to be home as soon as possible.”

“Well, then, let’s ditch this hole and hit the road. Some fresh air’ll be good for my head, anyway.”

“Of course.”

As it happened, Charlotte’s claim that the safehouse’s garage was stocked with “several” motorcycles was an understatement. When he followed the young woman through the creaky old

doorway, Ian was greeted by no fewer than a dozen bikes of all sorts of makes, from the sporty to the spartan. A classy, cherry red beauty caught his eye, tempting him to lay claim to it, but practicality was the word of the day, and so Ian instead selected an ugly yet functional machine left over from the Greek army. Charlotte did the same, though Ian observed that she acted with much less indecision.

Both of them put on backpacks full of rations and first aid supplies. Charlotte revved up her engine, Ian followed suit, and soon they had put the safehouse behind them, hoping to settle in the west before the sun did.

* * *

Elsewhere, Alexis watched the calm skies, all but certain they were a lie. A whole day had passed since their flight from Istanbul, and, somehow, she was not only alive, but free, both equally unexpected. Even better, she had seen neither bow nor stern of a loyalist airship, making for a peaceful voyage that might even have been pleasant had it not been for the specter of annihilation looming over them. It was too good. Something was amiss.

“We should be near Malta, soon,” Hector said, a hint of poorly-masked apprehension in his voice. Breaching Maltese airspace was to be a test. They would not attack the Directorate garrison there, merely drift close enough to be detected by its radar, and, from its defenders’ reaction, better assess their current situation.

Onboard the *Peregrine*, Teague served as captain, and he had instructed the remaining crew to avoid any cloud cover en route to Malta. There needed to be no doubt that the Directorate was aware of their presence.

“We’re definitely close enough now. Anything to report?” Mayumi asked after a tense minute. So vulnerable were they in the sky that she felt all but naked.

The radar operator shook his head. “Negative. No activity on – wait! Two ships just launched from the airfield. Looks like a pair of corvettes.”

“Maintain our course,” Teague commanded, folding his hands. “Don’t respond to them in any way unless they engage us directly.”

“They’d have to be suicidal,” Hector said. “Two light aircraft against a dreadnought is a joke.”

“They seem to agree. Both bogies are keeping their distance.”

“Well, well, they’re just watching. Lucky us,” Mayumi muttered.

Minutes felt like hours as the *Peregrine* made its way past Malta, the island itself only ever visible as a sliver on the horizon. By the time the two scouts broke off and returned home, everyone’s clothes had been dampened by sweat.

“That confirms it, then,” Hector said, allowing himself to breathe easy. “They know where we are, and yet they decline to act. Lancaster’s content to let us roam for the time being.”

Mayumi scowled. “Not going to give us the mercy of a quick death, are they?” she asked.

“Why would they? Clearly we don’t aim to surrender, as we’d have done so already if that were the case, so we must then intend to fight or flee. The *Peregrine*’s a tough enough bitch that it’d be costly for the Directorate to attack, but not tough enough for *us* to attack *them*. Any action on their part would be a waste when they can just sit on their asses until we run out of fuel.”

“Meaning we need to find my father as soon as possible,” Jackson concluded. “I assume even this idealistic lot is wise enough to know you can’t win without him, and, I confess, I am quite eager to return to more comfortable amenities. Not to say that you haven’t been most *gracious* hosts.”

“If the Directorate’s not actively hunting us down, we have some extra time, but Jackson’s right. Clock’s still ticking,” Alexis said.

“The *Peregrine* has about seven days of fuel left, barring any unforeseen complications,” Teague said. “According to Jackson, Bright Lighthouse is in Naples, Italy, which isn’t far from our current position – relatively speaking. Unfortunately, we can’t get too close without broadcasting our intentions to the Directorate, so Hector and I have decided that Eirene will drop Mayumi and Jackson a ways out from the city, and have them walk the rest of the way.

“Will Eirene stay and wait for them to return?” Alexis asked.

“No. She’ll fly back to the *Peregrine*, just in case there are enemy eyes about. We’ll simply patrol the sea until Mayumi confirms that Fairchild will cooperate.”

“And if he doesn’t want to play ball?” Mayumi asked.

“Then,” Teague said, his face grim, “we use the last of our fuel to land somewhere outside the UNPD and beg for our lives. Perhaps the Tehran Pact will take us in, though I doubt it.”

Mayumi closed her eyes. “I’ll try to make sure it doesn’t come to that,” she said.

* * *

The bones in Alexis’ neck crackled as she stretched, sprawled out on the firm, worn bed. So few in number were the remaining crew that they could afford some measure of privacy when it came to bunking arrangements, and so she and Eirene had this room to themselves. For now, though, Alexis was alone, as her friend was no doubt preparing for her voyage to Naples. Alexis reminded herself to see her off when the time came.

She was halfway through taking off her shirt when there was a knock at the door. Mayumi barged in before even waiting for a response.

“Come to say goodbye?” Alexis asked, letting her top settle back down around her waist.

“Yep. Probably not gonna be too exciting, but, you know – you never know. Especially right now.”

“You nervous?”

“A little.” Mayumi shrugged. “It’s not about what happens to me, but if this deal doesn’t work out, the rest of you are screwed. That’s not the sort of thing you want on your conscience, you get me?”

Alexis patted the side of her bed, signaling for Mayumi to sit down, which she did.

“Don’t worry about any of that,” Alexis said. “I know it’s not the most palatable idea, but Jackson’s the one who’s gonna be doing most of the talking. As long as he doesn’t do anything stupid, all you have to do is kick back, relax, and give us a call when it’s all said and done. Plus,

Jackson says he can get you an actually nice hotel in the city, so at least you'll have comfier accommodations than, well, this." She slapped the surface of her bed for emphasis.

