Minutes After Midnight

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To Nari

May we meet again someday.

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## Prologue – Akiko

Akiko couldn’t remember why she hated Montreal.

The city, aged as it was, remained as beautiful and industrious as ever. Students graduating from its schools, herself among them, continued to achieve great things, helping rebuild the world after centuries of decline. The citizens of the Union and its satellites owed their lives to her classmates and professors. Should she not have been proud, Akiko wondered? After all, she had graduated with honors from McGill’s grueling computer science program, a memory most would have treasured. As soon as she removed her cap and gown, however, the veil was lifted, and the illusion of comfort fell to the ground like the silken garments that had brought her so much pride.

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

Nobody would have claimed the city was perfect. The more time anyone spent amidst the ivory towers of Montreal, the more they would notice cracks in its façade: the sterile laboratories, the manic intellectuals swarming the streets like so many ants, the protestors raging against wars and taxes, and, looming above them all, the militant hand of the Skywatch, whose heavily-armed airships made port in the city for maintenance and training. These, though, were mere inconveniences, unworthy of such visceral disgust.

Had she thought about it more, Akiko might have concluded that such feelings merely reflected her own discontent, but she preferred distraction to introspection. Ironically, the same airships she loathed proved to be her relief. No longer wishing to pursue her original career path, the only job she was able to find was that of a stewardess aboard the Army transport *Kolyma*, and, while her new, transient life did bring her back to that damned city every so often, Montreal was far more digestible in small doses.

Akiko’s job was considered a low-risk position. Most of her passengers were low-ranking military officers who were unlikely to be targeted by hostile powers. This day, however, was different. Rather than the usual crop of soldiers, her crew would be hosting one Grand Marshal Vicente Vargas, along with his entourage. He would be disembarking in Rome to attend some “strategic technology conference” that Akiko could not have cared less about, except insofar as a sojourn to Italy offered plenty of sightseeing opportunities.

Akiko arrived thirty minutes earlier than usual, but even that proved insufficient. A crowd had already amassed at the security checkpoint, threatening to smother the gate agents under a tidal wave of luggage, bodies, and the odor of travelers who had been held up in the summer heat for a few hours too many.

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

“Excusez-moi…pardon…j’ai besoin aller…là-bas!” Fragments of what little French she knew spurted out of Akiko’s mouth as she shifted her petite frame sideways to cut through the line and reach the crew entrance. What followed was an extra sequence of security theatre – body scans, a quick but intrusive pat-down, and an interrogation to verify that she was who she claimed to be. When all the nonsense was complete, the agents at the checkpoint finally granted her passage to the gate from which the *Kolyma* would soon depart.

A handful of army personnel were already milling about, but there were two who seemed out of place, both of them women of Chinese descent, and one much older than the other. If her age alone didn’t give it away, the tall, gaunt, older woman’s vestments made clear her superior position, with the usual trappings reserved for executives – a tailored suit jacket and slacks, expensive amaranthine jewelry, and sandals with heels even higher than those Akiko sported. Meanwhile, her younger, tomboyish counterpart wore no such adornments, instead sporting a tight, utilitarian jumpsuit, the kind typically worn underneath body armor. It would have been easy to assume that they were *from* China, or what was left of it, but so many groups had been displaced as the old world order collapsed that Akiko knew such an assumption would be baseless. Her own family was testament to that.

To her surprise, the younger of the two turned to face her and smiled. “Sorry to bother you, miss, but do you know when boarding will begin? The schedule led us to believe we’re supposed to be departing soon,” she said, taking a bite out of the apple she was holding.

“I just got here myself, but from what I know, they’ll probably start letting passengers on in…” Akiko paused for a moment to check the clock. “…eh, fifteen or twenty minutes, once they finish the last security sweeps. I know it’s close to departure, but we should be leaving on time, unless there’s any last-minute maintenance. Pretty old ship, after all.”

“I guess that’s not too long a wait. Thanks,” the girl said.

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

“Will you two be getting off in Rome, or coming with us further east?” Akiko asked, unable to resist prodding further.

“First, we’re going home to Athens for a meeting, then it’s straight back Rome for the conference,” the daughter replied. “Work sure has us going ‘round and ‘round.”

“Sounds like you’re travelling almost as much as I am these days. What kind of work do you do that takes you so many places?”

