Thirty Minutes After Midnight

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. The United Nations Provisional Government, better known as the UNPG, had been generous with its funding. 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 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 something so significant,” Reed muttered. “If he were, though, would this alleged ‘representative’ be accompanied by the Tower Guard?”

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

“Have you talked with the Commissars about this?”

“Cutler and Bucharest have my back. Karahan has offered the Navy’ 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. That said, 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 Strategic Technologies 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, although 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, who 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.”

After a brief but intrusive investigation, an officer pronounced both women free of 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 out of the sky.”

“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. She and her crew had been placed there in order to steal sensitive intelligence from Hamilton’s personal effects, intelligence that would help her compatriots infiltrate the Strategic Technologies Conference, 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.

A blip from her computer told Eirene that one of her crew had sent her a file. Confirming that it contained the necessary data, she allowed herself to relax, content that they had not been discovered and that violence had not been necessary. It was then that she noticed the *Sunset Serenade* drifting away. Evidently, the investigation was to be a brief affair.

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

“Ah, hell,” she whispered.

Eirene was loath to take off until the four empty seats behind her were filled, but Lancaster had given her no choice. The young woman strapped herself 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 an enemy pilot would mean anything in a UNPG 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 his country 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,* yet she knew that, whatever his plans may have been, Akiko didn’t need to die.

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

## Chapter 2 – Fade to Blue

*“An apocalypse? Don’t dramatize it. Do you know what the greatest cause of death was in the 23rd century, even including the storms? Old age, with various diseases and the war itself taking a close second. In terms of what it did to our population count, the Himalayan-3 virus was the real apocalypse if you* must *use that word, but everybody forgets about that because it’s not dramatic enough. Nobody wants to admit we died a slow death.”*

* Ryan Mistle, editor for Archivist Victoria Cromwell

Istanbul was a city twice slain, first reduced to rubble 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.

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

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

Inside the Peregrine fortress, Alexis Eliades and Teague Ironwall sat alone at a table by the window. She was a tall and strong young woman with a thin face and 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 Mayumi, and Ian, the so-called ‘young people.’ Hector and I may be the ones making strategies, but you execute them. Is that not enough?”

“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. Even so, 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. Did you at least get the data we were after, or were you intercepted before you could acquire it?”

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

Hector blinked, trying and failing to conjure a response.

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

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

“Well, I should start by notifying the families of the deceased. Memorial services will need to be arranged as well,” Teague said 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 we may need a slight 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. A fugitive from UNPG law recently fled to one of our outposts on the Athenian outskirts, and it seems that some hot-headed little shit in the Skywatch is going to try and capture during the conference, presumably in a misguided attempt to curry favor with the Director-General.”

“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. But we think we can turn this to our advantage. Consider what might happen if we let this man seize his target, only to ambush and encircle him with our reinforcements, which we can easily prepare thanks to our forewarning of the attack. He’d no doubt call for reinforcements of his own, which would have to be drawn from Athens in order to get there on time, making it even easier for our teams in the capital to do their jobs. Best of all, since this would be an ostensibly defensive maneuver, it’s unlikely to provoke a retaliatory strike. We hand over the fugitive and chalk it up to a terrible misunderstanding.”

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

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

Alexis scowled at Hector. “Nobody here’s fool enough to think we’ll all make it out, but I’m with Eirene – 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. Whatever happens at that conference could have substantial implications for the ongoing conflict, and we need to have people listening in on it, lest we deprive ourselves of vital intelligence. 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 Strategic Technologies Conference,” Teague continued. “When it’s ready, we’ll inform everybody of their new duties. Go now and get some rest, and God be with you.”

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Though the days that followed were hectic, the final stages of the plan were set in place. Teague and Hector seemed full of confidence that it would succeed, and their agents would obtain the knowledge they sought from the Strategic Technologies Conference with “acceptable” casualties.

