Thirty Minutes After Midnight

By me

## Chapter 1 – Sierra

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

* Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster to Grand Marshal Archer Hamilton

Montreal wasn’t always miserable, Akiko remembered.

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

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

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

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

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

“Hello?”

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

“On my way. Might as well be crossing Checkpoint Charlie,” Akiko mumbled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I suppose he wouldn’t want to be absent for something so significant,” Reed muttered. “If he were, though, would this alleged ‘representative’ be accompanied by the Tower Guard?”

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

“Have you talked with the Commissars about this?”

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

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

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

“He says it will change the world.”

“It had better, considering how much money he’s cost us. That said, I don’t see what he could have found there that would change my plans.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Something the matter?” Reed asked.

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

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

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

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

“Eh?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I see.”

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

“Hey, Jamie,” he said.

“Something I should know?”

“Take a look at this.”

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

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

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

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

“Very well. Preparing to initiate rendezvous.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Go? Go where?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I am afraid this is no joke.”

After a brief but intrusive investigation, an officer pronounced both women free of weapons or contraband.

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

“Yes, sir,” the officer replied.

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

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

“Eirene.”

“Right. *Sayonara*, miss Eirene.”

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

Lancaster and Fairchild had been right about one thing. There were hostile forces aboard the *Sierra*, and those forces were Eirene’s. She and her crew had been placed there in order to steal sensitive intelligence that would help her compatriots infiltrate the Strategic Technologies Conference, but it seemed that Lancaster had caught wind of their treachery. That she had not been arrested on the spot suggested his information was incomplete. A small mercy.

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

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

“Ah, hell,” she whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 2 – Fade to Blue

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

* Ryan Mistle, editor for Archivist Victoria Cromwell

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Or lack thereof,” Hector said.

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

“Naturally,” Alexis said with a smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Now, I couldn’t help but notice,” Hector began, “that only one of the five people we sent to the *Sierra* has returned. Did you at least get the data we were after, or were you intercepted before you could acquire it?”

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

Hector blinked, trying and failing to conjure a response.

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

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

“Well, I should start by notifying the families of the deceased. Memorial services will need to be arranged as well,” Teague said once she had finished.

The others agreed.

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

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

“I beg your pardon?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perhaps. There was too much they did not know.

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

“Oh?” Alexis asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I side with who I think is *right*.”

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

“Okay, that’s enough. We’re all friends here,” Teague said. “Hector has the right of it, though. The UNPG has not seen fit to deny us our independence only because their resources are needed elsewhere, so if the new technologies being presented at this conference embolden them to march against Istanbul, we *must* be prepared for them. I understand your concern, but we may never get another chance like this, and you can rest assured that we’ve no intention of making a mess of it.”

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

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

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

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

“Looks like it’s starting to rain. Wonder if that bodes ill,” Alexis said, looking out the window of her bedroom on the day they were set to depart. Alone with Eirene, she could speak in her native Greek, which was a comfort. Despite its choice of capital, the UNPG had not deigned to include Greek in its school curriculums, merely the more popular English, French, and Chinese, much the annoyance of many a local.

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

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

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

That night, Alexis had been given a simple part to play. With a pair of binoculars, she would set up a nest on a rooftop near Samara Tower, where the conference would be held. 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 n

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

Taking advantage of this distraction would be the third and final player, a single man whom Hector had arranged to pose as maintenance worker. With help from a few sympathetic assets within the tower, he would plant a 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, Alexis and Eirene had made it theirs, adorning the walls with Eirene’s charcoal sketches, and the desks with cheap plastic vases and a radio that spat out more static than music. Such was their home, and they were determined to come back to it.

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

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

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

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

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

“Elections, I’d assume.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Just here to say hello?” Eirene asked.

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

“I’ve no complaints.”

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

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

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

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

Eirene said nothing, but nodded her assent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah. Yeah, look. Is that…”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No faith in Hector’s disguises?”

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

“Outside the building,” Eirene said.

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

“Fuck, this is depressing,” Mayumi interrupted. “I though we were coming here to relax before the end comes. Well, Ian wasn’t 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. A shadow seemed to fall over her face, just for a second, before she shook her head and took a large bite out of her kebab.

“You okay?” Eirene asked.

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

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

## Chapter 3 – Running Like Clockwork

“The new world was built on lies. The claim that humanity is on the brink of annihilation? A lie. The claim that religion 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 UNPG is neither provisional nor does it represent the global community.”

* Mayor Besim Ozcan of Istanbul

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

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

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

“My condolences.”

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

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

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

“What’s that?” Alexis asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Yet to be completed, the Science Administration Tower – where Alexis 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 Alexis could only assume were lined with kinetic shield barriers to deter snipers. Presumably, she mused, 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, Alexis would have called it out as the Director-General’s personal conveyance. Such a ship would not be much of a threat in battle, but if its crew somehow spotted her, the game would be up, and so she quietly thanked God that it seemed ill-inclined to activate its searchlights for the moment.

