Thirty Minutes After Midnight

Joana Uyyek

## Chapter 1 – Kolyma

*“You’d do well not to ignore the protests, Admiral. I understand that you’re a military man and are focused on military threats, but, under your blind eye, they’ve grown beyond a few angry priests and businessmen. Young intellectuals are now giving up on the Directorate. I’ve had to sit and watch as we hemorrhage brainpower, and, if we don’t act decisively, we risk losing an entire generation of disaffected students to our rivals abroad.”*

* Grand Marshal Archer Hamilton to Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster

Akiko couldn’t remember why she hated Montreal.

The city was still as industrious as ever, this much was true. Students graduating from the local university, her alma mater, continued to achieve great things, helping to rebuild the world after it was laid low by a wave of natural disasters. The United Nations’ “Provisional Directorate,” as the new world order was called, sold its schools as a true home for the student body, where a girl could cultivate and reimagine herself as whatever she wished, and Akiko was no exception. She had loved the city with all her heart – its sights, its sounds, and its smells. Even the feeling of the pavement beneath her feet was like a friend to her. As soon as she removed her cap and gown, however, the veil was lifted, and the illusion of comfort fell to the ground like the silken garments that had brought her so much pride.

And yet, try as she might, she couldn’t for the life of her remember why.

Of course, she could recall no shortage of minor grievances against the city. The more time she spent in the ivory towers of Montreal, the more she noticed its ugly imperfections: the sterile laboratories of the academic world, the manic fervor of researchers swarming the streets like ants, the loudmouthed protestors voicing their grievances against something or other, and, looming above them all, the militant hand of the Skywatch, whose heavily-armed airships made port in the city to be retrofitted by the Defense Administration. But these were inconveniences, nothing that should have made her hate the city above all others.

A question for another time. Ironically, those same airships she loathed proved to be her relief. The only job she was able to find was that of a stewardess aboard an Army transport, which got her away from Montreal at the very least. Her new, transient life did bring her back to that city every so often, but it was far more digestible in small doses.

Akiko’s job was considered a low-risk position. Most of her passengers were civil guardsmen, police in all but name, or Army officers, both of whom played second fiddle to the Skywatch and were unlikely to be targeted by hostile powers. Such an arrangement suited her well. She’d seen enough combat of during her mandatory year of student service. Even better, the company she kept onboard the *Kolyma* was of a humbler stock than the high-ranking Skywatch officers, who tended to be pompous at the best of times.

The first familiar face she saw at the gate belonged to a young aviatrix by the name of Eirene Baros, who had only recently been assigned to the *Kolyma.* Previously, Eirene’s role, commanding one of the escort corvettes that would detach from the larger transport should it come under attack, had been filled by a Frenchman named Pieter Marechal, but he had been replaced after a sudden and severe bout of illness. Not that it mattered. The odds of hostilities were so low, Akiko thought, that it didn’t really matter who filled the role. A trained monkey would do just as well, and provide in-flight entertainment to boot.

In her grey pilot’s jumpsuit, Eirene scarcely stood out from the crowd, save for a striking visage that caught Akiko’s attention, cute and elegant in equal measure, with blonde hair despite her clear eastern heritage. The two women had few chances to speak during their work, which didn’t bother Akiko much. Though she’d hardly have called her a friend, she offered a polite smile as she approached, which Eirene returned.

“Christ, it’s like trying to cross into North fuckin’ Korea back in the day,” Akiko said, gesturing to the dense crowd around them. “With this crowd, I’d be surprised if we get through faster than it took ‘em to clean up that mess. Protests really have ‘em spooked, huh?”

“It would seem so,” Eirene replied.

“You been waiting here long?”

“I just got here a minute ago, but I suspect we’re in for quite a wait. Security isn’t taking any chances, even with the ships’ own crews.”

“Hmmph. Talk about a pain. I’ve flown out of this airbase so many times you’d think they’d know I’m not a terrorist by this point.”

Eirene shrugged. “Maybe, but plenty of veteran crews have gone rogue in the past. I don’t entirely blame them, as annoying as it is.”

“Well, I do. I already went through all kinds of vetting when they hired me, and I’d assume they did the same for you, 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, feel free to apply for a job here.”

“Hah, no thank you. Having to live here might just be the one thing worse than passing through this checkpoint.”

As if in response to Akiko’s grievances, the line began to shift forward, all the other staff and crew shambling ahead through the gate that was supposed to offer easy access. The two women looked at each other in relief that almost lasted a whole five seconds before everything once again ground to a halt. Eirene hadn’t been wrong – they were in for a long wait.

By the time they made it through, the UNS *Kolyma* was already warming up on the tarmac, ready to lift off as soon as all were aboard. Next to one of its engine nacelles, Akiko saw a gaggle of officers milling about, no doubt waiting for her to arrive and serve them. Of their number, the most prominent and boisterously-dressed was Grand Marshal Hamilton, the man they were to ferry across the Atlantic, and the rest were a mix of his subordinates and the *Kolyma’s* crew, all in competition for his attention. Though the Army was a less prestigious organization than the Skywatch, the Grand Marshal’s favor was nonetheless a coveted boon for any aspiring officer.

Hamilton was a frequent passenger aboard the Kolyma, and most of the crew – the original crew – knew him well. He was an old man, with tufts of grey hair and a gaunt frame, and a conspicuous mechanical hand protruding from his uniform’s left sleeve – not an uncommon sight amidst armed forces personnel. Akiko herself had been pressured to install augmentations of her own, but had refused, even though she found the science behind them fascinating. With the Defense Administration campus so close by, the great scientific leaps could be observed from a safe distance. There was no need to put them in her body.

“Hold on for just a minute. I’m afraid these this lot have need of my services,” Akiko explained. “Or go on ahead if you’ve got your own work to do.”

“I’m in no hurry,” Eirene replied. With a respectful nod, Akiko turned away from her acquaintance and approached the circle of officers, waiting for them to acknowledge her.

“Good afternoon, lass,” Hamilton finally said after silencing one of his compatriots mid-sentence. “You seem well. I’m glad to see it.”

“Apologies for my tardiness, Grand Marshal,” Akiko replied.

“You needn’t be. We’re all being tried by these security measures, but they are necessary, so I can hardly fault you for it. After all, many of them were by my design.”

“I appreciate your understanding. In any case, would any of you gentlemen like some food or drink prepared before we depart? We may be a little behind schedule, but I can still have some appetizers ready by takeoff.”

“My usual will be fine, thank you,” Hamilton replied, indicating to Akiko that she should start a cup of flowery orange pekoe as soon as possible. The rest of the officers politely declined anything more than water, most likely wishing to appear temperate in front of their dear leader.

“Orange Pekoe and five glasses of water, on the way. I’ll have them prepared and dispatched to the conference room at once.” Akiko curtsied, as was proper, and was about to leave with Eirene when Hamilton stopped her.

“I believe you’re the last to arrive, so we’ll accompany you aboard, the Grand Marshal said. “If you don’t mind, that is.”

“Not at all. I’d be happy to escort you.”

Akiko was happy to have them along and to hear them talk politics, even if the barrage of names went well over her head. It made her feel like she was part of something, as insignificant as her role might have been, and there was always a chance that she might pick up some interesting gossip or news of a dramatic scandal. Mostly, though, all she overheard were petty squabbles between minor officials and banal discussions of policy.

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

“I suppose he wouldn’t want to be absent for something so significant,” one of the officers muttered, his uniform denoting a rank of Major. “If he were, though, would this alleged ‘representative’ be accompanied by the Tower Guard?”

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

“Have you talked with the Commissariat about this?”

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

“Then I wish you luck when the time comes,” the Major said with a respectful nod.

Some ways ahead of the pack, Akiko turned to Eirene. “You understand a word of that?” she whispered.

“Barely. Army and Skywatch are at each other’s throats, it sounds like, but what else is new?” Eirene replied.

“Yeah, pretty typical.” They both recognized a few individuals, of course. Any idiot child would know Magnus Keller as the Director-General, a title introduced to declare him leader of the new world, and Jacob Lancaster was the famed Grand Admiral, who had “convinced” countless territories to swear fealty to the Directorate. The others, though, must have been less distinguished personages, since she could not remember having ever heard their names.

Once the passengers were fed and the crew settled in, they began their journey to Athens, where the Provisional Directorate had made its capital. Hamilton would be staying there only for some technology conference, after which he would return to Montreal to try and quell local unrest. Every day it seemed like there was a new demand. Earlier, protestors had called for the Directorate to end its mandatory military service for university graduation, and others had demanded an end to the aggressive colonization of Africa and North America. The survivors there, they argued, deserve the right to self-determination, to build their own countries if they so choose. Magnus Keller clearly disagreed.

By far the most common demand, however, was to lift the restrictions on organized religion, allegedly a response to the clash of faiths that culminated in the so-called League Crusade – or at least to stop bombing those who failed to comply. Allowed to *privately* praise any gods of their choice though they were, the devout were prohibited from assembling in public in the hopes that this would prevent further conflict. While faith was not entirely out, the Church was. Public opinion of these policies varied widely, meeting with great approval from some and violent opposition from others, the loudest of whom by far were the outraged clergymen, but so it went. Centuries of turmoil and ruin had granted a lucky few the chance to mold a new sculpture, and the Directorate’s current form was their model of choice, even if many did not appreciate its avant-garde style.

As the transport ascended, Akiko could see the whole of Montreal. It might have been beautiful once, she thought. The centuries-old photos still decorating the university’s halls certainly made it look that way. Now, even the eponymous Mount Royal was obscured by a wall of skyscrapers, with a canopy of interlinking catwalks and platforms so thick that they were said to form a second city, hundreds of meters in the air. Rising even further was the ugly spire of the space elevator, the only one of its kind still operational, sticking out as if the city itself was showing her a rude gesture.

A few corvettes flew past, disappearing into a landing bay at the base of the elevator. The markings on their wings were that of the Civil Guard, just like Eirene’s. 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 wounded corvettes would surely have sought refuge at an airbase closer to the front. There was no reason for them to retreat so far.

Unless the Directorate was losing ground, she realized.

That, however, was none of her concern. If the North American survivors gained their independence, then perhaps she’d never have to visit Montreal again, as irrational as she knew her hatred to be. Maybe that wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.

\* \* \*

Hours later, the ship drew ever closer to its destination, continuing its passage over the Mediterranean Sea. With a half-empty tray in hand, Akiko returned to the conference room, where Hamilton and his staff were still hard at work.

“Something the matter?” Hamilton asked, noticing the stewardess’ arrival.

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

“I’ll be fine, doll, but thank you,” the Grand Marshal replied. Without another word, Akiko curtsied and left to put the tea back into storage.

After she’d done her business in the galley, saving a single cup of tea for herself, she headed out through the mess hall, where she spotted Eirene sitting alone at a table. The young woman didn’t seem bothered by her solitude, but Akiko figured she might use some company anyway, and approached her.

“May I?” she asked, gesturing towards the seat opposite Eirene. Mouth still full of steamed vegetables, Eirene nodded, and so Akiko sat down, waiting for her companion to swallow.

“Hamilton and his friends are done with you?” the pilot asked once her mouth was clear.

“For now, yeah. I’ll check in on them once more when we prepare for descent. Same ol’, same ol’.”

“That makes sense. He seems quite fond of you, I notice. An officer patting a stewardess on the head like that would have been unheard of from any other crew I served with, but I get the feeling that the *Kolyma* doesn’t care as much for guidelines as the Skywatch does.”

“That’s right, we don’t, and it seems we’re not the only ones.” Akiko pointed back towards Eirene. “That hair of yours is a dye job that’s not exactly within regulations, am I right? Your name says Greek but your face says…hmm, Chinese? Nowhere you’d find natural blondes, that’s for sure. And if I look closely, the roots…”

“Heh. Half-Chinese, half-Greek, yes,” Eirene said, biting her lip as the stewardess scrutinized her.

Such a mix did not surprise Akiko. Her own parents had fled Japan when it was devastated by earthquakes during the upheaval, and China was in no better shape. Refugees from both countries had migrated west, enticed by offers to help build the Directorate in exchange for new homes, or had fallen in with fleets of wanderers that travelled the globe, never staying in one place for long. The whole world, it seemed, had become a great melting pot.

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

“Civilians, hm?” Eirene said with a hint of alarm. “Well, I suppose this is as safe a job as any for your type. If you came from Transportation, then you probably studied in Montreal or Madrid, yeah? I heard most TA staff graduated from the universities there.”

“Montreal. They taught me well, but I can’t say I’m sorry to leave. The whole city just makes me sick.”

