WTF even is a title

By me

## Chapter 1 – Sierra

*“Don’t worry yourself unduly about the protests. Be on the lookout for violent rhetoric, and if they get too rowdy, crush them with the Civil Guard, but they can’t harm us while they’re standing peacefully in the streets. The rebels in Anatolia are far more pressing, which is why I am attending to them personally.”*

* Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster to Grand Marshal Archer Hamilton

Montreal wasn’t always miserable, Akiko remembered.

The city was still as beautiful and industrious as ever, this much was true. Students graduating from her alma mater continued to achieve great things, helping to rebuild a devastated world. Up until her own graduation, Montreal had been to Akiko as the reflection in the pool had been to Narcissus, a poor soul whose story had been reiterated to her ad nauseam by professors enthusiastic about the classics. She had loved the city with all her heart – its sights, its sounds, and its smells. Even the feeling of the pavement beneath her feet was like a friend to her. As soon as she had removed her cap and gown, however, the veil was lifted and the illusion of comfort fell to the ground like the silken garments that had brought her so much pride.

The cruel reality of the “new” Montreal was that, like every other city resettled by the United Nations Provisional Government, better known as the UNPG, it was not her friend. And, if it wasn’t her friend, what good was it to her? Akiko chided herself for her naiveté, for believing that she could have had a home in North America. The more time she spent in the increasingly cold, academic climate of Montreal, the more she noticed its ugly imperfections – the sterile laboratories of the academic world, the manic fervor of the researchers swarming through the streets like ants, the loudmouthed protestors voicing their grievances against something or other, and, looming above them all, the militant hand of the Skywatch, whose heavily-armed airships made port in the city to be retrofitted by Defense Administration. Following her tragic graduation, Akiko had come to hate the awful city that she had once loved. She often dreamed of how wonderful it must have been before the United Nations’ architects forced its wretched corpse back to life.

In the end, though, those same airships she hated proved to be her relief. The only job she was able to get was that of a stewardess aboard a government airship, which got her away from Montreal at the very least. Her new, transient life did bring her back to that city every so often, but it was far more digestible in small doses.

Akiko’s new job was considered a low-risk position. Her ship, the *Sierra*, was a military transport, but the important officials – the important *targets* – had private vessels. Most of her passengers were civil guardsmen, police in all but name, or Army officers, both of whom played second fiddle to the Skywatch. Such an arrangement suited her well. Working on a transport rather than a warship meant that there was little chance she’d see combat, something she’d had enough of during her mandatory year of service before completing university. Even better, the company she kept onboard the *Sierra* was of a humbler stock than the high-ranking Skywatch officers, who tended to be pompous at the best of times.

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

“Hello?”

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

“On my way through Checkpoint Charlie,” Akiko mumbled.

Reed laughed. “Security’s that bad, huh?”

“Yeah. Been in line for half an hour already.”

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

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

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The UNS *Sierra* stood on the tarmac, ready to lift off as soon as its crew were all aboard. Next to one of its engine nacelles, Akiko could see Captain Reed discussing business with Grand Marshal Hamilton, the man they were to ferry across the Atlantic. It was the first time she had seen the Grand Marshal. He was an old man with tufts of grey hair and a gaunt frame, and a conspicuous mechanical hand protruding from his uniform’s left sleeve. Most of the men and women who served the UNPG had some form of machinery in their bodies, although they were usually less obvious than an artificial limb. During her student service with the civil guard, Akiko had been pressured to augment her senses with small implants, but had refused, even though she found the science behind them fascinating. With the Defense Administration campus so close by, the great scientific leaps could be observed from a safe distance. There was no need to put them in her body.

“I’m here, sir,” Akiko whispered to the captain when she reached the group.

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

“I do,” Hamilton answered. Akiko curtsied, as was proper, and followed the group onboard, where she and her friends would accommodate them for the duration of the flight.

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

“I suppose he wouldn’t want to be absent for the passage of his pet legislation,” Reed muttered. “Would this alleged ‘representative’ be accompanied by the Tower Guard?”

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

“Have you talked with the Commissars about this?”

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

“Then I wish you luck when the time comes,” Reed said with a respectful nod. “Still, wouldn’t it be better to wait until Fairchild makes his announcement?”

“About what he found in the Vatican archives? I don’t see why I should wait for that.”

“He says it will change the world.”

“It had better, considering how much money he’s cost us. But I don’t see what he could have found there other than the Holy Spirit, and that won’t change my plans.”

Akiko enjoyed listening to them talk, even if the barrage of names went well over her head. She recognized Keller Magnus as Director-General, a title establishing him as leader of the new world order. Jacob Lancaster was the famed Grand Admiral, and Marcus Fairchild was the government’s pet artificial researcher, scheduled to present his latest project at the upcoming conference. The others, though, must had been less important personages, since she could not remember having ever heard their names.

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

Most of these dissidents called for the UN to lift its ban on organized religion, allegedly a response to the clash of faiths that defined the last century. Allowed to *privately* praise any gods of their choice though they were, the devout were prohibited from assembling in public. Faith was not entirely out, but the Church was.

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

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

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

“Roger that. Crew, prepare for liftoff,” Reed said. The vessel’s thrusters surged into life and it was taken upward into the overcast afternoon skies.

Reed shared the bridge with a short, round Turk by the name of Yusuf Fahri. The man was an amiable sort, if slightly aloof. Very little poking or prodding could convince Yusuf to talk if he didn’t want to, so Reed had long since learned not to try. Between his co-pilot and Akiko, there was little conversation to be had aboard the ship.

A single corvette was attached to the top of the *Sierra’s* hull, ready to launch should they come under attack, but there was no expectation it would ever have to be deployed. Ordinarily, the escort would be piloted by a man named Pieter Marechal and his crew, but Marechal had suddenly fallen ill and been replaced by an eccentric woman named Eirene Baros. Reed didn’t know Baros, but her credentials were impressive. He doubted he would ever have a chance to assess her skills as a pilot in person, however.

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Hours later, the ship drew ever closer to its destination, beginning to pass over the Mediterranean Sea. Akiko peeked her head through the doorway into the bridge.

“Something the matter?” Reed asked.

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

“I’ll be fine, doll, but thanks,” the captain replied. His co-pilot, Yusuf, nodded, and thanked the stewardess as she poured him a cup. Without another word, Akiko curtsied and left to put the tea back into storage.

There was only one person in the *Sierra’s* cramped galley when she arrived – the new corvette pilot, Eirene. Hers was a small, unassuming figure, with light olive skin and wavy, dirty-blonde hair. They’d never spoken, which didn’t bother Akiko much. Nevertheless, she gave her a polite smile, which Eirene returned.

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

“Eh?”

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

“Shit, you served on the *Serenade?* You’re with the Skywatch?”

“Oh, mercy, no,” Eirene laughed. “I was Civil Guard, stuck around even after student service, but I had to land on the flagship for one mission. Lucky me, I guess.”

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

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

“Montreal. They taught me well, but I can’t say I’m sorry to leave.”

“I see.”

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

“Hey, Jamie,” he said.

“Something I should know?”

“Take a look at this.”

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

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

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

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

“Very well. Preparing to initiate rendezvous.”

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

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

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

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“Speak of the devil,” Akiko said, peering out the galley window to see the *Sunset Serenade* extending a bridge by which the Skywatch inspectors would arrive. The flagship’s hull dwarfed the *Sierra*, completely obscuring the two women’s view of the horizon.

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

“Go? Go where?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I am afraid this is no joke.”

“They’re clean,” a woman finally said. “No weapons or contraband.”

Lancaster nodded. “Fine. Keep searching the room. And if *this* one,” he said, pointing an accusatory finger at Eirene, “tries to take off, shoot her down.”

“Yes, sir,” the officer replied.

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

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

“Eirene.”

“Right. *Sayonara*, miss Eirene.”

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

Lancaster and Fairchild had been right about one thing. There were hostile forces aboard the *Sierra*, and those forces were Eirene’s. The crew she had brought aboard with the corvette was to assassinate Grand Marshal Hamilton – the first step in a greater scheme – but it seemed that Lancaster had caught wind of their treachery That she had not been arrested on the spot suggested his information was incomplete. A small mercy.

With no conceivable route forward that did not risk the lives of her crew, Eirene was prepared to call off the attack until she noticed the *Sunset Serenade* drifting away. It seemed as if the investigation was to be a curiously brief affair.

She then saw a single one of the flagship’s railguns taking aim directly at the *Sierra*.

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 2 – Fade to Blue

*“An apocalypse? Don’t dramatize it. Do you know what the greatest cause of death was in the 23rd century, even including the storms? Old age, with various diseases and the war itself taking a close second. In terms of what it did to our population count, the Himalayan-1 virus was the real apocalypse if you* must *use that word, but everybody forgets about that because it’s not dramatic enough. A slow decline in birthrate isn’t as easily spun into a cautionary tale.”*

* Ryan Mistle, editor for Archivist Victoria Cromwell

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

It was there that the UNS *Peregrine* and its mutinous crew had landed to take up arms against those who had ordered them to slaughter innocents. This crew, now known as the Peregrines after their infamous dreadnought, soon came to lead the foremost rebellion against the provisional government. From a fledgling settlement in Istanbul, not far from the famed house of worship, they lashed out in the hopes of taking down the illegitimate regime.

Inside the Peregrine fortress, Alexis Eliades and Teague Ironwall sat alone at a table by the window. She was a tall and strong young woman with a thin face and a small, pointed chin, her short, reddish-brown hair lit up by the evening sunlight. He, by contrast, was a grey-haired elder, but far from frail. It was easy to tell that he had, in his youth, been someone of considerable strength and power.

As the two of them spoke. Alexis toyed with a rough stone, tossing it into the air only to catch it once again and repeat the process like some kind of Sisyphean game. Her right hand, meanwhile, clutched her rifle that lay flat on the table.

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

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

“Fighting against many of our own people’s parents and grandparents. Aunts and uncles.”

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

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

“They don’t take orders from me. They take orders from you. And Hayami, and Ian, the so-called ‘young people.’ Hector and I may be the ones making strategies, but you execute them. Is that not enough?”

“And after our final victory, when all the principalities are flying our flag, will you feed the people that same excuse? That you’ll have put Ian and a flimsy parliament in control while you pull the strings?”

“Of course. Ian is the perfect age to rule – young enough to plausibly represent the new world while old enough to be respectable. But he’ll still need advice from the more experienced. Don’t you trust me to do that?”

“No, I do trust you. I wouldn’t have followed you this far if I didn’t. If your role is strictly as an advisor, then they might accept that, but I just worry that many folks might get the wrong idea.” Alexis shrugged. “Maybe I’m just nervous with our move against Athens coming up so quickly.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Or lack thereof,” Hector said.

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

“Naturally,” Alexis said with a smile.

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

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

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

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

“Damn. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” Alexis said, looking deeply into the young woman’s crystal blue eyes. Holding Eirene close under such circumstances was a guilty pleasure. She felt a queer satisfaction in giving her friend the love and comfort she needed, and in the intimate trust they shared, although she could never be truly happy under the circumstances. Not while Eirene was so sad.

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

“Now, I couldn’t help but notice,” Hector began, “that only one of the five people we sent to the *Sierra* has returned. You were detected and attacked, I assume?”

“No. They suspected that something was up, but never knew it was me. Jacob Lancaster himself stared me in the face, but nothing came of it,” Eirene said.

Hector blinked, trying and failing to conjure a response.

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

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

“Well, I should start by notifying the families of the deceased. Memorial services will need to be arranged as well,” Teague said after a short pause.

The others agreed.

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

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

“I beg your pardon?”

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

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

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

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

“Guess who’s in charge of analyzing those black boxes.” Alexis said, crossing her arms.

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

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

The table fell silent once more as the four rebels considered this, but they came up with no answer in light of the available evidence. Fairchild was, of course, an important figure. In addition to his office as Overseer of the Defense Administration, he was the CEO of Madelyn-Rash Technologies, a company allowed to remain “private” in exchange for its loyalty to the UNPG. The man had never shown any inclinations towards factionalism as long as he was allowed to play with his toys, but if that privileged position were to be threatened, then perhaps he would throw in his lot with whomever let him keep it.

Perhaps. There was too much they did not know.

“Anyhow, as much as I’d love to continue this wild speculation, we have more important matters at hand,” Hector finally said. “I regret to inform you all that there’s been a change of plans.”

“Oh?” Alexis asked.

“While you and Eirene were taking your sweet time getting here, I received some rather unfortunate news from our spies in the field. The conference will *not* be postponed until a new Grand Marshal can be elected. No new Grand Marshal means no new security team, which means no chance for us to get our agents a free pass into the Tower.”

“That’s…yeah, that’s unfortunate. Is there a new plan?”

“One’s in the works,” Hector answered. “Teague and I had little time to discuss – minutes, really – so the details aren’t quite there yet. If we attack another target in the capital, it should draw law enforcement away from Samara Tower and give your team an opening, but you still might have to fight your way in as well as out.”

“And even more people are going to die,” Eirene said, her fingers tapping hurriedly against the table. “We’re essentially sacrificing this diversion team you propose. It could end up with a massacre if we’re not careful.”

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

Alexis scowled at Hector. “Nobody here’s fool enough to think we’ll all make it out, but I’m with Eirene – there’s gotta be a better way.”

“And nobody was surprised. Do you ever *not* side with your favorite piece of eye candy?” Hector replied.

“I side with who I think is *right*.”

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

“Okay, that’s enough. We’re all friends here,” Teague said. “Hector has the right of it, though. The chance to take out the Director-General is too good to pass up. I understand your concern, but we may never get another chance like this, and you can rest assured that we’ve no intention of making a mess of it.”

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

Although she could see Eirene fidgeting uncomfortably in her chair, Alexis wasn’t ready to start a fight. That could wait until Hector and Teague had more than vague possibilities to offer them. In the meantime, she would do what she could to care for her friend.

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

## Chapter 3 – Running Like Clockwork

“The old world made people soft. They thought that their freedom would last forever. That’s all these ‘Peregrines’ are: Malcontents who fail to realize that we’re only doing what must be done for humanity’s survival.”

* Director-General Keller Magnus, in *Watching the North*

“Looks like it’s starting to rain. Wonder if that bodes ill,” Alexis said, looking out the window of her bedroom.

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

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

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

After a week of planning, the Peregrines’ plan to assassinate the Director-General had become a three-step process, each stage needing several favors to be called in and several more to be owed. Alexis had a simple part to play. She and her small group of scouts would set up a sniper nest on a rooftop near Samara Tower, where the AI conference would be held, and wait for their brief window of opportunity.