“Me, personally? I’m chief of security at Aleph Null Research and Development, Athens branch campus. Well, I say ‘branch’ as if headquarters wasn’t lost before I was even born. Anyway, what matters is that our company was invited to participate in a joint development project with your Defense Administration, so we came to Montreal to work out the details.”

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

“Yeah, what she said. Aleph Null is essentially a branch of the Athenian government at this point, so we need to represent its interests accordingly. To be honest, I got the easy job. Mother here is our director, and my brother, who’s in the washroom right now, is our ambassador to the Union, so they get the enviable task of preventing a hostile takeover by economic *or* military means. Plenty of folks out there would kill to get their hands on our tech.”

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

“Security was kind of a nuisance, but what else is new?” The girl cracked a smile and tossed the apple up in the air, catching it with the same hand as it fell back down before taking another bite.

“Just a nuisance? I figured it’d be worse. With as many guards as they have around, you’d think we’re trying to cross the American DMZ or something. Hell, wouldn’t surprise me if that line out there lasts longer than the war does. Protests really have our boys in grey spooked, don’t they?”

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

“I can imagine. Tch, what a pain. I’ve flown out of this airbase so many times you’d think they’d know I’m not a terrorist by this point. Like, just skip the circus and let us in!”

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

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

“If you want to fix it, you could always get a job here on the ground.”

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

“Bad memories?” the daughter asked.

“More like no memories,” Akiko replied. “I feel sick every time I so much as *think* about this place, but I honest-to-god couldn’t tell you why. It’s like there’s a hole where my senior year of uni used to be. Maybe I blocked it out or something.”

“That’s…yeah, I really don’t know what to say. Quite unusual.”

The awkward silence that followed was broken by the timely arrival of a suave young man. He was tall and lean and just as well-groomed as the two women, with slicked-back hair, a clean-shaven face, and a tailored two-piece suit.

“…And here’s my brother that I mentioned,” the daughter said affectionately.

“More than just her brother, I’m her twin,” he elaborated, shaking her hand with the vigor of a career politician. “Older by about twenty minutes, in case you were wondering, not that I think you were. Name’s Elias.”

“Akiko,” Akiko replied. “It’s, uh, good to meet you.”

“Likewise. I see you and my dear little Cassandra are thick as thieves already. She always did draw people in.”

So, her name finally came out. Akiko made a mental note of it, in case they encountered one another again.

“I’m not sure I’d go that far, but I guess I’ve enjoyed our talk,” Akiko replied.

“Speaking of which, Miss, you said we’ve got some time to wait. Wanna grab a quick coffee with me and Elias?” Cassandra offered with a warm smile.

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

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

\* \* \*

When the time came for the passengers to board, a few minutes later than predicted, Akiko was there to greet Grand Marshal Vargas’ entourage, as were most of the bridge crew. His people met hers on the portside boarding ramp, underneath the shadow of the Kolyma’s impressive bulk, almost the size of an old-world aircraft carrier.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” Vargas began. “You all seem well. I’m glad to see it.”

“Thank you. We humbly beg your apologies for the delay, Grand Marshal,” replied the ship’s captain, a pale, portly man named Jameson Reed.

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

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

“Black tea if you’ve got any, thank you,” Vargas replied. The rest of his staff politely declined anything more than water, most likely wishing to appear temperate in front of their dear leader.

Akiko curtsied, adopting the demure mannerisms expected of one in her position. “Black tea and five glasses of water on the way, sir. Would you like them brought to your quarters?”

“The conference room, if it’s not too much trouble. We’ll be headed straight there.” The Grand Marshal then turned to face Captain Reed before continuing. “In fact, we would appreciate if you could show us the way.”

“It’s just astern of the bridge. I’d be happy to escort you while the young lady fetches your refreshments,” Reed said.

“Magnificent! I couldn’t ask for better hospitality.” Vargas beamed and spread his arms wide as if preparing to embrace the captain before following him off to the conference room. For her part, Akiko slipped quietly away to prepare the beverages, happy that she would not have to listen to Vargas’ group talk about whatever banal politics currently held their attention.

