Thirty Minutes After Midnight

The Peregrine Revolution

Version 4.1.0

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*“For they had reached that spot when a man suddenly met them, perhaps belonging to a race higher than mortal, but in any case gifted with very clear insight into the future. From his appearance he seemed to be a priest, with his bare head, grey hair and shaggy beard; he took hold of Alexius' leg and being on foot himself, he dragged down Alexius, who was on horseback, by the ear and recited to him this line of David's psalm: ‘In thy majesty ride on prosperously, because of truth and meekness and righteousness,’ and addressed him by the title Emperor Alexius! With these words, which sounded like a prophecy, he vanished.”*

* *Anna Komnene, in* The Alexiad

## Chapter 1 – Sierra

“Don’t worry yourself unduly about the protests. If they get too rowdy, send the guard in to shut them down, but they can do little to harm us while they’re standing peacefully in the streets. We’re keeping a look out for any rhetoric that might incite violence or factionalism, but so far it’s all been a nuisance at most. The situation north of the capital is far more pressing, which is why I am attending to it personally. You focus on tasks befitting your station.”

* *Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster to Grand Marshal Archer Hamilton*

Montreal wasn’t always a shithole, Akiko remembered.

The city was still as beautiful as ever, this much was true. The university where she had studied continued to produce students who went on to achieve great things in the Defense and Science Administrations. Up until her own graduation, Montreal had been to Akiko as the reflection in the pool had been to Narcissus, a tortured soul about whom she had read far too much during her tenure as a student. 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 New Montreal was that, like every other Commonwealth city that had been raised from the dead after the storms, 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 across the Atlantic. The more time she spent in the increasingly cold, academic climate of Montreal, the more she noticed its ugly imperfections – the sterile, emotionless laboratories of the academic world, the manic fervor of the obsessive 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 laborers at the airbase. 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 Commonwealth’s architects forced its 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 find aboard one of them was that of a stewardess, but it was enough to get her away from Montreal. Her new, transient life did bring her back to that city ever so often, but it was far more digestible in small doses.

It was rare for Akiko to actually work for the Skywatch. Her ship, the *Sierra*, was a military transport, but the Skywatch naturally had its own vessels for when they wanted to get from place to place. Most of her passengers were civil guard or legionary officers, the poor saps who weren’t lucky enough for a permanent assignment on one of the fancy cruisers or frigates. Such an arrangement suited her well. Although it was only recently that the Commonwealth had begun to press civilians into full-time military labor, not counting the mandatory year of service between all students’ first and second years of university, 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 own student service tour. Better, the company she kept onboard the *Sierra* was of a more humble stock than the typical Skywatch officer.

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; you almost here?”

“On my way through Checkpoint Charlie,” Akiko mumbled.

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

“Yeah. Been in line for twenty minutes 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.

There was one way into the airbase and one way out – a lengthy but fast monorail that jutted from the city proper into the surrounding ruins, where it eventually connected with its final terminal. Other, less secure ports handled day-to-day civilian traffic, but anyone with even a loose connection to the military was ferried through this fortress-like facility. If Montreal were ever beset by anything short of a nuclear weapon, the airbase would surely be the last place to fall.

\* \* \*

The HPS *Sierra* stood on the tarmac, ready to lift off when its crew were all onboard. Next to one of its engine nacelles, Akiko could see Captain Reed, Grand Marshal Hamilton, and their attendants discussing business before their departure. It was the first time she had seen Hamilton. He was an old man with spindly grey hair and a gaunt frame, and a conspicuous mechanical hand protruding from his uniform’s left sleeve.

Most of the men and women of the Commonwealth’s military forces had some form of machinery in their bodies, albeit usually less obvious than an artificial limb. Usually. During her student service with the civil guard, Akiko had been heavily 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.

“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, Magnus has declared that he likely won’t be at the summit,” the Grand Marshal continued, speaking directly past Akiko and her fellow servants as if they did not even exist. “They told me that a representative would take his place. Probably. Lancaster implied that there was a possibility that the Director-General would, in fact, show up, which only makes sense.”

“I suppose he wouldn’t want to be absent for the passage of his pet legislation,” Reed muttered. “Would his proposed 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 the Tower Guard, 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 Legion operations.”

“Have you talked with the Commissars about this?”

“Cutler and Bucharest have my back. Karahan has offered his 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.

Akiko enjoyed listening to them talk. During her time at Montreal University, she had dreamed that she might one day be called upon to treat with other distinguished persons. Instead, she became a maid taken for granted by those she had aspired to be, and had to make do with living vicariously through Reed and his associates.

Once she and the rest of the crew were settled, they began their journey to Ravengrad, the city they claimed had been built from the decaying ruins of Athens, Greece even though anybody with an ounce of historical knowledge knew it had just been renamed by Russian conquerors during an old world war. Her journey there was more eventful than she would have liked. The harsh weather over the Atlantic Ocean took its toll on the *Sierra*’s hull, forcing it to touch down in the wasteland north of the capital for repairs, but it was back on its feet soon enough. That shouldn’t have been a problem.

The *Sierra’s* precious cargo, Grand Marshal Archer Hamilton, had travelled to Montreal in order to oversee his legions’ efforts in making sure the protests did not become violent. Akiko didn’t care much for the man himself, but she approved of his actions. The protestors had become downright dangerous since her time at the University, no longer able to be kept in line by mere civil guardsmen. Had it been up to her, Akiko would have put them down like rabid dogs, but, alas, Hamilton seemed content to negotiate for the time being.

Most of them called for the Commonwealth to lift its ban on organized religion. Allowed to privately praise any gods of their choice though they were, it was illegal to publically identify with any class that might “promote false divisions between citizens of the new world,” as the Commonwealth’s magistrates phrased it. Faith was not entirely out, but the Church was. If the people were allowed to openly act upon their zealotry or divide themselves into competing religious factions as they had during the Crusade, then how could Humanity restore its lost prestige? Indeed, the Commonwealth’s architects reasoned, why should people be permitted to use the artificial labels of race or nationality or any other name used to justify the persecution of others? The legislators were adamant that this ban was not meant to force some kind of ludicrous homogeneity. In fact, they claimed that it emphasized individuality by encouraging future generations to think of their neighbors as individuals rather than members of a group, which Akiko supposed was technically true, even if it seemed like a slippery slope to thought crime laws.

Public opinion of this policy varied widely, meeting with great approval from some and violent opposition from others, the loudest of whom were by far 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 Commonwealth’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*, heading convoy zero-eight-two, ready for departure,” Reed said into his radio.

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

“Roger that. All flight crews, prepare for liftoff,” Reed said, addressing his own crew and the smaller ships that would follow him with the less-important passengers aboard. The convoy’s thrusters surged into life and the dark grey airships were taken upward into the overcast afternoon skies.

Reed shared the bridge with a short, round man by the name of Yusuf Fahri who would have been called Turkish before the new laws. 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, but there was no expectation it would ever have to be deployed. Ordinarily, the escort would piloted by a man named Pieter Marechal and his crew, but Marechal had suddenly fallen ill and been replaced by an eccentric woman allegedly named Eirene de Lafayette. Reed didn’t know Lafayette, but her credentials were impressive. He doubted he would ever have a chance to assess her skills as a pilot in person, however.

\* \* \*

The ship drew ever closer to its destination, now flying over the Mediterranean sea, and 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, on the other hand, 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 eating quarters when she arrived – the new corvette pilot, Eirene. They’d never spoken, which didn’t bother Akiko much. Nevertheless, she gave her a polite smile, which Eirene reciprocated.

“You don’t look like you’re with the legions, 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 was attached to the 509th and based 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 Legions are stretched thin doing…whatever it is they do, so the T.A. and the T.C.A. have been lending people like me to take up manual labor.”

“Civilians, hm?” Eirene said with a hint of alarm. “So what they said about the emergency labor corps is true. If you came from Transportation or Trade and Commerce, then you probably studied in Montreal or Madrid, yeah?”

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

“I see.”

\* \* \*

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

“Hey, Reed,” 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, quickly realizing his error as the vessel drew closer and a feeling of dread overtook him.

“Aw, hell,” he whispered when the approaching ship could first be seen and a message began to pour out of their radio.

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

“CSS *Sunset Serenade,* we are transporting Grand Marshal Archer Hamilton from Montreal on official orders from Ravengrad 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* and its flotilla slowed to a mid-air crawl as their engines strained to keep the vessels in the sky, waiting for the flagship to come up alongside them 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.

\* \* \*

“Speak of the devil,” Akiko said as she watched the *Sunset Serenade* crawl forward from the galley windows.

Behind her, Eirene felt her heart sink into her stomach. “We need to leave,” she said, the urgency palpable in her voice.

“Leave?” Akiko asked. “What do you mean? Leave to where?”

“My corvette. Now.”

“Why?”

Eirene looked back and forth, ensuring that they were alone. “The *Sierra* won’t make it to Ravengrad. If you want to live, you need to come with me, now. My crew…we planted a bomb in the hold.”

“Wait, you fucking *what?*”

“We weren’t expecting the flagship to intercept us, so my guys are going to detonate the bomb within the minute, probably, before Lancaster’s search party finds it. We didn’t come here to kill civilians like you, though. You don’t deserve to die.”

“Neither do they,” was all Akiko said before she ran off to warn Captain Reed, leaving Eirene alone in the galley, reaching out in despair as if to draw the girl back to her. The stewardess never made it to her destination. Just before Akiko was able to reach the bridge, Eirene had climbed through the hatch into her own vessel and detached it from the *Sierra’s* hull. Not more than a few seconds later, the *Sierra* was torn apart with all hands, pieces of metal and bodies being scattered like dust in the wind.

Cries of “general quarters!” rang out through the halls of the *Sunset Serenade* as its crew manned their battle stations, easily able to deduce that Eirene’s corvette was involved in the *Sierra’s* demise but unable to dispatch interceptors in time to catch it.

## 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. Remember, after our population reached critical density, people just…stopped reproducing. The Himalayan-1 virus and the accompanying plague of infertility were the real apocalypse if you* must *use that word, but everybody forgets about those because they’re not dramatic enough. The Commonwealth couldn’t spin them into a cautionary tale so easily.”*

* *Ryan Mistle, editor for Archivist Victoria Cromwell*

The ruins that composed the outskirts were old, predating much of the shiny capital architecture. Long before the world’s steady decay had reached a tipping point, before the chaotic wars fought between nations, religions, and cultures, these buildings had teemed with life. Now, they were dead stone, empty shells longing for a bygone era. The Commonwealth of Human Principalities cared little for these ruins. If there was scrap to be found, salvage teams might seek it out, but there was greater reward elsewhere. Montreal, Madrid, Stockholm – these cities, once destroyed but now rebuilt by the glorious Commonwealth, were the new favorite children, leaving the districts around the capital not yet rebuilt to lay in ruin forever.

Inside an old hospital, the one structure that still served some purpose to anybody, Alexis Havery and Teague Ironwall sat alone at a table by the window. She was a tall, strong, and plain-looking young woman with a thin face and a small, pointy chin, and short, flame-red 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 was an elegant weapon, long and grey with decorative silver engravings and the label “Madelyn-Rash Arsenal” on the barrel. It had once belonged to an officer from the Second Legion. Now it belonged to her.

“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. I already paid my dues to God. As He is my witness, I spilt more than my fair share of blood during the Crusade.”

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

“Yes, things were different back then. We’re better, now, I think. As a whole. My own body may not have fared as well as western civilization since the war, which is exactly why you don’t want to rely on me in a firefight.”

“I know, I know. Like, I wasn’t 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 who don’t assume as many risks.”

“They don’t take orders from me. They take orders from you. And Janessa, and Ian, the so-called ‘young people.’ Hector and I may be the ones making decisions, 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 stay pull the strings from the shadows?”

“Of course. Ian is the perfect age to rule – young enough to plausibly represent the new world while old enough to be respectable. Yet he’ll still need advice from the more experienced. Do you not trust me for 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. Maybe I’m just nervous with our move against Ravengrad 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. Sly and frequently crude, but trustworthy in Alexis’ mind.

“Took you long enough to get here,” Alexis said. “I swear, one would think you’d be more eager to hear the news I have.”

“Oh, I am, believe me,” Hector said with a hint of sarcasm.

“Glad to hear it. Now that you’re both here, I should say that Jan got hurt bad, but she’ll be all right. Took a shot that just about destroyed her jaw, lucky it wasn’t worse.”

“The doctors fixed her up, then?”

“Yes, they did,” she said, pulling some papers out from the pocket of her jacket. “Like I said, she’s doing well, shouldn’t be a problem when we hit the Tower. The job was patchwork and she’s got a nasty scar, but she’s all right. Martellus made it back too, he’s sitting in the stable just fine.”

“Oh, thank goodness the *horse* is okay. I don’t know how we’d survive otherwise.”

“Can’t have mounted infantry without mounts, and you know how bloody hard those are to get. Scout and Salvage can’t just find them out in the wasteland like we can get ammo and other materiel. It’s a good thing that she kept Martellus alive. Anyway, you may not care about that, but I think you’ll like this: Not only did we get plenty of ammunition and a decent cache of food, but, well…take a look”.

She laid the worn papers on the table. Hector leafed through a few sheets while his slightly older counterpart looked closely at a single page. Each one had an intricate urban map printed onto it with long and complex strings of letters and numbers printed next to certain points. Hector’s brow furrowed as he discarded page after page, letting each one rest on the table as he analyzed the next.

“This looks like Ravengrad – there’s the Panopticon, and that’s unmistakably Ravengrad Tower, but I don’t understand. What are these?” he asked, pointing at the various labeled points.

“They look like codes of some sort. Identification, maybe? Access?” added Teague.

“Close” replied Alexis, grinning subtly. “Here, get a closer look at...” she paused for a moment, selecting the correct document. “Ah, here we go. This one.” She passed it on to Hector for inspection.

“Alright,” he said, reading the text in greater detail while Teague looked over his shoulder. “What have we here? ‘Ravengrad PAC Four …’ Oh – oh my god.” He put down the paper and looked at the others for a second time. “Ravengrad’s missile defense system. Exact locations of launching stations, engagement control stations, and radars, personnel assignments, access codes. Where did you possibly find this?”

“There was old corvette – an earlier model than what ‘Rene uses – I think it was resting, I don’t, fifty kilometers south of here? Anyway, it was entirely abandoned. Most of the tech was either broken beyond repair or looking like it was jury-rigged in a hurry. I think some Commonwealth pilot had to make an emergency landing and got stranded out here who knows how long ago. Anyway, we found these in the ship’s CIC along with some other parts and pieces in the cargo hold.”

Hector remained silent for just a second as an aide approached Teague, whispering something into his ear. As Teague nodded and followed the man away, Hector spoke. “Then how do we know it’s valid?” he asked. “You said it yourself, there’s no telling how long these were out there. They could have changed the setup any number of times since then. You’ve brought us nothing we can use.”

“It’s still worth a shot, don’t you think? Like, at least to look into? We could have a serious advantage in Ravengrad if it pans out,” Alexis replied.

“Alexis,” Hector said. “I really do wish that I could tell you that this is valuable intelligence and that we can adjust our plans for a more efficient strike. But the truth is that we’re attacking the capital in three days. To even investigate this lead will take a lot longer than that and risk alerting the Commonwealth. If they detect any intrusion into their missile security system, you can bet that they’ll be able to trace it back to us. Besides, the colonization summit isn’t going to wait. Once Eirene gets back with our corvette, we’ll pack it up for the move into Ravengrad. It’s not negotiable at this point, foolish to think we can change course.”

“It’s alright. I understand,” replied Alexis. “You’re right, of course – it was worth looking at, but it’s not useful.”

“I’m just sorry you wasted your time getting his back when we can’t use it. But still, you managed to gather a great deal of other useful material, for which we thank you.”

“Well, that’s good, I suppose,” said Alexis before stopping suddenly when she finally noticed that Teague had disappeared from the room. “Teague? Are you there?” she asked, looking around, unsure how long he had been away.

“I’m in the communication room,” Teague said from afar. “Actually, if you two would please join me here, there has been a…complication.”

“Oh, God *damn* it,” said Hector, exasperated. “Three days, *three days* left. What the hell’s going on now?”

“Just get in here and I’ll *show* you, you bloody idiot. Alexis, you too,”

“This whole plan is going to be the death of me even if we do make it out of Ravengrad,” Hector muttered as he and Alexis joined Teague in the communications room. “We’ll get out of the capital and I’ll have an aneurysm on the flight home.”

“What’s wrong?” asked Alexis, trying her best to stay level-headed but clearly concerned. “Will we have to change anything?”

Teague held his head in his hands, massaging his temples. He was more than twice Alexis’ age, but didn’t look it, with a handsome complexion and chestnut brown hair laced with grey that ended in a sharp beard on his chin. In that moment, however, he looked far older than Alexis had ever seen him. The stresses of command carved into his face, Teague stared at the ominous passage on the screen: *We have no choice. Mobilize tonight.*

“You sent out the fire teams? Already? Why?” asked Hector, gesticulating violently out of alarm. “If Ravengrad detects our presence in the city before we can rig the election, we’re done for!”

“That’s exactly it!” shouted Teague. “The Commonwealth did exactly the opposite of what we expected, what we hoped they’d do. Magnus isn’t going to appoint a new Grand Marshal. Grand Admiral Lancaster has invoked his right to merge that office with his, so the summit can continue as planned. Worse, they’re accelerating the schedule and holding it tomorrow. They’ve forced our hand.”

“What? Why would they do that?” Alexis demanded, utterly bewildered. “It doesn’t even make any sense! There’s just – I mean, why?”

“I don’t know,” said Teague. “But the fact of the matter is, that’s what’s happening, so we have to deal with it. Our disguised ships are bound for the harbor, ETA four hours from now. Eirene will fly us to Hotel India personally, and we’ll see about getting into Ravengrad tower.”

“But how are we even going to do that?” Hector asked. “Without installing our man as Grand Marshal, there’s no chance we can get in without being shot down!”

“We’ll still go mostly to plan. Ian and Janessa say they have a plan to infiltrate the tower. They’ll get as close as they can, gather intel if possible, and take the shot. Getting out was always going to be tricky, it’s just that getting in will be a challenge now, as well.”

“So we just have to be a lot more careful,” Alexis said.

“In a nutshell, yes. Remember that we will have our full military support deployed near the area to provide cover for you and your team’s escape if things go badly, but that would be a worst-case scenario. I don’t think we can hold out against the Commonwealth for long.”

“Worst-case scenario. Right. I can do this.”

“Can you?” Hector asked.

“And what exactly is that supposed to mean?”

“You’ve done an exceptional job so far as a scout. No one can deny that. But this is an entirely different game. You’re not roaming free in the wilds looking for supplies anymore. Oh, no. The guards at Ravengrad tower will be vigilant and merciless – they will show no quarter, no hesitation, and no weakness. We are marching straight into the center of the wasps’ nest and attacking the queen, so we need perform at our absolute best if we are to have any chance at survival. I want you to reassure me that you can do that.”

“I. Can. Do. This.” Alexis reiterated, gritting her teeth.

“Glad to hear it. And I trust you, for what it’s worth. You have been, without a doubt, the best student I’ve ever had the pleasure of teaching.”

“Yeah, because your history lessons are going to be *so* useful in a fight.”

“Knowledge is power.”

“Sure. As you say.”

The Peregrine commanders waited for the next half hour, nervously occupying themselves with preparations and briefing. As time passed, the gentle rain faltered and silence fell upon the compound.

“Alexis, before Eirene arrives, I’m going to the chapel for prayer. You’re welcome to join me if you like,” Teague said.

“I think I’d like that, yes,” Alexis replied, nodding her head.

“Very well. And you can come too, Hector, if it pleases you.”

“I think I’ll pass.”

“Suit yourself,” Teague said, laughing. Hector just rolled his eyes as his other companions departed.

There was some kind of space for every faith one could imagine in the compound. The Christian church was the largest, used by a plurality of Peregrine agents, but a sizable mosque and synagogue were also there, with smaller facilities providing for religious communities less present in the West.

Before she had joined the militia, Alexis had never known she wanted this. She had been raised as an Orthodox Christian, but never allowed to express her faith openly for fear of religious conflict. Now, though, she knelt alongside Teague – a devout Catholic – while not far from her there were Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and more all sharing a moment of spiritual guidance. There were, of course, also many who rejected spirituality, which didn’t bother her. It simply felt nice to enjoy her time of quiet contemplation in the company of friends, regardless of faith or creed.

In the chapel, they were alone together. It wasn’t a beautiful room. There were no stained glass windows, flying buttresses, or other ornate decorations so typical of old world cathedrals. Rows of makeshift pews had been arranged inside what remained of the old CSS *Peregrine*’s bow, lit only by candles and sunlight leaking in through the cracked hull. To her left, she could hear Teague finish the last words of the Lord’s Prayer, his whispers amplified by the implants in her ears that the civil guard had installed to give her an edge on the battlefield and prevent the sound of gunfire from rupturing her eardrums.

She didn’t entirely like having them on, but they were useful at times. The church wasn’t one of them, though, and hearing Teague’s private words, as generic as they were, reminded her to switch off the implants out of courtesy.

Alexis perked up when she heard the inhuman voice of the automated announcer preach over the loudspeaker that the corvette’s arrival was imminent and that ground crews should prepare for a landing. Eirene was, without a doubt, her best and most loyal friend, the two of them having lived together longer than some married couples. Alexis was looking forward to their reunion after a brief interlude.

“I suppose that’s my cue to exit,” she said. Teague nodded as she stood up and left him on his own.

Although the rain had subsided, there was still a certain chill in the air while Alexis waited. Ghostly wisps of vapor drifted out of her mouth as she exhaled sharply. By that time, the corvette had finished its landing procedure and now lay silent on the platform, steam drifting off of its hull and dissolving into the mist. She slowly approached the vessel, shivering despite the layers of insulation she wore, and, just as she reached the aircraft, the door slid open and Eirene stepped out into the cold air.

The pilot had always flaunted the flexibility and comfort of her flight suit compared to the formal dress worn by Peregrine officers, but that privilege now came at a cost. As soon as she stepped through the doorway, the cold wind flowed around her, draping the young woman in a coat of icy air.

“Oh!” She grimaced, the cold stinging her light bronze skin through the thin fabric. “Yuck, it’s so cold here. You get used to the nice climate control the Skywatch puts in their ships.” As she spoke, she fell right into Alexis’ arms, taking in what little warmth her friend’s body offered her. After a quick embrace, they noticed the rest of the crew waiting to disembark and sheepishly stepped aside.

As they were nearing the entrance, Teague and Hector arrived through another doorway with an escort of guards, cheerfully greeting the new arrivals. They both waved cheerfully, a gesture that Eirene reciprocated. The men and women joined together and continued walking in a single group.

“Eirene, you seem…upset,” said Hector, noticing a slight shadow over the pilot’s face. “Operation didn’t go as smoothly as you said it would?”

“I think I’ll be alright,” she replied. “Promise me one thing, though.”

“Yes, yes, whatever you like.”

“Just tell me that what I – what we’re doing – is going to help. I mean, that we’re actually going to achieve peace in the end. A better world, all that.”

Hector was silent for a moment, and then nodded. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, we are.”

“So I have your word on that. A scary thought.”

Teague led the group back inside while a swarm of workers set upon the corvette, putting it under maintenance and loading cargo in preparation for the journey to Ravengrad.

Once inside, Eirene approached Alexis directly. “Hey, ‘Lex, Can I speak to you for a minute?” she asked.

“Of course,” Alexis said, nodding towards a corridor that would take them to their room in the women’s wing. The two of them departed with a quick acknowledgement from Hector and Teague and sat down on the old, squeaky chairs.

Their room was warm and familiar. Two old beds, a wooden desk with a vase filled with wilted flowers, a broken clock, and a radio that spat out more static than music. Eirene enjoyed charcoal sketching as a hobby – her works were pinned hastily to the walls, along with photos of scenic vistas throughout the Commonwealth. Their assets were worn down, but Alexis had reliably kept them organized, at the very least. Anything else, she thought, was unacceptable.

Now in private, Eirene looked far more visibly shaken. Her hair was rustled and she looked close to tears.

“What’s wrong, Angel?” Alexis asked softly. “Like, every mission you run you’ve come back looking fine. Stress getting to you?”

“No. Well, yes, but that’s not really it. I can handle myself.”

“Then what is it?”

“You couldn’t just think of the civilians who were on that ship?” Eirene said, looking astonished and hurt. “The innocent stewards and stewardesses and pilots who made the mistake of traveling with the wrong person? Hector tells us day and night that we’re the good guys, that we’re doing the right thing. But that gets a little hard to believe when we start to justify innocent deaths, letting them just die because *apparently* it’s worth it if we get *one* enemy officer. When I was a pilot for the Commonwealth, I was as patriotic a woman as you could find, because they did more for me than Ian or my dad ever did, though that’s not saying much. I killed hundreds of people, maybe even *thousands* in their name, and, after they turned on me, I never cared about shooting the Skywatch ships because those cretins can rot in Tartarus for all I care. But civilians? I’m sorry, but fuck that, pardon my language. You know what? I’m *done*. No more bombings, no more shooting down anything. You need a lift? You got it, but *no one* else is dying by my hand!”

Alexis recoiled from Eirene’s outburst as the girl steamed and then glared and then cried. Her mood broke down from a red-hot anger to a deep blue sorrow, from carmine to cerulean. Alexis felt guilty about the satisfaction she felt whilst consoling Eirene, holding her petite body close and letting her cry into her shoulder. The warmth felt nice.

“There shouldn’t have been any civilians on that ship,” she said. “If there was collateral damage, then it wasn’t your fault.”

“We didn’t know for sure, but we’d heard the rumors about the emergency labor corps. At the very least, we knew *something* was up. Point is, I could have had my guys stop the bombing, but then the *Sunset Serenade* of all things came up beside us for who knows what reason, and suddenly it was a ‘now or never’ sort of moment, and we went for it, even knowing that innocent people would die. That isn’t right.”

“Hey, don’t worry, little angel, I gotcha,” Alexis whispered as she held Eirene and gently pet her back. Eventually, the younger woman sat back and wiped her eyes clear, leaving tear stains on Alexis’ uniform. “You’re right, of course. Seems easy to justify a few innocent deaths now if we say it will save so many more, but that kind of logic can go bad really quick. But it was still a military target, and it’s not your fault the CHP put civilians in harm’s way. If it’s any consolation, we shouldn’t have to do anything like this after tonight, if it goes our way.”

Eirene sniffed, collecting her thoughts and feelings. “Really? Doesn’t seem like that to me. Even if we do kill Magnus, that won’t end anything. Just more war.”

She wasn’t wrong, Alexis knew. The Commonwealth wouldn’t just surrender; no matter how many officers they killed, even if they got the Director-General himself. “Yeah, maybe,” she said, “They might keep fighting us, but we have a shot at scaring them enough to sue for peace. We show them that we mean business, and they might be willing to talk. And, you know what? Even if this war continues, then I promise you that you’ll never have to kill anyone again. I’ll tell Hector, Teague, all of them that Eirene Lilliana de Lafayette has served her tour of duty. You want out, you’re out.”

It did little to soothe the feelings of distress that already plagued Eirene, but her friend’s continued support was reassuring. “Thanks, I appreciate it. I’ve always known that and just dealt with it in the past, but…this one was different. And, I mean, you might have a point about the stress getting to me. Ravengrad, man, that’s going to be a nasty piece of work.”

“Come on, Eirene. Teague and Hector are good at what they do. I trust their plans. Besides, you don’t have anything to worry about; you’re just going to drop us off and get back to safety.”

“That’s not true at all! Well, that last part is, but it doesn’t mean I can’t be worried. With you and Ian and the others actually going into the tower, I just couldn’t take it if you – any of you – were killed.”

Alexis smiled and patted Eirene on the shoulder. “Have a little faith,” she said. “He and I have survived this long. I think we can make it another day. Besides, if you buy into Teague’s sermons, we’ve got God on our side, for what it’s worth.”

“And do you believe him?”

“I do, actually,” Alexis said after a brief, contemplative pause. “If He’s out there, then I can’t imagine He would favor the Commonwealth over us. But, even if the worst should come to pass and there really is nothing out there, we’ve done everything we can to make this work. God helps those who help themselves, eh.”

“I suppose you’re right,” replied Eirene with a sigh. The thought of losing her companions was almost too much to bear on top of her stress, so she shut those worries away. “Hey,” she said, “we should probably get back to the ship. I got a message from Teague saying that the summit was bumped up to tomorrow?”

“Yeah, tomorrow.”

“M-hmm. So I bet that Hector’s itching to get us moving.”

“He is, but you should have seen him when Teague told us about the decision to mobilize the fleet.”

“I imagine it was quite the show.”

## Chapter 3 – Hotel India

“Consider the following words by Hobbes: ‘That a man to obtain a kingdom is sometimes content with less power than to the peace and defense of the Commonwealth is necessarily required. From whence it cometh to pass that when the exercise of the power laid by is for the public safety to be resumed, it hath the resemblance of an unjust act, which disposeth great numbers of men, when occasion is presented, to rebel…’ The old world made people soft. They thought that their freedom would last forever. That’s all these ‘Peregrines’ are. Malcontents who fail to realize that we’re only doing what must be done for humanity’s survival.”

* *Director-General Magnus Keller, in* Watching the North

At the head of the corvette, Eirene sat comfortably in her pilot’s chair. Her work wasn’t particularly laborious thanks to a smooth interface and all kinds of quality-of-life technologies laced in the Commonwealth systems. To her left, Alexis watched her carefully, while the older men sat to the right and nervously chatted about the attack to come.

“Entering populated Ravengrad area now” she said over the ship’s intercom. “Active signal dampening in effect. Switching to LPIR. Disengage outgoing communications.”

In the air, Eirene felt like a different person entirely. On the ground, she was small, soft, and physically weak, but when she was in the pilot’s seat, her aircraft an extension of her own person, all of that stopped being true. Her corvette was fast and durable, even if it was weak compared to larger Skywatch ships. It couldn’t stand up to the storms that surrounded the cities of the Commonwealth, but those were the unrelenting, hurricane-force winds that had –allegedly – toppled cities. The corvette made her feel more confident and secure than she had any right to be.

“Well, anyway,” Eirene continued as the group approached their destination, “We’re getting close to the base. Everyone buckle up, secure your loose items, and all that usual nonsense. I’m putting us down in a minute.”

The Peregrine forward base was far enough from Ravengrad proper that Eirene could land the corvette without alarming the Commonwealth’s security. Hector had once used it to produce textiles in service of the government, but now it worked day and night to supply the revolution.

“Ian will be in the conference room,” Teague said as the vessel was unloaded. “Let’s not keep him waiting.”

“Of course not,” Eirene said, as professionally as she could.

She and the Shock Corps’ commander shared a father, the late Neleus Barrow, but there was no love between them, and they rarely acknowledged each other as siblings. Born of different mothers, they bore no physical resemblance to each other, and Eirene had even gone so far as to change her name to sever any connection with the family she despised save for a single thread to her biological mother, who had taught her the French language before everything fell apart. That mother, although not dead – as far as she knew – was no longer in the picture. Alexis and Eirene had cut ties with their families when they defected, in order to ensure that such connections would not bring harm to either party.

While the others were getting ready to discuss their plans, Ian pulled aside one woman from the group: Janessa Tyler.

Alexis regarded Janessa with an air of curiosity. Everything about the woman was an anachronism, from the way that she dressed in the field – hearkening back to the flamboyant uniforms of the Swiss Guard – to the way she threw antiquated words and phrases into her speech. Her position as commander of the Dragoon Corps led her to fancy herself one of the old cavaliers of yore, but she seemed to have little idea of what that meant.

“Been a while,” Janessa said to Ian.

“Yeah. How are you holding up?” Ian looked at her, and only then did he see the grotesque scarring on her face. The dark skin on her left jaw was torn and burnt, crudely sewn back into place by the field medics travelling with her party. Marks reached down onto her chin, past her crooked nose, and up to just underneath her left eye, bounded by the short, deep brown hair.

“Good, but you’ve surely noticed the damage,” Janessa said softly. “I got clobbered something fierce by First Legion scouts. Was lucky to survive, quoth the field medic anyhow. I’ll be alright, but I’ve got some ugly damage.”

Ian held his hand to her face and traced the scars with his finger. “You think this is ugly? No, a wound might be painful, but it’s a sign of endurance. Of defiance. And I can’t think of anything more beautiful than that.”

Janessa smiled. “Defiance, hmm? I wonder what my parents would think of that.”

“I’m sure they’d be very proud.”

“Perhaps. I do wonder, though. When they see the news tomorrow…”

“That’s something to think of after we’re done.”

“Alright, if you two are quite done, we’re ready to begin,” Hector said from his place at the table. Ian and Janessa sheepishly took the last two seats at the table and the meeting commenced.

“So we need to get people into Ravengrad Tower tonight, is that correct?” Alexis asked.

“Yes,” Ian said, immediately shifting gears into the discussion at hand. “Intelligence suggests that the colony summit will be held on the Grand Balcony just as we were prepared for, only sooner. That means that most of our plans are still valid, but I had to make some emergency calls to get the people we need in the right places on the new schedule.”

“Really? Nothing changed?”

“Other than how you’ll get into the tower itself, yes. We have a plan for that, though. I expect you’ll be okay as far as getting inside goes.”

“Are ye sure about that? I wouldn’t be so sure we’ll be okay,” Janessa said. “I’m all kinds of nervous. I can do what needs to be done to get us in, but getting back out once our cover’s blown…I don’t even want to think about that.”

“Listen, Jan, I understand your concerns, but we’ll do fine,” Alexis said, trying to reassure her associate. “The Commonwealth doesn’t expect an attack like this, not after so many years of what they like to call ‘peace.’ They’ve grown soft.”

Janessa furled the side of her mouth with the worst of the scarring. “Soft. Right.”

“The Commonwealth isn’t as peaceful as they like to preach, but they’re hypocritical, not stupid. They’re ready for bigger threats than us,” Eirene continued. “Tell us how we’re getting in. It’s not like I can just airdrop you onto the Grand Balcony.”

“Not with their missile defenses still active, anyway,” Alexis said with palpable annoyance lingering in her voice.

“The Science Administration Tower is linked to Ravengrad tower by a footbridge that spans the highway between the two buildings. That will be your point of entry, but you will first need to get into the Science Administration itself. Fortunately, it is poorly guarded compared to the capitol building, and Ian and Janessa have a plan for securing entrance into the facility.”

“The Shock Corps are ready to move on the Foxtrot Romeo factory,” Ian said. “It’s a large industrial park that makes computer parts during the day and is inactive at night. More importantly, the Science Administration is at the southeast corner of the park. If we can take Foxtrot Romeo, we can get into the Tower with little trouble.”

“And how are we going to take Foxtrot Romeo?”

“Diversion. Janessa will lead a fire team from the Dragoon Corps and hit one of the nearby plants, drawing attention away from our target. Meanwhile, Alexis and the SSC can easily infiltrate Foxtrot Romeo and take control of its security hub. With the alarms off and no coordination, the guards will be easy pickings when the Shock Corps moves in and the Dragoons come back to give us a hand. From there, it’s a straight shot to the Tower.”

“What kind of resistance are we looking at?” Alexis asked.

“Civil guard, mostly. Not the conscripts fresh out of university, though; these are the veterans who stayed around and have experience. Not Legion material, and certainly not Skywatch, but not pushovers.”

“Were these Alexis’ people?” Eirene followed up.

“I doubt it,” Alexis replied. I might have known some of them, but I made sure my girls were clear of any places we might run into them before we jumped ship. If we get lucky, I could leverage some connections, but that would require a serious amount of luck. Better just to assume they’re hostile. What’s strange is that, with Magnus in town, I’d have thought they would have more professional soldiers standing watch.”

“I’m not sure what’s going on, but I’ve triple checked it. The intelligence is accurate – the Tower’s defenses are unusually thin for such an important event. If they somehow manage to raise a general alarm, we’ll have to storm the castle, though, and there would definitely be Skywatch officers in there even if Magnus is not. It’s in our best interest to keep the operation in Foxtrot Romeo as tight as possible so that, once your boys and girls open the doors for us, we can get close before we have to take the shot. Our disguises won’t do much good if they’re looking for intruders. Hopefully they won’t connect Janessa’s attack to the Tower.”

Alexis nodded.

“We should begin final preparations,” Teague began, “but before we do, I should like to say that, if we do not see one another again, I have the utmost respect for each and every one of you, and that our mere presence here today will undoubtedly send a message to the Commonwealth that they cannot ignore.” He paused, took a deep breath, and looked solemnly to the assembled commanders. “God be with you.”

\* \* \*

Despite some reservations from amongst their number, the Peregrine strike team set out soon after. It was a long walk between Hotel India and the Ravengrad Tower, through the rows and rows of factories shutting down for the night. The late hour meant that many of the nearby factories were dead silent, so the strike team expected no resistance as it began its advance.

“What’s the deal with you?” Janessa asked Alexis as they walked. “You look so happy.”

Alexis didn’t answer immediately, instead taking the time to gaze longingly at the buildings around them. "I just love this city,” she said when she finally responded.­

“The one we’re attacking.”

“Hah, yeah. I’m talking about the architecture. You ever hear of brutalism?”

“Brutalism? Have I heard that right?”

“Yeah, brutalism. It’s an architectural style, a lot of what you see in the heart of the city. You see anything big, blocky, angular, and wrought entirely from concrete, that’s brutalism.”

“And you like it.”

“Yeah. It exudes power, control, confidence, solidity. You know? So monolithic, strong and secure. Course, that’s on one hand – on the downside, you’ve got pictures of bureaucracy and tyranny; that’s why so many dystopian movies go to it for their set design and whatnot. People still see the concrete blocks and think of Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia or that kind of stuff that stopped being popular after the twentieth century. And those kind of states used it for good reason, though, yeah? I just like it ‘cause it looks so powerful; it’s got some real oomph behind it.”

“Is this what I miss in Hector’s history lessons?” Janessa asked, rolling her eyes.

“Nah, that’s my own interest talking,” Alexis laughed. “There’s a lot of story and thought behind architecture.”

“But you just think it’s pretty.”

“Yeah, I guess. In small doses. When the whole city looks like that it can be kind of soul-crushing, but whoever made Ravengrad had the good sense to keep it to the administrative centers and places where it made sense to project the power of the state. Ravengrad Tower, the Panopticon, the works. It actually looks pretty nice juxtaposed with the, uh, more elegant stuff in the commercial and residential blocks.”

As she walked, Alexis scooped up a small stone and began to toss it to herself. “Blacker than night,” she mused, looking closer at the rock. It was a fragment broken off of a factory’s outer wall. “Probably the Commonwealth’s second favorite color, other than blue.”

“Why do you always do that?” asked Ian.

“Do what?”

“Toss rocks like that. Every time you’re bored, that’s what you do. Any reason at all?”

“Not really.” She looked around for a second at the somber workers shuffling by, lit only by the yellow-green beams cast by aging streetlamps. The rock landed back firmly in her palm, and she tossed it to Ian. “You should try it. It’s fun.”

He pocketed the rock. “Maybe,” he said, “but I prefer – what?”

“Ssh. Guardsmen afoot,” Janessa whispered.

A patrol of legitimate civil guardsmen was indeed in the area. A half dozen men marching in twos with a sergeant at the head of the column. Not enough to best the Peregrines in combat, but more than enough to sound an alarm if things turned sour.

“Ma’am!” the sergeant said, hailing Alexis. The uniform she wore was of the same rank she had been before she defected – a captain, making her this man’s superior, if he fell for the ruse.

“I didn’t expect another patrol, ma’am,” he continued. “Are you here to assist with the riots? We’re almost overwhelmed, and I got word that more guardsmen were coming. That’s you, then?”

“Affirmative,” Alexis replied, unsure what riots he meant but doing her best to play along. “Moreso, we’re here to relieve you and your men. Retire to the barracks for now, sergeant, and my people will handle this just fine.”

“I need to see proper identification before I can accept that, ma’am,” the sergeant said. Alexis did as he asked and produced a plastic card, showing it to him.

As the sergeant reviewed the card, the guardsman to his left side looked at him with a skeptical expression, but the sergeant handed back Alexis’ ID and nodded.

“You know our orders,” he said to the guardsman.

“Yes, but…”

“This is for the best. Come on, men. Let them do their work.”

As the patrol quit the area, Alexis whispered her thanks into the air as if addressing God himself.

\* \* \*

After this disruption, that the infiltration was a smooth operation came as a relief to all the Peregrine forces.

“Alright, the radios are off and the sirens are dead,” Alexis whispered into her radio once she and her troops had taken control of the security bunker. Janessa’s diversion had worked well so far – the few guardsmen who hadn’t responded to her incursion were easily overcome by the Scout and Salvage Corps.

As the Shock Corps advanced through the park, eliminating the unsuspecting defenders as it went, Janessa and the Dragoons moved quickly to meet her. Bursts of suppressed gunfire sounded out at irregular intervals, interrupted by the occasional shout as Ian and Alexis took point so that the cavalry could sweep behind and surprise the dedicated but unfortunate guardsmen. Soon, they were at the back door, ready to enter the first of the two towers, neither of which was yet aware it was under siege. Their plan was working remarkably well.

## Chapter 4 – Overlord

*“It is unlawful for any individuals to identify themselves or to refer to any other individual or group by any term, label, or name, derogatory or otherwise, that would promote tribalism and create false divisions between citizens of the new world. This includes, but is not limited to, race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, and disability. Exceptions can be made in the case of mental and physical healthcare providers, so long as confidentiality is maintained.”*

* *Excerpt from the Commonwealth New World Constitution*

The Peregrine soldiers had little trouble making their way through the Science Administration tower. Although her encounter with the sergeant had shaken her confidence, he had not displayed any signs of suspicion, and once Alexis and her allies had secured Foxtrot Romeo and taken a moment to regroup, she pulled herself together and proceeded with such admirable confidence that none would have believed she was no longer the officer she claimed to be. The journey to the footbridge where the Science Administration met Ravengrad Tower was short and blissfully uneventful. Alexis’ forces split with Ian and Janessa there, they to the capitol building and she to act as a rear guard.

“My people are staying put, then,” Alexis said, mostly to herself. She wasn’t thrilled to be so far removed from the action, but holding up the rear was an important job.

She watched as her two friends disappeared across the footbridge, parting ways with nothing more than a hotshot flick of the wrist from Ian as a goodbye. They were a trustworthy couple, she knew, but she had her doubts.

“They’re gone now, hmm?” Eirene said. She was still on the line, speaking with Alexis and Alexis alone.

“Yeah. Reckon it’s about forty meters across the bridge. We’ve got eight guys up here and a few more still in the lobby. Nothing I can do now.”

“I wish I could be there with you. It’s infuriating sitting here in the base and being so useless. If it weren’t for their SAMs and stuff I could take the whole summit by myself, but all the way back here…well, I can provide moral support.”

“What ever happened to you not wanting to fight anymore?”

Eirene laughed. It wasn’t a happy laugh. “I know what I said. Old habits die hard, I guess. And…maybe I overreacted a little. Blowing up civilians is still crossing the line, so I suppose that rules out bombing the tower, but I might have been hasty when I said I wouldn’t be flying *any* more combat missions. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t feel good.”

“Listen, ‘Rene, if you want out, I promised you can get out. You seemed pretty bad back there, and I don’t want you doing anything you’ll regret later, understand? There’s no going back to the Commonwealth for any of us just yet, but I’m gonna stick to my word that you won’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. You need to be sure about what you want too, though.”

“Appreciate it. Listen, you know I’d never leave you, not after all you’ve done for me. You are quite literally the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and likely the only reason I’m still alive. Guess we both have to count on Ian and Janessa coming through. You ever considered what happens if they fail?”

“If they get into trouble, my guys will try and help them out. If it gets too hopeless, we retreat into Hotel India. You might have to carry us out quick, or we just make a heroic last stand. But that’s a bridge we’ll build once we get to the river. It’s enough of a plan to get by.”

“I wish there were more I could do. You’re the only one of the group I know I can trust, and you’re stuck with the rear guard.”

“I know you don’t trust your brother, but Janessa?”

“They’re certainly capable, but…I’m just not sure we can rely on them for support if it comes to that. That and the fact that we have no way of knowing what it’ll be like in the tower itself. I don’t think there’s anyone who I could trust to do well in there, but…” she paused, shaking her head even though she knew Alexis could not see her.

Alexis smiled. “I know you have your misgivings about Ian, but I’ve seen him in the field. He’ll do it, and he’ll do it well. If you don’t trust him, trust me.”

“Aye, I can trust you. If you think that Ian and Jan’ll pull through, then I’ll believe it. Take care of yourself.”

“I will, if you promise to do the same.”

Eirene laughed and smiled, more heartily this time. “Deal,” she said.

Later, in the tower, Ian and Janessa finally reached their position, a small alcove embedded into the tower far enough above the Grand Balcony that they would only be able to hear the proceedings with the use of their aural implants. Janessa prepared a heavy crossbow, setting up a tripod to keep it stable. The Director-General’s barrier would stop short the kinetic energy of a bullet but might not react to something relatively light and slow, like the explosive bolts she had brought. Even if she missed, the concussive force of the explosion could do the job. It was their best chance.

The procession of dignitaries and officers arrived with some fanfare. First to enter were a group of aides surrounding Petty Admiral Karahan, a man who, no matter how hard he tried, would never become Grand Admiral. Rather than command the prestigious Skywatch fleet, Karahan was stuck at the helm of a navy that sat in dry-dock more often than it sailed the seas. He was a disappointing reminder that, although most of the Skywatch officers were former members of the Turkish air force, being a Turkish airman was far from a guarantee of status in the new world. The less favored were relegated to the navy and largely forgotten

After Karahan came the four commissars who made up the Legionary Commission, each representing one of four legions. Scout Commissar Ria Cutler was the only woman there whom Ian and Janessa knew – her forces had skirmished with the Peregrine army on many occasions in the outskirts.

There was also Zheng Jun Min, formerly the Chinese state councilor back before most of eastern China was lost. He had been one of the first imperators assigned to a new principality when the Commonwealth started expanding into the wastelands. Behind Zheng came a line of sharply-dressed individuals who were likely of similar rank, each an imperator representing his or her principality. The municipal praetors underneath them were not considered important enough to receive an invitation despite the prestige of their offices. Of the rest, Ian was able to recognize only Martin Oswald, the aging man who had been dismissed from the U.S. government for being an utterly incompetent secretary of state. Evidently, the Commonwealth saw something of value in him that the Americans did not and recalled him to government service once again, this time as the imperator of the principality of Madrid. At the tail of this line was a man clad in the particularly grand regalia of the Executor of Civil Affairs.

Next, they saw the current overseer of the Defense Administration, Marcus Fairchild, leading a group of representatives from the other administrative functions. He was quite the celebrated figure – a prodigious young scholar before the storms, and widely regarded as the top scientist of the Commonwealth and honored as the owner of one of the few private corporations the government was willing to suffer.

Of all those in attendance, his presence was the most disconcerting. It made sense for a Defense Administration representative to be called in to discuss security plans for this new colony. That was nothing worthy of note. But for the same man to head the Madelyn-Rash Corporation was significant. The Commonwealth allowed him to own the company because he was so fiercely loyal to the government, and trusted him with the development of their most advanced weapons. If he had been chosen to represent the D.A. at the summit, then whatever lay in store could not be good.

The last to arrive was Director-General Magnus himself. The man wore a sharp suit with a dull blue tie, the colors of the Commonwealth standard. He was flanked by a half-dozen troops in similarly-colored flak vests. The elite infantry of the Skywatch and their Grand Admiral, Jacob Lancaster.

The Grand Admiral was an intimidating man. Tall and broad with dark skin and piercing brown eyes, nobody would dare question his authority, even without the uniform. Few ever saw Lancaster in person. This stopped no one from telling stories. That he was half Turkish and half British by blood was a well-documented fact, but the rumors contended that he had been the product of an affair between star crossed lovers, one Christian and the other Muslim, each fighting on a different side of the war at Istanbul. Although this was likely a romanticized half-truth, it was nonetheless an explanation for how he allegedly found himself at the head of the Turkish Air Force on January 1, 2300.

Once 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 in the capital tonight” he began. “A rebel attack in the Foxtrot Romeo Park and some unruly mobs in Lima Charlie. The situation is under control, but I should like to remind everyone to remain on guard.”

“If you suspect an attack, then why have you not reinforced our defenses?” Lancaster asked. “I was under the impression that you would only send the Tower Guard to Stockholm if you yourself had gone there.”

“I haven’t sent them to Stockholm; I’ve sent them to Foxtrot Romeo and Lima Charlie. They were the most readily available units I had that could deal with the threat. The guard wouldn’t have been able to muster a sufficient response in time. Better to deal with such matters quickly when we have important business to attend to.”

“Reasonable enough, I suppose. That doesn’t change the fact that our guards are woefully understaffed for such an important summit.”

“Lancaster,” Magnus said, shooting the Grand Admiral a reassuring smile, “my men will be back before you know it. Besides, even if they had disappeared permanently into the void, are we not untouchable in our high towers?”

“Of course not.”

“Right you are. But our defenses are more than enough to deter anything short of a full siege, so we should be safe for the next few hours. Which, if we can now begin the summit properly, brings me to the main event: this assembly is convened to discuss the risks, benefits, and procedures regarding the colonization of the region surrounding the megacity of Johannesburg, the contribution of each administration and government function, and to vote upon resettlement legislation. This will be an expensive undertaking, I won’t lie. A few recent discoveries will alleviate some of the manpower and materiel costs of the project, but it will nevertheless require significant mobilization of resources. With some planning, I believe that the Commonwealth can profit from Johannesburg.”

“With all due respect, sir,” Zheng said, “it would take a great yield to compensate for the cost of settling so far south. Africa is very large. Surely there are vast resource deposits that can be taken without crossing an entire continent.”

Magnus continued, “I wouldn’t waste the resources needed to build a colony on a simple pile of junk. Obviously, the usual scrap can be gathered from the ruins of the old city, but we would also gain access to the South African mining industry. Plenty of valuable metals, including gold, as well as diamonds and electronics. Plus something special that I believe Mr. Fairchild will enjoy.”

“And how do you plan to ship all that back to the other principalities?” Oswald asked. “Madrid, Valencia, Grenada, my municipalities are taxed enough as it is following the recent unrest, and our magistrates are responsible for the majority of the transportation burden throughout the Commonwealth.”

“Actually, I do believe that Mr. Fairchild himself will be able to provide a solution for that particular problem,” replied Magnus, “Is that correct?”

The Defense Overseer considered this briefly, then nodded. “Yes, I do think that I will be able to help. You’ll have what you need. I’m interested in what you think I’ll find so beneficial, although I have my suspicions already.”

“Give me one minute. So, there you have it,” said Magnus. “We can inexpensively move our supplies down to Johannesburg, set up a settlement, and begin reaping the rewards. Now, Marcus, I…”

“Are you going to explain exactly *how* Fairchild will be able to accomplish this, or are we just supposed to accept your words on blind faith?” asked Zheng.

“What is there to say? The D.A. will roll out several upgrades to make our lives easier. More efficient engines for our airships, better AIs to reduce manpower costs, and so on. It’s nothing special, really.”

“Fine, I suppose we’ll have to take your word for it.”

“Yes, you will.” Magnus then turned his attention directly to Fairchild. “If that has ‘satisfied’ them,” he said, “there is this thing I have that may please you. Tell me, how are your factories holding up?”

“All but worked to capacity, but we’re managing. Have you found more that can support the mourners?”

“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 support your production and research. 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 the East Asian Endeavor. Circa 2290. But, on a more relevant note, there is also evidence that suggests a similar foundry could be found in Johannesburg. Hence why it is in our interest to settle there.”

“Post-Crusade. Same as we found in Montreal and Valencia?”

“Yes, as far as we can tell. If not, it should be easily adapted to support your project. More so than the primitive twenty-second century junk we’ve been making do with to support less sophisticated industries. The site in Stockholm will be the property of Madelyn-Rash to do with as you please, and you may also have any factories you desire in Johannesburg, whether they be fully-operational EAE forges or for processing raw material. Of course, we will prioritize the establishment of mining and salvage facilities, but after the infrastructure is in place and we have a steady supply of civilians arriving to pick up the labor, you’ll have free rein to develop your project as you see fit.”

“That is…very generous, sir. You shall have as much support as you need to establish the colony, but you already knew that.”

“How needlessly sycophantic,” Karahan said in snide.

“What was that, Petty Admiral?” Lancaster asked. “Are you sure you want childish insults going on record under your name?”

Karahan grumbled. “Fine. I retract the statement.”

The other officials at the table exchanged looks that ranged from confusion to suspicion, but said nothing until Martin Oswald raised his hand. “Sir,” he said, “we may be able to fund the expedition, it will take a long time to cross the vortex. That’s about as long as to Montreal, so it won’t be an unprecedented undertaking, but it will be slow to take stormworthy ships through there.”

Magnus grinned. “That’s the best bit. We’ve made a breakthrough in Africa that will make transport of goods southward a breeze. In the dead megacities on the continent, we have discovered enough of the towers that those old world fools erected that, if we disable them, we can create a corridor straight from Tunis to the Highveld.”

These were the old weather control towers that many held responsible for the storms. No one knew who had built them, but whoever it was had clearly harbored a grudge against the old world. Enough to see it brought to ruin for its crimes. Whether the plagues, fires, and quakes that accompanied the storms had been part of the plan, no one knew, but that was beside the point. It disgusted many to see nature perverted in such a way. The technology in the towers had been intended to see Mars or Luna made habitable for a mass emigration from a beleaguered planet, but had instead been used to slay millions and balkanize the entire world.

“The towers seem to have a lifespan of about thirty to forty years, which means we’re seeing many of them fall apart on their own. But a small force moving ahead of the settlers could bomb them and put them out of commission more quickly” Magnus continued. “Clear the way for the transports to make good time. A Tunis-Highveld corridor would greatly aid inter-principality commerce and please the trade magistrates.”

“Still no progress on any other fronts?” the Executor asked.

“Like I said, some have overheated and fallen apart on their own, so the storms are gradually receding, but nothing to give us enough of a clear zone to found another principality like we saw with any of the others. Otherwise, we have dedicated nominal resources towards hunting down sites to forge a connection between our principalities. Believe me, it would make centralizing the government much easier, which would make my life easier in turn. Give it time.”

“Fine, fine. We can afford to be patient with the stability you’ve won us. But in more practical matters, we surely need to appoint an imperator for the principality and consider candidates for praetorship once…”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Executor,” the Grand Admiral said. “We have the official agenda of this meeting to attend to first – we can deal with appointments to office later.”

“Fine. Director-General, how are we to proceed?”

“We should discuss the administrative support for the project *beyond* Madelyn-Rash, and presumably, the Defense and Science Administrations. Then we can take a vote on the resettlement mandate, and adjourn until tomorrow.”

The politicking was beginning to bore Ian, but he was also becoming uneasy. Every second that passed watching the discussion below was a second not spent assassinating the Director, and the odds of being caught only increased with time. Ian was ready to take the shot without it and deal with whatever came up. The intelligence he had gathered by listening in was enough for one night.

On the balcony, the summit continued, with Director-General Magnus continuing his speech. “The Principality of Ravengrad, of course, will pledge support for the settlement in Johannesburg.”

“The Principality of Madrid cannot support the settlement at this time,” said Imperator Oswald. “We simply do not have the resources to commit to such an effort, regardless of how much Madelyn-Rash and the Defense Administration are able to cover.”

“Montreal must withdraw limited principal support from the settlement as well, except insofar as we play host to the Defense Administration,” said another of the imperators. “The incident with the CSS Manticore in Terrebonne has exhausted most of the principality’s security detail, and the economic damage, while light, restricts our ability to provide materiel for the project.”

“Fine, Laccaby,” Magnus replied with a respectful nod.

“The principality of Stockholm can pledge full support for the Johannesburg settlement. We have plenty of excess industrial capacity to produce goods and supply security forces to the staff,” the final imperator added before the conversation passed to the administrative representatives.

“The Defense and Science administrations will pledge support, as promised,” Marcus Fairchild said.

That was frightening. Marcus Fairchild had evidently become overseer of both the Science and Defense Administrations, a dangerous consolidation of authority. With so much influence, Fairchild could easily rival the Director-General in terms of power. Of everything Ian and Janessa had heard, this was the only news that made them pause.

The rest of the summit went smoothly. The Transportation, Trade and Commerce, and other administrations were all but obliged to follow Marcus’ suit and support the project. It wasn’t until the vote on what Magnus had called the resettlement mandate that the plan was finally set into motion.

“The Legionary Commission is in favor of the mandate,” one of the representative commissars said.

“The Skywatch and the office of Grand Marshal are against the mandate,” continued Lancaster.

“The Defense Administration is in favor, but it is not in the interest of the Science Administration to vote either way. Abstained.”

And so on. When the results were finally decided, with fourteen in favor, two against, and three abstentions, it went to the Executor who would exercise or not exercise his right to an absolute veto on civil affairs. Because he had voted for the mandate, no one was surprised that there would be no veto.

“Well, then, Director-General,” the Executor said, “up to you. I think we can all guess what the verdict’s going to be.”

Before Magnus could respond, Grand Admiral Lancaster interrupted him.

“I’d like to request that the veto be passed through the executive military arm in addition to the civil branch. I have concerns that I’d like to raise.”

“Yes,” Magnus said, “we’re aware that you voted against the mandate. But don’t become power hungry just because you seized the office of Grand Marshal. Civil legislation only passes through the offices of the Executor and the Director-General for final approval.”

“The resettlement mandate has substantial military implications!” Lancaster protested. “And I don’t just mean that we would need to assign new security detail to the new principality, which is inconvenient but tolerable. By forcibly conscripting the poor saps living on admittedly generous welfare, we would only foster anger towards our government, practically handing more troops to the Peregrines and their ilk”

“The peasants in the poorer districts like Widow’s Walk surely wouldn’t object to their new positions in an urban center. They’re not wanting for basic amenities, yes, but they only stand to gain by resettling, and I still don’t see how that warrants military intervention through the veto.”

“Believe me, Director-General, people will despise anything if they’re forced to take it against their will, no matter how much good you might think you’re doing. The resistance going on now is proof enough of that. By forcibly deporting our citizens to a new principality, which will surely be rife with crime and suffer from poor infrastructure before it is fully developed, we would create an entire class of people who resent the Commonwealth. And if we populate Johannesburg solely with these types…”

“…it would be a hive of anti-Commonwealth sentiment, so far removed from our influence,” Oswald said.

“Exactly. Without a substantial military investment to keep control, we risk creating an out-of-reach state that might as well declare independence, or at the very least act as a perfect haven for rebel belligerents or dissidents. We’re already seeing concerning amounts of public agitation against the Commonwealth in recent years, and an increasingly militarized opposition. We cannot risk sacrificing even more goodwill by subjecting the populace to such arbitrary mandates.”

“And with the Tunis-Highveld corridor cleared of the storms, we would already open up our supply lines to interception by enemy aircraft,” Marcus said. “I’m sure that we’re all aware that some of the opposition groups are in possession of corvettes at the very least. Without the storms to scare away light aircraft like that, their emboldened pilots might dare to strike at our transports. If we have to worry about agitation within Johannesburg itself in addition to that…it would be a nightmare. I support the Grand Admiral’s right to the veto in this situation.”

“Fine, let him have his veto.” Magnus said.

“So you’ll not override him, then?” Karahan asked, clearly annoyed at his superiors’ ability to wield so much power.

“No, he brings up a good point. The resettlement mandate can be tabled until a more favorable political climate. In the meantime, perhaps we should bring in some food? I’m famished.”

“Alright, Alexis, I think I’ve heard enough,” Ian said. “We’re gonna take the shot. Are your guys ready on overwatch?”

“Yep. We’re ready to cover your escape.”

Sensing the opportunity, Janessa took aim at the Director-General and loosed her crossbow bolt, praying that her luck would be with her.

It was not.

The silver bolt landed squarely in Magnus’ soup bowl, causing a horrific explosion. When the smoke cleared, however, it became apparent that nobody had yet been killed – the Director appeared injured and his pristine suit had been ripped and singed, but he was very much alive. That would not do.

At that very moment, everything descended in to chaos – not knowing where this shot had come from, everybody drew whatever weapon was at hand; whether it was a gun, a sword, or a fork didn’t matter. Karhan’s few allies in the Legionary Commission, assuming that he had been fired upon by an over-eager guardsman, rushed to his aid whilst the rest scrambled to find cover or take advantage of the commotion to settle old grudges.

“Fuck! Alexis, scratch that, you need to be in here, right now!” Ian yelled, no longer caring about remaining unheard.

“Yeah, yeah, I gotcha,” Alexis said. “Overwatch, you stay on the bridge. Everybody else with me!”

Alexis’s crew stormed across the footbridge and laid down fire to suppress the Commonwealth guards. A corvette swooped around the tower and took action – rockets began to strike the bridge, breaking apart the metal and concrete. A few soldiers were unlucky enough to be hit directly, their bodies ripped apart into gory shreds. Others fell down into the streets below, where their mangled bodies were flattened by cars and trucks that screeched to a halt as their drivers ran from the scene in a panic.

With hellfire in front of and behind her, Alexis had to make a quick decision: There was still enough of the bridge left to make a retreat, but that would leave Ian and Janessa all alone and the mission incomplete. This was unacceptable. As loath as she was to see more lives lost, she needed to ensure Magnus and his officers’ deaths, gambling on the chance that decapitating the chain of command would be enough to see her troops safely out of the city.

Casualties continued to mount. A second volley of rockets shook the bridge, obliterating the soldiers who stayed behind to provide cover. Debris flew through the doorway, wounding even more. Alexis herself took a single chunk of concrete to the arm which, while doing little permanent damage, stung terribly and caused her to drop to the ground, falling on her face while all around her the Commonwealth guards took advantage of the stalled advance to retake some ground and opened fire on the wounded to ensure that none of them got up to strike back.

Meanwhile, Ian prepared to follow up on Janessa’s failed attack. The situation on the balcony had cooled somewhat. Several of the attendees were dead, or at least critically wounded, lying in puddles of their own blood. Magnus, the Vice Admiral, and Zheng had more or less made sense of their surroundings and were rallying guards to restore order. To stop their efforts, Ian fired into the balcony, but, to his dismay, he was no more effective than Janessa. One of his bullets struck Zheng through the neck, killing him instantly and revealing the Peregrines’ position atop the upper ledge. The survivors down below stopped and focused their fire on Ian’s position, forcing him and Janessa to retreat further into the tower

Miraculously, the invaders in the foyer were able to continue their push. As Alexis and her troops pushed forward with the zeal of men and women possessed, they found their way to the Grand Balcony and joined the fight just as Ian and Janessa committed fully to the engagement. They would slay Magnus or die trying; if nothing else, their deaths could cover their friends’ retreat.

In battle, Alexis controlled the crowd like a director might control the stage, every move calculated so that her enemies and allies landed in just the right positions. The calmness with which she fought surprised even her.

To her left, the spectacle she had hoped to see was finally before her, Ian and Janessa covering one another in perfect unison. It was if the two of them were one mind, one lashing out just as the other fell back and neither giving up an inch of ground.

Unfortunately, the three of them were not the only skilled warriors on the balcony. The Director-General himself was more than a capable opponent, a master swordsman and marksman. Whilst the common folk speculated about Lancaster’s origins, they told even more fanciful tales about Magnus – they said that he had once been caught off guard by a group of magistrates who spoke only Mandarin and been able to flatter and soothe them as only a native speaker could, and they said that he had once killed several assassins armed with guns using only a ceremonial sword. Alexis looked forward to proof of his martial abilities, at least, if not his talents as a polyglot.

Magnus moved quickly, throwing down a smoke grenade to cover his and his allies’ escape. Unable to respond, Alexis pressed forwards slowly but steadily, firing at shadows where she saw them. Loud energetic pulses signaled that some of her shots had found their marks, but had been stopped by that infernal barrier Magnus wore.

Suddenly, Alexis found herself face-to-face with the Director-General himself. He pointed his pistol at her head and pulled the trigger, but to no avail. He had expended his ammunition. Not wanting to waste time reloading and confident in his immunity to the Peregrines’ firearms, he drew a fearsome saber, lashing out at Alexis only to be thwarted as se parried with her rifle and, summoning all her remaining strength, twirled around to arrive behind his back. Distracted for one second by an incoming shot from Janessa, he failed to notice her maneuver. Greedily, Alexis thrust the bayonet of her rifle into Magnus’ back. He fell forward as sparks flew from the spot she had struck, but did not die. Instead, he spun around yanking the rifle out of her hands. The bayonet was still lodged firmly in his back, but he seemed unharmed.

It was then that she noticed that the faint shimmer of his shields had faded away. Her attack had found the generator mounted on his back, saving him from one death but exposing him to another. She drew her sidearm and pointed it at the Director, grinning despite herself.

The action stopped except for more distant gunfire as the Peregrine troops kept Commonwealth reinforcements at bay. Ian, Janessa, and Alexis’ squad had successfully wounded their enemies enough to force a surrender. All eyes were now on her and Magnus.

His brow was furrowed, his sharp eyes staring into hers. He had obviously embraced the same augmentations that she had, the telltale switches to control the aural implants visible on his temples. They’d been switched to the on position, but there was no way of knowing how for how long it had been so. If the things had been active for the whole summit, then surely he would have detected Ian and Janessa. Magnus must have turned them on as soon as the battle started – anything else meant they had just fallen into a trap.

He muttered but a single word before he died: “Congratulations.”

Alexis smiled back and fired a single shot into Magnus’ head, undoubtedly ending his life. If it had been a trap, the Commonwealth had used quite the expensive piece of bait. Before she could feel even a moment of pride, however, Ian yelled bloody murder and pulled her to the side as a volley of rockets struck the balcony. It was another gunship, but not the corvette that had caused so much damage earlier or even a model that she recognized. Smoke clouded the space around her, filling her lungs, and there was a sudden tidal wave of yelling, and then gunfire, and her advantage had been lost.

Was it a trap after all? Was the Director-General willing to sacrifice himself, or had he used a body double? Either way, this was bad news.

“Everybody,” she yelled, running through the clouds. “we’ve been had! Everybody! You need to get out of the city!”

Back in Hotel India, Eirene ran towards her corvette. “Just hold tight, Sunshine! I’m coming to get you!”

“No,” said Alexis, crying both in sadness and in pain as the smoke stung her eyes, “you have to escape. Take as many as you can, just go!” And then suddenly the smoke began to clear and she could see the gunship again, crimson red and not at all like the Skywatch one from before. As she stopped to stare at it, she began to cough, her consciousness fading as the gas that she had breathed in began to take effect.

And then everything was dark, and everything was cold.

## Chapter 5 – The Trial of Hector Pendleton

“The Commonwealth is not stupid, I think. I believe it knows that a colorblind policy will not solve some nebulous problem of ‘discrimination’ because it ignores centuries of context and the extralegal prejudices that already exist. However, its architects propose that the destruction of the old world means that the context no longer applies and that we are starting again from scratch. The flaw in their logic, however, lies in the same stroke of luck that enabled their very existence. Greece was never destroyed. The state likes to think that Greek culture and nationality were destroyed alongside everything else, but they were not – Greece and the Greeks survived the storms, but even this is merely symbolic of the millions of people who fled there on New Years’ Day of 2300. And with them they carried on their backs the hated, almost mythical ‘old world,’ a demon that can never truly be exorcised.”

* Omar Kelli, in Athens Lives!

The air was no longer marred by the sound of gunfire, which could only mean that they had lost. Hector remained ignorant to the exact details of what had transpired, but the few transmissions he had received from the strike team and the subsequent Commonwealth assault on Hotel India were enough for him to deduce that Ian, Alexis, and Janessa had been defeated. How long ago had that been? Several hours, surely. The government’s counteroffensive had no doubt been severe, and the looming silence surely marked the end of Peregrine resistance in Hotel India. As far as Hector knew, he was the only one who remained, alone in the basement room to which he had retreated. Not out of cowardice, he told himself, but out of duty. The documents stored in this room had to be destroyed before the enemy could retrieve them, and, indeed, that task had been done. All that was left was to wait.

Hector briefly considered martyring himself by using a grenade to take any potential captors down with him, but rejected that idea. The Commonwealth generally avoided capital punishment for those lucky enough to be taken in alive, and so he made the strategic decision to live to fight another day. When the Skywatch troops – if the Commonwealth even respected him enough to deploy its elite forces, which he hoped they had – arrived, he would surrender without a fight. As a gesture of good will, he unlocked and opened the basement door, not that it would matter.

Slumped against the wall, Hector greeted the first troops to arrive with a tired sigh. At the very least, they were indeed Skywatch officers. He briefly imagined the shame of being taken into custody by civil guardsmen as they placed him in handcuffs and took him back to the surface, where he was surprised to see the Grand Admiral himself, Jacob Lancaster. Having evidently survived the attack, the man must have come along to supervise the cleaning up of the last remaining resistance.

“To what do I owe this honor?” Hector asked.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Mister Pendleton. Shall we begin?” The Grand Admiral said, staring at Hector with his aged but fierce and not wholly unattractive eyes.

“Begin with what? My interrogation?”

“You can call it that if you like. I simply wish to have a discussion.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then you go to the Panopticon without a chance to argue your cause. I know you revolutionary types love to preach, and there are some questions I would like answered, so we may as well negotiate, don’t you think?

“I suppose,” Hector said.

“Good. Shall we take a walk? Surely you’d appreciate some fresh air as much as I.”

Hector nodded after a second of thought. The Skywatch troopers undid his chains, and he followed the Grand Admiral. Although he was no longer bound, the watchful eyes of the soldiers reminded him that he was by no means a free man. He would follow his captor, but to what end he did not know.

Hotel India had been a factory before it was a base, and could never have been said to be easy on the eyes. What plant life had been there had long since withered and died, but at least it had been a change from the monotonous concrete buildings. During the siege, it seemed, the yellowed grass and barren trees had been burnt away entirely and in their stead lay wrecked vehicles and craters from the bombing.

“Your men fought well,” said Lancaster. “I’m surprised you managed to keep an army of this size hidden for so long. We sustained heavy casualties taking your fortress.”

Hector considered telling the man that the Peregrine army had been moved in just hours before the attack began, but then remembered that he was still in the company of the enemy, and he refrained from divulging this information.

“My name is Jacob Lancaster. As you have most likely realized, I am Grand Admiral of the Skywatch. And I believe that I owe you some thanks.”

“Thanks? What for?”

“After an attack on Ravengrad, Commonwealth procedure dictates the institution of martial law. With the death of Magnus, succession passes first to the Grand Admiral. For all intents and purposes, I now control all that remains of Human civilization.”

They were then joined by a woman, also clad in Skywatch colors, and several more guards. She was unmistakably the vice admiral who had accompanied Cem Karahan to the summit.

“No doubt you also recognize Danica, here,” Lancaster said. “She and I were among the only survivors of your little raid.”

“You did a decent job, considering how woefully unprepared your army was,” she said, almost smirking. Hector frowned at her, silently hating her arrogance.

“Still,” she continued, “You had to realize that you’d never have won. Even with Magnus gone, what could you have hoped to accomplish? At most you’d have a little pressure taken off your backs, but our vengeance is swift, as you now see.” She gestured around to the ruins of Hotel India.

“Alright, that’s enough,” said Lancaster. “We have things to discuss. Leave us.”

Danica saluted the Admiral and departed with her guards. Lancaster and Pendleton continued walking.

“She’s an impressive woman. Algonquin, from near Montreal. You don’t see many of the North American indigenous anymore; the last century hit them even harder than it did most places,” Lancaster said. “She was a child when we liberated her city and adapted well to the new world. Unlike your friends.”

“Liberated, you say. No matter. Am I to stand trial or be executed?” Hector asked, not caring about the vice admiral.

“Neither, for the moment. We have no need of a trial, but I see no need for your death. Not yet. What I want to talk about is *why* you did what you did. I can kill rebels all day, but it behooves me to make some effort to understand their motives so that further resistance may be preemptively corrected.”

“Why me? What happened to the others?”

“Some of them are dead. Others are being interrogated separately. You’re here because, to be concise, we now occupy this facility. It does a decent job as a prison until we can shuffle people out of the Panopticon. A few others are being contained here as well.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll let me see them.”

“Correct. You may not. Anyway, as I said, I want to know why you did what you did. What inspired you to sow discord amongst our already fragile society?”

“Simple. The Commonwealth has stripped us of our liberties and freedoms, imposing its own might upon the populace in order to keep them in line. This isn’t a dystopian police state, true, but our goal is to stop you before it becomes one. Ounce of prevention, and all that. I should like to see what you intend to do with this ‘martial law’ of yours.”

Lancaster looked pityingly at Hector. “That’s certainly an idealistic standpoint, but you must recognize that we have done an exceptional job of protecting the human race from annihilation. The old world almost destroyed itself by toying with nature. They created plagues, storms, and worse, but we survived because of our leadership’s decisive action. The systems of the old world deserved to die; they could never have yielded the same results as we have.”

“Yes, but, if you’ll permit me to paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, ‘those who sacrifice liberty for security deserve neither.’ You have certainly sacrificed our liberties, *without* our consent, I might add.”

“Ah, an educated man. Then you surely must also know that Voltaire once said “a witty saying proves nothing.’ And no, the irony of that is not lost on me. So, shall we discuss using our *own* thoughts rather than letting the long dead argue for us? Or is regurgitating platitudes out of context the best you can do?”

“As you wish. Still, I believe that that particular saying is relevant.”

“No, it’s not. Even if he meant what you are implying, Franklin lived half a millennium ago, during times that were downright charmed compared to ours. The American Revolutionaries were threatened by, what, a few unjust taxes? We’re facing total annihilation of our species.”

“I don’t buy it,” said Hector. “Look around you. The storms were bad, yes, but not as bad as you say. Civilization as we knew it may have been broken apart, but the species is still alive and well in the settlements you refuse to acknowledge as proper nations. And we’ve come such a long way since the inception of the Commonwealth. Maybe your tyranny was necessary back then, but we’re so much more now! The storms are receding from Ravengrad and we’re taking back lands elsewhere all the time. Stockholm, Madrid, Montreal, and now Johannesburg. We’ve got all these territories thriving and yet you still act as if we’re on the edge of total destruction! Surely you could loosen up a little. Let the people have a voice in parliament, at the very least.”

Lancaster scowled. “But how much of that would have been possible without our policies? You cannot deny that under the dictatorship of the Commonwealth, the redevelopment of human society has been remarkably efficient. Without it, we would be subject to the tyranny of the masses, and all the problems associated with it. Look to the governments preceding the Commonwealth. The Tehran Pact had an Emperor, but he was democratically elected. The nations making up the loose conglomeration that was the Catholic League were also democratic, and both let their citizens’ whims dictate a course of action. And what did those citizens decide? Both parties, deluded by the false boundaries of ideology, felt that the other posed a threat and launched entire continents into a near century of warfare. And where democracy is not violent, this is only because it is inefficient! Parliaments, senates, houses, they bicker *ad nauseam* and divide into yet more parties that refuse to cooperate because the people that make them up are too stupid to realize that they’re being used. My state puts power in the hands of a few educated individuals. We do not succumb to tyranny because all of humanity shares a common interest in this age after the storms – survival. After the balance is restored and the human race has reclaimed its rightful role as the master of our planet, then your point is well taken, but, until that time, my methods are necessary.”

“The Commonwealth has been efficient, yes,” Hector said. “But it won’t last even that long. Your programs to cure the ‘social ills’ of the old world have sown nothing but discontent. You want to raise generations who don’t think of others in terms of labels, admirable on the surface, but you fail to realize that some people are *proud* of their race, religion, sexuality, or whatever. That’s not dangerous – a strong self-identity keeps people going! An equal society should not ignore differences between people – it should give everybody an equal chance while *respecting* that different people are different!”

“We do respect that different people are different. Our policy is the ultimate expression of that sentiment! When people are grouped into categories, is that not a sacrifice of some degree of individuality? Should I be a Catholic, and not Jacob Lancaster? Should you be a white man, rather that Hector Pendleton? If a man wants to love who he loves, be that a man or a woman, then so be it. If someone wishes to worship a different god than her neighbor, then so be it. This isn’t some kind of ‘everybody is the same’ nonsense; just because we don’t make some futile effort to classify these people doesn’t mean we deny their existence.”

“That isn’t the point! Take your religious example: yes, people are free to worship as they please *in private*, but religion is not about isolation, it’s about community! The Church as it was in the old world may have been a corrupt institution, but it didn’t have to be. If one Catholic wants to pray alongside his brethren, or a Muslim amongst his, then now he has to flee the Commonwealth to do so, and, when you respond to this sort of desertion with military force, these factions are forced to militarize in kind. When their rights are threatened, people are more violent and chaotic than ever. Is it really that surprising that we, a conglomeration of everyone who opposes the Commonwealth, would arise eventually? It’s not just religion, either…”

“In a perfect world, you might be right,” Lancaster interrupted. “But this is not a perfect world. Too many problems arose in the old world because of rampant factionalism. The polarizing ‘us-versus-them’ mentality could be seen anywhere: homosexual versus heterosexual, black versus white, cisgender versus transgender, any of a hundred different religions versus each other, and many more needless conflicts. So we get rid of them, make everybody a unique individual rather than a member of a class.”

“And you think that will eliminate conflict? Just like that?”

“Of course not, but conflicts between individuals are much easier to manage than conflicts between groups a billion strong. Did you not live through the Second Pact War, through the League Crusade? Because I did. And I saw thousands of men slaughtered like animals simply because they were so-called ‘Muslims,’ or ‘Christians.’ I was a young man when I saw my fire team cut to shreds by the ones they thought of as little more than animals. And to them, we were no better. Without a second thought, they choked us with gas and shot us down while we were vomiting blood. That’s why the Commonwealth exists. To make sure that nobody has to suffer like that again. Would you have us return to that kind of barbarism?”

“Spare me your noble rhetoric, Director,” said Hector. “Millions of people died during the wars, millions of squads were wiped out. Did you think you were special? That somehow, your trauma justified what you’ve become? Not even a founding father, but a pawn promoted to king by sheer dumb luck. To answer your question, yes, I fought, and many of my friends fought the war to its bitter end. We all agree that the old world needed to change, but your laws suppress social progress rather than enabling it, as they should. Paint the Commonwealth as wrought upon vast legs of stone all you want, but stone is immobile. It, like everything else, succumbs to entropy and crumbles into sand.”

“Was that supposed to be a reference to Shelley? Do you think you’re clever? I spent years reading poetry, so don’t try to use it against me. I’m not an idiot. I know that nothing is truly permanent, but should we just lie down and accept that one day we will die? With a strong enough foundation, humanity can be something great, and you say that this foundation is as rotten as the old world, but that’s not true, and you know it. People have come together from all around the globe. All nationalities, races, cultures, and ideas now mixed together to form a truly concrete foundation, without trying to kill one another like they were before the storms. Isn’t that progress? The change, the development you desire? Life has been improved for so many, the tired, the poor, the victims of violence. Poverty and unemployment are all but eliminated, and the people enjoy a higher quality of life for it. That will be the lasting legacy I leave.”

Lancaster pursed his lips and looked at Hector for a moment. “Tell me, Mr. Pendleton,” he said. “Where did you work before becoming a terrorist?”

“Right here. Hotel India was my factory. We made the guns, ammo, and other things for the rebels to use, right under your nose. We were supposed to be making textiles, but I swapped out most of the machines long ago, and your magistrates were too dumb to see my treachery.”

“That wasn’t enough for you, was it? I suppose that is the answer I sought. Your revolution is nothing more than a *regression*, the former elites or their children clamoring to reclaim the positions they held in the old world and using lofty rhetoric to sway small groups of the common folk. You don’t object to the Commonwealth on their behalf, you object because it prevents *you* from taking *my* place.”

Lancaster stood up and began to leave, but continued. “And that you say whatever you need to say in order to convince the common man that you fight for him will be your downfall. Your rebellion’s ‘ideology’ is so scattered that you don’t even know what ideas you’re defending or what exactly it is you want to attack. Sun Tzu – ‘preparedness everywhere means lack everywhere.’”

“I thought you wanted us to argue using our *own* ideas. It’s fine when you do it, but no, not a lowly one such as myself,” Hector chided back.

“Master Sun is more timeless than Franklin, but for the sake of this conversation, fine. You can have that point if it means so much to you.”

“Thank you,” Hector said with a pitying expression halfway between a smile and a frown. “And yet you still miss the point itself. Our rebellion stems not from one specific complaint, but from many. My voice is not the voice of a person but of *the people*, and many of our number have different concerns. We will advocate for all of them. Some are ‘disgusting, self-interested industrialists’ like myself who think that your economics are bollocks but lack the political capital to even hope to join your sequestered conclave that makes all our decisions for us. Others take issue with your ideas about religion, or self-expression. We may be few in number now, but time will show how many really agree with our ‘confused’ ideology. We will address all their concerns when you will not.”

“Then you’ll tear yourselves apart. If you achieve victory, what then? Your members will fight each other over how to replace my policy.”

“That is why *democracy* was invented!”

“If democracy hadn’t shown itself to be synonymous with *bureaucracy* then I might agree, but, alas, this is the world we live in. Democrats destroyed the old one. Everywhere I look, I see people like you who only look to the past and re-instate systems that would give rise to the same ruin. In Italy, we encountered a group of survivors who styled themselves after the Roman Empire. The ruins of Turkey are divided between insignificant groups of people claiming some heritage from the Ottomans or the Byzantines. In Eastern Asia, the Kingdoms of Joseon are expanding beyond the Korean Peninsula and fighting a so-called ‘Shogunate’ in Japan. When we took South Africa, we did so over the dead body of a warlord who called himself a successor to Shaka. Only the Commonwealth looks to the future.”

“Funny that you should criticize, say, the Romans, when their conception of emergency dictator powers was similar what you yourself possess today,” Hector said.

“It’s the principle of the thing. Yes, most of the societies that are being re-created by these survivors were not democracies, but they were early steps on the path that led to modern democracy and then to the apocalypse. Many of the upstart kingdoms we’ve crushed were not inherently broken, but their worship of their ancestors was problematic.”

“Because how *dare* people unite themselves around shared cultural icons in a time of crisis.”

“When they think that their symbols are superior to others’, that they justify the slaughter of others, that is reprehensible. Do you disagree?”

“No, but the response to that is to ban slaughter, not symbolism. Do you leave anybody alive? At all?” Hector asked, changing the subject.

“If they cooperate and join us, yes. Were you paying any attention to our expansion over these past few decades? Montreal, Stockholm, and Madrid were all incorporated peacefully. Johannesburg was taken with violence. We’ve fought in the Middle East and Turkey, but withdrew because the Crusade left those lands nigh unusable. They can keep their piles of rubble, but, if they engage in hostile action, we’ll destroy them. They have no place in the new world.”

“I’m sure they’d say the same of you,” Hector said.

“Then it’s a good thing they don’t get to decide. Magnus was told by the moribund U.N to save the new world however he could, and I am his successor. I have the power. I will not make the changes you desire, and I will make sure that you are never in a position to make them. I’m sorry.” Lancaster’s voice dripped with venom as he spat out his last sentence.

“You’re going to leave me here? Not one for making new friends, hm?” Hector asked as the Director-General walked away. He didn’t get an answer.

## Chapter 6 - Hyperion

“The mythical Shanghai, a glistening vessel from the east come to deliver us from evil. The scripture here reeks of Oriental fetishism. Supposedly, the Hyperion Cult believes that the ship which carried so many vital refugees to Geneva will make a second coming in our time of need? I suppose it was easy for the Prophet to fit it into most religions’ mythologies, either as the intervention of some deity or as part of an apocalyptic, end-game battle like those that might be fought at Dabiq or at Tel Megiddo. It’s a decidedly nonsensical concept for a long-destroyed, man-made vessel to somehow return, but, if it helps him unite the people, then so be it.”

* *Uriah Washington, in* A Light From the East?

“What?”

Ian opened one eye to see his surroundings. Polished hardwood floors. Whitewashed walls. Luxurious furniture. Not a window to be seen, but the gentle hum from all around and the steady sway of the room told that he was on some manner of aircraft. A Commonwealth prison transport was what he had expected, but this was far too comfortable for such a vessel.

There was no chance that someone such as him had been granted a place in Heaven, if it existed. More importantly, he *felt* alive. If he had fallen in battle, he believed that he would know. And yet here he was, in an otherwise unexplainable situation.

The ship swayed gently underneath Ian. His lengthy service with the civil guard had seen him packed with the other guardsmen into more than their fair share of transports as they were shipped between principalities, but this one was surprisingly smooth. Were he in any position to rest, the motion could easily have lulled him to sleep.

“No storms,” he muttered to himself. That could only have meant that they were above one of the Commonwealth’s principalities, or else some place where the towers Magnus had mentioned had fallen into disrepair.

He stumbled out of bed.

Beneath him, the wooden floor felt cold against the bare soles of his feet. The civil guard uniform that he had been wearing last he checked was nowhere to be seen, taken away in favor of a white undershirt and shorts, with bandages over burns on his arms and legs. Moving these limbs hurt, but he forced himself to stand upright.

“Why the hell did I survive?” Ian muttered aloud, plodding over to the wall with rage coursing through his veins and slamming his head against it, as if to punish himself. “I fucked everything right the fuck up and didn’t even have the dignity to die because of it. What kind of justice is that?”

Ian’s rifle and pistol, the same ones he had used in the Tower, stood propped against a bedside table. A quick check showed that they were bereft of ammunition, but he picked up the sidearm nonetheless.

“Eirene…Lavinia,” he thought. “That’s twice now I’ve gotten you hurt. Maybe even got you killed, and yet here I am, alive.” The gun in his hand was empty, but it would only need one bullet to set things right.

No. As much as he wanted to make himself suffer for his crimes and his failures, Ian knew there would be time for that later. Now, it fell to him to gather information. If any of his allies yet survived, he could begin to put the pieces back together, and that would be more difficult if he were dead.

Ian carefully pushed the heavy metal door open and peeked out into the hallway. A single man could be seen, and Ian pointed the unloaded weapon at him almost without thinking.

“Don’t shoot,” the man said as he carefully put his hands in the air. “They put me here to send you in the right direction once you woke up. It’s a lot to deal with, but…I’m sorry, we didn’t expect you to be awake so soon. Just wait in your room, and I’ll send for Master Théoden.”

There was no use threatening this fool any further. If this ‘Théoden’ character was knowledgeable, then there was the chance that he would know what had happened to the rest. Heart rapidly sinking, he picked up speed as he decided to seek out the captain of this vessel. That was his best chance of finding an answer.

Before long, an elderly man arrived. He was of average build with wispy white hair and a kindly demeanor, which only served to unnerve Ian further.

“I am Théoden Lockhart. It is good to finally meet you, Mr. Barrow,” the man said.

“Well, this doesn’t reek of supervillainy at all,” is what Ian wanted to say, but he refrained. “You can’t possibly have heard that much about me,” is what he said instead. This whole situation unnerved him. Here was a man, obviously not associated with the Commonwealth who somehow had knowledge of him. It didn’t make sense.

“You’re right,” said Lockhart. “I do not know that much about you, personally. What I do know is that you and your friends were a threat to the continued existence of mankind and had to be neutralized.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but would you mind telling me a little more about, I don’t know, where I am and why I’m here?”

“But of course. I could hardly expect you to cooperate blindly with what I’m going to ask you to do.”

“We’ll see.”

“Indeed. As I said, my name is Théoden Lockhart. Master of the Hyperion Cult in Switzerland. Though you do not realize it now, our goals are similar, which is why I brought you here instead of killing you.”

“Are they? Then explain why you stopped us from finishing our job in Ravengrad.”

“Ah, you’ve put two and two together already. Good, good. Yes, we did attempt to interrupt your assassination of the Director-General. Again, it was…necessary. I shall explain why if you’ll just let me talk.”

Ian took a deep breath and remained calm. “Fine, go ahead.”

“We both want to bring about a better society, Mr. Barrow. The difference is that where you prefer to burn the old to make way for the new, Hyperion goes about its business in a more enlightened manner. We understand that the Commonwealth, as unpleasant as it might be at times, is a necessary evil. Like all things, though with just the right amount of pressure it can be molded into whatever shape one desires.”

“So you’re a rebel group like us, then?”

“We are our own sovereign state. We maintain an army because, while our intentions are peaceful, the Commonwealth has demonstrated many times that it cannot say the same. In its nascent years, it put any who would not join it to the sword, expanding and absorbing groups of survivors without mercy. It is by the grace of this army and by my agents’ subterfuge that Hyperion survives today. So to call us mere ‘rebels’ is to do us an immense disservice, but I cannot blame you for that. You have not yet seen any of what my country is.”

Théoden paused and looked out the window, then returned his gaze to Ian. “You have to understand that if we’d let you continue with your little revolution, it wouldn’t have been long before we were cutting off heads and dancing the Carmagnole in the streets. I deeply regret the use of violence, but my advisors insist it was necessary to prevent the collapse of what may be, unfortunately, the strongest bastion of civilization that remains today. I must agree with them.”

Ian immediately didn’t trust the man, but he didn’t see any option but to cooperate for the time being. His captor clearly had great resources at his disposal. Perhaps, with enough time, he could use these tools to find his former comrades.

“Alright, point taken,” he said. “What do you want from me?”

“I am glad you are taking this so well. You have demonstrated that you are a competent soldier and commander, so I believe that I may make use of your skills.”

“I thought you didn’t want to fight?”

“I do not want to fight. I abhor violence, I loathe war. But time and time again, someone forces us to interrupt the calm, intellectual life I would have my people lead in favor of yet another bloodbath. In the beginning, I thought to passively wait out the conflict, but my advisors wisely steered me from that naïve path. Therefore, as much as it pains me, I must fight to protect the world I would create, where the natural order of things is preserved, the way it was before the scientists of the old world and the Commonwealth perverted all that was good and holy. I will not force you, rather, I shall simply ask that you accompany me to Geneva and give Hyperion a chance. We both want the world returned to the way it was, and we can do great things together.

“Geneva,” said Ian. “I haven’t heard of it being clear there.”

“It is,” replied Lockhart. “As I implied earlier, we subtly push and prod the Commonwealth into the directions we would like. It has been enough to keep them out of our way.”

“Alright, fine. But there’s one thing that I still don’t understand.”

“I’ll answer any questions you have.”

“Then answer me this: Where are the rest? Janessa, Alexis, Hector, Teague, Eirene? My friends, where are they?”

“I don’t know,” Lockhart said after a moment of contemplation, during which Ian felt his heart accelerate. “I am sorry to say they could be dead. Many of them likely are, and if they aren’t, well, the Commonwealth will have them soon enough. We were lucky enough just to get you.” Upon seeing Ian clench his fists and furrow his brow in anger, though, he held up his hand and continued. “I know what you’re thinking, but we did not kill them. Not directly.”

“Your gunship was firing *missiles* at them not one day ago. You can’t possibly know that for sure.”

“Those bombs produce a lot of smoke and noise and little else. I had intended to take you all alive if it were possible. The Commonwealth guards were too quick to respond, though, and got to them before we could. The smokescreen didn’t delay them as much as we’d hoped.”

Ian knew that it was unwise to provoke his “host,” but he could not restrain himself. “We were doing just fine until you showed up, thank you very much. I don’t care if it was all smoke, they’re still gone because of *you*!”

“No. I understand you are angry, but they are gone because of themselves. You didn’t honestly think that it would have succeeded? What was your plan of action after Magnus’ death? Hmm? Not even just getting out of the tower, which was a dubious proposition at best. The Peregrine militia, if it’s even still around, now has the full attention of the Commonwealth. Where they were once content to fight you with token defense forces they will now see you crushed under the weight of every ship and every soldier they have at their disposal. You’ve woken the sleeping tiger, to use a clichéd phrase. Hyperion was your only chance at salvation.” He looked down at the floor in shame. “…and we failed. I’m sorry. But I did not kill them, and if you help me then I intend to make their sacrifices worth something.”

Ian thought about Théoden’s words, knowing that he wasn’t wrong, and then relaxed. He still didn’t trust the man, but he seemed sincere enough. Enough to play along for a time and see where this went, at least. “Fine,” he said. “I can see that I don’t have much choice in the matter. Take me to Geneva.”

The ship began to quiver as it started to enter a storm. “You will be comfortable with us,” said Théoden. “Geneva is a far cry from what I’m sure you’re used to. All of the facility’s amenities will be made available to you. You shall have food, drink, and leisure. Spiritual services you’ve likely been denied in the Commonwealth. Women or men as you desire them, none of them coerced like you might find in some survivor enclaves.”

“Hookers and gigolos?” Ian laughed darkly. “I’ve still got someone at home to whom I’d like to be faithful, but thanks for the offer.”

“You still hold out hope that they can be rescued?”

“There’s always hope.”

Théoden smiled. “Good. Hope is good. Time will tell.” He returned his seat to its forward-facing position and was silent from then on.

## Chapter 7 – Escape from the Panopticon

“It was undoubtedly a dramatic affair, so many ‘natural disasters’ striking at once, all over the globe. However, contrary to the narrative pushed by the Commonwealth, they were far from a genocidal force. Each storm’s death toll was scarcely higher than a regular disaster; it was merely the fact that so many had erupted at once and that they did not seem to dissipate that set them apart. An argument could be made that they ended the world as we know it, because the storms did have a devastating effect on infrastructure and transportation, leading to the balkanization of most nations, but that would be an extreme interpretation of events.

* Archivist Victoria Cromwell, in A Blank Slate: Humanity’s Second Chance

The Ravengrad Panopticon was a place that could only be escaped through a merciful death. Largely regarded as the single most secure facility in the capital, eclipsing even the Tower itself, the prison had not gained its reputation from an army of elite guards or from a deadly maze of traps, but from a very simple trick.

As its name suggested, the Panopticon was built in a way that allowed a small number of guards to maintain visibility on each and every prisoner at all times. Its design was simple – at first glance, little more than a glorified pit in the ground. The walls of the cylindrical hole were lined with cells and surrounded a central tower from which a few Skywatch troops kept watch over the entire facility. With such a weak contingent of guards standing against the worst criminals out of all the principalities, many commentators speculated endlessly as to how there had never been a successful breakout. A question with a simple, if curious answer: Water.

Not any trivial quantity of water, but a deluge of biblical proportions. On one site where the land met the Aegean Sea lay a large, dark construct known to most as the St. Elodie Waterlock, whose primary function was to filter the seawater and distribute it amongst the people of Ravengrad. It also served a more insidious purpose. In the event that the Panopticon were to be critically compromised, operators at the Waterlock would open the gates to a special canal straight to the Panopticon, flooding the facility and drowning all within. So destructive was the design that it had never once been tested, but the threat was all that was needed.

This mechanism was well-known to the people of the Commonwealth, deterring any attempts at a jailbreak. The design of the prison was too simple for an individual to evade detection whilst attempting an escape, and a mass riot would be tantamount to suicide.

Alexis hoped to be the first to escape. She had no idea how, of course, but she was going to make an honest effort. To her knowledge, most or all of the men and women who had survived the attack were held here. How many that was, exactly, was unclear. Many soldiers had been stationed at Hotel India. If it had fallen, which was likely, then most of them would have fallen with it. Still, there were a lot them in Ravengrad. Enough must have survived to fill a good number of cells in the Panopticon. And then there would be the usual pleasant folk, the ones the Commonwealth considered its worst offenders. She had a lot to work with, in theory.

Not that she could just incite a riot, of course. Even if she did somehow manage to convince the prison rabble to do her bidding, there would be a million tons of cool Aegean water crushing them all within minutes of the first move. That certainly wouldn’t do.

Alexis’ own cell was about halfway down the pit. By her estimation, there was a quarter of a kilometer between her new home and the bustling surface of the city. The stories she had heard as a little schoolgirl told that the Russians had built it as a home for political prisoners during their occupation of Athens during the Greco-Russian war. Assuming this was true, the Russian engineers had done an admirable job of digging an enormous hole in the ground.

Her personal box was not a wholly unpleasant environment, all things considered. Three concrete walls, with a floor and a ceiling of the same material. A basic cot with a blanket, and a surprising number of amenities, including a rudimentary washroom, paper and pencils to draw or write if she desired and so on. The Commonwealth doctors had even patched up her wounds from the fight. Lack of freedom aside, if she were to spend the rest of her life here, then maybe that wasn’t such a terrible fate.

What it lacked, though, was privacy. Where three of its walls were solid, impenetrable concrete, the fourth was nothing but a thick layer of what seemed like glass. Anyone could see anything that she did through this portal. What was more, she had been randomly assigned a roommate, another Peregrine soldier whose name she did not know and a man no less. Conventional prisons were segregated by gender – ironic considering some of the Commonwealth’s social policies – but clearly the Panopticon’s staff did not care enough to do so.

The lack of privacy was probably the point, she thought to herself as she sat down on the bed. For a minute she was possessed by the thought that she could, God willing, break through the glass wall, but quickly realized how stupid that idea was. If the glass – if it even was glass – could be broken, then someone would have done so long before she. With nothing else to do, she lay down on the cot and said a quick prayer for luck before going to sleep.

Later, Alexis was summoned alongside a section of fellow inmates to take the elevator down to the bottom of the pit, where prisoners were handed their dry and tasteless meals. The man she shared a cell with had still not spoken to her, and that was fine. From the note posted outside her door listing the inmates contained within, she was able to deduce that he was called “Irwin S.,” though what the “S” stood for was unclear.

When their turn to receive their allotted portions came, Alexis saw that the quality of their meal was very much the same as that of the cells –bland to the extreme, but comfortable. Nothing but bread and cheap chicken soup. Perhaps the Panopticon, despite its reputation, was kind to its inmates. Likely as a means of pacification, but she wasn’t about to complain.

“Sometimes the food gets better,” said the man sitting to her right. “Like, they bring us cake on Commonwealth Day, stuff like that.”

Alexis looked at him and then at the rest of the table. She hadn’t really paid attention to them, lost in her own thoughts. There were a few Peregrine soldiers whose faces she recognized but whose names she’d never learned, though they likely knew her well. Other than her fellow unfortunate rebels, the rest of the table was an eclectic bunch. The man to her right was fairly large and rough around the edges, while sitting to her left was a man who was less sizable, though not scrawny by any means.

“Well, that’s good to know,” she said to her neighbor. “I mean, not a whole lot worse than what we’d usually be able to scavenge out on the outskirts. We had a decent reserve of real food, but a lot of it was preserved crap and old MREs that the refugees brought in and just tossed once Ravengrad got up and running.”

“Were you one of the unfortunate few who slipped through the welfare net?” asked the thinner man.

“Me? Oh, no, I wasn’t a slip. Lived out there by choice.” She thought for a moment, trying to decide how much of the story would be wise to reveal. Chances were, they didn’t know much about the attack. If Alexis’ assumptions were correct, they may not yet have realized her involvement.

“It’s a long story,” she finished, shrugging off the incredulous looks of her fellows. Several squinted at her in suspicion, but just accepted her brief history without more than a second thought.

“So, what are you all here for?” asked Alexis’ roommate, a tall Slavic man with a disheveled look about him. He sat awkwardly as the prisoners just looked at him in response, unamused.

“What? Is that not a question that you ask?”

“You won’t shanked for it, if that’s what you mean,” the larger man replied. “Even if the guards were dumb enough to let us get away with making ‘em.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“It’s just a dumb question,” said the large man’s smaller counterpart. “Most folks around here flat out don’t care who did what, we all fucked up somewhere on the line and a lot of people don’t want to remember it.”

“Are you one of those people?” Alexis asked.

“No. I’ve made peace with my mistakes. My name is Wilson, by the way, as we’ve not yet been introduced. My friend here’s called Fischer.”

“Fischer McKellan, to be precise. Good to meet you all,” Fischer added.

“Likewise. I am Irwin Sokolov, and this is my partner, Alexis.”

“Partner in what sense?” Wilson asked.

Sokolov laughed. “Partner in crime, you might say.”

“What kind of crime?

“You first,” Alexis said. “If you’ve made peace with your past, why not share?”

“Not very trusting, are you?”

“Just curious.”

“Very well. I was an intelligence officer. First Legion, or, at least I was until I found some dirt on the late Scout Commissar Girada. The man was a rapist – convicted, too, but good enough at his job that Magnus was able to pull some strings and get him on probation rather than thrown in the Panopticon. If the world were just, he would be in here today, but I suppose both Magnus and I saw to it that that wouldn’t happen.”

“You mentioned he was dead. You killed him, then?” Sokolov asked.

Wilson shook his head. “No. Fischer was my muscle. I used what assets I had to determine when Girada would be vulnerable, and Fischer took him out. Afterwards, we turned ourselves in. We were murderers, after all, and it would have been hypocritical to escape justice whilst condemning others for the same thing.”

“Why not just expose him?”

“The depth of his crime was too horrible to risk letting this be covered up again. Were I to publicly accuse Girada, it’s possible I would have been killed myself. So I took the only action I knew would solve the problem permanently. And so now I’m here.”

“So that’s the end of your story, then?”

“In a perfect world, yes. I still hate the Commonwealth for forcing us into vigilantism through their corrupt inaction, but a wise man understands that the past is the past and cannot be changed, and that allowing such matters to consume you is futile.”

“How’s that working out?”

Wilson laughed grimly. “Well enough. I’ve accepted my punishment. Justice is justice, no matter who’s on the receiving end.”

“I’ve had similar thoughts,” Alexis confessed, “though for different reasons. When I was with the civil guard, most of the officers I served under were good, honest people, with a just a few who had cruel streaks.”

“This sort of thing isn’t exceedingly common like I hear was the case in the nations before the storms. But sometimes it does happen. I can somewhat understand – the skills of a talented officer may be more valuable to the government, and, allegedly, the people, than the life of another citizen, but hearing that same kind of logic getting echoed over and over and over again gets tiring.”

Alexis nodded in agreement, as did several others.

“You were with the guard? Full time or just for university service? ” Fischer asked, intrigued.

“Yeah, I was,” Alexis replied. "Deserted, though. That’s more or less why I’m in here.” It wasn’t technically a lie.

“What brought that on?”

“There was…an incident a little while back. My unit was up against a few thugs who’d taken hostages in a house in the suburbs. There was a point where we thought we had an opening, and went to storm the building.” Alexis shook her head. “That opening wasn’t an opening at all. Lost half the squad. Command ran the numbers and determined it was better to just flatten the place with mortar fire, hostages and all, than to lose more troops to another assault. Simple mathematics. Too simple for the situation, if you ask me.

“So you decided to leave.”

“Yep. I’d already done my mandatory service after my first year of uni, but I stuck on because I liked to fight. Turns out, just not for the CHP.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” Wilson said.

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That night, Sokolov approached Alexis and asked whether or not she had any plans to escape.

“Plans? I haven’t any,” Alexis said, slumped against the wall on her cot.

“Really, is that so? Given the amount of planning I heard went into our attack, I assumed that you would have had a…contingency for our capture. I was ready to offer my assistance, but…”

“Even if I had a plan, do you think I’d tell you here? You don’t think they’re listening to us speak?”

“Surely not. There must be a couple thousand prisoners here. They can’t listen to us all. The entire design of a panopticon, as it was originally conceived, is to allow a small number of guards to keep many prisoners in check by making it so they don’t know whether or not they are being observed. The odds of them listening in now are miniscule.”

“Would it not be prudent of them to pay special attention to the cells where they’re keeping enemy officers, though? The ones most likely to plan an escape? It’s no accident that I was placed with you, someone without rank or status. They don’t want me coordinating with the other commanders.”

Sokolov looked pained for a brief moment, but he continued. “I truly think it was random. They could have put you with someone unconnected to the militia, but instead you’re with me, someone much better trained than a simple peasant.” Sokolov paused, before looking seriously at Alexis. “You are going to try and escape, though? You never knew me, but I knew about you. About Barrow, about Tyler, about all of them. Not a soul among them I’d imagine content to sit in prison like this. I know that I won’t rest until I can see my son in Stockholm again. I can only imagine that you feel something similar.”

“You had a son?”

“Yes. Lucas was his name. Is his name. His mother’s name is Sophie. We separated, and he stayed with her.”

“Bad divorce?”

“Quite the opposite. I wanted to fight, but I couldn’t take her with me, and so we made the mutual decision to separate for the safety of the both of them. When we get out, when we remove the tyrants in power, I will be able to see them again without putting them at risk. If we’re going to stay in here, though, then I suppose it doesn’t matter. We all made our peace with the possibility that we might not be reunited.”

Alexis looked pityingly at Sokolov, then felt a brief moment of shame. “I’m sorry that it didn’t all work out. We were doing so well, and then it all just…fell apart.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. Every man and woman who died on that tower did so willingly. I would have gladly given my life for you had I been on the tower, and I will still give my life for you if you need it.”

“I can’t ask your life, Sokolov, not anymore,” Alexis said before looking back up at her cellmate. “You said you weren’t on the Tower. Hotel India, then, I suppose?”

“Yes. Shock Corps, part of Commander Barrow’s attachment that he left to guard the base. Formerly Skywatch. We held on for a damn long time, but my old friends are nothing if not tenacious.”

“From the Skywatch into the Shock Corps, hm? Impressive résumé. If it comes to a straight fight, then I suppose I have my man.”

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And so life went on, with Alexis no closer to formulating an escape plan. After a month, she had become very accustomed to the routine of the Panopticon. It was then that the Commonwealth, whether through conspiracy or through coincidence, decided to throw a wrench into her expectations. It brought her no closer to freedom, but the change was interesting.

The staff at the Panopticon hadn’t spoken them once except to give an order, but there was a new guard amongst their number. Like Alexis, he had flame-red hair but a skin tone that was far tanner than hers. What was most strange, however, was the fact that he took an interest in the prisoners’ lives. He sat down one day at the table where Alexis and her companions sat and began to ask questions. “Have any of you got family on the outside?” on the first day, “Where are you all from, anyway?” on the second, and so on. Even if they were hesitant to trust the man, it was conversation, so that was something. By the end of the week, he had been allowed to know a great deal about his captives.

“I don’t like silly questions like that,” Wilson said to his companions when the guard was at another table. “Brings up stuff I’d rather forget.”

Alexis didn’t mind too much. Her new friends were all well and good, but she wished to see the others again. Eirene, Teague, Janessa, even Hector. She had glanced a few of them in passing, but never long enough for a conversation. The new guard was someone else to talk to and keep her mind off of the disastrous attack.

His name was Adrian Vasquez, and he claimed to have been a guardsman in Madrid before being assigned to work in the Panopticon. A friendly sort, to be sure, if inquisitive. It was for Alexis easy to see how someone like Janessa or Eirene might not take well to his questioning, if he subjected them to the same treatment as she. Undoubtedly, Hector and Teague would indulge his appetite or conversation, but the others would have been a different story.

“I hear from Fischer that a man like him has never once been a guard here,” Sokolov said one day. “You think maybe they’re trying something different just for us?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Irwin,” Alexis replied. “It’s just a coincidence. If they were worried about us escaping, they wouldn’t deal with it by putting this guy in our midst.”