"Yeah, yeah, but as much as I'd like to spend the day sunbathing and drinking wine, surrounded by hot Italian guys, it's kind of hard to enjoy the little things right now."

"I'm not saying to shirk your responsibilities, but you can *try* to enjoy yourself. I'll hold down the fort while you're gone. Can you at least trust me to do that?"

"Not sure how much you can do, exactly, but I guess so. At least take care of Eirene once she gets back, won't you? She's a good girl, and she deserves better than this."

Alexis smiled and patted Mayumi on the back. "You don't have to tell me that. I've looked out for her this long, I can keep her safe for a few days more."

"Mmhmm." Mayumi paused, letting a moment of silence sink in. "She loves you, you know that? Really, *really* loves you. Anytime we're alone together, she won't stop gushing about how great you are. I'd wager you could just wink and she'd be all over you in a heartbeat. And I see the way you look at her, too, so don't try and tell me that you haven't noticed."

"I..."

"Ah, ah, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ambush you like that."

"No, you're, uh, you're right," Alexis said, closing her eyes and rubbing her forehead. "Everything you said is true."

"Then why not ask Eirene about it?"

"It just never felt right, considering how we met. It was my job to arrest her, for God's sake! Sure, I didn't end up doing it once I learned she was innocent, but I still could have turned her in at any time. I was the only thing keeping her safe at that point, and, as much as I wanted her, as much as she wanted me, I wasn't going to take advantage of her."

"Things have changed since then, haven't they?"

"Not sure how much. You did just tell me to keep her safe," Alexis said.

“That’s different. She’s a free woman, now, and you’re not responsible for her. If you’re gonna lecture me about taking time for myself in Italy, then forgive me for saying that some time together would be good for both of you. We might not have much left, after all.”

Alexis was silent, avoiding eye contact with Mayumi.

“Tell you what,” Mayumi said. “If you promise to take Eirene on a proper date once the crisis at hand is resolved, I’ll promise to relax a bit in Italy. That a deal?”

“Sure,” Alexis finally said after another drawn-out pause. “That’s a deal.”

“Splendid! Splendid. I’ll be sure to tell you *all* about my exploits abroad, maybe give you a few ideas what you and your girl can do together.” Mayumi flashed Alexis a mischievous wink.

“Thanks, but I think I’m better off not knowing the details. You have fun, though.”

“I will,” Mayumi said, standing back up with a flourish. She casually saluted her comrade as she quit the room, although, as she did so, Alexis couldn’t help but notice that there was still the faintest echo of sadness behind her smile.

* * *

Ian had been to Patras before. Unlike Athens, it was still recognizable as the city it had been before the rise of the UNPD, with traditional Greek architecture undisturbed by the loyalists’ great skyscrapers and fortresses. From the hill whereupon he and Charlotte had parked for a brief reprieve, they could see the clean, white spires of the Rio-Antirrio bridge that still crossed the nearby strait.

“You ever seen the old castle here?” Ian asked. “It’s no Parthenon, but it’s still a neat sight.”

“I cannot say that I have,” Charlotte said.

“If we had more time, I’d say we should pay it a visit. I know a girl who’s kind of into that sort of thing. Shame she couldn’t be here with us.”

“You will have time to get her a souvenir later.”

“I know, our safehouse awaits. You said it’s on the other side of the bridge?”

“On the Antirrio side, yes. It is not hard to find if you know where to look. There is an empty warehouse we use to store materiel for field operations.”

“It’s got its own fleet of motorcycles?”

“Some, among other light vehicles. We will not be using them, though.”

“Airship, yeah, you mentioned it.”

Charlotte nodded. “It is a small craft, and not very comfortable, but it will suit our purposes. If we wake up early again, we should arrive at Brenner Pass by midday.”

Ian finished off the last of his protein bars and stuffed the wrapper into his pocket, alongside a half dozen others. He washed it down with a gulp of water from a worn metal bottle before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and looking out over the city. A canvas of a thousand little lights beckoned them forwards, offering their much-desired warmth and rest.

The two motorbikes sped down the hillside road and into the city, passing sleepy houses and old shops owned by the latest in a long generational line, all asleep or close to it. Then came the bridge and the crisp sea breeze, and then the old warehouse Charlotte had described. She disembarked from her ride, tapped a long code into a keypad by the garage door, and then lifted it up, beckoning for Ian to park inside. He did so, and his companion followed.

“There is a bedroom of sorts directly left from here,” Charlotte explained. “It will not be comfortable, but I do not think it will be any worse than what you were used to in Istanbul.”

“Our home wasn’t that bad, but I’m not picky,” Ian replied.

“This is good. Now, *allons-y!*”

Near exhausted, they made the short trip to the bedroom – in reality, a repurposed office wing – where they both set down their bags next to their choice of bed. She hadn’t been wrong, Ian noted – the accommodations were of similar quality to those he’d had back home.

Charlotte took off her brown leather jacket and tossed it aside. She frowned, sniffed under her own armpit, and grimaced.

“I apologize that we are unable to shower until tomorrow,” she said. “There will be some deodorant in the bathroom down the hall, but I am afraid it will not be sufficient for a journey of this length.”

“And I’m sure this airship of yours is going to be on the cramped side,” Ian laughed.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Eh, it is what it is. A bit of unpleasantness is par for the course in our line of work.”

Charlotte continued to undress until she was wearing only a pair of shorts and an undershirt, and then reclined on the bed, basking in the flickering, fluorescent light. She took one deep breath after another, her chest rising and falling over and over. Ian watched her for a moment, trying and failing once more to take her measure, before lying down himself. A few minutes of quiet passed, as both of them tried to get settled into their beds.

