I Can Still Touch the Stars

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Dedicated to Nari

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## Chapter 1 – Rainier Wind

Akiko couldn’t remember why she hated Montreal.

The city was as beautiful and prosperous as ever. In a languishing world, its people had made their home into a haven for science and the arts alike. Should she not have been pleased with the time she spent there, Akiko wondered? Her grades had even earned her a senior year internship at Aleph Null Research and Development, where she worked alongside the world-renowned scientist, Marcus Fairchild. However, once she removed her cap and gown, the illusion was shattered, and her love for the city fell to the ground like those silken garments that had brought her so much pride.

Lacking an explanation for her feelings, Akiko instead sought an escape. As a final favor before she abandoned her career in academia, Marcus found her a less glamorous position as a stewardess aboard his luxury airship, the *Rainier Wind*, which was enough to get her away from Montreal. Only on rare occasions did she return, and the city was 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.

She had arrived in Montreal that morning to meet with her old master, after which they’d planned to cross the Atlantic for a conference in Athens that Akiko could not have cared less about, except insofar as a trip to Greece offered plenty of sightseeing opportunities. Unfortunately, on the day they were due to depart, a labor protest near the airport turned violent, and that put an end to any hopes she had of smooth travels.

She didn’t know what spark had lit the fire – probably something stupid, she thought – but, whatever it was, the authorities reacted to it badly. The last sight Akiko had caught of the disaster was a group of armored vehicles arriving amidst a cloud of tear gas, at which point she was detained without ever learning what crime she had committed.

Hence did she arrive in a small, windowless room, sitting across from a portly man wearing a Skywatch uniform. That much she expected. The Skywatch were a “private security” company that professed a specialty in air transit, and, after years of lobbying, had dug their talons into all sorts of high-profile functions. That their presence in Montreal had been slow to metastasize was the one good thing Akiko could have said about the city. This particular officer had been brought in to deal with detainees who weren’t fluent in French, and he looked as unhappy to be there as she was.

“I promise you, sir, I wasn’t part of the riot,” she said, her voice full of politeness she hoped would pass as genuine. “You’ve seen my ID; you know I’m with Aleph Null. If the card’s not enough, you can ask Dr. Fairchild yourself. Akiko Miura. He’ll vouch for me.”

“Well, Fairchild isn’t here, so all we have is your word. Did you know that almost ten percent of those we’ve arrested so far have been identified as Aleph Null employees, just like you claim to be?”

“Well, Aleph Null is, like, half of Montreal’s economy at this point, so I’m not really surprised. If my word isn’t enough, what about my record? I think it speaks for itself.”

“We did conduct a background check. You’re here on a work visa, is that right?”

“Yes, sir. From the migrant fleets.”

The officer raised his eyebrows. “Well, your English is surprisingly good. What ship did you come from?”

“If you did a background check, you *know* what ship,” she snapped, immediately regretting it. It wouldn’t do to have him think she was anything other than the demurest of little girls.

“Humor me.”

Akiko sighed and tried to adopt a friendlier posture. “I was born on the airship *Katayama Genji*. I emigrated to the U.S. in, I wanna say, April 2285? Lived in New York for a few years, then studied at McGill here in Montreal, hence why I speak both English and a little French. Is that enough?”

“It’s enough. Luckily, you don’t seem to be suffering from amnesia, because if what you said didn’t match what’s on your papers, then we would have had a problem. Am I correct in assuming the *Katayama Genji* is of Japanese origin?”

“Sure is. She’s a mutt built from the airframe of a *Tōhoku*-class air destroyer, former JASDF. Cost my grandparents a small fortune.”

“I see.” The officer leaned back in his chair and stretched his neck. “Alright, here’s the deal, Ms. Miura. While I don’t see any reason to detain you any further, I can’t just let you go until I file to have you released and the paperwork clears. Given the current state of affairs, that will take longer than usual.”

“I thought you said this would be over soon?”

“It will be, relatively speaking. A few hours at most.”

“A few – But sir, my ship is supposed to leave in two hours!”

“You’re part of the crew. They’ll wait. If you want my advice, just sit tight, keep your head down, and wait for it all to blow over. It’s easiest that way.”

Akiko massaged her aching forehead with her free hand, resigning herself to her fate. By the time word came that she was to be set free, the scheduled departure time for her flight had passed, and she was certain her old master would be furious.

“Fucking bureaucrats,” she muttered, allowing herself to scowl as soon as she was out of the officer’s sight. After taking a moment to adjust her skirt and vest, Akiko moved on.

At least she was not the only member of the *Rainier Wind’*s crew to bear the shame of tardiness. A crowd of the recently released, many familiar faces among them, had already amassed at the security checkpoint, smothering her under a pile of luggage, bodies, and the odor of travelers who had been held up in the summer heat for a few hours too many.

When she reached the gate from which her ship would depart, Marcus himself was just arriving, flanked by a pair of strangers. He was a mess, one who bore little resemblance to the esteemed researcher she once served. His skin was pallid, the grey hair on his head had begun to thin, and there were deep bags underneath his eyes, as if he hadn’t gotten so much as a minute of sleep in the years since they’d parted ways.

“Good to see you again, Doctor. Uh, sorry for being late,” Akiko said, bowing in deference to a man that didn’t look like he deserved it.

Marcus didn’t even turn around. “All of us are behind schedule,” he grumbled. “I can hardly blame a child for her lack of punctuality when even my senior personnel are being waylaid by the Skywatch at every opportunity.”

Akiko wanted to remind him that she was twenty-seven years old, but she begrudgingly bit her tongue. “The guy who questioned me said that ten percent of detainees were from our company,” was all she said.

“To be more precise, they’re targeting staff members from the Montreal branch campus, as if they’re making a concerted effort to delay us in particular. Given how close the Skywatch is to headquarters, one could be forgiven for thinking this harassment is retaliation for killing Chairman Lancaster’s Montreal Defense Initiative.”

“Which is why I recommended you abstain and let someone else take the blame. We had enough votes either way,” said one of Fairchild’s companions, a stern-looking older woman.