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

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

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

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

That night, Alexis had been given a simple part to play. With a pair of binoculars, she would set up a nest on a rooftop near Samara Tower, where the conference would be held. It was one of two spot sin the city that their spies deduced would have an adequate view of the goings-on that night. It was to be dull and uncomfortable, but also relatively safe.

Eyes, though, were not enough. The Peregrines needed ears as well, and so two other parties would go to Athens that night. One was Hector’s proposed diversion, who would bolster the defenses at the outpost designated Hotel India, in the hopes of drawing civil guard forces away from the capitol. The strength of this fireteam had been carefully measured to attract enemy reinforcements without overwhelming the attackers so severely that the UNPG gave them up for dead. With their victory far from guaranteed, those who volunteered had already bid their loved ones goodbye.

Taking advantage of this distraction would be the third and final player, a single man whom Hector had arranged to pose as maintenance worker. With help from a few sympathetic assets within the tower, he would plant a listening device within ‘earshot’ of the conference and transmit its findings back to Istanbul.

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 assume.”

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

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

“Just here to say hello?” Eirene asked.

Mayumi paused, smirked, and pointed at her blonde compatriot. “I knew you’d make it back safe. Good show,” she said. “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…” Mayumi 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…”

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

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

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

Eirene said nothing, but nodded her assent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

As the trio walked down the dusty street, Mayumi stopped to gaze at a 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 Mayumi was pointing, where she saw the countenance of a familiar man, seated at an outdoor table with a stack of papers in front of him. That man was Ian Barrow, the 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!” Mayumi shouted, waving at the young man. He turned to look at the group with a mouth full of roasted lamb as they walked towards him, his eyes obscured by a pair of expensive sunglasses.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No faith in Hector’s disguises?”

“Getting in won’t be hard, especially if Mayumi does her job right. 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. If we do get detected, all of them are going to get sealed off, preventing any traffic in or out of the building. The Skywatch rapid-response teams can override them, but without their codes, you want to guess my only way out?”

“Outside the building,” Eirene said.

“Right on target. If all goes to plan, we’re golden, but if it doesn’t, 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,” Mayumi 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.”

Mayumi 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,” Mayumi replied. “Ian put me on the spot and I kinda, you know, shorted out.” She shrugged and smiled, returning to her meal.

“If you say so,” Eirene said. The table was quiet from then on out, as the 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.

## Chapter 3 – Running Like Clockwork

“The old world made people soft. They thought that their freedom would last forever, and now that we can’t afford those freedoms, they rebel. 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 East*

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 two Peregrine agents remained unmolested as they disembarked and bid the captain fairwell. 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 Peregrines would travel to the heart of the UNPG in an old van, at which point Ian and Alexis would separate. They would never be more than a block away from one another, but that little distance was enough to prevent any kind of support. Each would have to run on their own.

After a short journey made in solemn silence, the van arrived in the capital proper. Despite the dominating presence of the 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 Mayumi’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 Mayumi *does*.”

“Mayumi 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 this job was done, she resolved, she would return to Istanbul and take a hot shower to cleanse this misery.

The chamber where Magnus was to hold his conference was known more commonly as the Grand Balcony, a ledge protruding from the western side of the tower lined with enormous glass windows, windows that Alexis could only assume were lined with kinetic shield barriers to deter snipers. That didn’t worry her, as there was unlikely to be any violence that night. 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.

“The listener’s 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’ve got eyes on the conference room."

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, Alexis 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.

Alexis was partially 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 near 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 the Peregrines, 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 else Magnus had told a lie. Ian made a mental note to investigate the veracity of this claim with the survivors from Mayumi’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, Mr. Fairchild, I’d like you to update me on the status of the factories your team has been using.”

“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 Avignon came across an old French 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 2280.”

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

“Yes, as far as we can tell. I can’t guarantee that it will contain what you’re looking for, but, if nothing else, its facilities can be used to support your project. The Defense Administration will be given full control of the site as soon as we’re finished surveying the site.”

“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,” Magnus said.

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.

“Now, first, a question,” Marcus began. “How many of you are familiar with the Rho AI?”