“Thank you for trusting me,” Charlotte eventually said in French, breaking the silence.

“It’s not like I have much choice,” Ian replied in kind. “Nevertheless, you have my thanks as well for taking me along. You didn’t have to do that.”

“You’re welcome. I truly hope we’ll be able to help each other.”

Another pause.

“Listen,” Ian continued, “I’ll do what I can to help you with this Inquisition business, but, as soon as we turn up a lead on the Peregrines, that’s where I’m headed. Is that cool with you?”

“Of course. I’d never expect you to abandon your loved ones any more than I’d abandon mine. Though, if I may – is it the people you’re loyal to, or the cause itself?”

Ian took a moment to consider. “I suppose it’s both,” he eventually said. “The UNPD needs to be stopped, obviously. In thirty years, it’s laid claim to most of Europe and Africa, forcing the locals to obey its laws, and at its current rate of expansion, it’s only a matter of time before it comes into conflict – armed conflict – with the Tehran Pact or another great power. A lot of people are going to suffer when that happens. And, God forbid, if they actually win...”

“Is that why you all left? You wanted to be clear of the powder keg when it goes off?”

“Hah! If that’s what we were trying to do, we couldn’t have picked a worse place to do it, sandwiched right in between the Pact and the Directorate. No, there’s a lot we don’t see eye-to-eye on, but all of us got together because we can at least agree that the loyalists’ goals and methods are too destructive to allow, and that we wanted no part of it.”

“And so you seek to make war against them?” Charlotte asked.

“Not by choice. I used to be gunning for a career in government, hoping to change things from the inside, but I found out the hard way that the powers that be aren’t too fond of dissent. They won’t purge you immediately, but if you start to push hard enough, they’ll push back, and so folks like me have to band together to survive. Everyone in the Peregrines has a story like that. They’re good people – most of them, anyway.”

“So, in the end, it’s all about survival.”

Ian took a deep breath. “In theory, the plan is to grow strong enough to challenge the Directorate, but if we’re being realistic, you’re right. Best we can do is try to keep ourselves alive and make a safe place for anyone who wants out of the loyalist war machine.” He laughed grimly. “As you can see, that’s going great.”

“If that’s really what you want, then perhaps your Peregrines and the Inquisition have a future together after all.”

“I’d like that to be true,” Ian said.

Chapter 8 – Bright Lighthouse

“*Stuff goes here.*”

- *Something Something*

Naples – or what was left of it – was a quiet town. Much like so many other cities, it had only just begun to recover from years of war when nature once again laid it low. Hundreds died in the fires of nearby Mount Vesuvius, the survivors leaving behind a charred ghost town as they fled. In the decades since, a small fishing community had risen from its desiccated husk, joined ever so often by the odd wanderer, and such people preferred to mind their own business. Nobody was likely to take notice of a lone corvette landing amidst the ruins.

According to Jackson, at least.

Mayumi and Eirene weren't so sure. Even if the corvette had escaped detection as it slipped away from the *Peregrine*, they had their doubts that they'd be able to reach their target unmolested.

“Bright Lighthouse is located on an islet off the coast,” Jackson informed them, doing his best to be helpful. “There's a fortified bridge connecting it to the mainland. Believe me, as long as nothing crosses that bridge, they couldn't care less what happens in Naples.” He laughed. “The stories I could tell.”

“This is where you spent your childhood, I take it?” Mayumi asked. Whether she was genuinely curious or merely humoring the boy, even she didn't know.

“Here, and there, and everywhere. I never really had *one* home, but, if I did...I suppose this would be it.” His face hardened. “I know the Lighthouse, and I know its security. Stay low and approach from the east, in the mountain's shadow. We'll slip right by the ships patrolling the gulf and land with no trouble at all. I promise.”

“If you say so,” Eirene mumbled.

As certain as the women were that Jackson was a fraud, their clear descent lent truth to his claims. If anybody saw the corvette set down at the base of the mountain, they either paid it

no heed, or were biding their time before acting against these intruders. All three prayed it was the former.

“You’re certain they’re not watching us?” Eirene asked once the engines had gone to rest. “No radar, satellites, anything?”

Jackson shrugged. “Both, presumably, but this isn’t a high-security area. They’ll write us off as another pack of roaming vagabonds come to trade with the civilized world. I suspect you saw plenty of those types yourself, back in Istanbul. Am I right?”

“O-oh, for sure,” Mayumi stammered. “Plenty of stateless Migrants passed through, but I’m not sure I’d say we’re any more ‘civilized’ than they are. Most, ah, seemed like good people.”

“Me, I can’t imagine living like that. Wandering from ruin to ruin, living off the land, only seeing city lights when you show up to beg for scraps?” Jackson shivered. “Horrible.”

“Maybe for you. Life on the move is rough, but, hey, at least you get to see the world. At least you’re free. Besides, Eirene here can tell you what ‘civilized’ life can get you when your daddy isn’t one of the most powerful men in the country.”

“Ah, have you already forgotten what befell me precisely *because* of who my ‘daddy’ was?”

“I’ll wager your cell was a lot nicer than the one I was looking at if Alexis hadn’t had a change of heart,” Eirene said.

“Ah, my apologies!” Jackson said, throwing his hands up in mock surrender. “You’re such a dainty young lady, I hadn’t realized I was dealing with a hardened criminal.”

“A scapegoat, not a criminal. Skywatch messed up and hit a Tehran Pact camp, but they didn’t want to take the blame. A lowly Guard pilot made the perfect fall guy.”

“So as not to tarnish the admiral’s sterling reputation! Clever.” Jackson paused, looking at the women’s unimpressed glares before continuing. “...but hideously unethical, of course,” he concluded. “In any case, my *point* was that nobody is going to suspect a thing, at least until we try to breach the Lighthouse itself, but by then, we’ll already be in the clear.”