That she might arrive at said window, two other teams would go to Athens that night. One was Hector’s proposed diversion, who would attack the munitions factory designated Hotel India in order to draw the Civil Guard away from Samara Tower. It was a allegedly a soft target, but those who volunteered had already bid their loved ones goodbye.

No less important was third and final team, a single pair of agents whom Hector had arranged to pose as a maintenance crew. Director-General Magnus would no doubt be wearing a kinetic barrier on his person, easily able to thwart any sniper attack, and these two men were charged with neutralizing this obstacle. An electromagnetic pulse near the conference chamber would give Alexis the precious seconds she needed to take the shot.

Reflecting on the battle to come, the two women sat in silence for a moment, looking about the room they shared. It was a small, cozy little place with just enough room for two beds with a wardrobe and desk each. With what space they had, Alexis and Eirene had made it theirs, adorning the walls with Eirene’s charcoal sketches, and the desks with cheap plastic vases and a radio that spat out more static than music. Such was their home, and they were determined to come back to it.

“What worries me,” Alexis said, “is what comes next. Like, say we take out Magnus. Say we all get back alive. How can we turn that victory into something *real*?”

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

“Take what you were saying about the diversion to Hotel India tonight. I know that people are gonna die, that’s what happens, but this whole willingness to trade human lives for progress is why I left the Civil Guard in the first place, and we don’t even know what we’re going to buy with those lives! Certainly not the end of the war.”

“Don’t you always say you trust Hector and Teague?” Eirene asked.

“I do. It’s just…I trust them to do what they think is right, and that they’ll try not to get us killed in the process. So when they say we’re targeting Magnus in the hopes that it’ll embolden other groups to rise up alongside us, I believe them, but what happens when all those groups want different things? Hell, what if *we* want different things? What if, when we no longer need allies of convenience, Hector starts pushing for an oligarchy, or Teague tries to set up a Catholic theocracy?”

“Elections, I’d hope.”

“Likewise. But we need to make sure we’re in a position to have them – revolutions are fertile spawning grounds for dictators.”

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

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

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

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

“Just here to say hello?” Eirene asked.

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

“I’ve no complaints.”

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

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

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

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

Eirene said nothing, but nodded her assent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

On paper, Istanbul still belonged to Turkey, whose government at Ankara was but one of many who refused to accept UNPG rule. So close was it to the enemy, however, that its wounds were difficult to heal, and so the city remained a sort of no-man’s-land, populated by those whose family trees were so deeply rooted that they were loath to leave, or by those with nowhere else to stay. The latter group included, of course, the Peregrine revolutionaries, whose presence Ankara tolerated, and sometimes even supported, so long as they continued to fight their mutual foe.

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

As the trio walked down the dusty street, Hayami stopped to gaze at a quant bistro.

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

“Yeah. Yeah, look. Is that…”

Alexis turned her head to see where Hayami was pointing, where she saw the countenance of a familiar man, seated at an outdoor table with a stack of papers in front of him. That man was Ian Barrow, the third and final team leader who would be making the journey to Athens that night. Of the four of them, he was the eldest at thirty-five years old, and his look, carefully crafted to match his idea of sophistication, was easily recognizable.

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

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

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

“My job is just to go to a factory and break things,” Hayami said.

“Sure, but…you know, never mind. I’m sure you’re all here looking to have a good time, so go ahead and take a seat. I can spare a bit of time.”

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

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

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

“No faith in Hector’s disguises?”

“Getting in won’t be hard, especially if Hayami does her job right. Getting *out* is going to be a different story. See all these red lines on this map, here? Blast doors on every arterial hallway or stairwell. Once you blow off Magnus’ head, all of them are going to get sealed off, preventing any traffic in or out of the building. The Skywatch rapid-response teams can override them, but without their codes, you want to guess my only way out?”

“Outside the building,” Eirene said.

“Right on target. Once we set off the EMP, my man and I will have a few seconds to make our way out the window. Luckily the ledges are built in such a way that we can map out an escape route, but if that one route is cut off, then we’re done for.”

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

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

Hayami opened her mouth, but no words came out. A shadow seemed to fall over her face, just for a second, before she shook her head and took a large bite out of her kebab.

“You okay?” Eirene asked.

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

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

\* \* \*

The water was calm as an inconspicuous boat drifted up to Widow’s Walk, a foul-smelling, waterlogged port district at the southern end of Athens. Hector had leveraged his connections to ensure that the dockworkers were enjoying well-earned time off that night, and so the half-dozen Peregrine agents remained unmolested as they disembarked. All was quiet but for the gentle stirring of the sea.

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

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

“My condolences.”

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

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

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

“What’s that?” Alexis asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And two hundred more that Hayami *does*.”

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

The chamber where Magnus was to hold his conference was known more commonly as the Grand Balcony, a ledge protruding from the western side of the tower lined with enormous glass windows, windows that Alexis could only assume were lined with kinetic shield barriers more powerful than the one Magnus himself wore. That didn’t worry her, as Ian’s electromagnetic pulse would disable them all the same. What did warrant some degree of concern was the airship lurking above the tower, the design of which she did not recognize.

If she were to guess, Alexis would have called it out as the Director-General’s personal conveyance. Such a ship would not be much of a threat in battle, but if its crew somehow spotted her, the game would be up, and so she quietly thanked God that it seemed ill-inclined to activate its searchlights for the moment.

Once the Director-General was dead, however, she was sure it would turn into quite the vigilant guard dog. That would make her escape a bit more difficult.

“We’re in position,” Ian’s voice came to her over the radio. “Looks like Magnus and company will arrive in five minutes. Over.”

Alexis took a second to confirm that her scouts were still in place around her, ready to cover their escape when the time came. “Roger,” she replied. “I’m in position as well and will fire on your signal. Out.”

Even with Magnus due to arrive in a matter of minutes, Alexis did not expect that signal to come for some time longer. Though they were there for the Director’s head, they also had a secondary goal: gathering information. Marcus Fairchild’s presentation on artificial intelligence was expected to be of some significance to the ongoing war, and so Ian’s team carried a recording device. They were instructed to delay their attack as long as possible that they might hear what the man had to say.

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

The council members took their seats around a baroque wooden table. On one side sat the regional governors, and opposite them sat the heads of the UNPG’s core administrations. At the head of the table was Director-General Magnus himself, the closest spots to him being reserved for the Grand Marshal and Grand Admiral.

Doing his best to blend in with the rest of the menial staff, Ian saw that several seats remained empty that night. Grand Marshal Hamilton’s absence was expected, but the other vacancies were evidence of an unfortunate trend. As core administrators retired or were ousted, rather than elect replacements, their peers had scrambled to claim the open positions for themselves. Marcus Fairchild alone had come to lead the Science, Defense, and Transportation Administrations.

That each office an individual held came with an extra vote on the Administrative Council was the least of anyone’s concerns. After all, the Director-General still had the final say. More real than the votes, though, was the concentration of power. Marcus was able to dictate what technologies the UNPG pursued, how its weapons were used, and how its people could travel. He was a particularly dangerous cog in the machine, one by which far too many others were driven.

A large part of Ian was convinced that Marcus should have been their target that night, but it was far too late to change their plans.

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

“If you suspect an attack, then why haven’t you reinforced our defenses?” Grand Admiral Lancaster asked. “I was under the impression that you would only send the Tower Guard abroad if you were travelling there yourself.”

“I haven’t sent them abroad; I’ve sent them to Hotel India. They were the most readily available units I had that could deal with the threat. The Civil Guard wouldn’t have been able to muster a sufficient response in time.”

That statement stood out to Ian, as there hadn’t been any of the elite Tower Guard in the convoy bound for Hotel India. Either they had taken an alternate route – certainly a possibility – or Magnus had told a lie. Ian made a mental note to investigate the veracity of this claim with the survivors from Hayami’s team, if there were any.

“Reasonable enough, I suppose,” Lancaster replied. “That doesn’t change the fact that our defenses are woefully understaffed for such an important conference.”

“Lancaster,” Magnus said, shooting the Grand Admiral a reassuring smile, “my men will be back before you know it. Besides, even if they had disappeared permanently into the void, are we not untouchable in our high towers?”

“Of course not.”

“Right you are. But our defenses are more than enough to deter anything short of a full siege, so we should be safe for the next few hours.”

Lancaster seemed skeptical, but he said no more.

“Now, before we begin, I have a question for Mr. Fairchild, specifically.”

“Yes?”

“How are your factories holding up?

“Our factories? All but worked to capacity, but we *are* managing. Have you found more that can support us?”

“We have. One of the foremen in charge of expansion up in Stockholm came across an old Swedish black site with manufacturing equipment that should be sufficiently advanced to support your production and research. Mostly superannuated military stock dating back to the April Fool’s War, but preliminary searches have turned up some databases and forges with ties to you-know-who. Circa 2290.”

“Pre-Crusade. Same as we found in Montreal and Valencia?”

“Yes, as far as we can tell. If not, it should be easily adapted to support your project. More so than the primitive junk the less sophisticated industries have to make do with. The Defense Administration will be given full control of the site as soon as we’re finished mapping it out.

“That is…very generous, sir. I shall do everything I can to repay this kindness.”

Lancaster rolled his eyes.

“You can start by briefing these kind people here about *why* this discovery matters. I’m sure they’re all excited to hear what you’ve been working on for so long.”

Marcus stood up from his seat and walked to the front of the table, next to Director-General Magnus. “Time to begin the main event,” he said with a knowing smile, already sure that his peers would be suitably impressed.

After clearing his throat, the gaunt old man began to speak in an unnerving, stilted voice. “I’m aware that we have several veterans of the Crusade in attendance tonight, so to them I apologize in advance for generalizing certain aspects of the background I’ll provide. You will surely recognize that the situation was far more complex than my presentation implies.”

A few of his audience, Grand Admiral Lancaster included, nodded in response.

“Rho AI, the first truly self-aware artificial intelligence was invented not long before the Crusade began in earnest, which led to something of a schism within the Catholic Church. On one side was the Technologist faction, who believed that, because man was created in God’s image, it was our destiny to create life, just as He did. This was obviously a radical re-interpretation of scripture, so they were heavily outnumbered by the Luddite faction, who unequivocally condemned this research.”

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

“Indeed. So much so that, towards the end of the war, they began to purge the Technologists from their ranks. The Technologists had begun work on their own AIs, the sacrilegiously-named ‘Holy Spirits’, but were forced into hiding before their dreams could be realized. Most of my own work is based on the research and infrastructure they left behind.”

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

“Completed, no, but we have made a breakthrough. As you know, we have for some time been able to reproduce the original AI system that predated the Holy Spirits, which we called the Sigma AI. Unfortunately, the hardware required to support it is extremely large, expensive, and energy-inefficient. The Holy Spirits, by contrast, are far more lightweight and advanced.”

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

Marcus smiled. “Very perceptive. What I, alongside Messieurs Magnus and Lancaster learned during our foray into Vatican City is that the Technologists were able to produce a working copy of the Holy Spirit AI. The Luddites sought to destroy it, of course, but without the inconvenient hardware requirements, it was easy to hide backups right under their noses.”

Marcus stopped for a second to cough into his arm. “My apologies,” he said. “In this inclement weather, I may have caught a minor cold. To return to the topic at hand, we found one such backup inside the computer system of a Crusade-era air destroyer. It seems that the Technologists were still invested in winning the Crusade, and so hid their prototypes in places where they could quietly contribute to the war effort. The poor thing that we found was serving as a glorified targeting computer, ensuring that all the destroyer’s shots found their marks up until the war ended and the ship was mothballed, trapping him inside for two score years.”

“And the Luddites never found it…him?” The portly governor asked.

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

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

“Which brings me to the first of two problems,” Marcus said. “Each Holy Spirit is complex and unique, so reverse-engineering the technology will be faster if we have more examples to study. Now, from what we learned in the Vatican, most of the backups were hidden inside the ships of the so-called ‘Papal Center Fleet.’ It was to be…what was it, again? The ‘sword to pierce the heart of Islam?’”

“The spear, but yes,” Lancaster said.

“Thank you. Unfortunately, the fleet was nearly annihilated, and the survivors disappeared, possibly a sign of the Technologists reclaiming their wayward children. Unless we can find those ships, our research will be delayed.”

“But you *can* continue without them,” one of the administrators said.

“Of course, but, in that case, the benefits may not be realized within our lifetimes. The second problem pertains to distribution – even once we have mastered this technology, we lack the infrastructure to mass-produce it.”

“I thought you said it didn’t require any major infrastructure?” came another question from the assembly.

“To *run*, no. Including its power source, a Holy Spirit AI is no larger than my head. But actually *building* the device requires extremely precise, sophisticated machinery that the UNPG simply cannot afford. This is why the Director-General’s gift to me at the start of this meeting was so important; as we scavenge the ruins of the old world, we sometimes uncover black sites that the Technologists used to fabricate the Holy Spirits. With enough of these sites under our control, we could begin mass production and, in so doing, succeed where the Technologists failed. We could change the world.”

“And how do you plan to do that?

Marcus paused, looking up and down the row of assembled council members. “As it happens, I have omitted one *small* detail,” he said. “My dear Lena, if you would?”

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

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

The councilors nodded in acknowledgement, a low murmur filling the room as they realized what he meant. Lena bore no resemblance to her father. This could have been a sign of adoption, but, in the current context, could only have meant one thing.

“Our first experiment derived from the Holy Spirit was officially called the Tau AI, but we refer to them as Mourners. 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. Robotics, artificial intelligence, and a small amount of bioengineering combined into a new form of life.”

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

“I’m sure you’re all quite skeptical,” she said with a comforting smile. “But my father has asked me to take a more active role in his administrative duties, so we’ll be spending a lot of time together, I’m sure. Hopefully, that will assuage your concerns, at least a little. But he didn’t come all this way just to show me off. After all, other than the lightweight architecture allowing for this *wonderfully* convenient body, my existence is hardly revolutionary.”

“I did mention that there was still room for growth, provided I can study more Holy Spirits. The Technologists invented the AIs, yes, but they also began work on a bridge between their hardware and the human brain. If finished, it would allow us to not only create life, but to preserve it indefinitely,” Marcus continued.

“It’s a complete violation of the idea of a soul, of course. I’m sure plenty of people will argue that I don’t have one, and will refuse to use this ‘bridge’ on those grounds. But for those who want it…immortality is within their reach.”

“And that,” Marcus said with an air of finality, “is why I am petitioning for your support today. With your assistance, we could hunt down the surviving Holy Spirits and revolutionize everybody’s quality of life.”

Although the audio being transmitted from Ian’s recording device wasn’t of the best quality, the Peregrine agents collectively realized one thing. If the technology Marcus promised could live up to his claims, if it could truly both create life – in a sense – and preserve it forever, then could not remain under loyalist control. Everybody had joined the rebellion for their own reasons, but this, at least, was something on which they could all agree.