Everybody in the audience raised their hands.

Marcus smiled. “Excellent. That saves me some time. And how many of you support the decision reached by our predecessors at Nicaea?”

Most of the attendees immediately put their hands back into the air, and those who did not slowly moved to mimic their peers. Ian could only assume that they wished not to stand out as contrarians.

That an artificial intelligence conference would begin with a reference to Rho did not surprise him. Developed not long before the Crusade, it had been the first AI deemed sufficiently self-aware to deserve human rights, as ruled by a similar UN gathering near the ancient city of Nicaea. Those were likely the predecessors to whom Marcus referred. The Crusade saw all of the factories producing Rho’s hardware destroyed, repurposed, or abandoned, but some few copies of the AI itself remained ‘alive.’ Perhaps Marcus intended to resume production, Ian mused.

“As many of you are likely aware, most of the dissent against Rho came from religious groups, save for one. A small group of predominantly Christian clerics, the Technologist faction, believed that, because man was created in God’s image, it was our destiny to create life, just as He did. This was obviously a radical re-interpretation of scripture, so they were heavily outnumbered by their Luddite peers, who unequivocally condemned this research.”

“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. The technology to produce Rho is well-documented, and several years ago we used it developed a theoretical successor, Sigma. We could put Sigma into production, but the hardware required to support it is extremely large, expensive, and energy-inefficient. Thinking we could do better, we turned to the Holy Spirits, which 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. We found one such backup inside the computer system of a Crusade-era air destroyer. It seems some of the Technologists infiltrated the Vatican in order to use its ongoing war as a test bed. 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. The crew 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.”

“Yes, the whole crusade was quite the tragic affair. However, today is a happy day, for our predecessors’ travails have granted us a great boon, an example of which I have brought before you today. Lena, my dear, 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.

“Though there is much room for growth, my team was able to develop a prototype called the Tau AI, although 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, no longer confined to a faceless computer terminal. With further study, we can take her even further.”

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

“Pleasure to meet you all,” she said with a reassuring smile. “Of course, my father didn’t come all this way just to show off little old me. Other than the lightweight architecture allowing for this *wonderfully* convenient body, my existence is hardly revolutionary.”

“Lena is a fully functional Tau AI, just as capable and deserving of her place at this table as any of us,” Marcus continued. However, you may recall that I mentioned we yet have room to grow. The Holy Spirits upon which we based our Tau design were complete, yes, but the Technologists 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.”

“It’s a complete violation of the idea of a soul, of course,” Lena added. “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.”

Although the audio being transmitted from Ian’s listening device was not of the best quality, the Peregrine agents collectively and immediately 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.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what exactly do you need from us?” a stern-looking old governor asked.

“What I need, Governor Ren, is people. Manpower. Boots on the ground, as it were. The Technologists worked out of hidden black sites, and if we can find those black sites, we can not only glean knowledge from their research, but make use of their manufacturing facilities. Manufacturing Mourner wetware requires specialized tools, tools that, I’m embarrassed to admit, we are unable to reproduce ourselves. Had the world not all but ended when I was young, things might be different.”

“Scouts to help you find these black sites, hmm? That may be within our means, but I must ask – how many of these sites will you need? You clearly have at least three already.”

“Dozens are believed to exist. Luckily, we don’t need to find all the sites directly. Each Holy Spirit contains metadata recording where it was born, and, from what we learned in the Vatican, most of those 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. Do not fret, however, as our occupation of the Vatican has given us a promising lead on the fleet’s whereabouts, and once we find those ships, we can find the black sites, and once we find the black sites…we can change the world.”

Alexis watched Marcus take his seat amidst the applause of his colleagues. When the clapping had concluded, Jacob Lancaster rose to take the now-vacant spot at the head of the table.

“Those of you with a more practical affect may be curious as to the more…immediate benefits of this technology,” the Grand Admiral said. “Lofty goals of immortality are all well and good, but it’ll all be for naught if our enemies do us in before we can achieve it. I’ve supported my friend Marcus’ project largely because of its numerous military applications, many of which I’ve already approved for testing.”