Once the passengers were fed and the crew settled in, they began their journey to Rome, the nerve center of the Union. The entire ship shuddered and groaned as its ancient engines struggled to lift its bulk into the sky, giving Akiko a full view of Montreal. It might have been beautiful once, she thought, and the centuries-old photos still decorating the university’s halls certainly made it look that way. Now, even the eponymous Mount Royal was obscured by a wall of skyscrapers, with a canopy of interlinking catwalks and platforms so thick that they were said to form a second city, hundreds of meters in the air. Rising even further was the ugly spire of a space elevator, the only one of its kind still operational, sticking up as if the city itself was showing her a rude gesture.

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

Unless the Union was losing ground, she realized.

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

\* \* \*

Hours later, as the ship continued to soar over the Atlantic Ocean, Akiko returned to the conference room, where Vargas and his staff were still hard at work. From outside the door, she could make out parts of their conversation, most of which made little sense to her.

“How many fatalities?” one particularly gruff voice asked.

“Only eighteen,” another replied.

“*Only*? That’s almost the entire fifth group annihilated!”

“Yes, but the fifth was the smallest we had, so the overall impact was negligible.”

“Adai is right, we can’t afford to keep incurring these kinds of losses,” came a third voice that Akiko recognized as Grand Marshal Vargas. “I’ll see to it that the survivors receive the appropriate treatment. Once we deliver this data to Fairchild, we should be able to avert further incidents, so, in the meantime, I beg your patience.”

“Patience? Tell that to the families of the deceased!” the man named Adai shouted.

Akiko felt uneasy hearing their words. This didn’t seem like a conversation she ought to have witnessed, and yet here she was, listening through a perilously thin and unguarded door. It was certainly sloppy on Vargas’ part.

Pretending that she hadn’t heard a thing, she knocked thrice on the door and waited as the conversation inside promptly ceased.

“Do come in,” Vargas finally said.

Akiko meekly slipped through the door. “Just making sure everything’s alright. I can have more food and drink brought out for you, if you’d like.”

“I’ll be fine, doll, but thank you,” the Grand Marshal replied. The others agreed, and so, without another word, Akiko curtsied and left them to their definitely above-board business.

By that point, she had begun to find that she was quite thirsty herself, and so she made a detour to the *Kolyma’s* mess hall. There were only a few guards eating there, which pleased her. She was never one for crowds, anyway, especially after the mess that had been the airbase checkpoint. Resisting the temptation to grab something from the liquor section, perhaps a bottle of soju or the watery beer the galley offered, Akiko instead procured a can of lemonade to quench her thirst and downed it in what must have been record time.

“Oh, fuck, that hits the spot,” she muttered to herself, massaging her temples.

As Akiko sat alone at the table, a pallid wave of ennui swept over her. She couldn’t tell exactly why – being out-of-touch with her emotions was hardly a new experience for her, after all – but everything about her situation seemed inadequate. Perhaps her brief intersection with Vargas’ military affairs had reminded her of her insignificance, or perhaps she was simply lonely. Even though she was formally part of the crew, and many of them were kind to her, she had never seemed like she truly belonged.

A cough from behind mercifully put a stop to Akiko’s wandering mind before she slipped into anything resembling self-reflection.

“I did promise to say hi,” came Cassandra’s voice with the confidence of someone greeting a good friend. Akiko tried not to get her hopes up that this was anything more than a casual conversation, knowing full well that when this girl disembarked in Athens, they would never see each other again.

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

“Stalking? Ah, you wound me – it was pure serendipity, I assure you.”

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

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

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

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

“That scent you’re wearing is real nice,” Akiko remarked, taking a deep breath.

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

“Sounds like a pain in the ass.”

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

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

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

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

“I’m a nepo baby, pure and simple.” The bluntness of her answer caught Akiko off guard, and she struggled to formulate a response.

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

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

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

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

For a moment, Cassandra’s unflappable demeanor seemed to crack. “Yes and no,” she said. “While it’s true that she *could* give me preferential treatment if she wanted to…well, she definitely doesn’t.”

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

“I wouldn’t say that. She’s just very, ah, passionate about doing things the right way, or at least what *she* thinks is the right way. Doesn’t matter who you are. If anything, her expectations for me are higher for me since I’m her own offspring and ‘ought to take after her,’ or some such nonsense.”

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

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

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

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

“Call it a lucky guess.”

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

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

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

“Nah, even this rust-bucket is stormworthy. Cap wouldn’t be stopping unless something serious went down, a blown engine or something. Like I told you earlier, poor girl’s practically ancient.”