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

Alexis took a second to confirm that her scouts were still in place around her, ready to cover their escape when the time came. “Roger,” she replied. “I’ve got eyes on the conference room. 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 around a baroque wooden table. On one side sat the regional governors, and opposite them sat the heads of the UNPG’s core administrations. At the head of the table was Director-General Magnus himself, the closest spots to him being reserved for the Grand Marshal and Grand Admiral.

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

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

Alexis was partially convinced that 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 was in place, Magnus held his hand high to silence the assembly, calling attention to himself as an attendant quietly took roll. “No doubt you are all aware that there has been some degree of violence near the capital tonight” he began. “The situation is under control, but I should remind everyone to remain on guard. Now, before we begin, Mr. Fairchild, I’d like you to update me on the status of the factories your team has been using.”

“Our factories? All but worked to capacity,” Marcus said, his slow and stilted speech giving him an eerie tone. “We *are* managing, but barely. Have you found anything new that might ameliorate our situation?”

“We have. One of the foremen in charge of expansion up in Stockholm came across an old Swedish black site with manufacturing equipment that should be sufficiently advanced to meet your needs. Mostly superannuated military stock dating back to the April Fool’s War, but preliminary searches have turned up some databases and forges with ties to you-know-who. Circa 2280.”

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

“Yes, as far as we can tell. I can’t guarantee that it will contain what you’re looking for, but, if nothing else, it includes the sort of manufacturing equipment you require. The Defense Administration will be given full control of the site as soon as we’re finished mapping it out.

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

Lancaster rolled his eyes.

“When your project is complete, you’ll have repaid me a hundred times over. 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,” Magnus said.

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

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

Everybody in the audience raised their hands.

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

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

That a discussion of artificial intelligence would begin with a reference to Rho did not surprise anyone. 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 remained ‘alive,’ either in android bodies or other computer systems.

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

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

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

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

“Completed, no, but we have made a breakthrough. The technology to produce Rho is well-documented, and several years ago we used it developed a theoretical successor, Sigma. We could put Sigma into production, but the hardware required to support it is extremely inefficient, requiring frequent recharges or a physical connection to the power grid. Thinking we could do better, we turned to the Holy Spirits, which are far more lightweight and advanced.”

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

Marcus smiled. “Very perceptive, Administrator Hanson. What I, alongside Messieurs Magnus and Lancaster learned during our foray into Vatican City is that the Technologists were able to produce a working copy of the Holy Spirit AI. The Luddites sought to destroy it, of course, but without the inconvenient hardware requirements, it was easy to hide backups right under their noses. We found one such backup inside the computer system of a Crusade-era air destroyer. It seems that the Catholic branch of the Technologists infiltrated the Vatican in order to use its ongoing war as a test bed. The poor thing that we found was serving as a glorified targeting computer, ensuring that all the destroyer’s shots found their marks up until the war ended and the ship was mothballed, trapping him inside for two score years.”

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

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

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

“Which brings me to our problem,” Marcus said. “Producing a Holy Spirit requires extremely specialized equipment, which we have neither the resources nor the knowledge to reproduce, hence why sites like the one mentioned by our esteemed Director-General are so valuable. To chance upon one is extremely unlikely; our preferred technique is to find other Holy Spirits and use metadata hidden in their programming to learn where they were forged.”

“Of course, that also means we need to find the Holy Spirits,” Lancaster said. “We have good reason to believe that the Papal Center Fleet, as it was called, contained many more hidden within its ships, but considering that it was nearly annihilated and the survivors scattered, that’s only marginally easier than searching for the black sites themselves.”

“It will take a lot of time, yes, but if we have more back sites, or if we can learn to mimic the technologies within, we can begin mass production of a new generation of AIs. We could change the world.”

“And how do you plan to ‘change the world’ by merely replicating the achievements of your predecessors?” Administrator Hanson asked.

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

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

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

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

“Despite the limitations we face, my team was able to develop a prototype called the Tau AI, although we refer to them as Mourners. My late wife once joked that because we’d forsaken our personal lives for this project, the AIs would be the only ones to mourn our passing, and the name stuck as a bit of dark humor. In any case, Lena here is the result of that experiment. Using the more efficient Holy Spirits as a basis, we created a much more efficient android chassis, which can operate for months without needing to recharge. With further study, we can take her even further.”

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

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

“As she says, the best is yet to come. The Technologists laid the foundation for my Mourners, yes, but they also began work on a ‘bridge’ between their hardware and the human brain. If finished, any one of us could operate a mourner body remotely, or inhabit it permanently.”

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

“And that,” Marcus said with an air of finality, “is why I am petitioning for your support today. With your assistance, we could hunt down the surviving Holy Spirits and begin our revolution.”

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

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

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

“Without consulting any of us?” a stern-looking old governor asked.

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

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

“The hypothetical ‘bridge’ aside, resuming AI production has obvious benefits,” Lancaster said. “As an obvious example, traditional unmanned drones allow us to attack targets without risking our own lives, but they cannot hold territory like infantry. With soldiers like Lena, here, we could deploy units as flexible as regular infantry, but without exposing anything more than an artificial, expendable body to danger. 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.”