“It would have been too close for comfort. I’m not going to gamble on a mercenary occupation.”

“And yet Skywatch troops are patrolling our streets regardless.”

Akiko was already tuning out from their political drivel, although she was curious about the two strangers. Both were of Chinese descent, with sharp features so similar that Akiko was certain they were mother and daughter. It would have been easy to assume that they were *from* China, but so many groups had been displaced as the old world collapsed that Akiko knew such an assumption would be baseless. Her own family’s flight from Japan was testament to that.

“Akiko!” Marcus said. “Since you’re so keen on staring, I should introduce you to my guests. This esteemed gentlewoman is Shufen Hao, the Director of Aleph Null’s Montreal branch campus, and the young one here is Cassandra Hao, our chief of security.”

Cassandra reached out and shook Akiko’s hand. “Pleased to meet you, miss. Your friend Marcus has been working on a new project, and we’ll be joining him to present the results at the conference.”

Star-struck, Akiko almost bowed out of instinct after Cassandra released her hand. “Sorry I didn’t recognize you. It’s been some time since I’ve worked on-campus. I hope you didn’t have as much trouble getting here as I did,” she said.

“Hah, don’t worry about it. As for the trip, other than the riot and having to get strip searched to enter the airport, it’s been just peachy.” The girl cracked a smile and tossed the apple she was holding into the air, catching it with the same hand as it fell back down before taking a bite.

Cassandra’s attitude was so disarming that Akiko felt immediately at ease, as if she were among friends. “I bet. It was the same story for me, too,” she replied. “I’ve flown out of this place so many times you’d think they’d know I’m not a terrorist by this point, 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, no thank you. Having to live in Montreal full-time might just be the one thing worse for my sanity than passing through this checkpoint.”

“Not a fan of city life?” Cassandra 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 last year of uni used to be. Maybe I blocked it out or something.”

“I’m sure you’re not the first student to lose a few memories here and there.”

“Ha, you’re not wrong. I had more than my fair share of drinks when I was a student, let me tell you.”

Cassandra smiled warmly at her. “Speaking of drinks, it seems like the ship won’t be ready for some time yet on account of all the delays, so I was thinking of getting a coffee or something at one of the cafés nearby. You’re welcome to join me if you’d like. Consider it my treat.”

“I think we should let this young lady get back to her work,” Shufen interrupted.

“Yes, mother. I suppose I’ll have to find you some other time, miss,” Cassandra replied, retreating like a dog with her tail between her legs.

\* \* \*

Once the employees that Marcus had managed to free were aboard, the ship’s ancient engines shuddered and hoisted them into the air, giving Akiko a full view of Montreal. It might have been beautiful once, she thought. Now, even the eponymous Mount Royal was obscured by a wall of skyscrapers and a canopy of walkways so thick that they were said to form an upper city. Rising even further was the spine of the defunct St. Elodie space elevator, sticking up like the skyline itself was showing her a rude gesture.

It wasn’t until they had left the city behind that she was summoned to the bridge, and she learned her troubles were far from over.

“There seems to have been unforgivable negligence on the part of the airport maintenance crew. We’re suffering a widespread equipment failure,” a weary-looking Marcus informed her upon her arrival. “Moreover, our own engineers were not as fortunate as you were to escape detention. I was unable to negotiate their release.”

“What all’s busted?” Akiko asked.

“Communications, radar, and the computer targeting for our weapon systems.”

“Wow, so we’re basically a flying brick. Why’d you call me here alone, though?”

“You may lean more towards theory than practice when it comes to engineering, but you were raised in a migrant fleet, were you not? I’m led to believe that your people live and breathe airships.”

“The captain’s daughter didn’t work in maintenance.”

“You mean to say her highness will be of no use to us, then?”

“I didn’t say that. I did pick up a thing or two, it’s just…the *Rainier Wind* is old. Every day I’m shocked it doesn’t fall out of the sky. Maybe if Aleph Null didn’t pride itself so much on flying a purebred and sourced parts from a newer model…”

“A radio is a radio. I’m sure even you can fix ours.”

“It’s not the radio I’m worried about. Given that three systems all died at once, it could be a problem with the power supply, or something, and you’d need someone with way more experience than me to fix that kind of mess. I’ll take a look, but, like, no promises.”

“I can’t ask you for more. If you need anything from me, I’ll be having a discussion with Director Hao.” Marcus quit the bridge without another word, leaving his former student to her own devices.

\* \* \*

Akiko was mid-way through dissecting the broken radio when she heard a gentle cough behind her.

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

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

“Stalking? Oh, you wound me! It was pure serendipity, I assure you. Well, that and Dr. Fairchild informing me that our communications and defense systems are compromised, which has obvious ramifications for my job.”

“Security. Right.”

“Exactly. Mind if I join you for a bit, Miss…Akiko, was it? Just to keep an eye on the situation.”

“Depends. Did you bring that drink you offered me back at the airport?”

“I thought you might like something nice in Athens rather than the swill they serve in the galley.”

“Oh, really? If you’re serious, then yeah, I’d be down for that. Hang around all you want. Just make sure not to, y’know, get up in my space.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

As Cassandra circled around the console, 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 an athletic build. 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 from headquarters.”

“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, turning back to her work. “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 have some thoughts, but I didn’t wanna say anything…”

“Hah, beautiful, *and* polite. Bet you’re a popular one.”

“I move around too much to for long-term relationships these days. Just, y’know, drifting from place to place with nothing more than a tiny-ass cabin to call my own, and a degree in a field that I ended up hating. Aerospace engineering, 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.”

Akiko peered deeper into the guts of the radio console. She was no mechanic, but she didn’t need to be to spot an obvious short-circuit, as if water had been poured over it.

“Cassandra,” she said, quiet enough that the bridge crew couldn’t hear her. “Is there a log of who all accessed the bridge before everything went FUBAR?”

“My guards would know, but it’ll be a short list. We’re running with a skeleton crew on account of all the arrests. Are you saying this was sabotage?”

