

### *Chapter 3 – Overlord*

*“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 late United Nations? A lie. The UPD is neither provisional, nor does it represent the global community.”*

- Besim Karahan

The water was calm as Cassandra and Ian stepped into an inconspicuous fishing boat moored off the shores of a small Aegean island. Nearby, on the rocks, the Peregrine corvette sat idle, its searchlights the sole source of illumination for the abandoned dock.

“I know I don’t need to remind you, but be careful, yeah?” Eirene said, looking longingly at Cassandra. “As much as I’d like to see you take down a tyrant or two while you’re there, it’s not worth the risk.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. See, not even armed.” As proof, Cassandra patted her own body in all the places she might keep a gun. Eirene nodded in acknowledgement, and Cassandra smiled cheerfully back at her.

“Not that you could harm a hair on any of their heads, even if you wanted to. Hundreds have tried and failed all the same,” Ian chimed in, checking his own gear to make sure he was prepared.

“No one ever got this close before. Taking the shot’d be easy from your position...if you don’t care too much about getting out afterwards.”

“Yeah, I’m not about to throw my life away to quench your thirst for vengeance.”

“And nobody’s asking you to do so. Purely hypothetical.”

“Uh-huh.” Ian rolled his eyes. “Anyway, if you two are done saying your goodbyes, we should get going. Wouldn’t want to miss our appointment.”

“Of course. I’ll be here waiting for you to return. Good luck out there, you two,” Eirene said.

“Yeah. Same to you,” Cassandra replied. Without another word, they cast away, and Eirene watched them disappear into the horizon.

It was a short, uneventful trip across the gulf to Widow’s Walk, a foul-smelling, waterlogged port district surrounded by a formidable concrete levee that was built to keep back rising waters. Most coastal cities had such structures, and those that did not were steadily being inundated by 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. Besim had leveraged his connections in the capital to ensure that the watchmen were enjoying well-earned time off that night, and so Cassandra and Ian remained unmolested as they disembarked. All was quiet but for the gentle stirring of the sea.

“God, this place is foul. I know it was safer to land on the island, but damn, I wish we could have flown straight there. Sucks to be us, I guess,” Ian said, breathing in the scent of salt, fish, and oil, all blended together into a maritime cocktail.

“Watch it – I grew up here,” Cassandra said with mock indignation.

“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, or anything.” 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.”

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

An old van was waiting for them in the Walk, keys still in the ignition, ready to bear them to the capitol building. Keenly aware that their vehicle was on its last legs, the pair drove onwards, further and further north, until their increasingly lively surroundings told them they had arrived at Athens proper. Despite the dominating presence of the Directorate’s fortifications, it was still a beautiful city, one of which Cassandra had many fond memories.

“I was talking with Besim a little bit before you ladies arrived 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?” Cassandra asked.

“In order for him to pull strings, those strings 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 breeds revolutionaries like nobody’s business. The Directorate needs a constant supply of fresh blood to keep the capital well-oiled, but this isn’t a burger joint, so they have to bring in educated, politically-savvy kids who ask questions the government can’t, or won’t answer to their satisfaction. We’ve got more allies in this city than you’d think.”

“Oh, for sure, an informed populace is the tyrant’s worst nightmare. But, like, how can you be sure these ‘allies’ of ours 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 failed to understand. Sure, they could try and keep people dumb so they don’t ask questions, but they’re so God damn arrogant that they think theirs is the only answer. So why not let the young blood ask questions if they’ll inevitably realize that

big brother 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 back in Istanbul. For now, the threat of the UPD keeps everyone together, but once that burden’s lifted...”

Putting a stop to Cassandra’s 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 Besim and Mayumi’s work, I imagine,” Ian said. “Ten cars, ten guys each. One hundred guardsmen that we don’t have to deal with.”

“And one hundred more that our friends *do*.”

“They can take care of themselves. Focus on doing your job, and have faith – Those two’ll be more than okay. Be downright shameful if they lost to that pitiful excuse for an army.”

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.

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Yet to be completed, the new Science Administration Tower – where Cassandra would set up her nest – was all but empty, once again thanks to Besim and his “allies” in the city. From the unfinished skeleton of the upper levels, she could actually see the Tower’s Grand Balcony, where the conference would take place, and had set up radios tuned in both to Ian’s listening device and the loyalists’ communications. It would have been a perfect position if not for the weather. 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 Cassandra could only assume were lined with shield barriers to

deter snipers. If she were an assassin, that might have been a problem, but, as Eirene and Ian had been keen to remind her, they were there to watch and listen. Nothing more.

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, Cassandra 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. "From what I'm hearing, Director-General Keller and his friends will arrive in about five minutes."

Cassandra 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 on their comms, 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. In most ways, however, they were a puppet show, only a few being blessed with real power.

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 overseers of the Directorate's core administrations. At the center were the spots for Director-General Magnus Keller himself, as well as the Grand Marshal and Grand Admiral.

From her perch, Cassandra saw that several seats remained empty that night. Grand Marshal Vargas's absence was expected, but the other vacancies spoke to 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. Based on his seating, Marcus Fairchild alone had come to lead the Science, Defense, and Transportation Administrations, which made him all the more dangerous should he align himself with Lancaster's conspiracy.

Once everybody else was in place, Keller 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’re all aware of the ongoing 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, and while I’m sure he needs no introduction, it’s my honor to present our first speaker, Overseer Marcus Fairchild, here to present the very latest in strategic technologies.”

Amidst the barrage of clapping from the assembly, Keller returned to his seat to make room for the Overseer on the podium. The ghostly old man gave a curt bow, waiting for the applause to die down before beginning his speech with a knowing smile, already sure that his peers would be suitably impressed.

“Almost thirty years ago,” Marcus began, “the last true artificial intelligence, Rho, was lost in an earthquake, alongside the forge that birthed it – much to the glee of those luddites who opposed the technology. With so many disasters laying waste to civilization, such a casualty was viewed as little more than a footnote, and it seemed like all the scientific progress it represented, and all the legal and philosophical debates about its personhood had been for nothing. But those of you close to the Defense Administration know that to be false, for I, and only I, have seen the value in not only restoring the old world AIs, but improving them. Sadly, bereft of the infrastructure and documentation used to develop Rho, we have...struggled, and were forced to put our efforts towards more mundane pursuits.”

“Only you would consider the development of orbital superweapons ‘mundane,’” Lancaster remarked, immediately catching Cassandra’s attention. No sentence containing that phrase could mean anything good, that much was obvious.

“And by ‘development,’ he means ‘restoring a superannuated group of satellites hardly ten years my junior,’” the scientist said to the crowd, visibly annoyed. “You all know about ASPIS, I presume? The Automatic Safeguard Protocol with Intelligent Systems, or, more colloquially, ‘the decrepit metal hulk floating in space.’ Built by the Americans of old and abandoned before it could even be tested. By the request of Director-General Keller, the Defense

and Science Administrations have secured its terrestrial command center, and are in the process of upgrading the orbital batteries to suit modern standards.”

“Solely for defensive purposes, of course. If we didn’t lay claim to the thing, someone else would’ve,” Keller chimed in from the audience.

“Someone less interested in *peacekeeping*, indeed,” Marcus said. He waved his hand dismissively as he continued. “But I digress, ASPIS itself is uninteresting. A weapon to destroy cities? Pure banality. That it causes such devastation without the radioactive effects of a nuclear bomb does little to make it an intellectually stimulating endeavor, but astute observers may recall the penultimate letter of the acronym – Intelligent. Inside the command center we found a dormant AI, not unlike Rho, which had been installed to operate the entire system.”

Lancaster snarled. “More old world foolishness. Entrusting weapons of mass destruction to an AI,” he said.

“No more dangerous than entrusting them to humans,” Marcus retorted. “Regardless, we were able to study this individual and learn from him all the knowledge we lost in the upheaval. While the woeful state of our high-tech infrastructure remains problematic, I’m pleased to announce the fruits of our labors. My dear Lena, if you would?”

A tall woman stood up from the assembled crowd. She was well-dressed, her outfit adorned with the usual cog-and-shield of Marcus’ political empire, but still looked distinct from the other overseers and administrators.

“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. Such discrepancies were common amongst the many orphans adopted by local families, 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.”

“Maybe he’s about to reveal that we can upload our own minds into these ‘Mourners’,” another replied, 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*, and not just a copy? 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.”

“And, so long as we controlled the supply, anybody using that technology would be dependent on us for their continued existence. Perhaps even foreign heads of state,” Keller noted.

“One day, perhaps. But not today. No, the practical advantage of our Mourners is that they can be mass-produced, making them...viable substitutes for a human military force. Lancaster, I believe this is your area of expertise.” There seemed a hint of disgust in Marcus’ voice, Cassandra 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. 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.

Some of the crowd eyed her with suspicion. “That may be so,” an overseer said, “but Lancaster just stated that one Mourner 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*.”

Marcus nodded. “The obvious next step is to upgrade ASPIS. We could simply reactivate its controller, but maintaining an obsolete system like that is increasingly problematic. Replacing it with a Mourner would help us future-proof the weapon.”

“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. Retrofitting ASPIS’ orbital batteries will be cheap enough thanks to the space elevator, but preparing the Mourners for mass production will take a pretty penny. So, a question for the audience – how would you propose we fund this little project of ours?”

“Well, we’d have to raise taxes,” a 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 for now. To them, it’ll look like we’re simply sucking up their hard-earned cash. We might be able

to get more support by claiming it goes towards national defense, which isn't exactly a lie, but we'd need to prove that we face sufficient threats to justify it."