“Without consulting any of your peers?” Governor Ren asked.

“The Grand Admiral is not obligated to consult the Council on matters concerning the development and deployment of his forces. You should know this, Governor,” Magnus said.

“Yes, but that still seems…ah, never mind. Please elucidate these ‘military applications’ of yours, Grand Admiral.”

“I’m sure the concepts I’m about to reveal are already beginning to take form in your minds,” Lancaster said. “While Robotic warfare is not exactly a new concept, Fairchild’s innovations will allow us to compensate for a number of shortcomings. As an obvious example, traditional unmanned drones allow us to attack targets without risking our own lives, but they cannot hold territory like infantry. Mourners, however, combine the flexibility of infantry with the expendability of drones. We would, of course, only utilize willing volunteers, enforce strict and regular psychological evaluations, and afford all Mourners full constitutional rights in accordance with the Nicaea Agreement, lest you worry about provoking some sort of robot uprising.”

“That’s all well and good, but I’m guessing you have more grandiose designs than marching east with an army of *plastic people*,” Governor Ren said.

“You’d be correct. If our trial runs of mourners in combat zones are successful, we can take advantage of their rapid cognitive abilities. I’ll admit that my knowledge of the technical side of things is sparse, but Fairchild assures me that a single mourner has enough processing power to single-handedly – and intelligently – operate even our largest airships, or an entire fighter squadron. We could even plug them into ASPIS, if we were feeling bold.”

Alexis and Ian knew very little about the “defensive” superweapon known as ASPIS, a shorter name for the Automatic Safeguard Protocol with Independent Subsystems. The weapon’s exact specifications were classified, and the Peregrine spies had learned only two things: It incorporated several orbital platforms, and it had never once been used.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Should that come to pass, then by all means, go have your fun with them. But Amirmoez is smarter than that, so we shouldn’t count on unchecked aggression. In fact, I was going to propose a deal with the Tehran Pact to secure the resources we’d need.”

“I see. And what would we offer them? We can’t give them access to the Mourners without sacrificing our strategic advantage.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Magnus replied. “As long as we own the AI forges, getting their leadership addicted to immortality might turn out in our favor.”

Magnus stood up, ready to make an emphatic point. Alexis watched, first with intrigue as she considered the implications of his plan, then with confusion as the power went out and the room fell dark, and then with horror as a bullet shattered the Director-General’s skull.

\* \* \*

His one job having long since been completed, Ian was already making his way out of the tower when his earpiece was filled with the sounds of the Grand Balcony descending into chaos. Alexis, meanwhile, could only sit and stare at the bloody spectacle before her. By the time her senses returned to her, she had already lost precious seconds.

“Oh, fuck me,” the young woman whispered under her breath. Clearly, there had been another plot being executed in the capital that night, a conspiratorial iceberg into which she and her friends had sailed, blissfully and fatally ignorant. As she turned and ran, Alexis barely had time to notice that the curious airship above her had not so much as moved, which seemed strange, but there was no time to think on it.

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

“Damn, they’ve locked the place down,” Alexis said aloud, though there was nobody to hear her. Her only hope of escape being to find a security office and pray that she could override the lockdown from there, Alexis began to see Ian’s wisdom in committing the Tower’s blueprints to memory. Wherever he was, she hoped that he was faring better.

\* \* \*

Ian couldn’t believe his luck as he stepped onto the asphalt outside Samara Tower. As a mercy, the Peregrine van was still parked in the old lot, although Alexis and her team were absent. Looking left, and then right, he confirmed that he was alone and allowed himself a moment’s rest.