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

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

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

“Fair dues. Might not even be the engines, anyway.” Akiko stood up and walked over to the nearest window, peering out to try and see if there was, in fact, any noticeable damage to either of the portside nacelles.

“See anything?” Cassandra asked.

“Well, nothing’s on fire, so that’s nice. I’m sure…oh. Oh no.”

“What is it? We’re not already in Rome, are we?”

Akiko shook her head. “Not unless Rome teleported to the middle of the ocean when we weren’t looking,” she muttered.

“Then that means…” Cassandra never finished her sentence. Once she arrived at the window, she followed Akiko’s gaze downwards and saw the object of her trepidation. At first, the shape below was hazy, obscured by clouds, but the sheer size of it could only mean one thing.

“Ah, hell,” she continued, with the sound of one who wanted to use an even more profane phrase but was too well-trained to do so. “A ship? That can’t be anything less than a carrier. Is it one of yours?”

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

“Elaborate.”

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

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

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

“I’ve trained with the Skywatch marines. They may not be numerous, but they can fight on land just as well as they can conduct a boarding action,” Cassandra said.

“…Yeah, thanks for the heads-up, I guess.”

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

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

“Ah, I think the carrier aiming a half-dozen railguns at us might disagree,” Elias said more playfully than the situation warranted, and the young women turned to him in shock.

His mother scowled. “Hmph. By the look on both your faces, I’m guessing that part is news to you,” she said. “Luckily, I’ve come with news from the bridge that should clarify matters. You see, Grand Admiral Lancaster himself has deigned to pay us a visit. And by ‘us,’ I mean his counterpart in the army, Grand Marshal Vargas.”

“Did you learn what for?”

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

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

“It’s probably just like you said. The Skywatch is trying to obstruct their rivals in the army,” Cassandra mused.

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

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

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

“Then wait we shall. Or at least I shall. It’s not my job to tell you folks what to do.”

To their relief, they didn’t have to wait long. The *Kolyma* rattled and shook as the *Sunset Serenade* tightened boarding clamps onto its hull, and mere minutes later, a cohort of Skywatch marines marched a dozen of Akiko’s shipmates into the mess hall. Even Captain Reed and Grand Marshal Vargas were among them, looking like prisoners aboard their own ship.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So do I.”

Any hopes they had that this would be a quick and painless affair were dashed when the Skywatch interrogators arrived. The first into the room were a cadre of men clad in dark grey body armor, each with a revolver at his hip. These men, and those marines already in the mess hall, immediately straightened up and turned to salute the last figure to pass through the doorway – Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster, just as Cassandra’s mother had promised. It was clear from this procession that the Skywatch intended to draw things out with formality.

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

“Good. Seems you’ve rounded up the important ones,” he said to his men as he surveyed the room. “And a few small fry got caught up in the net, it seems. That’s fine. We’ll have to search everybody by the end, anyway. You lot are dismissed.”

After another salute, the marines filed out of the mess hall, leaving the passengers and crew alone with the Grand Admiral and his interrogators. With most of the crowd gone, the atmosphere felt unnervingly intimate.

It was Lancaster who finally broke the ice. “Vicente, my good man,” he said, clapping the Grand Marshal on the back with a wholehearted smile. “I trust your stay in Montreal was productive? Crushed a lot of protests?” He clenched his fist tight as if he were personally squeezing the life out of some hapless malcontent.

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

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

“So, you did read my report after all. Am I to infer by your tone that you think I should have stayed my hand? They’d practically shut down the Defense Administration on the day of a crucial test; Fairchild would never have let me hear the end of it if I hadn’t done something.”

In a flash, Lancaster grabbed Vargas by his collar and pulled him close. The Grand Marshal’s entourage instinctively readied themselves to draw their sidearms, but refrained from acting further lest they escalate the situation. “You misbegotten fool,” Lancaster seethed. “Your tests can be rescheduled, but it’s hard to recover from that kind of PR disaster. You neglected to mention casualty figures in your report, so please at least tell me there were no civilians killed.”

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

“That’s…marginally better,” Lancaster said, with the look of a man dreading the amount of paperwork he would soon have to deal with. He released Vargas from his grip, and the tension in the room fell back to a low simmer. After a pregnant pause, the Grand Admiral turned to Akiko, of all people, and spoke.