"What about the attack on the *Kolyma*?" 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 another major power 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 the Pact is smarter than that. We shouldn't count on such wanton aggression. In fact, there is the possibility 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. Cassandra, meanwhile, could only sit and stare at the bloody spectacle before her, any view she had of the Grand Balcony obscured by thick black smoke. The radio tuned into the Directorate's security channel was aflame with frantic conversation, but the curious airship above her remained still and silent. Was it responsible for the attack? Unlikely, she concluded, although that left its identity an unresolved mystery. Regardless, there was no time to think. She needed to move.

As soon as she got to the door that would take her to the stairwell, however, she found it sealed by a set of metal bars, lit up by the red emergency lights from within the building. The tower as a whole remained unfinished, but its automatic lockdown procedure seemed very much operational. Cassandra cursed the Directorate and its paranoid priorities before setting about looking for another way down.

To her escalating displeasure, none of the options she tried appeared viable. There was no fire escape accessible from her part of unfinished roof. The few windows were barred just as the doors were, not that she was even able to break the reinforced glass. She even went so far as to consider jumping down the exposed beams, but that seemed too treacherous an endeavor, the danger of slipping compounded by the ongoing rainfall. Looking over the side, she could already see emergency vehicles pulling up to the base of Samara Tower. No doubt they would be coming the area for the culprit, a net Cassandra knew she would fall into if she did not make good her escape.

“Ian? Ian, you there?” she barked into her radio. “Can anyone hear me? What in God’s name is going on?”

“Everything’s proper fucked, Cass,” Ian finally replied, his voice half-masked by static. “I’m clear of the Tower, at least, be at the van in a minute or two. Where are you?”

“I’m trapped on the damned roof. Whole place went into lockdown just after the explosion, no way in or out, far as I can tell, so the only way down’s...a bit too fast for my liking.” Once again, Cassandra peered over the edge, watching the raindrops fall some two dozen stories past her to the ground.

“You are? God fucking...alright, listen up – the place is swarming with civil guard and I doubt it’s long before the Skywatch shows up. I’ll wait *one* minute before I make like a tree, you got me?”

Cassandra scowled and shook her fist at the sky. “*Malakas*, are you serious?” she swore. “You’re really just about to leave me here?”

“What am I supposed to do, fly?”

“No, but I am,” a third voice suddenly came in.

Both of them were stunned into momentary silence. “Eirene? Is that you?” Ian quickly asked.

“Yeah, it’s me,” the pilot said, confirming her identity. “You go save yourself, Ian. I’ll take care of her then meet you at the island.”

“Are you insane? They’ll shoot you down on sight!” Cassandra protested.

“Have a little faith, Sunshine. This is the kind of thing I live for.”

“No! Turn around and leave me here, before you get yourself killed! I can take care of myself.”

“So can I. The loyalists just got caught with their pants down, so they won’t be ready for me. Think of it like a fun challenge, no worse than escaping from the *Sunset Serenade*.”

Cassandra closed her eyes, taking a deep breath to try and quell the nausea rising in her stomach. It didn’t work. Her friend was a woman grown, this much was true, but Cassandra’s promise upon their first meeting had been to *protect* Eirene, and forcing her to invert that role brought nothing but disgust and shame. Even if they both survived the night, Cassandra knew that she had much to atone for.

“Anyway, I’m already inbound,” Eirene continued. “You hang on for just a sec, got it?”

“...I can do that,” Cassandra muttered.

Already turning the keys of the van’s ignition, Ian wiped sweat from his brow in relief. “Sounds like we’ve got ourselves a plan,” he said, pushing down on the gas pedal and jetting out of the parking lot. “See you two soon.”

“Yeah, see you – ”

*SMASH!*

Ian never even saw the truck that struck his flank. From their end, Cassandra and Eirene only heard the violent shriek of twisting metal and the start of a profane yell that quickly cut into static and silence.

“Ian? Ian! What was that?” Cassandra asked frantically, her mood once again deteriorating into panic. “Ian, are you there? Ian!”

In the cockpit of her Corvette, Eirene let out a mournful sigh. “Too late to worry about him now,” she said. “If his radio’s out, then he’s on his own. Nothing we can do anymore.”

“You’re right, but...”

“I’m right here, is what I am. Get ready to jump!”

Cassandra turned her gaze southwards and saw, to her shock and relief, the silhouette of Eirene’s corvette speeding towards her across the skyline. If the Directorate had even noticed the nimble little airship, they showed no signs of it. With great skill and care, Eirene slowed to a halt, the corvette hovering so close to the rooftop that its larboard wingtip nearly grazed the outer wall, and Cassandra seized the opportunity to jump atop the vessel and climb in through the top escape hatch. Her friend’s safety now secure, Eirene threw the lever to return her craft to flight mode and darted away, leaving the capitol behind.

Meanwhile, in the streets below, Ian’s consciousness slowly began its return to him. Mercifully, his head was already engulfed by the airbag, though he could scarcely summon the energy to move, a torrent of curses at whatever clown of a driver had just destroyed his only chance of escape coursing through his mind. While a small part of his mind knew that the accident was entirely his fault, 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 came from the tower, didn’t you?*

If this stranger could link him to the bombing, however falsely, then Ian knew the game was up, and he was doomed to die in Athens. As one small comfort, at least Eirene and Cassandra were likely to escape. 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. For the first time, he saw the woman before him, blurry as she was. She was perhaps a few inches shorter than he, with tan skin, brown 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 injuries would have made him easy for legitimate authorities to subdue. Confident that she was not a loyalist, 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 it.

#### *Chapter 4 – Scion*

*“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 UPD*

The nighttime tranquility shrouding Hotel India would have encouraged Cassandra, 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 outpost from Athens proper that it was hidden 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 Directorate 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.

Two shots rang out from the destroyer, one of which found its mark but glanced off of the corvette’s shield barrier.

“If they’re smart, they’ll switch to lasers. Our hull’s too thin to block a laser for long,” Eirene said in a cool, collected, and oddly enthusiastic voice as she prepared evasive maneuvers. To test her theory, she fired a single missile in the destroyer’s general direction, which, just as expected, exploded as it was struck by an invisible beam that detonated its payload. If they remained airborne much longer, the same fate surely awaited the corvette itself.

Ill-inclined to meet an early demise, Eirene made a sharp descent, landing in the blind spot left by a particularly large building. She and Cassandra clambered out of the corvette and fled into the ruins without a word, lest there be loyalist soldiers within earshot.

Making use of the rubble to hide themselves from the airship’s searchlights, they crept closer to the old warehouse, and noted that, for whatever reason, they seemed to be alone. As she deemed it unlikely that the Skywatch was in retreat, Cassandra 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 her friends might be saved.

Not far from their destination, Cassandra 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 second wave,” she whispered under her breath.

Cassandra stopped for a second to pay her respects to the fallen, hastily making the sign of the cross over her chest. Although her own spirituality did not align with any organized religion, her parents were on-and-off practitioners of Orthodoxy, and their habits had worn off on her. It was as good a rite as any, given the circumstances.

When the two of them finally reached Hotel India, they found Mayumi and Besim with 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 the newcomers for a second, cogs turning in her mind before she finally allowed herself a half-hearted smile.

“Hey, Cass. Hey, ‘Rene. Good to see some friends. Not sure why you’re here, though. Thought you and Ian would’ve been on your merry way to Istanbul by now,” Mayumi said. She moved in to hug Cassandra, but the latter stepped back and shook her head.

“I’m not in the mood to get touchy right now, sorry. Didn’t you hear the news, though?” Cassandra asked. “We were watching the conference like we when a goddamn bomb went off, or something. Not sure exactly what happened, but there was a big explosion that looked like it took out most of the audience. Everything fell apart after that, and I lost track of Ian, so Eirene and I figured our 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 this could happen.”

“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 we did what we can to do in Athens. 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 for the cause, 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,” Cassandra said. “Ugh, I feel so dirty. Is there a working sink anywhere?”



“You’ll find one down that hall,” Besim answered, gesturing further back into the building.

“Thanks.”

“Oh, oh, can you check in on the fugitive while you’re down there?” Mayumi asked as Cassandra approached the door. “We have him resting on a cot a few doors down. Guy *somehow* managed to stay 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 napping.”

“Yeah, sure thing. Be good to see this fellow with my own eyes, anyway.”

Making her first stop inside the promised washroom, Cassandra stared at herself in the cracked mirror. She looked just as bad as she felt, with deep bags underneath bloodshot eyes, and her hair all damp and messy. Her own body felt dirty and disgusting, a sensation amplified tenfold by the ongoing chaos and confusion, and she began to pace about the room, gesticulating wildly to shed excess energy.

One deep breath, then two, then three. Don’t panic, she thought. Besim is going to come up with a plan, just like he always does, and all this messy uncertainty will get tied up with a neat little bow. This shall pass. It always does.

Her impromptu mantra recited, Cassandra ran her hands through the sink and scrubbed them down in duplicate, just like she had done before leaving Istanbul. She wouldn’t truly feel clean without a proper shower at the very least, but a partial reprieve was a reprieve nonetheless.

Next, she continued gingerly down the hall and stepped into the side room where their guest lay asleep. He was a pale boy who looked about her age and reasonably handsome, with messy brown hair and flecks of dirt still on his face where the garrison’s medic had neglected to wipe him down. His clothes were unusually high-quality for someone who claimed to be a fugitive from justice, although they were torn and stained with mud.

“What did you do to make such a fuss?” Cassandra wondered aloud. The boy being in no position to respond, she shrugged and left him alone, closing the door quietly before returning to the others.

As she arrived, Besim waved her over to the circle of friends. “So, Cassandra, what is your evaluation of our new friend?” he asked once she’d rejoined the crowd.

“Utterly unremarkable is what I’d say. Just...seems like some guy. If I had to guess based on looks alone, I’d wager he’s your typical city-dwelling pretty boy. Nice house, cozy indoor job, probably gets all the girls. You know the type. Hell, sounds kind of like me back in school, minus the house.”