“Had a bad time in school, did you?”

“Surprisingly, no. There must have been something, because right after I graduated, the whole place just started to seem…rotten. My memory around that time’s a bit of a blur. If there was a specific incident, I can’t say I remember it. Maybe I blocked it out.”

“Curious.” Eirene took a sip from the glass of water in front of her. “I went to school in Athens myself, studied ancient history and classical literature. Would have gone for my PhD, but during student service I started as a pilot, and found that I enjoyed flying more.”

Akiko laughed. “Took a few of those classes myself, as electives,” she said. “I can understand why you’d rather spend time in the sky than the library.”

Eirene smiled, and the two continued to chat for some time.

\* \* \*

Grand Marshal Hamilton stepped onto the bridge of the *Kolyma*, surveying the crew hard at work. Directly ahead was the ship’s captain, Jameson Lovelace, who saluted him as soon as he arrived. Hamilton saluted him right back, as naturally as he breathed.

“What can I do for you, sir?” Captain Reed asked.

“Oh, don’t mind me,” Hamilton replied. “Just here to see a friend, is all.”

Reed allowed himself a cheeky smile. “And who might that be?” he asked. Both men stared at each other for a second before laughing and shaking hands. Before their cheerful reunion could continue, however, the first officer called for the captain’s attention, warning him of an incoming transmission that Reed reluctantly turned to take.

“UNS *Kolyma*,” a gruff voice began, “this is Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster, of the UNS *Sunset Serenade*. This vessel has been identified as a potential security risk, and is subject to additional screening prior to arrival. Please halt immediately and prepare for aerial rendezvous.”

“*Sunset Serenade,* this is Grand Marshal Archer Hamilton, en route from Montreal on official orders from the Director-General. Please transmit your authority override code,” Hamilton said, grabbing the microphone from the first officer. Everyone on board knew that the man speaking to them was the real deal, and easily outranked everybody on board, but procedure was procedure.

A few seconds passed, and a longer string of digits appeared on one of the *Kolyma’s* many monitors. Reed sighed, and then took the microphone back from Hamilton.

“Very well. Preparing to initiate rendezvous.”

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

“Damnable Skywatch bastards,” Reed muttered once the transmission had ended. “We’ve got the Grand Marshal onboard, and everybody knows it. What could he possibly be hoping to find?”

“Nothing. You and I both know he’s just doing this to make sure everybody knows he’s on top. And, of course, our good friend Director-General Keller loves the Skywatch, so nobody’s going to stop him,” Hamilton replied.

“Yeah, well, let’s just hope he doesn’t take too long having his fun.”

“Indeed.”

\* \* \*

“What in the devil?” Akiko exclaimed as the *Kolyma* came to a halt. She stomped over to the mess hall window, looking out only to see the *Sunset Serenade* extending a bridge by which the Skywatch inspectors would arrive. Such was the size of the flagship’s hull that it dwarfed the already sizable *Kolyma*, completely obscuring the two women’s view of the horizon.

Eirene’s heart sank to the pit of her stomach at the sight. “We should go,” she said. “This isn’t going to end well.”

“Go? Go where?”

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

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

Despite Eirene’s stammered protestations, Akiko turned and started towards the hall. Before she reached the door, however, it swung open to reveal a host of figures, led by one in particular that neither could fail to recognize – Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster, his dark, weathered face conveying no emotion save for icy contempt. Lurking behind him was a spindly pale man that Akiko didn’t recognize, and who emitted a threatening aura despite his curious lack of uniform. Eirene, too, seemed to notice the stranger, and regarded him with suspicion as he whispered something in the Grand Admiral’s ear.

The two women quickly snapped into a salute, a gesture which Lancaster ignored.

“Apologies for the interruption, but we have reason to believe there are terrorist elements aboard this vessel,” the old man said, his condolences obviously insincere. “Everyone aboard must submit to our inspection. Please don’t make this harder than it needs to be.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Akiko said as the Skywatch officers stepped forward to search the room, starting with her and Eirene.

“Unfortunately, this is no joke,” the old man replied. His troops continued their brief but intrusive investigation, finally pronouncing both women free of weapons or contraband.

Lancaster nodded. “They’re clean? Fine. Keep searching the room. And if *this* one,” he said, pointing an accusatory finger at Eirene, “tries to take off, shoot her out of the sky.”

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

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

“Y-yeah. Good luck to you too,” Eirene said.

\* \* \*

The particular model of corvette that Eirene flew was not the latest in air combat technology, but it was fast. From the transport’s launch pad, she looked over the *Sunset Serenade*, trying to gauge whether her speed and what few missile countermeasures she had would be enough to escape the wrath of the Skywatch should the situation further deteriorate.

After all, Lancaster had been right about one thing. There was an unfriendly agent aboard the *Kolyma*, and that agent was her. She had been placed there in order to steal the plans Hamilton had drafted regarding security at the upcoming conference, but Lancaster had evidently caught wind of their treachery. That she had not been arrested on the spot suggested his information was incomplete. A small mercy.

Although Eirene had already downloaded the plans to her corvette’s computer, she remained tense, still unsure whether the Skywatch was on her trail. It was then that, as if in response to her unspoken question, the *Sunset Serenade* withdrew its boarding ramp and started to drift away. Lancaster and his goons were already finished, it seemed, and her cover remained intact. Before she could let herself relax, however, Eirene noticed a single one of the flagship’s railguns taking aim directly at the *Kolyma*.

“Oh,” she whispered.

For a split second, Eirene entertained the notion of going back for Akiko, but Lancaster had given her no choice. The young woman strapped herself in and disengaged the clamps binding her to the transport. One shot hit its mark before she was fully clear of the condemned vessel, and a second blast sealed the *Kolyma’s* fate mere seconds after the corvette had launched, a final nail hammered violently into the flying coffin.

With no time to reflect on the horrifying scene, all Eirene could do was evade the fire that was now drawn to her – the only survivor, and the only witness to Lancaster’s crime. She twisted her aircraft until it was upside down, and pulled up on the stick until it had reversed direction in the shape of a split S, putting the moribund *Kolyma* between herself and the enemy. As a shield, it wouldn’t last long, but a precious few seconds were better than nothing.

A third salvo from the flagship’s railguns shattered the transport in twain, releasing a conflagration of such intensity that the sky itself turned a hellish, disturbingly beautiful red. That she appreciated it so made Eirene feel a pang of guilt, especially as she flew past the wreckage and, for a moment, wondered if she couldn’t also see human bodies amidst the falling scrap. Some even seemed to still be alive.

No. That was a distraction. The danger had not yet passed.

It took every countermeasure she had, on top of a healthy amount of luck, but Eirene did escape, and the magnitude of her situation soon sank in. Grand Marshal Hamilton was dead by his comrade’s own hand, as were Akiko and so many other innocents aboard the ship. She had prepared for the possibility of violence when she agreed to the mission, but for one of the Directorate’s own vessels to be shot down by the Skywatch was unthinkable. While he was not known for putting much value on individual lives, Lancaster would have been well aware that his country lacked the infrastructure to mass-produce such vessels as the *Kolyma*, making its destruction an irreplaceable loss.

Her mind wandered to the last time she’d seen Akiko, recalling the malice with which Lancaster had stared them down, and the strange man lingering in his orbit. What were those two up to, she wondered?

Nothing that could have justified what she’d seen, that much was certain. Even if the destruction of the *Kolyma* had some incomprehensible strategic value*,* she knew that, whatever his plans may have been, Akiko didn’t need to die. Part of her wanted to ignore the tragedy, to believe that the technical success of her mission was enough, and that the collateral damage was unfortunate but inevitable. Lancaster was clearly playing his own game, and Eirene’s seditious friends were playing theirs. With so many pieces on the board, what was the value of a single girl?

## Chapter 2 – Peregrine

*“When the climate reached its breaking point, the Upheaval, as it was called, was nigh biblical in its intensity. Storms laid waste to cities, lands buckled underneath our feet, plagues culled our young and elderly alike. It was as if God himself sought to punish us for the crimes we committed in His name.”*

* Bishop-Commander Vicente Rodriguez, of the Papal Center Fleet

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

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

Over the years, a new community arose, an eclectic mix of locals, rebels, migrants from afar, and anybody else willing to trade a bit of comfort for liberty. It was there that the UNS *Peregrine* and its mutinous crew had found a home after refusing an order to slaughter innocents. This group, now known as the Peregrines after their infamous dreadnought, quickly began to grow, and soon found themselves serving as the city-state’s militia in a tense standoff against the Directorate. Every so often, they engaged in a minor skirmish, but otherwise kept a low profile. The loyalists were equally content to ignore the defectors, but, if they proved worth of attention, the people of Istanbul knew they would not win the subsequent battle.

Inside the Peregrine fortress, Alexia Eliades and Besim Karahan sat alone at a table by the window. She was a tall and strong young woman with a thin face and pointed chin, her short, reddish-brown hair lit up by the evening sunlight. He, by contrast, was a grey-haired elder, but far from frail. It was easy to tell that he had, in his youth, been possessed of great might and constitution.

As the two of them spoke, Alexia toyed with a rough stone, tossing it into the air only to catch it once again and repeat the process like some kind of Sisyphean game. Her right hand, meanwhile, clutched her rifle that lay flat on the table. Once an idealistic student who’d rather make love than war, the Directorate’s brutality had forced her into battle alongside the Peregrines, where the old gun had served her well.

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

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

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

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

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

“Risks?” Besim’s eyes narrowed. “They didn’t see what it was like back then. They didn’t see the cities burn. They didn’t see the mass graves or smell the stench of carrion in the streets. But I did. The devastation was such that one could *almost* understand the Directorate’s hard line against the faithful afterwards, so those who think me ‘averse to risk’ had best wish our cold war never turns hot. This city will not survive a third doom.”

Alexia threw up her hands. “Don’t worry, I’m on your side here,” she said. “It was only a couple of the newer recruits, anyway, so I’ll talk to them and see what I can do. The rest of us recognize everything you’ve done for us, and for Istanbul. You can be sure of that.”

“I’m so glad I have you to act as my public relations manager,” Teague replied, his scowl turning back into a smile.

“And I’m happy to serve.”

“Well, you’ll have plenty of time to demonstrate your commitment in Athens. In the meantime, I have a meeting soon with some of the local imams regarding our charity work, so if you don’t mind…”

“Of course, don’t let me keep you,” Alexia said, bowing in deference to her superior. Having led Istanbul’s defense since long before the Peregrines arrived, Besim was a natural choice to lead the newly-reborn militia, and to liaison with the city’s civilian leadership, an important job that everyone knew better to interrupt.

She, however, had a task of her own in the meantime. Not long ago, they had received confirmation that Eirene was soon to arrive, hopefully with the data she had been sent to acquire, and Alexia wished to be the first to welcome her.

\* \* \*

The skies over Istanbul were clouded by the time Eirene landed, which did little to make the city seem any more welcoming. Those who called the ruins home had done what they could to make them livable, but from the air, all she could see was rubble and bits of green where nature had started to reclaim the land. As expected, Alexia was ready and waiting as soon as she stepped out of the corvette, and they embraced without a word, their bodies providing a comfortable bit of warmth amidst the chilly air.

Eirene was Alexia’s dearest friend and closest confidant, the two having formed a strong bond despite the roles they’d played when they first met, that of a hunter and her prey. In the years past, the Directorate had ordered Alexia – a mere student undertaking her mandatory service – to arrest Eirene on false charges, and it was only a moment’s hesitation that allowed her to clear her name and spared her the metaphorical gallows. Angered by such blatant corruption, Alexia agreed to shelter Eirene while finishing her service and her degree, and, once that was done, they fled to Istanbul as the best of friends.

Distracted by the joyful reunion, it took a moment before Alexia realized what was wrong. “You’re trembling,” she said, stepping back but keeping Eirene’s hands in hers. “Is something up…?”

Eirene tried to remain stoic as she shook her head, but the game was already up. There was no point in concealing her distress.

“Do you want to talk about it? There’s time yet before the others are ready,” Alexia said, looking into the young woman’s beautiful eyes. Holding Eirene close like this was a guilty sort of pleasure. She felt a queer satisfaction in giving her friend the love and comfort she needed, though they’d both have preferred it if such comfort were not necessary at all.

After a sniffle and a pat on the back from Alexia, Eirene looked down, shaking her head. “Could hardly have gone worse,” she mumbled. “I got the data, but the *Kolyma*…the whole ship went down. Destroyed by the hand of Grand Admiral Lancaster himself.”