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

When no response came, Ian feared the worst, only to realize that his handheld radio was entirely non-functional. Recalling how the lights throughout the tower had darkened just before Magnus’ death, he began to put together the pieces of the puzzle. The Director-General had been killed by a sniper, an attack that should have been prevented by energy barriers around the Grand Balcony. The unknown assassin would have had to remove that obstacle before taking the shot – for instance, by using an electromagnetic pulse to disable nearby electronics.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If this stranger recognized him, then Ian knew he was done, that he and Alexis were doomed to die in Athens. As one small comfort, at least his friends listening from Istanbul had heard what they needed to know. That the survivors would be able to capitalize on his success was enough for him to die content.

Much to Ian’s surprise, when she finally wrenched open the door, the stranger helped him onto his feet. Slowly, he regained some of his senses, and saw the woman before him. She was perhaps a few inches shorter than he was, with brown skin, eyes, and hair, and with a frantic look about her.

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

Ian groaned and stood up straight. It took more effort than he would have liked. This person, whoever she was, could have been luring him into a trap, but that seemed unlikely, given that his current injuries would have made him so easy to subdue that trickery was unnecessary. Confident that her non-allegiance to the loyalists, at least, had not been a ruse, and lacking any viable alternatives, Ian slowly followed the French woman into the darkness. He prayed to a god he did not believe in that some good would come of this.

\* \* \*

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

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

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

“Okay, okay, new plan,” Alexis said after taking a deep breath. Her best chance now, she figured, was to lay low for the night and rendezvous with her friends in the morning, once everything had settled down somewhat. Once they were together again, they could try to make sense of the night’s events.

Ian, she surmised, would likely have retreated to Widow’s Walk, assuming he had not already been captured and killed. With no way to contact him, though, Alexis changed her plans. Instead of returning to Istanbul by way of the Walk, she would instead travel north, where Mayumi and any surviving Peregrine soldiers were holding the line at Hotel India. As long as they, too, had not been wiped out, Alexis knew she would be safe there.

## Chapter 4 – Hotel India

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

* *Excerpt from the Provisional Law Code of the UNPG*

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

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

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

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

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

Alexis stopped for a second to close the young man’s eyes, saying a quick and silent prayer for him as she did so. The lifeless bodies, however, only grew in number as she approached the entrance to Hotel India, both Peregrines and loyalists. There wasn’t enough time to give all of them their rites. Alexis could only hope that the fallen guardsmen had been veterans, there of their own free will, rather than student service conscripts. Surely not even Lancaster would send green recruits on a dangerous mission like that.

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

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

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

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

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

“You haven’t heard the news?” Alexis asked, to which Mayumi shook her head. “We were watching the conference like we were supposed to, when someone *else* up and killed Magnus. Sniper, it seemed like. Not sure who. Everything fell apart after that, and I lost track of Ian, so I figured my best bet was to come here.”

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

“Is this all that’s left?”

“Not the only survivors, but the only ones left in Hotel India? Yeah. We’ve been having people sneak out one-by-one the same way you came in, since a big retreat would be easy for that destroyer up there to spot, and, you know…boom.” Mayumi made an explosive gesture with her hands to emphasize the point. “Not sure why they haven’t bombed us to bits already, though. They totally could, but, no, no, they might must to take a few of us alive for interrogation, or whatever.”

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

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

“True. I’m sorry.”

A solemn silence filled the room.

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

“I certainly agree. Although, uh, speaking of our ‘objective,’ whatever became of that fugitive? The one who supposedly caused this whole mess?” Alexis asked.

“Oh, him?” Mayumi said. “Guy wasn’t in great shape when he showed up, so we had a medic take a look at him in that back room over there. After the doc said he wasn’t gonna die, he *somehow* managed to fall asleep during all the fighting, so we figured ‘eh, why not let him rest?’ Seemed like he needed it, ‘cause as far as I know, he’s still sleeping back there.”

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

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

“Mind if I go take a look?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Or you with Eirene,” Mayumi added.

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

“Do you think this is connected to Magnus’ death?” Mayumi asked. “The Grand Admiral is next in the line of succession, and Lancaster’s clearly got no qualms about gunning down government officials for whatever weird agenda he has. Maybe this ‘fugitive’ has some kind of evidence?”

