Minutes After Midnight

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## Prologue – Once Gifted Children

Akiko couldn’t remember why she hated Montreal.

The city was as prosperous as ever, this much was true. Graduates from its schools, herself among them, had been instrumental in rebuilding the Union and its client states after decades of decline. Should she not have been proud, Akiko wondered? Her academic record had earned her an apprenticeship under the Defense Administration’s most renowned computer scientist, Dr. Marcus Fairchild, an experience her peers would have treasured. Nevertheless, as soon as she removed her cap and gown, the veil was lifted, and the illusion of comfort fell to the ground like the silken garments that had brought her so much joy.

However, try as she might, she couldn’t think of a single reason why.

Nobody would have claimed the city was perfect. The more time anyone spent amidst the ivory towers of Montreal, the more they would notice cracks in its façade: the poverty in the lower city, the overworked menials swarming the upper city, the anti-war protestors, and, looming above them all, the stern hand of the Union’s military, whose heavily-armed airships made port in the city for maintenance and training. These, though, were inconveniences, unworthy of such visceral disgust.

Lacking an explanation for her missing memories, Akiko sought a distraction to replace them. Ironically, that same military she loathed proved to be her relief. As she no longer wished to pursue her original career path, Dr. Fairchild offered her a position as an aide to his friend and colleague in the Defense Administration, Grand Marshal Vicente Vargas. This position was enough to get her away from Montreal, and, while her new, transient life did bring her back there on occasion, the city was far more digestible in small doses.

It was on the last day of one such visit that Akiko found herself handcuffed to a chair at an airport security checkpoint, which did little to improve her opinion of the place.

The grand marshal had been staying in Montreal to finalize some deal with a foreign technology company, which was supposed to be a simple affair. They would have remained there for a week, and then flown to some technology conference in Rome that Akiko could not have cared less about, except insofar as a trip to the capital offered plenty of sightseeing opportunities. Unfortunately, on the day they were due to depart, a protest near the airport turned violent, and that put an end to any hopes she had of smooth travels.

On the day of their departure, Akiko arrived at the airport an hour early, but even that proved insufficient. A crowd had already amassed at the security checkpoint, threatening to smother the gate agents under a tidal wave of luggage, bodies, and the odor of travelers who had been held up in the summer heat for a few hours too many.

Turning her nose up at the commotion, Akiko pressed onwards. The authoritative tapping of her high heels against the hard tile floor was inaudible underneath so many voices, which was a disappointment. At the very least, that sound made her feel like a professional, rather than the aimless child drifting from place to place that she knew in her heart she was.

Fragments of what little French she knew spurted out of Akiko’s mouth as she shifted her petite frame sideways to cut through the line and reach the crew entrance. What followed was an extra sequence of security theatre – body scans, a quick but intrusive pat-down, and an interrogation to verify that she was who she claimed to be. When all the nonsense was complete, the agents at the checkpoint finally granted her passage to the gate from which the *Kolyma*, the grand marshal’s personal airship, would later depart.

Vargas, however, was not there. Instead, amidst the rank-and-file, she saw two people who were clearly not army personnel, both of them women of Chinese descent, and one much older than the other. If her age alone didn’t give it away, the older woman’s vestments made clear her superior rank – a deep red suit jacket and slacks, expensive jewelry, and boots with heels even higher than those Akiko sported. Meanwhile, her younger, tomboyish counterpart wore no such adornments, instead sporting a tight, utilitarian jumpsuit, the kind typically worn underneath body armor.

It would have been easy to assume that they were *from* China, or what was left of it, but so many groups had been displaced as the old world order collapsed that Akiko knew such an assumption would be baseless. Her own family’s escape from Japan was testament to that.

To her surprise, the younger of the two turned to face her and smiled, tossing a bruised apple to herself over and over again.

“Sorry to bother you, miss, but have you seen Grand Marshal Vargas? We were supposed to be meeting him here,” the girl asked.

Akiko’s eyes followed the apple for a brief moment. “No, I just arrived, so your guess is as good as mine,” she said. “He’s never been the most, uh, attentive when it comes to time. You know how it is.”

“Hah, too true. Thanks.”

Having gotten a closer look, Akiko was now confident that these two were mother and daughter. Both shared the same sharp jawline, full lips, and dainty nose, made distinct only by the decades of age that separated them. It was also clear that the parent had tried to instill in the child some degree of poise, but it had not fully taken root. While the girl’s uniform was indeed immaculate, and her hair was done up in a clean pixie cut, her posture was noticeably less refined – or perhaps it just seemed that way next to her monolith of a mother.

“I’m guessing you two are friends of his?” Akiko asked, unable to resist prodding further.

“Friends? I don’t know about friends, but we’ve been working with him and Dr. Fairchild, yeah,” the daughter replied. “Now that we’re done in Montreal, he invited us to join him for the trip to the conference, and then we’ll be flying back to Athens all on our lonesome.”

“Fairchild? I was part of his apprenticeship program back at the DA. Is he here, too?”

“You were? Small world. But no, he’s not here. He was called away on urgent business a few days ago, told us he’d meet us at the conference.”

“Pity, I was hoping I could catch up with my old master. What kind of work do you do together, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“We’re with Aleph Null Research and Development, Athens branch campus. Well, I say ‘branch’ as if headquarters wasn’t lost before I was even born, but that’s not important. What matters is that our company was invited to participate in a joint development project with your Defense Administration, so we came to Montreal to work out the details.”

“And to ensure that the Union respects Athenian sovereignty,” the girl’s mother added, finally breaking her silence with as much scorn as Akiko anticipated.

“Yeah, what she said. Aleph Null is basically a branch of the Athenian government at this point, so we need to represent its interests accordingly. To be honest, I’m just the chief of security, so I got the easy job. Mother here is our director, so she gets the enviable task of preventing a hostile takeover by economic *or* military means. Plenty of folks out there would kill to get their hands on our tech.”

Akiko nodded. “Well, I hope you didn’t have much trouble during your stay here.”

“Security was kind of a nuisance, but what else is new?”

The girl cracked a smile and tossed the apple up once more, catching it with the same hand as it fell back down before taking a bite.

“Just a nuisance? I figured it’d be worse,” Akiko replied. “With as many guards as they have around, you’d think we’re down at the front lines. Hell, wouldn’t surprise me if that line out there lasts longer than the war does. Protests really have our boys in grey spooked, don’t they?”

“Well, I’d have used harsher language, but mother dearest might not approve. Still, it isn’t so bad compared to the vetting we had to do when we first arrived in Montreal.”

“I bet. It was the same damn story for me, too. I’ve flown with Vargas so many times you’d think they’d know I’m not a terrorist by this point. Like, just skip the circus and let us in!”

The daughter shrugged. “Veterans have gone rogue in the past. Annoying as it is, I don’t really blame them.”

“Well, I do. You said they already vetted you, and I know they did all kinds of background checks when I got hired, so making us go through this crap is just bad management, honestly. There’s *got* to be a better way.”

“If you want to fix it, you could apply for a job here.”

“Hah, noooo thank you. Having to live in Montreal might just be the one thing worse for my sanity than passing through this checkpoint.”

“Not a fan of the big city?” the daughter asked.

“I love cities, just not this one,” Akiko replied. “I feel sick every time I so much as *think* about this place, but I honest-to-god couldn’t tell you why. It’s like there’s a hole where my senior year of uni used to be. Maybe I blocked it out or something.”

“That’s certainly quite unusual, though I’m sure you’re not the first university student to lose a few memories here and there.”

“Hah, you’re not wrong,

“Speaking of which, miss, you said we’ve got some time to wait. Wanna grab a quick coffee or something with me?” Cassandra asked with a warm smile.

Before Akiko could reply, the older woman put a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “Now that your brother’s back, I think it’s time we left this young lady to her work,” she said.

“…Yes, mother,” Cassandra replied sullenly. She turned and followed her mother away like a dog with its tail between its legs, but not before giving Akiko one last wave goodbye and a promise to meet again during the flight, which the stewardess reciprocated.

Recalling that she still had a job to do, Akiko took her place at the marshal’s side, along with a handful of other attendants.

“Apologies for my tardiness, Grand Marshal,” she said, adopting the respectful mannerisms expected of one in her position.

“You needn’t be,” Vargas replied in his distinctive Castilian accent. “These security measures were by my design, so if anyone’s to blame, it’s me. Besides, I can hardly expect a child to be as punctual as my officers.”

Akiko wanted to remind him that she was twenty-six years old and had graduated with top marks from one of the most prestigious universities in the Union, but she knew by now that such protests were pointless.

“That said, I have worked up an appetite while we were waiting, so perhaps you wouldn’t mind fetching me a meal from one of the nearby restaurants? Some poutine, if you can manage? With extra gravy. I’ve developed a craving during my time here,” the grand marshal continued.

“Alright, one serving of poutine with extra gravy it is, then,” she said. With no reason to linger, Akiko curtsied, as was proper, and left to carry out the task she had been assigned.

\* \* \*

Once the passengers were fed and the crew settled in, they began their journey to Rome. The entire ship shuddered as its ancient engines lifted it skyward, giving Akiko a full view of Montreal. The city might have been beautiful once, she thought. Now, even Mount Royal itself was obscured by a wall of skyscrapers and a canopy of interlinking catwalks so thick that they were said to form an upper city. Rising even further was the ugly spine of the St. Elodie space elevator, the only one of its kind still operational, sticking up like the skyline itself was showing her a rude gesture.

A pair of corvettes adorned with Skywatch insignias flew past, landing at the base of the elevator. She noted that one of them was damaged and trailing smoke, which was an unexpected sight. As far as Akiko knew, the only active conflict was further south, in what used to be the United States, and any ailing vessels would have surely sought refuge at an airbase closer to the front. There was no reason for them to retreat so far.

Unless the Union was losing ground, she realized.

That, however, was none of her concern. If the Americans pushed north and took Montreal, then perhaps she’d never have to visit it again, as irrational as she knew her hatred to be. Maybe that wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.

\* \* \*

Hours into the journey, Akiko found that she was quite thirsty herself, and so she made a detour to the *Kolyma’s* mess hall. Resisting the temptation to grab something from the liquor section, such as a bottle of soju or the watery beer the galley offered, she settled upon a can of lemonade to quench her thirst and immediately took a long, steady drink.

“Oh, fuck, that hits the spot,” she said to herself.

As Akiko sat down at one of the tables, a wave of ennui swept over her. She couldn’t tell exactly why – being out-of-touch with her emotions was hardly a new experience for her, after all – but everything about her situation seemed inadequate. Perhaps her time with the grand marshal had reminded her of her insignificance, or perhaps she was simply lonely. Even though she was part of Vargas’ retinue, and he was kind to her, she had never felt like she truly belonged.

Thankfully, a cough from behind put a stop to Akiko’s wandering brain before she slipped into anything resembling self-reflection.

“I did promise to say hi,” came Cassandra’s voice with the confidence of someone greeting a good friend.

Akiko tried not to get her hopes up that this was anything more than a casual conversation, knowing full well that when this girl disembarked in Athens, they would never see each other again.

“So you did. Question is, was this a chance encounter, or have you been stalking me since we took off?” she asked with a cautiously playful smirk.

“Stalking? Oh, you wound me! It was purely coincidental, I assure you.”

“That’s fair. I guess there’s only so many places to hang out on this ship. Like, ninety percent of it is engines, hangars, and a couple of guns.”

“I certainly enjoy guns, but those decks are sadly off-limits to passengers, and so here I am. Mind if I join you for a little bit, Miss…Akiko, was it?”

Akiko gestured towards the seat opposite her. “Please do. I could use the company,” she replied.

As Cassandra circled around the table to take her seat, Akiko got a good look at her for the second time. Between the two of them, the other girl was taller by about half a head, with long legs and a fit, athletic build. It was clear that she put a great deal of care into her appearance. In addition to her clean uniform, makeup, and well-maintained physique, Akiko even picked up a hint of vanilla perfume, which was a welcome change from the odors that had assailed her up until that point.

“That scent you’re wearing is real nice,” Akiko remarked, inhaling deeply.

“I’m glad you think so. I had to spend a while getting dolled-up to make a good impression on our ‘friends’ in the DA.”

“Sounds like a pain in the ass.”

“Quite the opposite. I mean, I’ve always enjoyed the artistry in fashion and makeup, but I rarely get a chance to express myself on the job, so this was a welcome opportunity.”

“Well, you’ve clearly got a talent for it.”

Cassandra smiled. “You’re too kind,” she said.

“How’d you end up in that position, anyway?” Akiko asked. “Chief of security seems like a lofty title for someone so young.”

“I’m a nepo baby, pure and simple.”

The bluntness of her answer caught Akiko off guard, and she struggled to formulate a response.

“Come on, now, don’t act so surprised,” Cassandra continued. “You remember my mother, don’t you? I do what I can to earn my title, but let’s not pretend like having the director of a company as big as Aleph Null for a parent isn’t the biggest silver platter life can hand you.”

“I mean, I did put two and two together, but I didn’t wanna say anything…”

“Hah, beautiful, *and* polite. Bet you’re popular with the boys. Or girls, if that’s your thing.”

Akiko shrugged. “I used to be, but nowadays I move around too much to date, and I’m not the type of sailor to have a lover in every port. But, more to the point, isn’t that, like, a huge conflict of interest? Working for your mother, I mean.”

For a moment, Cassandra’s unflappable demeanor seemed to crack. “Yes and no,” she said. “While it’s true that she could give me preferential treatment if she wanted to, I can tell you right now that she definitely doesn’t.”

“She some kind of harsh taskmistress?” Akiko inquired, though she worried she was prying too deep.

“I wouldn’t say that. She just has, uh ‘thoughts’ about the way I live my life. If anything, her expectations for me are higher for me since I’m her own offspring and ‘ought to take after her,’ or some such nonsense.”

“When you put it that way, I can see how working with your mother might be stressful.”

“It can be. There sure are times I’ve considered quitting, but I’m not sure even God knows what I’d be doing if not for this, no matter how much my born-again brother claims He has a plan for us.”

“I understand,” Akiko said with a sigh. “When I was a kid, all I wanted was to get the hell out of my parents’ house, but, out here, I don’t really know what to do with myself. I’m just drifting in Vargas’ wake with nothing more than a meager salary and a degree in a field that I ended up hating. AI research, by the way, since I’m sure you were going to ask.”

“Am I really that much of an open book?”

“Call it a lucky guess.”

Before Cassandra could reply, both women were shaken by a tremor beneath their feet. Just as they had during takeoff, the ship’s engines protested being made to work, this time bringing the *Kolyma* to a full stop midair.

“What the hell is going on?” Akiko wondered aloud once the vibrations had dwindled to a faint but steady hum.

“Inclement weather, perhaps?” Cassandra suggested. “Might be waiting for a storm, or something.”

“Nah, we’d just go around. Cap wouldn’t be stopping unless something serious went down, a blown engine or something. Like I told you earlier, poor girl’s practically ancient.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but that sounds like it’ll take a long time to fix.”

“We won’t miss the conference, so don’t worry your pretty little head. Just have faith.”

“Now you sound like Elias. Just remember, my mother and I have a meeting in Athens to attend first. I’m sure your engineers are competent, but I still find being stuck in limbo like this…unsettling.”

“Fair dues. Might not even be the engines, anyway.”

Akiko stood up and walked over to the nearest window, peering out to try and see if there was, in fact, any noticeable damage to either of the portside engines. There was not.

“See anything?”

“Well, nothing’s on fire, so that’s nice. Maybe…” Akiko’s voice trailed off as she shifted her gaze downwards and realized the reason for their sudden stop.

The silence was not lost on Cassandra. “What is it? Will we have to make an emergency landing?” she asked.

Akiko shook her head. “In the middle of the Atlantic? The waves would tear us apart,” she said.

“Then what?”

Cassandra never got nor needed a response. Once she arrived at the window, she too was able to see what had so alarmed her companion. At first, the shape below was hazy, obscured by clouds, but the sheer size of it could only mean one thing.

“Good heavens,” she continued, with the sound of one who wanted to use an even more profane phrase but was too well-trained to do so. “A ship? Something that size has to be a carrier, at least, if not a dreadnought. Is it one of yours?”

“We’d best hope. There’s no way that thing didn’t show up on radar, so, if it’s hostile, Cap would have to be the biggest moron ever to let it get this close. And he’s no fool, so it’s probably friendly. In the loosest sense of the word.”

“Elaborate.”

“Skywatch and Army don’t play nice with each other. If that big boy down there is holding us up, there’s gonna be some proper bullshit coming our way.”

The proper bullshit in question rose slowly but steadily upwards until it its formidable silhouette blocked out the sun. Now that it was in plain view, nobody could have mistaken the ship for anything other than the most prestigious vessel in the Skywatch – the *Sunset Serenade.* Unlike most of the Union’s fleet, it was elegant and slender, lacking the bulky nacelles used by ships like the *Kolyma*. Its flight deck was busy with gunships that seemed primed to launch.

“What a shameless act of intimidation,” Akiko fumed. “It’s always the same, a bunch of man-children with more power than sense having a dick-measuring contest while the rest of us have to watch. And, like, everyone *knows* that the Skywatch are the prime minister’s favorites, so what are they even trying to prove? ‘Ooh, we have bigger airships than you,’ as if it’s supposed to be a surprise that the *air* force has more air power. But good luck holding territory with those.”

“I’ve seen the Skywatch marines in training. They may not be numerous, but they can fight on land just as well as they can board a ship,” Cassandra said.

“…Thanks for the heads-up, I guess.”

The sound of heavy footsteps turned their heads towards the mess hall entrance as Cassandra’s mother stormed into the room, with her brother Elias in tow. “There you are, girl!” she declared. “Next time, inform me before you go gallivanting about on a foreign vessel.”

“Foreign doesn’t mean hostile, mother,” Cassandra protested.

“Ah, I think the carrier aiming a half-dozen railguns at us might disagree,” Elias said more playfully than the situation warranted.

The old woman scowled at the two girls. “Hmph. By the look on both your faces, I’m guessing that part is news to you,” she said. “Luckily, I’ve come with a report from the bridge that should clarify matters. You see, the Skywatch is here to pay us a visit. And by ‘us,’ I mean our dear friend Vargas.”

“Yeah, we figured that much out already. Did you learn what for?”

“I’m getting to that. The word I received is that the Skywatch will be conducting a special investigation of our vessel before allowing us to land in Rome.”

“That’s weird,” Akiko said. “Any inspections are usually done upon landing. Aerial rendezvous isn’t completely unheard of, but it’s super inconvenient for everyone involved, so it’s usually only done if someone’s, like, dying, and a ship with medical facilities is closer than the nearest airbase. So, you know, pretty much never.”

“I’d also guess that they’re not usually done at gunpoint,” Cassandra mused.

“Their motives are none of our concern,” her mother continued. “However, we will be required to submit to the inspection, just like the rest of the crew.”

Akiko let out a long sigh. “Cool. Cool, I love that for us. Do we have to go anywhere, or are the inspectors going to come here?”

“The Skywatch has designated several muster points, and the mess hall is one of them. All we need do is wait.”

The first into the room were Grand Marshal Vargas and the rest of the airship’s bridge crew. While Vargas seemed unperturbed, Akiko noticed that his subordinates displayed a variety of emotions ranging from annoyance to fear.

“Grand Marshal!” Akiko exclaimed as she rushed to her charge’s side. “Are you okay? You look…well, never mind that. What’s this all about?”

“I wish I could tell you, doll, but I doubt I know much more than you do.”

“And they made you come all the way down here? Who’s manning the bridge?”

“Right now? Nobody. Guess they decided no one’s needed at the helm while we’re latched on to the *Serenade*. Curious that they had us march all the way back here, though.”

“Yeah, if it were me, I’d just send some goons to shake you down at your posts, but I guess this way’s more convenient for them, our own time be damned.”

“You know the Skywatch are a bunch of bastards. Just keep your head down, and let me handle them. It’s going to be okay; I promise.”

Akiko nodded resolutely. “I hope you’re right,” she said.

“So do I.”

Any hopes they had that this would be a painless affair were dashed when the interrogators arrived. The first into the room were a cadre of men clad in dark grey body armor, each with a revolver at his hip. These men, and those marines already in the mess hall, immediately straightened up and turned to salute the next man to enter – none other than the Grand Admiral of the Skywatch, Jacob Lancaster.

“Well, shit,” Akiko muttered.

Lancaster was a tall man with dark skin, hair, and eyes, and a stubble-lined jawline so strong that it looked bulletproof. His uniform was the lone splash of color amidst the monochromatic menagerie, navy blue with silver trim, and a surprisingly small number of medals.

“I see we caught some small fry in our net,” he said, gesturing towards the delegation from Athens. “You lot aren’t with the army. Identify yourselves.”

“Hao Shufen, Director of Aleph Null Research and Development, Athens Branch Campus,” the older woman answered. “With me are Cassandra Hao Zhenyan, our chief of security, and Elias Hao Zhenjie, our ambassador to the Union. I’m surprised you don’t recognize any of us.”

“My apologies,” Lancaster said with questionable sincerity. “The last time I had dealings with your company was when your predecessor was still in power. I knew he’d retired, but this is the first time you and I have met face-to-face, and I wasn’t expecting Vargas to be entertaining foreign guests.”

The woman that Akiko now knew was named Shufen seemed unimpressed. “Apology accepted,” she said in a flat voice.

“…But here here’s someone I know,” Lancaster continued, approaching the grand marshal. “Vicente, my good man! I trust your stay in Montreal was productive? Crushed a lot of protests?” He clenched his fist tight as if he were personally squeezing the life out of some hapless malcontent.

“My forces have dispersed a few of the rowdier groups, yes,” Vargas replied proudly.

Lancaster’s jovial façade dropped in an instant. “That’s right, they did,” he said, his voice dripping with venom.

“So, you did read my report after all. Am I to infer by your tone that you think I should have stayed my hand? They’d practically shut down the Defense Administration on the day of a crucial test! Marcus would have had my head if I didn’t do something.”

In a flash, Lancaster grabbed Vargas by his collar and pulled him close. The grand marshal’s entourage instinctively readied themselves to draw their sidearms, but refrained from acting further lest they escalate the situation.

“You misbegotten fool,” the grand admiral seethed. “Your tests can be rescheduled, but it’s hard to recover from that kind of PR disaster, and if you think that Marcus Fairchild’s name means anything to me, you are sorely mistaken. Please at least tell me there were no civilians killed.”

Lancaster’s aggression caught Akiko off-guard, but she was intrigued by his words about her old master. If Dr. Fairchild himself had faded into irrelevance, then perhaps she could cut herself some slack about how her own life had gone since graduation.

Vargas, meanwhile, looked astonished but not afraid. “Killed? No. I see no point in wasting lives, so we employed less-than-lethal weaponry. Nevertheless, a small number were hospitalized.”

“That’s…marginally better.”

Lancaster released Vargas from his grip, and the tension in the room fell back to a low simmer. After a pregnant pause, the grand admiral turned to Akiko, of all people, and spoke.

“You, girl,” he said, pointing at her. “Remind Mr. Vargas here why the protests began in the first place.”

The grand marshal scoffed. “She hardly needs to be involved in this –”

“Remind. Vargas. Why the protests started.”

“Er, they were against the war,” Akiko stated, falling back upon her professional etiquette. “They think that it’s not our place to support the American government in exile, especially when we’re still recovering from the war with Geneva.”

“And we have a winner!” Lancaster declared in a mocking tone. “They’re against the war. In other words, against violence. And you…” he pointed back at Vargas, “…used that same violence against them.”

“They needed to be taught a lesson!” Vargas shot back.

“When a fussy child refuses to eat their supper, forcing it down their throat will only make them reject it more. You need to wean them onto it, make compromises, offer rewards, and once they’re used to it, they forget why they ever protested in the first place. The people will accept my methods once they start to profit from them, but that will never happen if you turn them into rebels first.”

“I’m not sure the families of your dead soldiers will think they profited,” Akiko muttered, completely forgetting Vargas’ advice to keep quiet.

Once again, Lancaster turned around to face her, while the Athenians looked on in alarm. “You’re not wrong,” he said, in a mercifully calm tone. “That’s why it’s important that we win the war as quickly as possible, which is a problem we’re trying to solve. Care to comment, Vicente?”

Vargas folded his arms and snarled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. All I have to say is that appeasement hardly has the best political track record.”

“I would hope that our grand marshal can tell the difference between his own citizens and a foreign regime when it comes to policy. Not that it matters, because, as of today, you are no longer in charge of the security forces.”

“No longer – so that’s why you came here? To tell me to my face that I’m fired?” Vargas’ expression was now the picture of barely-contained fury.

“If the prime minister had listened to me, you wouldn’t just be fired, you’d be under arrest for gross negligence bordering on treason. Nevertheless, as grand admiral of the Skywatch, it *is* within my authority to impound this vessel. My men should be in control of the bridge by now. I suggest you all cooperate.”

“All of us?” Shufen demanded, turning the room’s attention back to her and her children.

“Yes, all of you. We have no reason to suspect *you* of any crimes, but if you prove an obstacle, that could easily change. So, please, keep your distance while I deal with the army”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Vargas said.

“I don’t believe I heard you properly.”

“You’re slipping, Jacob,” the grand marshal continued. “Demanding that we meet you so far from the bridge made it obvious that you planned to commandeer the *Kolyma*, so we came up with an alternate solution. While your men took the bridge, mine have moved to the cargo hold, where we have enough ordinance to destroy the ship entirely, along with all the data on board. Data that, if I’m not mistaken, is the real reason you’re here.”

Lancaster’s brow furled so deeply it threatened to cleave his forehead in two. “So, you’ve got some backbone after all,” he said. “I didn’t expect you to put up a fight in the face of overwhelming force. It’s stupid, but I can respect it. Tell me, though; how do you see this ending?”

“Ideally, with everything you seek either flying away, or laying at the bottom of the ocean.”

For just a moment, Akiko saw the grand admiral’s gaze shift over to the Athenians, and then back to Vargas.

“Alas, we don’t live in an ideal world,” he said. “My job wouldn’t be necessary if we did. Nevertheless, while I suspect you’re bluffing, I don’t want to start a firefight in front of our guests. Enjoy the conference, because there *will* be a reckoning after it’s done.”

With a flippant gesture, Lancaster bade his “comrades” in the army farewell and quit the room, along with the rest of the officers. Akiko could see Vargas’ hand moving towards his sidearm, but he stopped short of drawing it. To her relief, he possessed at least some degree of restraint.

“What’s our next step, sir?” she dared to ask. “I assume we’re not actually going to the conference, are we?”

“That’s exactly what we’re doing,” Vargas replied.

“I beg your pardon?”

“If Lancaster wishes to accost us further, then the safest place to be is in the capital. He can’t do anything drastic with so many others around, which is why he tried to intercept us all the way out here. It was fortunate that our friends from Aleph Null were here to be our shield today.”

“You’re most welcome,” Elias said, as if it were a service he had intentionally provided.

## Chapter 1 – The Cloud Garden

Athens was a city twice broken, first by a great earthquake when the old world fell, and then again by the wars fought over what remained. By some great fortune, the iconic Acropolis had survived, but the land surrounding it bore centuries of scars.

It its early years as an independent city-state, Athens had avoided the expansion of the Pan-Mediterranean Union not because of any spirited resistance, but because of that same state of ruin. So spoiled was the land that the Union had little interest in “persuading” the Athenians to swear fealty, and so it was left 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 time, this eclectic mix of locals, migrants, and anybody else willing to trade a bit of comfort for liberty had grown into a cosmopolitan and fiercely independent community set on standing apart from their imperialist neighbor.

Meanwhile, without much fanfare, a small laboratory near the Port of Piraeus re-opened its doors. It had once been the local branch of a multinational research firm backed by Chinese and American investors, all of whom were lucky enough to die before the old world did. For over fifty years, the laboratory achieved little of note, and when it went quiet following the destruction of the firm’s headquarters, hardly anybody noticed. Five years later, its lights turning back on went equally uncelebrated.

That insignificance didn’t last long.

Freed from the directives imposed by Headquarters, Aleph Null’s Athenian branch had not sat idle during those years of closure. Its director, Alexander Stathopoulos, kept his employees busy with medical research that the new world desperately needed, selling his products on the black market to keep the company afloat. For half a decade, a cohort of scientists, engineers, and support staff worked and lived inside the compound, rarely venturing outside, all to make sure Aleph Null re-entered the world stage with a bang.

As soon as everything was ready, Stathopoulos threw wide the gates and set his plans into motion. Using the leftover funds from his black-market trading, he hired scores of new employees, made deals with local gangs for protection, and purchased a fleet of vehicles to expand the company’s trade network. Aleph Null diversified its research as it grew, building new laboratories dedicated to aerospace engineering and agricultural sciences. A professional security team replaced the gangs, the old compound became a luxury apartment tower, and several farms were subsidized, using the company’s research to boost their yield. That time was a renaissance not just for Aleph Null, but for Athens itself, whose economy thrived with the increase in trade. When Alexander Stathopoulos finally retired, he did so content that his brainchild could take care of itself.

It was close to a century after his plans were first set in motion that the Union shuttle designated Kilo Oscar two niner began its approach to Athens.

Cassandra was the first of its passengers to awaken. The morning sun had not yet started its climb over the horizon, so, after rubbing her eyes – a mistake that left eyeliner smeared around them, much to her chagrin – she checked the time on her phone. It was almost 4am. That was going to properly ruin her sleep schedule, she thought. At least there were a few days before the conference to get herself back on track.