Besim rolled his eyes, but the thin smile on his face betrayed his amusement. “Boasting aside, Mayumi and I came to a similar conclusion. He doesn’t look at all threatening, but, then again, the same could be said of many heinous criminals. Regardless, we’re now committed to his defense, so we’ll have to see it through before we return to Istanbul to discuss your findings in the capitol.”

“We could still turn him over to try and get the loyalists off our back, 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 Directorate forgive and forget, especially considering they just got bombed, or something, and I’m not super into the idea of backing out now. So many lives spent today, we might as well get what we paid for.”

“And it would be a despicable thing to do if he really is innocent,” Cassandra said. “It’s not like the Directorate are strangers to outright murder. Pretty sure most of us who defected to Istanbul did so because we were ordered to kill someone who didn’t need killing.”

“Like you and Eirene.”

“Mmhmm. If they’ll paint a scared, lonely girl as a dangerous war criminal because they need a scapegoat, then yeah, I’m not about to take their word about this guy. He could be guilty, but we *know* Lancaster’s plotting something, considering what happened to the *Kolyma*, so I’m inclined to believe our new friend’s innocence.”

“Could even be linked to the explosion,” Eirene added. “If Keller dies, then Grand Admiral Lancaster becomes acting Director-General, and he’s shown no qualms about gunning down his rivals to serve his own weird agenda. Maybe he planted the bomb, and this ‘fugitive’ has some kind of evidence?”

“We should be so lucky. Would explain the kid’s fancy clothes if he was, like, some capitol page who overheard something he wasn’t supposed to, or that kind of thing. And that’d explain why the Skywatch wants him back so bad.”

“Not to shoot you down or anything, but wasn’t Lancaster in the audience himself?” Mayumi asked. “I don’t think he’d have blown himself up.”

“He and Marcus were conveniently on the podium when the bomb went off.”

“Ooh, yeah, that’s all kinds of suspicious.”

The remaining Peregrines continued to bide their time, waiting for opportunities to sneak away from Hotel India. In some few hours, but a single person had managed to escape, bringing their number down to eight, when the distinctive sound of cannon fire punctuated the air. All of the Peregrines instinctively took up defensive positions, only to realize that the cacophony was coming from above.

“Another airship?” Cassandra wondered. “Has Istanbul sent reinforcements?”

“Damn fools if they have. I certainly didn’t authorize this,” Besim said.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, could be anyone out there. C’mon, let’s check.”

All eight survivors dashed towards the outpost’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 silhouette in the shape of a manta ray setting it apart from the thinner Skywatch warships. If their friends back home had deployed the flagship, all of them knew it could only mean something serious had happened.

Faced with such 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...” Cassandra said, her voice trailing off as she watched the end of the battle.

“Yeah, this isn’t right. We’d better just ask the crew 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.”

Eirene shook her head. “No, there can’t be a war. If there is, we’ll lose, and everyone knows that. I’m sure the civilian government is working on a diplomatic solution as we speak.

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

“There’s still time to stop things from getting worse. 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.”

Once aboard the *Peregrine*, the survivors of Hotel India made for the briefing room alongside the fugitive, who was now conscious enough to walk – although not without Mayumi’s support. On the way there, they’d passed a mix of both militia airmen and civilians from Istanbul, their harrowed faces doing little to renew the group’s confidence. Those few who greeted them in the briefing room looked no different as they wearily saluted Besim.

“At ease, gentlemen. Now, tell me – why have you flown our flagship into an active warzone without explicit orders from myself? Where is the ship’s captain?” the old man asked.

“Captain Ozcan is...dead, sir,” answered one of the airmen, a young, skittish-looking fellow bearing the bars of a mere sergeant. “I-I was the highest-ranking one left until you all came aboard. Wish I could say we just meant to lend you a hand, but, really...it’s because we had no other choice.”

“I beg your pardon? Speak plain, boy – are we at war with the Directorate or not?”

“Not anymore. Istanbul surrendered.”

Cassandra’s heart dropped into her stomach. “Excuse me?” she said. “You’d better start from the beginning. What happened after the bombing?”

“We got the news of an explosion in Samara tower as it happened. An hour or so later, a Skywatch armada showed up demanding that we submit to an investigation,” the sergeant explained.

“On what grounds?”

“On the grounds that, given the ongoing conflict at Hotel India, they believed us responsible for the bombing.”

“What bullshit! They attacked us first!” Mayumi exclaimed.

“And everyone here understands that, but the Directorate’s people won’t hear anything except whatever *fantasy* their Media Administration concocts, which’ll be enough to make the occupation seem legitimate,” the sergeant said, clearly as frustrated as Cassandra and her friends were. “The militia put up a fight, of course, but our defenses were crushed almost immediately. It was all we could do to turn tail and run with as many refugees as we could fit.”

“And the ones who stayed behind?”

“The survivors sued for peace and signed a treaty with the Directorate. That was the last I heard.”

“So, you’re telling me they completely took over the city 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 *Kolyma* and this, Lancaster’s obviously trying to set us up. It’s lunacy!”

“I imagine the terms of this treaty weren’t favorable,” Besim said, changing the subject.

“You assume right, sir,” the sergeant replied. “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.”

“Oh, that sounds fun,” Mayumi said.

“The one blessing is that the civilian government acknowledged that the charges against us were fabricated, and that they have no intention of helping the UPD. I just hope they don’t endanger themselves on our behalf.”

“I hope so, too,” Cassandra replied. “And I don’t suppose the Directorate will let up on them if we turn ourselves in, would they?”

“A noble thought, but the loyalists are clearly not negotiating in good faith,” Besim said.

“Yeah, I thought as much. Imperialist bastards, they knew what they wanted and they took it...although, don’t you think that’s, like...a little weird?”

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

“Why would they want Istanbul so badly? It’s an old wreck, right? So why go to all this trouble just for us? At the conference they were talking about a war with another major power so that they could, I don’t know, tax everyone into space, so wouldn’t it make more sense to blame it all on one of the bigger fish in the pond, go to war, and win an actual empire instead of a bunch of poor refugees living in a bombed-out city?”

“Well, we are right in-between the Directorate and the Tehran Pact. Maybe they just needed us out of the way before they started the real war?” Eirene asked.

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, spit it out,” Mayumi 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.

“That’s the nice part, my friends. I always have something worthwhile to say,” he replied. “You see, within the Defense Administration, I had a simple but important task. I was to go undercover and keep *them* from plundering the wealth of knowledge my father holds.”

“And who is ‘them?’ The UPD?” Cassandra 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 Tehran Pact, what little remains of the Catholic Church, communists and capitalists alike! *Never* trust a capitalist, mark my words.”

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

“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. 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 effected my escape and ended up running into you. I daresay that was the greatest fortune you’ve had in some time, as my father will surely give you all the information and aid you require once you return me to him. Like you, he has no love for the Grand Admiral.”

Eirene looked pensive. “That *would* explain why Fairchild seems to be helping Lancaster with his plot,” she said. “Doesn’t tell us what Lancaster’s endgame is, but Jackson’s story checks out with everything else we know.”

“That, or Fairchild sent him to lure us into a trap,” Mayumi suggested.

“If you doubt me, I need only one person to go with me to my father’s headquarters, a base in Naples called Bright Lighthouse. Once they’ve confirmed my identity, they can report back, without ever putting your dear selves in danger.”

Cassandra didn’t want to trust Jackson or his father. Even if everything the boy said was true, Marcus Fairchild would no doubt have his own interests separate from those of the Peregrines. If she put her faith in him, there was no telling what compromises they would be forced to make for the sake of this alliance.

She didn’t trust them, but she had to. She owed herself that much.

“I can chaperone the kid. Being part of the Security Division doesn’t mean much without any place *to* secure, so I’m basically disposable,” Mayumi said.

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

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

“Fine. If you’re so dead set on being our ambassador, then far be it from me to deny you. Just be careful, okay?”

“You don’t need to mother me,” Mayumi said. “But thanks.”

Besim put his hands down on the table and looked around the assembled Peregrines, his face deadly serious. “I suppose we have a plan, then,” he said. “I can’t say I care much for her reasoning, but Miss Nagai will be more than capable of escorting our young friend to his father. It seems our fate now rests in the hands of both God and Marcus Fairchild.”

“Well, it would seem my father won’t have much slack to pick up if that’s the case,” Jackson laughed. “Still, I promise he won’t disappoint.”

“Spare us your promises. Actions will be our salvation, not empty words.”

“I agree. Alas, I have neither wings nor fins to ferry you across the sea, so I’m afraid the burden of transportation lies with you.”

“Very well. Eirene, you can fly Jackson and Mayumi to this ‘Bright Lighthouse?’”



Eirene didn't say anything, but nodded to confirm what everyone already knew.

"Good. In that case, Cassandra, I'm giving you command of the *Peregrine*. Ordinarily, it would have gone to Ian, being the First Officer, but..."

"Yeah, I get it. I won't let you down. What about you, though? What are you going to do?" Cassandra asked.

Besim opened his mouth to speak, but paused, and averted his gaze. "I'm returning to Istanbul," he finally said. "Though our army is defeated, the people will not have given up on the city, and so neither will I."

"Then let us come with you!" the newly-appointed acting captain protested.

"No," Besim said bluntly. "You all are needed elsewhere. It's my luxury and my burden to defend my home, so I will help my countrymen on the ground while you pursue what leads you can."

"But..."

"That's an order, *Captain* Eliades. I can make my way back to Istanbul on my own, so this is where we must part ways. God willing, by the time you're ready to return, there'll be an active resistance ready to receive you."

Cassandra suddenly felt sick. She wanted to object, fearing both what might happen to Besim and what might happen to her without his guidance, but the determination on his face made it clear he would not be swayed. "Yes, sir," she choked out with a half-hearted nod.