“And you’re absolutely sure about this?” Mayumi asked.

“At least fifty percent sure.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t inspire a ton of confidence.”

“And yet I don’t get the feeling that you’re blessed with an abundance of options at the moment.” Jackson winked, reveling in his own importance. “Come along, now. I know where we’ll be staying for tonight.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Mayumi said, rolling her eyes. “You got the goods, ‘Rene?’”

Eirene nodded and handed over a single flash drive, which Mayumi pocketed. As she and Jackson stepped out of the corvette, she gave the pilot one last, lackadaisical salute before following her companion into the city.

* * *

Still not far from Mount Vesuvius, the duo found themselves hiking across the hardened lava flows that made for a grim reminder of the city’s demise. Sheets of rock blacker than the night jutted into the ruins like obsidian knives, and bits of rubble crunched underfoot.

If Jackson was to be believed, Bright Lighthouse was about five hours from their current position on foot. It was possible, Mayumi knew, to reach their destination before sunrise, but what was the point? Marcus would no doubt be asleep when they arrived, and it certainly wouldn’t do to open negotiations without the benefit of a good night’s sleep. On that note, she sincerely hoped that Alexis had been right about the “nice hotel” Jackson claimed they’d be staying in.

“It’s not far now,” Jackson said as he jumped down from yet another black flow. He stopped, watching Mayumi land deftly on the ground behind him, and pointed straight ahead. “Look, lights! Civilization awaits.”

“Yeah, yeah, ‘civilization.’ You said all that before. I assume this hotel is in better shape than the buildings we passed so far?” Mayumi asked, gesturing all around her.

“Naturally. Do you really think I’m the type who’d settle for anything other than the best?”

“Okay, but from what I’ve seen, any building with four walls and a roof would qualify as ‘the best’ this city has to offer.”

Jackson laughed. “Well, it’s a far cry from the Director’s suite at Samara Tower, but it’s...fancy. While the government hasn’t bothered to clean up the outer reaches of the city, those parts they *did* fix were renovated quite nicely, I think you’ll find. Only a few minutes, now. Chop, chop!” He snapped his fingers twice to bid Mayumi forward, and she obeyed.

“Now, I maintain that it’s unlikely, but if we get caught, pray it’s by my father’s security. We’ll be safe with them; they’ll recognize me.” Jackson paused. “The Skywatch might also recognize me, but instead of rolling out the red carpet, they’ll put me in irons and put you in the ground. Best avoid that outcome, don’t you think?”

“I usually try to stay above ground. Are there even any Skywatch troops here?”

“In the city itself? Unlikely. But the patrol ships your lovely friend so skillfully avoided are sworn to the Skywatch, so we might run into some off-duty airmen. Good odds they’ll be drunk, though, so I wouldn’t worry too much.”

“I’d rather not stake this mission’s success on a bottle of alcohol, if that’s okay.”

“Fair enough.”

They kept walking. For the first time that night, people could be seen around them, few in number though they were. Merchants returned home after closing up their shops, and a handful of happy couples could be seen traipsing through the streets, arm-in-arm, enjoying each other’s company amidst the crisp night air. Mayumi watched them pass, and, for just a moment, felt warm inside. A secondhand happiness that soon gave way to envy.

She shook her head to try and clear her thoughts. Jackson noticed the gesture, but said nothing to indicate he had. The rest of their journey was spent in silence.

* * *

“This is the place?” Mayumi asked, looking at the hotel ahead. It was an attractive three-story building with an outdoor bistro still packed with late-night diners and a welcoming glow beckoning them in from the gloom.

“Indeed. Welcome to the Hotel Nicola.” Jackson pranced forward, spinning around to wave at her as he approached the entrance, two valets saluting him as he landed upon the front step.

“Good to see you safe, Master Jackson,” one of them said. “Will you be staying the night, or are you just here to rest with your companion?”

The young man paused. “Ah, you mean Mayumi here?” he asked. “She graciously volunteered to escort me home after saving my life in Athens, so I figured I’d treat her to a taste of luxury before we pay my father a visit. Just one night.”

“Very good, sir. I’ll send word to have your usual room prepared.”

“A separate one for the lady, if you would,” Jackson said, holding up two fingers to emphasize his point. The valet looked surprised at his request, but nodded in acknowledgement and handed him a pair of keys.

As they entered the hotel, Mayumi regarded Jackson with amusement. “I take it you stay here often?” she asked.

“Not so much these days, but when I was younger, yes. I often spent the night here after sneaking out for some fun and finding that my father was too busy to let me back in once I was through.”

Mayumi raised an eyebrow. “Too busy to let you in?”

“Not that I blame him. As I’ve made quite clear, his work is of the utmost importance, and it wouldn’t do for him to be disturbed. I was more than content to give him the space he needed and wait until the next day for him to notice my absence and instruct the guards to open the gate.”

“You couldn’t just, I don’t know, walk up and ask them to let you in?”

“Oh, believe me, I tried. I was told they had strict orders not to let anybody pass without express authorization from my father, who had apparently forgotten to include my name on the list. I suspect it was his way of discouraging me from leaving the Lighthouse without permission, but the outside world was *far* too interesting to let a minor inconvenience deter me.”

“Sounds like you had quite the childhood.”

“That I did. Quite the adulthood, too – so far,” he said, opening the door to his room and inviting Mayumi in. “What about you, though? Was your upbringing as exciting as your life is now?”

Mayumi didn’t answer at first. She followed Jackson into his room and looked at the ornamental décor bordering on kitsch. He, for his part, just sat down on a chair, cocking his head with a corny smile as he awaited her reply.