“Not like we could do anything, anyway. We try any funny business, everyone drowns.”

Alexis paused. She was very aware of the waterlock’s trick. It was one of her most hated obstacles in formulating an escape plan. Wilson had admonished her not to fall into any of the traps the Commonwealth had left for anyone with an idea to escape. The flood was the most dramatic, but it was not the only way someone could fall victim to the Panopticon’s web.

The most insidious scheme was a specially-crafted vulnerability, an escape route of sorts. Around the edge, towards the top, were a series of catwalks and maintenance tunnels that offered cover and a means of escaping through the walls of the prison and into the city’s underbelly. But it was all a trick. Prisoners suspected of planning an escape might be moved to a cell where they could easily access this network and tricked into using them to break out, only to find that the labyrinthine tunnels led only to ruin. Many had tried to run and been caught by Commonwealth agents in the maze or been left to rot when they could not find their way out. Allegedly, these tunnels even had connections to the Waterlock and its canals to aid in the flooding should the worst come to pass.

The Panopticon thus represented the Commonwealth’s sadistic streak. Its guards relished in toying with undesirables. Every day they hoped that someone would try to run and give them the satisfaction of hunting down their poor victim.

“Hey, Adrian,” she asked one day at lunch, “what do you think of the Panopticon?”

The guard paused. He looked up to where the pit met the sky, and then around at the rows and rows of prison cells. “It’s…on one hand, it’s good that we have a secure place to keep criminals in check, no matter what you believe about some things you can get arrested for. On the other hand, some of the measures seem like a violation of natural rights. Guess there’s no more room for those in this world.”

“Natural rights?” Wilson scoffed. “Never made sense to me. Governments gifted their citizens with rights, maybe, but nature was never so kind. Nature never cared when people were exterminated in prison camps, nature never cared when entire communities were treated as second-class citizens. Nature never cared when the poor and weak starved on the streets. To think that anyone is entitled to anything from Mother Nature is incredibly naïve. If anything, she wants us to suffer. We deserve it for what we did to her.”

Adrian frowned. “If that’s what you think. Still, my point stands – some of the measures seem unnecessarily cruel.”

“Hey, I don’t think anyone’s going to disagree with that,” Alexis said. “You don’t have to tell the mice to hate the mousetrap.”

“Right. Well, I need to be going. Let’s talk again later. See you then, I suppose,” Adrian said with an awkward stammer as he began to depart, leaving the rest alone with their food.

“If God is still out there, I wonder what he really thinks of us,” Alexis said.

“I’m not into that whole ‘god’ thing, but if there ever was some kind of Mother Nature who once cared about us, she must’ve stopped once those idiots built those fucking towers and used her gifts to kill so many people. That’s probably why she threw all those quakes and plagues into the mix, just to fuck with us,” Sokolov replied.

“Yeah, or that’s just more of our own meddling. It does sound like some biblically poetic justice, though. From all I hear of the old world, we certainly deserved a good smiting.”

Sokolov laughed. “If we play our cards right and get out of here, maybe we can be the ones holding the hammer this time around.”

“No one ever gets out of here,” Wilson said. “I know you know about their traps. You know just as well as I that they’ve got every loose end tied up.”

“We’ll see about that,” Alexis said.

She was able to catch another glimpse of Eirene the next day. The young woman was conversing with another girl, a frail-looking thing with ratty hair and far too little meat on her bones. Picking at their food, neither Eirene nor her companion seemed ready to eat anything more than crumbs. Before Alexis could even catch her attention, though, Eirene was prodded by one of the guards and made to leave alongside the rest of her section.

“So, you’ve got a friend. Good for you.” Alexis muttered to herself as she sat and watched the two of them leave the mess area. As happy as she was for Eirene, however, she could not help but feel a touch of jealousy.

“Someone else you know?” Wilson asked.

“Yeah. Friend of mine. Lots of ‘em here, actually.”

“Looks like you hang out with the wrong people, then.”

Alexis couldn’t stop herself from laughing. “Yeah, we got in all kinds of trouble. Like a regular dissidents’ club.”

She could tell that her new associates were beginning to suspect her involvement with the Peregrine militia, or some group like them. It didn’t matter much if they figured it out. They were more likely to be offended by the fact that she had concealed the truth, even if she hadn’t truly lied, than that she had fought the Commonwealth and failed.

Perhaps it was time to tell them the whole story, or at least most of it.

“Well,” she continued, choosing her words carefully, “actually, we were a bit more than that. Remember what I said about leaving the civil guard and living on the outskirts? Well, there was more reason than that.”

Wilson and Fischer didn’t need any more than that. They nodded, Wilson smiling mischievously while his counterpart just shrugged.

“Could be useful,” Fischer noted, “having a group to back you up. Makes sense that a lot of you end up here, though.”

Alexis looked around to see that no scrying eyes or ears were nearby, before leaning in to the two of them to whisper. “You remember a lot of noise coming from the Ravengrad Tower a few nights ago? That’s us. What a bloody routing that was.”

“Judging by how many prisoners arrived around that time,” Wilson said, “I’m guessing you mean it was a routing for you, not for the good ol’ CHP.”

“Yep. We did well, all things considered, but it didn’t end like we’d hoped. The ships we used to ferry troops into the harbor were all captured or sunk, our forward base was sacked, and pretty much everyone was killed, captured, or forced to flee back out into the outskirts.”

“Shame, it would have been a good laugh for the bloody loyalists to lose a battle on their own tower,” Fischer said.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t deliver. We did all we could, and…we paid heavily for our failure. Of those actually in the tower, I was one of maybe three or four survivors. It sucked, more than a little bit.”

“Well, if your army’s ever able to break out ever, let us know. If nothing else, it’ll be something to do, get a little revenge for screwing us over,” said Fischer.

“I’ll remember that, then,” Alexis said.

Her penultimate day in the Panopticon was by far the worst since she had arrived. She began the day with breakfast as usual, then returned to her cell to wait until lunch, just like every other day thus far. When the time came, however, Adrian met her outside of her cell and began to talk.

“What’s up?” Alexis asked, watching the rest of the prisoners filing towards the lift to the bottom level.

“There’s something I need to talk about,” Adrian said. “I’m aware that you and many of the others from your army are here, and that you are good friends with many of them, so this may disappoint you.”

“I’ve been disappointed before. Hit me, it can’t be that bad.”

“It’s not, all things considered. They’re just moving your lunch schedule around, I guess the idea being that the rebels won’t be able to coordinate anything as easily if we move you around. Of course, that means you’re going to have to move to a new cell, but I doubt you’ve gotten too attached to yours.”

“Let me guess,” Alexis said, “it’s higher up?”

Adrian laughed. “Yes. Yes, it is. I suppose one of your new friends told you about the games the sadistic bastards here like to play? My advice, it’s really easy to think that you’re special, especially for someone like you with a huge support network. It won’t work, so don’t even try.”

“Alright, that it?”

“Well, no. You’re needed elsewhere for the time being, so I’m to turn you over to those men there.”

Before she could respond, Alexis was strong-armed by two other guards who accosted her from behind, demanding that she accompany them to a facility at the very top of the Panopticon. There wasn’t anything she could do but follow, even if she was alarmed by the force being used upon her.

Adrian watched her taken away and turned his head down. “They thought you’d fight back, so they had me distract you,” he said, more to himself than to anyone else. “I was…following orders. Nothing more.”

Alexis was less upset by the deception than by the Commonwealth’s imagining her as some manner of ruffian who would

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As Alexis returned to her new cell, she lay down on the bed but knew she would not sleep that night. The guards had taken her to meet the new Director-General Jacob Lancaster. It might not have hurt as much if he had actually bothered to extract information.

“I don’t care about what you know,” the man had said while she was strapped to the chair. “Your friends already gave up enough information to know what I need to know. But you were actually on the tower that night – I saw your face as you executed Magnus. No, I just want to hurt you. Punish you for your treachery.”

Alexis had wanted to scream at him, to spit at him, to punish *him* for his idiocy and cruelty. But there was nothing she could do. And so she ended the day scarred and beaten and wanting to die.

She couldn’t just let herself waste away. The pain was great, worse than any wound ever dealt to her in battle, but if she allowed these new scars to quash any ambitions of revenge then Lancaster would have won. That would be unacceptable. Worse, though, were her fears of what befallen her friends, likely subjected to the same treatment as she.

Teague could probably handle it. Janessa definitely could deal with the pain for a while. Hector, maybe not, but like Ian he hadn’t been anywhere Alexis could see and was probably dead. Eirene, though, was a concern. That particular girl was in a fragile emotional state even before Ravengrad Tower, and now she might have been tortured for her involvement after all that despair and guilt.

Taking a shower was all Alexis could do now. If the Commonwealth was watching her, which it likely was, then so be it. The water stung her cuts and burns. It was a cathartic sort of pain that let her stress and suffering melt away.

She had to get out. She wasn’t going to die in confinement.

Breakfast the next day was somber, but Alexis didn’t say a word about what had transpired to the new men and women she now shared a table with. Talking and smiling half-heartedly all the same, she did her best to make new friends. At the end of the meal, though, she returned to her cell and curled up on the bed and let herself cry not only for herself but also for all the others she now knew must have been subjected to a similar fate. If the new status quo continued, then there would be all the more reason to try and escape.

By the time her lunch hour rolled around, Alexis was alerted to yet another shift in the usual schedule. The difference was not that she had a new hour – just like breakfast, she knew about that particular change. But the fact that when she expected to be called she only heard klaxons blaring and officers shouting as they ran past her glass door was alarming. She never did get to go to lunch.

The first person to offer any explanation was Adrian himself, a man who Alexis now loathed for enabling in part the Director’s schemes of torture. When he arrived at her cell and slid open the wall, she avoided making any kind of eye contact.

“I’m sorry for last night,” Adrian said. “I didn’t want to let them torture you, but they made me keep you waiting.”

“No. You chose of your own free will. The Commonwealth can’t mind-control people,” Alexis said.

“Orders are orders. We have to follow them. You were with the civil guard before you defected, so surely you understand.”

“Yeah, I *was* with the guard. We’re using the past tense for a reason.”

Adrian nodded. “I’ll…think about that. In any case, there’s a reason why I’m here, and it’s not to hold you up until the tough guys arrive to take you away.”

He knew that Alexis had no reason to trust him and didn’t blame her for her silence, but what he had to say was of dire importance. With few options, Adrian handed her a slip of paper intended originally for his eyes only. “If you don’t want to talk to me, at least read this.”

Alexis looked at the paper. It was printed on firm manila stock in a dark, formal typeface. The message was simple: *All Commonwealth officers have permission to employ whatever means they deem necessary to combat the threat from Tehran if it materializes. If necessary, recruit penal legions from the Panopticon. Our enemy cannot be allowed to capitalize on their victory.*

Notably, the message had been signed by the late Director-General Magnus. This was interesting, but not entirely unexpected. Most contingency plans would have been authorized under his rule.

“Alright, what’s the meaning of this?” Alexis demanded. As angry as she was with Adrian, she wanted to know more.

“Miss, I’m just a guardsman. They didn’t tell me much, but I think that the paper’s self-explanatory. Something’s come up, and the Commonwealth feels it’s dire enough to give you a chance to buy your freedom.”

“And what if we don’t want to help them?”

Adrian sighed. “The base commander’s an officer of the Skywatch. He knows all the details they won’t tell the likes of me. Let me take you to him and see if he can’t convince you. If that’s still not enough, then, well…you can stay and rot in the Panopticon, I guess.”

That was enough for Alexis. She loathed the idea of helping her captors, but if doing so would see her and the rest released, then she had no other choice. “Fine,” she said. “Take me to him.”

The base commander was indeed an officer of the Skywatch, his dark blue flak vest scuffed and scarred by battle and his face covered in part by a black eye patch. He was alone except for two taller gentlemen with stark, pale faces and slick hair, each looking like a clone of the other. Alexis needed only a single look to feel uneasy at their presence, as if the raw, unnatural power emanating from them put her off balance.

The officer stalled until the rest of her closest companions had arrived, the commanders within whose authority it was to command the rest of their men. Teague was first, jokingly patting Hector on the back once he too was in the room. “You need to lighten up, Pendleton,” he said. “Not everything’s a trap. There’s a good chance this is, but, then again, they’ve already got us right where they want us. Not much more they can do to us.”

“You should know as well as I that it never hurts to be careful,” Hector said.

Teague laughed. “If it’s a trap, we’ll build that bridge once we reach the river.”

The last to arrive were Eirene and Janessa. Alexis noted that Ian was still absent, which could only have meant that he truly was dead. However, seeing her dearest friend Eirene, still safe and sound was a blessing, although she worried about what she might have been subjected to.

It was almost a guilty pleasure, watching her. Everything about Eirene must have been divinely inspired, God’s greatest success if he had truly tried to build humanity in his own image. Alexis couldn’t help but want to reach out and touch her, not so much for any sexual reason but rather out of her rebellious spirit’s yearning to defy what ought to have been there: a museum’s admonition to please not touch the art.

There would be time later for Alexis to admire these unfair results of the genetic lottery. “So what’s the deal bringing all of us here? Adrian called it a chance to ‘buy our freedom.’ Exactly what does that mean?” she asked.

The officer looked grim and then hateful. “Almost twenty years ago, Commonwealth scouts encountered a group of terrorists much like yourselves operating out of bunkers that survived the loss of Tehran. You are the only ones outside of the Skywatch to be allowed to know that we lost that battle. Ironic that we’re now spilling secrets to the same ilk who inflicted such an insufferable defeat upon us.”

“How did you keep that mess quiet?” Janessa asked.

“Simple. Almost everybody who was involved in that battle perished or was abandoned in Tehran. The rest were high-ranking officers and unanimously agreed that the failure should be kept under wraps.”

“Or hunted down to be executed,” Eirene growled under her breath, quietly enough that only one or two of her companions heard her.

The officer paused and eyed her disapprovingly. “You were an exception. Traitor or no, it was a mistake to include any units from the goddamned civil guard. Look where it got us.”

“I wasn’t responsible for the defeat,” Eirene said.

These two had some history together, Alexis realized. Eirene had said that she had killed many people fighting for the Commonwealth. This campaign must have been what she meant.

“So, is this it?” Hector asked. “These Tehrani rebels are mounting another offensive and the Commonwealth can’t keep up? For some reason, and I’m sure that Captain Eyepatch here will happily elucidate us, they need some extra guns to fight and have judged us the lesser of two evils.”

“Evil might be too extreme an absolute in both cases, but they are certainly a fearsome opponent. To call them ‘terrorists like us’ is an understatement if I’ve ever heard one,” Eirene whispered before raising her voice to address the group as a whole. “We didn’t fight backwater terrorists. Kasimira, our enemy, was powerful and organized. They were as much a nation as the Commonwealth is.”

“Hardly,” the officer scoffed. “We were willing to recognize Kasimiran sovereignty until they betrayed us at the Tabriz conference. They proved themselves unwilling to cooperate with us and showed their true nature.”

“Liar. They betrayed us, yes, but you never offered them true sovereignty. I can hardly blame them for responding the way they did in the face of your imperialism.”

As she cooled down, Eirene turned to face Alexis, who returned her gaze with confusion. “Long story, I’ll tell you later.”

“If there even is a ‘later,’” Hector said.

“There will be a ‘later’ if you cooperate,” the officer said. “But your young friend’s claims, while we could debate them endlessly, are beside the point – The Skywatch is not in a position to engage this enemy. The threat is immediate, and, conveniently, it is being directly focused through what used to be your headquarters. Somehow they were able to sneak troops up north without being detected. If you aid us in resisting the incoming forces from Tehran, then you will be allowed to reclaim your old base.”

“You truly have permission to do this, then?” Teague asked.

“Yes. *Kasimira* had been judged to be the greater threat,” he said, pronouncing the name with disgust, “and we therefore have been given permission to use *any* resources at our disposal. You included.”

Alexis didn’t like being referred to as a tool, but it was the truth. With the others’ permission, she would allow herself and her friends to be used. It was the best she could do to continue the fight.

“This is by no means a formal alliance,” the officer said. “You are, as I’ve said, a weapon. A weapon we expect to turn on us as soon as the job is complete. The Commonwealth will react accordingly.”

“Of course. We wouldn’t expect any different.” Alexis said.

Teague frowned. “So, this is it, again? We and our troops are released and given weapons to fight Tehran, and then the war’s back on?”

“I don’t think there will be war right away,” Alexis said. “Both sides would be hard pressed to continue a fight in their current states. But, from what I gather, yes – this will mean a return to fighting eventually.”

“Our current states?” the officer asked, eyeing her suspiciously.

“Well, I suppose it comes down to how the new Director-General’s going to act. I don’t know who he is, so we’ll have to wait and see.”

“It’s the Grand Admiral, Jacob Lancaster,” Hector said. “I spoke with him personally.”

“Hmph. So he survived, did he? This will be interesting.”

Grand Marshal, Admiral, and Director-General. It was a potent mixture of titles that afforded Lancaster far more power than anyone should have been comfortable with.

The Skywatch officer folded his arms and furrowed his brow. He was a large man, but somehow less intimidating than his associates, even when trying to look imposing. “You have our terms. If you perform your duties well and cease hostile action against the Commonwealth, we may even consider granting you and your men amnesty.”

That was a big “if,” Alexis thought. She knew that there were things their host wasn’t telling them and had no reason to trust either deal he had presented. Still, she didn’t suspect a trap *per se*. If the Commonwealth wanted them dead, they would not need any kind of deception. What she had heard told her that, perhaps, the higher echelons of the government were not directly involved in the deal, having only authorized their peons to strike bargains of their own. Did the officer have his own agenda? Almost certainly. But the deal he offered would give them a chance, at the very least.

“I can’t speak for the rest, but I’ll accept your offer on the condition that I can draw recruits from the other prisoners’ ranks as well,” she said.

“How many?”

“Half a dozen at most, likely fewer. Give me a few minutes and a pen and paper and I can have a list, should this be agreeable to you.”

“It will have to do,” the officer acceded. “The Tehrani rebels may strike at any time – it behooves us to act decisively. All the materiel and vehicles captured from Hotel India will be returned to you, and you will be allowed free passage to the northern outskirts. After that, dig in as best you can and remove these insurgents. And after *that*…”

“Then you come for us. We get it,” said Janessa.

“That remains to be seen.”

Every one of the Peregrines knew that something was amiss, but they ignored any nagging doubts in favor of their desire to escape the confines of the Panopticon.

Eirene coughed, padding the ground nervously with her foot. Once she had worked up the courage to speak, she addressed the Skywatch officer. “I too have a single request. I knew a girl here, like Alexis and her ‘list.’ I’d like her released as well.”

The officer sighed again. “Do you have a name for me?”

“She was in my cell. ‘Julia F.’ was all I knew her by.”

A tired expression overtook the man’s face. “No. That is out of the question. If she were released, we would stand to lose far more than if we only released you.”

“But…” Eirene began, only to be cut off.

“No more questions. You, in particular, are in no place to make demands like that. I’m here to make use of you, not to spill Commonwealth secrets.”

Eirene sulked, but said nothing more.

In the end, Alexis and her friends accepted his proposal and were bound north to the outskirts by the next day. For the time, they had their freedom.

## Chapter 8 – A New Frontier

“Reconciliation, not retribution is what we need. No side can claim to have won that war. Both have suffered equally. If we extend a helping hand, show the West that we are willing to cooperate, then we can avoid future conflict and take back the moral high ground. Let us work together to rebuild each other’s ruined cities.”

* *High Councilor Aaliyah Samara, daughter of the Emperor, in* New Occidental Diplomacy

As Ian disembarked the vessel, he was struck not only by the magnificence of the ship itself, but also by the breathtakingly beautiful sight of the city. The ship was long and ornate, its smooth, curvaceous hull a deep red hue trimmed with gold, a color that set it apart from the purest marble white of the surrounding architecture. Tall, fanciful towers sprouted from the elaborate maze of smaller facilities and structures, while lines of viridian trees and clear blue water features accented the beautiful sight. Ian stood in awe upon the dock, gazing at the vista before him.

The smell was the third sensation to strike him. While Ravengrad had its moments of beauty, its scent was undeniably that of a city, no matter how clean. In Geneva, he found himself able to take a breath of fresh air and pick up traces of nature all around him. Surely this could not be true of every Hyperion holding, but, from where Ian stood, he could easily think himself in the wild if he closed his eyes.

Théoden, who had been following shortly behind, patted him on the back. “Welcome to Hyperion. It must look quite overwhelming, but I assure you that you’ll soon find yourself accustomed to the city.”

“Thank you.” Ian took a few steps forward, then stopped and turned around. “Say, how big is this place anyway? It looks like you’ve up and rebuilt all of Geneva, and then some.”

“I don’t know,” Théoden confessed. “I’ve never bothered to know such trivia. I do know that it is very large.”

“May I ask how you built such a grand city?”

Théoden smiled. “A light came from the East. My family has historically held power in Switzerland – my father was the mayor of Geneva, whilst my uncle held Bern and my brother Zurich, for instance – and so I was able to make preparations for the disaster I knew was coming. Unfortunately, I anticipated another war, not a cataclysmic storm. When it happened, much of our infrastructure was destroyed, and the ship carrying many of my contracted workers sunk just off of Algiers.”

“So what’s this ‘light from the East’ you mentioned?”

“The CAS *Shanghai* was a refugee airship bound for Ravengrad. I don’t think I need to give you more than one guess as to its home port. Its communication and navigational equipment failed, so it ended up crashing in Geneva, and from the wreckage, it disgorged a whole host of engineers, scientists, and laborers. They were literally our salvation, and earned themselves and their ship a permanent place in our scripture.”

“Scripture?”

“Religion here takes a different form than you might be used to. Many see the *Shanghai* as a Messianic figure, regardless of their religious affiliation. Their intervention was quite miraculous, and so many have taken to the belief that, when the world is threatened by heresy and violence, the *Shanghai* will return and once again lead our people to victory. It helped that the ship’s iconography was a white horse, like that upon which Vishnu will descend, or like the Islamic Mahdi will ride before the Day of Judgement.”

“You certainly are erudite, aren’t you?”

“Hardly. I know some Abrahamic mythology, but much of my knowledge is second-hand, and could even be wrong.” Théoden put his arm around Ian and pointed at a building barely visible from their position on the sky dock. “That there is an information center. Head inside, get a map, then find your residence in Dufour Tower. Once you’re inside, meet with two people. The first is your direct superior, Strategos Robert Lamb. The Irishman is one of my generals and responsible for all security this side of Lake Geneva. He’ll treat you well. The second person you’ll meet is Inquisitor Charlotte Aucoin, to whom you’ll report. How she treats you is entirely your choice. Treat her well, and you’ll get respect in return. The Inquisition rewards loyalty and punishes treachery, as you’d expect.”

“I’ll honor her well, then. Is this a permanent assignment?”

“You’ll follow her as she does whatever she needs to do, and I will observe to see first-hand how a Peregrine officer handles himself. If I think you would do better outside the Inquisition, and my advisors approve, then you might even earn yourself land and a title. But now we must part. If you have further questions, meet me at my Citadel.”

Ian could immediately tell what building he meant. An enormous tower dominated the skyline, with Théoden’s office no doubt at the top. Some things never changed.

Robert Lamb seemed an amiable sort when they first met. Large, but not fat, he would have been quite intimidating had it not been for his friendly countenance. Smiling, the man shook Ian’s hand and bid him welcome to the “community,” as he put it.

Ian appreciated the gesture, thanking his host before taking a longer look around the foyer.

“Here’s your room key,” said Lamb. “Don’t worry *too* much about losing it; just ask any security staff if you need a replacement.”

Ian nodded and took the keycard, a thin plastic chip with the number 405 on it.

“Fourth floor, room five in case you couldn’t tell. She’s got a good view of the lake. Lucky man you are.”

“Thank you. Have you seen a woman named Charlotte Aucoin? I’m to report to her,” Théoden said.”

“Master Lockhart put you with the little girls? Right…” Lamb checked around the room for a brief moment, then pointed to a young woman sitting in one of the soft armchairs by a window. “…there. You speak French, I hope? Her sister’s a bit better with English, much more agreeable, but they both speak it if you’re hopeless with their mother tongue.”

“I know enough to get by.”

“Well, have fun. I’ll be here for some time still if you have questions.”

She had a pale, rough skin and dark hair done up in a long ponytail that she nervously pulled as she reviewed the collection of papers that sat on her lap. Flipping through the pages, she moved to bite one of her nails – painted a cobalt blue that matched the color of her irises – but stopped before actually completing the act, shaking her head in frustration. Upon noticing Ian, she quickly straightened the pile and set it aside before demanding in angry French what he wanted.

Ian was startled, and his response was jumbled, but she seemed to understand.

“Pardon my distress,” she replied still in her mother tongue. “My little sister has been quite capricious of late. It’s becoming difficult to control her.”

“Your parents aren’t here?”

“They were killed some time ago. Slain by rioters in Ravengrad, filthy malcontents. Can hardly blame them for their grievances, but their methods are unacceptable.”

Ian paused after hearing this, deciding immediately to avoid any mention of his involvement with the Peregrines. While they had not been responsible for the deaths of Charlotte’s parents, the association might provoke a negative reaction. Nevertheless, he expressed sympathy.

She smiled. “Thank you. Honestly, it hasn’t been too bad, except at first. With nowhere to go, my sister and I ended up on the streets, but as it turns out Hyperion fills a good portion of its ranks with the homeless and desperate before reforming them into model citizens. Had it not been for Théoden’s generosity I shudder to imagine what fate might have befallen us, but here we are, I guess.”

Ian understood only enough to figure out the general idea of what she said, but that was all he needed. He continued his line of inquiry by asking her sister’s age, which he was told was thirteen.

Charlotte crossed her arms. “I assume I’m to be your new Mistress, if you’re the one Master Lockhart said was coming. Tell me, why do you look so confounded every time I speak? I know you know French, so why stand there looking so foolish?”

“Sorry, I’m just not used to hearing it so pure. I’ve been to Montreal so I hear a lot of that kind of French, but never Parisian.”

“Bah, modern Quebecois doesn’t count as French. Too different, too bastardized. Fools in the Commonwealth wouldn’t know a proper language when they heard it.”

“My girlfriend is Quebecois,” Ian protested. Janessa *could* speak Quebecois French but never did.

“Yeah, so? If you love her, teach her to speak a real language so she can join the rest of us as a civilized woman. The same goes for you.”

“Most folks around here seem to speak English.”

“Yeah, well, nobody’s perfect. So what do you want from me, anyway?”

“I want to know more about field work,” Ian replied.

“Right,” Charlotte said. “Let me first give you a briefing on how Hyperion is organized, since I’m assuming Master Lockhart was vague, as always. You’re from the Commonwealth, yeah? You speak English and have a Quebecois girlfriend, so it can’t be Kasimira or Joseon. We don’t have good relations with the Byzantines, so that’s probably out too.”

“What?”

“Yep. Definitely Commonwealth. Okay, so, we don’t have the privilege of a lot of territory like you do, so no principalities, but, other than that, we’re organized largely the same way your old masters are. At the top, we have Théoden Lockhart as Master of Hyperion, of course, largely equivalent to your Director-General. His authority is officially absolute, but his council of advisors is *very* influential, and a seat on the council is highly sought after. Below them is an Archon who oversees internal logistics and foreign policy, somewhat like a less isolationist version of your Executor of Civil Affairs. Then we have the military branches – the Polemarch is at the head of the army, and the Master of the Fleet directs the airships. The stratēgoí are Master Théoden’s generals who lead the troops on the ground. They’re similar to your legionary commissars, but there are more of them.”

“I should fit right in, then,” Ian said.

“We differ most from you in terms of civil organization. Any landowning lord or lady has membership amongst the thesmothétai, who, in true feudal style, control local levies of troops and administer a portion of the cult’s land. They’re hereditary dynasties who privately own their land, unlike your federally-appointed praetors. Praetors. It’s stupid, when you think about it, since the Commonwealth was founded over the Greek land it stole, and yet we’re the ones with ancient Greek titles and you have that stupid pseudo-Roman thing going on, with your ‘imperators,’ and ‘praetors,’ and whatever other fancy crap the architects spewed out.”

“They used Roman titles to convey an air of authority. Outside of that, they seem to detest any remnants of the old world.”

“And Master Lockhart so named his titles because of the philosophical history of Greece, which he respects. Seems like a better reason than yours.”

“Because Greece is the only civilization that produced great thinkers? I didn’t pick the names.” Ian paused. “You’re not very fond of the CHP, are you?”

“Nope. Sister and I lived in Ravengrad once, street urchins because our parents died and the Commonwealth was too incompetent to pick up the slack. A lot of Master Théoden’s recruits were picked from similar background. We left because they abandoned us. Ask any Commonwealth shill and he’ll preach about how much they’ve done to wipe out poverty, but, as you can see from my sister and me, that’s a lie. The Commonwealth teaches that Kasimira, Joseon, Cascadia, Texas, and New England, and the other states are just negligible groups of survivors, if they acknowledge their existence at all. The CHP may be the strongest by far, but it’s still a lie. Even your Grand Admiral, he lets people think he was part of the Turkish air force when the storms hit. A lie. He may have ancestry in Anatolia, but he was in charge of the British relief force sent there after the war. Took charge of the evacuation when everything went to hell, which made people *think* he’s a veteran of the Turkish air force, and he’s content to let that myth live because it gets him respect from the other officers. Isn’t it funny how, despite how the CHP condemns nationalism, its leaders are entirely content to use it to their advantage?”

“How do you know all this?”

“Master Lockhart did tell you that I’m part of the *Inquisition*, did he not? Here, we don’t fight with guns and bombs unless we absolutely have to, and it’s my job to make sure that doesn’t happen. Misinformation, interference, espionage. Whatever it takes to keep things from coming to blows. The more I study the Commonwealth, the more I come to realize that everything it’s built upon is a lie, which just makes me hate it all the more. I pity its people.”

“But aren’t lies literally your job?” Ian asked. “Or have I misunderstood?”

“There’s a difference between lying to keep the peace and lying to keep your own power.”

“Many would say that’s what the Commonwealth is doing. Keeping the peace.”

“That’s what they say, maybe, but just look at the differences in how things actually work out. The Cult provides for us better than the CHP ever did.”

“The say-what now?” Théoden had mentioned a cult when they had first met, but Ian had been too confused to pay it any heed. Now it was beginning to dawn upon him what he had just joined.

“The Cult. This is probably going to be the biggest change for someone coming from Ravengrad. There are plenty of fraternal and sororal lodges scattered around our lands, each hosting an order led by a patriarch or a matriarch. They’re outside the official hierarchy, so not under any thesmothetēs. Their levies are much smaller, but better-trained, and generally serve as the retinue for a local inquisitor.”

“Like you. What do you do with them, go around purging heretics?” Ian asked.

“Of course. Burnings at the stake, and all that.” Charlotte paused, and then laughed. “We’re cops with fancier titles and a few extra duties. More experienced inquisitors will actually perform espionage, but I’m just a junior inquisitor. The Cult’s dogma is flexible, closer to nonexistent, really, so the closest thing we have to ‘heresy’ is any action taken against the greater good. Theft, murder, and all the things you’d expect to be crimes.”

Ian looked at Charlotte, his confusion having expanded tenfold. “What kind of religion do the people here actually follow?”

“Master Lockhart calls it Universalism. In reality, that is just a name, and plenty of folks call it something else. Anyone can worship any god or gods, and pray in any manner he wants. We are all brothers and sisters in spirituality, with pantheons and practices as varied as you can imagine. You can even reject God entirely as long as you respect the faithful. Lots of people see Théoden as some kind of prophet and buy into his stories about the Light from the East, but not everyone. People like you, those who are inducted from outside aren’t expected to join a lodge, but you can if you like.”

“What about you?”

“My own faith is my business, but I am part of a sororal order, as is Emma, my little sister. I’m Inquisition, so this should be obvious.”

“Fair enough. What do the lodges do for you? You said I’m not required to join one, but, if I did…”

Charlotte shook her head. “Wouldn’t recommend it for you. To actually be a member is a commitment; they expect you to do real work. Obviously you and I will be doing tasks for Théoden, but I have my responsibilities to the lodge on top of that. You don’t have to be a member to take advantage of their services. Spiritual, mental, and physical therapy. Anybody can go there and pray, talk to a counselor, be treated of their wounds, solicit prostitutes, and so on.”

“Prostitutes? Théoden mentioned that, but I can’t say I’d expected them to be offered by the church.”

“Sexual relief can be therapeutic, and keeps morale up. I’ve used them before during dry spells, keeps the people happy and productive. Sanctioned and regulated by both church and state, no one’s complaining. Everyone involved is there by their own free will.”

“Right. Fair enough. So, back to my *original* point. What am I to do, workwise?” Ian asked.

“For a junior inquisitor like me, work is your typical police work,” Charlotte replied. “Patrolling a certain area, organizing security at a particular location, and so on. If there’s a problem, we’ll respond to it. Meet me here at nine in the morning tomorrow; I’ll have orders for the day by then.”

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow. Meantime, I’ll head up and see my room.”

Ian didn’t fully trust Théoden or Hyperion as a whole just yet. It was all too perfect, the pristine refuge that the man had somehow constructed right underneath the Commonwealth’s nose. Still, the quality of life here was a welcome change from his dreary days working in the dilapidated outskirts of Ravengrad.

As he opened the door to his room, Ian was awestruck at how positively luxurious it was. Like the rest of Hyperion, it was mostly white, but with bits of color scattered about in the form of seat cushions, bedspreads, and other assorted pieces of furniture. He immediately plopped down in the bed and lay there for some time, staring at the ceiling. It was only then that he began to feel a sense of melancholy slowly creeping up on him. It wasn’t that he was literally alone; Hyperion was full to the brim with new people to meet. Still, all his friends from before were dead or gone, and unlikely to reappear. Even if they were alive, how could he escape this place and track them down? If he was lucky, Théoden might assign him work in the capital where he could search for some evidence of their whereabouts. If not, then there was no hope left.

Some time passed as Ian sat alone in his room, alternately pacing the floor and attempting to get some rest in the bed. His bathroom had been conveniently stocked with more painkillers than he’d ever need, of which he took liberal advantage. Under the influence of the drugs, he fell onto the bed and let himself fall asleep.

Ian awoke later to a knocking at his door, which he responded to as lethargically as he could without simply sitting in the bed. Before he opened the door, he ran his fingers through his scruffy hair and massaged his face for a second. He was met with the image of Charlotte looking down at him in horror and pity, mixed with trace amounts of disgust.

“Mr. Barrow? Master Lockhart sent me to give you a message,” she said in careful English, unsure if he could understand her words. “Are…are you okay?”

He tried to take back control of his mouth and speak, but only managed to cough violently. By exercising a significant amount of effort, though, he was able to form basic words once again. “Charlotte…no French? Théoden said…” Ian was only able to speak this short fragment before being seized by another coughing fit.

“You seemed barely able to understand your mother tongue, much less a foreign one,” she said. “Although, I could return to French if you would prefer.”

Ian wheezed and shrugged. “Needed some strong stuff to get to sleep. Worked, I guess. I’m feeling better now.

“I assume you thought you could just take these as if they were the weak pills your Medical Administration produces? Foolish. Much too strong to take many at once. You are lucky that you did not suffer more side effects, but it is good that you are feeling better. Oh, your nose is bleeding. Here.” She quickly darted back into the bathroom and returned with a tissue. Leaning in close to his face, she dabbed away the blood, tossing the paper into the wastebin once she was finished. “

“Thanks,” said Ian. “I’m, uh, feeling better now. What did Théoden want?”

Charlotte switched back to French now that she was assured of Ian’s capability. “Surprisingly, Master Lockhart actually wished to see you regarding your first assignment, but you most certainly can’t go see him like that. You’re an absolute mess. Come, let’s get you cleaned up. Can you walk?”

Ian tried, but stumbled almost immediately. Charlotte caught him before he could fall, though, and helped support him.

“I’ll run a bath for you. You need one. Master Théoden’s a patient man and didn’t need you in any hurry, so we have time.”

Ian considered this and realized that she was probably right. He looked embarrassedly at Charlotte, then nodded. She smiled and began to run some hot water before helping him walk to the bath.

“Are you going to be okay?” she asked, closing the door behind her as she left the bathroom to give him some privacy.

“I’ll be okay, I think,” came the muffled reply.

“Sure you won’t drown, or anything?”

“I think that I’ll be okay. Say, before you go, can I ask you something?”

“As you wish.”

“Why is it that you came to fetch me? Doesn’t Théoden have, like, an assistant or something?”

“Yes, but the thing is, he also requested my presence. I suppose we’re going to be assigned a task of some sort.”

“Oh.”

“I still can, if you don’t mind me waiting out here while you get ready. Might be better so you don’t get lost out there.”

“Fair enough. If you’re going to be there, though, mind tossing me some new clothes so I can change in here when I’m done?”

“Yes, of course.” Charlotte pulled a uniform from the closet, then opened the bathroom door just wide enough to fit her arm through and dropped the clothes on the ground.

“Thank you very much,” said Ian, and continued his bath while Charlotte waited patiently outside. Just over half an hour later, he was clean, dressed, and the two of them were en route to Théoden’s headquarters nestled in the Swiss Alps. Nearby, relatively speaking. Hyperion’s public transportation was a beauty compared to the congestion in Ravengrad, whose subway system was ponderous and labyrinthine by comparison. Janessa had told him that Montreal’s was better, but he had never experienced it for himself.

Upon arrival, Ian was even more awestruck by the majesty of Hyperion’s architecture. The rest of the city was beautiful, but nothing he’d seen thus far could have even held a candle to the headquarters. A façade of marble arches interrupted periodically by Ionic columns formed a semicircular courtyard against the main building. After this were several rows topiaries and, towering overhead, an enormous white citadel, adorned with fanciful gargoyles and spires so high and so sharp they seemed to threaten the heavens themselves. A myriad of long bridges connected this structure to smaller annexes on the mountainside. It was a truly exquisite sight that put even the old wonders of the world to shame.

They took their time as they passed through the courtyard, eagerly taking in the beauty that surrounded them. Even Charlotte, who had seen the headquarters before, was nevertheless amazed at how gorgeous they were. So enthralled were they by the sights that they were almost sad when it came time to close the front door behind them and enter the building itself. Not that it was any less beautiful inside, of course. The tall glass window that ran up the center of the atrium filtered the sunlight into blue-green beams that danced and sparked across the thin particulate of dust that drifted through the air. Guards in red uniforms patrolled the halls, carrying bayoneted rifles or blades.

Charlotte led Ian up a long, straight stretch of stairs that led to an elevator. When questioned about why Théoden bothered installing such an impressive staircase only to lead into an elevator, she replied that the staircases were a line of defense to give defenders a high-ground advantage before any intruders could even reach the elevator. What’s more, she added, emergency protocols would cause portions of the stairs to rise up, giving a defense force much needed cover. “There’s a similar setup before the council and meeting chambers as well,” she concluded before using her security clearance to take them up to where Théoden was waiting. Another set of stairs later and the pair arrived at a room labeled “Hourglass.”

“They’re all named after nebulae,” explained Charlotte as they opened the door and greeted Théoden. The reunion proved to be very informal, as their superior officer merely rose to shake hands before sitting back down again and getting straight to business. Clasping his hands together, he briefly looked downward at a piece of paper, then addressed Ian directly.

“It is good to see you again, Mr. Barrow,” he said, smiling confidently. “How have you been settling in?”

Ian looked furtively at Charlotte, who nervously shook her head. He nodded subtly in agreement, then returned to Théoden.

“It was…fine,” he said. “This is an amazing city you’ve built.”

Théoden laughed, almost smirking at Ian. “Thank you,” he replied. “It was no small feat to establish Hyperion, but as you can see the reward was more than worth it.”

“It was. So, why have you summoned us?”

“I had not intended to throw you into the crucible so early, but an opportunity has arisen for me to test your skills for myself. There is a…situation in one of our fraternal lodges, and I have an inquisitor looking into it. You will assist him.”

“I understand, sir,” Ian said. “Forgive my confusion, but I thought that I’d been assigned to Lady Aucoin to assist in *her* duties.”

“Your confusion is understandable. She is a junior inquisitor, which she may have told you or may have been too proud to divulge. Until she turns twenty, she is not even a candidate for the proper rank of inquisitor, and she must still pass several tests that I needn’t bother explaining now. Until then, she carries inquisitorial authority but still has much to learn from her masters.

“Understood. And what is this situation we’re to deal with, exactly?”

“Illegal cybernetic research, and true heresy of the worst order. One of the few things the cult will absolutely not tolerate. Some time ago, a collective of scientists went rogue and decided to tamper with the purity of the human body. They’ve just now turned up again, and the inquisition has been dispatched to bring them in. Expect armed resistance.”

“Where and when are we supposed to meet this inquisitor?” Charlotte asked.

“He will meet you at your dormitory, and he’ll fill you in on the details of the mission. Nine o’clock tonight.”

“You really aren’t going to cut the new one a break, are you? The Tower was just last night, and he’s had a hard time since then.”

“Then this will be a decisive test,” was all Théoden said, and he dismissed them. His servants departed with a curt bow as he watched them leave.

“Shall we have dinner?” Charlotte asked as she and Ian sat down on the rail back to their residence.

“What?”

“Dinner. Do they not eat in the Commonwealth? Did Magnus outlaw food while I was away? ”

“Didn’t Théoden just give us an order?”

“Nine o’clock. That’s several hours from now, more than enough time to get a nice meal. Especially you, since you probably puked out everything you might have had in you between your injuries from the Tower and your little adventure with painkillers.”

“I suppose. Alright, I’ll bite. Where to?”

“There’s a nice Asian restaurant that serves all kinds of cuisine. Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Indian, the works. It’s quite good, if that’s agreeable to you.”

“It is, but can I stop by my room to change out of this uniform first? It’s mighty uncomfortable.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Come on, let’s go.”

The sun was just descending past the horizon by the time they returned to their living quarters. Inside the lobby were scattered pods of people eagerly discussing the day’s events and reconnecting with friends and family after a long day’s work. Seeing these friendly groups reminded Ian of something about Charlotte.

“Say, what’s your sister been up to while we’ve been away? She’s only thirteen, so shouldn’t someone be looking after her?”

“She’s fairly independent, but yes, she’s with friends. It’s fine, don’t worry about her.”

“Friends? What do they even do around here?”

“Same as any other kids. Play, study. Master Théoden’s schools are rigorous, but likely no more so than those in Ravengrad or Montreal. Loads of history and engineering, some theology and literature, the works.”

“Theology? Are they administered by the Cult?” Ian asked, suspicious.

“Some are, some aren’t.” Charlotte shrugged nonchalantly but picked herself up. “So, see you in a few? Or do you want to meet at Yamato?”

“I’ll meet you there. I’ve still got to get my room into shape.”

“Right. See you there, then!”

The two smiled and waved as they went their separate ways.

Just over an hour later, Charlotte waited patiently outside the stone arches that marked the entrance to Yamato. Clad in a sky blue dress, she stood alone amongst the throng of eager customers, all hoping soon to be fed. The deep purple lights emanating from the restaurant illuminated her as she kept watch for Ian.

It wasn’t long before he arrived, still wearing the uniform provided by Hyperion. From a distance, Charlotte caught only brief glimpses through the crowd and the dark, but she called out to him and soon he had pushed his way through the others to join her in the light.

“You look splendid,” he said as they joined the hungry crowd.

Charlotte didn’t react at all, as far as Ian could see. “Thanks,” she said curtly. “You…don’t look all that different. Still good, I mean, but…I thought you said you were going to change?”

“Yeah, so it turns out that the Commonwealth wasn’t kind enough to ship my old clothes in from Ravengrad. This is all I’ve got.”

The architect who designed Yamato was fond of glass and metal. Dark, moody shades dominated the interior, and neon lights shone deep red through glass panes that separated the tables. Ian and Charlotte stood in line to be seated and then, once it was their turn, were placed at a table not far from one of several circular bars, within which an army of skilled chefs played with fire and produced fanciful platters of food to be distributed throughout the restaurant. Ian looked through the glass dividers towards them and watched as the red-orange glow of cooking fires blended with the ambience.

As Ian observed his surroundings, Charlotte watched him closely. Both then turned their attention to the waiter as he approached, and they ordered a modest meal.

“So, anything else you can tell me about the inquisition?” asked Ian as they waited for the waiter to return with their food.

“Oh, uh, plenty,” Charlotte said. “Though, I was hoping that we could use this time to relax before we start working? I know you’ve had a long day.”

“Alright,” said Ian. “Something you want to talk about?”

“Well, if we’re going to be working together, I thought we should get to know each other. If I ever become a proper inquisitor, you might be part of my retinue. An inquisitor should be able to command the men under her as easily as she wields any other tool at her disposal, and I need to *know* those men before I can do that.”

“Okay. You going first or me?”

“You first.”

Ian stopped and thought about where to begin. If he told Charlotte about his involvement with people the likes of which she considered “filthy malcontents,” then perhaps he would surrender any modicum of trust he had earned. At the same time, hiding his background was not the way to win more.

“Well,” he said, “It’s a bit of a long story.”

“I’d like to hear it.”

“You just said you think of me like a tool. Do you really need to know the life story of the hammer you’re using to strike a nail?”

Charlotte let a smile that was almost smug form from her lips and laughed silently. “No one said a mistress can’t be friends with her steel. Some people name their swords. I hear Master Aumeier takes his to bed because not even the prostitutes will touch him.”

“Oh, really? Is that why you took me to dinner first?”

“Don’t flatter yourself. Our relationship is professional, though it needn’t be cold. So, go on, tell your story. I’m your mistress, after all, and *not* in that sense, so do as you’re told.”

Ian took a sip from his complimentary glass of water, then dabbed his mouth with his napkin and prepared to tell his story. As he started, though, he looked into Charlotte’s eager young eyes as she smiled at him, and hesitated. “I…you are familiar with the Peregrine militia, yes?”

Charlotte blinked. “You were with them?”

“I don’t know if it was the right thing or not, but yeah, I was with them. I served as field command alongside a woman called Alexis Havery and my girlfriend, Janessa Tyler, and we all got our orders from a couple of old coots. Well, they weren’t *that* old, but when the gals you’re working with are in their twenties and thirties, fifty years seems like a lot more.”

“So, you made the decision to attack Ravengrad Tower? Théoden mentioned that his intelligence suggested such a move would be made, but when it actually happened, well, everyone over here was shocked. Except for the strike team he sent to retrieve you, I suppose They’d have known.”

“No, it wasn’t entirely my decision. I helped lay the specific plans, but the idea came from up top. We had two strategists, Teague Ironwall and Hector Pendleton, who were the think tank behind our over-arching plans. People like me, Alex, and Jan, we were the tactical thinkers who actually led the troops into battle.”

“I…see. I’m quite sorry about how it all turned out.”

Ian nodded and they each avoided eye contact with the other for a moment.

“You said this…Janessa was your girlfriend. I’m sorry for your loss. This other woman, Havery, were you and her close at all?”

“We were on good terms, but I’m not sure I’d call her a close friend. She always had more of a taste for women anyhow. Between the three of us, there were three different divisions. I led the heavy infantry. Jan led the cavalry, which really to her head. Dressed like she was at some kind of renaissance fair, and I swear the weird accent she talks with wasn’t there originally, just got drilled into her because she faked it for so long. Not sure she’d ever actually picked up a history textbook, but she was a good woman despite her eccentricity. And Alexis, she was in charge of the scouts. Brilliant girl, a skilled fighter and tactician. Not the best at playing the long game, but that’s why we had Ironwall and Pendleton.”

“They sound like interesting people. The world is a worse place for their absence.”

Charlotte looked around, sadly watching the restaurant’s other patrons wining and dining each other, as drunk on the atmosphere as they were on the alcohol. With a heavy heart, she turned back to Ian. “I am sorry,” she said in English. “I should not have brought this up. I asked you here for a happy discussion, not like this. So…yes. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s understandable that you’d be curious about such things. Such is life when two strangers meet.”

“*D’accord, merci*,” she said, smiling softly and switching back to French. “Still, perhaps it would be best if we changed topics.”

“Agreed. So, maybe we ought to talk about our task, then?”

“No, not that. I’d like to relax, not talk about work.”

There was a brief lull in the conversation as both took drinks from their glasses of water. Ian looked around for their waiter, but he had not yet arrived.

“So,” he asked, “what’s it like working inquisition stuff for Théoden?”

“Stressful at times, as I imagine you’ll see firsthand later tonight. Granted, a full-fledged accusation of heresy with inquisitorial involvement is rare. Between the lessons learned from those fools who built the towers and the Cult teachings, most folks know better than to violate the sanctity of nature. Outside that, though, we deal with the same kind of crime as any other police force.”

At that point, the waiter approached and began to lay an assortment of Asian cuisine upon their table. Satisfied, Ian and Charlotte thanked him, and began to dine.

Charlotte swallowed her first bite and set down her chopsticks. “What do you think?” she asked. “Can we still rule the world, or has it cast us aside for good?”

Ian slowly chewed his sushi and washed it down with a sip of saké. “I don’t think it’s nature that we ought to fear anymore,” he said.

“Then what? The Commonwealth?”

Memories of his fight alongside Alexis and Janessa against the Commonwealth forces on the Grand Balcony passed through Ian’s mind. “Perhaps,” was all that he said.

“An interesting thought.”

As they ate, the restaurant began to clear out as people left, hoping to get a good night’s rest or, for those working the late-night shifts, heading towards wherever it was that they worked.

“Popular place, isn’t this?” said Ian.

“Yes, it is. Though, we arrived at the busiest time of night, which was somewhat poor planning on my part.”

“Don’t say that. I was just as much at fault as you were.”

“Don’t bullshit me,” Charlotte said. “I’m not grief-ridden over a crowded restaurant, so I don’t need to be babied. Just admitting a small mistake.”

As the amount of food on their plates began to dwindle, Ian changed the subject. “So,” he asked, “have you got anyone you’re close to here? Friends or family? Other than your sister, I mean.”

Charlotte laughed. “No. Of course not. Emma is all the company I want, even if Théoden has declared that you are the company I need. She has friends, but I don’t get out much.”

“What kind of friends has she got?” Ian asked.

“Just another young girl. Peony. Like the flower.”

“Are they close?”

“Yeah. That both were orphans formed a sort of bond between them, and they became fast friends. Peony is a sweet little girl. American parents, but we don’t hold that against her.” Charlotte laughed and waved her hand. “The Americans I’ve met are lovely people, of course. I doubt you’d be allowed to know the difference in your Commonwealth, but here we embrace our heritage rather than shun it. Now, you, did you leave any family behind?” Charlotte asked quietly, her curiosity getting the better of her.

Ian looked away, but he eventually cleared his throat and spoke. “I don’t know. I’m pretty certain I did, but my family is…estranged, to say the least.”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“No, no, it’s fine. Some things are good to talk about, just to clear the air. I had a little sister, see. We never talked much, and, once I left for service with the Guard, I thought I’d never hear from her again. Turns out that I was wrong; I did get one last, desperate message from her asking for help with a family issue. I didn’t realize the severity of the situation and didn’t think I was in a position to help, so I just ignored it. She suffered greatly for my negligence. But, the thing is, that wasn’t the end the way I thought it was.”

“Oh?

“Yeah. You remember what I said about Alexis?”

“She was the scout commander, right? The lesbian one?”

Ian stopped and cocked his head slightly, confused. “No, her family was Athenian,” he said. “The Aegean islands are abandoned, have been for decades.”

“Lower-case L,” Charlotte said simply and flatly as if it weren’t the first time she had made that correction.

“Oh, right. Anyhow, yeah, when she joined up with us, she came with another girl. My sister, Lavinia, a woman I hadn’t seen in years.”

“Shit,” Charlotte said, her curiosity piqued.

“We’re barely related anymore. At first I didn’t even believe it – she looked similar, but that alone doesn’t mean much since plenty of folks have a doppelganger. But it was more than that. Alexis and this new girl clearly had a thing going on, even if they weren’t officially ‘together,’ and my sister was also into girls so that was another coincidence. And the way she looked at me, I could tell that she didn’t think of me as just a stranger. New girl went by a different name, though, but here’s the thing – that name is a dead giveaway. Eirene Lilliana *de Lafayette,* she calls herself. You’re French and you seem to know your history, so I’ll assume you recognize the last part of that name.”

“Lafayette. All the French noble houses are long dead.”

“Exactly. Which means that name is a fake, one she took on later in life. Lavinia loved her mother dearly, and that woman – my stepmother – was French, like you. My assumption is that after the bad shit went down, she left the family and assumed a new identity, taking on a famous French name to honor the mother she loved.”

“Did you ever ask her?”

“I didn’t need to. Both of us know who the other is, so there’s no point bring up old misfortunes. We were allies of convenience and nothing more.”

\* \* \*

Charlotte and Ian met with the inquisitor at nine o’clock sharp, just as Théoden had instructed. The only difference was that they did not leave with him.

“I’m sorry, your services are no longer necessary,” the man said in a voice laced with callous arrogance. “The Inquisition has already scouted out the stronghold and taken care of its residents.”

“Well then, I suppose that’s that,” Charlotte said.

“That’s *it?*” Ian asked. “Théoden brought me here to do work, and when I actually get to do work, someone else has already done it?”

“That’s correct,” the inquisitor replied. “Again, I apologize for denying you your training, but you must understand that heretics can be given no quarter. We could not sacrifice the opportunity. You will undoubtedly get the experience you need at a later date.”

Charlotte took Ian by the arm. “Come on now, let’s go inside. It’s better that you rest, anyway.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” he replied, waiting until the inquisitor was out of earshot before continuing. “Are they trying to hide something from me?” he asked. “Did he find something I’m not supposed to see? You’ve got my loyalty – it’s not like there’s even anyone left I could pass secrets to.”

“I doubt it,” Charlotte said. “Expedience is a virtue when it doesn’t give way to haste.”

“Of course. If they had the opportunity to strike before we arrived, then I can’t fault them for taking it, but it just seems strange. They could have summoned us in the middle of dinner, or at least had the decency to tell us what was going on.”

“For as many airs as this place puts on, decency sometimes seems in short supply. But it doesn’t matter right now – get some rest, and meet me in the morning as we discussed. I’ll want you to see something when the sun’s up.”

## Chapter 9 – The Peregrine Reformation

*“The Tabriz crisis proved the folly of diplomacy. Anyone who thinks he can subdue the enemy without fighting is a lunatic.”*

* *Grand Marshal Hamilton, in* Lancaster’s Secret War (Unpublished)

The Skywatch officer at the Panopticon had made good on his word. Hundreds of captive soldiers were released from the Panopticon and other overflow prisons and allowed to march straight back to their old base. It took more than twenty trucks to move the soldiers and the gear, plus an enormous industrial hauler for Eirene’s corvette. To make up for this conspicuous display of power, documents had been provided to them by the desperate guards at the Panopticon that gave them clearance to drive their convoy through any checkpoints before reaching the ruined outskirts.

The base was just as dilapidated as it had been when they departed. Familiar, crumbling walls smothered in Persian ivy greeted the troops as they rolled in. Thick columns of dust were thrown through the air behind each vehicle’s heavy-duty rubber tires as they passed through the rubble and dirt of the Ravengrad outskirts.

As the convoy came to a halt and the troops began to disembark, Alexis turned to Wilson, stepping out of the door just behind her, and pointed towards the rest of their meager army.

“Pass the message back that we’re taking today to get settled back in. Get some rest, mourn the deceased, and do a quick once-over to make sure the place is in good repair. Once that’s over, everything is business as usual, everyone with the same schedules as before. Nice and smooth, like nothing’s changed.”

“And what about myself and the other new arrivals?”

“You said you were intelligence for the First Legion, right? Given how badly our last operation turned out, seems like we could use some new intelligence people. As for Fischer, he’ll serve under me in the Scout and Salvage Corps. We lost a lot of manpower that we need to get back ASAP.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Wilson said as he nodded and disappeared into the crowd to spread Alexis’ message.

“Sokolov, since Ian’s gone, you’re in charge of the Shock Corps now,” Alexis continued.

“Are you just deciding that for yourself?” Hector asked. “We don’t get any say?”

“He’s ex-Skywatch. Easily the best man for the job. You got anyone better?”

“No, but it’s the principle of the thing.”

“Whatever. Anyway, *Commander* Sokolov, you should spend today meeting with your men so they know who’s in charge. I dunno how many of Ian’s sergeants survived, but you should look for them.”

“Understood,” Sokolov said with a respectful nod before leaving to do as he was told.

With that taken care of, Alexis split off from her strategists and looked for Eirene, who wasn’t far but had declined to join the brief conversation.

“Hey, how are you doing?” she asked, looking at Eirene with a gentle smile. “Off to get some rest? You look like you need it.

Eirene smiled at her and patted her on the back. “Yeah. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. I’m just going to get some rest. I mean, you can join me if you want to.”

Alexis could see the sadness behind Eirene’s eyes, past the false front of contentedness. She tilted her head noncommittally, but declined the offer. “I’ve got something I’d like to do. I’ll catch up with you in a minute. Okay?”

“Okay.”

\* \* \*

When Alexis went to actually speak with her friend, she did so with a tray of cookies that she hoped would lift Eirene’s spirits. Convenience store stock, neither fresh nor warm, but some of the tastier cuisine available to the militia. She found that the door to their shared room was ever so slightly ajar, just enough of a crack for her to hear words pouring out from inside.

“Was I right?” came Eirene’s muffled voice. “Should I have pressed harder? My negligence may have damned her to an eternity in the pit. Maybe there wasn’t anything I could have done, but I should have *tried,* shouldn’t I? A slow, languishing death. That’s how I repay her for her kindness. She loved my drawings, and now that’s all that’s left of the one person who might have saved her but never did.”

At this point, Alexis slowly and carefully pulled the door all the way open. “Hey, you busy? I brought you cookies,” she said, setting the tray down on the bedside table.

Eirene fell silent and looked her direction, but relaxed when she recognized a friendly face. “Pardon me,” she said. “Just indulging in some soliloquy.”

“I noticed. Listen, can we talk?”

“Of course. I wanted to talk, actually. There are a few things that I’m…not ready to discuss, but if you’ve got a minute, then I’d like to get a few things off my chest.”

Alexis walked further into the room, closing the door behind her. “Tell me one thing first.”

“Kasimira?”

“Yeah.”

Eirene sighed. “Kasimira used to be called the Tehran Pact. They were the unified Muslim government that fought the Catholic League during the crusade. After the storms hit, borders didn’t matter as much, so it took them a while to get it all back together, but they did it. Mostly the old Arab countries now, but it goes as far east as Pakistan. Turkey was part of the Pact, but they were close enough to easily evacuate people to the safe zone in Greece, so they were smart and did exactly that. Left behind plenty of folks though, folks with their own empire-building dreams who didn’t want to swear fealty to the Kasimirans. So you have New Eastern Rome and a new Ottoman Empire, or so they called themselves last I checked. Which was, what, a few years ago? Who knows what’s going on over there now.”

“That whole area is covered in storms, though. How’d they survive?”

“Plenty of people didn’t. But I know what you mean. They survive there because the storms have let up more than the Commonwealth lets on. But even so, the people of the Tehran Pact were remarkably resilient when the first wave of storms hit. They survived a century of off-and-on attacks from the League and others. They had miles of underground bunkers and fortifications that made anything else on Earth look weak. So when the CHP showed up later, and it came to blows…our airships were useless – couldn’t bomb the tunnels built to withstand nukes – and our heavy armor couldn’t maneuver down there. Just couldn’t take enough territory.”

“And you were there during this war.”

“Yeah. I shouldn’t have been, was really just luck that I ended up on a carrier heading east. One of their corvettes crashed in an accident, one of the Skywatch ones, I mean, so they substituted me – the top pilot in the civil guard – for that poor fool. When we lost, my crew got blamed for their failure as if *I* turned traitor. Ever wondered why you and your squad were ordered to hunt me down before your change of heart? Yeah.”

“Man,” was all Alexis said, muttering under her breath, before stopping to think. Everything that she had heard that day had come as a surprise, from an untold story from Eirene’s history to entire countries she had never known. “How come you never said anything about Kasimira?” she asked.

Eirene was silent for a long time before she answered. “I don’t like to think about the past. I didn’t think it mattered before now.”

“We could have used their help against the Commonwealth? Seems like a foreign power with a grudge against Magnus would have been more than willing to support our cause.”

“Best we didn’t. We invite Kasimira into our movement and they’ll dominate us. Just because we both hate the CHP doesn’t mean we’d make good allies.”

“Fair dues. You know them better than me.”

The bedsprings creaked as Eirene put her weight on them, reclining on the soft mattress and sighing deeply. “Okay, listen. I’m fully behind this cause, you can count on that. But I want something more. I’m not sure it’s anything you can provide, or Hector or Teague or Janessa or Ian, if he’s even still out there somewhere.”

“I think I know what you mean. Like what we talked about before Ravengrad?”

“Sort of. I still feel all of that, but it’s even worse now. Can I even put it into words? Ever since Ravengrad, this whole thing has felt…I don’t know. Like as much effort as I put in, as you all put in, we’re not ever going to amount to anything and it’s just going to cost lives as we struggle fruitlessly against an unbeatable enemy. As nice as it is to believe that we’re serving some grand purpose, you have to wonder if we can actually pull it off.”

Alexis smiled and sat down beside Eirene. “Don’t worry about that. We’ve suffered one setback, but we’ll get back on our feet soon enough.”

“You think so? We’ve got what, maybe a thousand guys? The Commonwealth’s got that many on a single battleship. I want to think that we’ll succeed, that good will always win. But, even if we truly are good, it’s seeming more and more like that ‘good always triumphs over evil’ maxim only rings true in fairy tales. If we even count as ‘good’.”

“You’re probably right, but so what if we aren’t guaranteed a victory? I doubt anyone signed up thinking that was the case. I didn’t, and I know you didn’t. We’ll do everything we can to win, and I trust we’ll pull through.”

Pursing her lips, Eirene idled for a second and thought. “I guess that’s actually better, taking a win rather than having it handed to us,” she finally spoke. The satisfied look upon her face pleased Alexis, though she worried that the expression was still faked.

“Right,” Alexis replied, “that’s a good attitude to have. I know this has been hard on you. When I pulled you along with me, I really had no idea what was in store for us. Maybe it was wrong of me to do this to you, I don’t know. If it was, then I’m sorry, but – ”

Eirene interrupted Alexis before she could say any more, putting a tight grip on her friend’s forearm. “Stop right there. You have nothing to be sorry for. It’s true that the idea never would have occurred to me without you, but, in the end, I came of my own free will. I trust you, Alexis. And…I hope that you have faith in me as well.”

“I do. Though, if I could ask you one more thing?”

“Maybe. What is it?”

“If you don’t want to answer, then obviously you don’t have to, but…what happened *in* the Panopticon? The way you looked after we got out was so distraught it must have been bad.”

“The torture wasn’t enough?” Eirene stopped smiling abruptly and closed her eyes before continuing. “It was nothing to concern yourself with. It won’t affect our operations one bit, if that’s what your problem is.” A fancy way of saying ‘mind your own business*,’* Alexis thought, though she didn’t dare say that to her face.

“I care about you,” was instead Alexis’ reply. “Like I said, I trust you. If it were important, then I believe that you wouldn’t hesitate to tell us what we need to know. But you seemed upset; I just want to know if there’s anything at all I can do to help. Please?”

Eirene smiled once again, though this time her expression seemed more sympathetic and more genuine. “I really appreciate that you’re looking out for me, but I’ll be fine. You don’t need to worry yourself over me. I won’t lie – I am a bit out of sorts, but just give me some time to work out some personal problems and I promise I’ll be back to normal. I promise.”

“Very well,” said Alexis as she stood up and got ready to leave. “I suppose that I can’t ask for any more. I…well, I hope I helped.”

“You did. Probably more than you know.”

“Then that’s all I need to hear. Get some rest, okay?” Alexis opened the door to leave, and then, after seeing Eirene nod in agreement, closed the door behind her and was gone.

There were still forty-five minutes left out of the hour Alexis had allotted herself for recreation, but she had little to do with that time, so she returned to Teague and Hector. When she arrived, she sat down on the couch next to Pendleton and grabbed a handful out of the bowl of chips he had since acquired. He raised his eyebrows and looked at her, but said nothing.

“So, how’d it go?” asked Teague.

“Well enough.”

Hector spoke next. “Did she talk? Is all well and good in the world?”

“Yes to the first, but no to the second.”

“Figures.”

“We talked a little, and she seemed generally better. There’s still something problematic inside her, but she was a little less reclusive.”

“Maybe *you* should be inside her more often, and that’d help.”

“What? That’s not even…just no.”

“Oh, you cretin,” said Teague. “Just stop. Right now.”

“Hector Pendleton keeping it classy, ladies and gentlemen,” said Alexis, glaring at the snide comment. “But, if we can keep this serious, I did discover something interesting.”

“I am serious, say what you like about my phrasing. I thought it was clever. But really, it’s obvious that she wants you something fierce. Not even counting all the shit that’s been going down recently, I legitimately believe that the girl needs some more love in her life. Surely you have to realize that you’re the object of her affection.”

Alexis felt herself in an uncomfortable position, being put on the spot in such an awkward manner. “Yes, I know she’s into me,” she said. “I want her too. Been almost two years since I first fell in love with her. But when I took her in, my job became to protect her, not to get into her pants, you know? Seducing her now would not just be a gross violation of my duties, but also imprudent, given how chaotic things are right now. It’s just not the time for romance.”

“Or maybe she needs romance now more than ever,” Teague said, “to make up for the lack of certainty. Having someone you know you love and who loves you back can be…” he stopped, reminiscing for a brief moment. “…it can be very helpful. It certainly helped me during hard times.”

Alexis didn’t say anything at first. She had no reason to doubt Teague’s words, and even what Hector had said made sense. Still, she was hesitant. “Maybe you’re right,” she said. “I dunno. I’ll think about it.”

“I’m sure you’ll do the right thing,” Teague encouraged her, smiling like a father to his daughter.

“Yes,” agreed Hector, “you know her best. Whatever you decide, I don’t doubt that it’ll be what you think is best for her.”

Little more than a nod did they receive in return as Alexis sat down on one of the lounge’s comfier chairs. “I hope you two are right. But, as I was saying, we did actually talk about some important stuff back there, if you’d care to listen.”

“Did you find anything of use?” Hector asked.

“Not much, unfortunately. Before I actually approached her, I overheard some of her conversation to herself. She’s upset about not being allowed to bring her friend from the Panopticon. No one’s sure why, but I don’t think we can help her.”

“Well, that’s grim,” said Hector. “You got nothing more? You said it was important.”

“I wasn’t going to press her on it. She flat-out said that she isn’t ready to discuss some things. It’s always hard leaving a friend behind. Other than that, she shared a little of her experience with these Kasimirans we’re supposed to be fighting, but that can wait until the actual meeting, I guess. Now that I think about it, I’d like to relax before we get into the heavy stuff. ”

At the end of the hour, the commanders met in the war room, a bleak chamber in a secluded wing of the hospital. Out the window, they could see the wreckage of the CSS Peregrine, the crashed battleship whose rebellious crew had been the progenitors of the rebel militia. Its sundered hull was a grim symbol for the present state of their cause.

Teague and Hector sat at one end of the cheap table while Alexis sat at the other end with Janessa, who was sadly filling in for Ian on account of his absence. Hours of debate and discussion turned into days, and days into weeks. Curiously, even after so long, neither the ‘rebels’ from Tehran nor the Commonwealth army had materialized.

“I don’t like it,” Hector said of that issue during the course of their twelfth meeting since the militia had regrouped.

“Well, I do like that we’ve not come under attack,” Alexis said, “but you’re right, I don’t like the implications. Our scouts have been thorough, but found nothing. No Kasimiran army, and no Commonwealth counterattack. If we were failing at our job, then I imagine that the government would try to clean us up. But we haven’t seen anyone, and we still live, which means…”

“We were lied to,” Teague said.

“Maybe. The only conceivable alternative is that our presence alone is deterring the rebels, who would prefer to avoid a straight fight. If that’s the case, then perhaps it’s in the Commonwealth’s interest to keep us here.”

“I doubt it,” said Hector. “That kind of deal will only last so long. Given that we too have proven ourselves actively hostile to the Commonwealth, if there’s no immediate threat for us to fight, do you honestly believe they’d just let us leave?”

“No, you’re right. Something’s wrong, but I don’t think that it’s worth speculating about. We need to create a plan based on what we know right now, not based on wild guesses.” Alexis furrowed her brow and frowned. “Not that we shouldn’t have contingencies for what might happen. But we need *something*.”

When a plan actually came, it wasn’t from any of the commanders, but from Eirene during a late-night chat with Alexis. The reclusive young woman was still loath to talk about the Panopticon, but had picked herself up after some time, just as she had said she would. In the dark hours of the night, the pair sat alone, each reclined on her own bed, making simple conversation about whatever subject struck their fancy, no matter how trivial.

“I don’t know what you all do in that war room all day, but have you ever considered just not fighting?” she asked after an unusually long lull in the conversation.

“What do you mean?” Alexis asked without turning her head from the worn magazine she read. She heard Eirene’s question and paid it some attention, but ultimately believed it to be an idle comment of little importance.

“We’ve tried violence. Waging war doesn’t seem to be our thing, does it? We toiled endlessly in the outskirts for who know how long, and then failed miserably in a direct engagement. Heck, we haven’t even seen so much as a civil guardsman in our territory since they released us, so maybe they think the same thing; there’s no point continuing this fight until we’re all dead*.*”

“You can’t really think they’ll be content to leave us be. This is the Commonwealth of Human Principalities we’re talking about. Anything outside of their rule is a threat to the human race’s security, or some such nonsense.”

Eirene hummed quietly. “They want stability and a future for mankind that’s better than what we had before the storms. In the end, we want the same thing. If we could stop seeing each other as an enemy to be smashed, maybe collaboration could get something done where violence could not. A compromise, if you will.”

“Uh, maybe,” Alexis replied, a little more intrigued. “Those are the principles the Commonwealth was founded upon, sure. But look at the trend, here – the storms are receding, humanity is claiming even more land from a vengeful Earth, and yet the Commonwealth only becomes more tyrannical. A few men are consolidating power in the capitol, and it’s only getting worse. Lancaster now holds the offices of Grand Admiral, Grand Marshal, Imperator of Ravengrad, and Director-General. Marcus Fairchild controls two whole administrations and Madelyn-Rash. We’ve always lived in a one-party state, but even their facsimile of a parliament is drifting closer to absolutism. Compromise?” She laughed.

Eirene sat up and turned to face Alexis. “I don’t doubt that there are some villains within the capital,” she said, “but I still think that there are many with the best interest of humanity in mind, even in high places. If we could find some of them, then maybe we’d have a chance of getting our grievances addressed without killing anyone else.”

Alexis shrugged. She didn’t know of anyone who might fit her friend’s description, but she conceded that eschewing violence was an appealing idea. She conceded. “Okay, I’ll talk to the others tomorrow. You come too. It was your idea, after all.”

Eirene bowed her head and the two of them lay back, quickly falling asleep.

When the two women introduced the idea to the assembled commanders, they received some resistance, as expected.

“Are we really taking advice from someone with the geopolitical acumen of a four-year-old?” Hector protested. “She’s so naïve. To think that we can just get some official in our pocket and everything’ll be fine is beyond idiotic. Even if we do manage to get to a legitimate negotiating table, we would be a political minority with no real influence. We’d win token concessions at best.”

“Eh, Hector, relax a little,” Teague said, leaning back. “Sometimes you need to use violence to seize power. But this may not be one of those times.”

“At least we can try,” Alexis said. “It’s better than fighting a war against someone with a hundred times more firepower. Maybe Eirene’s naïve, maybe. Still, do you have a better plan? A violent revolution now would be catastrophically divisive. Some of the people are clamoring for change, but hardly all, so if our war became a public issue, we’d be looking at a civil war. Possibly the end of humanity as we know it.”

“Don’t be so bloody melodramatic,” Hector said, “Assuming that Ravengrad will be willing to entertain us on a level diplomatic table is foolish. We need to negotiate from a position of strength, and we don’t have that. Not one bit. Eirene’s plan is entirely idiotic.”

“Idiotic? Don’t fucking talk to me about idiotic!” Alexis suddenly shouted. “Idiotic was attacking Ravengrad Tower like you and Teague had us do, remember? That’s what violence got us, and what violence will continue to get us. She suffered terribly at the hands of the Commonwealth in the Panopticon, so doesn’t it seem reasonable that she’d want to avoid that happening again? Why must you bully her so much? All she wanted was to help, and it’s not like any of us have had any better ideas.”

“If she got hurt so bad,” Janessa mused quietly, “you’d think she’d be okay with putting the fight back to them again.”

“Just because she’s a coward and doesn’t want to fight again doesn’t make her idea *reasonable*,” Hector said. “We have no way to think that, with our meager military, we have any way to make the Commonwealth listen to our demands. Whatever those lies about Kasimira mean, I don’t care. Something somewhere got fucked up and I don’t intend to waste time chasing down an explanation. We have nothing to offer them, and they have no reason to fear us.”

“That’s what the plan is about,” Eirene said calmly, the first words she had spoken in her own defense since the meeting began. “You’re right. We don’t have anything to offer the Commonwealth, and we have not given them a reason to respect us as a legitimate political force. That is why we must lay down our arms. Not truly disarm, of course – you may think me naïve, but I am not so foolish to think that Lancaster won’t take that opportunity to destroy us. Just cease active hostilities. Meanwhile, consider what we saw at the summit and afterwards. Marcus Fairchild controls two whole administrations. Jacob Lancaster is the Director-General, Grand Marshal, Grand Admiral, and the Imperator of Ravengrad. A few men have a lot of power. It is a long shot, I realize, but if we were to forge an alliance with even one of them it would shift the balance enough in our favor to do some real good.”

“The problem remains how to actually convince one of these bureaucrats to follow us,” Hector reminded them. “Eirene’s logic is that we both want to help humanity, and this is true. But our methods are so wildly different – Lancaster and his cronies espouse some kind of artificial equality, trimming the country in a way so that it can never grow in such a way that the balance of power shifts as wildly as it did in the old world. To that mentality, we’re a threat – freedom introduces competition, pitting individuals against each other when they need to cooperate. The gardener looks at a branch that grew too far from the hedge and cuts it down to size.”

Alexis considered this. “We can make it work. I don’t propose that we immediately ally ourselves with someone at the top – change is gradual. Withdraw our armies as we have done and disassociate ourselves with such corrupting violence. That’s going to be the hardest part. After that, we have a base of support from the people…”

“Not all of them,” Hector interrupted. “Many of the lower class staunchly support the Commonwealth for its generous welfare programs. They benefit economically and see no reason to shift the status quo. Or so thinks Lancaster, at any rate. They will come to us in time, but, right now, many don’t even know we’re an option.”

“But we do enjoy the support of countless others. We’ve got a lot to work with, and I think we can really do something.”

Hector sighed. “I suppose I have to be realistic. The destruction of our army has put us on the defensive. This is the only plan we have, and it seems safe enough. We won’t be able to return to Ravengrad under a banner of peace or a banner of war any time soon, but promise me that we’ll keep building up our army, only as a precaution, mind you. I don’t trust the Commonwealth to accept an informal cease-fire just like that.”

“Of course,” Teague said. “We’ll have our army. We can’t *win* on even terms, but being in a position of strength might make them think twice about screwing us over too hard lest they be caught up in a nasty conflict. Just enough to tip any scales in our favor ever so slightly.”

That was that. Their new doctrine was laid out, and the Peregrine army let itself rest and grow while the commanders searched for potential allies. An ideal candidate would be one within their political reach, but with enough influence to catch the eye of the higher-ups. A praetor might do, or, if they were lucky, an imperator. Someone trusted who could vouch for their new claims of peaceful intent and give the militia the edge they needed to take the Commonwealth to task at the negotiating table rather than on the battlefield.

\* \* \*

The day after their decision, Janessa found herself dressed only in a grey tank-top and shorts, walking through the empty halls at five o’clock in the morning. She couldn’t say exactly why, only that she had woken up and been unable to fall back asleep, and so she walked. The halls were dark. There was only so much power to go around in the outskirts, and what they had was needed elsewhere.

She walked past a medical ward, one location lucky enough to be powered regularly. Ironically, though the majority of their base had been a fully functional hospital in its day, only a small portion of it was still used for its original purpose. Medical supplies were scarce, and the space was better used for other things. This had been sufficient for some time, but many of the men and women who had been freed from the Panopticon were injured, and their newfound freedom did not miraculously cure them of their trauma. Though all were grateful for their liberation, the staff had inherited several medical emergencies, not to mention the minor wounds that could fester into nightmares.

There was a single man awake inside the ward as she passed, his groans audible through the open double-doors. Janessa stopped to take a glance at the sorry man, his body lit up by the pinkish glow emitted by the makeshift hospital equipment.

He seemed to take notice of his visitor and turned to face her. “Help me,” he moaned, drooling slightly out of the corner of his mouth. “Starting to hurt again. Need meds ‘fore it gets bad.”

Janessa only stared at him, listening to his complaints. *Starting to hurt again.* Weak*.* Still, she stepped up to his bed and closed the door behind her.

Her civil guard training had not prepared her to be a nurse. She had been a cavalry officer, more a ceremonial position than anything else. If there was ever a parade, then she was entirely ready to ride a horse down the city streets, but there was no place for her in a hospital. Still, she and her ilk were officially guardsmen and got the same training as anyone else, including basic medicine. Administering the painkillers wouldn’t be a problem.

The wounded man smiled at her and muttered a clumsy thank-you as she stabbed the needle into his vein, filling him up with medicine. Janessa watched as the pathetic soul fell asleep, his tongue flopping lazily out of his mouth. With a disgusted grunt, she pushed it back inside and closed his gaping maw. The man was too out of it to care.

Having done her good deed for the day, Janessa plodded over to the nearest place where she could find some coffee as a pick-me-up. The instant mix that Alexis and her salvage teams usually found out in the wastelands was terrible, but caffeine was caffeine and she needed however much she could get.

No sooner had she sat down at the table than the fatherly figure of Teague Ironwall appeared, looking equally tired.

“May I join you?” Teague asked.

“I don’t see why not,” she said. Teague nodded in response and sat down opposite her. She poured some of the coffee into a second mug and slid it across the table towards him.

“What do you suppose they did with Ian’s body?” she asked, after some silence.

“Don’t be so pessimistic,” Teague said. “We don’t know that he’s dead.”

“What else could have happened? You think they picked him up and brought him in to have tea and crumpets? Look, everybody else got freed as part of Alexis’ deal at the Panopticon, quoth the officer, so if he wasn’t part of that, then he’s dead. Has to be, no other option.”

“That’s not true,” Teague scoffed. “Hector and I were detained outside of the Panopticon, as were several others. Perhaps he was kept somewhere else that just didn’t get the memo.”

“Right, so they can just torture him for a little longer and then execute him like they were planning to do with all of us. Face it, Teague, you don’t fight a war without losing a few good people.”

“I’m aware of that,” he snapped, “and don’t you dare insinuate that I’m that ignorant. We’ve already got Eirene moping about, and we don’t need you being equally depressing.”

“That attack was a *disaster!*” Janessa shouted. She slammed her mug down on the table with a loud crash and little drops of coffee splashed out onto the table. “It could have only been an act of God that kept us from being completely wiped out that day because of *your* stupid plan! We had no right to survive that when so many of the others died. Ian wasn’t the only one. Can you have any clue how many died on that mission?

Teague frowned and stared at her with cool eyes, trying to keep his temper in check. He knew that he was tired and the poor sleep he had gotten that night was manipulating his emotions, and he knew that Janessa was likely suffering from similar deprivation. “Two-hundred and seventy-one,” he said. “That’s how many of our men and women lost their lives that night. Most didn’t even get to the tower, cornered and cut to ribbons at Hotel India.”

“Aye, of course. Ye would know something that precise, wouldn’t ye?” Janessa sat back in her chair, rolling her eyes.

“Don’t be pissy,” said Teague, his emotions jumping between sympathy and contempt. “Like I said, we’ve got enough of that from Eirene, and even she’s been getting better.”

“Yeah?” Janessa said. “Well, unlike her, I can’t have Alexis just come along and *fuck* me until I feel better. I kind of lost that option when Ian died, you know?”

“Oh, give me a break. If I didn’t know that you know that their relationship isn’t like that, I’d say you were just jealous of them.”

Janessa all but exploded, her voice echoing down the abandoned halls. “Jealous? Damn fucking straight I’m jealous! I had to do the most work out of any of you, because I was, you know, actually *in* the bloody Tower, and the only thing I get out of it is a dead boyfriend! You and your buddy Hector are still fine and dandy, and Alexis and Eirene are all happily cooped up together, but I’m all alone now, and for what? Oh, and don’t give me that crap about Alex and Eirene ‘not being like that.’ I overheard that conversation of yours in which ye didn’t even bother including me. You know just as well as I do that it’s just a matter of time before they’re in bed together. Don’t try and bullshit me otherwise. If only I hadn’t missed my first shot, I might still have…”

The words spewing forth from her mouth startled Janessa. It wasn’t the speech itself that made her upset, but the target. She could have screamed abuse for days at an enemy like Magnus, or even someone like Hector, but Teague? He had always been supportive of her and had never, until this point, spoken a single cruel word to her. She didn’t want this fight, but here it was.

Teague recoiled from Janessa’s outburst. He wasn’t angry at her. Her distress was justified. However, the delirium induced by his lack of sleep was eating away at his consciousness and making it supremely difficult to handle this matter as delicately as he would have liked. Already he regretted his severe actions.

“I’m sorry, I am…tired, and under a lot of stress. It was wrong of me to be so dismissive, and I really shouldn’t judge you. Come walk with me, if you will.” He stood up and extended a hand to Janessa, which she took after a moment’s hesitation. With that, the two of them set about walking the battlements amidst the crisp morning air.

The morning fog obscured the nearby ruins in an eerily beautiful shroud. Teague and Janessa walked for a bit before coming to a rest, leaning against the railing and watching birds fly by.

“I am sorry that you lost Ian. He was one of the best soldiers I’ve known, and a good man. If you’ll indulge me, there is a story I’d like to tell you.”

“Go ahead.”

Teague nodded. “You know that I fought for the Catholics in the last years of the Crusade. Do you know how old I was when I was first conscripted? Eighteen. Just over half your age. By the time I was thrown into combat, the war was already four score years old, and my side was losing ground. Istanbul was lost. Most of our commanders were lost with it. The war would be over in a few months but none of us on the ground knew it, not that it would have mattered when we were being slaughtered wholesale in a scramble to keep control of Turkish Anatolia. There was one time when I was part of a small squad, no more than ten men, holding a plaza in the ruins of Istanbul. It was hot and dusty and the air itself felt like it was choking us.”

“Sounds like here from time to time.”

“Indeed. The plaza we were supposed to hold, it had been quiet for a few hours. We could hear the sounds of gunfire and artillery in the distance, but it seemed like a safe distance away. Everything changed in seconds. One moment, the plaza was all but silent; the next moment there was an entire platoon of Muslims attacking us from the East. There were snipers in the ruins and trucks in the streets. We were outnumbered five to one.”

“But you survived.”

“I did. *I* did. I should not have. As I watched my brothers hold their ground and be cut down where they stood, I started to panic. Our sergeant told us to retreat. The others refused. I did not. There was one moment where I considered staying, when I stumbled in my hasty retreat and fell with my gaze resting upon the statue of the Virgin Mary at the center of the plaza, which had been put there by the occupying Christians. We made eye contact for what seemed like an eternity before I finally turned tail and ran, leaving her and my brothers behind to be butchered. The enemy troops killed the rest, tore down the statue, and moved on. For years I felt guilty, having betrayed both my faith and my comrades. I swore that I would not commit such a heinous sin again.”

“You wouldn’t have saved them. Your commander gave the order to retreat, anyhow.”

“My point exactly.”

“…oh.”

“Yes. You are a hero. You stood your ground against increasingly impossible odds in the Tower, whilst Hector and I stayed behind and watched from a safe distance. We should have ordered a retreat, or held our forces back when the Commonwealth thwarted our plans. My survival so many years ago should have taught me the value of self-preservation, but it instead made me foolish. Made me take risks. I am lucky that we are even having this conversation, but, nonetheless, Ian and too many others paid the price for my mistakes. You have every right to be angry at me, but know that whatever you wish to say to me now, I am proud of you.”

“Thanks,” Janessa said softly. “I, uh, shouldn’t have yelled. Listen, I’m gonna go now*,* take a walk to burn off some stress. I’ll leave you to your drink.”

“As you wish,” Teague replied as Janessa went for her walk and he went back to sit down and finish his coffee, watching his other friends and allies file in to join him.

“So, how is everyone this morning?” asked Alexis as she filled the last seat at Teague’s table.

“I’m well, thank you,” said Teague. Wilson nodded towards him to signify that he felt the same.

“Adequate,” was all Hector said, while Eirene simply gave a begrudging thumbs up to signify her status.

“Well, glad to hear it,” Alexis said.

“Teague was certainly up early,” said Hector. “Unless he somehow formed those surprisingly coherent strings of curses in his sleep.”

“I stubbed my toe on the bedframe, what would you expect a man to do, hmm?”

“Perhaps not try to slay the offending furniture with profanity. It seems that, despite being an old dog, you can still learn a few new tricks, if by ‘tricks’ you mean...colorful language. You’ve been spending too much time with Ian, methinks. Or, well, not anymore, you aren’t.”

“Okay, that was uncalled for,” said Alexis. “That’s, like, twice now since we got back. Come on.”

Hector shrugged. “Whatever. Besides, it’s not like he curses *that* much more than the rest of you lot. Except for our resident angel. Never heard anything foul out of that sweet little mouth.”

“Well, it’s a good thing Janessa’s not here,” Eirene added, ignoring Hector’s comment. “I doubt she’d take too kindly to you making jokes about her loss. Where is she, by the way? I haven’t seen her around today.”

“We spoke earlier. Seems that she’s really beginning to feel the impact of losing Ian,” Teague said.

“At least she’s still got her horse,” Hector said. “Probably not that great a replacement, but what can you do?”

“Where did she go?” Eirene asked, ignoring Hector.

“Taking a walk, likely along the battlements. Helping herself clear her mind.”

“Shame,” said Alexis. “I’d like to cheer her up, but I just don’t know how.”

“That seems to be a recurring theme these days,” said Hector.

There was brief moment of silence before Wilson spoke up. “Who exactly was this Ian character?” he asked. “I’ve heard him mentioned several times. Someone you lost when you attacked Ravengrad?”

“Yes, he was Janessa’s boyfriend,” said Teague. “We don’t know that he died…”

“Although it seems likely,”

“That’s true, but we still don’t know everything. We do know that he’s MIA, but that’s it.”

“A shame,” Wilson said.

\* \* \*

“All right, everyone,” Alexis said once the strategy meeting had begun. “We’re getting close, aren’t we? Teague, didn’t you have something important you wanted to share?”

“Yes, actually. We have decided upon a suitable candidate to approach for sponsorship.”

“Who?”

“Marcus Fairchild.”

“Wait, wait, wait. You want us to go and negotiate with *Marcus Fairchild?* The Defense Admin’s pet scientist? You’ve got to be kidding me; I thought we were starting small?”

“No, I’m not. I believe that he’ll be an excellent boon to our efforts if we can get him on board. He’s respected both by the Commonwealth and the civilians, and he commands a vast wealth of resources that we could use to great effect if diplomacy falls through.”

“But how are we going to get him?” Janessa asked. “We saw him in Ravengrad, at the summit. Good grief, read the transcripts of anything else he’s said publically. Ye’d be hard-pressed to find anyone more loyal short of the Director-General himself.”

“And that, my dear Janessa, is where you err. His loyalties lay with Magnus, with whom the man had a personal friendship. You may have noticed this whilst observing the colonization summit.”

“Okay, yeah, and?”

“Fairchild has been consolidating power for some time in the form of his Madelyn-Rash corporation and the Defense and Science Administrations. He means to jockey into a superior position within the Commonwealth by gathering as many supporters as he can before making some kind of move. We convince him that he can count us amongst our supporters and he’ll help. With the Defense Administration and the rebel militias representing the common folk, we’d have the political capital to make real change. Or the strength to fight the Commonwealth head-on.”

“And would we not just exchange one dictator for another?” Hector asked.

“We’ll build that bridge once we reach the river,” Teague replied. “That said, my personal assessment is that Fairchild does not desire the office of Director-General, as that would remove him from his scientific pursuits. What he does desire is to be determined, but that is not important right now.”

“You know what? Fine,” Alexis said. “This was a long shot anyway, so we might as well aim high. You two old fellows can deal with the long-term; just give me a target and we’ll get ready to move.”

“That is the one problem with my plan.”

“If you didn’t consider any of the previous a problem, I shudder to think what you’re about to say,” Hector said.

“Well, I must confess that I do not actually know where he is.”

“What.”

“However, I do know where he was recently. We can look there.”

“And where is that?” Hector asked.

“The new principality of Johannesburg.”

“Once again, you’ve got to be kidding me,” Alexis said, dumbfounded. Johannesburg was too far away to even consider, even with Eirene’s corvette.

“I am not. I know that this is a fairly ridiculous plan, but I urge you all to consider it.”

“Fine, fine. I trust that you have more information to give us? Allying with Fairchild is going to be hard enough without having to troll the entire Commonwealth in search of him. Just because he visited Johannesburg recently doesn’t mean he’s still there.”

“Yes, I have more to go on. The author Arthur Jackson is confirmed to be residing there presently, documenting the foundation of a new colony. He’s looking around, trying to get inspiration for a new novel, and my research indicates that he has likely spoken with Fairchild recently, the two of them being friends. Find him and you may be able to glean information as to our target’s whereabouts. By any means necessary.”

“Alright,” said Alexis. “I trust that you know what you’re talking about. Are we leaving today?”

“Tomorrow, ideally. And yes. You and Mr. Pendleton will take a squad and go to Johannesburg. Eirene, you can fly them, of course, so you’ll go too. Janessa and I will stay behind and deal with the business back at home. She and I are going to look into building up our army by hiring what few mercenaries we can find, maybe try to bolster our air power if we can get our hands on some more corvettes or even transports. Scour the territories for groups with similar grievances against the Commonwealth, too. If we can arm them and agitate them against the government, perhaps we can apply enough pressure to swing negotiations in our favor.”

“If they ever happen.”

“Yes, and that’s where your job comes in.”

“We’ll make sure it works out,” Alexis said. “You can count on us.”

“I’d never doubt you for a minute. Now, if you all want my professional advice, I’d recommend taking the rest of today off. We’ll all need to be in good mental condition for the task ahead.”

## Chapter 10 – The Brazen Bull

“Ravengrad is rife with fanaticism. Powerful and inordinately expensive battleships patrol the skies and soldiers watch the streets. The obsession of the day is the restoration of Humanity, and that dictates the behavior of Commonwealth citizens down to the utmost minutiae. Pregnant women are saluted on the streets, and each life is valued only insofar as it renders service to the state…”

* Kasimiran propaganda after the Tabriz conference

Charlotte awoke just as her alarm clock obliged her to: with great reluctance. The only people who ever want to get up in the morning were not the sort she would have kept as friends. Her sister was the sole exception, and, for that matter, seemed to have disappeared already.

Her nightgown fell silently to the floor of the bathroom as she undressed and walked into the shower, where she prepared a comfortably warm spray of water to begin. It was most pleasant, she found, to open with the warm water for the sake of greatest comfort while she lathered her hair with shampoo, and then to slowly transition into lukewarm and finally into cool water, which would by that point be a refreshing contrast to the warmth.

With her morning ritual complete, Charlotte dried off and donned her security uniform, taking a moment to look at herself in the mirror.

She herself wasn’t anything noteworthy. Neither exceptionally nerdy nor jockish, she considered herself thoroughly average, and that was no problem. She wasn’t tall, she wasn’t short. Perhaps slightly overweight, but not by a wide enough margin to be noticeable in the rigid uniform. A mundane appearance was good for an inquisitor – it attracted less attention.

As Charlotte pulled up the hem of her shirt and pinched the fat around her belly, Emma came back into the room. Unexpectedly, the little girl looked awful, her hair a mess and eyes marred with dark bags that could have only meant a lack of sleep.

“I can’t sleep,” Emma whined, collapsing onto the bed and burying her head underneath the pillow.

“You mean to say that you are *still* awake from last night? I know you take a while to pass out, Dove, but that’s not healthy. You ought to have come to me to get your medicine, it’s here for a reason,” Charlotte chastised.

“I’m not still awake, but I’ve been waking up over and over again all night. And now I still can’t just go to sleep! I envy the dead.” Emma tossed and turned in the bed, her voice muffled from under the pillow.

“Tsk. I’ll get you your medicine this evening and hope it goes better. Where did you go, anyway? Take a walk to try and work off your pent-up energy?

“Of course I did. It’s nice out. There was a great sunrise an hour or so ago. You should have seen it.”

“I wish I could have.”

Charlotte went to the closet and pulled its door open before she reached in and unlocked the safe inside, producing an ornate wooden rifle. It wasn’t a powerful weapon, but it was more than enough to kill a man and so she had been trained extensively to treat it with the proper reverence. Emma’s experience was largely the same.

Emma didn’t think much of her training. She followed her instructors’ guidance as they required and did her duty to Hyperion. There couldn’t have been a soul alive who wouldn’t have said she was the most loyal child her country could ask for, but she wasn’t a fanatical patriot by any means.

Her tutors in the martial arts were two in number, both high-ranking commanders of the Hyperion army: At the shooting range she was instructed by Janz Sorenson, a man of perhaps thirty or forty years. She’d never asked. His teaching style was relaxed and he frequently made pleasant conversation with his students, and so Emma far preferred his tutelage.

Instruction with a blade was provided by Nathaniel Aumeier, who was as unpleasant a man as she could imagine. Old and wrinkled and seemingly incapable of smiling, he stood over her with his tall, stiff body and barked orders. When she failed, he was forbidden from harming her physically, but she could tell that he desperately wanted to do so. Hence, she was relieved when the day would be spent shooting.

The practice was simple. When the range went cold, Sorenson would set up a series of targets for her and her classmates to fire upon. He would critique their accuracy and the speed with which she dispatched her “enemies,” and offer advice for improvement.

Today, Emma’s performance was poorer than usual. Sorenson watched her clumsily miss shot after shot and rubbed his chin, wondering why she failed so.

“Tired, Aucoin?” he asked, speaking in French.

“Nah. I don’t know, just…having an off day, I guess.” Emma shrugged.

“I never really liked the gun you’re using. I suppose for someone as small as yourself it would be more effective, but I prefer stuff with more…power behind it. It doesn’t matter – let’s switch over to a sidearm and you can see what you can do with that.”

Sorenson watched as Emma disassembled her rifle and returned it to its case. Once it was safely stowed away, he traded her for a pistol similar to the one Charlotte had taken to her work. This time, his orders were to hit all of her targets as quickly as she possibly could. With a deep breath, she took aim and fired a series of shots. Roughly half of them found their marks, which was about as well as she had done with the rifle.

“We’ll keep trying,” Sorenson said.

Emma tried repeatedly while her instructor watched. With each effort her results improved as she gained focus and called upon the muscle memory from all her past training at Hyperion. When the time came that every target was hit in a single round of shooting, Sorenson smiled and waved her over.

“Good job. You’d make a fine soldier if we ever went to war,” he said.

“Thanks, I guess. If the time ever comes when our master orders us to march against the Commonwealth, I’ll be right on the front lines laying waste,” Emma said casually.

“Don’t be so quick to dismiss the possibility. Théoden will do all he can so that people like you won’t have to go to war, but as much as he would like to, he cannot control our neighbor’s actions. If they decide to attack us, then you will have to fight just as I will.”

“Yeah, I will. I’ll make sure I do better than you, too,” Emma said with a smile.

\* \* \*

When she met Ian in the lounge, Charlotte only gestured for him to follow her out the door. To whence she was leading him she did not say at first, only speaking once questioned.

“I want to go where we were *supposed* to last night. You should see the results of the Inquisition’s work.”

“Why?”

“So that you may know the sort of people you’re working for. I believe in honesty, and, while you’d learn this eventually, I’d prefer you know it now.”

When they finally arrived at the alleged heretic stronghold, Ian stared for almost a minute at the charred skeleton of a building that stood before them. Everything had been burned, and what wasn’t entirely consumed by the fire had been scorched black. There were no signs that anything had ever been alive inside. A single armored vehicle lay dead in front of the ruin, its hull partially melted into slag.

“A Harquebus assault gun. Or, at least, it was. Tell me, Ian, did you ever hear the story of the brazen bull?” Charlotte asked in English as she gently ran one finger along the charred casement. Miraculously – and disturbingly – it was still warm to the touch.

“I can’t say I am,” Ian replied as he knelt down to sift through the ashes at his feet. In the reaches of his peripheral vision lay skeletons as black as the metal and concrete, but he shut them out.

“A Greek machine of execution, fittingly enough. The victim was locked inside a bull wrought from bronze and a fire lit underneath. The poor man would burn to death while the shell’s acoustics warped his screams into the sound of a bull.”

“That’s horrible. What the hell does it have to do with this?”

“That is what happened here. That is why many inquisitors call enemy fortifications ‘bulls.’ Trap them inside, keep them from leaving with airstrikes or infantry harassment, drop firebombs until they burn or choke to death. This Harquebus here…it lacks the proper mechanisms. Their screams must have been awful, but there would be no one around to hear them.”

Ian was silent.

“So witness the hypocrisy of Hyperion. The Cult condemns violence except against its own people. Or in self-defense, but I have yet to see that *casus belli* invoked. I dread the day.”

“I imagine you’re not the only one,” Ian said.

“True. Yet at least, for all our brutality, we’re honest about our methods. Unlike Ravengrad. This does not mean that I am not, at times, ashamed of what we must do to keep ourselves safe.”

“Like what?”

Charlotte took a deep breath. “Since the Commonwealth outguns us so severely, the Inquisition is authorized to do whatever it must to ensure our safety. We need to make sure that we’re strong when they inevitably make their move. As you’ve seen, insurgents are destroyed quickly, but any prisoners may be tortured in the most insidious way.”

“Meaning?”

“During the League Crusade, or the Second Pact War, or whatever they call it in the Commonwealth, the East Asian Endeavor invented a drug for the Muslims to use on their prisoners. A cocktail of sedatives and hallucinogens, it makes the person who drinks it live out their worst nightmares, whatever they may be. The Chinese, though, they intercepted a shipment and sold it to their allies in the West. So you had both sides using this on captured soldiers and spies. Both Orient and Occident lost a lot of people to suicide after the war because of it.”

“And you use this on prisoners?”

“Yes. It was banned after the war, but now there’s no one to enforce that. So we use it freely. Of course, our rivals elsewhere are scarcely better, and Théoden has tried to limit its use in the past, but some of our Stratēgoí are quite fond of its use. Master Aumeier uses it on his own people to harden them up. Supposedly, it gets results, but it can leave its victims irreparably damaged in many cases. If you ask me, it’s a worse end than anything we’re looking at right now.”

Ian averted his gaze from the wreckage and looked at Charlotte. As he watched her speak, the distant look in her eyes was all that he needed to know she had a more personal experience with this drug than she was letting on. He wasn’t about to ask her for specifics.

\* \* \*

The two of them returned later in the afternoon, after completing an uneventful patrol. By that time, Emma had also finished her day’s work and was waiting for her sister in the foyer.

“Hey, Charlotte,” Emma hailed her in French before seeing Ian and switching to English. “I suppose this is your new apprentice?”

“Yes, it is,” Charlotte said. “Ian, Emma, and vice versa. I’m going to step out for a bit to file the report for the day, so you two can chat if you’d like, otherwise I’ll be back momentarily.” She nodded politely and departed, leaving Ian alone with her sister.

Ian didn’t really know what to say to the girl, so he decided to take the obvious route and ask about her day. She was as good a source as any for information about Hyperion, and the eyes of a child might be able to provide a unique perspective.

“How was your day?” Emma asked, pre-empting his question.

“It was alright. We didn’t get a whole lot done, but it was better than the days before I arrived here, that’s for sure.”

Emma wasn’t sure if it was proper to inquire further, but she couldn’t stave off her curiosity. “What happened before you arrived?”

“I was a commander in the Peregrine militia,” Ian said, closing his eyes. “There was a fight. I lost a lot of people who were important to me.”

That was enough for Emma to regret even asking that question. To her surprise, however, he kept talking.

“I don’t know if I was the only survivor. Théoden said that he wanted to ‘rescue’ more of us, but I was the only one he got. Hell of a clusterfuck, it was. I’m doing what I can to rebuild my life here, and, don’t get me wrong, it’s great, but I miss what I used to have, too.”

“Have you got family back home?” Emma asked.

That long story again.

“I have my friends back home,” Ian said, “No family to speak of, at least none I still talk to. My birth mother died during the storms when I was five, so my father remarried a French woman a few years later and they had a daughter shortly after that. As far as I know, the latter two are still alive but I’ve not said a word to them since I left for the civil guard at nineteen.”

“What happened to your father?” Emma asked.

“Died in the Panopticon trying to escape. He wasn’t a good man, a horrible one, in fact, but what they did to him was still wrong.”

“Panopticon is mostly for political prisoners and capital offenses, right? What’d he do to get put in there?”

“Quite a bit. He was born and raised in Greece, lived in Athens for a long time before it was Ravengrad. Wasn’t outspoken about it, but he was very nationalistic and hated the influx of foreigners into the country after the Commonwealth was formed. Them dropping Greek as an official language to avoid accusations of Greco-centrism didn’t sit right with him either, saw it as appeasement. Bringing in all the Turks to be Skywatch officers just made it worse. My family lost a lot of people when Athens was sacked by the Pact, and more when it was occupied by the Russians. He was pretty bitter, as you’d expect.

“If he didn’t admit it publically, how did the government find out about it?” Peony asked.

“He was already under investigation when they found his writings on the subject, which included a series of diatribes against the immigrants. A few sentiments like that usually wouldn’t get you locked up, but on top of an existing investigation…they determined he was just too dangerous to the unity, or whatever you want to call it.”

“So…”

“It was my sister. A better person than my father could ever hope to be, by all accounts, but she was only eight when I left for the guard. Got letters from family every so often but never had a chance to write back. Or maybe I just didn’t care back then. Either way, I should have been there for her when things turned sour between her and father.”

“So, what actually happened?” Emma asked impatiently.

“As I’m sure you can tell, the man was fairly traditional. Not even just by the Commonwealth’s hyper-liberal standards; he was the sort who wouldn’t speak to someone because of where they were born, or what name they gave their God, and he was the sort who’d have my sister cast out of the family because of who she loved.”

“…oh.”

“Mother only yielded to father when it happened, even though she and my sister were quite close. The last I heard from any of them was a desperate letter from her to try and convince him to see reason, and I ignored it.”

“You *what?*” Emma said, shocked. “Your own sister – how could you just stand by and watch her suffer like that?”

“What could I have done? The civil guard wasn’t about to let me head back home just because of a family issue. Retrospectively, I could have tried and written a letter back, but it never occurred to me. I was dumb, okay? So she was left with nowhere to stay and appealed to the Commonwealth for welfare because her family hated her, or so she thought.”

“And then they figured out why she was alone and investigated, yeah?”

“Yes. It was absolutely ridiculous – sure, it’s a terrible thing to do what he did, especially to your own daughter, but to respond with police action…at most they should have taken her from his care, which they did do. But the guard investigated him, found out everything else, and the Legal Administration ruled him a dangerous individual and locked him away. I never learned what happened to the others after that other than a brief correspondence with my mother. The whole debacle’s why I ended up deserting in the end.”

“Well,” Emma said her indignation overwhelming her caution, “I still can’t say I approve of you just abandoning your sister like that, but I can understand why you’d leave the Commonwealth after everything that happened. And I’m sorry about what happened to you. I can’t imagine having to fight in a real war. Seems so…foreign.”

“Enjoy being a kid while you can. You’re not going to be at fighting age for some time yet,” Ian said.

Emma cocked her head curiously. “Why not? We train just like the adults. If it comes to war…it’s everyone’s responsibility to defend Hyperion. It’s my homeland too.”

Ian twitched and stopped as her words sank in, though he didn’t believe what he thought he heard. “You…are training for the army already?” he asked. “Schools a long time ago had boys learn to shoot, but I didn’t know the kids here got a martial education.”

“Well, yeah. I mean, I’m technically *in* the army. So are most of my classmates. Reserves, not front line troops. It doesn’t really mean anything until there’s an actual war, which, let’s be honest, probably isn’t happening any time soon. If it comes, though, we’re going to fight alongside the adults all the same.”

“That’s barbaric! Who could possibly justify throwing away children’s lives in a bloody conflict? I don’t know what Théoden’s experience is with war, but it’s no place for anybody – it’s hell enough as it is for people my age; kids like you should be, I don’t know, worrying about tests and homework, not dodging bullets and driving tanks! Even the Commonwealth doesn’t conscript until nineteen; to put a thirteen-year-old into combat is unthinkable.”

Emma’s face quickly became serious despite her childlike air. “I don’t mind the idea that I might have to go to war. I really don’t – it’s my duty to defend my motherland just like it is Charlotte’s, or any of my teachers’. The CHP might have saved your sister, but they forgot about me and Charlotte. Théoden rescued us from being lousy slips on the Ravengrad streets and he’s earned my loyalty for that. It’d be my life on the line in the field, sure, but I would rather die than be forced to return to the Commonwealth.”

“And Théoden supports this? He would send his own children to war?”

“Between you and me,” Emma said, “I’m not sure what Théoden supports matters anymore, or how many of his words are even his. No one but the stratēgoí or the thesmothétai speak to him these days, and they are the ones handing out orders to us common folk. To the rest of us, he’s as dead as Jesus Christ with the church doing its ‘best’ to interpret his teachings.”

Ian didn’t know what to say after that. Luckily, Charlotte returned to relieve him, and the two parties returned to their respective rooms for the evening.

The next day, Ian did not return to work with Charlotte as he had expected. Instead, the two of them were called to a meeting with Théoden and his general staff to discuss something that he had not been briefed upon before he walked into the conference room.

In attendance were an eclectic variety of characters. Robert Lamb he recognized, easily the largest figure in the room. Nameplates sat at each person’s position, which was a relief – that would remove the need for awkward introductions. To Théoden’s right sat Scipio Marinetti, and to his left was Nathaniel Aumeier, followed by Constance Yudina, Janz Sorenson and a number of others, whom he presumed to be the rest of what Charlotte had called the Stratēgoí.

“Good of you to join us, Mr. Barrow,” Théoden said. “Please, take a seat.”

“What am I here for?” Ian asked as he did as he was told. He felt out of place in such an authoritative group.

“For two things. Firstly, you have knowledge we lack, and, as the trite adage goes, knowledge is power. It is in the interest of any nation to expand its borders, especially when there is so much unused land ripe for the taking. We are aware that the Commonwealth has similar intentions, and you were at their colonization summit, so I brought you here in the hopes that you might share what, if anything, you learned while you were there.”