Sensing her uneasiness, Besim smiled warmly at her. "Have no fear," he said. "If the Crusaders couldn't finish me, the spineless maggots from Athens won't fare any better. And as for you, I have faith that you'll find success, even without my leadership."

It was all Cassandra could do to pray that he was right.

\* \* \*

Morning sunlight poured into Istanbul's great Hagia Sophia through the cracked windows and holes left by stray artillery. Motes of dust, unsettled by the bombardment, drifted through the air, their shine giving the halls a haunting, ethereal atmosphere.

The dead silence was broken by a tide of footsteps, born from a dozen pairs of leather boots striking dirty marble. Ten men and two women, most of them tired and battle-weary, entered the grand mosque, those few who bore weapons performing a cursory sweep of the area.

“You needn’t bother with that,” one of the men said, a copper-haired youth who looked noticeably greener than his comrades, yet wore the outfit of a provincial governor. “My people already secured the site. No insurgents or booby traps to be found.”

Behind him stood Jacob Lancaster, now bearing the triple titles of Grand Admiral, Grand Marshal, and Director-General he had inherited from his deceased colleagues. The grizzled old man frowned as he scanned the surroundings, just in case the assessment had been wrong, but nodded in acknowledgement once he had verified their relative safety.

“My, isn’t this rather quaint?” the younger man continued, peering into the eyes of the Virgin Mary. “You’d never see anything like this made today.”

“We’re not here to admire the art, Governor Sokolov. We’re here to establish a base of operations,” Lancaster said.

“Yes, right, of course. It would just be a shame if our presence here attracted enemy fire.”

“You needn’t worry about that. According to reports, the rebels avoided major historical sites during the battle, which suggests they share your attitude towards preservation.”

“Of course. They’re rebels, not barbarians. However, it only takes one disgruntled insurgent to do permanent damage, so you can understand my concern.” Sokolov made a gesture towards a conspicuously fresh hole in the building’s wall, which Lancaster ignored.

The Director-General looked over the young governor. It made him uneasy to entrust an untamed frontier to such an inexperienced leader, but, amidst the ongoing tumult, the pool of trustworthy candidates had grown quite shallow. Magnus Keller had spoken highly of Sokolov’s talents prior to his untimely demise, and if the Director-General trusted his loyalty and his talents, then Lancaster supposed he would have to, as well.

“I expect this episode of violence to be fleeting,” Lancaster reassured his subordinate. “The *Peregrine* may have escaped, but there’s not much a single warship can do, and the rest of the city has already surrendered.” He laughed darkly. “It seems they don’t have much will to

fight. What you – all of you – should be more concerned about is that we now share a border with the Tehran Pact, who may see this as an act of aggression.”

“Is that not technically true?” Sokolov asked.

Lancaster scowled. “Believe me, I had no desire to lay claim to this...smoldering ruin, nor to threaten the Pact’s settlements in Anatolia, but the Peregrines forced my hand. Our presence here is a purely defensive maneuver, I assure you.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that.”

“Nonetheless, our neighbors may not see it that way. I’m sure there are many long meetings between Tehran and Athens to come.”

“I certainly don’t envy you that task,” Sokolov laughed.

“Spare me your pity. It’s my job to handle such matters. You have your own important work to attend to, namely, bringing this forsaken city back into the modern era. Belligerent as they may be, they’re our people now, and deserve the same comforts as we enjoy”

“Oh, I already have plans for that. Education and public works programs, restoration of historical sites, trade deals with the capital to stimulate economic growth. In time, I’m sure the locals come to appreciate everything we have to offer, and become model citizens.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” The Director-General turned to look around at the rest of his staff and nodded in stern satisfaction. “Now, given that our position is secure in your capable hands, I’m going to make my own rounds of the perimeter. I could use some time to think,” he said.

Offering the others a half-hearted salute, Lancaster left the old mosque. Finally, he was well and truly alone, save for any rebels who might be lurking in the mist. If anyone was there, then let them come, he thought, issuing a silent challenge. Not a soul appeared.

“Shame that we should meet again like this. I’d hoped to make a better second impression,” he muttered into the breeze, addressing the city itself as if it were an old acquaintance. The smell of smoke and powder lingered all around him, even though the fires were out and the guns had long since gone quiet. It was a familiar sensation, one that brought back unpleasant memories.

“We’ll do it right this time,” Lancaster continued. “Not like the crusade.” He spoke the last word with palpable disgust before resuming his walk.

His bones began to ache in protest, reminding him how little time he had left to carry out his grand ambition. In light of this, and perhaps inspired by the holy ground upon which he stood, he found himself praying for succor for the first time in as long as he could remember. God gave no response, not that Lancaster had expected one.

Distant sounds of gunfire interrupted his one-sided communion, though they were far enough away that he felt no need to evacuate. Instead, he stood in place, fists and teeth clenched out of frustration, and simply waited for the bout of violence to cease, the distinct sound of Skywatch rifles making it clear who the victor had been. The futility of it all would have been comical if it weren’t so sad.

Several Skywatch guards came rushing to his side, relieved to see that their charge was unharmed. At the front of the pack was the ever-eager Governor Sokolov, somehow already short of breath. Clearly, he wasn’t the athletic type.

“Sir, you really should come back inside,” the younger man said. “The resistance seems more active than we thought.”

“The last gasp of men too stubborn to realize they’ve lost. Nothing more.”

“As I mentioned earlier, it only takes one.”

Lancaster looked in the direction the gunshots had come from, then back at the governor. “If it makes you feel better, then fine, I’ll come,” he said, receiving a look of great relief in return.

“I appreciate your cooperation, Director, and I hope I don’t seem overly paranoid. Things are hectic right now, and it’d make us all more comfortable to minimize undue risk. Surely you understand,” Sokolov remarked.

“While I share your frustrations, the few remaining thorns in our side will soon realize their folly or be plucked out, and I have every confidence that you’ll make good on your promise of renaissance,” Lancaster replied. “The path forward is clear, Governor. All you have to do is follow it.”

## *Chapter 5 – Perseverance*

*“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 do apologies.”

“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 bite of the lip, 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 on the Directorate’s northern border. 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. Cassandra 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 UPD 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 UPD 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 science can do when left unchecked. 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 technological 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 Directorate 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 UPD, 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 find the truth. Make sure everybody knows who’s responsible.”

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 mostly 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 UPD 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.

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

“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.”

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.

\* \* \*

That evening, the two of them caught the first glimpse of their destination. Ian had been to Patras before. Unlike Athens, it was still recognizable as the city it had been before the rise of the UPD, 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 bridge still spanning the nearby strait.

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

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, here,” Charlotte explained. “I recommend you get some rest. We will take off once night has fully fallen, and, although our ship has an autopilot, I am sure we could both use some rest beforehand. The beds here 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.

“*Bien*. Now, follow me.”

Near exhausted, they made the short trip to the bedroom – in reality, a repurposed office wing – where they both set down their bags. Charlotte 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 we arrive in Kasimira,” she said. “There may be some deodorant in the bathroom down the hall, but nothing more.”

“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 UPD 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.

\* \* \*

Elsewhere, Cassandra 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 came as a relief for the newly-appointed Captain still getting used to running a ship. Cassandra doubted that this tranquility would last, however.

“We should be near Malta, soon,” Mayumi said, a hint of poorly-masked apprehension in her 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.

“We’re definitely close enough now. Anything to report?” Cassandra asked after a tense minute.

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,” Cassandra commanded, folding her 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,” Cassandra said.

“The *Peregrine* has about seven days of fuel left, barring any unforeseen complications,” Besim 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?” Cassandra 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,” Besim said, his face grim, “we use the last of our fuel to land somewhere outside the UPD 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 Cassandra’s 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, Cassandra was alone, as her friend was no doubt preparing for her voyage to Naples. Cassandra 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?” Cassandra 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?”

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

“Don’t worry about any of that,” Cassandra 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.”

Cassandra 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,” Cassandra 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,” Cassandra 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.”

Cassandra 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,” Cassandra 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 Cassandra 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, Cassandra couldn’t help but notice that there was still the faintest echo of sadness behind her smile.

\* \* \*

As night fell, the Inquisition’s flyer took off, with Charlotte at the helm and Ian in the passenger’s seat. Facing naught but clear skies, their journey ahead looked to be a safe one.

“We make sure that all of our aircraft are legally registered with the Directorate’s Transportation Administration,” Charlotte explained. “Our takeoff will not raise any alarms. If we are spotted approaching Kasimiran airspace, they may be suspicious, but, by then, it will be

far too late for them to intervene. Even that scenario is unlikely, as commercial traffic between the two countries is not unheard of.”

Ian nodded and gave Charlotte a thumbs up. He lay back as far as he could in his seat, which wasn’t very much, and tried to relax as air coursed through the craft’s tiny vectored thrust engines, sending it skyward. The whole cockpit shook and rattled, and, as much as he wanted to have faith in Charlotte and her Inquisition, he found himself unconfident in the condition of the vessel.

“You sure this thing’s skyworthy?” Ian asked.

“Skywo...hmm? Ah, yes. It will fly,” Charlotte reassured him.

“Better be. If I make it out of Samara Tower just to fall to my death in some rusty piece of scrap...”

“You will not. I promise. Remember, it is my own life on the line, too.”

“If you say so.”

The little flyer continued to cut across the sky, leaving the city of Patras behind. Every patch of turbulence they met caused another bout of tremors, but the craft lived up to Charlotte’s promise, and they seemed to be making good headway. If nothing else, they’d reach Kasimiran airspace within the expected timeframe.

\* \* \*

High above, masked from their radar, a stealth fighter marked with Skywatch insignias cruised through the moonlit clouds. Its lone pilot checked his own sensors, and, pursing his lips, let his thumb rest above a button on the control stick. He waited for just a second before two words appeared on the screen in front of him: TARGET LOCKED.