She stood up and stretched, listening to the cracking of her joints, and then lurched her way over to the washroom at the back of the shuttle, where she wiped off her smudged makeup to make herself presentable.

“You goddamned idiot,” she chastised herself, wishing she could smack herself upside the head without making everything worse. In her defense, she had been barely conscious at the time, but tiredness was no excuse for incompetence, even if the matter at hand was trivial.

Satisfied that the area around her eyes no longer looked like she’d lost a fight, she washed her hands in triplicate and left the washroom, careful not to touch any surfaces that she didn’t have to. When she stepped out into the cabin, she saw that her brother had also awakened.

“…Good morning, Cassie,” he mumbled, rubbing his sleepy eyes just like she had. He, at least, was wearing no makeup for such a gesture to ruin.

“Good morning to you too, dear brother,” Cassandra replied.

“Are we almost there, do you think?”

“Hard to say. We’re still above the clouds, so I can’t get a gauge based on the terrain. I guess that means we’re not descending yet, at least.”

“It won’t be long,” came Shufen’s voice from one of the seats ahead.

“Ah, mother. You’re awake!” Elias exclaimed in a jolly tone.

Cassandra, meanwhile, folded her arms. “How long have you been up?” she asked.

“I awoke when you got up to use the washroom. As did your brother, I must assume.”

“That’s right, but don’t worry too much about it,” Elias said. “It’s about time I was waking up, anyway.”

“Well, I’m glad at least one of us is a morning person. If you can even call this morning.”

“You already knew that. Hah, I still remember you begging mother for your own room when we were young.”

“As if you aren’t all still young. I suggest you take advantage of that youth rather than squandering it by sleeping in,” Shufen said.

“Four in the morning is not ‘sleeping in,’ mother,” Cassandra replied with a half-amused smirk.

“Tsk, I didn’t mean right now.”

“My sister is just playing at obstinance, I’m sure,” the ever-cheerful Elias interjected. “After all, I don’t believe she’s ever missed a staff meeting. She knows the importance of routine.”

Cassandra could think of several times she had eschewed her early-morning obligations, but those had all been during her university days, and Elias didn’t need to know about them. She was better, now, anyway. More punctual. More thorough. Cleaner.

Elias then gestured at Akiko sleeping opposite him. “Speaking of rest, our new friend seems to be quite the heavy sleeper as well. Perhaps she can stay with Cassandra once we get home. There’s room for two in her apartment.”

“I’ll thank you not to accept guests into the Cloud Garden without my approval,” Shufen said. “In this instance, however, I’ll allow it. As long as you two can take care of her, you’re welcome to keep her.”

“You say that like she’s a pet,” Cassandra replied with much distaste

“I say that like she’s *your responsibility*, which she is. I’m not going to support a third child, so she’ll need you to provide her with food, clothes, a place to stay. If that means being Cassandra’s roommate, then so be it, assuming both find that arrangement agreeable.”

“Oh, I’m sure Cassie won’t have any problem sharing,” Elias said, nudging his sister with his elbow. Shufen just rolled her eyes.

“That’s – ugh, nevermind, we’ll talk about this later. If mother doesn’t want to be involved, then let’s not involve her.” Eager to change the subject, Cassandra peeked back out the window. “Look, we’re entering the cloud bank,” she said. “Seems we’ll be landing soon.”

Elias didn’t skip a beat in following her lead. “Wonderful! I trust that party we discussed is still on?” he asked.

“I’m not sure I’m in the mood for a party, but I wouldn’t say no to a celebratory drink, as long as you can provide something non-alcoholic.”

“There’s always water, but I’m sure I can find you something more exciting, and I’ll bring out cider from my room for myself and Akiko.”

“You have cider *in your room*? I’m beginning to doubt this whole ‘moderation’ thing you were preaching.”

Elias just smiled and winked at her.

\* \* \*

Once the shuttle had descended beneath the cloud layer, Cassandra could see Athens International Airport lit up below her. Owing to the odd hour, it wasn’t very busy, but she could still make out a handful of passenger jets being loaded, and several of the flying wing transports that Aleph Null used for most international shipping, all lined up at their private terminal. Even in the dark, they were an impressive sight, looking not unlike a military formation. With some modifications, they could even act as one, though Cassandra had not seen that happen and hoped she never would.

Next to the flying wings were landing pads for helicopters and other VTOL aircraft, and the control tower assigned the shuttle to one of these after a short conversation with Shufen to confirm their identity. Its autopilot made the necessary adjustments in its flight path, and the four of them were safe on the ground before too long.

“Miss Akiko, it’s time to wake up,” Cassandra said, gently nudging Akiko’s shoulder.

The younger woman’s eyes fluttered, and she looked down at the blanket draped over her body, confused as to how it got there.

“Elias and I thought you could use some warmth. I hope you don’t mind,” Cassandra continued.

“…Nah, it’s fine. Appreciate it. But *fuck* does my back hurt. These seats really weren’t made for sleeping in, were they?”

“I wouldn’t know. You’d have to ask the engineer responsible.”

“Yeah, you’re right, dumb question. ‘Course they weren’t, these babies were only made for getting the hell out of dodge in case things go south on the mothership, or for dropping stuff off where we can’t land normally. We’re lucky they’re so fuel-efficient or else we’d be a smoldering wreck somewhere in the French countryside right about now.”

Akiko stretched and stood up, setting the blanket back on her seat. She looked Cassandra in the eyes and smiled warmly. “I really appreciate you taking me along. If you want, I can get out of your hair, now…”

“Absolutely out of the question,” Cassandra interrupted. “As long as you want to stay, you’re welcome in the Cloud Garden – our home. Or, if you don’t, we’ll make sure you have what you need to get back on your feet, reunite with your family, or whatever else. Your choice.

Halfway through following Cassandra out of the vehicle, Akiko paused. “…I’m not sure what I should do right now, to be honest,” she said, looking vexed. “I’m not even sure I *can* go back to my family, since I’m sort of a wanted criminal now. If it’s really okay for me to stay with you guys, then I’ve gotta take you up on that, at least for as long as it takes me to come up with a plan.”

“Of course it’s okay. Come on, we’ll take the monorail back to campus and sort things out there. Just, you know, take it easy in the meantime, alright? You’ve been through a lot.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. I have.”

Just like she had when they boarded, Cassandra extended her hand to help her companion from the shuttle, evoking the image of a noble lady and her attendant. Akiko couldn’t help but blush as she stepped down.

With nothing more than some vending machine snacks to sate their now-ravenous appetites, the group boarded a mostly-empty monorail and sat down for the journey westward. The lights in the cabin were flickering intermittently, but the floor and seats seemed largely clean save for a small amount of vandalism.

The monorail was so smooth that one could hardly tell it was moving, were it not for the buildings outside flying past. Aleph Null’s investments in local infrastructure had paid dividends in both speed and comfort. Even though the route stretched a long way around the southern end of Mount Hymettus, still regarded as a protected area for ecological and historical reasons, Cassandra knew from experience that the trip would scarcely take twenty minutes, intermediate stops included.

As they sped further and further away from the airport, the buildings around them grew taller. Massive cranes stood alongside the apartment and office complexes, erecting ever more structures to contend with the ongoing population boom.

“We’re past the outskirts, now,” Cassandra explained. “Not at the heart of the city, but getting closer. You’ll be able to tell when we’re there.”

“Looking forward to it,” Akiko replied.

“Used to be this side of town was all ruins. Picture all these towers with the tops blown off or straight-up fallen over, covered in moss and vines. I’ve seen some pictures of it back in the day, and, honestly, there’s a sort of nice aesthetic to it, as long as you don’t think too hard about *why* it looks like that. At least there’s still Hymettus and the Acropolis if you want nice scenery.”

“Maybe we can go there together some time, if you don’t mind showing me around.”

Cassandra smiled. “Now there’s a capital idea! Hold on, look – we’re almost around the bend. You should be able to see the Cloud Garden right about…now.”

She pointed out the window as the monorail turned around the bend, climbing higher up a gentle incline towards the next station. Akiko’s eyes followed, and she beheld for the first time the neon expanse that was Athens proper. There were countless buildings of, all of them illuminated by signage, hazard indicators to ward off low-flying aircraft, and light seeping out from the rooms where night-shift workers still toiled. Even more cranes sat idle here, waiting to resume their work on the skyscrapers that intermittently dotted the landscape.

All of that paled in comparison to what Akiko could only assume was the Cloud Garden.

The name was certainly apt. It was a ziggurat tall enough to have pierced Montreal’s upper layer, eclipsing every other skyscraper in the city. The Aleph Null logo **[todo: what does this look like?]** shone down upon the city from atop the megastructure, and a well-lit glass enclosure formed its crown – an arboretum containing the titular gardens. Along the coast were four similar but smaller structures, connected by skybridges to the main building.

“Welcome home,” Cassandra said, while her friend looked on in awe.

“You seriously *live* there?” Akiko gasped.

“We do. The main building has apartments for core staff members, recreational facilities, most of our executive meeting rooms, and all the original laboratories from when Aleph Null was just one man and his cult-like followers experiencing a collective fever dream. It also has access to bomb shelters, anti-aircraft defense systems, and the same model of shield generator that the *Sunset Serenade* uses.”

“Sounds like a lot of eggs in one basket to me.”

“It is and it isn’t. The Cloud Garden is the nerve center of our organization, for sure, but important functions are spread out all over the city. Trade and Commerce is run out of the Piraeus Gateway further north, the Athenian Army Command has its own compound in the middle of nowhere, and, well, you already saw the airport on the other side of the mountain.”

“And you’re in charge of security for all that?”

Cassandra laughed and shook her head. “Heavens, no. My jurisdiction is limited to the Cloud Garden itself, unless our staff have cause to visit another facility, in which case I’ll coordinate with that place to make sure all our Is are dotted and Ts are crossed. Plus, each of the wings has a security team captain who takes care of things there.

“Okay, that sounds a bit less insane. Anyway, this is one hell of a cool city. Bet it looks even better during the day.”

“I think it’s best at dusk or dawn, personally. By the time we get home, the sun should be coming up. We can watch it from the arboretum.”

“I’d like that,” Akiko said.

\* \* \*

By the time the monorail arrived at the Cloud Garden station, it had started to rain, souring their plans to watch the sunrise. Cassandra, Elias, Akiko, and Shufen all disembarked and made their way inside as quickly as possible, where a night watchman was ready to admit them into the building. He scanned all of their identification cards, only to stop when he got to Akiko.

“I see you have a new guest, Director Hao,” the man said.

“She’s staying at the pleasure of my children, actually,” Shufen corrected. “Issue her a visitor pass, if you would.”

“Length of her stay?”

“Indefinite.”

“Name?”

“Akiko Miura. A-K-I-K-O M-I-U-R-A,” Akiko said, clearly used to having to spell it out.

“Perfect. Just let me print that for you.”

It didn’t take long for the guard to get Akiko’s pass ready, and soon she had a bright red keycard with her name stamped on it hanging from a cheap lanyard around her neck.

“It suits you,” Cassandra joked.

“Red always was my color,” Akiko replied, equally in jest.

“Since you’re with Lady Hao, I’ll assume you know how to behave yourself and spare you the regulation speech,” the guard said. “Enjoy your stay at the Cloud Garden, Ms. Miura.”

“Thanks. You t – ah, never mind.” Akiko’s face turned flush and she hurriedly turned away.

“Oh, one last thing. A letter came for you while you were away, Cassandra. Oddly enough, it wasn’t delivered through the postal service, just left on my desk.” He shrugged and handed Cassandra a red paper envelope with no return address. Her eyes narrowed.

“Thank you kindly. I think I know who this is from,” she said, oblivious to the suspicious stare she was receiving from her mother, and the amused one from her brother.

“Great. I almost threw it away thinking it was spam, but I have to admit the color intrigued me. Best of luck to you all.”

“And to you as well,” Elias replied with a jovial bow.

As they waited for the elevator to their suites on the fortieth floor, Cassandra looked at the envelope quizzically, memories flashing through her mind. The boy – man, by this point – who must have sent it hadn’t bothered to contact her in almost ten years, so why was this message showing up now? And why hadn’t he delivered it through the usual means?

“Are you going to open that?” Shufen asked impatiently.

“Once I’m in private, yes. It’s addressed to me, and me alone.”

“Very well. Just inform me if it contains anything important.”

“Ah, you can at least tell us who it’s from, Cassie,” Elias pleaded.

“…It’s from Xiang. I guarantee it.”

“Xiang? I wasn’t aware you still talked with him.”

“I didn’t. Not since I left for university.”

“Assuming that’s true, and not a cover story, I’ll be relieved to hear it’s not another paramour of yours inviting you for a tryst,” her mother scoffed. “Though I suppose I should consider myself fortunate that your particular brand of recklessness won’t result in unexpected children.”

“You’re one to talk about recklessness. Or do you mean to say you’ve finally found our father after twenty-six years of looking?” Cassandra asked in a half-jokingly venomous tone.

“We all make mistakes. I’m trying to keep you from repeating mine.”

“Mistakes. Right.” Cassandra turned to Akiko. “Well, there you have it. This humble *mistake* welcomes you to our home,” she said with an exaggerated bow. Akiko, meanwhile, just smiled nervously, unsure how to respond.

“She didn’t mean it like that. You know mother treasures us. That’s why she tries to make sure we’re the best we can be,” Elias said.

Shufen did not deny his claims, but neither did she support them, or even reply at all.

Their next stop was the fortieth floor, where the Hao children’s apartments could be found, along with a dozen other families. There was a public lounge in the middle of the hall, which is where Shufen took her leave from the younger three.

“Elias. Cassandra. I assume you’re capable of making arrangements for Akiko from here on out?”

“You can count on us,” Elias said.

“I’m not the one counting on you. Worry about the girl. I don’t want to come back to find her dead or dying somewhere.”

“Oh, I’ll be fine.” Akiko replied, awkwardly flashing a peace sign.

“Very well. I’m going to make some calls and set up a meeting with the board. I’ll let you both know when that’s scheduled. In the meantime, get whatever rest you can without shirking your duties, because you’ll absolutely need it.”

“Understood,” the twins said in unison.

“Then I’ll leave you to it.”

With a curt nod, Shufen dismissed her children and their friend. She stepped into the elevator, hit the button for the forty-sixth floor, and was gone.

“I’m sure that meeting will be a fun time,” Elias said. “But first, a drink for everyone to celebrate our safe return. You two wait right here – I’ll be back shortly.”

“Sounds good. Thanks, Eli,” Cassandra replied.

As Elias wandered off to his suite to fetch the cider he had promised, Cassandra looked back at the letter in her hand and sighed. She carefully ran her finger underneath the seal flap to break apart the adhesive and removed the note within.

“You sure you wanna open that here?” Akiko asked. “I thought you said you’re waiting to do that in private.”

“I didn’t want to open it in front of my mother, because Heaven only knows what’s inside, and I don’t need to give her any more reason to judge me.”

“I mean, I’m an outsider, here, so stop me if I’m prying too much, but is it really that bad? Nothing she said seemed too out of line from where I’m standing.”

Cassandra sighed. “I know,” she said. “I know she’s right. When I was younger, I *was* reckless, and I definitely hurt some folks. I just wish she would give me a chance to prove I’m not that person anymore. That even if I’m not as chaste as she would like, I’m not putting myself or anyone else in danger.”

“She must trust you, at least a little, if she gave you this job. Like, you don’t put someone in charge of security if you think they’re a total flake.”

“That’s what I don’t understand! She knows I can handle myself. I’ve proven it every time we travel abroad without incident. So why act like I’m still some party-addled schoolgirl trying to smoke or screw everything she sees?”

Cassandra stopped to take a deep breath. Now wasn’t the time to get worked up, she knew, especially in front of guests.

“…Apologies,” she continued, straightening out her back. “I let my emotions get the better of me. You don’t need to be involved in any of this.”

“Heh, I think that’s twice today someone’s told me that,” Akiko smirked. It seemed to Cassandra like she was attempting to lighten the mood, so she smiled back, even if she didn’t find the circumstances around it particularly amusing.

“Well, let’s see what’s in this letter, then, shall we? This is definitely my friend Xiang’s handwriting,” she said, tapping the letter.

“How’d you know it was him from the get-go?” Akiko asked.

“When we were little, we used to write secret messages to each other and slip them into the red envelopes for New Years’, birthdays, and so on, in additional to the usual money. There hasn’t been any occasion for someone to send me one of these envelopes recently, so it had to be a clue to let me know it’s from him without posting a return address.”

“Wonder why he couldn’t just do that?”

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

Cassandra’s eyes scrolled down the paper, taking in Xiang’s words, which were penned in Mandarin Chinese.

*Dearest Zhenyan,*

*I could fill a whole letter telling you how sorry I am for how things ended up, but I have neither the time nor the ink, so all I can do is ask that you hear me out. A friend of mine, someone you don’t know, was captured and held against his will by the Skywatch in Tuscany. I was able to arrange his escape, but for reasons I can’t disclose, I am unable to escort him to safety, so I have instructed him to head by foot to where you and I first met. As I understand you hold a high position within the company, I beg you to advocate for him when he arrives. You and your family are the only people I’m confident will be able to protect him.*

*I wish I could tell you more, but the risk that this letter will be intercepted is too great. Hopefully you understand.*

*Best wishes,*

*Sun Xiang*

Cassandra stared at the letter for a moment, unsure what to do with it. She was tempted to throw it away then and there, but she knew it would be foolish to dismiss this news out of hand. After all, it sounded like this “friend” of his was coming no matter what, and, for all she knew, that one was innocent of any crime. Akiko certainly had been. At the very least, she could leave this letter with the Board of Directors and think about it no further.

No. That would be irresponsible. Xiang had written to *her*, and she had to be the one to deal with the situation he had presented.

“Cassandra? Are you okay? You’re…crying,” Akiko said.

A single tear fell from Cassandra’s eye and stained the paper. With her free hand, she reached up and wiped away the rest. “Just some old regrets, is all,” she said. “Damn, I’m being a poor host, aren’t I? And I’m not even the one who’s been ripped away from her friends and family. I don’t know how you’re holding up so well.”

“I’m sure the pain will come back, but, for now, I’m just kinda living in the moment. Then again, that’s easy for me to say when I don’t have ex…friends? Partners? Er, whatever this guy was to you sending letters to unbury all the old shit in my life.”

“Just friends,” Cassandra insisted. “I can tell you the full story some other time.”

“Yeah, no worries. I can hardly expect you to go pouring your heart out to some chick you met less than a day ago.”

“…Nonsense!” Elias declared, returning triumphantly with an armful of glass bottles. “We’ve all survived a crisis together. I’m sure my sister would trust you with her life by this point. So, what was that letter about? Or is it too steamy to share?”

Cassandra shook her head and wiped a tear from her eye. “It’s about business. I’ll share it with the Board at the meeting later on.”

“Business? Xiang never struck me as the business type. People do change, though. No doubt he’s matured just as much as you have.”

“We’ll see about that soon enough.”

“That sounds good to me. Anyway, I got you some plain cranberry juice, and sparkling cider for myself and our lovely guest.”

“Thanks again, Eli,” Cassandra said, smiling faintly and accepting the bottle of juice from her brother. She cracked it open and took a long sip while the others poured themselves glasses of cider.

“Have you two decided where she’ll be staying?” Elias asked after gulping down half of his drink in a single gulp.

Cassandra knew the polite thing to do would be to offer to share her own room, especially since the idea had already been broached. Akiko didn’t seem like she’d be a difficult roommate. If her appearance was anything to go by, there was nothing strictly unclean about her, and the two of them had gotten along well since their first meeting. However, despite all that, the very idea of sharing *her* space with another person on a long-term basis simply felt wrong.

“If there’s no space for me, I can sleep on the couches out here,” Akiko offered. Cassandra could tell that she had sensed her discomfort, and that only embarrassed her further.

“No, you can stay at my place until we find a suite for you” Cassandra blurted out before her instincts, which were crying out for her to stop, could get in the way.

“Are you sure?”

“No,” she wanted to say.

“Yes,” she actually said.

“Well, then I won’t refuse.” Akiko at least seemed pleased with this arrangement.

“Hmm, she’ll also need some clothes. Can’t have her wearing that stuffy stewardess uniform every day. I hate to impose, Cassie, but do you think you could loan her an outfit for the day? It might be a tiny bit big on her, but it’ll do until we get her some clothes of her own.”

“Um. Y-yeah, I guess,” Cassandra said. “I can spare her some pants and a shirt. She can just have them, honestly; I won’t need them back. Not sure she’d be okay taking my underwear, though, even if it’s clean. That seems…weird.”

“Well, I can tell you right now that your bras are too big for me,” Akiko remarked, looking from Cassandra’s chest to her own. “I mean, I really don’t mind wearing the same clothes for one more day. It’s not like I soiled these, or anything.”

“Well, then, we’ll just have to put a shopping trip first thing on the agenda. My sister can translate for you if you don’t speak Greek. We’ll be spending a lot of time together, I’m sure, so let’s set things up right,” Elias said.

“I’ll drink to that,” Cassandra replied, relieved that her wardrobe would remain her own.

The three of them clinked their beverages together and drank before saying their goodbyes and retiring to their own homes.

\* \* \*

“Since you volunteered to sleep on the couches in the lounge, I’ll assume you won’t mind if we set you up on the couch in here. Unfortunately, there’s only one proper bed, and it’s not that big,” Cassandra said, searching through her closet for a spare blanket. She found one with a lavender tartan pattern and tossed it over to Akiko, along with a spare pillow.

“Oh yeah, no problem,” Akiko replied. She caught the blanket, but then her hands were too full to receive the pillow, which landed unceremoniously on the floor next to her. “When I had an apartment in Montreal, there was a week where I slept in a sleeping bag on the hardwood floor because the company that was supposed to ship my bed got delayed. Heh, maybe that’s why I hate that place so much.”

“As good a reason as any, I guess.”

The apartment in which Cassandra lived was not large, despite her rank. The front door led into the living room, which was decorated in a sleek, modern style. The couch and an armchair orbited a mahogany coffee table that was well-polished, although it was hard to tell beneath the stacks of paper set neatly upon it. To the right was a cozy bedroom decorated with abstract art, and to the left were the washroom and the kitchen, which doubled as her home office. It was very quaint, and Cassandra preferred it that way – too much space would have been overwhelming for one who lived alone. However, she no longer *did* live alone, and the logistics of accommodating a second person for even a short time were causing sparks to fly in her brain, sparks that she dared not reveal to Akiko.

“There are snacks in the kitchen if you need something more to eat,” Cassandra continued, once again chafing internally at the idea that Akiko might not wash her hands before reaching into the pantry. “I’m going to take a quick shower and then collapse into bed for a few hours. I need at least that much *real* sleep before we start the day.”

“A woman after my own heart,” Akiko replied. She finished laying out her improvised bedding and wandered into the kitchen in search of the food her friend had promised.

Now alone, Cassandra took a deep breath and tried to reorient herself, focusing on the familiar space around her. The living room was still tidy. The bedroom was still tidy. The kitchen was still tidy. All was exactly the way she had left it before the trip. She was still in control, and nobody could take that away from her.

Next, she took a shower, keeping the water as hot as she could without burning herself, then gradually lowering the temperature until it reached a refreshing chill. She got out, washed her hands again for good measure, checked to make sure she hadn’t left any stray hairs in the bathtub - she hadn’t - and then left the washroom. By that point, Akiko was already lying on the couch underneath the blanket.

“You look comfy,” Cassandra said.

“Hell yeah, I am. This couch is softer than the bed I had back home.” Akiko paused. “Now that I think about it, my apartment’ll probably evict me, since I’m sure I’ve been declared either a traitor or dead by this point. At least I didn’t have any pets.”

“You have family, right? We can contact them and at least tell them to take possession of your belongings so you don’t lose those. Let them know you’re okay, too, but that you can’t come home until you know it’s safe.”

“If you’d do that, I’d really appreciate it. Man, I’m really stacking up debts, here, aren’t I?”

“You don’t owe me anything,” Cassandra said. “Anyway, I’m going to get some shut-eye, like I mentioned. See you in a few hours, Miss Akiko. Sleep well.”

“You too.”

Cassandra flipped the light switch and the room went dark, save for the distant city lights visible through the window. The two women quickly fell asleep, lulled by the gentle pitter-patter of rain against the glass.

## Chapter 2 – Red Envelope

Fueled by a few extra hours of rest, Cassandra and Akiko enjoyed their afternoon together. They had gyros for lunch at a local shop, the first full meal they’d gotten since the *Koylma* departed, after which they headed to the nearest shopping center to find Akiko some new clothes. The commercial districts in Athens were robust and ever-expanding to accommodate the burgeoning population, so it wasn’t hard to find everything they needed.

It helped that Akiko was an easy person to shop for. She was enviably attractive, with an elegant face, thin waist, and delightful curves around her hips and legs, the type on which any outfit would have looked good. Cassandra felt the urge to dress her up like a doll with all kinds of fancy clothes, and Akiko humored her desires at first. However, she seemed to prefer practical, comfortable clothes over high fashion, which Cassandra could respect, even if she didn’t feel the same way.

In the end, they went home with several new outfits for her, ranging from sleepwear to swimwear to business attire. Both of them returned to the apartment with bags over their shoulders, which they dumped at the foot of the couch that was Akiko’s temporary bed.

At that moment, Cassandra’s phone began to ring.

“You can change in the washroom while I take this,” she said to Akiko, who nodded and left with a handful of clothes picked largely at random.

Cassandra accepted the call and held it up to her ear. She didn’t need to hear a voice or look at caller ID to know it was her mother.

“Hello. It’s me,” Shufen said. Her voice came through as clear as if she were standing in the same room.

“Mother. I assume you’ve scheduled the meeting?”

“Yes. I was able to reserve conference room 2108 in the Agricultural Sciences center for us to present our story to the Board of Administrators, as well as a representative from the Athenian City Council. You’re expected there at six in the evening.”

“Six in the evening, Agri-Sci 2108. Got it. Anything else?”

“Bring that girl of yours. She won’t need to give a speech, but we should introduce her to the Board if we’re going to be sheltering her, just so they know what we’ve done.”

“You make that sound so severe. All we did was help a scared twenty-something escape an active warzone.”

“A scared twenty-something who’s now a fugitive from a neighboring superpower.”

“…Yeah, okay, fair enough. Was there anything else?”

“No. I’ll see you at the meeting.”

“Yep, see you then. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

Cassandra hung up and pocketed her phone, then looked at the washroom where Akiko was still changing.

“Miss Akiko?” she shouted so as to be heard through the door.

“Yeah? What’s up?”

“You might want to swap whatever you’re putting on right now for the formalwear we got. You’ll want to look presentable where we’re going.”

\* \* \*

Meetings were not commonly held after five in the evening, but this was the earliest hour that was available to everyone who would be attending. Cassandra knew most of these people well, all of them cut from the same corporate cloth. With as busy as their schedules were, it was a miracle that Shufen had been able to get them in the same room at all.

As they swung open the heavy oaken doors, Cassandra and Akiko were greeted by the familiar boardroom. In contrast with the contemporary style that the Cloud Garden’s architects seemed to prefer, it was distinctively baroque. There were bronze statues of historical figures along the walls, marble floors so polished that she could make out her own reflection, and a large chandelier at the very center, just above the round table where the board members sat waiting, alongside the City Council representative, a tall man whose name plate read Gregory Baros.

“Right on time,” Shufen said, beckoning towards a pair of empty seats. “Please, join us. I’m eager to begin.”

The two young women complied, taking their seats at the table.

“Thank you for assembling on such short notice,” the Director began. “I’ve called you all here to discuss yesterday’s events aboard the *Kolyma* and determine how, if at all, this affects our plans for the Strategic Technologies Conference. Our esteemed ambassador to the Union, Elias Hao Zhenjie, will appraise you of the events as we understand them.”

Cassandra raised an eyebrow as her brother stood up and smiled at the assembled board members. Evidently, her mother and brother had already conferred with each other.

“Yesterday evening, Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster boarded the airship *Kolyma*, on which myself, our Security Chief, and our Director were flying from Montreal to Athens, with a stop in Rome. His objective was to arrest Grand Marshal Vicente Vargas and his entire crew. Akiko Miura, who’s here today, was part of that crew. A stewardess, specifically.”

He gestured towards Akiko, who bowed to the assembled executives.

“Right now, we don’t know if the arrest was successful. I doubt Lancaster will volunteer that information to us, of all people. What we do know is that his attempt escalated after the Army personnel resisted arrest, putting all of us in danger. My mother wisely secured our escape by citing Article Four of the treaty of Napoli.”

“Article Four?” one of the Administrators asked, a wizened old man named Giannis Angelidou. “Article Four covers…”

“Research operations, we know. It was just a cute bit of last-minute statecraft to put pressure on Lancaster, and it worked. None of our personnel were harmed, so we don’t exactly have much grounds for a lawsuit. Not that I’m eager to get involved in a legal battle, hah. What’s important is that this points to an internal conflict within the Union that we need to be aware of.”

“Yeah, don’t want our neighbor’s house to burn down and take ours with it,” Cassandra remarked.