“Had to be. Even the *Rainier Wind* wouldn’t just blow a circuit like this. And also…” Akiko reached a gloved hand past some wires and pulled out a tiny machine, which she handed over to Cassandra.

“What’s this?” the security chief asked nervously.

“A barometer,” Akiko replied. “Modern ships keep cabin pressure at sea level, but the *Rainier Wind’s* so old that its cabin is only pressurized to about two thousand meters to reduce stress on the airframe. Meaning someone could rig this gadget to fry our circuits only after we’d reached cruising altitude. So simple. So stupid.”

“Stupid that we didn’t catch it, I agree.”

“Nah, wasn’t on us. This happened during maintenance, before any of us got aboard the ship. Our saboteur used the delays to sneak on board and plant this thing, rather than just cut the wires, precisely *because* we’d never notice until we were well on our way to Athens.”

“If the delays helped them get in, then you don’t think…”

The two women looked at each other in silence.

“What I think is that we’d better find Dr. Fairchild and your old lady,” Akiko said. “Let them know they need to get ready for a Skywatch attack.”

\* \* \*

It didn’t take long for the *Rainier Wind* to capitulate. A warning salvo from the Skywatch destroyer’s silver turrets brought the transport to a halt, and their rivals’ boarding party came aboard with no resistance. Cassandra had ordered her guards not to start a fight they couldn’t win, and so it was with bated breath that the rest of the crew waited aboard the bridge, wearing their protective masks. All of them except for Marcus and Shufen, whom they agreed would do the talking.

The door opened, and Akiko finally saw the face of their foe. He was a sturdily-built middle-aged man with a focused expression, and his deep blue suit was the lone bit of color in the monochromatic menagerie of the Skywatch. At his side were a half-dozen men, all of them carrying riot batons and small-caliber firearms unlikely to damage the airframe.

“Dr. Fairchild, my good man,” he said, opening his arms wide as if for an embrace. “And Director Hao, too! How have things been in Montreal? I hope the strike hasn’t been too bothersome.”

“I think you know exactly how things are going, Chairman Lancaster,” Marcus responded.

Lancaster’s mirth immediately gave way to malice. “I want to hear it from your mouth. Go on.”

“The situation was under control until your mercenaries arrived and started gassing the crowd. Illegally, I should add, since security on *our* campus remains *our* responsibility after the failure of your so-called ‘Montreal Defense Initiative.’”

“A local militia led by a mewling child still at her mother’s teat. I’m sure they would have saved the day.”

“At least those troops are actually *from* Montreal, unlike the Skywatch.”

“Those two aren’t,” Lancaster said, gesturing towards Cassandra and Shufen.

“I was born and raised there, actually,” the younger woman said in perfectly indignant French.

Lancaster ignored her and stepped back, letting the tension in the room fall to a low simmer. After a pregnant pause, the chairman turned to Akiko, of all people, and spoke.

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

Her old master scoffed. “She hardly needs to be involved in this –”

“Remind. Marcus. Why the protests started.”

Caught off guard, Akiko thought back to the signs she’d seen the protestors holding. “Uh, they’re striking because –”

“For God’s sake, take off that mask. We didn’t bring gas weapons, and I can’t hear a thing you’re saying.”

Akiko looked at Marcus, who nodded, and then doffed the protective gear. “They’re striking because of your contract with the Skywatch,” she continued in a clear voice. “They don’t much like the prospect of armed mercenaries in their workplace.”

“And we have a winner!” Lancaster said in a mocking tone. “They’re against the Skywatch. They want our contract with them terminated across all branch campuses and contractual protections against further oversight from headquarters. With that in mind, I’m sure you see why your retreat from the airport, a facility owned and operated *by* the Skywatch, made it necessary for my allies to defend themselves. I know you’re not stupid enough for that to escape your notice, Marcus, which makes me worry that this was an intentional act of sabotage. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“You’re one to talk about sabotage, given that we found evidence of your agents tampering with our equipment. This isn’t really about the strike, or the MDI, or anything so mundane, is it? If it were, you wouldn’t have made your move way out here, where I can’t call on branch security for backup. I can guess as to why, but it’s my turn to say I’d like to hear it from your mouth.”

“I can’t fault your intuition,” the chairman replied. “See, my friends in the finance department have been keeping an eye on your books, and they found impressively large holes in your expenditure reports. Millions of dollars gone, just like that.”

“You’ve resorted to this brazen act of piracy because of an *accounting mistake?*”

“Because we dug into what you were actually buying. Rocket fuel, carbon-fiber reinforced carbon, aluminum, a launch site in the ruins with no commercial utility? You’re restarting the ASPIS project without authorization from the board in order to cut me out of the loop, hoping that you could wow the crowd at the conference and all would be forgiven.”

A small part of Akiko wondered why the construction of what sounded like a space shuttle so incensed the chairman, but a much greater part wanted to be as far away from this nonsense as possible. *Sit tight. Keep your head down. Wait for it all to blow over.* Just like the man at the airport had told her.

“I know your prototype is still kept under lock and key in Montreal,” Lancaster continued. “I also know that your campus security is likely to resist if I attempt to seize it by force, which is why I’ll be taking you with me as collateral. You’ll be released once my own team confirms they can reproduce your results, so there’s nothing to fear.”

Marcus’ weariness vanished for a moment, supplanted by enmity. In that same moment, Akiko saw the faintest trace of smugness in Lancaster’s own expression. She wanted to punch the man on her master’s behalf.

“We don’t have the strength to fight him yet,” Shufen said, laying a firm hand on her partner’s shoulder.

Marcus didn’t break eye contact with Lancaster. “Very well. I’ll come quietly,” he said, pronouncing each word as if it caused him pain.

“You made the right decision. I’m proud of you,” the tall man replied.

With a dramatic flourish, the chairman and his guards escorted Marcus off the bridge. It wasn’t until the Skywatch destroyer had disappeared into the clouds that Akiko felt her heart rate fall to something approaching normal.

“What kind of science fair are you guys working on that’s causing such a fuss?” she asked.