## *Chapter 6 – 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 Cassandra 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 Cassandra 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.

Cassandra 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 Cassandra 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 Army troops. A few Skywatch officers too, looks like. 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 soldiers 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 hostiles 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 muttered.

“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, Cassandra, 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 soldiers 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 loyalists off her own back, to be sure.

Mayumi’s eyes narrowed. Her hand moved down to her holster. The soldiers drew closer to the car, one of them heading left, one of them heading right, and the last standing back to provide cover. As they did so, she noted that these troops were regular army units of middling rank, and were not equipped with barriers. That presented an opportunity.

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 target with a single shot to the head.

One remained.

For the first time, Mayumi made eye 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 courage 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 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 was flying home and encountered 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.

“Bright Lighthouse. I wonder what business you all have here,” 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 *Kolyma*. 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 7 – The Histories*

*“ayy lmao.”*

- *Ayy lmao*

Ian clutched his bruised ribcage, limping through the Neapolitan streets. Behind him, a column of black smoke poured from the flaming wreckage of the flyer now thoroughly embedded in an old storefront. He counted his lucky stars that the craft had been sturdier than it had felt in the air, with enough attention paid to safety that neither he nor Charlotte had sustained major wounds during their crash-landing.

Surviving the impact had only been the first of their trials that day, however. Not long after they emerged from the rubble, loyalist troops had arrived to secure the kill, forcing him and Charlotte apart during the chaos. Where the girl was now, Ian didn’t know. He hoped she still lived.

[TODO: Ian wanders for a bit, having at least one fight that he wins with high difficulty. Eventually, he overhears the gunfight with Charlotte and regroups with her as she leaves the Lighthouse]

For a moment, Ian refused to believe that the figure in front of him was Charlotte. That she had not only survived, but found her way back to him seemed too good to be true, and yet, here she was, alive and mostly intact.

“You’re hurt,” he said. “Is it bad?”

Charlotte shook her head. “*Non, c’est pas mal,*” she replied in French, confirming that her injuries were not severe before switching back to English. “I had a brief encounter with the Skywatch, but was lucky to encounter less...skilled officers.”

“Yeah, wish I could say the same. Guy I fought was a beast – one of the Tower Guard.”

“The Tower Guard? What was one of them doing in Naples?”

“Beats me. They usually don’t go anywhere the Director-General isn’t, and I doubt he’s lounging around in this little shithole.”

“Curious, but we should not waste time thinking about it. We should get moving. Are you well enough to continue our journey?”

“Yeah, sure am.”

“*Parfait.* Let us continue, then.”

As they walked, trying to keep a low profile, Ian held up his hand, a skeptical expression on his face. “Hold on, where exactly are we headed?” he asked. “We can’t exactly go back to the ship, you know.”

Charlotte seemed offended. “Of course I know that. I may be young, but I am not stupid. There is a train that runs all the way up the peninsula from here, crossing the Alps through the Mont-Blanc Tunnel – our gateway into Kasimiran lands, and the site of the Inquisition’s strongest fortress. Not our original route, but close enough”

“The Skywatch just shot down an Inquisition ship,” Ian pointed out. “You think they’re still running trains between here and there, or that they’ll let us on if they are?”

Charlotte pursed her lips, deep in thought. “You make a good point, but I do not think we need to worry. I have it on good authority that the trains in this city are still running, and you may remember that our vessel was registered as a civilian transport. If the Skywatch shot it down, they did so without knowing it was Kasimiran.”

“You think they misidentified us?”

“That is one possibility.”

“Meaning the Directorate isn’t at war with Kasimira. Yet.”

“I see no reason for our relationship to have deteriorated so quickly. The situation has always been...tense, but the Directorate has not laid any blame for the bombing upon Kasimira, and, even if they did, to strike first by shooting down a ‘civilian’ flyer is a questionable opening move, to say the least.”

Ian considered what she’d said. There certainly was a suspicious quality to the whole incident. Perhaps they truly had been mistaken for a Peregrine ship or some other enemies of the state, or perhaps they’d accidentally violated some manner of no-fly zone. Whatever the case, the train seemed like a viable and attractive option, especially given that they’d finally be able to get some sleep after a whole day of travel.

“Fine, we’ll take the train,” he conceded. “Just answer me this – how can you be sure they won’t just arrest us at the station? We were just in a shootout with their security forces, and I’m sure our foes were able to relay a brief description of us to their friends before they died.”

“The railway is operated by the Transportation Administration. The Transportation Administration is led by Marcus Fairchild. While the Inquisition has few eyes inside Bright Lighthouse, I have my own suspicions that Fairchild and his people will not be eager to take calls from the Skywatch.”

“Suspicious. Conjecture.” Ian shrugged. “It’ll have to do.”

“Yes. Still, we should move quickly. Even Fairchild cannot ignore the Skywatch *forever*.”

\* \* \*

Arriving at the train station, Ian was caught off-guard by how normal it all seemed. The handful of passengers waiting on the platform seemed entirely unperturbed by the morning’s events, and, indeed, were going about their business as if nothing had happened at all. Watching for any signs of hostility, he and Charlotte approached the ticket booth, paid their fare, and, after a brief security check, were seated in their own cabin aboard the eight o’clock northbound train.



The train's whistle sounded and its wheels began to turn. Ian finally let himself relax, sinking into the plush seat beneath him.

"See? What did I tell you?" Charlotte said in French, looking smug.

"You got lucky," Ian replied.

"Maybe. I think we were owed a bit of good luck, though."

"Hah, as if the world would be that fair."

"You're right, of course. We in the Inquisition aren't in the business of relying on chance. We prefer to make our own luck. Still, would be nice to think that someone out there's watching over us."

"You're religious, then?" Ian asked.

Charlotte pursed her lips, giving Ian the impression that he'd asked her a difficult question. Eventually, she just shrugged. "I want to believe there's a God," she said. "I think a lot of things would be a lot easier if there were."

"But you don't."

Charlotte shook her head, and then there was silence. Outside, rolling plains flew past, dotted with the ruins of cities left behind. Clouds masked the sky, and it started to rain.

"They probably won't let us smoke in here, will they?" Charlotte asked, changing the topic. She took a packet of cigarettes out of her pocket and pinched one in between two fingers.

"Probably not."

"I'm tempted to do it anyway, though. Who's going to find out?"

"You really want to risk blowing our cover like that? All for a smoke?"

Charlotte took another look at the cigarette and frowned. As she put it away, a single yawn escaped her mouth. It was almost cute, Ian thought.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Ian said. "Get some rest. Lord knows we could both use it."

“Agreed.”

Both of them lay down on their respective seats and closed their eyes. The steady rhythm of the wheels and the gentle pitter-patter of the rain blended together into an ambient medley that lulled the two youths to much-anticipated sleep.

\* \* \*

Ian’s body awoke before he did. Even as his eyes fluttered open, it took him a moment to notice that the rain had ceased and the clouds parted, allowing a clear sky to welcome them to Kasimira.

“Did you get a nice rest?” Charlotte asked.

“Yes.”

“We’re almost there.”

“I figured.”

“Do you want to see something exciting? There’s an observation car a little way down from here. You’ll be able to see the fortress as we approach.”

Ian shrugged and massaged the back of his neck, sore from sleeping without a proper head rest. “Yeah, sure, sounds great,” he said with less enthusiasm than Charlotte would have hoped.

From atop the glass-domed observation deck, Ian looked ahead. The Alpine mountains loomed all around them, lush with greenery, and standing tall at the base were the walls of a fortress so large it seemed an artificial mountain in its own right. Towers, antennas, and gun turrets peeked out from behind the mighty bulwark, upon which had been painted a single bold name: Herodotus.

Charlotte gazed upon the citadel with pride. “The shield of the Inquisition,” she said. “It’s entirely self-sustaining and impregnable, with a barrier strong enough to hold off an atom bomb. We control several such fortresses throughout the Alps, but this is the largest.”

“It can survive a nuke? How much power does that thing take?” Ian asked, skeptically.

In response, Charlotte only raised an eyebrow at him.

“Classified. Of course. I’m guessing I wouldn’t be wrong to say the answer is ‘a lot,’ though.”

“You could say that, yes” Charlotte replied.

A pair of heavy blast doors, barely visible at the base of the concrete behemoth, slid open to admit the train through the first set of walls. Ian noticed the faint shimmer of the fortress’ kinetic barrier seems to bend around the train as they sped through it, half-confirming Charlotte’s tale about the defenses. With luck, he would never have a chance to see its strength tested.

“We’re through the shield,” Ian noted. “Didn’t even have to slow down, from the feel of it. If you’ll allow me some speculation, I’d wager the barrier is calibrated to a rather low sensitivity. Given that this train wasn’t big or fast enough to trigger it, you must only use the barrier for heavy artillery and missiles, relying on other defenses to stop the rest. Keeps the power consumption down, too, which I’m sure is already immense for a shield of this size.”

There was an awkward silence as the train continued through the fortress, entering the tunnel that would finally deliver them to Kasimira. “Is that all?” Charlotte finally asked, eyeing Ian with curiosity.

“You testing me?”

“I’m testing something. If you have anything else to add, please do so.”

In the darkness of the tunnel, Ian scratched the back of his neck. He hadn’t expected to be put on the spot. What did she think he was missing?

“The shield,” he suddenly exclaimed. “Keeping it on all the time *should* be a colossal waste of power...unless you’re expecting an attack. The Inquisition is preparing for war, and you’re worried that your enemies will strike first.”

Charlotte smiled and patted Ian on the back. “Very astute. We conceal what we can from the enemy, but an attentive agent can learn a great deal from the tip of an iceberg – as you’ve proven,” she said.