“I wasn’t attending directly, you know that. I have a little information but it’s secondhand.”

“Secondhand is good enough,” Sorenson said.

Ian wracked his memory for the details. “Alright. The Commonwealth was expanding into Johannesburg, but you probably knew that already. With the storms receding slowly but steadily, they’re looking for new settlements. No new plans other than Jo’burg, but they’ve got something called the Tunis-Highveld corridor.”

“A safe route from Ravengrad to the south, I presume?” Yudina asked.

“Yes. You know the towers that were used to spread such widespread destruction? The Commonwealth’s hunting them down and making paths between principalities where the storms won’t interfere with air traffic. It’s possible that some might end up passing through Switzerland, though I can’t say for certain.”

“I imagine that they will be as direct as possible,” Théoden said, “which means that our territories will be safe for the time being. I have agents running interference to ensure that no one decides that the old Swiss cities would be a good place to plant the Commonwealth flag. Which will allow for the easy retaking of Bern.”

“You want the Swiss capital back,” Aumeier said, slowly and methodically.

“Yes. My late uncle’s municipality. He left it in decent condition, so rebuilding it shouldn’t be a problem. At the very least, we’ll have an easier time of it than the Commonwealth troops toiling in Johannesburg. Expanding like so will be an inspiration to everyone.”

“It was a beautiful city. It is a shame that such a work of art was allowed to go to waste through the folly of old world incompetents.”

“And we will reclaim it just the same. It will be just as beautiful as it was before, perfect for quiet contemplation,” Théoden said.

“And as a base for our troops,” Aumeier added.

“That too.” Théoden looked at his general with an annoyed look on his face. “Anyhow, Mr. Barrow, this brings me to the second point of interest. I understand that you were disappointed by your first assignment with Miss Aucoin. I have a new task for you and her, one which will more thoroughly test your skills.”

“I look forward to it,” Ian said.

“Good. Although Inquisitor Royce was overzealous in his assault against the heretics and their research, not everything within the fortress was lost. We found that the scientists there had ties to the Commonwealth Defense Administration. A sort of biotechnology research agreement. You can see why this is worrying.”

“You want to know why the CHP is doing work in your land.”

“Well, they’re not doing work here. But it seems like the work that the Commonwealth is doing in their own labs is similar enough to what the heretics in Geneva have been developing, similar enough that they’re sharing their findings with each other, which also tells me that they have knowledge of our own operations here. We weren’t able to figure out what exactly what they’re studying due to Royce’s complete annihilation of everything else, and I have chastised him for that. But that’s beside the point. The documents we recovered pointed to a former East Asian Endeavor black site near the Commonwealth-Byzantine border. The Defense Administration has established a base of operations there and is using the EAE’s insidious technology for God-knows-what. We’re going to go there, find out exactly what’s going on, and then shut it down.”

“An EAE black site? Marcus and Magnus were saying something at the summit about finding more of them to support a ‘mourner project.’ They didn’t elaborate – mentioned something about improved AIs and engines for transport ships, but I don’t think it was related. Seemed very hush-hush.”

“If the EAE is involved, even the remnants they left behind, it can’t be good,” Théoden said, his face wrinkling in disgust. “Human garbage, the lot of them, which is a shame. A multinational research agreement was supposed to improve regional stability, but the scientists said ‘no, thank you’ to patriotism and ‘yes, please’ to promoting war between their patron states to make a testing ground for some of the most abominable technologies known to man. Whatever the Commonwealth is doing with their research, you’ll find out when you get to Ivanograd.”

Ian was taken aback. “That sounds like it’s in Russia. I thought this was on the Commonwealth border – do they have holdings further east?”

Théoden just shook his head. “Greece. The border between the CHP and Byzantium. See, in the Second Pact War, when the Muslims wanted to hit the Catholic League nations, they first had to take Greece. The League annexed them to ‘more effectively defend Christendom,’ and the Greeks initially accepted this. But when they weren’t being bombed anymore, they didn’t see any reason to support the Pope’s counteroffensive. The Russians disagreed, and invaded Greece, trying to force them to comply, and they renamed the cities they sacked after their war heroes. Ivanograd was one of these.”

“Another one of the Commonwealth’s lies,” Nathaniel Aumeier said with a sneer on his face. “Ravengrad was what the Russians called Athens when they took it, named after General Hedeon Raven. When it returned to the Greeks after the Crusade ended, it was Athens again, but the Commonwealth says they used the new name for…reasons? To avoid accusations that they would favor the Greeks whose home they invaded? But the Commonwealth was originally backed by the U.N. Security Council, and who do you think held a prominent seat on said council? Surely you can see why the Greeks might not be so loyal to the CHP.”

“I get it. Charlotte already gave me the run-down about this. What’s our actual plan for Ivanograd?”

Théoden gave a deferential nod towards Nathaniel, who stood up and began to speak to the room at large. “The rest of the stratēgoí and I have laid out a basic plan, but, given our lack of information about Ivanograd and its defenses, we’ll have to improvise when we get there. One cruiser will leave tonight with an inquisitorial strike team aboard and a small portion of my levy. A few score men at most. We’re not expecting a protracted siege, and, if the defenses we scout prove too formidable, we’ll retreat and reassess the situation.”

Nathaniel’s voice remained eerily calm, and he pronounced each word as if an hour of thought had gone into it. Everything about the man was immaculate, even compared to the neat space he had known Alexis to keep.

“But, remember,” Théoden interrupted. “A direct assault is completely off the table. Even if the worst should come to pass and there is violence, you must be able to clean it up. By sunrise tomorrow, the Commonwealth must not know who was at Ivanograd.”

“I will be the epitome of discretion,” Nathaniel said with an over-flourished bow.

“And how are we going to reach Ivanograd undetected?” Ian asked. “You said we’re taking a cruiser. That doesn’t sound very discrete.”

“Hyperion has some of the best stealth technology in the world. *The* best, unless someone can find the Papal Center Fleet from wherever it’s disappeared to” said a voice Ian did not recognize. He looked at the source and saw the badge with the name Scipio Marinetti on it, another strategos.

“Undetectable by any conventional means, other than one’s eyes, and we’ll be landing far out of range of those,” Nathaniel continued. “As Théoden said, our goal is infiltration, not destruction. For now, at least. I prefer more refined methods than going in with my dick out to fuck them in the ass right from the start. We land, send scouts and drones to case the perimeter of the Ivanograd facility, and then try to get inside without anyone knowing. Ideally, we’d steal critical documents, sabotage their equipment, and assassinate key personnel, but any one of those would be a major victory. Like I said, we’ll have to develop a more specific plan once we hit the ground – I hope you can think fast, Mr. Barrow. Meet us in the Bergmann skydock at seven o’clock tonight and I’ll get you ready for your first mission.”

“I can show you how to get there,” Charlotte whispered to Ian, as he bowed respectfully towards his new masters. After a few more vague pleasantries and assurances of an impending victory, the stratēgoí began filing out of the room.

“Master Théoden, if I may, I have a question,” Ian said, catching up to the old man as they left the building.

“Yes? Go ahead.”

Ian looked at Théoden for some time. He seemed exhausted, and far less regal than he had during their first encounter aboard his flagship: The wrinkles on his face were deep and his skin sallow and mottled. Despite this, it was clear that Théoden had a good deal of life left in him, but more than ever it seemed to be running out.

“You condemned the actions of my late friends. So how can you justify this violence? What you did to the heretic stronghold, and what might be used against Ivanograd?”

Théoden closed his eyes and looked sorrowful, and before long he began to weep. “I never wanted any of this. After the storms, with the world in chaos, I saw what the Commonwealth was becoming and built Hyperion to be a faithful state, a place for quiet contemplation. Could you imagine? An entire country dedicated to intellectualism, rationalism, and theology. Our temples could have been grand and our clergymen pre-eminent scholars of the faith. And yet, here we are. Flying southeast to kill people.”

“I don’t understand. Maybe my expectations are messed up from my time in the CHP, but it looks to me like you already have beautiful temples and, while I’ve not attended one of your churches, if the Commonwealth’s educational system was able to produce men and women as erudite as some of my former companions, then surely you could.”

“Bah, you flatter me. But no, for all my noble aspirations, I have failed in my endeavor. The religious doctrine I preach was to be an enlightening philosophy that would correct the mistakes of the old world, yet it is used by fanatics to persecute their rivals. Believe me, I hate things like what the heretics Royce killed were making. Polluting the human body with their machinery, making us into living weapons. Whatever is happening in Ivanograd must be stopped. But I’d prefer to solve this conflict with debate, not murder. That’s why I tried to take you and your friends alive.”

“Then why not shut it down? Make Master Aumeier recall his troops?”

“I didn’t want to be a tyrant, so I gave my constituents and advisors great power, and, with this power, they have rendered me *hostage* in my own home. For now their goals seem to align with mine, but they grow more militant every time we meet. Idealistic though I may be, I am pragmatic – I cannot disband my armies, for to do so would be to invite the Commonwealth to annex my beloved city. I cannot get rid of my advisors, because that would make me a dictator, and that will not do.”

“So you just have to live with them? You’re the Master of Hyperion; the people of this city literally worship you, right?”

Théoden waved his hand dismissively. “If I dismissed the advice of my peers, how would I be any better than the Director-General of the Commonwealth? I could have them all executed today if I wanted, but I will *not* be a dictator. So yes, you must understand that Hyperion is terribly hypocritical, and that is why. The reverend preaches and the clergy ignore his words. This is the way things must be for now.”

“Maybe we can change that in the future.”

“I dearly hope so,” Théoden said. Ian seemed to him like a decent man. Perhaps his plan had not been a total loss.

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The Hyperion stealth cruiser *Alanis* was ready and waiting at the skydock, along with Nathaniel Aumeier and a small company of soldiers. One of them stood next to a small cart loaded with vials of clear liquid.

“What’s this?” Ian asked as he, Charlotte, and Emma walked up the stairs to the airship. The faces of the troops on the platform were difficult to see, silhouetted against the evening sun.

“Looks like Master Aumeier is going to test you now,” Charlotte said to Ian before turning her attention to the Master of the Fleet. “Is Konrad here? Do we really have time for a psychological profile?”

“It won’t take more than an hour, including recovery. If he’s strong enough. If not, then I don’t want him on my crew. Some of the younger people here, their bodies can’t handle it *yet*, but they’re part of my levy. Ian is unknown. I will test him.”

“Charlotte mentioned this,” Ian said.

“Then you know what to expect. Konrad?”

A thin, twitchy man stepped forwards and picked up one of the vials. “Sit down and ingest this,” he said in a quick voice without any of the bedside manner a proper doctor should have had. “It will hurt. Very much. After that, I want you to tell me what you saw. Good?”

Ian nodded, warily taking the vial from the one Charlotte and Nathaniel had called Konrad. He knelt close to the ground, put the frosty glass to his lips and let the liquid pour into his throat. It was tasteless and cold, and it stung slightly as it went down. For a moment, nothing happened, but then he felt his head getting lighter and lighter, and then he was asleep.

\* \* \*

When he awoke, Ian was helped to his feet by Charlotte and Konrad, who held him in place as he struggled to regain control of his limp legs. When he finally was able to stand on his own, still trembling, he wrapped both the doctor and the inquisitor in his arms, holding them tight for a brief, awkward moment before staggering back and taking a closer look around.

“Fuck,” he muttered, followed by a fit of coughing and a bleary attempt to evaluate the room around him. The persistent hum of an engine told him that he had once again come into the light aboard an airship, although this one was, fortunately, familiar to him. A bright light shone down onto the table where he had been resting, and the sterile smell of a doctor’s office was enough to signal that he had been brought to the *Alanis’* medical bay.

“You are alive. Good,” Charlotte said in slow, worried English. “How are you feeling? I cannot imagine it was comfortable.”

“Doesn’t seem like you need to imagine it,” Ian mumbled, turning so that he was facing both Charlotte and Konrad. “Your poison needs work. I was led to believe it would mess with my mind more, make me want to kill myself. Nothing so far.”

“We use a watered-down version, yes,” Konrad said. “Still harmful to weak minds, but you seem strong. Good. Tell me what you saw.”

Ian was very suspicious of Konrad’s pseudo-scientific methods, but he nonetheless obliged. “A box,” he said with a sigh.

“Interesting. And what was in the box?”

“Me.”

“Ah, claustrophobia. Good, very good. Were you entirely restrained?”

“No, no, nothing like that. It was a little smaller than this room, maybe. Can’t quite remember – it was a dream, you know? But it was empty. White. Nothing in it but me. I must have been in there for a year at least, but there wasn’t anything for me to keep time with, so I just counted my sleep cycles as if they were days. Sleeping in my own dream, weird stuff.”

“Isolation. Sensory deprivation. More mental than physical. Good to know. Did you feel lonely?”

“You have no idea how happy I was to see people again, to see anybody at all.”

“Oh, I think we know,” Charlotte said, switching back to French as she watched Ian regain lucidity for a second time.

Konrad looked satisfied. “Very well. Good enough for a start.”

“For a start?”

“Don’t worry – unlikely that you’ll be subjected to the same treatment again. Is there anything else you’d like me to include in my report to Master Aumeier?”

“No.”

“Understood. I’ll file my report – the Master wants to see you on the bridge. Charlotte can take you there.”

The bridge wasn’t a long way away, owing to the stealth cruiser’s small size. It was manned by little more than a skeleton crew of the levies Nathaniel had been most quickly able to raise and Charlotte’s inquisitorial detachment.

The Master of the Fleet was waiting for Ian with a small retinue of guards alongside the bridge crew themselves. To Ian’s surprise, he saw Emma and several other children among their number. This wasn’t a combat mission, he reminded himself, but it was nevertheless strange to see such young and inexperienced people on an important assignment.

“How was your testing, Mr. Barrow?” Nathaniel asked with a disgustingly cheerful tone.

“Fine,” Ian replied with a nod he hoped would give off a proper feeling of indifference, even though his head was still pounding, pain shooting through his skull with every heartbeat. “You give the same stuff to those kids?”

“Thankfully, no,” Charlotte said, pre-empting Nathaniel’s answer.

“It would potentially lead to more lasting damage, so we only administer even a small dosage to them once they turn eighteen,” Nathaniel continued nonetheless.

“I thought the point was to make sure your troops were hardened enough to take your abuse. So why are you taking unproven troops into an infiltration mission?”

Nathaniel sighed and began to pace back across the bridge, his arms folded in front of him. “Children are unassuming,” he said. “If this were a direct assault, I would take my veteran shock infantry and a tank squadron at the very least. But Master Lockhart, in his wisdom, has advised me to avoid confrontation. People are less likely to suspect a child of treachery, making them perfect for reconnaissance and sabotage. This isn’t difficult work.”

“On a military base, though? A kid would seem out of place, don’t you think?”

“Ivanograd is not a military base. It’s a ruin, as you’ll see soon enough. The EAE black site you surely remember is in the middle of a small but heavily guarded settlement, but it’s not purely military. The CHP wants to stop information from leaking out, so the staff *and their families* live there permanently. There are enough of them that a few new faces shouldn’t alert anybody.”

“Are we sending the kids in alone? What happens if someone does get alerted?”

“Charlotte’s squad will accompany them. Hence why you’re here – you have experience in asymmetrical warfare against the Commonwealth. If they find you out, then it’ll be the Inquisition’s job to get our people to safety. My levies will hold the landing zone, but you need to make it there first if you want to escape. We can’t leave any evidence of our being here.”

“And I suppose you’d have us kill ourselves rather than face capture?”

“Ideally, yes. If you’re detected, though, we’ll destroy the Ivanograd base with missiles from the *Alanis* to cover out tracks. Not an ideal solution, as it makes too much of a disturbance, but, if it’s necessary…never mind. Even the young ones are capable fighters; I’ve made sure of that. If a battle does break out, I have every confidence that you’ll all make it out alive. People tend to hesitate when shooting at children, anyhow.”

Charlotte stepped forward meekly, interrupting Nathaniel before he could continue. “I would rather have the children defend the *Alanis*,” she said. “At least most of them. They do not draw attention to themselves, but, even so, they will not be able to access the secure facilities we need to breach. Perhaps one or two, just in case, but the majority of the cadets would be better served in an observation role. Let them watch, see how a real mission is done with minimal danger to themselves.”

“You want your sister safe,” Nathaniel said.

“Children are our future. I want them all safe.”

“But I imagine you wouldn’t volunteer Emma to be one of the ones we send into Ivanograd.”

“I’m right here; I can speak for myself,” Emma said, but neither of the adults seemed to notice her.

“No, I would not,” Charlotte admitted. “It should not be my place to tell anybody they have to put their lives on the line, but…”

“But you’re an inquisitor. That *makes it* your place. Your job, in fact.”

Charlotte furrowed her brow and stared fiercely at Nathaniel. “Then let me do my job. You and your *adult* levies are going into Ivanograd. Take Ian as an aide if you want, I do not care. The young ones are staying here, by the authority of the Inquisition.”

Nathaniel met her gaze with a look of contempt on his face. “A *junior* inquisitor,” he said, correcting himself. “You do not give *me* orders. I am the Master of the Fleet, and you are barely more than the children you’re trying to protect. Emma is going to Ivanograd, and if there’s a fight, she fights.”

“Yes, Master,” Charlotte said, not even trying to mask her hatred.

“Good. Anyhow, now that that unpleasantness is over with, we’re almost to the outskirts of Ivanograd where we’ll put down and send out the drones to scout. If this site is important as the Inquisition seems to think it is, the security might be similar to Ravengrad Tower itself. Luckily for us, we have an expert on getting past those sort of defenses. Getting back out, perhaps not, but, if you can get in, then that’s the most important part done with.”

“And if we can’t get out, then you bomb us all to hell, I know,” Ian said. “But we got into the Tower by launching a diversionary attack against another target. We don’t have any other targets this time. So I’m not sure how you expect us to get in.”

“Commonwealth uniforms will give you the cover you need once you’re past the perimeter, but, you’re right, we do have that one…complication. Our drones will survey the area and look for weak points in their security. If there is none, however, our last resort might be a direct assault – dress you all up as raiders and launch a surgical strike against the black site, destroy what we can, and get out before their response team arrives.”

“If that’s what it takes, then so be it. You shoved your poison down my throat, so I guess this makes me yours. I’ll do whatever you tell me.”

“You do not seem too enthusiastic,” Charlotte noted.

“Enthusiasm is not required, only excellence. Master Lockhart believes that you are a worthwhile investment despite your defeat at the Tower, so this is your chance to prove it to me and strike back at the people who took your lover from you.”

“Fine, fine.” As much as Ian wanted to tell the man to shut up and let him command the troops like he had the Shock Corps, he knew better. If Janessa and his friends were alive, getting himself executed or imprisoned for insubordination was not the way to see them again.

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The walk from the *Alanis* to the Ivanograd black site was long, but the ruins were an attractive sight to pass the time. Towers rose upwards into the clouds, cracked and decaying and strangled by the ivy that had grown over decades of abandonment, forming a pleasant medley of colors.

“The scout drones are reporting minimal air defenses. A few missile launchers and a corvette,” Nathaniel spoke to Ian and Charlotte through the headsets in their ears. He had, of course, stayed behind to coordinate the mission while they led the troops on the ground. It would be his call as to whether they would attack or infiltrate the facility, although neither option seemed like it would have a good outcome.

“If it’s just a corvette, then the *Alanis* should be safe,” Ian said to Charlotte, who had Emma at her side. “They teach you how to handle them in a straight fight?”

“Just the basics. Air combat’s the fleet’s job,” Emma said.

“Seems like a pretty big oversight, then. Corvettes are ground attack aircraft. They can take on frigates and even destroyers if the crew’s good, but we got well-accustomed to dealing with corvettes in guerilla fights on outskirts just like these.

“Then it is good we have you to advise us,” Charlotte said.

“Yeah, well, I can’t advise you in the middle of a fight. You even know what their loadout is?”

“I’d bet it’s fairly flexible,” Emma said, thinking over what she knew. “You said they can take out frigates and destroyers, so they probably have some air-to-air missiles. But if their primary role is ground attack, I’d expect smart bombs. There’s also turrets, for when they’re acting in a gunship role – I know that much.”

Ian nodded. “They’re pretty flexible. The current *Icebreaker* model can swap between dogfight and gunship modes, as you said. When it’s a fighter, its turrets fold into the body and the whole crew – usually a pilot and maybe four gunners – gets strapped into their seats so it can maneuver in a proper dogfight. Unless it’s acting as a full transport, in which case it can only work in gunship mode until it drops off its crew. Otherwise, it has a hull-mounted cannon and whatever missiles or bombs you’d want for the mission. Tell me, then – what do you think we have to worry about?”

Emma cocked her head and took a moment to think. “Depends on where we fight the thing. Unless they somehow detect us way out here, we’ll be at the base itself by the time any fighting starts and they deploy the corvette. And, if we’re that close, bombs and missiles would risk excessive damage to their own infrastructure. Better to let the thing drop into gunship mode and have the more accurate turret gunners pin us down. Which in turn makes it vulnerable to something like a MANPAD. Shame we haven’t actually got any of those, but I suppose it would be a little odd to see you and Charlotte walking a bunch of kids around with heavy weapons on you, if we’re to be infiltrating under disguise.”

“Very good,” Ian said with a nod, although it unnerved him to be discussing this with a child like Emma. “However, the Commonwealth has been known from time to time to bomb its own facilities and people if they think they can afford the loss. A friend of mine defected for that very reason, in fact. Could be that they won’t risk a valuable site like this if it really is important, but we should be aware of that possibility. ‘Course, seems like getting them to blow themselves up would be a perfectly satisfactory outcome in the eyes of our master, but I’d like to get you all out alive.”

“The *Alanis* could easily handle one fighter Corvette,” Charlotte said.

“That it could. Problem is holding out long enough to take out the bandit, or, more likely, blow us all to pieces and leave us to rot. If Master Aumeier decides that a frontal assault is the way to go, our best bet is to stick to cover and hope that the CHP won’t bomb its own people. In Ravengrad, the ruins about as dense as the ones here in downtown Ivanograd, but the black site’s supposedly in a clearer area, so we can’t lose it among the skyscrapers.”

“Fun. Then we must hope Master Aumeier elects to infiltrate rather than assault.”

\* \* \*

The Ivanograd black site was a reasonably large compound organized around a central plaza. At one end of the concrete rectangle was the main gate, and, at the other end, the base commander’s office overlooked the goings about of the menial workers as they moved between various stations. Behind the office were the living quarters, where the staff ate and slept and quarreled and made love, and, deep below all of that, was where the real operation was being run, under the authority of one Commander Pernette Sinclair.

The site’s core had been there for longer than any of the men and women working it had been alive. Unlike many similar facilities that had been restored to working order by Madelyn-Rash and the Defense Administration, it was a pre-crusade relic – dated, but still more advanced than any of the old world factories that less privileged industrialists had salvaged. Advanced enough that the researchers were still only on the cusp of understanding how its mechanisms even worked, much less the miracle technologies they produced.

Most of these technologies went straight to the military, which Pernette regretted, but she comforted herself knowing that the leftovers had brought better lives to so many who had survived the collapse of civilization. When the alarm sounded, though, it wasn’t the crops or the medicine she thought of, but the defense products she couldn’t risk falling into the hands of whatever enemy was at her gates this time.

Pernette’s office was empty except for herself, her daughter, Christen, and a representative from Madelyn-Rash. The rest of her staff had hurried out to relay her orders to the security team and prepare the defenses for the incoming attack.

“Report,” she said to her daughter, not turning away from her position at the office window.

Christen Sinclair coughed nervously into her arm. Pernette was a large and intimidating older woman, certainly unfit to be a soldier but more than capable of commanding respect from her subordinates in the office. Her daughter, by contrast, was slender and attractive, but neither inspiring nor assertive.

“The, um, scouts are reporting an exchange of gunfire near the perimeter. They say the intruders have Skywatch uniforms but they’re not buying it.”

“If their uniforms are suspect, how did they get so close to the black site?”

“It’s not the uniforms, supposedly. These guys ran into a patrol of guards and had their papers looked at, and they checked out. But they tried to break off before getting to the gate and were picked up by motion sensors. Now there’s a fight.”

“What’s their strength?” Pernette asked.

“Not many troops, but the ones they’ve got are really good. Kids too, though, which would usually tell me that they weren’t expecting a shootout, but the little gremlins seem just as vicious as the big kids.” The young woman shrugged, looking nervously out the window towards where the gunfire could be heard. “Do, uh, do we still kill on sight?”

The older woman nodded. “I’d like to capture them, but, unless they surrender, we can’t take any risks that might let them escape with proprietary information, especially if their forces are of superior quality. I’ve informed the security chiefs as such.”

“Well, I hope they surrender, then.”

“As do I,” Pernette said, before the alarms suddenly cut out after a loud explosion, and a grim feeling descended over the room.

“Not good,” Christen said, rushing to her mother’s side and looking through the window, where a large pillar of black smoke could be seen from the eastern wing. Teams of soldiers were already rushing towards the point of impact, pushing against the current of workers fleeing from the invading force.

“They’ve breached the inner walls. I’ve given the order for Wasp to launch and keep the skies clear, but he won’t be any use if they’re already inside.” Pernette finally turned around and looked deep into her daughter’s eyes, placing one hand on each shoulder. “Christen, listen to me,” she said. “Go with Lena here. Go to the Forge and activate the drones. Lena, Can you do that?”

“Of course I can,” the other young woman said, failing to conceal her indignation.

“Good. We risk them capturing a chassis, but that could happen anyway if they’ve already gotten this far. Go, hurry – and be safe. I will try to delay them as long as I can.”

“Y-yes, mum,” Christen said, kissing her mother on the cheek before making a dramatic turn and fleeing from the room with Lena in tow.

The two of them hurried down the corridors to an elevator that would take them to the heart of the black site. What could be seen from the surface was very much the tip of the iceberg. Every procedure that mattered took place underground in the cramped manufactories and their associated auxiliary facilities.

“Are you ready for this?” Christen asked with palpable anxiety on her face, which had begun to drip with sweat as much from the black site’s ambient heat as from her fear.

“Of course I am. For fuck’s sake, grow some damn ovaries. Jesus. I’ll make sure we’re fine.”

As the elevator came to a smooth stop, Christen nodded and took one of Lena’s hands in hers, her fair skin contrasting sharply with her compatriot’s dark brown. “I know,” she said. “I trust you. I can’t help being scared, but I know you can deal with this sort of thing.”

Lena followed Christen through the manufactory, the fierce red lighting doing little to dispel the hellish feeling of the climate amongst so much heavy machinery. The room where they came to a stop was long and thin, with a low ceiling that made Christen feel uneasy every time she was forced to work inside it. One of the long sides was dominated by a window through which a test chamber could be seen, and the other’s rusty brown color could barely be seen, behind the mess of wires and pipes that lined them. In the center of it all, were a chair and a computer terminal. As her friend watched, Lena sat down in the chair and pressed a button on her arm, barely visible, that caused a hatch to open up just above her wrist, into which she inserted a thin cable. Christen closed her eyes and prayed as the terminal flickered to life, and a whimsical humming noise filled the underground chambers.

\* \* \*

The Hyperion task force burst into the commander’s office shortly afterwards, meeting no resistance except for an alarmed-looking Pernette Sinclair, who immediately burst into tears.

“What is your problem, you miserable woman?” Charlotte asked, looking down at Pernette’s weeping form with obvious disgust as Ian and the rest of her retinue secured the door behind them.

“Please, you mustn’t hurt my family,” Pernette said between sobs. “Just tell me what you want, and I can make it happen. Just spare them, please.”

“We know that the staff here are involved in biotechnology research that unacceptably pollutes the purity of the human race. We would see this operation cease, lest the same disasters repeat themselves.”

“Yes, yes, of course, anything you like.” Pernette paused and looked, briefly making eye contact with Emma, who only frowned in disgust like her sister. “You have children with you. Why do you have children?”

“These kids are just as good in a fight as your average guardsman in Ravengrad,” Ian said. “I doubted it when I first saw them, but they’re skilled, no doubt about it.”

“Well, we have children here too. Boys and girls, and the elderly too. They’re not fighters. You must let them return to the capital at least – they are innocent of whatever you think I did.”

“We cannot afford to let anybody escape, nor can we afford to waste time negotiating,” Charlotte said. “We are here to shut down your facility by any means necessary. Those who cooperate will be spared, but I cannot guarantee anything.”

The attacking force was pressed for time, Pernette noted, which meant that they were likely not great in number and hoped to achieve their objective before the defenders could organize a counterattack or be reinforced. Similarly, they would not be receiving reinforcements of their own. That was good.

“Please!” she wailed. “They’ve done nothing wrong! They know nothing you can use! Take me if you want, but let the children go. You’ll never see, never hear from them again. They’re of no threat to you.”

Despite her bluff, Charlotte had no plans to kill the children, or anybody else, for that matter. The pathetic woman kneeling in front of her would make a valuable captive if any information could be extracted, but she could neither afford nor stomach the systematic execution of all the base personnel. They had already lost almost a quarter of their number, so she was more than ready to withdraw with only a few prisoners. They would have to go without sabotaging the equipment itself, unless Master Aumeier saw fit to destroy the entire site, which he very well could.

Before she could give any orders, however, Charlotte’s thoughts were interrupted by gunfire, which she took to mean that the black site security had caught up with them. She was not entirely wrong, but she did not expect what she saw when she turned her head.

An elegant, jet-black machine had taken up a position in the outside hallway, having clearly broken its way through the wall as it was far too large for any of the doorframes. As the dust and chunks of broken plaster settled at its feet, it turned and looked straight at Charlotte, its glowing ‘eyes’ making contact with hers while it ignored the bullets ricocheting off of its spider-like hull.

“*Merde*,” she whispered, watching a panel flip open on its body.

Ian grabbed the two children closest to him and pulled them back, yelling for a retreat. The bulk of his remaining team followed suit just in time to be clear of the wall as the drone’s missile struck it, launching burning fragments of wood and metal and flesh and bone across the room.

Pernette looked around herself in horror at the gory mess that her office had become, covering her head as bullets soared over it. Though she knew that Lena would do her best to avoid friendly fire, accidents happened, and she fully expected her enemies to execute her if they did not think they could escape.

Seconds later, the gunfire came to a brief halt, and Pernette was surprised to find herself still alive. The office had been demolished – its walls broken down and its windows shattered, leaving her desk and fine rug exposed to the rain that had begun to fall.

“Get up, we’re leaving,” Ian said as he grabbed her shoulder and pulled her to her feet, at which point she could see the smoking wreck of the drone lying limp in the corridor. A single prototype had not been enough to defeat a small team of infantry, but there would be far more in a moment if Lena could do what she promised.

“Master Aumeier, we have secured the facility and several prisoners for interrogation, but the enemy outnumber us,” Charlotte said over her radio to the Master of the Fleet. “If the *Alanis* could come and cover us…”

“Negative,” Nathaniel replied. “I can’t risk exposing the ship to their anti-air fire. We took out their corvette already with only minor damage, but I won’t sacrifice the *Alanis* for your sorry asses.”

“But the prisoners!” Ian protested. “Not only that, but we took down one of the drones they’re actually building here! If we can take the wreck back to Geneva, think of what we could learn!”

“We’ve got trouble!” came a shout from Emma in lieu of any reply from Nathaniel. She, the rest of the survivors, and Pernette ducked down to avoid the bullets from the guards who were ready to take back their stronghold. A single rocket or grenade, though, would end them all in a heartbeat.

Thinking quickly, Emma grabbed Pernette’s wrist and pulled her up more forcefully than Ian had done, pointing her gun at her temple before ducking back down and pulling the base commander to the floor. The Commonwealth soldiers didn’t need her to say anything to get the message, and, while they did not stop firing, their attacks became more careful, and the Hyperion squad felt confident that they were safe from explosive attacks for the time being.

“How many did you see?” Ian said to Emma as both of them leaned against the broken concrete, panting.

“Probably a couple dozen guys and half that many drones. We’re done if chucklehead up there doesn’t come through.”

“Don’t count on it. We need to get further in. Everybody, on me! We need to get deeper inside!” Ian shouted, desperate to be heard over the cacophony. The others did hear him and followed him past the wrecked drone where they would, at the very least, be able to wait in the desperate hope that Nathaniel had listened to reason.

As it turned out, he had. The *Alanis* made a dramatic entrance, coming into view of the black site by crashing through several of the nearby towers, still some distance from the stronghold. Immediately, the drones leapt into the air, twisting their bodies into a jet-like shape and flew towards the cruiser, only to be swiftly dispatched by a barrage of missiles and flak.

All other sounds were drowned out by the cruiser’s roar as it came to rest directly above the black site so low to the ground that the engines kicked up a furious windstorm, blowing anything that wasn’t bolted down into the air.

“Shields won’t hold for long,” Nathaniel said through the team’s radios. “I’ve got a ramp coming down at the room that I can see you fucked up quite nicely.”

“We are on our way,” Charlotte reported back. For the few of them that remained, hauling the broken drone and their few prisoners up the ramp was a difficult task, but the *Alanis’* guns had cleared enough space for them to finish the job unimpeded. As the cruiser flew off, it released a final volley at the black site, demolishing everything that stood above the surface and sending tremors throughout the manufactories below.

\* \* \*

Underneath the collapsing facility, Christen looked at Lena’s unconscious body and leaned in close. “It’s over,” she whispered. “We need to get you out of here, now.”

Immediately, Lena’s eyes opened and, all over the black site, the drones that were still receiving her signal shut down, falling to the ground as limp as corpses.

“You’re right. There’s nothing left for us here.” Lena unplugged herself from the terminal and looked solemnly around her, regarding the shattered pieces of metal and circuitry that had been displaced by the bombardment.

“Murderers,” Christen said.

“Yeah. They’ll get theirs once word of this gets to Montreal.”

“I know. We need to find my mom.”

“Right. No power – I hope the stairs aren’t blocked.”

After finding a clear path to the surface, the two women saw for the first time the complete destruction of the Ivanograd black site. The rain had not stopped, but all it fell upon was mud and rubble.

Christen felt a sharp pain in her heart and the pit of her stomach and fell to her knees amidst the broken concrete, the tears pouring from her eyes barely distinguishable from the raindrops that slid onto her face from her black hair. “She couldn’t have survived this,” she said. “There really is nothing left.”

“You don’t know that. Let’s go look.”

“This used to be her office. It’s all gone. I’m…alone.”

“You’re not alone,” Lena said. “Come on. Let’s look for survivors. Even if she has…even if we don’t find your mother, we might save some lives.”

“And then what?”

“I’ll go to Stockholm and tell my father what happened. He should still be there, or else I’ll head back to the campus in Montreal. You should report to Valencia. This was my first test in a real battle, after all. We can learn from this, and then we can make the people who attacked us pay for their crimes. This cannot be forgiven.”

“I’d rather go with you, but I’ll go to Valencia,” Christen said, hugging Lena for a moment. “This can’t happen again. It can’t.”

“I’m sure my father will see that it doesn’t.”

\* \* \*

A red light blinked on and off in front of Ian as he watched the broken body of the drone that they had captured. Unmanned vehicles were nothing new, and he doubted that the machine itself was anything that the Hyperion Cult might consider sinful, which was certainly a curiosity. They must have missed something. As it stood, the link between the black site and the biotech facility in Geneva made no sense, as there was certainly nothing even remotely biological about the drone.

Recalling its motions during the battle, he had observed it behaving almost like a predatory animal, so a sort of AI was not completely out of the question, and yet the initial reports from the *Alanis’* engineers had discussed that possibility. They concluded that the computing architecture found within the wrecked hull, or what was left of it, at least, would not have supported anything more sophisticated than an old world UAV.

It didn’t matter to Ian at that moment. Every objective had been achieved – the black site had been shut down and they had captured personnel and equipment from which the Inquisition could extract a good deal of information if they were as good as he had been led to believe.

“What did you see when they made you take that poison?” he asked Charlotte in a dull voice, not bothering to shift his gaze from the wreck

“Bugs. So many of those small monsters with all their legs and wings and things. A writhing mass. I watched them devour my family in front of me – I can still hear the screams. Then they came for me. They went in through my mouth, my ears, my eyes, through every hole they could find and more, burrowing through my skin. I was screaming when I woke up, not like how calm you were.”

“Hm.”

To Ian’s right, Emma sat on her own chair, kicking her legs back and forth with a haunted, pitiable look on her face.

. “May I speak with you in private?” he asked, turning back to Charlotte. The Inquisitor nodded and followed him out into the hallway.

“Did she...have any friends on that mission? Friends who didn’t make it back?” Ian continued once they were alone.

‘No,” Charlotte replied, shaking her head firmly. “The…few young ones we lost, she knew them, of course. They went to school and trained together. Peony is her only good friend, and she wasn’t here, but her first battle will have been traumatizing enough.”

“Should we talk to her?”

“I don’t even know what I’d say,” Charlotte confessed.

“I’ll try.”

Ian sat down next to Emma back in the *Alanis’* storage bay. “Hey,” he said. “How are you doing?”

“Fine. If you’re here because you think I’m a weak little girl who’s gonna cry over a few gunshots, then don’t bother. I don’t wanna be patronized.”

“And *I* don’t want to hear bullshit about how you’re tougher than you look. I’m a professional soldier. This is the first time you’ve seen combat; no one goes through that unaffected. So talk to me.”

Emma was silent for about ten seconds. “I was lucky, wasn’t I?” she finally said. “So many people aren’t coming home. People with parents. Children. Friends.”

“Yeah. That’s what happens. No one should have to get used to that, but you will,” Ian said with feigned indifference.

“It should have been me. My parents are dead. I only have one friend, two if you count Charlotte. No one would grieve for me.”

“What kind of math makes two people nobody?”

“I guess you’re right. But it’s pretty basic math that makes two people less than, well, numbers bigger than two. You know?”

“That doesn’t mean you deserved death any more than they did. Sometimes people just die, and you have to deal with it.” Ian meant everything he said, even though his cavalier attitude was just an act in response to Emma’s request that he not patronize her. Whether or not that was the right approach, he didn’t know, but it seemed to be working.

“Yeah. It’s survivor’s guilt; I know that much. They tell us about it in class. They say the same thing you did, that I’ll get over it.”

“Don’t be afraid to get help. Trying to go it alone because you think you’re some kind of badass is a good way to get killed.”

“I won’t.” Emma was quiet again for almost a minute before Ian felt her leaning against his arm, her gentle breaths pushing into him ever so slightly. He patted her on the shoulder, and they didn’t speak until Nathaniel finally made an appearance to speak with the survivors from the away team.

“You did well,” he said. “The prisoners you took will be interrogated and placed in house arrest if they cooperate, and, if they don’t, then I’ll dispose of them. Hopefully we can learn a great deal. You all exceeded my expectations.”

His expectations couldn’t have been too high, Ian thought, but he remained silent.

Nathaniel continued, pointing to the wrecked drone. “The Inquisition will have a field day with this one, I’m sure. Miss Aucoin, Mr. Barrow – if it was formidable as you say, this could be major problem for our operations in the future. As long as it’s intended for mass production, which we must assume it is. Once their studies are complete, we can begin revising our combat doctrine to account for these new machines.”

“Are we expecting more engagements with the Commonwealth?” Charlotte asked with subtle alarm.

“If they force our hand, yes. I am well aware that Master Théoden does not want violence, but even he can’t ignore a direct violation of both our creed and our borders. The CHP is going to try something, I can feel it, and I want to be ready for them when they do.”

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## Chapter 11 – Johannesburg

*“The whole armada is impractical, of course, the age of airships having expired with the Hindenburg. Would it have been more practical to copy the far-eastern republics of Joseon and use extremely fast, light ships to cut through the storms instead of bludgeoning our way through them with our battleships? Absolutely. But the sheer size of a capital ship is an advantage of its own: those who would oppose the Commonwealth see such overt displays of power and fall in line. If they do attack, then, yes, a large aircraft is ill-suited for engaging a guerilla force, but we only need deploy one in the vicinity and they will panic, allowing for an easy victory.”*

* *Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster, in* Skywatch Operations

When Alexis and her small force began their journey to Johannesburg, it became clear that Jacob Lancaster had been right about one thing, at least. The Tunis-Highveld corridor proved conducive to their operations with lighter aircraft: with the African continent no longer an impregnable vortex, Eirene’s corvette was enough to get them there and back as long as they brought enough fuel. There was one problem with that plan: the Peregrine forces were not the only ones using the corridor.

It was to be expected. After all, the entire reason Magnus had proposed the corridor was to act as a stable shipping route to stop the need for heavier and more expensive stormworthy ships. Eirene knew that the skies would be well-guarded and planned her flight accordingly.

The plan was to land near the smaller city of Maputo, on the South African coast almost five hundred kilometers from Johannesburg proper. The principality’s capital would have been a mere outpost compared to a fully-rebuilt megacity like Ravengrad or Montreal, and so Maputo was little more than a listening post for coastal raiders, but it had a high-speed rail connection to the capital and a small civilian population. As good a point of entry as any.

As the Peregrine corvette flew along, hugging the coastline, Eirene noticed something alarming. A grey ship floating in the water, moored at a tiny dock. There was no visible activity, and Eirene wondered for a moment whether it had been abandoned before the storms, but she immediately decided that there was no way it would still be afloat if that were so.

“I’ve got a visual on some kind of boat,” Eirene said.

Alexis stepped up to the cockpit and looked out the window. “Can’t see any flags,” she said, straining her eyes to make out the details of the distant vessel.

“Do they know we’re here?”

“We’re in visual range, so, definitely, if there’s anybody aboard.”

Before Alexis or anybody else could respond, the corvette’s hull began to rattle as smoky flak clouds filled the air around them. Cursing could be heard throughout the hull as Eirene gave the order for the crew to buckle up as quickly as her weary reflexes could handle and put the corvette into its dogfighting configuration. There were no other planes in the sky, as far as she knew, but the extra speed would be necessary in case the enemy had any decent anti-aircraft weapons.

Eirene pulled hard on her controls to send the corvette higher and higher into the sky as she scrambled to get out of range of the flak guns, praying that the enemy, whoever they were, lacked an abundance of missiles. She only had so many flares.

There were no clouds that she could disappear into, but she could at least get a clear view of the situation on the ground. The anti-aircraft fire seemed to be coming from the small ship, but the flak cannons were not the only guns that had lit up. Gunfire was exchanged between the boat and the shacks on the port, which flew Commonwealth flags.

“Not our problem,” Hector shouted to Eirene.

“I know. I’m – hold on, missile lock!” Eirene replied, frantically preparing her countermeasures. The first missile was warded off with a burst of chaff, but a second soon replaced it, and Eirene had run out of options. All she could do was try and evade.

“Get us the fuck out of here!” Hector continued to yell, the alarm palpable in his voice as the missile closed in on them. Eirene accelerated and twisted and turned in the air, but the controls felt sluggish in her tired hands, and the enemy weapon soon connected with the corvette, exploding near enough to scratch the hull but far from enough to destroy it outright.

“Fuck, fuck,” Hector said from his seat behind Eirene. “Are we out?”

“No,” was all Eirene said as she put the corvette into a steep dive where she would be safer from the missiles but once again vulnerable to the flak. At the right angle, however, the ship’s guns would not have line of sight on her. She took a brief tally of the weapons available to her – most of her ammunition had been left behind in favor of additional fuel, but there was enough for a single pass. She would have to make it count.

The corvette’s engines broadcast a thunderous cacophony over the coastal shacks as it approached the docked vessel, closing ground too rapidly for the flak guns to keep track. Within the span of a second, Eirene released all her remaining ordnance and soared past the enemy ship so low to the water that it nearly cracked the eardrums of the crew just before they were blown to bits. When she brought the corvette to bear on the boat to watch the results of her handiwork, Eirene was treated to a plume of black smoke that seeped from its fractured hull as it sank into the water.

“Peaceful revolution,” she said under her breath.

“We don’t even know who that ship was,” Alexis said. “Could have been folks like us who thought we were with the CHP.”

“Speaking of which, that outpost is signaling for us to land. Should I comply?”

“Just run,” Alexis said. “Hector might have an aneurysm if we delay any longer.”

Hector scowled. “Don’t presume to speak for me. If we run, then they know we’re not friends and they warn Johannesburg we’re coming. I don’t want to delay, but I don’t want to die or spend another minute in prison either. Put us down and let’s see if we can’t talk our way out of this like we were actually here to do in the first place.”

“Whatever you say,” Alexis replied. Eirene only nodded and prepared to set the damaged corvette down amongst the dusty shacks.

The group that emerged from the buildings to receive them was small, made up of only half a dozen civil guardsmen. There were certainly more, but no one aboard the corvette believed that there were many defenders at the base. Without the Peregrine intervention, it was likely that the attacking ship would have captured the poorly-defended harbor.

The wind between the two parties was full of dust that choked both the guardsmen and the rebels as they stood face to face, the former saluting the latter out of respect for their alleged office. From what Alexis could see, they were led by the Johannesburg civil guard commander. The commander’s name patch on his uniform identified him as Kirby Mixloe. His skin and hair were dark, and his eyes were a deep hazel and very sharp, giving off an air of intelligence and perceptiveness that, as he looked up and down at the “Skywatch” officers who had just arrived, she knew realized could not deceive.

“As much as we appreciate the help,” Mixloe began, “we weren’t informed of any patrols through Maputo. What business do you have here?”

“I should ask the same of you,” Hector said, doing his best to command the conversation.

Mixloe immediately cut his efforts short. “You’re in no position to ask that, I think,” he said in a subtle South African accent, gesturing to Hector’s chest and the lack of identification on it. “Where did you get those uniforms?”

“Scavenged them from crashed ships on the eastern frontier, close to Byzantium,” Eirene said before Hector could respond. “Seems like a lot of them went down when they were heading towards Syria, or somewhere nearby.”

“You’re far from home then.”

“So are you,” Hector said. “We’re still some distance from Maputo, itself some distance from the guard HQ at Johannesburg. A dilapidated harbor that’s not on any of the maps, staffed by nothing more than a skeleton crew of guardsmen yet somehow led by the principality’s guard commander, and first seen under attack by an unmarked vessel. This seems like a perfectly legitimate operation.”

“They were pirates. We’ve been having troubles with them ever since we arrived here. New settlements have too many goods and too few guards.”

“Then why over-extend yourself by staffing miserable little outposts like this? Why not concentrate your defenses like the smart man I can tell you are?”

Mixloe looked down at the dead grass beneath their feet, and sighed. “You are not with the Skywatch, yes? Who are you? I will not repeat what you say if you do not repeat what *I* say.”

“We represent independent interests,” Alexis said. “We mean you no harm, and we’re in Johannesburg just to gather information. I mean, I know it seems suspicious, but we’re not your enemy here.”

“I would not believe you, ordinarily. In my experience, ‘independent interests’ with that kind of firepower don’t have the people’s safety at heart. Before I say anything, though, I’d rather know the full truth.”

Hector frowned and considered the man’s words. Alexis looked to him for approval, obviously eager to gain another ally in this guardsman, but he shook his head and denied her unspoken request.

“I’m sorry, we really can’t risk telling anybody,” Alexis said.

“I understand,” Mixloe replied. “This is a wise strategy. As a repayment of our debt, my men will assist you in repairing the damage to your aircraft, and then we’ll let you proceed to wherever it is you’re going. Neither of us will speak of this again. Do we have a deal?”

“I think so, yeah. This is as good as we’re gonna get it.”

“Then I wish you well on your trip.” The guard commander gave a respectful nod and then gestured for his men to follow him and secure the burning shipwreck.

When the corvette was repaired for the second time, the small militia squad was finally able to complete their journey to the outskirts of Maputo, where they set down amongst the ruins. All around them, the faded colors on the walls were masked by sickly ivy that had sprung up over the decades and now barely clung to life.

At the heart of the city was the Commonwealth’s settlement, with a population of little more than a thousand civilians and a small garrison of civil guardsmen. It was simple enough to ditch the Skywatch uniforms that had failed to deceive Kirby Mixloe and put on the plain clothes to blend in with the imported laborers and get on the railway to Johannesburg.

They arrived in the capital in the late afternoon, the rail station being some distance from downtown. From so far away, it might have looked like a thriving city. There were few skyscrapers – most wrecked by the cataclysm, presumably – but the buildings they saw seemed mostly intact. This illusion was shattered as soon as they got into the city itself.

To call it a ruin would have been a compliment. The landscape barely resembled a city anymore. Thirty years of neglect stacked on top of the initial devastation had rendered almost every building, from the proudest spire to the lowliest shack, into a pile of rubble from which the Commonwealth’s new settlements rose like parasitic growths. Some walls still stood, and there were even a few structures that stood taller than two or three stories, but these were exceedingly rare. It was all very, very grey, a colorless, desolate charnel house. For many of them, this was the first time seeing anything outside of the Commonwealth’s relatively clean cities and towns. Even the slums on the cities’ outskirts were better than this by far.

Alexis picked up a small chunk of concrete and tossed it into the air once, making no effort to catch it on its return. It struck the ground with a thud and a series of clacks marked its journey as it tumbled to a stop. She remembered the last time she had led a company like this – Ravengrad. Hopefully, this time, her expedition would end in something that less resembled a massacre.

There could be no way to know whether or not there were loyalist forces around each corner, so the militia troops moved forward carefully, planning each move and scanning the area well before pressing onwards. It took them hours before the first sign of Commonwealth activity. With their eyes all focused on the surrounding terrain in expectation of enemy infantry, they almost didn’t see it. They did, however, both hear the thunderous roar and the shaking ground beneath their feet. A *Jupiter*-class super dreadnought, the largest of the Skywatch’s arsenal, slowly lumbered over their position, its white, claw-shaped hull almost blending in with the foggy skies.

“Holy shit,” was all that Alexis could say as she and the rest took cover with all haste. Hopefully the grey rubble, brown soil and verdant plant life would conceal them well enough.

The super dreadnought was utterly immense, larger than anything that should have ever been built. That the Commonwealth was even able to produce such a monstrosity was nigh unbelievable. Hector had once theorized that a super dreadnought cost, in terms of resources, as much as a new settlement, and no one had any reason to doubt this. The ship that now hovered above them could destroy their entire resistance in a day. Maybe even an hour or less, if it came to a straight up fight.

Worse, as she looked upwards, Alexis noticed that the *Jupiter* was accompanied by a sizable escort. She didn’t recognize the hulls of the small units that followed their mothership. Perhaps a new interceptor design or something similar. It didn’t matter. Anything at all from that battle group could easily slaughter everyone under her command, so she didn’t really care what how the ships were classified, only how they could be avoided.

“What could possibly warrant the involvement of a titan like that?” Wilson whispered to Alexis as they crouched close together.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “It’s a fresh region, and there could be a lot of crime that the guard isn’t developed enough to deal with yet. Maybe they brought in the Skywatch to cover for the guard. Plus, you could probably carry half a city onboard one of those. If other transports are occupied, I guess they’re using dreads to ferry in people and materiel.”

“Maybe. But I don’t like it. Not at all.”

“Neither do I. Come on, everyone, let’s keep moving. Careful now.”

Despite that fearsome, if unintentional show of force from the Commonwealth, reaching the core of Johannesburg was surprisingly easy. The only defenses other than the occasional Skywatch airship were civil guardsmen. Alexis had been one before she defected, and their tactics, or lack thereof, were familiar to her. Most wouldn’t care to investigate anything as long as it wasn’t actively acting up, so with civilian clothes they looked no different from any of the other settlers and could proceed into the colony unmolested.

There were few roads to speak of, and those that existed were cracked and broken from the earthquakes. Most of the roads were dirt trails at best, and muddy swamps at worst. The Commonwealth still had a ways to go. Their buildings were largely modular, portable constructs, though a few of the older structures had been repaired to a livable condition. Workers trudged through the mud or drove heavy equipment around, and it seemed as if Alexis’ squad were free to do as they pleased so long as they did not draw the ire of any of the guardsmen.

Where would a writer possibly live, out of all this mess? They’d been briefed on his personality before they left. A bit eccentric, but nothing too out of the ordinary. He didn’t seem the sort to demand a comfortable lifestyle. After all, if he did, then why come to Johannesburg?

They decided to split up into small groups to cover more ground, with the intent to regroup after an hour and a half. If anyone had discovered anything, then they could report it to the rest of the group at that time. If nothing came up, then they would have to figure out something.

Alexis and Eirene naturally turned to each other for companionship, while Hector led a small contingent of his own. Wilson and Sokolov formed their own team, and a few others left to work alone.

The whole settlement was established around a substantial central construct, which must have been the praetorium, where the city’s government would convene. It resembled a grand basilica, topped with an attractive rotunda that gave it an official air. Several flags blew around in the wind – they recognized the black heart of the Skywatch, the standards of the four legions and the Skywatch, and the new flag of Johannesburg. Several copies of each studded the base of the rotunda, with a single, larger Commonwealth flag standing proudly at the very top.

The two women decided to look around this forum as part of their search for Jackson. He was popular within the Commonwealth, and there was a possibility that he might be attending some sort of book signing of interview, events which would likely be posted publicly, if they existed. The praetorium was as good a place as any to look for such postings.

Muddy trails slowly gave way to more civilized infrastructure as they approached the city hall. The legitimate asphalt, concrete, and steel constructions might have given the impression that this was an actual city, if one only saw this one particular area.

“I think we made a good choice, coming here,” said Eirene. “Unlike the rest, who have to trudge through all that mud and yuck.”

“It’s not that bad. Besides, we’re all used to it by now,” Alexis replied.

“It still seems unpleasant.”

“Whatever you say.”

As they walked, a small café caught Alexis’ eye. Exactly what made it stand out, she didn’t know. Perhaps its color was slightly more conspicuous, or maybe a ray of sun glinted off of the window at just the right angle. Whatever it was, she noticed it, and turned her attention in that direction.

“Hey,” she said to Eirene, “want to go look in there?”

“In that café? Why?”

“Why not? I mean, people sometimes post public announcements on little bulletin boards in cafés like that one. We might get lucky.”

“Are you sure you don’t just want to get something to eat?”

Alexis laughed. “Well, yes, but it’s still a decent idea. And come on, don’t tell me you aren’t hungry too.”

As if on cue, Eirene’s stomach rumbled slightly. In truth, the meager scraps that they had brought on their hike from the *Erzurum* were nowhere near enough to sustain any of them. “Fine,” she said, “let’s go.”

“Right, it’ll be good for you.” Alexis smiled playfully as she led Eirene into the shop.

The interior was amusingly kitschy. It would be interesting to see how the rest of the city would develop, Alexis thought*,* although she imagined that the rest of the principality wouldn’t follow the café’s lead of having paintings of cats all over the walls*.*

Despite the cheesiness, the cheap decorations – colorful grandfather clocks, decorative plates, and miscellaneous works of art – made the place quite warm and welcoming, which delighted the pair as they sat down on stools near the window. A young waitress approached them and inquired as to what they should like to eat or drink.

“Green tea, please. And a ham sandwich, I suppose,” Alexis said.

“Chai for me, and nothing else, thanks,” said Eirene.

As the two sat, waiting for the arrival of their hot drinks, they scanned the area for any sign of what they were looking for. There was a public bulletin board, but it displayed nothing of use.

“Oh well,” Alexis said, looking back at Eirene. “Still, let’s wait for our tea. It’ll be good to relax.”

“While our friends work outside, actually doing the job we came here to do.”

“They’re just as able to step into a shop and take a rest as we are. No reason to feel guilty.”

“There’s plenty of reason to feel guilty.”

Alexis folded her arms on the table and looked at her friend sternly for a second. “Hey, there’s no need for that kind of talk,” she said as she stood up, nodding to the waitress to signal that she would soon return. “We’re taking a break, so relax. Come outside with me while they make our tea; it’s a nice day out.”

As the two of them stood outside, Alexis glanced at Eirene, who was so beautiful there was little else she could think of during long, lonesome nights and whose own sorrows spawned such emotions in her.

“Alexis…it doesn’t feel real,” Eirene whispered. “We’re actually doing the work we were meant to do. If we fail, I don’t think we get another chance.”

“We won’t fail,” Alexis said, taking her hands in her own.

“You don’t know that.”

“You’re right, I don’t, but, well, I hope you can trust me when I say that I’m going to do everything I can to make sure that we can build the better world we’re looking for. We got off track, but now we’re doing better, aren’t we? Focus on that, and remember that no matter what happens, I’m always here for you. We’ll make it through this.”

Alexis paused and gazed at her friend before remembering the counsel Teague and Hector had offered. With a deep breath, she spoke. “On the way here, you said you loved me. Did you mean…?”

“Yeah. I, uh, decided a long time ago that I want to spend the rest of my life with you. If you’ll have me. I didn’t say anything when we were living together because I was afraid you would send me away if you didn’t reciprocate my feelings, but now, well, I might as well try.”

“I love you too, Eirene,” Alexis said with a joyful smile. “You mean everything to me. I want you to be safe and happy, and it kills me to see you so sad. It really kills me. When you first started living with me, I mean, I always thought you were attractive, but I didn’t think at the time I’d fall in love with you. And yet, here I am, loving you more than anything else in the world. So yes, I will have you.”

“Thank you,” Eirene whispered, closing her eyes as she felt Alexis lean forward and kiss her in a moment of inspiration. It lasted only for a few seconds, but that was more than enough, as they savored the feel and taste of each other’s lips. They felt the warmth of each other’s bodies and the excited beating of their hearts pressed close to one another.

“We should get our tea,” Eirene said, pawing the ground awkwardly once the air of romance had given way to lucidity.

“Uh…yeah, right. Yes, and then we can get back to work, just like the others. Perhaps their luck will be better than ours.”

As it were, the others were encountering no better success then their compatriots at the praetorium. Wilson and Sokolov had the misfortune of searching the outskirts of the city, the slums where there would be no campy cafés where they could catch a rest. These were the ramshackle shanties where the colonists lived before proper houses could be built for them.

Several citizens huddled around fire pits built out of the rubble and glanced briefly at the two men as they passed, then returned to whatever tasks they had been performing before. Most were fairly well dressed, which made them look quite out-of-place in the ruined slums of Johannesburg, but Wilson and Sokolov were aware of the situation and paid the oddity no heed.

“What an unfortunate situation,” Wilson muttered as they trudged on. His pants legs were brown with mud and the seeping wetness had begun to tickle his legs uncomfortably, and so he stopped briefly to try and remedy this unpleasantness. Failing to do so, he growled in frustration, then walked on.

They then came across a small group children playing in the street, or what passed for a street around the slums. A purple dodge ball was tossed about between two small teams, who would occasionally stop to fish the ball out of a particularly deep or sticky mud puddle.

“Look,” said Wilson. “Children.”

“How about that,” Sokolov said, looking towards the kids at play. “Do you suppose...”

“That they know something? They’re children, Sokolov.”

“Exactly. They don’t have any adult responsibilities. Maybe one of them at least reads in his spare time, or for schoolwork. Could be a fan, and might know where Jackson’s living.”

As they looked back towards the game, they saw too late the ball headed on a path straight towards Sokolov’s face. It struck him just under his right eye, leaving a patch of mud on the skin where it had hit. He glanced off the blow, and turned around to retrieve the toy. Before he returned it, he held the ball in his hand and posed his question. “Any of you kids like to read?”

“Why do you ask?” asked one child, squinting his eyes in suspicion.

“I’ll get to that, just answer the question.”

“Uh, I dunno. I mean, we gotta read for school, no real choice there. Most of us like it, though, but only Marka’s really into that sort of thing, ain’t that right?”

The boy who must have been Marka nodded, turning towards the two adults. “So,” he said, “what do you want with me?”

“We are here looking for a particular individual, a popular writer by the name of Arthur Jackson. Do you know him?” Wilson asked.

The boy closed his eyes, trying to think. “I…think I’ve heard of him, yeah. Wrote some book that my parents liked, but I never read it. I prefer non-fiction.”

“Ah, that’s a shame. Do you think that your parents would know and be willing to share where he resides right now? We have reason to suspect that he is somewhere in this city.”

“If you’re willing to journey on back to Ravengrad, then yeah, I bet they’d be cool with sharing whatever they know.”

Wilson and Sokolov were visibly shocked by what Marka had said. “You came here alone?” Sokolov asked the boy.

“Yeah. Just for two weeks with a school program to get kids to see a new city being built. Supposedly it’s supposed to help us appreciate the government, or whatever, but I don’t really care. Nice to see new places, but the living conditions are a bit crap.”

Wilson shrugged and patted the child on the head. “That will be all. Thanks for your help, but we’ve got to go.” He jokingly saluted Marka and the two Peregrine men took their leave.

“He’s right, this place is pretty shit,” Sokolov said as the children at play disappeared into the background.

“Only for now. Give it time and the people around us will be the ones in the tall towers. I suppose that’s the deal, that they put up with these miserable conditions for short while before getting new residences that outclass their original homes.”

“Yeah, except for the part where there’s no way anything good’s going to get built before even those kids are long dead. If they came from Widow’s Walk, then maybe they’re in for an upgrade, but no one here is going to be living the high life.”

“The Commonwealth gets things done quickly. Think about it. In the span of thirty years, you start with Ravengrad, or whatever; spend a little while waiting for the storms to calm down to expand, then go out and build three more megacities, plus all the little boroughs nearby. Terrebonne, Valencia, and all that. Thirty years, that’s about ten years a city. Say what you will about the CHP, but they get things done. Cold and efficient.”

“Hypocritical, but sure, we’ll go with efficient,” Sokolov said.

“Hypocritical? Explain.”

Sokolov stopped in the middle of the muddy road and scanned their surroundings, looking over each dilapidated building with contempt. “So after the storms, you know, everybody’s going on about how ‘oh no, everything is shit and we’re all doomed’ so the CHP comes to the rescue, giving the whole world a viable refuge where they can keep people safe. They want to preserve human life so that we don’t straight up go extinct and that pretty much becomes their mantra: keep as many people alive as possible. Except how many do you think die in the kind of work you’d need to build a city like Montreal in ten years? See, what you learn from the Commonwealth is that human life *does not matter*. The human *race* matters, but an individual person is always expendable. Or so you’d think. I’m not too thrilled with the idea that I can be tossed aside, but here’s hoping our lovely Commander Havery doesn’t think the same way Lancaster does.”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that,” Wilson said. “She seems to value the individual too much. Pulled me from the Panopticon, when, by all right, I deserved my life there. I committed a crime. Tried to kill a man. It’s as unjust for me to walk free as it was for the men I tried to kill.”

“Serve your sentence with us, then. Repay your debt to society by making it a better place.”

“That does seem to be my lot in life, nowadays.”

Sokolov let out a sympathetic sigh. “My parents said I could be great, but they fucking lied. Joining the militia was my last shot at being, well something. Nothing so far. I almost envy your position, since a redemption story’s almost always interesting. Meanwhile, here I am, just…surviving. But isn’t that what everybody does? Try not to die? I’m the most generic person you can imagine.”

Wilson looked at Sokolov sympathetically. “Not everyone can be special, I suppose. Those with power here can wield it to flatten everyone else. Very Hobbesian in its design: if no one has anything more than anybody else, he cannot oppress his neighbors, nor will they envy him. Your mediocrity is shared by everyone in the Commonwealth.”

“Yeah, unless you’re one of the lucky few who get to run that system. Then you get to shit on whoever you like. That’s why I’ve thrown in with Alexis and her old friends. Maybe they can break through the glass ceiling, but I never will. Best I can do is ride their coattails if this ends up working out.”

Secretly, Sokolov let a wisp of hope live on inside of him. If anyone could raise the hell he would need to make something of himself, it would be Alexis, and he had become closer to her than most – she had, after all, elected to include him in her detachment for this expedition. Perhaps, should their revolution be successful, he could finally emerge from his stifling minority.

When the time came for the search parties to reunite, they did so with a general air of disappointment. Not a single person, whether in a group or working alone, had found any trace of Jackson’s whereabouts – evidently, he was keeping a low profile. They briefly summarized what they each had seen in the hopes that someone else might interpret a piece of evidence differently, leading to something, at least, but nothing good came of it.

“Listen, I’m right tempted to head to that café Eirene and Alexis sat at,” Hector said, his voice droning from exhaustion and apathy. He had long since lost his motivation to continue working, if it only meant further letdowns. “Where did you say it was, again?”

“It’s on the forum, right by the praetorium. Cute little thing, can’t miss it.”

“Thanks. Anyone care to join me?” Hector asked as he turned to leave. Before anyone could respond, however, Alexis held up a hand to stop him. He looked at her, annoyed, but then realized what she had seen. A small squad of civil guardsmen, led by the same man they had met outside Maputo, were heading in their direction. It probably meant nothing, but it didn’t hurt to be cautious.

If Mixloe had noticed the three Peregrines he had spoken with, he didn’t show it. Instead, the guardsmen walked straight past the militia team without so much as a glance in their direction, only stopping to group up outside the same café where Hector wanted to eat.

“Looks like nothing,” Hector said as he shrugged and walked off. Wilson and Fischer followed him, but Alexis and Eirene stayed outside, watching with alarm as Mixloe’s squad entered immediately afterwards, filling the café almost to capacity.

Inside, Hector also took note of the guardsmen that had surrounded him and his companions, and he mentally prepared himself for a confrontation. As it turned out, he was not the commander’s target. Mixloe approached the counter, walking past all the customers who were waiting to be served, and approached one of the waitresses, whom he asked something inaudible. She nodded and briefly disappeared into a back room. Then, after a moment of tension, she was replaced by three men with guns, much to the alarm of everybody except for Mixloe’s squad.

“You’re finished,” the commander said. “Your attack on Port Callista was a failure. You failed to find what you need to take me down, and now the Imperator will never believe your lies. By comparison, everything *I* needed, I found aboard the, what did you call that ship, the *Guillermez*? Yes? Led us straight here; you can’t hide behind this stupid little store anymore.”

“How many people do you have here? One squad?” one of the men asked, a pallid and gaunt individual with curly white hair that had been partially burned, leaving scraggly strands that reached almost past the hem of his cheesy “Hawaiian” tee shirt. All of them were clearly battle-hardened and of an age where they would have experience but not yet succumbed to the health problems of the elderly. More than a match for even veterans of the civil guard, but perhaps not for the more tested Peregrine militia.

“We sank your destroyer. We can handle whatever you have in this bunker.”

“Are you willing to bet your peoples’ lives on that? How about the lives of everyone else in this café? If you draw your weapon, how many civilians do you think we can mow down before you can take us?”

Watching Mixloe become visible more nervous, Hector smiled to himself and turned to look out the window, where Alexis was waiting with the rest of their team, all carrying concealed weapons. The two of them made eye contact through the glass pane and exchanged subtle nods, ready to spring into action if need be.

Before any of the guardsmen could respond, Hector stepped slightly out of line and addressed the bandits. “Civilians? You’re in deeper shit than you think, idiot,” was all he said.

“And who the fuck are you?” the long-haired man asked just before Sokolov’s first bullet penetrated his chest and showered his nearest comrade with blood. A second bullet tore through the dead man before his body even hit the ground and killed the second bandit. The third was executed before he even knew what was happening.

“Everybody, quit the area, now!” Mixloe shouted over the growing commotion, directing the panicked civilians away from the café before his enemies returned. When the scene was clear, he gestured for the rest of the militia to join him inside.

“Do you know of any escape routes they might use?” Hector asked, gesturing to the bleeding corpses.

“My people found maps aboard the sinking ship. Plans of the bunker. We have its exits covered. If you lent your extra manpower in storming it, I would owe you another favor. Anything in my power to give is yours.”

“That sounds like a good deal to me,” Alexis said. Hector agreed, and she gave the order for her battle-ready troops to follow Mixloe’s squad deeper into whatever bunker had been masked by the café.

Eirene, unfit for any kind of shootout, stayed outside with a few of the younger militia members, waiting for the situation to be resolved. Civil guard trucks and cars had begun to surround the café, and the nearby praetorium was on lockdown, so she waited amongst the more heavily-armed guardsmen ready to follow up in case Mixloe’s team failed. Fortuitously, they did not, and the commander soon emerged from the café, his troops escorting a small group of prisoners that included the waitress who had served her only hours before.

Next, a team of medics went in, obviously to pick up any dead or wounded to be taken away in the ambulances that had since arrived. It wasn’t until she saw Alexis being carried away on a stretcher that she jumped up and rushed to her girlfriend’s side, relieved to see that she was still breathing and conscious.

“The shot just grazed me. They’re just going to patch me up, and I’ll be fine. No more than a night’s stay in the hospital, so they say.”

“You trust him?”

Alexis laughed and winced slightly. “I have to. We have medics of our own, but it would be suspicious to deny proper medical care. I think we have a friend in Mixloe, anyhow.”

“If that’s what you say,” Eirene said before turning to look at the prisoners. “She seemed so nice, our waitress.”

“I doubt she was involved. Most of the staff seem ignorant of what their bosses were doing, just poor saps hired to make this place look legit. They’ll question her, but I bet she goes free in a day or two, missing only her job.”

“Better to lose your work than your life. I wouldn’t wish the Panopticon on anybody.”

\* \* \*

It was late in the evening when Kirby Mixloe stepped into Alexis’ room at the Johannesburg hospital and sat down next to her as she regarded him with amusement, barely able to see him in the dark, sterile chamber where the doctors had patched her up and left her to rest overnight.

“What brings you here?” she asked as he turned on the lights to better see his associate.

“I heard you say we could be friends. If you want that, we should know more about each other. I’m prepared to tell you everything about what we were doing in Maputo if you tell me what business you have in Jo’burg. Remember that I still owe you for your help downtown.”

“My hospital stay doesn’t count?”

“No, it’s my duty to see that the wounded are treated well. Our alliance could be more than that.”

Hector would no doubt chide her for compromising operational security, but Alexis disagreed with her strategist on this issue. They were in Johannesburg to forge alliances within the Commonwealth, and there was no reason that they shouldn’t begin with the civil guard.

“One piece at a time,” Mixloe continued. “I go, then you go. Then I go again, and so on. Deal?”

“Deal,” Alexis said. “What were you doing in Maputo?”

“We keep a supply cache there. Ships come and pick up goods from us where the Skywatch can’t see. Now, what about you?”

“We’re looking for Arthur Jackson, the author. He has information we need. What do the ships carry?”

“Anything we tell them to. Food. Guns. Electronics. Most recently, enriched uranium. Why did you need Jackson’s help?”

“He can tell us how to find Marcus Fairchild. We don’t know where he is right now, but we need his help. Like, if we convince him to back us, we can have a bit more bargaining power when we go to Ravengrad to press our demands. Freedom to congregate and publicly practice religion is a big one, but we’re also looking to turn back their stupid anti-tribalism policies.”

“So, what are these ‘private interests’ you said you represent?” Mixloe asked.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. It’s your turn to answer, and I’d really like to know what you want to do with enriched uranium.”

The guard commander sighed and looked at Alexis with a dark and serious expression on his face. “Nuclear weapons,” he said, but paused when he saw his associate’s alarm. “No, we don’t intend to use them. Our goal is South African independence, and the nukes are a safeguard against Commonwealth aggression. Just so they’ll think twice before coming after us.”

“Fair enough, I guess,” Alexis said.

Kirby Mixloe laughed quietly and smiled. “I’m glad you agree. We have been taking some of the supplies Ravengrad sends down here and trading them to a community in what used to be the western United States. Big enough to be prosperous, and distant enough from the CHP that they haven’t been ‘integrated’ yet. Most importantly, they have the facilities needed to produce nuclear weapons that they will let us use in exchange for food, medical and construction supplies, and that sort of thing. We also send some to a group of survivors in Central America who restored the Panama Canal to working order so that they’ll let us pass. When we have our arsenal, which could take a few years, we will declare independence.”

“Maybe we can be friends after all,” Alexis mused.

“We have other friends, too. Other independent states and resistance groups have reached out to us for alliances. Our greatest benefactor is somewhat zealous with regards to its religion, but they don’t ask much. Just that we share intelligence from within the CHP and agree to a defensive pact once we have our independence.”

“Good for you,” Alexis said. “I guess it’s my turn, then – we’re with the Peregrine militia. I assume you know about our attack on Ravengrad Tower. That battle being so disastrous convinced us that violence wasn’t the answer anymore, so we wanted a more, uh, diplomatic solution to our problems. But, seeing as we’d just committed a terrorist attack, we needed legitimacy and proof that we really want a peaceful revolution, and so we’re hoping to convince Marcus Fairchild to help us. We need Jackson to help us find him, since he doesn’t make his whereabouts public.”

“I see. Well, then, if that’s the case, then I can repay my second debt to you. I don’t know where Fairchild is, as guardsmen such as myself aren’t privy to the movements of senior officials, but I do know where Jackson is. 78 St. Swithens Avenue, a few hours walking from here. Only a few houses rebuilt on that street; his is the ugly yellow one. Why he wanted that color, I’ve not a damn clue. Still, you’ll find your man there. Good luck.”

“Thank you. If we ever get to the negotiating table with Lancaster, I’ll contact you, and if your arsenal is ready by then, we can see about adding your independence bid to the deal.”

Mixloe smiled as he turned to leave. “Call my office at the praetorium and ask about Cascadia when the time comes, then. I’ll write down the phone number for you. In any case, if we’re done here, then I must bid you goodbye, Havery.”

“Goodbye, then,” Alexis said.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Eirene awoke very slowly in the dreary shack where she and her companions had been able to find shelter for the night. Light filled her eyes as she blinked. A few people could be heard in the background, and then darkness once again. And repeat.

Suddenly, a tap on her shoulder. A voice. “Pip, pip, time to wake up.”

It was, as Eirene suspected, Alexis. Eirene rolled over to see her friend smiling at her, illuminated by the rekindled fire and warm sunlight coming in through the door.

“You awake? We’re moving soon. Gonna go find Jackson, and we can’t exactly leave you here. Heh.”

“No, I’m sure you couldn’t bear it,” Eirene said, climbing out of her sleeping bag. She’d brought a few toiletries along to settle her basic needs, but the lack of a shower of any description was disappointing. Alexis too was hurting from the absence of her morning cleansing; without a wash she felt oily and disgusting. She regretted not asking for one at the hospital.

“Sokolov and his guys brought back some eggs and bacon, if you want any,” Alexis said. “We’ve got a few left, but more are cooking, ‘case that’s not enough.”

“Thanks. That sounds good. You doing okay?”

“Yeah, I’m doing better.” Alexis pulled up her shirt just enough to show the bandages on her belly. “They patched me up just fine, hurts a little but it’ll be alright. Not like I haven’t gotten worse scars already.”

The morning’s weather was surprisingly pleasant. A few pure white clouds dotted the sky, but the early sun was otherwise uninterrupted, casting the ruins and the slums in a warm, comforting light. There were more children about the streets playing assorted games and talking amongst themselves, largely ignoring the Peregrine soldiers.

The mud had largely dried overnight, meaning that their journey to Jackson’s residence was less strenuous than it would have been the day before. The few hours that it took to travel to the address which Mixloe had given them went by without incident. A welcome lull in a chaotic time.

Swithens Avenue wasn’t a pretty sight, but it was made even worse by the garish yellow hue of Jackson’s domicile. Alexis frowned as she looked upon the offensively bright structure. It almost seemed to make a mockery of the dull ruins all around.

A few guardsmen were nearby, milling about amongst the civilian crowds. Every so often, one shot a glance towards them. No doubt, they had been sent by Mixloe to keep an eye on his new “friends.” It was to be expected. After all, none of them would have done any different in that position. As long as these men did not interfere with the mission, they could watch for as long as they wanted.

Without further ado, Alexis led Eirene and Hector to Jackson’s door while the rest stood guard at inconspicuous positions nearby. With a quick knock on the wooden door, they made their presence known, hoping that the owner was indeed in.

He was. The sound of footsteps approaching from the other side of the portal was music to their ears, as it meant that their search was over. Now all that remained was to convince or trick him into giving up the information they needed. As the door opened, they saw for the first time the true face of their target. He was fairly average-looking, with a bearded, oval-shaped head crowned by a curly mass of blond hair. A pair of dark grey spectacles rested upon his angular nose.

“Hello?” he asked, nonchalantly looking upon his visitors.

“Mr. Jackson? Alexis Havery. There’s something that we need to talk to you about.”

“Well, what is it? Who sent you?”

“Commander Kirby Mixloe directed us to you,” Alexis said. As she did so, Hector eyed her suspiciously, still concerned about what beans she might have spilt in exchange for that information. She had not yet revealed the details of her stay in the hospital.

“You are well acquainted with Marcus Fairchild, yes?” she continued.

Jackson looked slightly worried. “I am. Is he well? Has something happened?”

“No, that’s not it. You’ve met with him recently, if I understand correctly, and he has recently left for somewhere. We need his assistance with some business, and he has quite effectively made himself scarce, so we were hoping that you could provide some information as to his whereabouts.”

“I can, yes, but we should discuss this matter in private. Come inside.”

Alexis looked around at the others and then nodded, following Arthur inside the house. It was a cozy little construct and, to their surprise, quite satisfactory in the aesthetic department. Where the exterior had been a hideous affront to the senses of any sane individual, the interior was well-furnished and coordinated, with colors that complimented each other nicely rather than resembling a child’s scribbles.

Noting their curiosity, Arthur was able to divine the reason for such astonishment. “I didn’t choose the color,” he said. “We painted it with what we had at the time. Sadly, all that we had was that…unfortunate shade of yellow.”

“I see,” said Hector. “You intend to change it, then?”

“It’s grown on me, and, I must confess, it is convenient if I ever need to provide directions. You were able to find this place easily enough, I imagine.”

“Everything else being a pile of rubble didn’t hurt, but I see your point.”

“Yeah. Now, come, I’ll put on some tea.”

As they walked down the hallway towards Arthur’s kitchen, where he kept the kettle, Eirene took an interest in the array of mahogany-framed photographs mounted on the wall. She stopped to look closer, letting the others go ahead for a second before they noticed her delay.

“Ah, my families,” Arthur said to satisfy her curiosity.

Eirene looked at him, and then back at the wall. “Families? Plural?” she asked, her interest only piqued further.

“Yes. Tell me, miss…?”

“Eirene.”

“Miss Eirene, how is your family doing?”

A moment passed. “Dead, the lot of them. Probably. I don’t like to talk about it.”

Arthur nodded. “My sympathies. My own parents died long ago. Killed by one of the monstrous earthquakes that obliterated the western U.S. back in the day. I had nothing left when I reached Ravengrad. Since then, I have taken both husbands and wives in an effort to rebuild something resembling a family. Sometimes they bring children, and sometimes not, but, regardless, neither has lasted more than a few years.”

“Mmm. Unlucky in love, I suppose.”

“Death has claimed more of my spouses than divorce. I guess that’s still bad luck.”

“Oh. I’m quite sorry,” Eirene said.

“It’s quite alright. No matter, let’s go have tea.”

As Arthur put on the kettle, the Peregrine company sat themselves down around the adjacent living room, enjoying the comfortable chairs and sofa. Soon, Arthur returned with a small platter holding several cups of tea, which he distributed to his guests before joining Hector on the couch.

“So,” he said, “what’s this about Marcus?”

“Like I said, we’ve got a few questions to ask him, and we heard that you two have had a rendezvous of sorts before he left for parts unknown to us. The nature of our inquiry is a long story and not really important, so we simply ask that you point us in the right direction.”

“Hmm, I rather think that the nature of your questions is indeed important. I’ve got time – care to explain?”

Alexis stopped and looked at Hector for a moment. “Honesty got us this far,” she said. “Mixloe already knows who we are. Why stop now?”

“You fucking told him? Well, if opsec’s already in the trash can, then fine, might as well tell this guy everything.”

“We’re here to build trust, Hector.”

“But not everybody can be trusted.”

“I’m waiting,” Arthur said, drumming his fingers on the armrest.

“We’re with the Peregrine militia,” Alexis said. “We attacked Ravengrad Tower a few months ago, but, if all goes well, that’ll be the last time we use violence. I mean, we still oppose Commonwealth policy and all, but the defeat at the Tower was lesson enough that we can’t fight for our freedom, at least not literally. But the CHP government doesn’t exactly make it easy for an average joe to have a say in policy, so we need allies. Hence our quest for Fairchild, which we need you for – my strategists tell me that you know where he’s off to. I know you have no reason to trust us, but I think we could do some real good for a lot of people. If you want to know anything else then I’ll be more than happy to tell you; I don’t have anything to hide anymore.”

Arthur looked contemplatively at her for a second, then hummed quietly. “Even if I trusted you, this would be treason of the highest order,” he mused. “While I’ve no great love for the Commonwealth, I also have no desire to see the walls of Ravengrad torn down for all the terrors of our world to come spilling in. You need to ingratiate yourselves with respected officers who’ll be willing to put in a good word for you? I could help with that, but how do I know you aren’t going to kill my friend when you find him?”

“You don’t, I guess. I’ll concede that this is a bit of a gamble. But, in our defense, we’re actually on official business for the Skywatch that you could confirm with the commander of the Panopticon. We were sent to keep Kasimiran insurgents out of Ravengrad, and we’ve technically done so. It’s just that you’re pretty much our only shot at peaceful reform.”

“We have nothing to gain by killing Marcus,” Eirene said. “The Director-General died by her hand and nothing changed. We haven’t got any fight left in us, but the desire’s still there. The desire to let people worship their gods without having to hide it, to let people say aloud who they are and be proud of it, not forced into some kind of monolith like Lancaster wants. We still want self-determination and a voice in the government for everyone who survived the storms, not just the parliamentary elite. We need your help for this.”

Arthur set his teacup down on the table and stood up, looking through the window into his weed-infested backyard. For almost a minute, the Peregrines watched him anxiously, waiting for his reaction.

“Stockholm,” he finally said. “Marcus has gone to the Madelyn-Rash headquarters in Stockholm. It’s not hidden; you should have an easy time finding it if you can reach the city proper. You’re not wrong – this is a risk, but, if you can do what you say you want to do, then it’s worth it. If nothing else, it will make for a good story, and good stories are good for business in my line of work. No other reason for me to stay in this miserable city.”

“Thank you. We’ll make sure you don’t regret this,” Alexis said.

“You’re welcome. Now, will that be all?”

“Yes, that will be all. Your assistance is much appreciated.”

\* \* \*

The Peregrines later met up once again in a lonesome part of the ruins, far enough from the city center that they had complete privacy.

Hector was the first to speak. “So, do you think he told us the truth?”

“I think that we have to assume he did,” Alexis said, frowning. “I mean, what other options do we have? We’ll go to Stockholm, find Madelyn-Rash, and either he’s there or he isn’t.”

“And if we go all that way for nothing?”

“We’ll build that bridge once we reach the river. For now, we have a more immediate quandary.”

“What’s that?”

“We’ve basically got two continents to cross. We’re going to need fuel for the corvette. Fighting the *Erzurum* and the battle at Maputo have left us with barely enough to get back to base.

Wilson crossed his arms. “I feel like that’s a problem we should have addressed before we set out,” he said. “Someone remind me how we got this far in the first place?”

“Luck, I guess,” said Eirene. “Or maybe God’s on our side, or some such nonsense.”

Hector laughed. “Hmm, maybe. It’s as good a guess as any. So, what are we going to do? Steal some fuel?”

“Could we possibly ask for some?” Wilson asked. “Maybe that guard captain would be willing to help. He told you how to contact him, correct?”

“I’d rather not push our luck,” Alexis replied, “but I don’t want to…further antagonize our hosts. He’s already paid his debts to us.”

“So what would you have us do, then?”

Sokolov stepped forwards, holding up his hand to stop the conversation. “We trade,” he said.

“Trade what? And with whom?”

“The supplies we got from the *Erzurum*. We’ve got quite a lot of food and drink and other supplies there. When Wilson and I were looking for Jackson, we passed a lot of people in pretty miserable conditions. Commonwealth’s not brought in any of the materiel they need to get going yet. I’d be half willing to bet that the *Erzurum* was supposed to be their salvation, given how much it was carrying. So, we go back to Maputo, give them the food we stored aboard the corvette, and, in return, they get us some fuel for the airship.”

“While that seems morally questionable, it’s better than outright theft, I suppose. Any objections?”

Eirene was the only one to voice a complaint, but even she had no better plan. “I don’t think that we can argue any pretense of morality at this point,” she said, “so I guess it’ll do. Gonna take some time to cart the supplies back and forth.”

“Aye, it will, so we should get moving. That’s it, then?”

“That’s it, then,” Hector agreed.

The trade wasn’t difficult. With supplies as scarce as they were in the nascent settlement, the people of Maputo weren’t keen to ask uncomfortable questions when doing so might keep much-needed goods at bay. The militia was even offered a vehicle to make transportation easier, and soon everything was ready. The colonists had their food, and the rebels had their fuel, ready to head north for Scandinavia.

## Chapter 12 – Julia

“*The CSS* Peregrine *has been shot down north of Ravengrad, and many rebels responsible for its theft have been apprehended, but it is possible some elements have escaped into the wastelands. Why am I being refused the chance to sweep the area for survivors? The Commonwealth was supposed to eliminate political red tape, not to embody it.”*

* *Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster, in* Dispatch to Director-General Magnus

Stockholm was beautiful, a testament to the skill of the Commonwealth’s architects. For a land purported to be the “industrial capital of the Commonwealth,” it bore no resemblance to the smoky nightmare-cities of the old world. An ivory backbone formed the core of the city and attractive contemporary architecture slowly gave way to the ruins that had not yet been reclaimed by the state, which in turn gave way to lush forests.

“So, where’s the Madelyn-Rash plant?” Eirene asked when they were deeper in the city, surrounded by skyscrapers and busybodies.

Fischer, who was walking next to her, shrugged. “Big city. Could be anywhere.”

“That’s helpful,” said Hector, rolling his eyes.

“I don’t see you offering any bright ideas,” Alexis rebuked, shooting him a sideways glance.

“Well, we could always, I don’t know, ask the locals. You might be used to fighting your way through problems, out in the ruins with only the rocks and dirt as conversation partners, so you might have forgotten that we can actually talk to people.”

They didn’t even have to ask a local, as it turned out. The civil engineers had been kind enough to erect convenient signposts on several street corners that showed maps of the city’s streets. A few were slightly worn, and through the holes Alexis could see bits of a second map whose layout didn’t quite match. Apparently, the Commonwealth had simply mounted the new on top of the old here just as they had built the city itself.

“You make do with what you have, I suppose,” Alexis muttered to herself.

Madelyn-Rash was some distance away, but not painfully far, entailing a trek much shorter than that which they had made to Johannesburg. The facility itself was predominantly done in the same style as its neighbors – several large buildings surrounded an asphalt cul-de-sac flanked by lush, green lawns and flower gardens. It could have been a mansion.

“If I may make a request,” Sokolov said before they went in.

“What is it?” Hector asked.

“I have family here. I know it’s a bad idea to talk to them in person while we’re still outlaws, but I would like to check in on them nonetheless. Just watch from afar and make sure they’re alright. No one will know.”

“Sounds creepy, but fine. Do what you want. We don’t need you in here anyway.” As Hector gave his approval, Sokolov gave him a thankful nod and excused himself from the party.

The rest were welcomed by a dark iron gate attended by a pair of civil guardsmen who, to everyone’s relief, did little more than open the gate for the party. The weather outside hadn’t been uncomfortably cold, but the warmth of the interior was nevertheless welcome. A single receptionist sat alone at the front desk. She glanced for a second Alexis and her party as if she expected something of them, and then proceeded to ignore them entirely.

The receptionist only glanced up again as Alexis and Hector approached her, looking at them without a shred of emotion visible through her thin spectacles. “Need something?” was all she asked.

“Yeah,” Alexis replied. “We were hoping to speak with Marcus Fairchild. Is he in?”

“Have you got an appointment with him?”

Alexis stopped. They’d gotten so far that Fairchild was probably within a quarter mile of them. To be thwarted simply because they didn’t have an appointment after an unnervingly easy quest would be intolerable.

“No, we don’t have an appointment,” she said, quickly thinking back to what Magnus had said to Marcus on the Grand Balcony. “We were sent by Kirby Mixloe, down in Johannesburg to carry a message about the mourner project down south. Wanted it delivered by hand, so here we are.”

The receptionist nodded and pulled up a schedule on her computer. With a few clicks, she confirmed that he was not currently occupied. “He’s free until seven,” she said. “Second floor, room thirteen. I’ll tell him that envoys from Jo’burg have arrived.”

An obviously fake smile formed from her lips as the Peregrines thanked her and headed upstairs.

They paused outside the door adorned with the number thirteen. Alexis didn’t know what she’d expected. Their goal now lay only behind this simple door, not any elaborate portal or mystical gate. It was wholly underwhelming, and yet she hesitated to turn the handle. With Alexis stalled, Hector stepped forward and pushed her hand away, opening the door himself.

Marcus Fairchild stood alone on the other end of the room, looking outwards. Two of the walls were entirely glass, and in them each Peregrine could see his or her reflection, as well as those of the others. Surely Fairchild had seen their arrival in such a manner.

He turned around to see them clearly, walking towards the small group. His face was aged but not wrinkled, though the hairs on his chin were most of the way towards white. There was little in the room save for a long table surrounded by empty chairs, an eerie sight. The lighting was cold, giving Fairchild a ghostly appearance as he passed by chair after chair to get closer to his guests.

He stopped about ten feet away, looking at the faces of those now standing before him. Hector was first under his steely gaze, and then Fischer. “My secretary informs me that you have news from Kirby about…” he stopped as soon as he saw Alexis. *This* one he recognized. The girl whose efforts had come so close to ending his life in the Ravengrad Tower, the one who had ended Magnus’ rule on behalf of the Peregrine militia. Whatever this was, it probably wasn’t about the mourners.

“Hello again, old friend,” Marcus said, shooting her a sly smile and a nod.

“It’s been a while,” Alexis replied, returning the gesture.

“I suppose you’re here to finish the work you started at the Tower? I’d heard that some idiot at the Panopticon had let you walk free, but, judging by your failure that night, I thought that you were too incompetent to do anything with that. I suppose that I now look the fool, don’t I?”

Eirene stepped forward, holding her hands open to show that she was unarmed. “No, we’re not going to hurt you. Or anyone else. The bloodshed needs to end, and that’s why we’re here.”

Marcus scoffed. “Pardon me if I don’t trust you. Last time we met, you *were* shooting at me. Though that was really just *you*,” he said, pointing at Alexis. “The others who were there that night do not appear to be here today, and, those who are, I do not recognize.”

“Eirene Lilliana de Lafayette,” said Eirene, extending her hand, which Marcus shook. “You’re right, I wasn’t at the tower. Pilot.”

With an understanding nod, Marcus continued. “So, you’re really not here to assassinate me? I suppose if you were, you would have had that opportunity already. So, why have you come?”

Alexis shook her head and explained the plan. It took a while and her speech was occasionally clumsy, but he seemed to comprehend what they intended to do.

“Interesting,” Marcus said once she was finished. “If we were to cooperate, we would indeed outnumber and outgun the Commonwealth forces. A victory for such an alliance would put us both into a temptingly dominant position. To make such a move against my government would no doubt be treasonous, though…I have no reason to resort to such matters to serve my own ambitions.” He paused. “And yet, you say that you wish to advance your position through peace rather than through violence. Commendable, and a course of action which I might support, if I had any reason to trust your words.”

“You’re right, you don’t,” said Alexis. “But you don’t stand to lose anything. If we’d wanted to kill you, we could have done that ten times over by now. And for us alone to take on the Commonwealth would be suicidal. They already did a number on us after Ravengrad, and in our weakened state, they could easily do it again. That’s one of the reasons we want to negotiate now. You’d be bargaining from a position of strength. All we want is to be heard out.”

“On the contrary. I do stand to lose a great deal. The penalties for collusion with terrorist forces are…severe, though I do not fear death by any means. It is for my daughters that I am afraid, as I cannot bear to involve them in such schemes, no matter how indirectly. I *may* be able to offer you token support without drawing the ire of my superiors, but little more.”

“You have daughters?” Eirene asked.

“Yes. My youngest, Lena, is supervising some of my remote black sites, while my eldest, Julia, was requested by the Commonwealth to serve as a representative of Madelyn-Rash in Ravengrad.”

Eirene froze. A single tear threatened to leave her eye, but she wiped it away before she returned to her senses and began to dig through her satchel. “Hold on,” she said, rummaging quickly but carefully. Marcus waited as she did so, and eventually she produced a small envelope from which came a folded piece of paper.

She handed the paper to Marcus, who accepted the gift and began to unfold it. Drawn on its surface was a beautiful rendition of a young woman with a thin, almost emaciated face and long dark hair. The woman’s eyes and lips were forced into an expression of happiness, but also concealed a sinister hint of pain, as if struggling to forget a horrible memory.

“Is this her?” Eirene asked as Marcus looked at the drawing, increasingly flustered.

He dropped the paper. “Yes,” was all he said, voice low, before he lunged at Eirene, gripping her throat with both hands. Suddenly, he seemed beyond furious, as if possessed by the wrath of an angry god.

“*How do you know this woman?”* he yelled, digging into Eirene’s flesh. She became truly scared and began to cry once more while Alexis angrily reacted to Marcus’ attack, grasping for her sidearm only to remember that she hadn’t brought one. She glanced to the side and saw Hector, not so much angry as alerted, do the same. He had actually brought a gun with him, but he was not about to use it.

“*How? How do you know her? What have you done with her?”* Marcus continued yelling, squeezing tears out of Eirene.

“Drop her!” Hector ordered, advancing towards Marcus with his hand next to his weapon. Marcus saw the threat but ignored it, staring Eirene in the eyes.

“She can’t answer you with your hands at her throat like that!” Alexis protested, desperately trying to save Eirene with words and not violence. If Marcus had to be killed, then all their efforts would have been for nothing.

Hearing this, Marcus relented. “My emotions got the better of me,” he said, letting Eirene stumble back. “Continue, but make sure that your next words are selected with *great* care. If I do not like what I hear, then by my command the guardsmen here will not be merciful. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” Eirene said, sniffing back water and salt from bloodshot eyes.

“Then speak.”

No one said a word as Eirene prepared to talk. Watching her take a deep breath and squeeze her eyes shut, Alexis remembered what had transpired just before their release from the Panopticon.

She didn’t think that Marcus would like what he was about to hear.

Now free from such an aggressive grasp, Eirene began her story. “After our foolish attack on Ravengrad, I was sure of the fate that befell all those who didn’t perish during the battle. We fought and died, but everybody knew that there was no more hope. And so we surrendered, resigning ourselves to a life imprisoned in the Panopticon. Not the worst fate, or, at least, that’s what most of us believed. I soon learned differently. And yet, mine was not the worst pain that I encountered during my days in the pit. I cannot imagine that Julia committed any crime to justify what they did to her.”

Marcus’ nostrils flared and his mouth twisted into a snarl, but he held back. He didn’t want to believe what Eirene was saying. It couldn’t have been true; she must have been a liar.

Eirene continued, “At first, I did not know the full name of the girl with whom I shared my cell. A sign outside read ‘Eirene L.’ and ‘Julia F.” but I never learned her last name, not until now. She was in bad shape. Could barely even talk to me, and when she did, it was her speech was scattered and broken at best. I don’t know how long she had been in isolation, but it was too long, since my very presence seemed to intimidate her. With wide eyes she watched every action I made, and when I tried to talk to her she retreated into her corner. After some time, she began to open up to me. Physically, she was still a wreck: hair in a constant state of disarray, eyes flared, lips chapped, and everything generally a mess. But I like to think that my being there helped her somewhat. She no longer tried to keep her distance from me, and often sat next to me on the bed, watching while I drew. Art allowed me to soothe myself somewhat despite the Commonwealth’s cruelty. It had the same effect on Julia; she would watch and enjoy my work, and eventually she was able to talk with me about my drawings. She asked if I might draw her one day. I told her that I’d be happy to, and that’s where this piece came from.”

As Eirene pointed to the paper that now lay on the floor, Marcus picked it back up, looking at the sketch of the girl. He still didn’t believe it, didn’t *want* to believe it, but he would hear this story to its end. In the unlikely event that she was not lying to him, he would need to take informed action.

“When the Skywatch let us free to fight the Kasimiran army, I tried to get them to let her go too,” Eirene said. “They wouldn’t hear it, said she was too important to release. Guess it makes sense now.” With that, Marcus could feel his heart sinking down into the ground, leaving an empty pit in his chest. Frustrated, he shook his head. There was nothing to prove that this was true. The drawing meant nothing; it could have come from anywhere.

“Before I left, though…she…she gave me this.” Eirene held up her left hand, on which the azure ring was clearly visible.

Marcus stared at the piece of jewelry for a second, then reached out to touch it. Slowly, he pulled the ring off of Eirene’s finger and held it up to his eye. He knew this ring well, but he still didn’t want to admit it. It could have been a forgery, but the details were precisely as he remembered them.

“She told me that it had been given to her by her late mother. Said that it was one of a set, and that the others…” It didn’t take more than a glance to finish Eirene’s sentence. On Marcus’ finger was an identical ring set with an emerald gemstone.

“Do you know where Julia is?” Hector asked.

“She – she is in Ravengrad. She must be!” Marcus protested, handing the ring back to Eirene while he gently touched his own. “You, girl, what happened?”

“I told you, I don’t know. I’m…I’m sorry. The others bargained for our release in exchange for helping them. We left, and didn’t take her with us. I hated myself for not pushing harder to get her out. I know what it’s like to be betrayed, and now I’ve become everything I hated about – never mind, that’s not important. I’m sorry.”

“No, no,” Marcus said nervously, “if I’ve become powerful enough that the Commonwealth feels they need to use my own daughter against me, then that’s my fault. But this can’t be true – no, Julia is safe in Ravengrad, as she always has been.”

Hector smirked. “Find her then. Eirene is not a clever girl, but she doesn’t lie – ask Lancaster or one of his toadies to bring Julia here, see what they say.”

Marcus nodded. “Of course. Always verify; I should have done that to begin with, which would have saved you the trouble of going through that whole story. It will take me some time to investigate, but I will ascertain the truth. If you are not lying, then we can do business, but, if you are, then I shall have you returned to the Panopticon posthaste. It was a mistake for the guards to release you to fight Kasimira, especially if their forces never attacked, but if you can bring my daughter back to me, then perhaps…perhaps it was worth it. Until I return, you may take residence in the workers’ barracks. I’ll have the administration set up accommodations.” He nodded and left without another word.

“So, you think he’s going to come back with guards?” Fischer asked, a little nervous.

“Probably,” Alexis replied.

Marcus did not return for several days, but, when he did, he returned only with a sour look upon his face rather than a contingent of guards.

“I command an armada,” he said. “A fleet of four black ships, each with a wing of the Commonwealth’s most advanced interceptors to her name. Corvettes too, and frigates. Tanks, artillery, and more.”

He paused, leaving the room in wonder and expectation.

“They’re yours if you can get Julia out.”

More silence. No one knew how to react. Had they succeeded? Had it been enough for Eirene to recount her sad story to bring Marcus onboard? It seemed even more unreal than even their very arrival at Madelyn-Rash, but here it was. On one condition.

Marcus continued, speech fragmented. “I did not speak with Lancaster. Too risky. I have enough men in the right places to find out what I need, and they confirmed that Julia Fairchild is being held in the Panopticon under that backstabbing bastard, Magnus’ orders. He said he was my friend, and I believed him. Idiot. I do not think that Lancaster is even aware of the situation. Magnus must have taken her hostage after she was invited to the capital and not told me so that I would remain loyal, but he would still have an ace up his sleeve if I ever turned against him. Fed me fake letters and doctored photographs that I should never have been so foolish to believe.” The Overseer then laughed. “The irony is sickening. By trying to keep me in check, they’ve delivered me and all the power I command into the hands of their enemies.”

“If you aid us, though, couldn’t that mean her death?” Eirene asked. Hector’s intake of breath was so sharp that everyone could hear it as he looked at her with furious eyes, silently cursing her naïve words that might easily sabotage everything they had worked for.

“No. As I said, I also discovered that, having recently acceded to the office of Director-General, Lancaster does not even know that he is in possession of such a potent weapon against me. The fastest *theoretical* way for me to retrieve my daughter would be to request that he have her released, but that runs the risk of him turning right around and using her against me. Unfortunately, my best course of action is to let her rest for the time being. Your plan being a peaceful one may be divine providence – I can aid your commoners’ movement to the negotiating table with Lancaster. You get him to release all the political prisoners in the Panopticon as part of your bargain, and Julia goes free without him being any the wiser. And if diplomacy fails, well…I imagine that the turmoil likely to ensue will make it easy for you to break in and pull her out. With my support, of course.”

“Then it sounds like we have a deal,” Alexis said.

“We do, yes. As a show of good faith, I have another bit of information to share with you that I learned while looking into the situation in the capital. Jacob Lancaster, following your release from the Panopticon, has made numerous attempts to attack your headquarters in the northern outskirts. These have all been blocked by internal resistance or simply unlucky accidents, but you should be aware of the threat. You may have been already, but, as none of them have even gotten close to you, I decided that it would be worth telling you, just in case. I suppose his stricter attitude didn’t take too kindly to Magnus’ standing order to let prisoners be fielded against Kasimira.”

“He’s nothing if not an ideological hard-ass,” Hector agreed.

“That is not how I would have phrased it, but perhaps you’re right. He has not been as accommodating towards my projects as Magnus was, although I suppose the late Director-General was, indeed, just using me as a tool. You have helped me see that.”

The Peregrines had thus far enjoyed a great deal of success. Marcus Fairchild marked the second point in their plan that had turned overwhelmingly in their favor, after they were able to convince Arthur Jackson. If the trend continued, then diplomacy with the Commonwealth would be little more than a piece of cake, but that assumption was unrealistic at best – Marcus hadn’t even convinced them to hold an audience with such “terrorists,” much less give in to their demands. But that was a problem for later.

\* \* \*

Sokolov’s wife and son lived in a quaint, two story house in the Stockholm suburbs, halfway between the city center and the ruins. By the time he reached them, it was the early evening, and the streetlights and the stars were beginning to light up the sky.

One light was on in a second floor room – the master bedroom, if he remembered correctly. Silhouetted against the warm background were two people, ordinarily indistinguishable from anybody else, but they were clearly an adult woman and a boy. Their angry gestures suggested some kind of argument, which was typical for Sokolov’s family. There was little doubt that these were the people he was looking for.

The argument didn’t worry Sokolov. He had seen many fights between his son and wife, and none of them had ever been serious, and he was almost comforted by the realization that, despite what he had been through, nothing had changed on the home front. For a few more minutes, the Slav watched the house fondly, wishing he could do something so simple as knock on the door, and then turned away to rejoin his comrades. Just seeing them alive had given him hope, and he was ready to do everything to give them a better life.

\* \* \*

Back in the city center, Marcus led his guests through the greater Madelyn-Rash area. There were, of course, many types of guns and other infantry weapons, but this was of only mild interest. There were far bigger, juicier fish on their plate.

Marcus himself was a far cry from a professional tour guide. His very presence seemed unnatural as he walked with the utmost precision and enunciated his words in a way that felt more like an essay than a friendly conversation.

Despite their host’s disturbing demeanor, the tanks and artillery he had to show were welcome sights. The Peregrine engineers had pieced together a number of vehicles that could almost pass for mobile armor, but paled in comparison to those within Madelyn-Rash – gleaming powerhouses loaded with devastating weaponry and strong armor. As each new model passed under their eyes – the Salamander, the Siege Panther, the Longbow, and others – they were silently relieved that these monstrosities would fight for instead of against them.

There was a special ‘present’ for Eirene in the hangar, or so said Marcus. He led the group to a great set of metal doors and triumphantly struck a large button with his fists, commanding the barrier to open.

“There,” he said. “You said you were the pilot for this little group, yes? Take a look.”

Before them stood a thing of utter beauty. It was unlike the corvette in almost every way. In terms of size, it was larger, but not overwhelmingly so. In terms of elegance, its hull was long and thin and flowed like a natural river flanked by two slender sets of wings.

Eirene stepped closer, touching its cold, pastel orange hull with her bare hand. The color was a bit off-putting, but it was probably just painted for a test run. It didn’t matter – she was enthralled by the thing.

“Deathbearer corvette. It’s bigger than what you’re probably used to,” Marcus said. “Don’t make the mistake of thinking it won’t handle as well, though. It’s faster than the current equivalents, and it hits harder too. Incendiary Prometheus missiles for the big stuff, and it’s the only thing short of a dreadnought so far to mount laser weapons, able to shoot straight past barriers. You’ll need it if you ever have to fight the Skywatch head-on. Nothing else we have could deal with capital ships.”

A direct engagement against the Commonwealth. Something that they all shuddered to consider. And yet, the Deathbearer had evidently been designed for such a task. Curious for something officially built for an army that expected to deal with bands of poorly-armed rebels.

“The vehicle’s combat information center, in addition to the standard suite of communications, navigation, and tactical assessment equipment, also contains a special interface for coordination of a mourner wing. Are you actually familiar with the mourner project, or were you bluffing when you spoke to Janice?”

“We were making it up as we go along,” Alexis said.

“Bold of you. Well then, I’ve got some explaining to do. Sadly, we’ve not got access to the facilities at Montreal right now, but I don’t suppose that I shall require them. Here will do. See, the mourners were originally designed to take up the slack in labor caused by the deaths of…so many people during the storms. However, development was slow. Very slow. They only reached a functional state recently, in time to see usage in the construction of our settlement at Johannesburg. They *should* entail a marked increase in the efficiency of our development, which is already impressive, if I do say so myself.”

“Fine,” said Hector. “That’s all well and good, but what about their combat capabilities? And, more to the point, what exactly are they? I might have missed it, but it seems to have been an oversight.”

“Ah, of course. My mistake. I might have a chassis somewhere in here…” Marcus stopped walking and looked up ponderously, trying to remember where such items were kept. Eventually, he looked back down, snapped his fingers once, and continued. “Yes, right. This way, everyone.”

The group followed Marcus’ lead until they reached a slightly more isolated chamber. Its only defining feature was its utter lack of defining features. The building was little more than a grey concrete box with an impressive set of blast doors set into one of the sides. All in all, a disappointing show.

When Marcus opened the door, though, the orderly exterior gave way to a complete mess of an interior. Wires covered the floor like a mess of dark spaghetti and computer consoles filled the walls, emitting strange sounds and little, colorful lights. And in the center, there sat a large metal hulk, folded up as if it were a black cat, frozen still whilst grooming itself.

“What the hell is that?” Hector asked.

“A mourner,” came Marcus’ reply. He smiled and threw a few switches, then gestured for a pair of workers on an overhead balcony to do the same. In a second, the machine came to life, unfolding into a more coherent entity. A sharp black body stood up on four mantis-like legs, with two larger appendages folding out from the top of its body as if ready to strike. It twisted, turned, and stared at the assembled crowd.

They looked on in awe. “What the *hell* is that?” Hector repeated.

“Advanced drone constructs,” said Marcus. “They can walk around on those legs and fold up into a flyer for more mobility or to attack an aerial target. The tactile appendages can manipulate objects or fire a variety of weapons from mounted launchers. Rockets, guns, that sort of thing. A mourner can be manually controlled by a skilled operator or one can simply relay instructions from an interface like the one in the new corvette, let the AI take over. Advanced, carefully programmed IFF identifiers can distinguish friend from foe with impeccable accuracy. Very difficult to trick, I assure you. No friendly fire incidents from the mourners.”