Having heard enough, Ian slipped his hand into his pocket and flipped the switch on his concealed device. A loud crackle and buzz filled the room. Magnus had mere moments to realize that his barrier would no longer protect him before Alexis pulled her trigger, and a bullet shattered his skull.

Time seemed to slow down as Ian and Alexis both paused in astonishment. Just like that, their hated enemy was dead, and all that remained was to quit the city before the net closed in around them.

A small army of Skywatch officers swarmed onto the Grand Balcony. Alexis shot again, and again, but then there was smoke and even more gunfire – from what source she could not determine – and Ian’s team was all but lost to her. Amongst this chaos, the airship looming overhead seemed taken by a suspicious lethargy, having made no movement to intervene in the growing battle.

“Alright, time to pack up and leave,” she said, shouldering her rifle, only to find her scouts aiming at her with theirs.

“Ma’am, I’m afraid I have to ask you to come with us,” one of them said.

Alexis scanned her traitorous companions, wondering if Ian’s partner had betrayed him as well. There were six of them in front of her, and a thirty-story drop onto hard pavement behind her. Neither made for a particularly attractive option.

“Hurry up and put down your weapon,” the man continued. “You won’t be harmed if you come quietly.

“We snuck someone onto one of your crews, so you snuck someone onto one of ours, is that it?” Alexis said, doing as he asked “Fair’s fair, I guess. But if you were with the loyalists this whole time, why let me kill Magnus?”

“You misunderstand. We’re not…”

“Grenade!” One of the other scouts shouted as a small metal ball rolled out from a nearby stairwell, spewing toxic gas that choked all seven sets of lungs. Skywatch officers stormed onto the scene, just as they had on the Grand Balcony, and quickly neutralized the opposition. It had become clear that her scouts had not been loyalist spies, but Alexis fell unconscious before she could consider who exactly it was that had tricked her.

The last thing she felt was the cold sting of raindrops splashing against her face.

## Chapter 4 – The Mansion by the Sea

“Stuff goes here”

* Ur mom lol

Alexis awoke to the sound of a humming engine and the feeling of cold metal beneath her body. She wriggled in place, finding herself secured to a seat.

Immediately and involuntarily, her muscles tightened and her hairs stood on end. This wasn’t okay, it wasn’t *right*, and there was nothing she could do about it but make a token, fruitless struggle against her restraints, an effort she soon abandoned. Instead, Alexis focused on letting her muscles relax and took a few deep breaths to calm her nerves. As natural as it was, panic would ill-suit her in such a tight space, only worsening whatever misfortune had befallen her.

With a clearer mind, she took stock of her surroundings. The steady rumble and bounce from below told her that this was no airship, but rather a truck of some kind, although without any open windows it was difficult to discern much beyond that. Several mysteries thus stood before her.

First, how much time had passed since she killed Magnus? Alexis suspected it had not been too long, although she had only her lack of hunger by which to form a hypothesis.

Second, where was the truck going? This was an easier question to answer - she was being taken to a prison, most likely the Panopticon, to await interrogation and, eventually, execution.

Finally, and most importantly, on whose orders had her team betrayed her? Alexis tried to focus her mind, to remember what had happened that night. She could have sworn that the scouts were set upon by loyalist forces, but she’d had only a loose grip on consciousness at the time, and thus was not ready to trust her own memory. Perhaps, God willing, some of them had survived and would be able to answer the many questions she had once they arrived at their destination. Looking at the many empty seats in the truck, she knew this was unlikely.

“Was I the only one taken alive?” Alexis asked, hoping one of the guards would tell her.

“The rest were armed and tried to fight back. Nothing we couldn’t handle, though,” came the reply, and, with it, confirmation that she would have to seek answers elsewhere.

The truck continued to trundle on, and Alexis became convinced that it was not bound for the Panopticon. That trip should have lasted mere minutes, and, while she had no precise means of keeping time, she was sure that she had been bound for quite a bit longer than that. There were, of course, many other prisons, but none as secure as the Panopticon. None, at least, that she knew of. It was not out of the question that Alexis and her friends were destined to rot forever in some remote compound – after all, who amongst the loyalists would miss them?

Slowly, the rattling and humming around her came to a stop. Alexis felt herself filled with dread. Inside the truck, she was ignorant, and that ignorance allowed for hope, but the doors were about to open and show her what awaited on the other side. In all likelihood, that would be nothing more than a bullet to the head and an unmarked grave.

A crack of blinding sun was the first thing she saw when the time came. If she was to die, at least she would die in daylight.

Next came not a sight, but a smell, and a familiar one at that. Salty sea air, just like that which she breathed as a child on Widow’s Walk, filled Alexis’ lungs. They were near the coast. Nostalgia overtook her, and for just a moment, she felt at home, an illusion which almost made her present captivity worse.

One of the guards undid her bindings and bid her follow him into the open. Her muscles were stiff and achy, but Alexis complied with only a bit of groaning.

“Welcome to Bright Lighthouse,” he said once her feet were on solid Earth.

Alexis was startled by the beauty before her, marred only by the corrugated metal bunkhouses and barbed wire perimeter – admittedly, a rather egregious blemish. The lighthouse itself, a massive yet elegant marble beacon, would have put the ancient wonder of Alexandria to shame, and beyond it stretched the endless blue of the Aegean. How long, she wondered, had the UNPG kept such majesty hidden?

A small orderly with an air of self-importance approached them. “This is Alexandra Eliades?” he asked the guards, who nodded in unison.

“Excellent. Follow me, Miss Eliades. We’ve no time for dawdling.”

As Alexis followed the orderly, she did her best to take stock of the camp. Near the lighthouse itself was a busy harbor at which several ships had made port, most of them loaded with unmarked cargo crates. Most of the dockworkers were dressed in worn jumpsuits – other prisoners, she assumed.

“Where exactly are we?” Alexis asked.

“You want me to tell you, so you can more easily plan an escape? I think not,” her companion said. “Bright Lighthouse is a labor camp, this much you may know, and I expect you and your friends will spend the rest of your days here. We’re not going to execute you, lest you feared we might.”

“Why kill us when you can put us to work, is that it?”

“Quite right. Most manual labor is, of course, automated these days, but you’ve still got a good set of arms and legs, and there’s no need to waste good manpower in a time of rebuilding. You’ll be carefully monitored, of course, so don’t get any treacherous ideas.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

The orderly smiled. “Now there’s a smart girl. Let’s hope your friends have the same wisdom.”

Friends, he’d said. That meant there were other survivors from Ian and Hayami’s teams. A good start.

After a half-hour of bureaucracy, Alexis was taken to one of the metal bunkhouses, where the guards instructed her to change into a jumpsuit much like those she’d seen worn by the dockworkers. It was clean, at least, although she knew that wouldn’t last long. The inside of the bunkhouse, its chipped paint stained with oil, dirt, and God knew what else, told her that much.

“Your job here is simple,” the orderly said once Alexis had changed. “Trucks will arrive at the loading bays, and you inmates will move them onto the ships as directed by one of our supervisors. Work starts every day at eight hundred hours, after you get breakfast at the mess hall. Lunch is at thirteen hundred hours, and dinner at eighteen, after which time you’re confined to quarters.” The orderly gestured towards the ratty bunk beds all around them. “Now, if you’ve no questions, I’ll take you to the loading bay and your supervisor will put you to work.”

Alexis frowned, but said nothing. The only play she could make was to keep her head down and learn as much as possible. Escape would come later.

\* \* \*

In a conference room aboard the dreadnought *Peregrine*, Eirene gently sipped from a glass of cold water. Across the table, Teague watched her with sympathetic eyes while Hector leaned back in his chair, twiddling a pen in between his fingers.

“I know you’re worried, but we’ll get her back. We’ll get them all back,” Teague said.

“Are you sure that’s a wise promise to make?” Hector asked. “It’s quite likely that any rescue operation will cost more lives than it saves. I thought that’s something our lovely little pilot *disapproved* of. Or are some lives more valuable than others if they’re your friends?”

“Of course not. But if there’s a possibility we can extract our people without suffering excessive losses, should we not try and take it? Don’t answer that – I already know you agree. You wouldn’t have bothered even looking into our missing friends if you didn’t.”

“Yes, I looked. There’s no harm in investigating certain avenues lest we miss out on an opportunity for profit, but there *is* harm in making empty promises. My contacts within the UNPG administration have been able to confirm that some of our agents have been captured, but not how many, the identities of those taken, or, most importantly, *where* they’re currently located. Liberating the captives would be an advantage we’d be fools not to press, but more foolish would be to pursue this fantasy at the expense of real progress. Samara Tower was, ultimately, a major victory for us, and we need to capitalize on it.”

Eirene set down her glass of water. “And how do you plan to do that?” she asked. “Seems to me like having thrown the government into turmoil gives us the perfect opportunity to stage a rescue. If we got into Samara Tower, surely we could get into whatever prison holds our friends without wasting more lives.”

“In case you weren’t listening, I *said* I was looking into it. But lives aren’t the only currency by which I measure worth. The time, money, and political capital that would go into just planning a rescue could be better spent elsewhere, so don’t expect me to just drop everything to chase this futile goal. You have an airship. If you want to after Alexis yourself, be my guest.”

“Maybe I will go it alone,” Eirene said, scowling at Hector.

“You most certainly will not,” Teague interrupted.

“And why is that?”

“Because I’ll help you. Hector, you can return to Istanbul and continue reaching out to other resistance groups, see if they’ll take advantage of the chaos we’ve sown. Presumably, that won’t yet require any of our military assets, right? Meanwhile, Eirene and I can form a small, independent task force and use that to pursue our wayward comrades. I believe I can do it without diverting too many resources away from your intelligence network.”

“What exactly will you need?” Hector asked.

“One ship. The *Peregrine* will do. Give me this, and I’ll get our friends back. You can count on it.”

\* \* \*

When Alexis arrived at the work site, she recognized one familiar face.

“Alex! So, so good to see you, girl,” Hayami said, looking ready to tackle Alexis with a hug.

## Chapter 6 - Hyperion

“The mythical Shanghai, a glistening vessel from the east come to deliver us from evil. The scripture here reeks of Oriental fetishism. Supposedly, the Hyperion Cult believes that the ship which carried so many vital refugees to Geneva will make a second coming in our time of need? I suppose it was easy for the Prophet to fit it into most religions’ mythologies, either as the intervention of some deity or as part of an apocalyptic, end-game battle like those that might be fought at Dabiq or at Tel Megiddo. It’s a decidedly nonsensical concept for a long-destroyed, man-made vessel to somehow return, but, if it helps him unite the people, then so be it.”

* *Uriah Washington, in* A Light From the East?

“What?”

Ian opened one eye to see his surroundings. Polished hardwood floors. Whitewashed walls. Luxurious furniture. Not a window to be seen, but the gentle hum from all around and the steady sway of the room told that he was on some manner of aircraft. A Commonwealth prison transport was what he had expected, but this was far too comfortable for such a vessel.

There was no chance that someone such as him had been granted a place in Heaven, if it existed. More importantly, he *felt* alive. If he had fallen in battle, he believed that he would know. And yet here he was, in an otherwise unexplainable situation.

The ship swayed gently underneath Ian. His lengthy service with the civil guard had seen him packed with the other guardsmen into more than their fair share of transports as they were shipped between principalities, but this one was surprisingly smooth. Were he in any position to rest, the motion could easily have lulled him to sleep.

“No storms,” he muttered to himself. That could only have meant that they were above one of the settled principalities, or else some place where the towers Magnus had mentioned had fallen into disrepair.

He stumbled out of bed.

Beneath him, the wooden floor felt cold against the bare soles of his feet. The civil guard uniform that he had been wearing last he checked was nowhere to be seen, taken away in favor of a white undershirt and shorts, with bandages over burns on his arms and legs. Moving these limbs hurt, but he forced himself to stand upright.

“Why the hell did I survive?” Ian muttered aloud, plodding over to the wall with rage coursing through his veins and slamming his head against it, as if to punish himself. “I fucked everything right the fuck up and didn’t even have the dignity to die because of it. What kind of justice is that?”

Ian’s rifle and pistol, the same ones he had used in the Tower, stood propped against a bedside table. A quick check showed that they were bereft of ammunition, but he picked up the sidearm nonetheless.

“Eirene…Lavinia,” he thought. “That’s twice now I’ve gotten you hurt. Maybe even got you killed, and yet here I am, alive.” The gun in his hand was empty, but it would only need one bullet to set things right.

No. As much as he wanted to make himself suffer for his crimes and his failures, Ian knew there would be time for that later. Now, it fell to him to gather information. If any of his allies yet survived, he could begin to put the pieces back together, and that would be more difficult if he were dead.

Ian carefully pushed the heavy metal door open and peeked out into the hallway. A single man could be seen, and Ian pointed the unloaded weapon at him almost without thinking.

“Don’t shoot,” the man said as he carefully put his hands in the air. “They put me here to send you in the right direction once you woke up. It’s a lot to deal with, but…I’m sorry, we didn’t expect you to be awake so soon. Just wait in your room, and I’ll send for Master Théoden.”

There was no use threatening this fool any further. If this ‘Théoden’ character was knowledgeable, then there was the chance that he would know what had happened to the rest. Heart rapidly sinking, he picked up speed as he decided to seek out the captain of this vessel. That was his best chance of finding an answer.

Before long, an elderly man arrived. He was of average build with wispy white hair and a kindly demeanor, which only served to unnerve Ian further.

“I am Théoden Lockhart. It is good to finally meet you, Mr. Baros,” the man said.

“Well, this doesn’t reek of supervillainy at all,” is what Ian wanted to say, but he refrained. “You can’t possibly have heard that much about me,” is what he said instead. This whole situation unnerved him. Here was a man, obviously not associated with the UN, who somehow had knowledge of him. It didn’t make sense.

“You’re right,” said Lockhart. “I do not know that much about you, personally. What I do know is that you and your friends were a threat to the continued existence of mankind and had to be neutralized.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but would you mind telling me a little more about, I don’t know, where I am and why I’m here?”

“But of course. I could hardly expect you to cooperate blindly with what I’m going to ask you to do.”

“We’ll see.”

“Indeed. As I said, my name is Théoden Lockhart. Master of the Hyperion Cult in Switzerland. Though you do not realize it now, our goals are similar, which is why I brought you here instead of killing you.”

“Are they? Then explain why you stopped us from finishing our job in Athens.”

“Ah, you’ve put two and two together already. Good, good. Yes, we did attempt to interrupt your assassination of the Director-General. Again, it was…necessary. I shall explain why if you’ll just let me talk.”