“My sister is right. If the Union is destabilized, we have not only the long-term threat of that chaos spilling across our borders, affecting our trade routes, and so on, but also the possibility that anybody we send to the Strategic Technologies Conference will be at risk. After all, Lancaster has shown that he doesn’t much care about collateral damage.”

“Are you recommending we pull out of the conference?” another Administrator asked.

“I wouldn’t say that. It’s up to my mother, of course, but I’d personally say we should go, if only to get more eyes on Union politics. My sister will make sure we’re safe.” Elias smiled at Cassandra.

“For sure. I’m definitely going to do another look over my security plans for Rome,” Cassandra replied. “Just off the top of my head, the rooms on the eighteenth floor and up of our hotel have a direct view of the Grand Balcony. I can pull some strings and rent out an entire floor; use it as a command center. I’ll also post sniper teams there to provide overwatch in case another fight breaks out.”

“Do you intend to inform the Union of these changes?” Shufen asked.

“Well, we kind of have to, don’t we? They’re absolutely going to notice us setting up shop in the hotel, so, as a sign of good faith, it’s probably best that we tell them we’re bolstering our security. Just not the specific details. They’ll understand.”

“Good. Let me know once you have a new draft of the security plan and we’ll go over it.”

“Will do,” Cassandra sighed. She was certain that her mother would have all sorts of suggestions, but, frustratingly, her advice usually ended up being solid, and she wasn’t about to let her pride endanger the company.

“For my part, I’ve already started making arrangements for a meeting with a Skywatch representative to make absolutely clear that we had no involvement in whatever Vargas was scheming,” Shufen added. “Most likely, that will happen during the conference itself.”

“And if they don’t accept that?” Angelidou asked.

“Then all of our lives become a lot more difficult.”

“Hmph. You must be *very* confident that they’ll take you at your word, given that you are openly harboring a fugitive. Unless you intend to extradite her when the Union inevitably demands it.” The elderly administrator pointed an accusatory finger at Akiko.

“That kind of matter is my job, and I don’t like to break promises,” Elias said.

Shufen raised her hand to silence her son. “The girl is an asset, albeit a small one. She has an amicable relationship with several army personnel who were implicated in the conspiracy. If we ever need to make contact with them, she’ll be able to aid us.”

“And, in so doing, tie ourselves to that same conspiracy?” Representative Baros said.

“I said *if*. We have no way of knowing how things in the Union will turn out. You’ll forgive me for hedging my bets.”

“On the topic of assets, there’s something else I think you all should be aware of,” Cassandra said.

“That letter from Xiang?” Elias asked.

“The very same.”

Cassandra took the folded-up letter from her pocket and opened it back up, reading the text exactly as Xiang had written it, except for the introduction. They didn’t need to hear that part. When she finished, she tossed the paper onto the table in front of her.

For a moment, nobody spoke up. Then Shufen leaned forward.

“So, you believe that ‘friend’ of his may be involved in this conflict?” she asked.

“It’s a possibility we can’t ignore.”

“We *also* can’t ignore the possibility that the entire story is a fabrication designed to rouse your sympathies. This boy may have committed a legitimate crime.”

“In which case, we’ll send him back and buy ourselves some good will from the Union. All I ask is that, when he arrives, we hear what he has to say, alright? The fact that he’s *specifically* fleeing from the Skywatch, right after we see Lancaster trying to prune his country’s own ranks, seems too perfect to be coincidental.”

Shufen pursed her lips and sighed. “Very well, we’ll hear the child out. I’ll warn you right now, though – I’ve no intention of letting you turn the Cloud Garden into a stable for your collection of strays.” She glanced sideways at Akiko.

“I’ll take in whoever I need to if I think Aleph Null can use them.” Cassandra said, staring directly at her mother.

“So you say. I simply hope they actually will be useful, and you aren’t letting any…personal biases affect your judgment.”

Akiko coughed. “I’ll do whatever I can to make myself useful to you,” she declared resolutely. “I may have been a stewardess when we met, but, like I told Cassandra, I have a bachelor’s degree in artificial intelligence, and apprenticed under Marcus Fairchild at the Defense Administration during my senior year. Hell, if you call up McGill, they’ll give you my credentials.”

“We’ll find you a job where you can start earning your keep,” Shufen replied. “That, however, is beyond the purview of this meeting, so, for now, you’ll act as my daughter’s retainer and assist her with whatever tasks she asks of you. I trust that isn’t too much?” Shufen asked.

“Not at all. Basically what I did back on the *Kolyma,* anyway.”

“Good. Then that leaves us with one last question. Cassandra, the letter mentioned that this fugitive would be headed to where you and Xiang first met. I have an inkling as to where that might be, but I’d like you to confirm it for me.”

“The Samekh Wing reconnaissance outpost in the Roman outskirts,” Cassandra immediately answered.

“That’s what I thought. You kids were both doing a ride-along with some of our patrolmen, if my memory is correct?”

“We were. You wanted us to watch that affair with Marinetti and get a sense of what our jobs would be like when we grew up.”

“Ironic, given that our work ended up having Marinetti extradited to the Union.”

“Yeah, ‘cause he was guilty as sh - well, they proved he was guilty. I’ll run a background check on this new ‘friend,’ and, if it turns out he’s a bad guy, we’ll send him back. Easy.”

Shufen frowned. “Very well,” she said.

“Do we have any estimates on when this fugitive will actually arrive at the outpost?” Representative Baros asked.

“The letter said he’s walking. I checked some numbers online while Akiko and I were out today and it’s looking like a four or five-day trip from Tuscany to Rome, including sleep and such.

“Then there’s a good chance he arrives during the conference,” Angelidou observed.

“If he does, that’s even better for us. All eyes will be on the Tower, meaning less chance of resistance in the outskirts. I’ll relay this message to the security personnel there so they can be on the lookout, and that should be that.” Cassandra snapped her fingers to emphasize her point.

The board members looked at each other, then back at Cassandra. Representative Baros was the first to nod, and the others gradually followed suit, with Angelidou being the last.

“Since everyone is in favor, it seems like we have some action items, at least. The Security Chief and I will draft a new security plan for the conference, and Samekh Wing will prepare to receive the fugitive from Tuscany. Cassandra, Elias, and Akiko, you all are dismissed. I have some other matters I need to discuss with the Board.”

“I’m glad I could be of service,” Elias said, bowing his way out of the room. The women also bid a respectful farewell to the Board and followed him away.

In the hallway outside, opposite the boardroom, was a window so large that a small aircraft could have flown through it into the building’s central lightwell. A lounge had been set up at the foot of this glass portal, and it was in this lounge that the trio reconvened.

“Rescuing a political prisoner amidst internecine strife. Things are finally getting exciting, eh?” Elias said, smiling like a boy playing his favorite part of a game.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Cassandra replied, walking up to the window and craning her neck to look at the sky. “Chances are, it’ll be a simple affair. Besides, neither you nor I will be on-site when this runaway finally shows himself.”

“Yes, Samekh will get to have all the fun. Pity.”

“And here I thought you enjoyed schmoozing with politicians.”

“Um, question,” Akiko interrupted, raising her hand politely.

“Go ahead, Miss Akiko.”

“What exactly *is* Samekh Wing? I mean, I can gather it’s some kind of military unit, but what’s it actually do?”

“The wings are joint task forces composed of Aleph Null security forces and the Athenian military. Each one is designated with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, keeping with the company’s name.” Cassandra explained.

Akiko still looked confused. “Cool, but, uh, why Hebrew letters, if you don’t mind me asking? Like, you’d think a company in Athens would use Greek lettering.”

“Well, we weren’t *founded* in Greece, but, to answer your question, I’m told it’s about mathematics. Aleph Null refers to the size of the smallest infinite set of numbers, because apparently some infinities are bigger than others. Don’t ask me why; there’s a reason I didn’t go into the science side of things. Point is, our founder invoked it to represent the set of ideal futures - still infinite in scope, but made as small as possible once our work has ‘severed those threads of fate we find undesirable,’ or something like that. If you want his motto verbatim, read the company handbook.”

“Okay, sure, but what kind of ‘ideal futures’ was he looking for?”

“Unfortunately, he neglected to elaborate on that topic before Headquarters went missing somewhere in eastern Asia. Hmph. Figures that we’d be the ones having to do the philosophical heavy lifting.”

“I’m sorry, you said it *went missing*?”

“To demonstrate a spirit of international cooperation, Aleph Null didn’t build a headquarters in any particular country,” Elias said. “Instead, it operated out of an airship that moved wherever it was needed, delegating tasks to branch facilities like ours. There were stories that it even had a stardrive, the only functional prototype Madelyn-Rash ever made.”

Akiko laughed. “So what I’m hearing is that there’s good chance they just fucked off to space when everything started falling apart, and left us mortals to rot,” she remarked.

“Yeah, only if you believe Madelyn-Rash actually built a functional stardrive, which is *very* unlikely, to say the least,” Cassandra said. “The rumors are just, well, you know. Rumors.”

“For sure. But you gotta admit it’s fun to think about.”

“I won’t disagree with you there.”

Akiko walked up next to Cassandra and joined her in looking at the sky, which was beginning to turn to dusk. “When I was a kid, I wanted to go to space,” she said, sighing. “But then I learned that pretty much all space stations are run by robots, not like the old days, so I went into AI research to try and at least *touch* the stars that way.”

“Hey, who knows? They need human technicians up there every so often. There’s still a chance.” Elias gave her a cheerful bump with his elbow.

“I’m sure my younger self would be over the moon to hear you say that,” Akiko replied.

Sensing unease, Cassandra changed the subject. “The sun’s gonna be setting soon,” she said. “Since we have clear skies tonight, what do you say we go to the garden and watch the sunset from there?”

That put a smile on Akiko’s face. “I think that sounds wonderful,” she replied.

“Well, I’ll leave you ladies to it, then,” Elias said, giving them a farewell wave. He straightened his tie and sauntered off, his footsteps on the tile floor echoing throughout the empty hall.

\* \* \*

The Cloud Garden’s arboretum was filled to the brim with trees, between which wove stone paths and beds of exotic flowers, all kept healthy by a robust climate control system. A few researchers were still hard at work collecting samples from the latest batch of crossbred flora, so Cassandra and Akiko wouldn’t be alone, but that was fine.

Akiko sat down on a bench facing the sea to the west. Just like she had onboard the monorail, Cassandra preferred to stand.

“The water’s real pretty,” Akiko said, watching the Saronic Gulf glimmer beneath the setting sun.

“Sure is. On clear evenings like this I sometimes come up here to read until night falls, and sometimes even after that,” Cassandra replied. “Just basking in the ambiance, taking in the sweet scent of the flowers, and all that. Our scientists cultivated a lot of extinct or endangered species, thanks to the Global Seed Vault up in Norway, although not all of them are kept here, of course. This place is mostly decorative. An amenity for those of us privileged enough to live in the Cloud Garden.”

“Guess I should count my lucky stars that includes me, now, too.”

A cocktail of violet and carmine filled the sky. They waited in silence after that, simply enjoying each other’s presence as they watched the sun sink close and closer towards the horizon, and finally disappear.

## Chapter 3 – J’Accuse

Aleph Null’s preparations for the Strategic Technologies Conference were proceeding apace. As they had agreed, Shufen and Cassandra produced a revised security plan that largely matched the Security Chief’s proposal during the meeting. The most significant addition was that their team would now travel to Athens via the company’s one and only airship, the ANS *Peregrine*, which could carry with it a full complement of troops and was heavily armed itself. There was some concern that the Union would view such a move as a provocation, but Shufen and Cassandra both agreed that Athens’ military strength was so much lower than their neighbor’s that they could not possibly be viewed as a threat.

Their delegation at the conference would consist of the usual suspects. Shufen and Elias would be the ones to actually enter Unity Tower, the capitol building of the Union, while Cassandra would oversee their security team from her nest in the adjacent hotel. Now appointed as her retainer, Akiko would also be there to help out. Cassandra had assured her that their work would mostly be of the “hurry up and wait” variety, and she should bring a book to amuse herself, so Akiko had selected a random science fiction novel from her host’s bookshelf.

Before the main event began, however, there was the business in the outskirts to take care of. The staff from Samekh Wing were holed up in a dilapidated warehouse deep inside an abandoned industrial district. It rarely saw any form of foot traffic, and for good reason. Ivy crept up the crumbling brick walls, trash and debris littered pothole-ridden streets, and unknown chemicals pooled around burst pipes. The smell alone could have kept an army at bay.

Cassandra went alone, driving a worn-out old van that could have featured on a true crime documentary. Its exhaust pipe spat out smoke as she pulled up to the warehouse and hit the breaks, bringing the vehicle to an abrupt stop, after which she hopped out and waved her hand about to try and usher away some of the dust. The sulfurous odor made her grimace. Those who worked at this facility were brave for putting up with such conditions, she thought.

Her contact at the warehouse was another long-time friend of hers, a security officer named Eirene Katraki. Although she was Cassandra’s senior in years, she was her junior in rank, which, thankfully, did not seem to bother her much. After Eirene volunteered to fill an open position there in the Roman outskirts, the two had corresponded only infrequently, and Cassandra was eager to catch up.

One of the loading bay doors began to slide up, revealing a small contingent of security personnel. Eirene was, naturally, at the front, her attire in a characteristic state of disrepair, to the point that she had cast aside the jacket entirely and wore only a tattered tank top alongside the company-issued cargo pants. Her bronze skin bore scars and tattoos both, and Cassandra could have sworn that several new marks in both categories had been added since last they met. Even her otherwise unassuming visage was adorned with a bandage across the nose that seemed very fresh. It was an open secret that Aleph Null’s security forces maintained the old tradition of recruiting from local gangs to bolster their numbers, and Eirene’s rough appearance was evidence of this.

“Cass! Wow, it’s been far, *far* too long since I saw my favorite lady in the flesh,” Eirene said, hopping down from the loading bay while her staff stood back. “How’s life been treating you? I heard that *malakas* Lancaster gave you some grief on the trip back from Montreal.”

“Life’s been treating me fine, thanks. The incident with the Skywatch was a real headache, but we were never in any real danger.” Cassandra replied.

Eirene snapped her fingers and pointed at her friend with a sly wink. “I knew you’d handle anything they threw your way. Good show,” she said. “What about ol’ Eli? Is he holding up alright?”

“Oh, yeah, he’s doing quite well for himself. I think he’d rather be here dealing with Xiang’s fugitive friend, but he’s needed in the city to prepare for the conference. Frankly, so am I, so we’d best make this briefing quick.”

“Splendid! Glad to hear your dear brother’s life is looking up, too. Shame you can’t stick around, though, cause I’d really love to treat you to a meal. We’ve got the latest and greatest in MREs for your dining pleasure if you ever want to drop by again.”

“Now *that* is a tempting offer. I just might have to take you up on that once this mess is over,” Cassandra laughed.

“I’ll make sure to have the kettle ready to go when that happens. And, by ‘the kettle,’ I mean the FRH, but that’s basically the same thing, yeah? Anyway, please, come in, come in. We’ll, uh, talk more inside.” Eirene patted Cassandra on the back and beckoned for her to follow her back into the warehouse. Cassandra obliged.

Once the loading bay door was sealed back up, Eirene took Cassandra into what used to be the manager’s office of the warehouse and lay back in the patched-up armchair, throwing her legs up on the desk. “So, what’s this hot gossip that’s so important you had to tell me in person?” she asked, cocking her head inquisitively.

Knowing full well that her mother would have chastised her for doing so, Cassandra also slouched back in her chair, echoing Eirene’s air of relaxation. “It’s actually pretty simple. Almost inconveniently so,” she began. “At some point in the next few days, while the Union is distracted with the conference, a young man will arrive at this facility. I don’t know his name or what he looks like, but it’s not like anybody else is going to come wandering by, so it should be obvious it’s him. If you ask this guy who sent him, he’ll tell you he was sent by a man named Sun Xiang.”

“Sun Xiang, got it. Anything else I should know?”

“There’s a chance that Union forces will be in pursuit. If they show up asking questions, you know what to do.”

“Tie them up, drive them out to the harbor, and toss them in with concrete shoes?”

“I mean, you could do that, but I think my mother would be happier if we didn’t cause a diplomatic incident.”

“Aw, she’s no fun,” Eirene sulked.

“Yeah, tell me about it. Jokes aside, chances are that they won’t bother you if you tell them to take it up with our embassy instead. If they do decide to force the issue…well, I trust in your judgment.”

“We’ll get this kid safe to Athens, don’t you worry. Even if I have to give my life to do it.”

“Wow, a little morbid, don’t you think?”

Eirene shrugged. “Eh, kinda. Like you said, probably gonna be an easy job. But, just in case it isn’t, won't you stay here a bit longer to share my last meal with me?” She gave her an exaggerated, cheery smile.

“Rene, this is a simple job. You’re not dying any time soon. Once we rescue Xiang’s friend and the conference is over, you can come over to the Cloud Garden for dinner. Eli would love to see you again, and you can meet the gal we rescued from the Kolyma. She’s really nice, so I’m sure you two will get along great.”

“Fine. I’ll hold you to that, you know!” Eirene said with a smile that failed to hide her disappointment.

“I wouldn’t dare disappoint.”

\* \* \*

The hotel at which the Athenian delegation would be staying was a welcome change from the dreary conditions of Samekh Wing’s warehouse. Diplomats and corporate executives visiting Rome were accommodated there, and so it was made appropriately luxurious. Aleph Null had paid a pretty penny to reserve an entire floor for their ‘command center,’ but Cassandra believed that it was worth it to ensure there were no disruptions from the other guests.

Leaving the piece of refuse she called a car in the hands of the valet, she took the elevator to the thirtieth floor of the hotel. From there, the security team would be able to clearly see the Grand Balcony, the glass-enclosed overhang on which the main event would be held.

Cassandra swiped her keycard at the door to suite 3010 and headed in. Immediately inside, Akiko and a few other officers were busy setting up equipment and sweeping the area for bugs, while that room’s sniper team stood nearby, discussing their plan of attack should the worst come to pass. Before talking to anyone, she immediately made a detour to the washroom, where she washed her hands - once again in triplicate - and moistened her face with a washcloth in an effort to clean herself of the outskirts’ impurity. Once she was satisfied that her exposed skin was no longer tainted, Cassandra returned to the others.

“Chief Hao, it’s good to see you,” one of the officers stepped away from his work to say to her.

“Likewise. What’s the status of the command center?”

“We’re in the middle of sweeping for surveillance devices now, ma’am.”

“Have you found any?”

“None so far, no.”

“Alright, keep at it. Renting this place won’t have gone unnoticed, so the Union had ample time to bug the rooms. If we can, we should check the floors immediately above and below, too; as thoroughly as you can manage without upsetting the hotel. I asked for clearance to do a full search when I spoke with management but got stonewalled.” Cassandra scowled at the memory.

“Understood. I’ll pass that order on to the men,” the officer said with a firm nod.

“Thank you. What about the cameras and sentries?”

“We have access to the hotel’s CCTV system, so you’ll be able to monitor all the hallways on this floor, plus the stairwell. Private rooms are obviously a no-go, but we have guards in them, too. Two guys and a sniper team in each room facing the Tower, just like you wanted.”

“Probably more than we need, but the extra manpower will come in handy if the Skywatch makes a move against the army at this conference.”

The officer looked uneasy. “Ma’am, if I can speak freely?” he asked.

“Of course,” Cassandra said.

“I worry that the sheer size of our force here will prove…cumbersome, in the event that we have to exfiltrate the Director and her entourage. There’s something to be said for a leaner fighting force in such an event.”

“You’re not wrong, but our men in the tower are the only ones who’ll be handling exfiltration if things go south. Well, them and the sniper teams. I wanted a big contingent of guards here just to keep the place secure from Union spies, since there’s a good chance we’re in Lancaster’s bad books after the *Koylma* incident.”

“He did say we weren’t on his list, though,” Akiko chimed in, having finally finished the task she had been working on.

“He did, but he still tried to detain us at first. On the off chance that he considers us guilty by association, there’s no need to let his goons listen in on us,” Cassandra replied.

The security officer nodded. “If that’s what you think, then I won’t complain any further. This is your party, after all. Unless you need me for anything else, I’ll get back to work, let you two ladies catch up.”

“Thank you. Dismissed.”

The officer saluted and rejoined his comrades in preparing the room, leaving Cassandra alone with Akiko.

“I see they’ve been putting you to work,” Cassandra noted.

“I volunteered. Security ain’t anything I’d ever claim to be an expert on, but it would have been super awkward to just sit around reading while they worked, so I asked if there’s any, like, simple labor I could help with. Ended up helping them set up the screens to watch the security feed and the conference livestream.” Akiko shrugged.

“Good, I’m glad you’re settling in.”

Cassandra continued into the room, and Akiko dutifully followed her. Next to the window, they stopped and looked out together towards Unity Tower. Though it was narrower than the Cloud Garden, it was quite a bit taller, and its distinctive black exterior accented with flags and imposing statues exuded an aura of authority.

“So, your mom’s in there, huh?” Akiko asked

“Mm-hmm. The Prime Minister’s speech should start in…” Cassandra checked the grandfather clock on the adjacent wall. “...two hours. Two hours and twenty minutes, I guess. If either Lancaster or Vargas makes a move, chances are it’ll be either then, or at the closing ceremony two days from now, since they’ll both have an excuse to bring a lot of troops into the Tower. Doesn’t mean we can just relax in the meantime, though.”

“Hey, you were the one who told me to bring a book,” Akiko reminded her.

“That is true. I’m sure I’ll find some way for you to earn your keep, though.”

“I’d appreciate it if you did. Even if it’s just, like, going on a run to get you a pizza, or something. Anything to keep me from climbing the walls.”

Cassandra laughed. “If these next few days are so boring that the only thing I can find for you to do is fetching a pizza, then I’ll consider myself blessed,” she said.

**[todo: Rewrite this entire scene so Cassandra is at the conference and doesn’t need this annoying radio back-and-forth. She sees the explosion first-hand, panics over Akiko’s well-being, and witnesses Lancaster’s accusations against Aleph Null while being held at gunpoint. Afterwards, her mother is quietly enraged and declares that their next step is to meet with Jackson, whom Eirene confirms has made it to the warehouse.]**

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“Daleth Overwatch, this is Daleth one-two. Radio check, over,” Elias’ bodyguard said, his voice leaping from his mouthpiece to Cassandra’s headset over a background of classical music.

“Daleth one-two, this is Daleth Overwatch, I read you loud and clear, over,” Cassandra replied.

“The video feed should be up and running soon,” Elias himself chimed in. “You’ll be able to see everything as if you were here yourself. Ah, shame you can’t have any of this food, though. It’s really quite excellent. Over.” As he spoke, Elias took a sip of wine from the glass he was carrying and let out a satisfied sigh.

“Well, you can always bring some back for me. Whatever you think is best, I have faith in your taste. Over.”

“Haha, copy that, Daleth Overwatch. Out.”

Cassandra leaned back in front of her screen and grabbed a slice of pizza margherita from the takeout box next to her. It was actually quite good, she thought, so she wasn’t too jealous of her brother and mother.

Moments later, one of the dark monitors in front of her flashed into life. On the screen, she could see a wide view of the grand balcony and all the assembled guests, who were sitting on folding chairs. That, at least, was one thing she had over Elias at the moment - her own selection of furniture was far more comfortable. A podium had been set up so that the speakers would face the audience with the city at their backs, and three enormous screens had been erected to project any visual aids, with the unfortunate side effect of obscuring her snipers’ view of the event.

Elias, meanwhile, continued to help himself to the buffet. He stacked his paper plate with warm bread rolls, steamed and salted vegetables and a generous serving of noodles lathered in aioli sauce. It wasn’t a particularly fancy meal, but it had been prepared with care.

While he was on the way back to the Hao Family’s table, he was hailed by a handsome older gentleman accompanied by a petite, nervous-looking woman, whom he would have wagered was a few years his junior.

“Excuse me,” the man began in a formal tone, “are you the ambassador from Athens?”

“I certainly am,” Elias replied.

“Perfect. I spoke with your mother not long ago, and she gave me your description, though I doubt I would have needed it. You really are her spitting image.”

Elias smiled. “I’m sure it helps that there are few other men of Chinese descent at this particular soirée.”

“Then you and I have something in common. I have seen no other Swiss in attendance tonight, my companion excluded.”

The young woman gave Elias a nervous wave.

“Ah, you must be the delegation from Geneva. I heard tell of your alliance with the Union but didn’t expect them to extend an invitation to such a fresh partner! Pleased to make your acquaintance, both of you.”

“We argued fiercely to secure our spot at this event. Allow me to introduce myself properly. My name is Nathaniel Bergstrom, deputy mayor of Geneva,” the man said, shaking Elias’ hand stiffly.

The young woman did not extend a hand to him, merely electing to nod in his general direction. “And my name is Charlotte Aucoin,” she said in an awkward, stilted manner. “I am a junior officer of the technology regulation task force…you may know it better as the Inquisition. Many like to call us that, but I promise you, we are not so harsh.”

“Very prestigious,” Elias said, although it was not lost on him that both were subordinates to other, more powerful members of their respective organizations. Perhaps Geneva too suspected a degree of danger at the conference and had elected not to send the highest echelons of its leadership, much like the mayor of Athens had also remained at home.

“Have you heard anything about what the Union intends to present at this first panel?” Nathaniel asked.

Elias shook his head.

“Pity. Neither have I. They must want to keep it tightly under wraps. And yet, this conference, while not open to the public, is hardly secure itself, what with it being streamed live to those who could not attend in person. Anything they announce will be known to all the world’s leaders by tomorrow morning, so why the secrecy now?”

“A flair for the dramatic, perhaps?” Elias suggested. “You wouldn’t ask a movie director why they don’t tell us the ending before opening night.”

“That’s a fair point.” Nathaniel turned around to look out over the balcony, beyond which the Athenians’ hotel could be seen, a distant silhouette against the evening sky.

“Your delegation is staying at the Hotel Augustus, yes?” the deputy mayor continued.

“We are. You seem to know a lot about us.”

Nathaniel laughed. “Hardly. I was talking with your mother before, remember? She mentioned it. I’ve heard that hotel is quite luxurious; sadly, our budget was too tight for us to join you there. Charlotte and I are staying in a rather basic establishment several miles south of here. It’s a far cry from our accommodations in Geneva.”

“Well, if I’m ever in Geneva, I’ll have to see that for myself. Given that we now have the Union as a mutual ally, I’m sure there will be cause for me to travel there sooner or later.”

“We would be happy to host you in such a case,” Charlotte replied.

Meanwhile, in the shadow of one of the projector screens, Director Hao Shufen and Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster met face-to-face for the second time that week.

“Lady Hao, I’m glad you could attend,” the military man said, bowing respectfully. “You have my deepest apologies for that mess aboard the *Kolyma*. It was my mistake for letting things get out of hand.”

“Apology accepted, Grand Admiral,” Shufen replied in an icy tone.

“You can rest assured that the treasonous officers and their staff won’t cause any more trouble. I hope that our collaboration will continue for the benefit of all mankind.”

“As long as the terms of our treaty are upheld, it will. If I may ask, though - what fate befell Vargas and his crew?”

“The survivors have been detained and are undergoing questioning as we speak. The Skywatch also has possession of the *Kolyma* itself, along with all of its computer data, passenger logs, security camera footage. Anyone with even the loosest tie to that conspiracy will be dealt with shortly, and you can rest easy knowing the skies are safe.”

“Good. I have little patience for those who threaten me or the people under my protection,” Shufen replied. “However, I still find myself uncertain as to what their crime actually was.”

“That information is, I’m afraid, quite classified. I can tell you that they stole sensitive data with the intent to use it against the Union, but that’s all.”

“I see. As long as this little spat of yours doesn’t escalate to the point my company or my country has to get involved, you’re free to keep your secrets.”

“Naturally, if anything comes up that may impact Aleph Null’s operations, you have my word that you’ll be the first to know.”

“That would be appreciated. We do have some formal requests to make, but those can wait until our actual meeting.”

“Of course,” Lancaster said, taking a sip of the deep red wine in his own glass. “In the meantime, I hope you enjoy the conference. We have some exciting news to share with the scientific community.”

Shufen didn’t respond verbally, but raised her glass towards Lancaster. They clinked them together and drank before going to look for their seats as the conference began.

\* \* \*

As soon as the clock struck eight, the music playing throughout the Grand Balcony fell silent, its sudden absence urging the crowd to do the same. Once they had done so, an unassuming old man in a navy blue suit made his way up to the podium, using an engraved cane to support his walk, and began to speak.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Union and its allies,” he began. “Thank you all for honoring us with your presence. While our numbers are thinner than they ought to be, due to the recent incident, it nonetheless gladdens me to welcome so many bright minds to the Strategic Technologies conference. It gladdens me even more so to introduce our keynote speakers for the night: Marcus Fairchild, overseer of the Science, Transportation, and Defense Administrations; and Prime Minister Magnus Albani!”

There was an eruption of applause as the two distinguished gentlemen walked up on stage. Marcus Fairchild was clearly the older of the two, with wrinkled, pale skin, a thinning hairline, and a neatly trimmed beard. Magnus Albani, by contrast, was fairly young for a world leader, just on the cusp of middle age. He was tall and thin and clean-shaven, with a pair of golden spectacles set upon his pointy nose.