“I wish I could say, Miss Akiko, but I can’t let that cat out of the bag just yet, even for a sweet thing like you,” Cassandra replied. “You’ll have to wait until the conference, even if Lancaster is the one presenting it.”

“Hold up, we’re not actually going to the conference after all that, are we?”

“That’s exactly what we’re doing. The conference is the safest place for us to be. Even Lancaster wouldn’t dare start a fight in public, and we’ll have our friends from other branches to back us up if things do go pear-shaped.”

“I’m not sure what pears have to do with it, but yes,” Shufen said. “The New York, Dublin, and Berlin branches will support us with both votes and force of arms. You’ll be in no danger from Lancaster or anyone else.”

“Right. So, try and enjoy the trip.” Cassandra smiled and winked at Akiko. “I do still owe you that drink, after all.”

## Chapter 2 – J’accuse!

Cassandra hung her arm out the side of the speeding convertible, feeling the fresh Athenian air against her skin. With her stomach already full of food and drink, she closed her eyes and swayed in time with the *Nisiotika* musicon the radio, up until the vehicle came to a stop more abruptly than she would have liked.

The thin man at the wheel, the one who had nearly launched her out of her seat, was her twin brother, Elias. In the years since they’d last met, she had forgotten what it was like to ride with him, as much as he insisted that he was in control at all times.

“Aah, we’re here! Go ahead and get out, little sis. I’ll talk to the valet,” Elias said in Mandarin, adjusting his spectacles.

“I’m driving next time,” Cassandra replied.

“Is there going to be a next time? I thought you’ll be heading straight to the hotel with mother after the conference. Not that I wouldn’t be happy to treat you at another restaurant, haha.”

“You say that like I’ll never see you again after tonight. We live in different countries, not on different planets.”

“Fair enough. Maybe I can come visit you and mother in Montreal.”

“I’m sure she’d love to see you,” Cassandra said, lying through her teeth. The truth was that she had no idea what would happen when Elias and Shufen met again after five long years. Her sibling had always chafed under their mother’s strict parenting, and his decision to join the communists and travel to America only further estranged him.

At least it seemed he’d done well for himself. On the rare occasions when he called or wrote, Elias never said much about his work with the party, so it came as quite the shock when he announced that he would be attending the conference as a representative of the Comintern, the alliance of revolutionaries whose ideology had found purchase in the failing states of the old world. Cassandra was shocked that they had even been invited, given the history of conflict between them and Aleph Null. Then again, she thought, it was a good opportunity for “her side” to flex their technological muscles in front of a rival. No doubt the Comintern felt the same.

After leaving the valet with a healthy tip, the twins walked past rows of poplars to the convention center’s main gate and presented their photo IDs to the guard on duty.

“Cassandra Hao Zhenyan of Aleph Null Research and Development, and Elias Hao Zhenjie of the New Communist International,” the guard read aloud, examining their faces to make sure they matched the photographs. “Welcome to the Strategic Technology Conference. Just walk through this here metal detector, then the exhibition hall is up the escalator to your left.”

“Thank you kindly, sir,” Cassandra replied.

The twins’ mother was already waiting for them in front of the exit to the Grand Balcony. Much like Cassandra, she was dressed in an amaranthine qipao that reeked of opulence, both of them standing in stark contrast to Elias’ plain black suit.

“There you are, girl. You kept me waiting,” Shufen said.

“Oh, it’s my fault,” Elias immediately interjected. “I invited her out for a meal to celebrate our happy reunion, and it may have taken a bit longer than I expected.”

Their mother seemed less than impressed, and she raised an eyebrow towards Cassandra. “I half expected you to be off on a tryst with some new paramour. Even if your particular brand of recklessness won't result in unexpected children, remember that you represent our company and our family while you’re here.”

“I didn’t even do anything, and you’re still lecturing me? Besides, you’re one to talk about recklessness. Or do you mean to say you’ve finally found our father after twenty-odd years of looking?” Cassandra asked.

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

“Mistakes. Right.” Cassandra turned to Elias. “Well, there you have it. Perhaps we *mistakes* should go see the exhibition hall on our own.”

“She didn’t mean it like that. Mother’s just trying to make sure we’re the best we can be,” Elias said.

“Oh, I gave up any hopes of that long ago. Now it’s just damage control,” Shufen replied in a venomous tone.

If Elias took offense at the jab, he hid it beneath an inscrutable smile. “You two go ahead without me,” he said. “I’m just going to step out onto the balcony to smoke before the presentation starts.”

“You still smoke?” Cassandra asked.

“You have your vices, I have mine. Now go on and get ready for your show, little sis. I’m eager to see what you and that Fairchild fellow have been cooking up.”

Rather than explain the fate that had befallen their new project, Cassandra raised a hand towards her brother, who met it with a clap and a fist bump. It was a gesture they had done so many times in their more innocent years, and she felt herself smiling.

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The conference was held in one of the Wings of Piraeus, buildings so named for their distinctly avian shape that stretched out over the harbor. From the great windows of its exhibition hall, Cassandra could see ships sailing underneath to unload whatever goods they had brought from distant lands. Inside, hundreds of guests mingled amongst themselves in anticipation of the night’s main event.

It was on the fringes of this crowd that Cassandra soon found familiar duo engaged in conversation, both carrying drinks from the cocktail bar. One was her new friend, Akiko, and the other was a scruffy-looking man she might charitably describe as an acquaintance, one Jackson Fairchild. As Marcus’ son, he had graciously volunteered to represent the Science Administration at the conference while his father was otherwise occupied.

“And look who we have here,” Jackson said with a tipsy swagger as soon as Cassandra caught his eye. “One of my father’s newest playthings.”

“And here’s his lapdog, finally let out of the house,” Cassandra teased back.

“If that’s what you call having the honor of standing in for him at this prestigious event, then yes. *Bark, bark*.”

“I wouldn’t know; I was invited to be here from the very start. How is the old man, anyway? Have you heard from him?”

“He’ll be fine, I’m sure. Headquarters is no doubt digging into the depths of his mind like some delicious tart, trying to pick out whatever scraps of knowledge they can comprehend, which means they can’t harm him, unless they want to spoil their ill-gotten goods.”