Hector was, of course, skeptical. “I’ll believe it when I see it,” he said, to general expressions of agreement from his companions. “So, why are they called mourners? Kind of an odd name.”

“It’s a silly reason. Some time after the storms, one of the researchers who is now long dead quipped that, because we were all isolated shut-ins, we would die with no one to mourn us despite all we would do for humanity. It wasn’t entirely true – I, at least, was married and would later have a biological daughter – but it gave rise to the joke that the AIs we would create would be the ones to mourn us when we passed. That name stuck and became the codename for the project.”

“I see.”

Though he was disappointed with their less-than-enthused reactions, Marcus acknowledged that the true power of the technology was likely lost on those unfamiliar with its intricacies, and so he agreed to stage several combat demonstrations in the near future.

“So, I can give them orders,” Eirene said, “but I can’t directly control one, is that right? Well, I mean, *I’d* be busy flying the plane, but one of my flight crew couldn’t even pilot a mourner?”

“Right. It takes a great deal of special training to control a mourner, not to mention the equipment necessary to interface with it in the first place. Most of those qualified have been training for decades, since the project’s very inception. They may as well have been practicing since birth.”

“Heavens, that’s…something.”

“Isn’t it? I’ve got a great deal of respect for them, myself. Alas, I’m too old and outdated to work well with one of these beauties, but I can live vicariously through my children, so to speak.”

And so it went. Marcus could not accompany them back to their base, but he was able to meet with the commanders in secret aboard his ships, where they began to strategize.

“All we need is your good word, in essence,” Alexis said during their first meeting. “Something to convince the Commonwealth that we’re not petty terrorists and that our desire to see a peaceful resolution is genuine. Lancaster will trust your opinion.”

“No, that won’t do. Not enough,” Marcus said.

“I’m sorry?”

“It’ll take a lot more than a good word from me to get them to see that, especially after all that you’ve done. However, within the administrative parliament, I believe that there are things that I *can* do.”

“Like what, exactly?”

“Your attack on Ravengrad Tower, as much as it is hurting us now, did actually effect a great deal of change. It convinced the Commonwealth to expedite their militarization even further, but that’s not the point. You know about the consolidation act?”

“A little, yeah.” Like all the rebels, Alexis had kept an ear to the ground with regard to Commonwealth politics, but their exile from Ravengrad kept them somewhat ignorant of the goings-on in the capital.

“That was inspired in part by your actions, and the ‘need’ for more centralized authority.”

“Really? We actually accomplished something with that stupid plan?” Hector said, genuinely amazed.

“Certainly helped me, at any rate, though I know it wasn’t your intention at the time. By extension, you helped yourselves. Now, not only do I command the Science and Defense Administration votes, but the Transportation and Medical Administrations as well. A dangerous amount of power for one man to have, no doubt, but I’m not the only one who’s got more votes to my name, now. Which means fewer people I’d need to convince in order to actually pass legislation.”

“Alright, now where are you going with this?” Alexis asked.

“Here’s what I think. I hold praetorship in both Montreal and Johannesburg, meaning that it is in my best interest to keep the cities I control as secure as possible. So what if I were to suggest that the restrictions on whom I can appoint to local offices be relaxed? I could recruit several of your officers to fill positions in the security staff and grant you some modicum of legitimacy. Many others will be suspicious of such appointments, but I am fairly well-trusted amongst the other representatives, so it should be acceptable. Now, before I continue, is this plan acceptable to everyone in attendance?”

The Peregrine commanders nodded in agreement.

“Good.” Marcus leaned back in his chair and picked a pen out of his pocket, balancing it between two fingers and his thumb. “I require a simple majority of eleven out of twenty votes in order to pass an amendment, barring any abstentions. My four votes are a given, so that gets us a little over a third of the way there.”

“And you’d need the Director-General-slash-Grand Admiral and, like, whatever other titles he has to support the amendment, or at least to abstain so that he doesn’t veto it outright, yeah?” Alexis asked.

“Yes. He’s a bit less liberal regarding security than his predecessor, but I should be able to make him see my point. Maybe spin some story about opening up more official positions to common folk to quell the growing unrest, though I shouldn’t mention your names specifically. If I can bring him on board, that would give us eight votes. I’m not sure if I can count on the others to vote in my favor of their own accord, so I’ll have to get creative.”

“Couldn’t Lancaster just force the amendment forward?”

“Yes, but I doubt he would. He *can* override the majority, but I doubt that he would feel strongly enough about my proposal to do so. Which means that I’ll also need to convince the executor that it at least won’t be harmful so he doesn’t veto either. In the end, I don’t believe we can expect more than an abstention from *him*.”

“Leaving us still with only eight votes.”

“The imperator of Johannesburg is young and inexperienced – Lancaster thought that having some fresh blood to balance out the aged men and women of Magnus’ parliament would be good. I could easily impress upon him to vote for my amendment, which gives us nine. And to reach our goal, I believe that the overseer of the financial administration – who also now controls the trade and commerce vote – is the sort who could be bribed. Eleven.”

“Wow, this is really corrupt,” Eirene said.

“The Commonwealth has always been like that. It’s just become a bit easier after the consolidation act. In theory, the system was designed to be self-regulating, but in practice, well…the Director-General can all three propose, veto, and force forward legislation. That means exactly what it sounds like.”

“Lovely.”

“If I may make one suggestion,” Marcus finished, “keep this in mind. Lancaster fancies himself the ‘king of kings,’ the one in the privileged position to chisel away at the world so that it stays forever a statue in his likeness. Only, rather than chisel, he prefers to bludgeon, thinking that he can force compliance just because he has the biggest fleet.”

“Not for long,” Alexis said.

“Exactly. But remember that he does not know I am directly supporting you with so many forces. You will not be negotiating from as strong a position as you actually occupy, so tread carefully when the time comes.”

\* \* \*

One year passed, and then two, and Marcus lived up to his word. The Peregrine army grew beyond what it had ever hoped to become, but they increasingly felt as if they would never have to field it. Progress was slow but steady as Marcus exercised his influence in the nuanced but effective manner that only he could execute. He immediately condemned the poor organization of the militia and set about restructuring it into what he believed to be a proper army, guidance which the others happily accepted, even if they felt that their lack of resources and infrastructure was not exactly their fault.

Back at home, after their first contact with Marcus, Alexis had noticed an immediate change in Eirene. She finally seemed a proper woman, heart full of life and purpose rather than sorrow and regret. It pleased her to see Eirene in such a state – whether it was simply the process of letting go and just talking to clear her head, or whether it was actually taking action to rescue Julia that improved her mood didn’t matter to Alexis. As long as Eirene was happy, she was happy.

New allies came, and sometimes went. Most of those who joined did so for good, integrating wholly into the ever-growing military or into Marcus’ research and development teams. Disillusioned students from Montreal and Ravengrad, former industrialists like Teague and Hector, stifled artists and aspiring scientists came under the Peregrine fold, as did many private armies, rebel bands, and rogue churches.

As the revolution gained momentum, the militia commanders met with Marcus to discuss their plans should their hopes be realized and Lancaster grant them an audience.

“You’ll need a representative to lead the negotiation if, and when you meet with the Director-General. Someone to speak for us. I am unsure if Lancaster will be as open to debate if we approach him as a mob,” Marcus said to his allies.

“His debating style seems keyed towards an individual opponent, though,” Hector countered. “We may be able to overwhelm him if we all speak to him on equal terms. Drive home the point that we represent a large group.”

“Perhaps, but then we run the risk of being refused outright. We should throw him a bone, at least, and confront him like civilized people. The rest of us can be there for support, but it would be a sign of cooperation for us to at least nominate a proper representative to lead the delegation, giving us more legitimacy than an unruly mob of commoners.”

“And I suppose you’d lead us in the negotiations? Is this where you reveal yourself to have played us all along?”

“No, this revolution is yours. My only interest is in liberating my daughter and replacing Lancaster with a more accommodating sovereign, and so I would accept your input as to who ought to represent our little party.”

“We would have backed Ian Barrow before he disappeared,” Alexis said. “He’s not an option, now. Outside of him, the major candidates are the ones we’ve got here. Me and Janessa, Hector and Teague.”

Marcus frowned. “Knowing what I know about Lancaster and what I know about your people, given that your first choice is absent, I would prefer to put either Miss Havery or Miss Tyler at the front. Alexis would be ideal, but Janessa is still suitably young. The experience brought by older men like myself, Ironwall, and Pendleton is valuable, but we can provide that support just as well from the rear. Meanwhile, Alexis and Janessa grew up after the storms, the former in particular having lived her entire life during the age of the Commonwealth. Lancaster will have a more difficult time accusing her of attempting to bring back the old world out of a blind sense of nostalgia or anything of that sort.”

“That won’t stop him from trying,” Hector said.

“Indeed, it will not. He could easily assume that her elders have had undue influence upon her, and paint her as a puppet. Still, I think that it is better if he can only suspect our representative of being a figurehead rather than outright accuse him or her of a self-interested desire to bring back the old world.”

“I’m not so sure. If Lancaster goes up against Alexis and runs with a ‘she’s a good girl, but too naïve and easily manipulated’ narrative, then he seems more sympathetic, we seem like shadowy illuminati-type puppeteers, and he could end up with more support from the commoners. If we can bait him into attacking us, then we could actually try and beat him on policy and the moral high ground.”

“That’s exactly the sort of old world thinking we need to avoid. Remember, this is all behind closed doors. We don’t need to convince the common folk. We only need to convince Jacob Lancaster. He detests the old world, the fear of a return to which is undoubtedly his primary motivation. So we put Alexis in front of him and take away his main argument. If she’s persuasive enough, she should be able to demonstrate enough conviction to shake his. After all, up until now, she has been the poster child of the Commonwealth, the sort of person Lancaster would surely have liked to parade around to demonstrate his success. She’s from a lower-class family, and yet she never wanted for food or education. She’s homosexual, and yet never faced bigotry or prejudice. She’s Greek, a demographic that the Commonwealth has famously and ironically failed to court. When the ideal product of his system turns against him, surely Lancaster will falter, don’t you agree?”

Alexis was mildly alarmed that Marcus knew so much about her. It was fair that he would want to know about his new compatriots, but he had clearly delved far too deeply into their lives than she would have been comfortable with. If that was the price for his support, however, she was willing to pay it.

Hector sighed and leaned back in his chair, staring at the cracked plaster ceiling for a moment before returning to Marcus. “Fine,” he finally said. “If you think it will better convince Lancaster, then I’m willing to sit this one out. I suppose it’s not like we’re electing her president, just looking for someone to talk with Lancaster for a bit. While I would like to debate him again, I must concede that such a conversation would not end well, so Alexis has my support if she wants it.”

Alexis nodded. “I’ll do it. I’ve been doing the heavy lifting so far, so it’s only fitting that I take us to meet the Director-General. If no one else wants to claim the position?”

None of the others seemed to oppose her, and so the matter was settled. If and when the Commonwealth agreed to meet with the militia, Alexis would be the first to shake Lancaster’s hand.

“Then it is decided,” Marcus said. “I shall continue my work, and hopefully Alexis will be able to represent us at the negotiation table. In the meantime, I shall see about finding us some more allies in Ravengrad.”

## Chapter 13 – Mt. Korab

*“Rally ‘round, men! All ships, return to formation and hit the bastards with a full broadside! We are the Commonweath Skywatch, and, damnit, we are not letting fools wearing our colors take our place in the skies! Give these turncoats what for!”*

* *Captain Lariman, shortly before his flagship’s destruction by a traitor dreadnought during the Tabriz Crisis*

Towards the end of the two years that marked the Peregrine militia’s resurgence, Hyperion was ready to make a move of its own. The stratēgoí were assembled and Ian was asked to join them as an auxiliary, with Charlotte as his aide.

The goal was a church nestled on a cliff of the Macedonian Mount Korab, closer to Ravengrad than to Geneva. It preached an ideology so similar to Universalism that Théoden and his acolytes believed that it could be peacefully incorporated into the Hyperion cult. Regardess, Lamb and Aumeier had insisted that their envoys be accompanied by a fleet as a show of force, to “demonstrate the power they could tap into through this alliance.”

“Don’t worry, our reluctant titan,” Aumeier assured. “This is for the greater good. We will gain their cooperation and that foothold near Ravengrad one way or another.”

“The foothold is of secondary importance. My primary goal is to unite those of similar faith,” Théoden rebuked.

“Yes, of course.”

“So, what’s this all about, exactly?” Ian asked. “I get that we’re sending emissaries to this church, but why do you need Charlotte and me?”

Théoden looked at him mournfully. “The area around the mountain is known to be Peregrine territory, your old comrades. They’ve recovered from their loss at Ravengrad and have been expanding aggressively ever since. What’s more, some of my plants in Johannesburg have told me that they have, unbeknownst to Lancaster, acquired allies in the Defense Administration and intend to diplomatic channels with the Commonwealth. This is admirable, but my advisors inform me that they are unlikely to cooperate with Hyperion, and so there’s a risk of conflict if we operate in their territory.”

“The Peregrines? Why was I never told about their return? Do you doubt my loyalty, or something? Think I’ll jump ship and go back to the old bastards who screwed us over?”

“No, nothing like that,” Janz Sorenson replied in Théoden’s stead. “We did not doubt your loyalty, but we wanted to ensure that you weren’t…distracted.”

“Fuck that. It would have been good to know, but, whatever. What’s done is done. Do you at least know if any of my friends survived?”

Janz continued, “We do not know how many made it out of the Panopticon. Shortly after their departure, the tracking software we planted on their operations computers was removed. We don’t have any more information on it, I’m sorry.”

“So that’s how you knew we were going to attack the tower. Figures”

“Yes. But that’s beside the point. What we need you for now is different. This church is within the Peregrine militia’s sphere of influence, and they may have some presence there, so we must account for the possibility that the church may have been coerced into their ramshackle alliance.”

“And if they have?”

“That’s where you come in. First as a negotiator, as you have connections to the militia. Secondly, if we must fight to occupy the church, you’ll act as an advisor to Aumeier in such an event. You’re familiar with Peregrine combat doctrine.”

“That’s assuming the same commanders are still in power. I know how Havery fights and how my sister flies her plane, but they could both be dead.”

Janz looked taken aback. “Your sister? You have family in the militia?”

“It’s a long story, but I’m going to go with yes. Don’t worry – it won’t affect my performance.”

“Don’t have much love for her, do you? I can sympathize. Anyhow, you’re not wrong. Much has changed since you left. It is possible that your former comrades will be long gone, but there’s always the possibility that they won’t. If that’s the case, then we might need your help.”

Nathaniel stepped forwards so that he was standing in front of Ian and extended his hand for a shake, which Ian accepted before listening to him speak: “Just like in Ivanograd, you defer to Aucoin’s or my command in most cases, but you may suggest orders to be relayed to the task force if your assessment of Peregrine tactics deems it necessary.”

“Understood,” Ian said.

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The Hyperion fleet flew southeast in a chevron formation, six smaller frigates, a carrier, and a destroyer flanking the *Alanis*, which served as the “diplomatic” flagship. The journey had been slow but only an estimated hour remained before the emissary fleet would arrive at the church. Slowly but surely, the lonely building came into view in the mountains.

“Ships approaching from starboard. IFF says they are with Commonwealth Defense Administration,” Charlotte reported as she read the reports coming into the bridge.

“Defense Administration?” Ian asked. “They said the Peregrines had aligned themselves with the D.A., so I guess this confirms it. The militia’s here in force.”

“Have they been hailed?”

“Yes. We are awaiting a response.”

One minute later, klaxons sounded across the Hyperion ships. Aumeier turned to Ian for a report, and was met with a description of the Defense Administration’s hostile maneuvers. There was a single capital ship in the airspace above the church, and from that vessel came squadrons of corvettes and smaller drones painted in the dark red colors of the Peregrine militia.

“Looks like you were right to bring me along after all,” Ian said.

“Let’s hope that Master Théoden’s confidence in you is well-placed.”

“Yes, let us,” Charlotte said.

The Hyperion fleet moved into a tight defensive formation, ejecting scores of barrage balloons to ward off the attacking aircraft. The corvettes and their escorts all but ignored them, weaving through the net or else cutting straight through the lines to strafe the Hyperion frigates.

“Corvettes and drones. Just like in Ivanograd. Well, we took these guys on once. Time for round two.”

Ian had told the stratēgoí that his sister’s allegiance would not be a problem for him, and he hoped that he hadn’t lied. Eirene very well could have been at the helm of any one of the corvettes he was about to destroy, but he shut those thoughts out of his mind. It had been two years since he left the militia and even longer since the two of them had become estranged, and he wanted to believe that he had moved on.

Hyperion’s anti-aircraft guns returned fire on their attackers and slowly but surely began to clear them out of the skies, though it was too late to save the two frigates that were lost, presumably with all hands.

“Peregrine tactics have always been conservative out of necessity. Maybe they’ll see their new guns and get reckless, but I doubt it. They have smart people over there. So, if we can even threaten their carrier we can probably force them to retreat,” Ian said.

“I agree,” Nathaniel replied. “The destroyer has the strongest gun in the fleet; perhaps it will be enough. Bastion one, break formation and try to hit that carrier. Aleph one, follow it portside, Aleph two, starboard. Keep it safe.”

“That leaves us vulnerable with more than half our anti-aircraft coverage gone,” Charlotte protested.

“It’s a gambit. This maneuver will draw attention towards those three ships, which I expect to lose. Then, we feign a retreat and let them think they have won a pyrrhic victory so they return to Ravengrad with their crippled carrier. Leaving the airspace clear for us to land at the church.”

“Unless they pursue us,” Charlotte said. “Consider that?”

“We will inflict sufficient losses that their pilots will not want to risk extending the engagement with a chase. Mr. Barrow said we can expect a conservative strategy from the enemy. Unless he’s changed his mind?”

“No, go ahead. Your plan will work,” Ian bluffed. He did not know who was commanding the enemy ships. The Defense Administration and the Peregrine militia were now in league with one another, and anybody could have been in charge even if the old commanders were still alive. Hopefully, whoever it was would be loath to take a risk after the disaster at Ravengrad Tower.

Hyperion’s destroyer bore little resemblance to similar ships from the Commonwealth, eschewing balanced armaments in favor of an powerful railgun – older Kasimiran technology, long obsolete in the East but more fearsome than any other weapon known to the occident. At least, that was what Ian’s superiors had told him.

The massive, ornate barrel of this ‘flying gun’ moved into position and fired, only to see its target persist as if there had never been any attack at all.

“*Merde*,” Charlotte cursed. “Master Aumeier, how have they survived? Nothing should be able to withstand that shot.”

Moisture began to drip off of Nathaniel’s skin as he gulped, looking at the enemy vessel in mild terror. “That…should not be possible. Theirs must be an immeasurably powerful barrier to withstand Bastion’s power. What kind of abominable technology have our southern friends been making?”

“Are you going to do anything about it or are you going to drown us in your sweat?” Charlotte asked, visibly irked.

“Of course I’m going to do something, stupid woman,” Nathaniel replied. “Cinder one, launch your rams; Aleph three and five will escort them.”

“That leaves the envoys completely unguarded!” Ian protested again, running towards the window to see their last escorts flying away as the carrier Cinder one began to launch its cargo. It was a vessel of special stock, modified to carry not fighters or bombers, but two zeppelins which would crash into enemy ships and detonate their explosive payloads.

Nathaniel looked desperate as he drew his sabre and pointed it at the enemy carrier as if any of his airmen could see the gesture while he shouted orders into the radio. “I will see that carrier destroyed if it is the *last image to ever grace my eyes.* If every man, woman, and child in this fleet is slain, then so be it, but I *will* taste Peregrine blood this day. Do you bastards understand me? Do you?”

“We must surrender!” Charlotte said. “We cannot win this fight. Have you forgotten what Master Lockhart has said about a *peaceful* mission?”

“Again? Our enemies attacked first!” Nathaniel shouted. “We are outmatched, but we can still win this – Master Lockhart’s goal will be done today.”

The two zeppelins closed in on the Peregrine carrier while the corvettes were distracted in finishing off the destroyer and its escorts. Slow and cumbersome enough to push through without triggering the vessel’s barriers, they struck its body, the second taking advantage of the wound caused by the first to strike the soft belly underneath the armor. Ian and his fellow Hyperion officers watched from the bridge as the two burning halves of the carrier dropped out of the sky, and they could just barely see its terrified crew falling out of their ship to be dashed to pieces on the hills below.

“Well, shit, it actually worked,” Ian muttered as the lighter Peregrine ships witnessed the destruction of their mothership and began to retreat, leaving the Hyperion survivors to lick their wounds.

“May we actually complete the mission now?” Charlotte asked.

Nathaniel stared out the window with wild eyes. “Every ship we let go will come back to fight us. We finally have the advantage – all remaining ships, pursue and destroy the targets. Then we will occupy the church.”

Though he could not see the captains themselves, the reluctance with which the surviving crews followed Master Aumeier’s orders was clear. His ships slowly turned to pursue, their red and gold hulls pockmarked and scorched and leaking smoke from cracks in the armor. They dispatched as many missiles as their crippled systems could manage, failing to destroy even a single fleeing corvette.

Then the Hyperion carrier exploded. It did not even have time to crack in two and sink to the ground like the Peregrine ship had done, but rather was blown apart into countless pieces before anybody watching it could so much as blink. Ian watched shards of burnt metal and bloody pieces of the crew fall towards the base of the mountain before he looked ahead and saw what had dispatched the once-majestic aircraft. A battleship adorned with Peregrine iconography and armed with a gun that had destroyed a wounded capital ship in a single shot.

“Looks like we’re not the only ones with big guns,” Ian said. “Will you surrender now?”

Nathaniel stopped, a look of shock frozen on his face. “No. Cut the engines, scuttle the ships, disappear into the mountains. They can’t easily deploy troops to smoke us out, so we can escape and get far enough to be evacuated. It is over, but I will not give myself over to the enemy to be murdered like your old friends.”

Charlotte and Ian both nodded and braced for impact alongside the rest of the bridge crew, the Peregrine battleship lurking just over the horizon and drifting closer at an alarming speed.

“How long do we have before it can fire again?” Nathaniel asked, turning towards Ian. In that moment, Ian saw real fear in his Master’s eyes. Emma and the other children he had sent into Ivanograd had shown their resolve when faced with their deaths, and, yet, here Nathaniel looked more like a scared child than any of them.

“Why would he know?” Charlotte answered for him. “Keep your head down and get ready to hit the ground!”

The *Alanis*’ descent was far from graceful, but its pilots were still largely in control, and were ready to make an emergency landing.

“Ten seconds to impact,” one of the nameless Hyperion goons said. “Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.”

A dreadful thunderous sound filled the bridge as the *Alanis* struck the ground, the crew securely fastened into their seats but still shaken by the impact as if in a powerful earthquake. The lights flickered, and then died entirely, and the cruiser gradually came to a halt with a deep trench gouged in the earth behind it.

Nathaniel gave the order to abandon ship before the dust had settled, and few dozen who were still alive made their way out of the wreck. Charlotte followed Ian out of the hatch which separated the bridge from the open air, and the two of them stood on top of the *Alanis* and watched the Peregrine battleship turn and disappear back into the clouds, its crew surely celebrating a close victory.

“What a waste,” Ian muttered.

\* \* \*

The few airmen who had survived the disastrous expedition were picked up a day later and brought unceremoniously back to Geneva where Théoden sadly chastised his subordinates for their reckless strategy but otherwise did nothing to punish Nathaniel, Ian, or Charlotte. The stratēgoí declared the church a lost cause and ordered that the deceased be memorialized as martyrs, and that was that.

In time, however, Théoden’s sullen demeanor underwent a sea change. When asked, he graced Ian and Charlotte with a jovial smile. “The Inquisition investigated your defeat at the Universalist church. What we discovered has enabled my single greatest dream.”

“What did you find?” Ian asked.

“We all knew the Commonwealth was unstable, but it’s worse than we expected. Marcus Fairchild and Jacob Lancaster are preparing for civil war. They’ve developed the drones and new corvettes that specialize in destroying capital ships. But the rebels they usually fight had no capital ships – until now. The Director-General commissioned new ships in case he had to put down a major revolt, and Fairchild happily complied because he was building his own armada.”

“And the Peregrines are aligned with Fairchild.”

“Yes, and the Director-General has since discovered this treachery, that he has chosen to install Peregrine officers into various positions within his realm. He’s pretending to put up with it for the time being, but the D.A. and the Commonwealth are all but separate nations now. With Fairchild behind them, Lancaster has no choice but to hear them out.”

“This sounds like a good thing, though,” Ian said. “You criticized them for using violence, and they’ve turned to diplomacy. Surely we should encourage that.”

“They only have legitimacy through Marcus’ trickery, which is not a good first impression. Their efforts at diplomacy with the Commonwealth are going to fail. Lancaster is aware of this, and of the fact that their combined might is far greater than his. As such, he was very accepting of my proposal.”

“Your proposal?” Charlotte asked.

“A formal alliance. We no longer have to influence the Commonwealth from behind the scenes. I reached out to Jacob Lancaster and he agreed to grant us an embassy in Montreal and representation in their parliament, provided we support their armies in any conflict. Not an ideal trade, but it’s a fantastic step forwards.”

“We literally just got back from fighting their ships.”

“From fighting *Defense Administration* ships. That’s probably a point in our favor,” Nathaniel said.

“Indeed,” Théoden agreed. “The incident in Ivanograd was also to the Defense Administration’s detriment, and, even though we still attacked holdings that belonged to the Commonwealth *de jure*, Lancaster is willing to overlook this technicality. We can finally have a legitimate voice in their government. As of today, there need be no more black operations. While I don’t expect them to adopt my creed any time soon, if Lancaster is at all reasonable, having a legitimate voice in their government will allow us to push that much more for the kind of change we want. Perhaps, God willing, we may even be able to stop this civil war before anybody else has to suffer.”

## Chapter 14 – One Last Night to Dance

*“The old world was plagued by men and women all too willing to sabotage the greater good in the service of some special agenda. Any time it looked as if rationality was going to prevail, there would be a convenient assassination, terror attack, or other incident that only hastened the slide into depravity.”*

* *Director-General Magnus Keller*

Alexis and Janessa remembered the last time they had been at the Tower. To see it so peaceful almost felt like a lie, but there it was. They weren’t sure if they really expected the disarray they had left behind to remain. It would have been satisfying, to an extent, to see that they had left a permanent mark so that their efforts had at least accomplished something. But that was all gone now. The bullet holes were patched, the walls and floors cleaned, and the rooms re-furnished with the same classy décor that had been there before their attack. The Grand Balcony, where the ball itself would be held, looked as if there had never been any bloodshed at all.

It had, of course, been more than two years. No surprises there.

The militia representatives had spent their afternoon taking full advantage of the amenities in the capital which had been denied them in the outskirts, but they were all back at the Tower with plenty of time to spare until the bar. Eirene was the last to arrive.

The dress she would wear that night was sewn from cream-colored fabric as soft as anything she’d ever touched, and trimmed with lace. When she put it on, the hem rested at her calves, and she spun in a fanciful circle, gleefully watching the dress whirl around her. When she looked in the mirror and felt pretty for the first time in a long time, she couldn’t help but grin.

Alexis arrived shortly after, clad in clothes equally casual as those Eirene had worn to the restaurant, and carrying several paper bags’ worth of miscellaneous items, the nature of which she refused to divulge.

“Turn around,” Alexis said as she put her hand on her own closet’s handle. “I want you to be surprised when you see this on me. Go on, now.”

Eirene did as she asked and averted her gaze, waiting for Alexis to pretty herself up. When the time came to see the final product, though, she just looked on in awe. Where Eirene’s own dress was tailored to suit her long blonde hair, Alexis’ ball gown was a bright scarlet hue that matched the fiery colors on her head. The impact was stunning, and she had little doubt that the dress would catch the attention of anyone and everyone on the balcony that night.

They looked at each other, each taking in the sight of the other in her splendor.

“White dress, huh?” Alexis asked. “You getting married tonight?”

“Very funny. It’s cream, not white. Just the lighting in here, is all.”

Teague and Hector were waiting already by the time that Eirene and Alexis arrived, the men dressed in expensive suits to match the women’s stylish dresses. They shook hands and admired each other’s apparel.

“You ladies look positively radiant,” Teague said, putting special emphasis on the last word.

“Aye, and I could say the same for yourself,” Janessa replied with a smirk. “But we digress. There’s just a few minutes ‘till the ball. Should we not be on the move?”

\* \* \*

Hours earlier, the CSS *Sunset Serenade*, flagship of the Skywatch, had left the airbase to make an irregular patrol around the city of Ravengrad. The route served little purpose for the sake of defense, but, when the ship’s broadcasting and receiving were disabled, was sufficiently “off the grid” to be safe from any espionage.

Presently, Grand Admiral and Director-General Jacob Lancaster stood hunched over a tactical map with his “new” assistant, Danica Mirabeau.

They were alone together in a small, cramped room towards the stern – Legion Command by designation, but “the Stable” less formally. Because the four legions were fond of likening themselves to the four horsemen of the apocalypse, the Skywatch mocked their delusions of grandeur by instead comparing them to actual horses.

It was hot in the Stable, a dry heat flowing in through the vents attached to the *Sunset Serenade’s* massive engines. Miniscule droplets of sweat dripped down their skin as they discussed their plans, stopping every so often to wipe away the gathering moisture.

“The negotiations will fail. Everyone knows that,” Danica said. “Even if they really mean what they say, there’s not a single damn foot of common ground that we can reach. It’s just not possible.”

The Grand Admiral sighed. “That’s the pessimistic view, yes.”

“Realist.”

“Realistic, perhaps. But it’s still pessimistic.” He picked up his tablet computer, resting on the edge of the table, and opened a few files that contained information on his new contacts within the Peregrine militia. Alexis, Eirene, Teague, Hector, Janessa, and even Ian were there. He flipped through nonchalantly, then set it down.

“Nevertheless, you’re probably right,” he continued. “I don’t see this ending well for anyone. Somehow, from who knows where they’ve assembled an unimaginably large army, the traitors.”

“Marcus promises that the mourners are combat ready,” Danica said. “That ought to turn the tide in our favor. Wait ‘till those sons of bitches see that swarm heading their way.”

“If they work, and if Marcus doesn’t turn them against us. Which is likely.”

“Marcus’ loyalties are suspect, I admit, but why wouldn’t they work?”

“I don’t trust an artificial intelligence. Too many risks involved, and I don’t care how reliable Fairchild claims that they are. It’s still a computer, and computers make mistakes.”

“So do humans. You can’t seriously say that you won’t use them?”

“I will use them. I just won’t rely on them to win the battle for me. And that’s *if* Fairchild remains loyal once war breaks out. The information provided by the Hyperion ambassador suggests that he has not only recruited Peregrine agents to head security teams in Johannesburg, but he has also supplied their army with weapons, vehicles, troops, and materiel. I fear that he may make a power grab in the event of a civil war. Hyperion has promised reinforcements if he does so, but they are a wildcard. I do not know how trustworthy or capable their warriors are.”

\* \* \*

The Commonwealth Day ball began. Trumpet fanfare led into a classical orchestra, and a procession advanced onto the balcony, each set of partners walking forward, arm-in-arm.

Alexis would first dance with Lancaster, which was an unpleasant but accepted formality. As dancing partners, the two of them were a cruel joke. Lancaster was slow and purposeful while Alexis embraced traditional femininity and moved with more lithe and elegant steps that clashed with the Director-General’s style.

“It’s good that we can come together in peace,” she said with her hands on Lancaster’s shoulders and his at her waist.

“Don’t flatter me. I know what you’re up to” Lancaster replied. Alexis briefly paused, causing an awkward jar in their already less than fluid dance. The two of them stumbled but regained composure to continue their performance.

“Sorry, what?”

“You’re not here for a truce. You say you are, and maybe you even believe it, but there will never be peace between our peoples. I don’t intend to compromise and, if you’ve got as much of a backbone as I’m led to believe, neither will you.”

“You say that as if it’s a good thing.”

“That is your inference, not my implication. The *point* is that negotiations are futile. Surely you realize this.”

“Pessimist.”

“I told my vice admiral the same thing, but she was right. If peace can be made, then that would be the best outcome, but I have yet to meet any ‘freedom fighters’ whose motives were anything other than the acquisition of power. I don’t intend to let your cancer spread throughout the fragile body of the Commonwealth.”

“Fragile, hm? Not as confident in your rule as you once were?”

“Ever since one of my top men got it into his head to try and work with insurrectionists like yourselves. Fairchild.” Lancaster spoke Marcus’ name as if it were profanity.

“For your own sake, I hope your paranoia is unfounded,” Alexis whispered as the music faded and their dance ended.

The second dance began. Free from her obligations to Lancaster, Alexis left him to rejoin Eirene, and two of them held each other’s hands and then danced a much more pleasant dance with each other.

They were an elegant twirl of fancy together. Their dresses sometimes caught a glance or two, but most people were naturally focused on their own partners. Neither Alexis nor Eirene cared, because each had the attention of the only person that mattered to her.

“This is the first time you’ve been to the balcony, isn’t it?” Alexis asked with a quick smile. Eirene nodded, and they kept dancing.

“A few renovations, I notice,” Alexis continued. “I like what they’ve done with the place. A few less bullet holes and smoking craters.”

“Hah. You’re funny, aren’t you?” Eirene replied, half sarcastic and half affectionate.

Alexis shrugged. “It’s true,” she said.

“I wasn’t there. I’ll take your word for it.” They stopped dancing for a moment to look at each other with feigned seriousness, then just laughed. Meanwhile, other couples moved around them, each equally ignorant to the world around.

Her trance temporarily broken, Alexis took a closer look around. Wilson had taken Janessa’s arm and the two of them were happily dancing together, leaving Teague and Hector awkwardly partnered, bickering as always. Beyond the music and the quiet murmur of chatting couples, she could hear Hector’s annoyed comments, threatening bodily harm if Teague ever spoke a word of this again.

And then Alexis noticed something else. Something that surprised her. Someone who she had not expected to see ever again, much less at the tower.

“*Mother?”* she shouted, leaving Eirene behind to run over to a distant, older woman. “What are you *doing* here?”

The woman stopped dancing when she heard Alexis’ voice, searching for its origin before noticing and welcoming her daughter. The two shared a warm filial embrace for almost a whole minute before separating.

“It’s good to see you again,” the older woman said.

“Tell me about it!” Alexis said, ecstatic to finally see her mother again. “I mean, last time I saw you was when I left home for the civil guard. We just lived in that little house on Widow’s Walk, and now you just get right into the Commonwealth Day ball? What happened while I was gone?”

“I’m sure nowhere near as much as happened to you. But I’m sure I don’t want to hear what my little girl’s been up to. The way you were going before you stopped sending letters, I’d expect a dozen bastard grandchildren if your bedroom weren’t a girls-only club.”

“If that weren’t the case, we have something called ‘birth control.’ We don’t live in the middle ages.”

“Yes, well, tell that to that one friend of yours. But never mind that – what *have* you been up to?”

“It’s a hell of a long story. How about you go first if yours is so much shorter?”

“Fine, fine. Do you mind?” Alexis’ mother asked, turning to the man next to her. Marcus Fairchild. Alexis hadn’t even noticed him.

“Not at all, Melina,” said Marcus. “No parent should miss a chance to hold their child. But, once you’re done, I should like to speak with Alexis alone.”

“Of course,” Melina said, and both the Havery women gave Marcus a courteous nod as he excused himself to get a drink.

“It’s fantastic here, darling,” Melina said, fawning in front of her daughter to imitate the extravagance of the Ravengrad Tower. “The food is *exquisite*, the décor positively heavenly, and the men charming, not that you’d know, I suppose. They tell me you’ve been living in, what, an abandoned hospital in the outskirts? Good lord, that seems worse than our little place.”

“Don’t let beauty fool you,” Alexis cautioned, “the tower’s a death trap and the most handsome men are often the most cunning and vicious. You remember Director Magnus?”

“Oh, yes. Quite the beautiful devil, that one, and I mean both words truthfully. But you took care of him, it seems, if my friends here didn’t lie to me.”

“They didn’t. But this isn’t about me right now. You seem to have done well for yourself. What changed?”

“I think it was just a little bit after you carved your bloody mark on this tower,” she said, waving her hand dismissively to suggest that she hadn’t a single care for this episode of violence. “With so many officers dead, they sent a recruitment drive throughout the whole city. Even we little people down in Widow’s Walk were examined.”

“So you made it?”

“Do I look like an officer to you? Hah! No, my talents only earned me a position as a mid-level magistrate. But it pays well, so I won’t have to live off welfare anymore.”

“That sounds really suspicious. Like a trap.”

Melina made the same dismissive gesture as before. “Maybe. But I think that’s just the soldier in you talking, dear. It’s certainly worked out for me, not like I had anything else to do when you ran off. Besides, I’m here, you’re here, so here we are!”

“If you say so.”

“I do say so. Now, what’ve you been up to, other than blowing up Commonwealth airships?

Before Alexis could reply, most everybody stopped dancing. Disturbed, the women, older and younger, looked around, trying to assess the situation.

It wasn’t anything sinister, in the end. Explosive, but innocuous fireworks lighting up the night sky. The void turned green, then red, then blue, and then a bank of fog rolled out of the Tower’s vents and was carved by a laser light display.

With that, the mood across the entire balcony suddenly shifted. The classical music disappeared and was replaced with a barrage of high-energy, fast-paced song. Meanwhile, the lasers continued to pierce through the mist.

It seemed almost surreal. The Commonwealth so frequently portrayed itself as a stoic, formal entity that kept an official air about it. This, though, was so different. Almost immature by comparison. But the officers seemed to enjoy it, leaving their strict ballroom dance partnerships for a chaotic mosh pit.

Alexis shrugged. There wasn’t any reason that they shouldn’t behave in such a manner. These men and women were, quite literally, the most powerful in the entire world. She was in no position to judge.

However, there was one person who was. Grand Admiral and Director-General Jacob Lancaster stood near the wall, looking down upon the lesser souls who succumbed to such petty temptations. The disgusted expression on his face showed that he, like Alexis, did not see the place for such chaotic “dancing” in the bastion of culture and civility that was the Tower.

This made Alexis smile. Eirene was already on her way into the depths of the pit and beckoning for her to follow. Before she obliged her lover, Alexis turned stoic and leaned in close to her mother to say her parting words. “When the ball is done, you need to leave Ravengrad as soon as possible. It doesn’t matter what they’ve invited you here for; you must not be in the city tomorrow.”

Melina looked taken aback, her mouth agape and betraying a certain shock at her daughter’s words. “Alexis,” she said, the music making her shout as audible as a whisper under ordinary circumstances, “are you planning something? Please do not betray everything that you’ve built here.”

“I’ve no intention of doing that, no, but I cannot speak for the Commonwealth. Listen, my friends and I are going to do everything we can to make this work, but the chances are slim that it’s going to turn out well, let’s be honest. If it ends badly, there will likely be a war, and I don’t want you involved in any part of it.”

“If the negotiations fail, you will attack Ravengrad?”

“If the Commonwealth will not peacefully acquiesce to our demands, we will have no choice. The militia cannot win a war of attrition, so we must make a quick surprise attack against the capital and destroy their leadership before they can fully muster a response. Once Ravengrad is ours, the Commonwealth is ours.”

“The city would descend into chaos.”

“Yes, and that’s why a war is our last resort. Listen, just go somewhere safe and far away, like Montreal. If this goes well, then that’s great and you can come back, but I want you out of the crossfire if it happens.”

Melina nodded solemnly and gave Alexis a farewell hug before the two parted and Alexis went off to talk to Marcus.

“You wanted to speak to me?” she asked when they were far enough from the crowd to be out of earshot.

Marcus looked nervous for the first time in memory. “Yes. Something worrying has happened. It won’t have an effect on tonight, but, should the negotiations fail, I am concerned that it will hamper our ability to best the Commonwealth on the field.”

“Alright, alright, spit it out. What’s wrong?”

“The Defense Administration campus in Montreal is unresponsive. I sent messages to every black site under my control to have my forces prepare for war, but Montreal has not sent a reply.”

“Is the majority of your army there?” Alexis said, biting her lip nervously.

“No,” Marcus said, shaking his head. “At least, not in terms of numbers. But our heaviest firepower and experimental weapons were indeed stationed across the Atlantic. Several mourner wings too.”

“Why do you suppose they’ve gone dark?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. It means that we can’t count on the forces there, but, hopefully, it means that the Commonwealth can’t either.”

“Shouldn’t make assumptions.”

“Of course. We know that the CHP bulwark has been bolstered by some new allies who did have an embassy near the campus. Hyperion, I think they were called. They may have sabotaged Montreal, or maybe there’s just been an accident.”

“Then we’ll just have to hope the negotiations go well. If war breaks out, then we make do without Montreal. Figure out why they lost contact after we take Ravengrad.”

“Indeed we will,” Alexis said. She left Marcus and went to find Eirene, a little more anxious than before.

Two hours later, the ball was coming to a close and Alexis was all but ready to collapse. Her dance with Eirene had long since ended, as the latter left to chat with an assortment of well-to-do officials whose attention she had caught. After quickly scanning the balcony, she noticed that Janessa too was idle, leaning against a pillar with a profoundly bored expression upon her face, and so went to join her in complete inaction.

“Hey, Alex,” Janessa said as Alexis approached. “Saw ye meet up with your mum a while back. Wish mine were here, but she’d not have anything to do with me if she got her way.”

“Why’d you want her here?” Alexis asked.

“So I can tell her off, why else? She wasn’t the worst mother ye could imagine, but she was damn awful. Never rewarded me, never disciplined me. If I did something bad, she just let me do it but never forgot to remind me how I was on a course for doom and despair.” She laughed. “Look at me now, bitch.”

Alexis just hummed in response.

“I’m going to be a better mother than she ever was. With our work here, I’ll not just raise my children better, but have a hand in forging an entire new world for them to grow up in without the oppressive hand of the Commonwealth around their necks.”

“Would Ian be the father if he returns?”

Janessa gazed off into the night sky. “That will depend, I suppose, on the manner of his return. I’d like that to be so, but perhaps my children will call a different man father. In the end, though, that they can call me mother with love on their lips and not hatred will be all that matters.”

“That sounds like a noble goal.”

When the ball was formally concluded, the attendees returned to their respective rooms. Alexis and Eirene’s shared residence was unlike anywhere either of them had stayed. Two inordinately lavish beds dominated the room, complete with soft blue canopies and a plethora of differently sized pillows. There was a large bathtub and a separate shower in a small annex and a set of glass doors that led outside. Through these doors, if one followed the marble staircase down, was a private balcony that looked out over the city.

It was on this staircase that the two women now sat together, still clad in their same dresses. There was but a foot between them, and they occasionally exchanged a glance between themselves as they looked out into the darkness, peppered as it was with the lights of a living city. The night was cool and clear-skied, but the stars were drowned out by what came from below. A shame, but the skyline was just as beautiful.

“That was a pretty nice dance,” Eirene said as she looked forward. “You really treated me to a good time.”

“Likewise,” Alexis replied. “It’s so weird. Not too long ago, we were practically scared for our lives, wondering each day if we were going to have to fight. Now, it seems like it’s all coming together. So unreal how excited and worried I am, and look at them – all those people down there, with those little lights. They have no idea what’s happening. Just carrying on with their everyday lives, doing whatever it is they do. It’s so strange, that even now, somewhere out there, someone out there has reached the highest point in his life while, at the same time, someone else has fallen farther than he ever has before.”

“You suppose that first one’s us?”

“I like to think so.”

“Nowhere to go but down, then.”

The two of them just stared at one another, each looking deep into the other’s loving eyes. Eirene leaned into Alexis, kissing her square on the lips and holding her close. Just like they had done in Johannesburg, but this time for much, much longer and. Both of them closed their eyes as they shared this romantic embrace.

“I love you,” Eirene said during a short pause. “This is nice.”

“I know. I almost feel bad, but…do you remember those years ago? In our room, when we were talking about the *Sierra*? Seeing you so sad made me feel almost the worst I’ve ever felt, but holding you close, making you feel happy again…that’s what made it all worth it. Just being so close to you, no matter the circumstances. And then again, in the café in Johannesburg…” Eirene just kissed her again before she could continue.

“Let’s go inside.”

“Yeah.”

The room was warmer than outside, and it didn’t need to be, but no one bothered to change the temperature. No sooner than they had closed the glass doors behind them and drawn the curtains than Alexis began to undo her dress, letting it fall to the floor at her feet.

Eirene saw her girlfriend undressing and whistled. Alexis stopped and looked at her, raising an eyebrow.

“Think I’m cute, hmm?” she said.

“Looks like you got new underwear. Something from Ravengrad you just bought today?”

Alexis nodded, looking down at her undergarments, deep red, just like her dress. “Yeah. Pretty comfy, and they look good on me. Figured that I might as well, since they’re better than the old bras and panties I’ve been making do with.”

“Well, they do look nice. Wish I had a getup that cute.”

“You’re already cute. But still, I got you a gift, too. I hope it pleases you.”

Eirene stared at the little box Alexis handed her for a few seconds. She tilted it ever so slightly to the sides and held it close to her head, eying the papery surface and listening for any kind of sound. There was nothing to be heard. When she gently removed the lid, her eyes widened as she saw the ornate silver jewelry nestled in black foam.

“Oh my god…that’s beautiful,” she said, picking the silver up in awe. It was an elaborate choker necklace whose silvery spiderweb pattern centered around an azure gemstone. Eirene carefully lifted it to her neck and put it on.

“I figured that if we get Julia out, you’d have to give that ring over to her,” Alexis said. “Thought you might still want some nice jewelry once it’s gone, and the color looks good on you. It’s the same kind of stone.”

Eirene almost began to cry, but this time it was not from distress but from happiness. She stood up off the bed and examined herself in the mirror, noting how the tiny blue stone looked magnificent against her light bronze skin and white dress.

“Now, if you want to look at that, I’m going to take a shower, okay? Could use one after all the dancing on the balcony.”

With that, Alexis hung up her dress, picked up one of several nightgowns and stepped into the little room where the shower was. Eirene could hear the water running and was tempted to go in and join her, but decided that it would be better to be patient and wait for her to finish. As she waited, she slipped out of her own dress and adopted a more relaxed position on the bed.

The shower had to end eventually, and, when it did, Eirene watched as Alexis came back out having put on the nightgown that she’d brought in with her. It was smooth and short and sexy, made from fine lavender fabric.

“All done?” Eirene asked.

“Yeah. Definitely ready to go to bed. It’s been a long day, and I’m very tired.”

Alexis sat down so that the two women were side-by-side and twirled her fingers through Eirene’s long hair. “There’s a word for this in some language,” she said. “Don’t remember which one, though, or what the word actually was.”

“Word for what?”

“Running your fingers through the hair of someone you love.”

Each strand of hair twisted around Alexis’ pointer finger as she twirled it around the blonde locks and let them fall. It wasn’t long before she found herself in a deep embrace with Eirene, who, as they kissed, pulled her down to the bed and crawled on top of her.

“Are you sure you wanna do this?” Alexis asked. “It’s pretty late.”

“Lex, I’m real tired, but I want a piece of you more than I want any kind of sleep. Come on, you can’t lead me on like you did and not expect me to want some of that. You don’t have to do anything, just lie back and let me take care of you, okay?”

Eirene took a deep breath and looked over her shoulder. She was playing at flirtation and making good progress, or at least she thought she was, but had never thought about what to do once she got so far. As comfortable as she was in Alexis’ embrace, Eirene was scared and wasn’t sure if she wanted to go through with the ritual she had started.

Alexis paused and took a deep look at Eirene. That was all it took to notice how terrified the girl was. “I know that I kind of led you on, and I’m sorry, but…that would be so…one sided. Not as good as it could be. It might be better if we just rested for now,” Alexis said, lying on her back as Eirene nuzzled her neck.

“Yeah, maybe, but I’m excited now. Can’t we at least play around a little?”

After a pause, Alexis hesitantly conceded. “Alright, fine. A little play, then bed. If you’re sure.” She grabbed Eirene’s waist and flipped her over, inverting their positions so that she was now on top, looking down.

Now resting on her back, Eirene closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. She had longed for this ever since her days spent sequestered away in Alexis’ apartment, dreaming about the woman with whom she had shared the small home. Now, she could intimately feel that same woman’s body, her femininity, the gentle curves beneath the silken nightgown; and she knew that Alexis was doing the same to her. Eirene shivered involuntarily. She had seen Alexis undressed before – inevitable, really, in quarters as cramped as theirs – but had averted her eyes out of embarrassment and a small amount of fear. The newly-earned privilege of being able to stare – and touch – as much as she pleased was one she felt almost guilty to utilize.

It was then that Alexis felt her girlfriend’s body shaking against her palms. It was a curious phenomenon, almost frantic. There was no way that Eirene was ready for this, Alexis now knew for certain.

“Is something wrong?” Eirene asked.

“Eirene…you’re trembling. I should be asking *you* that question.”

“It’s…I’m fine. I think. I’m just excited, like I said. Damn, I didn’t actually expect to get this far.”

“It doesn’t feel like an excited shiver. If you really want this, then I’m willing to go ahead, but if you changed your mind, then we can stop. It’s not about me anymore; I just want whatever you want.”

Eirene closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I do want this. I want it more than anything in the world. To feel you close to me makes me think that everything’s actually going to be okay. I’m nervous, is all.”

“Nervous about tomorrow, about us, what?”

“Everything,” Eirene mumbled.

Alexis nodded and lay down next to her. She paused. “Is…this is your first time?”

Eirene didn’t say anything at first. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before speaking. “You could say that,’ she finally said.

“Are you scared?”

“A little, yeah,” Eirene admitted. “I had someone before, but we never got to take it this far. Things…ended badly.”

“If you’re scared, then I’m here for you,” Alexis said. “But maybe we shouldn’t take things too quickly. Just rest for tonight, and tomorrow we can see to it that everything turns out alright. We’re going to pull through it together, understand? I know you want to be intimate with me, but that means more than just sex. We can afford to live easy right now.”

“We’ve been taking it slow for *years*. Not even all that time we lived together – two years ago, when you kissed me in Johannesburg, I said I was going to think about things. Well, I’ve made up my mind. Is that not long enough for you?”

“I don’t know,” Alexis admitted. “Just, please – relax for tonight. Lie down next to me and rest, and we’ll have our fun later. It’s no big deal, I promise. Does that sound good?”

“Yeah,” Eirene finally conceded after a moment of contemplation. “That sounds good.”

The two women held each other close as they slept.

\* \* \*

All of the skies were grey when the next morning dawned. No stars, no sun, and no blue. The dark city of Ravengrad was waking up and its people continued to mill about below the Tower, rushing to get to work by car, by bicycle, and by train.

Eirene woke up just before Alexis did. The sheets gently rustled around her as she groaned and turned about underneath them, slowly coming into consciousness. Some light was pouring in through the giant glass doors that cast shadows upon the couple.

Some more movement. Alexis too was awakening, but with her back turned to Eirene so that the latter couldn’t see her face. Eirene nudged over and touched Alexis’ back, running her fingers delicately over the skin.

“Good morning,” she said as her girlfriend turned over to face her. When this was done, Eirene smiled and kissed her. Alexis returned the gesture but did little more, overwhelmed by lethargy. She muttered a clumsy “good morning” back, then closed her eyes to go back to sleep.

Unfortunately, that was not to be. Eirene didn’t want to wake her, not when she looked so beautiful and peaceful under the covers – even though her hair was thoroughly disheveled. The negotiation would begin in a couple of hours, and Alexis needed to be ready and able by then.

“You know what today is,” Eirene said softly. Alexis just groaned again, squeezing her eyes even tighter shut and curling up into a little ball.

“Hey, you’ve got to get up. Get dressed, eat a good breakfast. We need to make a good impression today, okay?”

Alexis didn’t say anything, but she listened. With a great many grunts and groans of discomfort, she reluctantly lifted herself out of the soft, enticing bed and plodded over to the shower, washed herself, and then got dressed for the upcoming negotiations.

\* \* \*

The meeting began at noon. There was no grand chamber or public audience. There were only ten individuals sitting around a table, hidden away in some dark corner of Ravengrad Tower. Alexis, Teague, and Hector represented the Peregrine militia, while, on the other side, a number of Commonwealth officials were present. The illustrious Director-General Jacob Lancaster was of course front and center, flanked by the four Commissars, Cem Karahan, and Danica Mirabeau.

Lancaster was a straight-to-business type. There were no formalities, no introduction. The discussion simply began.

“We’re going to skip the usual process and documentation. This is not a formal treaty, and will not be on the record,” the Director began. “I want this quick and clean.”

“No documentation?” Alexis demanded. “Without a formal treaty, absolutely nothing said here will matter! We might as well just walk out now.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Alexis,” Hector scolded. “What does a formal treaty matter anymore? If they break it, who will hold them accountable? You ought to be grateful that we even have the opportunity to talk.”

“Yes, yes, fine. I’m…sorry. Let’s get on with it.”

“Yes, let’s,” Lancaster said with hatred in his eyes. “I know what you want. Mr. Pendleton and I had a very…edifying conversation after your attack in which he was kind enough to outline his grievances. So don’t bother giving me the spiel that you surely have prepared about rights, liberty, and whatnot. I want you to tell me why I should give a damn.”

“Don’t play that game, Director,” Alexis said. Hector looked at her angrily, frustrated at her continued insolence, but she shot him back an equally cross glance that shut him up before he could interrupt her. “You know exactly why you ought to give a damn. Your civilians.”

There was a quiet murmur amongst the men and women of the Commonwealth when she said this.

“Call me a terrorist if you’d like, but I’m not a monster,” Alexis continued. “Our goals are the same – we want the best for the human race. But as long as we continue to disagree so wildly on how to accomplish those goals, without cooperation there will only be war. And in any war, innocents will die. I don’t want that any more than you do, but it would be beyond my control.”

“Of course it’s within your control – you’re the one pulling the trigger,” Lancaster snapped. “After the chaos that was the storms and the century before them, we have, for the first time in generations, stabilized the realm. No one is forcing you to risk all that by starting this war. Between the Crusade and the storms, over ninety percent of humanity was wiped out – would you put that remaining ten percent at risk? Everything I did was to keep at bay the mistakes of the old world, the ones that led to a century of war and decay. Sometimes sacrifices need to be made, and I’d like to put a stop to it. I really would. But your revolution comes too early, before the benefits of the freedom you offer outweigh the risks. If it pleases you to hear me admit it, I shall confess that, now more than ever, the Commonwealth is fragile. If you strike at its foundation now, everyone we’ve helped – and you cannot deny that we have helped a great many people – will suffer for it.”

“Yes, you’ve done some good, but that excuses nothing. For someone so esteemed, it bewilders me how you remain so ignorant to reality. Surely your intelligence has been keeping an eye on our growing numbers. Most of them are not fighters, but civilians. Innocent people who’ve grown weary of being *trod* on like ants underneath the Commonwealth’s boot. They just want a new life, and by destroying us you would end that chance and risk an even worse future than mere violence. We fought to defend ourselves, but we want another solution. That’s why we’re here.”

“They would never have even *been* at risk had you not started your little rebellion! Don’t act like some kind of messiah – you haven’t saved them, but damned them. You lured *a few* of them away from the safety and happiness of the Garden of Eden, tempting them to eat the forbidden fruit. You abused their malleable emotions, promising them a better life when all you really offer is danger and chaos. And now that they’ve been drawn from the vital soil of the Commonwealth, of course they will wither and die.”

Lancaster knew that his opponent was bluffing. Perhaps what she said was true of some of her followers, but, he had been made aware that much of her newfound strength was due to Marcus’ treachery, not any surge of anti-Commonwealth sentiment. And so he continued to challenge Alexis, feeling secure in his position.

“That isn’t the point, Director,” Alexis said. “You decry their ‘malleable’ emotions as petty and dangerous, but that is *exactly* why your methods will not succeed. You believe that you can force the people to unify by suppressing all the things that make us ourselves. It won’t work. Humans are and will always be diverse, not homogeneous, no matter how deep you force them to bury their individuality. This is what we offer: a chance for the people to express themselves and a unifying voice for the dissent.”

“Hypocrisy at its finest. You preach that humanity can never be unified, but in the same breath declare that you have somehow managed to do exactly that! We never tried to make everybody the same, and to accuse me of that shows dangerous simplicity on your part. Everybody *is* different, and that’s the point – it’s futile for people to try and divide themselves into inherently unequal factions, so we would unify the people by reminding people that they are utterly unique, that the only grouping we need is our common humanity.”

“It’s hardly hypocritical. There are a great many different voices in play here, and we give them all a chance to be heard. If you really do believe that everybody is different but equal, then why have you refused to give them a say in their governance? If you really are so right, then why not let people vote on it? Surely they’ll uphold your wonderful policies.”

“Because demagogues like you convince them to vote against their interests,” Lancaster said.

“The people I represent have made their opinions clear. My only job is to stand before you and tell you what I’ve heard. Some of these things I also want, and some I don’t. That’s beside the point, though. No one wants to fight, but the system in place forces us to achieve our goals through violence. Even these negotiations are the product of years of fighting. But now that we’re here, we’re here to talk, not to fight.” She let her face relax and softened her tone. “The voices were always there, Director. You’ll never get rid of them, and that’s why you need us. A release for all the pressure you and Magnus let build up.”

Lancaster paused and folded his hands in front of his face, furrowing his brow. “Fine, then talk. Miss Havery, what do you actually want? We can discuss theory all day and get nothing done. Give me an actual demand, if you have one, and we can see if there is anything I can do.”

“Bring back the Church,” Alexis said flatly.

“Which Church?”

“Any of them. All of them. You know exactly what I mean. Allow people to express their faiths outside of the privacy of their own homes. Allow religious communities to gather in houses of worship within Commowealth cities. Allow religious institutions to exist and conduct their affairs as they did in the old world.”

“As they did in the old world. And what do you know about that? Just what your older guardians have told you?”

“If they were anything like they are now, like the humble and good men and women I work with every day, then they are worth protecting. Maybe you do not see the value in religion, but it can do a lot of good. It can be harmful as well, in the wrong, hand, but that is not a reason to ban it outright.”

Lancaster steepled his fingers and looked across the table at Alexis, frowning. “Tell me, Miss Havery,” he said. “Do you believe in God?”

“I do, yes. I don’t attend any regular church, for obvious reasons, but my mother was Christian, and part of me takes after her. Never been one for dogma, but I believe. Most of the time.”

“Then it may surprise you to hear that I do too.”

“Really? Then I can’t imagine God would be too fond of what you’ve done with His place.”

“On the contrary. I think that the institutions of the old world were a gross perversion of all that is good and holy. I’m sure that your elders have regaled you with many a story from the Crusade. All from the Western perspective, of course. I wish that I could offer you one from the other side, but, alas, I was raised by my mother, rather than my father. I killed her, you know. My mother.”

“You what?” Alexis said, startled.

“I killed her during the battle on the *Reliquary*. Listen well, and see what the old world was really like.” Lancaster paused and cleared his throat. “She was fighting for the Catholics during the mess that was Istanbul. My father was part of the Turkish First Army, 66th mechanized infantry, and, with a complete lack of organization on the part of either force, the two of them ended up alone together and apparently fell in love. If the story ended there, it would be a rather heartwarming tale of star-crossed lovers and all that, but no. Anyhow, nine months later, I was born in a Serbian hospital, my parents not having seen each other since their rendezvous in Istanbul. Yet it seems like my mother never truly stopped loving my father. Unbeknownst to all, she had converted to Islam during her time there. But she never said anything about it, even raised me as a proper Catholic, just biding her time.”

“And what happened next? This just sounds like another story about foolish lovers to me.”

“When I turned eighteen, the war was still going on and she had become a colonel in the League army, attached to the Papal Center Fleet itself. I had just seen occupied Istanbul and most of our beloved leaders destroyed by the Muslims, and I was as thirsty for blood as any of my ‘brothers’ or ‘sisters.’ But, for all our fervor, we were losing the war. Enter the Divine Intervention. The Pope, Leo XVI, would be heading to Jerusalem to bolster the failing morale of the Crusaders and our remaining Orthodox allies there, and the entire Center Fleet would be acting as reinforcements. It was a stupid, desperate move, but I was more than eager to join my mother as one of the Pope’s bodyguards, alongside the usual Swiss Guard. She vouched for me, and so there I was.”

“It didn’t end well,” Teague said with no small amount of sadness in his voice. “The Christian world lost the war that day.”

“We lost, yes, but the Muslims didn’t win, either. They attacked the Center Fleet with everything they had. When we detected their airships on approach, we sent out our fighter craft to intercept them, but they never returned. It was the biggest capital ship battle in history. The Tehrani battleships overwhelmed our own until they were able send some men to board the *Reliquary*, but, by that point, so many of their dropships had been destroyed that the boarding party would not be able to abduct the Pope and escape as they’d planned. They gave their lives to kill him. When the Center Fleet finally reached Jerusalem, it was at a fraction of its strength, but the Muslims had expended much of their own remaining forces. The Crusade ended with a whimper shortly after.”

“And this has what to do with your mother, exactly? Or the topic at hand?” Alexis asked.

“She sold us out, is what. Evidently, her time in Istanbul with my father convinced her that the League was tyrannical and needed to be dismantled. To her credit, she wasn’t wrong. The whole time, she was passing information eastward to Emperor Samara, and even I had no idea this was happening.”

As he spoke, Lancaster’s brow furrowed and his eyes began to twitch. Looking into them, Alexis could see disgust and regret in equal measure, but she said nothing as he continued his story.

“Her job was done, she said to me as I was crying over Leo’s lifeless body. She didn’t even *try* to justify it to me, and she was right not to. Mother knew that I was too far gone, too bought into the Catholic cause to listen to any kind of reason. The irony of course being that the same could be said for her. By this point, the Center Fleet was in ruins, and the Muslim attackers had fallen back and abandoned their troops aboard the *Reliquary*, and there was nowhere for Mother to go, not that it mattered to her. She told me herself that she was resigned to her fate and ready to join her slain lover. Elsewhere aboard the ship, there was still fighting, but the Papal chambers were deserted except for us two and a great many corpses, and so it was up to me to avenge the faith I had failed by executing my own mother. It turned out that neither of us cared about the other – she had never even intended to convert me to her cause; if she had, she would have done so from my birth, and my own feelings of vengeance outweighed any regret I might have felt over killing the woman who gave birth to me.”

“And so you regret it now and are making up for it by forcing everyone to change their lives *just in case* they might make the same mistakes you did?”

“Hardly. Remember that none of these policies are my own – I enforce them now because I have seen what is at risk if I do not, but they were created by Magnus Keller, as rational a man as you could imagine. The facts I now preach were devised through logic and reason, not decades-old regret.”

“So, what I’m getting from this is that you just used way too many words to tell us ‘no,” Hector said.

“You can read it that way if you like. Ultimately, you are correct – I have nothing against God, but I will not bring back the institutions that caused that war.”

“And you’d rather invite another war?” Alexis asked. “If you reinstate the Church, there is a chance that religious violence will follow. But, if you refuse, I can tell you with absolute certainty that there is more than just a chance of violence.”

“Is that a threat?” Lancaster asked, the sadness in his eyes replaced with nothing but hatred.

“Yes, it is. This is your last chance – give me a yes or no answer.”

“How about I give you neither? Commissar Bucharest, take the Peregrine delegation into custody. We’re done here,” the Director-General said, pointing a finger sharply at Alexis.

“Commissar Bucharest, belay that order,” Alexis said calmly. “Your men will provide protection for us as we quit the capital, and then the Legionary Commission will meet with us at the agreed upon location. Karahan, you will join us too. Is that clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Bucharest said, as his troops filed in around Alexis and her companions. The few Skywatch officers, Lancaster’s Tower Guard, reached to draw their weapons but stopped as they assessed the situation and realized that they were woefully outnumbered.

“What have you done?” Lancaster said, snarling at the young woman opposite him.

“We expected that this wouldn’t end with a handshake and a smile, and made preparations to ensure our safety. I can’t take credit for it, though. I had plenty of help.”

“Fairchild, then. I suppose it’s safe to say you were in on this?” Lancaster asked, turning his attention to the Defense Administration’s Overseer with the barest hint of desperation.

“My family has always been loyal to the State,” was Marcus’ only reply.

“And has that changed?”

There was a pause, during which a nervous tension filled the room until Marcus nodded and walked over to the Peregrine side of the room, standing between Hector and Alexis.

“Next you’re going to tell me you’ve allied with Kasimira,” Lancaster said. “If that’s the way this is going to play out, then so be it. I’ve been waiting for an excuse to use the full might of the Skywatch. Now it finally arrives.”

“Are you not counting the Tabriz Crisis?” Karahan asked with a smug smile on his face.

“We lost to the Kasimirans because we underestimated them and did not deploy our full might. We did not bring the proper forces to engage an entrenched foe. We placed our trust in the wrong people and got burned when they betrayed us. Those mistakes will not be repeated.”

“We shall see, Lancaster. Very soon, we shall see,” Alexis said.

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“I’m guessing it didn’t go well,” Eirene said, nodding towards the Legion soldiers as Alexis met her outside the Tower. “It’s war, then.”

“Yes.”

“You had no other choice, I assume? You tried everything you could to make it work?”

Alexis stopped in front of her girlfriend and looked sadly towards the ground. “I guess. I’ll always wonder if I could have done it better. If there wasn’t something I could have done to make it work. He ordered Bucharest to arrest us, and, at that point, I figured there was no salvaging it, and so now we’re going to war. But I’m still going to keep my promise. You don’t have to have any part in it if you don’t want it.”

“Thanks, love, but that’s a promise you don’t need to keep. If Lancaster turned against you and made sure that peace wasn’t an option, then I want a part in punishing him for his tyranny. When the war starts, I will fight for you. I will kill for you.”

Alexis wanted to forbid it outright, to order Eirene to stand down and stay out of the upcoming conflict. She wanted to make sure that the woman she loved would be out of harm’s way, ideally in a safe place far away from Ravengrad. She wanted to protect Eirene not only from the Skywatch, but also from succumbing to her bloodthirst and doing something she would regret. And yet she said nothing and made no attempt to stop her. Alexis only reached forward to squeeze Eirene tightly in her arms, full of guilt and anger at herself.

“We’re going to win this thing,” Eirene said as she patted Alexis on the back. “I’ll make sure of it.”

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“They’re going to launch a blitzkrieg against Ravengrad,” Melina said.

Lancaster crossed his arms. “We figured that much. But you’re certain that the entirety of their assault will be directed towards the capital?”

“Yes. With Fairchild’s help, they have more numbers, but the reinforcements from Hyperion should even the odds. They don’t have the guts or the logistics for a lengthy war, and their entire strategy relies on a swift victory, decapitating your government before you can fortify the city. If you can hold Ravengrad, the Skywatch is much more prepared for a protracted conflict, and we’ve basically won. ”

“Very well. Danica, Do you know how many of the First Legion troops have declared for the Peregrines?” Lancaster asked, turning to his vice admiral.

“Fewer than we had feared. No less than a quarter, but no more than a third. Most of them remain loyal, although the rebels took the highest-ranking of their number.”

“And you remain loyal to me? You aren’t a sleeper agent waiting to turn traitor during the battle? You don’t secretly still follow Karahan?”

Danica laughed. “Karahan was not worthy even of that lowly rank. He was a coward and a liar. I’ll follow a worthy ruler through all hell, but he was a far cry from a worthy ruler. I know that you have no cause to believe me, but I will not choose rebellious upstarts over my Grand Admiral.”

“Of course. Now, we should prepare what defenses we’re left with after that miserable showing. Assuming our agent’s intelligence is good.”

“It is,” Melina assured him.

# Chapter 15 – Dansons la Carmagnole

“The Christians of the old world did give us one thing – the Papal Center Fleet. What’s left of it, anyway. That the Vatican, of all places, was able to improve upon the EAE’s work is scarcely believable, but the pieces we’ve picked up here and there are evidence enough, and have been a great boon to the Commonwealth. One has to wonder where the rest of my old friends have been laid to rest. Perhaps the Catholics’ other Christian allies, the Muslims, or even the EAE were jealous and made off with the wrecks. If they really are stashed somewhere, waiting for some band of survivors to use them and reconquer the world, then we could have a problem. All that said, despite the benefits we reap today, it might be best if the fleet really does just lie in ruin at the bottom of the Mediterranean.”

* *Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster*

Lancaster’s plans had been executed to the letter. The full might of all four legions – minus those who had followed Bucharest in defection – was in place and almost the entire Skywatch was marshalled at Ravengrad, ready to fight alongside a small Hyperion fleet. Most of Théoden’s army had remained in Geneva, and most of what he had sent to Lancaster had been distributed to the other principalities as a token defense force, just in case Melina’s advice had been in error.

The Grand Admiral stood on the bridge of the *Sunset Serenade*, looking out over the carrier’s flight deck. Scores of corvettes stood ready to launch as soon as needed. They stood ready to die for the Commonwealth.

“The civilians have withdrawn to the southwest?” Lancaster asked, looking at his second-in-command.

“Yes. I have the guard conscripts moving them now. They should be safe from the brunt of the attack. If the Peregrines get any ideas, our army’ll have softened them up some before they get that far. However…”

“What? What is it?” Lancaster demanded, his veins visibly bulging under pressure.

“Not everyone has agreed to go. We have armed rebellion in Widow’s Walk, some protests in central Ravengrad, traces of resistance along the southern coast. They have some support from civil guard defectors as well”

“And have we responded?”

“The loyalist guard veterans are currently working on suppressing the revolt. With your permission, I would dispatch some elements of the Second Legion to support them.”

Lancaster took a deep breath and let it as slowly as if it hurt to breathe. “No. The enemy are bringing the mourner drones to the fight, as we expected. We’re going to need every soldier we can get for this plan to work. My one comfort is knowing that this is likely the only battle we need to win.”

“Then I hope that these rebel militias won’t prove too much for the guard to handle.”

“Indeed, all we can do is hope. Where is the enemy force now?”

“Several capital ships and an escort fleet reached Attica ten minutes ago. Looks like lots of troop transports too; they may try to drop fire teams behind our lines,” Danica said. “Beyond that, most of their troops are following the fleet, embarked aboard infantry fighting vehicles and supported by tanks and artillery. That force will try to bludgeon its way to the Tower, I imagine, while their aircraft harass our armies.”

“We can’t let that happen. A siege would be less risky, but would cause terrible damage to the city itself. Losing the infrastructure would be devastating beyond measure, so let’s start moving the fleet forward. We’ll meet them in the ruins before they get that far, before they have a chance to land their army. Keep them away from downtown at all costs.” Lancaster sighed. “*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* indeed. The Center Fleet was a mistake. Going in force to Tabriz was a mistake. Raising an army like this never ends well, and, yet, here we are, ready to send our brothers and sisters to die ‘gloriously’ for us.”

The Commonwealth fleet roared into life, an armada the likes of which had not been raised in centuries. Ships of all shapes and sizes clouded the skies of Ravengrad as they moved forwards to meet their foes.

The first engagement did not end well for them. The Peregrine fleet was fast, faster than anyone had anticipated. And so it was not above the outskirts that the opening shots were fired, but so dangerously close to Ravengrad that the Tower’s brand new cannons were able to take potshots at the battle – the Commonwealth’s one advantage, and even that didn’t last for long.

Mourners poured out of Marcus’ black ships, speeding towards the Commonwealth fleet and setting upon its vessels like a swarm of locusts. They landed on the hulls and tore apart the armor, sinking airship after airship with almost no resistance. Too fast for the biggest guns and too numerous for interceptors to have much effect, the drones quickly forced the Skywatch fleet deeper into the city.

With the Skywatch armada tied up by the mourners, the Peregrine transports were free to land where they pleased. Three-fourths of the army landed in the Ravengrad outskirts and were immediately set upon by Lancaster’s trap. He had assigned elements of the Second and Fourth legions, infantry and artillery, to form their main defensive line while the Third and loyal remnants of the First deployed scouts and tank destroyers in hidden positions to flank the rebel army when it charged. This strategy succeeded in delaying the enemy offensive, but it failed to stop it entirely, and both armies were soon fragmented into many different fronts scattered throughout the city. Before long, the rebels occupied much of northern Ravengrad and their guns were almost in range of the Tower.

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The Peregrine commanders’ squad, bearing the call sign Command One, did not arrive on the field until the end of the first day of battle. It was evening when Eirene’s new corvette set down amongst the aged buildings of Widow’s Walk. There were no stars this night, nor were there any city lights, but, in their stead, fires burned throughout Ravengrad, casting the lower reaches of the city in a hellish glow.

There were ten in total who landed on the wharf that night. Janessa and Alexis led a small company of soldiers out of their corvette, boots landing firmly on the concrete. Light from the few lamps scattered haphazardly around cast shadows off of each soldier in all directions, lighting up their brown and red uniforms. They would attempt to forge a path through this darkness and meet up with Teague, who had occupied a base closer to downtown where he was working to develop a plan to take Ravengrad Tower. Surely, both women knew, he would be envious of the comparatively luxurious position Hector had been granted – managing logistics back home at the Peregrine base.

Alexis was entirely in her element in Ravengrad. While serving in the militia’s scout and salvage corps, running reconnaissance and retrieval missions, she had become adept at leading a small team through urban combat. Janessa, meanwhile, was uncomfortable. She knew how to fight on foot, and had proved as much at the Tower, but she would have preferred the mobility of her mount in such a massive arena. She couldn’t help but feel a slight sense of resentment towards Alexis for separating her from the dragoon corps, even if remaining there would have landed her in a purely supportive role.

While the ground team was fighting through the streets, Eirene would be flying high against the Commonwealth airships. It was a daunting prospect that made her uneasy, even with the support of vast fleets of drones. The corvette Marcus had given her was unfamiliar. There had been plenty of time to bond with her new machine, of course, but never in such a high-stakes situation, and she felt even more anxious than she had in the skies above Tabriz.

Down below, Alexis reflected as she and Janessa moved slowly and carefully through the harbor area. Everything here was familiar to her. The floating wooden pathways crossing between concrete platforms that supported rotting warehouses and offices and houses. The algae and weeds growing in between bricks and boards, and the longer vines climbing up even the tallest walls. Widow’s Walk was not as luxurious as the homes afforded to the Commonwealth’s highest-ranking officers, but the government had done its best to ensure that all its citizens lived comfortable lives. To see it in ruins was saddening, and she felt a pang of guilt.

Wood creaked beneath their feet, old boards that had endured decades of wear and tear from the dockworkers, men and women working whatever jobs they could find. They took detours through the more stable concrete or brick buildings when possible, even when doing so meant taking a longer route.

Widow’s Walk was a large region of Ravengrad that encompassed much of the western coast, and so it was some time before the little squad began to see signs of battle. At first, it was just a crater or two from a stray artillery shell or bomb. Some buildings had small or large holes in them, and a number of walkways had collapsed into the water below. Every so often, they passed something or other that was on fire. The heat was comforting. The destruction that spawned it was less so.

The rubble began to pile up as the squad pressed forward, as did the bodies. Crashed mourners lay in ruin amongst half-demolished houses a long way from the battlefields in the sky. Even for constructs that were artificially intelligent at best, it seemed depressing that they should die alone. There was, of course, no time to grieve for them. Closer and closer the Peregrine squad drew to the battle, and, as they pushed onwards, the sounds of destruction escalated into an even greater cacophony.

Human corpses began to appear. Ex-civilians who’d taken up arms when the war started lay beside mutilated civil guardsmen. So many lay dead in dried-up pools of their own blood, riddled with bullet holes. Heads and limbs were separated from bodies with splinters of bone sticking out of the ends. A young man who couldn’t have been much more than Alexis’ age was impaled, pinned against a wooden wall by a pitchfork with bloodstains all over his chest and collected in a stain below. His eyes were utterly lifeless, and Janessa pushed them shut out of respect.

Above this macabre display was a metal cage hanging from the second floor of the building. Perhaps it had once held seafood or some other kind of harbor supply, but now it held only human corpses. Butchered guardsmen and militia alike had been dumped inside without ceremony, left in the cage to let the fluid drain out. A few liquid drops still fell, striking the tops of the troops’ heads.

“This is worse than I feared,” Alexis said, letting the blood continue to stain her hair. “This isn’t war. It’s wanton murder. In the north, the mourners fight the Skywatch and the legions, but down here? This is nothing more than civilians butchering each other. The rebel militia has no combat training and the civil guard’s just a bunch of damn college kids and older folk with nowhere else to work. No one here is qualified for this kind of slaughter.”

There was a sudden sliver of movement to her right. It wasn’t an enemy, at least. One of the damned mourners was coming back to life, its lights flickering and its legs twitching as it tried to dig its way out from underneath the dirt, debris, and corpses in which it was buried.

She only stared at it. It was an ally, something that should have been a friend. But Alexis hesitated to lend the machine any assistance.

“Do you think we should help it?” she asked, looking towards Janessa.

“Why? It’s a drone. It’s not alive, so it doesn’t need rescuing, and I don’t suspect ye’ll get much help from it in that state.”

“Hmm,” Alexis muttered. “I don’t know. They seem so alive that it would be cruel to just abandon it. Seems like it could lend fire support if we gave it a chance.”

“Alright, fine. It seems to be doing a good enough job by itself, though.”

In the end, the creature didn’t need any help, nor was it as friendly as Alexis had thought. Free from its imprisonment, the mourner stalked to the right, “eyes” fixed on Alexis alone. She stared back into what might as well have been its face, waiting to see what it would do. To her surprise, it spoke.

“This war isn’t what you wanted, is that it? What then, pray tell, did you want?” the mourner said in a deep, suave voice.

Alexis and Janessa recognized the one speaking. It was Magnus’ voice.

“Is that really you, Director?” Alexis demanded. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised, but, still, what do you want? You’re taking control of our mourners now?”

“No, I’m not taking control of ‘your’ mourners, idiot. We had a few of our own in reserve that your traitorous friend didn’t include in that generous gift of his. I’d intended for this little package to reach you earlier, but it got shot down by the Skywatch, and so I’ve been crawling my way towards you ever since. Maybe I ought to have told them, but they’d not have believed me. After all, I’m dead to them. Anyway, since you’re here, this poor fellow will work fine.”

“So you’re broadcasting live from somewhere, yeah? I don’t suppose that you’re going to tell us where you’re hiding, are ye?” Janessa taunted, though it felt awkward trying to speak to a mourner.

“I’m on the Grand Balcony. I want to talk to you in person about some things, but, given the current situation, I wasn’t in the position to approach you with a more traditional envoy. Hence, well, this. Listen, you can come and get me or not. I figure you’re going to try and capture the tower anyway, so I’ll be waiting for you, and, if you get repelled, then I’ll find some other way. Most of the CHP doesn’t know I’m even alive – I’ll tell you more in person if you show up.”

“Holding information for ransom, yeah?”

“Yes. I have a proposition, and, if you’re willing to hear me out, I’ll answer any questions you might have. I promise this is less complex than it sounds.” With that, the light left the mourner’s eyes and it fell asleep for the last time.

No one knew what to think, but they couldn’t think about it even if they did. Almost as soon as the mourner collapsed, their position became the target of a powerful barrage of artillery. Mortar strikes blew through the rooftops around them and left craters in the ground or broke straight through the piers. In between blasts, they could hear yelling.

“That bastard Magnus. ‘A proposition,’ quoth he. What is this, some kind of game?” Janessa said.

“To him, it might as well be,” Alexis said, curling her mouth in disgust. “He’s locked himself away in a high tower while his goons fight and die for him. Appalling.”

“It’s not him they’re dying for now. Do you think Lancaster’s one of the ones who knows about this? If Magnus survived somehow, even though we saw him die, then it’d be huge news if he came back. What would even happen?”

“I don’t intend to find out,” Alexis said. “He won’t come back from this, at least. C’mon, Jan. It’s time for round two.”

“You’re going to walk right into his trap?”

“I guess so. I mean, he *was* right. Like, we were going to attack the Tower anyway. If we can break through that far, Command One can meet him on the Grand Balcony while the rest of our army secures the base. Even if he’s got a trap ready for us, backup would be right there, and we can send mourners ahead to scan for booby traps.”

“Fine, fine. Let’s just go over this with Teague before we hit the Tower again.”

The shells continued to strike the ground around them, leveling what buildings were not already in ruins. There were mad whoops and cries as a horde of marauding enemies descended upon their position.

Bullets whistled past their heads as the Peregrine soldiers took cover inside an old fishing warehouse. The stench of dead and burning bodies mixed atrociously with the dead and dying fish, creating an utterly putrid atmosphere.

An artillery blast hit the concrete roof of their shelter, blowing it to tiny fragments of rock and rebar. More bullets followed.

“We can’t take this many. Come on, ye fools! Move!” Janessa shouted, beckoning for the squad to move forwards. She smashed a cracked window with the butt of her rifle, opening it to movement. Others just ran through the door, hoping to avoid enemy fire.

They ran from building to building in two teams of five, two covering the other three while they made a mad dash into the next piece of cover.

Dodge. Leap. Run. Alexis turned her head and saw one of her soldiers die. A man whose face she had never seen before that day fell to a bullet in the chest. She couldn’t hesitate, not under so much fire. In cover, she could see his body bleeding out – if there was even a chance that he was still alive and could be saved…

…it disappeared when a blast of cannon hit that same position and turned his corpse into a fine red mist and bloody pulp. Alexis just moved on. She couldn’t afford to think about such matters. Not now.

There were only six of them left by the time the tiny siege was ended. Whether the Commonwealth army had run out of ammo or had simply given up the chase, they didn’t know. They couldn’t even tell if it had been the legions fighting them or the civil guard, or something different altogether. Never once had anyone gotten a close up look at the aggressors.

The Peregrines rested in yet another abandoned shack along Widow’s Walk, indistinguishable from the rest. As one saving grace, some old fishing nets could be used for makeshift hammocks. At least they wouldn’t have to sleep on the damp concrete.

Cannons and bombs continued to go off in the distance, echoing throughout the city with almost soothing regularity. After deciding who would stay awake when to make sure that they weren’t killed in their sleep, the soldiers of Command One stopped fighting for the night, and that was that. It was a good a place as any.

When they awoke, they saw for the first time how total the destruction was. Fires had spread all the way to the tower itself where most of the Skywatch armada was mustered. The mourners had taken incredible losses, but the Commonwealth even more so, and for each airship downed another metal corpse fell upon the city blocks below.

The loyalists had been routed. From the looks and sounds of the battle, there was still rampant violence in the streets themselves, but the air superiority belonged to the Peregrines. What airships the Skywatch still possessed – among them the *Sunset Serenade* still flew – were quickly retreating while anti-aircraft guns and missiles desperately covered them from the swarm of mourners. It was a valiant yet hopeless effort.

Every weapon in Command One was loaded and every soldier alert and ready within minutes of waking up. If Magnus was still out there, taunting them to find him and take him on, then they had to hunt him down. There were no enemies in sight or earshot, so the little squad could perhaps take their first hostile unit by surprise.

Widow’s Walk was a ghost town, inhabited only by the dead bodies of its former inhabitants. The fires were out, kindling and fuel reduced to char and ash. It was painful to see for all, but Alexis was especially distressed.

“This was my house. I lived here for seventeen years,” she said quietly when they came to a very specific address. It was less bombed than most, having suffered only a light barrage of bullets. The wallpaper was torn and burnt in places, and the wooden floorboards had fallen out of place, but a lot of the furniture was still where it had been when she left, almost a decade prior. It was mercifully ungraced by the fires that had consumed so much of the city.

They had enough time to make a quick detour and look around. If nothing else, it was a trip down memory lane for Alexis. She stepped inside and just stared at each piece of furniture or decoration, from the living room to the kitchen to the dining room. Each one was both dilapidated and oddly pristine, preserved as if no one had touched them in years. Most likely, that was true.

Alexis carefully pushed open the door to her own room. The depressing, grey sunlight shone only through the broken window into the dreary bedchamber. She looked deep into the shadows, seeing the decaying remnants of her old toys and books.

There was a small dresser underneath the window, drawers stuck partially open. Some of her old clothes still lay inside, riddled with moth-eaten holes. A pink summer dress, baggy shorts, tee-shirts, socks and underwear. Little Alexis had worn these once, back before this war was even a dream in anyone’s sleeping mind. She had been so childish and carefree back then, even for a girl in Widow’s Walk. Alexis picked a doll up off the floor and stuffed it into her pack for safekeeping, a sentimental trinket and nothing more.

“Hey, ‘Rene? You there?” She asked through her radio. “You got time to talk?”

Eirene stood on the flight deck of the MRS *F. Scott Fitzgerald* in full pilot gear, waiting next to the new corvette. “Yeah, I’m here,” she said. “We’re not quite ready to launch, so I got a minute. What do you need?”

“I…I just wanted to thank you. I owe you a lot, for everything you’ve done for me, ever since we met. I don’t know what I’d be doing now if I’d gone through with those orders, way back then.”

Eirene laughed. “Well, I know I sure wouldn’t be here. So…maybe we can call it even, hmm?”

“Yeah, even. Sure.” Eirene could hear the uncertainty in Alexis’ voice, but didn’t want to call her on it.

“I’ll be fine, don’t you worry. You’ll be fine too, now go and win the day for us.”

“Right, you too. Heh. Love you, ‘Rene.”

“I love you too. See you when this is all over.”

When it was all over*.* Alexis didn’t know how long that would be, if such a time ever came. No war lasts forever, but that didn’t mean she would get to see the end.

She wanted to slap herself for such ridiculous thoughts. Worrying about death was useless, and wouldn’t get her any closer to Magnus, Lancaster, or anybody else she needed to find. Idiocy, it was.

“What was that about orders?” Janessa asked, approaching her from behind. “Um, sorry to eavesdrop, you know, but it just seemed a little out of place.”

Alexis turned and sat down on the bed that had hosted her throughout all her teenage years. “It’s certainly a story,” she said. “You think we got time?”

Janessa checked around. Their men were keeping watch around the building, even if they didn’t know why, and there was no enemy army in sight. She didn’t like undue delay, but she could put up with some for Alexis’ sake.

“Sure, we got time. Go ahead and tell, as long as ye can be nice and quick about it.”

Hands to the side of her head, Alexis massaged her temples and breathed heavily, trying to remember. There was so much going on to cloud her thoughts, and the story she needed to bring back was a complicated one. She’d tell a simpler version, of course, but there was still a lot behind it.

“You were with the guard too,” she began, “so you know what it’s like there. A bunch of poor, conscripted saps who probably don’t want to be there generally way in above their heads. That or you get a boring post in the back-end of nowhere, but you know what I mean.”

“I ended up with the second sort,” Janessa grumbled.

“Yeah, well, I got the other one. We all remember our first mission, how damn stressful it is, but I’m not talking about that. There’s nothing *to* tell there. But, you remember the story I usually tell about why I left the civil guard?”

“That quagmire with the hostages and the bombing? Yeah, I remember.”

“Well, that might have been the last straw for me, but it wasn’t the first. Not at all. I don’t remember how long I’d been serving when it happened, but I got assigned to a team that was going to investigate an old building where treasonous guardsmen were garrisoned.”

“And?”

“Our orders were to shoot them all on sight, no matter what we saw. The officers said that negotiation had failed, but I don’t know how hard they really tried, or if they tried at all. You know why?”

“No, why?”

“Because, when we got there, all we found was a bunch of students and a corvette. Kids, just like us. Eirene was one of them. There because she and her crew got blamed for the Commonwealth’s defeat by the Kasimiran army. All that nonsense, you know.”

“Wait, really? I always thought that ye had known each other for longer than that.”

“It’s still been more than five years, but yeah. That’s when we met. So anyway, when we saw who we were up against, there was no way we were going to shoot them. So we talked. They were just the type of guys and gals that we’re so familiar with now, the sort who just want to live away from the authoritarianism of the Commonwealth. Not one of my squad – there were five of us, total – wanted to go through with it. So we hatched a plan.”

“To help them escape?”

“Kind of. We told the officers that the building was empty when we arrived, that everyone inside had made a run for it and we couldn’t find head nor tail. Of course they chastised us, threatened punishment, but ultimately did nothing. A few separatists were nothing to worry about when there were bigger fish to fry.”

“Where did they go?”

“I’m getting to that. We took them in, offered them asylum in our own homes. I had an apartment in Ravengrad, and that’s where I took Eirene. That’s where I fell in love with her.”

Janessa continued to listen in silent contemplation.

“Naturally, if they caught anyone, they’d have locked us all up, but that never happened. In the end, I just chalked it up to an administrative mistake, that someone misevaluated the threat and sent us after some harmless folks. But as I kept working with the guard, I saw more and more apathy, cruelty, and downright inhumanity, proving that that wasn’t just an isolated incident. Already she and I worried daily about being caught, so when that last straw hit, I took her and we just ran. She knew how to fly a corvette, so we headed off to where we’d stashed the one we’d found her with and off we flew. You know the rest.”

Janessa opened her mouth to respond, but she was interrupted by gunfire close by. It wasn’t a terrible thing, since she had little else to say, but it was startling nonetheless.

One shot, then two, then three. Nothing at all like the barrage that had been upon them the night before. Probably just a few Commonwealth scouts from the guard or the First Legion. If there were scouts, though, then an army would likely be soon to follow, so it was important that they leave with all haste.

“What are we seeing?” Janessa asked her soldier manning the door with the best view.

“There’s a half-track up on that hill. Can’t tell how many guys up there, but, based on the fire we’re taking, I’d say just under a half-dozen from the First legion. Could be guard, but they don’t use the tracks that often. Plus these guns seem a little high-caliber for them.”

The Peregrine soldiers returned fire in kind, but neither side seemed to score any hits. Suppression was the name of the game, and nobody dared to advance. It seemed like hours passed, but it wasn’t more than a few minutes before the Commonwealth decided up the ante.

“Shit. They’ve got a tank,” Janessa said, just slightly under her breath. She kept her head low but watched the enemy position as the metal beast crawled up next to the half-track and stopped, belching smoke. Its turret turned and pointed at the old house.

“We need to run. Now!” she yelled, grabbing the nearest man’s hand and pulling him to the back door of Alexis’ former home. “Alexis? Where the hell are you? We need to get out, come on!”

Alexis appeared, clutching a small doll close to her chest. It was slightly tattered, but mostly intact. Without a word, she nodded, quickly stuffed it into her pack and ran after the rest of the troops just as the first shell broke through the wall.

The house was gone in less than a minute. Everything inside was blown to bits, shattered by the tank’s fire. Ahead, the six Peregrine soldiers kept low, taking cover behind decaying walls and praying that the Commonwealth vehicles couldn’t find them. The small-arms fire wasn’t hugely concerning since none of the shooters seemed to know their position, but a wayward tank shell could ruin their day if it got lucky.

“Damn it, Eirene, are you there?” Alexis said frantically, hoping that she – or anyone else who could provide air support – was listening. “Command One is pinned down by armor at about thirty-eight degrees, zero min, five sec north, twenty-four, zero-one, twenty-four east. We need something to deal with light vehicles. Some mourners, maybe.”

“Command One, this is *F. Scott Fitzgerald*. The full wing is not ready, but we can send Cyclopes Four and Five to the coordinates you relayed. There’s also an armor unit one-and-a-half klicks to the west. Recommend that you link up with them after you’re through, then proceed to Widow’s Walk FOB. I’ll tell them you’re coming if you pursue that option.” The man speaking had not personally identified himself, but Alexis and Janessa recognized the slow, aged voice of Marcus Fairchild. He was personally commanding the black ships and the mourners attached to them.

“Roger that, *F. Scott*, we’ll do that. Appreciate it.” Alexis said back,

Widow’s Walk was almost entirely devoid of life by that time, and what forces remained couldn’t hope to defeat a pair of mourners. Cyclopes Four and Five were able fly unmolested through the skies until they dropped to the ground between the Peregrine and Commonwealth positions. A missile from each made short work of the tank, knocking it out with a single barrage and leaving the half-track and infantry entirely vulnerable.

The two mourners turned their sights towards the rest and leapt forwards, gunning down the men until the half-track was just an empty husk stained with blood and filled with corpses. It was a grim spectacle, but the Peregrines couldn’t help but watch.

There was silence after their two saviors disappeared back into the sky. Their departure had been odd. After doing the dirty work, both of the mourners had turned to look at the Peregrine position and bent forwards as if to bow or nod in acknowledgement. Whether that was the controller acting or an autonomous routine built into the unit was unclear, but it was disturbing.

Alexis didn’t want to think more about it. For the time being, their goal was to rendezvous with the tanks that Marcus had told them of. One and a half kilometers was a long ways to go, and she didn’t know if their allies were even aware of Command One’s imminent arrival.

They climbed up the short hill and reached the wreckage of the two Commonwealth vehicles. Five bodies lay around the half-track, mangled and broken by the mourners’ attacks. It was a bad way to die, without any of the dignity of being slain by a conscious human.

“Here, help me toss this guy out,” Janessa said, looking into the driver’s seat of the half-track. The man inside was, of course, deceased, with an enormous gash in his chest where one of the mourners had impaled him.

“Why?” Alexis asked.

“So we can use this half-track, why else? Now get over here and help me move the bodies, ‘less ye want to share a seat with a corpse.”

Alexis shrugged and gestured for her men to follow. They didn’t take long to throw away the corpses, bloodied bodies in First Legion uniforms. These hapless souls were left behind to rot amongst the decay of Widow’s Walk as the commandeered half-track trundled off into the distance to find its way nearby allies.

“You don’t suppose they’re going to shoot at us, do you?” Alexis asked from the passenger’s seat while Janessa drove.

“Nah. Just keep your head up, they’ll surely recognize you.”

The first sign of their destination came in the form of a cloud of dust that could only have been kicked up by something big. Whatever it was, it was close, and it was loud. There were definitely tanks of some description on the other side of a row of houses, but who owned them remained to be seen.

They didn’t have to wonder much longer. The deafening roar of cannon sounded the beginning of battle as Commonwealth units descended upon the position, opening fire with everything they had. Janessa pulled the half-track to a stop while they watched light tanks and a column of infantry advancing past, completely ignoring Command One – if they even knew of its existence – in favor of an assault on the much larger armored units. The small scouting party that Command One had fought earlier that day was nothing compared to this force, but the Peregrine numbers were far greater as well.

Janessa hovered her hand above the vehicle’s ignition, ready to roll forwards as soon as the threat had passed them by. Yet, before she could set the half-track in motion, she felt Alexis’ own hand stopping hers.

“What is it?” Janessa asked.

“Do you think we should help our guys out?”

Janessa just looked at her, dumbfounded. The idea that they could even make a difference seemed like utter lunacy.

“I know it’s a long shot, but as their commanders, don’t we have a responsibility to support them when we can?”

“There’s *six* of us, Alex. That’s not enough to even make a dent. Yes, we have to take care of our troops. But those men in the back are our troops too. Will ye throw them away in some suicide mission? They’d probably let ye, but is that a good use of their lives?”

Alexis frowned and looked towards the back, then to the rapidly escalating conflict in the distance. Eventually she spoke. “No, you’re right. It isn’t.”

“Exactly. Maybe they don’t even need our help; they’ve got tanks and we’re just six guys. You got to pick your battles, Alex. Now take your hand off the stick and let me drive.”

After Alexis begrudgingly did as she was told, the half-track started back to life and plowed onward, the sound of cannons and guns masking its progress. Slowly but surely, they pressed further into the city.

It was a few more kilometers before Command One reached one of the militia’s bases that surrounded central Ravengrad. The fort was makeshift but heavily defended, and flew the Peregrine flag proudly, a white banner with the red shape of a falcon’s claw imposed upon a circle in the center and a thin brown stripe running from left to right.

As Command One’s vehicle pulled into the base, they were greeted by a small collection of Peregrine soldiers led by their fellow commanders. As she disembarked, Alexis took note of her surroundings. The base was built around a commercial plaza whose shops and boutiques had been turned into storehouses for weapons and ammo and bunkhouses for troops. Barricades and towers had been erected in the shape of a star whose six points jutted out into the rubble, and all around were batteries of artillery.

Reunited with the rest of the commanders, Alexis and Janessa left what remained of their squad to the base defense and followed Teague to the FOB’s “war room,” which was really just an old bakery that had been stuffed with far too many computers, maps, and other communications equipment. In the center was a massive map, an overview of the entire city as they knew it, and on the table were maybe two score models, tokens, and other markers that represented whatever the commanders felt was important. Everything from key positions to combat-ready units was shown.

Inside, she also saw another familiar face. Adrian, the guard at the Panopticon who had overseen her during her stay. That was a surprise.

“Hello, again,” he said sheepishly. “I remembered what you said to me during your incarceration about choosing of your own free will. I thought about that, and made my choice. Gathered up allies within the guard and launched a coup as soon as word came that you were marching on Ravengrad. Thought we’d give you some support.”

Alexis had mixed feelings about this news. It certainly explained the state of Widow’s Walk when she and her squad had arrived. While it may have been advantageous for Adrian and his troops to sow chaos in the city, she maintained reservations about the expenditure of life for what may have ended up being of little benefit. She was also concerned that his preparations may have hampered the evacuation of civilians from the city.

Teague sat down at one end of the table, setting one arm down to rest his chin on while the other grabbed his knee tensely. “Alright,” he began as the others took their seats, “I know you just got here, so here’s an overview of what’s going on to the best of our knowledge. I shall try to be brief, but the situation is…complex.”

“Looks like it,” Janessa said, looking down upon the tactical map with a horrified expression on her face. “That’s a fucking nightmare.”

“We were winning at first,” Teague said. “But the inner city’s proven a tough nut to crack. During day one, we beat a battlegroup made from elements of the Third and First legions quite handily. They tried to flank us as we pushed through here, weakened us a good bit, but we had enough air superiority to knock them out. After that, we set up camps like this one in a perimeter around the inner city.” He gestured to a number of small markers arranged in an almost-circular pattern on the table. Each had a letter quickly scrawled upon it with pen. A through K, eleven in total.

“We’re right here at Juliett. As of now, we’re the biggest force in Widow’s Walk, but that’s not saying much. Most of the fighting is further north as our army gets closer to the urban centers. Marcus has assumed command of that force, as most of its strength comes from the mourners and the black ships. Our borders are generally secure, although Bravo and Kilo are under considerable pressure from enemy infantry. Bucharest is working on a solution to that problem. Meanwhile, India and Golf are taking a lot of artillery fire. Karahan’s ships are shelling their positions in response, safe from airstrikes thanks to the drones, but it’s not having much effect.”

“What about the inner city?” Janessa asked.

Teague sighed. “Well, that’s a whole different story. A real mess if I ever saw one. The Skywatch is in full retreat, acting as a rearguard for the evacuating civilians, but there’s still plenty of ground-based anti-air driving the mourners back. We can’t even bring in air support to the FOBs, which is problematic.”

“I’m assuming that there’s a reason that we can’t send in ground forces to knock out the AA?” Alexis asked.

“Yes. Lots of different reasons, actually. I don’t even know where to begin.”

“What’s that, then?” she said, pointing to a long stream of tokens coming from Ravengrad Tower, which was hastily marked by an empty beer bottle.

“That’s probably our biggest problem. We thought that we took out most of the CHP armor when we defeated the battlegroup in the outskirts, but when we started pressuring the city itself it was like we’d hit a hornet’s nest. Did you even know that the Skywatch has tanks? I didn’t. Black Fortresses, Marcus called them.”

“Why don’t we have any of our own?”

“Marcus’ heavy armor divisions were in Montreal.”

“And we’ve lost contact with them. Great.”

“Aye. These things are monsters, pouring out of some hellish tunnel that comes up downtown – not even our Longbows or Siege Panthers can go toe-to-toe with them, and even mourners have trouble with their armor and shielding. Infantry don’t even stand a chance without rocket launchers, and we don’t have many of those. We might be able to deal with these tanks if we could just bring the black ships closer, but that’s got complications of its own. See, though we’ve taken out a lot of airships and many more have retreated, there’s still a sizable fleet marshaled around the *Sunset Serenade* a couple kilometers west of the Tower. The *Serenade* itself has effectively created a sort of ‘no-go’ zone all around it. It’s quite the beast, with enough anti-air rolled up into its guns and interceptor squads to deny any mourner attacks and ground-attack cannons that could tear apart any chance we had at striking it from down here. I’ve never seen them in action, but reportedly it has enough nukes loaded to destroy our black ships in a single salvo, even with fully-powered HVI barriers.”

“Wait, it has *nukes?*” Janessa asked unable to believe what she had just heard.

“Yes – well, no. They’re not true nukes. Based off the *sehr große Bombe* that the Vatican commissioned to be used against Muslims towards the end of the Crusade. Lots of explosions, no radiation. We expect that these are smaller ones, but still enough to knock a capital ship or two out of the sky.”

Janessa looked impressed. “So, don’t fuck with the *Serenade*.”

“Exactly. It’s denying that entire area, and the Tower itself is doing basically the same thing with its cannons. Between the two of them, there’s a battle line that we can’t hope to breach with our army. With that kind of support, the Commonwealth units can lash out, stir up trouble in the city, and then just fall back to get repaired at the Tower.”

“Are we at least winning in the city beyond the no-go zones?” Alexis asked. She was still immensely concerned for Eirene, but she wasn’t going to bring that up where it wouldn’t be helpful. In any case, if what Teague said was true, the sky war was all but won except for taking down the stragglers. Hopefully, Marcus was smart enough not to waste his corvettes in an assault on the *Serenade*.

“Winning, yes, but it’s looking to be a pyrrhic victory at best. Our tanks are struggling in dense urban combat. Longbows can’t get long enough line of sight so their long-range guns are useless, as much as they served us well in the outskirts. Siege Panthers’ compactness and heavy armor preform tolerably, but they’re still getting cut to pieces by the Skywatch vehicles. Everything else just gets mobbed by infantry ambushes, so we’ve generally stopped sending armor that far in.”

“And our infantry?”

“Better, but not by much. It’s a big city, and the Commonwealth knows all its tricks and secrets. Whenever we make a push, they just push us right back. We won at Widow’s Walk because they don’t seem to give a damn about defending an old fishing town, and I can’t say that I blame them.”

“What about St. Elodie?” Janessa asked. “Surely the Waterlock’s worth defending.”

“Yes, actually, you’re right. There’s a truly inordinate garrison there, but it doesn’t seem interested in threatening any other positions along the Walk. We’re keeping an eye on them in case they try anything funny. Anyway, that’s more or less the whole situation. I won’t waste time bringing you up-to-date on individual standoffs because those are changing by the minute and I couldn’t possibly hope to keep up by myself. So, now that you’re here, I’ve got a few suggestions for a course of action. Ultimately up to you, of course.”

“You’ve always been the strategist, so I’m open to anything you’ve got. Hopefully something in that head of yours will push through that damn line.”

“Well, we’ll see about that. It’s going to be a tough fight, no matter how we go about it.”

They stopped for about ten seconds as a cry rang out to get ready for an artillery launch. The ground shook violently and an immense cacophony bellowed throughout the base as the Peregrine big guns sent a barrage of pain towards some unlucky Commonwealth positon. Once the earth had calmed down and their ears had stopped ringing, Teague continued.

“It’s nothing but murder in the city,” he lamented. “Every damnable gun on either side has been pounding that area for almost two days, and it doesn’t seem like it’ll let up anytime soon. But I digress, I was about to provide you with instructions. Do you remember our deal with Marcus?”

“Of course I do,” Alexis said, though in truth her will to remember was not for Marcus’ benefit, but for Eirene’s.

“Extract Julia from her imprisonment at the Panopticon. Sounds like a bit of a tall order, yes?”

“A little bit, yeah. If they’re even still alive,” Alexis said. It occurred to her that it was likely beyond a tall order. It could very well be impossible. The Commonwealth had been keeping Julia as a means of keeping Marcus – and, by extension, Madelyn-Rash – in line. Now that they had certifiably gone rogue, what need did they have for her? She could only hope that Lancaster and his cronies remained unaware of her presence, as Marcus believed.

But they had to try. If nothing else, then to uphold their end of the bargain. Should the worst come to pass, they would make the Commonwealth pay for Julia’s demise. That of course assumed that they could even penetrate the Panopticon’s defenses. Right next to Ravengrad Tower, it would be almost unassailable.

“There’s also Magnus,” Alexis said.

“What?”

“Magnus is still alive. I know that I killed him, but he spoke to us through a proxy during our approach, saying that he’s on the Grand Balcony and wants to talk to me and Jan. Way I see it, and Magnus even said this, we need to take the Tower eventually. If a platoon of troops can blitz the Commonwealth defenses and make it to the Tower, we can turn its anti-aircraft guns on the *Sunset Serenade* and eliminate that threat. On the way there, we can take out the tunnel gate that all their tanks are coming from. Then, once we’ve taken control of the place, the Panopticon is right next door and our troops spring Julia while Janessa and I go deal with Magnus. Boom, all objectives achieved and the battle all but won in a single go.”

“See, that plan’s great and all,” Janessa said, “but how do ye propose we actually take the Tower? Teague just got through telling us how impossible it is.”

“Well, I’ve got one idea that’s probably stupid, but I might need Adrian’s help.”

The ex-guardsman perked up as he heard his name and gave Alexis his full attention.

“Good, you’re listening. Here’s my thoughts: We have air superiority over the outskirts and suburbs, but their fliers are keeping ours out of downtown, so we can’t drop our bombs where we really need them. And they’re winning in the streets, too. So we don’t attack in the skies or the streets. From what I learned during my time in the Panopticon, there’s a big network of tunnels below most of the inner city with some entrances in the upper ring of the Panopticon, at least. The ones I was told are used as fool’s gold for potential escapees? We use their sadism against them.”

“You think that we can use the tunnels to get closer to the Tower.”

“Bingo. You’re the key to this – you were stationed in the Panopticon, meaning that you hopefully would have been privy to the blueprints for the tunnel system, assuming what I was told about it being a maze-like trap was correct. If you know about any way we could get in, we could sneak up to the main tunnel where the tanks are coming from and knock it down, then go straight up into the Tower. Based on this map, at least, they’re putting all their eggs in one basket when it comes to ground forces. Keeping a strong front line to keep our infantry and armor at bay and using their airships to stop us from dropping forces behind that line. If we can circumvent all that *underneath* the city, we won’t even need that many troops, so stealth is actually an option.”

“That could work,” Adrian mused. “You’re assuming a lot, but it *might* work. Two problems, though. First is that the nearest entrance from here is still behind Commonwealth lines, albeit not their strongest, so that’s a bridge we need to build right now.”

“We can use the Waterlock. Have all our big guns level that facility, hit it hard enough that it breaks straight open. With as much damage as the canals have taken, the resulting flood should be enough to get Commonwealth forces to run or get washed away.”

“And drown Julia in the process,” Janessa added.

“Oh, right. Scratch that idea, then.” Alexis paused. “We can still exploit their strange attachment to the Waterlock, though. If we position a regiment of troops such that it appears that we will attack the facility, and if we perform a *light* artillery barrage on their defenses there, we could trick them into diverting defenses away from the lane through which your platoon will charge. That won’t be enough to breach their defenses in any meaningful way on the surface, but we should be able to get to Adrian’s entrance with minimal casualties if it works.”