Alexia’s skin turned to ice, and her eyes widened. Sensing her friend’s shock, Eirene nodded in confirmation.

“Before you ask, I don’t know why. I was hoping Teague might have some insight, but I’m…not optimistic.”

“Yeah, we didn’t hear shit down here, sorry. Anything you’ve got to say is all new to us.”

“Figures.” Eirene paused. “Can we, ah, go inside? It’s a bit cold.”

“Oh, sure. Come on.” Alexia took Eirene in her arm and shepherded her from the landing pad towards the warmth indoors. Once they had crossed the threshold, she expected her friend to relax, only to find her even more distraught, presumably as whatever events she had witnessed continued to sink in. As much as Alexia wanted to poke and prod, she would wait for Eirene to let it out at her own pace.

“There was a girl,” she finally said, stopping in the middle of the hallway. “Her name was Akiko. We talked a bit just before everything fell apart, and she seemed nice enough, but just as soon as we’d met, the *Sunset Serenade* showed up and attacked the *Kolyma*. I don’t blame myself for that, but Akiko…I could have saved her. Just her. If I’d somehow convinced her not to go back, she’d still be alive.”

“I assume the reason she went back was to go help her friends?” Alexia asked.

Eirene nodded.

“Put yourself in her shoes, then. Imagine the person you love most – family, friend, partner, whoever – was in mortal danger. Would anything, anything at all, persuade you to leave them behind with a stranger you’d just met? No. There was *nothing* you could do. Nothing except remember her, and avenge her.”

“Avenge her how, exactly?” Eirene snapped. “With what army do you intend to march into Athens and force Lancaster to stand trial? Remembrance isn’t worth anything while we’re stuck behind these walls, if we only ever reach out to ensure our *own* survival. I wouldn’t even call it cowardice, just…helplessness. And I hate it.”

Alexia opened her mouth to respond, to try and reassure her friend, but could think of no words beyond trite platitudes. In truth, she knew, Eirene was right. There was nothing they could do to bring the Directorate to heel, and offering sanctuary to those who managed to flee was little more than a bandage atop a gaping wound while the same men remained in power. Were they resigned, then, to grit and bear the abuses of their stronger neighbors?

“I assure you,” she finally whispered, “we will find a way. I can’t pretend I know how or when, but Lancaster, Magnus, and all the rest will be held accountable.”

Eirene shook her head solemnly. “I’m sorry, Sunshine, but that’s a promise you can’t make,” she said.

“What do you mean? I don’t buy for a minute that there’s really *nothing* we can do. The flight recorder on your corvette might have picked…”

“That doesn’t matter. We both know that Lancaster will squash us as soon as we move against him. Besim won’t let you go down that route, and for good reason. And before you say you’ll do it on your own so that none of us take the blame…that’s something *I* won’t allow. I’m not going to lose you, too.”

“That’s one thing you’ll never have to worry about,” Alexis said in a mellifluous voice that soothed Eirene ever so slightly.

“I’m glad,” her friend replied, and the two hugged once more. Once they let go, the two women spent a moment avoiding eye contact, unsure of what to say next.

“We should probably, ah, go talk to Besim,” Eirene finally said. “I’m sure he’s waiting to hear my report.”

“Besim’s in a meeting of his own right now. We got plenty of time.”

“Still, I’d rather start making our way to the conference room. Making *some* kind of progress will help put my mind at ease, I think.”

“Of course.” Alexis gave Eirene the cheeriest smile she could muster and turned to leave, gesturing for her to follow.

\* \* \*

Besim’s business in town was mercifully brief, so the two women did not have to wait for him long. As soon as the old man walked through the door, he beamed at Eirene and threw his arms open wide to welcome her back home. In return, Eirene smiled back, hopping out of her chair so she could shake his hand.

“It’s a blessed day that sees our little bird returned to us,” Besim said jovially. “I trust you kept in good health during your time in Montreal?”

“As well as I could. Things seemed a bit dicey over there, but I didn’t run into any trouble until…” her voice trailed off, leaving Besim confused and alarmed.

“Trouble? Were you unable to acquire the data?”

“No, I got the data just fine. They suspected that something was up, but never knew it was me. Didn’t stop Jacob Lancaster from shooting down the *Kolyma*, though.”

Besim blinked. “I beg your pardon?” he asked, dumbfounded.

“The *Kolyma* was shot down by the *Sunset Serenade*. By the Grand Admiral’s own flagship. I barely escaped with my own life, but so many others…”

“Perhaps you should start from the beginning,” Besim interrupted, finally taking his seat at the old table.

“Right. Yes. The beginning”

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

“Well, I should start by offering my condolences. If you think it appropriate, I can organize a non-denominational memorial for the deceased. Somehow, I doubt their own government will give them the respect they deserve,” Besim said once she had finished.

“That sounds good, yes,” Eirene replied. Alexia nodded in agreement.

“Very well, I’ll see to that later on,” Besim continued. “Now, what I can’t understand, and what I imagine you two are also wondering, is why Lancaster would attack a loyalist airship like that. Everyone knows that Skywatch and the Army have something of a rivalry, but such brazen murder of the Grand Marshal is insanity. As much as Director-General Keller loves the Skywatch, he can’t overlook this.”

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

“I beg your pardon?”

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

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

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

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

“Guess who’s in charge of analyzing those black boxes.” Eirene said in a resigned voice.

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

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

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

Perhaps. There was too much they did not know.

“Anyhow, as much as I’d love to continue this wild speculation, we can’t act based on mere conjecture,” Hector finally said. “We *can* act upon the intelligence Miss Baros has retrieved for us, however, which brings me to an urgent matter. While we would be on track to prepare an infiltration of the conference, I regret to inform you all that we have encountered certain complications.”

“Oh?” Alexia asked.

“While you and Eirene were taking your sweet time getting here, I received some rather unfortunate news from our spies in the field. A fugitive from the Directorate recently sought refuge at one of our outposts on the Athenian outskirts. Regrettably, the commander there took him in, and now it seems that some hot-headed little shit in the Skywatch is going to try and capture him during the conference, presumably in a misguided attempt to curry favor with the Director-General.”

“That’s…yeah, that’s unfortunate. Is there a plan to deal with it, yet?”

“As if you had to ask,” Hector answered. “Besim and I had little time to discuss – minutes, really – so the details aren’t quite there yet. But we think we can turn this to our advantage. Consider what might happen if we let this man approach, only to ambush and encircle him with reinforcements, easily prepared thanks to our foreknowledge of the attack. He’d no doubt call for reinforcements of his own, which would have to be drawn from Athens in order to get there on time, making it even easier for our teams in the capital to do their jobs. Best of all, since this would be an ostensibly defensive maneuver, it’s unlikely to provoke a retaliatory strike. Once our own mission in Athens is complete, we’ll hand over the fugitive and chalk it up to a terrible misunderstanding.”

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

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

Alexia scowled at Hector. “Nobody here’s fool enough to think we’ll all make it out, but I’m with Eirene – nothing we could learn at this conference would be worth this sacrifice.”

“What a surprise, you defending Eirene’s naivete. Do you ever *not* side with your favorite piece of eye candy?” Hector replied.

“I side with who I think is *right*.”

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

“Okay, that’s enough. We’re all friends here,” Besim said. “Hector has the right of it, though. The UNPD has left us alone only because their resources are needed elsewhere, so if the new war mac hines free them to march against Istanbul, we *must* be prepared. I understand your concern, but we may never get another chance like this, and you can rest assured that we’ve no intention of making a mess of it.”

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

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

Though the days that followed were hectic, the final stages of the plan were soon set in place. Besim and Hector seemed full of confidence that it would succeed, and their agents would obtain the kn owledge they sought from the Strategic Technologies Conference with an “acceptable” number of casualties. All that remained was to depart once the hour came.

“Looks like it’s starting to rain. Wonder if that bodes ill,” Alexia said in her native Greek, staring out the window of her bedroom. Alone with Eirene, she could speak the language freely, which was a comfort. Directorate schools were taught in English, but Alexia’s mother had made sure to pass on her own tongue, and so Greek words now reminded her of home.

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

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

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

That night, Alexia had been given a simple part to play. With a pair of binoculars, she would set up a nest on a rooftop near Samara Tower, where the conference would be held. Hector’s agents had ensured that it would be clear of guards, giving her a clear view of the goings-on that night in case anything happened that a listening device could not detect.

Eyes, though, were not enough. The Peregrines needed ears as well, and so two other parties would go to Athens that night. One was Hector’s proposed diversion, who would bolster the defenses at the outpost known as Hotel India, in the hopes of drawing security forces away from the capitol. As strong as this defense would be, everybody knew that the Directorate’s army would be stronger still, and so, with their victory far from guaranteed, those who volunteered had already bid their loved ones goodbye.

Taking advantage of this distraction would be the third and final player, a single man whom Hector had arranged to pose as maintenance worker. With help from a few sympathetic assets within the tower, he would plant a bug within ‘earshot’ of the conference, which would relay every word back to the Peregrines.

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

“What worries me,” Alexia said, “is what comes next. Like, say we get in and steal all their secrets. Say we all get back alive. How can we turn that intel into something *real*?”

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

“Take what you were saying about the diversion to Hotel India tonight. I know that people are gonna die, that’s what happens, but this whole willingness to spend human lives like a rich kid spends his parents’ money is why I left the Civil Guard in the first place, and we don’t even know what we’re going to buy with those lives! Certainly not peace. Not now.”

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

“I do. It’s just…I trust them to do what they think is right, and that they’ll try not to get us killed in the process. So, when they say we need to know what happens at this conference in order to survive, I believe them, but that’s short-term. Nobody around here seems to have a plan to effect real change, or even an idea of what kind of changes we want! What if, when the Directorate starts to falter, Hector starts pushing for an oligarchy, or Besim wants to set up a Catholic theocracy? I doubt that’ll happen, but just pretend for a moment. What would we do?”

“Hold elections, I’d assume.”

“Yeah, I’d hope so as well. But we need to make sure we’re in a position to have them – revolutions are fertile spawning grounds for dictators.”

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

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

“Good to see you, Mayumi,” she said, gently pulling the door open. In front of her was, as expected, a svelte Japanese woman whose piercing eyes and charming smile never failed to draw attention. She was the newest commander to be granted the role, and the three women had become fast friends.

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

“Just here to say hello?” Eirene asked.

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

“I’ve no complaints.” Eirene said, reciprocating the hug.

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

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

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

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

Eirene said nothing, but nodded her assent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Of course. I’ll keep an eye on her until you all leave.”

\* \* \*

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

As the trio walked down the dusty street, Mayumi stopped to gaze at a quaint bistro.

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

“Yeah. Yeah, look. Is that…”

Alexia turned her head to see where Mayumi was pointing, where she saw the countenance of a familiar man, seated at an outdoor table with a stack of papers in front of him. That man was Ian Dayal, the lucky chosen who would be heading into the Tower that night. Of the four of them, he was the eldest and most experienced, having served under Besim as first officer aboard the *Peregrine.* Ship-to-ship was his forte, but that night he’d be playing the part of a spy, just like the rest of them.

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

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

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

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

“True, but…actually, never mind. I’m sure you’re all here looking to have a good time, so go ahead and take a seat. I can spare a few minutes.”

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

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

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

“No faith in Hector’s disguises?”

“Getting in won’t be hard, especially if Mayumi does her job right. But if anything at all goes wrong…see all these red lines on this map, here? Blast doors on every arterial hallway or stairwell. If we do get detected, all of them will be sealed off, preventing any traffic in or out of the building. The Skywatch rapid-response teams can override them, but without their codes, you want to guess my only way out?”

“Outside the building,” Eirene said.

“Right on target. If all goes to plan, we’re golden, but if it doesn’t, I’ll have a few seconds to make my way out the window. Luckily, the ledges are built in such a way that we can map out an escape route, but if that one path is cut off, then I’m done for.”

“Fuck, this is depressing,” Mayumi interrupted. “I thought we were coming here to relax before the end comes. Well, I guess Ian wasn’t there when we decided that, but he never stops thinking about work anyway, so whatever.”

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

Mayumi opened her mouth, but no words came out. Instead, she just smiled, shook her head, and took a large bite out of her kebab.

“You okay?” Eirene asked.

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

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

## Chapter 3 – Opening Moves

“The new world was built on lies. The claim that humanity is on the brink of annihilation? A lie. The claim that the church was the source of our ancestors’ sins? A lie. The very name of the regime, intended to make you believe it derives its authority from the United Nations? A lie. The UNPD is neither provisional, nor does it represent the global community.”