“You think he’ll cooperate?”

“No, but I also don’t think it matters. They have our data and our prototype, meaning it’s only a matter of time before Lancaster reproduces our results. I hope you’ve done a better job preparing security for tonight than you did on the trip here.”

“As you well know, venue security is being provided by our hosts from the Athenian branch campus.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t their director a close friend of Lancaster? That doesn’t cause me any comfort.”

“You’re exactly right, which is why I’ve worked with our allies to come up with a plan for extracting key personnel in case of an emergency.”

Akiko raised an eyebrow. “Given that this is the first I’m hearing about this, I’m guessing I don’t count as ‘key personnel,’” she said.

“That decision wasn’t up to me,” Cassandra replied, looking sheepish.

“If it’s any consolation, I wasn’t informed about this, either,” Jackson added. “I’ll have to have words with your superiors about this oversight, Hao.”

“Go right ahead. In the meantime, Miss Akiko, I see your glass is empty. Perhaps you’d like to come with me to the bar for a refill?”

“That eager to settle your debts, are you?”

“I think my mother would have me whipped if I broke a promise, no matter how small.”

“Well, I hope for your sake that ain’t literal, but sure, I’m game. See you around, Jackson.”

The boy gave Cassandra and Akiko a halfhearted salute as they sauntered off together, disappearing into the crowd.

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After Akiko had imbibed an impressive quantity of alcohol – Cassandra herself declined any more liquor so as to keep her wits about her – the pair of them rejoined their party in front of the exhibition hall’s center stage. Shufen and Jackson were already sat in the rearmost row of folding chairs, neither so much as acknowledging the other’s existence.

“Ready to see this sniveling little rat take credit for our hard work?” Jackson leaned towards them and whispered.

“Not particularly,” Cassandra said.

There was much fanfare when the sniveling little rat in question stepped on the stage. Dressed in the same colors he had worn whilst accosting the crew of the *Rainier Wind*, Lancaster waved to the crowd with a warm smile and a predatory stare.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’m pleased to welcome you to this year’s Strategic Technology Conference. Before we begin, I’d like to extend special thanks to Director Alexander Stathopoulos of the Athens branch campus for hosting us tonight.”

The chairman paused for a short, elderly man to stand up and receive the crowd’s applause before continuing. He held up a remote and tapped the button once to project a familiar image onto the screen behind him.

“The St. Elodie Space Elevator. Built in Montreal by Avalon Aerospace prior to the company’s acquisition by Aleph Null some fifty years ago, then abandoned due to structural damage sustained during the Comintern riots. Due to financial and political concerns, it’s remained in a state of general disrepair ever since.”

Cassandra narrowed her eyes at the chairman’s choice of words. It wasn’t uncommon for those ideologically opposed to the Comintern to append its name to that incident as a means of disparagement, and they weren’t *factually* wrong to do so. However, the name quite intentionally omitted the arrests and aggressive strike-breaking tactics that most sources agreed were the source of unrest. At least, that was what she had been taught in school. The Carnaval uprising, its more common name, had been part of her mother’s youth, well before her own time.

“It is a testament to the value of the space elevator that Avalon Aerospace was allowed to remain unionized when it became the Montreal branch campus,” Lancaster continued. “Ironic, then, that this very same union’s lack of restraint turned its most valuable asset into a crippling liability. Nowadays, what used to bring in enough profit to support a small country by enabling asteroid mining projects is draining our coffers to the tune of almost half a billion Canadian dollars per year, just to keep the thing from collapsing. And, of course, tearing it down would be even more expensive.”

Next to Cassandra, Jackson chuckled. “Why does it feel more like this asshole brought everyone here just to read us the riot act?” he whispered.

“I mean, that’s just it, yeah? He’s an asshole,” Akiko replied.

While her companions conversed across her, and Lancaster continued his introductory speech, Cassandra noticed movement out of the corner of her eye. Several of the security guards standing around the perimeter had left their posts and were making their way outside. All were wearing the badges identifying them as men from headquarters, and they moved together as an organized unit. The thought crossed her mind that there might have been some kind of incident, but none of her own men had reported even a single *malakas* drunk on ouzo, much less a brawl.

“You don’t suppose they just all had to use the washroom at the same time, do you?” Jackson said to her.

“You noticed too?”

“I’m not blind, nor is this speech thrilling enough to demand my full attention. Give me a little credit.”

Meanwhile, on the stage, Lancaster finally arrived at what the audience had been so eagerly anticipating – the point. With yet another tap of the remote, the image of the space elevator disappeared and was replaced by two photographs of cities that looked like they had been taken by satellite.

“Does anyone recognize these locations?” he asked the crowd.

He was met with silence.

“Oh, come on, now, don’t be shy,” Lancaster said with a smirk. “I’m sure some of you know what I’m talking, because this here on the left, ladies and gentlemen, is the Comintern party headquarters for the western United States, in Seattle. Likewise, we have its counterpart across the Pacific, in Beijing.”

Lancaster advanced the slide show once more, and Cassandra scowled at the next image to appear on the screen, a silver spacecraft in the shape of a flying wing.

“Both of these images were taken yesterday, from this vehicle right here – the Peregrine reconnaissance shuttle. A fast and reliable vessel capable of reaching orbit from a terrestrial runway for pennies on the dollar compared to the spaceplanes of old. Most importantly, it is nigh undetectable by modern instruments, hence our ability to snap these…souvenir photos with our rivals none the wiser. Or take other action, if we thought it prudent.”

“Not only does he steal our work, he uses it to make threats like some kind of warlord,” Cassandra said with furrowed brow.

“Does your brother work at either of those sites?” Akiko asked.

“Seattle, yeah. He says it was beautiful before…you know. Just like everywhere else along the ring of fire.”

“Guy must be really into the cause if he’s down to live somewhere like that.”

“Well, that’s where his believers are. That said…” Cassandra scanned the crowd, trying to gauge her twin’s reaction. “…I’m not sure where *he* is right now. Mother, did Elias ever come back from the balcony?”