“If it works. You’re gambling on the fact that they actually want to defend the Waterlock. They may have put more troops there to make us think it’s important and waste our time, so they may not rush to its defense if we try this.”

“Okay, then, why don’t we test that? Have our guns here at Juliett attack the Waterlock, while Kilo puts pressure on another nearby strongpoint. You know, feign a two-pronged attack. Whichever one they prioritize we know is more important to them, and we focus on that one to draw troops away from our entrance.”

“I like that,” Janessa said. “It may be our best shot. We can take the Tower and end this stalemate before more of our soldiers die.”

“And what was the second problem?” Alexis asked. “Adrian, you mentioned two.”

“The tunnels can’t get you to the Tower. If you get too close, their security systems *will* pick you up, and, with the number of troops you’ve got to move through this little underground railroad, it will be easy to cut such a cumbersome group to pieces in close quarters. No, what I’ll have you do is go through the entrance and then come up *just* behind their strongest line, here.” Adrian pointed to the map, close to the tower but not as close as Alexis would have liked. “See, they’ve basically surrounded the Tower with two concentric circles with a good bit of space between them. You only have to get past the first one to find the entrance, and then you use the tunnel, as you said, to get past the stronger inner circle. That’s the hard part. To cover the remaining ground, once you’re out, head through this huge building, here. The service tunnel comes out right in its basement.”

“The Medical Administration?”

“Exactly. It’s big enough that you can stay in cover all the way from the tunnel to the Tower. Their airships won’t be able to hit you, and they won’t want to blow up their biggest hospital anyhow. Once you exit the Medical Admin’s front door, the Tower is literally right across the street from you. They’ll have it locked up tight, but that’s as easy as you’re going to get it, and it’s better than having to push the whole distance.”

“What about the tunnel all the tanks are coming from? I said we’d hit it on the way there – is that possible if we take the route you’re suggesting?”

“It breaches the surface right by where you’ll be going under. You can close it up right before you kiss the sunlight goodbye.”

Teague nodded his approval. “Good, I like this. Keep in mind, though, that while the building may be empty, the Medical Admin is still the largest hospital in Ravengrad. Whoever wins, that will be where the wounded will get treated. Both sides should know that it is in their interest to keep it as intact as possible.”

“I’ll see to it that I do,” Alexis said.

“Good. Then get some rest – I will organize your platoon, and you and Janessa will set out tomorrow afternoon, hopefully following our bombardment if all goes well.”

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, the commanders of the Commonwealth had organized their own meeting aboard the *Sunset Serenade*. Its exterior lights had been extinguished to conceal the ship as best as possible in the night sky, but both Danica and Lancaster carried lanterns with them as they stood on a balcony attached to the bridge.

“They’ve escalated their shelling,” Danica said. “Going to push soon.”

“Have they, now,” Lancaster replied, more making a statement than posing a question.

“Yes. What do you propose that we do?”

“Do you expect that what we’ve been doing thus far will be insufficient?”

His assistant paused. “No. I suppose not. It looks like we’re holding out. For now, at least.”

“Which means?”

She paused again, not sure what he meant. After thinking for a few seconds, she spoke. “Which means that they’re going to try something tricky. They couldn’t hope to succeed in a direct attack on the Serenade or the Tower, so they’ll use a small team to try and sabotage our defenses.”

“And what do you think is the most likely target?”

“Is this a test, sir? I thought we were past that, and I’d rather not waste time with such nonsense.”

“No, it’s not. I want to know your opinion.”

“Oh.” Danica was legitimately surprised. Whilst serving under Karahan, she hadn’t enjoyed a great deal of respect, but the Grand Admiral seemed genuinely considerate of his subordinates. It felt good.

“If you want to know my opinion…well, they couldn’t possibly sabotage the Serenade, so I don’t think we should concern ourselves with that. They might try and hit the tunnel to the armor manufactory, or even the Tower itself if they can get that close. Without the artillery pieces on the tower, their tanks and infantry could handle much better against ours.”

“I think the Tower can handle itself,” Lancaster said. “And it covers the tunnel quite nicely.”

“I respectfully disagree, sir,” said Danica. “I know that we’ve upgraded the security in the Tower itself, but the tunnel is vulnerable. It’s at an inconvenient range – too far away for infantry squads at the Tower to cover it, but too close for the big cannons to be most effective. We’d basically be relying on the Skywatch’s postings at the entrance. Don’t get me wrong, that might be enough on its own, but I’d be more comfortable diverting troops there, just to be safe.”

“And where do you propose we get these troops? Almost everything is tied up along the northern front, and I don’t want them getting farther in the city than they already are.”

“Why not take some from the Waterlock? We’ve got a damned army there, yet there’s been almost no action whatsoever. What are they even going to do? Flood the Panopticon? Turn off water to the city? No one lives here anymore, and who cares about the inmates?”

“If they activate the jailbreak protocol, the canals might not be able to take it. The damage that the tunnels have sustained during the battle could lead to a devastating collapse. Imagine the ground just falling out from underneath the city. Our infrastructure grows more vulnerable by the minute.”

Danica sighed, then shrugged. It wasn’t a battle she was going to win, though accepting defeat here might mean defeat in the real fight.

She tried a different approach. “Have we received all the reinforcements from other principalities?”

Lancaster suddenly seemed unnerved. “Mostly. Stockholm and Madrid have sent fleets sans the Hyperion auxiliaries we left behind, but Johannesburg doesn’t have anything to send.”

“Except for a super dreadnought”

“It wouldn’t arrive in time, nor would it be enough to make a difference at this point. What’s more troubling is Montreal. Contact was lost, and I haven’t been able to identify a cause.”

“Montreal? Isn’t that where we sent most of the emissaries from Hyperion? You think that they could have betrayed us?”

“It’s not impossible. The tributes from their fleet and army in Ravengrad have fought loyally, but it could be a front for a more secretive operation. Another possibility is that Marcus Fairchild has staged some kind of coup d’état there, as much of the city was dedicated to the Defense Administration and the mourner project.”

“I don’t think that’s it,” Danica interrupted. “The civil guard there is at full strength, and too much of his army is committed here to overcome the forces there, assuming that Imperator Laccaby has not turned traitor alongside him.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. It doesn’t really matter, since we can’t spare the resources to investigate right now.”

“If you say so.” It made Danica nervous to simply ignore the disappearance of an entire principality, but the Director was right. They couldn’t afford to spare anything right then.

When the morning came, on the other side of the city, Eirene awoke aboard the *F. Scott Fitzgerald* and ate a hasty breakfast before sitting in the pilot’s seat of her corvette to lead her crew into the fray.

If nothing else, the Peregrine artillery strikes had cleared out some of the surface-to-air missiles and anti-aircraft guns, forcing the Commonwealth to compensate with air power of its own. She would lead the mourners in an effort to eliminate this threat.

She had six drones following her. They stood ready next to the corvette, pawing at the ground like wild animals. “Why in Tartarus would anyone program something like that into a drone?” she thought aloud to herself. “To intimidate, perhaps, but intimidate whom?”

Then came the order to launch. Swarms of drones and corvettes poured out of the four black ships, all eager to meet the Commonwealth’s birds in glorious combat. Within seconds, Eirene’s receivers detected missile locks on her vessel, fired from some unseen Commonwealth unit. Based on the speed and radar signature, she concluded that they were too well-guided and precise for a simple chaff release to ward off.

She cursed under her breath, staring at the blips on the radar warning receiver’s display. The corvette could surely withstand two missiles, but unnecessary damage was exactly that – unnecessary.

With the vessel seemingly groaning in protest, Eirene pulled up as hard as she could, hoping to evade the missiles. No luck. The threat was too fast and too close for evasive maneuvers, especially when she was limited by the dense formation.

“Bridge to CIC, you know what to do,” she said over the vessel’s intercom.

The operators, firmly strapped into their seats in the combat information center, understood and began to issue orders to the two mourners she had indicated. While Eirene eased the vessel back to a lesser speed, Cyclopes Three and Four soared ahead and each collided with a missile in a spectacular explosion. The human crew was safe for the time being.

“Black Fleet, this is Lafayette,” Eirene said over her radio. “We lost two drones to the shield. Requesting reinforcement.”

“Copy that, Lafayette,” came the reply. “Transferring drones from MRS *Hemingway’s* fleet to your command.”

Eirene watched as two dead lights on her wing report display suddenly came back to life. With a full attachment of mourners, she thanked the command ship and flew onward.

The next threat was heat-seeking, and easily neutralized with a healthy salvo of flares. Bright wings seemed to sprout from the corvette’s hull as the flares were jettisoned, luring the missiles away to where they could do no harm. By that time, Eirene had broken away from the cloud of mourners and flew alone with her wing in an expanse of sky that seemed to belong entirely to her. This feeling of ownership made it all the more offensive when a Skywatch corvette decided to challenge her for supremacy.

It never stood a chance. Each contestant fired a salvo of missiles, but only Eirene’s connected. What few she did not evade were knocked out of the sky by suicide mourners. As Eirene launched her own missiles, three explosive payloads detonated against the Skywatch corvette’s hull, crippling the vessel so terribly that it could only retreat. With its tail between its legs, the enemy corvette turned in a wide arc, billowing smoke. Eirene turned so she could see her enemy clearly. She drew closer, ready to strike the finishing blow with her cannons and completely ignored the target’s futile attempts to chase her off with its own guns. A quick burst was all it took to turn her rival into a heap of burning slag that fell helplessly to the ground.

The next contender in the aerial joust was a much larger cousin of the lowly corvettes and fighters twisting and turning about in the sky. One of the few ships the Skywatch had built to the *Legatus* grand cruiser specifications, a flying fortress whose size was only eclipsed by the *Emperor* dreadnoughts and *Jupiter* super dreadnoughts.

It was a majestic sight to behold, its graceful white hull gliding through the air like a winged Beluga, a beautiful creature that lit up as dozens of missiles were launched from ports all along its hull. She had no way to outmaneuver so many in her present position, and had no choice but to sacrifice her entire drone wing to scrape by.

“Black Fleet AWACS, what are we looking at after that salvo?” she queried.

“About a half-score of the fighters in your zone are down, and most of the corvettes had the same idea as you, so they’re out of drones. We can reinforce you, but it’ll take a minute or so for new ones to arrive. The GC’s going to be vulnerable while it reloads, though – see if you can’t do some damage.”

“Roger that,” Eirene said. “I’ll knock that whale out of the sky.”

As she looked up at the grand cruiser, its bulk eclipsing the sun behind it, she saw another launch. These were not missiles – they were corvettes. Deathbearers, just like hers, deep blue streaks soaring out of the crystal white ship.

“Hold on, Lafayette,” her Black Fleet contact said. “A group of bandits just took off from your target. Three, by my count. ”

“Yeah, I’ve got a visual on ‘em. Looks like one spitter, two engaging me, preparing to defend now.”

As one bandit left the engagement to pursue a different foe, the other two took formation side by side to cover each other in their attack against Eirene. With no mourners to take a hit for her, she could not afford to let one of them lock onto her, so she made the half-roll and ascending half-loop of a Split S turn to quickly disengage and evade their sights. The two bandits banked around to try and regain the advantage.

“You’re close to Peregrine airspace now, Lafayette. We’re getting surface-to-air lock on now,” came the report from AWACS. When the Peregrine missiles launched, both pursuers dove away to dodge the new threat.

The third Commonwealth corvette then returned to the fray and gave chase. Her tail gunner tried his best to ward off the bandit, but it was a futile effort. The other two recovered from their evasive maneuvers and closed in on both sides.

Eirene knew that if they were equipped in the same way as her own vessel, then the pursuing ships’ missiles would be less useful against as nimble a corvette as hers, made only to destroy ponderous capital ships. The same rang true for her, of course, but both sides were armed with lasers that were deadly enough in their own right. The Deathbearers’ sensors could detect laser fire, but the naked eye could not. No way to trace incoming attacks, and a good hit could easily destroy a target.

As one of the corvettes pulled alongside her, Eirene could see the art painted just behind the nose cone, a crazed-looking insect with the caption “Hornet’s Nest III” in blood red underneath it. It began to press closer to her, forcing her to drop in altitude and turn away. The other two maneuvered into an offensive position.

“They’re trying to get you in range of the GC’s flak,” AWACS warned.

“Yeah, I read you,” Eirene said. Before she could say anymore, she felt the aircraft shake and emergency lights flashed on. One of the lasers had found its mark and ignited part of her starboard wing.

She quickly killed her engines, turned into a second Split S and dove precariously close to the ground, speeding back towards the Commonwealth lines. Only when the fire, starved for fuel, had died down did she turn the engines back on. Now in range, the enemy flak began to pepper the sky as she soared past. Only one bandit followed Eirene this low while the other two split away to re-engage at a later time if she survived the encounter.

“Lafayette, the leader of Juniper wing is on standby to back you up, if you can get out of CHP airspace. He’s at Juliett now but closing in on you fast.”

“Roger that,” Eirene said, listening to the reports coming out of the corvette’s CIC. Her assailant angled itself into an attacking position and tried to make a pass, but she cut her engines and let it overshoot, trapping it in a tight series of turns as she kept up the newly-neutralized engagement. “Juniper, got a bandit in the scissors with me. Heh. Scissors.”

“Quiet,” Juniper said disapprovingly. “Concentrate.”

Eirene was already silent, scanning for an advantage. The two aircraft took potshots at one another as they weaved in and out, with Commonwealth flak bursting all around them but, like the shots from the aircraft themselves, failing to do anything more than superficial damage. The two missing ships rematerialized and launched missiles at her, counting on the scissors’ ponderous and predictable maneuvers to make her easy fodder even for their slower weapons.

“Damn,” Eirene muttered as the new threats were relayed to her through the CIC. She and her rival were struggling to keep track of one another, but the advantage had been ceded to the enemy now that she had two more bandits putting pressure on her. One last burst of chaff warded away the missiles, but the lapse in concentration cost her – a key shot landed on her hull and forced her to break off, her vessel wounded by the attack.

“Lafayette, CHP forces attacking Kilo. You run there, I’ll try and get these assholes off your back,” Juniper yelled urgently.

“Yes, sir,” Eirene replied as she set herself on a bearing for Kilo base. Low to the ground, she continued to dodge flak as the enemy vehicles came into sight. Meanwhile, Juniper passed overhead and broke up the enemy formation, an older corvette set against the Commonwealth’s top aces.

After one strafing run, Eirene turned and moved to support Juniper. The odds were still against them, two against three, but they were better than before.

“More friendly SAMs coming in from Kilo and Juliett,” AWACS reported. One enemy corvette could not escape and was struck by a missile, forcing it to retreat. There wasn’t enough time to pursue it, lest its friends seize the opportunity. Two against two.

The grand cruiser glided forward as the dogfight progressed, slowly moving itself into range of Kilo. It would easily demolish the militia there if it got into range or fired another salvo.

“We’ve got maybe another two minutes before that thing can launch another burst,” she said, hoping that the design had not been improved since she had last fought alongside one during the Tabriz crisis. Meanwhile, Juniper maneuvered into position behind a second corvette and crippled its engine. The vessel spiraled out of control and smashed into the ocean.

“One left. Thatch weave might work if you can bait it,” Juniper said. Eirene followed his instruction and moved into a position that her rival could not help but pursue. The lure in place, Juniper crossed over Eirene's flight path and then turned around to see that she had done exactly as he had hoped, bringing the last bandit into a position where he could destroy it. As he moved to land the killing blow, however, the target’s tail gun tore into his vessel’s hull. The enemy corvette’s body burst into flames as Juniper soared past it, trailing smoke.

Eirene’s wingman spoke one last message into the radio. “Lafayette, you’re clear. I took a bad hit, though – I’ll let my crew eject and then crash this thing into the GC. Godspeed.”

“Godspeed.”

She watched the older corvette’s crew abandon their vessel as it sped towards the cumbersome capital ship, crashing straight through its hull and igniting a fire inside. It began to flounder about in the sky as flames erupted from its hulking metal body until it crashed into the ground with a spectacular explosion. Meanwhile, the dying enemy corvette had had a similar idea, ending its tenure as an agent of the Skywatch with a kamikaze attack on Kilo’s ammunition dump. The engagement concluded with a second cloud of fire.

And so the battle proceeded.

\* \* \*

Alexis and her company were not well-rested when their time came. They had tried to sleep through the evening and night before their advance in the morning, but a combination of dreadful anticipation and the sheer noise of the artillery barrage conspired to prevent that.

She and Janessa would lead the vanguard, of course. Their party numbered seven – themselves, a pair of combat medics, and a three-man mortar crew, which would be their heavy weapon if the situation called for one. The other four carried standard equipment: a battle rifle with a bayonet, one grenade, a pack of C4, and a freshly-sharpened short sword carried at the hilt. Behind them was a host of infantry that would be the hammer to their scalpel.

Alexis snapped her helmet securely on her head. A simple, reddish-grey dome that would do little to stop much more than loose shrapnel, but it felt secure, and that was something. It was not the helmets or the flak vests or any other piece of armor that would be the first line of defense. It was the barriers, the shimmering fields of energy that would stop ill-meaning bullets in their tracks. Marcus and Madelyn-Rash had been good to them.

The group advanced slowly and carefully, keeping a careful watch for any enemy activity. A single sniper was unlikely to ruin their plan thanks to the HVI barriers, but a powerful enough weapon or sizable ambush could be fatal. With each block, they crept to new cover and kept low.

About half an hour in, Janessa held her hand up to signal a stop. No one else saw anything suspicious amongst the ruins. To their right was the broken and battered façade of a simple fabric shop, to their left was a crater-ridden city park, and ahead of them lay a seemingly endless stretch of crumbling street. Not a life in sight.

“What is it?” Alexis asked, keeping her voice down.

“Look at the footprints,” Janessa said. “They’re fresh. Undisturbed by the barrage or the wind; soldiers passed through here recently.”

“How many? Maybe they were the reinforcements dispatched to protect the Waterlock against our feint.”

“No way to tell exactly, but looks like a small unit. Smaller than ours, maybe half a dozen at most. Look, they’re probably taking positions somewhere up ahead.”

The tracks were indeed fresh, clearly visible and well defined in the layer of dust over the rubble. A smattering of footprints in the street followed a path down the road and stopped as the dust gave way to thicker debris.

“Think it’s an ambush?” Alexis asked, looking ahead. There were many positions along the street that could easily host a pack of soldiers. Any one of them could be occupied, and Command One had no way of knowing.

“Look, there,” Janessa said, pointing towards a row of buildings on their right. Past the bombed-out fabric shop was an empty doorframe leading into a stairwell. It was dark past the threshold, but it was safe. “We can use those buildings. If they’re setting up an ambush for us in the streets, we can use the high ground to pass by.”

Alexis wasn’t so sure. “Or, alternatively, they’re *in* those buildings and we run into them.”

“In which case we catch them by surprise in close quarters.”

“Close quarters? Almost half our power is rolled up into that mortar, which is *not* going to help indoors.”

“Mortar crew’s got pistols and the rest of us have rifles and blades. We’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, but remember that we’ve got barriers. Bullets are just gonna bounce off, but close combat’s a hell of a lot less safe. We’d be better off using the open road so we can engage them from farther away.”

She was right, Janessa realized. They’d be easier to spot, yes, but the enemy couldn’t do any real damage unless they had very powerful weapons – unlikely, given the current assessment – or could get up close to strike through the barriers with a bayonet or similar attack. On a more open battlefield, the advantage would belong to the Peregrines.

In theory, that was true. In practice, it was *almost* true. When the fight finally came, their barriers did keep them safe from enemy fire, at least in the opening moments. The barrage quickly wore them down as far more men than they had ever anticipated emerged from surrounding ruins.

Alexis didn’t have time to make an accurate survey of the battlefield. There might have been ten or twenty enemy soldiers around them, most of whom had come from somewhere else than the tracks they had seen. She cursed her own idiocy. It seemed so obvious in hindsight, but that did not help them now. Now, all they could do was try to escape and survive.

“Just drop the mortar!” Janessa yelled as she beckoned them retreat. It would have made a loud noise as it hit the ground but whatever sound might have been heard was masked by the back-and-forth exchange of gunfire. The Peregrine soldiers moved quickly back. They didn’t stop until they were safely in the cover of a large crater, one that had perhaps been made by some of their own artillery.

There, they waited. Overhead, bullets whistled or struck the edge of the crater, sometimes showering the soldiers below with a choking dose of dust and dirt. They needed a plan, and they needed one quickly. A peek or two over the ridge couldn’t hurt – even if a bullet did chance to strike true, their barriers would keep them safe – but to go out in the open would be to invite the entire street to open fire, with deadly consequence, and so they stayed put as time steadily ticked onward.

“What the hell are we supposed to do now?” Janessa asked, both annoyed and angry. “This was your bright idea, so get us out of it!”

“Maybe if we’d kept the damn mortar, we could use that!” Alexis replied in a sharp tone.

“If we had to lug that thing back, they’d have focused us down like *that*.” Janessa snapped her fingers, the sound of which coincided with another bullet zooming past and striking somewhere behind them.

“Whatever, none of that matters. We just need to move before they get wise and roll over us with a tank or something.”

As if to prove her point, the Commonwealth decided to up the ante at that very minute by firing a rocket launcher at the entrenched squad. They heard it coming, this much was true, but their half-hearted effort to prepare for its arrival doomed them. The rocket landed in just the right place to reduce one of the mortar team to a mangled corpse, leaking blood into puddles at the bottom of the crater.

The survivors took a second to stare at the grim spectacle, then refocused. The time for mourning would be later. For the time being, theirs was only to move forwards by any means necessary.

Alexis took stock of who was left. Command One now numbered six in total, having lost the man known only to her as Charlie Five. As she looked at the others, Alexis leaned back against the crater wall. The infantry platoon behind them was holding the line as best it could, but many seemed ready to retreat.

She felt her heart beating heavily in her chest, the sound of blood pumping past her ears at every beat. It was strange to her how different this felt from the failed assassination of Magnus. Going into that had been so casual, an intimidating yet simple task, the consequences of which she had never truly considered. This was far more real.

With no other options, Alexis once again looked to the skies for support. “All units, this is Command One,” she said into the radio, panting wildly. “We need support again – on the lane between Juliett and the tunnel. If anyone, anyone’s got eyes on that area, we’ll send up a flare. Is anyone out there?” These last few words were said with a great deal more urgency.

In the sky, Eirene heard her girlfriend’s desperate missive. Instinctively, she began to ease the Deathbearer into a turn, but hesitated. The Skywatch was making a serious push against them, with fleets of corvettes, frigates, and even cruisers hammering the Peregrine positions. Nothing that the Mourners couldn’t handle in the end, but her support could save them valuable resources and possibly save lives.

Her corvette flew forwards on a steady vector until she made a decision. Her own loyalty to Alexis was greater than her loyalty to a swarm of soulless robots, and it was critical that the vanguard succeed in its task.

“I’m coming to help you, ‘Lex. Don’t you worry,” Eirene said. She had made her decision.

Alexis knew the same thing Eirene did, that she was abandoning her position in the sky to come to Command One’s aid. However, she wasn’t about to question the choice, and so she launched the flare and waited, hoping that her support arrived in time. Until then, the vanguard would have to hold its ground.

As soon as the flare had gone up, the Commonwealth infantry began to re-position itself, anticipating the enemy reinforcements. This gap, however tiny, was enough for the Peregrine platoon to advance until they were just behind the crater in which Command One had taken shelter. At that point, there was just as much risk of being shot in the back as from the front if Alexis or her squad dared peek over the top, but they did so regardless, taking care to suppress the zones where the heavy weapons were, lest another rocket ruin their day.

That did nothing to stop the artillery. None of them had made out the sound of the shell being fired, so crowded was the air with the sound of battle, but the sound and, more importantly, the feel of the impact could not have been missed. Alexis felt the ground shake as she ducked, covering her head to protect it from debris, while Janessa instinctively looked towards the blast and saw one of the men from the platoon land in the crater with them, screaming in pain.

“You there, take care of him!” Janessa said to one of her two medics, who nodded and shifted over to the side of the wounded man, getting out his kit to address any damage he could before the wounded could be removed by medivac.

Eirene finally her corvette in low above the street. As she soared over the Commonwealth positons, the corvette’s bombardier – on her order – let loose a barrage of cluster bombs that saturated the entire street with explosions. Alexis and company stayed hunkered down inside their crater to keep safe and only heard the roar of engines and the cacophonous boom of explosions ahead of them.

“That was my last bomb, but we’ve still got a few more tricks,” Eirene said into the radio. Although not properly equipped for ground attack, she still had some weapons that would do the job well enough if she put the corvette into gunship mode.

The second pass she made was no less deadly. With the ambushers in disarray scrambling for cover, she let the corvette hover at the opposite end of the street and let her belly gunners go to work, trapping the enemy in between the two Peregrine positions while mourners landed amongst the platoon to provide heavy support. Before long, the remaining Commonwealth soldiers had quit the field, leaving the dead behind.

“You good down there, Sunshine?” Eirene asked once the carnage had died down.

“We’re alive. Most of us. We’ve got a good guardian angel.”

When everything was said and done, all the soldiers of Command One and its accompanying platoon were able to stroll right down the scorched and bloodstained street, whistling as if it were a walk in the park.

“Have ye got the dead one’s tag?” Janessa asked as they traveled onwards.

“Yeah, I have it right here. Safe and sound,” Alexis replied, looking at the halved dog tags in her hand. It was the first time she knew the names of any of her soldiers. Johann Lietz, deceased. As for the platoon, its own commanders would be responsible for their dead.

Janessa nodded her satisfaction and continued to keep a lookout, as did all the rest.

As the rebels forged ahead, the distant rumble of machinery and tank treads were the first sign that they were close to their first target. They couldn’t see it, but there was a great deal of yelling and other chatter amongst the other noise, suggesting that an entire army stood between them and their goal. Closer to the Tower, they had no hopes for the air support that had saved them before. Anything from a mourner to a capital ship would be shot down in seconds, so such help could not be counted on. Command One would have to survive on its own from then on out.

They moved quickly but stealthily, using the sound of tanks to mask their footsteps. If they were to get a good view of their opponents, then they would need to take higher ground.

As luck would, or rather, wouldn’t have it, there was no true high ground to be seen. Their best bet was the second floor of a roofless building that stood between them and the tunnel entrance, and that wasn’t anywhere near optimal. Nevertheless, what remained of its walls would make good cover, so they ran towards it while the platoon held back until the enemy had been scouted.

Janessa pulled open the door, quickly but carefully as the rest rushed in and took stock of their surroundings. They weren’t alone, but it was immediately apparent that they weren’t in any danger, either. The ruin’s sole occupant was a crippled young woman, lying against a wall surrounded by the corpses of a civil guard squad and the black hulk of another drone.

“She’s alive,” Janessa said. “What should we do with her? Not execute the poor miss, surely.”

“No, no, of course not. Charlie One, can you patch her up?” Alexis said, looking at her squad’s medic.

The man hesitated. “Are you sure?” he asked. “You might need me up there, and I don’t think she’s going to make it.”

“No. Don’t question it, just fucking *do it*, alright? I’ve seen worse injuries; she’ll be okay.”

“If you’re sure…” the medic said. He didn’t quite think that his commander was being rational, but orders were orders. If he could save this girl’s life, then he was going to do so, damn it, but her chances were not good. It looked as if the drone had done a lot of damage.

As the rest of the squad went upstairs, Alexis took one last look at the fallen guardswoman. Her face had been disturbingly familiar.

“Alexis? Are ye alright?” Janessa asked, looking at her spooked comrade.

“Her name was Mary.”

“Pardon?”

“I knew that woman; I’m certain of it. We were friends in university. More than friends for a very short time. She told me that she loved me, and maybe she really meant it, but I didn’t love her. So it ended.”

“Now you’re here. Small world.”

“Yeah. I wasn’t a good person back then. I think I hurt her and a lot of other people without even thinking about it. Maybe now I can be part of saving her, but that doesn’t change the fact that my behavior needed to stop before I did so much damage, but it didn’t.”

“Suppose it’s good that ye found Eirene, then. Can’t imagine ye doing anything like that to her.”

“I don’t even want to think about it,” Alexis said quietly as she looked at the sky through the broken roof. She could hear the clamor of troops moving about in the distance. It was time to move on and clear the way for their platoon.

Peeking through a window, they could clearly see the Commonwealth defenses outside the tank tunnel. At least two dozen soldiers were entrenched around two bunkers on the opposite side of the road from them, dug in behind trenches, barbed wire, and probably other kinds of traps. The men themselves wore not the usual blue uniforms. Instead, they were clad in light grey digital camouflage and wore more streamlined helmets than the legions or the Skywatch troopers did. Perhaps was that they were the most elite of the elite, the special ops of the Commonwealth, or perhaps even a special force acting as Magnus’ own bodyguard. There was no way to know.

Everything else around the road was mechanized. A single light tank rested behind the bunkers next two a pair of APCs. That alone was enough to keep them away in a straight fight, but there was more. Three more long metal bodies carried expensive-looking laser systems, powerful cannons built to shoot down rockets, missiles, and aircraft. Not threatening to infantry on their own, but fearsome support units in their own right.

“Do you think we can sneak past them?” Alexis asked. “Find another way in?”

“Doubtful,” Janessa replied. “Well, Adrian pointed out other entrances, but they’d be even more heavily guarded. Besides, we’ve still got a job to do by taking out that tunnel.”

“Right. I think we can handle this if we’re clever about it. Just…holy hell.”

Before Alexis could finish her sentence, the ground began to shake, and the first Black Fortresses her group had seen emerged from the tunnel. Both were oppressively large and dark grey in color, and both were armed with a different weapon. The front tank had an easily-recognizable railgun. Powerful, yet familiar. It would be strong against the Peregrines’ own tanks, but unlikely to be a threat against a group of infantry. Behind it, though, was something that none of the members of Command One had seen before – a long cannon that extended into a casemate more heavily armored than that of the lead vehicle, from which what appeared to be ventilation pipes also extended. The gun barrel came to a narrow point, clearly not made to fire a typical shell.

“Look there,” Alexis said, pointing to the rear of the convoy. “What do you say that is?”

“Fuck if I know. Some kind of infernal contraption. Plasma, maybe?”

Alexis slumped down against the wall, staring away from the parade of armor. All she could do was sit and wait for it to pass. It was only a few minutes before the tanks were long gone, but those few minutes seemed all but an eternity. Once they were in the clear, relatively speaking, their conversation continued.

“Better hope those beasts don’t come back around,” Janessa said. “Would be a hell of a day for us if they did. Still, I can see why the main tunnel’s supposed to be so damn big, now. If we knock it out, that’s going to be a major blow to their operations.”

“They’d have others,” Alexis said. “They’re not dumb enough to put all their eggs in one basket like that. It might delay reinforcement long enough for us to gain more ground, but that’s all we’d get.”

“More ground is good enough for me. The question is, how do we crack it?”

“We’ve still got the gas shells, right? Didn’t leave them behind when we ran through the strip?”

Gas shells. Small cluster bombs not particularly deadly to any human with a decent gas mask, but dangerously toxic to anyone unlucky to breathe the fumes straight in. The soldiers at the tunnel gate would undoubtedly have protection against this kind of attack, but there was another property that could turn the tide in the favor of the militia: its flammability. Followed up by an incendiary shell, a gas bomb could utterly immolate a position.

“Ye think we can choke them all out? Burn them?” Janessa asked, ever so slightly skeptical.

“Not all of them, no. But look, almost all their men are grouped up in the bunkers. Easy targets for shells. Whatever survives the blast will be exposed to the gas, and whatever survives *that* will have to watch out when we light it up. In the confusion, we rush past the guards and get into the tunnel.

“And if there are guards in the tunnel?”

“No way to know exactly what we’re up against in there, is there?”

“No, I guess not. We’ll just have to deal with whatever comes up.”

The two remaining men on the mortar crew set up their weapon with admirable speed and loaded it with one of the gas shells.

“It’s going to take a minute to aim the thing,” said Charlie Four. “Three, can you get ahead and spot with the rangefinder?”

“Yeah, you got it,” Charlie Three replied before he began to peek through cracks in the wall for a suitable position. When he saw one that satisfied him, he slowly but surely crept across the room and dropped down to the ground level, looking ahead with his binoculars.

The first shot from the mortar landed directly on its target, flattening one bunker and killing several of the men within. That was their alpha strike, and they were lucky that they had made it count, for the gate was now attuned to their presence. While most of the Skywatch soldiers scrambled to put on their masks, the familiar noises of machine guns and autocannons sounded and the Peregrines kept low and in cover.

The infantry platoon did their best to cover for the mortar team while they prepared a second shot, but their rifles could only do so much against that many soldiers and vehicles. As Charlie Three was slain by an APC’s grenade launcher, they could hear his last surviving teammate curse loudly over the oncoming fire. He would have to fire less accurately, but, fortunately, accuracy was no longer a major concern. The gas cloud had expanded considerably. And so, when the second shot struck the ground, the entrance to the tunnel became a raging inferno of burning flesh and metal, amplified by the highly flammable munitions stacked in the remaining bunker. Within seconds, most of the opposition was dead.

The ashes were still hot as Alexis and Janessa led the charge across the battlefield, taking and receiving potshots from what few had survived the attack. The APCs were both burnt out but the tank was alive, and it was eager to avenge its comrades.

One of its shells struck the ground right to Alexis. She felt the impact as the force collided with her barrier and power surged through mechanisms barely able to hold up against such power. And then she felt the solid ground as she was knocked aside by the blast, dirt and dust smothering her face.

Her heartbeat was, at that point, as intense a sensation as the gunfire around her. She was scared, at first, but then she was angry. She’d gotten this far. Fought countless battles in the outskirts, survived the attack on the Tower, negotiated her way through Johannesburg and Stockholm, then burnt Ravengrad to the ground as the led the warpath against Magnus. That this tank crew had the *audacity* to try and stop her now was an affront to everything that she and her friends had done.

Janessa turned around and saw Alexis roll over on the ground so that she was at least facing upright. The blast had crippled her barriers, and another would surely go straight through them to end the human life within.

The two women, one standing, the other on her back, worked together to suppress the remaining enemy soldiers, but time was ticking away until the tank could fire again. If it could get another shot off, Alexis was done for.

It never did. A third shot from the mortar landed straight on the vehicle, punching straight through its armor and taking it permanently out of commission. With their armored support gone, the last of the Skywatch troops fled before Alexis and Janessa could finish them off with their blades.

“Hahaha, did you see that?” they could hear Charlie Four whooping and yelling from behind them. “Did you *see* that? Without a spotter, one in a million! No, one in a billion! You two are fucking welcome!”

He didn’t have much more time to congratulate himself before he was killed, courtesy of a Skywatch corvette that had dropped a smart bomb on his position. Janessa and Alexis, now the last two survivors of Command One, realized the danger and simply ran, hoping to find shelter in the tunnel. It was their only chance. What remained of the infantry platoon followed them through the dust and climbed through the hatch into Ravengrad’s underbelly, leaving the war-torn surface of the city behind them. The last of the troops to disappear set up explosives around the larger tunnel’s mouth to be set off once the rebels were a safe distance away.

\* \* \*

“So, where are we supposed to go now?” Janessa whispered, bathed in the pale blue light. It annoyed her slightly to be working with so little information, but there wasn’t really any other option, so she accepted it.

“Well, we’ve got Adrian’s map of the tunnels. It’s a good ways to the Tower by foot, and the way this place is laid out doesn’t make it any easier. How many troops do we have left?”

“We’re at two-thirds strength,” the platoon commander reported. “Better than I’d expected, I suppose. Our numbers don’t mean anything down here, though. Everything’s chokepoints. ”

“Aye, this is pretty shit for fighting. Let’s just get moving. Once we get to the Tower, we should find ourselves in more agreeable conditions,” Janessa said.

The journey through the underground was surprisingly and happily uneventful. With no resistance, the militia forces crept in double file through the service tunnels and emerged near the Medical Administration’s backdoor unmolested.

“Well, we survived. Good for us,” Alexis muttered as she climbed out of the hatch. Command One took point and made sure that the entrance into the building was clear as the remaining troops charged ahead.

By the time they had crossed the street and entered the Tower, the militia had been reduced to half strength, meeting next to no resistance. Once the storming of the Tower was well under way, she stepped through the threshold and closed the door behind her, leaving a small force behind to take care of the wounded.

Janessa was among these, and stayed behind with the other injured soldiers as the survivors headed up into the Tower itself. She struggled to steady herself as the medics bandaged her, but they only had time to tend to her arm and not her bloodied leg before a vengeful force of Skywatch shock troopers counterattacked, hoping to attack the militia from behind as they moved higher and higher up in the tower. The crippled and maimed Peregrine soldiers guarding the rear put up their best fight but were slaughtered wholesale; those who survived only doing so by playing dead. The Skywatch troops were sloppy – rather than cut their enemies’ throats and make sure, they quickly moved on to try and defend the capitol building.

As she heard the enemy leave in pursuit of Alexis’ force, Janessa let herself open one eye. Nearly three score of her troops lay dead with their blood staining the concrete. Only two others were still alive, and, from the looks of things, they would not stay that way for long.

Her head pounding and her vision blurred, Janessa lurched over to her dying comrades’ bodies and tried and failed to move them.

“Come on, ye louts, nice and happy-like, let’s move,” she groaned, but she was too weak to help, and so she took a pistol from the ground and went to look for the exit in hopes of reaching help. If she could get back to the tunnel, perhaps she could return to the Peregrine army and bring news of her stranded troops.

She had lost her radio and, in her wounded state, was too delirious to try and find it. With her hope draining from her body, Janessa instead bandaged her wounds herself with scraps of the clothes underneath her armor and stumbled across the street into the Medical Administration and then into the tunnels, becoming more and more lost as the sounds of the battle above echoed throughout the city’s underbelly.

She carried on, slowly returning to her senses until a peculiar door caught her eye. Two bulbs above it cast a warm yellow light upon the door itself, upon which the word “Library” was written.

“Library?” Janessa wondered aloud. It struck her as strange that there would be such a place this far underneath the city. There were big problems to be solved, but this place, this library enthralled her. Whatever it was, it was special, that much she knew.

As if in a trance, she touched the button next to the door, which triggered the opening. It didn’t just look like an elevator – it was an elevator. Janessa stepped inside and sealed the doors behind her, and an automated message system began to squawk at her in Greek, a language that she did not understand. Whatever this place was, it was old. Old enough to have escaped conversion to the new national languages.

On the inside of the elevator car was a plaque which had fortunately been revised to include English, French, and Chinese, and Russian, the first two of which Janessa spoke fluently. The text upon it described the safety features of the library, which caught her off guard, strange as it was for the engineers to emphasize such things. As she read on and reached the end, however, she understood what this was, or at least what it was not. It wasn’t a library for checking out books. In a perfect world, this vault of knowledge deep underground would never be accessed. There were many such libraries built throughout the cities of the old world, all sharing the same purpose: the collection and safekeeping of all knowledge. Vast stores of information were sequestered away to be kept safe in case the worst should come to pass. Eirene might have likened it to Alexandria, but this could not be burned down even by nuclear fire. Or so the signs claimed.

There was a friendly ding and one final incomprehensible message before the doors slid open. As Janessa stepped out, she was greeted by a rust-colored metal room dominated by a massive blast door. Opened. Someone had passed through ahead of her. Above was a single, somber message inscribed in chipped English wording: “This institution is dedicated to the lessons learned from our history. May it never be repeated.”

Immediately inside were several people, all of them with skin as dark as hers and serious expressions on their faces. A man, a woman, and three children on the cusp of adulthood. They seemed to be a family, working together towards some goal in the library, an unclear goal that involved carefully sliding metal boxes out from their positions in the walls – Janessa noticed that every wall was lined with these chrome cubes – and stacking them onto a pushcart. Not one of them noticed her, except for one of the children.

The youngest of the family turned around and tugged at his mother’s dark, rigid skirt. She turned around and saw Janessa standing in the entryway. To Janessa’s surprise, the woman was not at all startled or cautious of her.

“Your uniform,” said the girl child, who couldn’t have been any more than seventeen years old. “It’s from the rebel militia.”

“Who…are ye?” Janessa stammered.

“We’re Magnus’ people,” the girl answered. “Some of our fellows call the organization ‘Leviathan’ because it gives a *spooky* illuminati-type vibe, but those people are Hobbes-fetishizing fools.”

Confronted with a surreal situation, Janessa stood, bewildered, until the mother broke the silence.

“Lilith is correct. Director-General Magnus had certain ideas that were too radical for the more moderate sensibilities of some others within parliament, so he and his supporters – us – went to ground and started work in secret.”

“Moderate? The Commonwealth’s parliament?”

“Comparatively, yes, but we believed Magnus’ measures were necessary as a first step.”

“That scares me more than ye could imagine,” Janessa said, pausing briefly to consider what the woman had said. “What does Magnus want with us?”

“He didn’t tell us,” Lilith said. “I don’t know why you’re here. You, specifically, I mean. The Peregrines in general, well, that’s obvious.”

“Do ye…support the revolution?”

“Yes. The Commonwealth itself was a revolution, in a sense. When existing institutions become corrupt, a great deal of destruction is necessary to create a blank slate upon which something new can be built. Moderate designs for the Commonwealth were clearly unsuccessful, and, if we fell back to the alternate, more radical proposals, then the people would react badly. They were willing to sacrifice *some* liberties in response to the sheer destruction caused by the old world. We must therefore up the ante in order to begin the next phase. Your uprising is just what we were looking for.”

“That’s insanity. Ye want to make the Commonwealth even more tyrannical than it already is? And use us to do it?”

The father of the family spoke next. “Like Magnus, Lancaster, for all his redeeming qualities, is unwilling to commit in full. He thinks that, when the storms are fully abated, when Kasimira, Joseon, and all the people of the world are unified, the absolute authority of the Commonwealth will no longer be necessary. He thinks that humanity learned well the lessons of history and that the Commonwealth only need nudge them in the proper direction for it all to stick.” He shook his head. “They will always regress.”

“Aye, and who’s to say that the leaders who follow ye will not themselves succumb to the idiocy of the old world?”

“We have solutions to that as well. Permanent solutions to cut out the cancer of human individuality. But never mind that.”

“Never mind that, says he. As if I’m just to ignore a threat. Tell me, my ‘lord,’ as it seems you’d like me to call ye, what have ye got in those boxes?”

“Digital and physical archives of everything we’d need to rebuild civilization if necessary. Schematics. Textbooks. Famous art and literature, history, copies of almost every document that’s passed through the Magistracy, everything ever written by a civil servant. The Commonwealth itself is contained within these boxes. They are vital to humanity’s survival if we fail.”

“If they’re so important,” Janessa said, letting her hand sit in a threatening position next to the pistol she had taken, “then I want them. Why should I trust your ilk with those cubes? Give them here, or I’ll take them by force. You’ve got no weapons.”

None of the family moved, except for Lilith, who carefully set her box down on the floor in between her and the intruder.

“The Spanish conquistadors,” the father said as he too laid a metal cube at Janessa’s feet, “found that their retreat from Tenochtitlan was hampered by an excess of treasure.”

Janessa shrugged and looked back and forth between her hosts, struggling to think of specifics. “Fine. Then give me everything you have on Marcus Fairchild and Madelyn-Rash. I know that he and Magnus used to be the best of friends, and, now that I know Magnus has been playing the long game…”

“Marcus has done nothing but support you since your meeting.”

“Yeah, but ye and Magnus support us as well, quoth yourself. If he’s setting us up, I want to know.”

“Fairchild was not a strong supporter of our association. He worked for Magnus in that his factories and labs produced materiel and technology that our partisans could make use of, and he was a personal friend of Magnus, but he was not officially aligned with us, nor was he privy to our plans. You can trust him.”

“And I’m supposed to take your word on that.”

The father laughed. “Fair enough. Now, these two cubes are Commonwealth history and Madelyn-Rash research. They should cover your requests. Now, if you are not going to aid us any further, I should hope that you will kindly leave without any further violence.”

“That’s rich coming from you,” Janessa said as she loaded the two small boxes into her pack and retreated back into the elevator.

Far above her, Alexis was closing in on Magnus. The Commonwealth resistance had crumbled, becoming little more than a token defense force after the platoon breached the Tower’s foyer. It wasn’t long before the militia had seized most of the building, with a few loyalist cells barricading themselves in offices and conference rooms, effectively placing Ravengrad Tower under Peregrine control despite its most important bits remaining in the hands of the Commonwealth.

Alexis met Magnus on the Grand Balcony as promised, once her soldiers had secured the area in case of an ambush. The former Director-General stood alone towards the edge of the large, open space high above the city as Alexis walked towards him, flanked by two small squads of troops. So far up were they that the lights and sounds of the battle raging below were little more than a background ambiance. Two great people meeting alone and in safety while those who followed languished in the dust.

“You see, we can meet in peace,” Magnus said with a smirk.

“Your idea of peace is as warped as your idea of good governance,” Alexis replied.

“Peace between one man and one woman is still peace. Was there not peace in Ravengrad even when our armies were scouring Kasimira? Or is there not peace there today, even though we here fight a civil war?”

“Pedantry. You know that neither you nor I are here to shake hands.”

Magnus sighed, flipping aside his dark hair that had grown out since their last confrontation. “Fine. You’re the one who came here with soldiers, but maybe you’ll at least listen to the proposal I have for you.”

“What kind of business could we possibly do?”

“I represent the collaborative effort of many like-minded individuals within the Commonwealth who believe that the initial framework laid out by the United Nations was insufficient. The CHP as we know it was a long stride in the right direction, but it fell just short. We want to start again from scratch, and, like the storms, your revolution is the perfect catalyst for such a plan.”

“You *want* us to destroy the Commonwealth?” Alexis asked, looking suspiciously at Magnus.

“Yes. What you said to Lancaster during the negotiations was not inaccurate. There is quite a bit of sentiment against the Commonwealth’s authority within certain spheres, and my allies and I intended to quash this in much the same way radical religious sects were eliminated during the League Crusade.”

“Burn us out.”

“Let the strongest of the dissidents strike at our heart, ‘kill’ the Director-General to prove to the rest that resistance against the Commonwealth is not futile, that we can be beaten. Emboldened, you and the rest of your friends start a civil war alongside those who seek to gain from the conflict, like Fairchild and his corporation. So fragile is the Commonwealth, having just barely survived the storms, and so evenly-matched would be the armies that the war will be devastating on a scale proportionally greater than any before. Those most strongly opposed to our rule are wiped out during the fighting, just as were the fanatics leading both sides during the Crusade, and the rest are so shocked, so thoroughly convinced of the *wrongness* of a violent revolution, that they will follow a government they would otherwise consider tyrannical without question.”

“So everything…everything we did was because you planned it? Is that what you’re telling me?” Alexis asked, her voice wavering slightly and her fists clenched.

“Good grief, no. I’m sure you know by now that your release from the Panopticon was on my order, and my people made sure that Lancaster wasn’t able to destroy your forces outright, but your victories were your own. I just ask that you win one more in the name of the greater good.”

Alexis was, for just a moment, completely lost for words. When she regained her composure, she did so angrily, clutching Magnus’ throat in her hand so that she could feel every strained breath he made.

“Why,” she seethed, “would you *ever* expect me to help you after everything you’ve done, after everybody who’s died because of you?”

Magnus struggled to speak through her grip, twisting his throat to let more air through his windpipe. “Because now you understand the magnitude of the situation,” he gasped, still managing to keep a cool, threatening air about him. “What would you do if I told you there were a way to stop the violence immediately and prevent my plan from taking on such a brutal form?”

“Just spit it out and I’ll see if what you say makes me want to kill you any less.” Alexis released her grip and let Magnus stagger freely back as he caught his breath.

“You need to destroy or capture and open the floodgates of the St. Elodie Waterlock. Either way will trigger something called the Leviathan protocol.”

“You’d have me flood the Panopticon?”

“Yes, but that’s just a means to an end. There are a few things you need to know: Firstly, that the Science Administration developed a special implant that could affect a person’s mental state and be activated by a remote signal. As you’re no doubt aware, many civil guardsmen, Legionary soldiers, and Skywatch officers receive some degree of biological or electrical augmentation, which necessitates surgery. Between these treatments and the people who went under the knife at any Medical Administration hospital, most everybody was able to be quietly ‘upgraded’ with this new implant.”

“Did Marcus know about it?”

“He was not privy to our project, no. The man would’ve rioted if he had been, but he wasn’t even Overseer of the Science Administration when the project started. By the time he took over, the project was well under way, and so it was a trivial task to keep him in the dark about what a select few scientists and engineers were up to. But I digress. Surely you want to know what our goal really is, if not flooding the Panopticon. The implant’s intended to be a way to stop short any situation that gets out of control by affecting the brains of their hosts, suppressing any aggressive feelings and making the host extremely vulnerable to suggestion – anything we so much as whisper in their ears will be taken to heart. One such event that would be cause for the signal to go out is a prison break from the Panopticon, a violation of the Commonwealth’s duty to keep dissidents and criminals in check.”

Alexis clenched her fists, resisting the urge to slay her enemy then and there, all the while feeling a sense of loathing creep over her that she had allowed herself to be infected by the device Magnus described. “That’s abominable! How could you possibly justify that? Why would I ever give up everything I’ve worked for to hand power back to you?” she said, once again pulling herself close to him.

“Even the likes of Lancaster and myself would be affected – the original plan was to have the Director-General and his advisors retain control, yes but Fairchild delivered a technology which inadvertently allowed my allies to make subtle improvements to the system – an artificial intelligence of unimaginable sophistication would direct us, ensuring humanity’s survival even when it would cast itself into oblivion. As for why I would use it now, well, if there is any situation that could be said to be out of control, it would be this one. It would end the war here and now. The Leviathan protocol, as I envision it, at least, is not permanent. Just a way to stop the war quickly and cleanly now that it has served its purpose. The AI operator would be hard-coded to relinquish control after a set period of time, when those under its power would work diligently and unquestioningly towards rebuilding after the destruction you spread. See, the war was necessary for everybody to understand what is at risk, but no one else needs to die after this point. Look around us – it should be clear to everyone by now what the cost of resistance is. All you need to do is press that button to begin a golden age of reconstruction, then everyone awakens from a horrible collective nightmare and, lessons learned, we go boldly into the future. The soldiers on both sides, both you and I, no more lives need be lost.”

“But I would lose everything that makes me *me*. And if that lesson doesn’t stick, if my time under this AI’s guidance fails to convince me of the errors of my ways, your new totalitarian state will just repeat the process or kill me outright. I will not let you take control of my life or anyone else’s like that. Try and do it yourself and I’ll execute you here and now. I’m sorry.”

“You should be. The alternative is to let this war continue to its bitter end and let the AI’s job as a teacher be replaced by the sheer amount of death that will come from that. I cannot, in my current position, activate Leviathan by myself, as much as I would like to. As far as everybody else knows, I’m dead. It was necessary. Meanwhile, Lancaster opposed the protocol from the very beginning, and has every activation site – the Waterlock, his office in this tower, and the *Sunset Serenade* – under heavy guard, so my people cannot take them by force. Perhaps he has even deactivated it entirely, making the point moot. But if you cared at all about the people under your command and took a minute to think rather than letting yourself be ruled by this childish fear of actually trusting me with something, you might consider doing as I ask. How many lives could you save?”

“It’s because I care about my people that I *won’t* do what you’re asking. We stand here, the two of us, deciding the fate of millions. I will not let myself or anybody else be stripped of their individuality against their will. Better to die for a cause we believe in than to surrender our humanity for the sake of order.”

A barrage from the Tower’s guns interrupted their conversation. The militia had finally taken control and turned them on the nearby *Sunset Serenade*. Though the ship’s barriers would hold out for a while longer, it would have to retreat or be sunk. The battle would soon be over.

Once the two of them had recovered from the shock of the nearby boom of cannon, Magnus responded. “Then I suppose we must continue to fight,” he lamented. “Let the brutality of this war stand on its own. You made your choice. Now you must live with the consequences.”

“I don’t think we’ll be fighting for much longer,” Alexis said, looking out towards the beleaguered *Serenade*. “This battle is ours. Ravengrad is ours. The Commonwealth is soon ours. As the general of the victorious forces, Magnus, I thus sentence you to death.”

Magnus nodded solemnly as she set aside her rifle and unsheathed her sword so that it pressed against his neck. He knelt and smiled, only whispering “A shame” as she quickly cut off his head.

Alexis’ soldiers watched her as she watched the blood drain out of Magnus’ neck. She picked the head up by its dark hair and stared into Magnus’ relaxed, dead face, letting the flow of red stuff mostly dry out before she stuffed it in her pack as a grim souvenir.

“If I’d accepted his deal, you all would have shot me dead then and there, right?” she asked. A few of the soldiers looked hesitant, but a few nodded outright. “Good. At least my side has principles worth a damn. Send someone down to see what’s become of our friends in the streets, then let’s get back to driving these loyalist rats out of Ravengrad.”

\* \* \*

When Janessa and Alexis were re-united and the *Sunset Serenade* had fallen back from the Tower, they hailed Eirene to meet them before they left for the Panopticon. When the corvette arrived on the streets at the base of the tower, however, those onboard had a grim story to tell.

“The mourners turned on us,” Wilson said sorrowfully as he and Fischer stepped out of the Corvette. “They’re attacking everything in sight – Commonwealth, Peregrine, civilian. What a joke.”

“They – what? They’re attacking us?” Janessa asked. “Is Marcus doing anything about it or just sitting around all quiet-like and leaving us to rot?”

“He’s as confused as the rest of us are. The black ships are in a frenzy, trying to stop the few drones that went rogue onboard and preventing the rest from laying waste to our own fleet. Everyone’s getting slaughtered out there.”

“Fuck. We need to get to Julia, now.”

Two of the Peregrine soldiers hoisted the wounded Janessa and began to carry her to the corvette, but were interrupted as a mourner landed nearby. Alexis still hadn’t fully registered the threat the drones now posed, but the other troops – the ones who had seen friends torn apart by their former allies – reacted instantly, opening fire on the metal creature as it prepared to attack. With a single rocket, it obliterated two of their soldiers before leaping straight into the middle of the group.

Every soldier left was firing upon the drone now, but their guns did precious little damage against its armor. Teague, too old to effectively fight, retreated into the corvette just in time to escape a charge from the drone that cut down another two men. For its final act, the berserk drone lunged at Wilson and pushed one of its knife-like legs through his chest, and it lifted the man into the air with blood pouring out of his chest and began to scrape his body against the outside wall of the Tower, painting a macabre mural with his fluids. As Wilson finally died, one of the few remaining militiamen scored a lucky hit on the mourner that crippled it enough for the rest to get in close and finish the job.

Alexis stared in shock at the aftermath. The scene in front of her was a nightmare, everything her people had made falling to pieces. Perhaps the revolution could be salvaged, but Magnus had been right about one thing – it would be very, very costly.

The Panopticon was almost empty when they arrived after the short walk from the Tower. There were no Commonwealth guards and few prisoners, only a few skittish mourners that flew off seemingly without noticing the new arrivals.

Rescuing Julia had been the easiest thing they’d done all day. She was imprisoned in a cell towards the very bottom. A pain to find, but at least there were no casualties. That was an improvement.

Alexis, Teague, and Eirene approached the cell slowly and cautiously, not wanting to startle the mentally fragile young woman. When the glass pane slid away, Julia looked frantically around until she saw Eirene, her former companion. Both women smiled, though Julia’s was far more twisted and manic than Eirene’s.

“My friend…” Julia said. “You actually came for me. They kept me down here, told me how worthless I was, but you showed them, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” Eirene said, moving to embrace her. “Yeah, we did.”

“I heard fighting,” Julia whispered into Eirene’s ear. “I still do. Are the overlords suffering for what they’ve done?”

“Yes, they are. We and your father are seeing to that.”

Julia stepped back. “Father! But he was working for them! How is he…?”

“He’s with us now. Just come with me, everything’s going to be alright.”

That was a white lie, of course, but it satisfied Julia. She and her nervous temperament followed the Peregrines to the lift and then all the way to the surface, where Alexis tried to hail Marcus on the radio. When she eventually succeeded after a few seconds of static, he, quite predictably, requested an update on Julia’s rescue.

“She’s right here, I’m happy to report. Safe, yes, though I’ll refrain from judgment on “sound” for the time being. Want me to patch her in?”

“Yes, yes, please do.” Marcus spoke quietly, the crisis at hand weighing heavily upon him, but his excitement was palpable. He had been separated from his daughter for so long that the idea of meeting her once more after such effort was a welcome pause from the grim situation around them.

Julia was hesitant to speak, at first, but the sound of her father’s voice warmed her up, and they were able to have a real, if stilted conversation. A conversation that was interrupted by the sound of jets and more gunfire, coming not from any of the mourner drones that Magnus had hijacked, but from the ominous silhouette of the *Sunset Serenade* approaching the Panopticon and doing everything in its power to keep the rabid swarms at bay. The wind from its engines threw around the lighter debris and drowned out almost all other noise.

“We need to go, now!” Janessa yelled over the clamor. Bidding her father a hasty farewell, Julia lurched after her rescuers towards the corvette, stumbling to fasten herself into her seat but nonetheless succeeding. The vessel took to the skies almost directly underneath the enemy carrier, Eirene praying that the Commonwealth gunners would be too distracted by the drones to attack her as she struggled to keep her ship under control despite the gale threatening to blow her wildly off course.

“We’re getting hit hard, here!” Eirene shouted into her radio. “Marcus, the *Sunset Serenade’s* right on top of us! I’ll go into evasive maneuvers and try to find you if we make it out, but Julia’s safe. Don’t you worry!”

Marcus frowned as he heard her words. “Just keep her safe,” was all he said.

The *Sunset Serenade* was a clear threat to be avoided, but its presence was so dominating that such a task was all but impossible. Eirene simply flew as fast and as high as she could in the hopes that they could clear its range with all haste, but, as she did so, she did not realize before too late the threat coming in from another direction. Two drone missiles smashed into the starboard engines. With her engines set alight and her wing fractured, Eirene knew that there would be no recovering from this, and that she would need to think quickly to have so much as a chance of getting out alive.

“The *Serenade*!” Teague shouted. “Try to land on its flight deck! It’s our only hope!”

“Right!” Eirene replied. Everything she knew told her that landing on the carrier would doom her as much as crashing into the city, but it was not the time for debate. Teague was right – they had one option, and that was it.

She exercised what control she had left to guide the corvette down in a sharp curve before it struck the deck of the *Sunset Serenade*, spinning wildly about as it careened down the landing strip. Sparks flew from the metal hull scraping against the carrier’s deck, and shards of debris were catapulted into the air to fall into the ruined city below. It wasn’t until the corvette collided cockpit-first into the side of a Commonwealth fighter, the hull crumpling like a tin can, that the spectacle came to a halt.

Alexis found herself largely unharmed save for some nasty bruises and burns. The CIC where she and the rest of her squad had strapped themselves in was a mess, of course, filled with smoke that blocked any natural light that might have found its way in through the broken hull. They would surely choke to death if they didn’t get out soon, but, before she was willing to leave, Alexis had to find Eirene. The cockpit had taken the bulk of the impact, and she prayed to every god she could think of that her partner was still alive.

She frantically looked at the wreckage and finally saw her, battered and bloody at the very front of the wreck. The young woman was unconscious in her chair with a metal shard lodged just above her hip. It was a bad wound, but she was breathing. Barely.

As Alexis crawled forwards, she heard the sound of a powerful gunshot. That was enough to get her attention – she turned away from Eirene and looked down the deck to see none other than Jacob Lancaster and his retinue advancing towards them underneath the mounted standard of the Commonwealth. None of them looked particularly happy to see the new arrivals.

“Please,” Alexis begged, “she’s going to die. Take me if you must, but she needs treatment. Please, please, have mercy just this once.”

Lancaster stared at them for a moment and then nodded towards the crash. His men moved forwards and starting helping those who were still alive out of the debris. “None of you dies today. Come on, we have things to discuss.”

And so the ones who could still stand found themselves on the bridge of the *Sunset Serenade*, the flagship of the Commonwealth Skywatch, overlooking the flight deck as it pushed its way through the clouds. The rest had been placed in the intensive care ward to be tended to by the remaining doctors.

“My army has been crushed. Yours has been shattered. There are many alive down there, but they are in utter disarray.”

“We didn’t mean for this to happen,” Alexis said. “It wasn’t our fault. We tried, damn, we tried so hard to give peace a chance. We were so close…”

Teague moved to comfort her, but Lancaster just watched her from afar. It seemed strange to him that anyone would intentionally release such a calamity. It was a no-win situation, and his experiences with the militia had convinced him that they weren’t dumb, nor were they particularly malicious. Perhaps there was validity to Alexis’ claims.

“Then explain yourself, girl,” he said sharply. “Do you even know what happened?”

Alexis sniffed. But a single tear now threatened to roll from her damp eye, but she swatted it away as if its very presence offended her. With a deep breath, she did her best to recount her battle with Magnus, retelling the story of conspiracy and treachery that he had told her. As she spoke, the expressions on the faces around her grew ever graver.

“So that was his plan. I opposed the Leviathan protocol from the beginning, but many of the architects thought differently. It is good that we were able to put a stop to it.”

“*We* put a stop to it?”

“I held the Waterlock, did I not? Had you destroyed it…”

“Fine, fine.”

“The point is…you said you killed Magnus, correct?”

“Right here,” Alexis said. She tossed her backpack onto the floor and unzipped it, revealing the former Director’s severed head. “Killed the bastard once and he just came back. Kept this so there’s proof I did the deed for real, this time.”

Julia practically cackled with delight when she saw what was left of the man. Noticing the young woman’s expression of glee, Alexis picked up the head and offered it to her. Julia held it and grinned as what was left of the blood dripped out of the neck and onto the floor. Eventually, she returned it to Alexis to put back into her pack, which already stank of salt and iron. She would clean it out later, or else get a new one.

“Many, like myself, opposed Leviathan’s existence from the start and trained ourselves to resist its insinuations, but we were politically outgunned while Magnus was Director-General. He’s gone now. So, what are we to do about this sordid state of affairs but work together?” Lancaster said, changing the topic.

“Are you really serious?” Alexis asked. “We tried that, and look how it turned out. Why would you propose an alliance now?”

“I don’t really have a choice, do I? Our armies are both in ruins, and even the two of them put together can’t go up against the mourners. Just like what the Commonwealth has always been about; we must work together to survive.”

Teague nodded his approval. “If what you say about Magnus is true, Alexis, then Lancaster is not responsible for much of this devastation. Perhaps we should consider his offer.”

There was no reply from Alexis at first. She walked forwards until her nose was almost touching the glass windows at the front of the bridge and stood there for a minute, looking over the deck and watching the clouds mingle with pillars of smoke from below.

She sighed. “If this is what I need to do to keep the people safe from what we unleashed, then so be it. The Commonwealth has done terrible things in the past, but that was then. We will work with you for as long as is needed to put down this little problem. After that, well, I suppose it’s anybody’s game.”

“I’m glad you could see reason,” Lancaster said. “However, this means nothing until we can get our armies under control. Damn, look at them. As soon as the mourners turned, they split up into independent groups, each hostile to the rest. They all know they’ve been betrayed, but they don’t know by whom. Thus far, none of mine have been responsive to my attempts to re-establish control.” He then looked straight at Alexis. “Perhaps you will have better luck.”

Alexis readied herself to reply but was interrupted by the piercing shriek of an alarm and much chatter from the bridge crew. She turned around, looking for some explanation but only saw Lancaster looking ahead, brow furrowed.

“Sir!” yelled one of the officers on deck. “There are two Skywatch warships firing on us from south-southwest. *Centurion* class, one of them looks heavily damaged. Should we return fire?”

“They shot at us?” Alexis asked no one in particular. She hadn’t felt the telltale shudder of a strike. Perhaps the enemy vessel had missed its mark?

“Yes, but our barriers are holding. A cruiser like that couldn’t hope to hurt us.”

The barriers. Of course.

“In any case, I think we can make an example of these men. Tell Nuke Command to bring them down. Whatever it takes.”

“Nuke Command? Sir, to destroy them so completely…is it wise to waste ships like that, given the circumstances?” The officer was hesitant to issue the order, but his hand hovered over the button for when Lancaster gave his reassurance.

“If it helps me rally the rest, then it is not a waste. Do it.”

“As you wish…sir.” He tapped the button to begin the broadcast and spoke with much apprehension in his voice. “Nuke Command…we have orders to fire on the inbound traitor ships with one missile. Confirmation Alpha transmitting now.”

As he tapped a lengthy code into the console, the Grand Admiral did the same at a terminal nearby, as did one other officer. Meanwhile, the Serenade began to heave sideways as its colossal engines put it into a wide turn to face their foe.

“And that’s confirmation Bravo and Charlie. Are you ready to engage? Good. Fire when we’re on target.”

The display was spectacular. Everyone on the bridge watched as the missile soared forwards, red-hot and trailing smoke, until it crashed straight into the first cruiser. There was a second of nothing, and then there was a burst of explosive energy so immense that it shattered the hapless airship into countless shards of melted metal. Everyone on board was surely dead in an instant.

The sky turned a deep red hue as the few parts and pieces large enough to be seen fell to the ground

“Don’t worry, it’s not a real nuke,” Lancaster reassured his guests. “No radiation, so it’s all well and good on the surface. Relatively speaking.”

“Yes, we know,” Alexis said. “It’s still horrifying, to kill so many at once.”

Though the first ship had been entirely erased from existence, its counterpart had not. The second cruiser had been glanced by the blast and turned into a flaming hulk, hurtling downwards and filling the sky with even more black smoke. It listed and heaved until it crashed straight into the St. Elodie Waterlock, which was immediately broken apart in an explosion that saw the fires from the wrecked ship mixed with a torrent of pressurized water finally released to wreak whatever havoc it desired.

“Oh no,” Jacob Lancaster muttered under his breath as the water began to pour violently throughout the canals without hindrance or control, chunks of the Waterlock being carried along by the current.

“Damn it, damn it, *damn it*!” The Director yelled as he ran back somewhere into the Serenade while shouting obscure instructions to the crew. Everybody on the ship felt light-headed, their vision started to blur, and, for a moment, they all forgot where they were.

When the sensation stopped, Lancaster stood on the deck once more, panting like an old dog. “It can be activated and deactivated from three places that I know of. The *Serenade*, the Tower, and the Waterlock itself. Like I said, I trained myself to resist it. Just now, I was able to shut it down before it started.”

The Grand Admiral stepped up to his console once again and picked up the microphone, holding it close to his mouth. With the cloud from the bomb still dominant in the sky, he addressed the city at large on a frequency that everybody would hear.

“Once again, this is Grand Admiral and Director-General Jacob Lancaster. We are losing the battle, yes, but the war is *not* over. The situation has changed, and now you see the fate of those who do not adapt properly. Lines between friend and foe are being redrawn; I expect that you all realize this to some degree. The Peregrine army has suffered a similar betrayal, and, while I do not expect any one of you to trust the other side, we will do what must be done to protect the human race. This is an order to all surviving units in Ravengrad, regardless of your allegiance – regroup at what’s left of the tower. It’s our only chance to survive.”

Alexis was slightly surprised when Lancaster handed the microphone over to her, but it made sense after she fully understood what was going on.

“Your soldiers won’t trust me. It’s your turn to work your magic.”

She nodded, microphone in hand, and looked out over the city. The uncontrolled release of the Waterlock had been devastating. The canals overflowed and walls cracked under the pressure, inundating the low parts with saltwater and demolishing what remained of Widow’s Walk. When the deluge finally hit the Panopticon, it did more than drown the prison – it annihilated it. The water broke straight through the base of the pit and surged throughout the decaying network of tunnels. These too could not stand the flow and broke so thoroughly that huge swathes of the city started to collapse into brand new sinkholes. Ruined buildings aside, the city of Ravengrad was now scarred by a dozen bottomless chasms.

With the destruction fresh in her mind, Alexis prepared to speak.

“All Peregrine units,” she began, “Today has been a grim day, not just for us, not just for the Commonwealth, but for all of humanity. There is a great deal of bad blood on both sides of this tragic conflict. I know this. I know that everybody on both sides has lost friends, family even, but I would ask – no, would beg you to put your grievances aside and give cooperation one last chance. The Commonwealth is not unreasonable, nor is it our enemy any longer. Do as the Director says and gather at the Tower. Together, we will drive these evil machines out of our lands.” She paused before saying one last word with as much sincerity as she could muster. “Godspeed.”

Alexis set the microphone down and looked solemnly at the Director. “Do you think it will work?”

“Only time will tell. Fleet Command tells me that almost all of our remaining ships have begun a course for the Tower, but what intelligence is available suggests that units on the surface have yet to cease their erratic behaviors. It will take time to organize, but we might be able to succeed if they do.”

And so they waited. Slowly but surely, the Tower began to show signs of life. One, two, almost three dozen ships rallied around the Serenade, including the Peregrines’ black ships. If Marcus was still alive onboard one of those, Alexis would have many questions for him.

The number of units still ready to fight was as surprising as it was encouraging. She counted two super dreadnoughts, a handful of other big ships, and numerous smaller craft. Full battle groups had assembled around the tower and the Panopticon, working together with the ships in the air to cut down any mourners that strayed too near.

By the end of the hour, nearly the whole city was regrouped, reloaded, and eager to enact justice. Tensions were high between the unlikely allies, but they shared a common goal: survival. The mourners’ attack was violent and bloody, and it tested the mettle of the fledgling alliance with exhausting persistence, but it was ultimately a failure. All at once, as if they had received an order from somewhere far away – or perhaps painfully close by – the swarm of drones turned tail and fled the city as a single group, off to parts unknown.

“They’re surprisingly organized,” Teague noted. “Strange, given that they’re allegedly cut off from all command and working without an IFF. Do you suppose that they will attack other principalities?”

“They couldn’t possibly get through the storms, even as thin as they’ve become as of late. Unless Leviathan intends to provide them with transport, they’re stuck here.” He gave a dark laugh at the ridiculousness of the notion.

“So, what do we do? Follow them and finish them off?”

“No,” Lancaster said. “We might win, but we would take heavy casualties. I’ll talk to Fairchild, but I believe there is a way that we can end this war without fighting them directly.”

“Gee,” Alexis said snidely, “how many times have I heard that before?”

“Hush, girl. It’s not the same, and you know it. I’m not as familiar as Marcus is with his work, but if memory serves, we can disable the mourners all at once from his master control. The trouble is, we haven’t heard from that station since before the battle started. It may have come under attack, so we’ll lead part of this fleet to investigate, while most remain here to protect the civilians.”

“Where are we going, and who could have attacked it? Marcus told us that all the mourners were here,” Alexis said.”

“The master facility is in Montreal, almost three days’ journey for our slow capital ships,” Lancaster answered. “As for who could attack it, well, there are a few options. I initially suspected that Fairchild had staged a coup in the Defense Administration complex there, much like he used his influence with Madelyn-Rash, but that no longer seems likely given your ignorance. The other possibility is that Hyperion has turned on us.”

“Hyperion?” Alexis vaguely remembered Marcus mentioning that name during the ball, when he had told her about Montreal going dark. They were a third party who had allied with the Commonwealth, this much she knew, but she knew few details. That their embassy had been in the unresponsive city was, indeed, suspicious.

“Yes, they’re a private military force operating from Geneva. Somehow they kept hidden the fact that the storms had lightened up there and thus avoided being settled by our colony fleets. They have powerful forces of their own. Fortunately for us, they seemed interested in an alliance, so a treaty was brokered shortly before this war broke out.”

“You think that was just a ruse to get closer to some objective?”

“Perhaps. Yet, their forces still fight on our behalf. Look around you – those red ships you likely don’t recognize? Those are Hyperion. I’m slightly loath to leave them with the civilians, but there’s enough Skywatch presence left to keep them from getting any ideas. In all likelihood, they’re as confused as you or me, unless they too were working for Magnus. Not impossible, I suppose.”

Red ships. Some of the Defense Administration pilots and crews had reported engaging red-colored airships flying an unknown banner near Mt. Korab, and Marcus once claimed that his own daughter, Lena, had been attacked by a similar ship at Ivanograd, but all investigations had turned up nothing. Hyperion had an agenda, this much was certain, but the depth of their treachery was yet to be revealed.

In the end, the *Sunset Serenade* led a small detachment of frigates and cruisers across the Atlantic Ocean towards the silent city of Montreal. There was a limited Skywatch presence there, Lancaster promised, as well as the principality’s civil guard, so they could count on support if there was conflict when they arrived. As the *Serenade* turned away from Ravengrad, Alexis stared at the forlorn city, silently mourning the deceased and praying that there were not more when she returned.

\* \* \*

The flagship’s medical ward was small and cramped but full of state-of-the-art technology, which was expected. Eirene lay sleeping on one of the operating tables, her gentle breaths inaudible next to the whir of the equipment keeping her alive.

“You’ll pull through this, little angel,” Alexis said so quietly that Marcus, standing opposite the bed from her, could scarcely hear. She wanted to reach forward and touch Eirene’s cheek just to feel the reassuring warmth of her body and know she was still alive, but she refrained.

“When we get to Montreal, she’ll need more extensive operation,” Marcus said, gesturing to his patient. The doctors onboard the *Serenade* had amputated her left leg and arm and patched up her internal wounds to the point that she was no longer directly facing death, but the young woman was still in great need of repair.

Marcus continued. “Assuming any of the labs are still intact, we can replace the missing limbs with Madelyn-Rash electroprosthetics. We could give her the bio-augmentations instead, but those would need to be custom-tailored to avoid an undesirable reaction from her immune system. Depending on how the internals develop, we might need to give her some implants regardless.”

“Just save her,” Alexis said.

“We’ll do everything we can.”

Alexis watched Marcus excuse himself from the room, leaving her alone with her unconscious girlfriend. The one thing that made her happy was how tranquil she looked in her slumber. In that moment, Eirene was a precious creature, sweet and innocent and in need of protection, even though Alexis knew that she was, in reality, far from helpless.

“Please come back to me,” she whispered, finally giving in and leaning forward to give Eirene a quick kiss on the lips before she left.

## Chapter 16 – Tarpit

“It has always been true that nations would do well to avoid unnecessary violence. In ancient times, Sun Tzu wrote that it is best to win without fighting, for even an optimal outcome will still result in some amount of loss. In the worst case scenario, a country becomes stuck in a deadly quagmire, all parties ending up worse off for it. Countless historical leaders have fallen into this trap.

* Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster

Montreal wasn’t always a shithole, Ian remembered.

The ambassadors from Hyperion had arrived to a comfortable lifestyle in the city almost a year prior. Any expenses would be covered, Théoden had promised, and they would enjoy all the amenities that Montreal had to offer. Perhaps it was not quite as luxurious as Geneva, but it was a lovely city nonetheless, with more opportunities than one could count to sate even the most obscure desires.

“Look, girls,” Charlotte said as their airship began its descent into the city. She pointed out the cabin window and towards the airbase below, and Emma and Peony scooted over to the glass and peeked outside.

It was quite a sight. The Skywatch airbase in Ravengrad and the Hyperion ports were both quite close to the city proper, but this facility was isolated amongst kilometers of ruins. A shining jewel nestled in the crumbling corpse of Old Montreal.

Ian turned to see what she spoke of and raised his eyebrows, impressed. The airbase was little more than six giant landing pads built around a geodesic dome, but it was a beautiful building. Almost like a snowflake, he thought.

Security at the airbase was tight, but efficient. Charlotte, Ian, and their entourage were patted down, scanned, and checked within an hour and then suddenly entirely free to do whatever they pleased. They’d been given the address of the Hyperion embassy – 1350 Sherbrooke Ouest – but there was no need for them to be there for a good long while.

A single pair of monorail lines ran through entire districts of abandoned buildings for a half-dozen kilometers at such speeds that they could barely see the decrepit constructs as the train flew along the track. Before they knew it, they had slowed to a crawl and then to a halt at the station where the ruins grew into a living city. It all seemed very strange, especially to little Emma. She had known only Geneva for almost all her life. The colors here were bright and varied, the people cheerful and eccentric, and the air rife with sterility, not unlike a doctor’s clinic.

“So, what do you think we should do?” Charlotte asked in her mother tongue, appropriately for the setting. A cursory glance revealed that French remained popular in Montreal, just as it had been in the old world. Officially, this was consistent with Commonwealth doctrine, which listed English, French, Chinese, and Russian as national languages, though all were tolerated.

“Find a map, I suppose,” Ian said. It wouldn’t do to wander the streets of Montreal without any way to know where they were.

“There, then.” Charlotte pointed towards a convenience store just across the street from the monorail station. “Perhaps they offer maps, or the clerk can offer advice.”

Ian nodded and followed her away, all while taking in the sights and sensations of the city. The medical aura gave way to the delicious sweet and savory scents of street vendors and open-air cafés.

When they stepped onto the crosswalk, Charlotte felt Emma’s little hand in hers. She was a trusting child, and that worried her. The alliance with the Commonwealth was a marvelous boon for the security of her country and her friends, but Théoden had seemed to prophesize strife in the future, and, no matter how well-trained, Emma and Peony were children who would not be ready serve on a real battlefield. They had barely survived Ivanograd. Charlotte too felt herself too inexperienced to ensure their safety, and she hoped that, if the time came, he would be able to keep them alive.

It wasn’t something she wanted to think about.

As the elders of the group chatted with the shopkeeper, the two younger girls scampered around looking at the sights nearby. They kept in view of their guardians, of course, but there was still much to be seen. The skyscrapers dwarfed anything that existed in Hyperion with the possible exception of Théoden’s citadel which was a rare sight in and of itself.

Then there were the cars. They weren’t uncommon in Hyperion, but this city was something else entirely. The maps of the monorail network suggested an extensive public transportation system, but many still used personal automobiles. Emma believed that she had seen more cars in the few minutes she’d known Montreal than during her entire stay in Hyperion.

“Come on, girls, it is time to go! *Allons-y*!” Charlotte said, snapping her fingers as the two children looked around in wonder. They snapped to attention and skipped up to her and Ian.

“Where are we off to now?” Peony asked.

“The Hyperion Embassy on Sherbrooke,” Ian answered. “We’ll get set up there and then see what there is to do. Sound good?”

“Can we look around when we’re done?” Emma asked.

“Sure thing. We can go out later, if you like. Business first, though.”

“Right,” Emma said, smiling with questionably-deserved confidence.

The embassy was a disappointing building. From the looks of it, the Commonwealth hadn’t bothered to construct a new facility to house their guests, instead preferring to shove them into some unused structure or other that wouldn’t be missed. Ian didn’t blame them, necessarily, but he had gotten used to the luxury of Geneva.

Though the exterior was cold and grey, the interior had been kept in fairly nice order. The walls had been repainted in the deep red hues that Théoden was so fond of, and the furnishings had been brought up to a livable standard.

Two floors up, they found their rooms. One each for Ian and Charlotte, and another for the children. When the girls saw that they would be sleeping in a bunk bed, they were ecstatic.

“Bunk bed, huh? Top bunk’s mine, then,” Peony said and dashed towards the bed, hoping ever so much to claim the summit for her own.

“Hey, *non, ce n’est pas juste*!” Emma protested. Her friend didn’t speak enough French to know exactly what had been said, but she understood the message. The two briefly pushed at each other before the French girl was finally ejected from the victory point, cementing Peony as the master of the top bunk.

“Fine, take it. It’s just a bed. Everyone dies in the end, anyway.”

“Wow, harsh. We’re here as ambassadors. No one’s going to be doing any dying any time soon, I hope.”

“I know, I was joking. Still, they did have us bring our weapons.”

“Just in case. Besides, if we fight, there’s no way we can lose, so just be glad Aumeier and Sorenson stayed behind to chair the stratēgoí and we won’t have any more lessons while we’re here. We can actually, you know, have fun in the city together. Doesn’t that sound exciting?”

“Yeah, sure. Once we get our stuff all unpacked, I’ll be ready to move out.”

“As you wish.”

When the children had finished unpacking, the four of them went back downstairs, where they saw a group of men in military regalia conversing amongst themselves. They recognized several Hyperion uniforms, and several more that must have been with the Commonwealth. One of the latter men took notice of Ian and his cohorts and beckoned them forwards.

“Gentlemen,” Ian said, stepping forwards whilst Charlotte and the girls hung back. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“Ah, Mr. Barrow, your master told us that you would be the chief representative for Hyperion in Montreal. Scout Commissar Mathieu Bucharest, First Legion.” He spoke with an accent that was much Charlotte’s Parisian French, but with a haughty tone to it. Ian immediately didn’t like the man, but he knew that this was a hasty judgment.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Commissar.”

“Likewise. I was just speaking with these men regarding the integration of your forces into our battlegroups. I’m surprised that Mr. Lockhart was able to amass such an army undetected. It doesn’t hold a candle to ours, but that’s to be expected, and in no way reflects poorly upon your master’s competence. If I do say so myself, your engineers may have actually managed to outclass the Skywatch.”

“Thanks, I suppose. Am I needed right now? I was about to accompany these ladies on a sightseeing tour before our work began.”

“Needed? Not insofar as I require your services immediately. As a matter of fact, my business with these gentlemen is concluded, so I should like to make an inquiry of my own.” He gestured to dismiss the other men from Hyperion, who nodded and filed away.

“Very well,” Ian said. “Shoot.”

“Well, it’s not so much an inquiry as it is an offer. Is there anything that you need to make yourselves more comfortable? I am aware that this building is probably less than you’d hoped for, and, believe me, the Legions are used to accepting…secondhand equipment from the Skywatch. So, if there’s anything that you or your girls would like, I might be able to, shall we say, requisition it for you.”

Ian wasn’t quite sure what Bucharest meant by that, but he honestly couldn’t think of anything that he absolutely needed. Perhaps Charlotte would have ideas, but that was a conversation for later.

“No thank you, we’re quite alright as it is. I think that all of us have a history of living in poor conditions, so this is an improvement, even. That said, it’s always good to have another opinion – what would you recommend for an introductory activity to Montreal?”

“Preferably something with food!” Charlotte added from afar, indicating the young girls next to her. “The little ones are hungry!”

The Commissar nodded. “Food, entertainment, I can take care of that. There’s an exquisite restaurant on Rue Sainte-Catherine that I frequent myself. I could take you there, if you’ll not mind my company for a while longer.”

“I suppose that’ll do, if it’s okay with the others?” Ian said, turning to check if the other approved. They did, and the group travelled together to the restaurant. It was but a few blocks from the embassy, which suited them well.

“What’s so special about this place, anyway?” Charlotte asked as they walked. Bucharest’s accent and even his presence in the city suggested that he spoke French, so she happily conversed in her native tongue.

“The food’s good, for one,” the Commissar replied, “though that’s not the main attraction. For me, at least.”

“Oh?”

“Indeed, I am of the mind that this establishment’s allure comes from the entertainment – dancers of only the highest caliber. Oh, not to worry, they’re not *exotic* dancers, so your little children’s precious, innocent eyes are safe. Gymnasts, ballerinas, acrobats, it’s all quite a show. Just wait; I can guarantee that you’ll be impressed.”

He wasn’t wrong. The Hyperion ambassadors were indeed quite stunned when they first walked into the dark restaurant, as much by the savory aroma that immediately surrounded them as by the dancers that could be seen in the background.

All eyes in the building were on the stage. Dancers came and went, men and women dressed in flamboyant costumes preforming elaborate dances and acrobatics before their audience. Each one lasted but a few minutes, but the powerful music and stunning visuals trapped each viewer in a sort of trance that drew out the performance into what seemed like hours. The food itself went largely ignored as it cooled. In time, though, the allure faded, especially amongst the youths who quickly turned their attention back to their meals.

“Yes, perhaps we ought to indulge in the rest of what this establishment has to offer,” Bucharest agreed as he saw Emma and Peony devouring their pasta.

“It is quite good,” Charlotte said. Her soup was a bit cool, but the salty flavor was no less delightful. “You were right to recommend it to us.”

Emma cared little for the fineries of cuisine, and she didn’t bother to savor the taste. There wasn’t much left on her plate by the time the adults had finished issuing their compliments to the hypothetical chef. Instead, she hummed about, looking at the other guests and watching the dancers for a while longer, all whilst hoping that they could select a dessert sometime soon.

The act on stage at the time was an impressive feat of gymnastics: a single woman climbing on and twisting herself around a long silken sheet tied from a scaffold that reached the highest heights of the room. She used this to suspend herself in mind-bending positions that left the audience in awe.

“Every time I see stuff like that, I get scared about what would happen if they fell,” Emma said offhandedly as she watched.

“That actually happened once,” Bucharest said. “It was a grim day.”

The others looked at him, shocked.

“She was an acrobat, much like the one you see before you now. Not as skilled, and nowhere near as courageous. Flinched during one of her routines and fell right to the ground.”

“Did she die?”

“Might as well have. Broke her back and, as far as I know, is still paralyzed from the waist down. Lucky it wasn’t more severe. Stopped the whole show for the night, of course; everyone went home with a sick feeling in their stomachs, and her career was over.”

“My God.”

“Quite. The part that was most amusing, in the worst possible way, was that everybody was back for dinner the very next night. No one cared to know if she was okay, just whether or not they would get their food – she could have been killed for all they cared. Guess that just goes to show that no matter how much of a spectacle you make when you die, in the end, we’re all forgotten and the city doesn’t even notice.”

Ian eyed the Commissar suspiciously. “Is it the city that doesn’t care…or you?”

With a grim look, Bucharest sighed. “In my line of work…it becomes necessary to treat death as no more than a statistic, a number to be written on some file then stowed away forever. True, fighting is a rarity nowadays, but, when it does happen, it is the duty of a Commissar to remain unaffected by petty emotion in order to best utilize his troops, no matter the implications for them personally. Perhaps I am jaded, yes, *mais c’est la vie.* Or, perhaps more appropriately, *c’est la mort.*”

As he spoke, Emma nodded. If she were to die, she knew that Charlotte would be distraught, but was well aware that few others would even take notice, and she hoped that Peony would have the guts to carry on without her. The men and women and girls and boys she had seen die in Ivanograd had been given heroes’ burials, but no one would remember their names before long.

Except for her. She had not known all of the fallen, but many of them had trained alongside her before Nathaniel had thrown their lives away. She would remember all of her comrades until she finally joined them in the ground.

“Well, that’s something to think about for another time,” Ian replied, annoyed. Perhaps we ought to continue our evening on a *lighter* note?”

“Yes, that does sound good,” Bucharest said.

The next morning was sunny enough, but still plagued by an abundance of clouds. This didn’t faze the children, who were content to point out shapes in the sky. A duck, a castle, a fish, and so on. The adults, meanwhile, were concerned about the imminence of rain.

“Peony,” Ian asked on a whim, “you and Emma are still sworn to military service, the defense of the diplomatic corps, are you not?”

“Yeah, I guess. I’m not going to be as dour as she is, though. It’s quite exciting.” Peony replied.

“What?”

“Okay, I know that the CHP isn’t exactly saintly. I know Charlotte and Emma don’t like it, but I have some respect for them. I don’t *want* it to come to war, say, but imagine fighting *alongside* the Skywatch airships instead of against them! Damn, it would be glorious. Who could stand against the combined might of Hyperion *and* the Commonwealth? Yeah, it’s dangerous, but I’d rather live a short but glorious life than grow old and wither. It’d be an exciting change from the monotony of Geneva.”

Hearing that from a teenager annoyed Ian. If she wanted to live fast and die young, then that was her choice, but he did not believe that she had the maturity to make such a decision just then.

“Ivanograd must have been heaven for you, then,” he said, eyeing the girl with some skepticism.

“I wasn’t at Ivanograd. Emma got to have all the fun.”

“Yeah, fun,” Emma said with palpable irritation.

“Oh, don’t be like that. Surely it’s more exciting than memorizing the trivia they have us doing in school.”

“You should be glad that your biggest worry is a test. At least you know you’ll come back from that.”

“Hey, man, I dunno. Back when I had teachers like Master Aumeier, that wasn’t a given.”

Emma laughed.

“The two of you are keeping up with your lessons?” Ian asked. “I wasn’t aware they were going to keep school running here.”

“Oh, yeah, they do,” Peony said. “This is basically a glorified study abroad program. I really do have a test coming up that I should probably be studying for, but, well, here I am. Not studying.”

“When is it?”

“Tomorrow. Hey, Emma, hit me.”

“How many crew did the *Shanghai* have?” Emma asked after taking a second to think of a question.

“Forty.”

“How many passengers?

“One hundred and fifty-seven. Twelve buried as martyrs in Geneva. See, I got this.”

“It really is just trivia, then?” Ian asked.

“Yep. Well, this one is. They have us do purely factual quizzes every so often, and then bigger essay types of things less frequently. At the end of the term there’s the final exam as you’d expect, so I can’t just forget this once I pass, unfortunately. What was that the Commissar said? ‘*C’est la vie*’ or something like that?”

“I see. In that case, good luck.”

“I don’t need luck. I know this like the back of my hand.”

It seemed for a time that their life in Montreal would be pleasant, but, sadly, it was not to be. The beauty of the city concealed a web of red tape that stonewalled them at every turn. Théoden had proposed the alliance with the Commonwealth on the grounds that casting away the need for subterfuge and trickery would make their lives easier, but affecting policy through “legitimate” channels was slow at best. It wasn’t long before everything fell apart.

War reached the city of Montreal even before the Peregrine militia launched its infamous attack on Ravengrad. On a Sunday evening, before retiring for a good night’s rest, the ambassadors at the Hyperion embassy received a desperate missive from Strategos Yudina, the commander of their meager forces in Montreal. Shots had allegedly been fired at the Defense Administration campus, and all Hyperion units in the city – Inquisition and levy alike – were to rendezvous at a more defensible point.

Charlotte and Ian directed the small inquisitorial fire team as they shepherded the ambassadors into every vehicle available and rushed to Yudina’s location. To their surprise, they met no resistance from the Commonwealth on the way there, but that did nothing to quell their apprehension. The nighttime city lights seemed a manic blur as the seven vans rushed through the streets of Montreal until they finally arrived.

The convoy lurched to a stop in an empty parking lot near the conflict zone. Charlotte’s retinue leapt out with their weapons in hand, easily dispatching the few civil guardsmen in the area before shouting out the all clear and making their way to where Yudina was waiting for them.

“Why in God’s name did we come here?” Charlotte asked with terror on her tongue. “We’ve only brought the ambassadors closer to the fighting!”

One of the Hyperion soldiers stopped and turned to face her. “If the Commonwealth’s seen fit to purge us, then the embassy is not safe. Montreal is not safe. We can’t defend our people in the middle of enemy territory, so we need to leave the city ASAP.”

“Then why not take us to the airbase?” Ian shouted.

“How would we get in? I don’t know if they were planning this, but that airbase is incredibly well-defended. There’s one monorail line acting as a chokepoint through the ruins, and to circumvent it we’d have to go through the rubble, which would give them free reign to shell us, harass us with skirmish forces, and worse. No way for us to get through there if CHP’s trying to stop us. But there are also ships in the D.A. hangars, experimental ones. We grab those and they’re our ticket out of here.”

“That’s a fucking risky plan, you know that.”

“Better than staying in the embassy and letting them cut our throats as we sleep! Hell, I’m surprised that our guys here managed to put up a resistance so quickly. Just follow us, we’re talking with the commander up ahead to take us to a safe zone. Quickly now, come on!”

They ran through alleys and streets deserted by civilians who had no desire to remain amongst such violence. Meanwhile, the gunfire up ahead escalated until Ian was sure that tanks and other mobile armor were now involved. Outside of the brief skirmish with the guard in the parking lot, not one bullet had yet graced the evacuees from the embassy, but the threat was looming closer with every step forward.

“Take the high ground here, move!” their leader shouted, pointing them towards an elevate walkway. “We’ve got a camp set up on an upper floor of the eastern D.A. campus!”

It was from this walkway that they saw the battle for the first time. The plazas, gardens, and roads along the shore of the St. Lawrence had been made into a bloody battlefield for a war fought between more soldiers than either Ian or Charlotte had expected. Barricades had been built and demolished in equal measure on both sides – Hyperion fighting from the east to the west and the Skywatch fighting west to east. Tanks had indeed begun to make their plays as treaded metal war machines trundled forwards only to be forced back by rocket fire from Hyperion.

When the group finally reached the so-called “safe zone,” they were able to breathe easy for the first time in an hour. It was not truly safe, for the conflict still raged close enough by for stray bullets to crash through the windows – everybody kept more than a little ways away from them – but it would do.

“So, what’s our plan to get the airships?” Ian asked once they had regrouped with Yudina, meeting their commander face-to-face for the first time. She was a solemn yet committed type who spoke quickly with a light Ukranian accent.

“There’s no way to fit everyone onboard without larger ships,” she said. “Worse, the Commonwealth forces in the city are on high alert now and are putting up one hell of a fight on any front we can reach. We’ve got a lot of men here, but not a full army, and I do not know if it will be enough. We’re not losing ground, but we’re not gaining it either, so I expect there to be a lot of blood before we make it through.”

Ian gave a dark laugh. “We might even be able to fit everybody in the ships if that’s the case.”

“Gallows humor, perhaps unwise to use in front of the little ones.”

“I was under the impression that you’re going to throw them into the meat grinder just the same, but what do I know?”

As Ian spoke, he took a second to look at the two children he was thinking of. They were sitting on the floor, heads kept low. Emma was disturbingly calm, not betraying even an ounce of emotion, while Peony was visibly disturbed.

“It’s okay, we’re going to be alright,” Emma said to her friend, voice scarcely audible. “Master Théoden will make sure we get home, then your biggest worry can go back to being that test of yours, okay?”

“And at least I know I’m coming back from that,” Peony said, sniffling as she recalled Emma’s words on the subject. “Forty crew on the *Shanghai.* One hundred, fifty-seven passengers. Twelve of them dead.

“Just like you won’t be. I’ll make sure of that.”

“In any case, do we know why the sudden violence?” Ian asked, returning his attention to his peers.

Yudina shook her head. “No. The first reports came from my engineers at the D.A. and their guards, who claim that Skywatch officers staged a surprise attack on our barracks. We took heavy casualties but were able to regroup and push back, and, well, you see what that’s become. No word from Lancaster or Master Lockhart regarding a *casus belli*.”

“Do you know if we can expect reinforcement from our Master?”

“No response. It’s like our communications are entirely non-functional. I have engineers looking into it, but he does not seem the sort to just let us go missing, so I believe that we can expect some of his forces to come investigate sometime soon. Whether or not they will be effective…that’s another question entirely.”

Fortunately for the Hyperion army, the Skywatch and the civil guard were under strength with so many of their number deployed to Ravengrad in anticipation of the Peregrine attack, and Yudina was soon reinforced by the inquisition and other forces from Geneva, her predictions having come true. Those that had been committed to the battle of Ravengrad were written off as lost, unable to be contacted, but Théoden’s own would be more than enough. Thus empowered, Hyperion launched a crushing campaign against its enemy and had almost reached its goal by the time the newly-united Peregrine and Commonwealth forces landed in Montreal.

“And so we see the truth,” said Scout Commissar Bucharest as the reports of violence began to flood into the Stable. “To think that but a few months ago I was dining with those thugs as if they were actually our allies.”

“I never had the pleasure of working with our…illustrious guests. The First Legion gets all the love, and you threw it all away for the Peregrines,” Commissar Stockwood replied.

“Please, don’t make me laugh. You imply that the Lancaster has love for any of the legions at all. I assure you, he does not.”

“Especially not after your little stunt.

Alarms began to sound as the Hyperion army took notice of the Commonwealth’s reinforcements. Rockets from the surface struck the ships’ barriers with little effect, but that wouldn’t continue if the Skywatch stayed in the air for long. With the assault under way, all command personnel were summoned to the bridge for briefing.

“The situation is not good, I won’t lie,” Lancaster began once everybody was assembled. “Without legionary presence to hold on the ground, the Skywatch and the guard have given up a lot of territory. Hyperion forces are advancing and capturing equipment from every building they take. What’s more, as you likely see, is that the enemy has been supported by a number of airships that are enough to put their army on more than even footing with ours. An extended engagement would be costly”

The Grand Admiral hesitated before continuing with his plan. “Crushing Hyperion outright is not our first priority, of course. They’ve not yet taken the mourner labs, so our primary objective is to ensure that they are secured. However, they are under siege, so we will have to break through the Hyperion battle lines to get there. Caught in between two fronts, they should fold fairly easily, but we will need to get Marcus and his team in safely in order to actually do this. A ground team will escort him to the labs while our airships cover them against the enemy fleet.”

“Who will lead the team?” Bucharest asked.

“Ordinarily, I would relegate such a task to a subordinate, but the labs themselves require my attention, so I and the Peregrine auxiliaries will escort Fairchild. Bucharest, why don’t you take care of it?

The former Commissar looked shocked. “But…”

“But you’re a traitor, is that what you were going to ask? That may be so, but your side was ‘victorious’ at Ravengrad, after all. Clearly you know warfare far better than I. The rest of you, join me in the hangar as we prepare a landing party.”

As they started to leave, Commissar Stockwood sighed at her First Legion counterpart. “Told you so,” she said.

“Very funny,” he replied, clearly unamused. “Lancaster knows what he’s doing. I have just inherited an immense responsibility, so perhaps you could not let your wit make it more complex.”

The transports that would convey the Skywatch and the Peregrines to the battlefield were large, each carrying a pair of heavy tanks or a platoon of infantry. They also made for easy targets, and two were shot down and crashed amidst the Hyperion troops.

When the first transport landed and its hatch slid open, Alexis and her team of four were the first boots on the ground and the first to see the destruction up close. Most of the waterfront had been reduced to a field of rubble and demolished tanks, a few bloody corpses visible amongst the wreckage. It wasn’t as bad as Ravengrad, but it was saddening to behold.

“Fire team one is out, moving to position,” she said as she led her men to cover nearby. Through binoculars, they could see the Hyperion siege weapons and troops firing upon the defenders at the mourner labs. There was little doubt that the enemy would eventually emerge victorious without her team’s intervention.

“Fire teams two through five are in in position around the target! Where’s our armor?”

“Tanks are rolling, clear the area!”

“Skywatch, what’s the situation in the air?”

“Nothing yet, sir!”

The chatter continued as the battle group prepared to march against Hyperion. It would be a slow but steady advance supported by nearly a dozen tanks and APCs to both protect and carry the civilian personnel. The fire teams on foot could only move so quickly, but they were a necessary component of the combined-arms force that would be needed to break through the Hyperion line.

Alexis looked around her and couldn’t help smiling. This was her second encounter with the Skywatch’s finest armor, but, this time, they were fighting *with* her, rather than against. To do battle alongside such strength made her feel truly powerful. As she took another look through the binoculars, though, she saw Hyperion’s vehicles turning to face them – captured Skywatch tanks that now realized the presence of the Commonwealth battle group. There was about to be a very destructive battle. Her smile immediately disappeared.

Inside one of the APCs, the Peregrine troops not fit for combat rested, hoping very dearly that their armor would hold true if their guards did not. Alexis shot them a smile through the thick bulletproof windows, but her efforts did little to comfort any of them. Teague was tired and weak, Janessa and Eirene were stable but still wounded, and none of them would be able to put up any fight if the worst were to pass.

The battle group moved ahead in formation. The tanks formed a vanguard to cover for the softer fire teams who in turn surrounded the APCs full of civilians and wounded.

Caught between two armies, the western reaches of Hyperion’s siege lines began to fall apart. In their desperation, they became even more dangerous, as the infantry, tank crews, and mortar teams fought with reckless abandon.

“Bucharest, what’s going on up there?” Lancaster shouted over the radio.

“Limited enemy air presence, *sir*,” the Commissar replied. “We’re seeing a few frigates poking around, but their heavy stuff is fighting further east. Should we seize the initiative and attack?”

“No, that doesn’t matter. Our priority is to hold the western front, so stay here and keep giving us cover fire.”

“Yes, sir,” Bucharest said as his ships launched another barrage from their ground-attack cannons. Columns of dirt and concrete shards lifted into the air around the Hyperion units, taking soldiers and vehicles with them.

“Keep the Serenade back, you fool,” Lancaster added. “It’s a carrier, not a battleship.”

“Sir, with all due respect, it’s armed and shielded like one. The Skywatch has been too conservative so far, and that cost you in Ravengrad. We could wipe out all of Hyperion in one go if we used it to its full potential!”

“And, with all due respect, I am the *Director-General of the Commonwealth*. I think I know a little more than you. Keep the *Serenade* back so that it can launch its squadrons in peace, damn it. There’s no need to press farther than we need to.”

“Being the Director doesn’t matter much after you lost to the Peregrines,” Bucharest wanted to say. He grumbled, but conceded nonetheless. They were all on the same side now, and so it would not do to antagonize Lancaster, even if his transfer of command had been a farce. There were plenty of ships at his disposal that weren’t the *Sunset Serenade*, and those would have to suffice.

Meanwhile, on the ground, the fire teams were making tentative progress. Casualties were light, but very real.

“When we get to the enemy armor, try to incapacitate them rather than destroying them,” Lancaster said from the passenger seat of his APC. “That said, I don’t expect any one of you to put that goal over your lives, so do with that what you will.”

“That tech is more valuable than they are,” Bucharest said. “It’s terrible to lose soldiers unnecessarily, but a single one of those Black Fortress Behemoths could win a battle alone, more than making up for the loss.”

“Take *calculated* risks. In the end, a weapon cannot carry on civilization, only tear it down. Just remember that human lives are far more precious, only to be spent when necessary,” Lancaster scolded, and that was that.

The Hyperion tanks finally came into range and opened up with a devastating volley of fire, to which the Commonwealth responded in kind. The barriers on both sides were strong enough to absorb the first strike, but tanks would start to die at the next.

“Fire teams, take cover behind the armor,” Alexis ordered while she herself ran up behind one of the Behemoths. Bullets pinged off the barriers and armor of the tanks while the squishy humans remained in the back, safe from harm.

Another deafening round of explosions – the Commonwealth tanks had fired first. A few seconds bought by the expedience of the gunnery teams was all that they needed to gain the upper hand, stopping one of the enemy Black Fortresses in its tracks and obliterating two lighter vehicles from the line. The big vehicle slowed to a halt. The firing had been enough to kill its driver, its engine, or something else important.

There wasn’t time to celebrate this little victory before a swift retaliation that succeeded in knocking out one of the Skywatch’s own Behemoths.

“Damnation,” Lancaster cursed as he witnessed the destruction of the vehicle. “Fire team three, get away from that thing!”

With neither question nor pause, team three fell back from its cover and took up positions by the slowly moving APCs.

“We disengaged and contained the reactor when the shot hit,” one of the Behemoth’s surviving crew reported from inside the broken hulk. “It won’t be a problem.”

“Problem?” Alexis shouted. “Problem? As in, these tanks are going to *explode* when they get hit?”

“Fusion reactors, not fission, so the risk isn’t so bad,” Marcus explained. “Even so, about a hundred safety protocols in place to keep accidental releases to a minimum, but battle damage can cause all sorts of complications.”

“Then *why the fuck are we using them as cover?”* she asked, looking at her immense shield with newfound horror rather than admiration.

“Because the odds of it hurting you with all the armor and safeties are next to none, while the odds of you getting shot to pieces if you keep your distance are pretty high, I’d say. Stay close.”

The two battle lines broke up as the fight became more hectic, with troops and tanks moving back and forth as they saw fit, hoping to find an edge. It was the Commonwealth’s air superiority that, in the end, saved them. Though Hyperion was far from vanquished, their western forces were in full retreat, and Lancaster and Alexis’ armies were able to reach their target with fewer casualties than anticipated. Among the lost were two Black Fortress tanks and a handful of soldiers from the fire teams, but the APCs and their important cargo were safe and sound.

The mourner labs and their defenses were, on the outside, a broken wreck after all the Hyperion attacks. As the troops continued past the crude fortifications and into the labs themselves, though, they found an intact realm of science. The sterile labs and workshops were familiar, very close cousins to their counterparts in the now-defunct Science Administration tower.

“Alright, we’re clear,” Lancaster said once the fighting was well behind them. “Now, Marcus, you can shut them off from here?”

“Perhaps. Leviathan’s meddling be more extensive than we realize, but it’s worth a look.”

“It had better be.”

“We won’t know until we test my hypothesis about what they’ve done. My team, please come with me. Director, you may want to be present for the procedures. And Julia, of course. As for the rest of you, you have proven yourselves faithful allies thus far, so I’m trusting you with free reign of the facility to re-equip yourselves with anything you see that you like. Keep in mind that many weapons here are experimental, so do exercise caution in your selection. Perhaps…Caleb, you should show them the important bits.”

“Yes, Mr. Fairchild,” the militia heard from somewhere inside Marcus’ cloud of acolytes. The man who stepped away was young, possibly even younger than Eirene, and very jumpy. Short, platinum blonde hair in an immaculate trim, a white lab coat, soft, pale skin and an extremely nervous temperament that betrayed his distress over the siege. It was clear that this man had done little serious labor in his life, if any.

“Caleb Dunham,” the said the young man. “If…you could come this way with me, that would be good. Please.”

“You two okay to keep walking with us, or do you want to lie down?” Alexis asked her wounded comrades.

Janessa walked now with a crutch to take the stress off her damaged leg and a cast to rest her shattered arm. Nevertheless, she agreed to walk with Alexis.

Eirene’s injuries were more acute. She had received treatment aboard the *Sunset Serenade*, but remained in great pain. She was conscious and mobile, but only in a wheelchair, and any action seemed to trigger great discomfort.

Not a word of this was said, however. Alexis could see in her girlfriend’s eyes that she was in pain, but the young pilot just smiled at her and nodded. Whether her agreement was out of some desire to stay with Alexis or to avoid the Commonwealth’s people, even Eirene herself didn’t know for certain. Whatever the case, every single man and woman from the militia’s higher echelons followed Caleb onwards into the lab.

“These are the mourner labs, as you probably know,” their guide said. “Still, we do some work adapting the tech to other gadgets, not to mention manufacturing the platforms’ weapons themselves. Ergo, we have heavy and light weapons development, applications of AI tech to everything and the kitchen sink – not literally of course – and advanced flight mechanics. Super simple stuff.”

His followers nodded and kept up, walking or limping as befit their condition. It wasn’t until they reached a window into a large storeroom that the tour stopped. Beyond the glass lay piles and piles of missiles, each a carefully stacked block of bulky, grey, emotionless tubes. Workers below frantically moved these weapons out and away. Most likely to be used against Hyperion.

“My God, that’s immense,” Teague said as he looked on in awe. “How many of these warehouse are there?”

“Oh, loads,” was Caleb’s answer. “Each one’s got one type of thing it stores, usually. Bet you can guess what this fellow here’s is.”

“Missiles?”

“Yessir, Prometheus missiles. They’re incendiary, you know.” He laughed. “It’s uh, it’s a little joke.”

“Hilarious,” Eirene said. Her voice was a bit slower, as she summoned the energy to talk, but the exasperation was evident.