* Besim Karahan

The water was calm as an inconspicuous boat drifted up to Widow’s Walk, a foul-smelling, waterlogged port district surrounded by a formidable concrete levee that was built to keep back an ever-rising sea. Most coastal cities had such structures, and those that did not were steadily being overtaken by waters bolstered with melted polar ice.

The boat came to a rest near the levee, just close enough for the passengers to jump onto a weathered platform that was conveniently devoid of prying eyes. Hector had leveraged his connections to ensure that the dockworkers were enjoying well-earned time off that night, and so Alexia and Ian remained unmolested as they disembarked and bid the captain farewell. All was quiet but for the gentle stirring of the sea.

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

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

“My condolences.”

“Shame we’re on such a tight schedule. Would’ve liked to go see if my old house is still standing. Those old cannons are still there, so it’s not like they’re being proactive about demolition.” She gestured down the levee towards a series of crumbling gun emplacements, long since abandoned in favor of more sophisticated weaponry.

“If we get out without raising any alarms, we’ll have all the time in the world. I’ll make a stop wherever you want.”

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

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

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

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

“What’s that?” Alexia asked.

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

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

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

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

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

“That’d be Mayumi’s work, I imagine,” Ian said. “Ten cars, ten guys each. One hundred guardsmen that we don’t have to deal with.”

“And one hundred more that Mayumi *does*.”

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

The chamber where Magnus was to hold his conference was known more commonly as the Grand Balcony, a ledge protruding from the western side of the tower lined with enormous glass windows, windows that Alexia could only assume were lined with kinetic shield barriers to deter snipers. Presumably, she thought, this is why they seemed unconcerned with securing spots like hers, where a sniper might position herself.

What did warrant some degree of concern, however, was the airship lurking above the tower, the design of which she did not recognize. If she were to guess, Alexia would have called it out as the Director-General’s personal conveyance. Such a ship would not be much of a threat in battle, but if its crew somehow spotted her, the game would be up, and so she quietly thanked God that it seemed ill-inclined to activate its searchlights for the moment.

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

Alexia took a second to confirm that her scouts were still in place around her, ready to cover their escape when the time came. “Understood,” she replied. “I’ve got eyes on the conference room. No unusual activity in the street, either."

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

The council members took their seats, arranged in a semicircle around a central podium. On one side sat the regional governors, and opposite them sat the heads of the UNPD’s core administrations. At the center were the spots for Director-General Magnus himself, as well as the Grand Marshal and Grand Admiral.

From her perch, Alexia saw that several seats remained empty that night. Grand Marshal Hamilton’s absence was expected, but the other vacancies were evidence of a worrisome trend. As core administrators retired or were ousted, rather than elect replacements, their peers had scrambled to claim the open positions for themselves. Marcus Fairchild alone had come to lead the Science, Defense, and Transportation Administrations.

That each office an individual held granted an extra vote on the Administrative Council was the least of anyone’s concerns. After all, the Director-General still had the final say. More real than the votes, though, was the concentration of power. Marcus was able to dictate what technologies the UNPD 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. Alexia was partially convinced that Ian should have put a bullet in Marcus’ head while he was there that night, but it was far too late to change their plans.

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

The crowd muttered in agreement.

“Thank you all for your understanding. Without further ado, while I’m sure he needs no introduction, it’s my honor to present our first speaker, Administrator Marcus Fairchild. Mr. Fairchild, why don’t you tell all these kind ladies and gentlemen what I mean? I’m sure they’re all excited to hear what you’ve been working on for so long.”

Marcus nodded and replaced Magnus at the podium as the Director-General returned to his seat. “Time to begin the main event,” he said with a knowing 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 Crusade, it had been the first AI deemed sufficiently self-aware to deserve human rights, as ruled by a similar UN gathering near the ancient city of Nicaea. The subsequent war saw all of the factories producing Rho’s hardware destroyed or repurposed, but some few copies of the AI itself were rumored to remain ‘alive,’. As far as Alexia knew, none of these could be found within the Directorate.

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

“Unsurprisingly, men of the cloth disapprove of playing God,” Lancaster 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 governors, a portly young man.

“Completed, no, 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 an older woman sitting amongst the crowd.

Marcus smiled. “Very perceptive, Madam Hanson. What I, alongside Messieurs Magnus and Lancaster, learned during a foray into the ruins of Vatican City is that the Technologists were able to produce a working copy of the Holy Spirit AI. The Luddites sought to destroy it, of course, but 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 ongoing 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 twenty years.”

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

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

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

“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 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 Ian didn’t recognize her attire as either a governor’s or an administrator’s uniform.

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

The councilors nodded in acknowledgement, a low murmur filling the room as they realized who – and what – she was. Lena bore no resemblance to her father. Different skin, different hair, different eyes. This discrepancy could have stemmed from 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.

“That’s all well and good,” a stern-looking governor said, scanning Lena with a critical eye, “but what exactly is the *point*? This seems like a lot of expense for little practical benefit.” Listening in, Alexia was wondering the exact same thing.

“Maybe he’s about to reveal that we can upload our own minds into these ‘Mourners’,” Hanson 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. But I digress. No, Governor Ren, the main advantage of our Mourners is that they can be mass-produced, making them…viable substitutes for a human military force.” There seemed a hint of disgust in his voice, Alexia thought.

“Unmanned drones have been used for centuries, but, unlike those robots, Mourners can actually hold territory like regular infantry,” Lancaster said, joining Marcus at the podium. “A single AI ‘program’ has enough processing power to remotely control an entire squad of bodies like Lena’s, without any risk to itself, assuming that their primary body stays off the field. We would, of course, only utilize willing volunteers, enforce strict and regular psychological evaluations, and afford all Mourners full constitutional rights in accordance with the Nicaea agreement, lest you worry about provoking some sort of robot uprising.”

“You needn’t worry about our loyalty any more than one of your human soldiers,” Lena added.

Ren eyed her with suspicion. “That may be so,” he said, “but Lancaster just stated that one Mourner can control multiple bodies. Doesn’t that increase the damage a single one of you can do if it *does* go rogue?”

“You’re not wrong, especially since Mourners aren’t limited to android chassis like my own. They can control all kinds of vehicles as well, as long as we install the proper interface, but it’s not like we haven’t dealt with mutinous airship crews before. Remember the *Peregrine*?”

“I do. I also remember that we never actually destroyed it.”

“But the Skywatch did force it to run off with its tail between its legs. I believe it’s hiding in Istanbul, now? The point is, Mourners aren’t any riskier than human soldiers, and the extra manpower will give us a huge advantage against our neighbors – Istanbul included, if need be.”

“Fair enough. And yet I’m guessing the lot of you have more grandiose designs than marching east with an army of *plastic people*,” Governor Ren said.

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.”

Alexia didn’t know much about ASPIS, a less cumbersome name for the Automatic Safeguard Protocol with Intelligent Subsystems. Other than its name, the allegedly defensive superweapon’s specifications were highly classified. All she and her friends knew was that it involved several military satellites, and that it had never once been used.

“Of course, many of you are likely, and rightly, concerned about the cost of this endeavor,” Magnus said. “I won’t lie. It will be expensive. Just ferrying ammunition to the ASPIS batteries is a major undertaking, to say nothing of a comprehensive retrofit, and that’s *after* 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 governor said, without waiting to be called upon. “We could increase the tax rate in developed urban centers, which might also encourage emigration to frontier regions we want to settle.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Magnus stood up, ready to make an emphatic point, but was interrupted as the building’s power went out. There was a moment of loud confusion, and then the room exploded.

\* \* \*

His one job having long since been completed, Ian was already making his way out of Samara Tower when his ears filled with the sounds of the building’s descent into chaos. Alexia, meanwhile, could only sit and stare at the bloody spectacle before her. Any view she had of the Grand Balcony was obscured by thick black smoke. The curious airship above her remained still and silent. Was it responsible for the attack? Certainly not, she concluded, although that left its identity an unresolved mystery. Regardless, there was no time to think. She needed to move.

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

Alexia cursed her misfortune. As her only hope of escape was now to find a security office and pray that she could override the lockdown from there, she began to see Ian’s wisdom in committing the Tower’s blueprints to memory. Wherever he was, she hoped that he was faring better.

\* \* \*

Ian breathed a sigh of relief as he stepped onto the asphalt outside Samara Tower. As a mercy, the Peregrine van was still parked in the old lot, although Alexia and her team were absent. Looking left, and then right, he confirmed that he was alone and allowed himself a moment’s rest.

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

When no response came, Ian feared the worst, only to realize that his handheld radio was entirely non-functional. Recalling how the lights throughout the tower had darkened just before Magnus’ death, he began to put together the pieces of the puzzle. Anyone of any importance at the conference would have been wearing an energy barrier that might protect them from attacks, just as the Balcony itself was shielded. If this explosion was indeed an attempt upon the life of one of the attendees, the assassin would have had to remove that obstacle before detonating their bomb – for instance, by using an electromagnetic pulse to disable nearby electronics.

“Well, if I’m right, that’s twice now this assassin screwed us over tonight,” Ian muttered. With Alexia unaccounted for, there was a chance that he would have to leave her behind in order to survive. Ian hoped it would not come to that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If this stranger could link him to the bombing, however falsely, then Ian knew the game was up, and he and Alexia were doomed to die in Athens. As one small comfort, at least his allies listening from Istanbul had heard what they needed to know. That the survivors would be able to capitalize on his success was enough for him to die content.

Much to Ian’s surprise, when she finally wrenched open the door, the stranger helped him onto his feet. Slowly, he regained some of his senses, and saw the woman before him. She was perhaps a few inches shorter than he was, with tan skin, brown eyes and hair, and a frantic look about her. Hers was not the visage of someone in control.

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

Ian groaned and stood up straight. It took more effort than he would have liked. This person, whoever she was, could have been luring him into a trap, but that seemed unlikely, given that his current injuries would have made him easy to subdue without resorting to trickery. Confident that her non-allegiance to the loyalists, at least, had not been a ruse, and lacking any viable alternatives, Ian slowly followed the French woman into the darkness. He prayed to a god he did not believe in that some good would come of this.

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

Ian, she surmised, would likely have retreated to Widow’s Walk, assuming he had not already been captured and killed. Lacking any means to contact him, though, Alexia changed her plans: Instead of returning to the Walk and then to Istanbul by sea, she would instead travel north, where Mayumi and any surviving Peregrine soldiers were holding the line at Hotel India. As long as they, too, had not been wiped out, Alexia knew she would be safe there.

## Chapter 4 – The Gambit Accepted

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

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

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

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

Making use of the rubble to hide herself from the airship’s searchlights, Alexia crept closer to the old warehouse, noting the suspicious dearth of loyalist soldiers outside. As she deemed it unlikely that the Skywatch was in retreat, Alexia 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 Mayumi might be saved.

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

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

Alexia stopped for a second to close the young man’s eyes, saying a quick and silent prayer to no god in particular as she did so. The lifeless bodies, however, only grew in number as she approached the entrance to Hotel India, both Peregrines and loyalists. There wasn’t enough time to give all of them their rites. Alexia could only hope that the fallen guardsmen had been veterans, there of their own free will, rather than student service conscripts. Surely not even Lancaster would send green recruits on a dangerous mission like that.

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

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

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

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

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

“You haven’t heard the news?” Alexia asked, to which Mayumi 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 Ian, so I figured my best bet was to come here.”

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

“Is this all that’s left?”

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

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

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

“True. I’m sorry.”

A solemn silence filled the room.

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

“I certainly agree. God, this whole operation’s been a disaster,” Alexia said. “You wouldn’t even be here if the loyalists hadn’t chased that fugitive into our hands, and now the conference gets bombed? I wonder if the two are related.”

“Uh, maybe?” Mayumi said. “If we get out of this alive, we can always interrogate him later. Not now, though. The guy wasn’t in great shape when he showed up, so we had a medic take a look at him in that back room over there. After the doc said he wasn’t gonna die, he *somehow* managed to fall asleep during all the fighting, so we figured ‘eh, why not let him rest?’ and it seemed like he needed it, ‘cause as far as I know, he’s still sleeping back there.”

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

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

“Mind if I go take a look?”

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

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

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

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

“If he hasn’t actually committed a crime, then yeah,” Alexia said. “It’s not like the UNPD are strangers to murdering innocent people. Pretty sure most of us who defected to Istanbul did so because we were ordered to kill someone who didn’t need killing.”

“Like you and Eirene,” Mayumi added.