“Not that I’ve seen, but I haven’t been looking for him,” Shufen replied.

“Tsk. I’m going to find him and drag him back. He should be here to see the chairman threaten his hometown.”

While Lancaster prattled on about the Peregrine’s other uses, Cassandra politely excused herself from the room and made her way past the guests who were still perusing other exhibits, or standing in line for refreshments. Just as expected, she met Elias on the wing’s ivy-coated balcony, looking out over the coastline with neither cigarette nor drink in his hands.

“What are you doing out here, big bro?” she asked in Mandarin. “You’re missing our presentation, even if the chairman’s the one giving it.”

Elias didn’t even turn to face her. “Oh, it’s okay,” he replied. “The rest of my delegation will file a proper report later. And now you’re here to tell me everything I’ve missed so far! Things do have a way of working out, don’t they?”

“Well, now I don’t even want to say anything, if you’re really gonna be that lazy.”

“Mmm, but you’re still going to, aren’t you?”

Cassandra sighed. “The long and short of it is that the chairman stole our spaceplane design that was intended for transport, mining, and research, and is pitching it as a stealth bomber. He implied that it could be used to attack Comintern strongholds like Seattle or Beijing.”

“Ah, so just the usual corporate bluster. Nothing to fret about. An act of war would be beyond even a company as big as Aleph Null, anyway.”

“You’re not worried he might sell the tech to someone who *can* do something like that?

“For all his empty words about fighting communism, he sells just as much to the Comintern as he does our opposition. It’s bad for business to pick sides.”

“So that’s why you’re out here, is it? Nothing that goes on in there really matters?”

“Exactly. So why not stay with me for a bit? It’s a beautiful night.” Elias patted the concrete fence he was leaning against.

Without a word, Cassandra joined her brother at the edge and gazed into the stars. For a minute, they stood there together, listening to the crashing of waves below and the murmur of the crowd behind them.

“I missed having you around, you know. Losing you, then Chenmei, then Xiang, all my friends from university…it’s been lonely at home.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath full of salty sea air, thinking of all the loved ones who had exited her life.

“And I’m sure mother’s quite busy with all the turmoil around campus.”

“Turmoil that your people have been stirring up, yes.”

“Aha, I do admit I have some culpability in the matter, but the sentiment was already there. The Comintern just helped them organize.” Elias paused, taking note of his sister’s frosty demeanor. “Ahem. Still, I’m sorry for making your life so difficult. In more ways than one, I’m sure.”

“You did what you had to. I can hardly blame you for – wait. What’s that?”

The first bomb exploded on the far side of the wing, and so Cassandra at first mistook its tremors for an earthquake. The second bomb exploded on their side, putting to rest that false assumption with a burst of flame and shrapnel close enough for both brother and sister to feel the heat.

Cassandra didn’t react immediately. It took her almost three seconds of staring, listening to the ringing in her ears, before her instincts compelled her into the fire.

“Little sis, wait!” Elias barked. “The wing, it’s unstable, it’ll –”

He didn’t need to say what would happen next. The wing cracked down the middle and its tip fell into the harbor, taking with it a crowd of screaming guests, whose bodies were crushed between the water and an avalanche of rubble.

If they weren’t among the dead, Shufen and the other VIPs from the Montreal Branch would be making their way to the muster point. All Cassandra needed to do was meet them there, where transport had already been arranged.

A single memory held her back from running for the exit. *I’m guessing I don’t count as key personnel,* Akiko had said. She and Jackson could still be inside, lost and confused, and there was no way to be sure Shufen would have offered them any help, nor could the men from headquarters be trusted. Leaving her brother dumbfounded, Cassandra continued her sprint into the building. If she died trying to save her friends, that wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.

It took precious minutes and no small amount of luck, but she was able to track down her friends amidst the stampede. Both were stumbling about in the smoky halls, holding on to each other for support as they coughed and lurched forwards like runners in a three-legged race.

“Akiko! Jackson! There you are!” Cassandra said between mouthfuls of smoke.

“Cass? What the hell are you doing back in here?” Akiko shouted back.

“I came to get you, what else?”

“Bringing us along with your little escape plan? Will mommy dearest be okay with that?” Jackson asked.

“I don’t care what she thinks, because whatever just happened will make Lancaster crack down hard on Montreal, and I don’t want you anywhere near him when that happens.”

Jackson smiled at her. “Music to my ears,” he said.

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Only after they’d left the building would Cassandra’s charted route diverge from the crowd flowing into the streets. To the credit of the Athenian branch staff, they had done a remarkable job of preventing a stampede. With the help of local first responders, they corralled the frightened guests into the few exits that had been deemed safe and rendered aid to those whose injuries were too severe to escape on their own. The trio from Montreal slipped back into this current and rode it all the way out.

In the street, they encountered their first hurdle. Rather than flee, Chairman Lancaster had taken charge of the evacuation, directing both the Athenians and a team of Skywatch officers from a post just outside the building. He did not fail to notice their arrival.

“The fledglings from Montreal made it safely to the ground, I see,” he said as soon as their eyes met. “But where’s your mother? Has she already left without you?”

“We made our own plan to escape in case you tried anything. Couldn’t be sure you wouldn’t try and ambush us again,” Cassandra replied.

“A plan that conveniently distances yourselves from the scene of the crime and any authorities who might look into it. Don’t think I didn’t notice you excuse yourself from the exhibition hall right before the bombs went off.”

“You can’t possibly be – I was off to look for my brother!”

“You mean the brother who’s part of the organization currently agitating riots in Montreal? That brother?”

“There’s a wide gulf between a rowdy protest and an act of terrorism, and you know it. My brother and I had nothing to do with any of this.”

“That remains to be seen, which is why I can’t let you go free just yet. Even if you didn’t plant the bombs yourself, you may know something about who did.”

“Ah, those three will be leaving with us,” Elias said, arriving unannounced from behind Cassandra. She whirled around to see not just the man himself, but a small group of armed Comintern guards. Lancaster’s mercenaries drew their own weapons in anticipation of a fight.