Finally, she spoke up. “I loved my parents,” were her only words.

“Ah. My condolences,” Jackson said, his smile dropping as he detected the past tense. “I lost my own mother when I was very young, you know. To hear my father tell it, she was a frail enough woman that I’m surprised she lived long enough to give birth to me, but something about her made him fall in love.” He shrugged. “Not that I ever got to see what it was.”

“Listen, I don’t really want to talk about it. Maybe some other time.”

“Are you sure? They always say it’s better to talk these sorts of things out.”

“I’m sure. I’m really sure.”

“Fine, have it your way,” Jackson said. “Your room is the one opposite mine. Here’s your key.”

Mayumi reached out to catch the little brass key, as Jackson tossed it over to her. “Can I be sure I won’t wake up and find you ran back to your daddy without me?” she asked once it was firmly in hand.

“Pah! Do you really think so low of me?”

“Haven’t given me much reason to think high of you.”

“There’s no reason for me to betray your Peregrines. This alliance helps everybody involved, and I would see it to fruition. Especially with myself as a key player.”

“You think we’re your path to fame and fortune, huh?”

“Assuming you win. I give it forty-sixty odds, at best.”

“Whatever,” Mayumi said, rolling her eyes. “Anyway, I’m gonna go crash for the night. See you later, I guess.”

Once she was alone in her room, Mayumi let herself fall backwards onto the bed. Its softness was a pleasant surprise. She stared at the taupe drywall ceiling, and a single chip of paint flaked off, landing on her cheek like an ugly snowflake.

Mayumi let out a long sigh.

Alexis would certainly be disappointed, she thought. She was hardly making good on her promise to enjoy herself in Italy, although there would presumably be time for that once the agreement with Marcus Fairchild had been brokered. If she failed, then they’d have bigger problems than a silly little deal, anyway.

It crossed her mind that Eirene had probably made it back to the *Peregrine* by then, and the odds were good that she and Alexis were enjoying an intimate moment together while Mayumi lay alone on a bed made for two. The thought made her chuckle.

She brushed the fleck of paint off of her face and closed her eyes. Almost immediately, she was asleep.

* * *

When Mayumi woke up, she didn’t even notice the screaming.

What she did notice was Jackson standing over her, shaking her violently. “Who-what the *fuck* are you doing?” she demanded once she realized who he was. A quick slap to his arm got Jackson to back off, and she bolted upright, blinking furiously to try and clear the crust out of her eyes.

“For God’s sake, woman, are you deaf?” he shouted, ignoring her question. “Naples is under attack, and we need to get to the Lighthouse *now*!”

“Under attack? By whom?”

“Do I look like I know? Does it matter? There was a massive explosion, and the streets are swarming with Skywatch troops. If we’re careful, we might be able to evade them.”

“Ugh, of all the times...fine, fine, I know it wasn’t your fault. You know the way to the Lighthouse, yeah? Is there a clear path?”

“There should be, yes, so long as you get off your arse before they secure the area. Ordinarily I’d suggest a series of underground tunnels, but the officers I saw looked like they were moving to lock them down, so we’ll be sticking to the shore. You have a gun, I assume?”

“Somewhere around here, yeah.”

“Then *find it*! Or just take one of mine.” Jackson procured a pistol from one of the two holsters Mayumi just then noticed he was wearing, and handed it over to her. She accepted the gift, slipped it into her own holster still on her hip, and followed him out into the hallway.

“Dare I ask where you got these?” she asked.

“You really have to ask? There’s a safe in my private room here. Just in case.”

“Right.”

“Left at this corner, actually. Come along!”

Around the bend, Jackson gestured for Mayumi to stop as he carefully peeked out a nearby window. Confirming that there were no eyes on him, he invited her to take a glance of her own.

“See that?” he said, pointing to a squad of Skywatch troops patrolling the streets below, still shrouded in the dark of a sun not yet risen. “They’re looking for something. Not sure what, or who.”

“Us, I’d assume?”

Jackson laughed. “I’d have thought even you’d be smarter than that,” he said. “This is clearly related to the explosion you slept right through – an unfortunate accident we’ve got caught up in. You people do seem to attract a lot of those. In any case, there’s a monorail system that stretches across the entire coastline; it’s probably been shut down, but that actually helps us in this case. We can easily cut along the tracks until we get to the Lighthouse.”

“And if it isn’t shut down?”

“Then we get run over and turned into paste, and whatever happens after that isn’t our problem anymore. But it’ll be dead as a dormouse by now, don’t you worry.”

“Works for me either way. How’re we gonna get to the station, though?”

“Fire escape.” Jackson pointed his thumb at a door opposite them.

“And then we run for it?”

“And then we run for it.”

Mayumi took a deep breath. “Alright, guess we’re doing this. How long before the guards come back around?”

“Few minutes, probably.”

“Then it’s showtime.”

Jackson nodded and threw open the door to the fire escape, immediately triggering the building’s alarms. With sirens blaring behind and below them, he and Mayumi ran down the creaky metal stairs until they were safely on the ground, peeking into the street to check for hostiles.

“The alarm should draw some attention to the hotel,” Jackson said. “A good distraction, as long as we’re clear of the area when they arrive. You see anyone?”

“Nope.”

“Mmm, perfect. Come on.”

The two of them dashed from sidewalk to sidewalk, taking a moment to reconnoiter once more upon reaching the opposite side of the street. A few civilians yet remained nearby, unsure whether to flee or hide in place, but there were no Skywatch officers to be seen.

“If we’re caught, I’ll try to bluff my way out of it,” Jackson said.

“I thought you said they’d recognize you?”