“Mmhmm. If they’ll paint a scared, lonely girl as a dangerous war criminal because they need a scapegoat, there’s no telling what they might have pinned on this guy. He could still be guilty, but we *know* Lancaster’s plotting something, and, considering what happened to the *Kolyma*, I’m inclined to believe our new friend’s innocent.”

“You could be right about this being linked to the bombing,” Mayumi said. “The Grand Admiral is next in the line of succession, and Lancaster’s clearly got no qualms about gunning down government officials for whatever weird agenda he has. Maybe this ‘fugitive’ has some kind of evidence?”

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

“True. We’ll just have to wait.”

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

“Another airship?” Mayumi wondered aloud. “If it’s one of ours…oh, oh, this isn’t good. I thought the plan was to de-escalate once you were clear of the Tower?”

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

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

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

The new contender was not just *a* Peregrine ship, but the eponymous dreadnought *Peregrine*, its distinctive manta ray-like silhouette setting it apart from the thinner Skywatch warships. If their friends had deployed the flagship, both women knew it could only mean something serious had happened.

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

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

“Yeah, this isn’t right. We’d better just ask Besim and Hector what the hell’s going on,” Mayumi replied. “Damn, tonight was supposed to be so simple. But if this is the start of a *proper* war, then things are gonna get real ugly, real fast.”

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

“I wasn’t able to find him. Just the wreckage of our car, so I linked up with Mayumi instead. No body, though, so he could still be alive,” Alexia replied.

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

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

“Not anymore. Istanbul surrendered.”

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

“To begin, Magnus died in in the blast. As far as we can tell, he was the only fatality. A suspiciously short time the bomb went off, we were contacted by loyalist officials accusing us of the murder. They cited our ongoing conflict at Hotel India as evidence that we were involved in the assassination plot.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, that sounds fun,” Mayumi said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“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 UNPD?” Alexia asked.

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

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

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

“Uh-huh.”

“But in fulfilling this vital role, I made a rare error, and found myself captured by Lancaster and his flying blackguards, 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.”

Eirene’s face lit up. “That explains why Marcus was helping Lancaster onboard the *Kolyma*!” she exclaimed. “His son was being held hostage to ensure his cooperation. Doesn’t tell us what Lancaster’s end game is, but everything Jackson just said checks out. If we bring him back to his father, the Admiral loses his leverage, and Marcus is free to tell us everything we need to know.”

Though it was difficult for Alexia to feel any sort of confidence in light of the current situation, she couldn’t help but feel inspired. Despite Jackson’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 rise above the ongoing crisis.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

“And when you’re gone?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Done?” the Grand Admiral asked.

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

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

“Of course, but I don’t think it will come to that.”

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

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

“Of course,” Lancaster replied as he quit the building. Yevgeny remained in place for a minute more, standing alone amidst thousands of years of history.

## Chapter 5 – Sunrise

“Obviously, there are plenty of folks who’ll reject the truth the first time we tell it. They’re not important. What’s critical is that we reach the next generation, make sure they know all the great things our country’s done for them before any other biases sink in.”

* *Education Administrator Ethel Grayson*

Ian awoke to a dull agony, every movement causing his joints to creak and a fierce, caustic pain to sting his muscles. Keeping his eyes closed, the injured man probed the surrounding area with one lethargic hand, finding only coarse wooden floors and a sweatshirt folded into a makeshift pillow beneath his head.

“Goddamnit,” he groaned, trying and failing to sit himself up. Just doing that in his current state would have been an accomplishment of its own.

“It is always worse when you wake up afterwards, yes?” came a woman’s voice that Ian recognized from the night before. “At the time, you think perhaps it is not so bad, but in the morning, you realize your folly. Or my folly, in this case. I do apologies.”

“Both our folly. Mine more than yours,” Ian said.

“That is kind of you. Here. You must be hungry.” The woman handed Ian a wrapped protein bar, which he gladly accepted and bit into, savoring the comfortable mix of granola and dried fruit. Around him, the room came back into focus. Sunlight was seeping in through boarded-up windows, and there was little else to be found save for a few tables and chairs, some papers scattered about, and an old television caked in dust.

“Eat up. Today is a long day,” the young woman continued. Ian could see her more clearly now. She was young, petite in stature with an outwardly cool demeanor, but a host of nervous tics – a twitch of the feet, a lip bite, a twirl of the fingers through her silky brown hair – that betrayed a supreme lack of confidence. Her name, Ian had learned, was Charlotte Aucoin, and she hailed from Kasimira, an isolationist state that had been forged from the ruins of central and eastern Europe. That was all he knew of her; much and more remained a mystery.

“I’m sure it will be. It’s a long way home,” Ian replied. The safehouse to which Charlotte had spirited him away was on the western coast of the Attican peninsula, exactly opposite Widow’s Walk and the boat back to Istanbul, if said boat was even there. Alexia surely would have taken it herself if she yet lived.

Charlotte’s nervous demeanor was suddenly masked by a solemn pall. “I can take you to your home if that is what you want,” she said, “but…”

“But what?” Ian asked.

“Last night, not long after you fell asleep, I reached out to my contacts at home, and learned that the UNPD invaded Istanbul before the dust had even settled in Samara Tower. The city capitulated, and your friends either scattered or…died. If I could offer more than my condolences, I would.”

Ian didn’t react at first. When he tried to speak, he choked on his words. Nausea overtook him, born as he felt the connection between himself and his comrades sever itself, leaving him with nothing but loneliness and guilt.

“I assume this means they blame us for the bombing,” he finally said, not making eye contact with Charlotte.

“It would seem that way, yes. The UNPD only announced that it was ‘working to bring the perpetrators to justice,’ and my fellow agents could find no information to the contrary. If you want to see for yourself, just look here.” Charlotte switched on the television, cycling through channels until a live feed of Istanbul appeared to verify her tale.

“Fuck me. I have to wonder if they somehow, I don’t know, noticed me planting that bug and figured I’d also planted the bomb.” Ian looked at his new companion, saw her quizzical expression, and then continued. “We were just there to listen,” he explained. “Obviously, we don’t have the best relationship with Athens, so we figured we needed to know if they were planning anything that might affect us. I swear, if I fucked up somehow and it turns out this whole war is my fault, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“It is not your fault,” Charlotte said. “It was mine.”

Ian laughed grimly. “Listen, you hit my car, but that’s hardly…”

“I knew this would happen. It was my job to stop it. I failed.”

“What?”

“Apologies, it is difficult for me to explain,” Charlotte said, twisting her hair around her finger once again.

“If it’d be easier to tell me in French, go ahead. I speak it well enough.”

Charlotte smiled and nodded. “In Kasimira, there’s an organization called the Inquisition,” she said in her mother tongue, with a touch more confidence than before. “It’s not as scary as it sounds; we have quite a few duties, but none of them involve burning heretics at the stake, believe me. One of them is, however, the investigation and containment of any technologies that violate ‘natural law.’ No playing God, in other words.”

“Marcus Fairchild called such people Luddites,” Ian said.

“No doubt to disparage us, but we’ve seen what such technology can do. Some, if not all of the storms that destroyed the old world were spawned by misguided – some might even say sabotaged – attempts to end the climate crisis through terraforming. Nobody wanted to solve problems the right way, so they slapped a scientific band-aid on a gaping wound and paid the price for that. But that’s beside the point. I’m sure you can understand why we’d also be keeping an eye on that conference last night.”

Ian nodded.

“During our planning, we caught wind of the bomb threat from what we previously believed to be a fairly passive resistance group. When our anonymous tip to the UNPD was ignored, I was sent to Athens to prevent the bombing, for fear that Magnus’ death would destabilize our southern neighbor. They were right to worry, but wrong to send me, it seems. I wasn’t able to find the bomb in time, so I fled, at which point I ran into you.”

“None of that changes the fact that my friends got blamed for this mess,” Ian said. “I don’t know if it’s my fault. Maybe it was, or maybe this is all a big loyalist conspiracy. But even if it’s an honest mistake, and even if we somehow show your evidence to the UNPD, they’re not going to un-invade our city. They can’t bring back our dead.”

There was a pause as Charlotte leaned back in her chair. She sighed, and, for a moment, all that could be heard was the rush of wind outside, and the muffled clamor of a distant train. Everything almost seemed normal.

“We can’t bring them back,” she eventually said, “but we can learn the truth. We can avenge them, and, hopefully, find any survivors.”

Ian looked at her with raised eyebrows. “We?” he asked.

“I mentioned that the group responsible for the bombing, a small collective of Greek nationalists, was once mostly quiet. It’s out of character for them to take such direct and destructive action, so the Inquisition believes they were manipulated somehow, especially as they haven’t yet taken credit for the incident. Could be Lancaster, could be someone else, but it’s clear to me that *someone* was behind all this, and it’s in the Inquisition’s interest to find out who. If you’re willing to help us, some of our leads may well point you to your friends. I don’t mean to be presumptuous, but it might be the best chance you’ve got.”

As loath as Ian was to put his faith in a girl he had just met, not to mention one who barely seemed an adult, she wasn’t wrong. Still, he needed to know exactly what his helping this “Inquisition” would entail, and he asked as such.

“Our day-to-day operations differ little from the Civil Guard you know so well, except that instead of arresting people who dare to pray in public, we go after anyone who commits one of the three heresies,” Charlotte answered. “The first is willful misrepresentation of history. The second, as you now know, is forbidden research, and the third is violence against a fellow citizen. Any other laws are enforced by the local magistracy.”

“Misrepresentation of history?” Ian raised an eyebrow.

“Vague, I know. Not many people get brought in for that one since it’s so hard to prove intent. As an example, though, the UNPD refers to the whole Second Pact War as the League Crusade, even though the Crusade was only one part of a larger conflict. By making sure people wrongly think of the war as a purely religious affair, they generate support for their anti-clerical laws. That’s the kind of thing we’d like to avoid.”

“And what happens to people convicted of these crimes?”

“Fines or prison sentences, depending on severity. We’d never ask you to kill anyone except in self-defense, which I’ll admit is more common than I’d like. Our work takes us to dangerous places.”

A dozen different alarm bells were sounding in Ian’s head, but, once again, he reminded himself that there wasn’t a better option for him to find his friends, or, indeed, to survive. If even half of what Charlotte had told him was true, then surely, he thought, the Kasimirans couldn’t be all bad.

“Fine, I’m game,” he said, throwing up his hands.

A sly smile crept onto Charlotte’s face. “I am glad,” she said, switching back to English. “Sadly, like I said, today will be a long day. The Kasimiran border is far from here. Do you know how to ride a motorcycle?”

Ian nodded.

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

“I suppose an organization called the Inquisition *would* have layers of contingencies for situations like this. You do exfiltration often?” Ian asked.

“Me? No.” Charlotte shook her head. “As far as sticky situations go, however, this is not the worst I have been in. Even so, I would prefer to be home as soon as possible.”

“Well, then, let’s ditch this hole and hit the road. Some fresh air’ll be good for my head, anyway.”

As it happened, Charlotte’s claim that the safehouse’s garage was stocked with “several” motorcycles was an understatement. When he followed the young woman through the creaky old doorway, Ian was greeted by no fewer than a dozen bikes of all sorts of makes, from the sporty to the spartan. A classy, cherry red beauty caught his eye, tempting him to lay claim to it, but practicality was the word of the day, and so Ian instead selected an ugly yet functional machine left over from the Greek army. Charlotte did the same, though Ian observed that she acted with much less indecision.

Both of them put on backpacks full of rations and first aid supplies. Charlotte revved up her engine, Ian followed suit, and soon they had put the safehouse behind them, hoping to settle in the west before the sun did.

\* \* \*

That evening, the two of them caught the first glimpse of their destination. Ian had been to Patras before. Unlike Athens, it was still recognizable as the city it had been before the rise of the UNPD, with traditional Greek architecture undisturbed by the loyalists’ great skyscrapers and fortresses. From the hill whereupon he and Charlotte had parked for a brief reprieve, they could see the clean, white spires of the bridge still spanning the nearby strait.

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

“I cannot say that I have,” Charlotte said.

“If we had more time, I’d say we should pay it a visit. I know a girl who’s kind of into that sort of thing. Shame she couldn’t be here with us.”

“You will have time to get her a souvenir later.”

“I know, our safehouse awaits. You said it’s on the other side of the bridge?”

“On the Antirrio side, yes. It is not hard to find if you know where to look. There is an empty warehouse we use to store materiel for field operations.”

“It’s got its own fleet of motorcycles?”

“Some, among other light vehicles. We will not be using them, though.”

“Airship, yeah, you mentioned it.”