As if to illustrate Ian's conclusion, they emerged once more into the daylight, and he was greeted by a train on adjacent track carrying tanks and other armored vehicles, and a look skywards revealed several ring-like airships patrolling the skies. Yet more gun emplacements adorned this side of Herodotus, and Ian resisted the urge to ask why so much firepower was aimed towards the Kasimirans' own lands. The answer was no doubt 'classified,' anyway.

Having taken in all the sights, Ian and Charlotte returned to their cabin to collect what few belongings had made it this far with them. Before long, the train pulled lazily into Geneva, depositing the two, still weary from their journey, onto the platform with little more than the shirts on their backs.

"Well...welcome to Geneva," Charlotte said, gesturing all around them. Ian followed her hand with his gaze. While he didn't know to what extent the city had been damaged during the storms, it was clear that whatever wounds were inflicted had long since healed, just as well as the Directorate's own megacities. Everything looked the same as the old-world photographs Ian had seen before, save for a few towers that now dotted the skyline. One particularly large building caught his eye, a large, marble-white spire with great glass panes that displayed its inner workings and a great statue of an angel adorning the top.

"I'm guessing that's the capitol building?" Ian asked.

"It is. Powerful men do like their tall towers. Our Chancellor Leuthold has little in common with your Director-General, either the new one or the old, but, in that one respect, they are quite similar."

"Is that so? What *is* this Leuthold like, then? Or is that classified information, too?"

Charlotte looked at Ian, unimpressed. "He's a good man," she said. "He founded Kasimira to be a nation of philosophers, theologians, historians, and, during his years in power, has brought millions of survivors into the fold whilst protecting them from threats. Both external and internal."

"Internal threats being your jurisdiction, right?"

“Obviously. All Inquisitors report directly to Chancellor Leuthold, although he usually leaves us to our own devices. External threats are handled by the army, led by magistrates who oversee their own lands. It’s almost feudal, in a way.”

“Sounds like quite the well-oiled machine you’ve all got here.”

“Most of the time, but not always,” Charlotte said with a sudden grimness in her tone. “Remember, I brought you here for a reason. I need all the help I can get rooting out certain *hostile elements*, and a man talented enough to infiltrate Samara Tower will be a useful asset.”

“Right, I remember what you told me. I also hope *you* remember that, as soon as we make contact with the Peregrines, I’m headed back to my friends. That was our deal, right?”

“If we find them and they’re still alive, I won’t stop you.”

“Then I’ll do whatever I can to assist in the meantime.”

Charlotte smiled warmly at Ian and nodded in gratitude. “Come along, then,” she said. “I’ll show you where you’ll be staying. Don’t worry, it’ll be a lot more comfortable than our accommodations thus far.”

“Glad to hear it,” Ian said.

\* \* \*

Ian and Charlotte stood in front of a four-story building, that, other than the banner depicting a stylized scroll and dagger, looked no different than those around it. Everything about it seemed warm and comfortable, an especially inviting sight after such an arduous journey.

“Alright, this here’s the dormitory for junior Inquisitors like myself,” Charlotte said, pointing at the front door. “I’ll talk to the front desk about getting a room for you, where you can finally take a shower. Lord knows I’ll be taking one myself. After that, I’ll have some food and a fresh set of clothes sent up to your room.”

“And then we get to work, I assume?”

Charlotte laughed. “No, you’ll be taking today off. Rest, get acquainted with the city, all that. Tomorrow’s when you’ll dip your toes into the pool, so to speak.”

“I do like the sound of that,” Ian said.

As promised, Charlotte helped Ian get settled into a single-person room on the third floor of the building, which made him feel like a university student on his first day of school. His young companion bid him farewell with a cheerful smile and a promise that she’d meet him back at the lobby later that evening, to give him a chance to rest and recuperate on his own. Once she was gone, Ian threw aside the dirty rags he’d been wearing, took a shower hot enough to burn away his growing anxiety, and collapsed naked into the bed.

\* \* \*

The sun was already setting by the time Ian woke up. He took a moment to reflect on the damage this day had likely done to his sleep schedule before practically falling out of bed and changing into the clothes Charlotte had sent him. They were simple, grey cotton garments; functional, but not terribly fashionable.

As he pulled up his pants and fastened his belt, it occurred to Ian that Charlotte had never mentioned any form of payment for the work he’d be doing. Hopefully, he thought, he’d be compensated with more than just room and board – at least enough to modernize his new wardrobe. Ian resolved to ask his new friend about that later.

Suddenly, he heard a knock on the door. It was a soft, gentle rapping, which led Ian to expect Charlotte had returned, and yet, when he opened the door, he was greeted by a figure noticeably shorter than he expected.

“Monsieur Dayal?” The girl in front of him asked, with the same Parisian accent as Charlotte. “My sister sent me to get you. She says she’s sorry, but she had some work to finish before you two meet up again. Shouldn’t be too long, so but I guess she wanted to let you know.”

“Nice of her, I suppose. Thought she wasn’t going to be working today, though?”

“She thought you might ask that, and said to remind you that her words were that *you’ll* be taking the day off. My sister, on the other hand, has things that need doing.”

As she spoke, Ian got the impression that even this girl was evaluating him, and that he had fallen short of her expectations. Even though she seemed like she was barely a teenager, it was enough to make him shiver.

“Fair enough, she did seem like a workaholic. Lead the way,” he said, trying to stay cool. The girl nodded and walked out. Ian followed, closing and locking the door behind him.

As they walked down the hallway, he took another look at the girl. She was a head shorter than her sister, though otherwise similar in build and complexion, save for a few zits on her face. Had he not known otherwise, Ian could easily have mistaken the child for a pubescent version of Charlotte herself.

“So, kid, what’s your name?” he asked.

“Emma. Emma Aucoin...although now that I think about it, I probably didn’t need to clarify,” the girl answered.

“Well, then, I’m pleased to make your acquaintance, Emma. I have to say, your English seems a bit more natural than your sister’s. What’s with that?”

Emma shrugged. “Pretty much everyone here’s multilingual, but I’m sure you expected that. Charlotte, though, she...never really was all that fond of English. Or anything other than French, for that matter.”

“I guess everyone has their preferences. Most folks I know like their native tongue best, so I’m not surprised Charlotte’s the same way.”

“Joke’s on her, though – most business here is done in English. Speaking of which, do you know what exactly she brought you here to do? I have to say, I’m curious.”

Ian pursed his lips, mulling over his response. “I’m not sure she’d want me to say,” he explained, remembering Charlotte’s own secrecy. “Not that she gave me much information to spill in the first place. All I know is that she’s doing some kind of internal investigation, and is under the impression that her enemies and my enemies may be the same, or at least in league with one another. Hence our cooperation.”

“Ooh, sounds spicy. Good luck with that.”

“Honestly, I could use less excitement in our life, but if it helps me get the Peregrines back together, it’ll be worth it,” Ian said.

\* \* \*

For a short while, Ian waited in the building's lobby with Emma, standing in awkward silence. Eventually, Charlotte arrived in a clear state of frustration, her brow furrowed and her fists clenched. She took a deep breath and tried to smile.

"You seem upset. Is something wrong?" Ian asked, making sure to use her favored language in the hopes it might better soothe her.

Charlotte only shook her head. "No, it's nothing," she replied. "Obstruction from the Magistracy. Nothing I'm not used to."

"Meyer again?" Emma asked.

"Yes. You'll surely meet him later, Ian" she continued, pre-empting his question. "He's not a pleasant fellow, but one we have to work with nonetheless."

"I've worked with my fair share of unpleasant types."

"Good. You'll need that experience in our line of work. But that can wait until tomorrow. Tonight, we celebrate our partnership."

"Indeed! I look forward to it. I'm sure a woman of your profession has a carefully-planned agenda for the night."

"Oh yes, I've selected a series of activities that will allow me to glean whatever I need to know about my new ally. By the time the night's over, I'll understand every aspect of your psyche, down to the finest minutiae." Charlotte gave him a sweet smile, implying that she was joking, but Ian still got the impression that there was some truth to what she said. For her part, Emma just shrugged again, as if to say he was on his own when it came to dealing with her sister, and they both followed her out the door.

As it turned out, Charlotte's "agenda" involved a lakeside restaurant not too far from Ian's new apartment. On the way there, she pointed out all kinds of landmarks and other points of interest, such as shops whose wares she considered particularly high-quality. Emma pestered her for some ice cream from one such locale, but Charlotte rebuked her impatience, telling the girl that she'd have to wait until after dinner.



The lights inside the restaurant were dimmed and warm, giving it a cozy, rustic atmosphere. They were seated at a small, round booth nestled in a central island, and given a glass of water each to hold them over as they perused the menu.

“Hmm, I could really go for some chicken, but the sausage and sauerkraut also sounds good,” Ian said.

“Why not get both? I’m sure you’re hungry,” Charlotte replied.

“My internal rhythm has already been disrupted enough without me entering a cycle of starving and gorging myself. The chicken will be plenty, I think.”

“Suit yourself, monsieur Dayal. I, on the other hand, have no intention of holding back.”

Noting Charlotte’s petite frame, Ian practically snorted in disbelief, but, when the time came to place their orders, she did in fact request a veritable feast all for herself. Emma, by contrast, seemed content with a small vegetarian platter. Evidently, the sisters were not alike in *every* way.

“So,” Charlotte opened up in between bites of steak. “These friends of yours you’re looking for, what are they like? I imagine they’re good people if you want so badly to go back to them.”

“Most of them are fine folks. Our official leader is a man named Besim Karahan, an ex-Crusader who was the original captain of the UNS *Peregrine*, which is where we got our name. Fortunately, he’s very hands-off, kind of like how you described your Chancellor. Never did care much for micromanagers, anyway. Only thing I really have against the man is some of the company he keeps, like this one industrialist type who’s obviously just in it for the money. Of course, you need money to fuel a revolution, so...”

“I understand. Many of my own superiors have questionable motives, but, if it keeps us all aligned, I have to put up with that. It’s just how it is.”