“If this is a rescue attempt, you’re just making things worse,” Cassandra hissed at Elias.

“The Comintern also lost people in the attack just now,” her brother continued, completely ignoring her. “At least six confirmed dead already. If my *meimei* knows anything about this incident, then we would very much like to hear from her. And, if I can be frank, we don’t exactly trust Aleph Null or their puppets in Athens to be forthcoming with their own employees’ wrongdoings.”

“*Alleged* wrongdoings,” Jackson interjected.

“Mmm, yes. Alleged.”

The tone with which he spoke, while inappropriately cheerful, betrayed none of the warmth Cassandra had come to expect from him, and she began to worry that his desire to arrest her was genuine. On one hand, he was still her brother, and he would – he *should* – have trusted her profession of innocence. On the other hand, she realized, it had been some time since they’d last met. There was no way to know how he’d changed in the interim, and he could say the same about her.

“Look at you two, arguing over who gets to take me home like drunken frat boys,” Cassandra said, trying to force her voice above the men. “Let me tell you what’s actually gonna happen – both of you are going to put down your guns and let us go home without any more nonsense.”

“You don’t exactly have many cards to play here, girl,” Lancaster replied.

“I don’t need my own cards when I can just play yours. Seems to me like either side trying to nab us is going to start a fight with the other. Maybe you’ll win, but will either of you take that risk over suspicion alone?”

“You’ve got our balls in a vise anyway, what with my father in custody,” Jackson said. “If you want something from us, why not just squeeze us later, when tempers aren’t running quite so hot? And you, commies – you’ve got so many believers in our city that I’m sure there are ways to get what you want without putting your lives on the line.”

Elias was the first one to stand down. “*Meimei* and her friend aren’t wrong,” he said. “No reason we need to fight here and now. We all know where to find them if we need them.”

“And if they go into hiding afterwards?” Lancaster asked.

“Then it’s just like the boy said. We squeeze them back out. Though I’m sure that won’t be necessary, haha.”

Lancaster stared at his opponents for a moment, and then gestured for the Skywatch to lower their weapons as well.

“See? That was a much happier ending, I think,” Elias said with a self-satisfied smile.

“Tell that to your six dead friends,” the chairman replied.

“There’ll be time to grieve for them later. Best way to honor them right now is to prevent further deaths, don’t you think?”

“An odd change of tune from the ones who started this confrontation, but fine. Have it your way.”

“In that case, I think we’re done here,” Cassandra said. “Miss Akiko, Jackson, come on. We’re leaving.”

“Say goodbye to mother for me!” Elias shouted after them.

Both the Comintern and Skywatch guards shuffled to the side to make way for the departing trio. Before they left, Cassanda glanced back towards the broken wing. It was still abuzz with activity, from the ongoing stream of survivors pouring out of every viable exit, to all kinds of watercraft gathering in the harbor to retrieve bodies both living and dead. Clouds had rolled in to obscure the stars, and the plume of smoke from the burning building rose upwards to join them.

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Survivors from the Montreal branch campus were already boarding the airship by the time Cassandra and her friends arrived in the old lot where it had been tucked away. The vessel was the smallest of corvettes, far less comfortable than even the aging *Rainier Wind*, but it was fast and quiet, which was exactly what they needed to escape Athens. Or, rather, it would have been, had Elias’ timely intervention not earned them a ticket to leave at their leisure.

The people themselves were in a sorry state. Of the nearly twenty VIPs that should have been there, fewer than half were present, and many of those she did see were covered in soot or clutching open wounds. Of some consolation was the fact that her mother was among their number, and seemed to be uninjured.

“Is this everyone?” Cassandra dared to ask.

“Yes,” was all Shufen said in reply, rubbing her undoubtedly aching temples. Under ordinary circumstances, Cassandra might have been put off by her mother’s curtness, but the night had clearly taken its toll on the woman’s psyche, and she couldn’t find it in her heart to judge.

“Then there’s room for a few extra guests. Let’s get out of here,” Jackson said.

Akiko spun around to look at him. “Lancaster is letting us go,” she said. “We’re not gonna, y’know, wait and see if anyone else shows up?”

“He only let us go at the wings because the Comintern was about to start a shootout. Do you see any of them here now? I guarantee you headquarters already sent goons to snatch us up now that we’re exposed.”

Cassandra opened her mouth to argue, but she knew that he was right. The plan she herself had written called for the corvette to take off if there was any doubt as to the status of any VIPs, trading a few potential hostages for the escape of the rest. However, it was easier by far to write such a plan than it was to execute it.

“Just get on the ship, everyone,” she muttered, knowing they had a long flight home ahead of them.

## Chapter 3 – The Cloud Garden

One dreary winter, in a time before Cassandra, Akiko, or even Shufen had been born, a small factory on the bank of the Saint Lawrence River re-opened its doors. Once a minor branch of the Avalon Aerospace company, it achieved little of note for decades, and when it went quiet following the company’s descent into financial ruin, 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 Avalon, the factory had not sat idle during those years of closure. Its director, Emile Lasalle, had quietly purchased the site for himself, and turned his attention from private spaceflight to government contracts, which kept the company afloat. For that half decade, a cohort of scientists, engineers, and support staff worked and lived inside the compound, rarely venturing outside, all to make sure they re-entered the world stage with a bang.

As soon as everything was ready, Lasalle threw wide the gates and set his plans into motion. Using the profit from his contracting, 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. The newly-christened Lasalle Industries diversified as it grew, building or buying facilities for robotics and medical research. A professional security team replaced the gangs, the old compound grew into a luxury office, and Lasalle became a household name. Those years were a renaissance not just for the company, but for Montreal itself, whose economy thrived with the increase in trade. Then, with a new foundation in place, Emile Lasalle gazed once more upon the stars, and the St. Elodie Space Elevator was born. It took the sale of the company to Aleph Null to see the project through, but he died content, knowing that his great work was complete.

Close to a century after these plans were first set in motion, the corvette carrying Cassandra and her friends returned from Athens. The vessel was suitably small to land at the branch campus itself, near what had once been Lasalle’s original headquarters, and so they gladly avoided the airport and its untrustworthy personnel.