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

Vargas scoffed. “She hardly needs to be involved in this – ”

“Remind. Vargas. Why the protests started.”

“Ah, they were against the war,” Akiko stated confidently, falling back upon her professional etiquette. “They believe that the North American settlements have the right to self-determination. Many also want independence for Montreal itself.”

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

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

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

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

Once again, Lancaster turned around to face her, while the Athenians looked on in alarm. “You’re not wrong,” he said, in a mercifully calm tone. “That’s a problem that I…that *we* are trying to solve. Care to comment, Vicente?”

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

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

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

“Oh, you aren’t just fired,” Lancaster said. “My forces should have control of the bridge by this point, so I think it’s time I cut to the chase. You are all under arrest for conspiracy against the Union.”

“All of us?” Cassandra’s mother demanded.

Lancaster stared her up and down, frowning. “Ah, the Athenian delegation. You’re not on our list, so you’ll be released once we’ve confirmed your identities. Until then, you’ll be confined to quarters.”

“What about her?” Cassandra asked, pointing at Akiko. “She’s just a fuc – just a stewardess. Surely you can’t think she’s involved?”

“Until we find out what she knows, she’ll be staying with us. Now, are you all going to come quietly, or not?” Lancaster replied in an ominous tone. “

“I think not,” Reed spoke for the first time since the Grand Admiral’s arrival.

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

“You’re slipping, Jacob,” Reed continued. “Moving all the key personnel away from the bridge made it obvious that you planned to commandeer the *Kolyma*, so we prepared a welcoming committee to greet your men when they arrived. I believe you’ll find that the army is still very much in command of *our* ship.”

The thunder of cannons erupted all around them as the *Kolyma* fired a point-blank broadside into the *Sunset Serenade*, eliminating the need for Lancaster to verify Reed’s words. Caught off guard by the cacophony, most of those assembled in the mess hall dove for cover.

“You’re bluffing,” Lancaster said, the only one from the Skywatch not visibly shaken. “A transport’s peashooters can’t possibly break our shields, and, even if they could, you’re still bound to us. Sinking the *Serenade* would take you down with it.”

“That’s true, but you need the *Kolyma*, don’t you? My men only fired that salvo to prove that we control the gun decks, and, with them, enough ordinance to destroy the entire ship, along with all the data on board. Which we won’t hesitate to do if you persist with this folly,” Reed retorted.

Lancaster’s brow furled so deeply it threatened to cleave his forehead in two. “Well played,” he sneered, “but I don’t need the ship when I have you. Interrogators, disarm these prisoners and have them brought to the hangar bay! We’ll make sure they live to spill their secrets.”

“We’re not your prisoners yet,’” Vargas said, nodding to his staff, who drew their sidearms. Lancaster and the interrogators did the same, trapping Akiko and the Athenians in the middle of a standoff.

The Grand Admiral’s eyes flickered between the two sides, and he smiled, though his grin radiated more malice than mirth. “So, you’ve got some backbone after all,” he said. “I didn’t expect you to put up a fight in the face of overwhelming force. It’s stupid, but I can respect it. Tell me, though; how do you see this ending?”

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

“Alas, we don’t live in an ideal world. My job wouldn’t be necessary if we did. Nevertheless, I admit that I underestimated your resolve, so you’ve earned yourself a few extra minutes. Enjoy them while you can – once the second wave comes, *all* of you are in for a reckoning.”

As Lancaster and his men quit the room, Akiko could see Reed’s finger tightening around the trigger before Vargas bade him stand down with the subtlest of hand gestures. “You know what we need to do,” the Grand Marshal said.

Reed frowned, but holstered his weapon all the same. “You’re right,” he replied before turning to address the room. “Listen up, everyone. Those from my crew are to follow me to the bridge. Our Athenian guests, stay here and keep your heads down. Despite what he says, it’s us the Grand Admiral wants, so you’re safe as long as you keep out of the way until we repel this ‘second wave’ of his.”

For a moment, Akiko considered obeying him. She’d done her year of student service in before graduating, and knew her way around a gun. That did not mean, however, that she would be anything more than a burden in a fight against the Skywatch, or was she particularly inclined to throw her life away for a cause she did not understand. In the end, as cowardly as it felt, all she could bring herself to do was watch as her captain left her behind.