“I said they *might*. Hence why I’ll try diplomacy first. But don’t be afraid to open fire if that fails. You’re already at war with the Directorate, after all – hard to make it any worse.”

“Yeah, yeah, you don’t need to tell me twice,” Mayumi responded.

Doing their best to remain alert but inconspicuous, the duo moved on, as quickly as they could without drawing undue attention. A confectionery shop caught Mayumi’s eye, its owner and a few patrons waiting out the storm within, and she dearly wished they had the freedom to browse its wares. Perhaps she would return once their business was done.

A tap on her shoulder brought her back to the present. Mayumi looked back at Jackson and saw him jab his finger towards another squad of soldiers coming their way - three men in Skywatch uniforms, well-armed and surrounded with the distinctive shimmer of kinetic barriers. If it came to a fight, firearms would be ineffective.

Her hand curled into a fist.

Sensing Mayumi’s tension, Jackson laid a hand on her shoulder. “Like I said, I’ll see what I can do,” he whispered. It didn’t do much to calm her, but she forced herself to act natural. They’d made sure to dress in casual clothes when leaving the *Peregrine*, so their attire, at least, would not give them away.

As expected, keeping their heads down did little to deter the officers, who immediately locked onto the two passersby. One of them, presumably the leader, raised his hand in a harsh gesture for them to stop, leading his partners towards the pair until they were surrounded.

“Oi, you two,” the gruff, square-jawed officer began. “What business do you lot have in Naples? Here to trade?”

Mayumi nodded. Jackson resisted the urge to give her a dirty look, but resolved to play along with her story. There was no changing course now.

“Indeed. Usual Migrant business, hoping to make a deal. You know how it is. Although, I get the feeling the markets will be closed for the foreseeable future,” he said.

The officer stared at Jackson, eyes narrowing into pointed slits. He looked him up and down, trying to take the boy’s measure. “Is that so?” he asked, clearly doubting the veracity of Jackson’s story. “Well, you’re wrong on one count – shouldn’t be long before everything’s back to normal, *if* everyone cooperates. What ship are you two from?”

Although he had anticipated that question, Jackson had no answer to give. Nomad vessels typically hailed from the far east, well beyond the reach of the Directorate, and would therefore have an eastern name, although he knew no specific conventions. Assuming any existed to begin with. His mind began to race, trying to formulate a convincing reply before the officer saw through the façade.

“We’re from the *Katayama*,” Mayumi butted in, with a conviction that caught Jackson off-guard. “It’s a *Tōhoku*-class air destroyer, former JASDF. If your investigation is still ongoing when it returns, I’m sure Captain Nagai-sama would be honored to assist you.” She finished her spiel with a deep, uncharacteristic bow that Jackson hurriedly mimicked.

“That won’t be necessary, we don’t need Migrant vessels meddling in our affairs. I must say, though, I’m curious what a white boy like him’s doing on a Japanese ship.” The officer pointed at Jackson.

Mayumi acted shocked. “Evan-san is a valuable member of our crew,” she said. “We found him living alone in the ruins of New Orleans, not far from the North American Quarantine Zone. We were scavenging at the time.”

Jackson resisted the urge to look at her askew, too surprised by her shift in affectation to take offense at the backstory she’d invented for him.

“And your people tested him for any contagions?”

“Of course.”

The officer pursed his lips, thinking over her story. “Very well. just try to stay clear of the streets until we give the all-clear,” he said, deciding that it checked out. Soon, the officers had departed, and the two of them were alone once more.

Jackson looked at Mayumi. She looked back. They kept walking.

“The *Katayama* was your ship, I take it?” he asked.

Mayumi nodded.

“That explains why you seemed so insulted by my remarks about the Migrants. Don’t take it personally, I’m sure you’re all wonderful people. But what’s with the honorifics all of a sudden? I mean, ‘Evan-san’? Didn’t expect that from you.”

“I don’t usually bother with them in English, no, but people usually give me more leeway when I play up the ‘cutesy, submissive Asian girl’ act, going on about ‘honor,’ and all that stuff. Not very dignified, but not very threatening either, so it keeps me under their radar, and indignity’s only a problem for people who had any self-respect to begin with.” Mayumi chuckled to herself. “Could’ve *really* sold it if I had a kimono or something, but, eh, can’t always get what you want. Anyway, for what it’s worth, Evan was a real guy. Even though he died during a, ah, incident aboard the *Katayama*, an investigation would turn up records of one Evan Royce among the crew, which would have made us look legit enough.”

Jackson pursed his lips. “Perhaps you’ll survive this mess after all,” he mused.

“That remains to be seen. Should we get going?”

“Of course.”

“Splendid. Lead the way.”

* * *

The cold steel rungs of the ladder made Mayumi wish she’d worn gloves as she climbed up to the monorail. Layers of rust and creeping ivy told her that this particular ingress had not been maintained in some time.

She popped open the hatch, and, after peeking through to confirm no train was about to decapitate her, lifted herself onto the platform. Jackson followed just behind.

“Should be a clear shot from here to the Lighthouse,” Jackson said.

“Yeah, unless we get, I don’t know, wiped out by a train.”

“I already told you, that’s *highly* unlikely. Moreover, should the worst come to pass, we need only jump off as soon as we hear it coming.”

Mayumi looked down to the ground below. She’d never been a good judge of heights, but they were definitely high enough that a fall would be likely to break her legs, at the very least.

“Not thinking of ending it all, are you?” Jackson asked, patting Mayumi on the back. Startled, she flinched at his touch and turned her attention back to him.

“No, no, definitely not. Not when we’re so close,” she replied.

“Then let’s get on with it.”

“Right.”