As the aircraft entered Canadian airspace, Cassandra twitched against the rock-hard seat cushion. Though the flight should have offered plenty of time to rest, her memories of the disaster kept her from restful sleep, and she felt like her body was fraying at the ends. Her skin itched all over. Her expensive high heels suddenly seemed a size too small, binding toes that couldn’t so much as wiggle. The bra she rarely noticed anymore was now a painful sensation around her chest and back that she longed to tear off.

Montreal was on the horizon, she reminded herself. Only half an hour, give or take, before she would be able to strip herself down and take a much-needed shower, or perhaps a bath in her apartment’s hot tub. That sort of leisure, the privilege of wealth, was exactly what she needed. Until then, however, the best she could do was to take deep breaths, scratch the itches as best she could, and try to situate her mind in a comfortable place, the way her therapist had once suggested.

For Cassandra, that place was a café on Sherbrooke Street. It was a kitschy little building in the shadow of the upper city where she and her high school friends liked to eat in the afternoons. She recalled the smell of poutine and cigarette smoke, the crinkle of other patrons’ newspapers, the laughter of her classmates, and her mother’s disapproving glare whenever she returned from the “dangerous” lower streets. The children had suspected that Shufen sent guards to keep an eye on them when they ventured down below, but had never been able to prove it.

Even though these memories carried with them a pang of sorrow for friends she no longer knew, they were also a source of warmth, which was enough.

That was a lie. It was never enough.

Sensing her distress, Akiko laid a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. Cassandra immediately and instinctively swatted it away.

“Yikes, alright,” her friend said. “No touching, huh?”

“Not right now, no. I’m just…I feel dirty, okay? And being packed in here with so many people really isn’t helping.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Akiko replied in the hesitant tone of someone who clearly did not.

“Anyway, we’ll be home soon. Then I can wash off all this sweat and ash and sleep in my own bed again. Maybe spend some time at the gym afterwards.”

“You a gym rat? I mean, you clearly work out, but is it, like, a big hobby of yours?” Akiko made no effort to hide her eyes scanning up and down Cassandra’s bare arms.

“I wouldn’t say big. I go a few times a week to help keep myself in shape. Healthy body, healthy mind, and all that.”

What Cassandra didn’t want to say was that the exercise was another way to appease her mother. In her teenage years, Shufen had stressed that it was a waste to work one’s mind while neglecting the body, and “encouraged” her daughter to spend at least as much time playing sports as she did reading manhua. Nowadays, there wasn’t time enough to join a proper team, but she was used to the regular workouts and grew restless without them.

“Well, speaking of home,” Akiko continued, “I think we’re just about there. Look.”

The space elevator had been visible for a while by that point, and, as the corvette closed in on the city itself, it banked into a gentle turn around that axis, bringing into view their final destination – the Cloud Garden. That was the name that Emile Lasalle’s architects had given their new base of operations, a towering ziggurat topped with greenhouses containing the titular gardens. Cassandra had spent many afternoons up there, either to relax on her own, or for private time with a friend or lover.

Akiko was pressed against the window like a child on her first flight, which Cassandra found charming. “Even when I worked in engineering, I never got to actually go inside the Garden. Guess they saved the nice offices for, uh, what was the term you used again? Key personnel?”

“Rank has nothing to do with it,” she said. “Even the Cloud Garden needs janitors and secretaries. However, there’s a lot of sensitive material in the labs, which means a lot of background checks and psych evals. I’m sure you could have done it if you really wanted.”

“Hey, don’t get me wrong, I’m not complaining. Those tests sound like a pain in the ass anyway. I’m just telling you what they told me.”

“Gotcha. Anyway, you’re free to stay with us as long as you need, since I remember you said you lived aboard the *Rainier Wind* and Heaven only knows if we’ll ever get it back. I’ll get you proper identification in case anyone asks.”

“That’s not gonna be a problem for your mother?”

“As long as you keep to the public areas, it’ll be fine. This isn’t the first time I’ve brought someone into the Garden.”

“Probably the longest you’ve had anyone stay, though.”

Cassandra declined to respond.

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The public hallways of the Cloud Garden were made to be inviting, with warm colors and large windows through which the morning sun made polished hardwood floors and plaster walls glow. At this hour, the space was expectedly empty, save for the last person Cassandra wanted to see upon her return.

“Xiang,” she muttered under her breath.

The man in front of her had been her first, oldest, and closest friend, up until the stress of life drove them apart. After too many arguments to count, they’d arrived at the unspoken conclusion that it was better not to interact anymore. An agreement that remained in place as he strode right past Cassandra and bowed before Shufen.

“Welcome back, Director Hao,” he said.

“This is a pleasant surprise. It’s good to see you, Xiang,” Shufen replied.

It was no secret that her mother liked him. He was well-groomed, with flawless porcelain skin and voluminous hair that must have been the product of an extensive morning routine. He was adept in etiquette. He had been a volleyball star in both high school and university. And now he was a scholar with a master’s degree in political science. Cassandra did her best to live up to the same virtues, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that she compared unfavorably to him in Shufen’s eyes.

At least the time of arranged marriages had long since passed. In the days of old, her mother would have certainly tried to negotiate one between the two of them, and the Sun family would have easily accepted.

“I have information you’ll find relevant,” Xiang said. “In the ten hours since your departure from Athens, Chairman Lancaster has prepared to reintroduce the Montreal Defense Initiative before the board of directors.”

A flicker of wrath jumped across Shufen’s eyes. “He’s done what? How do you know this?”

“We can discuss my sources in private later.”

“Yes. Of course.”

Though her own work rarely concerned affairs outside the Cloud Garden, Cassandra had some inkling of what Xiang did for the company. He was the Montreal branch’s liaison to headquarters, which meant he was the perfect man to be their spy, for all the good that seemed to do them. Even his connections had not foreseen Lancaster’s raid on the *Rainier Wind* and abduction of their lead scientist.

## Chapter whatever

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.

\* \* \*

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.

*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