“Not that I’m not glad for your company, but shouldn’t you be going with them?” Cassandra asked.

“Cap can handle it, and someone needs to look after you guys,” Akiko replied. Even though her new friend’s tone did not sound accusatory, she still felt the need to defend herself.

“While I appreciate the thought, I’ve no intention of sitting idly by while the Directorate plays games with our lives,” Elias said. “God helps those who help themselves, as they say.”

“Tch, you and your ‘God’ again,” Shufen chided. Elias either didn’t hear her remark, or didn’t care to respond.

“My brother’s right,” Cassandra said, also ignoring her mother. “If we play by their rules and wait here, we’ll probably end up dead. Miss Akiko, the admiral mentioned a hangar. Are there any shuttles on board we could use to escape?”

“Shuttles? I mean, in theory, yeah, but you gotta know the Skywatch has the hangars locked down tight. Plus, the autopilot is only made to get you from point A to point B, not dodge missiles, so if they decide to shoot you down, you’re shit out of luck.”

“Then we need to make sure it doesn’t come to that.”

Cassandra finally turned to look at her mother, who nodded. “For once, I think you’re right,” the old woman said. “As long as you can do your job and get us to the hangar in one piece, then I’ll do mine and negotiate passage. Given that we’re not suspects in whatever crime the army has allegedly committed, Lancaster should see reason and avoid causing a diplomatic incident.”

“I can help you with that,” Akiko chimed in. “There’s a maintenance shaft that runs the length of the ship, goes right past the hangar bay. Door even has a window in it so you can peek through and make sure there aren’t any nasty surprises on the other side. You just have to make sure you’re through before the Skywatch takes the security office and starts checking the cameras.”

“Very convenient. And I assume we need you to get us into this shaft?” Cassandra asked.

“Sure do. I can take you all the way to the end, on one condition.”

“…You want to go with us. Off the ship.”

Akiko chuckled darkly. “I guess I’m an open book too,” she said. “I didn’t take this job because I believe in the Union or anything. Like, you heard them, Vargas and Reed are ready to blow us all to kingdom come if things come down to it, and the rest of the crew might be devoted enough to follow them into the grave, but I never wanted any of this. Taking this job was a last resort. So, please, you can do whatever you want with me when we get to Athens – I just want to live.”

“…I have no reason to disbelieve her,” Cassandra said after a moment of silence. Her mother didn’t speak a reply, but a stoic nod was enough to communicate her approval.

Akiko’s eyes lit up with the realization that, for the first time in a long while, she had a chance to escape the doldrums in which she had found herself. “Brilliant!” the girl exclaimed. “I’ll take you both there right away. I just hope Mrs…um, your mother is right about the Grand Admiral.”

“Hao Shufen,” the old woman said, answering the unvoiced question. “Lady Hao will suffice as a means of address.”

“Very well, Lady Hao. All of you, please follow me.”

After a quick survey of the halls around them to ensure nobody had returned to the area, the three of them dashed off towards the maintenance shaft, and reached it without incident. The way forward was cramped and hot. It was also, however, enough to keep them safe from the skirmish commencing above, and that was all they needed.

When they reached the door, Cassandra crouched in front of it and took out her mobile phone, holding it up just high enough for its camera to peek through the window without being seen itself. After a minute of recording, she turned back to her comrades so they could review the footage.

“Only two guards, looks like. Pretty standard buddy system,” Cassandra said.

Akiko pursed her lips. “That’s odd, I expected more.”

“Yeah, if it were me, I’d want at least two squads to cover each other, but perhaps they can’t spare the men. Or perhaps the *Sunset Serenade* is deterrent enough against what we’re trying to do.”

“Well then, it’s a good thing Lady Hao is here to talk us out of this clusterfuck.”

“Not yet,” Shufen replied. “These *peons* don’t have the authority to release us, so we’d be detained until they hear from Lancaster, which may not happen before the *Kolyma* is destroyed. We need to get airborne to force a confrontation and catch the Grand Admiral’s ear directly.”

“Right, and we can’t fight our way to the shuttle, either,” Cassandra added. “I like to think I can handle myself in close-quarters combat, but each of those men has at least twenty kilos on me, and Elias was never much of a fighter, either. No offense.”