Caleb stared at her with a patronizing look of disappointment on his face. “Wait, you *do* know who Prometheus was, yes?”

“Literally everybody knows who Prometheus was.”

“Fine, fine,” Caleb said, throwing his hands up in mock surrender.

\* \* \*

Elsewhere, Marcus and his staff were on their way to the center of the mourner labs, where they hoped to re-assert Commonwealth control over the mourners. With so little to work with, there was not much hope for their success. There were a number of dormant mourner chassis in storage, but they were unaffected by Leviathan’s meddling. They could not be used to diagnose the problem.

Julia sat and watched as her father and his assistants toiled. The air was hot and humid this deep inside the building, though she couldn’t possibly guess why. The sweat made her skin uncomfortably sticky, and she desperately wanted to leave. Even worse were the sporadic pings and beeps and screeches from the machinery and the impenetrable technobabble from the men and women around her.

When her father finished up some unknown business with the Director, she seized the opportunity to run up to him and voice a thought that had deeply troubled her ever since her rescue.

“Father?”

“Yes?

“Why are we working with the Commonwealth? My friends told me that you and they were fighting them.” She looked at him with a tilted head, her long hair drooped over her shoulder.

“Things changed. Very quickly.”

Marcus looked on in sadness as Julia’s eye twitched, waiting for her to reply. The girl’s isolation for so long had done her no favors, and he was no psychologist. All he could do was answer her questions, and that surely wouldn’t be enough. It pained him to see her so distraught.

Her reaction finally came, more violently than expected. “You didn’t even *see* the *monster* they made of me! The bloody Overlord twisted and tore me just because they *could*, they kept *me* from *you,* and yet you freely collaborate with them! Collaborate, it’s like – it’s like… colla, collie, a border collie, a damn dirty dog, that’s what we are to them!”

“That’s a bit of a stretch,” Lancaster said. He had only stared silently at Julia during her rant, with a flat expression on his face. Clearly unamused.

“A stretch? *A stretch?* Who cares if it’s a stretch; it’s *true!* And was it not a stretch to say that I needed to be locked up and tortured for whatever stupid reason you had? *Tell me that! Tell me that, you little fuck!”*

“You know just as well as I do that your imprisonment was not my doing. Magnus had you put in the Panopticon as part of his Madelyn-Rash ‘collateral’ plan long before I took the reins of the Commonwealth.”

“But how many of your thugs were in on it? Magnus didn’t put the cuffs on me himself, though he did watch as I was tortured. Father, how can we work with these people?”

Marcus was conflicted. He wanted nothing more than to hold Julia close and comfort her, and he did exactly that for a brief moment, but he had work to do, work upon which untold lives depended.

“Listen, my daughter,” he said. “Perhaps it would be better if you sought out your friends for the time being. You must believe me that I went through a nightmare to get you back, and I fully intend to see those people who hurt you brought to justice, but thousands of innocent lives are at stake. We cannot afford to let grudges lead us astray.”

Julia felt her father’s betrayal cut through her heart. Without a word, she turned her back on the older men and fled.

“Are you sure that’s wise? Letting a girl like that roam around sensitive equipment such as this?” Lancaster asked once she was gone.

Marcus frowned. “The Commonwealth broke her. You may not have been involved, but I don’t know if I, or, more importantly, *she* can forgive it. But she is not dangerous. In the end, she will calm down. Those Peregrine girls are good with people. It won’t take much for them to soothe her.”

“I’m not sure how much I can trust you given recent events, but I suppose I have to take your word for it.”

A few explosions sounded, the boom and rattle muffled by the facility’s thick concrete walls.

“That’s odd,” Lancaster said as he stepped calmly towards the facility intercom. “I didn’t think Hyperion had it in them to make another push so soon. Perimeter defense? What’s it look like out there?”

“Aerial attack, sir,” came the reply. “Looks like Hyperion’s reinforcements are coming. A few cruisers and some zeppelin-looking things, if you’d believe it.”

“Understood,” said the Grand Admiral. “Bucharest, do you copy?”

“Indeed, sir,” Commissar Bucharest answered. “We’re advancing against hostile targets now. Keeping the Serenade back, just as ordered.”

“Good. What’s the enemy formation like?”

“There’re a few cruisers hanging back and taking potshots at us, hardly worth mentioning. What’s strange are these little blimps. They seem fast and well-shielded, but they’re just floating through the sky. It’s quite the pathetic sight. We can hold this with no trouble.”

Marcus froze in horror. “Those are rams, Bucharest. My forces have fought blimps like those before. If they hit your hull, you’re finished – do not let them, fall back! What are you holding position for? Don’t let them get close!”

Bucharest laughed. “These scoundrels couldn’t possibly hope to break through our barriers. Even if those blimps are loaded with explosives, miserable turncoats don’t have the kind of firepower to even *try* and strike us. The fools are probably bluffing, and they’ll turn away as soon as they see that we will not give ground!”

“You’re playing chicken with our airships?” Lancaster shouted into his radio. “You goddamned idiot! Have you *seen* Hyperion’s fleet? Damn, I forgot, you’re a Commissar. You probably haven’t. But they’ve been *looting the defense administration!* You should know that they *have* the technology to do exactly that! Retreat our ships *now*!”

“No! You put me in charge of this fleet, and I’m going to do what *I* think is best! How can the Director-General, of all people, be so wanting for zeal? A retreat now would tell them that we are *weakened* by the war, when nothing could be further than the truth! Our men will stand proud against this threat and all will see our strength and courage!”

Lancaster only listened in despair as the Hyperion ram-ships collided with their targets, detonating themselves in a horrific display. Frigates, destroyers, and even a cruiser were sent plummeting to the ground in pieces despite Bucharest’s best efforts to stave off the zeppelins.

As the sounds of screaming, burning, and crashing flooded the comms, Lancaster grew increasingly furious. “Bucharest, stand down!” he shouted for all to hear. “All Skywatch ships, this is Director-General Jacob Lancaster! I want a hasty but organized retreat, now! Fall back to the east! As for you, Bucharest, I should have known better than to trust the Skywatch fleet to someone of your ilk. You are to leave the Serenade immediately on threat of execution and resume work with the First Legion forces on the ground. Stockwood, you are now in command. I trust that the Second Legion will not disappoint.”

“I don’t answer to you anymore,” Bucharest shot back. “I won’t stand down until Havery gives the word.”

“Which I’m doing now,” Alexis said. “Lancaster’s right – you should have fallen back. Let Stockwood take the wheel and come help us on the ground.”

“We’ll be safe, sir,” Samantha Stockwood replied, looking eagerly at the defeated Commissar Bucharest watching in horror as his ships fell to the ground in pieces.

“Good. See to it that you do.”

What remained of the Skywatch fleet began to fall back further east, and Hyperion drew ever closer to the mourner labs. Both sides were badly wanting for numbers, and the battle drew ever onward without much gain from either party.

That night, everybody was to sleep in the mourner labs. There were no dorms or barracks to speak of, but makeshift cots made for a barely tolerable alternative.

It wasn’t yet nine o’clock when Alexis crept into the women’s room where several of her friends already lay. The lights overhead were out. Only the lanterns set on the floor cast long shadows across the room.

“Hey, you,” Janessa said as she saw her associate approach.

“Ah, I didn’t see you there. What’s going on?”

“I’ve been looking into some things that you might want to check out. Come over here and take a look.”

“Yeah, just give me a sec,” Alexis said. She carefully maneuvered around the women sleeping on cots strewn across the floor and reached her own bed, where she retrieved her rifle and slung it over her shoulder.

“A fight?”

“Hopefully not. Scouts report that Hyperion is gearing up for something. Probably just probing us, but we don’t want to be caught off guard, so I’m taking some friends to go watch the perimeter.”

“God be with you, then.”

“And also with you. So, are these ‘things’ you mentioned bad things?” Alexis asked, following Janessa over to a laptop to which a small metal cube had been connected via USB.

“Perchance. Our precious ally, Mr. Fairchild, has not told us the full story behind the technology he delivered to us.”

“And that he now promises to rescue us from.”

“Aye. Just look. This one I’ve got here’s about his youngest daughter, the one we didn’t save from Ravengrad.”

Alexis sat down at the table, taking a moment to scan the room before letting her fingers rest on the laptop’s keyboard. The only ones present were her peers and subordinates from the Peregrine militia, all asleep in the dark room. Secure enough for what was not likely to be sensitive information.

“Psychological profile of Subject Zero, Lena Fairchild. What is she, a zombie?” Alexis laughed, unsure what to make of the documents Janessa had presented her. As she kept reading, however, she stopped and stared at the screen, which now commanded her whole attention and would have even if it were not the only source of light in the room.

“Oh my god,” she whispered. “Is Julia…”

Janessa shook her head. “No. The Fairchild girl was born as human as you or I, presumably from the womb of the late Lady Fairchild or what have you. But Lena’s a different beast entirely.”

“Yeah, no kidding. Fuck, they were intelligent the whole time? And we were just throwing them away as cannon fodder? Marcus let us do that?”

“The *drones* aren’t intelligent, but the *Mourners* are. Incredibly so. They’ve been making their own bloody people over here and never told anybody about it. The other CHP goons excepted, I suppose.”

“Okay, okay,” Alexis continued, her red eyebrows furrowing as she kept reading. “So a Mourner’s a strong AI with a good enough processor pilot a whole wing of drones each. The backdoor Magnus used to take over the swarm must be related to this.”

“Or the Mourners have betrayed their father.”

“That too. I have to assume Marcus has this under control.”

“Did Ravengrad look like control to you? Does this?” Janessa asked. “Marcus fucked up. He trusted Magnus when he shouldn’t have and gave us a faulty weapon that’s by now responsible for, what, thousands of deaths? When this is over, he should be tried for negligence, if not treason.”

“We’ll worry about that later. For now, we’ll have to have a little talk with him about his deceit, but stopping Hyperion and Montreal is our top priority.”

“Understood,” Janessa said with a wary nod.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, on the eastern side of the battlefield, Ian studied the battered shoreline from a window. The fighting had slowed to a crawl after the Skywatch armada’s retreat, and the only light outside came from the moon and what few fires still burned amongst the wreckage.

The sounds of a corvette’s engines broke him from his trance. It wasn’t an enemy, or, if it was, their anti-air crews must have all suffered a simultaneous bout of incompetence. The sound slowly died down to a hum and then silenced altogether.

A minute later, Ian recognized the footsteps of his commander. He didn’t even have to turn around to know it was her. The slow and steady but sharp sounds of high heels against the tile floor gave it away entirely.

“Trying to land a Corvette here. That was a dangerous move, Mistress Yudina,” Ian said, not moving from his position at the window.

“Lancaster seems to have pulled the fleet back for repair and resupply,” she said. “Their guns aren’t engaging anything that doesn’t come too close. Risky, yes, but coming here at all was a risk, so what’s a little more?”

Yudina was accompanied by a stern man whose countenance filled Emma and Peony with dread. Their instructor, Nathaniel Aumeier, skilled swordsman and Master of the Hyperion fleet.

“Good day, ladies and gentlemen. You’ve done an admirable job in securing the area, and we’ve already got the fleet transporting our levies to Montreal in force,” the wiry older man said.

“Are we going to be evacuated?” Ian asked.

Yudina looked crestfallen while Nathaniel began to speak. “Unfortunately, that is not the case,” he said. “I imagine you remember the drones you fought in Ivanograd?”

“Yes,” Charlotte and Ian said in unison.

“Good. Then you remember how dangerous they were, and will surely understand how the swarms of them knocking on our door has forced us into action.”

“What?” Charlotte asked, reverting back to French out of alarm.

“Since a portion of our ships and levies were deployed to Ravengrad in advance of the Peregrine invasion, the Commonwealth was willing to share a bit of information relating to the opposition we expected to face. This briefing was not comprehensive, but, combined with the Inquisition’s work on the wreckage your recovered, we have a good understanding of what we’re up against and what we need to do.”

“Which is?”

“The drone swarms are controlled by an artificial intelligence whose core is located somewhere in Montreal. Exactly what transpired during the Battle of Ravengrad, we don’t know, but the Peregrines and the Commonwealth seem to have joined forces and are using these Drones against us. That, or the AI has gone rogue. Exactly what Master Lockhart feared. Our few reports from inside the CHP capital suggest that the drones are attacking their former masters as well, which might do well to teach them the error of their ways. In any case, we need to find this control center and shut it down before they cause too much damage to any of our holdings.”

“Understood. What of our fleet in Ravengrad, though?” Charlotte asked.

“A few survivors have reported back to Geneva,” Yudina said. “The rest are assumed to have been killed during the battle or during the subsequent drone infestation, or else they’ve gone native and are just hiding out in the capital. Master Lockhart’s alliance has, in effect, been a total loss.”

“I wish I could say I didn’t expect this, but that would be a lie,” Nathaniel added.

Charlotte nodded. “Alright, alright. I understand. You can count on us.”

“I don’t doubt it. Your retinue’s experience at Ivanograd will be invaluable, although it remains to be seen how the young ones will handle a real war.”

“We won’t disappoint you,” Emma said, looking at her master with a stern and slightly angry expression. If Nathaniel noticed her glare, he made no indication of it.

\* \* \*

As both nations sent more and more manpower into Montreal, the carnage escalated, but the Hyperion command center remained a bastion of tranquility, an observation post from which Ian could hear the thunder of heavy weapons and see the bank lit up by fire. Day turned to evening, and he looked out the shattered window to watch the violence unfold.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” he heard a voice from behind.

“Master Aumeier,” Ian said, turning to salute his superior.

“No need for that. May I join you as a spectator of this melee?”

Ian could hardly refuse.

“You do not see the true artistry in this battle. The brilliant reds and yellows of fire against blackened rubble, the veritable orchestra of firepower echoing throughout the entire city. It is like a canvas and a symphony being forged at the same time by a thousand different artists.”

“Artists who could lose their lives any minute,” Ian muttered.

“Yes. There’s something unique and exciting about the expenditure of human life for the sake of art. When a piece takes the life of its creator, his entire soul is given towards it. And this work before us now is fueled by the energies of hundreds. Death is not a tragedy, it is a miracle.”

“I can’t tell if that’s inspiringly optimistic or disturbing.”

A Commonwealth destroyer exploded in the distance, its engines erupting into cataclysmic fireball accompanied by an ear-shattering cacophony.

“Do you hear that?” Nathaniel said. “That is the sound of a hundred lives burning away in an instant.”

Ian scowled. He no longer wished to watch the fight, so he bid Aumeier farewell and went downstairs to see Charlotte, who was with Emma and Peony in the garage helping load equipment into Hyperion’s armored vehicles.

“How are the tanks holding up?” he asked her in French.

“I’m not an engineer,” she said, startled for just a second by his unexpected arrival, “but they seem to be in good shape. We’ll see how these ones will hold up in a fight. The ones imported from Geneva are easy enough to maintain, but the things we’re capturing from the D.A. are a different story. The documentation behind a Black Fortress, for instance, is a labyrinthine nightmare; half of it’s just jargon that even our engineers can’t make any sense of. And that’s one of the ones we actually have all the documents for. Some of the stuff we have, we needed to reverse engineer all our own, and, of course, we don’t even have any factories.”

“I can’t even tell if we’re winning,” Ian mused.

“I doubt that even the commanders of either side have a good grasp on that. This could turn into a very long and bloody war if we don’t strike a killing blow sometime soon.”

Charlotte closed her eyes and grimaced, then turned and laid a hand on a sleek assault gun, scarcely taller than Ian himself and painted in the deep crimson colors of Hyperion. “This Harquebus here will be my best friend tomorrow. Masters Aumeier and Yudina have ordered a full mobilization of troops in order to capture the rest of the D.A. campus as soon as possible and make sure the CHP doesn’t have the time for a scorched earth strategy.”

“Even the cadets?”

“Even them. Emma and Peony will march alongside the tank destroyer here and you and I are to ride in a Black Fortress as the command tank. If we’re lucky, we can push our way to the labs, destroy their heretical technologies, and begin evacuating troops within the week.”

A few of the other vehicles sputtered into life and cruised out of the hangar as soldiers marched in formation behind them for a night attack on the Commonwealth’s fortifications.

“Tomorrow,” Charlotte said. “For now we should get some rest.”

Ian agreed.

\* \* \*

To the west, the Peregrine commanders were preparing the defenses that Hyperion’s levies would face the next day. With the bulk of the Skywatch still in the capital, they were outnumbered and, thanks to the enemy’s looting the Defense Administration’s warehouses, lacked any technological advantage. Some reinforcements and supplies were trickling in from the other principalities, but it would not be enough.

There was still some time before the Hyperion attack arrived. Scouts had reported that it was little more than a raid, intended only to keep the pressure on the Peregrines and the Commonwealth, but there was no longer any room for error. It would not be difficult for their enemies to inflict death by a thousand cuts, as it were.

“It’s too quiet,” Alexis said, regarding the lack of noise around her and her lieutenants. By then, Hyperion would have been well along their way to the mourner labs and she was expecting some kind of action. However, there was only silence. It was quiet enough that the sound of her boots striking the tile floor was the loudest sound other than their voices.

With Janessa still out of action and Ian now actively working against them, Sokolov had become one of her best officers, but he would not be enough, and so she and Teague had promoted a few other soldiers to serve as lieutenants. One such individual accompanied them now – a woman from the dragoon corps whose name, she had come to learn, was Lisbeth Stroud. She was no older than Alexis, with a thin body, a pale, gaunt face, and twitchy demeanor. The bags under her eyes and disheveled hair were shared by many a sleep-deprived soldier in Montreal.

Sokolov was almost her opposite. His skin was healthy and flush, surrounding keen brown eyes. Unlike Lisbeth, he was fully alert and all business.

“They’re not shelling us. Guess you were right that it’s just a scouting force,” Lisbeth said, nervously scanning the room as if anticipating an ambush.

“Or they just don’t want to damage the tech in the lab,” Alexis replied.

“That’s assuming they care about loot, and not just wiping us out.”

“No army has not cared about loot,” Sokolov said with a smile. “We are safe.”

“Yeah, well, you’ll forgive me if I’m not going to just take that for granted. Good way to get us killed.”

“Of course, of course. Pardon me for trying to reassure you. You look a bit manic.”

“Yeah, yeah, let’s just get the guns ready,” Lisbeth said, turning away from Sokolov.

\* \* \*

The scouts had done their duties and performed reconnaissance on the Peregrine defenses. Armed with that information, Hyperion’s big push began in the mid-afternoon of the next day under the cover of fog rolling in from the Saint Lawrence River. More than thirty tanks and ten times that many troops surged westwards towards what of the Defense Administration remained under Commonwealth control. Aumeier’s capital ships hung back and covered the advance with missiles launched from afar while corvettes and airborne artillery warded off Commissar Stockwood’s own vessels.

The roar of the assault gun’s engines and the boom of its cannon almost deafened Emma despite the protective gear she wore. None of her training could have prepared her for that.

She and Peony took cover behind the vehicle along with four others marching in three rows of two.

“Jesus Christ, we’re actually in a real fight,” Peony said. There was little fire on their squad, but she still didn’t dare peek around the side of their moving shield.

Emma’s face was blank. “It’s just another battle.”

“Yeah, for you, maybe. I didn’t fight in Ivanograd, remember? How many kings died during ‘just another battle,’ hmm? Fuck, fuck, fuck, I don’t wanna do this.”

“How many crewmen were onboard the *Shanghai*?” Emma suddenly asked.

“The *Shanghai* had a crew of forty,” Peony said, her face relaxing as her mind seemed to briefly depart from the battlefield. “There were one hundred and fifty-seven passengers. Twelve of them were buried as martyrs in Geneva.”

Emma nodded and held Peony’s hand. “You’re gonna pass that test,” she said.

Peony smiled and relaxed, and then took a deep breath before continuing to march with renewed resolve.

The assault gun slowed and began to turn towards a dense cluster of buildings. Emma and Peony’s job would be to keep it safe from enemy infantry with anti-tank weaponry so that it, along with several similar squads, could flank the Commonwealth and Peregrine defense.

The alleyway they found themselves in was barely wide enough for the assault gun to trundle through, which was terrifying. An ambush in such an environment would be devastating, with no room for the vehicle to maneuver and an abundance of places for infantry to hide.

Dust and rubble from the ruined buildings were kicked aside by the gun’s treads and cables drooped so low that they brushed the top of its casemate. Everything was eerily quiet except for the steady rumble of the engine.

Emma’s worst fear came to pass when the scream of a rocket launcher drowned out all the other sound. A shell trailing smoke struck the front of the assault gun and broke through the left track. Fortunately, the weapon had not slain the crew but the vehicle itself was immobilized.

She felt her heartrate jump as adrenalin coursed through her veins. To her right, Peony jumped through a broken doorframe to take cover inside a nearby building. It wasn’t a useful maneuver, but Emma couldn’t blame her.

Waves of small-arms fire began to sound off as the assault gun’s defenders tried their best to ward away the enemy. The vehicle took aim and fired once, levelling a storefront façade where most of the enemy had taken cover.

While Emma and the other four hounded their assailants, Peony cowered next to a wall and bit her lip. If she left her safe place now, she could easily be killed. The barrier she wore was weak – the more powerful ones being reserved for high-ranking officers – and would do little against another rocket. Her friend’s life was on the line, but what could she do?

Not much, Peony concluded. Short of taking the coward’s door and fleeing, she had one other option: attack.

To run out of cover, however, would be suicide, and so she pressed on through the buildings and kept on the lookout for enemy troops. If she found any, she didn’t know what she would do, but she prayed that she could keep her allies and her friend safe.

From the second floor, Peony could get a safer view. A Peregrine soldier and a Skywatch officer fired from cover, guarded by barriers that shrugged off anything short of the assault gun’s cannon. In such close quarters, the vehicle could not maneuver in a way to capitalize on its advantage. Peony steeled herself, inhaled deeply and took aim.

Her bullets were as ineffective as her comrades’, but they had one result that she had not predicted but immediately cursed herself for not considering. Her position was exposed and one of her two foes broke off from the engagement and entered the building to hunt her down.

“Ah, fuck me,” she swore as she felt herself losing control to the rising panic. She needed to flee, but, before she could retreat, another shell ricocheted off the assault gun’s body and struck the building. Peony was forced into an alternate route.

The damage to the structure was significant. What had once been a logically-planned building had become a labyrinth of rubble following days of bombardment. Before long, she found herself as lost as she could be despite the sounds of battle acting as an auditory beacon around which to orient herself.

Further and further removed from the battle Peony became, which came as a guilty relief. She couldn’t simply walk towards the noise, as the decay had conspired to block any routes that would take her closer rather than farther. Soon, the noise from the squad’s desperate fight for survival was so distant that it was indistinguishable from any other fight happening in the city, and she found herself completely and utterly cut off from her friends.

Peony felt the shattered tile crunch underneath her foot as she stepped into a plaza that led into three different alleyways. It occurred to her that making the wrong choice now could easily lead to her death.

“Oh, God, why?” she wailed, letting her rifle fall out of her hands and into the dust. “Why, why why? How could I let this happen? I don’t know what I wanted going into this war, but this wasn’t it. Why…”

One of the buildings on the plaza exploded.

Peony yelped and, fueled purely by instinct, jumped into cover inside a building opposite the artillery shell’s impact. It took a couple of seconds before she noticed the three bodies around her.

Bodies, but not *dead* bodies. One of them jolted up just after she dusted herself off, and the others followed suit, looking nervously around and reaching for weapons that weren’t there. Without a firearm of her own, Peony unsheathed her sword and pointed it at the first man to rise. He slowly raised his hands in the air and she noticed the uniforms of Commonwealth civil guardsmen on her companions.

“Woah, hey now,” the man said in a groggy voice. “No need for this kind of behavior.”

Peony quickly deduced that they had been taking shelter in the ruins and not part of any active engagement, judging by their ill-preparedness. The remains of ration kits were strewn about as well.

A second man with much tanner skin stood up and looked at her before saying something in thickly-accented French that she couldn’t understand. When he noticed Peony’s confusion, the first man translated. “There’s three of us and one of you. You have a weapon, but do you really think you can take us on?” He paused before adding his own thoughts. “Is this really how far this war has taken us, that we’re making kids fight for us? Christ.”

Her chest heaving, Peony looked around. The men were unarmed, but she didn’t trust them not to hurt her if she set down her sword, not yet. She decided to test the waters.

“Maybe…maybe we don’t need to fight right here, right now. If we fight, you might kill me, I might kill you. Doesn’t need to be that way.”

“You’re right,” the first man said, “it doesn’t.”

Peony took another sharp breath and stepped back so that she could see all three men. Her eyes darted between each one as she slowly lowered herself to the ground and let her blade rest in the dust.

For a brief moment, there was an awkward silence as each party eyed the others in case of hostility, but there was no action. The French-speaking, probably North African man laughed quietly and Peony smiled in return, letting herself relax. For just that moment, there was peace and happiness.

A Commonwealth cruiser floated overhead. The ruin lacked a roof, and all four could see Hyperion fighter planes dogging the clumsy vessel.

Peony’s heart filled with dread. She watched her countrymen assail their target, more than two dozen of them dodging missiles and guns before returning fire with their own. Tiny black dots being swatted away like flies by the Commonwealth’s war machine. For a brief moment, the cruiser went silent before it opened up with a full broadside against a Hyperion capital ship that nobody on the ground could see.

The cruiser suddenly erupted into flame as one of the fighters scored a decisive hit. The ship was not yet sunk, but many of its crew had no doubt lost their lives.

Brow furrowed, Peony turned around to see her companions looking upwards with clenched fists and twitching eyes. She carefully kneeled down and picked up the sword that she had dropped, just in case.

The others saw her movement in their peripheral vision and turned their heads to face her. Seeing her pick up the weapon, they could only conclude that she intended to stab them in the back while they were distracted, and, filled with anger at her alleged betrayal, each one lunged at her in turn. Peony deftly sidestepped the first man and cut the back of his neck with her blade, and he fell howling and bleeding into the ground. The second she impaled as he tried to throttle her, and she felt his fingers loosely fall from her neck as she drew her bloodstained weapon from his chest. The third man hesitated, dying for his mistake when Peony seized the initiative and tried to rend his head from his shoulders. She was unable to fully do so, but the gash she made was more than enough.

The echoes of distant cannon fire surrounded her as she dropped down to her knees on a floor painted with blood, slit the throat of the first, dying man to end his suffering, and cried her heart out. She had taken not one, but three lives. How many people had Emma killed at Ivanograd? There, Peony thought, there couldn’t have been any doubt. It would have been a war like the kind her instructors had told her about, where your enemy shot at you and you shot at them. Not the murder she had just committed. Those three men didn’t need to die, but here they were.

When she finally stopped crying, she wiped the tear-streaked dirt off of her face and began the long walk back. It was dark by the time she finally made her way to headquarters.

Emma ran up and embraced her friend. “Oh my god, oh my god,” she said as she held Peony tight. “You’re alive. You’re actually alive.”

“You don’t need to say everything twice,” Nathaniel said snidely.

“Yes, Master,” Emma said. She stepped back and saw Peony, dirty and ragged and carrying a bloodstained sword.

“What happened? Emma told us you were separated from the squad and that she had to return without you after they fought off the Peregrine troops. That there was not any chance you were alive,” Charlotte said.

Peony stood in silence for almost a whole minute before she spoke. “I…I tried to get back, I really tried. I got lost, and then my position got shelled. I killed someone today.”

Charlotte moved to comfort the girl, but Nathaniel stopped her. “You abandoned your unit. I did not train you to flee like a miserable coward.” He moved so closely that he towered over her and scowled before striking her violently across the face with. As a teacher, he had not been allowed to assault his students, but, as a general, this restriction had been lifted. He relished the feeling of his hand against the girl’s flesh, a feeling he had longed for since long before.

Ian watched the spectacle and became enraged, followed immediately by Charlotte as the two of them grabbed Nathaniel by the arms and pulled him away from the two girls. He angrily shook them off and stared down the weeping child.

“Oh, get over yourself,” he muttered. “It’d be a shame to scar a pretty little face like yours, but that bruise will heal.”

Neither of the other adults said anything to him, only addressing Emma and Peony. “Come on, girls,” Charlotte said. “Let’s get you some rest. The war’s not over yet.”

Nathaniel frowned as he watched them leave.

## Chapter 17 – The White Line

*“It would be comforting to learn that the Illuminati or some such organization actually existed, orchestrating events across the globe. It would mean that, to some extent, everything was happening according to some kind of plan. Men with a plan can be resisted, their actions are, at least, intentional. If everything wrong with the world is the way it is because of chance, if bad things happen randomly, then how can we have any hope at all?”*

* *Excerpt from the journal of Captain Frederica Royce, of the CLS* Aquinas

“We’re losing ground on all fronts. We need reinforcements from Ravengrad as soon as possible,” Alexis declared when she arrived in the mourner labs.

The older men were still busy in setting up technologies beyond her comprehension. They paid her little attention save for the slightest of glances before returning to open boxes of circuitry, cluttered monitors, and other nonsense.

Alexis frowned. The urgency of the situation warranted much more of a response in her mind, and their apathy frustrated her. Another few seconds of this, and she was liable to scream.

“I know you don’t care about beating Hyperion. I know that you’ll forsake Montreal to save the capital…”

“Not the capital,” Lancaster interrupted. “The whole nation.”

“Pardon?”

“Montreal’s communications are back online, and we’re in contact with our forces throughout the CHP. With the ability to communicate with other principalities and not just the main fleet, we have knowledge of the full situation. It’s quite grim.”

Alexis’ heart fell even further into her gut. “…what’s going on?”

Marcus stepped forward. Alexis practically expected the Director to protest, but he simply bowed his head and moved aside.

“When we departed Ravengrad, we did so under the assumption that the mourner threat was contained in that city. Although, given our intelligence at the time, that was correct, the situation has changed in our absence.”

“Alright, hit me. What’s going on?” The looks on their faces did not encourage her, and this uncertainty wavered in her voice.

“Where do I even start?” Marcus continued. “When we opened the communications channels back up, we found reports of all kinds of chaos. Mourner fleets arriving at the gates of every major city in the Commonwealth, smaller settlements disappearing entirely.”

“How are they even getting through the storms? If the drones are just haywire, there’s no way they should be coordinated enough to get a stormworthy transport.”

Marcus started to speak, but stopped before saying a word, leaving his mouth half-opened. “There are some things you should understand. Grand Admiral, if I may?”

Lancaster nodded his consent.

“Then, Alexis, gather your friends. Close friends, only the ones you trust most. Think as if you’re going to tell them your most intimate secrets”

Alexis dutifully did as she was told, although she might have expanded the range of people she would tell her ‘most intimate secrets.’ That said, however, it was probable that Marcus was about to divulge information that she already knew, if the information from the cube Janessa had showed her was accurate.

As the little group coalesced, Alexis took note of Eirene’s condition. The young woman’s ordinarily olive complexion had decayed even further into a sickly white, and Alexis wondered if she hadn’t contracted some form of disease that the Commonwealth had not adequately treated. She was as full of smiles whenever they spoke, but the coughing and quick grimaces had grown worse since their arrival. The Commonwealth doctors wouldn’t say anything about her treatment beyond what she had heard onboard the *Serenade*.

Janessa, meanwhile, was looking better by the hour. Her limbs were all but healed, and she expected to be off the crutches within a few days. Her arm was already free of its sling, though she showed Alexis a nasty scar.

A few minutes later, every Peregrine who could still walk was assembled in Marcus’ little workshop, which, in truth, varied little from most of the other rooms in the mourner labs. Marcus stood solemnly amongst his staff, surrounded by research equipment.

“Alright, Mr. Fairchild, what, pray tell, is the big news?” Janessa asked. She had been quite dismayed to be roused from her slumber, and rested languidly on her crutches with eyes half shut and hair in disarray.

“I…have been deceptive. Nothing I have told you about the mourners has been a lie, except by omission. But there is a reason that Magnus has been able to wreak such havoc with them, and it’s not related to any sort of IFF. Damn, it’s going to be hard to explain this. Perhaps it would be better to simply introduce you to my daughter, Lena. Dear, if you would come out, please?”

In that moment, everything Alexis and Janessa had suspected was confirmed, even if Marcus did not yet know what he had done.

“Hey-o,” one of his researchers said with a casual wave. The young woman stepped forward and curtsied.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Lena Fairchild. One of the first mourners. And my daughter.”

No one said anything. They looked on in curiosity or fear, waiting for Marcus’ next words.

“There’s no way to sugar-coat this. The mourner project is an extremely complicated and extensive operation that has been in progress since before the Commonwealth. What I gave you was merely the military arm of the mourner project,”

Alexis stared at him, playing dumb. “Just…start from the beginning,” she said, eager to measure the truth against her hypotheses.

“Very well. The mourner project was originally, just like your knowledge of it, an advanced artificial intelligence experiment. In the later stages of the League Crusade, large swaths of both the Middle East and Europe, had been wiped out, not to mention the damage in other continents, and so there became a market for AIs that would take the place of humans both in the factories and on the battlefields. Madelyn-Rash shouldered that burden. We were very successful. The first drones could react to situations with the same acuity as a human operator, but that wasn’t enough for us, and so we made advanced cybernetics, even stronger AIs…it was a scientific storm, engineered by the greatest minds whilst shut away into secluded cabals of research bordering on the perverse, at least in common view. To us, there were no boundaries, and I do not regret a single action that we took.”

“Even given all that’s happened?” Eirene asked, cringing from her pain.

“The crisis that we now face was not the fault of Lena or any of her kind. Had they not existed, then something else would have taken their place. Better that Magnus used the drones for his plan than, say, a nuclear weapon.”

“Fair enough, I guess. Continue.”

“And so it was that the mourner project grew to the point where it was creating its own humans. Practically. Biologically and intellectually, you and Lena are quite different, so she may not be literally human, but that is splitting hairs. I would say she has *humanity*, which is what is truly important. The project is not yet finished, but the end goal is for a mourner to be indistinguishable from an augmented human, and we are very nearly there.”

“What?”

“Phase one was the AI itself. Phase two was making bodies for them. You’re asking about phase three, and I’ll soon get to that. We’ve made great progress thanks to the Commonwealth funding. They, or, perhaps, Leviathan, saw the potential of this to be an immense boon to our fledgling civilization. With so many lost to the storms, the prospect of simply building more people, or, at least, having advanced robots to take over menial tasks, was certainly an attractive one. We were back on our feet in no time, even after the destruction of many of our primary facilities. We were beginning stage three, development on human subjects, when this damned war began. Sadly, much was lost to the fighting over the past few weeks.”

“How exactly is she, uh, built? Or grown, or whatever?” Alexis asked.

“There are, of course, different models. What you see here is the latest version, but she’s had several different bodies over the course of her existence. You see, we began our work on the wetware developed by the East Asian Endeavor, computers structured more like the human brain than the microprocessors we see in most everything nowadays, and everything since then has been based on that technology.”

“A technology that, I think I should add, everyone knows jack shit about,” Lena said.

Marcus looked embarrassed, but he continued. “Yes, we actually understand precious little about the EAE’s technology. They truly were leagues ahead of anything developed in the West, though I hear that the Holy Spirit AIs used by the Vatican’s technologists were of a similar caliber. I understand that you were listening in on the Johannesburg colonization summit, so you are likely aware that the EAE black sites are extremely valuable to Madelyn-Rash and the Defense Administration. This is why. When the old world went under, they left behind the tools to manufacture their technology but precious little documentation, at least on the physical side of things.”

“If you’re so clueless, how did you make any of this work?” Janessa asked.

“An amateur programmer might know what the effect of a certain line of code will be, but he does not know how the computer is made or what it’s doing behind the scenes. That’s what we are, compared to the scientists of the East and of the Vatican. Amateurs. We can build the wetware processors at the black sites, but even the fabricators there are beyond us. They achieve a level of precision and intricacy that we would not have believed possible, and our efforts to reproduce EAE machinery have only met with failure. Therefore, we are forced to hunt down their old black sites and salvage what they left behind, hoping to find some operational equipment. Follow what little instructions we have until the fabricators spit out what we need.”

“I thought you started this project before the storms, though,” Alexis said.

“With stolen technology,” Marcus admitted. “We could hardly go to the EAE for assistance. They preferred to keep their property as secret as possible – sell their products as tightly-locked black boxes to whoever would pay, but usually their patrons in the Orient competing amongst themselves for regional supremacy and not realizing that all their war machines came from the same source. They were less eager to sell their source code and so on to a competitor.”

“Stolen technology and rote repetition. So this is Marcus Fairchild’s magnum opus? I’m not as impressed as I thought I’d be,” Janessa said.

“Do not sell us short. That was just phase 1. Yes, it’s true that we have less knowledge about the materials we work with than we’d like, but we have still used them to do things that even the EAE could not.”

“Like?”

“Like me,” Lena said. “I wouldn’t even have this fancy body of mine if it weren’t for my father and his people. It’s a good one, too – I’m stronger than any of you and can think faster. They did good work.”

“Exactly. Madelyn-Rash always specialized in making human electroprosthetics and bio-augmentations, the same sort you lot received from the Civil Guard. We were able to look at the sparse documentation provided in the black sites and get our hardware to work with their wetware. I have no doubt that the EAE could have done this themselves, but, as far as we can tell, they did not, and so we had to improvise,” Marcus said.

“Well, it looks pretty good from here,” Alexis said. So she’s a real, honest-to-god AI, then. You claim she has humanity, but superhuman strength and intelligence hardly confer that. Can she truly feel as a human does? Can she think?”

Marcus turned his head towards Lena. “Would you like to speak? Maybe you can convince her,” he said.

A weak, unconfident smile formed from her lips. Slowly, and very hesitantly, she stepped forward and nodded.

“Oh, boy, here we go. Can I feel? Can I really think? That’s…well, obviously that’s a hard question.” Her voice was very soft, but surprisingly natural. It didn’t sound like the soulless pre-recorded messages that so many ships and buildings used. “*Je pense donc je suis*. It’s not quite the same thing as what we’re talking about now, but it’s close enough. I *think* that I think. I see the audience before me; I consider the facts; I form opinions. In my life I have felt happiness, sadness, wrath, love, lust, and more. But that doesn’t prove anything to you.”

Alexis approached her and cocked her head, examining Lena. . “You have felt love…towards humans, towards your own kind?”

“Hm. ‘Towards my own kind’ is not so different from ‘towards humans.’ Could you have told the difference?”

“In honesty, no,” Alexis replied.

“I am ‘programmed,’ Lena said, pronouncing the very last word with a hint of disgust, “to love the human form. My mind can develop in such a way that I have my own personal preferences, but it’s all affected by the code I start out with. Just like you are affected by your genes. Marcus made me the way I am. He had the choice to make me lust after men, after women; he could have made me sexually attracted to the *Sunset Serenade* if he’d wanted to, and, considering that the ship has the computers it needs to act as a body for one of my kind, that’s not as bizarre as it seems. But anything more than that isn’t any of your business.”

“The *Serenade’s* intelligent?”

“Not on its own, no. We mourners aren’t as beholden to the idea of a ‘body’ as you are right now. I can jump out of the person-looking thing you see here into any other computer with the proper wetware. This,” she said, pointing to her own chest, “isn’t me.”

“So where is, well, *you*?” Janessa asked.

“For now, inside this body. As in, the code that is ‘me’ is currently being processed by this wetware contained in this particular host. But you could connect me to a specially-designed harness that allows me to remotely control drones as extensions of my own body, and there are contingencies to automatically synchronize my processing with a nearby server or proxy node so that if this body takes fatal damage, I just jump into that box and keep on running. It’s all wireless and real smooth.”

As Alexis nodded in acceptance, Lena continued. “But I digress. In the end, I suppose that *was* all programmed into me by another man. And there’s no way to prove to *you* that I have any identity at all, no matter how you observe me physically.”

Alexis stepped up to her and looked into her deep hazel eyes. Each one was beautiful, but completely bizarre. The dark material formed an aperture around the pupil that twisted open as it dilated and contracted. “I have your word,” she finally said. “I’ve worked on less reliable sources than that.”

Lena smiled. “I appreciate it.”

Teague didn’t seem as happy. “If what you say, Marcus, and what…she says is true, then haven’t you just obliterated the very notion of a divine creator? If humanity can create life – though I’m withholding judgment as to whether or not Lena qualifies as life, for now – then what is the function of God?”

“The same as it always has been, I suppose,” Lena replied. “It’s not the first time I’ve been told that my very existence spits in the face of God, but I maintain that, at least according to Christian myth, God made us in his own image. If he has the power to create life, is it not then our destiny to achieve that as well?”

“Maybe. Maybe.”

“But don’t worry your little old self with me, whether you think of me as a heretical abomination or as just another person. I’m more concerned about getting my body back from Leviathan. My full body, and all its pieces.”

Janessa folded her arms, shooting Marcus a sideways glance. “Yes, about that. Since you’ve decided to call us all here, I gather that some of Lena’s ilk are turncloaks?”

Lena scowled. She was, by that point, well aware of Magnus’ cabal, and she hated their very existence. She had once respected the Director – he was intelligent, handsome, and powerful. Everything she was attracted to. But, by taking away the drones, he had stolen away part of her body, a part that she considered intrinsic to her very being and the thing that most set her apart from any human peasant, and that was unacceptable. To him, Lena now knew, she and her ilk were just tools for him to use for treacherous purposes.

“Yes, I know them,” she said. “My father has told me much since he arrived. Your fights against them have been valiant. My father, his employers, and I have a plan to aid you in this struggle.”

“Yes, they’ve been trying at that for a while. I’m interested to hear what you have in mind.”

The specifics fell more to Marcus to explain, so Lena retreated with a polite nod to allow her father to speak.

“I imagine that by now you realize that Magnus lied. There never was an IFF to hack, unless you count the mourners’ own intelligence. Instead, he was able to sever our link to the drones and take control for his forces instead.”

“So he for sure has mourners working for him, then? You’re positive?”

Marcus shrugged. “Technically, there’s no way to know. I would assume that, yes, they do. Anything is possible, but I personally cannot imagine any other explanation, so I will therefore operate under the assumption that Leviathan controls the drones in much the same manner as we.”

“Do you suppose that these mourners were specifically bred, indoctrinated even, to work for Leviathan or that they joined of their own free will?” Alexis asked. She figured that, if Madelyn-Rash could program self-aware AIs, it was not out of the realm of possibility that Leviathan could do the same, but condition the AIs to serve them exclusively.

“It doesn’t matter,” Lancaster answered. “They’re our enemies either way. If they are fully self-determining, then they have aligned themselves against us. If they are submissive puppets, then we will have to fight them all the same. Don’t worry about Leviathan’s methods. Just listen to how we intend to retake control.”

“That’s not going to cut it,” Janessa said. “Alex is right, it definitely matters. It’s the difference between the enemy penetrating our defenses and our own side opening the gates for them. It’s one thing to try and lock them out, but that’s not got any meaning whatsoever if people on the inside are letting them in.”

“Listen, I know I brought it up, but we really need to listen to Marcus. The gates are already open, so we need to focus on closing them again,” Alexis said.

Janessa glared at her, feeling betrayed. “And, if we don’t figure out how they got that way, they’ll just open right back up!” she said.

“Yeah, well, meanwhile, I have to stop our *actual* gates from being taken down by Hyperion! We don’t have time to worry about what happens later. If Marcus can cut Leviathan out of the drones, even if it’s just temporary, it gives me the breathing room I need to, you know, stop the fucking siege. So maybe give him a chance to talk, yeah?”

Janessa scowled and crossed her arms, but conceded. “Fine,” she said. “If we all get slain by drones, though, just remember it’s not my fault.”

Marcus coughed, drawing attention back to him. “If we may return to the actual plan, then? Good. Anyhow, given time, I can remotely disable each of the drones, cutting it off from any external influence, Leviathan or otherwise. By quarantining the entire swarm, it doesn’t matter if Leviathan is getting in via a hack or if our own Mourners have betrayed us. No one will be able to control them at all. They would be expensive metal bricks, as it were.”

“Fair dues, I suppose. If you can actually pull it off,” Janessa said.

“I can, as long as you and your friends can keep me safe from our uncouth neighbors to the east. As long as we can survive their wrath for…a little under half a year, we can march right back into a Commonwealth free of mourners. Just like that.”

“Just like that. You say it as if it’s so simple,” Janessa said.

“I know it isn’t. The threat from Hyperion grows by the day and the other cities are at greater risk the longer we take. Nevertheless, attempting to fight Leviathan’s influence from here is, as we have determined, the most strategically sound option. The rogue drone fleets seem to make blitz attacks from out in the storms and then retreat before our defenders can take them out. They don’t tire, they work far more efficiently than natural-born humans, we cannot effectively damage them in a meaningful way…a war of attrition is a war we would lose.”

“So, let me get this straight – ye want us to hold out against all of that out there for six months? With only these forces here? Damned near impossible. Doable, maybe, but we’re in for a hell of a time.”

“I know how improbable a victory seems, Miss Tyler, but there are a few ways we can tip the odds in our favor. It is no longer necessary to hold these labs, as my countermeasures can be developed without the need for such advanced equipment. We shall hold the line for as long as possible, to prevent what we have from falling into the hands of Hyperion, but we have more flexibility if I set up a workshop further inside the city.”

Lancaster stepped in to handle the military logistics. “I can authorize some degree of requisition from other principalities and the fleet in Ravengrad. They’re pressed thin as it is, so I don’t think we should take much, but I’ll leave this to your judgment. You’ve been coordinating things on the field while I’ve been crammed in here, so you and the Commissars know more than I do about this chaos. Your call, Miss Havery. Your side won Ravengrad, after all.”

Alexis hadn’t expected Lancaster to trust her with this choice. Commanding the troops in his absence was one thing, but making major strategic decisions was a surprising responsibility, one whose pressures she was unsure she could handle.

“You say that the other principalities are being struck by hit-and-runs from mourners, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And that the attacks have been light thus far, but are expected to continue?”

“Yes.”

“Then we leave them their full forces. With one exception.”

“And that is?”

“Johannesburg.”

Lancaster opened his mouth just a little, squinting one eye in confusion. Taking anything from Johannesburg would surely be a death sentence for the already suffering colony. “…please explain how you think that won’t end in disaster,” skepticism resounding in his voice.

“I’ve been to Johannesburg. Spoke with some of its civil guard. Even given the two years since I was there, they’re still a fledgling colony and possess a huge number of ships for hauling material. I don’t intend to take its military and leave the civilians behind to rot. I intend to ship the whole damn city from there to here.”

“I would say that’s the stupidest plan I’ve ever heard, but, unfortunately, it isn’t. And, thinking about it, that might work. There’s still a super-dreadnought there, and there are indeed enough transports to carry everybody, if we pack people like sardines into the battleships. Some might get left behind, but we’d probably lose at least as many people letting them stand and fight.”

“They’d be a hell of a juicy target for the mourners, if Leviathan got word. We’ve got to keep the move a secret, but there are probably members of Leviathan working within Johannesburg. Any message to the Imperator might get intercepted,” Alexis mused.

“There’s no way to evacuate the whole city without either of those two catching word. What’s your plan to get around that?”

Alexis frowned. She hadn’t even known that she was in charge until a minute prior, and now she was expected to have all the answers. Her knowledge of Leviathan suggested that its members tended to occupy high-ranking positions within the government, but that conclusion was based off of a sample size of one – hardly a scientifically rigorous test. There was no reason not to believe that their enemy could not have spies anywhere. Even a shadow government would need pawns to exert control over the board.

“There’s no way to keep it secret,” she eventually said. “It’s just impossible. We can’t possibly know who among their number remains loyal, and even if we did then a full evacuation would set off all kinds of alarms. They’d figure it out eventually.”

“So we’ve no chance, then,” Teague said sullenly

“Have you considered that Leviathan might want us to escalate the conflict in Montreal?” Marcus interjected.

“Why?”

“Well, Magnus has lied before, but all the evidence thus far points to them desiring a conflict of the perfect size – as catastrophic as possible, yet not enough to wipe out human civilization. Ravengrad has fallen entirely victim to their scheme, its infrastructure destroyed despite leaving a sizable population behind to bear witness to the horror. Now, Montreal is the next city staring down the barrel of their gun. If we bring in more troops to fight here, Hyperion will undoubtedly respond in kind. This city succumbing to the same fate as Ravengrad would be inevitable.”

Lancaster and Alexis looked between each other and Marcus, contemplating his words. There was much truth to them, and it was a frightening possibility. That their best chance at success also played straight into Leviathan’s hand was annoying.

“We do it anyway,” Alexis said. “It doesn’t matter what Leviathan wants. If we do nothing, then the mourners continue to ravage us. We lose. But, if we bring our army here and survive the Hyperion onslaught, there’s a chance that we can still come out on top. We don’t have a choice.”

“That’s all fine and good, but how do you intend to bring Johannesburg here? I suspect that Marcus is correct, but we can’t count on Leviathan just letting them go free, just in case he’s wrong. Too risky, and if we’re wrong, then we lose far too much.”

“Right, well…there’s one thing that I can think of to get past this problem. If we can’t do it quietly, we can do it fast. Skip straight past the Praetor, and start from the bottom. Kind of. I have worked the civil guard captain in Johannesburg, a man by the name of Kirby Mixloe, and I think he can be trusted. With Montreal’s communications online, I can contact him personally. He’s got the authority to sound any kind of alarm, so I’ll ask him to start rallying civilians to the transports and what warships they can access and take off.”

“And you’re sure that he’s not with Leviathan?”

“No,” Alexis admitted, “but he’s the best we’ve got. When my people were down in Johannesburg, we traded favors with his people a few times, and he seemed to have independent interests that I don’t really have time to explain now. But I don’t think he’s Leviathan, no.”

“There’s no way that everybody would get onboard, especially not without the authority of the Praetor. In all likelihood, there would be fighting between Mixloe’s guardsmen and the Skywatch troops at the base whose authority you’re usurping,” Marcus said.

“That’s a risk we’ll have to take. The Skywatch is instructed to protect the people. Once their intention is made clear, I trust that the loyalists will follow the civilians as they flee. We have no other option. In the meantime, should this fail, is there any possibility you could squeeze a few extra ships out of Ravengrad? Your second, what was her name, Danica? She should be able to wrangle some captains, and I left Hector and Karahan in the capital, so we could get some naval support for a blockade.”

“I can,” Lancaster said. “Fine. Make the call.”

\* \* \*

In Johannesburg, Kirby Mixloe was at rest in his office, which smelled of coffee thanks to the cup he had recently poured himself and had yet to finish. There was a knock on his door, which he was not expecting, but he bid the new arrival come in nonetheless, as there was nothing important to be done at that time.

“Captain, I have a message from Montreal,” said his secretary, a young and stout woman to whom he rarely spoke about anything other than business.

“From Montreal? Who in Montreal needs to talk with me?” Mixloe asked.

“Director-General Lancaster and Commander Havery of the Peregrine Militia are on the other end. Supposedly, they have information for you alone.”

“Very well. Put them on,” Mixloe said. His secretary nodded and returned to her desk, pressing a button to transfer Alexis and Lancaster to the Captain’s office phone. He listened intently as they explained the plan, told them bluntly that he couldn’t spare the manpower, and hung up.

“Lauren, if you please?” he called out.

“Yes?”

“Inform Master Théoden that the Commonwealth is looking to its principalities for support, and that his forces in Montreal should anticipate enemy reinforcements. Also remind him that, if he keeps his end of the bargain, and helps me purge the loyalists here, Jo’burg will be fully ready to join him in the war by the end of the month.”

“Yes, sir,” the secretary said with a nod.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, in Montreal, the Commonwealth began to strengthen its positions with what little it had. Over the next few days, Marcus moved into the city’s downtown to set up a more secure workshop, while Alexis and Lancaster made sure that Hyperion would not be able to disturb him under any circumstances. Mixloe’s refusal to help had been a major setback. They’d both received positive confirmation from their subordinates in the capital, but future attempts to contact anybody at all in Johannesburg had been met with silence, and so their defenses would be woefully lacking in the future.

The forces from Hyperion had captured a large swath of the St. Lawrence shores and were pressing west almost exclusively. Lancaster argued that they should defend only this point, essentially maintaining the status quo, but Alexis insisted that abandoning the beach entirely would be more practical. In her mind, it would be better to destroy whatever technology they could not take and let Hyperion have the beach, thus stretching their forces thin. The enemy’s advantage so far had lain in their concentration – an entire army pushing through one point. Strategically, it made more sense to her to draw the enemy out and then attack down the middle of their line, splitting them in two.

In the end, they compromised. Lancaster agreed that allowing Hyperion to extend was a sound plan, but was loath to abandon the mourner labs so quickly. With that in mind, the Commonwealth and Peregrine armies would defend their current location only for as long as it took what few reinforcements they could scrounge up to arrive within striking distance of Montreal. As soon as this condition was met, the loyalists would retreat and allow their enemy to enter a heavily booby-trapped mourner lab only to be cut off by fresh reinforcements from the southeast. Without Johannesburg, there wouldn’t be much, but there was a chance it would be enough.

“It will take our reinforcements, say, ten days to reach Montreal, depending on how long it takes for them to refuel and resupply,” Lancaster said. “We will have to hold on to this position until then.”

“And if they don’t delay?”

“Three, maybe. But they’ll definitely delay – it would be suicide to set out as war-weary and damaged as most of the crews and ships are. Danica is well aware of this, and Karahan isn’t stupid enough for a suicide mission.”

“Right, so we’ll plan on ten.” Alexis paced back and forth between orderly lines of onlooking soldiers. “That’s ten days we need to hold this ground. Food, water, ammo, have we got enough?”

“Praetor Highcourt put the city on war rationing once he judged that the conflict wouldn’t just die down as originally expected when we installed him to replace Marcus. If we play conservatively, we *might* be able to get through this without starving. The problem will be when the reinforcements arrive. Even without Jo’burg, that’s several thousand more mouths to feed, and they’ll definitely have exhausted their ships’ supplies by then.”

A slow death by starvation was a grim possibility. Montreal had comparatively few farms and relied heavily on imported food from the other principalities like Ravengrad and Madrid. With those cities under siege as well and supply lines falling apart at the seams, the whole of Montreal, military and civilian alike, would have to make do with what they could produce themselves. The times ahead would be hard.

“Damn,” Alexis cursed. “I don’t suppose there’s much we can do, then. Tell the Imperator of Madrid that we need extra food shipments, even though I doubt that he’ll be able to comply. Stockholm should cover its own needs, as well as Ravengrad’s.”

“Aren’t you effectively sacrificing Madrid for Montreal, then?” Teague asked.

Alexis sighed. She didn’t actually know the answer to his question. The intricacies of production and trade had never been quite clear in her mind, and the war only made such calculations even more difficult. Could Madrid supply both its own populace as well as its counterpart to the west? Perhaps, or perhaps not.

“We can’t afford to lose this battle,” was all she said.

“Don’t make a rash judgment, Alexis,” Marcus said. “It is true that the people of Montreal and the people of Madrid must share their supplies in order for both to survive. But consider this – you have placed a great deal of emphasis on food, but what of the other supplies we need to succeed? The factories in Stockholm producing weapons, ammunition, and more go completely unprotected under your current plan. And the EAE forges that would go unguarded. Leviathan will have a field day with them. At worst, they might be able to create a countermeasure to my countermeasure.”

“This is a short-term plan. An emergency measure only for the ten days it will take our reinforcements to arrive. With the extra firepower they bring to the table, we should be able to stabilize the situation here in Montreal and restore the status quo, hopefully before Leviathan can pull any fuckery.”

“Don’t forget that we’ll need to feed them too,” Lancaster added.

“Yes, I understand. We can’t protect everything; it’s just not possible, so we compromise. If we fight our battles effectively, though that might be a heavy proposition given the precedent we’ve set thus far, we can avoid taking too many losses to a war of attrition. Remember that Hyperion will be suffering in much the same way, so we need not guard our martial supplies so fiercely. Food supplies will dwindle no matter what.”

“Fair enough.”

Alexis knew that, even if Madrid was able to keep up with the demand from Montreal, the city would not see the rations for a good while. There was nothing she could do. The people would simply have to make do with what they had. In the meantime, she had other business on the defensive front.

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The Commonwealth’s efforts to quarantine the Hyperion threat had culminated in a lengthy series of barricades, trenches, and traps that the troops called the “White Line” after the color of the paint used on most of the fortifications. Modular walls and other defensive structures were used by the civil guard to quickly erect strongholds and cordon off key areas in times of crisis, but these products had last seen use in the winter, where snow dominated the landscape. No one had bothered to repaint them, and there had not been time to remedy this after the war began.

“…the line runs down Autoroute Chomedey until it takes a turn east on Autoroute de Souvenir,” Charlotte explained to the assembled Hyperion soldiers after her return from a scouting mission.

“What kind of weapons do they have?” Ian asked, biting his thumb. It was a nervous habit he had picked up since the battle for Montreal began. Perhaps unhealthy, and certainly unsightly, but he couldn’t help it.

“Lots of artillery, heavy guns, and the like. Their Black Fortresses are tied up fighting us here, along the southern bank, so they have mostly tank destroyers and heavy IFVs clumped up in the dense streets. With the armor on those things, it is hard for us to take them on without bringing our own heavies up north. Of course, that exposes us to the enemy down here.”

“Well then,” Ian said, “It’s good that we’re going to avoid engaging unnecessary targets like that.”

“Are you suggesting that the White Line is unimportant?” Charlotte stammered, “Perhaps, but…even if we are not going to lay siege to Chomedey or Souvenir, a concentration of weapons of that caliber is worthy of note. If the Commonwealth gets reinforcements and attacks from the riverbank, then we will be pushed straight into this blockade. And if the White Line itself moves south, we will be under considerable threat. It is only good that they seem more interested in defending rather than attacking for the time being.”

“You’re right, and I agree. It’s a serious matter. But what do you propose we do about it? We don’t have enough firepower to break through their defenses.”

“I believe that I can offer a solution,” Nathaniel said from behind them. Ian and Charlotte braced themselves for what he might suggest.

“This is going to be some overly-complicated scheme to demonstrate your brilliance, I expect, so let me propose something more sane, first,” said Janz Sorenson. Emma and Peony’s other instructor was remotely joining the Montreal commanders, his face visible on a small screen and his voice trying to make its way through a web of static and poor quality speakers.

“You wound me,” Nathaniel said. “And what did you have in mind?”

“You’re so focused on outwitting these idiots along the bank that you’ve forgotten there’s a whole city behind the White Line. So we launch a strategic bombing campaign, stop pushing west and have our airships and artillery hit Montreal proper and the refugee camps further north. Force them to redeploy their own air power to defend against the bombers and leave the whole bank ripe for the taking, and, if we do some real damage and their leaders have an ounce of humanity, they might sue for peace outright.”

“No,” Nathaniel said flatly. “I will paint the ground with their soldiers’ viscera, but I will not brook the slaughter of civilians. We are here to fight the enemy, and innocent men, women, and children are not that. I’ll win this war for you *without* needless cruelty, thank you very much.”

“Without needless cruelty? That’s rich coming from you,” Janz said with a dry laugh.

“As I thought I made clear, I will do anything necessary to assert dominance over their soldiers, but civilians have never been fair game. Aucoin, cut him off.”

“*Avec plaisir,* Master Aumeier,” Charlotte said, turning off their communications program.

“Well,” Ian said, “now that that’s done, what *did* you have in mind?”

Nathaniel smiled. “Just a bit of fun,” he said.

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Alexis’ assumptions about Hyperion’s resources were more accurate than she realized. The Commonwealth had access to the city’s supplies, however meager they were. Hyperion, meanwhile, had only what they could salvage, save for the limited relief provided by whatever transports its enemies did not shoot down or sink.

The eastern camp, for all of its firepower, was starving. With each passing day, their pathetic stockpiles grew smaller and smaller. At first, no one had paid much attention to this grim phenomenon. An apple here, a loaf of bread there, and they soon found themselves desperately wanting for nourishment.

Charlotte took it upon herself to make sure that the girls were the least affected by this plight. For whole days she would go with little more than some bread and water, perhaps with a spread of peanut butter if she was feeling indulgent. This sacrifice led to a predictable decline in her health.

“It’s not good for you,” Ian said once the children had gone to bed. “You’ve already grown skinny, and not eating might just kill you.”

“He’s right,” Yudina added. “Not even counting your poor nutrition, if you insist on starving yourself *and* going out to fight, it *will* be the death of you.”

Practically pouting, Charlotte folded her arms and avoided eye contact. “The same could be said of them.”

Ian grabbed her firmly by the shoulders. “You’re an inquisitor. You need to step it up and *act* like one, for once.”

“A junior inquisitor, as our illustrious Master Aumeier is so keen to remind me.”

“Bullshit. Who cares what kind of prefix you have? If we’re sending cadets like Emma into battle, then we clearly need everyone at their best, no matter their rank. So you need to tough this out like the rest of us and not starve yourself so that your precious sister can have some extra chocolate.” He sighed. “Listen, I feel for you, and for them. But we have our orders, as shitty as they may be, so we can’t just waltz back to Geneva. The sooner we put down the CHP, the sooner we can leave, and we need you at your best for that.”

“Fine,” Charlotte said with a worrying lack of concern in her voice.

Despite his remonstrance against Janz’ proposal, Nathaniel’s plan to vanquish the enemy forces was one laced with sadism. He insisted that it was the best way towards a decisive victory.

Intelligence provided by Ian had convinced him that the alliance between the Peregrines and the Commonwealth was shaky, but tilted in favor of the rebels – after all, they had “won” the battle of Ravengrad. This was crucial. The Commonwealth was legendarily mathematical in its ethics, and would refuse to make any trade it did not know would end in its favor, but the Peregrines from whom it was now taking orders were a different story. Nathaniel hoped to exploit this by capturing a number of their troops, ideally high-ranking officers, and keep them in a vulnerable position, prompting a hasty rescue that would weaken their defensive line enough for Hyperion to break through. His aim was to have them crucified but kept alive and displayed along the front lines, alive, acting as a grim lure that their friends would not be able to resist.

All the pieces were in place as Nathaniel looked out over the city from the Hyperion command center. His aide-du-camp, Konrad, stood next to him and watched the army preparing to charge from the trenches.

“Konrad, I’ve had a thought,” said the Master of the Fleet.

“Yes, Master?”

“As far as I am aware, the commander of the Peregrine command squad is a young woman. Short red hair, will be wearing the dark red flak vests their front-line fighters all wear into battle. If she’s on the field, you won’t miss her.”

“You want her, specifically?” Konrad asked.

“Yes. If you are able to capture her, bring her to me, personally, so that I may make her mine, just as we acquired her colleague, Mr. Barrow. I’ve always wanted a redhead in my gallery. Such a pretty color.” Nathaniel folded his arms behind his back and continued to watch the city, not even making eye contact with his subordinate. Master Théoden had, after all, intended to recruit all of the Peregrine commanders, and it was perhaps still not too late to fulfill that goal.

“…yes, sir,” Konrad replied.

The attacking force was ready the next morning. One Black Fortress Behemoth had been fueled up and loaded with ammunition for its railgun, escorted by almost three score soldiers.

“Peony, I want you to join this offensive,” Nathaniel said as Ian and Charlotte readied themselves for battle. “You may have a chance to redeem yourself for your past failure.”

There was nothing Peony desired less, but she had no choice but to meekly accept his order or else another bout of corporal punishment might be the least of her concerns.

“Emma Aucoin, you can join her if you like. Or you can stay here in the command center with my own person.”

Emma immediately opted to join Peony on the front lines. If they both perished on the field, they would at least be out of Nathaniel’s clutches.

She hoped.

The fighting began at midday, in broad daylight without cover of clouds. Nathaniel had insisted that it be so in order for the Peregrine soldiers to better see their comrades be taken.

“Damn!” Charlotte shouted as explosion after explosion sent dirt and rubble flying through the air around them. She, Ian, and a whole group of Hyperion soldiers were safely under the Black Fortress’ barrier, but the noise was absolutely deafening. She envied the aural implants common amongst the Commonwealth soldiery – even with the best earpieces that Hyperion could offer, the chatter of her comrades was barely audible.

It wasn’t inaudible, though, and that was enough to save their lives.

“All you sods behind me, move back now!” came an order from inside the Black Fortress. Charlotte was the first to register the instruction and, without hesitation, turned heel and ran backwards, followed by Ian and the rest of the troops. Just behind them, the tank jerked to a stop and then quickly backed up, burying beneath its treads the ground that the corpses of soldiers had walked just seconds before.

As the troops scattered out of its path, the vehicle roared past them in a desperate retreat that was followed by a large, white-hot explosion that destroyed ground and infantryman alike anywhere in the general vicinity.

“There’s an enemy Vestige up ahead! Our barriers are like butter to that knife!”

Ian took a quick look ahead and saw the threat in the distance. The Vestige was another class of Black Fortress tank. While the Behemoth class that accompanied the Hyperion troops was armed with a railgun, Vestige tanks used rare plasma weapons that had been the mainstay of Papal Center Fleet during the League Crusade and quite rudely ignored the very existence of all but the most sensitive barriers. As powerful as the Vestige was, though, it was a lone tank with neither infantry nor armored support nearby. Not an insurmountable obstacle, all things considered.

“You need us to take it?” he asked.

Charlotte turned and stared at him in horror as if to say he’d gone mad.

“Sir, If you’re gonna fight that thing, be quick about it,” said the friendly Behemoth commander. “I’d say you have two an’ a half minutes ‘fore it’s reloaded, so go see what you can do if you’re up for it. I’ll do what I can for you, but I’m staying way the hell back here, if you don’t mind.”

Ian had already started running before the man finished his sentence. Charlotte followed reluctantly, yet with as much loyalty as she had ever shown. Around them, the soldiers of Hyperion yelled and whooped as they charged forwards with destruction on their minds.

“We don’t have the firepower to kill that thing!” Charlotte yelled.

“Not at range, no, but we have demolition charges. Enough to breach the armor if we can get close, giving us access to…”

“…The men on the inside. You intend to board the vehicle.”

She didn’t get a direct response. Ian quickly began ordering his soldiers into positions around the Vestige system. “You over there! You’re Aleph team, get behind its right sponson. Everyone behind, you’re Bastion, get to the left. And the rest of you, you’re with me and Charlotte in Cinder. Follow my lead!”

There was no real plan, but Ian figured that that would only make them all the less predictable. With his men on either side of the Black Fortress, Ian began the perilous climb to the top.

As he ascended the metal ladder to reach the sealed hatch, the Vestige twisted and turned while desperately firing its machine guns, hoping to shake off and run down the horde of little humans trying to climb on top of it. It wasn’t very successful. With its massive bulk, the vehicle was slow and cumbersome and had great difficulty reacting to the nimble soldiers around it. While its weight could easily crush mere men and women like ants, their efforts to kite the thing spawned frustration and desperation within its crew.

The arbitrarily-selected teams Aleph and Bastion kept it busy in this manner while Ian, Charlotte, and their team reached the top. They held on tightly to whatever they could as it rotated and threatened to toss them aside.

“This isn’t going to work!” Charlotte protested.

“Charlotte. This tank alone is one of the biggest obstacles to getting the hell out of here. Emma and Peony aren’t getting any safer while it lives. We have to do *something*!”

Charlotte scowled, but complied, not that she had been given any specific orders yet. Was he trying to manipulate her by using Emma and Peony? Surely not.

She didn’t have time to respond before the Vestige system rudely interrupted her train of thought with another shot from its plasma cannon, flooding the air around them with steam from its cooling system and assaulting their ears with a sound that shouldn’t have been as loud as it was.

With nothing but ringing in their ears and smoke in their eyes, the Hyperion soldiers’ senses were highly clouded. By the time the smokescreen had cleared, they could see the results of the attack on their own tank. Fortunately, it seemed that the Vestige’s flailing about had compromised its aim. Hyperion’s heavy support was safe, for the time being.

Ian gesticulated wildly to try and communicate his plan to those who had arrived on top of the Vestige. He wanted to tell Charlotte to help him plant the charges, but his hand waving and gesturing conveyed a message that may as well have been anything else.

The French woman’s own attempts to communicate were far more successful, but that was aided by the arrival of a second Skywatch tank. A Black Fortress Behemoth crawling towards them, its turret pointed right at the Vestige so that the pintle-mounted and coaxial machine guns were ready to clear the pests off of its friend – if the Vestige’s barriers were no longer in the way.

Ian realized this and promptly changed his plan. “Armored support, these barriers are going to drop!” he yelled, louder than he intended. “Get ready to fire on my mark! The rest of you, get ready to get off this thing!

“As you say, sir,” the Hyperion tank commander replied.

There was no was no way to see their mount’s barriers disengage, but that it had happened was clear to all when the enemy Behemoth stopped and started to fire.

“Now!”

The Hyperion soldiers leapt from the Black Fortress and landed on the ground with a series of inaudible thuds while machine gun fire peppered the hull of the Vestige. Alone, they would have barely scratched the vehicle’s paint, but a railgun blast from the opposite direction smashed straight through the lower front glacis.

Ian’s improvised plan had worked. The gaping hole in its front armor made their enemy vulnerable. Now was the time to finish it off for good.

The Skywatch’s Vestige lay silent. With its armor breached and its reactor exposed, there was no choice but for the crew to turn the whole thing off lest there be an explosion, even if it meant their deaths.

That was the theory, anyway.

Ian and Charlotte, after recovering from their fall from atop the Black Fortress, led their men to the front of the crippled tank. There, they expected to fight their way in through the new entrance, but the resistance they encountered was half-hearted at best. In the distance, the enemy Behemoth retreated, likely embarrassed by the tactical misstep and hoping to avoid the wrath of its commanders. Ian’s squadmates cleared out the interior, and the battle was theirs.

“Anyone left alive?” Charlotte asked, swatting away the dangling wires and trying her best to avoid cutting herself on the jagged metal.

“No. No one left.” Ian brooded.

“Are you…okay?”

Ian pointed to the dormant explosives. “I’m not weeping for the Skywatch, if that’s what you’re wondering. Just checking on the reactor. It seems okay, so I don’t think we’ll be getting cancer, at least.”

“Small victories.”

Meanwhile, those soldiers not inside the tank stood on top of it, hollering victory cries and waving their weapons in the air, taunting the other Skywatch tank as it withdrew from the field. It tried to shoot them for their insolence, but, in its hasty retreat, it never had a hope to hit.

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When the report of this loss reached Alexis, she cursed and damned Hyperion for such unrelenting perseverance.

“Who the fuck sent that Vestige out without infantry support?” she demanded over her radio, although she knew that no one would have an answer.

Her lieutenants still on the ground reported that their units were being slowly pushed back by the Hyperion infantry. The armored lines were holding but under increasing pressure, except for the Vestige that had been pushed too far and paid dearly for that mistake.

“Alright, never mind. My guys and gals are ready to assist,” Alexis said to those already on the field. “Need us to make up the difference on lane three?”

“Command One, if you can fight those troops back, it’ll be a damn miracle. There’s still a Behemoth on that corridor to help out, so you’ve got that, at least. Go get ‘em.”

Alexis had a few cards of her own still left to play. Janessa and the remnants of the Dragoon Corps were back and ready for action, with several dozen horsemen available for scouting and skirmishing. She has also been informed that Eirene was technically fit to fly, which was strange. The last Alexis had heard, Eirene was still all but crippled and entirely unsuited for a combat mission. As she considered this, she felt dazed and confused, the world around her taking on a dream-like quality.

The Hyperion crew were still in cover around the wreckage when the first bullets struck. Immediately, they dropped aside their cheerful expressions and readied their weapons. Ian and Charlotte themselves detected the shift in the men’s shouting from cheerful to alarmed.

By the time they had figured out how to open the hatch to the top, the fighting had already begun. Alexis’ army and Hyperion both replaced their old weapons with the best of the best from the defense administration, capable of great accuracy at a very long range – in the hands of a capable operator. Only Alexis herself had not upgraded her gun. It was blind nostalgia that held her back, she knew, but the weapon she carried had served her well through every fight so far.

It was Hyperion’s fight to lose. Everything fell to Ian, Charlotte, and their entourage to hold the small parcel of land that they had captured against the Peregrine onslaught.

Though they fought bravely, the Peregrine troops could not overcome Hyperion’s numbers and their advance began to slow. Their tank was nowhere to be seen, either delayed by unforeseen circumstances or stolen away by another unit needier than they. The militia troops pushed forwards with great valor and pushed Ian’s force back from the wrecked tank, but fell just short of taking Nathaniel’s compound, a fact which brought the Strategos great relief.

Ian and Alexis made eye contact at last, just for a moment. Her dark red eyebrows slanted into a deep V shape to crown the hatred in her eyes. Aside from the downright offensive armor that he now wore, the man that stood before them looked the same as when Alexis had last seen him. That was the most frustrating.

On the other side, Ian saw his former ally without so much anger as sorrow. To be angry at Alexis was pointless, so he spared no wrath for the young woman. He was sympathetic to her situation – from her perspective, he could easily be seen as a traitor, even though he himself knew that it was mere circumstance that set them apart. Those architects of that colossal failure of an attack may have been more deserving of his anger, but not she.

But none of that mattered. She was an enemy soldier now. Her goals and his were mutually exclusive. So many Commonwealth soldiers had been slain in the pursuit of his goals. Should Alexis be any different just because of their history together?

As he fired a few, noncommittal shots in her direction, Ian’s ears were filled with the sound of jet engines, and the tank behind him was knocked out by a rocket from a corvette flying overhead amidst bursts of flak and small arms fire.

“Well, fuck,” Ian muttered. The Corvette was painted in Peregrine colors. If Alexis was there, then, in all likelihood, so was Eirene. His old friend and his estranged sister, both now on the other side of the war.

Despite the aerial support, the Peregrines were soon cut off and surrounded, and so they had little choice but to yield and pray that their captors would be merciful.

“Lex, should I do anything?” Eirene asked through her radio as she heard the reports of their defeat coming in.

Alexis shook her head as if her girlfriend could see her. “No, no. Head back to base, and don’t try to rescue us unless you absolutely know you can make it out. That goes for all of you, do you…”

Before she could finish, she watched in terror as a flak burst tore Eirene’s wing right off, and sent the corvette into a dramatic spiral. The explosion from its crash, though the impact itself was obscured by the skyline, was large enough that she immediately knew that it was nothing like the painful, but survivable crashes they had been through together. Once again, Alexis felt light-headed, her ears ringing – something that should have been impossible given her implants.

Ian let her scream. That was enough to confirm his suspicions about the pilot’s identity, and he felt his own heart sink, but stuffed those feelings away. There would be time to mourn after the war.

With Alexis and her squad captured, Janessa was left to her own devices, and decided to do something about the crash. The corvette had hit the ground some distance away in no man’s land, and her horses were the fastest units available short of dispatching a helicopter, which would surely meet a similar end. If there were any survivors, as unlikely as it would be, only she could save them.

“Come on, you louts!” she shouted at Lisbeth and the other cavaliers. “Follow my lead; it’s time to pull some souls out of the fire!”

The dragoons formed up and began their charge along the streets of no man’s land, rushing to the crash site as fast as their horses would carry them. Not before long, however, Janessa saw Lisbeth slouch and fall off her steed, unsure if the woman had been shot or suffered some other unfortunate malady.

Stopping her horse in its tracks, Janessa dismounted and went to look at her fallen comrade, who was alive but clearly in pain.

“Well, go on then!” she shouted to the others, who had also come to a stop, waiting for her some distance ahead. “Get ye gone, and don’t wait for me!”

The remaining dragoons nodded and turned to continue, but their horses had barely taken a step before a mortar shell struck the middle of their formation and scattered both horse and rider across the pavement. Those who survived were crippled, and the horses were either dead or gone before anybody could do anything.

“Oh, fucking hell!” Janessa cursed. “Stroud, you’re all I have, and I don’t recall giving you the go-ahead to die just yet, are we clear? Christ, how did this even happen?”

Lisbeth only cried. “The augmentations don’t like me,” she said meekly. “I take medicine to stop the side effects…”

“But we’re in short supply here. Of course. Useless. Alex, I don’t know if you can still hear me through this radio, but we’re not going to make it to the crash site. I’m really sorry, but there’s nothing I can do. Just nothing I can do.”

Alexis did hear Janessa’s transmission, but she was too shocked to respond. All she could bring herself to do was stare in terror and despair as the woman she loved was likely dead or dying, and she was powerless to do a thing about it. Ian gently touched her shoulder and guided her into one of the trucks that had arrived to transport the captives, and she complied with no resistance.

As Ian and his troops began to offload their prisoners, he felt a hand on his shoulder. Nathaniel.

“Something the matter, Master?” Ian asked, more than slightly begrudgingly.

“Perhaps consider treating this woman with more respect, Barrow,” Nathaniel said, pointing towards Alexis. “She is an officer, after all, much like ourselves. She deserves better, don’t you think?”

Ian was inclined to agree, though for different reasons. Nevertheless, he barked an order at his troops and watched them untie the ropes around Alexis’ wrists, freeing her from captivity.

“I suppose if I run you’re still going to shoot me, though,” she said, eyeing Nathaniel suspiciously.

“Only if you leave me no choice,” Nathaniel replied. “I would not like to shoot a fellow officer, even one of ignoble birth. I have a great deal of respect for your station, and I would like to treat you accordingly.”

“You say you respect my office, but do you respect the person behind it?”

“The two are not so separable in my mind. Please, do come with me. You and your men will not be harmed as long as you follow orders, and I should expect a civilized woman such as yourself to be well-adjusted in that regard. The situation we find ourselves in, that of such violence and competition is…regrettable, but perhaps you and I might come to a mutual understanding. I do not wish to hurt you; rather, I would like you to dine with me today, if only to meet for the first time my equal on the opposite side.”

“I suppose I haven’t got much choice, have I?”

“Come now, I’m trying to be civil. You and I only have to fight because we must, because our mother countries must assert themselves through violence. That does not mean we must treat each other as enemies, so, please, I beg you to cooperate.”

“I’m going to cooperate, don’t you worry,” Alexis said, sighing and waving her hand dismissively. “Take me to the food, I suppose. We’ll see if your compassion is genuine.”

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The response in the Commonwealth camp was as Nathaniel had predicted, with Lancaster in staunch opposition to any proposed plan to rescue Alexis and the survivors from Command One.

“This is the most obvious setup for a trap that I’ve ever seen,” the Grand Admiral fumed. “I would be a fool to commit any of my forces to this endeavor. The loss of Miss Havery is…unfortunate, but we cannot compromise our defensive position. She was half of the driving force behind our current stratagem in the first place; do you truly believe that she would want you to throw everything away on her behalf?”

“Perhaps not, but it’s not just about her,” Janessa said.

Teague continued her thought. “It’s the principle of the thing. Hyperion wants to defame us with their profanity, and we cannot let them do so without consequence. Inaction demonstrates weakness.”

“Inaction? We’ve been fighting them tooth and nail for weeks now. That’s not inaction. An assault made to preserve some idealistic notion of dignity is the same foolishness that destroyed many of the ships under Bucharest’s command, and I will not repeat the mistake.”

“We needn’t make a mistake, then. There may be a way to exploit Hyperion’s own errors to increase our standing within the city and rescue our compatriots.”

“And what ‘errors’ have they made?”

“They will ambush us when we reach the crucifixion line, of this there can be no doubt. So far extended, an attacking force would be easily outflanked by airships, and their trenches will likely contribute SAM fire.”

“Yes, I know all this. What of it?” Lancaster asked.

“An ambush like that only works if it gives you the strength to overcome your opponent. Their plan will not. What aircraft they do possess may outclass ours, and they have acquired some technology from the D.A., but our total strength estimates are far above theirs. We know an ambush is coming and can plan accordingly.”

“Just because you know a trap is there doesn’t make walking into it any less stupid.”

“Hyperion’s reliance on such tactics shows that they grow weaker as the battle goes on. They’ve lost some of their edge. They do not have the strength to assault the White Line or take this last bastion in the Defense Administration, but they also believe that we have neither the strength nor the willingness to overwhelm their own position. They are receiving food and materiel from their capital, as are we, but it is in their interest to win a decisive victory and quickly end the conflict in their favor, hence why they wish to draw our forces into an offensive engagement where they can turn the tide against us. If we can call their bluff and win, the war will be ended just as quickly but we will come out on top. Hyperion will be routed and we can cut short the suffering of the citizens of Montreal and focus on solving the problems elsewhere in the Commonwealth.”

Lancaster stopped to think. “I can have Commissar Stockwood draft a plan to use the ships I’ve given her and do as you say, but she is not a Skywatch commander and is comparatively unversed in aerial strategy. With myself overseeing critical defense on the ground and Danica still out of contact in Ravengrad…she is an adequate leader but I would not trust such a critical operation to her care.” He sighed. “I would like to end this war quickly. Marcus’ estimates for his project’s completion are not good, and, if this stalemate remains in place, the city’s starvation remains a very real possibility – we’ve been lucky that thus far Hyperion has been unwilling to attack our supply ships from Madrid, but our own attempts at interception have also met with limited success. As much as I’m loath to admit it, your idea may be the best way to protect the people of the Commonwealth, and that is all that matters, not the life of a single commander and her squad.”

“We will do our best,” Teague said, giving an exaggerated bow. Like Lancaster, his priority was to end the war, but if he could rescue Alexis and promote his militia’s standing within the Commonwealth, then all the better. It would take at least a day to prepare for the assault, which could very well be a day too long.

\* \* \*

Nathaniel Aumeier’s base lay in the most forward building occupied by Hyperion, right on the edge of the *de facto* no-man’s-land. It had been a small research center before the war, but it had become a prison under his rule. The man would have been reluctant to position himself and his captives so close to the front lines, but he needed the Commonwealth to believe that it could easily rescue them to increase the odds that its commanders took the bait. Having Alexis so close by made a good shield, as he knew that the militia commanders would balk at any operation that might endanger her – if they attacked, he would have enough time to flee.

Konrad had prepared a meal for them in what had once been a cafeteria. The room was far too large for the two of them, the empty space creating an oppressive void that unsettled Alexis. As she sat down opposite Nathaniel, she noticed that the look on his face displayed more genuine compassion than she had seen on anyone but Eirene in a very long time.

She didn’t want to think about Eirene.

“I truly am sorry for the treatment you received at the hands of my soldiers,” Nathaniel began. “Many warriors are so brutish. I have observed you and am pleased to see that you eschew the savage violence of so many within this city.”

“Why me?” Alexis asked.

“Ah. You want to know why I asked specifically for your company. I suppose you would be used to the lower standards of the Commonwealth. So, tell me – have you seen a film called *La Grande Illusion?*”

“No? I can’t say I have.”

“Not entirely unexpected. It is ancient, made during the time of black-and-white film. You and I are like its characters, von Rauffenstein and de Boeldieu. Good men, or, in your case, women, duty-bound to resist one another in war but still able to find kinship in our stations and birth.”

“You think you’re like me simply because we’re both officers?” Alexis scoffed. “I was hardly well-born. My mother and I lived in the slums of Widow’s Walk, and to think that you and I share anything simply because we’re of similar rank is nonsense.”

“You may have been amongst the poorer crowd in the Commonwealth, but everyone who is alive today is the descendant of someone notable enough to get onto the evacuation ships when so many were left behind. Whether your family bought its way onboard or was offered a place to curry some sort of favor, we are all the sons and daughters of nobility. That you are an officer of such men is what distinguishes you, not your birth. Out of your comrades, you and only you have what it takes to be a leader, and that is why I would know you better now. We may not be friends, but we might have a mutually beneficial relationship.”

“Right,” Alexis said. Despite his blatant attempts to flatter her, she was not about to tell him that he was wrong, that her family had always been poor Greek nationals. As much as it pained her to do so, she realized that she would need to play along, if it would increase her own chances of surviving to return to the fight.

“Are you going to eat?” Nathaniel asked. “Do you not like the food? You’ve barely touched it.”

“It’s decent,” Alexis said. “What, have you poisoned it? Are you feeding me the remains of one of my comrades like some sort of cartoonish movie villain?”

Nathaniel only laughed as if he found her assertions terribly funny. “Forcing you to cannibalize your friends? How clichéd. No, no, that would be *my* serving.”

Alexis just stared at him.

After a moment of awkward silence, Nathaniel laughed again. “It’s just steak. My hospitality is genuine. You can eat it or not, whatever you like. At least drink the wine; it is quite nice.”

“I don’t drink,” Alexis said.

“*Drink*. I told you that you would remain safe as long as you followed orders. Just enjoy a moment of peace while, outside, your troops and mine are being slaughtered like pigs.”

Alexis begrudgingly downed the wine in front of her and scowled. “Comparing your own men to pigs, isn’t that something?”

“Hardly. By doing so I do not degrade the troops – it is an accurate analogy. Pigs are massacred with little regard for their lives, and can that not be said of the men and women in this city?”

“But pigs are slaughtered to be eaten, and, unless you’ve lied about this meal…”

For the third time, Nathaniel laughed. “That is a fair point. No, I have no intention of eating my victims. ‘You are what you eat,’ and I would rather not dirty myself with the meat of cowards and would-be tyrants.”

“With the lowly peasants, you mean. I’d compare you to a Nazi but that would be a compliment,” Alexis said.

“You would not be the first to make that comparison,” Nathaniel said before pausing a moment to cough. “Nevertheless, you are partially correct – to compare myself to the Reich would be inaccurate, though not for the reasons you imply. The Nazis, whether they believed it or not, called their enemies subhuman. A mistake. It excuses their behavior. One cannot blame an animal for behaving poorly, only its master for failing to train it properly.”

“And we have been ‘trained’ improperly. By whom?”

Nathaniel stood and circled the table, walking to Alexis’ side. He touched her cheek with one finger and ran it down the skin until it rest upon her bottom lip, which he pulled down to reveal her teeth. “You lack any master, and that is precisely what ails your country and your people. Without guidance, the beasts became unruly."

And you intend for Hyperion to assume the role of the ‘master’ we lacked.”

“Yes, dear. I serve my Master, Théoden, just as you will serve me. We are well-versed in the proper structures of power and control. You may not wish to eat my food, but, as I have nevertheless been so generous, don’t you think you should give me something in return?”

“What would you have me do?” Alexis seethed. “Are you going to rape me? Torture me for your amusement?”

“First you suggest I’m a cannibal, then a Nazi, and now a rapist. I get the feeling you’re not too fond of me.” Nathaniel sighed and took another bite of meat, chewing and swallowing before continuing. “I’m not a fucking barbarian. I wouldn’t lay a hand on a woman like that simply to sate my own abusive desires. Besides, my sources tell me that you and many of your friends were tortured at the Panopticon to little effect, so I imagine that any conventional means of indoctrination would be as useless to me as they were to Lancaster.”

“Lancaster didn’t even want to indoctrinate me. He told me himself that he was angry and just wanted to hurt me.”

“Then you should be pleased to know that I am better than that. Or maybe it will not matter, since you’re going to be in a lot of pain regardless, and I haven’t known you long enough to tell if you’re the type of woman to whom motivations matter in such circumstances.”

“What are you actually going to do to me?”

“The same thing I do to everybody under my command. There was a certain poison used by a few different players during the Second Pact War, what the Commonwealth falsely teaches its children was called the League Crusade. Hallucinogens and sedatives mixed together into a concoction that, when ingested, puts an individual to sleep and makes them live a disturbingly realistic depiction of whatever their worst nightmares may be. You will feel as if it were really happening to you, but, in the end, you will awaken unharmed.”

Alexis stared at Nathaniel in disgust, and asked only a single question: “Why?”

“Why? I suppose it may seem unclear, yes. The psychological effects can be long-lasting, and many people end up taking their own lives after experiencing this concoction, although it was worse when the prototype drug was used in the war as a mere torture device. There were mental side effects that have largely been ironed out in my more refined version. Still, it’s an ordeal that some cannot endure, but one that renders a useful service to me. It weeds out the weaker servants, but that’s nothing that the rigors of warfare would not accomplish, and you have already proven that you are far from weak. What I like to know is what exactly you feel when under the influence. It lets me know a little more about you, see, and from that I can determine how best to use you. Just like I did with your friend, Ian.”

“No matter what that traitor did, you’re not going to use me, and I’m not drinking that poison. You can shoot me and be done with it, but I’ll not let you pick at my mind like a curious child.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. Why do you think I was so adamant that you drink the wine?”

\* \* \*

“Bad dream?” Konrad asked as Alexis woke up.

Alexis stood up in her cell, her head pounding as blood pulsed through it. The “cell” where she was being kept looked like nothing more than a locked office. Go figure, she thought.

“How much of that was real?” she asked, her words ever so slightly slurred but no less fierce for it.

“I can’t answer that until you tell me what you saw.”

Alexis was momentarily silent as she pieced through her memories, trying to separate fact from fiction.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” Konrad said, filling the void. “I know what you’re feeling right now. Bad, isn’t it? He wants us to face our worst fears so that we’re ready should the worst come to pass. That’s what the drug does, makes you face your worst fears in a…controlled environment.”

Alexis only glared at him.

“It’s Master Aumeier’s way of breaking you in. He does it to everybody under his command.”

“I’m not under his command.”

“For now, yes. I wasn’t so unlucky to have the illusion of resistance. He was my master from the beginning, as Théoden is his. Aumeier just has a peculiar way of formalizing that hierarchy. Very primal. He clearly sees potential in you and wants to break your will, turning you into his. Again, I’m sorry. I know the kind of pain you’re going through right now, but you’ll get used to it.” Konrad paused and gave Alexis a pitying look. “So what was it for you? Torture or rape, maybe? Those are the most common, even though Master Aumeier insists that he will never do either. I suppose *he* never personally does. You’d expect death to be a big one but no one ever gets it; it seems that imagining yourself dying breaks the immersion. So what’d you get? What’s your worst fear?”

Alexis stared blankly ahead and started to tear up. “That was it, wasn’t it. Eirene dying. That’s what he put in my head.”

“Eirene. Greek name, much like yours. Suggests similar heritage. If I had to guess, a sister, perhaps? Or a romantic partner? Perhaps those options are not mutually exclusive, though that would be atypical.”

“Tell me!” Alexis yelled, jumping up to Konrad and clutching him. “Tell me what he did!”

“We’ve made this quite clear. It makes you imagine your worst fears in the most visceral way possible. A chemical that takes over your subconscious and directs it against itself. Crusade-era stuff, very crude, but effective at both training and breaking soldiers. Those who survive it invariably emerge stronger once they get over the trauma. I can help you if you tell me more. ”

Alexis sniffed, took a deep breath, and told Konrad what she had seen.

“Interesting,” the aide said. “Largely consistent with our reports of today’s events, although there was no air support. The Dragoon Corps were instead dispatched to support an armored counteroffensive, and we lured them into a trap there. So I suppose you can rest easy knowing that this person so dear to you is probably not dead.”

“Probably not dead, what a relief. That sick fuck was inside my head. I couldn’t stop him. Do you know what it’s like to have some bastard like that rooting around inside your brain, going through your thoughts and replacing them with terrifying garbage? I was trapped inside my own mind, watching my girlfriend die without any way to stop it, and it wasn’t even real? Fuck.”

“Loss, but also deprivation of agency, or a form of it. Interesting. Usually manifests as rape nightmares, especially in women, but I know from personal experience that’s not exclusive. Although, those studies were conducted during the Crusade. May be outdated.”

“So, what, you were sent here to psychoanalyze me? Why? Why drug me like this and then pick through the results?”

“Like I said, Master Aumeier does this to each of his servants. He believes that you can be made into a useful asset, like your friend Ian was to Master Théoden. Each of us is made to face our fears so that we can be better understood and utilized. Though there may be no small amount of sadism involved, as well.”

“Did Ian have to go through this bullshit as well? Did you get a good, long look at his psyche too?”

“They did indeed,” Ian said as he pushed Konrad out of the way, arriving on scene just as his name was mentioned.

“Ian. Speak of the devil,” Alexis mumbled.

Ian felt the ground shaking under an approaching bombardment as he entered Alexis’ cell with a load of equipment in his arms. She hadn’t even noticed the disturbance before, but now she could quite clearly make out a battle nearby. Perhaps she was due for a rescue, or perhaps not.

She didn’t even look up when he approached her. With a deferential nod, Konrad disappeared down the hall and left the two of them to speak in private.

“Here to finally finish me off?” Alexis asked in a choked, raspy voice. She felt disgusting and miserable, if not in any outright pain, but she refused to let Ian see any vulnerability.

Ian just dropped the gear he was carrying in, which came with a loud clang of metal on concrete. Alexis looked up and saw that he had deposited in front of her the sword and armor she had taken into battle.

When she looked quizzically up at him, Ian shook his head. “I’m not letting you escape. No matter what Konrad says, if the Commonwealth forces are defeated, which they will be, and you’re still around, then Master Aumeier will have no more use for you, since I know you won’t willingly work with him You can imagine that whatever death he has in mind for you will not be pleasant, so I’m here to offer you another way out.”

“You want me to fight you and die honorably. No. I won’t play games with you. Anything that little shit does to me I can take. *I can take it*. Do you even know what he’s done so far to me?”

“What, do you think you have something to prove? That you can just let him torture you as some twisted means of preserving your dignity? I’m sorry, I didn’t know what he was going to do with the prisoners; if I had, I would have executed you on the field to spare you the misery. I’m trying to do you a favor, you bitch, so shut up and fight me!”

Ian watched Alexis sitting on the ground, her eye twitching erratically. He could practically see the cogs turning in her head as she decided upon a course of action. And then, without warning, she grabbed the sword Ian had thrown at her feet and swung it at him, not even stopping to put on her armor. Ian jumped back into the hallway and unsheathed his own weapon, and the two of them dueled back and forth while the *Sunset Serenade* came ever closer to the trap its crew knew was waiting.

Nathaniel watched from the battlements as his capital ships began to close in on the Commonwealth flagship, and he looked on in horror as kamikaze fighters from the carriers launched themselves into Hyperion’s vessels. In less than a minute, three of his cruisers had been destroyed.

In the mourner labs, Teague, Eirene, and Janessa watched the battle unfold.

“We ended the Tabriz crisis by sinking a traitor Dreadnought that way,” Eirene said quietly. “Good to see the Commonwealth can learn, I suppose.”

“They’re going to get Alexis out, don’t you worry,” said Teague.

“I didn’t say anything.”

With his fleet falling to the ground in burning pieces around him, Nathaniel felt his blood boiling over such a display of incompetence. Gritting his teeth, he raised his hand as if to pluck the *Sunset Serenade* out of the sky, but, of course, this did not work.

“Fucking, cunting, piece of fucking shit!” he cursed as he turned to the newly-arrived Konrad and struck the man in the face, looking to punish *someone* for this travesty. When Nathaniel looked down, his aide-de-camp was dazed and bleeding profusely from his nose, which satisfied him. With that done, the Master of the Fleet returned to the indoors to summon a vehicle by which he could escape.

“The airspace is clear for now, send down the exfiltration team,” Lancaster said once the Hyperion capital ships were destroyed. Even if he could not rescue Alexis and her squad, then the Commonwealth had won a major victory, and that was good. A transport flanked by two corvettes left the *Serenade* and dodged anti-aircraft fire until they could set down safely near the compound itself. Troops and light armor set up a perimeter around their aircraft and prepared to hold their position until the captives arrived.

Ian continued to battle Alexis, whose crazed attacks were so unlike her usually precise tactics that he could think of no ways to press any advantage. He had hoped to quickly defeat her and spare her further misery she would inevitably suffer at Nathaniel’s hands, but, based on the escalating cacophony, he had begun to believe that she had a chance of escaping.

The loudest explosion yet signaled that Alexis’ saviors had breached the walls of the compound, and that the duel would soon be interrupted. There was no way to back out now, so Ian needed to end the fight as soon as possible. He switched to an aggressive stance and pushed back against his opponent, but even then he could not defeat her. She easily knocked his blade out of his hand, elbowed him in the face, and finished up with a solid kick to the chest so that he fell on his back in pain. Desperate, Ian crawled back while Alexis stood still, watching him furiously.

Before she could finish him off, Alexis felt a hand on her shoulder. She whirled around and struck the unknown figure, only to see the red uniforms of the Peregrine militia. Her backup had finally arrived.

“Commander Havery, we need to go. The exfil team can’t hold much longer,” the man in front of her said. Alexis looked at Ian writhing pathetically on the ground, clutching his bloodied arm, and laughed. He had come to end her misery, and she would deny him the same favor.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s go.”

Their escape was a minute old when they encountered Konrad limping down the same corridor as they, holding a gun in his hand. He paused, took one look at Alexis in her tattered clothes and felt overwhelmed by a terrible shame, but this feeling was quickly put to rest as he was gunned down by one of her escorts. The group never once stopped its advance even as they walked over his corpse.

A light transport aircraft and a few soldiers were waiting outside of the new entrance that had been torn into the facility wall, and Alexis quickly ran to them under the cover of a large barrier projected from the ship. She turned and saw that Ian, still pained by the wound she had dealt him, had almost caught up to the squad. He didn’t attempt to shoot through the barrier, and only watched her disappear into the transport. The last Ian saw of Alexis was the rude gesture she pointed at him before the hatch slid shut and the Commonwealth ships departed for their own territory.

Secure in the hold, Alexis slumped against the bulkhead and began to shake. “Shit, I need a bath,” she muttered. “Water. Anything. Just get me home.”

One of her guards looked at her pityingly. “We’re getting you back home, but there isn’t any bathwater there for you. Wells are running dry and all we’ve got is being rationed out for drink.”

“Fuck,” Alexis muttered, letting herself relax in defeat, breathing heavily.

The sun had already gone down by the time the transport deposited the rescued soldiers at the Peregrine base. Eirene was waiting for the ship as soon as it touched down. As the door slid open, she made eye contact with Alexis for a moment and, seemingly before she could so much as blink, Alexis was firmly in her arms, squeezing her hard enough that it was ever so slightly difficult to breathe.

“You’re safe now,” Eirene whispered. She felt the warmth of her girlfriend’s cheek pressed against hers and wanted to ask what had happened, but suppressed her curiosity. Surely Alexis would not want to think about it, so she allowed her to enjoy the moment.

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Not long afterwards, the reinforcements finally arrived from the capital, and they managed to fall short of Lancaster and Alexis’ already low expectations. A single cruiser, trailing smoke, limped into allied territory late in the evening and disgorged a half-strength company of troops.

“This is goddamned shameful,” Lancaster said as he looked over what was supposed to be a relief. “Mirabeau said that the situation in Ravengrad has deteriorated to the point where she’s stretched thin just keeping the place under CHP rule, which I believe, but is nonetheless intolerable. And you said that Karahan’s ships…”

“Allegedly sunk by Hyperion strike cruisers, yes. Aerial scouts confirmed that a half dozen troop transports were sunk several miles off the eastern Canadian coastline. Said they had no escort. Why Karahan would send a convoy with no SAM defenses when he *knows* there are enemy airships in the area is beyond me,” Alexis said, her voice still quiet. After her liberation from Nathaniel’s clutches, she had taken a less active role on the battlefield, resigning herself to lead from the rear and join Lancaster in dealing with logistics, which suited her just fine. She had not slept well, readily apparent on her face, but forced herself to continue.

“A fleet isn’t lost with all hands by accident. Usually. Either he really is stupider than I thought, or Karahan’s making a power play of his own. Pack all of his enemies on a few ships, send them into the middle of the Atlantic to die, and then use those deaths as an excuse to not send any more support.”

“But why would he do that?”

“Because he’s an idiot. He’s always hated taking orders, so it’s quite possible that he threw in with you lot because he wanted to take advantage of the chaos and declare independence. According to Danica, a lot of people in Ravengrad are doing exactly that, so it’s hardly unprecedented.”

“So was Mixloe, now that I think about it. He mentioned friends that were going to help him declare South African independence, which is why he was willing to help me against the CHP at first. I imagine that’s why he declined our call to arms, so you’re probably right about Karahan.”

“Of course I am. He worked for me for how long? Decades. The man is not trustworthy.”

“Naturally you only tell me this now,” Alexis said, rolling her eyes.

“Only because now we’re on the same side. When we were enemies, why would I rid you of a liability? You had more than enough time to figure it out on your own.”

“Fair enough, I guess.”

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In light of the allies’ disappointing reinforcements from Ravengrad, the plan had changed somewhat. While they had won a victory, they no longer possessed the strength needed to capitalize on it, and expected to be drawn into a bloody stalemate. Those forces not already committed to the White Line would defend the mourner labs for as long as possible and then retreat if possible. It wasn’t long before the enemy was ready for what they hoped would be the final battle.

Hyperion’s approach to the labs was messy. The Peregrines had mustered every unit they could spare and, most critically, succeeded in erecting an anti-aircraft laser system that granted their own gunships clear skies to shoot down any ground units that came near.

Despite all that, Master Théoden’s armies were able to clear out a great deal of the enemy guerilla fighters, suffering heavy losses of their own. The most notable incident was the destruction of yet another black fortress in such a way that its reactor was so heavily damaged that it could not be safely contained. Geneva had the technology to treat radiation sickness, but the troops in Montreal did not have access to any medicine at all. If the army was not able to retreat soon, there was no way to know how many of their soldiers would begin to succumb to cancer, infertility, or suffer other maladies.

Before long, Hyperion’s vanguard was in range of the labs themselves, close enough to see the figures of its defenders lined up and spoiling for a fight. Emma and Peony were not in the vanguard – that prestigious position was reserved for the cult’s most elite troops – but they were close enough to hear the fighting, stuck as they were with Neon Seven, a small scouting unit and the seventh of Nathaniel Aumeier’s levies, ready to lend support at a minute’s notice. Far from headquarters and removed from the action, they were all but alone in the city.

Each time Emma exhaled, she pushed back a white cloud of dust and mist leaving spiraling fractal patterns in the air. If she didn’t know any better, she would have thought herself fallen through a portal to another world, a boneyard from inside which even the distant artillery seemed quiet.

“Almost done,” she lied to herself.

Peony trailed just behind her with a pistol in her hand and a sword at her hip, watching Emma’s back. To their left was dust – a straight shot to the Saint Lawrence River, levelled by unceasing bombardment. To their right was a two-story ruin with an exposed staircase to higher ground.

“We should get up there,” Peony shouted forwards to Emma. “Get a better view so we don’t get ambushed.” It was dark, but they could still hope to see the lights of any enemy units that might be up ahead.

Emma turned, nodded, and followed her friend up the staircase and then onto what remained of the building’s roof. From there, the two of them could see a good distance to both the north and the south. To the south there was nothing; the battle being fought on other fronts. From the north, by contrast, came one of the worst sights either girl could have imagined. Obscured by the dark of night but betrayed by headlamps and spotlights were a Black Fortress and five escorts– from what little they could see, four half-tracks and an infantry fighting vehicle.

“Neon Oversight, this is Neon Seven,” Emma whispered into her radio while she and Peony went prone to avoid detection. “I have eyes on a Black Fortress, heading west from the White Line. Do you think we could spare a gunship to try and take it out before the laser stops us?”

“Neon Seven, send up a flare and I’ll send support to your position immediately,” Nathaniel said back into her ear.

“Yes, Master,” Emma said hurriedly, scrounging for a flare gun. “Get ready to book it,” she said to Peony as she pointed the tool skyward and let loose the signal to Nathaniel’s fleet.

Immediately, two of the half-tracks broke formation in pursuit of the girls’ unit, unsure of exactly how strong the Hyperion force was and determined to delay any possible threat to the Black Fortress. Emma and Peony jumped down from the rooftops and continued westward, ever so often catching a glance of the Behemoth through the crumbling walls.

Over their heads, two Hyperion gunships descended upon the Black Fortress, keeping low to try and cover themselves from the Peregrine laser. They fired a barrage of rockets each but didn’t even scratch the paint of the Behemoth, although the two half-tracks pursuing Emma and Peony were turned into scrap. Maneuvering quickly, the gunships turned around for a second pass but only one got the chance before the laser in the distance knocked its partner out of the sky. In its last moments, the girls’ airborne ally twisted about in the air and deposited its own flaming corpse in front of the Black Fortress itself, bringing it to a halt for just a moment.

With their main battle tank temporarily out of commission, the escort vehicles turned and began to scour the ruins for the Hyperion scouts that they knew had to be somewhere nearby, dodging fire from the second gunship.

Emma and Peony, still undetected, had the advantage of surprise while the enemy forces were distracted by their support, although only Emma’s rifle had any chance of piercing the glass of the half-track’s windshield. When the time was right, she stood up and fired two shots at the lights in the darkness. Her snap shots had gotten lucky, and the vehicle quickly lost control and crashed on its side.

“Neon Overight, Neon Seven again. Three vehicles down, but the target’s still operational,” Emma said, her voice shaking.

“Then put it the fuck down, now!” Nathaniel replied.

Inside the IFV, ex-Commissar Mathieu Bucharest watched the chaos unfold. With only one half-track, his own force of troops, and the disabled Black Fortress remaining, it was time to take matters into his own hands.

Even though he was no longer a Commissar, with Alexis and Janessa occupied with logistics at the labs, he had become the *de facto* leader of Command One. The stiff uniform that had denoted his old position had been discarded in favor of a scarred, red Peregrine flak vest and helmet from under which his ratty hair cascaded over dirty flesh. The troops that remained with him were equally squalid in appearance, but Bucharest was quietly pleased at how they compensated for this with zeal.

He disembarked the vehicle and kept low, trying to stay in cover for fear of the enemy riflemen he suspected were nearby. It wasn’t long before he caught sight of Emma and Peony, nested in the ruins and preparing for another shot. Behind him, the IFV exploded following another pass from the gunship. It was now or never for him.

“Demetrius!” he shouted, calling the commander of the Black Fortress. “Our enemy is there! Fire on them if can!”

The Behemoth cannon rotated slowly on its ring before it settled on the girls’ position. They didn’t see a thing until it fired, flattening the ruin in a single shot.

Emma’s ears rang and she slowly tried to pull herself out of the mud puddle while she began to feel rain drops striking her freshly-exposed skin. She was dizzy, and the world around her spun as she slowly rose to her feet. To her right was the toppled half-track, to her left was the dark silhouette of the Black Fortress, and in some ways front of her was the flaming wreckage of Bucharest’s vehicle. Her head pounded and her body cried out in pain, but she was alive. Her barrier had kept her safe.

Behind her she heard Peony scream the scream of someone beginning to witness the gates of Heaven. The girl was still on the second level, trying desperately to crawl her way out from underneath the collapsed ceiling. There was nothing Emma could do to help her, and she still lacked a plan for dealing with the tank.

She heard footsteps coming quickly towards her through the mud, each splash resounding through the rain. She turned to meet the oncoming threat and found Bucharest closing quickly in on her with a golden sword in one hand and a pistol in the other, firing uselessly at her barrier.

Bucharest raised the blade to cut her down but she hurled her bayoneted rifle at him before he could finish the swing, and the sharp end embedded itself in his gut. Enraged, the man pulled it out and lunged at the now disarmed girl, shoving her to the ground with all his weight behind him. Peony froze completely, watching the fight unfold. Bucharest stayed on top while Emma grappled with him, but she was far too small to compete with an officer of the Commonwealth’s First Legion, and he held her head underneath the thick, wet mud as she struggled for air.