Listening in from her nest in the hotel, Cassandra frowned. The introductory speaker had introduced Marcus Fairchild as the overseer of three separate administrations, an unprecedented concentration of power that must have been a recent development. Those from Aleph Null had treated with him before, but only as the overseer of the Defense Administration. Now, he was able to dictate what technologies the Union pursued, how its weapons were used, and how its people could travel. He was an especially dangerous cog in the machine, one by which far too many others were driven. It was an ill omen for the stability of such a superpower.

Once the applause died down, Magnus stepped forward and began to speak in a raspy Italian accent. “No doubt you are all aware of the incident aboard the *Kolyma*.” he began. “I am as troubled as you are to learn of such treason within our highest echelons, but I assure you that the situation is entirely under control. I’d like to begin our presentation today by commending Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster for his decisive response to the conspiracy, and by congratulating my friend Marcus Fairchild for his appointment to the offices left vacant by two of the guilty parties.”

It was hard for Cassandra to tell through the live feed, as high-quality as it was, but she could have sworn that Marcus looked less than pleased about the news. That made two of them, she supposed.

“Thank you all for your appreciation and understanding,” Magnus continued after the crowd finished a second round of applause. “Now, Mr. Fairchild, why don’t you tell all these kind ladies and gentlemen what we have for them tonight? I’m sure they’re all excited to hear what you’ve been working on for so long.”

Marcus nodded and stepped up to the podium, right as Magnus stepped back. “Time to begin the main event,” he said with an almost regretful smile, already sure that his peers would be suitably impressed. “Now, I assume you are all familiar with the Rho AI, and the Nicaea Agreement that followed its birth?”

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

Marcus making a reference to Rho was unsurprising. Developed not long before the Aleph Null was founded, it had been the first AI sufficiently self-aware for some to argue that it deserved human rights, although the United Nations ultimately declined to extend them. The fall of the old world saw all of the factories able to produce Rho’s hardware destroyed or repurposed, but some few copies of the AI itself were rumored to remain ‘alive.’ As far as Cassandra knew, none of these could be found within the Union.

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

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

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

“Work that you’ve now completed, I assume?” said one of the guests in the front row, a portly young man from southern France, judging by his accent.

“Completed? No, our work will never stop, but we have made a breakthrough. The Rho technology is well-documented, and we could reproduce it, but the hardware it requires is inefficient, requiring an enormous computer and a lot of power. Thinking we could do better, we turned to the Holy Spirits, which are far more advanced.”

“Are?” asked the old man from Geneva to whom Elias had spoken earlier.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you my daughter, Lena Fairchild.”

The guests nodded in acknowledgement, a low murmur filling the room as they realized who – and what – she was. Lena bore no resemblance to her father. Brown skin rather than pale, black hair instead of blonde, and the most piercing eyes anyone in attendance had ever seen. This discrepancy could have been the result of adoption, but, in the current context, could only have meant one thing.

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

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

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

Cassandra’s eyes widened.

“Did you know about this?” Elias whispered to her through his microphone.

“Not in the slightest,” Cassandra replied. “Our work with the D.A. was about developing a new spacecraft to supply orbital installations. However, I wonder…Akiko, you said you worked under Marcus Fairchild for a year. Did these ‘Mourners’ of his ever come up?”

Akiko finished chewing a mouthful of pizza and swallowed it. “Hm? Oh, not directly, I don’t think,” she said once her mouth was clear. “That kind of thing would have been *way* above my pay grade, I’m pretty sure. But we did study these “Holy Spirits” that he’s talking about, so it’s totally possible that some of my research did get involved. I could give you a whole write-up on their specifications if you wanted.”

“I think my mother would appreciate that, thanks.”

“Yeah, sure thing. I’ll take care of it when we get back”

Back on the Grand Balcony, a stern-looking man in a Trade and Commerce administration uniform leaned into his microphone. “That’s all well and good,” he said, scanning Lena with a critical eye, “but what exactly is the point? This seems like a lot of expense for little practical benefit.” Listening in, Cassandra was wondering the exact same thing.

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

Marcus laughed. “For a time, we were excited by the idea of digitized human consciousness, but it was not to be. No matter how we approached the problem, we were unable to answer the obvious question: How you know it’s really you? Until we can bridge that gap, we’re at a bit of an impasse.”

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

“One day, perhaps. However, that is unimportant.. No, the main advantage of our Mourners is that they can be mass-produced at low cost, making them…viable substitutes for a human military force.” There seemed a hint of disgust in his voice, Cassandra thought.

“Unmanned drones have been used for centuries, but, unlike those robots, Mourners can actually hold territory like regular infantry,” Magnus said, joining his co-presenter at the podium. “A single AI ‘program’ has enough processing power to remotely control an entire squad of bodies like Lena’s, without any risk to itself, assuming that its central processing unit stays off the field. Though the Nicaea Agreement does not require it, we intend to only utilize willing volunteers, enforce strict and regular psychological evaluations, and afford all Mourners full constitutional rights, lest you worry about provoking some sort of robot uprising.”

“You needn’t worry about our loyalty any more than one of your human soldiers,” Lena added. Her voice was surprisingly melodious, without a single hint as to its synthetic nature.

From his table, Elias could see his new acquaintances from Geneva eyeing Lena with suspicion. “That may be so,” the woman named Charlotte said, “but Lancaster just stated that one Mourner can control multiple bodies. Does that not increase the damage a single one of you can do if it does go rogue?”

“You’re not wrong, especially since Mourners aren’t limited to android chassis like my own. They can control all kinds of vehicles as well, as long as we install the proper interface, but I don’t need to remind you that we’ve dealt with mutinous airship crews before. You haven’t already forgotten the *Kolyma,* have you?”

“I have not. My concern is not about whether you can destroy a rogue artificial intelligence. It is about how much damage will be done before you do.”

“Not to mention, we don’t have the infrastructure to easily build replacements for these airships. There’s a reason we’re still using ancient vessels like the *Kolyma*,” the man from Trade and Commerce said.

“All of that is true of human crews. Ideology can spread like wildfire aboard a ship and turn them mutinous in a heartbeat. The point is, Mourners aren’t any riskier than human soldiers, and the extra manpower will give us a huge advantage against our rivals. To our knowledge, none of them have even come close to matching this technology.”

Charlotte folded her arms. “Perhaps. And yet I would guess the lot of you have more grandiose designs than marching east with an army of plastic people,”

Lancaster nodded. “The obvious next step is to upgrade ASPIS. Right now, it’s controlled by a Rho AI, but maintaining an obsolete system like that is increasingly problematic. Replacing it with a Mourner would help us future-proof the weapon. Only for targeting, mind you. Arming it would still require confirmation from myself and Skywatch orbital command.”

Cassandra had some familiarity with ASPIS thanks to her work with the Defense Administration. The “Automatic Safeguard Protocol with Intelligent Subsystems” was an allegedly defensive superweapon, although its specifications were highly classified. All she and her friends knew was that it involved orbital weapons platforms, and that the weapon had never once been used in battle.

It occurred to her that this may have been the end goal of the Defense Administration when they reached out to Aleph Null’s aerospace division. A modernized space fleet would certainly make it easier to retrofit these satellites. She made a mental note to have her family take them to task on the matter later on.

“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 already a major undertaking, to say nothing of a comprehensive retrofit, and that’s after cost of the Mourners themselves. So, a question for the audience – how would you propose we fund this little project of ours?”

“Well, we’d have to raise taxes,” the portly Frenchman 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, it’s a possibility. However, our citizens might not react favorably towards a tax unless they believe they’ll see some benefit, and the rewards for this project are too long-term for the layperson to grasp. To them, it will look like we’re simply sucking up their hard-earned cash.”

“We might be able to get more support by claiming it goes towards national defense, which isn’t a lie, but we would need to prove that we face sufficient threats to justify it.”

“We’ve been getting hit hard in New England. Perhaps we can use that?” Lancaster asked.

“If you can find evidence linking the American resistance 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 to serve as a casus belli.”

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

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

Cassandra felt herself losing interest. There was still the ever-present threat of violence, and so she could not afford to let herself be inattentive, but the longer the night went on, the less likely that seemed. When the presentation concluded after endless back-and-forth about trade, taxes, and scientific concepts that went well over her head, it seemed like they were in the clear, at least for that night.

And then the Grand Balcony exploded.

“What fresh hell was that?” Akiko shouted, bolting to Cassandra’s side.

“I-I don’t know,” Cassandra stammered, tapping the side of her monitor in disbelief. Immediately afterward, both of them hurried to the window, where they were treated to the sight of an inferno spreading throughout Unity Tower. “Daleth one-two, Daleth four-niner, this is Daleth Overwatch, do you read?” she shouted urgently into her headset. “I repeat, Daleth one-two, Daleth four-niner, this is Daleth Overwatch, do you read?”

“Daleth Overwatch, this is Daleth one-two, copy loud and clear, over.”

Cassandra breathed a sigh of relief. If Elias’ bodyguard was alive, then so was he, most likely, although that still left their mother unaccounted for. “Roger, Daleth one-two, what’s your status?” she asked, beads of sweat dripping from her forehead into her eyes.

“VIP one-two is with us, en route to the primary evac point,” the bodyguard reported. “No sign of VIP four-niner, over.”

“Shit, shit, shit,” Cassandra muttered to herself, doing her best to keep her composure. “Uh, Daleth one-two, proceed as planned, then make your way to the secondary evac point. Daleth Overwatch will rendezvous with you there, then continue to the Samekh Wing outpost. Over.”

“Wilco, Daleth Overwatch. Out.”

“So we’re leaving?” Akiko asked.

“We’re leaving.”

In a haste, Cassandra gathered up the security guards in her nest, and, together, they fled the building, facing no resistance. A horde of emergency vehicles had already accumulated in the boulevard in front of Unity Tower, but, after a brief encounter with law enforcement wherein Cassandra provided proof of their identities, they were allowed to leave and meet Elias at the nearby park, which had been designated as their secondary evacuation point in case of a crisis.

As soon as their eyes met, Elias and Cassandra rushed into each other’s arms. Time stopped while the twins embraced, lit by the streetlight and blazing tower behind them.”

“I’m so glad you’re safe,” Cassandra said, tears still welling in her eyes. “But mother – you really didn’t see any sign of her?”

“She survived the blast. I saw it with my own two eyes. Alas, we were separated in the stampede that followed, so I couldn’t tell you where she is now, nor why she isn’t responding to the radio. Deep breaths, okay, Cassie? Mother wouldn’t want us to panic.”

Cassandra hadn’t even realized she was hyperventilating, but, now that he had pointed it out, she knew he was right. Panic was unbecoming of one in her position, even if it was pure nepotism that got her there. She inhaled deeply, letting the cold night air fill her lungs for one, two, three, four seconds, and then exhaled for even longer. A few more cycles, and, at the very least, it no longer felt like her heart was about to leap out of her chest and splatter all over Elias’ jacket.

“Alright, everyone,” she announced to the group, which now numbered over a dozen men and women. “Like I said, our next stop is Samekh Wing’s warehouse. It’s a few hours from here by foot, the night is dark, and the terrain is hazardous, but it’s the only place we know is safe.”

“Do we even know that?” Akiko asked. “There was that thing with Xiang’s buddy, so we could be walking into a shootout if shit hit the fan while we were gone. Well, it kinda already did, but you know what I mean.”

“Eirene would have informed me of anything like that. Unless some disaster struck that killed everyone there instantly, we can be confident the warehouse is secure.”

Akiko looked back at the burning building and bit her tongue.

“Anyway, that’s enough chit-chat. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover, so let’s get moving,” Cassandra continued. She felt as far from “in control” as she could have possibly been, but knew she needed not to show it. At least, more than she already had. It was hard enough to command respect as a twenty-eight-year-old woman – a girl, many would say – and she didn’t need to look like a crybaby on top of that.

Thankfully, Elias had her back. She didn’t know what she would have done had he not been there.

## Chapter 4 – Prodigal Son

The road leading to the warehouse was shrouded in silence, a tranquility that would have encouraged Cassandra were it not for the Union air destroyer hovering in the skies above.

“Damnation,” she whispered. “You were right, Akiko. That ship up there must be jamming their communications so they couldn’t get a message out.”

“This fellow must have been quite important for the Skywatch to mobilize such a vessel. Seems we have a modern-day Helen of Troy on our hands,” Elias remarked.

“Except I don’t think Lancaster is after our new friend for his beauty, unless I’ve woefully misjudged his character.”

“Should we fall back?” Elias’ bodyguard asked.

Cassandra paused. Her first instinct had been to say no, that they needed to press onward and rescue who they could from the warehouse. However, the more rational part of her knew that such a plan would only put more lives at risk, especially with noncombatants in tow. With this in mind, she ordered them to take shelter in the nearby ruins while she alone made contact, and to return to Rome if they did not hear word after one hour.

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

She finally reached the warehouse and found Eirene alongside six Samekh Wing officers, 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. Eirene stared at her for a second, cogs turning in her mind before she finally lifted a hand and bid Cassandra come closer.

“Hey, Cass, good to see a friend. Not sure why you’re here, though. Thought you and your family would’ve been off to Athens by now,” Eirene said.

“You haven’t heard the news?” Cassandra asked, to which Eirene shook her head. “We were watching the conference like we were supposed to, when a goddamn bomb went off. Not sure who planted it. Everything fell apart after that, and I lost track of Mother, so I figured my best bet was to come here and wait it out.”

Eirene 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.”

“You may have been right that it’s not an easy job, but I’m not letting you give up just yet. What happened, exactly? Spare me no details.”

“Not many details to spare,” Eirene said. “Kid came down from the north, just like you said he would. Practically delirious, but he said the right name, Sun Xiang, so we let him in. Few hours later, some Union troops come after him and start shooting, no questions asked.”

“They didn’t even ask you to hand him over, first?”

“Sure didn’t. We fought back, of course, and repelled the first wave. Guess they realized we weren’t who they thought we were at that point, ‘cause next time, they sent in a guy to talk. Told him he’d have to take it up with our embassy, just like you said, and he agreed, but called in the airship to make sure none of us make a run for it in the meantime.”

“I see,” Cassandra said. “This night just keeps getting worse. Is this all that’s left?”

“Not the only survivors, but the only ones left in the warehouse? 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.” Eirene made an explosive gesture with her hands to emphasize the point. “At least we have something they seem to want, though. They totally could bomb us to bits, but, no, no, they need our guy alive.”

“And to avoid further antagonizing Athens.”

“You seem really confident that they give a shit about what we think.”

“They cared enough to let me and my family go during the *Kolyma* incident.”

“Yeah, yeah, I guess. Anyway, this was, oh, an hour or so ago, so it would’ve happened after the bombing you talked about. Wonder if the two are related.”

“It certainly could be. We know from the Prime Minister’s opening speech that Lancaster has been purging ‘traitors’ within the government. I’d assume the *Kolyma* was the first step of this process, and there’s a good chance this fugitive is one of them, too.”

“And so, when he showed up, the Union thought we were involved.”

Cassandra shrugged. “Can’t see any other reason they’d go for the ‘shoot first, ask questions later’ approach. The bombing, though…”

“Retaliation?”

“That’s what I’d put my money on. If these conspirators really did set off that bomb, then I’m not about to shelter this kid, no matter who’s asking. I won’t put the company in danger by harboring terrorists, especially not ones who attacked my family.”

“Well, if you did want us to go to war on either side of this clusterfuck, you know I’d be behind you every step of the way. I trust you,” Eirene said, beaming far too warmly at Cassandra.

“We’re not going to war,” Cassandra replied with a stern frown. “You and I both know Athens would never survive that.”

“All of us here knew the risks when we signed up, but you’re right, those of us who are psycho enough to live in this dump shouldn’t be deciding policy. Heh.”

“Speaking of people who should be deciding policy, we need to think about figuring out what happened to my mother.”

“What else is there to do?” Eirene said, shrugging. “If she’s alive, she’ll be with the Union. Hell, if she’s dead, she’ll be with the Union. Either way, nothing for us to do except sit pretty and wait for things to calm down over there, then the higher-ups will tell us what the situation is.”

Cassandra sighed and massaged her temples with her right hand, trying to rub away the headache she was rapidly developing. “I know, I know,” she said. “I just don’t like having to ‘sit pretty’ for lord knows how long. Do you know how stressful it is not knowing if my mother is even alive?”

“Nah, I get it, I get it. Hey, rather than bouncing off the walls, why don’t you go check on mister fugitive over in my office? Don’t expect him to be too talkative, though. The guy wasn’t in great shape when he showed up, so we had a medic take a look at him, make sure he wasn’t going to flop over and die. After the doc said he was gonna live, we figured ‘eh y’know, why not let him rest?’ And it seemed like he needed it, ‘cause as far as I know, he’s still sleeping back there.”

“Might as well, but, first, I have about two dozen people in the ruins out there waiting on a message. Since the radio is down, we’ll need another way to let them know it’s safe to come in if they stick to the rubble. If they don’t get word from me, they’ve got orders to head back to Rome.”

“We can use the floodlights. I’ll have one of my guys flash ‘em a message in morse code,” Eirene suggested.

Cassandra pursed her lips and nodded. “Good idea. That would work,” she said.

“Then I’ll get to that while you’re in my office.”

“Be back in just a minute then.” Cassandra paused. “And this guy didn’t say anything about why he was on the run? ‘Cause my theories are just theories; for all I know, we could be harboring, say, a serial killer. Not that I think Xiang would be friends with one.”

Eirene 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 was so eager to get him back.”

“Okay. I’ll go check in on him.”

“Mmhmm, 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.”

Cassandra nodded, and gently stepped into the office where the fugitive lay asleep, which was guarded by two of Eirene’s men. He was a pale, skinny 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. She would have guessed that he was just another innocent bystander guilty only by association, just like Akiko, had it not been for the armed men in pursuit. That part was a little bit different.

“So, did you glean any answers from looking at him?” Eirene asked once she returned.

“What do you think?” Cassandra asked.

“Yeah, I figured not.” Eirene paused and leaned against a support pillar. “Fuck, I’d like a bath,” she said.

“A bit of a non sequitur, but I agree.”

Both of them waited and waited as the rest of the Aleph Null staff trickled into the compound. The atmosphere grew livelier, though still solemn. They were, after all, sharing the room with several dead bodies, lives for which the Union would have to be held accountable. As time went on, Cassandra felt the anxiety in her stomach give way to rage at the criminal negligence - or worse, malice - displayed by their neighbor. This kind of disaster would never have happened under a competent administration.

**[todo: some kind of transition scene here. Also probably cut most of the previous scene cause it sucks.]**

The first, and only good news they received that night came when a small commercial helicopter flew in from the south, landing between rusted cars in the warehouse’s parking lot without so much as a peep from the airship hovering above. It bore Union markings, but from inside emerged none other than Cassandra’s mother, much to the young woman’s relief.

Cassandra did not run out to meet her, not necessarily for want of enthusiasm - though she knew her mother would be less than receptive to sappy displays of emotion - but rather due to an abundance of caution. With tensions high, there was no need to make sudden moves.

“Glad to see you’re well, mother,” she said. Just like how Eirene had greeted her earlier that day, she now looked down upon Shufen and her entourage from atop the loading dock.

“I could say the same of you. The civil guard in Rome informed me that you and Elias left the city immediately after the bombing, but I had no other information. Are either of you injured?”

Cassandra shook her head. “No one’s hurt. I’m sorry we didn’t go back for you.”

“Don’t apologize. You did the right thing. Don’t they still teach schoolchildren not to run back into a burning building?”

“Yes, but…”

“Then you should know you were in the right to leave me behind. Have some confidence in your decisions, girl.”

Despite ostensibly being praised, Cassandra didn’t feel like she’d received a compliment. “Very well, mother. Come on up, we’ll talk inside.”

Shufen stepped up onto the loading bay and followed her daughter indoors. Both Elias and Eirene expressed the same relief as Cassandra that their Director had made it through the ordeal in Rome, and, after that, all four of them left to confer in the privacy of Eirene’s office. Only Akiko remained outside with the guards, with Cassandra’s promise that they would be home before long.

“So, this is Xiang’s friend?” Shufen asked once they were alone, pointing at the young man still slumbering on a bedroll.

“Sure is,” Cassandra replied. “He’s been sleeping a long time, but I don’t really blame him. Seems like he’s really been through the wringer.”

“Unfortunately, his trials and tribulations are not over yet. Nor are ours.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“You shouldn’t. I’ll assume you know nothing about what happened after the bombing and start from the beginning.” Shufen cleared her throat and stood such that she faced the rest of the crowd. “The blast, which Union law enforcement has already determined was caused by an improvised explosive device, set a fire in the grand balcony. The fire department put it out before it spread to the rest of the building, but, unfortunately, Prime Minister Albani perished in the blast, along with, last I heard, at least three other people.

Even Elias’ eyes widened in shock at the news. “Albani…is dead?” he stammered.

“He is. It gets worse.”

There was an uneasy murmur amongst her audience.

“Union security forces performed a search of the entire area, including our rooms at the Hotel Augustus. They claim they found traces of urea nitrate, ferric oxide, and other materials used to make the bomb in room 3007, which was under our control at the time. As such, they now consider us prime suspects in the case.”

“That’s absurd!” Cassandra shouted. “We did a comprehensive search of all the rooms when we arrived. Any traces of those substances we missed would have to have been so small that there’s no *way* the cops could have found them, unless they already knew they were there. This is the most obvious setup in history.”

“For a small mercy, Grand Admiral Lancaster - or, perhaps I should say, acting Prime Minister Lancaster - has not formally accused us of the crime. That’s why I’ve been allowed to meet with you all, and why we will be allowed to return to Athens tomorrow morning. However, I was forced to make…concessions.”

“I *really* don’t like the sound of that,” Eirene said, biting her lip nervously.

“The Union has demanded that Aleph Null submit to an investigation, during which time an ‘investigative detachment’ will be stationed in Athens. They’re also aware that both fugitives have been in contact with us, and have told me that any information leading to their capture will be seen as a sign of good faith on our part.”

“Very subtle,” Eirene snarled. “Lancaster, you piece of shit.”

“That isn’t how I would phrase it, but I can’t dispute your assessment of his character. Regardless of whether he intended things to play out this way, the fact remains that the Union now has a strong foothold in Athens, one which we aren’t in a position to oppose. If we want to retain our sovereignty, we’d best tread very carefully.”

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,” Shufen 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 who planted the bomb, nor can I tell you the full extent of what Lancaster may or may not be planning. But I know who *does* know – my father, Marcus Fairchild.”

“What?” the old woman asked, caught off-guard.

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

“Wait, Fairchild? You’re seriously saying that you’re Marcus Fairchild’s…son?” Eirene asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And who is ‘them?’ The Skywatch?” Cassandra asked.

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

“Your father was a capitalist himself before he joined the Defense Administration, wasn’t he?” Elias mused.

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

“Uh-huh.”

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

“I think you mean *Xiang* planned your escape,” Cassandra said.

“I won’t deny I had help. But he couldn’t have done it without the information I supplied to him from inside.”

“Nor would he have needed to if you hadn’t gotten yourself captured.”

Jackson ignored her comment and continued. “Now, you may be wondering - why did Lancaster feel the need to resort to subterfuge? After all, do he and my father not serve the same Union? The answer lies in a simple difference in opinion. My father, benevolent as he is, wants his technology shared with the world for the benefit of all mankind. Lancaster may claim that his goal is the same, but it’s a lie. Just like everyone else, he wants our Mourners to work for him and him alone, cementing the Union’s dominance over the new world.”

“For the benefit of all mankind,” Shufen said with disgust. “Lancaster said those exact words to me at the conference.”

“It doesn’t surprise me. I doubt the man has had an original thought in his life that didn’t involve violence. But I digress. You all know about ASPIS, yes? The orbital weapons platform? With the world’s nuclear arsenals depleted or in disrepair, such a device would make the Union’s advance unstoppable. If you value your independence, I suggest you help us keep it out of his hands.”

“Hmm, isn’t it already in his hands, though?” Elias asked, his friendly tone veiling his skepticism.

Jackson smirked. “You’d think so, wouldn’t you? The Skywatch may be the only ones with physical access to the ASPIS control center, but they can’t use it. Not with a security system powered by a Rho-model AI who has sworn a vow of pacifism.”

“Ah, so Lancaster is trying to beat this AI with a stronger AI. Interesting.”

“It’s the only way that has a chance of working,” Jackson explained. “Any attempts to physically disconnect the security system will make the whole thing self-destruct. A Mourner, however, could root it out at a software level, which is why he wants our technology so badly. When my father made clear his intentions to share it with the world he and all of his allies were declared traitors.” His face darkened. “You saw what happened next.”

“Yeah, your father got to be the keynote speaker at the Union’s most prestigious technology conference. Why isn’t he, you know, in jail? Or dead?” Cassandra said.

“Need I remind you what I said about my father’s brain, and how Lancaster needs to pick it? As long as I was in captivity, the Skywatch owned him. It’s the only reason he was allowed - forced, really - to keep his office, as well as those of his imprisoned colleagues. Thus, it seems to me like you all have a choice. Door number one: You return me to my dear friend Jacob Lancaster, he uses that leverage over my father to complete ASPIS, and that little ‘investigative detachment’ grows and grows until you realize too late that you’ve been occupied. Door number two: You return me to my father. Your city is still occupied, but Lancaster’s advantage is gone, and you’ve joined this little war of ours on the winning side.”

“If you wanted us to help you, it was a mistake to refer to your affair with Lancaster as a war. That doesn’t make it sound too appealing for us to join, now does it?,” Elias said.

“Oh, come now, are we really getting hung up on semantics? Debate language all you want, but Lancaster’s troops are on their way to your city as we speak. You’re a part of this whether you like it or not.”

**[todo: This line feels a bit out of character for Elias, revise it. Also go back and edit the council scene to make Shufen more hawkish so her actions in this scene make sense]**

Elias paused, gears turning in his head. “Don’t mistake me. I want Lancaster to burn for what he’s done. The man put my family in danger not once, but *twice.* Thrice, if you count his imminent occupation of our homeland. However, I can’t let my personal desires cloud my judgment, so I would leave his punishment in God’s hands while we deal with him at the negotiating table.”

“That’s a mistake. A big damn mistake,” Jackson said, his composure cracking.

Cassandra’s stomach churned as she listened to their conversation. Elias was not, strictly speaking, wrong, but if this Jackson fellow was telling the truth, then both he and Akiko were innocent. His side of the story seemed more believable than Lancaster’s, at least, given the latter’s proven track record of false accusations.

“Not as big a mistake as it would to enter a war with the Union, even a cold one. I’d rather hold him off at the negotiating table,” Elias replied.

“God, how can you be so stubborn?” Jackson interrupted. “You. Are. Already. Involved. You were as soon as you boarded that damn airship. If you really care about your people, then the only, and I mean *only* way to keep them safe is to side with us. Give a tyrant an inch, and he’ll take a mile.”

“Then we won’t give him an inch,” Shufen declared suddenly. All the younger staff in attendance stopped talking and turned to face her.

“I beg your pardon?” Elias asked.

“Despite his poor manners, Jackson is right. We’re already under occupation, or we will be very soon. Complying with his investigation will be a sign of weakness when we need to project strength.”

“Lancaster will tear Athens apart looking for this man if we continue to shelter him!”

Shufen snarled and clenched her fist. “He’s going to tear Athens apart anyway. It’s better for us and our people if he’s too busy fighting Marcus Fairchild to do too much damage. Then we can make him pay for having the *audacity* to try and extort us.”

Cassandra had never seen her mother so angry. Even when they’d fought, Shufen had only ever treated her with quiet disdain, not visible rage.

“Surely you’ll need to at least get approval from the Board,” Elias said.

“I *own* the board,” Shufen declared in response. “Cassandra, Have your men get ready to escort Jackson Fairchild to his father’s headquarters,” Shufen continued. “A small team, low profile. One or two at the most. If I’m not mistaken, it is to the south of here, in Naples?”

Jackson nodded. “It’s a facility called Bright Lighthouse, or just ‘*the* Lighthouse,’ on the Neapolitan coastline,” he confirmed.

Relief and excitement both washed over Cassandra. Despite the boy’s eccentricity, if what he said was true, he could indeed be the “key to their salvation”, as he’d phrased it. Marcus Fairchild would be a powerful ally, and, if he was amenable towards their cause, he could be just what they needed to triumph over this crisis.

The key word, of course, being “if.” There was no guarantee that Marcus would agree to help.

“How can we be sure this isn’t a trap?” Elias asked, giving voice to Cassandra's thoughts. “Considering Lancaster’s clear disposition towards false flag attacks, he could have sent this ‘Jackson Fairchild’ to us to both provoke a conflict with Aleph Null and lure any survivors into an ambush.”

“Like you said, I need only one person to go with me to Naples. Once they’ve confirmed my identity, they can report back, without ever putting your pretty little heads in danger.”

“I can chaperone the kid. I’m just a washed-up security guard wasting away up here in the outskirts, so I’m basically disposable,” Eirene said.

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

“Well, someone’s gotta do it, right? Everyone else here has families or an important job already. It’s just the truth, and, besides, at least it gets me out of this dump.”

“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 Eirene’s volunteering, then I think we at least have a plan to move forward,” Shufen 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, Cassandra and Eirene both knew Shufen was right. This was the company’s best opportunity to recover from such staggering losses, and to not pursue it could doom them all. **[todo: rephrase this]**

“Just be careful, all right?” Cassandra said to Eirene.