“Mmm. Just how it is.” Ian took another bite of chicken and washed it down with some wine. “Luckily, my peers are a lot nicer. Mayumi’s a little weird but she’s always been supportive of the rest of us. My friends Cassandra and Eirene are a good couple of girls, too.”

“You’re close to quite a few women, I see,” Charlotte noted.

“If you’re wondering whether any of them is my girlfriend, the answer is no. Cassandra and Eirene are lesbians, Mayumi’s not fit for a long-term relationship, and I’ve been too busy to meet any women outside work.”

As he finished his explanation, Ian noticed Emma staring at him, pityingly. “I guess that’s good for a spy,” she said. “No attachments for an enemy to exploit.”

“I take it you’ve watched a lot of movies where the hero’s lover gets kidnapped?”

“A few.”

“Well, don’t let it get to you. If you run away from personal relationships because they might be used to hurt you, you’ll die a sad, lonely old woman.”

“Or I’ll die in young in some battle, somewhere. If the UPD decides to come north...”

“Aren’t you a little young to be thinking like that?” Ian asked, mildly shocked.

“Not really. I do military training, same as the other kids my age. It’s supposed to instill discipline. Sometimes they take us along on low-risk missions so we can learn on the job and see the world at the same time, a duty I’m happy to carry out.”

Ian nearly dropped his fork. “You do *what*?” he asked. “Charlotte, your Inquisition uses child soldiers?”

“No, we absolutely do not,” Charlotte replied, firmly. “Unfortunately...the same cannot be said of the magistracy. They promise to shield the cadets from actual combat until they come of age, which is easily done during peacetime, but I worry what will happen when war does break out. Just like you said before, the Directorate has quite the appetite.”

“But internal affairs is your entire job! How can you just stand by and let this happen?”

“Believe me, I’d love to put an end to the practice, but the reality is that the Inquisition lacks the influence to effect meaningful change. At best, I could except Emma from service by recruiting her as an aide, but then she’d have to come on *my* missions, and I don’t think anybody wants that.”

Ian set down his utensils and stared Charlotte down. “What is it you really brought me here to do?” he asked, fully aware that they had broken their agreement not to discuss work that night.

Charlotte looked solemn. Her eyes darted back and forth furtively, and then she leaned in closer to Ian, who reciprocated the gesture. “We believe the Magistracy is plotting a coup,” she explained. “They grow weary of peace and seek to replace Leuthold with a chancellor more eager to expand our borders. Every year, they militarize further, and for what?”

“...To attack the Directorate. It’s the only target that makes sense. You think they bombed Samara Tower and killed Magnus to destabilize the government and turn them into easy prey...meaning my people really were just caught in the crossfire.”

“That’s the leading theory, yes,” Charlotte said with an apologetic tone. “If we can prove it, we can take down the Magistracy and clear your names in one fell swoop.”

Ian looked between Charlotte and Emma. He still wasn’t sure whether they could be trusted. The elder sister, at least, almost certainly knew more than she let on – understandable, given the nature of her job, and the younger, while most likely earnest in her convictions, was still a child, and thus unreliable.

“If what you’re saying is true,” he said, choosing his words carefully, “then you will have my assistance, as pledged. I’m not going to back down now.”

Charlotte cut herself another piece of steak and held it up to her mouth. “I’m glad to hear it,” she said before taking a bite.

Ian followed suit. It wouldn’t do to wait for his dinner to get cold.

## *Chapter 8 – Tying the Knot*

*“ayy lmao.”*

- *Ayy lmao*

When Fairchild’s tanker *Marigold* first approached the *Peregrine*, Cassandra was fully prepared for a battle, but it never came. She and the rest of the crew were equally shocked to find that the inbound vessel, while not necessarily friendly, was at least not hostile, and bore a cordial invitation to meet with Administrator Fairchild and discuss an alliance. The fuel and rations he had sent were a godsend for the crew that would stay behind with the flagship while the negotiations took place, although Cassandra noted silently that Fairchild had not offered any ammunition. Clearly, she thought, he meant to keep them alive but unable to fight for themselves.

“It’ll be good to see Mayumi again,” Eirene said, walking alongside Cassandra as the two of them boarded the tanker, the last of their party to do so.

“Come on, she hasn’t even been gone two days,” Cassandra replied.

“I know, but it feels a lot longer than that. I’m just glad to hear she’s safe – assuming Fairchild isn’t luring us into a trap.”

“Besim said the *Marigold*’s captain set him up on a video call with Bright Lighthouse, and that Mayumi was there to greet him. She was wounded, but she claimed those injuries came from Directorate forces, and I don’t think she could be convinced to lie, no matter what they did to her.”

“I guess, but...” Eirene trailed off, lost in thought.

“But what?” Cassandra asked.

“...Never mind, I’m just being paranoid. Fairchild was researching human consciousness, so I thought maybe he could have, ah, manipulated her mind somehow. It’s a stupid idea, I know.”

Cassandra shrugged. “Pretty far-fetched, but we do need to be ready for a trap, just in case.”

Ahead of them, Besim and Hector were already making themselves comfortable in the cramped crew quarters, alongside the few other airmen that had volunteered to come along for extra security. Originally, Cassandra was to have stayed behind as acting captain of the *Peregrine* in Besim’s absence, but she and Eirene had insisted on coming to recover their friend. Without much cause to argue, the senior officers allowed it, and left the deck in the hands of other trusted crewmates.

The ship rocked under their feet as it separated from the *Peregrine*, withdrawing its boarding ramp. Unlike the majestic dreadnought, the tanker was an ugly, bulky thing that bludgeoned its way through the sky instead of cutting, but was also surprisingly quick. When the announcement came that they had arrived in Naples, Cassandra hardly felt that they’d been travelling for any time at all. Because Bright Lighthouse lacked the proper infrastructure to receive a vessel of such size, a small dropship conveyed the diplomatic party to the surface, marking the end of their journey.

The small craft's doors slid open, and Cassandra and Eirene found themselves face-to-face with Fairchild's own envoys. To everyone's relief, Mayumi was among their number. She smiled and waved with her uninjured arm.

"I'm glad you seem to be enjoying yourself, as per our agreement," Cassandra said with a smile as they approached each other.

"Oh yeah, I'm doing super, super good." Mayumi leaned a bit on the crutch she was walking with. "What about you? Did you...?"

Cassandra only shook her head. Eirene looked at her quizzically, but said nothing.

"Shame. Well, anyway, I actually pulled off the part that really matters!" Mayumi continued, gesturing towards the other diplomats, who had already begun fraternizing. "I delivered Jackson to his father, with only a *very minor* incident along the way, and convinced the old man to hear out our old men. Ball's in their court now."

"So it would seem."

"Meaning there's actually, really, truly time to relax. To have some fun." Mayumi winked at Cassandra.

"I definitely wouldn't mind a girls' night out," Eirene said. "Maybe you could show us around the town, if you got any chance to see the sights before...whatever it was that happened."

"Oh yeah, Jackson was a *great* tour guide. Kind of unironically, even – it's just hard to show someone around the city when you're getting shot at."

"I could imagine, but I was asking if you knew anywhere *specific*."

Mayumi pursed her lips and hummed, trying to remember. "There was this place I saw that sold really good-looking chocolates and other sweets. Don't remember where it was, but I could ask Jackson for the address of the hotel and give you steps from there. I'd guide you there if I could, but I'm, ah, actually a bit busy, so you'll have to make do on your own for tonight."

"Really? You can't even spare an hour or two for some fun?" Eirene asked, both surprised and disappointed.

“I know, I know, you’re both *so* looking forward to spending time with me, and I really hate to let you down, but I really do have some important business that needs my *utmost* attention. Hard to believe, I know, but I’m sure you two can have plenty of fun without me.” Mayumi smiled cheerfully.

“Sure, but...”

“Shh, no ‘buts.’ You two go enjoy yourselves. I’ll be happy knowing you two are happy...and at least I’ll have Jackson to keep me company in the meantime, heh.”

“Rest in peace,” Cassandra said, folding her hands in mock prayer.

“I’ll manage. His dad and sister will be there too, to keep him in check.”

“Is that so? I look forward to meeting them in person, rather than through a pair of binoculars.”

“Yeah, well, you’ll get your chance soon enough. *After* you two get back. We have a deal? For real this time?”

“We do,” Eirene nodded, entirely unaware of what Mayumi meant by “for real.”

“Splendid! Gimme, like, fifteen minutes to get some intel from Jackson, and I’ll get back to you with anything you’ll need to know about Naples...or what’s left of it.”

“Thanks a bunch. You take care of yourself, Mayumi,” Cassandra said.

“No promises, but I’ll try,” Mayumi replied, grinning and bowing in a dramatic fashion as she turned to leave.

\* \* \*

Cassandra stepped into the shower and sighed as the hot water and steam enveloped her, burning away the leftover aches and pains. She lathered soap onto her body and shampoo into her hair, all to make sure she was as fresh as could be for the night to come. As soon as she felt sufficiently clean, she stepped out, dried herself off, and walked over to the nearby wardrobe.

Bright Lighthouse itself made no accommodations for guests, and so Jackson had set them up in the same hotel to which he had brought Mayumi. He’d also arranged for them to pick

out new clothes at a nearby boutique, since it “wouldn’t do” for them to “go about dressed like a bunch of rough-and-tumble vagabonds.” Despite the insult, Cassandra wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth, and had selected an elegant ensemble for herself.

After putting her underwear back on – the nicest set she had, just in case – she donned a pair of tight dress pants and a sporty jacket over a white chemisette. A bit of makeup and a pair of shiny new shoes completed her ensemble, and Cassandra was and ready to meet Eirene for what Mayumi was clearly hoping would be a date. Whether that would end up being true, however, was anyone’s guess. Cassandra herself still wasn’t sure of her own intentions.