The dilapidated city seemed to fall back asleep as they walked along the rail, boots tapping against the concrete. There were no more shouts or sirens to be heard, only the gentle rustling of wind through the trees planted alongside the monorail in a half-hearted attempt to breathe some life into the city.

Mayumi closed her eyes and breathed in the sea air. It was peaceful, not unlike a walk along the old walls in Istanbul. There had been a fort by the shore that she, Alexis, and Eirene had once visited, and she could almost picture herself back there if she did her best to forget Jackson.

Before she could immerse herself in the illusion, however, the sound of a gunshot shattered it into pieces. Mayumi froze up, her ears ringing, standing still until Jackson all but threw her to the concrete “floor.”

“Should have known it wouldn’t be that easy,” the boy snarled. A second shot rang out, and then a third.

“Doesn’t seem like they’re shooting at us, though?” Mayumi said.

“That matters remarkably little, since those shots are coming from up ahead. We’ll have to sneak past the loyalists’ impromptu target practice to reach the Lighthouse.”

A fourth shot caught Mayumi’s ear, and she held up a hand to silence Jackson. “Did you hear that?” she asked. “That was a different gun. Whoever they’re shooting at is shooting back.”

“Yes, people tend to do that. What’s your point?”

“The enemy of my enemy…”

“...Is a *distraction*. We need to keep moving, slow and steady.”

“We can just take a look. I don’t know about you, but I’d rather not run past an active gunfight without knowing how big or how bad it is. Just want to get some eyes on the situation, then, if it doesn’t look like we need to worry, we skedaddle. Is that *agreeable* to your majesty?”

“Fine, we’ll get a look. Should be a safe enough vantage point from up here, anyway.”

Mayumi and Jackson crept forwards, keeping their heads down, until the ongoing gunfire told them the fight was just below. Silently, Jackson nodded to Mayumi, giving her to go-ahead to take the look she so desired.

In the street below, Mayumi watched a single young woman take cover against a bullet-ridden car, making sure to put the engine block between herself and the trio of Skywatch officers advancing on her position. It was a smart move, but seemed unlikely to save her, especially with what looked like a bloody wound on her side.

Leaving the woman to die was undoubtedly the safe bet. That would keep the Skywatch off her own back, to be sure.

Mayumi’s eyes narrowed. Her hand moved down to her holster. The officers drew closer to the car, one of them heading left, one of them heading right, and the last standing back to provide cover.

Jackson barely had time to notice as Mayumi loosed two shots from her gun. So quick was her draw that she felt like a cowgirl from an old western. – or rather, she would have, had either of her bullets found their mark rather than adding two more holes to the already pockmarked sedan.

“You dullard!” Jackson shouted. “You’ve doomed us both!”

“Yeah, yeah, tell me about it at the Lighthouse,” Mayumi said as she dropped to take cover from a hail of retaliatory gunfire, a sudden breeze sending her coattails aflutter.

She leaned over to take several more shots. A single bullet tore through her forearm, forcing Mayumi to the ground, only for the officer responsible to be slain where he stood by the strange woman, who had taken advantage of the chaos to reposition. His partner, now aware she was outnumbered, retreated to a position that gave her cover from both assailants, but, by that

point, Jackson had fallen back along the monorail to get a clear shot, and he easily dispatched the officer with a single shot to the head.

One remained.

For the first time, Mayumi made contact with the stranger below. A series of hand gestures later, they had agreed on a plan to flush their final adversary out of cover. Doing her best to ignore the pain in her arm, Mayumi crept along the high ground, watching the bus behind which the man had hidden. She was able to get just a glimpse of him talking on his radio, no doubt calling for backup. They needed to hurry.

Her fortune reversed, the stranger advanced, confident that her guardian angels would cover her from above. That confidence faded, however, when a blaring horn and the clamor of many wheels heralded the imminent arrival of the monorail.

“Bastards,” Jackson muttered.

Mayumi’s mind began to race. They were still too high up to jump safely, but, then again, possible injury was preferable to certain death. A single tree below could have cushioned the fall somewhat, but it was a small, scrawny thing that offered little support. Could she somehow stop the train? Not without explosives. There wasn’t enough room to the sides for them to hope the train might simply pass them by, either.

With nothing else to do, they jumped. Both Jackson and Mayumi landed on the soil beneath the little tree, kicking up a cloud of dust as they did so. Above them, the monorail soared past, and the whole structure beneath it rattled like so many aching bones, not unlike the ones in Mayumi’s leg that she felt snap upon impact.

Finishing his descent with an elegant roll, Jackson paid no heed to Mayumi as he stood up just in time to see the lone Skywatch survivor fleeing the scene, dodging bullets from the stranger. One more shot from Jackson’s gun put an end to his escape.

“Hmm. That takes care of that,” he muttered. “Now, Mayumi, care to explain what in God’s name this was about?”

“You did tell me to open fire if I felt it necessary,” Mayumi noted, clutching her leg.

“True, but if you had to compromise our position, I’d have hoped your accuracy might be better. How’s your arm? Or your legs, for that matter?”

Mayumi looked down at her wound, the pain starting to worsen as the adrenalin wore off.

“Arm stings, but it’ll probably be alright. Just grazed me, really. My leg, though...” She gently poked her left shin and winced.

“The Lighthouse is minutes away. If I support you, we may yet make it.”

“I can help, if you need,” a new voice said. Mayumi and Jackson turned, finding themselves face-to-face with the woman whose life they had just saved. Up close, she was much smaller than they would have expected, and the French accent with which she spoke indicated that she too was foreign to this land. A jacket wrapped around her waist acted as a makeshift bandage for her own wound. Luckily, it didn’t seem too severe after all.