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

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

ASPIS was the abbreviated name for the Automatic Safeguard Protocol with Integrated Subsystems, an allegedly defensive superweapon. Other than its name, the weapon’s specifications were highly classified. All Alexis and Ian knew was that it involved several satellites in orbit, 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* we optimize the Mourners themselves. So, a question for the audience – how would you propose we fund this little project of ours?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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 the tower when his earpiece was filled with the sounds of Samara Tower descending into chaos. Alexis, 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 Alexis 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.

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

\* \* \*

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

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

When no response came, Ian feared the worst, only to realize that his handheld radio was entirely non-functional. Recalling how the lights throughout the tower had darkened just before Magnus’ death, he began to put together the pieces of the puzzle. Anyone of any importance at the conference would have been wearing a personal shield 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 whoever this is screwed us over tonight,” Ian muttered. With Alexis unaccounted for, there was a chance that he would have to leave her behind if he were to survive; Ian hoped it would not come to that.

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

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

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

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

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

Through his ringing ears, Ian could hear a 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 recognized him, then Ian knew the game was up, that he and Alexis were doomed to die in Athens. As one small comfort, at least his friends listening from Istanbul had heard what they needed to know. That the survivors would be able to capitalize on his success was enough for him to die content.

Much to Ian’s surprise, when she finally wrenched open the door, the stranger helped him onto his feet. Slowly, he regained some of his senses, and saw the woman before him. She was perhaps a few inches shorter than he was, with brown skin, eyes, and hair, and 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 Alexis smiled. After too many minutes spent scouring the lower levels of the building, she had found a maintenance tunnel in the underground parking garage, sealed only by a regular lock that was easy enough to pick. Soon, she was outside, and everything seemed perfect.

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

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

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

Ian, she surmised, would likely have retreated to Widow’s Walk, assuming he had not already been captured and killed. Lacking any means to contact him, though, Alexis 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, Alexis knew she would be safe there.

## Chapter 4 – Hotel India

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You haven’t heard the news?” Alexis asked, to which Mayumi shook her head. “We were watching the conference like we were supposed to, when 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,” Alexis 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.”

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

All in all, the boy didn’t seem to be anything special, so Alexis returned to the group, noting that it 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 UNPG forgive and forget, especially considering what’s going down in the capital right now, and I’m not super into the idea of condemning an innocent man to save our own skins.”

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

“Or you with Eirene,” Mayumi added.

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

“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, I guess, if he was, like, some capitol page who overheard something he wasn’t supposed to. Until he wakes up, though, guessing isn’t gonna do much for us.”

“True. We’ll just have to wait.”

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

“Another airship?” Mayumi wondered aloud. “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-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…” Alexis said, her voice trailing off as she watched the end of the battle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

“Not anymore. Istanbul surrendered.”

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

“To begin, Magnus died in in the blast, alongside several others. A suspiciously short time the bomb killed Magnus, alongside several others, 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 *Sierra* and this, Lancaster’s obviously trying to set us up. It’s lunacy!”

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

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

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

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

“Oh, that sounds fun,” Mayumi said.

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

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

Hector looked as if he was about to slap Alexis. “What the *fuck* do you think?” he said. “They were willing to lie get the invasion started, so what kind 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.

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

“What I want to know is why they wanted Istanbul so badly. It’s an old wreck, right? So why go to all this trouble just for us? 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,” Alexis 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 UNPG and the Tehran Pact. Maybe they just needed us out of the way before they started the real war?” Eirene asked. “Or maybe they think we have one of those Technologist black sites they were talking about.”

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

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

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

“What.”

“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 better have something worthwhile to say now that you’ve conveniently gotten better.”

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s not a comprehensive list.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But in fulfilling this vital role, I made a rare error, and found myself captured by Lancaster and his flying blackguards, presumably to get me out of the way. They put me under house arrest in an admittedly luxurious estate, and they treated me well, but ‘tis human nature to yearn for freedom, so I planned my escape, and ended up running into you. I dare say that was the greatest fortune you’ve 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’s why Marcus was helping Lancaster onboard the *Sierra*!” she exclaimed. “With his son held hostage, he didn’t really have much choice. Doesn’t tell us what Lancaster’s end game is, but this kid’s right. If we bring him back to his father, Lancaster loses his leverage, and Marcus is free to tell us everything we need to know.”

Though it was difficult for Alexis to feel any sort of confidence in light of the current situation, she couldn’t help but feel inspired. Despite Jackson’s 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 Alexis’ thoughts. “Given Lancaster’s clear disposition towards false flag attacks, he could have sent this ‘Jackson Fairchild’ to us to both provoke a conflict at Hotel India and lure any survivors into an ambush.”

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

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

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

“Well, someone’s gotta do it, right? Everyone else here has families or an important job 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, Alexis and Eirene both knew Hector was right. This was the Peregrines’ best opportunity to recover from such staggering losses, and to not pursue it could doom them all.

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

Behind the young, 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 UNPG, 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 6 – The Histories

“Obviously, there are plenty of folks who’ll reject our message 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 am sorry.”

“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.

“My name is Charlotte,” the young woman continued. Ian could see her more clearly now. She was small, almost childlike in stature with 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.