“None taken,” Elias replied, “though I’d wager their guns are more of a problem for you than their greater supply of testosterone. We’d need a miracle to win that fight, and those are in short supply these days.”

“That too. The good news is that when they patrol behind the shuttle, this door’s in their blind spot. If we time our run just right, they won’t notice us until it’s too late.”

Akiko’s gaze shifted ever so slightly towards the door. Her hand tightened around the keycard in her pocket.

“Speaking of which, take off your shoes.”

“What?”

“Softer footsteps, less noise. We don’t want them to hear us.”

“Yeah, I guess that tracks. Heels ain’t great for running, anyway.”

Akiko slipped off her shoes and set them gently down next to the others. For a moment, she did consider bringing one along as an improvised projectile, but she knew that a trained marine would never be defeated by a wayward stiletto.

Now several centimeters shorter, Akiko produced the keycard and unlocked the door, taking care to keep her head away from the window. After that, it was again Cassandra’s turn to take point. Once she confirmed that the guards had moved behind the shuttle, all that stood between them and their escape was twenty meters of empty space.

Cassandra slid open the door and led her companions into the hangar, moving at a brisk but gentle pace to make as little noise as possible. When they got to the shuttle, Akiko used her key one last time to unlock it and let the others through. A small part of her expected the others to slam the hatch shut and take off without her, now that her services were no longer needed, but her fears were silenced when Cassandra instead gave Akiko a kindly smile and extended her hand to help her aboard. She appreciated the gesture, even if she didn’t really need it.

“Strap yourselves in, everyone” Cassandra said as she tapped on the shuttle’s touchscreen to power up the autopilot. The engines flared into life, undoubtedly alerting the guards outside, who were by then in no position to do anything about it other than radio the *Sunset Serenade* to prepare for interception. Under ordinary circumstances, that would have been more than enough, but Shufen seemed confident that Lancaster would simply let them go when pressured.

The hangar bay doors slid open with a loud metallic groan, and the shuttle catapulted into the evening sky. Once it turned to align itself eastward, Akiko could see the *Kolyma* and the *Sunset Serenade* locked together, one dwarfing the other. It was the first time she had viewed her own ship from so far away. When viewed from the ground, its size felt overwhelming, but now it only looked like a toy ship, the kind her father kept on his shelves at home. The gratuitously large Skywatch carrier did not make for a favorable comparison, either.

At first, that carrier did not seem to stir. None of its lasers lit fires aboard the shuttle, and no missiles bore down on their heat signature. It took less than a minute for this illusion of peace to be dispelled by a pair of jets that launched from the flight deck and took up flanking positions on either side of the shuttle.

“Well, here they are. The ball’s in your court now, Mother” Cassandra said.

One of the Skywatch officers, a curt-sounding man with a Tunisian accent, hailed them from aboard the flagship. “Shuttle Kilo Oscar two niner, this is the *Sunset Serenade.* Identify your crew and passengers immediately. Over.”

Shufen was more than happy to oblige. “*Sunset Serenade*, This is Hao Shufen, Director of the Aleph Null branch campus in Athens,” she replied in a scathing tone. “Accompanying me are Elias Hao Zhenjie, our ambassador to the Union; and Cassandra Hao Zhenyan, our chief of security. We demand that we be escorted directly to Athens International Airport, as the Union has displayed a gross disregard for the safety of our personnel, violating Article Four of the Treaty of Napoli. Inform Grand Admiral Lancaster that if our demands are not met, Aleph Null will withhold all further aid to the Defense Administration on these grounds. Over.”

“Roger that, Kilo Oscar two niner. Stand by for further instructions.”

The radio went silent, and Shufen switched off the shuttle’s transmitter so those aboard could speak privately while the Skywatch too conferred amongst themselves.

“Article Four covers exposure to known dangers as part of *research operations*,” Elias noted. “I suppose you could argue that travel to and from a site is an ‘operation.’ I’ll have to push for an amendment to clarify the scope.”

“It doesn’t matter all that much. Lancaster really messed up by not checking the passenger manifest. Mother probably could have cited the *Magna Carta* and he’d fold, ‘cause he knows we’ve got him dead to rights. Legally speaking, at least,” Cassandra added.

Akiko was not confident that Lancaster would not simply choose to silence them for good, and she clearly wasn’t alone. Despite Cassandra’s bold words, when Akiko looked closely, she could see the hairs on the back of her neck standing on end. No doubt she felt the same anxiety as before over being “stuck in limbo,” as she’d put it, awaiting judgement.