Charlotte nodded. “It is a small craft, and not very comfortable, but it will suit our purposes.”

Ian finished off the last of his protein bars and stuffed the wrapper into his pocket, alongside a half dozen others. He washed it down with a gulp of water from a worn metal bottle before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and looking out over the city. A canvas of a thousand little lights beckoned them forwards, offering their much-desired warmth and rest.

The two motorbikes sped down the hillside road and into the city, passing sleepy houses and old shops owned by the latest in a long generational line, all asleep or close to it. Then came the bridge and the crisp sea breeze, and then the old warehouse Charlotte had described. She disembarked from her ride, tapped a long code into a keypad by the garage door, and then lifted it up, beckoning for Ian to park inside. He did so, and his companion followed.

“There is a bedroom of sorts, here,” Charlotte explained. “I recommend you get some rest. We will take off once night has fully fallen, and, although our ship has an autopilot, I am sure we could both use some rest beforehand. The beds here will not be comfortable, but I do not think it will be any worse than what you were used to in Istanbul.”

“Our home wasn’t that bad, but I’m not picky,” Ian replied.

“*Bien.* Now, follow me.”

Near exhausted, they made the short trip to the bedroom – in reality, a repurposed office wing – where they both set down their bags. Charlotte hadn’t been wrong, Ian noted – the accommodations were of similar quality to those he’d had back home.

Charlotte took off her brown leather jacket and tossed it aside. She frowned, sniffed under her own armpit, and grimaced.

“I apologize that we are unable to shower until we arrive in Kasimira,” she said. “There may be some deodorant in the bathroom down the hall, but nothing more.

“And I’m sure this airship of yours is going to be on the cramped side,” Ian laughed.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Eh, it is what it is. A bit of unpleasantness is par for the course in our line of work.”

Charlotte continued to undress until she was wearing only a pair of shorts and an undershirt, and then reclined on the bed, basking in the flickering, fluorescent light. She took one deep breath after another, her chest rising and falling over and over. Ian watched her for a moment, trying and failing once more to take her measure, before lying down himself. A few minutes of quiet passed, as both of them tried to get settled into their beds.

“Thank you for trusting me,” Charlotte eventually said in French, breaking the silence.

“It’s not like I have much choice,” Ian replied in kind. “Nevertheless, you have my thanks as well for taking me along. You didn’t have to do that.”

“You’re welcome. I truly hope we’ll be able to help each other.”

Another pause.

“Listen,” Ian continued, “I’ll do what I can to help you with this Inquisition business, but, as soon as we turn up a lead on the Peregrines, that’s where I’m headed. Is that cool with you?”

“Of course. I’d never expect you to abandon your loved ones any more than I’d abandon mine. Though, if I may – is it the people you’re loyal to, or the cause itself?”

Ian took a moment to consider. “I suppose it’s both,” he eventually said. “The UNPD needs to be stopped, obviously. In thirty years, it’s laid claim to most of Europe and Africa, forcing the locals to obey its laws, and at its current rate of expansion, it’s only a matter of time before it comes into conflict – armed conflict – with the Tehran Pact or another great power. A lot of people are going to suffer when that happens. And, God forbid, if they actually win…”

“Is that why you all left? You wanted to be clear of the powder keg when it goes off?”

“Hah! If that’s what we were trying to do, we couldn’t have picked a worse place to do it, sandwiched right in between the Pact and the Directorate. No, there’s a lot we don’t see eye-to-eye on, but all of us got together because we can at least agree that the loyalists’ goals and methods are too destructive to allow, and that we wanted no part of it.”

“And so you seek to make war against them?” Charlotte asked.

“Not by choice. I used to be gunning for a career in government, hoping to change things from the inside, but I found out the hard way that the powers that be aren’t too fond of dissent. They won’t purge you immediately, but if you start to push hard enough, they’ll push back, and so folks like me have to band together to survive. Everyone in the Peregrines has a story like that. They’re good people – most of them, anyway.”

“So, in the end, it’s all about survival.”

Ian took a deep breath. “In theory, the plan is to grow strong enough to challenge the Directorate, but if we’re being realistic, you’re right. Best we can do is try to keep ourselves alive and make a safe place for anyone who wants out of the loyalist war machine.” He laughed grimly. “As you can see, that’s going great.”

“If that’s really what you want, then perhaps your Peregrines and the Inquisition have a future together after all.”

“I’d like that to be true,” Ian said.

\* \* \*

Elsewhere, Alexia watched the calm skies, all but certain they were a lie. A whole day had passed since their flight from Istanbul, and, somehow, she was not only alive, but free, both equally unexpected. Even better, she had seen neither bow nor stern of a loyalist airship, making for a peaceful voyage that might even have been pleasant had it not been for the specter of annihilation looming over them. It was too good. Something was amiss.

“We should be near Malta, soon,” Hector said, a hint of poorly-masked apprehension in his voice. Breaching Maltese airspace was to be a test. They would not attack the Directorate garrison there, merely drift close enough to be detected by its radar, and, from its defenders’ reaction, better assess their current situation.

Onboard the *Peregrine*, Besim served as captain, as he had before the vessel’s split from the Directorate, and his instructions were to avoid any cloud cover en route to Malta. There needed to be no doubt that the loyalists were aware of their presence.

“We’re definitely close enough now. Anything to report?” Mayumi asked after a tense minute. So vulnerable were they in the sky that she felt all but naked.

The radar operator shook his head. “Negative. No activity on – wait! Two ships just launched from the airfield. Looks like a pair of corvettes.”

“Maintain our course,” Besim commanded, folding his hands. “Don’t respond to them in any way unless they engage us directly.”

“They’d have to be suicidal,” Hector said. “Two light aircraft against a dreadnought is a joke.”

“They seem to agree. Both bogies are keeping their distance.”

“Well, well, they’re just watching. Lucky us,” Mayumi muttered.

Minutes felt like hours as the *Peregrine* made its way past Malta, the island itself only ever visible as a sliver on the horizon. By the time the two scouts broke off and returned home, everyone’s clothes had been dampened by sweat.

“That confirms it, then,” Hector said, allowing himself to breathe easy. “They know where we are, and yet they decline to act. Lancaster’s content to let us roam for the time being.”

Mayumi scowled. “Not going to give us the mercy of a quick death, are they?” she asked.

“Why would they? Clearly we don’t aim to surrender, as we’d have done so already if that were the case, so we must then intend to fight or flee. The *Peregrine*’s a tough enough bitch that it’d be costly for the Directorate to attack, but not tough enough for *us* to attack *them*. Any action on their part would be a waste when they can just sit on their asses until we run out of fuel.”

“Meaning we need to find my father as soon as possible,” Jackson concluded. “I assume even this idealistic lot is wise enough to know you can’t win without him, and, I confess, I am quite eager to return to more comfortable amenities. Not to say that you haven’t been most *gracious* hosts.”

“If the Directorate’s not actively hunting us down, we have some extra time, but Jackson’s right. Clock’s still ticking,” Alexia said.

“The *Peregrine* has about seven days of fuel left, barring any unforeseen complications,” Besim said. “According to Jackson, Bright Lighthouse is in Naples, Italy, which isn’t far from our current position – relatively speaking. Unfortunately, we can’t get too close without broadcasting our intentions to the Directorate, so Hector and I have decided that Eirene will drop Mayumi and Jackson a ways out from the city, and have them walk the rest of the way.

“Will Eirene stay and wait for them to return?” Alexia asked.

“No. She’ll fly back to the *Peregrine*, just in case there are enemy eyes about. We’ll simply patrol the sea until Mayumi confirms that Fairchild will cooperate.”

“And if he doesn’t want to play ball?” Mayumi asked.

“Then,” Besim said, his face grim, “we use the last of our fuel to land somewhere outside the UNPD and beg for our lives. Perhaps the Tehran Pact will take us in, though I doubt it.”

Mayumi closed her eyes. “I’ll try to make sure it doesn’t come to that,” she said.

\* \* \*

The bones in Alexia’s neck crackled as she stretched, sprawled out on the firm, worn bed. So few in number were the remaining crew that they could afford some measure of privacy when it came to bunking arrangements, and so she and Eirene had this room to themselves. For now, though, Alexia was alone, as her friend was no doubt preparing for her voyage to Naples. Alexia reminded herself to see her off when the time came.

She was halfway through taking off her shirt when there was a knock at the door. Mayumi barged in before even waiting for a response.

“Come to say goodbye?” Alexia asked, letting her top settle back down around her waist.

“Yep. Probably not gonna be too exciting, but, you know – you never know. Especially right now.”

“You nervous?”

“A little.” Mayumi shrugged. “It’s not about what happens to me, but if this deal doesn’t work out, the rest of you are screwed. That’s not the sort of thing you want on your conscience, you get me?”

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

“Don’t worry about any of that,” Alexia said. “I know it’s not the most palatable idea, but Jackson’s the one who’s gonna be doing most of the talking. As long as he doesn’t do anything stupid, all you have to do is kick back, relax, and give us a call when it’s all said and done. Plus, Jackson says he can get you an actually nice hotel in the city, so at least you’ll have comfier accommodations than, well, this.” She slapped the surface of her bed for emphasis.

“Yeah, yeah, but as much as I’d like to spend the day sunbathing and drinking wine, surrounded by hot Italian guys, it’s kind ofhard to enjoy the little things right now.”

“I’m not saying to shirk your responsibilities, but you can *try* to enjoy yourself. I’ll hold down the fort while you’re gone. Can you at least trust me to do that?”

“Not sure how much you can do, exactly, but I guess so. At least take care of Eirene once she gets back, won’t you? She’s a good girl, and she deserves better than this.”

Alexia smiled and patted Mayumi on the back. “You don’t have to tell me that. I’ve looked out for her this long, I can keep her safe for a few days more.”

“Mmhmm.” Mayumi paused, letting a moment of silence sink in. “She loves you, you know that? Really, *really* loves you. Anytime we’re alone together, she won’t stop gushing about how great you are. I’d wager you could just wink and she’d be all over you in a heartbeat. And I see the way you look at her, too, so don’t try and tell me that you haven’t noticed.”

“I…”

“Ah, ah, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ambush you like that.”

“No, you’re, uh, you’re right,” Alexia said, closing her eyes and rubbing her forehead. “Everything you said is true.”

“Then why not ask Eirene about it?”

“It just never felt right, considering how we met. It was my job to arrest her, for God’s sake! Sure, I didn’t end up doing it once I learned she was innocent, but I still could have turned her in at any time. I was the only thing keeping her safe at that point, and, as much as I wanted her, as much as she wanted me, I wasn’t going to take advantage of her.”

“Things have changed since then, haven’t they?”

“Not sure how much. You did just tell me to keep her safe,” Alexia said.

“That’s different. She’s a free woman, now, and you’re not responsible for her. If you’re gonna lecture me about taking time for myself in Italy, then forgive me for saying that some time together would be good for both of you. We might not have much left, after all.”

Alexia was silent, avoiding eye contact with Mayumi.

“Tell you what,” Mayumi said. “If you promise to take Eirene on a proper date once the crisis at hand is resolved, I’ll promise to relax a bit in Italy. That a deal?”

“Sure,” Alexia finally said after another drawn-out pause. “That’s a deal.”

“Splendid! Splendid. I’ll be sure to tell you *all* about my exploits abroad, maybe give you a few ideas what you and your girl can do together.” Mayumi flashed Alexia a mischievous wink.

“Thanks, but I think I’m better off not knowing the details. You have fun, though.”

“I will,” Mayumi said, standing back up with a flourish. She casually saluted her comrade as she quit the room, although, as she did so, Alexia couldn’t help but notice that there was still the faintest echo of sadness behind her smile.

\* \* \*

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

“We make sure that all of our aircraft are legally registered with the Directorate’s Transportation Administration,” Charlotte explained. “Our takeoff will not raise any alarms. If we are spotted approaching Kasimiran airspace, they may be suspicious, but, by then, it will be far too late for them to intervene. Even that scenario is unlikely, as commercial traffic between the two countries is not unheard of.”

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

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

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

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

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

“If you say so.”

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

\* \* \*

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

## Chapter 6 – Bright Lighthouse

“Stuff goes here.”

* *Something Something*

Naples – or what was left of it – was a quiet town. Much like so many other cities, it had only just begun to recover from years of war when nature once again laid it low. Hundreds died in the fires of nearby Mount Vesuvius, the survivors leaving behind a charred ghost town as they fled. In the decades since, a small fishing community had risen from its desiccated husk, joined ever so often by the odd wanderer, and such people preferred to mind their own business. Nobody was likely to take notice of a lone corvette landing amidst the ruins.