Ian took a deep breath and remained calm. “Fine, go ahead.”

“We both want to bring about a better society, Mr. Baros. The difference is that where you prefer to burn the old to make way for the new, Hyperion goes about its business in a more enlightened manner. We understand that the UN, as unpleasant as it might be at times, is a necessary evil. Like all things, though with just the right amount of pressure it can be molded into whatever shape one desires.”

“So you’re a rebel group like us, then?”

“We are our own sovereign state. We maintain an army because, while our intentions are peaceful, the Provisional Government has demonstrated many times that it cannot say the same. In its nascent years, it put any who would not join it to the sword, expanding and absorbing groups of survivors without mercy. It is by the grace of this army and by my agents’ subterfuge that Hyperion survives today. So to call us mere ‘rebels’ is to do us an immense disservice, but I cannot blame you for that. You have not yet seen any of what my country is.”

Théoden paused and looked out the window, then returned his gaze to Ian. “You have to understand that if we’d let you continue with your little revolution, it wouldn’t have been long before we were cutting off heads and dancing the Carmagnole in the streets. I deeply regret the use of violence, but my advisors insist it was necessary to prevent the collapse of what may be, unfortunately, the strongest bastion of civilization that remains today. I must agree with them.”

Ian immediately didn’t trust the man, but he didn’t see any option but to cooperate for the time being. His captor clearly had great resources at his disposal. Perhaps, with enough time, he could use these tools to find his former comrades.

“Alright, point taken,” he said. “What do you want from me?”

“I am glad you’re taking this so well. You have demonstrated that you are a competent soldier and commander, so I believe that I may make use of your skills.”

“I thought you didn’t want to fight?”

“I don’t want to fight. I abhor violence, I loathe war. But time and time again, someone forces us to interrupt the calm, intellectual life I would have my people lead in favor of yet another bloodbath. In the beginning, I thought to passively wait out the conflict, but my advisors wisely steered me from that naïve path. Therefore, as much as it pains me, I must fight to protect the world I would create, where the natural order of things is preserved, the way it was before the scientists of the old world and the Commonwealth perverted all that was good and holy. I will not force you, rather, I shall simply ask that you accompany me to Geneva and give Hyperion a chance. We both want the world returned to the way it was, and we can do great things together.

“Geneva,” said Ian. “I haven’t heard of it being clear there.”

“It is,” replied Lockhart. “As I implied earlier, we subtly push and prod the Commonwealth into the directions we would like. It has been enough to keep them out of our way.”

“Alright, fine. But there’s one thing that I still don’t understand.”

“I’ll answer any questions you have.”

“Then answer me this: Where are the rest? Hayami, Alexis, Hector, Teague, Eirene? My friends, where are they?”

“I don’t know,” Lockhart said after a moment of contemplation, during which Ian felt his heart accelerate. “I’m sorry to say they could be dead. Many of them likely are, and if they aren’t, well, the loyalists will have them soon enough. We were lucky enough just to get you.” Upon seeing Ian clench his fists and furrow his brow in anger, though, he held up his hand and continued. “I know what you’re thinking, but we did not kill them. Not directly.”

“Your gunship was firing *missiles* at them not one day ago. You can’t possibly know that for sure.”

“Those bombs produce smoke, chemicals that put you to sleep, and little else. I had intended to take you all alive if it were possible. The Commonwealth guards were too quick to respond, though, and got to them before we could. The smokescreen didn’t delay them as much as we’d hoped.”

Ian knew that it was unwise to provoke his “host,” but he could not restrain himself. “We were doing just fine until you showed up, thank you very much,” he said, jabbing an accusatory finger at Théoden. “I don’t care if it was all smoke, they’re still gone because of *you*!”

“No. I understand your anger, but they are gone because of themselves. You didn’t honestly think that it would have succeeded? What was your plan of action after Magnus’ death? Hmm? Not even just getting out of the tower, which was a dubious proposition at best. The Peregrine militia, if it’s even still around, now has the full attention of the Commonwealth. Where they were once content to fight you with token defense forces they will now see you crushed under the weight of every ship and every soldier they have at their disposal. You’ve woken the sleeping tiger, to use a clichéd phrase. Hyperion was your only chance at salvation.” He looked down at the floor in shame. “…and we failed. I’m sorry. But I did not kill them, and if you help me then I intend to make their sacrifices worth something.”

Ian thought about Théoden’s words, knowing that he wasn’t wrong, and then began to cry. Théoden let him do so, patiently waiting for Ian to clear his head.

When the tears finally slowed, Ian considered his situation. He still didn’t trust Théoden, but he seemed sincere enough. Enough to play along for a time and see where this went, at least. “Fine,” he said with a sniff. “I can see that I don’t have much choice in the matter. Take me to Geneva.”

The ship began to quiver as it started to enter a storm. “You will be comfortable with us,” said Théoden. “Geneva is a far cry from what I’m sure you’re used to. All of the facility’s amenities will be made available to you. You shall have food, drink, and leisure. Spiritual services you’ve likely been denied in the Commonwealth. Women or men as you desire them, none of them coerced like you might find in some survivor enclaves.”

“Hookers and gigolos?” Ian laughed darkly. “I’ve still got someone at home to whom I’d like to be faithful, but thanks for the offer.”

“You still hold out hope that they can be rescued?”

“There’s always hope. This isn’t the first time I fucked up.”

Théoden smiled. “Good. Hope is good.”

## Chapter 7 – Escape from the Panopticon

“It was undoubtedly a dramatic affair, so many ‘natural disasters’ striking at once, all over the globe. However, contrary to the narrative pushed by the UN, they were far from a genocidal force. Each storm’s death toll was scarcely higher than a regular disaster; it was merely the fact that so many had erupted at once and that they did not seem to dissipate that set them apart. An argument could be made that they ended the world as we know it, because the storms did have a devastating effect on infrastructure and transportation, leading to the balkanization of most nations, but that would be an extreme interpretation of events.

* Archivist Victoria Cromwell, in A Blank Slate: Humanity’s Second Chance

The facility known as the Panopticon was not a true panopticon, as the layout was originally envisioned. The supposed advantage of such a building was to allow a single watchman to supervise every prisoner, exploiting the fact that they could never know if he was observing them at any given time, but the Provisional Government had grown paranoid and augmented Bentham’s design with an entire army of guards to keep the country’s worst offenders in line.

Officially, the Panopticon was created to contain the worst of the worst, those who needed to be kept under close scrutiny. Over the years, most of its population had been replaced by political prisoners, mostly young idealists and elders who advocated a return to the ways of their childhoods. The Peregrine rebels who were captured expected that most of them would be sent there, and the government did not disappoint.

All things considered, it wasn’t a terrible fate. Even if it believed them beyond any hope of rehabilitation, the government was reluctant to abuse the Panopticon’s inhabitants and, for the most part, treated them fairly. Presumably, Alexis thought, this was designed to reduce the likelihood of a revolt. Sensible enough, granted they could spare the resources. In the event that the prisoners did revolt, however, there was one last measure in place to quash an upstart rebellion. The main “ring” of cells that surrounded the central guard post was not a tower, as most panopticons were, but rather a pit. A pit connected to the canals bringing fresh water into the city after being desalinated at the St. Elodie Waterlock. The prison’s warden, if he felt it necessary, could open the floodgates and drown the entire panopticon in cold Aegean water.

“That does put something of a dampener on our otherwise decent accommodations, Hayami said as she and the remaining Peregrine commanders ate lunch at the bottom of the Panopticon. Meals were the one time of day that the prisoners were allowed to socialize with anybody other than their cellmates, under the watchful eyes of the guards.

“Yep. Like, I’m sure that the criteria for actually activating that protocol are pretty strict, but, still. Makes the idea of a breakout somewhat undesirable,” Alexis replied. “If we wanted to get out, it would have to be a few at a time. Not that it’s relevant, because that doesn’t exactly seem possible.”

“Aye. Seems like the only consolation we’ve got now is that we killed Magnus. With any luck, that will inspire someone else to take up our mantle. The revolution will not die with us.”

“God willing.”

“Indeed.”

The two women were not alone at the table, but company was sparse. The prisoners were assigned meal shifts, and few were lucky enough to eat with their friends, if they even had any. Besides Hayami, Alexis was joined by a strong-looking man of Eastern European ancestry and a skittish woman with a soft English accent. The English woman was Alexis’ cellmate, Lisbeth Stroud, but she did not recognize the Slavic man.

“I don’t believe we’ve met. Irwin Sokolov,” he said, extending a hand to Alexis.

“I was just about to ask,” she replied.

“Sarcasm, or…?”

“No. I was genuinely curious. I’m sorry if it came off that way.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble. Anyway, seems we’ve got two of the three commanders at this table. You don’t suppose Commander Baros’s just on another shift, do you?”

“He has to be,” Hayami said.

“And if he’s not?”

“Then, when we burn Athens to the ground, you’ll have a different commanding officer, I suppose.”

Alexis looked sideways at Hayami. “So, Lisbeth, you never said which section you belonged to,” she said, moving the conversation away.

“Dragoon,” Lisbeth said before opening up a bottle of pills and swallowing one with a gulp of water.

“One of Jan’s girls, then. What are the pills for? The UNPG lets you administer your own medication?”

“Yeah. They do. See, I, uh, have implants. Augments. Same as you. But my body doesn’t like them. So I have to take these pills or else I’m gonna have a pretty bad time of it. It’s a lot of rubbish, but that’s my lot in life.”

As Lisbeth spoke, Alexis found herself struggling to keep up. Her rapid delivery of each fragmented sentence combined with her accent made for a difficult conversation, but she was starting to get used to it.

“Are the pills from Madelyn-Rash?” Sokolov asked.

“Yep. Mm-hmm. Standard issue. Defense Admin sends ‘em out to the military, too. We’re rare enough that our pills aren’t exactly over-the-counter.”

“Hector used to be able to procure some for her,” Hayami added. “He had enough fingers in the industrial pie to make it happen. Guess he won’t be doing that anymore.”

“Lucky he could do that, then. From what I’m hearing, it’s not the kind of thing I’d have been able to find on my salvage runs.”

“Aye.”

\* \* \*

Because of the shifts, Alexis was unable to assess how many of the Peregrines had survived Samara Tower. Hector and Teague were unaccounted for, but that did not mean they were dead. Hector’s death would not have been a tragedy in her eyes, but Teague was someone she did not want to lose. By the grace of God, Eirene had evidently made it out alive and, physically, in one piece. Alexis’ younger counterpart was part of the lunch shift just before hers, and the two occasionally caught glimpses of each other as they were shepherded between their cells and the base of the Panopticon. On one such occasion, Alexis had observed Eirene sitting at a table with a pad of paper and drawing pencils, sketching a fragile-looking young woman posed opposite her. The guards soon ordered her to pack it up and return to her cell with the rest of her shift, but it was clear from the brief scene that the two women had, to some extent, become friends. Alexis couldn’t help but feel an ounce of shameful jealousy that she quickly hid in the back of her mind.

\* \* \*

“We need to get the fuck out of here,” Hayami said on that day’s lunch meeting. “I’m not going to just sit around like a lousy good-for-nothing while there’s people who need killing.”

“I think it’s clear by now that just killing people isn’t enough,” Alexis replied.

“And you know this exactly how? Since when does a single defeat – a pyrrhic victory, even – warrant a radical change in direction?”

“I didn’t say we’re going to become peace-loving hippies. But we clearly need to, uh, augment our methods. Do something new. Not a radical shift in doctrine, but we clearly need to reconsider our approach to this problem.”

“And what exactly would you say our problem is?”

Alexis paused.

“See, you don’t know. Fighting’s all we have. If we waste time deliberating, experimenting, we let the enemy take advantage. We need commitment, dedication to a single goal. That’s how we win.”

“Sure, sure,” Alexis said. “Because it’s not like we’re locked up or anything. The enemy already *has* the advantage, so why not take the time to re-evaluate our strategy?”

Hayami laughed. “Aye, that’s fair. Still, if we get out, we need to hit the ground running.”

“I guess I can’t argue with that.”

Suddenly, Hayami’s eyes sharpened. “Ssh, guards approaching,” she said in a whisper that only those sitting at the table could hear. Her words briefly reminded Alexis of their encounter with the guardsmen before the fateful attack on Samara Tower. Allegedly, the civil guard had been instructed to respond to some riot or other, but, as she reflected, she recalled that Magnus had insisted that his own elite troops were on site. Another oddity, and another mystery to solve.

Regardless, the rebels kept quiet as a pair of civil guardsmen meandered by. One of them, a young man with tanned skin and hair as red as Alexis’ muttered something incomprehensible into the other’s ear, prompting the latter to nod and quit the area, leaving the former alone with Alexis, Hayami, and company.

“Good afternoon,” the man said. “I was just transferred here. Figured I should become acquainted with our newest and most infamous guests.”

“Is that so?” Hayami asked, masking her suspicions beneath as neutral an expression as she could manage.

“Why not? Is it wrong?”

“It’s certainly unusual,” Alexis said. “Why do you care?”

The guard looked from side to side, checking to see if his peers were watching him. They were not. “There are some of use who are sympathetic to your cause,” he said in a low voice. “Don’t expect us to help you organize a prison break, or anything – that’s beyond our power even if we wanted to – but I at least understand your grievances, if you get my drift.”

“Oh, one of *those*. You say you support our cause but lack the conviction to take action, is that right?” Hayami said.

“Jan!” Alexis snapped.

The guard smiled. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to punish you for a little back talk. But take your colleague’s advice – many of the other guards are not so tolerant.”

“Whatever.”

“I apologize for her,” Alexis said, prompting a loathsome glare from Hayami. “Anyway, what exactly did you want?”

“Just to talk, I guess. My name is Adrian. I hope you haven’t suffered any grievous abuse at the hands of my peers. I’m sure you know how zealous they can be.”

Alexis shrugged. “Nothing worse than a few nasty looks. They’ve been kind enough to grant most of our requests for simple materials. Books, pens and paper. You know. Food’s actually an improvement over what we usually had to eat on the outskirts.”

“Good, good. You don’t deserve harsh punishment.”

“Is that so? I know quite a few who’d disagree.”

Adrian shrugged. “Yes, and, alas, they hold a little more sway here than I do. Still, just know that I’ll do whatever I can to make life easy for you.”

“I appreciate it,” Alexis replied, deciding that it was best to be diplomatic.

Hayami instead eyed Adrian with a suspicious glare, sizing him up and arriving at the conclusion that he was of dubious quality as an ally. “So,” she said, “If you’re so sympathetic to our cause, why did you stay with the UNPG? Why didn’t you join up with us before…”

“Before everything went to hell? Would I have really made a difference? Don’t you think it’s better to have a man on the inside?”