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

## Chapter 5 – A Line in the Sand

The first resistance against the Union came from the cloistered halls of Aleph Null’s boardrooms, where Shufen and Elias worked day and night to placate him without revealing their real plans. It was easy enough to satisfy Lancaster’s desire to search their holdings. The only evidence that either of the fugitives had ever been in their care was Akiko’s temporary visitor pass, the records of which were easily destroyed, and there was nothing else in the city that might have tied them to the crime. As for Akiko herself, she had been hidden away in a safehouse underneath the mountain, close enough to be within reach, but far enough to escape Lancaster’s search while he was fed false information. Despite this preparation, all the Athenians knew that they could only stall for so long, and that Lancaster would soon realize that the leads he had been given were bogus. They could only hope that, by the time he did, their alliance with Marcus Fairchild would be in place.

To reach the Defense Administration headquarters in Naples, Eirene and Jackson first fled south on foot. Like Jackson’s first trip from Tuscany to Rome, it would take several days, and so they had brought with them a heavy backpack filled with several MREs each. Each time they ate, Jackson bemoaned Eirene’s reluctance to stop at even a halfway-decent restaurant, and each time he complained, she shut him up by threatening to return him into custody, if he missed real food that much. By the time they crested a hill and saw their destination on the horizon, the boy had mostly ceased his grumbling.

It was well into the evening when they reached the city limits. Just like Rome, Athens, and every other metropolitan center that yet survived, Naples was surrounded by stretches of decaying ruins, where wild animals roamed free and only the boldest or most desperate humans dared to tread.

“Be on your guard. If this place is anything like Rome’s outskirts, we probably won’t run into anyone, but, if we do, they’ll be a real piece of work,” Eirene said. “I don’t know the lay of the land all that well, and I’m guessin’ you never set foot out here, either. Rather chill in your ivory tower all day, yeah?”

“Of course I never did. Why would I sully myself with this…filth? I’ll need a hot bath or five to cleanse myself of the impurity. As will you, for that matter.” Jackson replied.

“That, at least, you’re not wrong about. I hope the baths in your daddy’s place are really damn nice, ‘cause the showers we had back in the outskirts were, uh, unreliable, to say the least. You had maybe five minutes of hot water before it ran out.”

“I’m surprised a company as wealthy as Aleph Null couldn’t furnish you better.”

“It’s not that they couldn’t afford it. Any big construction projects in the outskirts would have drawn attention to ourselves. Sure, the Union knew we were out there, but as long as we kept a low profile, they didn’t give a shit. They keep an eye on us, we keep an eye on them, fair’s fair. If we started hauling in construction equipment, though, they might have an issue with that.”

“Well, you have my respect for putting up with that state of affairs. If it were me, I’d have gone on strike until they at least gave me basic amenities.”

“I guess that’s why you needed me to escort your sorry arse to your father’s house,” Eirene said, not even bothering to look back at Jackson.

Jackson stopped in his tracks. “Hah! Fair enough,” he laughed before picking up his pace to catch up with Eirene.

Without incident, they crossed through the ruins and soon reached Naples proper. While the Neapolitan outskirts were not unlike those Eirene had seen before, the inner city bore no such similarity. Naples had no skyscrapers, nor were its streets busy with traffic. In the twilight years of the old world, hundreds died in the fires of nearby Mount Vesuvius, the survivors leaving behind a charred ghost town as they fled. In the decades since, however, a small fishing community had risen from its desiccated husk, joined ever so often by the odd traveler, and such people preferred to mind their own business. Nobody was likely to take notice of a few strangers blowing in from the north.

According to Jackson, at least.

“Other than the Lighthouse itself, this isn’t a high-security area,” he said as they hopped a short fence leading into the first inhabited district they’d seen that day. “Anyone who sees us will write us off as another pack of roaming vagabonds, come to trade with the civilized world. I suspect you saw plenty of those types yourself, back in Athens. Am I right?”

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

**[todo: mention migrant ships at some point earlier, probably during the introduction of Athens, so this doesn’t come out of nowhere]**

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

“Maybe for you. Life on the move is rough, but, hey, at least you get to see the world. At least you’re free. Besides, ask the people on the *Kolyma* what ‘civilized’ life can get you when your daddy isn’t one of the most powerful men in the country. If they’re even still alive.”

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

“I’ll wager your cell was a lot nicer than the ones they got” Eirene said.

“A gilded cage is still a cage, is it not?”

“Spoken like someone who’s never had to sit in a real prison cell.”

“Don’t act like that’s some kind of badge of honor. Anyway, Bright Lighthouse is located on an islet off the coast,” Jackson informed her, doing his best to be helpful. “There’s a fortified land bridge connecting it to the mainland. Believe me, as long as nothing crosses that bridge, Naples could burn to the ground and the people inside the Lighthouse couldn’t care less.” He laughed. “The stories I could tell.”

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

“Here, and there, and everywhere. I never really had *one* home, but, if I did…I suppose this would be it.” His face hardened. “I know the Lighthouse, and I know its security. As long as we stick to the shoreline, where it’s all commercial zoning, we won’t run into any guards who aren’t on our side. I promise.”

“If you say so,” Eirene mumbled.

Now that they were on his home turf, Jackson took the lead, and guided Eirene through the quiet backstreets, pointing out landmarks along the way as if he really were acting as her tour guide. Were it not for the elaborate, technologically adorned complex that was Bright Lighthouse, Naples would have looked like any other vacation town, albeit one much smaller than it had been in its heyday.

“This late at night, the Lighthouse will be locked down, so we’ll stay at a hotel that I know is safe. It’s not exactly the Prime Minister’s suite at Unity Tower, but it’s…fancy. While the local government hasn’t bothered to clean up the outer reaches of the city, those parts they did fix were renovated quite nicely, I think you’ll find.”

Jackson paused for a moment to breathe in the crisp, fresh city air.

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

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

“In the city itself? Unlikely. But the patrol ships we saw flying overhead are sworn to the Skywatch, so we might run into some off-duty pilots coming from the airport. Good odds they’ll be drunk, though, so I wouldn’t worry too much.”

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

“Neither would I, but sometimes we don’t get a choice.”

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sounds like you had quite the childhood.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Assuming you win. I give it forty-sixty odds, at best. Still, that’s much higher than it would be without my father’s help”

“Whatever,” Eirene said. “Anyway, I’m gonna crash for the night. See you later, I guess.”

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

Eirene let out a long sigh. She brushed the fleck of paint off of her face and closed her eyes. Almost immediately, she was asleep.

\* \* \*

True to his word, Jackson was there to meet her at the break of dawn. They indulged in a flavorful breakfast with bread and jam, yogurt, and fresh fruit, and a cup of coffee each. Eirene begrudgingly admitted to herself that she’d almost forgotten what real food tasted like, and that she could understand the boy’s yearning for such meals.

After they’d checked out from the hotel, the pair continued onwards to the Lighthouse. The streets were no longer quiet, which wasn’t Eirene’s preferred environment, even if it did make it easier for them to disappear into the crowd. Closer to their destination, the traditional Italian architecture gave way to newer buildings, a smattering of apartments and stores built in a more contemporary style, between which were nestled worn-down fortifications that hadn’t been used since the war. Eirene wondered for a moment why they hadn’t been torn down, given the local government’s clear unwillingness to maintain them. If they were intended to be used, she thought, they should at least clean off the graffiti.

“The access road is just ahead,” Jackson said, pointing down the street. “We turn to the right after we pass the old radio station, and there should be a gate straight ahead after that. I’ll talk to the security guards there and have them roll out the red carpet.”

“Yeah, nah, you’ll do no such thing,” Eirene scolded. “The end might be in sight, but that doesn’t mean it’s safe to attract attention. Case in point.”

She pointed at the ground. Jackson’s gaze followed her gesture, coming to rest on a line of footprints in the dirty street.

“Okay, someone walked through here. So what? It’s not like this place is abandoned. It’d be weirder if there *weren’t* some footprints.”

“It’s not just ‘some’ footprints. Back when I ran with a street gang in Athens, a lot of folks wore Union police boots bought cheap from international surplus retailers, and that’s the exact tread they have. Plus, the fact that I could recognize them means they’re fresh. Two sets of prints, so at least two cops somewhere in the vicinity who could rat us out to Lancaster.”

“I’m sorry, you said you ran with a street gang?” Jackson asked, incredulous.

“I’ve been part of a lot of different crews in my life. You got a problem with that, or something?”

“No, no, it actually explains a lot.”

“Hmph, I’m choosing not to think about what you mean by that.”

Jackson shrugged. “Anyway, if they’re just patrol cops, I doubt we’ll have much trouble with them. Worst case scenario, I can easily bluff my way out. God knows how many times I did that during my wayward youth.”

“Perhaps our lives haven’t been so different after all,” Eirene remarked, amused. “But are you sure they won’t recognize you?”

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

“I’m not murdering a pair of cops,” Eirene responded.

“Do you want this alliance to happen, or not? Nobody ever shook off an occupation without doing some distasteful things.”

“Fine, fine. Just keep low and we won’t have to worry about that, anyway.”

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

The sudden arrival of several policemen, no doubt the ones whose footprints she had seen, brought her back to the present. Eirene looked back at Jackson and saw him nod to confirm that he too was aware of them – three, not two men in ratty uniforms, well-armed and armored. One of them must have been walking behind another when they made the tracks she’d seen.

Her hand curled into a fist.

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

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

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

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

“Indeed. Usual Migrant business, hoping to make a deal with some of the local fishermen, our tech for their meat. You know how it is. Though I worry that the markets may not favor us as of late,” he said.

The officer stared at Jackson, eyes narrowing into pointed slits. He looked him up and down, trying to take the boy’s measure. “Is that so?” he asked, clearly doubting the veracity of Jackson’s story. “Well,you’re right about one thing, most of the merchants here get any tech support they need from the D.A.. What ship are you two from?”

Although he had anticipated that question, Jackson had no answer to give. Nomad vessels were melting pots with crews from all over the world, and could have any number of names depending on their country of origin, although he knew no specific ships that could be proven to exist. His mind began to race, trying to formulate a convincing reply before the officer saw through the façade.

“We’re from the *Charybdis*,” Eirene butted in, with a conviction that caught Jackson off-guard. “It’s a modified *Archon*-class air destroyer, first registered in Athens, and now recognized as a trading partner in over twenty sovereign nations.. If your investigation is still ongoing when it returns, I’m sure Captain Eliades would be honored to assist you.” She finished her spiel with a deep, uncharacteristic bow that Jackson hurriedly mimicked.

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

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

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

“And your people tested him for any contagions?”

“Of course. We can provide documentation if you desire it.”

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

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

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

Eirene nodded.

“That explains why you seemed so insulted by my remarks about the Migrants. Don’t take it personally, I’m sure you’re all wonderful people. But what’s with the formality, all of a sudden? Didn’t expect you to bow to a beat cop like that.”

“Oh, I didn’t want to, but people usually give me more leeway when I play up the ‘cute, demure little girl’ act. Not very dignified, but not very threatening either, long as I keep my tats and scars covered up, so it keeps me under their radar. And indignity’s only a problem for people who had any self-respect to begin with, heh” Eirene chuckled to herself. “Could’ve really sold it if I had a kimono or something, but, eh, can’t always get what you want. Anyway, for what it’s worth, Evan was a real guy. Even though he died during a, ah, incident aboard the *Charybdis*, an investigation would turn up records of one Evan Royce among the crew, which would have made us look legit enough.”

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

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

“Of course.”

“Splendid. Lead the way.”

Jackson and Eirene continued forward, and eventually they reached the gateway that led to the Lighthouse. It made for a formidable sight, and a sturdy icon of the Union’s power. The islet was covered in its entirety by a fortified complex whose architect had a clear penchant for brutalism. From the southern end rose the concrete-and-metal spire of the Lighthouse itself, projecting a beam that steadily faded away as the sun rose.

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

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

The drone bobbed in the air. Its spotlight went dark, and it soon left them alone at the gate.

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

“Hold the fuck up, your sister?”

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

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised by this point.” Eirene winced. “God, my legs are sore. I don’t suppose you have a spa here at the Lighthouse? Maybe a cute masseur and some hard liquor to drown out the pain?”

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

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

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

“I am glad to see my son returned to me,” the old man said. “Though the fact that he had to rely on others for support is…regrettable. Pray tell, my son – who is this stranger you’ve brought to my door?”

“Her name’s Eirene. She’s with Aleph Null Research and Development, Athens branch campus, and she saved my life. At great cost to herself, I might add,” Jackson explained.

“I see. Then you have my gratitude, Ms. Eirene.”

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

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

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

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

“Not much in the way of military force, Athens being occupied and all, but Aleph Null still has some of the brightest minds in the world. We’d be able to put them all to work for you. Aerospace engineering, agriculture, biomedical, you name it.”

“Biomedical science, you say?” Marcus asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah. Figured you’d know that already. Uh, no offense.”

“I was passively aware, yes. That you’ve brought it up now, though, has inspired an idea most…intriguing. Very well. As a gesture of goodwill, I shall instruct my guards to open the Lighthouse gates to your leadership. When they arrive, we’ll have a little chat. I hope they what they have to offer proves worthwhile.”

\* \* \*

The safehouse where Akiko had been hidden away was a cramped, spartan little box with little in the way of amenities. Cassandra felt bad stuffing her guest away in a place where she couldn’t even get a glimpse of sunlight, but, until such time as the Union stopped looking for her, she would have to stay there. Once they had secured Marcus’ cooperation, Akiko would be able to go free, and Cassandra promised that she would make up for the isolation in every way she knew how.

“It’s not like she has the plague, mother,” Cassandra had protested when her mother forbade her from so much as visiting her friend.

“She doesn’t, but you just as well might,” was Shufen’s reply. “You were at the conference when the Prime Minister was assassinated, staying in one of the rooms where they found bomb-making materials, no less. There’s a good chance you’re being tracked, so if you don’t want to lead Lancaster right to your little friend, you’ll do what I tell you and stay put. Her blood will be on your hands if you sneak out.”

Cassandra couldn’t argue with that. As much as she longed to see Akiko, even just to beg forgiveness for imprisoning her after inviting her into her home, it would have been an even greater disservice to risk exposing her position. She would just have to apologize even more profusely once the crisis was over.

Outside the safehouse, the Union’s investigation of Athens had begun in earnest. Skywatch airships now hung in the skies over the Attican Peninsula, and it was their captains who dictated which vessels were allowed to enter and leave the city. To nobody’s surprise, this was a very short list.

All of Aleph Null’s own aircraft were confined to their hangars, stymying the company’s trade, for which all the board members cursed the Union. It was a small mercy that they were a privately-owned company, not beholden to stockholders, whose wrath over this loss of income would no doubt have been fierce. Then again, Cassandra thought, perhaps a legion of angry capitalists would help motivate the Union to withdraw.

Worst of all, Skywatch officers had been installed throughout the city, creating checkpoints along major thoroughfares that made even the average citizen’s daily commute an exercise in frustration. Inspectors poked their noses into facilities both private and public to ensure none of them had participated in a conspiracy against the Union, once more causing business to grind to a halt as they did so.

By the end of the first days, few arrests had been made, and there were no stories of brutality on the part of the occupiers. For all his faults, it seemed like the disdain for Grand Marshal Vargas’ use of violence against citizens that he had expressed during the *Kolyma* incident had been genuine. In that sense, it was lucky that he had been the one to triumph over Vargas, whose hand would have been far less gentle.

Everyone knew, however, that this state of relative peace could not last. Lancaster may not have hit them hard right out of the gate, but it was plain to all that his occupation would slowly choke the life out of Athens the longer it continued. The city’s rebirth had hinged on Aleph Null’s economic strength, and, without that, it would wither on the vine.

**[todo: maybe some scenes in the Cloud Garden of Elias, Cassandra, and Shufen planning out their resistance?]**

Thus it came as a relief when Cassandra’s phone pinged her with a single text from Eirene. “It’s done,” the message said. “He wants to talk with the Director.”

Though she was part way through her lunch at the time, Cassandra did not hesitate to march straight to her mother with the news, stuffing her sandwich back into the paper bag as she rushed out the cafeteria door. She rushed to Shufen’s office near the top of the Cloud Garden and all but kicked the door down, panting slightly from the hurry.

“It sounds like you have something important to tell me,” her mother said, barely looking up from the documents she was signing.

“Eirene and Jackson made it to the Lighthouse. Marcus Fairchild is willing to meet with you.”

Shufen set down her pen and looked Cassandra in the eye. “Shut the door,” she said. Cassandra complied.

“You’re gonna go and meet him, right?” the young woman asked, her heart racing. “I can prepare a security plan for the trip. I don’t know much about the Lighthouse, but…”

“I’m not going to meet Fairchild, no,” Shufen interrupted.

“I beg your pardon? This whole scheme was your idea!”

“I didn’t say we wouldn’t pursue this alliance. Unfortunately, there are a great many meetings I must attend in the coming days with Aleph Null staff, the Athenian government, and the Union ‘investigative detachment.’ As such, I can’t spare the time for a trip to Naples.”

“So you want me to go in your stead,” Cassandra concluded.

“You and Elias, yes. This will be no vacation, so you won’t have time for lounging about in the warm Italian sun, do you understand?”

“Of course I understand. I hadn’t even considered it, not with so much at stake. But…” she paused, scared of what the reply to her next question might be.

“But what? It won’t do to hold your tongue at a time like this.”

“I mean, didn’t you say I was probably being tracked? Are you sure it’s the best idea to send me?”

“Anyone who matters is being watched,” Shufen said, scowling. “You, me, Elias. Every single individual within this company possessed of a single gram of authority has the Union’s eyes on them. That can’t be avoided. By traveling to Naples, we will be drawing a line in the sand for everyone to see, a line that says we aren’t going to lie down and take whatever Lancaster throws at us. If he has even a shred of pragmatism in that militaristic body of his, he’ll run back to Rome with his tail between his legs, so I say let him watch! Let him watch as we cement this alliance and strip him of all the power he holds dear.” With fervor unusual even for her, the old woman picked her pen back up and signed the last document on her desk, practically throwing down the pen once she was done.

“Here,” she continued. “This is a writ granting you and Elias permission to act as representatives for both Aleph Null and the city of Athens, signed by myself and the mayor. Present it to Fairchild and he should be willing to treat with you as if you had the full authority of the company behind you, which you do.”

Shufen stood up and handed Cassandra the sheet of paper. Her daughter briefly looked it over, confirming that its text matched Shufen’s words - not that she doubted her mother.

“You had this ready to go, already,” Cassandra observed. “Has it been the plan to send us all along?”

“The board made the decision this morning. It was simply fortunate that Eirene’s message came right afterwards.”

“In that case, thank you for trusting me with this.”

“Call it a mix of trust and desperation. I’m confident you’ll give it your all, so long as you don’t get distracted by a pretty face. Italians are well-regarded for their beauty, aren’t they?”

“I’m not sure. The only one I ever knew was Prime Minister Albani, and men like him…men in general, really, aren’t exactly my type. Also, you know, he’s dead.” Cassandra shrugged nonchalantly.

“It would be hard for me to forget that little fact, given that it’s the source of all our present woes. In any case, you’ll leave for Naples tomorrow. Cancel all your meetings for the rest of the day and prepare for your trip.”

“Understood, mother,” Cassandra replied. “I’ll delegate Cloud Garden security to Zayin Wing while I’m away, and take a detachment from Daleth with me for our own protection. Given that we don’t seem to care about Lancaster’s prying anymore, can I grab Akiko from the safehouse, too? I owe her some time in the sun, and, besides, she says she used to apprentice for Fairchild back in uni. Maybe she could be some help.”

“Do as you will. It’s your mission, which means it’s your call.”

In accordance with her mother’s wishes, Cassandra emptied her schedule and devoted the rest of the day to the new task at hand. There was no chance that the Union’s investigators would allow her to travel directly to the Lighthouse without asking a lot of questions, so she scheduled a new meeting with the security team at Unity Tower to review the crime scene, which was still being inspected. This meeting would, of course, be canceled as soon as she was en route to Italy, but the Union didn’t know that, and so they approved her request.

The next step was to inform Elias of their new assignment, so that he could arm himself with whatever information he needed to make their case. Cassandra found him in the Cloud Garden’s library, perusing books from the legal section with a hefty stack of notes by his side.

“Hey, Eli,” she said. “You working?”

“No, not at all. I’m just satisfying my curiosity about a few things.”

Cassandra looked over the array of paper scattered across the desk, on which were written things like **[todo: research legal concepts that he might be reviewing]**, and raised her eyebrow. “More than a few things, by the looks of it,” she said.

“Ah, it’s relative, isn’t it? But I’m guessing you’re not here just to chat. Did Eirene reach the Lighthouse?”

“Got it in one,” Cassandra said, tossing the writ onto the top of Elias’ literary smorgasbord. He picked it up, and his eyes devoured the legalese in seemingly record time.

“We’re to represent Aleph Null *and* the city of Athens at this meeting? That’s…interesting. I can’t say this antagonistic approach is what I would have chosen, but if this is what mother wants, I’ll carry out her orders.”

“That’s good. We need to show this Fairchild guy that we’re a unified front. He’s not gonna want to deal with us if we look like a chaotic mess of infighting.”

“And we won’t. Mother’s will is second only to God’s, and I don’t think this job of ours constitutes sacrilege.”

“Honor thy father and thy mother, wasn’t it?”

Elias smiled. “Exactly. I hope to do just that, and I also hope you’ll do the same,” he said.

“‘I’m doing this because it’s the right thing, not because mother, or God, or anyone else told me to.”

“As is your prerogative. If the result is good, does the intention behind it really matter? Hm, a question for the philosophers, perhaps. Perhaps we ought to focus less on the ‘why,’ and more on the ‘how.’ Have you and mother talked at all about what we intend to offer Fairchild in exchange for his cooperation?”

“Mother told Eirene to offer him our scientific assets, as our military is…tied up at the moment. She already talked to the department heads and compiled a list of personnel and equipment that we can dedicate to further joint projects, like the one we *were* going to do with the D.A. branch in Montreal.”

“I’m sure a scientifically-minded man like Marcus Fairchild will see the value in that.”

“He’d better,” Cassandra said. While the logic was indeed sound, the fact remained that none of them knew Marcus well, and so they simply had no way to know whether he would be amenable to their deal. That he had agreed to meet them was a good sign, but plenty of agreements had failed much further into negotiations than they had gotten thus far. It was a gamble, and Cassandra hated gambling.

\* \* \*

It was late in the evening when she knocked on Akiko’s door. A metallic echo rang throughout the dreary underground corridor with each strike. After a few seconds, the door opened.

“Cassandra!” Akiko exclaimed, reaching out to touch her arm as if confirming she was real. “I thought you said you wouldn’t be able to visit me. What changed?”

Cassandra gently brushed Akiko’s arm aside and followed her into the cramped interior of the safehouse. It wasn’t lacking in basic necessities, at least, although it was rather spartan in its design. “What changed is that we’re ready to call Lancaster’s bluff,” she said, “and we need you to help us do that. You said you worked for Marcus Fairchild a while back, so I’d appreciate your help getting ready to, uh, negotiate with him.”

“You wanna know what kind of guy he is, huh? Well, I can tell you right away that he was like a fucking ghost in the research lab. We’d go days without any sign of his existence and then suddenly you’d find this old guy with skin so pale it’s practically translucent peering over your shoulder, no trace of how he got there. And God help you if he found your work unsatisfactory. I swear, the first time he told me off for sloppy lab work, I was half convinced he’d show up to haunt me in my sleep.”

“A perfectionist, then?” Cassandra asked.

“That’s putting it lightly. Thing is, he’d never yell at you, or anything like that. He’s just so fucking creepy that any criticism from him sounds like he wants to harvest your organs because that’s the only way you’ll ever be useful.”

“He didn’t seem that strange at the conference.”

“He’s capable of acting like a normal human when he needs to, and putting on a show for the men who have him collared sounds like a time when he’d ‘need’ to. But when he’s the one with the power…yeah.”

Cassandra looked pensive. “Well, we’ll see. I can deal with a perfectionist, even an eccentric one. Anything else?”

“At least he doesn’t have much of an ego,” Akiko said, filling up a glass of water from the sink. “ First day of my apprenticeship, he told me that he values a scientific mind, that as long as I was willing to learn, I’d have his respect. And, like, that was true. He acted like he was the smartest guy in the room a lot of the time, but, to be fair, he *was*, and when he was wrong, he’d give you credit for calling him out on his bullshit, as long as you were appropriately respectful and could back up your argument with data. He hated yes men.”

**[todo: edit Marcus’ speech at the conference to reflect these traits]**

As she finished ranting, Akiko filled a second glass and slid it across the counter to Cassandra, who deftly caught it and brought it up to her lips, all in a single motion.

“So, pay attention to details, and stand my ground in case of a disagreement. Sounds like he’ll be easy enough to placate,” the security chief said after she had downed her drink.

“Don’t take my word as gospel, though,” Akiko replied. “I’ve already told you that I don’t even remember most of my time there, and he could have changed in the years since I worked for him.”

“Sure, I get that. Eli’s doing his own research as we speak, and he’ll share whatever he learns with me and my team. I just figured I’d ask you, you know, seeing as you’re the only one among us with first-hand knowledge of the guy.”

Akiko smiled. “Well, I appreciate you thinking of me. When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow morning. The security team has prepared you a fake identity that should suffice to get you onto the plane. After we land in Rome, the Athenian embassy will spot us some cars, and we’ll drive down to Naples for our *real* meeting.

“Ooh, a fake identity? How exciting. We’re like real spies, now,” Akiko said, suppressing a laugh.

“Do try and take it seriously,” Cassandra chided her. “You’re a wanted fugitive, even if you’re a lot lower down on the totem pole than Jackson was. As long as we don’t make any kind of mess on the plane, or anything, I doubt anyone will notice, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t stay diligent. The alternative is leaving you cooped up in here.”

Akiko looked around the small, gray room. “Right. Of course,” she said. “Is there anything in particular I need to do?”

“Nope,” Cassandra replied, shaking her head. “We’ve got your documentation all ready to go, so when you get to security, just hand it to them and follow their directions. Say nothing unless they ask, and, if anything goes wrong, call me first.”

“You got it, boss. Now, can we finally get out of here?”

Cassandra nodded and led her out of the safehouse, where they were greeted by the clear night sky. The city lights hid the stars, but Akiko knew they were there, and so she reached out to them with one hand. In her mind, they reached back.

## Chapter 6 – The Gates of Heaven

The washroom at the airport was still busy, despite air traffic being throttled by the ongoing investigation. If anything, the whole place had become even more crowded. People still needed to fly, but there were fewer planes and more security, leading to a glut of passengers waiting at the gates and checkpoints.

Though her nerves were starting to affect her bladder, Cassandra refused to relieve herself on a toilet that had been used by an untold number of other people since it was last cleaned. She had only stepped into the washroom to try and calm herself down with a ritualistic hand washing, running her hands through the sink one, two, three times, just like usual, and lathering them with soap between each pass.

There was no reason for her to believe that anything would go wrong, not this early in the plan, but her nerves were already beginning to fray. No matter how many times she washed herself, she felt like she was covered in dirt that made her skin itch, and so she scratched herself on the neck, arms, cheeks, and everywhere else that she could reach, never seeming to make even the slightest amount of difference. Perhaps it was the washroom itself that was unclean, she thought, public as it was. When she reached their hotel in Naples, she’d be able to take a proper shower, and thinking ahead to that gave her some small relief.

At least her hair hadn’t yet begun to turn gray, Cassandra thought, although she still felt like the haggard face reflected in the mirror seemed uncomfortably corpse-like. She started to imagine maggots beginning to chew it away, and once again her heart began to race, but after closing her eyes, taking a deep breath, and then opening them again, everything returned to normal. The only thing staring back at her was the well-kept visage of an attractive young woman on a business trip like any other.

Aware of the women behind her waiting to use the sink, Cassandra quit the washroom and returned to the bustling terminal corridor, where Elias and the security guards from Daleth Wing were waiting for her.

“That was fast,” her brother remarked.

“I didn’t actually use the washroom. You know I don’t like public ones.”

“Ah, right, and I suppose the one on the plane is out of the question, too. Hopefully you can hold your bladder until we reach Naples.”

“It’s not that long a trip. Do you take me for an infant?” Cassandra asked, amused.

“I meant no offense. Just keeping my little sister’s needs in mind.”

“And I’ll be sure to return the favor when you’re in the old folks’ home, big brother.”

Elias’ presence was as comforting as always. As long as he was there for her to talk to, she could anchor her manic thoughts to him and keep them from sinking into an obsession over “what ifs.”

It was then that Akiko made it through the security checkpoint, her false identity having passed muster. The ensemble that they had picked out for her suited her well, Cassandra thought. Her hair was done up in a ponytail and she was wearing a sharp-looking business outfit, complete with a black pencil skirt that stopped a short ways above the knee, an equally black jacket over a white dress shirt, and a pair of round spectacles that sat squarely on her face. They were non-prescription, but, once again, the Union didn’t need to know that.

Both twins let out a sigh of relief as Akiko grabbed her brown leather purse from the x-ray conveyor belt and walked up to them waving cheerfully.

“Glad you made it through,” Cassandra said. “They didn’t give you any trouble, looks like?”

“Nope. I did exactly like you said. Show them my ID, follow their orders, say nothing otherwise. Easy peasy.” Akiko flipped her ponytail nonchalantly.