According to Jackson, at least.

Mayumi and Eirene weren’t so sure. Even if the corvette had escaped detection as it slipped away from the *Peregrine*, they had their doubts that they’d be able to reach their target unmolested.

“Bright Lighthouse is located on an islet off the coast,” Jackson informed them, doing his best to be helpful. “There’s a fortified bridge connecting it to the mainland. Believe me, as long as nothing crosses that bridge, they couldn’t care less what happens in Naples.” He laughed. “The stories I could tell.”

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

“Here, and there, and everywhere. I never really had *one* home, but, if I did…I suppose this would be it.” His face hardened. “I know the Lighthouse, and I know its security. Stay low and approach from the east, in the mountain’s shadow. We’ll slip right by the ships patrolling the gulf and land with no trouble at all. I promise.”

“If you say so,” Eirene mumbled.

As certain as the women were that Jackson was a fraud, their clear descent lent truth to his claims. If anybody saw the corvette set down at the base of the mountain, they either paid it no heed, or were biding their time before acting against these intruders. All three prayed it was the former.

“You’re certain they’re not watching us?” Eirene asked once the engines had gone to rest. “No radar, satellites, anything?”

Jackson shrugged. “Both, presumably, but this isn’t a high-security area. They’ll write us off as another pack of roaming vagabonds come to trade with the civilized world. I suspect you saw plenty of those types yourself, back in Istanbul. Am I right?”

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

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

“Maybe for you. Life on the move is rough, but, hey, at least you get to see the world. At least you’re free. Besides, Eirene here can tell you what ‘civilized’ life can get you when your daddy isn’t one of the most powerful men in the country.”

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

“I’ll wager your cell was a lot nicer than the one I was looking at if Alexia hadn’t had a change of heart,” Eirene said.

“Ah, my apologies!” Jackson said, throwing his hands up in mock surrender. “You’re such a dainty young lady, I hadn’t realized I was dealing with a hardened criminal.”

“A scapegoat, not a criminal. Skywatch messed up and hit a Tehran Pact camp, but they didn’t want to take the blame. A lowly Guard pilot made the perfect fall guy.”

“So as not to tarnish the admiral’s sterling reputation! Clever.” Jackson paused, looking at the women’s unimpressed glares before continuing. “…but hideously unethical, of course,” he concluded. “In any case, my *point* was that nobody is going to suspect a thing, at least until we try to breach the Lighthouse itself, but by then, we’ll already be in the clear.”

“And you’re absolutely sure about this?” Mayumi asked.

“At least fifty percent sure.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t inspire a ton of confidence.”

“And yet I don’t get the feeling that you’re blessed with an abundance of options at the moment.” Jackson winked, reveling in his own importance. “Come along, now. I know where we’ll be staying for tonight.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Mayumi said, rolling her eyes. “You got the goods, ‘Rene?”

Eirene nodded and handed over a single flash drive, which Mayumi pocketed. As she and Jackson stepped out of the corvette, she gave the pilot one last, lackadaisical salute before following her companion into the city.

\* \* \*

Still not far from Mount Vesuvius, the duo found themselves hiking across the hardened lava flows that made for a grim reminder of the city’s demise. Sheets of rock blacker than the night jutted into the ruins like obsidian knives, and bits of rubble crunched underfoot.

If Jackson was to be believed, Bright Lighthouse was about five hours from their current position on foot. It was possible, Mayumi knew, to reach their destination before sunrise, but what was the point? Marcus would no doubt be asleep when they arrived, and it certainly wouldn’t do to open negotiations without the benefit of a good night’s sleep. On that note, she sincerely hoped that Alexia had been right about the “nice hotel” Jackson claimed they’d be staying in.

“It’s not far now,” Jackson said as he jumped down from yet another black flow. He stopped, watching Mayumi land deftly on the ground behind him, and pointed straight ahead. “Look, lights! Civilization awaits.”

“Yeah, yeah, ‘civilization.’ You said all that before. I assume this hotel is in better shape than the buildings we passed so far?” Mayumi asked, gesturing all around her.

“Naturally. Do you really think I’m the type who’d settle for anything other than the best?”

“Okay, but from what I’ve seen, any building with four walls and a roof would qualify as ‘the best’ this city has to offer.”

Jackson laughed. “Well, it’s a far cry from the Director’s suite at Samara Tower, but it’s…fancy. While the government hasn’t bothered to clean up the outer reaches of the city, those parts they *did* fix were renovated quite nicely, I think you’ll find. Only a few minutes, now. Chop, chop!” He snapped his fingers twice to bid Mayumi forward, and she obeyed.

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

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

“In the city itself? Unlikely. But the patrol ships your lovely friend so skillfully avoided are sworn to the Skywatch, so we might run into some off-duty airmen. Good odds they’ll be drunk, though, so I wouldn’t worry too much.”

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

“Fair enough.”

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sounds like you had quite the childhood.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Are you sure? They always say it’s better to talk these sorts of things out.”

“*I’m sure*. I’m really sure.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Assuming you win. I give it forty-sixty odds, at best.”

“Whatever,” Mayumi said, rolling her eyes. “Anyway, I’m gonna go crash for the night. See you later, I guess.”

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

Mayumi let out a long sigh.

Alexia would certainly be disappointed, she thought. She was hardly making good on her promise to enjoy herself in Italy, although there would presumably be time for that once the agreement with Marcus Fairchild had been brokered. If she failed, then they’d have bigger problems than a silly little deal, anyway.

It crossed her mind that Eirene had probably made it back to the *Peregrine* by then, and the odds were good that she and Alexia were enjoying an intimate moment together while Mayumi lay alone on a bed made for two. The thought made her chuckle.

She brushed the fleck of paint off of her face and closed her eyes. Almost immediately, she was asleep.

\* \* \*

When Mayumi woke up, she didn’t even notice the screaming.

What she did notice was Jackson standing over her, shaking her violently. “Who-what the *fuck* are you doing?” she demanded once she realized who he was. A quick slap to his arm got Jackson to back off, and she bolted upright, blinking furiously to try and clear the crust out of her eyes.

“For God’s sake, woman, are you deaf?” he shouted, ignoring her question. “Naples is under attack, and we need to get to the Lighthouse *now*!”

“Under attack? By whom?”

“Do I look like I know? Does it matter? There was a massive explosion, and the streets are swarming with Army troops. A few Skywatch officers too, looks like. If we’re careful, we might be able to evade them.”

“Ugh, of all the times…fine, fine, I know it wasn’t your fault. You know the way to the Lighthouse, yeah? Is there a clear path?”

“There should be, yes, so long as you get off your arse before they secure the area. Ordinarily I’d suggest a series of underground tunnels, but the officers I saw looked like they were moving to lock them down, so we’ll be sticking to the shore. You have a gun, I assume?”

“Somewhere around here, yeah.”

“Then *find it*! Or just take one of mine.” Jackson procured a pistol from one of the two holsters Mayumi just then noticed he was wearing, and handed it over to her. She accepted the gift, slipped it into her own holster still on her hip, and followed him out into the hallway.

“Dare I ask where you got these?” she asked.

“You really have to ask? There’s a safe in my private room here. Just in case.”

“Right.”

“Left at this corner, actually. Come along!”

Around the bend, Jackson gestured for Mayumi to stop as he carefully peeked out a nearby window. Confirming that there were no eyes on him, he invited her to take a glance of her own.

“See that?” he said, pointing to a squad of soldiers patrolling the streets below, still shrouded in the dark of a sun not yet risen. “They’re looking for something. Not sure what, or who.”

“Us, I’d assume?”

Jackson laughed. “I’d have thought even you’d be smarter than that,” he said. “This is clearly related to the explosion you slept right through – an unfortunate accident we’ve got caught up in. You people do seem to attract a lot of those. In any case, there’s a monorail system that stretches across the entire coastline; it’s probably been shut down, but that actually helps us in this case. We can easily cut along the tracks until we get to the Lighthouse.”

“And if it isn’t shut down?”

“Then we get run over and turned into paste, and whatever happens after that isn’t our problem anymore. But it’ll be dead as a dormouse by now, don’t you worry.”

“Works for me either way. How’re we gonna get to the station, though?”

“Fire escape.” Jackson pointed his thumb at a door opposite them.

“And then we run for it?”

“And then we run for it.”

Mayumi took a deep breath. “Alright, guess we’re doing this. How long before the guards come back around?”

“Few minutes, probably.”

“Then it’s showtime.”

Jackson nodded and threw open the door to the fire escape, immediately triggering the building’s alarms. With sirens blaring behind and below them, he and Mayumi ran down the creaky metal stairs until they were safely on the ground, peeking into the street to check for hostiles.

“The alarm should draw some attention to the hotel,” Jackson said. “A good distraction, as long as we’re clear of the area when they arrive. You see anyone?”

“Nope.”

“Mmm, perfect. Come on.”

The two of them dashed from sidewalk to sidewalk, taking a moment to reconnoiter once more upon reaching the opposite side of the street. A few civilians yet remained nearby, unsure whether to flee or hide in place, but there were no hostiles to be seen.

“If we’re caught, I’ll try to bluff my way out of it,” Jackson said.

“I thought you said they’d recognize you?”

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

“Yeah, yeah, you don’t need to tell me twice,” Mayumi responded.

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

A tap on her shoulder brought her back to the present. Mayumi looked back at Jackson and saw him jab his finger towards another squad of soldiers coming their way – three men in Skywatch uniforms, well-armed and surrounded with the distinctive shimmer of kinetic barriers. If it came to a fight, firearms would be ineffective.

Her hand curled into a fist.

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

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

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

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

“Indeed. Usual Migrant business, hoping to make a deal. You know how it is. Although, I get the feeling the markets will be closed for the foreseeable future,” he said.

The officer stared at Jackson, eyes narrowing into pointed slits. He looked him up and down, trying to take the boy’s measure. “Is that so?” he asked, clearly doubting the veracity of Jackson’s story. “Well, you’re wrong on one count – shouldn’t be long before everything’s back to normal, *if* everyone cooperates. What ship are you two from?”

Although he had anticipated that question, Jackson had no answer to give. Nomad vessels typically hailed from the far east, well beyond the reach of the Directorate, and would therefore have an eastern name, although he knew no specific conventions. Assuming any existed to begin with. His mind began to race, trying to formulate a convincing reply before the officer saw through the façade.

“We’re from the *Katayama*,” Mayumi butted in, with a conviction that caught Jackson off-guard. “It’s a *Tōhoku-*class air destroyer, former JASDF. If your investigation is still ongoing when it returns, I’m sure Captain Nagai-sama would be honored to assist you.” She finished her spiel with a deep, uncharacteristic bow that Jackson hurriedly mimicked.

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

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

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

“And your people tested him for any contagions?”

“Of course.”

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

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

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

Mayumi nodded.

“That explains why you seemed so insulted by my remarks about the Migrants. Don’t take it personally, I’m sure you’re all wonderful people. But what’s with the honorifics all of a sudden? I mean, ‘Evan-san’? Didn’t expect that from you.”

“I don’t usually bother with them in English, no, but people usually give me more leeway when I play up the ‘cutesy, submissive Asian girl’ act, going on about ‘honor,’ and all that stuff. Not very dignified, but not very threatening either, so it keeps me under their radar, and indignity’s only a problem for people who had any self-respect to begin with.” Mayumi chuckled to herself. “Could’ve *really* sold it if I had a kimono or something, but, eh, can’t always get what you want. Anyway, for what it’s worth, Evan was a real guy. Even though he died during a, ah, incident aboard the *Katayama*, an investigation would turn up records of one Evan Royce among the crew, which would have made us look legit enough.”

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

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

“Of course.”

“Splendid. Lead the way.”

\* \* \*

The cold steel rungs of the ladder made Mayumi wish she’d worn gloves as she climbed up to the monorail. Layers of rust and creeping ivy told her that this particular ingress had not been maintained in some time.

She popped open the hatch, and, after peeking through to confirm no train was about to decapitate her, lifted herself onto the platform. Jackson followed just behind.

“Should be a clear shot from here to the Lighthouse,” Jackson said.

“Yeah, unless we get, I don’t know, wiped out by a train.”

“I already told you, that’s *highly* unlikely. Moreover, should the worst come to pass, we need only jump off as soon as we hear it coming.”

Mayumi looked down to the ground below. She’d never been a good judge of heights, but they were definitely high enough that a fall would be likely to break her legs, at the very least.