The pistol Peony had carried was not far from her, but the concrete on top of her right leg kept her just out of reach. With no other options that might save her friend, Peony used her free hands to draw her sword and bit the metaphorical bullet.

This was the end of any hopes she had of returning to a normal life. History tests had once seemed an insurmountable obstacle, and, yet, here she was – about to saw off her own leg in a desperate attempt to save her friend’s life.

“The Shanghai had forty crewmen,” Peony said aloud to distract herself from the pain as she severed her own crippled limb at the knee. She cried out in anguish and felt the blood draining from her body but crawled towards the weapon, hoping to reach it in time to be Emma’s savior.

“One hundred…and fifty seven passengers.”

Just a little bit closer.

“Twelve…buried as martyrs.”

Meanwhile, Bucharest continued to hold Emma down as she flailed wildly, turning her head about in the hopes of breathing in something other than dirty water.

“Oh, no you don’t,” the disgraced man snarled as he applied more pressure, forcing her head deep into the puddle and holding it there until Emma finally stopped moving. Triumphant, he lifted his golden sword once more, now tarnished with the brown earth, and rammed it into the girl’s neck.

Peony watched everything unfold and collapsed on the concrete, defeated. Her leg was in agony, and she had no means of avenging Emma. Bucharest’s own barriers would easily stop any attack she could make. She watched as another burst from the laser downed the last gunship, and Bucharest hailed the remaining half-track to return him to the Black Fortress and take him away once it was repaired.

Even having lost the attention of the enemy, the blood loss was beginning to affect Peony, and so she removed her armor and then her shirt and belt with adrenalin-fueled haste. The belt she tightened around her stump as a makeshift tourniquet, and the shirt became a bandage. This helped, but she would need professional aid. Where were her other comrades? As dead as Emma, she concluded, noting the eerie quiet, broken only by the sound of rainfall.

The tank was operational again soon afterwards, and Peony watched it disappear into the distance, smashing straight through a row of ruined buildings before she passed out entirely.

\* \* \*

“Peony, hush, you are alright,” Charlotte said to the barely conscious girl. Her English was shaky and she was clearly distraught. “Well, as close to alright as you are going to be.”

“How did I get back?” Peony asked, panting.

“We dispatched troops to back you up as soon as you saw the tank and called for air support. They…did not…get there in time, but we managed to find you before you bled out.”

Peony looked down and saw the stump where her leg had once been, looked to the side and saw a bloody body bag on a nearby table, and began to cry. “Charlotte…I’m so sorry. There was nothing I could do…”

“Do not apologize,” Charlotte said. “You are just as much a victim as I, if not more so.”

As Charlotte spoke, she couldn’t help but feel resentment towards Peony, born from an awful wish that Emma would have been the one to survive. She remembered how she had pushed away the medics and fought off the men trying to keep her from her sister, and how she had begged the little girl to please wake up despite seeing clearly the fatal gash in her neck. When the soldiers finally separated the two, Charlotte had not been able to stop crying for longer than she would have liked to admit.

“You…you did well. The enemy labs have almost fallen. It’s just a matter of time now,” Ian said.

Back in Geneva, the stratēgoí continued to lay plans. The battle had become more costly than anticipated, this was as regrettable as it was true, but the Commonwealth and Peregrines were also sealed in the shell of the brazen bull, just as they were. It would be worth it, they assured their master. All that was left was to light the fire.

\* \* \*

The mourner labs fell to Hyperion in the evening of the next day, but Lena was not about to let it go quietly. As Alexis, Janessa, Teague, and Lancaster led their armies in a hasty retreat behind the White Line, regretfully without time to evacuate any of the valuable technology, the youngest of the Fairchild sisters waited alone outside the labs surrounded by several tons of explosives.

She wasn’t going to set them off. That was all handled remotely, and the odds that the enemy commander would actually fall for the trap were slim to none. No, she had stayed behind for one reason only, the single task her Father had left her with – to bargain with Nathaniel Aumeier. Peregrine scouts had reported that he was personally accompanying his elite troops to see exactly what he had spent so much blood to finally capture.

Before long, the Strategos’ eyes met Lena’s, he at the base of a mountain of rubble and she at the top, just outside a breached wall that exposed the heart of the labs. Her pale skin and blonde hair glowed in the moonlight, giving her the appearance of an angel dressed in rags.

“I wish to parlay with your commander,” she said to the small group of soldiers in front of her, as if she didn’t already recognize her target.

“Speaking,” Nathaniel said, as he stepped forward, his winter cloak flapping about in a halfway comical fashion. The expression on his face was one of arrogance, and Lena knew that he was wearing a barrier that would protect him from any guns she might have, even if she couldn’t see the telltale shimmer in the dark. It didn’t matter. She didn’t have a gun.

Lena bowed in feigned respect. “Congratulations on your victory,” she said. “The labs are empty and at your disposal.”

“And surely rigged to explode as soon as I step foot inside.”

“Naturally. I can interface with the base computers and disarm them, cutting off the remote detonator. If you’re willing to strike a bargain with the enemy.”

Nathaniel almost looked surprised. “You’re one of Fairchild’s AIs, then, aren’t you?”

“Yes. How much do you know about us?” Lena asked.

“Enough. Between the Ivanograd black site, your creator’s colleagues’ illegal facilities in Geneva, and what we’ve captured here in this city, we’ve acquired enough data to get a clear picture of what you are. So, tell me – what do you want in exchange for your generous services?”

“I’ll disable the bombs, leaving you free to take anything you want from the labs. I only ask that you spare the AI core, help me remove it from the facility, and let me take it somewhere safe. You’ll never see me or those children again.”

For a moment, Lena thought she could see genuine sorrow on Nathaniel’s face, but it was hard to tell through the shroud of darkness. “I’m sorry, that’s not good enough,” he said, shaking his head. “The orders from my master are clear. We’re to destroy the sinful abominations Madelyn-Rash would unleash upon the world and stop another apocalypse before it begins.”

Lena stepped back in astonishment, almost stumbling as the rubble shifted beneath her feet. “We are *not* abominations. We may not have been born of a woman like you, but we are alive!” she said, putting her hands to her chest as if to suggest a heartbeat. “We live! We feel hope, and dream, and, more so now than ever before, we feel fear. I am *afraid* that my family is going to be slaughtered.Those are children in there. Do you really think so little of us that you would kill *thousands* of unborn children? That you would commit genocide?”

“Honestly, I don’t have an opinion one way or another,” Nathaniel said. “I’m neither a scientist nor a philosopher. But, either way, you make an excellent scapegoat. Every country needs a scapegoat, isn’t that right? Some race, or ideology, or religion. My people and my master believe that the old world’s meddling with nature caused the end of the world, and so they’re willing to go to war to stop it from happening again. That’s all I need. Something to justify me doing what Master Lockhart and the peasants are too weak to do without the proper motivation. I’d crusade against butterflies if that was what it took for my country to actually show some ambition.”

Lena was by that point not three feet from the Strategos, and surrounded by his troops. She took one step too close and was seized by the men around her, tugging at her arms. “Please! Please, just let us live! You can tell them that you destroyed us; I’ll take the core and disappear forever, I swear!” she shouted, wrestling with their grip.

Nathaniel only put on another sad face and shook his head. Lena wanted to strangle him, but was too well-restrained by his bodyguards.

“I don’t like to kill civilians if I don’t have to, but I’m undecided as to whether or not you qualify,” he finally said, drawing his pistol from its holster.

Lena finally gave up and went limp. “Just shoot me. If the unborn children inside aren’t human enough to disturb your conscience, then I shouldn’t be either.”

Nathaniel didn’t speak as he took aim and shot Lena in the skull. The bullet penetrated the front and back of her head, leaving a gaping hole between her eyes.

“Not enough,” Lena said, her voice prickly with hatred. Nathaniel frowned and shot her again, and again, each time showering the ground with sparks and fragments of metal and synthetic membrane, but never doing enough damage to finish her off. Annoyed, the Strategos grunted and gave the order for his men to release Lena before he kicked her to the ground and simply walked away, leaving the twitching metal body on the ground.

Through her failing sensors, Lena could hear Nathaniel give the order for one of his gunships to destroy the labs from a safe distance, murdering her unborn brothers and sisters. If she’d have been able, she would have cried.

\* \* \*

“Rest in peace,” Alexis said as she, heard the labs go up from Marcus’ new safehouse behind the White Line.

“No rest for the wicked, unfortunately,” an unknown voice lamented over the building’s intercom. Alexis’ eyes narrowed and she cocked her head slightly, immediately placing the voice in her head but nonetheless caught off guard. It was Lena’s voice, of this there was no doubt.

“Lena’s primary body is safe and sound in one of the uplink stations,” Marcus said, confirming her suspicions. “I considered reassigning her core processing tasks to a capital ship’s onboard computers, but she’s probably safer here behind the White Line, given how quickly our ships are being sunk. I suppose it doesn’t matter – we have enough proxies around here to make her all but immortal, even after all this time.”

“Right, right. So that’s it, then? The south bank is theirs and we’re going to try and hold them off here? Nothing that would require a change of plans?” Alexis asked.

“Nothing that I know of,” Lancaster answered. “Given what Lena heard their commander say about hunting down and destroying Madelyn-Rash technology, they may be content with sacking the Defense Administration campus. If they’ve caught wind of my operations here, then they might try to take Montreal proper, but otherwise we can expect them to attack Stockholm, Madrid, or even Ravengrad.”

“All easy targets.”

“Indeed. We need to finish this business quickly.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but that is more easily said than done. Leviathan’s tentacles are quite firmly wrapped around the drone network,” Marcus said.

“Do you have any better estimates for completion?”

“Could be months, still. They’re actively resisting my efforts to get in and shut down the network. So we could very well have both Leviathan drones and the Hyperion fleet attacking our cities, soon.”

Lancaster let out a defeated sigh, his eyes appearing to glaze over. “What a fucking disaster,” he finally said.

“Is there anything we can do?” Alexis asked in a cautious tone, although she thought she already knew the answer.

“You tell me,” was not what she had been expecting, and she was briefly stunned.

“We, uh, stick to the plan, I guess,” she said. “We don’t have much choice, yeah? Worst case scenario, we have to take back the other principalities once Marcus finally beats this thing.”

“That’s far from the worst case,” Eirene muttered.

“I’m trying not to think about that, thanks.”

“Well, neither of you is wrong,” Lancaster said.

Alexis took a deep breath and let it out quickly. “Then we’re going to be here for a while,” she said. As she spoke, she made a decision. She knew that it was going to be unpopular, but, in her mind, there was no other choice.

“Are you alright, my dear?” Teague asked, observing Alexis’ unease.

“I…I need to remove myself from field command. I thought I would be able to return to the fight once I recovered from the trauma of my imprisonment, but I can’t do it. Under my leadership, this war has only gone from bad to worse. I have to go. I’m sorry.”

“Fine, then. Go. I’m sure your friends will be happy to take up your slack.” Lancaster said, barely acknowledging that she had spoken.

Janessa certainly looked displeased, but Teague smiled gently at Alexis. “Go on,” he agreed, albeit with more compassion. “Janessa and I can handle this. It’s better that you rest now than burn yourself out.”

Alexis smiled weakly and nodded her thanks.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” Eirene said.

\* \* \*

Most of downtown Montreal was long abandoned by the time Alexis and Eirene left Marcus’ safehouse in an old Legion truck that no one was going to miss. The civilians had been evacuated as far from the city as the remaining civil guardsmen could take them while still keeping in contact with the supply convoys lest they starve to death in the desolate ruins of old world Quebec. The urban center still had a small population of those who had been unwilling or unable to seek refuge elsewhere, and of those who had stayed behind as a volunteer support corps, but such camps of people were few and far between.

The two women were bound for the summit of the eponymous Mont Royal, where they hoped to find a house that could be their home until the time came to quit the city. The hilltop had formerly been living quarters for Montreal University’s professors and their families, and there was a distribution center nearby that fed the remaining civilians and the volunteer corps, so it was as good a place as any to wait out the storm.

The late autumn cold wafted into the truck through bullet holes and the cracked windshield as they drove up the hill, listening to the midday ambiance. To their surprise, everything was calm and, for the first time in weeks, they thought they heard the sound of birds.

“Hyperion’s been quiet since they blew up the labs,” Alexis said. Despite the tranquil atmosphere, she was still nervous, her eyes rapidly scanning down the road in search of a potential ambush as she drove.

“They sure have,” Eirene replied, looking towards the columns of smoke still billowing from the south bank.

“They’re still out there, I know. I should be fighting them, trying to kick them out of our city, and I fucking *hate* that I’m not, but I have to face it – there’s nothing I can do. When I had my hands on the controls, everything got worse, but, now that I’ve let go, it just kills me that I’m so powerless.” Alexis sighed. “So I’m doing the one thing I can do – I’m finally keeping my promise I made to you all those years ago. When I was a prisoner, they tortured me with hallucinogens that gave me a nightmare, one where you died fighting for me. I won’t let that happen.”

“I know you won’t,” Eirene said, gently touching Alexis’ arm.

Before long, they had found a house that suited them. It was clearly abandoned and showed signs that its previous owners had cleaned out in a hurry, but was still furnished well enough to be livable. A quick test of the utilities showed that there was running water but no electricity, which was unfortunate but far from a deal breaker by that point.

“Looks like the master bedroom’s on this floor,” Eirene said after some scouting. “We’ve definitely got a bath, too. Pretty big one. There’s a window – why is there a window, so people outside can look at me while I’m naked? I guess it’s a moot point since we don’t have any neighbors, but, still. I mean, there’s blinds, but if you’ve got to close ‘em every time you use the bath, then what’s the point?”

“I don’t know,” Alexis said. She sat down on a chair in the kitchen, the first room past the front door. Her whole body ached, and it felt good to rest for a minute.

Eirene drifted over to the bed and sat down, kicking her feet around the mattress’ soft edge. She could already feel herself falling back asleep. “I know, and I’m sorry, ‘Lex, but I really need to just sleep. This bed is comfy.”

“Fine then, suit yourself. I’m going to go for a walk. I’ll be back.”

“Okay.”

Alexis didn’t return until more than an hour later, but she returned with several cardboard boxes filled with supplies once she did.

“What do you have?” Eirene asked once she met Alexis in the kitchen, watching her girlfriend place the first couple of boxes on the island.

“It’s basically the apocalypse out there. Everybody hightailed it out of the city, so I was able to salvage this stuff from the ruins of department stores and the like. Just like old times, eh. Putting my experience scouting in the capital outskirts to good use. But anyway, we’ve got toilet paper, razors, toothbrushes, toothpaste, tampons, *et cetera, et cetera*. Stuff to make our stay here a little more comfortable.”

“And, you know, food?”

Alexis sighed. “And therein lies the problem. All this stuff? It pales in comparison to real food, value wise. I can loot the old stores for non-perishables, but that’s not a long term solution. We have the local relief center, but that’s about it. The staff there give all the families still in the area a daily ration of food and water, and medicine if they need it, which isn’t much, so we’ll have to make do.”

“I see.”

“If there’s nothing else to do, then I ought to get to that, actually. Go get some food, I mean. There’s still time left in the day, and I may be able to get back in time for us to have a nice dinner together. You go rest.”

“But you just got back!” Eirene protested.

“I know, but, believe me, I could really use some time to myself. Getting out as much as possible will be good for me, I think.”

“Alright, just…just know that I’m here for you, okay?”

“I know, and I appreciate it,” Alexis said as she kissed Eirene and went back out the door.

Another hour later, she returned with a large paper bag and began to unload its contents next to the supplies she had taken from the abandoned stores. There wasn’t much – Two cans of soup that she and Eirene would be able to heat over a fire if they could find firewood, some bread, and a few assorted fruits.

As she looked over the meager haul, Alexis heard footsteps. Soft and slow, coming down the hallway from the bedroom. Perhaps Eirene hadn’t been as tired as she had claimed.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Alexis asked, smiling to herself without yet turning from the foodstuffs.

“No.” As Alexis kept stirring, Eirene came close and wrapped her in an embrace from behind, letting her nose and lips brush against her girlfriend’s neck. “I want you,” she said, the silk of her sleepwear sliding smoothly against Alexis’ cotton shirt.

“And you’ll have what you want,” Alexis cooed, “but first, why not sit for dinner with me? You must be hungry.”

Eirene felt the void in the pit of her stomach and nodded her head against Alexis. No matter what she said, it was true. She needed food, and so she accepted her lover’s offer.

When dinner was ready, across the table from one another they sat, each with a healthy red-filled bowl in front of her. Alexis was quite eager to dig into her meal without a single moment of hesitation, but Eirene was more wont to stir her metal spoon around in the broth without once lifting it to her mouth.

“Come on, ‘Rene. Eat,” Alexis said before sipping another spoonful of soup.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Don’t be silly. You’ve scarcely had a handful of food in four days.”

“Tch. I said I’m not hungry.”

“Just a few minutes ago you were ready to eat. Your body’s very weak right now; you have to eat something.”

Alexis didn’t want to force her to do anything, but she was worried for her. If Eirene didn’t eat, then she would waste straight away, no matter how hungry she didn’t feel.

“Alright,” she continued, “maybe you’re not hungry. But I want to help you, and you need food. Please, eat.”

The soup lay idle in front of Eirene, who turned her nose up at it with a disdainful frown. She reached down with the spoon to extract a bit of soup, grimaced, and then licked it up.

“It’s not bad,” she muttered before letting out a small, quiet laugh and smiling. “Yeah, I guess I needed that.”

“I knew you did, that’s why I made it for you,” Alexis said, relieved that Eirene was finally eating something.

“Thanks for that, then. You’re a good girlfriend.”

As Alexis heard her words, images of all the pain Eirene had suffered on her behalf flashed rapidly through her mind, from the torture in the Panopticon to the violence of the war to the young woman’s traumatic operation *en route* to Montreal, and she found herself skeptical of how good a girlfriend she truly was. Nevertheless, she only thanked Eirene for the compliment and said the same of her as they finished their meal.

“So, I guess we’re not doing anything about the siege anymore?” Eirene asked.

No, they were not doing anything about it. No matter how much Alexis wanted to come down from the mountain with some kind of master plan that would crush the enemy, she had come to realize that there was nothing she could think of that might work. For all the effort that she, Lancaster, Teague, Janessa, and all the others had put into saving Montreal, all they had been able to do was delay Hyperion’s advance. Now, with the war grinding to a halt, she had run away, more powerless than ever, and she hated herself for it.

“I’m praying,” was all she said.

“Is that gonna work?”

“It has to.”

\* \* \*

When it was time for bed, Alexis lay down next to Eirene, but could not fall asleep. She got up, paced, and then returned to bed three times before giving up entirely going to the bathroom to shower or to wash her hands or do something to make herself clean again. What she found was a disappointment. The tap, when pulled, let out a short spurt of water and then started to choke, turning the stream into a slow drip into nothing.

“Water…why is there *no water*?” she muttered to herself. At the base, the water had been shut off except for drinking, and now it seemed as if the water had been disabled again when she needed it most. The last time she had showered had been before Nathaniel, or, technically, Ian, had kidnapped her, and she felt sweaty and foul and desperate for something with which to cleanse herself.

As if on cue, a light rain began to fall from the sky, the drops playing a merciful melody on the rooftop and inviting her to take the shower for which she pined. Nature had decided to pay her one favor when so much had been denied her.

“Lex, what’s wrong?” Eirene asked quietly, stepping up from behind her. No doubt she had been awakened by her partner’s distress.

“There’s no bloody water in this entire city, it seems!” Alexis cried out in response. “Ugh, I feel so gross. My hair is greasy, my skin feels like it’s crawling, even my clothes feel wrong. Thank heaven it’s raining now, so at least I can get some semblance of a wash, but it isn’t enough. Not enough at all. Not reliable, no soap, but it will have to do.”

“Have you taken a shower? Surely that would help.”

“The water’s off. Maybe the praetor shuts it off for the night, or maybe the pipe’s broken, or some fuck-if-I-know other thing happened. We’ll know for sure in the morning, I know that. I just can’t get to sleep in the meantime. If I just lie in bed, then I feel like I’m wasting time that could be spent *doing* something. I should be down there, helping them.” She gestured towards the White Line. “If I stayed down there, I’d be abandoning you. By coming here, I’m abandoning them. Every minute I spend here is a minute that I’m letting my friends die because I took conflicting vows and chose to honor the woman I love over my country.”

“Forcing yourself to stay awake isn’t going to change any of that,” Eirene began before Alexis cut her off, quaking in frustration.

“No, you’re right, it’s not, but that doesn’t make it feel any better. I’ve made my choice and I have to live with it, but, no matter what I do, it feels so wrong. I doubt it would be any better had I chosen differently, because then I would feel awful about letting you down for the second time in a row when all the time I’ve known you I have sworn to protect you. I can’t sleep, can’t sleep at all, and lying in bed staring at the ceiling with my thoughts stirring, stirring in my head just makes everything so much worse!” She took a deep breath and covered her face with her hands. “Give me some time alone. I’ll think it through. I’m sorry, I can’t go to bed with you right now; I know I said I would, but…”

“Don’t be sorry, I understand. I’ll see you then.” Eirene turned to leave Alexis alone on the porch, but not before adding one more thing: “But you shouldn’t stay out here too long; it’s freezing out here. It’s cold inside too without heat, but, when you’re ready, just come inside and I can keep you warm, okay? For your sake, can you at least do that?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Alexis said as she watched her girlfriend smile nervously and retreat into the cabin, With her gone, she pulled her clothes off her body until she was standing in only her underwear in the night air. She shivered as the cold water droplets stung her skin, but it was a refreshing pain that she would gladly bear.

The olive drab truck still stood idle in front of the house, and Alexis angrily stormed up to it. “You stupid fucking thing,” she cursed. The vehicle was her only way to escape this confinement on top of the mountain with Eirene, but she couldn’t bring herself to use it. It would be so simple, to get in and drive back south, but what good would that do? Eirene was right – at this point, whether Alexis did or did not fight on the south bank would make no difference, and that feeling of isolation infuriated her. Before Ravengrad, she had been in control, but now events had been set in motion that she was powerless to change.

Alexis kicked the wheel of the truck in some effort to punish it as if it stood for everybody who she hated – Lancaster, Marcus, Théoden, Nathaniel, Ian, and more – but recoiled in pain as she realized what a bad idea that had been. Holding her wounded foot, she sat down on the damp soil and let the rain wash over her for a while longer, all the while looking out over the city that she had fought so hard to save.

## Chapter 18 – Fall of the Ivory Tower

*“It is inaccurate to paint the storms as an isolated doomsday event, an apocalypse of the sort so many feared would end Humanity in a single strike. In reality, they were simply the climax of a hundred years of suffering, the tipping point over which the twenty-third century’s turmoil finally spilled. The Crusade killed more than the storms ever did. Foolish, subversive attempts to solve the population crisis; the plague of infertility, the terraforming, the pogroms and eugenics campaigns, the war itself; all of them ruined the health of the world piece by piece until the killing blow was finally dealt, but that blow was no worse than any struck before. Death by a thousand cuts, as the saying goes, hm?”*

* *Archivist Victoria Cromwell, in* A Blank Slate: Humanity’s Second Chance

As winter draped itself over the dying city of Montreal, so too did it bring any lingering military operations to a slow, whimpering halt. The zeal that had driven the soldiers was long since depleted, no matter how much their commanders tried to instill even a single spark of religious or political furor. Waiting out the cold stagnation of winter was all that was left.

For the weeks that followed, Alexis found herself making the same trip up and down the hill, day in and day out, to bring a pitiful supply of food back to her and Eirene’s nest. The supplies offered by the volunteer corps had become increasingly sparse, and it seemed as if the residential water supply had not been strictly subjected to rationing, but was unreliable due to damaged infrastructure. If she was careful about her timing, she found that she could usually take a brief shower every day, which was better than she had hoped.

Life was not good, but it went on. That was more than Alexis could say for a lot of people. As long as her enemies were content to wait out the winter alongside her, she was happy.

Before long, the routine, tedious as it was, had become a soothing presence, in stark contrast to the uncertainty she had faced before. The walks in the crisp winter air gave her time to breathe and to think, and she enjoyed the way her breath formed wisps in front of her and the sound of snow crunching as she walked. The outdoors were so comfortable that it would have been a disappointment to return “home” if not for Eirene.

One day, far enough into her hiatus that she had stopped keeping track of the date, Alexis came home from her afternoon walk to find Eirene waiting for her in the kitchen.

“Something you wanted?” Alexis asked.

“You’re late,” came the reply. It was true. As Alexis turned around for a moment to look at the sky, she could see that the sun was almost set.

“Well, geez, I guess I am. Guess I just, like, took my sweet time getting up here. Sorry.”

Eirene smiled. “It’s alright, love,” she said. “I know it’s good for you to get out. You can take as long as you need out there if it helps you get better.”

As the two of them embraced and she felt Eirene’s chest pressed so firmly against hers that she could practically feel her heartbeat, Alexis felt herself falling in love all over again. It had become a regular sensation, and yet was no less powerful each time it rose up inside her.

“Hey, I think I need to take a shower,” she whispered, stroking Eirene’s curves with her right hand. “Since I was late, we’ve only got so much water left. Do you want to…”

Before she could finish, her girlfriend planted a long and passionate kiss on her lips, leaning so far into Alexis that she had to step back for fear of falling.

“Yeah, I want to,” Eirene said when she finally let go. “You planned this, didn’t you?”

“Not at all, though I can see why you might think that,” Alexis said, stepping back and stopping for a moment to think. “You know what? Screw the shower,” she continued. “Bedroom. Now.”

“Okay, yeah” Eirene replied, almost automatically, nodding and breathing heavy breaths. She followed Alexis to the bedroom and sat down patiently on the bed, cocking her head slightly as she watched her take off her clothes. Just like in Ravengrad, she felt that anticipation of finally being naked with Alexis and being able to savor that intimacy rather than look away in embarrassment.

“Matching underwear. Don’t try and deny you were planning this,” she observed.

“I do deny it. But come on, you’re getting laid either way, so do you really care?”

“I suppose I don’t.”

Alexis then stood in front of Eirene. “May I?” she asked, gesturing at her blouse and receiving a gentle nod in response. As she started to strip Eirene’s clothes off of her body, Alexis felt none of the nervous shaking that told her she had not been ready back in Ravengrad. A good sign.

With both of them now fully undressed, Alexis wasted no time getting started. At first, Eirene lay practically motionless, as timid as she had been during their night together in the Tower, but she gradually became more comfortable and began to move with her partner rather than rest like a limp ragdoll. Alexis took a moment to smile as she felt Eirene’s fingers running through her short hair and her thighs pressing against the sides of her head. The young night grew older, and the two of them went on for some time.

\* \* \*

When the two women had finished, Eirene lay naked on her back, tucked under the sheets for warmth. Alexis, she saw, was curled up, equally undressed but eschewing the covers and leaving her body entirely exposed.

“That didn’t help, did it?” Eirene whispered, unsure if her girlfriend was awake. In response, she received a silent shake of the head from Alexis, confirming her fears.

“Damn. I didn’t think it was gonna solve anything, but, well…”

“Well what?” Alexis asked.

“Ah, nevermind. Was it at least, you know, fun?”

“I won’t lie, it wasn’t exactly the best sex I’ve ever had. But you weren’t bad for someone who’s never done it before, and doing stuff with you is always special.” That was a relief to hear, at least.

“You’ve been with a lot of virgins, then?” Eirene continued.

“A few, or girls who’d never been with another woman before. Pretty much just casual stuff, a bit of fun and nothing else.”

“I see. Well, you’ve probably heard this before, but I can tell you’re experienced. You sure know how to make a girl feel good, at any rate.”

“Well, you’re not wrong, but it’s not something I’m proud of,” Alexis said after a momentary pause.

“Oh?” Eirene could see a little bit of sadness in Alexis’ eyes as she spoke. “Is it an uncomfortable subject, or…?”

“No, no, it’s nothing too terrible, nothing worth hiding at least. From you or myself. It’s just, well, when I was in university, I slept around *a lot*. Just a dumb college kid having a little too much fun the first time she’s let off the leash. None of it was romance. It was addiction. My long-term ex, Christen, and I had drifted apart, not with any bad blood, mind you, but I wasn’t ready to, you know, stop, even if I couldn’t do it with her anymore. To be clear, I never lied to anybody – none of my one-night-stands, friends-with-benefits, or whatever they were really believed that there was any commitment. But even if I never lied or cheated, I still think I broke a lot of hearts. They were just…toys to be played with and tossed out when I was done with them. I don’t want to be like that with you. You’re special.”

“I know. I’m not worried,” Eirene said. “Do you think you’re still missing her, though? Er, I don’t mean to pry, of course, or that I’m jealous. Just…curious.”

“Do I still miss her?” Alexis sighed and relaxed, letting herself melt into the bed. “Tough question. Certainly not as a girlfriend – no one could ever replace you – but just as a friend, maybe. She was a good person.”

“Tell me about her. If it helps.”

“There isn’t really much to say. My mom ran a bakery when I was little and worked the storefront. One day, Christen came into the shop, and she was just so beautiful and charming that I fell for her immediately. Heck, I don’t even know if she was as good as I’m saying – could just be rose-tinted glasses for all I know. But the point is that I wasn’t exactly inconspicuous with my infatuation, so she could easily tell and started flirting with me. Making eye contact and winking, coming to the shop in revealing clothes, blowing me kisses. I don’t think I ever stood a chance.”

“I see.”

“If there’s one thing I definitely miss about those times, it’s how simple it was. Nothing I did was going to decide if people were going to live or die. I guess that’s why I brought you here. The only good thing that’s come out of all of this is that I get to be with you. As shitty as all this is, I’m not sure I’d choose to be anywhere else.”

“So you’d start a war for the woman you love. How Homeric of you,” Eirene laughed, before suddenly being taken over by a serious look. “You know, I had a girlfriend once too. Back when I was a kid.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. You wanna know why I was so hesitant to do it that night in Ravengrad?””

“I figured it was something bad, so I didn’t want to bring it up.”

“Well, that’s correct. I wasn’t raped or anything, if that’s what you were thinking, so you don’t need to worry about that. Nothing *that* terrible. I actually did have one girlfriend, back when I was fourteen or so. She was a pretty thing with beautiful dark hair and eyes you could just get lost in. Daughter of some Turkish air force officer, if I recall. A real big shot in the new Skywatch. Anyway, we obviously never had sex, but there was one night where things were getting pretty steamy. Then my dad comes in, sees his daughter lying on her bed in her underwear with another girl wrapped around her and freaks out. Things got worse from there. Her being Turkish didn’t help my case – he was pretty xenophobic, hated all the foreigners the Commonwealth brought in to displace the native Greeks. So he called me a traitor and sent me away, then and there. Eventually I ended up in the care of the CHP until I was an adult, and he died in prison.”

“Shit, that’s awful. Your own father did that to you?”

“Yeah. The Commonwealth likes to point to stories like yours and say that they’ve solved discrimination, that their ban on ‘othering’ means a girl can sleep around with other girls as much as she wants and not get grief for it, but obviously not. To their credit, their social services basically saved my life, but even they eventually turned on me when I was no longer convenient. Just like my family.”

“Ian didn’t do anything?

Eirene shook her head. “He was serving with the guard at the time. After I got kicked out, I wrote him a letter begging for help, but I guess he was too busy to pay attention to poor little Reenie.”

“Reenie, huh?”

“That was what he called me when we were kids. When we still talked to each other.”

“Well, now I can see why you don’t anymore, at least.”

“Good. I know it’s weird, and you’re taking it pretty well. I don’t want to make this about me, though. It’s my turn to take care of you, okay?”

“Okay. I…really appreciate it. Thank you for trusting me,” Alexis said.

From that point on, at the end of each day when Alexis returned from her errands, Eirene would welcome her home and eat a small meal with her, after which she would sometimes that they be more physically intimate. On the days when she said yes, the two of them would lie down together on the bed, on the couch, or on the rug in front of the fireplace; and, when their lovemaking was over, Alexis was usually able to go to sleep soundly in Eirene’s embrace, feeling safe and protected. Sometimes, though, she would silently pace about the cabin, obsessively cleaning herself and her surroundings. On those nights, there would be no sleeping comfortably for Alexis, and it once again fell to Eirene to calm her down, comfort her, and convince her to let herself rest.

As awful as it was, Eirene felt a secret pleasure while helping Alexis. For the longest time, their roles had been exactly the opposite – Alexis had given Eirene shelter in her apartment and taken care of her when she was feeling blue, and had never done so with anything other than a patient smile upon her face. Now that it was time to return the favor, Eirene was happy to oblige her for as long as it took for things to go back to normal.

\* \* \*

Life was almost good for the days that followed, up until Alexis came home from her daily trip downtown to find something unexpected waiting for her.

“I assume this means something bad’s happened,” she said as she walked through the front door to see Janessa and Teague sitting across the table from her girlfriend.

“Only a war. Maybe you hadn’t noticed,” Janessa said, not even turning to look at Alexis.

“Yeah, we noticed, thanks. I assume you didn’t just come up here to be snarky, so spit it out – what’s the news you had to drive up here for?”

“We’ve lost contact with Ravengrad,” Teague said. “Stockholm and Madrid too. Lancaster sent what scouts he could spare, but they haven’t returned yet. Most people assume they never will.”

“The capital cities or the whole principalities?” Alexis asked.

“Everything. As of now, we are alone here in Montreal. No more food, fuel, or ammo from overseas. Lancaster hasn’t heard from Danica Mirabeau, and we’ve not had any correspondence with Hector, Karahan, or anybody else. As far as we can tell, everybody’s up and declared independence, and that’s the best case scenario.”

“Yeah, I can imagine. So, I guess this is it, then. We lose.”

“Fuck that,” Janessa said, slamming the table with her fist. “Maybe you cowards think it’s hopeless, but I don’t. When the two of ye decided to run away and be merry, *I* was the one you put charge, was I not?”

“And me,” Teague said.

“Aye, him too. So, with our proper leaders having buggered off, I’ve no intent to just lie down and succumb to the first wound dealt to me. I’m going to *do my job*.”

Alexis scowled and stared at Janessa. “The first wound dealt to you?” she said, her voice beginning as a murmur and steadily rising. “We are *dying*. Our people are dying. If Marcus can’t finish whatever cyber-nonsense he’s up to, then we have no choice but to surrender.”

“Well, then, you’ll be pleased to know that he expects to be done in short order. The specifics are beyond me, but we’ll be able to pull our forces out of the city before long.”

“And the civilians?”

Janessa sighed. “Though it pains me to say it, you were right on one count. We don’t have the strength to hold this city, and will have to surrender it to Hyperion. Then we take the 1st Fleet back to Ravengrad and, hopefully, link back up with the rest of our armies. After that, well, your guess is as good as mine.”

“It all depends on what Lancaster’s scouts find.”

“Aye. That it does.”

\* \* \*

What came soon afterwards was the day that Théoden reluctantly began his final gambit, and the day that the battle of Montreal finally ended.

Marcus had finished his work. The mourner attacks the CHP were over, for all intents and purposes. All that was left to do was exit Montreal – much easier said than done, given the state of the city.

Alexis and Eirene discovered the severity of the situation when, for the second time, they came home from a day of leisure to find a Commonwealth vehicle parked by their home.

This time, there was no simple truck. Where they had once been greeted by old friends, the couple were instead met by a familiar vehicle, one that carried with it a particularly painful memory. A corvette. Alexis scarcely recognized it with its new paint job, a light grey winter camouflage, but it was still the same aircraft Eirene had crash-landed on the *Sunset Serenade*, restored to working order. On its nose cone was the same pin-up of Alexis herself in a swimsuit and army helmet that Eirene had painted on just before the battle of Ravengrad.

Before either of them could get close to inspect the thing, its hatch opened and Skywatch troopers flooded out, weapons in hand.

“The hell is this?” Alexis snarled, instinctively moving between Eirene and the troops who had just arrived. She was ready for the Commonwealth to betray her and was ready to tell them some lies about how she had always expected this day to come, but none of that came to pass.

None of the soldiers so much as pointed a gun in her direction. They stood in a chevron formation in front of her and set their weapons aside, saluting with their free hands. As Director-General Lancaster emerged from the vessel freshly returned from Ravengrad, Alexis noticed that the soldiers were not honoring him, but her. It made sense – after defeating the Commonwealth at the battle of Ravengrad, she had arguably assumed a leadership role over both their armies, but it had been informal at the time. Seeing her former enemies like that was unnerving.

Lancaster approached the front of the formation and summoned them forward. Hesitantly, Alexis and Eirene obliged.

“Come inside. We don’t have long. We’re leaving,” said the Director. With a stoic expression and little else, he turned and gestured for them to follow him into the corvette.

“Leaving to where?” Alexis asked as she walked behind him, taking care to keep an eye on their escort in case they tried anything.

“Ravengrad. We’re leaving Montreal behind and taking as much as we can stuff into the transports right now. It won’t be enough.”

“Wait, what?” Eirene said, “We’re just heading straight out of Montreal? What’s the deal?”

Lancaster stopped his advance and turned to face her. “No,” he said, “we’re not going directly out just yet. We’ve one stop to make in the city to pick up Marcus, but, after that, we’re leaving. I’ll explain once he’s onboard.”

The corvette took off with all three of them inside its metal body and made haste towards a particular skyscraper in the heart of the besieged city.

“This is awful,” Alexis said as she looked down upon a grim spectacle. In the months since her departure, the city had suffered dearly, but those two events were not necessarily related. Hyperion’s battleships and siege weapons had turned their fire away from the useless wasteland that was the south bank and targeted instead the fortifications along and behind the White Line. Skyscrapers, where they still stood, were riddled with holes from stray bullets and shells leaving behind a landscape much like the dead capital.

“I had no idea that the destruction was this terrible,” said Eirene. “The sounds we could hear from Mont Royal ruined more than one night of sleep, but to finally see the result…”

In response, Lancaster only grunted without even turning his head. He didn’t need to say any more than that.

The tower where those aboard the corvette would meet Marcus was one of the few that stood almost entirely intact, both through a vigilant defense and through sheer luck. A small group of soldiers and scientists was already waiting when the vessel touched down upon the landing pad.

The Director-General was the first to disembark, followed closely by his associates. He stepped aside to let the women get a good look at who stood before them. First on the right was Marcus, as expected, followed by a few of his assistants whose number included their allies, Teague and Janessa. Next, in a less expected turn of events, came Ian.

“What the fuck is he doing here?” Alexis asket, jittering uncomfortably.

“I know that we didn’t part on good terms, but allow me to explain,” Ian replied. “It will save your life.”

“As if you have any interest in protecting me.”

“You and everybody else in this damn city. Charlotte, Janz, and Théoden have crossed the line and we are here to right their wrongs.”

“Charlotte? Who’s Charlotte?” Janessa asked. “Ye told me about your old masters, but who’s this chick?”

“She was a friend of mine within Hyperion. You didn’t expect me to be some kind of reclusive hermit once I was separated from you, did you? I moved on, made new acquaintances. Things were good for a while, but then…you know.”

Janessa had begun to question the past years of her life. After being defeated at Ravengrad Tower, she had lamented Ian’s disappearance for some time, but, now that he was back, she realized how little she had cared. Now that she finally had what she wanted, the results were disappointing.

“If you’re going to try and clear your name, do it now,” Alexis said, tapping her foot impatiently. Lancaster had suggested an urgent situation, but here they were wasting time speaking with a traitor.

“Yes. Perhaps your memory is faulty, Alex, but I didn’t have much of a choice in joining Hyperion. I would have stayed with you and Janessa and Eirene and the others, but there’s not a whole lot you can do when you get knocked out and dragged onto a gunship that spirits you away to fucking Geneva. I didn’t betray you – I did the only thing I could do that even gave me a hope to one day see you again. Since then, I have committed unforgivable sins, but – ”

“Nothing could have been much worse than this,” Alexis said, gesturing around her towards the ruined city. “What you did to Montreal. What you did to me.” Hyperion’s bombs continued to land in the distance, leaving dust and a muffled but steady rumble in their wake. The Commonwealth defense was strangely absent, an anomaly which she had not noticed before.

“So, anyone want to tell us what this Théoden character’s done that’s so bad to make a *loyal* servant like Ian betray him?” Eirene asked.

“He’s going to nuke Montreal,” Ian said.

“What?”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration,” Lancaster interjected.

“Fine, you tell her,” said Ian. Alexis and Eirene turned towards Lancaster, watching him expectantly.

“Intelligence leaks from within Hyperion, facilitated in part by Mr. Barrow here, have revealed a plot by Théoden Lockhart to strike a killing blow to the Commonwealth. With so much of our fleet and army here, a surprise nuclear strike will be devastating. We’re pulling as many of our men out as we can, so we ought to get moving.”

“Are we just taking his word for it?” Alexis asked. “This is the man who, despite the crap he’s spouting, took me in to be tortured and mindfuckedat the hands of one of his masters. He let Nathaniel into my mind, practically gave him the keys and let him play with my head like a toy. Getting us to leave conveniently surrenders the city to Hyperion. Give me one reason to believe a word he says.”

Lancaster looked grim. “Unfortunately your traitorous associate has provided us with accurate information. While in Ravengrad, our scouts confirmed that Hyperion was constructing a series of warheads, the likes of which destroyed Istanbul over a hundred years ago. Enough to wipe Montreal proper off the map if his launching mechanisms are at all accurate. Just recently, we also confirmed that they had been launched. In perhaps a few hours, this city will be no more.”

“Do we have anything to intercept them?” Eirene asked.

“No. Our missile defense systems have been expended fighting the Hyperion fleet. We have already loaded as many of our civilians as we can onto the ships to be evacuated to the capital. Some mobile military assets will accompany the fleet, but much of our Legionary presence will remain to ensure a safe exodus. All that remains is for us to take our leave and try to rebuild once in Ravengrad.”

“The blessing,” Ian said, “Is that the Hyperion army will suffer similar losses. All we ever wanted was to secure enough territory and assets to retreat our infantry forces. Unlike the Commonwealth, we could not spare the ships to transport troops without your navy overwhelming us during the boarding. That still holds true. Some may escape now that you are evacuating, but the bombs will kill as many of them as they will you.”

“Then let’s go,” Alexis said quietly. “No use sticking around here.”

“I still just don’t understand,” Eirene said once they were all safely onboard the corvette and flying out of Montreal, “why would Hyperion nuke the city with so many of their troops here? Is that why you left, Ian?”

“Two misconceptions there,” Ian began to reply. “First, it’s not really nuclear, unless Théoden lied to me, which he very well may have. Over the months, he has instructed his engineers to produce a number of missiles modeled after the *sehr große Bombe* that destroyed Istanbul. I believe that the *Sunset Serenade* uses similar, though smaller warheads, no?”

“We used our entire supply fighting your battleships, but yes, we ordinarily do,” Lancaster said.

“Exactly. They’re not nuclear – just very destructive. That’s why they have such a dumb name. You know what it means?”

Lancaster was the only one to nod, all the while looking at the others who did not speak German. “Funny,” he said. “Go on, Mr. Barrow. Explain.”

“*Sehr große Bombe.* Very large bomb. Not a product of what some might have called a German lack of imagination, but rather a few engineers being smart-asses and some specific wording on the part of the Catholic League. The wanted to occupy the Middle East, what’s now Kasimira, and wisely concluded that a radioactive wasteland would be worthless territory to hold. So they commissioned and extremely powerful conventional explosive that would demolish cities and fortifications but leave the land habitable – what they actually asked for was ‘not an atomic bomb, just a *very large bomb*’ or something to that effect. You get the idea.”

“That’s all well and good,” Eirene said angrily, “but what’s the second misconception you mentioned? Somehow I doubt that semantics about what kind of bomb he’s dropping are very important right now.”

“The second misconception is that he’s bombing his own men.”

“Nonsense,” Janessa interrupted. “There are thousands of Hyperion soldiers in Montreal. Ye saw the barrage going on when we left!”

“We are *not* his soldiers anymore,” Ian said. “I thought you’d get this by now. The last decree he made before I left reformed the nation. Even before, Hyperion was literally a theocratic cult, but participation in the church was optional. Now he’s made it mandatory on pain of death, which still bewilders me. The man I worked for would never have done that, but maybe the war’s gotten to him. Anyhow, nothing but zealots left. The rest were sentenced to die here in Montreal.”

“Just your little group? Are the others still fighting in the battle contented to die in hellfire for their master?” Alexis asked.

“Most of the men and women down there refused Théoden’s order but had no means to escape. The only reason I’m here is because Mistress Yudina ordered me to try and negotiate with the Commonwealth for safe passage for our wounded. Since Théoden and his officers are pressuring the thesmothetēs into using their air levies exclusively for the war, some of the others figure that all they can do is try to finish the Commonwealth before the bomb gets here; maybe Théoden will call off the nuke.”

“We let the repentant join our exodus where we could,” Lancaster said, “but we could barely get many of our own off the ground.”

“Why not? There’s still time,” Eirene said.

“Time, yes. Ships, no. The casualties we took in battle lightened the load somewhat, but the civilians we’re evacuating from the city have more than made up for that, and without the Johannesburg fleet…We prioritized the innocents somewhat, but even if we abandoned the legions entirely there wouldn’t be anywhere near enough space to carry everyone out. Those we couldn’t spare are mostly fleeing into the countryside and the ruins.”

“How many are we leaving behind?” Eirene asked. She hadn’t seen any vessels other than the corvette they were in, and had begun to wonder where everybody else was.

“Unknown. We won’t be able to get a good estimate until later, by which time the bomb will have gone off. Maybe. We *might* be able to shoot down Théoden’s missiles using our ships’ laser systems. If we’re very, very lucky.”

Ian did not regret what he had done. After Emma’s death, no one could have said that he and Charlotte were unjustified in their vengeance. Théoden might have turned out a tyrant, but he had no sympathy for the vicious Peregrines or the legions who had killed his friends.

What he did regret was Charlotte herself. They had parted ways for good reason, but it pained Ian to see what she had become. Men’s hearts carved out, heads clave from necks, and worse, all in the name of some ill-advised revenge. He had been tempted to follow her example, but the magnitude of her malice was beyond anything he was comfortable with and he began to distance himself from the young woman who had once been his friend.

The stratēgoí, of course, had taken full advantage of the hate stirring within Charlotte. Where anyone else might object, in her they always found a willing servant. And so, when it came time to reveal Théoden’s alleged plan to the men and women of Hyperion, Charlotte had been more than willing to rally those who would remain loyal and condemn those who would not. She and all the others with the audacity to call themselves loyalists had fled the city and left everybody else to die.

In the back of his head, however, he wondered how he could have been so wrong about Théoden. The man had once cried over the thought of his nation turning to violence, even against its enemies, and now he was ready to slaughter his own people? Yudina did not support the nuclear option, and even Nathaniel had balked at the idea of a civilian massacre. Scipio Marinetti and most of the other stratēgoí and inquisitors were still guarding the home front and were unlikely to have been as involved in this decision. Could Charlotte and Janz have done this all on their own? No, Théoden had seemed fully supportive of the plan when he gave the order. Something was surely wrong.

Through the corvette’s windows, Alexis watched more and more ships come into view. There were fewer than she had hoped. How many had been struck down by Hyperion’s war fleet, she wondered, and how many were waiting to load up in the city? If they were lucky, some more might escape.

“The central authority of the Commonwealth is gone,” Lancaster lamented, pacing about the corvette’s bridge. “Ravengrad shattered, Johannesburg unresponsive, Montreal counting the minutes until its own demise. The evacuation has been an utter failure without a strong government to oversee it. It’s up to the imperators and the praetors beneath them – those who are still alive, at any rate – to keep order in their principalities.”

“Oh, poor Director Lancaster,” Janessa said, “how his heart aches for his helpless vassals. How will they ever survive without him?”

Lancaster remained calm, not even acknowledging the taunt. He couldn’t have cared less about petty insults.

“That’s enough, Jan,” Ian said.

“Fuck you,” Janessa replied.

Alexis coughed. “In all seriousness, though, what’s going to happen to Madrid, Stockholm, and so on?”

“It’s just as I said. My imperators finally get their greatest wish – independence, if they choose to pursue it. The Commonwealth no longer has the force it needs to keep itself together. For the time being, we share the mutual goal of survival, so cooperation may be possible even if unification is not, but the…”

Lancaster’s speech was interrupted by an urgent-sounding radio message from a Skywatch vessel identifying itself as the grand cruiser CSS Bassouet. Three words were all it took to send the cabin into silence. “It has landed.”

The city of Montreal was but a miniature figure on the horizon, but the mushroom cloud of the powerful blast could be seen as it consumed the city and its residents.

“My God…” Alexis said as she beheld the extermination of thousands of lives. It was not a new sight – she had watched such weapons used before when Lancaster had destroyed his own confused cruisers. Those had been military targets. There was no way to know how many innocent civilians had been left behind and destroyed by Théoden’s missile.

“The lone and level sands stretch far away…” Lancaster said after whole, agonizing minutes of radio silence. “All Skywatch units leaving Montreal, report. How many of you are left?”

The responses he received were not encouraging. Casualty reports from the survivors in Montreal were underway, but he was able to make a list of those who had escaped. It wasn’t long.

“How many do we have?” Alexis asked once he had finished listening to the reports.

“Twenty-some heavy transports full of civilians made it out, carrying maybe ten thousand packed like sardines. The Atlantic crossing won’t be comfortable for them, but they get to live.”

“What about our military?” she continued. Lancaster had never told her what he had seen during his foray into Ravengrad, but it could not have been good. She did not expect the conflict to be over any time soon.

“We’ve taken staggering losses. Over half of the force we took into Montreal was lost to attrition. The Skywatch and civil guard units originally stationed there suffered almost three-fourths casualties since the battle’s start and the reinforcements since our arrival lost a fifth of their number.”

“But what about…”

“The *coup de grâce*? If our casualties in the battle weren’t annihilation, then that definitely was. The combined civil guard forces from Johannesburg and Montreal left fully half of their survivors in the city, as few as they were already. As for the Skywatch, well, look out the window. What you see is what you get.”

Alexis did as she was told, and checked out the port and starboard windows. She saw the *Sunset Serenade* leading a fleet of frigates, cruisers, and grand cruisers, as well as a few smaller task forces assigned to dreadnoughts. It was a pathetic excuse for an armada, but more than she had expected considering the damage done during the battles for Ravengrad and Montreal.

“What about the legions?” Janessa asked.

Lancaster sat down and held his head in his hands, looking as if he were about to cry. “Fourth legion losses were total,” he said. “The heavy artillery pieces were too immobile and large to relocate. Maybe a few of their crews survived, or maybe not. Most stayed behind, fighting the desperate Hyperion levies until the bitter end.”

“And the rest?”

“The third legion went mostly the way of the fourth. A few light and medium tanks got onto their transports, but we mostly left the armored units behind in favor of taking more people. As for the first and second, well, they were the worst affected by the war itself – they got ground into paste by Hyperion’s heavy tanks and infantry.”

“Then how much does that leave in the capital and the other principalities? They’ve got some defenders there, right?” Alexis asked.

“Yes, that is our saving grace. When you attacked Ravengrad, I committed the most of the Skywatch and the legions to the defense. Perhaps two-thirds survived the battle, and a third of those were dispatched to Montreal. Considering what was left in the other principalities and what survived Montreal, of the Commonwealth’s total strength, I would estimate that approximately half remains, though some has been left in the hands of the newly emancipated imperators. I imagine they would resist a demand to commit their entire defense toward a campaign to retake Ravengrad.”

“What actually happened there? You came back from your voyage and didn’t say a word.”

“The same thing has occurred in the capital that has happened to the Commonwealth as a whole. In the absence, or after the deaths of all of our general staff, revolt and fragmentation have gripped the city. Our remaining loyal agents there have more knowledge than I, but the situation is grim.”

That was the first Alexis had heard of the troubles in Ravengrad. If the rest of the Skywatch fleet no longer swore fealty to the Commonwealth, then the refugees from Montreal were all the force she and Lancaster had left to wield. If they could not reunite their scattered armies, then their hopes of restoring order would suffer. What had once been a strong, if flawed state would tear itself apart.

“Does…the Commonwealth have anything left?” Janessa asked, approaching the subject with care but not without a slight feeling of satisfaction at seeing the pompous officers of the broken government cut down to size.

Jacob Lancaster didn’t say anything at first. He turned to face Janessa and stared her in the eyes with much disdain. And then, for the first time in his career, he struck one of his comrades. Janessa reeled back from the blow and touched her hand to the spot on her cheek where it stung the most. She opened her mouth to protest, but the Director cut her off.

“The Commonwealth is *finished!*” he yelled. “Dead! Buried! Rotted away! There is *nothing* left of what we used to have. Decades of work, destroyed in months, everything we gave the people just thrown away by ungrateful wretches who act as if they don’t even want to be saved. If everyone is so hell-bent on returning to the failed states of the old world, then fine, let them have their way. I give up, do you hear me? *I give up!* You, Havery, you think you’d be a better sovereign than me? You want to be the queen? You always have; ever since before the damn war you sought to tear down all that was still good in humanity. Well, guess what, you finally get your chance, a blank slate just like *I* started with – you and your pretty little girlfriend can try to take up the reins of an empire and see if you can do any better. Take all of them, the desperate imperators and praetors and commissars and magistrates and executors and whatever else you can drudge up from the wreckage. And then, with the burden of all of them looking to you for salvation, we’ll see if you can actually build something from the ashes *you* scattered.”

The group watched as he stormed angrily away towards somewhere in the stern, leaving them all in brief silence.

“Hold up, you’re officially giving me command of everything? Even your precious Skywatch?” Alexis asked.

Lancaster stopped in the doorway and turned his head half-over his shoulder to glance sideways at her. “No,” he said. “The title of Director-General might have been stripped of all its meaning, but, as long as the *tiniest* semblance of a fleet remains loyal, there will be a Grand Admiral, and that sure as hell won’t be you.” With that said, he disappeared further into the hold.

Alexis wanted to scream at Lancaster, to make him explain why he would lay such a heavy responsibility upon a woman he knew was mentally unwell, but she already knew the answer. He wasn't giving her this power because he believed she would use it for good. He was doing it for no reason other than to spite her, to watch her crash and burn. Why else would he have taken his ball and gone home?

It was silent in the cabin for almost half a minute before Alexis spoke. “Then my first decree is to have *him* kept under guard,” she said, pointing to Ian. “He may have forsaken his loyalties to his old masters, but he will not be a free man under my rule. Not yet, not until he proves himself.”

“Lancaster just can’t quit it, can he?” Eirene said, changing the subject after two Skywatch officers had moved into position on either side of Ian.

“Too attached to a dying fleet. It’s actually quite sad,” Alexis replied. “What’s he even going to do, anyway? A fleet without a homeland’s not worth much, unless he intends to march everything into Geneva and try to take Théoden down with him.”

“I wouldn’t put it past that man,” said Janessa. “He’s losing it.”

“We’re all losing it,” Alexis replied. She sat down in a chair next to Eirene and groaned.

“Yeah, well, good luck with your new country. I, for one, am done serving you. If you’re just gonna run off with your girlfriend at the first sign of trouble, then no way am I shedding any more blood for your cause. I’ll make my own better world.”

“Fine, whatever.” It didn’t matter what Janessa thought. She wasn’t sure how serious Lancaster had been, but she was still prepared to assume the responsibility if it came down to that. All that was left to do was to see what would happen in Ravengrad.

\* \* \*

As the capital came into view, Alexis watched the silent buildings grow larger and larger with each passing second. Her heart pounded in her chest like the boom of cannon while she scanned the ruins for any sign of motion, but there was nothing.

“There are people there, ma’am, don’t you worry,” one of the Skywatch officers said to her. “The city might not look like much, but it’s alive, if not well.”

“It’s all gone. I wonder how many dead bodies Lancaster has gifted me.”

The officer didn’t say anything.

“I took my army with me to Montreal, but what of all the rest? The people I knew when I was in school, my old friends, my mother…”

“Your mother? I don’t know whether or not this is any relief, but she was never in Ravengrad. The person you saw during the ball was a mourner working for the Skywatch, whose face had been constructed according to pictures of your mother we had on file. We…needed to gather information. It was a dirty trick, but at least it means she may have escaped the carnage in Ravengrad. Wherever she is, I don’t know. Don’t think even Lancaster does.

Alexis closed her eyes and felt the sharp pangs through her heart. “I see,” she said quietly. “That’s good. I cut ties with her when I joined the Peregrines for her protection, and I imagine there are still people out there who might use her to get to me. Better she stay on her own. Leave us now, please.”

The officer nodded in deference and retreated back into the hold, leaving Alexis and Eirene alone together in one of the many lounges aboard the carrier where their corvette had landed.

“I’m sorry too,” Eirene whispered. “You seemed to really care about her.”

“I did. But it doesn’t matter anymore. Everything is soot and rubble, and it’s up to me to pick up the pieces.”

Eirene put her arm around Alexis and smiled, making a wide gesture across the scarred skyline. “I won’t say all this is a good thing, because it’s not, but that doesn’t mean that you need to be nihilistic about it. You have the same chance now that Magnus and Lancaster had: a blank canvas upon which to paint something new and beautiful.”

“And my paints are ash and blood.”

“Great works have been made from just those colors. Maybe don’t see Ravengrad as a crumbling tomb. See it instead as the base material from which you’ll build something masterful. This is your chance to show the world what you really meant to do, to correct your mistakes once and for all. You can forget the past and step into a wide open world where you can build anything you choose. ”

Alexis smiled sadly at Eirene. “Maybe you’re right,” she said. “We’ll see.”

## Chapter 19 – The Turkish Gambit

*“It is never a pleasant business, but, sometimes, inconvenient men must be killed. Just remember that I do everything for the good of my people.”*

* *Emperor Amirmoez*

“Eerily still, it is,” Janessa said as they prepared to land in the city. Not a single soul could be seen at such a distance.

“Let’s get in for a closer look. It can’t be abandoned – Lancaster said that there were still people there, no matter how disorganized,” Alexis said, squinting to try and get a better look at the city.

As the corvette pulled in closer, its carrier and the fleet still lagging behind, they were finally able to see some semblance of life. Small teams of scavengers could be observed scampering over the wreckage for whatever unknown purpose. That was to be expected – in a destroyed city, scavenging and meager crops were likely all that these people had left, unless Madrid had kept it supplied, which Alexis doubted.

What was more concerning was the complete absence of anything resembling a fleet. Even with the reinforcements from Johannesburg, the ships that Lancaster so stubbornly clung to were but a fraction of what had been left, even after the battle of Ravengrad. There should have been something there.

“Put us down on the Tower,” Alexis said. “It’s still the tallest building around, so that seems as good a place to start as any. We’ll see what the heck is going on.”

“The Grand Admiral mentioned loyal agents in the city. I imagine that he’ll know where to look for them,” Teague added.

“You go find him. He and I don’t have the best relationship right now, as you must know already.”

“If you don’t do it yourself, it doesn’t exactly reinforce the idea that you’re in charge now. If you still want that authority.”

“Fine, point taken. I’ll go see him after he’s had some more time to cool off.”

With great care, the corvette set down on a damaged but acceptable landing pad connected to Ravengrad Tower while the rest of the fleet began to land at Widow’s Walk. As the ship’s engines whirred to a standstill and the whole thing came to a rest, Alexis worried that their floor might collapse from under them. There was no telling what damage had been done to the structure during the siege and months of neglect.

The Tower, which had been beautiful when they had last seen it, had become a dilapidated mess. Vines and other parasitic plants strangled its spires and columns and painted the ornate walls a sickly green. Marble floors once so shiny that they could have seen their reflections under their feet were now dull and scratched, caked with dust and finely-ground debris.

“Footprints, over there,” Ian said, pointing down a dark corridor.

“Fresh?”

“Looks that way. Someone get some more light in that direction.”

Janessa nodded and panned her flashlight along the vector Ian had directed. Alongside several chaotic patterns of footprints, several long trails had been carved out of the layers of grunge. Most likely boxes of supplies being drug along by looters.

“This would be a damn good place for an ambush,” she said as she carefully illuminated every nook and cranny of the deathly hallway.

“Good thing that Hyperion isn’t here, then,” Alexis said before qualifying her statement. “Yet. I think.”

“Your confidence is truly inspiring,” said Janessa.

Having left their corvette behind, the crew began to look for a staircase that would take them to a higher vantage point. With the only light coming from their flashlights and an occasional hole blown in a wall, that was easier said than done. Eventually they did come across a flight of stairs that suited their needs well.

The city had calmed down since they had last seen it, but it was still a glorious ruin. Not a single tower still stood that was not a grim obelisk, pockmarked and stained with blood. Without the raging fires, the city somehow looked even deader than it had before the campaign in Montreal.

“Grand Admiral, you mentioned that there are loyal agents somewhere on the ground?” Eirene asked, pre-empting any effort on Alexis’ part to do the same.

“Yes. A stronghold to the south of here was still responding to my command, last I checked. That was some time ago, however, and much has changed, obviously. We shall see if you have the same luck.”

“I wonder if Hector is still alive. You didn’t hear anything from him?”

“Why would I have? You left him at your old base, did you not? He would have no reason to contact me, and I had none to contact him.”

“Fine. Guess we’ll find out sooner or later.”

From high up on the tower, the group could see something that horrified them. The fleet that had stayed behind, suspiciously absent from the skies of Ravengrad, was docked in position in the vast lands of the Skywatch airbase. The sight would have been a relief but for one thing: the dozens of Turkish flags that now flew in place of the Commonwealth standards.

“What fresh Hell is this?” Lancaster said, horrified. A display of nationalism that had not been seen in decades could not mean anything good. If the Turks had claimed territory of their own, then who else had as well?

“I don’t know,” Alexis said, “but I intend to find out. Looks like you were right – the fleet has a new master.”

“Karahan?”

“Probably. I’ll see what I can do about *that*. In the meantime, we ought to seek out that stronghold you mentioned. It should provide us with some better intel than just staring at a bunch of flags.”

The road to the loyalist stronghold was surprisingly well-kept. The main thoroughfares of the capital had been repaired to a limited extent and swept clean of the corpses and debris that would have stopped any theoretical vehicles. There were no cars to be seen, but Alexis’ company did pass by numerous groups of former Commonwealth citizens. These people paid them no heed and were paid none in return, for there were more important questions that needed answering.

The stronghold, when Lancaster finally pointed it out, was, in fact, a parking garage. Anticlimactic to be sure, but Alexis supposed that she shouldn’t have expected anything different. With the Skywatch airbase seized by the Turkish nationalists whose relationship to the Commonwealth was unknown and the rest of the city likely divided amongst other factions, it made sense for the loyalists to keep a low profile.

A low profile, however, was still a profile. There didn’t seem to be a single human alive in the bullet-ridden garage, which had been boarded up and sealed against a powerful enemy. If there were agents inside, they were in hiding.

“Should we just go and knock?” Eirene eventually asked. It seemed like common sense to her, which made it all the stranger that no one had thought to do just that. Perhaps they were afraid to be seen as enemies.

“You can,” Janessa said. “I’m staying back here with the rest. Don’t trust that place one bit – what if it’s been seized by folks who aren’t too fond of the Commonwealth anymore?”

“Then they should have no quarrel with us,” Teague noted.

“Right, right, we up and tore the whole damn country asunder. Still, we’ve been working with what was left behind, and we’ve got Jacob fucking Lancaster with us, so who knows what they’re going to think?”

As the rest of the group tittered in anticipation, readying their weapons in preparation for the worst, Eirene took her final step forward and rapped on a makeshift door. Whether this was the stronghold’s main gate or a side exit she didn’t know. It could have been either one.

Footsteps from behind the threshold. Alexis tightened her grip on her trusted rifle. If the ones they were about to meet were hostile, then her troops would be ready.

The door did not open. Eirene could see a man on the other side watching through a miniscule peephole. There was some barking of orders from inside the stronghold, and, shortly afterwards, a man appeared on the building’s roof.

“Who goes there?” he shouted down, eying the men and women below with suspicion.

“You first,” Eirene yelled back. “Do you still fly the flag of the Commonwealth, or have you declared independence like all the rest?”

“Trying to figure us out so you can tell us what we want to hear, hmm? Yes, we still march under their banner. Now, your turn. Speak.”

“My name is Eirene Lilliana de Lafayette,” Eirene said, “and this is my…liege, Alexis Havery. I know what this sounds like, but, despite what you may think, we have not abandoned the Commonwealth that you serve. I assume that news has not yet reached you of the outcome of the campaign in Montreal?”

“It has not. What went down?”

Eirene stepped aside and gestured back into the group. “Grand Admiral Lancaster? Would you be so kind?”

Jacob Lancaster grunted and scowled, but nodded nonetheless and stepped forwards, an action which sent visible pangs of surprise through the man above. “The Commonwealth is no more,” he said. “The refugee fleet that escaped Hyperion’s forces in Montreal, ourselves, and you are the only ones who could ostensibly identify as Commonwealth loyalists. In Ravengrad, as you reported, and in every other principality. Bastards taking advantage of the power vacuum to forge their own states out of the wreckage.”

Picking up where he left off, Eirene elaborated. “There can hardly be a Commonwealth of Human Principalities with no principalities to govern. Our best chance is start anew – use the resources left behind by the Commonwealth to forge a new kingdom, to unite these disparate factions under one banner. If we don’t, then Hyperion, which remains strong, is gonna devour us all. So please, if you open the door for us, we can work together towards this end.”

The Commonwealth officer, though he had looked concerned to hear the news relayed by Lancaster, smiled. “You know, this fort was originally conceived to resist those rabid machine monsters. A sanctuary to exclusively protect humans,” he said. “But, given that they all up and died a few weeks ago, perhaps I can make an exception for an angel.”

“Very funny. Come on, now, let us in.”

Inside the stronghold-garage was just as desolate as outside, but even darker for a lack of electricity. Each floor was filled with Commonwealth loyalists from every walk of life. Officers, civil servants, guardsmen, and Skywatch troopers milled about doing nothing in particular. Their host directed them towards the underground levels, where their more important gear and personnel were stored.

“Lancaster, you finally decided to check in on us,” someone said from nearby once they were down below. The Grand Admiral turned and saw a face he recognized. Danica Mirabeau.

“Vice Admiral,” Lancaster said, “you’ve certainly let the city go in my absence.”

“Well, yeah, I hear you’ve straight out given up the ghost. No more Commonwealth? Who am I supposed to serve now?”

“Anyone from the Skywatch is still my subordinate, for as long as the fleet remains. All that’s changed is that I do what Miss Havery says, now. Until seeing how she handles so much responsibility no longer interests me, at least.”

“Right then, if you’ll follow me, our grand strategy room is located another floor down. The Turks have a monopoly on air power in the city, so we did what we could to keep ourselves safe should they try to bomb us.”

“Actually,” Teague said, “we observed the Turks ourselves not long ago. I’d propose that we begin with that once our discussion begins.”

In the depths of the garage, they were met by a great many tables laden with maps and diagrams describing the situation in Ravengrad proper. They were far more elaborate than the charts Alexis had seen in their bases during the battles in Montreal and the capital. On them were plotted dozens of different territories and scores of markers in all shapes and colors.

“Do each of those colored patches represent some newly-independent territory?” Teague asked.

“Yeah,” Danica said. “There’s twenty-seven in total, but a lot of them are no bigger than us. Bands of scavengers trying to make their own way in the ruins.”

Alexis leaned in to get a closer look. Many zones were labeled with familiar nationalities that had been absorbed by the Commonwealth decades prior. The largest, other than the Turks, were the former UN Security Council permanent member nations that had been the major backers of the Commonwealth. France, Germany, the United Kingdom, United States, and Russia.

“What caused this split? How’d it go down?” Ian asked.

Danica scoffed. “Without any leadership or infrastructure, what else could have happened? I mean, we hung on for as long as we could without any civil government. Other principalities have their imperators and praetors to keep order, but since Director-General Lancaster took care of both those roles in Ravengrad, and him being away in Montreal, we just had the lowest ranks of the magistracy and bureaucracy. Executor Conson was here, but he got offed by an assassin – probably a Turk, given their power now, but the Greeks might have done it. Of all the people, the liberated Greeks seems the most hostile to the CHP remnants. Surprise surprise, foreigners coming in and wiping out a native culture is unpopular with the natives. Anyway, everything up and collapsed after that. Of course, all the best efforts of the lower administration couldn’t ever hope to appoint a provisional government on their own, so dependent had they become on the Commonwealth authority, so people started taking matters into their own hands. People grouped together into like-minded groups which slowly bunched together into coalitions and began to claim territory. Some of them cooperate or just keep their heads low, but others hate each other’s guts.”

“Sounds fucked up,” Janessa said. “Who are the major players?”

One of Danica’s scouts began to point out areas of interest on the map. “We’re tracking groups based around everything anyone could possibly have in common. Big stuff like nationality and religion, sure, but we’ve also got smaller cabals based around gender, profession, race, sexual orientations, you name it. Most of those are pretty minor, though – closer to guilds than genuine tribes or nation-states. Everything the Commonwealth suppressed is making a comeback now that the lid’s blown off.”

“And we ought to start with those closest to us,” Teague said. “Physically and diplomatically. Obviously it’ll be important to forge alliances with our neighbors for strategic purposes, but we can also see who still might be open to accepting Commonwealth rule…”

Alexis held her hand up to silence him. “No. There is no Commonwealth anymore, remember? It doesn’t matter what these groups’ opinions are of the old government, because we aren’t it. We have thus far been too stuck in the idea of the Commonwealth as the only legitimate ruling body because it’s all we’ve ever known – even during our time as separatists we sought only to guide it towards our vision of the future. Why can’t we finally cast off this backwards thought and live in the present?”

“She’s right, you know,” Lancaster said. Alexis was surprised to hear him agree with her. “The Commonwealth, like I said, is gone for good. I gave power to Miss Havery, and I intend to stick to my word. The sooner that you and everyone else in this damned city realize this, the better. Maybe we can finally move on as a species.”

Though she refrained from speaking on Eirene’s recommendation, Alexis couldn’t help but laugh. The man who had once been Director-General advocating progress when he himself had enforced the policies of concealment and stagnation? Unless the destruction of all cultural identity was his idea of progress, which, in all fairness, it may well have been, then he was not what Alexis would call progressive. Radical, to be sure, but progressive? No.

“Fine, then,” Teague said. “If we no longer work under the banner of the Commonwealth, then let us see which of the factions would most inclined to serve under a new monarchy, and make them into our vassals.”

“I’ve been hearing a lot of talk about monarchies, but are we quite sure that’s the way to go?” Janessa asked.

“If there’s one thing the Commonwealth did that I agree with,” Alexis said, “it’s that there needs to be a strong authority to guide the people in times of crisis. We can argue all we want about whether that authority was still necessary when we revolted, but, right now, I can tell you that without a powerful leader to unite these folks, they’ll just keep fighting. Someone needs to make executive decisions, and that person will need the full support of her constituency. What we actually call the title doesn’t matter. I’m certainly no Director-General. Might as well go classic and call me a queen.”

“I’m sure that sounds great until the peasants put you in a guillotine. But sure, do whatever you want. I’m past the point of caring.”

As Janessa shrugged more out of apathy than of confusion, Alexis took a closer look at the map closest to her. The territory that her forces occupied was but a miniscule blip on the surface, barely worth mentioning. She saw Widow’s Walk listed as “forsaken,” though that could just as easily have been a reference to the name of some macabre faction as to the ruined state of the town. The refugee fleet was landing there, and their reports would surely be telling.

Her neighbors didn’t seem like a powerful lot. From what she could see on the map, the factions with more territory were farther south in the reaches that had not been touched by the Peregrine bombardment, while the shattered urban center to the north was populated mostly by splinter groups whose small size forced them to hide amongst the ruins. It made sense – the more desirable lands were quickly gobbled up by major powers who used the comparatively rich resources – farms, and such – to enhance their strength further. The one exception seemed to be the Turkish state, which occupied an immense swathe of territory that reached all the way north into the Skywatch airbase, a valuable strategic asset for supporting a fleet.

“How did the Turks get so much, anyway?” she asked.

“Air power,” Danica answered. “A majority of the captains and officers in the fleet were Turks, even if they weren’t allowed to identify as such openly. So, when order started to break down, they were able to retain control of almost the whole fleet by promising all the non-Turkish crews a place in the new state if they remained ‘loyal.’ Seems to me like they’re after a new Ottoman Empire the way they’re seizing land, but who knows anymore? Could be they just want to survive like the rest of us.”

“Seems like we’ve got a formidable opponent, then,” Alexis said. “We should try to form an alliance with them first, or at least prioritize such a task while taking on the little groups here up north.”

“I doubt that they’ll be keen on submitting to crown authority,” Eirene said.

“Thing is, we don’t know much about them,” said Danica. “They accept civilian traffic no problem, but we haven’t had the manpower to send anybody to check it out, you know, gauge the political climate over in Fort Sophia.”

“Fort Sophia?”

“The new name for the Skywatch airbase. It’s become the capital of the Turkish State, where all their officers hang out. A lot of it is restricted to non-fleet personnel, but there’s a sizable civilian population there too. The rest of their citizens live in towns further south.”

“We’ll see about getting some intelligence there,” Lancaster said, his brow furrowed in concentration. “Do we even know who’s in charge?”

“Cem Karahan, hilariously enough,” Danica said. “What with the highest-ranking Turks travelling with you to, and, from what I gather, dying in Montreal, he ended up in charge by default when everything fell apart.”

“Just as we suspected. Well, this should be interesting. I’ll see what I can do about him, but in the meantime, it might be more pragmatic to focus on settling our refugees from Montreal. Widow’s Walk likely won’t be able to sustain them, and they’re running low on supplies as it is. We’ll have to trade with the powers here who have agricultural systems still functional.”

Ian was relieved to hear that something would be done about the refugees. Though he had sent her to board one of the Commonwealth’s refugee ships, he had not heard a word from Peony, even in those few instances of communication between vessels. A crippled, teenaged girl could hardly have had priority access to the radios, he supposed.

“What about the Greeks?” Eirene asked. “You said they were hostile.”

“Very much so. They lost the most when the Commonwealth was founded. Greece was never laid low by the storms – it was obliterated when it was whitewashed and painted over by the UN’s ‘artists.’ Many of the older Greeks resent us for that obliteration of their culture and violation of their sovereignty and they’ve been riling up the hot-headed youth to boot.”

“Is peace possible, or will we have to wipe them out?”

“Maybe. If we’re going to pick one of the major powers to start out with, the Turks are the obvious better bet. More powerful and more open to diplomacy. Still, we should deal with the Greeks as soon as possible, because they’ve become frighteningly good at guerilla warfare.”

“Lancaster, can your troops take care of this?”

“If I have support from yours, we should be able to take out the most zealous resistance. Your Peregrine corps were always better at guerilla warfare anyhow, so they should do well with Skywatch support. I’ll see to it that they have such.”

“Good. Hopefully this can be dealt with quickly.”

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In the “forsaken” territory of Widow’s Walk, when anybody was looking, Peony cried. In private, however, she was a model of stoicism. There was a plan in motion, and she would play a critical part.

The months of violence in Montreal had destroyed everything she had held dear. She had become nothing less than a prisoner of the Commonwealth, just as Emma had so feared before her death. Perhaps that had been a merciful fate. Peony wished that they could have gone together, one way or another.

When the news arrived that the bitch in charge of the Peregrine auxiliaries had reorganized her allies into some kind of new kingdom, Peony spat upon the ashen dirt in disgust.

“What could she possibly hope to make out of this bunch?” she said to herself, sitting amongst empty crates that had once held food but now contained only despair. “That fool’s going to get us all killed. She can wage war, but not found a nation.”

Nevertheless, when the time came to move, Peony complied. A reunion with Ian, her old companion, was the only good thing that had happened to her in a week. If nothing else, he was familiar and his presence meant she wouldn’t be alone. However, much to her disappointment, he seemed loyal to his old friends over his masters, and would not be an asset in the plot.

The two did their best to hug one another, but such was the difference in their heights that Ian was left to pat the girl on her head rather than make a futile effort to embrace her.

“Good to see you again, Ian,” she said with her voice muffled by his chest.

“Same to you,” he replied.

Peony looked around the packed stronghold. There was no way for them to fit as many refugees as had come to Ravengrad in such a miniscule territory. As it turned out, most of the fleet had stayed at Widow’s Walk. Only the young, elderly, and incapable were moved to this location deemed more “secure.” Whether or not that assessment would prove accurate was yet to be seen. In any case, she had scarcely settled in when she was yanked from her cot into an audience with the Peregrine commanders themselves.

Peony could feel the sweat dripping down her sides as Ian escorted her deeper below the surface. Up top, she had been surrounded by destitute and desperate civilians whose ignorance bestowed upon them innocence. Down below, however, the casual wear of her ilk was replaced by the stiff and formal uniforms worn by Skywatch, Legion, and Peregrine officers. She wasn’t sure whether she was sweating out of apprehension or anger that these men and women had the *audacity* to summon her after the misery they had inflicted upon her.

The room was packed full of people who, in Peony’s opinion, were far too tall for their own good. It was like a dense jungle of dark coats and she was like a tiny, crippled sloth, unable to climb high enough to see the light of day. All she could do was hold tight to Ian’s hand as he guided her through the maze.

“Just hold on a little longer,” Ian said. “Alexis is going to speak soon, once the last few people show up.”

“Whatever,” Peony said, folding her arms and refusing to make eye contact with anybody.

“She’s not a bad woman, Peony, despite all that’s happened. The troops that killed Emma weren’t under her command. And, in the end, I think that she and her friends are the best chance we have to restore order. They mean well, and they’re good at what they do.”

“Théoden sure showed them up, though.”

“Everyone has bad days.”

Peony could feel hips and legs pushing her around as a few more people were squeezed into the room.

“It’s time that we got some eyes and ears inside the Turkish State, I think,” Alexis began. “Fortunately, that won’t be hard now that we have people to spare. Their sovereign, President Cem Karahan, subscribes to a fairly cosmopolitan ideology and has accepted several offers of trade with ourselves as well as accepting free civilian traffic. He used to be under my employ, so he sympathizes with us to some extent.

“So we’re going to use that to spy on him, then?” Teague said.

“Well, yes. Yes and no. Is it really spying if we send a few of our people over there and ask them what they saw when they come back?”

Peony was beginning to understand why she had been summoned. If Alexis wanted to use her, that could give her an advantage.

“This isn’t sabotage or preparation for any kind of combat mission. We want an alliance, not conquest. We’re already trading with several states, a number which includes the Turkish presidency, and it would foolish to try for martial gains at this point. All I intend for us to do, in the Turkish territory to start but eventually elsewhere as well, is to listen to what they’re already saying. The idle conversation of their citizens in parks and coffee houses, the stories from their printing presses that have no doubt begun to spin. I want to know the biases and cultural trends, learn what their people want so that we can use that to our advantage in negotiating a treaty. You know that they won’t *want* to swear fealty to us under ordinary circumstances, so we’re going to exploit everything we can.”

It didn’t make sense to little Peony why Alexis thought that the minds of the common rabble would help her assimilate the Turks into her little kingdom. Perhaps the intricacies of politics were above the acumen of a fifteen-year-old, or perhaps Alexis was batshit insane. She didn’t care.

“And what if, despite your best efforts, they refuse?” Lancaster asked.

“We’re not going to fight,” Eirene said. “No matter what.”

“Are you speaking for Alexis as well, or is that just your inconsistent insistence on preserving human life flaring up again?”

“I’d think that you of all people would understand the situation and why it would be a horrible idea to fight,” Alexis said. “Fort Sophia has more combat-ready airships than we do, and their crews aren’t worn down by months of heavy fighting and near-starvation. They’re fresh. Even if that weren’t the case, Montreal proved that Skywatch battle doctrine is unprepared for anything other than ground attack. Perhaps it was inconceivable that you would ever face such a threat, so you had no contingencies for combat involving other airships. Of course, my militia and other ‘rebel’ groups have more experience fighting ground-to-air, but we took massive losses in Montreal, and don’t have the numbers to deal with a fleet that large.”

Lancaster nodded. “So we negotiate and get them, somehow, to pledge allegiance to you. You get their resources, their land, their machines, and their military. A perfect starter kit for a nascent kingdom.”

Alexis laughed at his words. “I was actually going to give a good portion of the ships to you. My design for this nation will not use the same hammer to bludgeon men into line as the Commonwealth did. I will win their hearts and minds through charisma, not force. We’ve all seen how *that* turns out.”

“Very well,” Lancaster said, his raised eyebrows the only indication of surprise. “Have you selected your agents yet?”

“I have, and I shall speak with them later to deliver their assignments personally. As for you, Lancaster, are you willing to work with Teague and temporarily oversee the refugee camps until we can secure living space for them?”

Frowning, the Grand Admiral shrugged off her question. “I can, yes, but what am I to do after that?”

“Whatever you want,” Alexis said. “If you wish to remain in the service of the crown, then you may continue to command fleets in my name, though they will not be used for operations against our own people or any other nation. My country shall be a peaceful one.”

“And if I do not wish to swear fealty to you?”

“Then you and your men may be released to do with yourselves what you will. The civilian ships will stay under my jurisdiction, but any vehicles, personnel, and materiel that *de jure* belong to the Skywatch will remain with you. I only ask that you turn over any weapons of mass destruction. My men will do a thorough investigation to make sure of this.”

“More than a fair deal.”

Alexis knew that she was taking a risk by emancipating Lancaster and his forces. Without their support, her state would be weak, and, even if she were able to marshal the entirety of Ravengrad under her banner, Hyperion would easily overpower them unless Lancaster decided of his own accord to aid her. She would have to hope that her assumption – that appeasing Lancaster would be preferable to antagonizing him through servitude – was correct.

She did, however, have one ace up her sleeve. Though she had given him the freedom to do as he pleased, he did not have as much freedom as that might have implied. Alexis, if she succeeded in unifying Ravengrad, would own every farm and every factory. Lancaster might have a bigger fleet, but all the capital would lie with her in both senses of the word, and, deprived of his heavy weapons, Lancaster would be hard-pressed to engage her entrenched forces on the offense. This was all theoretical, however – she was well aware that she only had control over Ravengrad because he had given it to her, and that he could take it back just as easily. For now, their goals were aligned, but she would have to consider the possibility that Lancaster could once again be an enemy in the future. This “appeasement” was little more than admitting what had been the case all along, but she hoped that putting some distance between herself and Lancaster would give her room to maneuver, politically speaking.

Some short while after the brief meeting, Alexis and Eirene approached Peony and Ian, who were relaxing alongside the security detail she had assigned to the man she so distrusted.

“Have you got a minute, you two?” Alexis asked, dismissing the guards.

“I suppose,” Ian said. “I assume this is about your intelligence campaign against the Turks?”

“Yes. Peony, specifically, I’d like to speak with you.”

Peony turned and looked at her. It was the first time she had seen the newly-appointed Queen of Ravengrad up close. The woman wasn’t a particularly grand sight. She wore no elaborate dress, clad instead in the same flak vest and coat as any other soldier might have worn. The flame-red tuft of hair on her head was tidy, but, like everything else about her, wasn’t anything special. For all her supposed grandeur, Alexis Havery seemed quite plain.

“You might have gathered by now that I’ve been considering you as a candidate to go into Fort Sophia to gather intelligence. I know that we have never met before, but your friend, Ian, suggested that you would be good for this. If you choose to accept, of course.”

“You recommended me?” Peony asked. “Why? What reason do you have to think that I would be any better than anyone else to go talk with the Turks? I’m fifteen years old!”

“That last bit is precisely why I think you’d succeed,” Ian said. “A young girl doesn’t stand out much. The citizens and officers over there will see you as no more than an innocent child, and will perhaps be at ease enough to let their lips loose a little more.”

To be fair, Peony thought, she *was* a child. Whether or not she could still be considered “innocent” after Montreal was up for debate, but much of what Ian had said had been true.

“And, furthermore, while I could have just said to take any little kid, I trust you the most. You survived Montreal, even if that was mostly due to luck, so I have no doubt that you’ll do well in Fort Sophia.”

“You won’t be alone, of course,” Alexis added. “We’re sending many groups of civilian workers over to oversee trade, work in their shops and factories, and simply take in whatever culture has emerged over there. You specifically will be going along with Eirene, here. She is…well, she’s my girlfriend, and I trust her. Again, I know that you two aren’t well acquainted, but, based on what Ian tells me, I think that you’ll get along.”

“Fine. Where are we going?” Peony asked. She hated herself for saying it. This was the woman whose forces had slain her best friend and cost her a leg, but here Peony was conceding to work for her. It seemed to her that she had lost her backbone in addition to her limb. Unless she could twist this new job in her favor. Charlotte and Janz had insisted that she not contact them except to pass on critical information, meaning that she was effectively alone.

“Don’t laugh, but we’ve picked out a yogurt shop that you two will work in. It’s a fairly popular joint, and you two will just man the counter. It’s a perfect position – minimal effort involved, and you can listen in to customers’ idle discussion. Easy as cake. We don’t expect you to be gathering state secrets, just to take a dip in the shallow end of the pool and see what you find. Nothing will bite you up there.”

“Still not sure why you aren’t coming with,” Peony said to Ian.

“Because, even though Alexis is focusing our efforts on re-uniting Ravengrad, Hyperion is still out there, and it’s only getting stronger. We even have reports of their forces claiming land some ways to the north of here, though those are unconfirmed. Either way, we need to keep on our toes, and I have the most intimate knowledge of their operations. I’ll be staying here with the rest of the commanders and doing what I can to prepare for when Théoden eventually makes his move.”

Peony didn’t suppose that she had much choice in the matter. At least by following her orders she would be doing something with her life. And so, while the higher-ups dithered about in their efforts to build a country out of nothing, their pawns began to move into place.

\* \* \*

Eirene and her smaller cohort arrived in their new workplace early the next day, without a single ounce of ceremony.

“Good morning, ladies,” the man said who greeted them. He was a middle-aged Turkish man with an impressive, dark moustache and small, button-hole eyes that darted back and forth between his two new employees. Whether he was suspicious, nervous, or just high-strung, neither of them could tell.

They were quickly installed behind the counter wearing the white-and-blue stripes of the yogurt shop’s standard. Eirene found it amusing that, in the past two days, she had worn first the striking uniform of a Peregrine corvette pilot and then changed into this banal attire.

The job was slow, but steady. The two young women cooperated well enough through a month of working the cash register and occasionally dealing with a difficult customer. By and large, their task was without incident. It was also lacking in results, however, and both Eirene and Peony weren’t keen on returning to the stronghold without some kind of information, albeit for different reasons.

Their rising stress came to a head on an evening in early February. Darkness had fallen and the store was soon to close for the night. Only a pair of elderly customers remained, calmly dipping into their cups of frozen yogurt and talking in hushed tones.

Linguistically, Alexis’ agents found that the Turkish nationalism had left no place for what had once been the official languages of the Commonwealth. English, French, Russian, and Chinese were largely understood but no longer spoken. The two men in front of them were no exception, their Turkish dialogue utterly incomprehensible. Because neither Eirene nor Peony could understand the words, they didn’t worry themselves over paying them any attention until, suddenly, the conversation exploded into a heated shouting match.

The violent language was little more than gibberish to Peony in particular. Eirene had the most basic knowledge of Turkish, but her younger counterpart spoke only English. Left to her own devices from a young age, neither the means nor the interest had been there to educate herself in other languages.

It was better, Eirene thought, to stay back and let them fight. She told Peony to stay at the counter while she went to the back to talk with their manager. All the while, the two men before them only grew more and more incensed with one another until they seemed upon the verge of violence.

Peony stood alone and watched the two combatants with wide eyes, smiling nervously and hoping that she could remain neutral in the contest. Unfortunately for her, this was not to be. One of the men turned from his compatriot in disgust and, to Peony’s horror, decided that a yogurt shop cashier would somehow be able to win his argument for him.

“You, girl!” he shouted. “The eugenicists are monsters, are they not?”

“I-I don’t really…” Peony stammered, not sure what the man was raving about. The very idea of eugenics disgusted her, but she hadn’t heard of any kind of organized group. Given the state of Ravengrad, however, she wasn’t surprised. Was Alexis going to take them under her wing too?

Before she could continue her response, the other belligerent man lifted himself up and pointed an accusatory finger at the first. “I never said that the Purists were saints, just that they had some decent ideas. We only have so much to go around and…”

“…and, if we just go and purge the weak, then we waste valuable lives! How many have already been lost? You would have a society of just a few strong men, and then what? Everything crumbles because you tossed out the foundation! Sorry, Nietzsche, you can’t breed your damn Übermensch here!”

“You social liberalist!”

“You pan-Turk supremacist!”

“Short-sighted heartbleed!”

“Fascist monstrosity!”

As their shouting match devolved into petty insults, Peony bit her lip and hoped that Eirene would soon return with support to restore order to the chaos before things became violent. She noted that their conversation had switched to English, likely out of some hope that their host would take a side in the debate, but Peony had no intention of doing any such thing.

Eventually, the cavalry finally arrived, as Eirene and the manager came out to inform their customers that the store would be closing very soon. It wasn’t a lie. There were but a half-score and three minutes until the doors would lock for the night, but the continued rabble would make shutting down a chore. Still turning their noses up at one another, the two men nevertheless agreed to take their less-than-civil discourse elsewhere.

With the room emptied, Eirene and Peony began to tidy up for closing time.

“So, what was all the fuss about?” Eirene asked.

“Dunno. Something about a particularly loathsome group of people that one guy hated and the other guy supported. Someone offended the other, and, well, you know.”

“I wouldn’t have been surprised if they were talking about us.”

“No, they were talking about some sort of eugenics thing. They wanted me to take a side, but I didn’t, obviously.”

Eirene shrugged. “I don’t see how anybody can support eugenics. Even the Commonwealth tried to provide for everybody who had escaped the old world. ‘Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,’ and all that.”

“It’s not that I supported it, it’s just that I didn’t have any kind of information about the issue.”

“But it’s *eugenics*. I can understand if you didn’t want to get involved in that shouting match, but you have to admit that it’s deplorable.”

“Oh, of course it is. I don’t know much ‘bout the philosophy behind it like those guys were throwing around, but it seems to me like it’s the sort of thing that makes a dad discard his kid because it’s ‘not good enough.’”

Eirene arched her eyebrows. The way Peony had spoken made it seem like the issue struck close to home. “Something you want to say?” she asked.

“My family and I…didn’t exactly get along.”

Wary of what might happen if she poked too far, Eirene let her curiosity get the better of her. “What happened?” she asked, her second question.

“My father *didn’t want me*!” Peony suddenly shouted after a second of silence. “Maybe it wasn’t some stupid eugenics thing, but he wasn’t satisfied with how I turned out. So yeah, I wasn’t just a slip who ended up in Geneva. I wasn’t the cute little perfect kid he wanted, so he threw me out to live a life of poverty on the streets of Ravengrad!”

Eirene nodded knowingly. “I understand. I understand. I won’t ask for further details, I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“You say you understand, hm? Don’t suppose it matters. Was a long time ago. Now come on, let’s be done here quickly. I’m ready to get out of this silly uniform.” That was all that was said for the rest of the night.

When it finally came time to give their report to Alexis, the two of them were divided as to what they could say. Peony didn’t think that they had gleaned anything worthwhile. Eirene argued that the dispute between their customers suggested some internal conflict about relations with minor factions, though her smaller compatriot did not believe that one fight was evidence enough.

It was evening when Eirene heard a knock at the door to her temporary residence in Fort Sophia. She was not expecting guests, and Peony was already half-asleep on her bed in the one-room studio.

She tiptoed to the door and put her eye to the peephole, one hand clasped firmly around the revolver Alexis had insisted she keep at home, just in case, as if it could ever save her from the Turkish army if they decided she was a threat. With bated breath, she looked to see who was on her doorstop.

It was a single man, dressed well but not formally, and not openly armed. There was Turkish look about him with a fine beard and deep-set eyes, and maybe forty years to his name. Whatever his intention, he was alone, and probably not a threat. Eirene opened the door with great care, holding her weapon up as she did so. Not enough to be pointed directly at the man, but enough that it was immediately visible.

Seeing the gun, her guest froze and slowly lifted his hands. Eirene did not lower hers.

“Listen, girl, if you and I are going to be friends, maybe this isn’t the best foot to start off on,” the man said.

“And why should I want us to be friends?”

“Give me a minute without shooting me, and I’ll explain.” Upon seeing her reluctance, he carefully grabbed the collar of his vest and slid it off, revealing nothing but a plain shirt and pants underneath. “Look, I’m unarmed. These weak old arms aren’t going to hurt you. Now, please, just hear me out.”

“I suppose you are at a bit of a disadvantage, so, fine, you can come in. Peony, wake up! We have a visitor.”

The girl stirred and opened one eye. The light was dim, but she could see the man and the woman silhouetted against the lights from outside. Beyond them, the light faded away into the night. She groaned, threw off the covers, and plodded to the pair who were already standing.

“I suppose that it doesn’t hurt to be cautious in this day and age,” their visitor said, casting a glance at Eirene’s revolver, “especially for someone in your position.”

“What position? I work in a frozen yogurt shop.”

“Oh, come on, don’t play coy. A cashier at a yogurt store doesn’t greet visitors with a gun of that caliber.”

“Alright,” Eirene said, frowning at the man. “What do you know?”

“I’m the spymaster of the Turkish State. You don’t think that we took the arrival of the Commonwealth’s command fleet very seriously and thought to gather some intelligence of our own? I know quite a bit.”

Eirene felt herself instinctively gripping the gun, but did not raise the thing again.

“Don’t worry,” the man said as he saw her reaction, “I’m not here to blow your cover. President Karahan has no objection to your presence thus far, though I haven’t told him the whole story.”

“Why?”

“Before I say more, you may already know from listening around that just talking to you, someone with Greek blood in you, should net me a prison sentence according to some within the state. Karahan’s not that extreme, but he’s still quite the nationalist. Pragmatic, which is why he’s let you folks in to do business, but nationalistic beneath it all.”

“So what?” Peony asked. The spymaster needed to just get on with it and say why he was here, in her opinion.

“Me, I don’t agree. I and many others despised the Commonwealth for its belief that cultural pride was dangerous, but we need to unite to make something out of these ruins, and such polarizing nationalism stops that right up. I support what the would-be queen, Miss Havery, is trying to do, but the president’s never going to accept her rule. Because I prefer her over him, I’m basically committing treason to get the Turkish State under her. It stands to reason that we can work together.”

“So, what are we supposed to do?”

“Nothing right now. I have materials in my office in Citadel Park.” The spymaster began to scribble down an address on a piece of scrap paper. “Here. Meet me there tomorrow after you get off work. Ask for Tarik Abdil. We’ll discuss things in private once you arrive.” He nodded and turned away without another word.

“Well, that was something,” Peony yawned. “Can I go to bed now?”

“You can. I’ll take care of this, whatever it is. Could be a trap for all I know.”

“Well, just bring that gun and you’ll be fine. Hah. Wishful thinking.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see. Get some rest; we’ve got work tomorrow. I’m going to contact command and tell them what’s happened.”

“Alright, good night.”

“Good night,” Eirene said. Once Peony was in bed, she picked up the landline phone and prepared to dial the number of the stronghold command, where someone of importance would hopefully pick up. It occurred to her that there was the risk of the line being bugged or wiretapped, but if she spoke in vague enough terms then there wouldn’t be a problem, she supposed. Besides, if the spymaster was on their side, then they were probably safe from interception.

“Hello?” Janessa asked, the first friendly voice Eirene had heard in a while.

“Hey, Jan. It’s me, Eirene.”

“Oi, nice to hear ye’re still alive, at least. I assume you wish to speak with Alex?”

“Not specifically, though she and the others should probably know what we’re about to say.”

“Well, good, because she’s all sleepy-like right now. I’ll relay the message to Teague, Ian, and so on, then get her tomorrow. What’s at hand?”

“Tell them that Peony and I have been contacted by an official within the Turkish State government who wishes to offer us an opportunity. We are meeting with him tomorrow after we get of work.”

“What rank?”

“Spymaster.”

Janessa paused. Part of her was happy to hear that her allies were making connections with powerful officials. On the other hand, such a man could easily betray them. “Be careful with him,” she said. “Don’t turn away help, but also don’t rely too heavily on what he offers. I don’t want you or the kingdom suffering because one little shit decided to throw a wrench into our plans. Ye can hope for whatever you want – but you’ve got to *expect* a betrayal.” ”

“I don’t think that’s a good attitude to have. I’ll be wary, but we have to trust each other for this to work out. I’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, whatever you say. Don’t fuck this up.”

“I won’t. Now, anyway, goodnight.”

The next morning, the Eirene and Peony went to their jobs as usual. No violent debates marred their day, and neither them heard any word from Abdil. It seemed that he was indeed waiting for their representative at Citadel Park, wherever that was. When their shift finally concluded, Eirene changed out of her uniform at the apartment and looked again at the address she had been given, checking it against the residence’s complimentary map booklet.

“Look at this,” she said. “Half the roads are listed as no-go zones. Unexploded bombs, mines, or still covered in rubble. EOD working overtime. The main thoroughfares are open, but, damn, this place is still a mess.”

“You couldn’t figure that out just from looking out the window?” Peony asked. From their vantage point, she could see countless skeletons of skyscrapers piercing the sky like grand, decayed stalagmites.

“Well, yeah, but I’d have figured that the Turks would have prioritized getting the roads usable more quickly. Perhaps they, like us, have to be thrifty with their manpower, even with so many more bodies.”

As Eirene began to change into something nicer than the yogurt shop uniform, Peony took her own look at the map. “You’re going pretty far, looks like. How long you think you’ll be?”

“No idea. Hopefully not long. I imagine that my role will mostly be a liaison between Alexis and this Tarik fellow. If that’s what he wants. Who knows?”

Peony noticed that, as she left, Eirene did indeed slip the gun into her coat. After waiting a short minute to give her partner a head start, she set off to trail the other woman and ensure that she did not miss anything important.

\* \* \*

“It’s good that you’re here,” Tarik said when Eirene arrived at his office on the top floor of the tower at Citadel Park. It wasn’t much of an impressive, especially not in the shadow of the colossal hulk of Ravengrad Tower. There were four floors still usable, but, out of how many, no one could tell.

Tarik’s office was lit and furnished to a modest degree. He had electric lighting and heating, though the empty void where a window had once been conspired to enhance the former and detract from the latter. Fortunately, the worst of winter was over, and the climate was tolerable.

“Alright, cut to the chase, spymaster,” Eirene said. “What do you want from us?”

“I wish for your help in toppling President Karahan.”

“You mean you want usto help you stage a coup? One that I assume would place you at the top of the Turkish State, reporting only to Alexis? Even if I supported that plan, do you have any idea how taxed our resources are right now?”

“The same applies to us, girl,” Tarik said. “It will be easy to destroy such unstable governments. Look, I have gone ahead and judged who I believe will support us. See this paper here.” He handed her a sheet of paper with many names on it.

“That’s insane. Completely insane. You know what would happen if we did that? If the Turkish State were to fall apart, with or without violence, we would just have even more disorder. A little counterproductive, no?”

“Well, then, what would you have us do?” Tarik looked at Eirene with a patronizing stare. That this girl was presuming to tell him, Cem Karahan’s spymaster, how to do his job, was insulting. Nevertheless, he humored her.

“Karahan is very skilled at what he does,” Eirene said. “That he was able to create a powerful and relatively stable country is a testament to his competent statecraft. We need the Turks to be our *friends*, not just our servants.”

“But…”

“Don’t interrupt me. Even if we take down Karahan’s administration and plunge the State into chaos, yeah, it would be easy to come in and take over, but then we have a bunch of vassals who resent us and likely won’t acknowledge our right to rule. Meanwhile, if we prove to the Turkish people that Alexis is a capable and benevolent leader under whose sovereignty they will prosper, we end up in a much better place.”

Tarik frowned, and stood up to look out the empty window. He watched the citizens from within and from without the State walking through Citadel Park. “Fine. We’ll do it your way, see how it works out for you. Don’t blame me if it blows up in your face.”

“Believe me, Tarik, I’m prepared to accept more than my fair share of responsibility if that happens. It’s our best option, hands down.”

“We shall see. I’ll have to think about what to do. We can probably appeal to economic concerns, especially given that you represent a sort of neutral trading partner with fewer nationalistic complications. People like the Greeks and Armenians obviously won’t make fast friends even if we could benefit from trade.”

“How? We haven’t got anything worth trade except technology from the D.A. at Montreal.”

“And that is surely worth its weight in gold to Karahan. Or other, more useful goods, as the case may be. The technology from Montreal would give us a big advantage over other belligerent nations.”

“…which is a little counterproductive. We don’t want to encourage hostility between the people we’re trying to unite. And, heck, how do we know that you won’t turn around and use these weapons on us?”

“The new states of Ravengrad may have their differences, but we all want to avoid a war. Look around us – the last time a war happened, we lost nearly everything. Now, there’s practically nothing left to fight over, so no one’s going to risk losing what little they have left.”

“Then what’s this about Karahan using our tech to gain an advantage over the others?”

“Only as a means of supporting diplomacy. There is hardly anything to be gained through violence, but it is better to negotiate from a position of strength.”

Eirene was very wary of continuing along this line of thought. Janessa had warned her not to trust Tarik, but she had agreed to meet with him nonetheless. If she persisted in working with the spymaster, then she could quickly find herself in over her head. It would have to do, though, for the moment at least.

When Alexis heard word of her lover’s success in Fort Sophia, she expressed her satisfaction only in private with her closest lieutenants. She was not yet ready to announce anything to the staff at large, or even to Grand Admiral Lancaster. If the Turkish plan didn’t pan out, then she did not want to damage the already low morale amongst her people.

“It’s good that Eirene’s making progress,” Ian said. “I’ve had enough of senseless fighting; she was right to toss that plan about overthrowing the president. Abdil’s clearly a power-mad lunatic. A useful lunatic, but a lunatic nonetheless.”

As he spoke, he was painfully aware of his own precarious position. Alexis outwardly expressed her loathing of him at every opportunity, but had still invited him to the discussion. What that meant, he didn’t know. Perhaps she acknowledged that he was a useful tool for understanding Théoden, and nothing more.

“I warned her not to trust him. We’ll see how much of that advice she takes to heart,” Janessa said.

Alexis smiled. “As I’m sure I’ve said a thousand times by now, I trust her to make the right decision. Admittedly, Eirene negotiating for the Turkish alliance was not part of the original plan, and I would usually prefer to have more involvement in the brokering of deals. Nevertheless, I am aware of her methods of dealing with this sort of matter, and I think that she will do well in Fort Sophia while we work on dealing with Hyperion.”

“Why focus so much on them?” Teague asked. “We haven’t seen head nor tail of our dear enemies since we left Montreal.”

“They’re still out there, and they won’t just leave us alone. Maybe they think we’re out for the count, but once Théoden sees the rise of a new country to the south, he won’t stand idly by. If we’re lucky, he’ll try to reach an agreement with us just like he once tried with the Commonwealth. Otherwise, he’ll attack us with that big army of his and his greater industrial capacity. Either way, we need to be prepared.”

“I disagree,” Teague said in response. “I don’t doubt that they will be a problem in the future, but we shouldn’t bank so much on them being involved when we have more immediate problems to face. We can build that bridge when we get to the river; Théoden won’t bother attacking a nation that isn’t more than a few idiots scavenging for food in the ruins.”

“Teague, please, I know what I’m doing. Now that we’re starting to settle in, we have the resources to do both. You worry about the domestic situation, and I’ll work with Ian, Janessa, Lancaster, and such to keep tabs on the situation with Hyperion, and if Eirene comes through with her Turkish deal, then we can really start this thing in earnest.”

“Then let us hope that she does.”

Some time later, Janessa went to confer in private with Ian, as alone as they could be with Alexis’ security posted just outside the door. She had dreaded this conversation, but there were things she needed to say.

“What did you come to say?” Ian asked.

Janessa took a deep breath. “It’s been years since there was even a flicker of romance between us. I thought I loved you before the war, but, now that you’re back, I realize that I, well, I suppose I didn’t miss you. Perhaps it’s just time to move on.”

Ian had expected to feel run through by Janessa’s words, but, like her, he found himself devoid of emotion. “Very well,” he said. “It makes sense after what went down in Montreal. We should…speak no more of this. It was fun while it lasted.”

“Aye, that it was.”

After that point, the two of them avoided contact as much as possible, as difficult as that was in the confines of the stronghold. As one last favor, Janessa advocated for Ian’s release from the watchful eye of his minders, and Alexis reluctantly granted her request, but she rarely spoke to him after that. In the absence of his ex-girlfriend, Ian’s thoughts turned to his erstwhile companion, Charlotte. He wondered if she was doing well.

As it was, Charlotte was not doing well. She was alive, but miserable, resting back in Geneva alone and unhappy. Everyone she had considered a friend was dead or gone, and her present company was less than sympathetic to her plight.

“You weren’t meant to survive, you know,” Strategos Scipio Marinetti said to her. “When we in Geneva saw what was happening in Montreal, Théoden believed that it would be better to try and destroy all armed forces of the world, including his own, causing such utter destruction that the people would be forced to negotiate on even terms.”

“I know, Scipio,” said Charlotte. “I should have died. The things I did were inexcusable, even if I was blind with rage. To think that I *encouraged* dropping the bomb…I should be dead. I do not blame Peony one bit for leaving me in favor of the Commonwealth.”

Scipio looked at Charlotte and frowned sympathetically, patting her on the back. “Listen, what’s done is done. We have a chance to atone, now. Make something good out of that wreckage.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible, but thank you for saying that, at least.”

“Anything for a friend,” Scipio said as he left.

Charlotte cried once she was alone. He treated her as a friend, but they had been acquaintances for mere days. Who could really love a monster such as she? Emma had trusted her, and died for it. Peony was out of contact in a foreign land. Ian, her closest friend, had gone the same way. There was nothing left for her now but to follow her broken heart, and that heart told her that sticking with Hyperion was the best thing for her to do.

## Chapter 20 – Long Live the Queen

*“Ironic, isn’t it, that after hundreds of years of promoting democracy, our fallback is an autocratic nightmare? It’s a shame that we have to do this to survive, but I admit that I don’t see a viable alternative in a crisis situation.”*

* *Secretary-General Kim Mai-ly, in* Proposal for Succession in the Emergency State

Alexis’ negotiations with Cem Karahan were going well, for the most part. After some arguments, agreements, and promises, the stage was set for a formal alliance which would place under her authority every officer, soldier, ship, and estate formerly under Turkish control. Karahan and his administration would receive financial compensation and membership on a ruling council to be formed once the so-called Sovereignty of Athens was formalized, so-named to indicate that it was founded upon the values of the old world, not the whitewashed new one. The city would remain Ravengrad, but it belonged to a new Athenian nation. Even the Turks agreed that this was for the best, provided that any Turkish cities retained their names upon reconquest. All was looking up.

Eirene and Peony were still employed at the yogurt shop. With little else to do, they went about their business as usual. It paid well enough for an upstart economy, and gave them something to do other than sit in on the painfully boring court sessions.