“Well, that’s step one cleared, then. Still have to make our way through customs on the Union side of things.”

“It’s nothing we haven’t done before,” Elias said.

“Yeah, except this is the first time we’re doing it with a wanted fugitive, so keep that in mind,” Cassandra replied.

“I trust that you did your job well enough that it won’t be a problem.”

“Hah, well, at least one of us has faith in me.”

After waiting for the better part of an hour at the gate, a period of idleness which did little to calm Cassandra’s racing mind, they boarded Pan-Mediterranean Airlines flight 204 to Rome-Fiumicino Airport. On account of the company’s planes being impounded, they had been forced to take a normal commercial airliner, but the board had at least been kind enough to authorize the purchase of first-class seats. Much like Akiko, Cassandra and Elias were dressed in completely unremarkable business attire, and nobody would have suspected they were anything other than corporate executives on the never-ending quest to make more money.

An uncomfortable two hours later, during which time Elias held on to his sister’s arm to assure her that she was in no danger from either the Union or the other passengers’ impurities, the plane touched down, and the group disembarked. Fortunately, the Athenian embassy was mere minutes away by light rail, and so it took no time at all for them to pick up a pair of company cars and start their drive to Naples. By early afternoon, they had arrived at the Lighthouse.

In the back seats of the frontmost vehicle sat Cassandra and Akiko, with their guard from Daleth Wing at the wheel. Elias and his guard had taken up the rear

“So if you worked for Fairchild, does that mean you ever got to come here?” Cassandra asked, peering out the tinted window at the veritable fortress ahead of them.

Akiko shook her head. “No, I never had the privilege. This place, far as I ever heard, is more administrative. Most of the actual work got done in Montreal, Madrid, Tunis, places like that.”

“Like that?”

“Cities big enough to support that kind of work. They needed a big labor pool and the infrastructure to support them. Housing, entertainment. Hell, even power. Can’t run a big-ass R&D operation without enough electricity to power this whole little town a hundred times over. Well, I’m probably exaggerating, I have no idea how much power our labs actually took up, but it had to be a lot.”

“That certainly wouldn’t surprise me. I’ve seen some figures on the Cloud Garden’s energy intake, and it is *substantial.*”

Both cars pulled up to the same iron gate at which Jackson and Eirene had arrived, although there were no drones to meet them, this time. Cassandra had communicated through her friend in Samekh Wing the estimated time of their arrival, and so they were instead welcomed by a cohort of human attendants, led by one in particular whom she recognized.

Sun Xiang was a lean but strong-looking man, with muscles much larger than one might expect from an academic. A healthy body, he had always said, supported a healthy mind, and Cassandra did remind herself that he had once worked in security, just like her. Unlike her, however, he had harbored greater ambitions, and they seemed to have paid off. That fact instilled in her no small amount of jealousy.

“Welcome to the Lighthouse, Zhenyan,” Xiang said as Cassandra rolled down her window to speak with him. She thought she detected a trace of sheepishness in his voice. Perhaps he really did regret the past conflict that had driven them apart.

“Thanks for coming to meet us,” Cassandra replied coldly. “You can address me as Cassandra, though. You were the only one to ever use my Chinese name, anyway. Unless you count the times my mother would chew me out in Mandarin.”

“She did do that a lot, though. But if that’s what you want, then ‘Cassandra’ it is. In any case, I decided that I should be the one to receive you here. After all, it was at my behest that you became involved in this…debacle.”

“Don’t go thinking it was because of you that we came here. We need Marcus Fairchild, not you, and not his son, either. If we didn’t have some wannabe dictator breathing down our necks, we’d have saved the kid, dumped him on your doorstep, and been gone, just like that.” She snapped her fingers to emphasize the point.

“That’s all I ever asked for, isn’t it?”

“All you ever asked for, but not all you ever wanted.”

“As perceptive as ever. You and I will talk later, in private, if I can at least convince you to hear me out. For now, take your cars to the end of the road, and our valet will park them for you. I’ll follow you in my own vehicle and then escort you to Mr. Fairchild’s office.”

“Fine. I’ll see you there.”

Cassandra rolled her window back up, and the little convoy forged onwards as soon as the gate was open. Soon, they had cleared the first hurdle of their quest. They had reached the Lighthouse.

The lavish interior of the facility belied its spartan exterior. Its foyer was furnished with marble floors and columns, polished wooden furniture, paintings dating back hundreds of years - assuming they were original copies - and, at the center of it all, a state of none other than Marcus Fairchild himself, in a pose clearly intended to evoke Rodin’s famous Thinker. Mercifully, he had not been rendered nude.

“I thought you said he didn’t have much of an ego,” Cassandra whispered.

“Not much doesn’t mean none,” Akiko replied. “He still likes to think of himself as one of the great scientists. Can’t say I blame him.”

“I can only hope the rest of his goals are this transparent,” Cassandra replied.

“It’s a bit cliché, isn’t it?” Elias added. “You’d think a man like Marcus Fairchild could find a more, shall we say, subtle way of portraying himself as an intellectual.”

“Intellect and creativity are two separate things,” Akiko remarked.

Marcus’ office was not much different from the rest of the building they had seen. It was ornate, though not so much as to be gaudy, and covered in portraits. Where it diverged from the foyer, however, was his choice of wall decorations. Rather than expensive artwork or monuments to vanity, Marcus had hung simple portraits, both painted and photographed, of himself with members of what must have been his family. Cassandra could recognize Jackson and his synthetic ‘sister’ among their number.. She silently added “sentimental” to the mental dossier she had assembled.

The man himself, however, did not match the dignity of the room. Marcus Fairchild was passed out on the desk, his arms folded into an improvised pillow in front of a computer that had long since gone to sleep itself. That he would tolerate that kind of repose from one of his subordinates was unlikely, Cassandra thought, but she wasn’t about to say anything.

“Mr. Fairchild, sir?” Xiang said, peeking his head in through the open door. “The guests from Aleph Null have arrived, and they’re ready to see you.”

Marcus stirred. Slowly, he raised his head and rubbed his eyes. “...Is it that time already? I still need to review these proposals,” the old man said, half-heartedly sifting through the pile of papers on which he had been resting. “Perhaps they can wait for, say, ten more minutes? Have the servants bring them drinks, if they want.”

Xiang turned back to the Athenians. “I’m sure you heard all that. Apologies,” he said, bowing respectfully. “You’ve unfortunately caught Mr. Fairchild at the tail-end of an all-nighter, but at least it’s just a short time. He once delayed an appointment with Grand Admiral Lancaster by a whole week, so you’re honestly quite lucky.”

“A whole week? Maybe we’ve picked the wrong side, Cassie. I’d say that wait time alone justifies the Grand Admiral’s ire,” Elias laughed.

Cassandra felt less amused. It did not bode well that their salvation had been sleeping on the job at the time they were meant to meet. Either he was an incompetent layabout - unlikely, considering Akiko’s description of the man - or he simply did not respect Aleph Null enough to welcome them like honored guests. Either way, he did not give the impression of a reliable ally.

“I’ll take you all to the reception. You can join our other guests waiting there,” Xiang continued.

“Other guests? You mean Eirene and Jackson, or someone else?” Cassandra asked warily.

“Your companions are resting in one of the executive suites. I’m sure they still have their phones with them, if you’d like to call to confirm we haven’t harmed them in any way. The guests to whom I refer are a pair of representatives from Geneva, who are here to talk to Mr. Fairchild about the Mourner project. Don’t ask me if they intend to take his side in the war, because I honestly have no idea. It’s frankly none of my business.”

“Ah, I believe I know them!” Elias exclaimed. “What were their names…Nathaniel and Charlotte, I believe? The latter was a member of the Technology Regulation Task Force - an inquisitor, to use a term I’m sure she’d find unfavorable.”

“Mmhmm, those are them. Since you’ve already met, this should be easy. For the rest of you, come along and I’ll introduce you.”

When they arrived in the reception room, they were indeed met by the same two individuals that Elias had encountered at the conference. Both were standing by a table on which were arrayed a variety of light snacks, a coffee pot, and a tea kettle, alongside the appropriate tableware. Unlike at Unity Tower, however, Charlotte had already filled her plate and was in the process of filling her mouth, as well, when Xiang began to make introductions.

“Ms. Aucoin, Mr. Bergstrom. Apologies for the intrusion, but I thought you might like to meet Mr. Fairchild’s other guests. These are Cassandra and Elias, of the distinguished Hao family, and Akiko Miura, their retainer.” Once they’d been made aware of each other’s presence, Cassandra’s old acquaintance excused himself from the room.

**[todo: during the planning for the trip, explain that they coordinate more with Marcus so that it makes sense that his staff know their identities]**

“Good to see you again, Mr. Hao. And, judging by the resemblance, this lovely lady must be your sister,” Nathaniel said, lowering his head to kiss Cassandra’s hand. She accepted the old-fashioned gesture out of politeness, even though the feeling of his lips against her skin made her shiver.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised to see you here. No doubt the inquisition is *very* interested in this “Mourner project” that Mr. Fairchild is working on, not to mention its more practical applications.”

Charlotte finished chewing a mouthful of grapes. “Mrmph. The *Technology Regulation Task Force* is here to discuss an agreement for our agents to oversee the Mourner project, yes,” shesaid, pointedly displeased by Elias’ use of the ‘inquisition’ moniker.

“The question is, why are you here?” Nathaniel asked.

“We have some business with Administrator Fairchild, is all,” Cassandra answered.

“Ah, yes, ‘business.’ How very…unhelpful.”

“Yeah, forgive me if I don’t forget about infosec in front of an officer of a foreign government that I just met.”

“Very prudent,” Charlotte replied, nodding in approval. The French woman took a bite of one of the bread slices on her plate, and Cassandra felt inspired to grab one for herself. She picked up the largest piece remaining, scarfed it down, and then took a second for later. They weren’t as sweet as the ones at the conference, but they were still warm from the oven, with a heavenly crunch as she bit down through the crust.

“Mmm, this bread is really something,” she said, looking over the table. “Although, is there butter…?”

Charlotte pointed at a small basket on the table. “Butter and jam, both, if you desire.”

“Oh, *yes*, I certainly do desire. Thanks a million.”

Before Cassandra could apply a healthy serving of both to her bread, however, Xiang returned to the reception room and coughed politely. “The delay proved shorter than expected,” he said. “Mr. Fairchild is ready to meet with the representatives from Aleph Null in his office.”

“Well, lucky us!” Elias said, turning to the Genevans. “I suppose this is where I must bid you both farewell. If you’re staying here long, then I’d love to stop by and talk with you about your work. I must confess that our conversation at the conference left me curious.”

“And I have some things I would very much like to tell you,” Charlotte replied, earning herself a conspicuous side-eye from her older companion.

“Wonderful. I’ll talk to you later, then.”

Cassandra and Akiko also nodded their heads in Charlotte and Nathaniel’s general direction, practically in unison. And then they were gone, leaving their new acquaintances behind.

\* \* \*

Once the three representatives had sat down in his office, their guards standing watch outside, Marcus Fairchiled turned his gaze from his monitor to his guests. He picked up a pen and tapped it twice against the wooden desk as if calling the meeting to order.

“First of all,” the old man began, “I’d like to express my gratitude once more for returning my son to me. You are all clearly men and women of upstanding moral character, something that I find in rather short supply within the Union, especially after the arrest of so many of my colleagues. I’m sure I don’t need to explain to you my government’s many failings.”

“Yeah, we’re way more familiar with Lancaster’s style of leadership than I think any of us would like,” Cassandra replied.

“Excellent. Then I’ll not belabor the point. I have decided to accept your proposal for a political alliance against the Grand Admiral. This may be our greatest opportunity to defeat him, now that he’s lost his leverage over me, and, by extension, the administrations I control.”

“And ASPIS,” Akiko said.

“Straight to the heart of the issue, my former pupil,” Marcus said. When Akiko raised her eyebrows in surprise, he smiled. “Yes, I remember you. You were never the brightest apprentice in the Montreal facility, but you were far from the dullest.”

“That’s a compliment coming from him,” Akiko muttered to Cassandra.

“Don’t let it go to your head. I didn’t invite all of you here just to sing your praises. We have actual business to discuss.”

“Indeed. I believe you were talking about ASPIS?” Elias said.

“I don’t need reminding.”

“I didn’t - ah, never mind. Please continue, Mr. Fairchild.”

“I don’t need your permission, either. Ahem. You are all obviously aware of the Union’s ongoing war in New England, in support of the American government in exile. The precise status of the war effort, however, has been largely kept secret, save for the blatant propaganda fielded by both sides. The Union’s Media Administration claims that the rebels are a minor inconvenience, never mind that they overthrew what was once the most powerful state in the world and now possess some of the last remaining nuclear weapons, while the rebels broadcast news of great victories at every opportunity. Based on what you know, how would you say the war is going for us? Or, rather, for Jacob Lancaster?”

“I don’t think the Union’s doing so hot,” Akiko answered before anyone else could so much as open their mouths. “Just before the *Kolyma* incident, I saw two corvettes flying in for repairs at the space elevator. Now, I don’t know jack shit about war, but I know a thing or two about air traffic, and Skywatch corvettes *never* come to Montreal on their own. Not without a carrier.”

“...Ergo, the ships deployed to the American front must have nowhere else to land, anymore,” Cassandra finished.

“Exactly. Union’s losing to the rebels, and losing bad.”

Marcus smiled. “It’s just like I said: not the brightest nor the dullest. Your evidence is solid, but your conclusion missed the mark.” He tapped a button on his keyboard and the wall behind him lit up with a projected map of North America, upon which were drawn countless battle lines.

“The Union, as it happens, is not losing,” the man continued. “It’d be more accurate to say that the American front has turned into an intractable stalemate spread out from New York to Toronto to Milwaukee.” He pointed at each city on the map, all of them notably surrounded by markers designating military units and fortifications. “Not that this matters to us. None of us are going to be in the trenches unless things go terribly, terribly wrong. However, this miserable state of affairs has led Lancaster to make several promises to certain individuals, who have agreed to support his administration in exchange for…favors.”

“Certain individuals, several promises, favors. I thought you said you weren’t gonna belabor the point,” Cassandra said. “Say it plain - who’s he dealing with, and what does this have to do with ASPIS? With you?” **[todo: maybe cut this line, idk if it’s in character]**

“You’re correct, I did say that. This isn’t irrelevant, but if you want, I will ‘say it plain.’ One of the parties involved is, of course, the American government in exile. They helped fund the Union when it was founded, and they want a return on investment in the form of reclaiming the country they were ousted from. The longer the stalemate drags on, the more they hold his feet to the fire. He’s managed to placate them so far by promising that ASPIS will win the war once it’s completed. If they learn he can’t control it, he risks losing their support.”

“I see. I can’t imagine the American loyalists are the only thing keeping him afloat, though,” Elias said.

“Of course they aren’t. The second party, you’ve already met. Charlotte Aucoin and Nathaniel Bergstrom, the representatives from Geneva, made a deal with Lancaster to offer intelligence and materiel support in exchange for permission to investigate the Mourner project and ensure it complies with the Inquisition’s regulations. That’s why they’re here today. What they don’t know is that I have no intent of ceding any of my children to Lancaster’s control, and that I intend to offer them what they want only if they *don’t* help him.”

“Are there any more?”

“Only his internal allies. A host of corporate and government officials whose pockets will be lined with war booty if the Union wins. It should be fairly obvious what this all means - we need to take control of ASPIS for ourselves. Do that, and Lancaster will be forced to bargain with us.”

“Do we even need to do that? You have the Mourner project, and your kid already told us that the satellite’s AI is locking out any attempts to activate the firing mechanism. So why go after ASPIS ourselves?” Akiko asked.

Marcus sighed and pressed another button on his computer, advancing the projection to the next slide. On it was displayed a picture of a familiar airship, the *Kolyma*.

“I’m sure you recognize this vessel. The *Kolyma* was transporting data related to the Mourner project when it was captured by the Skywatch. Ergo, it’s only a matter of time before their scientists are able to replicate my work, and our advantage evaporates.”

There was a moment of silence as the Athenians considered his words.

“This isn’t to say we should act hastily,” Marcus continued. “It will take them a great deal of time to decrypt the data, and even more to make use of it. This gives my people the time they need to perfect the Mourners’ algorithms, and your people the time they need to devise a plan for delivery.”

“Delivery? Delivery where?” Cassandra asked.

Marcus clicked over to the next slide, which depicted a large structure floating in space.

“The ASPIS control center is on a space station in low Earth orbit, about four hundred kilometers up. The only way to reach it is through a rocket launch, which would be costly and vulnerable to attack; or through the Montreal space elevator. The Skywatch controls access to the elevator past the upper city, so it’ll be a tough nut to crack, but I’m confident we can make it past with minimal violence. None at all, if we’re lucky.”

That would have to be pretty damn lucky, Cassandra wanted to say.

“I don’t expect you to have any answers right away. Like I said, we have time, so make yourselves at home at the Lighthouse. In the meantime, I’ll speak with your Director about convincing Lancaster to relax the yoke he has on Athens’ neck.”

Cassandra felt a wave of trepidation wash over her. The more Marcus spoke, the more she realized how far in over her head she truly was. Up until a few days ago, the worst she’d had to deal with were white collar criminals and the occasional disorderly *malakas* drunk on ouzo, and now she would have to assault a space station like she was some kind of hero.

That said, being a hero wasn’t an unappealing idea. Any past mistakes would surely be forgiven if she saved a whole city, or even more.

“I really hope you and my mother can work some magic,” she said, “because, if you can’t, it’s really gonna get bad over there.”

“It’s going to be bad everywhere if we fail, but so too will it if we don’t act at all. Go now. Xiang will show you around the Lighthouse and introduce you to the members of my staff you’ll be working with. I’ll summon you the next time you’re needed.”

“Thank you kindly, Administrator,” Elias said, standing up to shake Marcus’ hand. The women just smiled and waved at him as they made their exit.

Xiang greeted the group once they had left the office. “Please, follow me,” he said.

“You’ll be here for a while, so we’ve made every effort to make the Lighthouse comfortable for you,” he continued as the group walked ahead. “Each of you will have a room in the executive suites, just like your friend, Eirene. Fully furnished, each with its own kitchenette. Breakfast is also served at seven in the morning in the employee lounge on the second floor.”

“You mentioned Eirene? Can we see her?” Cassandra asked.

“Certainly. She’s staying in Suite 309. Just up these stairs and to the left. If you’d like to talk to her now, we can finish the tour some other time.”

Cassandra nodded. “I think that’d be for the best,” she said. In truth, she just didn’t want to see his face any more. Whether or not he was aware of this, Xiang took them all to the room he had mentioned. Before he took his leave, however, he stepped close to Cassandra and whispered into her ear.

“Obviously, I would like to speak to you in private. I think there’s a lot of air that needs to be cleared. Can I come by your room later?” he whispered, still loud enough for everyone to hear.

When Cassandra’s expression visibly shifted towards disgust, he realized his mistake. “Ah, right, I forgot. You don’t like others entering your private space. In that case, meet me in the aquarium chamber on the first floor, at, say, ten at night? No one will be around at that time.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I can ask. If you don’t show up, then that’ll be answer enough.”

With that, Xiang bowed and took his leave. Elias had already knocked on Eirene’s door, and so it was only a second later that she opened it, immediately receiving a firm handshake and a friendly pat on the back from the ambassador. He and Akiko followed her inside, loudly recounting stories from their respective journeys to the Lighthouse, but Cassandra just stood still, tuning out until their conversation had been reduced to white noise.

After a moment, she snapped out of it. “I’m glad to see you, ‘Rene,” she said, stepping just through the doorway. “Glad to see you’re okay, too. Jackson kid didn’t cause you too much trouble?”

“Eh, I don’t know, he seems harmless,” Eirene replied. “Just a bit of an ass at times. You get used to it.”

“I’m sure I’ll have to if this partnership continues. Say, do you know how to get to the beach from here? I think I really need to be alone for a bit and get some fresh air.

“...Be alone? Uh, sure?” Eirene said, her expression both confused and concerned. “You can just head back from the foyer to the reception room and then follow the hallway to the left, then once you get outside, there’s a path that takes you to the cliffs overlooking the water. Good place for a walk, for sure.”

“You alright, Cassandra?” Akiko asked.

“I’m fine, Miss Akiko. I just need space to breathe.”

“...Okay. Hope you have a nice walk.”

\* \* \*

It was almost two hours later when Akiko found Cassandra standing by a bench on the cliffside, tossing a reddish-brown rock to herself while lost in thought. The sun was still out, but it had sunk low over the horizon, casting long, gloomy shadows into the woods.

Toss. Catch. Toss. Catch. Cassandra’s gaze followed the rock, first as she launched it upwards, and then as gravity pulled it back down over and over again, like some kind of sisyphean game. She focused, ignoring the sounds of both industry and nature around her, the crunching of Akiko’s boots against the gravel path, her name being called, up until she felt a hand on her shoulder.

Immediately, she yelped and leapt forward, dropping the rock onto the path, where it became just another one of many. Her first urge was to defend herself, although that immediately subsided when she saw Akiko’s face, as embarrassed as she looked to have provoked such a reaction.

“Geez, sorry, I thought you heard me coming, at least. Didn’t mean to startle you like that,” Akiko said.

“It’s fine. Just don’t…don’t touch me like that, okay? Without warning, at least,” Cassandra replied, her heart rate slowly falling back to normal.

“I thought that, like, calling your name was warning enough, but I getcha. I’ll wait for confirmation in the future.”

“Appreciate it.”

“Anyway, I know you said you wanted to be alone and get some fresh air, but it’s been two hours, so I was getting worried. Is everything going okay? You. uh, seemed pretty out of it.

Cassandra sighed. “I won’t lie to you and say everything’s fine. You deserve better than that. It’s…well, it’s about Xiang. You remember that he and I have some history, right?”

“I know that his letter really seemed to upset you.”

“Xiang and I have a…complicated relationship nowadays,” Cassandra began, looking out over the sea. From afar, the crashing of waves and cawing of gulls filled the moment of silence that followed.

Akiko regarded her curiously. “Back when you first got the letter from him, you said you and he were ‘just friends,’ but the way you talk about him makes him sound more like an ex-lover. Er, sorry if that’s too presumptive.”

Cassandra shook her head. “He and I *were* just friends,” she confirmed. “It was his sister that I was in love with.”

“Oh, is that so?” Akiko asked, raising one eyebrow. Cassandra noticed that she didn’t seem especially surprised. In fact, her voice sounded intrigued, which was itself quite interesting.

“Her name was Chenmei,” Cassandra continued. “It translates to ‘morning beauty’ in English, and, man, did that describe her perfectly. I’ve been with a lot of girls in my life, but she was the only one I’d say I truly loved.”

“Was she your first partner?”

“Not my first, no. I’d had a few girlfriends before. Just casual stuff, really, kids figuring themselves out. You know how it is.”

“I sure do,” Akiko said. “More than you realize, I’d bet.”

“It might surprise you what exactly I realize,” Cassandra replied, smiling gently.

“Heh.”

There was another empty moment as they stood alone by the water, watching the clouds scroll by. For the longest time, the ghosts of her old companions had been content to lurk in the back of her head. Bringing them back into the limelight was causing Cassandra no small amount of ill feelings, made up of both grief and resentment in equal measure.

“I take it Xiang didn’t much care for you dating his sister?” Akiko asked, continuing her line of inquiry.

“Quite the opposite. When we told him we were together, he said he couldn’t be happier that his sister and his best friend had found each other. He did joke about exacting vengeance against me if I ever broke her heart, but those were just, you know, jokes. Until they weren’t.”

“You’re telling me you broke up with her?”

Tears started to leak out of Cassandra’s eyes. “No. God, no,” she replied. “I loved her way too much to do that. I loved her so, so, *so* much, right up until…until she passed away. Xiang blamed me for her death, and things fell apart from there.” It was a struggle to even pronounce those last words, both because of the sadness welling up in her gut, and because saying them aloud reminded her once more that the whole story was real.

“...Oh. Shit, I’m so sorry,” Akiko said, visibly ashamed that her prying had dredged up such memories. “Listen, if you don’t want to talk about it, I’ll drop the subject, here and now.”

“You don’t need to apologize. It might do me some good to talk, actually.”

“Whatever makes you more comfortable.”

Cassandra smiled and pawed nervously at the gravel path with one of her boots before she began.

“I’d known Chenmei for years before we started dating. Xiang introduced us, of course, the first time I visited his house, and we became friends. Started hanging out more, just talking about, well, everything, and it seemed like she really trusted me. Trusted me enough that I’d be the first person she asked for any advice, and, I gotta say, that made me feel really good. She came to me when she wanted dating tips, she came to me when she started to think she might be a lesbian… and she came to me to confess about her depression.”

Akiko’s face fell even further. “I think I can see where this is going,” she said.

“And I’m sure you’re right. It’s not hard to guess. See, at one point, she and Xiang both got new jobs at Madelyn-Rash, right around the time it got folded into the Defense Administration. She said she wanted to go, that it was basically her dream job, but didn’t want to leave me all alone at home. And I encouraged her, you know? I just wanted her to be happy. My mother always used to tell me that you’ll know you found the right person when their joy is what brings *you* joy, and, in that sense, I think Chenmei was the only girl I dated that she ever approved of. ‘Cause I *lived* for her happiness, and I like to think she felt the same way about me.” Cassandra paused and took a deep breath.

“It sounds like you were a really good partner for her.”

“Maybe at first. When Chenmei took that job, she seemed like a whole new person. Told me she wasn’t depressed anymore, that she was making new friends in Montreal, all that good stuff. But then she started to grow…distant. We called each other less and less, and eventually she stopped picking up at all. It worried me, but she’d promised me she was doing better, and I didn’t want to treat her like a baby, so I didn’t push any further. Didn’t even ask Xiang to check on her. A week after the last message I got from her, he called and told me she’d killed herself.”

“Jesus Christ. And you said he blamed you?”

“Did he ever! Told me that I was a failure of a girlfriend, that I should have let him know as soon as anything seemed wrong, that it was my silence that killed her. And, like, I couldn’t even bring myself to disagree with him, really. Not at the time, at least.”

“Did…did you ever learn why she did it?” Akiko dared to ask.

Cassandra laughed darkly. “Xiang never told me. After he read me the riot act, he never spoke to me again, so I never got to learn why or how, not that I’d even want to know that second part. Don’t know where she’s buried, if they buried her at all. Whether she left a note. Guess he thought I didn’t deserve to be a part of her life, including its ending. And then he sends me *this*.”

She took out the letter her old friend had sent her and grasped it tightly, the paper crumpling in her grip.

“Tch. ‘*Dearest Zhenyan*,’ he says, as if we’re still that close. Doesn’t even mention Chenmei, just some trite platitudes about ‘how things ended up.’ He’s lucky we need this lead, or else I’d give him the same cold shoulder he gave me.”

“Are you gonna meet with him like he asked?”

“...I have to. For her sake,” Cassandra declared. Once again, she was tempted to destroy the letter, to throw it out to sea and let the water reduce it to pulp, but she could not bring herself to do it. Some force - nostalgia, or perhaps regret - stayed her hand.

“At the end of the day, he’s the best link I still have to her. Photos and old gifts can only get me so far. There’s just nothing like sharing your memories of someone with another person.”

Akiko bit her lip. “I may not have known her, but you’re always welcome to share those memories with me, if you think it will help. It’s the least I can do after all this.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Cassandra replied.

They stood together in silence for a while longer, watching the clouds until the sun began to set, and the sea air turned cold.

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Cassandra and Xiang met in front of the aquarium at the appointed hour. All the lights were off save for those behind the tank itself, which painted the room in a shifting turquoise pattern and left long shadows across the checkerboard floor. The whole room was devoid of visitors; there would be no witnesses to their conversation, other than the dozens of tropical fish that Marcus kept.

“Xiang. You wanted to talk. Are you here to apologize for everything you said to me? All the hate? The accusations?” Cassandra opened, gesticulating angrily.

“As I said, I’m here to clear the air,” Xiang replied, his rigid stance contrasting her aggressive movements. “I won’t deny that I made mistakes. I’m sure your grief came close to mine. However, neither will I admit to all wrongdoing in this affair.”

“Oh, you’re telling me my grief ‘came close’ to yours? Give me a break from these…these *misery olympics*. I suffered just as much as you did. Chenmei was everything to me, do you understand? Fucking. *Everything*!”

“She meant so much to you that it took you a whole, what was it, three weeks before you climbed into another girl’s bed?” Xiang snorted, turning up his head at her.

A jolt tore through Cassandra’s body, and she staggered. “H-how do you even know that? I sure as hell didn’t tell you,” she demanded, with fists clenched. Both of them advanced forwards, circling around each other like a pair of territorial sharks amidst the watery glow.

“Your mother and mine were still colleagues in industry. I heard things. But what does it matter? I’m sure you cared about her at one point, but, by the end of it, you couldn’t even spare a minute to ask me how she was doing. Was it that you weren’t getting sex while she was away? Was that why you gave up on her?”

“Oh that’s *rich*,” Cassandra fired back. “You’re gonna get on my case for not asking you to check on her, and not think that maybe, just maybe, you could have gone to check on her yourself? What kind of brother needs his sister’s girlfriend to let him know something’s wrong? And now you have the *gall* to accuse me of using her for something as trivial as sex? The person I loved most in the entire world?”