Eirene was already waiting for her when she arrived in the hotel’s lobby. Her friend was dressed in a style more distinctly feminine, a red, knee-length skirt and a white, backless top with detached sleeves that showed off her shoulders and collarbone. In Cassandra’s unbiased opinion, she looked positively radiant.

As soon as the they made eye contact, the two women all but ran at each other and embraced.

“You look good. That’s a real cute skirt,” Cassandra said once they had stepped apart.

“Thank you,” Eirene replied, beaming. “And that’s a cute, ah...everything.” She gestured broadly towards Cassandra, who smiled.

“I’m glad you think so. Now, if you’re ready to go, I’m *pretty* sure I remember the directions Jackson gave us, so I hopefully won’t get us lost.”

“Hah, hopefully indeed. Should we get going?” Eirene extended her arm, inviting Cassandra to take it in hers. After a moment trying not to act flustered, the taller woman complied, and the two of them walked into the wintery evening breeze, holding hands.

When they arrived at the shop Mayumi had mentioned, only having had to ask for directions once, the pair ordered themselves a light meal each and sat down to eat at an outdoor table. So far from those major cities that still stood, there was precious little light pollution to choke the night sky. Eirene looked especially beautiful under the stars, Cassandra thought.



The two women continued their meal, and, for the time being, forgot about the world around them. Before long, they'd finished eating, and quickly found themselves relaxing on a carved stone bench that overlooked the water, leaning against each other for warmth.

Neither of them talked. It was enough to listen to the town's ambiance – the chatter of happy couples in the background, the breeze through the nearby trees, the occasional rumbling of the monorail – and to enjoy each other's company. Inside Cassandra's head, however, thoughts ran rampant. "Tell her that you love her," one part of her brain said. "With so much up in the air, is now really the time for romance?" another warned. "Just kiss her, you fool," said a third imaginary voice. "You know you both want it."

In the end, Cassandra split the difference and gently rubbed her head against Eirene's, just to see what would happen. Eirene nuzzled her back, still without a word.

That would have been enough for her. Cassandra closed her eyes, content to know that Eirene shared the same affection she felt for her, and had just allowed herself to relax when the dull whine of an airship's engine caught her ear, distant but distinct. Looking outward, she saw an enormous vessel passing over the gulf, a hundred little lights making sure it stood out against the dark sky. She silently cursed the behemoth for intruding, cutting open her little bubble of paradise and dragging in an unwanted reminder of the brewing conflict.

"A troop carrier," Eirene explained, detecting the new object of Cassandra's attention. "A big one, too. Haven't seen one that size since I flew for the Guard."

"One of Fairchild's, you think?"

Eirene shook her head. "No," she answered. "Look at the name."

Cassandra craned her neck and squinted, trying to make out the bold lettering painted on the side. "UNS *Nile*," she eventually read aloud.

"Right. The Skywatch and the army name their support ships after rivers. Nile, Indus, Mississippi...Kolyma. From what I've seen, those operated by the Defense Administration are named after flowers, like our friend, the *Marigold*. I'm not sure why it'd be here, though."

"It's headed southwest, meaning it's bound for the Tunis-Highveld corridor. Preventative measure, maybe, meant to keep the Tehran Pact from cutting off their colonies in South Africa.

Hmph. Lancaster really is picking a fight with everyone and their mother, isn't he?" Cassandra said with a disgusted snarl.

"Wasn't just him, sadly. How many fledgling nations did Magnus annex in our lifetime? Dozens? Scores? It was his unchecked aggression that caused the Tabriz Incident in the first place, even if Lancaster was the one who pulled the trigger."

"Well, fuck them both, but at least Magnus is already burning in hell."

The venom dripping from Cassandra's words shocked even her, and she realized how tense she'd suddenly become. She took a deep breath, let her face relax, and unclenched her jaw and fists. "I'm sorry," she continued. "Really, uh, spoiled the mood, didn't I?"

"A bit, but I understand," Eirene said, squeezing her companion a little tighter. The reassurance did little to make Cassandra feel better, but she reciprocated the gesture, out of a sense of duty if nothing else.

\* \* \*

The conference room at Bright Lighthouse was a spacious area, with three of its four walls made from glass to grant any occupants a scenic view of the gulf. At the center was a lacquered wood table at which Mayumi sat alone. She idly twirled a pen and waited for company to arrive.

Eventually, there was a knock at the door, and Jackson came in. "I see you're as bored as I am," he said, taking a seat across from Mayumi.

"Won't lie, I'm kinda jealous of Alex and Eirene. I'm sure they're having a grand old time right out there, even if they seem determined to resist my efforts at playing cupid," she replied, smiling cheekily with her mouth, but not with her eyes.

"Not everyone can be a matchmaker."

"Well, at this point, what can I be? Hmph. If I could get them to be happy together, then at least I could say I did something good with my life."

"You *did* rescue me and help broker this alliance. If anything, that puts you well ahead of your comrades in terms of accomplishments."

Mayumi turned away from Jackson as her face twisted into a scowl. “Accomplishments?” she asked. “What accomplishments? How many people died on my watch at Hotel India? The only reason *any* of us survived is ‘cause the flagship came in to bail us out. Meanwhile, we lost the city, lost hundreds of good people, and ran away with nothing to show for it except some intel that Besim would probably pretend was worth it, even though it wasn’t.”

“You succeeded in your objective and, despite being sent on a suicide mission, still saved dozens of lives, my own not least of all! I’d call that a win any day of the week.”

“Talk to the families of the people we buried that day and ask *them* if they feel like we won,” Mayumi said in a sharp, vicious tone.

For a moment, Jackson didn’t say anything. He stared intently at Mayumi and leaned forward, putting his weight on his forearms before he replied. “You’re a damn fool if you think you can save everyone, every time,” he said. “Would you have preferred to join the dead yourself? Sometimes staying alive is all you can do.”

Violently, Mayumi stood up and started pacing back and forth. “You know what? Yeah!” she declared. “Yeah, if anyone died that night, it should have been me. I don’t have any family left, so it’s not like anybody’s going to be too torn up if I bite it. Alex and Eirene might be sad for a while, but they have each other. They don’t need me.”

Jackson frowned. “Listen to yourself,” he said. Do you subject your friends to your misery like this, too? I must say, it’s really *quite* irksome to be around.”

“I...I...” Mayumi’s voice trailed off, and she turned to look out the window. After a moment watching boats floating about in the gulf, she shook her head.

“Hah! Another masquerade, then – you’re hiding the truth from the people you actually care about. Shows me where I stand, at least.”

“No, no, it’s not that,” Mayumi said, embarrassed.

“You needn’t worry about offending me. My ego’s not actually so fragile that I’d take insult when you favor your old friends over a stranger like myself. In time, I’m sure you’ll all come to appreciate my talents, but you haven’t yet had much chance.”

Mayumi rolled her eyes, but otherwise ignored his boasting. “Well, I’m glad of that, at least. Still, I’m sorry. It’s just that, like you said, I don’t need to be sharing my grief with everyone else, ‘cause that wouldn’t really be fair to them. It’s my problem to deal with, right?”

“Pfft, wrong again,” Jackson scoffed. “Look, I was not *blessed* with an abundance of friends either, but even I know *that’s what friends are for*, damnit! If you’re not going to talk it out with them, though, then at least tell *me* what’s causing these little worms of doubt to dig into your mind. If we’re to be ‘allies,’ then we need to trust each other, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I...suppose,” Mayumi said, looking back out over the water. Jackson got out of his seat and joined her by the window as she continued.

“You remember what I said about the *Katayama*? The Captain Nagai I mentioned was my father.”

“So I gathered, but go on.”

“I never had much going for me as a kid. A Migrant ship doesn’t exactly offer a lot of opportunities for career advancement, unless you strike out on your own, and I loved my parents too much to do that. Didn’t really mind, though. Making them proud was all I lived for, and they were plenty proud of me, as long as I did my part to keep the *Katayama* running, which I always did.”

“...until they passed away,” Jackson said, his voice solemn and respectful.

“Until they were murdered, more like,” Mayumi corrected. “There was a mutiny. My parents and everyone loyal to them were killed or forced to flee. The boy whose name I gave you, Evan, was a friend of mine who died helping me escape, which is how I ended up in Istanbul. I was safe there, but, without my parents, I didn’t have much in the way of *purpose*, and all I could bring myself to do was just...wander.”

“And the Peregrines gave this purpose you lacked?”

“I hoped they would. If nothing else, sacrificing myself in battle for what seemed like a good cause would be a way for me to finally die, to give it all up without feeling like I was wasting my family’s sacrifice. Paying it forward, in a sense. And yet, here I am, still alive and standing on the graves of better men.”

Mayumi tried to continue, but the jumbled mess of words fighting to escape her mouth floundered before they reached her tongue. Frustrated, she pounded the window with her fist, and, when nothing came of that gesture but a hollow *thud*, pressed her head against the glass, tears pooling at the corners of her eyes.

In the reflection, Mayumi saw Jackson watching her with the same pity one might a crying infant. She felt his hand upon her shoulder, a gesture that she might have once swatted away, but could no longer summon the energy to oppose. Instead, she allowed him to pat her back sympathetically, which, against her expectations, proved comforting.

“I’ll not waste my time debating what makes a man ‘better’”, Jackson whispered. “Nonetheless, I must ask – regardless of your criteria, what about that makes them more deserving of life than you?”

“I’m not sure. That’s a question for the philosophers. But the people I lost surely wanted to live, whereas I, well, don’t,” Mayumi replied.

“But you *have to* live,” Jackson insisted, his gentle touch turning into a firm grasp. “It’s a poor friend who willingly leaves this mortal coil when she could do so much more for her loved ones by staying alive.”

The dam burst, and Mayumi’s tears spilt down her cheeks.