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

“True. We’ll just have to wait.”

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

“Another airship?” Mayumi wondered aloud. “Oh, oh, this isn’t good. I thought the plan was to de-escalate?”

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

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

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

The new contender was not just *a* Peregrine ship, but the eponymous dreadnought *Peregrine*, its distinctive manta-like silhouette setting it apart from the more naval Skywatch warships. It was more than a match for the destroyer keeping them penned in. If their friends had deployed the flagship, both women knew it could only mean something serious had happened.

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

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

“We’d better just ask Teague and Hector what the hell’s going on,” Mayumi replied. “Damn, tonight was supposed to be so simple. But if this is the start of a *proper* war, then things are gonna get real ugly, real fast.”

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

“I wasn’t able to find him. Just the wreckage of our car, so I linked up with Mayumi instead. Didn’t see his body, though, so he could still be alive and out there,” Alexis replied.

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

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

“Not anymore. Istanbul surrendered.”

Alexis’ heart dropped into her stomach. “Excuse me?” she said. “*Malaka*, you’d better start from the beginning. What happened after Magnus died?”

“A suspiciously short time after his death, we were contacted by Skywatch officials accusing us of the murder. They cited our ongoing conflict at Hotel India as evidence that we were involved in the assassination plot.”

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

“They also claimed to have found the remains of a vehicle containing Peregrine equipment near Samara Tower. I doubted the veracity of this claim, but you seem to have corroborated their findings. It’s circumstantial evidence at best, but the possibility that we had a hand in their leader’s death was enough cause for them to mount an invasion of Istanbul.”

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

“And Istanbul gave up that quickly?” Alexis asked.

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

“I’m guessing the terms weren’t favorable.”

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

“Oh, that sounds fun,” Mayumi said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What.”

“Jackson August Fairchild, at your service.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“My dear, I always have something worthwhile to say,” he said. “You see, I had a simple but important role within Madelyn-Rash. I was to go undercover and keep *them* from plundering the depths of my father’s brain.”

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

“Anyone and everyone! The wealth of knowledge my father holds is a delicious tart, and absolutely everybody wants to stick their fat, hairy fingers into it. The UN, the Pact, every flavor of separatist movement, the church, communists and capitalists alike! *Never* trust a capitalist, mark my words.”

“At this rate, I’m surprised you’re not including, like, Zionists or the Illuminati,” Mayumi said.

“It’s not a comprehensive list.”

“Uh-huh.”

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

Eirene’s face lit up. “That explains why Marcus was helping Lancaster onboard the *Sierra*,” she mused. “With his son held hostage, he didn’t really have much choice. Doesn’t tell us what Lancaster’s end game is, but what Jackson’s saying makes sense. If we bring him back to his father, Lancaster loses his leverage, and Marcus is free to tell us everything we need to know.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

“And when you’re gone?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Done?” the Director-General asked.

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

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

“Of course, but I don’t think it will come to that. It’s in everyone’s interest to avoid further conflict.”

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

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

“But of course,” Lancaster replied.

## Chapter 6 – The Histories

Ian

## 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, Mayumi 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 Mayumi, 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,” Mayumi 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 Mayumi. “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,” Mayumi 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.”

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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.

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“We need to get the fuck out of here,” Mayumi 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?”

Mayumi 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, Mayumi’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, Mayumi, 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?” Mayumi 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?” Mayumi 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 Mayumi. “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.

Mayumi 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?” Mayumi’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,” Mayumi 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,” Mayumi 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.”

Mayumi 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,” Mayumi 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.”

Mayumi 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.

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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.” Mayumi 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?” Mayumi 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?”

Mayumi 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,” Mayumi muttered.

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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,” Mayumi 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,” Mayumi 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,” Mayumi said.

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

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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 Mayumi. 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,” Mayumi 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.

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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 Mayumi 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 Mayumi, 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 Mayumi 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 Mayumi 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.”

\* \* \*

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.

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“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.