“I already told you - I know I made mistakes. After she passed, of course I blamed myself. Who wouldn’t? There were times that I felt like I deserved to follow her into oblivion, but I knew it would be evil of me to make my parents feel that pain twice.”

Xiang looked like a wild animal, one that had been shot in the leg and was lashing out in desperation. Cassandra didn’t need to see her reflection in the aquarium glass to know that she looked much the same.

“That’s exactly my point!” she yelled, pacing from marble tile to marble tile. “Who wouldn’t blame themselves? Do you think I didn’t go through the exact same thing? Just because I used casual flings to cope doesn’t mean I didn’t love her, that I didn’t hate myself every second of the day for not seeing the signs, for not following up, for…for trusting her word that she was okay, when she obviously wasn’t.”

Xiang took a deep breath and pressed his forehead against the cold glass, his breath leaving behind a foggy patch that drew the attention of several fish. “I know you’re not trying to say it was her fault. And…I know this is both of our cross to bear. I just…I just…”

“Spit it out. Stammering won’t help anyone.”

“I just need to hold *someone* accountable. There has to be a reason she died, and that reason, as best as I can tell, is us. Both of us failed her, and both of us deserve to suffer for it.” He balled his right hand into a fist and punched the glass, causing the gathered fish to flee.

“So that’s what this is really about, huh?” Cassandra asked. “You just want to cause more misery, as if that’s somehow going to account for her death? I would say that’s revenge rather than justice, but I don’t think that even counts as revenge. It’s just…pathetic self-destruction.”

“I’d rather destroy myself than forget her, like you did.”

Cassandra pointed to her own withered face, and the salt streaking down it. “Does this look like someone who forgot?” she asked.

They stared at each other. Xiang was the first to wipe away his tears, and Cassandra did the same right after.

“I have held onto that pain for every waking hour since she passed,” she continued. “There were times I wanted to let her go. Anything to stop it from hurting. But if that pain is the only thing keeping her with me, then I welcome it. As do you - that’s why you’re doing this.”

“Why *we’re* doing this,” Xiang corrected. “I know you wanted to hurt me just as badly, to make me grovel. You wouldn’t have come here otherwise.”

“That…might have been a small part of it.”

Xiang laughed. “Well, at least we’re being honest with each other, now,” he said.

Cassandra laughed back, although it looked more like she was choking. The tension began to ebb, and they both relaxed, leaning against the surface of the fish tank.

“I’m starting to forget what her voice even sounded like. I have photos, letters…but no recordings.” Xiang reached out and closed his fist around thin air. “The more time goes on, the more she slips away from me. The whole time we spent in Montreal is already almost gone.”

“Just when you were working in Montreal?” Cassandra asked, her eyes narrowing.

“Just then. I was working so hard that I must not have really been paying attention to what was going on around me, because I really can’t remember it. It’s just a blur that ends abruptly with her death.”

“That’s an oddly familiar story.”

“You felt the same way, I take it?”

“No, not me. A friend,” Cassandra said, recalling the conversation she’d had with Akiko when they first met. “But never mind that. I don’t want to hate you, Xiang. I really don’t. I’m just not sure I can forgive you for everything you said, not just yet.”

“And I won’t ask you to. All I want is for us to keep her memory alive, whether that be together or apart.”

“I think I can do that. No, I *will* do that.”

“Then I’ll be happy, and I hope you will be, too.”

Cassandra nodded and started to walk away, then paused and looked back over her shoulder. “We’ll have to work together on this operation, of course,” she said. “Agree to at least speak cordially when that happens?”

“Agreed.”

Satisfied, she kept walking, while Xiang lingered a while longer to watch the fish.

\* \* \*

“Sounds like it went okay,” Akiko said once Cassandra closed the aquarium door behind her. The two of them walked side-by-side back to their living quarters.

“About as well as I could have hoped, yeah,” Cassandra replied. “Thanks for coming to be with me.”

“I mean, you’re welcome, but I didn’t really do anything. Just kinda lurked out here while you two chewed each other out.”

“You offered to share her memory. This is part of that.”

“It just feels a little slimy to have me listen in without telling your friend. A lot of that seemed really, uh, personal,” Akiko said nervously.

“You’re not wrong, and I do feel bad about the deception. However, there’s not much we said that I hadn’t already told you.”

“That part about Montreal seemed new. Him forgetting it all, I mean. I already knew they worked there.”

“Yeah, that is a weird coincidence.”

“Something about that damn city just seems to suck people in and burn them up,” Akiko said, a look of disgust spreading across her face. “It doesn’t surprise me at all that he’d lose himself in his work.”

“Maybe I should consider myself lucky that I didn’t have to stay there for long,” Cassandra replied.

“Don’t forget, we’re going back, eventually. The space elevator, and all that.”

“Right. Well, hopefully that’s another quick trip.”

“I’ll do everything I can to help make that happen.”

\* \* \*

A thousand kilometers to the east, the *Sunset Serenade* approached the city of Athens. Its bulk was too great for the airport to accommodate, and so the flagship hovered ominously over the Cloud Garden while a helicopter ferried Grand Admiral Lancaster and his retinue to a landing pad below.

Exercising the authority granted to them by Shufen’s concessions, the Union established a command center of sorts in the executive boardroom, much to the annoyance of the board members themselves. Once that was done, Lancaster summoned Shufen to meet him. She had expected that such a call would come, and was already prepared for whatever discussion they might have, despite the late hour.

When Shufen arrived, Lancaster was waiting for her, hands steepled, flanked by a pair of heavily-armed bodyguards. In front of him was what looked like a map of a city, although it was impossible to tell from a distance which city it was.

“Give us some privacy, please,” the Grand Admiral said to his guards, and they summarily quit the room.

Shufen watched them leave, and then turned her attention back to the man in charge.

“The Union already has a garrison in Athens. It’s a few kilometers to the northeast of here, in case you were unaware,” she said.

“I am aware, and, as much as I’d like to spend some time fraternizing with the metaphorical infantry, I’d much rather see the legendary Cloud Garden for myself, and enjoy Aleph Null’s world-famous hospitality.”

“I hadn’t realized our laboratories were such a tourist attraction.”

“Well, you won’t find them in any travel guidebooks, that’s for sure, but I know you know how to treat a guest.”

“We do. Especially a guest who arrives uninvited and unannounced.”

Lancaster smiled and bid her sit opposite him, which she did. Next to the map was a carafe full of water that he used to fill two glasses, one of which he handed over to Shufen. She accepted it and took a single sip.

“This water is really quite refreshing,” the Grand Admiral said after a drink from his own glass. “Could you believe it’s just tap water one of my men got from the break room nearby? Stupid question, of course you can believe it. This is your home, after all. Still, it’s much more pure than I’d have expected from a backwater like this.”

“Athens hasn’t qualified as a ‘backwater’ for decades, and it has Aleph Null to thank for that,” Shufen replied with a scowl.

“Yes, and it would be quite a shame if it had Aleph Null to thank for its *return* to being a backwater.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, of course it’s a threat. All of the leads you offered relating to the whereabouts of Jackson Fairchild and Akiko Miura have gone completely cold, meaning that either your security forces are woefully incompetent, or you’re intentionally covering for them, if not harboring them directly. I hoped that it was the former, but, given that my agents have recently reported your darling children heading towards Naples, I have a suspicion that it is, in fact, the latter.”

“Then fly to Naples and intercept them, rather than wasting your time sampling our water.”

“Fairchild still has too many allies for me to attack him directly without my trump card. I let him keep that power, thinking I had him cowed, but then you interfered, and so here we are, having this unpleasant little talk. He’s already begun to corrupt your organization, and, by extension, your city. I won’t stand for an ally who aids my enemies.” **[todo: trim down this line?]**

Shufen’s iron demeanor did not crack. “You claim that Aleph Null is corrupt, but where’s your evidence? The fact of the matter is that I don’t control my children. Cassandra has always been a rebellious one, sparring with me ever since I first voiced my disapproval of her love life, and Elias pays more fealty to ‘God’ than to the company. Harlots and charlatans, worming their way into their brains.” **[todo: We know he’s religious, but perhaps an example of him putting faith over family somewhere in the previous chapters?]**

“The possibility that this is the work of a rogue agent is the only thing keeping me from turning this city to glass,” Lancaster said.

“That and about a hundred different treaties and regulations,” Shufen replied, taking another drink from her cup.

“Those can be circumvented. It just takes time, and a bit of capital.”

“Whatever happened to the Lancaster I met aboard the *Kolyma*? The one who nearly choked a man to death for firing on protestors?”

“The difference is that those protestors were *my* citizens. The people whose interests I’m sworn to protect. I don’t *want* to attack your city, but if I have to in order to prevent the Mourners from falling into enemy hands, then I will, because it’s not just you that Fairchild intends to share his technology with. He’d see it spread to everyone - the American rebels, the Tehran Pact, every dime-a-dozen warlord with delusions of grandeur.”

“Well, on those matters, our interests are aligned. I’d rather not have you attack my city, either, nor do I want some unhinged warlord gaining access to ASPIS.”

“Then can I count on you to put a leash on your spawn, or will the Skywatch have to hunt them down and execute them?”

“You have my word that I will do what I can to corral them. This incident is both an embarrassment to the company and a threat to national security, so any assistance you can provide will be accepted,” Shufen vowed.

“I’m glad, because I wasn’t about to give you a choice,” Lancaster said.

He took another sip of water and looked over the map, which Shufen now saw depicted the center of Montreal’s lower city. After a few seconds, he pointed one finger at a dense cluster of transit lines.

“There,” he muttered. “The space elevator. That’s going to be their next move. The only question is when.”

“Fairchild won’t attack the facility with his own forces. He’ll use a proxy - my daughter, more likely than not,” Shufen pointed out.

“All the more reason for us to try and intercept them there. Fairchild will need to distance himself from the attack or risk losing face, so he can’t retaliate if we capture and interrogate Cassandra. Instead, he’ll disavow her, and our little cold war continues.”

“I know my daughter’s mind better than anyone else. When she makes a move for the space elevator, I’ll be ready for her.”

“Make sure that you are,” Lancaster said, standing up and pushing in his chair. “Your city’s fate depends on it.”

## Chapter 7 – Au Genève

Cassandra stared at the map laid out on the table in front of her. It bore the same diagram of Montreal’s lower city that, unbeknownst to her, Lancaster had shown her mother in Athens not long before. Her lip curled in frustration.

“This map is…lacking in detail,” she said. “Xiang, do we have any better ones? Ideally depicting the interior of the space elevator itself?”

“The Transportation Administration is friendly to my father, as all the others *should* have been,” Jackson interjected. “I can contact the security office there and have them deliver a detailed schematic of its layout and defenses.”

“Wait, if your dad controls the elevator, then why the hell are we sneaking around? Can’t we just, y’know, walk in like we own the place?” Akiko asked.

“Because,” Xiang responded, “what the young master failed to mention is that the Transportation Administration only owns the terminals in the lower and upper city. There’s a checkpoint even further up that we jokingly call the stargate. The Skywatch has complete control of it, and they inspect any cargo headed upwards. They also physically disconnect the cityside elevator controls in the event of any disturbance, preventing any sort of ground assault.”

“So you’re saying we need to neutralize the stargate, somehow. I’m guessing it won’t be included in these schematics Jackson will provide,” Cassandra said.

Jackson looked offended, but did not refute her suggestion.

“Xiang, Jackson, see what you can do about getting us more details about that little hurdle. In the meantime, I’ll work on getting us access to the lower city center in the first place; get the easy part out of the way, at least.”

Both men nodded and left to begin their assigned tasks, leaving the staff from Aleph Null to their own devices.

“Since this is going nowhere fast, I have a proposal,” Elias said.

“I’m listening,” Cassandra replied.

“You might remember that Charlotte, the nice young lady from Geneva, wanted to speak with us. I propose that we visit her and see what she has to say. Given that Marcus is seeking a partnership with them, as well, they might be able to offer us some help with the Space Elevator.”

“Yeah, uh, they’re still technically Lancaster’s allies right now, so I’m not exactly sure about that one,” Eirene said.

“Obviously, we won’t tell them everything just yet. All I want to do is talk, and see if we can deduce their intentions from there. The Inquisition would make for a powerful ally, if we can get them to cooperate.”

“Fine. Let’s hear what she has to say. Can you set up a meeting with her?”

“I already have,” Elias said, smiling. “She’ll be waiting for us in her room at twelve-thirty in the afternoon.”

Cassandra laughed. “Talk about seizing the initiative. Fine, twelve-thirty it is. Akiko, Eirene, you can come, too, if you want.”

“Oh, it’s okay, really,” Eirene replied. “I’d say it’s better if I stay behind. Someone needs to supervise Jackson, after all.”

“I’ll stay too. I had some questions I wanted to ask Xiang - technical stuff, nothing to do with, well, you know,” Akiko said.

“Very well. Good luck to you both - especially you, ‘Rene.”

“Thanks, I’ll need it.”

With everyone’s tasks decided, the group dispersed, and soon the twins were ready to meet with Charlotte. Her room was just down the hall from theirs, conveniently enough.

“I am glad you could come hear me out,” Charlotte said, in the same stilted English as always.

“As am I, Inquisitor, Aleph Null is always looking to make new friends,” Elias replied.

“That is fortuitous, because the Inquisition feels the same way. I asked you here to discuss a mutually-beneficial arrangement. You see, the Inquisition is currently dealing with an internal problem, and my sources tell me that you and Marcus Fairchild are planning a resistance against the Union. My organization also has concerns about Jacob Lancaster’s plans for the Mourner technology, and we are willing to aid you with your problem if you aid us with ours.”

“Well, so much for secrecy,” Cassandra muttered.

“We are the Inquisition, after all. It is to be expected that we would do some investigation of our own, especially in the days following such a dramatic incident. Lest you worry, we have not planted any spies in your company. I simply asked some questions of Fairchild’s associates and made my own deductions.”

“In that case, it seems like you have us at a disadvantage,” Elias said. “You know so much about us, but we know very little about you.”

“Exactly what I hope to remedy. I want to invite you two to visit Geneva for a few days, so I can share *our* problems with you in the Inquisition’s own territory. It would make me more comfortable, and seeing our city might also make *you* more comfortable with this alliance. Then you can decide if you want to help us.”

“This could easily be a trap,” Cassandra warned. “She says she ‘made her own deductions,’ but she’d also know all this stuff if she was straight-up working for Lancaster. As soon as we step on that train to Geneva, who’s to say we won’t be grabbed by some goons and hauled off to prison, or worse?”

“I thought you might be worried about that, which is why my associate, Nathaniel, will be remaining here as collateral. He is our deputy mayor, making him a valuable hostage.”

“That’s a little better, but we certainly can’t bring the whole team. Even if your intentions are good, any kind of travel is risky, and that would be too many eggs in one very unstable basket,” Elias said.

“That is fair. I take it you will act as Aleph Null’s representative, Ambassador?”

“I will.”

Cassandra turned to face him. “Let me come with you,” she said.

“You need to stay here and plan the Montreal operation, Cassie,” Elias replied.

“I can step away for, how long is this gonna be, a couple days? Eirene and Xiang are more than capable of managing things on their own for that long, but having to sit around and wait while my brother puts himself at risk would drive me crazy.”

“You want to protect me; is that it? I thought I was the older sibling.”

“By a matter of minutes. Come on, Eli. You can’t expect me to just sit on my rear while you do the hard work, so, please, just let me have this.”

Elias looked pensive. “We’ll need approval from Marcus, of course, but, if he says yes, then you’ll be welcome to join me.”

“I am sure he will allow it,” Charlotte added. “The Inquisition’s alliance with the Defense Administration is all but in place. He will be happy to see his friends working together, and he can also vouch for us as a reliable ally.”

“If that’s the case, then we have nothing to worry about,” Elias replied, smiling.

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Charlotte wasn’t wrong about Marcus. When Elias and Cassandra went to propose their business trip to him, he wholeheartedly endorsed the plan, although his recommendation did come with a strict admonishment not to tarry too long - while their timetable was not urgent, that did not mean he would suffer undue delays.

When the time came to leave, the twins met their associates in the Foyer. Xiang, Jackson, Eirene, and Akiko all came to send them off, although Marcus himself was notably absent, having been “too busy” to do more than offer the vaguest well-wishes.

“I hope you guys have a nice trip,” Akiko told Cassandra, shaking both her hand and Elias’.

Cassandra laughed quietly. “You say that like we’re going on vacation. If only that were so.”

“Well, in that case, I hope you have a *tolerable* trip, hah. I’ve heard Geneva is a very pretty city, so that’ll be nice, at least, even if there isn’t much time for sightseeing. Maybe another visit is in order after all this is done?”

“Sure, we can add that to the bucket list. It’s been so long since I’ve been able to just take a trip with my friends and relax.”

“I think all of us are gonna need one hell of a break when we’re done.” Cassandra turned to address the group at large. “You all think you’ll be able to hold down the fort while I’m away?”

“Sure, sure,” Eirene replied. “It’s gonna be no trouble at all, so don’t worry about little ol’ me. Er, little ol’ us, I guess.”

Jackson waved his hand dismissively. “The young lady is right. I’m sure it will be impossible for even the most incompetent of us to cause a disaster in such a short time.”

“And I wonder who that might be?” Eirene asked, half-jokingly. “Surely not the one who got himself caught and had to be bailed out.”

“Hah, bold words, but not false. I’ve learned from my mistakes, let me assure you.”

“That remains to be seen.

Xiang, meanwhile, merely stepped up beside Akiko and shook Cassandra’s hand as well. He smiled. She smiled back. Neither of them said a word, for no word needed to be said.

“Well, I think we ought not draw this out too long,” Elias said. “The train to Geneva leaves in an hour, and our friend from the Inquisition is probably waiting for us on the platform already.”

The twins waved farewell to the others and headed out the door, suitcases in hand. Before long, they arrived at the station, finding that Charlotte was indeed already there.

“I see you two are appropriately punctual. This is good,” she said as they approached.

“Yeah, if you ask my mother, that’s probably my only virtue,” Cassandra replied. “How’s the situation here? No police giving you dirty looks, or anything?”

“You forget that I am not a suspect in an ongoing murder investigation. However, your concerns are unfounded. Like the space elevator, security along the railway is organized by the Transportation Administration. The Transportation Administration is allied with Marcus Fairchild. While the Inquisition has few eyes in Naples other than my own, I would wager that the guards here will not be eager to share any information with the Skywatch.”

“Suspicions. Conjecture.” Elias shrugged. “It’ll have to do.”

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

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

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

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

“You got lucky,” Elias replied.

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

“Hah, as if the world would be that fair.”

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

“You’re religious, then?” Elias asked.

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

“But you don’t.”

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

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

“Probably not.”

“I’m tempted to do it anyway, though. Who’s going to find out?”

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

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

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Elias said. “Get some rest. Lord knows we could both use it.”

“Agreed.”

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

\* \* \*

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

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

“Yes.”

“We’re almost there.”

“I figured.”

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

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

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

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

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

In response, Charlotte only raised an eyebrow at him.

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

“You could say that, yes” Charlotte replied.

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

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

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

“You testing me?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m guessing that’s the capitol building?” Elias asked.

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

“Is that so? What is this Leuthold like, then? Or is that classified information, too?”

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

“Internal threats being your jurisdiction, right?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Glad to hear it,” Elias said.

\* \* \*

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

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

“And then we get to work, I assume?”

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, now we’re on your turf, so what’s this ‘problem’ of yours you needed our help with?” Cassandra asked.

“The problem is the very reason I had to take you away from the Lighthouse. Granted, a trip into Naples would have also sufficed, but, as I said, viewing our city first-hand will help you see what we stand for.”

“You certainly stand for a strong sense of style, at least,” Elias remarked.

“Yeah, and the flashier the façade, the more it can hide,” Cassandra said. “Please, Miss Charlotte. Continue.”

“The problem concerns my partner, Monsieur Nathaniel Bergstrom. I believe he is responsible for the crime of which you have been accused - the murder of Prime Minister Albani.”

Cassandra and Elias’ eyes both opened in shock.

“Well, that’s quite an accusation,” the elder twin said. “What’s your evidence?”

“Unfortunately, I have nothing conclusive, or else I would give it to you to help clear your names. However, Geneva and the Union have had a tense relationship for some time. By decapitating their leadership, he would significantly weaken a powerful rival.”

“Well, that’s certainly a motive, but any politician worth their salt has at least a dozen enemies gunning for them at any given time. What makes you think your man is the one who landed the killing blow?”

“The Inquisition had been following a plot to assassinate Albani for some time, organized by a Sicilian separatist group that had, up until recently, been fairly passive. Like you say, the Prime Minister had many enemies. Unfortunately, our agent within their ranks was discovered and had to be extracted, but, before that happened, several of their personnel were spotted meeting with the deputy mayor’s agents.”

“And you think the bombing was the culmination of this plot?” Cassandra asked.

“The evidence is circumstantial, but yes, that is our current hypothesis. We believe that Bergstrom has been radicalizing this faction with the intent of using them against Albani, although it is unlikely that it was his intent for you to be blamed for their actions. If you will permit some speculation, I suspect that his intent was to also frame the Inquisition, as we have been at odds with the magistracy for some time.” **[todo: Edit the scene where they are introduced at the conference to show their conflict some more]**

“He wanted to frame his own country for a terrorist attack? I find that hard to believe.”

“Things would play out just as they have in your Athens. Genève would lose some standing with the Union, and would be ‘asked’ to hand over the criminals. Unlike you, however, Bergstrom would comply, completely neutralizing us as a threat in his rise to power and weakening a powerful neighbor in one blow.”

“Ah, if that’s the case, then Lancaster really is innocent, isn’t he? Well, perhaps ‘innocent’ is the wrong word. Rather, it would mean he has no agenda against us,” Elias said.

“If, and I mean *if*, my theory is correct, then yes. You were simply caught in the crossfire of this feud between the magistracy and the Inquisition.”

“Does Nathaniel know you know?”

“Know that I suspect him, you mean? *Non*. *Il ne sait rien*. However, like I said, his faction and mine have been at odds for some time, and he is no doubt exercising caution around me.”

Elias nodded. “Good. The last thing we need is the Genevan mayor’s office coming down on us, on top of the Union.”

“There’s one thing that still seems weird,” Cassandra said. “Lancaster seemed to know immediately that there was bomb residue in one of the hotel rooms we were staying in. If he really was clueless about this plot, how did he find out about that so fast?”

“That, I cannot tell you,” Charlotte replied.

“Can’t, or won’t?”

“I am not hiding anything from you. If I seem reticent, it is because I truly do not know.”

“Yeah, so you say. If, and this is a big ‘if,’ we were to help you out, what would you want us to do, exactly, and what are you gonna offer in return?”

“Given that we will all be spending time together at the Lighthouse, all I ask for now is that you keep an eye on Nathaniel and report any suspicious activity to me. In exchange, the resources of the Inquisition will be at your disposal. If we are able to prove that Nathaniel is responsible for the murder, your names will be cleared, and we eliminate a threat to international stability. Both of us win.”

The twins looked at each other, then back at Charlotte.

Elias was the first to speak. “Well, my sister may not agree, but I find this deal appealing,” he said. “Can we trust the Inquisition? Maybe, maybe not. However, last I checked, the space elevator was looking quite impenetrable, and we could use all the help we could get.”

“Yeah, you’re right about one thing - I sure don’t agree. At least not yet. I don’t want to get all tangled up in someone else’s mess when I already have my own to try and clean up.”

“The *point*, Cassie, is that this is already our mess. Assuming what she said is true, then Nathaniel is the very reason we’re involved in any of this in the first place!”

“Assuming. That’s something I’d rather not do right now. You know I don’t like dealing with uncertainty.”

“You were happy to accept uncertainty when you welcomed Akiko into the Cloud Garden,” Elias said. “And when you accepted Xiang’s request to shelter Jackson.”

“Those are different!” Cassandra snapped. “Lancaster’s charges against Akiko were obviously nonsense, and I had reason to trust Xiang, despite our falling-out. Do you really think that an organization calling themselves *the Inquisition* doesn’t have some kind of hidden agenda?”

“We do not try to hide what we are. All of us are looking out for our own interests, but that does not mean we have anything to gain by betraying you,” Charlotte pointed out.

“Listen, Eli, I’m not saying we need to dismiss this offer out-of-hand. I’m just saying that maybe it’s not a great idea to get into bed with a shadowy organization and feed them information about someone they can’t even prove is guilty. I mean, Nathaniel’s kinda creepy, but he hasn’t done anything *wrong* yet. For all we know, *they’re* the ones who framed us.” She pointed a thumb in Charlotte’s direction.

“You don’t need to make a decision right now,” Charlotte replied. “I have given you the lead on Nathaniel, so feel free to conduct your own investigation. If you do not find anything, then, well, we would have no business together anyway.”

“I think that’s more than fair, Cassie,” Elias replied.

Cassandra sighed. “Fine. My brother’s right, we have nothing to lose by doing some snooping. Nothing except some wasted time if this doesn’t pan out. But if we do end up working together, the space elevator is still my operation, okay? I’m not about to put my family and my city’s future in the hands of this ‘Inquisition.’”

“I think that is also, as your brother said, more than fair,” Charlotte said.

“Good. Then I guess we have a deal.”

“You two are free to take the train back to Naples at your leisure - I myself have some business of my own to take care of in Geneva.” Charlotte laughed. “And I think my sister will want to spend some more time with me, too.” **[Todo: Rewrite this scene to make Charlotte’s request from Cassandra and Elias more demanding so that Cassandra’s hesitation makes more sense.]**

\* \* \*

Later that evening, Cassandra and Elias visited a small but busy cafe in the heart of the city, along the Lake Geneva waterfront. The sun had set and the patio lights were on, casting a warm glow over the twins as they ate their food - at present, a savory crèpe with cheese, eggs, and ham on buckwheat flour for Elias, and a bowl of tomato soup for Cassandra. Elias had, of course, also ordered a generous amount of wine to accompany his meal, while Cassandra had only asked for water.

“This is a pretty nice place,” the elder twin said between sips of his drink.

Cassandra looked out over the water. The illumination from the city regrettably polluted the sky too much for many stars to be visible, but the multicolored lights peppering the lake and the opposite shoreline had their own beauty to them.

“It is, yes,” she replied, not shifting her gaze away from the waterfront.

“You really seemed not to trust Charlotte. Is it really just because she’s an inquisitor, or is there more to this? If you’ll pardon my asking.”

“And there’s the question we all knew you were going to ask.” Cassandra closed her eyes and took a deep breath before continuing. “I don’t really have any reason to doubt her, no. If you held a gun to my head and forced me to choose, then yeah, I’d say we should side with her, but you have to understand, everything we’re doing right now is a result of false accusation after false accusation. Akiko, you, me, Jackson. After all that, you can’t blame me for being a little touchy when I’m asked to haul in a guy without any evidence.” **[todo: consider moving this argument to the actual negotiation with Charlotte, and make this whole conversation about something else]**

“No, you’re right, I can’t. Charlotte seems like a godly woman, but devils often hide beneath a mask of piety.” **[todo: Have Charlotte show more religious rhetoric in her earlier dialogue so it explains why Elias thinks this]**

Cassandra picked up her spoon for the first time since the meal had been served and sampled the soup, immediately grimacing as it made contact with her tongue.

“Oh? Does it taste bad?” Elias asked.

“No, no, just hot,” Cassandra replied. “Maybe a little salty for my tastes, but it’s good. I’ll just wait for it to cool a bit.”

“I think that’s good advice in general. Let’s wait for things to cool down before we make a decision about Charlotte. I’ll call Mother tomorrow and get her opinion on the matter, too.”

“She put us in charge of this rolling disaster, Eli. Do we really have to keep getting her opinion about everything? And, please, if your next words involve the phrase ‘honor thy father and mother,’ I’m jumping into the lake, I swear.”

Elias laughed. “As much as I’d like to see that, I just think it’s polite to keep her informed,” he said.

“As long as she doesn’t try and micromanage us, because the last thing I need right now is someone else second-guessing every move I make. I do that enough myself.”

Suddenly, Elias reached out and put his hand on hers. It was comfortably warm.

“You’re doing fine,” he said. “We got to Naples. We brought Marcus on board with the plan. Everything is going exactly how we need it to, so you can stop pacing in your room every night.”

“I-I…you can really tell I’m pacing?” Cassandra asked. **[todo: add a scene earlier to show her pacing in her room in Naples?]**

“The walls are apparently quite thin, and the floorboards are squeaky. I see you scratching yourself a lot more, too - I hope that’s just bug bites or dry skin, and not another compulsion.”

“Just dry skin. I’m fine.”

“You know you can always talk to me if you’re not.”

“*I’m fine*.”

“Alright, alright, I’m just looking out for my little sister.”

“Well, I don’t need anyone looking out for me, whether that be you, or mother, or anyone else. I’m a grown woman, and I can take care of myself!” Cassandra spat.

Immediately, she regretted lashing out, and instinctively scratched the back of her neck in embarrassment. The coincidental timing of that gesture was not lost on Elias, who raised one eyebrow, but said nothing.

“I’m…I’m sorry,” Cassandra stammered. “I know you didn’t mean anything by it.”

“And I know you didn’t, either. It’s a stressful situation, and keeping your emotions bottled up isn’t good for anyone.”

“Well, you know as well as I do that I’ve never been one for that kind of thing.”