“And what exactly was our ‘man on the inside’ doing for us all this time?” Hayami’s glare intensified. “You may have ideals, but you lack the conviction to do anything with them. We don’t need a milquetoast coward of an ally who spends his days lying to himself that he’s making a difference sitting on his ass and doing nothing but enabling a tyrant’s visions.”

“Do you think I had a choice?” Adrian asked, a hint of malice insinuating itself into his voice. “I have a brother. He can’t take care of himself, so I have to do it for him. Abandoning a stable job to pursue some pipe dream wasn’t exactly a good idea.”

“You always have a choice. You think none of us have families? I left my parents behind. I, for one, was more than happy to do that, because they were awful people, but plenty of others gave up people they loved to make a better world.”

“I cut ties with my mother,” Alexis admitted.

“And I with my wife and son,” Sokolov said.

“Parents, brother, and sister,” Lisbeth added, finishing the group.

“It was for the best,” Hayami said. “We went into a dangerous business, and having close ties to relatives outside the Peregrines was a risk, to both them and us. It sucks, but there’s no progress without sacrifice. And it sure as hell beats doing nothing.” She sighed. “Listen, I know your situation was a little different. You needed to actually care for this brother of yours. But that doesn’t excuse doing *nothing*. And just ‘expressing your sympathies’ *is* doing nothing.”

Adrian looked at the table. “Maybe,” he said. “Maybe.”

“I used to be with the civil guard,” Alexis said. “Stayed with them even after student service. We all know how hard it is to leave a comfortable life, so I don’t blame you for staying. And you’re not wrong to assume that a man on the inside could help our cause, even if you haven’t really done much thus far. I can hardly expect every man, woman, and child to drop everything and take up arms for the cause.”

“Would make our lives a lot easier if they did,” Hayami said, cracking the faintest of smiles. Lisbeth giggled in response, her face immediately turning red as she stopped and bid herself make no more noise.

“Yeah, well, something tells me that isn’t going to happen,” Adrian replied. “Still, you said you were civil guard? If it’s not too much to ask, what made you quit?”

Alexis sighed. “I mean, there were a few reasons. But the last straw was this operation we had in the outskirts near Liar’s Bluff, not far from where I ended up living with the Peregrines, funnily enough. Anyway, it was a hostage crisis. Pretty routine – bunch of thugs took two engineers and were demanding money and passage to some rebel base they’d heard of in Tehran.”

“I’m guessing that base no longer exists.”

“I’d assume so,” Alexis replied. “I didn’t stick around for the follow-up. Anyhow, I was a lieutenant at the time, one step up from the Athens guard captain.”

“Quite the prestigious position.”

“Mmhmm. If you asked my captain, though, my job was basically to keep them from spending their entire downtime ‘drinking, smoking, and fucking’ with their boyfriends or girlfriends, which I did. Mostly. Point is, I had a lot of authority, but still had to follow someone’s orders. So when the day started going south…well, our first attempt to storm the building was sub-optimal, to say the least. We were in position and thought we could take out the bad guys fast enough to keep the hostages alive, but, apparently, they had more intel than we thought and were waiting for us. A half dozen of my girls killed or wounded, which is more than I’d lost in my entire career up to that point.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Adrian said, the expression on his face seemingly genuine.

Alexis felt the sorrow rising up inside her, each memory bringing with it a new pang of guilt. “I’d done my best to turn them into the best unit the guard had to offer,” she said. “We were never gonna be on the same tier as the Skywatch, but we were damn close. It just wasn’t enough. Anyhow, just one loss wasn’t gonna make me defect. We all knew the risks. But what happened after…” She paused. “As soon as we’d fallen back, regrouped, I made plans for another go. They’d executed a hostage in response to our attack, some old man who deserved better. I wasn’t about to let them take another.”

“So, what happened?”

“With only one hostage left and an apparently unassailable position, my captain made a decision – glass the whole place. Figured it was better to flatten everybody, including the hostage, than waste more people having another go at a rescue. The UNPG ran the numbers and came to a decision. Nothing I could say would change their minds.”

Hayami scoffed. “Perhaps they put too much trust in you. Thought that if you couldn’t take it, then that was that.”

“I won’t disagree. Part of it was my fault, I don’t deny it. But they should have replaced me and tried again, not just given up and resorted to scorched earth or whatever.”

“So you decided you’d had enough and deserted, hoping to find someone who could use your talents in a more ethical way, is that right?”

“To find greener pastures, yes. I took some of my most trusted people and headed north that day. They were just as disgusted as I was, so it wasn’t hard to convince them. One of them knew about the Peregrine base ‘cause her brother had apparently defected a little earlier, and that’s all she wrote.”

“The brother she’s speaking of is dead now, by the way,” Hayami said, her mouth curling into a bitter grimace.

“As are most people in that story, I imagine” Sokolov replied. “We should avenge them, not sit around mourning.”

Hayami turned to face him, her incensed face betraying any attempt to disguise her rage, but was interrupted as Adrian stood up. “Whatever you’re planning, I think it’s best I don’t know about it,” he said. “Anyway, thanks for your time. It’s been…interesting.”

“And thank you for listening,” Alexis said, giving him a quick and sloppy farewell salute.

\* \* \*

As time went on, the truth that there would be no escaping from the Panopticon became oppressive. With only one way in or out and an omnicidal mechanism ready to destroy them all at a moment’s notice, any conventional escape plan was all but an impossibility.

“I suppose there are worse fates,” Sokolov said. “Military prisoners of regimes past would likely give their right legs to trade places with us, if they still had them.”

“Would that we had better food, though. I’d hoped to improve my lot in life, and yet here we are.” Hayami said with a hint of humor in her voice.

“I always assumed that food from the government would be average at best. Fortunately, I find myself comfortable with mediocrity, being myself mediocre.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” Alexis said.

Sokolov shrugged. “Not hard, just realistic,” he said. “I joined the Peregrines to make something of myself, to do something worth writing down in the history books rather than waste away in obscurity. But, as Commander Tyler says…here we are.”

“Not for long, God willing.”

“So that’s your plan?” Hayami asked. “Just wait for God to help us?”

“I didn’t say we shouldn’t try. But, like, look around us. Realistically, is anything short of an act of God gonna deliver us from this pit?”

Hayami shrugged. “I’m of the mind that the words ‘god’ and ‘realistic’ scarcely belong in the same sentence. If your god did help the faithful, then perhaps there’d have been more than one successful crusade. But what do I know about the machinations of the Lord – I’m but a humble chevalier.”

“Well, do you have a better plan?”

“Any plan we come up with is liable to get us killed. I’m sure you don’t need reminding. So why not just make a leap of faith? I guess that’s a bit of an ironic term to use given what I just said, but whatever. Storm the elevator and see if we can get to the surface before they dump the Aegean on us. Either we escape or we die trying, which, the way I see it, is preferable to rotting down here.”

“Fortune favors the bold,” Sokolov said.

Alexis hummed. “That’s what they say, but I’m not sure how often it proves true. I prefer caution.”

“How many are remembered in history books for their caution?”

“At least as many as are remembered for hasty mistakes, like the one that ended us up in here. We lost at the Tower because we were forced to scuttle our plans and take reckless action. I’m not going to make that mistake again. We’ll be patient and wait until the enemy presents us with an opportunity.”

“Right, I guess you’re the boss,” Hayami muttered.

\* \* \*

On the rebels’ last day of incarceration, their morning began with a cacophony of sirens and yells from the rim of the Panopticon. From the base of the pit where they had assembled for breakfast, the prisoners could not tell what crisis had arisen, but could easily make out the shapes of a half-dozen capital ships passing overhead. Those with an acute sense of direction realized that they were headed north, in the direction of the now-abandoned Peregrine base.

“That doesn’t seem right,” Alexis said as she watched the metal hulks drift away. To her left, Lisbeth twitched, and, on her right, Sokolov eyed the ships with keen suspicion.

“Couldn’t be headed for our old place,” Hayami said, sharing her comrades’ concerns. “If they wanted to sweep the area for stragglers, a fleet like that would be entirely uncalled for. Do you think, perchance, someone else might have moved in?”

“Would have to be someone pretty damn scary. We held that base for years and never saw more than a few skirmish units. I can’t think of any other reason that they’d be sending a fleet to the north, though, so who wants to guess who the new public enemy number one is?”

“Russian remnants, maybe?” Sokolov mused. “If they wanted to hit the UNPG, they’d probably do a blitz attack from the north. It’s what I’d do, at any rate.”

Alexis considered his hypothesis, but dismissed it. “Doubtful,” she said. “Russia was still on the Security Council when the UNPG was founded, so any Russian forces worth mentioning were integrated from the start. Nothing but a few urban holdouts and Siberian tribes up there now, far as I’m aware.”

“So many with bones to pick. None of them strong,” Lisbeth said.

“She’s right,” Hayami agreed. “The Provisional Government’s not without its enemies. All the scattered groups who don’t want to swear fealty to the new world order would no doubt like to see them dead, but, unless one of them’s managed to rebuild itself into a proper country with an organized military, I’m not sure what they could do to provoke that kind of reaction. We were the most credible threat to the UNPG that I ever knew of, and even we had to resort to guerilla warfare at the best of times.”

Sokolov shrugged. “Well, if we go by Alexis’ logic, we can rule out Russia, France, Britain, China, and the United States. All permanent members of the UNSC and founders of the UNPG. The Chinese and Americans, maybe not, since they’re farther away and had to leave more people behind when the storms hit, but that also means they’d have a harder time mobilizing anything that’d pose a real threat.”

“Iran,” Lisbeth said, quietly but decisively.

“Hey, now there’s an idea. Pure conjecture of course, but I’d put some money on it,” Sokolov said. “Could be some other group of Tehran Pact remnants, but Iran’d be strongest individual power left in the Middle East. Or, if they managed to reform the Pact…now *that* would be a threat. Of course, I’m no expert on that area, so that might not even be possible. It’s all a guessing game anyway.”

“Thing is, if the Tehran Pact were attacking, you’d think they’d use Istanbul as a staging point, not hit us from the north,” Alexis said.

“That didn’t work out so well for them during the Crusade, did it?”

“They got all the way to Vienna before they ran out of steam. If they launched a second attack against the West, but this time only needing to take Greece to land a killing blow, they could probably do it. But maybe you’re right, and they’re being cautious, sending an expedition up north to loop through Ukraine and tie up the UNPG in the north while they make a naval landing at Attica or the Peloponnese. The only other possibility that I can even imagine is that the Pope, if he even exists, finally mustered a big enough army to seek revenge for the sack of Vatican City.”

“That seems…unlikely,” Hayami said.

“Agreed. My money’s on Tehran. Not that it matters.”

\* \* \*

When they finally learned the truth, the Peregrines were surprised to discover that they had been correct – almost. That evening, prompting no small amount of alarm, the Peregrine leaders were summoned to a clandestine room near the rim of the Panopticon, alone but for a mere handful of Skywatch officers in their grey-blue fatigues and body armor.

Scanning the room, Alexis noticed just about everybody of importance within the rebel leadership. In addition to herself, Teague and Hector were present, as was Hayami. Ian was conspicuously absent, a poor omen of his chances of survival, but in his place was Eirene, representing the Peregrines’ air wing. Every branch of their military was represented except for the Shock Corps, but, in that moment, none of them mattered to her except for Eirene.

It was almost a guilty pleasure, watching her. Everything about Eirene must have been divinely inspired, God’s greatest success if he had truly tried to build humanity in his own image. Alexis couldn’t help but want to reach out and touch her, not so much for any sexual reason but rather out of her rebellious spirit’s yearning to defy what ought to have been there: a museum’s admonition not to touch the art.

“Tell me,” one of the officers said, interrupting Alexis’ admiration, “what work would you be willing to do for us in exchange for your freedom?”

“I beg your pardon?” Hector asked.

“We have protocols. In the event that a threat is posed which our existing military cannot contain, the Skywatch is authorized to recruit reinforcements from within the penal system. You and your troops have extensive combat experience in the regions where we expect to engage the enemy, so I’m ready to offer you a deal. All your people get released, re-armed, and re-supplied, and we ship you all up north to hold the enemy off at your old base.”

“Tehran?” Alexis asked, echoing Lisbeth’s gamble from earlier in the day.

“Sort of,” the officer replied. “We’ve yet to observe the rise of any legitimate nation-states, but a group of insurgents *has* sprung up from the corpse of the Pact. Islamic extremists, according to our intelligence. We’ve deployed what forces we can to the areas they’re threatening, but our infantry units are occupied elsewhere, so we could use your guerilla specialists to actually hold the ground.”

Alexis was immediately suspicious, and she was certain that her compatriots felt the same way. They had killed the Director-General of the Provisional Government – if these were mere insurgents, how could they possibly warrant the liberation of such dangerous prisoners? Everything she saw pointed to some sort of trap, or at least a scheme that would not be to their benefit.

As she voiced these concerns to the others, most of them seemed to agree.

“And yet, why set a trap for those already in custody?” Hector asked. Neither Alexis nor any of the others could present a counter-argument.

“It isn’t a trap, but neither is it meant for your benefit. You’re a tool that we intend to use, and ideally expend, and once these Tehrani rebels are dealt with, we will recall your forces. Naturally, you’ll resist and we return to the status quo prior to your great failure at the Tower.”

“In our weakened state, a return to the status quo would put us at a severe disadvantage, but freedom is freedom,” Hector said. “Even if it is a trap, at least we’d have room to maneuver.”

“He’s not wrong. I suggest you take this opportunity,” the officer said.

The entire scenario still seemed implausible to Alexis. After all, why would the government release prisoners on only their word that they would fight some mysterious enemy? However, she had to concede that Hector was right. Whatever plan the Provisional Government had cooked up had to be better than the Panopticon. “Fine,” she said. “If you’re all on board, then so be it. I’ll do whatever you need me to do.”

“Likewise. Seems like waiting did pay off after all,” Hayami said with a grumble.

“We’ve yet to see if that’s true,” Alexis replied.

“Right.”

The rest of the Peregrine leaders agreed that this was their only real chance, suspicious as it was, and so the deal was struck. All the rebel prisoners would be released and garrisoned at their old fort, in the hopes of warding off the attack from Tehran. A convoy of troops and supplies, including everything from rations to Eirene’s corvette, arrived at its destination in the evening of the next day. For the time being, they were free, although most of them were still unsure as to why.

## Chapter 8 – The Children’s Crusade

“Reconciliation, not retribution is what we need. No side can claim to have won that war. Both have suffered equally. If we extend a helping hand, show the West that we are willing to cooperate, then we can avoid future conflict and take back the moral high ground. Let us work together to rebuild each other’s ruined cities.”