“Not thinking of ending it all, are you?” Jackson asked, patting Mayumi on the back. Startled, she flinched at his touch and turned her attention back to him.

“No, no, definitely not. Not when we’re so close,” she replied.

“Then let’s get on with it.”

“Right.”

The dilapidated city seemed to fall back asleep as they walked along the rail, boots tapping against the concrete. There were no more shouts or sirens to be heard, only the gentle rustling of wind through the trees planted alongside the monorail in a half-hearted attempt to breathe some life into the city.

Mayumi closed her eyes and breathed in the sea air. It was peaceful, not unlike a walk along the old walls in Istanbul. There had been a fort by the shore that she, Alexia, and Eirene had once visited, and she could almost picture herself back there if she did her best to forget Jackson.

Before she could immerse herself in the illusion, however, the sound of a gunshot shattered it into pieces. Mayumi froze up, her ears ringing, standing still until Jackson all but threw her to the concrete “floor.”

“Should have known it wouldn’t be that easy,” the boy snarled. A second shot rang out, and then a third.

“Doesn’t seem like they’re shooting at us, though?” Mayumi said.

“That matters remarkably little, since those shots are coming from up ahead. We’ll have to sneak past the loyalists’ impromptu target practice to reach the Lighthouse.”

A fourth shot caught Mayumi’s ear, and she held up a hand to silence Jackson. “Did you hear that?” she asked. “That was a different gun. Whoever they’re shooting at is shooting back.”

“Yes, people tend to do that. What’s your point?”

“The enemy of my enemy…”

“…Is a *distraction*. We need to keep moving, slow and steady.”

“We can just take a look. I don’t know about you, but I’d rather not run past an active gunfight without knowing how big or how bad it is. Just want to get some eyes on the situation, then, if it doesn’t look like we need to worry, we skedaddle. Is that *agreeable* to your majesty?”

“Fine, we’ll get a look. Should be a safe enough vantage point from up here, anyway.”

Mayumi and Jackson crept forwards, keeping their heads down, until the ongoing gunfire told them the fight was just below. Silently, Jackson nodded to Mayumi, giving her to go-ahead to take the look she so desired.

In the street below, Mayumi watched a single young woman take cover against a bullet-ridden car, making sure to put the engine block between herself and the trio of soldiers advancing on her position. It was a smart move, but seemed unlikely to save her, especially with what looked like a bloody wound on her side.

Leaving the woman to die was undoubtedly the safe bet. That would keep the loyalists off her own back, to be sure.

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

Jackson barely had time to notice as Mayumi loosed two shots from her gun. So quick was her draw that she felt like a cowgirl from an old western. – or rather, she would have, had either of her bullets found their mark rather than adding two more holes to the already pockmarked sedan.

“You dullard!” Jackson shouted. “You’ve doomed us both!”

“Yeah, yeah, tell me about it at the Lighthouse,” Mayumi said as she dropped to take cover from a hail of retaliatory gunfire, a sudden breeze sending her coattails aflutter.

She leaned over to take several more shots. A single bullet tore through her forearm, forcing Mayumi to the ground, only for the officer responsible to be slain where he stood by the strange woman, who had taken advantage of the chaos to reposition. His partner, now aware she was outnumbered, retreated to a position that gave her cover from both assailants, but, by that point, Jackson had fallen back along the monorail to get a clear shot, and he easily dispatched the target with a single shot to the head.

One remained.

For the first time, Mayumi made eye contact with the stranger below. A series of hand gestures later, they had agreed on a plan to flush their final adversary our of cover. Doing her best to ignore the pain in her arm, Mayumi crept along the high ground, watching the bus behind which the man had hidden. She was able to get just a glimpse of him talking on his radio, no doubt calling for backup. They needed to hurry.

Her fortune reversed, the stranger advanced, confident that her guardian angels would cover her from above. That courage faded, however, when a blaring horn and the clamor of many wheels heralded the imminent arrival of the monorail.

“Bastards,” Jackson muttered.

Mayumi’s mind began to race. They were still too high up to jump safely, but, then again, possible injury was preferable to certain death. A single tree below could have cushioned the fall somewhat, but it was a small, scrawny thing that offered little support. Could she somehow stop the train? Not without explosives. There wasn’t enough room to the sides for them to hope the train might simply pass them by, either.

With nothing else to do, they jumped. Both Jackson and Mayumi landed on the soil beneath the little tree, kicking up a cloud of dust as they did so. Above them, the monorail soared past, and the whole structure beneath it rattled like so many aching bones, not unlike the ones in Mayumi’s leg that she felt snap upon impact.

Finishing his descent with an elegant roll, Jackson paid no heed to Mayumi as he stood up just in time to see the lone survivor fleeing the scene, dodging bullets from the stranger. One more shot from Jackson’s gun put an end to his escape.

“Hmm. That takes care of that,” he muttered. “Now, Mayumi, care to explain what in God’s name this was about?”

“You did tell me to open fire if I felt it necessary,” Mayumi noted, clutching her leg.

“True, but if you had to compromise our position, I’d have hoped your accuracy might be better. How’s your arm? Or your legs, for that matter?”

Mayumi looked down at her wound, the pain starting to worsen as the adrenalin wore off.

“Arm stings, but it’ll probably be alright. Just grazed me, really. My leg, though…” She gently poked her left shin and winced.

“The Lighthouse is minutes away. If I support you, we may yet make it.”

“I can help, if you need,” a new voice said. Mayumi and Jackson turned, finding themselves face-to-face with the woman whose life they had just saved. Up close, she was much smaller than they would have expected, and the French accent with which she spoke indicated that she too was foreign to this land. A jacket wrapped around her waist acted as a makeshift bandage for her own wound. Luckily, it didn’t seem too severe after all.

“Well, I imagine that’s the least you could do after we stuck our necks out for you,” Jackson said. “Regardless, I do appreciate the offer. I’ll take her right, you take her left, okay?”

The two of them hoisted Mayumi upwards, still limping on her one good leg, and carefully began their journey towards the Lighthouse.

“So, why were they after you, anyway, miss…?” Mayumi asked between grimaces.

“Aucoin. Charlotte Aucoin. I was flying home and encountered a security patrol. My ship was damaged, and crashed nearby.”

“That explains the explosion we heard.”

“Yes.”

“You’re part of a rebel group, then?”

Charlotte shook her head.

“Then who?” Jackson asked.

“Pardon me, but, as grateful as I am that you saved my life, I do not believe it prudent to disclose such information. Surely you understand.”

“No, no, I get it. Totally get it. Operations security, and all that,” Mayumi said. She took one look at Jackson, who nodded in approval, before continuing. “Can’t hurt to tell you who we are, though. We’re here on business for the Peregrines – what’s left of them, anyway. You ever heard of us?”

Charlotte seemed to tense up. “No, I cannot say that I have,” she answered after a short delay.

“Figures. We never really were as influential as we’d like. Just a bunch of rejects trying to make our own way in the world.”

“It is much the same for me.”

\* \* \*

To their good fortune, the Skywatch was unable to catch up and intercept the group before they reached their destination. The guards at the gate were shocked to see Jackson, but did not tarry in admitting the group past. At last, they were safe.

“Bright Lighthouse. I wonder what business you all have here,” Charlotte said. “Unfortunately, as grateful as I am for your company, I must now take my leave.”

“You could come with us, you know,” Mayumi offered. “Your mysterious organization and mine could be friends.”

“Perhaps someday, but not today. I have a, ah, companion waiting for me. Should we meet again, though…an alliance may yet be beneficial.”

“Alright, then. Have a nice trip to wherever it is you’re going!” Mayumi said, shooting her as cheerful a smile as she could muster.

Charlotte gave them a respectful bow, and, just like that, she was gone.

Still leaning on Jackson for support, Mayumi turned around to face the Lighthouse. It made for a formidable sight, and a sturdy icon of the Directorate’s power. The islet was covered in its entirety by a fortified complex whose architect had a clear penchant for brutalism. From the southern end rose the concrete-and-metal spire of the Lighthouse itself, projecting a beam that steadily faded away as the sun rose.

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

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

The drone bobbed in the air. Its spotlight went dark, and it soon left them alone, just as Charlotte had done.

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

“Your sister?”

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

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised by this point.” Mayumi winced. “God, my leg hurts. Don’t suppose there’ll be a hot bath waiting for me inside the lighthouse? Maybe a cute masseur and some hard liquor to drown out the pain?”

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

“Alex is gonna be so disappointed in me. Promised her I’d be living it up by now, but here I am, limping across the finish line with a – ow – a broken leg and a bleeding arm.”

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

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

“I am glad to see my son returned to me,” the old man said. “Though the violence that seems to have followed him is…regrettable. Pray tell, my son – who is this stranger you’ve brought to my door?”

“Her name’s Mayumi. She’s with the Peregrines of Istanbul, and she saved my life. At great cost to herself, I might add,” Jackson explained.

“I see. Then you have my gratitude, Miss Mayumi.”

“Yeah, you’re welcome.” She coughed. “Didn’t just come here to deliver your kid, though. My people and I, we were hoping we might work…ah…work together, since you clearly don’t have much love for Lancaster, either.”

“So, you lose your city and come running to me for deliverance, is that it?”

Mayumi looked down. “Yeah…yeah, that pretty much sums it up.”

“And what have I to gain from this arrangement?”

“Evidence. A corvette’s flight cam proving what Lancaster did to the *Kolyma*. It’d be just what we need to light a fire under his feet.” She procured the drive Eirene had given her from her pocket, and dangled it tantalizingly in front of Fairchild. He reached out to grab the device, but she withdrew it just as fast.

“Sorry, can’t just hand it over. We can take a look at the tape after you’ve at least heard us out. That’s all we’re asking.”

Marcus frowned. “Very well,” he said. “As a gesture of goodwill, I shall send a tanker to your flagship with the fuel your people surely need. When it returns, your leadership will come along with it, and we’ll have a little chat. I hope they have more to offer me than a video and a crippled little girl.”

## Chapter 7 – The Histories

“ayy lmao.”

* *Ayy lmao*

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

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

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

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

“You’re hurt,” he said. “Is it bad?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah, sure am.”

“*Parfait.* Let us continue, then.”

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

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

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

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

“You think they misidentified us?”

“That is one possibility.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

“You got lucky,” Ian replied.

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

“Hah, as if the world would be that fair.”

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

“You’re religious, then?” Ian asked.

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

“But you don’t.”

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

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

“Probably not.”

“I’m tempted to do it anyway, though. Who’s going to find out?”

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

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

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

“Agreed.”

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

\* \* \*

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

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

“Yes.”

“We’re almost there.”

“I figured.”

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

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

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

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

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

In response, Charlotte only raised an eyebrow at him.

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

“You could say that, yes” Charlotte replied.

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

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

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

“You testing me?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m guessing that’s the capitol building?” Ian asked.

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

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

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

“Internal threats being your jurisdiction, right?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Glad to hear it,” Ian said.

\* \* \*

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

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

“And then we get to work, I assume?”

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Emma. Emma Aucoin…although in retrospect, I probably didn’t need to clarify,” the girl answered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

“Meyer again?” Emma asked.

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

“I’ve worked with my fair share of unpleasant types.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“A few.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 8 – Tying the Knot

“ayy lmao.”

* *Ayy lmao*

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But what?” Alexia asked.

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m glad you seem to be enjoying yourself, as per our agreement,” Alexia said with a smile as they approached each other.

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

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

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

“So it would seem.”

“Meaning there’s actually, really, truly time to relax. To have some fun.” Mayumi winked at Alexia.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sure, but…”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

Bright Lighthouse itself made no accommodations for guests, and so Jackson had set them up in the same hotel to which he had brought Mayumi. He’d also arranged for them to pick out new clothes at a nearby boutique, since it “wouldn’t do” for them to “go about dressed like a bunch of rough-and-tumble vagabonds.” Despite the insult, Alexia wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth, and had selected an elegant ensemble for herself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“A troop carrier,” Eirene explained, detecting the new object of Alexia’s attention. “A big one, too. Haven’t seen one that size since I flew for the Guard.”

“One of Fairchild’s, you think?”

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

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

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

“It’s headed southwest, meaning it’s bound for the Tunis-Highveld corridor. Preventative measure, maybe, meant to keep the Tehran Pact from cutting off their colonies in South Africa. Hmph. Lancaster really is picking a fight with everyone and their mother, isn’t he?” Alexia said with a disgusted snarl.

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

“Not everyone can be a matchmaker.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So I gathered, but go on.”

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

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

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

“And the Peregrines gave this purpose you lacked?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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