“Aha, that’s true. Although, speaking of emotions, I’m happy to see that you and Xiang seem to be getting along. I take it your talk with him the other day went well?”

Cassandra nodded. “We, uh, cleared some things up. I’m not sure I’d say it’s all water under the bridge, but we’ll work together. We have a plan to move forward.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Elias said.

Cassandra lifted another spoonful of soup up to her mouth and blew on it gently, causing little ripples in the broth. She lapped up just a tiny bit, and then, satisfied that it had cooled down to a tolerable degree, continued to eat, savoring the taste of tomato, salt, and herbs.

“You know, the saltiness is kind of growing on me,” she said. “I’ll have to take Akiko here once it’s all said and done.” **[todo: Some mention of Akiko preferring salty food, perhaps during the mess hall scene in the prologue]**

“She’s a salt fiend, then?” Elias asked.

“She said something like that, yeah. How’s the crèpe?”

“Not the best I’ve had, but decent. The wine’s great, though.”

“And that’s the most important part, isn’t it?”

“Hah, it sure is.”

\* \* \*

One day later, at the Lighthouse, Eirene sat alone in the conference room. It was a spacious area, with three of its four walls made from glass to grant any occupants a scenic view of the gulf, and at the center was a lacquered wood table at which Eirene waited for her associates - those who were not currently in Geneva - to arrive. She idly twirled a pen and then flicked it across the table, taking in the scraping sound as it slid to a stop at the other end.

Eventually, there was a knock at the door, and Jackson came in, the first of three. “I see you’re as bored as I am,” he said, taking a seat across from Eirene.

“Won’t lie, I’m kinda jealous of Cass and Eli. I’m sure they’re having a grand old time right out there, even if they seem determined to resist my efforts at playing cupid,” she replied, smiling cheekily with her mouth, but not with her eyes. **[todo: rewrite this scene so it’s about Cassandra and Elias, not a romantic couple]**

“Not everyone can be a matchmaker.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So I gathered, but go on.”

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

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

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

“And Aleph Null gave this purpose you lacked?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You say I have to,” she sobbed, “but I don’t *want* to. I’m a burden on everyone I care about, so it would be better if I just…just went away.”

“That’s complete nonsense and you know it. Tear down this circus of self-pity and ask yourself what it is that you really want. Is it validation? Because you’ve been given that in spades. Belonging? You have friends, which is more than a lot of people have. Purpose?” He gestured all around him. “We all have a purpose, now. Wiping that smug smile off of Jacob Lancaster’s annoyingly handsome face.”

“Fuck, if I knew what I wanted, do you think I’d be like this…this crying mess?”

“From what I’ve seen, yes, I think you’d be a crying mess regardless, but that’s not a bad thing for someone in your position. Cry all you want, let it out, and then try to make sense of the pieces once they’re all on the floor. You don’t need to do it today, but you need to do it. I’m not going to work with someone who’s a wreck.”

“I know. I know. You think I haven’t told myself that a million times before?”

“I don’t doubt you have, but sometimes, what you need isn’t a lecture from yourself. but a firm kick in the rear from another person to get you into gear. Maybe I’m not the right person to deliver that kick, but I had to try, because it seems like Elias and Cassandra trust you, and we wouldn’t want that trust to be misplaced, now would we?”

“It’s good of you to try, I guess, but you don't need to worry. I’m not going to let them down. Or you, I guess.”

Jackson looked skeptical. “Fine,” he said in a tone that all but admitted defeat. “Have it your way. As long as you hold up your end of our little bargain, what do I care if you hate yourself while you’re doing it? Do at least try to make yourself presentable before the others arrive.” **[todo: Change this scene so that they are more argumentative, but Jackson’s argument is ultimately more profound rather than the platitudes it is right now.]**

“Oh, don’t you worry about that. If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s making it look like there’s nothing wrong at all,” Eirene said, flashing him an uneasy peace sign that did little to inspire confidence in her mental state.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Jackson muttered.

True to her word, when Akiko and Xiang entered the room, Eirene had wiped away her tears, shaken herself out, and regained her composure entirely. Neither of them would have suspected a thing. The four of them waited just a little longer for Cassandra and Elias, freshly returned from Geneva, to arrive and brief them on what had happened during their meeting with the Inquisition.

It escaped nobody’s notice that both of the twins wore grim expressions on their faces.

“What’s with the dour look? Was Charlotte not what you thought she’d be?” Akiko asked, the first to venture a guess as to what was wrong.

Cassandra shook her head. “No, she’s about what I expected from someone with her title,” she said. “She made us an offer, but her intentions seemed suspicious and her asking price was high, so we declined. For now.”

“Then what’s got everyone so down?”

“In the morning after our meeting with Charlotte, I called my mother to update her on our progress,” Elias said. “However, I wasn’t able to reach her.”

“Okay, so, she’s a busy woman. That’s not weird, is it?” Jackson asked.

“That’s what we thought, but we still haven’t been able to get a hold of her. Complete radio silence from Athens,” Cassandra replied.

Everyone at the table exchanged nervous glances at each other.

“That…certainly bodes ill,” Xiang said.

“Yeah, you tell me. I asked Marcus if he’s heard anything, but he hasn’t gotten any news either. It’s not like Athens was destroyed, or even the company headquarters, so there’s no reason we shouldn’t be able to talk to her. Or anybody else in the building, even. Even her secretary isn’t picking up.”

“Then what does that mean for our support from Aleph Null? This whole alliance relied on the D.A. receiving technical support from your research and development staff.”

Cassandra shrugged, looking uneasy to the point of nausea.

“I wish I knew,” she said. “We may have to make *another* trip to try and meet with my mother face-to-face, although that’s even riskier than our little foray into Geneva, given the Union’s presence in Athens.”

“I’ll go,” Eirene immediately said, raising her hand. “You two are the ones whose faces the Union knows, so I can get through easier, and it’s less skin off our nose if I get caught.”

Jackson looked at her and rolled his eyes.

“No one’s getting caught. I know Athens like the back of my hand, so it’ll be no challenge at all sneaking you in,” Cassandra said, snapping her fingers to emphasize the point.

“That’s all well and good, but we also need a contingency if we’re unable to re-establish contact,” Xiang interrupted.

“If we find out that my mother’s…well, if we’re no longer able to count on Aleph Null for support, then we just have to keep going, I guess. We have our goal, and I intend to see it through. We don’t need my mother to succeed here.”

“My father may not appreciate Aleph Null reneging on its deal with him,” Jackson said.

“If we hand him the space elevator and ASPIS, do you think that’s really gonna matter?”

“Mmm. Perhaps not. But a promise made should be a promise kept, he always used to tell me.” **[todo: maybe include some hints that Marcus values fulfilling promises in earlier dialogue? Actually, just re-write this scene, it doesn’t make sense for Shufen to totally cut them off just yet.]**

“And we’ll keep our promise. It just might take a little bit longer than expected without direct support from my mother. Marcus will have his scientists, even if I have to march back to Athens and drag them here myself after we finish up in Montreal.”

“Which is the important part, I think everyone here can agree,” Elias added. “While our trip ended up not being fruitful, I know you all were working on the space elevator project in the meantime. Have you made any headway?”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, we did,” Eirene replied. “Jackson actually did what he said he’d do and got us plans of the upper and lower city terminals.”

“Like I said. Promises made, promises kept,” the young man interrupted.

“Yeah. Anyway, after looking at them, I have some ideas for how to get us in. It’s one impressive piece of work, let me tell you - if we didn’t have friends on the inside, I’d say there’s no way we’re gonna crack either terminal, much less that stargate Xiang mentioned. They’ve got cameras with no blind spots as far as I can tell, motion sensors, armed guards at basically every point we could hit…”

“Okay, ‘Rene, we can go over the details later. You mentioned the stargate, though. Xiang, any news on that front?” Cassandra asked.

Xiang shook his head. “Alas, I was not so lucky. It’s somewhat difficult to procure classified information from the government when you’ve been declared an enemy of the state.”

“That’s okay,” Cassandra replied, patting him on the back. “We’ve got time. Just keep at it.”

“I will.”

“Then, unless Eli has anything else he wants to say, I’d say you can all go enjoy the rest of your night. See you all tomorrow.”

Elias declined to add anything, and so he, Jackson, Xiang, and Eirene took their leave. However, as they all departed, Akiko chose instead to linger until she and Cassandra were the only ones remaining in the room.

“Something you want to talk about, Miss Akiko?” Cassandra asked, cocking her head in curiosity.

“I just wanted to make sure you’re okay. Not being able to hear from your mother…it must be awful.”

“Man, do I really seem that messed-up? Seems like everyone’s trying to test my mental state nowadays. I’m not the one you should be worried about, you’ve been away from your family for weeks, now. How are *you* holding up?”

“I…I don’t know. It’s hard,” Akiko confessed. “I know they’re safe, and they know I’m safe - I told them that much in the last message I was able to send to them. But, as nice as you’ve been to me, I won’t lie and say it doesn’t hurt at times. I just wanted to live, like, a normal life, find some career I could be happy with, but that *fucker* Lancaster took it all away from me, and now I’m even more lost than I was before.”

Cassandra sighed. “I wish I could do more than make vague promises about getting you back on your feet when this is all done. I’ll keep you safe, though. That’s pretty much my whole reason for existing right now.”

“But that’s the thing - what if you can’t? Like, I don’t wanna seem ungrateful, ‘cause you’ve done more for me than I *ever* could have asked of anyone, but we’re just two people, you and I. And the Union is, well, the Union. Even with Marcus backing us up, do you really think we have the clout to take them on?”

“Aleph Null has been able to punch above its weight class since the beginning. We’ve saved so many lives with our medical tech, and, as cynical as it sounds, made a lot of money in the process.”

“Yeah, if there’s one thing that can move mountains, it’s money, so you’re not wrong on that front,” Akiko said, starting to tremble. “Question is, though…how are Aleph Null’s coffers looking? Can’t bring in so much as a single drachma when the Union’s blocking all your trade. I won’t sugar-coat it, Cass, I’m scared. Really fucking scared. Everything might seem peachy right now, but it’s like we’re climbing up to the top of a rickety old roller-coaster, and once we hit the top - once we make a move for the space elevator - things are gonna pick up real fast, and when they do...” She imitated a train crash with her hands, letting the resounding *clap* finish her point as it echoed throughout the room.

Cassandra reached forward and took one of Akiko’s hands in hers, staring into her eyes. She felt a queer sort of satisfaction in being there to comfort her friend, even if she wished the circumstances hadn’t made it necessary.

“That’s not gonna happen,” she said. “Athens has stood for thousands of years, countless wars, the very Earth turning against it. Some would-be fascist isn’t going to be our death knell, that’s for sure.”

Akiko’s hand tightened around Cassandra’s. “I don’t doubt Athens will survive. I just wonder if *I* will,” she said.

“You will. We’re *all* going to make it out of this. If there’s one damn thing I do with my life, it’s going to be protecting my city and everyone in it, and that includes you, now.”

“I’ll owe you my life if you can pull this off,” Akiko said. “A lot of people will.”

“You won’t owe me anything. I’m only doing the right thing.”

“Well, either way…thank you.”

Akiko let go of Cassandra’s hand, only to lean forward and catch her off-guard with a tight, and more than slightly awkward hug. Cassandra didn’t know how to respond, at first, but quickly resolved herself to let it happen, embracing Akiko in return as her friend cried on her shoulder.

## Chapter 8 – Lingering Thoughts

Days turned into weeks, and Cassandra and her crew were no closer to solving the stargate problem. Every time an opening presented itself, a complication arose, and they were forced back to the drawing board. Everyone had become increasingly on-edge, and tensions in the Lighthouse were high.

“What about *Carnaval*?” Akiko asked one day. “The traditional winter festival in Quebec. I never really cared for it, but it’s, like, a huge deal over there, and one hell of a security nightmare. There’s gotta be some kind of weakness we could exploit.”

“Staging what the Union will no doubt paint as a terrorist attack during a holiday celebration won’t win us very many friends, but if it’s our only option, then it’s our only option,” Elias said.

“Pah, let them say what they want,” Jackson replied. “We can’t let the opinions of the common rabble keep us away from our objective.”

“I wonder if that attitude is why you didn’t have many friends growing up,” Eirene said.

“It’s one reason out of many, but that’s not what we should be discussing right now.”

“Right, right, what were we going on about, again? Oh, right, we were talking about blowing up a fucking parade full of kids in snowman costumes.”

“For Christ’s sake, no one said anything about blowing up the parade itself. All I meant was that we take advantage of the distraction to sneak into the elevator,” Akiko said.

“And how do you expect that to happen, exactly?” Eirene asked. “*Malaka*, you don’t really think those guards at the stargate are gonna drop their work and watch some dumb parade while we sneak right on past, do you? They’ll just keep it locked tight like they always, always do, at most watching some broadcast on a little TV screen up there, and none of that changes the fact that the only way to ASPIS is through this godforsaken elevator. And let’s not forget that we need to get back down, too! Nobody’s even proposed an idea for that part of the trip.”

“The ASPIS control center has transport shuttles on board. Once we’re up there, we can use them to re-enter Earth’s atmosphere,” Xiang said.

“And then get blown up by a surface-to-air missile?”

“Once we’re in control of ASPIS, that isn’t going to be a concern.”

“And how do you figure that? Do you intend to join little miss war crimes over there and nuke any site that could feasibly shoot us down on re-entry?”

“What the fuck, nothing I said has anything to do with war crimes!” Akiko protested.

Xiang and Eirene both ignored her.

“I intend to use diplomacy from a position of strength, which I’m led to believe was the plan this whole time,” Xiang said. “Or am I mistaken?”

“No, you’re not mistaken, but, to paraphrase Clausewitz, war is the continuation of policy by other means. Sometimes you have no choice but to assert your position with force,” Elias replied.” **[todo: does it make sense for Clausewitz to be remembered this far into the future? Does that matter?]**

“The *threat* of force will be more than enough. Lancaster is a brute, but he isn’t a dumb one. He’ll recognize overwhelming strength and yield once we steal the ace out of his sleeve.”

“I thought our good friend Jackson here was supposed to be the ace up his sleeve. Now that we’ve got him, has Lancaster listened to a word we’ve said? Is Athens free? Psh, of course he hasn’t, and of course it’s not. If anything he’s only poured more troops into that damn city. What makes you think he won’t lash out like a cornered animal if we take away his toys?”

“Patience, girl. I told you from the start that rescuing me was only the first step. That’s why we’re doing all of this, isn’t it? You would have just dropped me on my father’s doorstep like an angsty, tattooed stork otherwise,” Jackson said.

“Tch.” Eirene folded her arms and looked away from him.

“This meeting is getting nowhere fast,” Cassandra finally said, scratching her shoulder and grimacing. “All of you, get out of here and get some rest. Have a hot meal and a hot bath. There aren’t even that many of us, but if you all keep bouncing off of each other like this, I’m going to stop inviting everyone to every meeting. Maybe I should just do that anyway, have everyone just do their own damn jobs and leave tactical to me and ‘Rene.” **[todo: define better what everyone’s specific job actually is]**

“As long as everyone keeps the others up to speed, I’m fine with that,” Elias said.

“And who gave you two the authority to make that kind of decision?” Jackson demanded.

“My mother, the director of Aleph Null. I can show you the documents proving it, if you like.”

“Ah, yes, your mother, whom we only hear from once in a blue moon. You may think you’re running the show thanks to her nepotism, but, lest you forget, all of you are here at the pleasure of *my* father.”

“And you think that means you outrank her?” Akiko asked.

“Nobody outranks anybody. At the end of the day, all of us are nothing more than a bunch of kids playing at spycraft because the grown-ups are otherwise occupied. Don’t go getting any delusions of grandeur.”

“You’re one to talk about delusions of grandeur,” Eirene muttered under her breath.

“Fine, I’m not about to fight you all on this. We can keep meeting together if it matters so much to you, but, for heaven’s sake, can you at least try to tolerate each other’s presence?”

Eirene pointed at Jackson with her thumb. “If I didn’t tolerate this *malakas*, I wouldn’t be here. Not like he doesn’t have a point sometimes, he’s just a dick about it.”

The others seemed to nod in agreement, including Jackson himself.

“Whatever. I’ll see you all later, I guess.”

\* \* \*

Later that afternoon, Cassandra found herself pacing in her room once more. Ever since her brother had mentioned it, she’d become keenly aware of the habit, but she felt no need to stop, only to take care around the squeaky floorboards. She’d gone so far as to mark these boards with sticky notes, and carefully adjusted her routine to avoid them without upsetting the rhythm of her march.

Step by step, Cassandra moved forward and back and then forward again, her mind racing from one subject to another each time one of her feet met hardwood. Her crew’s inability to solve the conundrum of the stargate, the burden of responsibility thrust upon her by her mother, her regrets surrounding Xiang and Chenmei, and her oath to Akiko all floated in and out of her mind, keeping her from focusing on any one of them.

A knock at the door brought her back down to earth.

“H-hello? Who is it?” She said, feeling unbalanced by the disruption.

“It’s Xiang. Would you mind coming outside?” her visitor said.

“Xiang? Oh, yes, of course. I’ll be right there. Just, uh, let me get dressed.”

That was something of a lie. She had dressed down to relax after the meeting, but nobody could have said she wasn’t presentable. However, the minute it took her to put on her jacket and heels was another minute she had to corral her wandering mind and ready herself once more for human interaction.

The soft patter of Cassandra’s socks against the floor turned into a sharp, authoritative clacking as her polished shoes carried her to the doorway, where she met Xiang. Much like her, he had discarded his business wear, and was now clad only in an undershirt and sweatpants.

“You look tired. I didn’t wake you up, did I?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Good. Listen, I came here because I think there’s something you should see.”

“Oh? Is it about the stargate? Because if it’s not…”

“Trust me. You’ll want to read this.”

Xiang reached into his pocket and took out a worn piece of paper. Cassandra didn’t think much of it, but, once she opened it up and beheld the beautiful, familiar handwriting upon the note, her eyes widened and her heart fell into the basement.

“Is this…” she whispered.

Xiang shook his head. “Not a suicide note, if that’s what you’re wondering. It’s a page from her diary. She didn’t write it to explain anything, but it is, as far as I can tell, the last thoughts she ever committed to paper.”

“I’m not sure about this,” Cassandra said, feeling uneasy. It seemed wrong to peek into her late ex-girlfriend’s private thoughts, but, then again, she had only recently brought Akiko to listen in on her little talk with Xiang, and the hypocrisy of her feelings was not lost on her, so she looked closer at the worn page in her hand.

On it, in flawless cursive, Chenmei had begun the entry like a letter. At the very top of the page were two words that split her soul in two - “Dear Zhenyan.”

**[todo: use a better metaphor here]**

“This isn’t a diary entry, it’s a damn letter!” she shouted at Xiang, holding the page in his face.

“A letter that she wrote in her diary, yes. I don’t think she ever intended it to be anything more than an exercise, one she hoped might heal her broken mind. Just read it.”

Cassandra frowned and moved on to the body of the text.

*Dear Zhenyan,*

*[todo: letter goes here]*

*The last thing I want is to forget your face, like I’ve forgotten so many other things during my time here. However, there are times when I feel like it would be for the best. Perhaps it would ease the pain of my mistake? Or is that simply a fool’s errand?*

*[todo: more letter goes here]*

*Always yours,*

Chenmei had signed the letter by stamping her name’s Chinese characters in red ink upon the paper.

“Did you have this letter the whole time?” Cassandra demanded. “You knew she lied to me about all that and you *still* accused me of abandoning her?”

“The fact that she hid the truth to spare you her pain doesn’t change the fact that you shirked your responsibilities as her partner. Besides, I didn’t read it at first. It was months later that I first thought to check, because, like you, I wanted answers, but I was scared about what I might find. By the time I realized it, I’d already burnt that bridge. There was no coming back from the things I said.”

“And yet, here you are, trying to rebuild that very same bridge.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice, did I? Besides, I think it’s what she would want.”

“I…you’re right,” was all Cassandra could say.

She looked back at the letter. There was one thing that stood out to her amidst the tale of overwhelming loneliness and despair. “…*Like I’ve forgotten so many other things during my time here*,” Chenmei had written. It was a phrase too familiar to not catch her attention.

“Once is a fluke, twice is a coincidence, three times is a pattern,” she muttered to herself.

“Excuse me?”

“You talked about forgetting a period of your life while you were working at the D.A. in Montreal. Chenmei writes about the same phenomenon in this letter, and Akiko once told me about a similar experience, also while she was an apprentice in Montreal. *Everyone* who works at that laboratory ends up experiencing memory loss. Doesn’t that strike you as at least a little suspicious?”

“It *sounds* like you’re trying to dodge responsibility for her death by making up some kind of conspiracy. Do you realize how unhinged you sound right now? You can’t really think that Marcus wiped our minds to protect company secrets, or whatever nonsense idea’s gotten into your head.”

“This has nothing to do with Chenmei’s death. She lost her life to depression, and we couldn’t save her, which is something we’ll just have to live with. Still, three separate people, one of whom has no relationship to the others except for her old workplace, all come down with this really specific form of amnesia? I’m not saying it was a conspiracy, necessarily, but *something* happened in Montreal. Don’t you want to figure out what it is?”

Xiang shook his head. “I thought you would have been averse to more distractions,” he said.

“This isn’t a distraction! I just want to make sure Marcus isn’t doing anything, you know, unscrupulous behind the scenes. That he isn’t hiding anything from us.”

“He *isn’t* hiding anything from you. I’ve worked for the man for years, and he’s never shown any signs of being secretly evil, or anything like that. If all you have to support this insane theory is a pure coincidence, then I don’t know what to tell you. People forget things as they grow up. It happens.”

“Sure, but all at the same time?” Cassandra snapped her fingers as an idea came into her head. “Hold on, what year was it that you left for Madelyn-Rash?

“It would have been…the winter of about five years ago, I think?”

“Right. And the part where you said it gets hazy was how long after that?”

“Well, I remember Madelyn-Rash merging with the D.A., which happened a year after I was hired. And I obviously remember Chenmei’s death, which was about six months after that. So it’s just that half-year gap that I lost, which was probably just working on some random project that got cancelled. Do you remember the details about every month of your life?”

“No, of course I don’t. Still, Chenmei wasn’t specific, but she implied the things she couldn’t remember would have been recent, which would put them in the exact same gap. If it turns out that Akiko is missing that exact same period…”

“It’s certainly no smoking gun, but there might be something to it, if that’s the case. *If* that’s the case.”

“And if I find out that it is, will you at least consider helping me look deeper into this? You said we’d keep her memory alive together. I don’t want any part of that to go missing.”

Xiang sighed. “…That’s unfair,” he said, “but, yes, we did. So, if you can conclusive link all of us to this mystery event of yours, then you can count on me to help investigate. For my sister’s sake.”

“For your sister’s sake,” Cassandra agreed.

\* \* \*

Cassandra’s eyes shot open as she heard Akiko’s answer.

“Mid-year, 91 AU?” she asked. “You’re *certain* that’s the last memory you have in Montreal?”

“I mean, yeah? Not like I have an exact date on anything, but that’s when my ex broke up with me, which is my last vivid memory of Uni. Everything else is just…well, it’s not *empty*. Just completely nondescript, like that flavorless paste they apparently serve in prison.”

“No, no, that lines up perfectly!” Cassandra exclaimed. “You, Xiang, Chenmei…all three of you worked at the lab in Montreal, and all three of you have no memory of anything that happened during that period. Something’s fishy, and I’m *going* to figure out what it is.”

“You certainly seem excited,” Akiko noted.

“I-I’m not *excited*, per se. Maybe you could call it ‘energized.’ Xiang didn’t believe me, and I’m guessing you don’t either, which is fair enough. But a common thread is enough for me to go off of.”

Akiko hesitated, looking nervous. “I’m not sure what you’re expecting to find if you follow this lead, but I’ll have your back no matter what. Just…”

“Just what?”

“Just try not to go off the deep end, okay? People can get lost in this kind of obsession, and I don’t want that to happen to you.”

“I’m not going to forsake my duties, lest you worry,” Cassandra replied.

“It’s not about your duties. I don’t care about those. I care about *you*. You’ve been a good friend to me and I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

Cassandra smiled gently. “That’s very sweet of you, Miss,” she said. “But you don’t have to worry. All I’m doing is trying to figure out what happened during those few months in Montreal. If it turns out that it’s nothing, then I’ll just forget about it. Where’s the harm in that?”

“It’s not what happens if you don’t find anything that worries me. It’s what happens if you do.”

“You mean if I fall down the rabbit hole and never come back out? That all depends on what turns up, I guess. Worst case scenario, we find that Marcus is actually some kind of supervillain trying to take over the world, but let’s be real, that won’t happen. For all I know, there was some kind of accident that affected all of your memory.

The very thought of that made Akiko shiver.

“Well, if it’s for my health, I certainly won’t complain,” she joked.

*Chapter whatever – idk*

Akiko closed her eyes and pushed open the heavy metal door, scared of what she might find.

The first things to greet her on the other side was the pale blue glow of a dozen computer screens and an ambient hum from the sinister machine that had taken so much from her. The room was a veritable nest of wires and coolant pipes **[todo: think of some cool simile to describe all these bits converging on a central point]**, and, right at the center, Cassandra stood hunched over the control panel, typing a command into the machine one keypress at a time.

>Mnemonic Matrix: Activate targeted suppression system? (Y/N)

> Y

“Cass!” Akiko shouted, her voice barely breaking through the mechanical cacophony.

There was no response.

“Cass! What the *fuck* are you doing here? This had better not be what I think it is,” she yelled again.

“It’s exactly what you think it is,” Cassandra replied. “I’m curing myself of the pain.”

“Curing yourself of the – really? *Really*? After everything Xiang did, everything he sacrificed for us, you’d just let yourself forget him like this?

“I’m not going to forget what he did. I’ll remember his sacrifice, just not the parts that are jabbing into my heart like a thousand damned needles. I can’t live with those anymore.”

>Mnemonic Matrix: Targeted suppression system activated. Awaiting connection to subject…

Cassandra turned around and looked into Akiko’s eyes. For the first time in their brief relationship, her partner was staring at her not with love or admiration, but with genuine fury.

“So, all the time you two spent together before then will be gone? I can’t fucking believe this,” she snarled. “Have you already wiped your mind of the promise you made to him, too? The part where you two said you’d keep Chenmei alive together? ‘Cause there’s no way you’re purging Xiang from your head without throwing his sister out with him.”

“I know, I know it’s bad. I don’t want to do this, but, please, I can’t live with the pain of losing them both. They’d want me to be happy, right?”

“You’re not going to *be* happy, idiot. Don’t you remember what happened to me? None of the memories actually went away, they just got buried too deep for me to reach. And when I couldn’t reach them, I couldn’t deal with them, so they just stayed underground, leeching poison into my subconscious the whole time. It wasn’t until I woke the fuck up and faced them head-on that I could even start to recover. And who was it that got me to do that? Maybe you can remind me – if you haven’t forgotten that, too.”

“It was me,” Cassandra answered, ashamed. She picked up one of the cables protruding from the console in front of her and plugged into the port on her temple. The tissue around it was still bleeding from the implant procedure. **[todo: is this how the connection should work?]**

>Mnemonic Matrix: Subject connected. Please wait for synaptic map compilation.

“Exactly. Was everything you said to me when you wanted me to remember just a lie, then? Were you using me this whole time, pretending to love me so that I’d help get you closer to Marcus? Are you going to forget me, too, when all this is over?”

“I’d never forget you!” Cassandra blurted out. “I wasn’t lying when I said you should get your memories back, and I wasn’t lying when I said I loved you. It turns out I’m just…weak. I thought I could bear the pain of everything, but that was when I still had Xiang. I had my mother. I had Elias. Grief shared is grief halved, after all.”

“And wasn’t I supposed to share your pain?” Akiko demanded. “Wasn’t that the whole reason you told me everything on that rooftop? Why you asked me to be there when you confronted Xiang? Am I really not enough for you anymore?”

Tears started to flow from Cassandra’s eyes.

“You wouldn’t believe how much it hurts,” she said. “There is no one person who could take this pain away from me.”

“But one machine can, is that it?”

“I hope so.”

>Mnemonic Matrix: Synaptic Map compiled. Enter keywords to be suppressed:

> “Sun Xiang” & “Sun Chenmei” & Date:<12019AU96

Akiko was tempted to rush forward and yank the cables out of her girlfriend’s head and put an end to this madness, but she remembered the meltdown that had happened in Naples. Such a rash maneuver had a very real risk of killing Cassandra, or rendering her brain-dead, and that thought kept her at bay. Instead, she committed to one last gambit that she prayed would be convincing.

“If you’re going to let go of them, then you might as well add me to the list,” Akiko said, taking another step closer to Cassandra, “because I’m not letting you forget. As long as you and I are together, I’ll be there to remind you, every hour of every day. I’ll carry the weight of all those memories with you so that you never have to suffer alone. Just like I promised.”

Cassandra looked at Akiko, her expression impenetrably blank, and then back at the computer screen.

“If that’s what you really want,” she said, making one last change to the command.

> & “Miura Akiko”

“Guess I did lie about one thing,” she whispered. With one resounding *clack*, she made the final keystroke needed to complete the procedure.

>Mnemonic Matrix: Confirm targeted suppression of selected keywords? (Y/N)

> Y