“Well, I imagine that’s the least you could do after we stuck our necks out for you,” Jackson said. “Regardless, I do appreciate the offer. I’ll take her right, you take her left, okay?”

The two of them hoisted Mayumi upwards, still limping on her one good leg, and carefully began their journey towards the Lighthouse.

“So, why were they after you, anyway, miss...?” Mayumi asked between grimaces.

“Aucoin. Charlotte Aucoin. I attempted to evade a security patrol. My ship was damaged, and crashed nearby.”

“That explains the explosion we heard.”

“Yes.”

“You’re part of a rebel group, then?”

Charlotte shook her head.

“Then who?” Jackson asked.

“Pardon me, but, as grateful as I am that you saved my life, I do not believe it prudent to disclose such information. Surely you understand.”

“No, no, I get it. Totally get it. Operations security, and all that,” Mayumi said. She took one look at Jackson, who nodded in approval, before continuing. “Can’t hurt to tell you who we are, though. We’re here on business for the Peregrines – what’s left of them, anyway. You ever heard of us?”

Charlotte seemed to tense up. “No, I cannot say that I have,” she answered after a short delay.

“Figures. We never really were as influential as we’d like. Just a bunch of rejects trying to make our own way in the world.”

“It is much the same for me.”

* * *

To their good fortune, the Skywatch was unable to catch up and intercept the group before they reached their destination. The guards at the gate were shocked to see Jackson, but did not tarry in admitting the group past. At last, they were safe.

“I am glad to see we have arrived without incident,” Charlotte said. “Unfortunately, as grateful as I am for your company, I must now take my leave.”

“You could come with us, you know,” Mayumi offered. “Your mysterious organization and mine could be friends.”

“Perhaps someday, but not today. I have a, ah, companion waiting for me. Should we meet again, though...an alliance may yet be beneficial.”

“Alright, then. Have a nice trip to wherever it is you’re going!” Mayumi said, shooting her as cheerful a smile as she could muster.

Charlotte gave them a respectful bow, and, just like that, she was gone.

Still leaning on Jackson for support, Mayumi turned around to face the Lighthouse. It made for a formidable sight, and a sturdy icon of the Directorate’s power. The islet was covered in its entirety by a fortified complex whose architect had a clear penchant for brutalism. From the southern end rose the concrete-and-metal spire of the Lighthouse itself, projecting a beam that steadily faded away as the sun rose.

A handful of insect-like drones patrolled the islet, each the size of a small car. One of them descended to meet them, shining a spotlight on the pair. Mayumi and Jackson held up their hands to shield their eyes, and felt its rotors blowing their hair about.

“Go on, then,” Jackson said, as if challenging the drone. “Tell our father I’m home.”

The drone bobbed in the air. Its spotlight went dark, and it soon left them alone, just as Charlotte had done.

“Now you’ve officially met my sister,” he told Mayumi once the thing had vanished.

“Your sister?”

“Yes, my sister. Lena. I believe you heard – ah, no, you were busy holding your little fort while your friends watched Samara Tower, so you wouldn’t have seen her before. Don’t worry, though, you’ll meet her in her ‘normal’ body soon enough.”

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised by this point.” Mayumi winced. “God, my leg hurts. Don’t suppose there’ll be a hot bath waiting for me inside the lighthouse? Maybe a cute masseur and some hard liquor to drown out the pain?”

“Sadly, no, the best we have to offer is state-of-the-art medical care. You’ll just have to make do.”

“Alex is gonna be so disappointed in me. Promised her I’d be living it up by now, but here I am, limping across the finish line with a – ow – a broken leg and a bleeding arm.”

An armored car approached from further down the path, coming to a smooth halt mere meters from Jackson and Mayumi. Though the vehicle’s windows were tinted, bright headlights further hampering their visibility, it wasn’t hard for Mayumi to guess who was inside, waiting to address the new guests.

The side door slid open and Marcus Fairchild descended, each step taken with an eerie, spiderlike precision that complemented his aloof demeanor. Fairchild’s very presence unnerved Mayumi, to say nothing of the piercing gaze with which he took her measure, causing her to briefly freeze up, although she saw no such shift in Jackson’s affect. Quickly recovering her senses, Mayumi offered a slight bow, more genuine this time.

“I am glad to see my son returned to me,” the old man said. “Though the violence that seems to have followed him is...regrettable. Pray tell, my son – who is this stranger you’ve brought to my door?”

“Her name’s Mayumi. She’s with the Peregrines of Istanbul, and she saved my life. At great cost to herself, I might add,” Jackson explained.

“I see. Then you have my gratitude, Miss Mayumi.”

“Yeah, you’re welcome.” She coughed. “Didn’t just come here to deliver your kid, though. My people and I, we were hoping we might work...ah...work together, since you clearly don’t have much love for Lancaster, either.”

“So, you lose your city and come running to me for deliverance, is that it?”

Mayumi looked down. “Yeah...yeah, that pretty much sums it up.”

“And what have I to gain from this arrangement?”

“Evidence. A corvette’s flight cam proving what Lancaster did to the *Sierra*. It’d be just what we need to light a fire under his feet.” She procured the drive Eirene had given her from her pocket, and dangled it tantalizingly in front of Fairchild. He reached out to grab the device, but she withdrew it just as fast.

“Sorry, can’t just hand it over. We can take a look at the tape after you’ve at least heard us out. That’s all we’re asking.”

Marcus frowned. “Very well,” he said. “As a gesture of goodwill, I shall send a tanker to your flagship with the fuel your people surely need. When it returns, your leadership will come along with it, and we’ll have a little chat. I hope they have more to offer me than a video and a crippled little girl.”

Chapter 9 – ayy lmao

“ayy lmao.”

- *Ayy lmao*

Ayy lmao