* *High Councilor Aaliyah Samara, daughter of the Emperor*

As Ian disembarked the vessel, he was struck not only by the magnificence of the ship itself, but also by the breathtakingly beautiful sight of the city. The ship was long and ornate, its smooth, curvaceous hull a deep red hue trimmed with gold, a color that set it apart from the purest marble white of the surrounding architecture. Fanciful towers sprouted from the elaborate maze of smaller facilities and structures, while lines of viridian trees and clear blue water features accented the beautiful sight. Ian stood in awe upon the dock, gazing at the vista before him.

The smell was the third sensation to strike him. While Athens had its moments of beauty, its scent was undeniably that of a city, no matter how clean. In Geneva, he found himself able to take a breath of fresh air and pick up traces of nature all around him. From where Ian stood, he could easily think himself in the wild if he closed his eyes.

Théoden, who had been following shortly behind, patted him on the back. “Welcome to Geneva. It must look quite overwhelming, but I assure you that you’ll soon find yourself accustomed to the city.”

“Thank you.” Ian took a few steps forward, then stopped and turned around. “Say, how big is this place anyway? It looks like you’ve up and rebuilt all of Geneva, and then some.”

“I don’t know,” Théoden confessed, shrugging. “Large, I suppose? Not a megacity like Athens or Montreal, but big enough to support all the refugees I’ve collected.”

“Yeah, it seems like quite the flock. May I ask how you built such a grand city?”

Théoden smiled. “A light came from the East. My family was quite wealthy and owned quite a bit of land here in Switzerland, so I was able to make preparations for the disaster I knew was coming. Unfortunately, I anticipated another war, not a cataclysmic storm. When it happened, much of our infrastructure was destroyed, and the ship carrying many of my contracted workers sank just off of Algiers.”

“So what’s this ‘light from the East’ you mentioned?”

“The CAS *Shanghai* was a refugee airship bound for what would become Athens. Its communication and navigational equipment failed, so it ended up crashing in Geneva, and from the wreckage, it disgorged a whole host of engineers, scientists, and laborers. They were literally our salvation, and so earned themselves and their ship a permanent place in our scripture.”

“Scripture?”

“Religion here takes a different form than you might be used to. Many see the *Shanghai* as a Messianic figure, regardless of their religious affiliation. Their intervention was quite miraculous, and so many have taken to the belief that, when the world is threatened by heresy and violence, the *Shanghai* will return and once again lead our people to victory. It helped that the ship’s iconography was a white horse, a figure that features prominently in many mythologies. Islam and Hinduism, for instance.”

“Erudite, aren’t you?”

“Hardly. I have picked up a lot over the years, but much of my knowledge is second-hand.” Théoden put his arm around Ian and pointed at a building barely visible from their position on the sky dock. “That there is an information center. Head inside, get a map, then find your residence in Dufour Tower. Once you’re inside, you should meet with two people. The first is your magistrate, Robert Lamb. The magistrates are local nobles who all report to me, but they have autonomy regarding the laws of their own holdings. Lamb’s a good man, and he’ll treat you well, so don’t worry.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Indeed. Now, the second person you’ll meet is Inquisitor Charlotte Aucoin, with whom you’ll be working here in Geneva. How she treats you is entirely your choice. Treat her well, and you’ll get respect in return. The Inquisition rewards loyalty and punishes treachery, as you’d expect.”

“I’ll be sure to honor her, then. But what am I actually going to do? What’s this Inquisition about?”

“You’ll follow her as she does whatever she needs to do, and I will observe to see first-hand how a Peregrine officer handles himself. If I think you would do better outside the Inquisition, and my advisors approve, then you might even earn yourself land and a title. I don’t micro-manage my people, so Charlotte herself will have to explain what your actual tasks will be. Now, unless you have any more questions, we’ll part ways here. Find me in my office at Geneva Tower if you need me.

Ian could immediately tell what building he meant. An enormous tower dominated the skyline, with Théoden’s office no doubt at the top. Samara Tower, Geneva Tower. Some things never changed.

Robert Lamb seemed an amiable sort when they first met. Large, but not fat, he would have been quite intimidating had it not been for his friendly countenance. Smiling, the man shook Ian’s hand and bid him welcome to the “community,” as he put it.

Ian appreciated the gesture, thanking his host before taking a longer look around the foyer.

“Here’s your room key,” Lamb said. “Don’t worry *too* much about losing it; just ask any security staff if you need a replacement.”

Ian nodded and took the keycard, a thin plastic chip with the number 405 on it.

“Fourth floor, room five in case you couldn’t tell. She’s got a good view of the lake. Lucky man you are.”

“Right, thanks. Hey, uh, do you maybe know where I could find Inquisitor Charlotte Aucoin? Théoden said I was to report to her.”

“Master Lockhart set you up with Lottie and her little girls, eh? You’ll have an interesting time with that one, no doubt about it. Charlotte and her little sister are in room 511, and if they’re not back already, they will be soon. You speak French, I hope?”

“Enough to get by. They don’t speak English, then?”

“Emma, the little sister, she’s fluent. Lottie’s not bad but she prefers French. You can tell the English words don’t come naturally to her.”

“I see. I’ll keep that in mind, then. Anything else I need to know?”

“Depends. How old are you, exactly?”

“Thirty-five.”

Lamb let out a chuckle. “Thirty-five, eh? Well then, if nothing else, you should know that Lottie’s barely more than half your age. Girl’s only just turned nineteen, so I hope you don’t mind working for a youngster.”

Quiet alarm bells began to sound in Ian’s head, but he ignored them. Nineteen wasn’t that much younger than Alexis or Eirene, who were both capable women. Depending on Charlotte’s experience and the jobs they would be doing, he figured that she could yet prove adequate.

\* \* \*

Ian finally found Charlotte in her room, as Lamb had indicated. He hadn’t yet visited his own, as he had no belongings to unpack save for what he was presently wearing, and so he decided that he should meet his superior as soon as possible.

When Charlotte opened the door, Ian immediately noticed her displeasure at his dropping by uninvited. She had bags under her eyes and her dark hair was a mess of uncoordinated strands that dangled around her shoulders. Her lips were twisted into a scowl that was more intimidating than it had any right to be, coming from a woman so much younger than he.

Before he could say anything, however, her face softened. “Pardon me if I am less than hospitable,” she said in stilted English. “My little sister has been capricious of late. What business do you have with me?”

“I’m, uh, supposed to report to you now. Théoden recruited me and said that I was supposed to shadow you on operations, get a feel for the place, and all that.”

“Master Lockhart recruited you personally, did he? Then I shall expect great things from you. But, yes, I was informed that I would have a new addition to my retinue.” Charlotte shrugged. “I do not believe that it is necessary, *mais c’est la vie*. Sometimes we get things we did not ask for.”

“Tell me about it. Anyway, just thought I’d introduce myself straight away, get that taken care of. If I’m going to be working for you, is there anything I should know?”

“I do not know how much Master Lockhart told you about our little country, so I will give you the full spiel once you are settled in. In the mean time, I only have to ask if you speak any French. It is my preferred language, but I can tolerate English if it is necessary for our work.”

“It’s not my first language, obviously, but I speak it well enough,” Ian said.

“Excellent. That’s very good to hear,” Charlotte replied with a smile, switching to her mother tongue. “Anyway, I’ll meet you in the foyer of this building at seven-thirty in the morning. I assume you’ve talked to Lamb already, given that you knew where to find me, but I’d recommend going back to him to find out where you can get outfitted and equipped. I’ll expect you at seven-thirty sharp with a uniform and weapon of your choice. Outside of the uniform, the Inquisition doesn’t really have a standard set of gear.”

“Sure thing, I’ll get on that as soon as possible. I look forward to working under you, Inquisitor. Is that the title I should use?”

“That or ‘Mistress Aucoin’ will do. Now, if you’re done, I should attend to my sister. We’ll meet you tomorrow morning.”

\* \* \*

After picking up his uniform – a sharp-looking set of crimson fatigues – and a replacement rifle, Ian spent the rest of the day resting in his room. The bed, at least, wasn’t uncomfortable, and his room had a pleasant view of Lake Geneva complete with a small balcony that offered a breath of fresh air in a private environment.

In the evening, after a simple meal at the residence hall’s cafeteria, Ian stood alone on the balcony. There had been alcohol at the cafeteria, and he felt a strong desire to down a drink or two as he watched the sun disappear, but he knew it would be best to remain sober as he got his bearings. The city that was now his home was beautiful, of this there was no doubt, but he could not shake the feeling of dread and the worry that he had become an enforcer for an oppressive theocracy. What other form of government would employ an inquisition?

Charlotte, meanwhile, tried not to think about her new recruit. The part of her that was, at the end of the day, still a teenager acknowledged that he was certainly quite attractive, but her more professional instincts reminded her that such thoughts were highly inappropriate, and so she disregarded them.

Regardless, Charlotte was uneasy taking on an apprentice. She knew nothing about Ian, save that he was an expatriate from the UNPG and that he looked Greek, which made sense. Worse, she questioned whether this arrangement was ideal given the current set of circumstances. She was but a junior inquisitor, as her superiors were eager to remind her, and her responsibilities were usually limited to petty crime investigation. Perhaps this is why Master Lockhart had assigned Ian to her, as some way to test the new recruit’s skills in a low-stakes environment, but she had no experience training someone older than a cadet. Her little sister was one thing, but a man twice her age was quite another. Under any other system, she thought, he would be the one training her, but she resolved to prove to Ian, Théoden, and anybody else who was listening that she was up to the task.

\* \* \*

Just as Charlotte had ordered, Ian was ready in the foyer at seven-thirty in the morning, his uniform pristine, his hair freshly combed, and his rifle at the ready. He saw the young inquisitor arrive less than a minute afterwards, with two small girls in tow. They couldn’t have been more than twelve, he thought.

“Before we begin, there’s one thing you should know,” she began in French, skipping any pleasantries. “Our Inquisition is not modeled after the historical organizations of the same name, so if you were afraid your duties would involve burning heretics, you needn’t worry. Master Lockhart has always supported freedom of religion. ‘Heresy’ in Geneva has very few specific qualities, so we mostly act as a glorified police force.”

“So we’re just cops on duty, then?”

“Basically. If the Inquisition needs us for a specific operation, we’ll be informed at least twenty-four hours in advance, but we’re expected to respond to any requests for aid should an incident arise during our patrol. Otherwise, we just walk the streets and keep the peace. Simple.”

“Sounds good to me, ma’am,” Ian replied.

“Ma’am, is it? How quaint.”

“I’m sorry, would you prefer I called you ‘Mistress Aucoin?’ Was that what you said yesterday?”

Charlotte smiled. “No, ‘ma’am’ will do fine. We typically use ‘Master’ and ‘Mistress,’ but we’re not strict about it. I suspect you’ve gotten used to your own titles from your work down south, so I don’t mind whatever you call me as long as it’s respectful. We’re not a traditional military group in the way something like the Skywatch is.”

“Alright. I’ll try to use ‘Mistress’ from now on.”

“When in Rome, hmm? Right, now that that’s squared away, you may as well meet my other wards, Emma and Peony. They join me on patrol on the weekends.”

Ian followed Charlotte’s gesture towards the children. They were small, skinny girls with nearly identical haircuts that stopped precisely at their shoulders and cheerful smiles on their faces. Up until that point, they had been distracted whispering and giggling to each other, but they perked up at the mention of their names.

“Introduce yourself, girls,” Charlotte said, stepping aside to clear the space between them and Ian.

The dark-haired girl spoke first. “I’m Emma. Charlotte’s sister,” she said, with an exaggerated bow. “*Ever* so pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“And I’m Peony,” said the brunette, eschewing Emma’s theatrics in favor of an ambivalent shrug. “Cadet serving Mistress Aucoin. But you already knew that.”

Ian did his best to show the girls a friendly smile as he introduced himself and promised that he wouldn’t let them down.

Peony just stood in silence as Emma laughed. “So, you’re working for my sister too, then? I don’t suppose we outrank you then, since we’ve been here longer?” she said, returning Ian’s smile with her own. It was such a saccharine smile that it could only have been an insult, a reminder that he had fallen so far that a pair of little girls had seniority over him.”

“Strictly speaking, no,” Charlotte said. “Mr. Baros is outside the usual chain of command while Master Lockhart evaluates his abilities. Once that time comes, he will be assigned an appropriate role. Theoretically, you might all graduate to junior inquisitors together, but that remains to be seen.”

“Killjoy.”

“Right. It’s worth noting that the inquisition also acts as the fun police,” Charlotte said to Ian with a deadpan look on her face. “Regardless, we should get going. I still have questions, but we can walk and talk. Come on.”

Ian, Emma, and Peony followed the young woman onto the street, which was mostly deserted. What surprised Ian the most about Geneva was twofold – its beauty, and its scale. In Athens, the atmosphere had not been entirely unpleasant, but it had been crowded, its streets blocked by hordes of pedestrians and its skylines obscured by endless rows of skyscrapers, to say nothing of the ruins where he had spent the last few years of his life. The other UNPG cities were scarcely better, or so he heard. But Geneva, while clearly expansive – from his room, at least, Ian could not see a limit to the city – easily eclipsed even the finest architectural achievements of his former home. Its air was fresh and smelled of early spring, and he could hear birds chirping amongst the trees. With precious few skyscrapers in the area, the nearby mountains made for an attractive view from almost anywhere in the city. How such a large settlement had escaped the UNPG’s vision, or at least its grasp, was a mystery.

“Okay, so we have a problem that we need to fix,” Charlotte said.

“And what’s that?” Ian asked.

“I’m an inquisitor. Knowing things is half our job description. And I don’t know anything about you. That won’t do, especially if you’re to support me in the field.”

“Well, then, what do you want to know?”

“As much as possible. For instance, I want to know your family, your friends, your blood type, allergies, medication, skills, hobbies, employment history, relationship history, what you had for breakfast each morning and the color of your underwear.”

“Really?”

“What do you think?” Charlotte asked, her face betraying none of the answers Ian wanted.

“I haven’t known what to think since I got here. I don’t even remember what color my underwear is? Grey?”

“Correct. All undergarments in the set you would have received when you got your uniform are grey.”

“Alright, then,” Ian said, trying and failing to hide his confusion. “So, do you already know the answers to all those other questions? Is this some kind of test?”

“No, I don’t know the other answers. I can make educated guesses based on the statistics I know, but nothing more. For instance, I’d wager that you had waffles for breakfast since they’re by far the most popular breakfast item here, but, being a new arrival, you may not have known that. Unless you asked someone for a recommendation.”