The four of them sat in silence. Moments later, judgement came.

“Kilo Oscar two niner, continue along your route to ATH. Upon arrival, a crew from Transalpine Airlines will handle the vehicle’s return,” came the voice over the radio once more.

“So, like, we’re free to go?” Akiko asked.

Elias held a finger up to his lips, reminding Akiko that her presence aboard the shuttle had not been made known, and then he nodded.

“The Grand Admiral also wishes to inform you that he looks forward to speaking with you again at the Strategic Technologies Conference. Over,” the Skywatch pilot continued.

“Wilco, *Sunset Serenade.* Out,” Shufen replied, terminating the conversation without acknowledging Lancaster’s ominous wishes. The two fighter jets peeled off and returned to their mothership, leaving them alone in the sky once more.

Everyone on board, other than the ironclad Hao Shufen, let out a sigh of relief. Now convinced that they were fully in the clear, the twins turned and gave each other a high five-into-fist bump combo so smooth it seemed rehearsed.

“Well, that’s another crisis averted,” Cassandra said, stretching out in an alluring, almost catlike fashion. “Although I’d be remiss not to acknowledge Miss Akiko’s efforts. I know you didn’t do it for our sake, but you saved us all kinds of trouble with that shortcut.”

“Don’t forget our mother. We’d have been swatted like flies without her,” Elias added.

“Selling yourself a little short, Eli, wouldn’t you say? You know the treaties better than anyone here. I’m sure you could have argued our case.”

“But would her words carry the same weight coming from me? I think not.”

Cassandra shrugged. “From an ambassador? ‘Course they would. It’s a moot point, though. We’re not dead or in jail, and *that* calls for a celebration.”

“You children may party all you like once we arrive in Athens. Meanwhile, I still have to manage the fallout from this mess. Frankly, so does my son, but I’ll not deny him a moment’s reprieve.” Shufen said, her exhaustion palpable. Akiko could have sworn she even saw a few more grey hairs on the woman’s head than there had been before.

“That’s surprisingly merciful. Well, you heard my mother, everyone!” Cassandra declared. “I’ll see about getting us some drinks once we arrive.”

Elias laughed. “*You* will definitely not be arranging the drinks. Let someone who knows a thing or two about liquor handle that, unless your new friend here is content to stay sober all night.”

“Seems a little ironic for a man of God to be our sommelier.”

“Is it ironic, or apropos? Water into wine, and all that. It’s no sin to imbibe in moderation.”

Akiko didn’t even notice herself losing focus. Raw feelings coursed through a mind too cluttered to consider the fact that she had no plan for the future now that her life was in no immediate danger. This untreated anxiety sapped her will to even remain awake, and so she didn’t.

\* \* \*

Cassandra looked sideways at Akiko’s slumbering body, and gently nudged Elias with her elbow. He followed her gaze and watched as she stood up, careful not to bump Akiko’s legs, and opened up the compartment filled with emergency supplies. From it, she gathered a blanket and set it gently over the sleeping girl before leaning back and closing her own eyes.

Elias was the next to fall asleep, and Shufen was the last. The dutiful autopilot carried out its mission to bring its weary passengers home, while the *Kolyma* burned behind them.

## 

## Chapter 1 – The Cloud Garden

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

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

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

That insignificance didn’t last long.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Are we almost there, do you think?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Tsk, I didn’t mean right now.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Elias just smiled and winked at her.

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. I have.”

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

They stopped to collect some

“So, uh, why the Hebrew letters, if you don’t mind me asking? Like, you’d think a company here would use Greek lettering.”

“I’m told it’s about mathematics. Aleph Null refers to the size of the smallest infinite set of numbers, because apparently some infinities are bigger than others. Don’t ask me why; there’s a reason I didn’t go into the tech side of things. Point is, our founder believed that there are infinite possible futures, but our work would prevent the worst of them, until only good futures remained. Still infinite in number, just…smaller. As small as it can be, now that the bad branches have been trimmed away.” Cassandra made a cutting gesture with her fingers to emphasize the point.

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

“Unfortunately, he neglected to elaborate on that topic, meaning it falls to us to figure it out. Can’t say I’m too fond of the guy.