“Which is exactly what I did. Damn.”

“My sister’s basically a genius. She’s the brains of the family,” Emma said.

Charlotte frowned. “Don’t sell yourself short. As I said, just an educated guess. I’m not even going to try to deduce anything else. Too many variables. So, in the absence of any other ways of gathering information, I suppose I’ll just have to ask you a few questions.”

“Fair enough,” Ian said. “Shoot.”

“Right. All that stuff about blood type will be handled by the doctors. I assume you got an appointment when you picked up your new gear?”

“I did, indeed.”

“Good. First off, I want you to tell me about your work with this ‘Peregrine Militia’. What kind of work did you do? Who did you work with?”

“Lots of things and few people. Officially speaking, I was the Commander of the Shock Corps. We hit fast and hard whenever there was a serious fight. The Scout and Salvage Corps under Alexis Eliades supported us by doing reconnaissance, acting as skirmishers, and scouring the ruins for supplies we could use. And then there was the Dragoon Corps, the horseback riders and occasional unit of mechanized infantry, who mostly ran messages and supplies between various units in the field. Heavy vehicles like tanks and aircraft were rare enough that we’d assign them to *ad hoc* task forces whenever they were needed. Myself and the other commanders – Alexis Eliades and Hayami Tyler – worked together on various missions, usually leading from the front on the really important ones, but we also doubled as strategists, spies, and diplomats whenever necessary. On our last mission before I ended up here, the plan was to assassinate the Grand Marshal and pull some strings to get me elected so I could get close to the Director-General. That didn’t pan out, as you can tell.”

As Ian explained the past few days’ events, he felt the hole in his heart grow larger. It wasn’t his fault, he knew. At least, not entirely. If anything, Teague and Hector were to blame, since they were the ones who had laid the plans for this operation and sent them all into danger, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that there might have been something he could have done to salvage that disastrous attack. Now, all he could do was answer Charlotte’s questions and join this “Inquisition” in the hopes that it would grant him access to resources that he could use to make amends for his failure and set things right.

“I see. Well, a diverse set of skills will be useful in the Inquisition, at least. Especially if you have experience with espionage,” Charlotte said.

“At this point, being useful is about all I can hope for,” Ian replied. It wasn’t the full truth, but he did not yet feel it would be appropriate to divulge any ulterior motives.

“I think we’re all hoping out that your assistance proves useful. Regardless, you mentioned two names – Alexis and Hayami, as I recall? Were you close to either of them, or any other people you may have left behind?”

“Close?” Ian said with a dark chuckle. “Yeah, I’d say we were close. I wouldn’t go so far as to say the militia was like a family, but Hayami and I were, uh, together. She was a good woman. Very eccentric. She let the fact that she led the cavalry go to her head, dressed like she was at some kind of a renaissance fair even though I’m not sure she ever picked up a history textbook. But a good woman all the same.”

“Ah. I’m sorry for your loss,” Charlotte said, perhaps the first bit of sympathy Ian had gotten from her.

“I’m not too eager to count her out just yet,” Ian continued. “She was always a stubborn one.”

“I see. And what of this other woman? Were you and her close at all?”

“What, you mean Alexis? It gets a little bit complicated here.”

“Your ex?”

That made Ian laugh, although he immediately regretted it. “Definitely not. No, she always had more of a taste for women. Besides, I was with Hayami before she and I even met.”

“So, what’s complicated about it?”

“The fact that she’s in love with my sister.”

“Oh. Does your sister feel the same way?”

“I think so, yeah,” Ian said. “They’re not ‘officially’ a couple, haven’t even kissed as far as I know, but anybody with eyes can see the way they look at each other. Now, don’t get me wrong. I don’t object to their relationship at all, and, even if I did, her love life isn’t any of my business. But my own relationship with Eirene isn’t the best, which makes it a bit awkward when I have to work so closely with the woman she loves.”

“And Eirene is your sister’s name, I assume? Was she in the militia with you?”

“Yeah. And yeah. She was our pilot. To make a long story short, back when she was a kid, I didn’t help her when she needed me most and she resents me for it. I can’t say I blame her.”

“What did she need?” Charlotte asked.

“At this point, what does it matter?” Ian snapped. “I fucked up. I’m not going to fuck up again. That’s all there is to it.”

Charlotte frowned, but eventually nodded in acceptance. Ian couldn’t help but feel like she intended to get this information out of him one way or another.

“Now, I have one last question for you.”

“Oh, only one more?” Ian said.

“Where do your loyalties lie?”

“Excuse me?”

“If we were to find out that these friends of yours, your sister included, were still alive, would you leave Hyperion to join them? If I ordered you to take an action that would hinder their cause, would you comply?”

“I’m not…”

“Choose your words carefully, Mr. Baros. I expect you to be completely honest. If you aren’t, I’ll know.”

Ian took a deep breath. “The attack on Athens shook my faith in the Peregrine cause,” he admitted. “Still, I know them. They’re good people, and they’ve earned my trust. What kind of man would I be if I just threw them all away?”

“Yes or no, Mr. Baros.”

“No. No, I wouldn’t follow an order that would hurt my old friends. I can’t say for sure whether I’d go back – I suppose it would depend on whether they’ve gotten their act together or not – but I can’t just forget years of loyalty.”

Charlotte nodded again. “Your convictions have been noted. Now it’s my job to prove that we deserve your trust, too.”

\* \* \*

That day’s patrol was entirely uneventful, but Ian appreciated the chance to explore the city and listen to Charlotte give him an informal tour. The younger girls in particular were eager to point out the best places to grab a bite to eat, Emma showing particular excitement for a local candy shop whose owner she claimed would often give samples and leftovers to her and Peony.

“And this,” Charlotte said towards the end of the route, “is the Grand Theatre of Geneva. Rebuilt. Again. There’s someone here that I’d like to catch up with.”

“Friend of yours?” Ian asked.

“A colleague. Inquisitor Royce, who was responsible for my early training. He’s been running surveillance out of the theatre for a while now. Just thought I’d check in to see how he’s doing.”

“Are there a lot of unsavory types in the theatre?”

Charlotte laughed. “Depends on what you mean by unsavory. No, many of them are a bit strange, but not criminal. The theatre’s as good a place as any to use as a front for a listening post.”

“So, how many buildings here are just fronts for the Inquisition, then?”

“All of them,” Emma answered in a tone that was far too chipper for a confession that the entire city was spying on them.

Charlotte regarded her sister’s interruption with an amused smile. “A bit of an exaggeration, but it’s at least eighty-five percent,” she said.

“Seriously?” Ian asked.

“You’ll find out in due course, won’t you?”

Ian groaned. He had begun to suspect that Charlotte was having far too much fun with her new recruit, but he wasn’t going to say anything about it. Regardless, he was interested in seeing the inside of the theatre, even if he felt guilty to enjoy such a luxury while his friends were rotting in prison, or worse.

Ian had rarely had cause to enter any kind of theatre, but he knew that they were often lavish to the point of excess, and the Grand Theatre of Geneva did not disappoint. Its interior was the very picture of European neoclassical architecture – not a subject in which Ian was well-versed, but he appreciated it as much as a layman could. He watched Emma swaying in time with the music that could be heard from the auditorium as they entered the foyer, with Peony practically attached to her but far less dynamic in her movements.

Inquisitor Royce wasn’t hard for Charlotte to find. At first glance, he didn’t seem any different from the other patrons of the musical arts. A pale, grey-haired man in an immaculate suit was hardly out of place in such an establishment, but a closer look revealed at least one scar travelling from his chin to his ear, partially covered by a grandiose moustache.

“Master Royce,” Charlotte said with a bow. Emma copied the gesture, as did Ian after a moment’s delay. Peony just stood still with her arms crossed, but Royce didn’t seem to mind.

“Miss Charlotte, Emma, Peony. So good to see you all. Have you come to face the music with me?” the elder Inquisitor said with his face aglow. Ian noted that the man had a distinctly boisterous American accent.

“Careful how you say that, or some people might think you’re actually in hot water,” Charlotte said.

“Ah, just a joke. I remain in good standing with the Inquisition. As do you, it seems, given that you’ve been assigned a new responsibility.”

And now, Ian saw, he had been downgraded to a “responsibility”. A step above “liability,” at least, even if that would probably be more accurate.

Nevertheless, he introduced himself. “Ian Baros. Former Peregrine militia. Your Master has me shadowing Charlotte as she helps me learn the ropes,” he said. In English, to Ian’s relief.

“Good. Good. Have you been acclimating well?”

“As well as I can, considering that I lost everybody important to me not too long ago. But, hey, at least this place has good music, so I can hear a nice violin solo to accompany my mourning.”

“Ah. You have my pity.”

Pitiful. That was an even more accurate assessment of Ian’s current state. Hopefully, he could remedy that before long. Teague would have told him to pray for salvation, but that alone certainly wouldn’t do.

“But, yes,” Royce continued. “Athanasia Comis is perhaps the best violinist alive today. We’re lucky to have her. Although I wouldn’t be surprised if little Emma surpassed her one day.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Emma said.

“Don’t be silly. Master Barbie said you were literally born to be a musician,” Peony said.

“Ugh, don’t remind me about Barbie,” Emma said with a look of disgust suddenly marring her face. “Besides, what does he know about genetics? As far as I’ve heard, there’s no solid evidence that it’s genetic.”

Ian coughed. “If I may, what exactly are you all talking about?” he asked.

“Emma has perfect pitch,” Charlotte explained. “She can easily recognize or produce specific notes without a reference, which helps her excel in her music classes. Athanasia is the same way.”

“Is that so? I suppose that’s a neat talent to have.”

“Yeah, neat’s about all it is” Emma said. “Too bad the days where you’d take a drummer girl into battle are long gone. But at least I can be the most musical inquisitor in the field, am I right?”

“It’s a bit early for you to thinking about going to war, isn’t it? Do they even have you training for combat at your age?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, I’m technically *in* the army. So are most of my classmates. Reserves, not front line troops, so it doesn’t really mean anything until there’s an actual war, which, let’s be honest, probably isn’t happening any time soon. If it comes, though, we’re going to fight alongside the adults all the same.”

“That’s barbaric!” Ian said, slightly louder than he intended. “Who could possibly justify throwing away children’s lives like that? I don’t know what Théoden’s experience is with war, but it’s no place for anybody – it’s hell enough as it is for people my age; kids like you should be, I don’t know, worrying about tests and homework, not dodging bullets and driving tanks! Even the UNPG doesn’t conscript until nineteen; to put a twelve-year-old into combat is unthinkable.”

Emma’s expression quickly darkened as her innocence evacuated her face. “I don’t mind the idea that I might have to go to war,” she said. “I really don’t – it’s my duty to defend my motherland just like it is Charlotte’s, or Royce’s. Or yours. The UNPG forgot about me and Charlotte. They preach about their generous safety net, but if you’re unlucky enough that its bureaucrats don’t catch you, then you’re as good as dead. Théoden rescued us from being lousy slips on the capital streets, and he’s earned my loyalty for that. It’d be my life on the line in the field, sure, but I would rather die than be forced to go back to Athens.”

Ian chewed his lip for a minute as an awkward silence set in.

“It’s only scout work that we do,” Peony added, as if that made it any better. “We’re not in as much danger as the magistrates’s regular levies.”

If this was how things were, then Ian supposed he would have to deal with it for the time being, as much as he didn’t want to. Unlike his sister, he had usually acknowledged that a war would come with some collateral damage, but intentionally sending children into combat was another thing entirely, one that he was unsure he would ever come to accept.

“Well, if I may,” Royce said, breaking the pregnant pause with a cough, “I do have a request to make of you all. My investigation’s run into a bit of difficulty, and I could use some extra eyes and ears.”

“Well, luckily for you, we have some of both to spare,” Charlotte said.

“Fantastic. We should speak further in private. Come, the Inquisition has a bunker underneath the theatre where we can talk.”

The violin solo had shifted back into a full orchestra by the time Ian and his new allies reached the elevator that would take them to the inquisitorial safehouse. It was nondescript save for a lengthy passcode that Inquisitor Royce easily pressed in.

“Less security than I expected,” Ian mused.

“This is not an important facility, so it can afford to be a softer target,” Charlotte explained.

“Right. It’s only a place to have a bit of privacy,” Royce added. “We don’t store any sensitive material here.”

“I see.”

“Good. Anyway, now that we’re alone, I can tell you what’s going down. The magistrate who owns this land has been under investigation for a while now. His name’s Dietrich Lübeck, and he’s a member of the strategoi.”

“Which is what, exactly?”

“Ah, right. New guy. The strategoi are the cult’s generals, our highest-ranking magistrates. They command the lesser magistrates, who in turn command their personal levies. Only Master Lockhart and the Archons of the fraternal and sororal lodges, that is, the leaders of the Inquisition, outrank them. And even then, the Archons’ primacy over the strategoi has weakened.”

“So, this guy’s a pretty big fish is what I’m gathering.”

“Very big. We have cause to believe that he’s leaking government secrets, and Master Lockhart tasked the inquisition with proving it. This is our big chance. If we can take down a strategos, no one would be able to question our authority.”

It seemed that Geneva was as rife with factionalism as Athens was. Ian could easily imagine the Grand Marshal salivating at the prospect of arresting a Skywatch officer.

“What kind of evidence do you have against Lübeck?” Peony asked. “Can’t imagine it’s anything solid.”

“You’re right, we don’t have anything solid. We did an audit of each strategos’ activities and noticed a few irregular patterns, but nothing more. Charlotte, I was hoping that I could get your little ones to follow him around for a bit.”

“So long as it is outside their regular school hours, I do not think that would be a problem. I think they will enjoy some more interesting field work. Is that right?”

“Of course,” Emma replied. Peony nodded in agreement.

“Is there anything specific you want us to do, or should we just shadow the guy?” Ian asked.

“Lübeck has a child of his own. A boy named Johann who should be in one of the girls’ classes, if I recall correctly.” Royce turned to Emma and Peony and raised an eyebrow.

“Yep,” Emma said. “Little Johann. Quiet, mousy kid. I ate lunch with him a few times and he seemed nice enough, but never really got to know him.”

“Good. Lübeck dotes on him and rarely lets him out of his sight, so what I’d like Emma and Peony to do is see about making friends with Johann. Peony in particular – she’s less directly connected to an inquisitor, so it will seem less suspicious. Stick around Johann and see if you can leverage that friendship into getting close to our target and looking out for anything suspicious.

“Seems manipulative, but I can do it,” Peony said.

“Poor Johann,” Emma added.

“Yes, well, we’ll try not to make him suffer for his father’s sins. Or, at least, his alleged sins. Now, while the children are doing that, I’d like the adults to help me monitor Lübeck’s correspondences. If you’re willing to help, I can have specific tasks for you tomorrow.”

“I think that sounds good,” Charlotte said. “If you think it will help, then I will do what you ask.”

“I probably don’t have much of a choice, but sure,” Ian said.

“You always have a choice.”

“I guess. Anyway, if I’m here, I might as well make myself useful, so I’ll do whatever you ask, uh, Master Royce?”

“Yes, Master Royce will do fine,” the Inquisitor said. “I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

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As the sun first began to light up his room early the next morning, Ian heard a knock on his door. He was awake, at least, having gotten up early to mentally prepare for whatever Royce would ask of him, but was not expecting guests at such an hour. Behind the door, he guessed that Charlotte or one of the girls was waiting for him to answer.

The man whom Ian actually did meet upon opening the door, however, was not anyone he recognized. He was tall, spindly, and pale, with finely-trimmed hair the color of charcoal. The uniform he wore was unfamiliar, dull brown with golden epaulettes as opposed to the Inquisition’s crimson. Neither Robert Lamb nor Théoden had been wearing a uniform when they’d first met, so he had no clues as to this person’s occupation. It was military, that much was certain, but he could say no more with any certainty.

“Ian Baros?” the man asked.

Ian nodded. “Yes, that’s me. Are you one of Lamb’s levy officers?” he asked, making his best guess.”

“Certainly not,” the man said with just a hint of disgust on his face. “I am Strategos Nathaniel Barbie. Master Lockhart dispatched me to collect you and your inquisitorial companion. Your presence is required.”

Just listening to Nathaniel speak told Ian that this man had an exceptionally high opinion of himself. Any reservations he had about working for Charlotte and Inquisitor Royce were no longer necessary if this was the alternative.

“Does she know about this yet?” Ian asked.

“No, but she’ll be informed soon enough. Don’t trouble yourself with her. Get dressed quickly, if you would, and then follow me. I’ll take you to our meeting room.”

“Alright, if that’s what Théoden wants, then I’ll be all ears. But I already told Inquisitor Royce that I’d meet with him to help out with some things.”

“Inquisitor Royce has already been told that you’ll no longer be available today. You may meet with him later, after our meeting concludes.”

Ian had to wonder how Nathaniel already knew that he was working with Royce. Either someone at the meeting had let that detail slip, or that safe room was less safe than the Inquisitor had claimed. Either way, it was worrying.

“Alright. I’ll be ready in a minute,” he said, trying not to betray any of his concerns.

“Don’t keep me waiting,” Nathaniel replied.

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Charlotte was already waiting in the foyer when Ian and Nathaniel arrived. The unhappy look on her face was the least composed Ian had ever seen her during his short time in Geneva.

“Are you intentionally disrupting the Inquisition’s work?” she demanded in angry English as the two men approached.

“Miss Aucoin, I am only doing Master Lockhart’s bidding. Take it up with him if you have a problem with it,” Nathaniel replied.

“You and I both know that is bullshit.”

“Why don’t you ask him when you see him?”

“That is not what I meant. Bah, never mind. Come, Mr. Baros. I suppose we should see what our Master has to say.”

“As you wish, uh, Mistress,” Ian said.

Nathaniel kept up his haughty air as he escorted Charlotte and Ian to Geneva Tower, which the two of them did their best to ignore. The Tower itself was easy to see from any point in the city, but its omnipresence was less oppressive than Samara Tower had been back in Athens.

“The tower extends as far beneath the surface as it rises above,” Charlotte said in French as they began to climb the staircase to the Tower’s main door. “Before we enter, Mr. Baros, tell me – do you think our meetings are conducted at the top or the bottom?”

“Top, easily. I’d expect there to be secure rooms at the bottom in case of a bombing, but Théoden…or, I guess, Master Lockhart seemed to want this place to be some kind of philosophical paradise. For that, he’d want to do as much business in the open air as possible. So we’ll be meeting at the top.”

“Right you are. I suppose it’s not a hard guess, considering that even the UNPG meets at the top of Samara Tower rather than the panic rooms underneath, and they’re far more paranoid than Master Lockhart is.”

In truth, Ian was mostly looking forwards to seeing the view from the top. The entire city was lit up and glistening underneath the morning sun and would surely make for a stunning vista. It was a welcome change from the dreary ruins of the Athens outskirts and the crowded bustle of the city proper, one that almost soothed his mind. Had the locales been reversed, Ian questioned if he’d be coping nearly as well.

To his dismay, the conference room lacked a view of the outside, but the elevator to the top had been lined with glass, so that would have to do. The lighting was comparatively poor, and more similar to the UNPG’s authoritarian motif than he would have liked.

The trio was evidently the last to arrive at the meeting, as Théoden and a group of others were already present. Ian didn’t recognize them, but they were wearing the same uniforms as Nathaniel, indicating that they were the other members of the Strategoi. Théoden sat at one end of the table in flowing religious regalia, gesturing for the late arrivals to sit at the other end.

“My apologies, Master,” Nathaniel said with exaggerated deference. “I was less expedient in collecting my subordinates than I’d have liked.”

“The Inquisition reports to Master Théoden, not to the Strategoi,” Charlotte said with bitter air on her breath.

“For now,” Nathaniel replied. Ian was surprised to see him state his intentions so blatantly.

“Please, don’t squabble,” Théoden said. “We have business to discuss.”

Charlotte and Nathaniel both agreed in unison before taking their seats, leaving Ian to sit between them, directly opposite Théoden. The two of them made brief eye contact before Théoden coughed and began to speak again.

“Mr. Baros, I’m pleased to see that you seem well. Have my people been as good to you as I said they would?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. I have faith in the good men and women I employ, and in the work we do. But you haven’t really had a chance to see any of it. I have a real job for you, now, one that I think you’ll be well-suited to. I’m aware that the other inquisitors may have asked you for help, as is their right, but my Strategoi have informed me that something urgent has come up. I’d like you to look into it.”

“We recently took out a heretic stronghold here in Geneva,” Nathaniel began. “Inside, we found some rather juicy intelligence.”

“Heretics? Earlier, Charlotte told me that your inquisition has a rather…loose definition of heresy. What exactly do you mean by that?”

“Perversions of nature,” came the reply from a man Ian didn’t recognize. He was tall and tan with light stubble on his chin, by far the handsomest man in the room. “The kind of research that destroyed the old world, like those weather control towers we all know and love. Genetic modification and AI are also very much off-limits. There are things that Mankind shouldn’t mess with.”

“One of our high-level objectives is to hunt down and purge the Holy Spirit AIs,” Charlotte said.

“Talk about spilling secrets,” Nathaniel said, glaring at her.

“If Master Lockhart brought Ian here, then he trusts him. We should too. Besides, I have the authority to decide what my subordinates need to know, do I not?”

“Fine.”

“It’s actually relevant information to his new job, wouldn’t you say?” Théoden asked. “Miss Aucoin, please, continue. Mr. Baros does not know this story.”

“Right. As I was saying, the Vatican did a good job of purging the Holy Spirits in the late years of the Crusade. Originally, the Catholic Technologist faction thought that making true AIs, something that could really be called ‘life’ would bring them closer to God.”

“And I’m sure it didn’t hurt that AI soldiers would help them with the war,” Ian said.

“Too true. The original Seraph interceptor was upgraded to house the Holy Spirit AIs, and was nearly unbeatable in the skies, up until the Tehran Pact developed its own counterpart using the same wetware. It was based on East Asian Endeavor tech, although we do not know if it was stolen by one side or the other, or whether the EAE was playing both sides.”

“We do know the EAE was perfectly willing to play both sides of the Sino-Japanese conflicts, even after they were officially disbanded. It wouldn’t surprise anyone if they were using the Second Pact War as another test bed,” the handsome man interjected.

“Probably, but, if that were so, one would think they would have tested less outdated technology. That wetware was decades old by the time the Seraphim were introduced. Either way, it does not matter. The point is that the Catholics started using true AIs around the time they started making gains against the Tehran Pact, but the Vatican quickly divided into factions who supported or opposed the ‘Holy Spirits,’ as they were called. Pope Leo XVI was a Technologist, but the Luddite faction managed to convince him to scrap the project. Almost all the Holy Spirits were destroyed. Almost.”

“Which, Mr. Baros, is where you come in,” Théoden said. “We have reason to believe that the UNPG has resurrected the Holy Spirits, or at least forked the technology into something equally abominable. These heretics that Mr. Barbie mentioned were working on just that, and they had some ties to the Provisional Government’s Defense Administration. We found documents pointing to a former EAE black site in the ruins of Thessaloniki that the UNPG may have activated.”

“And you want us to shut it down?” Ian asked.

“I’ll be in charge of this operation,” Nathaniel replied. “Shutting it down is an ideal scenario, but our primary goal is gathering intel. They may be heavily defended, and I don’t want to march my levies into any fortifications without first knowing what we’re up against.”

“So it is a scouting mission,” Charlotte said.

“Correct.”

“And we do not know anything more about what this black site produced? Only that there are loose links to the Holy Spirits?”

“If the EAE is involved, even the remnants they left behind, it can’t be good,” Théoden said, his face wrinkling in disgust. “Human garbage, the lot of them, which is a shame. A multinational research agreement was supposed to improve stability in East Asia, but the scientists said ‘no, thank you’ to patriotism and ‘yes, please’ to promoting war between their patron states to make a testing ground for some of the most disgusting technologies known to man. Whatever the United Nations is doing with their research, you’ll find out when you get to Thessaloniki.”

“We don’t know any more than that, unfortunately. That’s the whole point,” Nathaniel said. “We’ll send a small team to Thessaloniki to scout out this black site. If we don’t find any more evidence of heretical research, we’ll keep an eye on it but otherwise leave it alone. If we do, then we probe its defenses and try to figure out how to shut it down for good. Surely you can see why this is more important than that idiocy Royce had you doing.”

Nathaniel was technically right, Charlotte knew, but she still suspected ulterior motives were involved. For the sake of avoiding conflict, she agreed.

“I have the carrier *Alanis* on standby to take you and a team to Thessaloniki’s airspace tonight, where you’ll board a corvette to take you the rest of the way,” Théoden said. “In addition to yourselves and Miss Aucoin’s little girls, you’ll have support from sixteen Inquisition cadets. That should be more than enough to survive down south, and be a good exercise for the cadets.”

Charlotte let her jaw drop, and then immediately regained her composure. “You cannot seriously want to send the cadets on this mission!” she said. “They are children! Not soldiers yet.”

“You just want your sister safe,” Nathaniel said.

“Children are our future. I want them all safe.”

“But I imagine you wouldn’t volunteer Emma to be one of the ones we send into Thessaloniki, given the choice.”

“No, I would not,” Charlotte admitted. “It should not be my place to tell anybody they have to put their lives on the line, but…”

“But you’re an inquisitor. That *makes it* your place. Your job, in fact.”

Charlotte furrowed her brow and stared fiercely at Nathaniel. “Then let me do my job. You and your *adult* levies are going into Thessaloniki. Take Ian as an aide if you want, I do not care. The young ones are staying here, by the authority of the Inquisition.”

Nathaniel met her gaze with a look of contempt on his face. “A *junior* inquisitor,” he said, correcting himself. “You do not give *me* orders. I am a strategos, and you are barely more than the children you’re trying to protect. Emma is going to Thessaloniki, and if there’s a fight, she fights.”

“I….yes, Master,” Charlotte said, not even trying to mask her hatred.

“Can I trust the two of you to get along for one mission? Théoden asked.

“Of course, Master,” the two of them said, once again in unison.

“If nothing else, it’ll be a bonding exercise,” the handsome strategos said with a laugh.

Charlotte did not dignify his comment with a response.

\* \* \*

“This is ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous” Charlotte fumed in French when she and Ian were finally alone. “The strategoi couldn’t be more transparent.”

“You think this is suspicious?” Ian asked, although he already knew the answer.

This was the first time that Ian had actually seen Charlotte let out her anger. “Of course it’s fucking suspicious,” she snapped. “As soon as we start looking into this Lübeck case, the strategoi decide that we’re *urgently* needed elsewhere.”

“Didn’t Théoden decide that? Is he in on whatever they’re planning?”

Charlotte sighed. “Master Lockhart is a good man. Completely dedicated to the cause of peace and prosperity for everyone. But he trusts his advisors a little too much.”

“He wouldn’t listen to the archons?”

“The archons and the Inquisition are a bit too busy doing actual work to play politics. Since Master Lockhart insists that our military be purely defensive, and nobody’s attacked us yet, the strategoi get to spend their days sitting around and doing whatever they please. In this case, making our lives hell.”

“I see.”

“And don’t let them trick you into thinking this’ll be easy. If I’m right, and this is a plan to get rid of us before we find out anything nasty, I fully expect that little shit Nathaniel to arrange an accident for us.”

“Really? He’d even have the kids killed? Just like that?” Ian asked.

“I wouldn’t put it past him. Realistically, I think he won’t turn his own guns on us, or anything like that. Too obvious. But he *will* deliberately expose us to more danger than he lets on. If you and I die, then Royce’s investigation is compromised, and if the other cadets – the children of various Inquisitors – are killed, their parents might be too distraught to work effectively. It won’t shut us down, but it would impede us without raising suspicion.”

“But you figured out his game immediately. Surely Théoden would be able to tell what’s going on?”

“Maybe, but only if he believes that the strategoi are actually up to something. My theory’s based on the assumption that they’re guilty. If they’re clean, then it could all just be an unfortunate coincidence.”

“You don’t seem to believe that, though.”

“Not one bit.”

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Just as quickly as he had found himself taken to a quiet, comfortable place, Ian had been returned to a combat zone in the decrepit ruins of an old world city. Somehow, the conditions in Thessaloniki were even worse than those in the Athens outskirts, where there had at least been plants and animals to give the landscape some life.

“Nothing but dust and rubble as far as the eye can see,” he said, looking down at the city from the window of the corvette. “I wonder why nothing grew here the way it did in Athens.”

“Looks like a lot of factories down there. Maybe it was more polluted?” Emma said, hazarding a guess.

“Maybe. Or maybe whatever the UNPG’s building down there is keeping animals away.”

“If the animals were avoiding the area because of something resonating from the facility, wouldn’t the plants be thriving? I think Emma’s right – pollution is the most likely,” Peony said.

“We’ll find out soon enough, I guess.”

The corvette’s engines kicked up a storm of dust as it set down. The Inquisition team waited for it to settle before they disembarked the *Alanis.*

All around them, the late winter air felt crisp and refreshing. Outside of the breeze and their footsteps on the rubble, there wasn’t a single sound to be heard in Thessaloniki.