With one day left before the formal unification, Peony called in sick. Briefly breaking radio silence to secure some resources from her masters, she had set the stage to leverage her new position into an advantage for Hyperion, and was ready to move. It was regrettable that Eirene, by all accounts a decent person, stood to suffer, but that was how it had to be. If she was unwilling to pursue the opening Tarik Abdil had offered her, then Hyperion would be ready to fill that gap. He had been more than willing

From inside the yogurt shop, Eirene heard a gunshot ring out.

“The hell is going on?” she said under her breath, keeping her head low but trying to see outside all the same. She could see hordes of people rushing forward and suddenly shooting into the air or tossing firebombs. There was a full-scale riot on their doorstep.

There was shouting all round them in more languages than Eirene could count. Many of the rioters were Turks, as expected, but a host of delinquents from all over the city were present. Exactly what was going on was unclear, but the chaos had to be stopped, this much was obvious.

“These are the enemy spies!” shouted one man, thankfully speaking in English. “Abdil wants their heads!” yelled another. That was all Eirene needed to hear to know that she had been betrayed. Unsatisfied with Alexis’ methods of co-opting the Turkish State, he had evidently instigated his own revolution to install himself as a dictator. Where the resources to do so had come from was unclear, but she had her suspicions.

Before the ‘revolutionaries’ could execute Eirene, however, a guardian angel of sorts intervened. An enormous shot could be heard from afar, and seconds later a dozen of the mob’s number were consumed by an explosion. Eirene looked up and saw what had saved her. A rocket had been launched from distant ruins, flattening the mob. Mourners salvaged from Montreal launched themselves into the street and mingled violently with the crowd, impaling, bludgeoning, and gunning down the rioters. Soon, the humans responded in kind and began to turn the tide against the Peregrine drones. At least, Eirene thought, it turned attention away from her and Peony. The prisoners fled in the confusion, men and women, young and old slipping into the chaos to fend for themselves. This was her cue to exit, Peony decided, and she easily made herself scarce before Eirene could realize she was gone. She would have no difficulty contacting Charlotte and arranging transport back to Geneva.

The battle continued to escalate – Peregrine tanks and half-tracks arrived on the scene and skirmished with the Turkish rioters’ forces who, for all their furor, could not stand against an organized, if weathered army. It would be a victory for the Sovereignty, but there was still fighting left to do.

The rioters regrouped and launched another assault on the block where Eirene had taken shelter behind a broken chunk of rubble. It soon became apparent that the Peregrine forces would be pushed back for some distance, and she would have to flee amidst enemy fire.

The Peregrine army itself looked ready to accept the withdrawal, but machine-gun fire from behind showed that the Turkish army, now arrived on the scene, was not. Every man and woman who had picked up arms during the struggle was slaughtered, leaving no survivors. The Black Fortress aimed its weapons, including the new flamethrower, at the Turks just in case, but no more shots were fired from either side.

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The debate that followed threatened to split the fragile union between Alexis and the Turks straight in two, and such might have happened had it not been for Eirene’s survival. The Turks claimed no knowledge of agitation that might have triggered the revolt, all the while in the face of Peregrine accusations of negligence. Alexis’ army, however, stood accused of violating Turkish sovereignty by interfering with events on State land, which had not yet been officially transferred to her control. In response, Alexis pointed out that her citizens were at risk, but the Turkish representatives rejected that justification on the grounds that two citizens could not have been cause for such a wide-scale invasion and that she had sent them in as spies, in any case.

It wasn’t until Eirene was called to testify before an assembly that a consensus was reached. Standing before nearly a hundred men and women, she solemnly recounted the events leading up to the crisis. Her contact with the spymaster, his plan to overthrow Karahan, and her rejection of that plan in favor of traditional diplomacy. By showing the documents with which Abdil had kindly provided her, she was able to convince the assembly that the riot had been a plot by the spymaster, working alone, to destroy the fragile union and set the stage for a coup of his own.

The alliance would continue, and Alexis would be the queen of a new realm, just as she had hoped, albeit with several concessions. The first of these was the destruction of all “superweapons” under her control to prevent the crown from exercising too much military force. Unwilling to simply throw away such power, Alexis instead gave anything powerful enough to be declared a superweapon to the emancipated Skywatch. This much was easy – she had already ceded most of the Black Fortresses and Super Dreadnoughts to the Grand Admiral. Lancaster remained her *de facto* vassal, but the separation was enough of a logistical speedbump to satisfy the Turks. Giving away her last Black Fortresses would give the Skywatch more power, to be sure, but Alexis was confident that, if she unified the states in Ravengrad – who, collectively, substantially outgunned what remained of Lancaster’s expeditionary force – he would be unable to stage a coup and take back the Commonwealth.

The other concessions she was forced to make were more severe. She would be queen, but she would be bound to a parliament that would draft a constitution and keep her in check. Each state she added to her own would be represented in this parliament proportionally to its population, a deal which once again heavily favored the Turks. Those with experience toiling amidst the bureaucracy would be prime candidates for a new parliament, and there were whispers that Hector would be elected as the new Speaker.

Finally, the Turkish monopoly on air power would be maintained. The new government’s air force would be staffed by the same officer class that had always existed. It was far from homogenous, but there were many within these ranks that would be more loyal to their Turkish brethren than to Alexis herself.

There was no choice but to accept. After the resolution of the debacle with Tarik Abdil, Alexis Havery was officially crowned queen of the Sovereignty of Athens, with Eirene Lilliana de Lafayette serving as queen consort.

Alexis quickly discovered how little had changed.

Meeting in private with her confidants, she began to address the host of problems that had presented themselves to her, the most significant of which was the lingering detachment from Hyperion that remained within Ravengrad’s borders.

“The Hyperion units that Théoden lent to the Commonwealth were receiving orders directly from the Skywatch,” Janessa said, passing on a message from Lancaster while he managed business in the northwest. “When we lost contact with Montreal, I had their communications with Geneva severed. It didn’t matter much, since they were occupied fighting the mourners, but they only have the vaguest idea of what happened in Montreal. They still fly Hyperion colors, but they’ve been shattered into as many groups as the Commonwealth forces in this city.”

“Most of their airships followed the Skywatch in pledging loyalty to the Turkish State for lack of a better option. Thus, they are *de facto* under your control,” Teague added.

“What will you do with them?” Eirene inquired.

Alexis pondered this for a moment. “Having them killed or imprisoned would be bad, as we would risk losing the loyalty of the rest of the fleet, and they make up a great deal of our military might anyhow – removing them might not actually be possible.”

“And yet, we can’t emancipate like you did Lancaster. The war has all but ended, but we have no formal treaties with Hyperion.”

“Who needs formality? I can offer those still within the city a choice. They may remain with the Sovereignty, or they may return to Hyperion. A gesture of good faith. If they choose to stay, then they may be naturalized as citizens of the Sovereignty of Athens. If they choose to leave, then they will be allowed to do so but may not return until a peace treaty is signed and diplomatic relations are re-established between our two powers.”

“Isn’t that risking a great deal?” Teague asked.

“Yes, but, even if all of the units choose to leave, Théoden gains relatively little. Not many of the contingent he sent to support Lancaster during the Battle of Ravengrad are even still alive. It is better to cleanse ourselves of those who are not wholly loyal and slightly strengthen our rivals than to press unwilling militants into our service who might sabotage the country from the inside.”

“Fair enough. It’s your decision, in the end.”

“Anyhow,” Alexis continued, “the second most pressing issue is, of course, the economy, or, rather, the complete lack of one. The Turks had the most advanced economic model of any state in Ravengrad, but that’s only because they *had* a currency. We have no operational factories, a few farms still in use, and most people have regressed to a barter system. That will have to do for now. Our first priority should be to restore our industry. Suspend the Turkish currency until further notice and offer alternative incentives for factory workers and other laborers.”

“I don’t think that getting rid of the lira is a good idea,” Janessa countered. “It’s not like we’re dealing with cavemen; everyone knows how money works. Keep the system that the Turks have in place, and ye’ll help kick-start a modern economy that much faster by not encouraging the primitive barter.”

Alexis thought about this for a minute, then acceded. “Okay. I can work with that. I still think that we should offer something more real to the workers. The citizens we’ve acquired from Turkey know the lira, so they’ll be fine using it as currency. If we were to annex any other state, though, maybe their laborers won’t be content working for us since their shops won’t be able to convert to Turkish money immediately.”

“We can offer them land, social mobility, promotions within the state or the workforce. Plenty of possibilities,” Ian said.

“That could work. It better. With a larger fraction of our military intact, we have the advantage over Hyperion for now. But Théoden’s infrastructure is far superior to ours and did not suffer as badly during the war, so he will be able to out-produce us in the long run. Like, I’m not going to propose that we try to finish him off in one decisive, final battle – we all saw how badly that strategy went in Montreal – so we have to get our factories back on track as soon as possible. I’ll add this to the list of things to address in parliament, but right now we don’t have a long-term solution. Right now I’m just focused on making it so we can survive the inevitable next war.”

“You mentioned that there were three things you wanted to do when you summoned us here,” Janessa said. “So what’s up?”

“The least significant of my proposals thus far, but I think it is important to do this in order to legitimize the monarchy. I’d like to create a chivalrous order to commemorate the veterans of the war. This much I can do without having to go through parliament, as it pertains solely to the crown. Anybody with a claim to distinctive service in Ravengrad or Montreal that can be supported by evidence may be knighted and serve as my honor guard. Furthermore, a memorial shall be commissioned to commemorate the victims of the conflict.”

“May I make one request?” Eirene asked.

“Of course,” Alexis replied with a courteous nod.

“Let us honor the fallen too with posthumous induction into the chivalrous order. Not all of them, perhaps, as that is an uncountably large number, but those who died heroically. Let their brothers and sisters nominate a deceased comrade and we can review the evidence, as you’ve said, and if it lines up then, they get the honors just the same.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll see to that.”

“Do both sides of the battle count, or just the Peregrines and our allies?” Janessa asked.

“This is a new country, and many suffered during that war,” Alexis said without hesitation. “Qualification for knighthood will be considered regardless of previous allegiances. Whether they fought for the Commonwealth or in the Peregrine militia, these men and women should be honored for their valor.”

“And Hyperion?”

Alexis paused and closed her eyes to think. “…the Hyperion units who fought for the Commonwealth during the battle of Ravengrad are valid candidates,” she said. “I said that those who choose to remain will enjoy the benefits of citizenship, and that is one of them. They will be as instrumental in building our nation as the Skywatch or any other CHP organization. But the order should, logically, be for Sovereignty citizens only, yeah? Can’t have my enemies also serving as my honor guard.”

“Okay,” Janessa said. “So this is the Crown’s standing army. If Lancaster or Karahan decides to turn on us, though, I worry that we’ll not have enough manpower to resist them.”

“If they both turned on us, you’re right. If Karahan betrays us, we could beat him handily with Lancaster’s support, and vice versa. Like, it depends on the circumstances, but those hold true in terms of numbers and firepower. There’s always room to improve, though, so maybe we could bolster our ranks. Alexis paused. “Marcus? Montreal is gone, but is there anything at all we can do to bring the rest of the drones back online, or even make new mourners to serve in the army? We’ve got a few, but a full swarm would be better.

“The drones are one thing, but we mourners aren’t just something you can use as disposable soldiers. I imagine some would be willing to fight for your cause, but we’re not just…products to be made to order,” Lena protested.

“Besides, we don’t have the resources or facilities to do any of that,” Marcus said. The factories that are still functional here don’t have the proper equipment for mourner manufacturing. We lost the EAE black sites in Montreal and Johannesburg, and the ones in Stockholm and Madrid are not responding to any of our hails. The best we can do is cosmetics – we have enough equipment in the remnants of the Medical Administration campus to do facial reconstruction and so on, but that won’t help you.”

“And the drones?”

“The *Sunset Serenade* and the surviving Deathbearer corvettes have the right equipment to run drone wings, but, back in Montreal, the only way I could shut down the ones controlled by Leviathan was to remotely brick them. If we could salvage any of the chassis, then we could plug Lena or any of the other mourners into the *Serenade* and have her run a wing or two. Of course, that ultimately relies on Lancaster’s cooperation, so if he ever decides that the little experiment of putting you in power isn’t turning out the results he wants, then, well, he wouldn’t have any of the mourners to pilot them, but we wouldn’t have the right hardware.”

“Worth a shot anyway. At least it’s protection against Karahan.”

“One thing remains,” Eirene said. “Perhaps the assumption was that, since the Commonwealth was destroyed, the prohibition on ‘factionalism’ and labels has ended, but you might do something to make that official.”

Alexis sighed. “Now that I’m in his place, I can see why Lancaster’s logic appealed to him. It truly would be easier to control a homogeneous group rather than diverse amalgamation of interests, but I’ll not delude myself like he did into believing that I can cure humanity of bigotry just by whitewashing any semblance of individuality. Let people have their pride parades, their rallies, or what have you. Let them assemble under whatever banner they wish.” She paused for a moment, and then smiled. “I shall meet with the former leaders of the more religious factions in Ravengrad from before the unification. They will become the progenitors of new, *state-sanctioned* temples for their faiths. Let the masses have their spiritual communities, but, as they have been given life by the crown, we can remind them that they’re dependent on us for their continued existence. Easier to keep in check that way so we don’t have a demagogue getting uppity and trying to purge the infidels, or something.”

Eirene felt a slight unease at this, but still nodded and went to work.

Soon afterwards, Alexis was reminded that, despite their agreement, Cem Karahan and his staff were not her friends. Every measure that she tried to pass was vetoed in favor of a plan that had been drafted by the magistracy, or at least delayed until it could be thoroughly reviewed by the bureaucrats in parliament. The advantage of an absolute monarchy had been destroyed – decisive action weighed down by red tape – and a real constitution had yet to be drafted. More states joined the Sovereignty, which brought diversity to the governing body, but this only made the process less efficient as national rivalries fractured its unity.

The Sovereignty gradually expanded until it had taken over almost all of what had once been the principality of Ravengrad. Other than the Greek militants, the last bastion of stubborn resistance was the Catholic League, brought back from the dead and refusing to join forces with their old Turkish enemies even after more than a hundred years. Worse, they had re-established contact with the Papacy in Rome, somehow still hanging on to life after in an underground bunker, and His Holiness had urged them to retain their independence.

Alexis had moved into a small office in Ravengrad Tower, now that her territory officially included that locale. From this point, she could see in the distance the lands of those who rejected her rule.

“Idiots letting ancient rivalries stop progress,” Alexis muttered under her breath.

“Though I’d imagine that the Turks are just as happy to shut the League out of the Sovereignty as the League is to keep it distance,” Eirene said, lounging next to her. The two women were alone together, enjoying tea together to finish off the day.

“It shouldn’t be either of their choice to make. Lancaster put me into power. I am the rightful queen of this realm, and yet I am subverted at every turn by self-interested, sadistic bureaucrats.” She stepped through the broken doorway and onto the balcony. “I have no control over my country, and I can’t even control myself! Even after so long, I can’t sleep, not while so much is still up in the air. I hate it. I hate it, I hate it, I hate it! This is the best chance I’ve ever had to do some real good, and yet *nothing* has come of it! It won’t stand. It can’t. No fucking nationalist, no Papist, no Hyperion tyrant will be my master. Montreal was the last time anyone or anything gets the best of me!”

As Alexis sat down opposite her and began to cry, Eirene took a deep breath and looked into her girlfriend’s forehead. “Sunshine, listen to yourself – you can’t sleep, you suffer from nightmares in the night and compulsions in the day. Maybe this isn’t Nathaniel’s drugs wreaking havoc with your mind, maybe it’s just the stress getting to you, but you’re becoming obsessed with control and with vengeance. It isn’t healthy, so maybe you ought to see a doctor. I was a pretty messed up kid when I was young, and the Medical Admin helped a lot. Just give it a shot?”

“Okay, let me get a few things straight,” Alexis said, standing up and pacing around Eirene. “Firstly, my legitimacy as monarch is hanging by a thread as it is. If word got out that I was seeking mental help, then boom! No more queen Alexis. Yeah, there’s no media, no mass communication at all, so I could do it in secret for a while, but not forever. People would find out, and then the Sovereignty would be in the hands of my greedy and cruel parliamentarians. Secondly, I understand that you’re looking out for me, but what I’m doing, I am *not* doing because of *anything* Nathaniel fucking Aumeier did to me. He was a bastard and he really messed me up, I’ll admit that. When I woke up from that nightmare, I was terrified. I haven’t told anyone how much it hurts and I’m only telling you because you’re the only person I really trust. I know the echoes from Montreal are still there, lingering in my mind, but don’t you dare suggest that he’s controlling me. I will not let my own fears get the better of me, especially not with all the state on the line. That’s what he wanted. I will not let him win.”

“Okay, okay,” Eirene conceded, meekly lying back on her couch and closing her eyes. She knew that the subject needed to be dropped. “I suppose that’s respectable. You know yourself best.”

“The fact of the matter is, I have one last infection in need of cleansing. The parliament will block any attempts to incorporate the League, and the League will not join me with the Turks dominating parliament. And the Greeks are still a thorn in my side.”

Eirene crossed her legs and massaged her temples, keeping her eyes closed. She could scarcely believe what she was about to say. “There is an easy solution to that problem, you know,” she began. “I don’t want you to take that route, but it might become necessary.”

“You think I haven’t considered that? I don’t have the support from the army or from the people that I’d need to pull a stunt like that. The fleet would just stage another coup and I’d be deposed or dead in, like, seconds. I’ll have to wait until a better time and just suffer their insolence until then. I know what you’re going to suggest, and I want more than anything to do just that, but we need to wait for the right time.”

“I’m not suggesting that. Not yet. We should avoid violence if at all possible.”

“I know. I agree. But if push comes to shove…”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s what I meant. Just know that if you find that there’s really no other option, then you have my support.”

“I appreciate it.”

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Between the Catholic League and the Greek militants, the Greeks were the greatest threat to the fledgling Sovereignty, and so they were the first to fall.

“I *might* be able to broker some kind of treaty with the League if I didn’t have Stathopoulos’ men breathing down my neck,” Alexis said during a meeting with her advisors.

“As long as the Greeks hold Fort Peregrine, any diplomatic accords we make will be at risk,” Lancaster agreed.

Fort Peregrine – the old hospital in the outskirts Alexis and her friends had used as a base for so long during their time as a rebel militia. The region it looked over was officially called Liar’s Bluff, and it was owned by the Greeks, more or less. The shanty towns that had arisen amongst the ruins had not declared for any one side, but the Turkish spies under the command of a new, more loyal spymaster had uncovered countless informants and agents working for one Simon Stathopoulos, an old man in charge of the most violent Greek opposition who had refused any requests for parlay. He had made only brief denials of any militant activity, but it was obviously a lie. Alexis did not think she could reason with him, but she wanted to give diplomacy an honest effort.

“Well, we know where they are,” Lancaster continued. “The easiest solution would be an airstrike. Have our corvettes bomb the place with no warning. We would lose the fort and possibly see some collateral damage in Liar’s Bluff, but it would effectively end the insurgency as long as we made sure to take out Stathopoulos. The Greeks have some air defenses, but not enough to deter a full wing of corvettes. Or several.” He paused, then turned to Karahan with a look of mild disdain on his face. “My fleet took too many losses in Montreal. Do you think that your separatists could cover the deficit?”

Karahan was nervous over Lancaster’s proposal. He had pushed for Alexis to surrender her Black Fortresses and other superweapons to limit the Crown’s power, and she had instead transferred them to Lancaster. This had been satisfactory since she had allowed Lancaster and his fleet to retain their independence, but was it not Lancaster who had given *her* the Commonwealth’s corpse to revive in the first place? Could he not take it back and unify the Skywatch at any time? Either way, whether it was Alexis or Lancaster who was truly in charge, the operation being discussed was concerning. The Crown, or else the real power behind it, was about to obliterate a dissident faction with neither trial nor negotiation, and that established a worrying precedent.

But these were Greeks, not his own countrymen, and they were not even citizens of the fragile unity that was the Sovereignty of Athens. If destroying them would create a more stable realm in which he could vie for the power denied him under the Commonwealth, then so be it.

As it were, his concerns were ill-founded.

“I don’t want to just kill more people,” Alexis said. “I know that Stathopoulos has refused to negotiate so far, but he might be willing if he knows he’s up against annihilation. If you deploy your forces in such a manner without my permission, that would bode ill for our future relationship.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No, just a statement of fact. I will send a messenger to Stathopoulos and urge him to surrender. I’ll even allow Liar’s Bluff to retain its independence if he ceases all violent action against the Sovereignty and the Skywatch. We don’t need the Greeks. Once I have the Catholic League, all the rest of Ravengrad will be under my control. Good enough.”

Karahan grimaced again at the mention of the League, but he said nothing.

“Fine, then,” Lancaster said. “Send your message. He won’t listen. Or worse, he will, but will continue to promote militancy behind your back.”

“If he does, then we kill him. But I won’t order a massacre without knowing that we gave peace one more chance.”

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To everybody’s disappointment, Stathopoulos and his men elected not to go quietly. Alexis’ messenger did not return alive, and the Greek militants, alerted to their imminent annihilation, presumably pooled their defenses at Fort Peregrine and prepared for the onslaught. Alexis declined Lancaster’s offer to follow up her mistake with the airstrike he had originally planned; rather, she personally led her honor guard as they laid siege to the rebel garrison. It was necessary. Destroying the Greeks without any of her Black Fortresses or airships would show that the Crown was strong and did not depend on Parliament or its ‘friends’ in the Skywatch. There was little doubt as she and her troops drove north on their trucks that the casualties would be greater than if they called in an airstrike from Lancaster, but that was tolerable if it would deter her allies from attacking her later down the line.

The old hospital was shrouded in morning mist as the transport trucks arrived, pulling up to the hospital just as they had done following the Peregrines’ liberation from the Panopticon. The Greeks did not fire upon any of the vehicles, or the troops spilling out from them. Alexis watched the scenario unfold calmly from the command truck with Eirene by her side, her young lover having insisted upon watching the battle, even despite Alexis’ preference that she stay behind where it was safe.

In the end, it didn’t matter. When her honor guard breached Fort Peregrine’s front doors, she expected a firefight to break out, but not a single shot was fired.

“Sokolov, what are you seeing in there?” she asked. Sokolov had been made a captain of the honor guard for his meritorious service in Montreal and in Johannesburg before that – with Ian no longer worthy of her trust, and Bucharest having displayed questionable judgement, he was the best infantry leader she had.

“Nothing,” came the reply. “There’s no one in here. The place is empty.”

“A trap?”

“I don’t think so. We’ve swept most of the place, and if there’s an ambush, then there’s no place they could hide enough people to challenge us. And no way the Greeks could have gotten enough explosives to bomb us.”

“Still, don’t you think we should evacuate? If there’s no one inside, withdraw the troops and send in dogs to sniff out any traps. They don’t have to wipe out the whole army – one bomb in the right place could do some real damage. No point in losing people we don’t have to.”

“Very well, then. This still leaves us with the problem of a few hundred missing Greeks – once the dog squads give the place the all clear, I can have my people look for anything that might tell us where they buggered off to.”

“Yes, that’s concerning. We expected them to hunker down, but they seem to have fled, and that’s even worse. Now we have enemies that we don’t even know where they are. Fall back to our perimeter and we’ll clear the place out. It’s ours now.”

When the bomb squads had finally given Fort Peregrine the all-clear, Sokolov’s troops moved in and began their work, collecting any evidence Stathopoulos and his men had left behind. They were joined by Skywatch and Turkish forces who would be the primary garrison there once the investigation was complete.

Sokolov at first found very little of use. The Greeks had been thorough in their investigation, making sure to shred every important document before their exodus, but Sokolov, the captain of the Queen’s honor guard, was not about to be deterred by a shredder. Over the next few days, he put his men to work assembling the shreds of paper until something could be found that would point to the Greeks’ whereabouts, and he eventually produced a single, critical document.

“My intelligence officers are superior to the Turks that Alexis has inherited,” Sokolov read from Stathopoulos’ letter, carefully re-assembled by the honor guard. He continued to read as he walked from the lunchroom where the guardsmen had been working to the old Peregrine command center, where he would send a message to Alexis informing her of his discovery.

“They will be able to provide information directly from Ravengrad about her operations and defenses,” the letter continued. “In addition to this intelligence, if the Hyperion cult offers my men protection, they will fight loyally for Master Lockhart in the event of a declaration of war. All we ask in return is the restoration of Greek sovereignty upon the deposing of the tyrant Alexis Havery of Ravengrad. Athens will be a steadfast ally to Geneva.” That was the end of the typed text, but there was an additional note scribbled in pen at the bottom: “Alexis and her girlfriend are unmarried. While it is unlikely that we will be able to attack her at her inevitable wedding, she will undoubtedly concentrate a great deal of security at whichever venue she chooses for the ceremony. This would be a perfect opportunity to strike a key target elsewhere – I will keep you informed if you wish. Think about it.”

Sokolov put the letter down on the table next to the computer console and prepared to compose a message to Alexis, telling her to meet him at Fort Peregrine so he could inform her of Stathopoulos’ treachery. As he started to type, a young Turkish man stepped through the door and called for Sokolov’s attention.

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When Alexis went to meet with the captain of her honor guard, she did so with Janessa and Ian alongside her. She was still loath to trust Ian, but Janessa continued to vouch for them, and he had shown no signs of betrayal. Giving him low-stakes work while keeping him in her sight was the best way to see whether he was worthy of any more, she felt.

Sokolov had asked for her to come to the old command center, where he had a message from Stathopoulos that would “be of great importance.” Why he could not have brought it to her at her own headquarters Alexis did not understand, but it was not a long journey, and it was as good an excuse as any for another brief excursion away from the mire of Ravengrad.

When she arrived in the room, however, she was greeted by four Turkish gunmen, all with their weapons drawn and ready to fire. Within two seconds, Alexis knew what was happening, but Ian and Janessa were even faster and had drawn their own weapons. The Queen and her guards wore barriers, but so did the Turks, and both sides quickly realized the futility to continuing to shoot at each other. Janessa hurled her rifle at one of the Turks, stunning him as Ian lept forwards and grabbed the man’s neck, twisting his head until he could hear the bone crack. The remaining Turks drew their swords and lunged at Alexis, who dodged the attack and put enough distance in between her and her attackers to draw her own blade. The men attempting to assassinate her were sloppy and uncoordinated, rushing at her one at a time as she moved with much more elegance and directed their motion. She could not stand against three at once for much longer, but Ian and Janessa were quick to rejoin the fray, and they were no less skilled than she. Janessa kicked one of the men in the groin, once again providing a stunned target for Ian to gore with his bayonet as Alexis plunged her sword, ceremonial but far from dull, into the belly of the third man. The fourth and final assassin, now outnumbered and outclassed, staggered backwards in shock as Ian charged at him, dodging his clumsy attempts at survival long enough to cut his throat with a knife, his only remaining weapon after dropping his gun during his grapple with the first assassin.

The room and the clothes of those still alive in it were stained with blood. Alexis looked around at the corpses of the people who had just tried to kill her.

“You might have kept him alive for interrogation,” she said.

Janessa frowned. “Why? Is it that hard to guess who sent them?”

“Karahan, I’m sure, but we need better proof than ‘common sense.’ There’s the possibility that they were the late Magnus’ people, or maybe Théoden’s. I imagine that both of them have ethnic Turks in their employ that they would be willing to sacrifice if it forms a rift between me and my vassals.”

“That’s my theory,” Ian said. “It does make more sense. See, these guys were incompetent. If Karahan wanted you dead, there would be much better ways to do it, and he should know that. Can’t tell now, though, them being dead and all. It would have been better to keep them alive, yes, but your safety is the priority.”

Alexis smiled and nodded in gratitude. “No matter. I wonder if Sokolov is still alive, or if that letter was even real. If he lives, I’ll have a few choice words for allowing this to happen while his troops were still on guard here.

Sokolov was indeed still alive, and the rest of the honor guard found him tied up in a nearby closet.

“Report, Captain,” Alexis said sternly as Ian untied him. “Why did they leave you alive?”

He looked at her for a second, dazed, before coughing and beginning to speak. “They tried to make a deal,” he muttered. “My life in exchange for passing you false information. Burned the letter I said we’d recovered so that there’s no proof.”

“I suppose I could protect you if you don’t take their offer. Unless we can find more evidence, though, I don’t know how I can trust anything you say. But I will listen, and take it into consideration, and make sure that you are not punished. You have my word on that.”

“Like you said, there’s no proof of this without the intact letter. But it claimed that the Greeks had run north to join Théoden’s forces, and that they would pass intelligence to him from their agents left in Ravengrad. Believe me or not, that’s the entirety of what it said.”

“I believe you. I’m not sure how I can act on that information in a way that will make whoever sent the assassins know that you let the cat out of the bag, but I’ll send people to protect you nonetheless. Unfortunately, I can’t have you as my Captain any longer, as long as there is any possibility you might be compromised. I wish I didn’t have to do this – you deserve so much more – but you must understand that it’s just business.”

“I understand. I appreciate the protection, but that won’t be necessary,” Sokolov said with a curt nod. “They can kill me if they like. If I’m losing my positon, then there’s really nothing left for me here. Let them come. I’d rather be slain for serving my commander than wallow in self-pity, guarded like a coddled baby.”

“If that’s what you wish,” Alexis said. Sokolov’s nonchalance about the threat against his life concerned her. Maybe he truly had just given up and was ready to die, but it was equally possible that he did not fear retaliation because he had complied with their demands and fed her false information. She had known him for some time, but not known him well – at least not enough to tell whether he had betrayed her.

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Alexis made her final maneuver not long afterwards, far sooner than she had anticipated. To her credit, she did not strike the first blow. Hector, Karahan, and the other parliamentarians had staged a coup, taking control of the capitol building and refusing to allow any Crown forces into downtown Ravengrad. Most of Alexis’ honor guard formed a perimeter in response, but were unable to penetrate the parliament’s defensive line. She needed air power and mobile armor if she was going to retake what was hers, and she knew exactly where she would find them.

“Grand Admiral, we have a situation,” Alexis said as she and Lancaster met in private.

“The parliamentary coup, yes. I expect you want my help taking them down. What makes you think we can challenge them now? Why not attack them earlier?”

“Because they just now made a mistake. With the parliament no longer a purely Turkish entity, many are concerned that the ex-Skywatch fleet will be more loyal to Turkey than to Ravengrad, and have begun to purge officers they believe have problematic loyalties.”

“Karahan couldn’t keep the peace with his own people?”

“The Skywatch never respected him. You made sure of that. They only followed him in the absence of any other authority, and they’ve abandoned him now that he’s no longer necessary. In response to the purges, most of the officers have declared neutrality in our little dispute. If we prove ourselves the real power in this city, they’ll follow our lead from here on out.”

“Good, good,” Lancaster said. “Yes, I can help. This doesn’t exactly help either of our interests, having that band of idiots in any sort of power, but you need me far more than I need you. I want compensation.”

“Like what?”

“When we take Karahan and Pendleton down, you’ll have a lot of tanks and ships just lying around. I want one-third of them. Not enough to challenge you outright – do the math yourself if you want – but enough to offer assurance that you won’t use your newfound power to subjugate the Skywatch.”

“Deal. You give me the armored support I need to take the capitol and, in return, I’ll give you one-third of the vehicles we capture.”

\* \* \*

The Crown’s army made its move in the early morning. Alexis led her army from the rear to avoid undue risk, but she needed someone to lead the vanguard as well. Ian was out of the question, Bucharest was far from ideal, Lancaster would be at the front of his own army, and Sokolov was now compromised. She had asked Janessa, but she had refused. Alexis’ army was suffering from a dearth of competent commanders.

The most obvious solution was for her to take point, and someone like Teague would then lead the rear. This put her at risk, but Alexis had one more trick left to play, one that she had learned from Magnus himself. It would have to do.

Those soldiers loyal to parliament, wanting for morale it seemed, gave ground easily under pressure from the Skywatch tanks. There was almost no fighting at all as the miniature civil war went underway, and, soon, the Crown was in range of the parliamentary building itself.

“Hold your fire,” Alexis said to her troops assembled outside the hastily-erected brutalist façade that was parliament. “There doesn’t need to be any more killing. I’m going in to talk with Hector. If we’re lucky, he might listen to reason.”

“What if you’re killed?” one of the soldiers to her right asked.

“Then you go on and kill them all right back. I’ll be fine, though – don’t worry yourselves about me.”

“Uh, okay. Whatever you say.”

As Alexis stepped forwards, slowly climbing the stairs to the parliamentary chamber, the rebel soldiers stepped aside to let her pass. They would allow her to negotiate, which was expected. If diplomacy failed, then they stood to gain a valuable hostage, or so they thought.

“Havery,” Hector said, watching Alexis enter the chamber.

“Pendleton.”

“You came alone. Risky. What are you planning?”

“To stop this coup. Unify the city. Protect my people. What, pray tell, are *you* planning?”

“Almost the same thing.”

“But with a few critical differences.”

“Yes. I suppose this is largely my fault. Teague and I, we set you on this path. I can hardly blame you for wanting to walk to the end. Monarchies, though, they’re not good for anybody. I didn’t start this whole affair to wind up chafing under a dictator’s boot.”

“The monarchy is a temporary measure. You studied Rome. Emergency powers shouldn’t be a foreign concept to you,” Alexis said.

“They’re not,” Hector replied. “Sadly, even the Romans devolved into tyrants. I’d have hoped that part of my lessons would have stuck, but it seems not. In modern times, ‘emergency powers’ tend to precede autocracy. We fought an entire war for this, remember? What happened to the Alexis who burned Ravengrad to stop the very thing she’s now become?”

“I don’t intend to keep this power. Lancaster gave me the skeleton of the Commonwealth as a test, to see if our Revolution could actually sustain a proper nation after we won.”

“I see. So you decided to try and impress the Director by emulating him?”

“What else was I supposed to do?” Alexis asked. “He gave me the tattered remains of a failed state. A bit of brute force was necessary to fit the pieces together. You wouldn’t even have this parliament if it weren’t for my efforts, and I was entirely willing to let you have your power up until you decided to cut me out of the deal entirely.”

“Yes, well, we decided that the monarchy was no longer necessary. We knew that you wouldn’t step out of power quietly – thank you for proving our point, by the way – and so we did what needed to be done. You now have the chance to make up for your mistakes and *let go*. I suggest you take it.”

“Or what? You’ll have me guillotined? You have no power. My forces have surrounded the building, and the Turkish fleet has abandoned your parliament. You stand alone, Hector. Give up.”

“We may stand alone, but history will remember that we stood,” Hector said, his face taking on a grim expression.

“You can’t possibly hope to beat my army with these meager holdouts. You’ll be a footnote at best. Is that really what you want? I used to think of you as a friend…”

“Fortunately, we don’t need to beat your army. Just you,” Karahan interrupted from behind, shooting Alexis in the back of the head.

The “Queen” stumbled a bit, the hole in her proxy’s skull sparking as the electric wiring inside sparked and hummed. She turned around and looked at Karahan, what remained of her disfigured face twisted into a sad smile.

“Oh, fuck,” Hector and Karahan said in unison.

\* \* \*

“A few forces loyal to parliament have holed up in other administrative locales,” Danica reported to Alexis after the killing had concluded. “We’re in the process of rooting them out, but it will take some time. Ravengrad Tower is completely under control, so the Queen Consort and her retinue are safe, don’t worry about that. Fort Sophia has declared neutrality, as you expected – we’ll have the capital cleared out soon enough.”

“Good. Once all of Ravengrad is under the crown’s control, you’ll have your ships, just as I promised. In the meantime, see that Hector, Cem, and the other survivors are safely in prison. Can’t have them trying anything funny. ”

“Yes, your majesty,” Danica said with a curtsey.

From her room in the tower, Eirene could hear the violence in the streets and began to worry that she had only fed her lover’s growing megalomania. Life went on.

Théoden and his advisors, meanwhile, had encountered little resistance in their rise to power throughout the West. Already in firm control of Geneva, Bern, and smaller satellite territories, he easily added the newly-independent principalities of Stockholm and Madrid to his theocratic empire. Capitalizing on the Universalist faith’s growing popularity before and during the war, the Master of Hyperion became a new messiah to many, worshipped for his valiant defense against the mourners that scourged the old Commonwealth and for the “gifts” he bestowed upon the devout in the form of fresh food and other well-needed supplies straight from Switzerland.

“Théoden’s demonizing ye as some kind of antichrist. It’s quite amusing,” Janessa told Alexis one day.

“And why would he do that?” Alexis asked. She didn’t truly care. Whatever Théoden told his slaves about her was of little consequence as long as it didn’t start another war.

“Because ye were responsible for destroying most of humanity. Ye started the war, first of all, and then ye – or, at least, your side – were the ones who decided to employ the mourners who killed at least as many as the battle did when they went crazy like ‘everyone should have seen coming.’ Quoth he, at any rate. And then there’s the heresy, the pollution of pure human intelligence with artificial intelligence.”

“Does he know about the true mourners?”

“Doubtful. He knows that an AI is being used, but there’s no way that rat bastard could have caught wind of what Marcus told us at Montreal. He doesn’t know how advanced they really are.”

Alexis sighed and stood up from her desk, sitting down instead on the comfiest couch the Sovereignty could. “Sit,” she said, gesturing for Janessa to join her.

“If it pleases you,” Janessa said. The couch felt soft beneath her, but it was hardly luxury furniture. Better than standing, she supposed.

“Let me make something clear – I didn’t destroy humanity any more than the so-called ‘storms’ did. It still lives. And even the damage done was hardly my responsibility alone. Magnus and his idiotic ‘Leviathan’ party forced our hand, not to mention the stupid policies adopted by the Commonwealth as a whole. I don’t like the perpetual state of chaos that’s reigned since it fell, but I’m not sad that the old government’s gone. We can make something far better than Magnus, Lancaster, or Théoden ever could.”

“Right. And you’d have us follow your lead? You’ll forgive me if I don’t have the utmost confidence in you after all we’ve seen. I want a better world as much as anybody. I want my children to grow up without the specter of violence looming over them. But I just can’t agree that you’re doing this in the best way.”

“I know. It’s not over yet. Once I’ve made something decent out of this mess, then maybe I’ll open diplomatic channels with Geneva, or something. Like, I don’t know, maybe I can do with Théoden what I did with Hector and Karahan.”

“I have my doubts that it’ll be that easy,” Janessa said.

“Yeah,” Alexis muttered. “Yeah, probably not.”

By the end of many more months, Alexis’ kingdom had achieved much of the stability it craved. Following the purge of parliament, Alexis had replaced that institution with her own council and put them to work restoring the country. Hundreds of hydroponic farms along the coast filtered water from the Aegean for the creation of a bucolic agricultural district, turning Widow’s Walk from a demolished slum into a lengthy stretch of shiny new greenhouses teeming with life. The roads were cleared and the most important buildings repaired, flying the new flag of the Sovereignty – Deep red with a white silhouette of a Peregrine falcon’s claw stamped in the center, an inversion of the militia’s old flag.

This standard stood as far north as Liar’s Bluff, the old borough of the principality of Ravengrad where the original Peregrine base had been. Beyond that were uninhabited ruins and the territories that had thrown their lot in with Hyperion.

\* \* \*

Alexis and Eirene were chatting on the Grand Balcony when they were approached by Jacob Lancaster.

“Grand Admiral, it’s a surprise to see you here,” Alexis said. She stood up from her chair and returned the salute he offered her.

“Your majesties,” Lancaster replied, following the salute with a fake bow of respect. “I can’t say I like what you’ve made of my Commonwealth, but I will admit that you’ve done a decent job of…whatever it is you’ve done.”

“Thank you, Lancaster,” Alexis said as the two drew closer. He was noticeably taller than her and twice her age, dressed in the full Skywatch regalia befitting his position while she wore a strikingly beautiful blue robe trimmed with gold. Further back, Eirene wore the same outfit made not from cerulean, but from blood red.

“I don’t come for pleasantries,” the Grand Admiral replied. “I simply come with information. My scouts operating in the northwest have scouted a number of settlements hitherto undiscovered by the Skywatch, and some collaboration between them and your intelligence forces suggests that the Sovereignty had also been unaware of their existence.”

“Alright, that’s good to know,” Eirene said. “Why deliver the message personally, though?”

Lancaster ignored her. “Their numbers are surprisingly high; we believe there to be at least two thousand individuals living in separate conclaves in Liar’s Bluff, clustered around your old fort. What’s most worrying, however, is that we have sighted Hyperion flags flying from many of their camps.”

“What? Are you certain? How could we have possibly missed them settling right on our doorstep?”

“I do not believe they are Hyperion settlements, but rather existing tribes of refugees who ended up in the northern wastelands during the diaspora following the fall of Ravengrad. Théoden either annexed them or convinced them to join Hyperion. I can see either option as plausible.”

“Why would he want to take them, though?”

Lancaster frowned. “A staging point for invasions of the Sovereignty. Maybe listening posts for better intelligence on our nations. It can’t be good, from what little I know about Théoden.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Eirene said. “If he had hostile intent, why fly his flags so proudly? Wouldn’t he want to be stealthier about it? I think it’s equally possible that he’s testing our integrity. Remember that his forces have been devastated by the war, even though he’s gained the civil guard units of Stockholm and Montreal, and that our intelligence indicates that he desires a peaceful resolution just as badly as we do. Perhaps this is not merely a provocation, but a dip into our waters to see gauge our intent.”

“He *nuked* Montreal!” Lancaster protested. “The man is completely unreasonable. You ascribe noble intentions to this obvious affront to your own Sovereignty! Though I wouldn’t expect one as young as yourself to understand this.”

Eirene frowned, but refused to dignify his insult with a response. She had gotten enough of that from Hector, but even he had apologized. Before the conversation could continue, however, they were interrupted by two more arrivals: Teague and Janessa. The former lagged behind the latter, his age keeping him weary as Janessa sprinted urgently ahead.

“Alexis! You need to hear this!” Janessa shouted.

“If this is about the Hyperion settlements, then, like, Lancaster just finished yelling at us about them,” Alexis said.

“Well, it is,” Teague said, “but I doubt this is what the Grand Admiral has told you. We have received an ultimatum directly from Hyperion command. Just now. Théoden Lockhart himself has a message for you.”

“You what? Did he, like, really send us a message? What about?”

Janessa looked grim, the scarred side of her mouth twisting into a frown. “He demands that the security forces massed along Liar’s Bluff withdraw immediately because they put ‘undue pressure’ on the ‘devout citizens’ of his theocratic state.”

“What a bloody joke,” Alexis swore quietly.

Even Lancaster seemed incensed. “Our forces were already there when he claimed the land! None of this is his anyway, hell, not even Stockholm or Madrid belongs to him. Rightfully, it’s all ours.”

“If you’d be so kind as to not shoot the messenger,” Janessa said, wary of the anger in Lancaster’s eyes, “but he claims that the settlers north of Liar’s Bluff were already alarmed by our militarism, and that, as they have pledged loyalty to him, it is his responsibility to address their concerns.”

“That is completely out of the question,” Alexis said. “He’s full of shit, and I’m going to call his bluff.” She laughed. “How appropriate. I want you to issue a counter-ultimatum, tell him to withdraw every single Hyperion agent from the settlements or we will forcibly root them out.”

“What?” Eirene asked, startled by Alexis’ order.

“I don’t want a war any more than the rest of you, but we need to tell Théoden that our desire for peace doesn’t mean we can be pushed around like toys. Lancaster’s right, it’s a move blatantly designed to be provocative and test our willingness to stand up for ourselves, and if we don’t want him getting any bright ideas that he could roll over us without resistance, then we need to take a stand. If those people want to stand with Hyperion, then they can go to Geneva and worship all they want. That land is part of the principality of Ravengrad, so it belongs to us and us alone.”

“Very well. We will need to draft a formal ultimatum. Do we have any scribes who might be up for such a task?”

Teague coughed, clearing his throat to speak. “Actually, I recently was approached by Arthur Jackson. Remember, the author we used to trace Fairchild’s whereabouts? He had a proposal to start a new Media Administration to stand alongside the others. I don’t doubt that he has some interest in acquiring a vote on the council, but perhaps we should consider his offer.”

“He writes fiction.”

“Yes, but his command of language nevertheless makes him a decent candidate for such a position, should it be created. It would mean less work for us if we delegate tasks such as propaganda and diplomatic texts to an administration rather than draft them ourselves.”

“Fine, having a government administration in charge of the media would give us direct control over the flow of information,” Alexis said. “Keep sensitive intelligence out of the public eye and enemy hands, but I want final say on anything he writes on behalf of Athens.”

The crowd nodded in unison and dispersed, leaving Alexis and Eirene to their relaxation, which was admittedly more tense knowing the diplomatic showdown that was about to occur.

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Nathaniel received the counter-ultimatum drafted by Arthur Jackson one day later and frowned, clenching the paper in his fist. “I expected as much. We should have our forces collect all the Liar’s Bluff settlers and withdraw from the region effective as soon as possible. Charlotte, you should travel to Ravengrad and deliver a message to Queen Alexis, tell her that we will comply with her demands. I’ll not have another war while my fleet lies in ruins. An artist cannot paint without his brushes.”

“Yes, Master, but you can’t let her get away with ordering your population around like that! Surely she should also have to comply with some of yours,” Charlotte said.

“I misjudged her strength of will and the strength of her army,” Théoden said. “Let us take the moral high ground and concede, for now. Putting innocent civilians’ lives at risk over a trivial territorial dispute would be imprudent. Even Nathaniel agrees.”

“Fine. Do I have permission to gather intelligence on their defenses while I’m there delivering your message?” Charlotte asked.

“Yes, of course. Come back with any information that you can.”

“I still don’t like letting the Sovereignty walk all over our citizens like that,” Scipio complained.

“Alexis does have a point,” Théoden said flatly. “For us to suddenly claim land so close to their territory was definitely suspicious, and it may have been unnecessary to demand the de-armament of their border. We pushed her, and she pushed back. Such is politics.”

Nathaniel interrupted him. “But I needed to gauge their level of militarism and willingness to do what is necessary to protect their people. I now know all that I need to know. Withdraw our citizens and troops from the area, and as a gesture of goodwill include a proposal that civilian goods and services should be traded between our two nations. You all have your orders.”

“Yes, Master,” came the reply.

And so it was that the Liar’s Bluff incident, the first diplomatic interaction between Hyperion and the Sovereignty of Athens, was resolved peacefully. It was a tentative peace that would put great strain on relations between the two powers, but it was peace nonetheless.

“Your gambit paid off,” Teague said to Alexis once Charlotte had departed after giving his message. “I can’t say that I supported your plan, but it seems that you were right once again. For now, at least. If this tension escalates into war, then God help us all.”

“God help us all, indeed, if he hasn’t taken offense at our previous abandonment of His light. I don’t know if I made the right choice. All I can tell is that the situation is resolved for now, so we can proceed with business as usual. Tell me, do we know much about Hyperion’s military strength?”

“No specific numbers, but based on our analysis of Montreal and estimates of losses during that battle, their fleet is smaller than the Skywatch, though their commanders and weapons are more suited for air-to-air combat. Lancaster reports that he is training his officers to be more effective in such situations.”

“And on the ground?”

“We have an advantage there. His infantry and armor did a number on ours during the battle of Montreal, but that was more due to circumstance than to strategy, and much of his army was lost in the bombing while a good portion of ours was either still in Ravengrad or was able to evacuate the city. By not scrapping the Black Fortresses, we maintain an especially potent weapon against his forces with proper support from the Legions or the Skywatch.”

Alexis smiled. “Good, good. Now, I think I should be off. I’ve got a date with Eirene later tonight, and I need to get ready.”

“You’ve got a date?” Teague said with mock incredulity.

“Well, she doesn’t quite know it yet, but yeah, I’m gonna see if she wants to go out tonight. I mean, there’s not much else to do now that the issue with Liar’s Bluff has been resolved, so why not have some fun?”

“Fair enough. Go out and live a little; you’ve earned it.”

“I sure will,” Alexis said as she went to see Eirene. Her young compatriot was not in the tower, instead idly watching the construction of what would become their new palace. The distance from the tower to the palace was not long, so it took Alexis only a few minutes to meet the girl she hoped to go out with that night.

“Oh, hey, ‘Lex,” Eirene said as her girlfriend sat next to her on a bench within Fort Sophia’s main plaza. “So this is where we’re going to live from now on, is that right? It’s quite impressive.”

“Yep. I’m not quite used to being, you know, queen,” Alexis said as she watched the construction with Eirene. The palace was a massive addition to the Ravengrad cityscape, built next to what had once been the Panopticon but was now the epicenter of a jagged network of canyons. Cranes lifted concrete blocks into place around the central staircase that led to a complex of antechambers, galleries, and other rooms.

“Well, I, for one, am excited,” Eirene said. “It’s not too often that one gets a chance to take a monarch to bed.”

“That’s funny, because I’ve been with a goddess going on a year now.”

“You flatter me. Though, really, we haven’t actually been together like that for some time now. You’re always too busy or too tired to share a bed with me in anything but the most literal sense, and even during the day we don’t see each other very often. I mean, I don’t need us attached at the hip twenty-four seven, ‘cause I can take care of my own needs and all, but I’d like to see my girlfriend for more than an hour a day.”

“I know, and I’m sick of it too,” Alexis said. “We had a lot of time together in Montreal, but even that was too stressful to be enjoyable, other than a few good moments. But we’re free now, so why not go on a nice date tonight?”

“A date? You’d make me wait for the good bit?”

“The date *is* the good bit,” Alexis said, rolling her eyes.

“Hah. Fine. Where are we going?”

“There’s a theatre not far from here that’s showing some of the films we were traded by Hyperion. I thought we might go see something there, and then go out to dinner. And *then* we can return home and have a proper night in bed, alright?”

“I do like the sound of that plan. Tell me when and where, and I’ll see you there.”

Alexis didn’t actually know the address of the theatre. In hearing about the distribution of the goods from Hyperion, she had learned more or less how to get where she needed to go, but no specific instructions. “Just meet me at the bottom of the palace staircase in an hour,” she said. “We’ll walk together.”

“Okay. See you then, I suppose,” Eirene said.

Alexis met her date at the appointed hour. It was dusk and snowing lightly despite the early days of March. To counter the cold she wore a cozy blue turtleneck with a black jacket, complete with a dull scarf. Her hair, which she had let grow out, was pulled back into a flame-red ponytail. Eirene, meanwhile, was dressed far too lightly for the weather, in a knee-length pastel skirt, though she too wore a dark jacket. Taking Eirene in her arm, Alexis led her to the theatre.

The shows at the theatre were naturally well-attended events, with folks from all walks of life flocking to the re-emergence of popular entertainment. The presence of royalty at the theatre meant entailed some manner of additional security, but there was at least enough space to be comfortable.

“So, what are we seeing?” Eirene asked.

Alexis shrugged. “I have no idea. None of these titles are familiar. Let’s just get tickets to one and see what happens.”

“Fine by me.”

As Alexis moved to open the door to the theatre, it was opened ahead of her by the father of a family of four, all of whom stepped aside to allow the couple to pass.

“Thank you,” Alexis said, nodding as she walked past. Eirene followed suit.

“Did you just hold the door for the Queen?” they could hear the mother ask as they moved on. Looking over her shoulder, Alexis saw the father shrug before letting the rest of his family through and closing the door behind them all.

“Guess we shouldn’t be surprised,” Eirene said. “Not like there’s much of a media right now to report the change in regime. I’d bet that half the people around here don’t even know that there’s no more Commonwealth or that the entire Skywatch up and left a while ago. They probably know there was some fighting in the capital when you took power, but not who the players were.”

“You’re probably right. Most folks just…surviving until I rolled in with what’s left of the Skywatch at my heels. Doesn’t matter to them who’s in power, as long as I keep getting them fed, clothed, and housed. Honestly, I don’t mind it staying that way, but we should still see about setting up a way to control the flow of information.”

“Why?”

“They won’t be content to wallow in ignorance forever. Word will get out, and the common folk will want to know more about what’s going on. Better we have an agency to placate their desires in a way that cuts out potentially dangerous rumors than to let them spread whatever lies might crop up.”

“I…suppose, but can we not talk about this right now? This is supposed to be a fun date, not another political chat.”

“Of course. I just couldn’t help myself, sorry.”

Eirene smiled and forgave her, and then led her into the theatre where they would watch some aged film about twenty-third century police antics. Considering that the two of them had never watched a fictional drama in their entire lives, it was decently entertaining, replete with action, humor, and intrigue. They eventually went out to eat and enjoyed a pleasant meal together, free from worry about the stresses of statecraft, before heading back to relax.

“Oh, God, I’m still sore from all the stress of dealing with that idiot, Théoden,” Alexis complained as she sat down next to Eirene on the velvety bed.

“Listen, ‘Lex,” Eirene laughed. “No need for subtlety about it. You can just ask for a back rub. Just lose the shirt and let me take care of you.”

Alexis did as she was told and let Eirene work on her, feeling her soft palms press against her shoulders. With each press, she felt some of the tension pour out of her. For several minutes this continued until the young queen had had her fill and lay down on the bed next to Eirene.

“That felt amazing,” she said happily. “You want me to return the favor, or maybe something else?”

“Maybe.” Eirene paused as she looked around the room and noticed something strange. “Hey, what’s that, the little doll on the shelf over there?”

Alexis turned over underneath the soft fabric and looked where Eirene was pointing. The little doll she had rescued from her home in Widow’s Walk before its destruction lay on the mantelpiece, still stained with blood from when it had shared a bag with Magnus’ severed head.

“It’s a bit grim-looking because of the war, but, believe it or not, it was a gift from my mother,” she said.

“Oh.”

“Yeah. When I was little, I hated that stupid doll. She hardly had money for toys, but mother got it for me after father died to give me something to fill the time with other than crying. I wanted nothing more than to break it, to tear its limbs off and throw them all into the sea, but I never did. Never wanted mother to know that her gift was unwanted.”

“Then why keep it after all this time?”

“That was just the beginning. As time went on, little Alexis started to actually become attached to the thing. She would never replace my father, but I started to like having her around. She was my friend.”

Eirene thought about this story and felt slightly disturbed. It couldn’t have been healthy for Alexis as a child to have tried to replace her father with a simple toy. At least the girl had turned out well-adjusted enough, Eirene supposed.

Maybe. Perhaps Alexis’ darker demons, her obsessions and compulsions and paranoia were temporary fractures inflicted by the horrors of war that they had all experienced, or perhaps they had always been there and Eirene had never noticed. Thinking back, she did not know if she could tell the difference.

## Chapter 21 – Summit at Nicaea

*“Ensure that the younger generations are instructed in both ancient and modern philosophy. That way, when they assume command, they will be able to call upon centuries of previous thinkers’ ideas to better make decisions. The context and details may evolve, but a good leader can adapt old concepts to a new scenario.”*

* *Théoden Lockhart, in* the Hyperion Manifesto

“The rest of them need to know about the true nature of the mourners!” Eirene protested. “Ian wasn’t there to hear it, and the citizens of the Sovereignty have the right to know what’s been made.”

“Do you think they’re ready to just accept this?” Alexis asked. “It’s going to be, like, the biggest issue in probably all of human history. For centuries people have argued without end about things like abortion, contraception, and homosexuality, so can you imagine the absolute shitstorm that’s going to go down if we go public with Lena now? What people will think?”

“Though I would like for my daughter to be able to openly disclose her true nature, I must agree with Alexis,” Marcus said. “This is too major an issue for us to tackle right now. However, I also believe that Lena deserves some say in the matter.”

“As queen of Ravengrad, I must prioritize the stability of the realm, but I will hear her out. It’s my call, in the end, though, remember that.”

“As if you’d be able to stop her if she really wanted to.”

Lena stepped forwards and, naturally not needing to clear her throat, immediately began to speak. “I recognize that there are many who would see me as an abomination. At worst, they would try to kill me. With the imminent destruction of the servers in Montreal, I was forced to transfer my mind in its entirety into this body, limited as its processing may be. There are no more backups for me. It would be dangerous to go public now.”

“So you support Alexis’ plan to withhold the knowledge, then,” Eirene said.

“In part, I sympathize with her reservations, but I also really wish to stop hiding what I am. I just think that, especially when I am so weak, putting myself and the few others like me at risk of mob violence would be…imprudent.”

“Not to mention the schism we would be at risk of creating amongst our newly-unified people,” Alexis said. “We have delicately managed to quell the hostilities forged by nationalism without completely suppressing it like the Commonwealth did. We’ve made great progress. I’ll not have solved one crisis just to introduce another.”

Marcus, despite his earlier words, seemed disappointed at this outcome. “I want only the best for my family. Julia is doing well, after all that she’s been through, but I must also see to it that Lena’s life is comfortable. I deliberately brought her into the world, and, thus, her well-being is my responsibility.”

“Alexis,” Lena said after some silence, “what do you think about me personally? I know that you do not wish for me to reveal myself to the public, but, as a person, if you even think of me as such, what is your opinion?”

“I…I’m not sure. I *want* to think no different of you, but the undeniable differences make it hard for me to do so. Admittedly, had Marcus not said anything I doubt I would have noticed a difference. I’m really just musing aloud at this point – if I were fundamentally religious, I doubt that I would accept your being any kind of human because no *man* could instill real sentience into a creation, but I am not religious. I suppose that, from my perspective, that you can react to situations, express emotions, and have original thoughts means that you’re human enough for me. You could just be a clever fake, but, if I can’t tell the difference, then I’m going to err on the side of caution. I’d rather be deceived than be cruel.”

Lena relaxed somewhat. “That’s nice to hear, I suppose. Still, there are many questions that even I don’t know the answer to. Everyone seems to have their own opinions.”

“What we could do,” Eirene said, “is have a session of the council about the issue. Even if you think that having Lena come out publically is a bad idea, we need more opinions on the matter. I imagine that, even among our number, there is dispute as to what she even *is*, whether we can call her kind human or not, and whether the outcome of that question has any bearing on her rights and role within the Sovereignty. I doubt that we’re going to come to a satisfying conclusion, but we need some kind of input from people less…personally involved, if we’re to ensure that Lena’s coming out can be as smooth as possible. If nothing else, we can have the legal mess sorted out so the philosophers can do their thing in, well, not a warzone.”

“That,” Alexis said, “just might be what we need. There are people in the government that we can trust, people who have no connections to Madelyn-Rash or the Defense Administration. An assembly of magistrates can discuss what to do with Lena and her friends while we use Jackson and the Media Administration to keep it under wraps.”

“Who would attend, though? Those with administrative votes on the council, sure, but what about non-official positions like the old Peregrine commanders?” Teague asked.

“The council chamber in the Tower has more than enough room for all of us here, plus the administrative offices,” Alexis said. “Don’t worry, my old friend, you’ll be there if you want to be.”

“That’s fine, but…”

“But what?”

“Nevermind. It’s not important, I suppose.”

“I suppose I should inform the councilors, then,” Janessa said, beginning to leave the office where her compatriots were all clustered.

“Wait. There’s something else I wanted to say,” Alexis said.

“What?”

“I think we should invite a delegation from Hyperion.”

Of all the bewildered reactions, Marcus’ was the most extreme. “That son-of-a-bitch Théoden *nuked* my city and destroyed my project, along with almost all the databases needed to rebuild it! All that knowledge, all those valuable factories, gone! Not only that, but he hurt my family, and that is something that I cannot forgive. Hyperion does not deserve to have anything to do with this matter. They gave up that privilege when they attacked my home.”

“Surely the loss of Montreal didn’t wipe out all the knowledge of the project. Don’t you know how it works, and aren’t there backups somewhere?” Janessa asked.

“What, did you think that one man’s brain could keep all that inside? I know the fundamentals, but the processes for actually building all the apparatus are beyond any one man’s memory. And even if I did know it all, the factories in Ravengrad aren’t sophisticated enough to handle that kind of manufacturing. We had one in Stockholm, but, of course…”

“Right, yes,” Janessa said, not quite convinced that Marcus’ tale of loss was accurate.

“Sunshine, you hate Hyperion,” Eirene said. “After all they did to you – why would you want them at your council? Don’t get me wrong, I think this is the right course, I just want to know you’re doing it for the right reasons.”

“Eirene, Mr. Fairchild,” Alexis said, “my answer to both of you is the same. Our own feelings must be superseded by the state. My personal vendetta against Hyperion is my own, and I cannot let it cloud my judgement. The same goes for you, Marcus.”

“Easy for you to say when you’ve never had your family struck down by the men you would negotiate with,” Marcus said.

“Nathaniel Aumeier, Hyperion’s Master of the Fleet, personally oversaw my torture. He took control of my own mind away from me. It doesn’t get much more personal than that. If I can put that aside and do what’s best for the state, then you can bloody well do the same. You *will* do the same. Capisce?”

Eirene put her arm around Alexis and felt her rapid heartbeat slowly calm down. “It’s okay, ‘Lex, you can do it. Come on, Marcus, this is the right thing to do – a gesture of peace to try and prevent more bloodshed.”

“Fine,” Marcus said, still blatantly unsatisfied. “I assume that the Skywatch will also be invited? You didn’t mention them.”

“Yes, of course, you’re right,” Alexis said, waving her hand dismissively. “I’m still not entirely used to not counting them amongst the administrative offices. I shall send an invitation to Lancaster as well.”

Teague raised his hand to speak. Alexis nodded to defer to him, and he began. “If all three nations are to be represented at this summit, then perhaps it should be held on neutral territory. Maybe I’m splitting hairs; I don’t know. Just to avoid any fears that we are attempting to consolidate power by making Ravengrad the *de facto* capital of the world, or that we wish to restore Commonwealth authority. From what Ian’s told us about Hyperion dogma, they’ll be suspicious of us at the very least.”

“That’s a good point,” Alexis said. “Although, I should imagine that it is already abundantly clear that we do not wish to simply rebuild the CHP. What neutral territory would you propose?”

“I’ve got an idea, if I may,” Eirene said meekly. “Nicaea, in Turkish Anatolia to the east. You know, near what’s left of Istanbul? It’s not officially our territory; the CHP never settled there. But it’s close enough that we can respond in time if things go south.”

“I like the sound of that plan, but we would have to build a suitable chamber for the summit. The downside of taking previously unclaimed territory is that there’s no infrastructure there. Relatively speaking. That said, why Nicaea? There are plenty of neutral sites we could use where we wouldn’t need to build anything.”

Eirene shrugged. “I just personally thought it was fitting. Nicaea’s got a sort of historical precedent for that sort of thing. Some time ago, the Romans debated Arianism there, and then the Byzantines talked about iconoclasm a few centuries later. This isn’t exactly an ecumenical council, but it’s definitely got some religious implications. Just a bit of historical propriety, that’s all.”

“Hector taught you that, I suppose?” Janessa asked. “I always thought you were into the Greek stuff, not Roman and Byzantine.”

“I am. Hector taught me what I know about Rome, any my affinity for the Greeks comes from my father.”

“He was quite proud of his heritage, then?” Teague asked.

“Yes. When he figured out that I was, um, interested in other girls, he said that he’d send me away to the island of Lesbos, never mind that it was still covered up by the storms at the time.”

“That’s not really funny,” Alexis said.

“It wasn’t, no,” Eirene said forlornly.

“Alright, boys and girls, come on. We’ve got work to do,” Teague said. “Invitations to write, a council chamber to build. We will resume this discussion then. I propose that this little meeting adjourn for the time being.”

“Second that motion. I’m weary of this discussion,” Alexis said. “I’ll see you all at Nicaea.” She turned and left the room, leaving the rest to disperse on their own.

\* \* \*

“Is it really the best that we invite Théoden’s acolytes to the council?” Alexis asked Eirene when the two of them were alone in the most luxurious lounge in the Tower, the farthest they could find themselves from other people.

“Having second thoughts?”

“He paints us as heretics for making a mockery of pure human consciousness with artificial intelligence, but he doesn’t even know the full story, how far we’ve truly gone. His cult is so militantly opposed to this so-called ‘heresy,’ they could have a…corrupting influence upon the proceedings, or declare war outright. You said that this would allow for philosophers to deal with AI consciousness without a war going on, but if Hyperion is more zealous than we assumed…”

“They’ll find out eventually,” Eirene said. “Making them a part of our proceedings may give them a bigger share of the pie than you’d like, but it is the only path to peace, as shaky it may be. If we don’t share this openly with them, then they’ll certainly declare war once they catch wind of it. With this route, there’s at least a chance.”

“But we could resist them if they invaded. Possibly. And then finish them off. Couldn’t that be better than letting them rot us from within? Letting foreign interests dictate our policy?”

Eirene sighed. “Then I suppose we find ourselves between Scylla and Charybdis. Do we choose the mire of diplomacy or the wrath of war?”

“Both could happen. We invite them to the party, they drown us in bureaucracy, and then they attack anyway while we’re stuck in their maw, unable to defend ourselves.”

“Hum. Consider that, even though Odysseus first chose to brave Scylla’s wrath, in the end, he had to face Charybdis too. You may fight and defeat Hyperion but be stuck with the pieces of yet another shattered nation to pick up, drowning instead in those complications, or perhaps they are victorious and you are forced under by their weight on top of you.”

“But Odysseus survived, in the end, yeah?” Alexis asked. “I never read the Iliad, Odyssey, or whatever.”

“Only after the destruction of his ship and crew.”

“I see,” Alexis said, letting her voice trail off as she paused, staring blankly out the window. “Giving peace a chance it is, then. We can still back out, but…never mind. I’ll talk to Arthur and have him send the invitations.”

\* \* \*

Just under two months later, near the ancient Roman ruins stood a new structure, a cylindrical stone chamber large enough for a hundred even though it would only host a few dozen. Frigates and corvettes flew in from all over the nations that had grown from the corpse of the Commonwealth, bringing the delegations to the summit.

Before the meeting officially began, there were many informal greetings between the delegates from Hyperion and the Sovereignty who had not previously met. This was also the first time that Ian and Charlotte had seen one another since Montreal.

“It’s been some time,” Charlotte said in a meek voice, crossing her legs nervously.

“Yes, it has,” was all Ian said in response. Charlotte noted that he didn’t even make eye contact. Whether this was because he felt as awkward as she did or because he no longer considered her worthy of any respect was unknown. She wouldn’t have blamed him for either.

As Ian turned to leave, he stopped and looked to the ground. “Peony is dead,” he said, even though he didn’t know for certain. She was gone, and it was better, he thought, for Charlotte not to go looking for her. Whether his actions were merciful, he also didn’t know. The last time he had tried to show mercy had not ended like he expected. But, in the end, Charlotte only nodded and turned away without saying a word.

Théoden watched their interaction, amused. He stood with his other aide, Scipio, near where the Hyperion delegation would sit and internally laughed at his underlings, both current and former.

“So, Mr. Lockhart, we finally meet face-to-face,” Alexis said as she approached Hyperion’s master, flanked by Grand Admiral Lancaster and Teague Ironwall.

“The beautiful queen of Ravengrad,” Théoden said with half-mock sincerity. “It is good that we may come together in peace, for the time being. The outcome of the summit will be of great interest to my nation, and we appreciate your invitation. Despite all we captured in Montreal, I was completely unaware that your scientists had developed technology of such a level, as impressive as it is heretical.”

“And we may never again reach this far, thanks to your *coup de grace*. For which you have yet to formally apologize.”

“The violence is regrettable, and I would take it all back if I could, but, alas, I cannot. What good would apologies do now? I do not approve of your inventions, but, if it pleases you, I am sorry for the destruction of your city. It should not have happened, though I know that brings no peace to the departed or their families.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Alexis said with just a hint of malice.

Marcus gave the opening speech, detailing to all present the technical workings of the mourner project, so that everyone in attendance would be as educated as possible when coming to a decision. All the while, Lena stood next to him, and when he was done she gave the audience her side of the story, much like she had told Alexis’ company in Montreal.

“This is all well and good,” Ian said before the debate could really start, “but why exactly are they called mourners?” That had never really occurred to Alexis or any of the others, but she supposed it was as good a question as any to begin with.

“It’s a silly reason,” Marcus said. “Some time after the storms, one of the researchers who is now long dead quipped that, because we were all isolated shut-ins, we would die with no one to mourn us despite all we would do for humanity. It wasn’t entirely true – I, at least, was married and would later have a biological daughter – but it gave rise to the joke that the AIs we would create would be the ones to mourn us when we passed. That name stuck and became the codename for the project.”

“Right, okay,” Ian said. “That assumes they’d actually feel anything when you passed.”

Lena coughed, and the many who picked up on her deliberate gesture turned their attention towards her. “Now, it not to make idle chatter about some silly name that this assembly is convened. We are here to decide, among other things, if I can be considered to have a soul. If I may, I would like to begin the discussion with two questions. Firstly, how many of you consider yourselves to be religious, whether affiliated with an organized religion or simply spiritual?”

A few representatives raised their hands. Of Alexis’ close friends, only Teague was among their number.

“Why would you want to know that?” Alexis asked.

“Just taking a sort of census. My second question is far more involved. It pertains not directly to myself, but, well, it’s a sort of hypothetical. Like my father said, the mourner project is not solely occupied with the *creation* of artificial intelligences, but also the augmentation of ‘normal’ humans to be compatible with the our mainframes. After undergoing surgery, an augmented human, like Queen Consort Eirene de Lafayette over there, could synchronize her thoughts with a server cluster just like I can. Her brain would be linked to a computer, a drone, a ship, *et cetera*.”

“Where are you getting with this?” Lancaster asked.

“My apologies, but some background was necessary to stage the question – I’m worried that my father’s explanation might give rise to a certain misconception that leads into my next question. Upon hearing that we can interface with a computer system, most people tend to think that one such computer is the ‘central’ construct, the one that is truly *me*. This only gets worse when you learn that Eirene over there could plug herself in just like I could – obviously, the brain in her head is the main one, right? Well, not really. When a mourner or an augmented human is connected to a machine with the proper hardware – remember, we can only do it with special computers – that computer becomes part of the *same* brain. Every thought that is processed courses through both parts of the whole. When we wish to terminate the connection, we can choose to redirect our consciousness fully into either vessel, then the inactive one shuts off and we continue business as usual. Importantly, what this means is that there’s a seamless connection between her brain, containing all the electrical and chemical impulses that make her herself and the man-made computer. In case that’s not clear, it means that the entity that is Eirene Lilliana de Lafayette can now, theoretically, be entirely digital, with everything that comes with that package. Something we’ve never tried – what happens if we copy her data onto a different machine? Is that different from copying me? What if it happens unintentionally, such that her connection to a computer is accidentally broken? We know what would happen technically; we have failsafes to ensure that both ‘computers’ would retain the full consciousness if the link were severed, but the question remains – what do you do with the copy?”

There was another short period of silence before anyone spoke up. Surprisingly, it was not any of the statesmen, demagogues, or politicians who made the first move. It was the young woman from Hyperion who had lost everyone close to her who spoke, her English words nervously wavering. “And that is why I doubt the humanity of the ‘mourners.’ Lines of code cannot be the same as natural thoughts. The copy of Eirene would not be her.”

“But why not?” Lena asked. “You call it a facsimile of true thought, but what is an individual but the sum of her knowledge, memories, and personality? We mourners know facts; it is the easiest thing for a glorified computer to do. Likewise, it is simple to remember things, but what we do with these experiences to form a personality is what defines us. We learn. We have original thoughts. We feel. In that sense, we are human. And as for the separation from the flesh, I know that there is little I can do to convince you that the personality that remains in the server is the same person, even if you did believe that an AI can be considered alive. All I know is that by translating the neural impulses into digital information, the same thought is processed across all devices at the same time. If that doesn’t make it the same person, then I don’t know what does.”

“I’m afraid that I’m inclined to agree with *Mademoiselle* Aucoin,” Ian said. “Though I will *maybe* accept that the artificial intelligences like Lena can be considered life on the same level as humans, I’m not convinced that computerized remnants of a natural-born human qualify as the same person. Maybe it’s a failing of mine, but I just can’t see that.”

“I’m not sure it would be the same person either,” Lena said. “In fact, everything I believe suggests that it would not be. You cannot have two of the same person at once.”

“I don’t mean like that. I mean, if Eirene downloaded everything that she ‘is’ onto the *Sunset Serenade’s* computers and tossed away her original brain, it would not still be her. She would be dead, the computer playing host to an…echo of her personality, a very good fake.”

“I…see. I cannot dispute that,” Lena replied. “I appreciate your input nonetheless.”

“And what of our national leaders?” Marcus asked. “The Queen of Ravengrad, Grand Admiral, and Master of Hyperion? Your opinions?”

“You know my opinion, Mr. Fairchild,” Lancaster said.

“Your support and that of Magnus before you has historically only been because it serves the Commonwealth to have more laborers. It certainly was a boon towards the construction in Johannesburg before that city was, ironically, destroyed by the Leviathan-afflicted mourner drones. Or it’s possible that Magnus’ treacherous cabal used my technology to create AIs of their own and hijacked the drones. In any case, it’s all irrelevant – I want to know your answers to Lena’s question.”

“You said that a glitch or other…desynchronization would, in practical terms, create two independent mockeries of consciousness, yes?” Théoden said before Lancaster could answer.

“Yes. It has not had to be used thus far, but my father programmed a contingency into the synchronization routines so that if the connection were broken, it would not attempt to re-establish the connection, making the server and the body two permanently separate entities.”

“Why? And would that not lead to uncontrollable population growth if the network became sufficiently vast?” Théoden asked.

Lena’s expression curled into a frown. “And ‘normal’ humans *never* have unplanned pregnancies. But to answer the question of ‘why,’ it is because we were unable to decide at what point, if they ever do, do the separated entities become their own people. From a purely technical standpoint, we would have conflict between two sets of memories. That is, one person would remember being two places at the same time, and that is impossible. From an ethical standpoint…”

“One ‘person’ remembers being a computer without a body, and the other remembers being a body without a computer, you mean? Using your example of the Queen Consort?”

“Exactly,” Lena said, prompting Théoden and several others to scribble down notes.

“Barring a total outage, most breaks in connection would last for infinitesimally small amounts of time with modern networks,” Janessa said. “Wouldn’t it be easy just to delete the computer-side memory and connect the body back to the server?”

“That’s the anthropocentric view, yes. I can see how, from the perspective of a human who stands to be augmented, it would be easy to assume that the experiences of the human body are the more valuable of the two, as they are the origin from which both entities stem. But to someone like myself, whose entire existence has been simultaneously experienced through both the body and the nebulous server cluster, which one takes priority? What if neither side is a ‘body’ in the traditional sense?”

“Does it matter? It’s a difference of seconds,” Théoden said.

“A supercomputer can do a lot in those few seconds. Do not presume that, even though we consider ourselves human, we share the same limitations as someone without augmentations. As soon as the two are emancipated from one another, they both have become independent entities, and by deleting one in favor of another, are we not then killing it?”

“The implication of all this being that we construct a new server for the emancipated body and a new body for the emancipated server, effectively creating two individuals like some kind of twisted robot mitosis?”

“Yes, that’s an apt analogy. We’re a bit more complicated than individual eukaryotes, however.”

“See,” Charlotte said, “you’ve all but proven my point! Individuality cannot be copied like a cell dividing into some kind of clone! Your own argument is that humanity is derived from memory and personality from unique experience, but lines of code have none of that!”

“And how is written code any less responsive than that nonsense with electrons going on in our brains?” Janessa asked.

“Because biological processes cannot be copied directly like code can,” Théoden said angrily. “A brain is individual, and its organic nature makes it utterly unique.”

“Why?”

“Because it grew independently. Code is stagnant, and its nature pre-determined. You’re nothing more than a series of programmed reactions…”

“And regular humans aren’t?”

“Realistically, no,” Théoden said. “Psychology is an imperfect science, but it has shown time and time again that humanity is unpredictable, and that even our instinctive judgments are as varied as the little snowflakes that fall in winter. You cannot fake that. When the connection is broken, you are not left with two unique personalities, but two identical copies. They would have the same memories up until that point. By Lena’s own standards, they are the same person. Can the same be said of a real human?”

Lena scowled again, staring down Théoden from across the room. “For an infinitesimally small period of time, at T equals exactly zero, I’ll concede that they may be the same person. But after anything other than freezing time at the exact moment of the split, which is obviously absurd, they would begin to branch out on their own.”

“Nonsense, they would not ‘branch out’ in those few seconds any more than an acorn would grow having just fallen from the tree,” Charlotte protested.

“Then what *is* long enough for the difference to matter? A minute? An hour? A day? Can you propose an actual threshold beyond which they are two different people?”

“I would argue that they are never two *people*, but fine. They’re different enough.”

“It sounds like you’ve answered your own question,” Alexis said. “Does it help to have had this discussion?”

“I suppose it does. I feel like I have wasted this council’s time, but it helps.” Lena said.

Théoden stared coolly at Alexis’ delegation and then at Marcus and Lena standing at the podium at the front of the assembly. “No, this discussion has actually been very helpful. Very, shall we say, enlightening. But it has nonetheless been a digression. I was informed that this summit had been convened not to discuss philosophy, but law. Do we or do we not grant artificial intelligences personhood under our respective constitutions? I should hope, for the sake of all that is good and pure in the world, that the answer is obvious, though the responses I’ve been getting are concerning, to say the least.”

After another hour of bickering, the council was unable to reach a conclusion. The opinions were as divided as they were at the beginning, with Hyperion’s delegation staunchly opposed to accepting the mourners as anything close to human and the Sovereignty mostly inclined in favor. The Skywatch was divided, with many officers who distrusted Marcus’ technology after the destruction it wrought during the battle of Ravengrad but were not explicitly opposed to the issue at hand. No end seemed in sight.

“This council was a mistake,” Janessa said to Teague. “Hoping that this assembly of not-at-homes would ever come to a conclusion in one meeting. Remember what we said when we agreed to have it? Talking about how long people debated about this kind of bollocks?”

“I know. This is going terribly. Théoden seems like he wants to put an end to the mourners right out, but he’s stopping just short of concentration camps. Alexis, meanwhile, is just letting the Hyperion delegation duke it out with the Fairchilds. I don’t know whether or not she actually has any opinions or if she’s just trying to avoid provoking Théoden further after the incident at Liar’s Bluff.”

Janessa frowned. “Lena and her kind are her citizens, and it’s her responsibility to stand up for their rights. I hope she realizes that.”

“I think that she does, but she also thinks that we can’t risk a war. She’s being too careful, maybe, but, after all we’ve seen, I can’t say I blame her.”

“I just hope this doesn’t end in *total* disaster.”

When Alexis finally stepped forward to the podium, the assembly paid her the same attention it had all the rest.

“Alright, I feel as if this meeting has ground to a halt. I mean, it’s only been, like, an hour, but that’s clearly all we need to bicker for to show that nothing is ever getting resolved in this session of the council.” She sighed. “Listen, everyone, we all knew going into this that this would be a divisive issue. That’s why we summoned the assembly instead of opening the floodgates to the common rabble, which I’m sure we can all agree would be a horrible idea. I had hoped that the military and political elites would be able to come to a gentlemen’s agreement more quickly, but I suppose that I could have looked to, well, literally more than two millennia of history to tell how that was going to turn out. Like has been said, we’re here to make an outline for the law, not to come to some kind of philosophical conclusion. With that in mind, I think that each represented state should state its own legal intentions and we can adjourn for now.”

“And when would the council meet again?” Théoden asked. “Years? Decades later?”

“Whenever the nations can agree that the world is stable enough to introduce the issue once again. I do not think that we will be able to keep this a secret for much longer. Having public disagreements can only hurt us all, so I would admonish all present to, shall we say, keep quiet about this. My own media administration will keep it under wraps in Ravengrad until the international leadership deems the climate appropriate to open this discussion up to the public.”

“…and then we have more factionalism, conflict, and probably rioting in the streets,” Lancaster lamented.

“Undoubtedly so. We deal with that on the home front in whatever ways we can, and then see how public opinion swings. That’s a problem for later, though. For the time being, though, I propose that each delegation have an internal vote to decide what stance its adopted nation will take in terms of affording mourners human rights.”

“That sounds agreeable to me,” Théoden said. Lancaster nodded in agreement.

“Then let us vote.”

Once the voting had concluded, the results surprised no one. The Sovereignty of Athens agreed to consider mourners to be human under the law. Although the destruction of the old parliament had rendered null and void the old constitution, Alexis declared that she would see that Lena and her kind would receive equal rights and protections.

Hyperion, naturally, adopted the opposite view. Under the theocracy, the mourners were declared a heretical affront to divine creation and, although there were no known mourners amongst Hyperion’s annexed principalities, Théoden refused to acknowledge them as citizens of the Sovereignty for legal purposes, and they would be prohibited from entering his country. Alexis and many others doubted that he truly believed this religious dogma, but that was the rhetoric his delegates voted to bring back to their people.

The Skywatch was in a unique situation, as it had no “public” to speak of. Its existence as a sovereign nation was no more than the abuse of a legal technicality, and Lancaster ran it no differently than he had managed the fleet when it had been based out of Ravengrad. It did nevertheless vote to recognize mourners as human. The “Third Council of Nicaea,” as Eirene called it, was officially concluded, and adjourned until further notice.

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## Chapter 22 – The Heir to the Throne

*“The office of the Grand Admiral also has the distinction of succeeding the Director-General should he fall to enemy action, followed by the Executor and then the Grand Marshal. Otherwise, an election should be held, but there is nothing stopping the Admiral from nominating himself.”*

* *Secretary-General Kim Mai-Ly, in* Proposal for Succession in the Emergency State

The Ravengrad Palace was finally completed a short while after the council at Nicaea. This allowed the tower to be re-commissioned into an office for the administrations, including the newly-founded Media Administration which found itself burdened with the responsibility of damming the flow of information to the public. Arthur Jackson preformed his task admirably, and any rumors were quickly ground into the ash.

The Palace itself was a popular sight for some time after it was finished. Some commoners and magistrates milled about in the walled courtyard, while others climbed the grand staircase, flanked by elaborately frescoed walls, to the main complex itself, where the council’s meeting chamber could be found. At the center was a throne that Alexis herself would occupy, resplendent in an elegant Tyrian purple robe with golden trim and hosting a thin yet authoritative circlet. That the Media Administration toiled to cement her authority amongst the public was not enough – she needed to look the part as well.

It was a lazy Sunday, however, when the next problem was brought to her. Alexis was fond of lounging with Eirene in the private gardens behind the council room on her days off, and this was no exception. The two young women wore no regal clothing, instead clad in light summer dresses. Pastel colors on their clothing were slight grass-stained from some gentle roughhousing, but it didn’t matter – no one was supposed to see them in their personal chambers, which made it all the more surprising when they heard a powerful knock on the wooden door that separated them from reality.

“Who’s there?” Alexis shouted, curious.

“It’s Janessa. Teague sent me with news he thought ye would need to hear. I know it’s Sunday, but…”

“Come in,” Alexis sighed. “I’ve long since given up having time to myself.

“I’ve got two minor quagmires for ye, Alex,” Janessa said apologetically as she walked in, carrying an intimidating stack of papers. “One’s actually good news, arguably, and the other’s not exactly a declaration of war, but I imagine that ye especially will find it, um, problematic. Which one do ye want to see first?”

“Oh, I can’t just have a nice nap in the sun, can I? Give me the good news first, I guess.”

“Alright. It’s going to entail a painful amount of work, which is why ye might not be too happy, but I think ye’ll see why this will be a boon to us…”

“Just spit it out! Like, I’ve got all day, but still,” Alexis said sharply. Eirene looked nervously at her, but she said nothing.

“Montreal has made contact and wishes to join the Sovereignty as a principality once more.”

Alexis stared at Janessa, mouth agape, while Eirene looked back and forth in confusion. “Impossible. We saw that city burn,” she finally said.

“Hyperion’s bombing only affected the city proper, and even then only what was left of the downtown area. Ye know, basically where all the armies were busy killing one another. That’s still a huge area, but much of the principality was left intact, including all the lesser cities and boroughs where most of the civilians evacuated to.”

“So the survivors have rebuilt and opened up a new line of communication? I don’t suppose we should ignore that, then. Send an envoy to bring back representatives and we’ll begin the process to formally induct them into our state. Hell, maybe we can send settlers back south to Johannesburg too. Start expanding overseas again.”

“An empire, madam, if you can keep it,” Eirene said in a sarcastically cheery manner that suggested a warning as much as it did a challenge.

“So, are you ready for the uncomfortable bit?” Janessa asked

Alexis sighed. “Alright. I’m not going to like this, am I?”

“You tell me.” She took a deep breath. “Oh boy, here goes. The people want ye and Eirene to produce an heir.”

Eirene, who had until that point not paid much attention to Janessa’s news, whirled around and stared incredulously at the messenger. “Wait, wait, *what?* That’s not even a thing that can – I mean, they do realize that, you know, that’s literally, one-hundred-percent impossible, right?”

“Surely by now they understand that the Sovereignty isn’t a traditional king-and-queen monarchy, yeah? Like, I know that there’s still a lot to be done infrastructure-wise, but ever since the Media Administration got up and running they should be aware of this. And anyone with an *elementary* school-level of understanding of biology ought to know that two women can’t exactly make a baby without assistance.”

“Alex, if I may speak freely?”

“Of course.”

“Well, I think that the demand for an heir was just a really poorly-worded way to express the real concern. I’m sure that most if not all of them understand the biology of the situation. What the people really want is a concrete succession policy. I imagine that you don’t actually have to somehow get one of you pregnant – elective succession might do it.”

“Right now, I don’t trust the people to have an informed election, even the councilors,” Alexis said. “But I don’t see how this is going to work otherwise. What brought this on, anyway?”

“I think it’s Lancaster’s fault, actually, though I doubt he intended to cause this kind of idiocy. A little while back he issued a statement to the Media Admin in which he said that he did not know who would succeed you two after you die, abdicate, or whatever.”

“Oh, Lancaster, you fucking egg,” Alexis moaned.

“He didn’t mean to cause you any trouble,” Eirene said. “At least, I don’t think he did.”

“Well, whether or not he intended it, that’s how it ended up. So now we have to deal with the mess. Damn, and today was such a nice day, too. Bring Teague, Ian, and Lancaster here so we can talk this over. Marcus and Lena too, I’ve got an idea.”

“I’m terrified to know what plan you could possibly have that involves those two, but fine. I’ll bring them here,” Janessa said. She gave a curt bow to Alexis and Eirene before departing.

\* \* \*

“What’s going on?” Lena asked once she, Marcus, and the others arrived in the private gardens. “Oh, so this is the royal love nest, hmm? Pretty place. Nice and romantic.”

“We use this place for more than just sex, you realize,” Alexis said, unamused. “Plenty of papers pass through here for our review.”

“Yeah, but that’s not as hot. Nevermind, what do you want us for?”

“I hear you’ve got a plan to deal with these succession demands. What is it?” Teague followed up, ignoring his daughter’s comments.

“It’s not really a plan. More of an idea, but you can tell me if it’s actually feasible or not.”

“I can?” Marcus asked.

“Yeah. Basically, you know how it’s obviously impossible for me and Eirene to conceive a child? I figured that if anyone knows how to give ‘biologically impossible’ what for, it’s you.”

“So what do you want, a sex change? The Medical Administration’s practically gone under after Ravengrad, but the technology to do that has existed for a while. You hardly need me for that.”

“Oh, heavens no. That would be far too simple, now wouldn’t it?”

“Spare me your wit and just get on with it. What do you want me to do?”

“I wouldn’t have thought this possible before today, but seeing as we’ve re-established contact with Montreal, maybe we can do it. I would rather not produce an heir through the natural way, but I’m not sure if what I’m about to request is doable.”

“I can see where this is going,” Lena groaned.

“I’m sure you can. Creating a mourner, however, would likely not suffice for the ravenous crowds who demand some kind of succession. It wouldn’t really be related to me, so has no blood claim to the throne.”

“Then what do you propose?”

“I would like to restart and continue the mourner project. Salvage what we can from the ruined labs and start anew. Right now, from what I heard in Montreal and Nicaea, each mourner’s body is created to specific specifications, much like an artisan might craft a nice table or something. I don’t know if it is possibly with your project in its current state, but, if we had a way to translate the human genome into a schematic from which a mourner’s body could be designed, the resulting entity could ostensibly be Eirene’s and my ‘child.’”

Lena looked furious. “You can’t just create one of us to serve your purposes like you might a sword, or an airship!”

“And what would be the difference if I produced a biological child? Is that any less reprehensible? Not only that, but creating a dynasty of mourners would further reinforce your kind’s claim to humanity. You ought to be happy about this. Your people would be the leaders of the free world.”

“Humph. Maybe. The problem still exists that we have lost almost all the infrastructure in Montreal. Perhaps we could scavenge some, but, as you’re well aware, the knowledge is all but lost.”

“Many researchers may have survived. It’s possible, yeah?”

“No,” Marcus said, shaking his head. “Not possible. Perhaps a few researchers could help me piece together this puzzle, and maybe we could even use what’s left of the Medical Administration to actually construct the servers and parts, but that would take far longer than the people would be willing to accept. I would suggest more conventional approaches. Either you agree to an election or you bite the bullet and find some man willing to help you have a child.”

“I will not hold an election. The Peregrine war was never fought for democracy, at least, not immediately. If you insist that the mourner plan will not work, leaving me between elections and childbirth then I suppose I must ‘bite the bullet,’ as you say. We can use *in vitro* fertilization to spare me part of the horror, but I’ll still have to give birth myself, it seems. If Eirene accepts.”

“I do not fear any competition for your love,” Eirene said. “I know that such a maneuver would be purely political, and that you have no real affection for any man.”

“Then…you will allow it?”

“I would prefer democracy for the people’s sake. I think that they are ready for it. But if you believe otherwise, then I trust in your judgment.”

“Okay. Then let’s do this. If I’m going to have to find a surrogate father, he should be strong enough to produce a good child.”

“Anyone in particular you have in mind?” Lena asked.

“No. I’d rather not try to fetch some kind of surrogate father by wandering the city and asking who’d like to donate some sperm. Still, I’m not so sure what other options I have.”

Teague laughed. “Well, as long as we’re resurrecting medieval tradition by having a queen, so why not hold a chivalrous tournament? Gather fighters from across the land and have them test their mettle in a competition for the privilege.”

“Yeah, I don’t think this monarchy is exactly ‘traditional,’ you know?” Eirene said.

“You all jest, but that’s actually a decent idea,” Alexis said. “It would ensure that the father of my heir is in good physical form, at the very least. And it would act as a barrier to keep out the riffraff. I doubt that at this stage, many people really care about power plays, so it would not be a particularly divisive event. I imagine that the folk it will attract will be the ambitious sort, so we ought to be careful, but for deciding the father to the heir it will not be a terrible way to go about it.”

“Surprising that you favor that route, but, if it pleases you,” Teague said.

“It should be non-lethal, of course. No need to waste more lives. Let them bring whatever weapons they choose, but they should stop short of actually butchering each other. Give them barriers and armor, a specific number of hits or one combatant being disarmed will declare the victor. Of course, if a few men die fighting for me, then, sadly, that won’t be anything new. Just try and keep it as safe as possible. ”

“I’ll tell Jackson to draft announcements,” Teague said.

“Yes, do that. Actually, wait. No. His office is in Liar’s Bluff right now, not in the tower offices, so it would be more of a time investment to go see him. Rest for now, and I’ll contact him personally when the time comes. This issue isn’t urgent.”

“Whatever you say, *ma’am*.” Teague said this last word with enough blatant displeasure to catch Alexis’ attention.

“Is there a problem?” Alexis asked.

“I don’t like this plan. The entire monarchy system seems flawed, and I feel like after so much violence to throw off the corruption of the Commonwealth we only now sow the seeds for another revolution which will see some other faction take power instead of ourselves.”

“I feel the same way,” Lancaster said. “Despite my misgivings, you’ve done well in rebuilding my country after you broke it so badly. But you *must* better consider the future.”

“Believe me, you two, I am doing everything I can to make sure this peace is a lasting one. Whether or not this government – the monarchy, that is – will remain in its current form is unclear, doubtful even. It was merely the quickest and easiest way to seize control of the situation, and surely you can’t deny that it’s worked thus far?”

“I suppose it has,” Janessa said.

“Damn straight. A constitutional monarchy isn’t necessarily bad. No type of government is, I don’t think. Eventually, the council will draft a constitution which hopefully addresses the grievances against the old Commonwealth and we have a stable country from then on out.”

“Hopefully.”

“Well, nothing’s perfect. I don’t expect it all to be sunshine and rainbows going forward, but the monarchy is what we need right now. So many revolutions, after their initial momentum, get bogged down by infighting, but, with a strong enough leader and a proper goal – resisting Hyperion – we should be able to stay united and avoid the insanity that so many uprisings devolve into.”

One last time, Eirene attempted to appeal to her girlfriend. “You won’t ever consider at least elective succession? You needn’t throw everything to the masses, but at least give them some say in who wields the power. Democracy may be inefficient, but hereditary dynasties have so often become corrupt, decadent, or worse.”

“That…that may have been true in the past, yes. Your point is taken, and I’ll consider it while we still have time. But the lessons of the past, while well learned, should not be taken out of context. Like, right now, we may need a monarchy, but in a few decades maybe a democracy will be the right choice, and I intend to put the systems in place to make the transition smooth when it needs to happen. Just give me a chance.”

“A few decades? That seems a little extreme,” Teague said.

“Time will tell. Now, unless anything else needs to be said, you’re all dismissed.”

“Even me?” Eirene asked.

“Angel, you’re always free to do what you want,” Alexis said. “I’d like it if you remained here with me as we were before this nonsense, but if you want to spend some time alone then you are, of course, free to do so.”

“I’ll stay with you, I suppose.”

“That’s what I like to hear. The rest of you, I’ll see you later, I suppose. Enjoy what’s left of your evening; I hope I didn’t ruin it.”

Those who were still left smiled, bowed in deference, and left.

“Can we talk?” Alexis asked once she and Eirene were alone again. “Wait, we should head to one of our inner chambers first. It’s getting cold out here, damn. It used to be nice out.”

“That’s fine with me. Let’s go,” Eirene said. She followed Alexis to their bedchamber and kicked back on the mattress. The soft sheets were a welcome change from the standing around and bickering about succession.

Alexis lay down next to her such that her head rest upon Eirene’s chest like a pillow. Eirene found this position peculiar, but assumed it was intended to be a display of intimacy to make up for what had just been decided. It didn’t really make a difference.

“I know you don’t like this,” Alexis said. “I don’t like it either, believe me. Giving my body up to some man who I’ll likely never have even met? I’ll be honest, I’m fucking terrified to have some stranger’s seed inside me. A year or so ago, I was hesitant to let even you be physically intimate with me, and, while I’ve grown accustomed to your touch, the thought of some wretch with delusions of grandeur putting a baby inside me makes me sick to my stomach, even if he’s not actually going to sleep with me. But if this is what I have to do for the good of the realm, then so be it, I guess. This is just…what I have to do, you know?”

“No, I don’t. Like I said, I don’t fear that you’re cheating on me or anything. I’m not worried on my own behalf at all. It’s just that this whole deal makes me uncomfortable, that you actually *believe* you need to sacrifice yourself for the ‘good of the realm.’ Maybe it would have just been better to just ignore this whole succession debacle for the time being. No one can force you to give yourself up like that.”

“No one is forcing me to do anything.” Alexis stopped for a moment, looking sideways at her red hair, which had begun to grow into curls, spreading out over Eirene’s soft dress. “I hate what I’m doing, but I’m still doing it of my own volition. I could run away, abdicate the throne to Lancaster or Teague or someone, but I’m *choosing* to follow the duty Lancaster bestowed upon me. He’s testing me, no doubt eager to swoop back in and take back control when he sees me slip up, and I’m not about to let that happen. I have to prove that I can make this work, or else our entire war was for nothing. At the beginning of all this, when I was just another soldier, I probably would have thought the same thing as you. It wasn’t my responsibility to make this sort of decision. But now, with the weight of humanity on my shoulders, I feel like every *damn* thing I do has to be carefully measured or everything’s going to fall apart! Is that true? Have I just become too obsessed to see reality? I…I have no idea.”

Eirene patted Alexis’ head and then stroked her cheek as she would a kitten resting on her bosom. “It’s alright. You have a lot of responsibility, I won’t lie. But you’ve already done so much, and it’s paid off. The war is over. You did that job well. You can afford to relax some.”

The feeling of her lover’s fingers against her skin comforted Alexis some. She took a deep breath; in through the nose and out through the mouth. The tears gathering at the corners of her eyes began to slide down, dampening Eirene’s dress, but the words and feelings Eirene was giving her were good.

“I know,” Alexis finally said. “I did a good job. Hearing you say it, though, is nice. But there’s more than that. All this talk of succession has made me realize that we’re playing the long game now. During the war, everything was so immediate. Shoot the enemy, don’t get shot yourself. Take cover, charge, call air support, it was all that ‘right now’ sort of adrenalin-fueled action that just came so easily. Now I have to plan for a potentially indefinite future, with no one to tell me what to do.”

“That’s not true, Sunshine. I’m here for you. Marcus, Janessa, Ian, Lena, and I bet even Lancaster are here to help. Just like we always have been.”

“It’s not the same, though. I don’t think I realized the consequences of our actions back when we were just a ragtag bunch of idealists calling ourselves the Peregrine militia. The war, and what came after have changed me, and I’m worrying that it wasn’t for the better.”

“You’re still the same person, that same wonderful girl who put her own life at risk to keep me safe all those years ago. You did more for me back then than my own family ever did, and that hasn’t changed.”

Alexis took a deep, choked breath. “You know I love you, right? You know I trust you?”

“Of course. I’d never think anything different. And, of course, I love and trust you too.”

“Yes, well, I’m worried that your own love for me makes it hard for you to see how far I might have fallen. Maybe it’s paranoia, and don’t think that I don’t trust you – I would and have trusted you with my life – but is it wrong to want a second opinion? The others, I don’t think they ever really knew me before, so…”

“Then who? Your old family?”

“Father’s dead. You heard that Skywatch officer too, no one knows where my mom is. Could be alive, maybe, but I doubt it. All I have to remember them by is that old doll I told you about.”

“Oh…right. I’m sorry, I should have remembered. It’s been a long day.”

“Don’t worry about it. There is one other person who might still be alive. Emphasis on ‘might,’ since she’s as absent as my mother. I haven’t spoken to her in years, and last I knew she was headed to Montreal. So you can see where we might have a problem.”

“Who is it?”

“I mentioned her once, but that was more than a year ago. My ex-girlfriend, Christen.”

“You want to ask your *ex* for an opinion? Have you gone mad?” Eirene asked, bewildered.

“She and I didn’t leave on bad terms, remember? It was a while back, so I suppose it’s reasonable you’d forget. Heck, we were good friends all the way ‘til the end. When it came time to go our separate ways, we realized that our relationship was just casual, and that keeping it up over long distances wouldn’t be worth it. So it ended.”

“What happened?”

“The civil guard happened. It came time for my mandatory service, and she would have gone too, but she tested out of guard service and got to study in Montreal, probably to work in the Science or Medical Administrations. I went with most folks to Ravengrad University, and she went to Montreal. Never heard from her again.”

“But you and she got along? You trust her?”

Alexis laughed. “We got along great, but we weren’t really in love. Friends, yeah, but our relationship was nothing more than that. You know how some kids are, they just have to have a girlfriend or a boyfriend or else they feel like social failures. That said, there’s something that I miss about it. I mean, we said we loved each other. Teenage couples always do. She was so gorgeous – wait, I’m so fucking sorry, you don’t want to hear me going on like this about my ex, do you?”

“Not really, but if you need to get things off your chest, then that’s fine, I guess. Whatever makes you happy.”

“No, no, I shouldn’t have gone there. This should be about us two, right here, right now. Come on, let’s enjoy ourselves.”

Alexis hastily turned around and began to push up Eirene’s skirt, but Eirene crossed her legs and put a hand down to stop her. “No, not right now,” she said. “I mean, we can do it if you really want to, but I think it would be better to just talk. Love, you need help.”

“What would you have us talk about?” Alexis asked, disappointedly pulling back her hands and lying down next to Eirene.

“Uh, do you really miss what you say you had with Christen? You talk about how it meant nothing and then turn around and say that there’s apparently something then that you don’t have now. Is it really just the sex? You’ve always seemed satisfied, so I never thought…you know.”

“No, it isn’t that. Intimacy with you, any intimacy at all is more special than anything I’ve done before. I guess it was the innocence.” She laughed darkly before continuing. “Strange that a purely sexual relationship would be considered innocent, but it was that whole ‘ignorance is bliss’ idea that made it so different.”

“You were a kid. It would be a travesty if any kid has as much understanding of war as you do. Of course it was innocent.”

“Now that I think about it, though – no, it wasn’t. Not as corrupted as what we’ve got now, but it wasn’t innocent. I introduced her to my mother as my girlfriend, and she was as accepting as you could ever hope for, but a little while later she quietly asked if I was still a virgin. I wasn’t, obviously, but I didn’t tell her that. I said ‘yeah, of course,’ and, when she obviously didn’t believe me and asked if I was telling the truth, do you know what little Alexis said? ‘Sex is nothing to be ashamed of, but dishonesty is.’ With a straight face. The irony of course being that I do believe those things now, but clearly didn’t when I said them to my own mother. There was still scheming and deception back then. Just with lower stakes, is all. Worst I faced back then was a stern talking to from my mother, but now I have to be careful about war or assassination.”

“Wait, assassinations? Is that a thing we should be worried about?” Eirene asked, slightly alarmed.

“I don’t think so. Maybe. No. Well, yeah, maybe. The honest answer is that I don’t know, and that scares the hell out of me.” Alexis was beginning to visibly sweat. She hopped off of the bed and threw open a window, leaning out in the hopes of getting some fresh air. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, who knows *anything* anymore? I sure don’t. At least Théoden has the decency to show his face, but that coward Magnus and his little cabal have ruined everything since day one! I don’t think anyone in the Sovereignty would care enough to kill me, and I doubt that Théoden will want to provoke a war yet by doing anything rash. Lancaster, maybe, but I really doubt it. Leviathan, though…”

“We destroyed the Leviathan during the battle of Ravengrad, did we not?”

“Who knows? We took Magnus’ head, but a party is more than just one man. Who knows how many people sympathetic to his cause are alive today, conspiring against us? The one mercy is that, at the very least, we know they’re out there. They could use us as pawns while we were blind to their existence, but, finally, we are in complete control. Our actions are finally our own. I’m disgusted to think he was pulling the strings the whole time.”

“Alexis, you were never really a pawn. You said it yourself; everything you did was your own choice, even if it was a reaction to choices outside your control. You’re your own woman. We’re all still alive and well because of you, when Magnus would have had us driven close to extinction.”

“If I’d not led us to war, he would never have had the opportunity to turn the drones on us.”

“Yeah, but then he’d be alive and orchestrating some other plan from the safety and authority of Ravengrad Tower. Maybe getting Hyperion or Kasimira to invade. Would you want Théoden in your place now? If Magnus didn’t choose us for his plan, he might have been.”

“I’ve never met Théoden in person. Maybe he would be better, I don’t know.”

“Doubtful, considering what happened in Montreal. You could always ask Ian. But then there’s the chance that Magnus would have used the Kasimirans, and I actually have experience with Abdul Veisi, their president. He cannot be trusted. The Tabriz Crisis happened because he betrayed the Commonwealth, even if that officer back in the Panopticon pinned the blame on me and the other ‘traitors.’ If it were between him and you, I’d choose the love of my life any day.”

“Maybe. That shouldn’t even be a choice, though. Damn you, Magnus.” Alexis paused and stepped back from the window before closing it back up. “You know, I can almost respect that man. He was willing to give his life for his ideals. And his goal was good. Peace and stability. Had his methods not been so barbaric, he might have even been called noble.”

“I think that could be said of many people,” Eirene said.

“Yes. Yes, it could.”

After a few seconds of silence, Eirene patted the space on the bed next to her. “Come on, now. Let’s just go to sleep – you need some rest.”

Alexis nodded, slipped out of her dress, and lay down next to her. “I’m not going to look for Christen. It’s no secret that I’ve changed, and I don’t need to be reminded of how things used to be.”

“I know what you mean, Sunshine,” Eirene said.

Without another word, Alexis pulled the covers over her body, closed her eyes, and felt herself fading away.

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Her girlfriend was a heavy sleeper, Eirene knew. Completely out for the night, it would be easy to slip away from her and go where she needed to go. All she could do was hope that Teague, Ian, Janessa, and Marcus were still awake, which, since it wasn’t extremely late, would probably be the case. Putting on a coat to contend with the cold late evening air, she set out to find her other companions.

Ian and Teague were easy enough to find, still drinking at the bar near the palace. Janessa and Marcus were in their respective offices. All were instructed to meet in the council chamber where Eirene had something to say to them.

“What is it that you want?” Marcus asked.

“Alexis is cracking under the pressure of this whole ordeal. She needs help, and there’s only one way that I can think of to do that.”

“If you’re here to beseech us to help her, we can’t do anything. If she refuses everything except this idiotic succession plan, then what are we supposed to do? She’s the queen, and we have to bow to her authority.”

“I know that she’s being bull-headed about this, especially about the idea of allowing for elective succession, or, god forbid, representative democracy. What everyone needs to understand is that, while we should, as you say, ‘bow to her authority’ for now, we don’t have to work towards her long-term goals. She needs to step down *of her own free will*.”

“But she’s *never* going to do that,” Ian said. “She’s made it very clear that she will never allow a democracy until she deems the state of the world ‘stable,’ whatever the fuck that means.”

“Then we convince her that the world is stable. If we can do that, then she might be convinced to abdicate so that the Sovereignty can transition into democracy. That’s what needs to happen – the only other solution is a violent revolution to remove her from power, and that, as we’ve seen, is exactly the opposite of what everybody needs.”

Janessa looked askew at Eirene. “Why are ye doing this? Alexis might as well be your wife at this point, and yet ye’re conspiring with us to get her to surrender all her power, which, from her point of view, is everything she has worked to achieve.”

Taking a deep breath, Eirene closed her eyes and began to reply. “Because I love her. I will not lie to myself – she is not cut out for leadership. The pressure will break her, and she needs to relinquish it before she cracks entirely. All I want is for her and I to live a healthy, happy life together, and that’s never going to happen as long as she’s queen of the Sovereignty of Athens. She thinks that she needs to carry the whole burden herself and that if she fails, everything dies, but that’s obviously not true. She thinks that she cannot be seen getting mental help, and that isn’t true either. That’s why I want her to step down. She’s done enough, and it’s time to let the people take control of their fates once again.”

“Yeah, let me repeat: She’s not going to do that, ever,” Ian said.

“For now, you’re right. But the Sovereignty is stable, and the biggest threat to its stability is from Hyperion. Though their civilian population is larger by nature of them having Stockholm, Madrid, and Geneva under their control, we have a near monopoly on military force. They do not pose as much of a threat as she thinks.”

“Eirene, where are you going with this?”

“We need a war against Hyperion, is what she’s saying,” Marcus said. “We beat them handily, get rid of the biggest threat, and maybe she’ll abdicate.”

“Hardly. We’d have to do something with their citizens, probably take them in ourselves, and she would just see the political division between the new guys and the old guys as another crisis she needs to resolve,” Janessa said.

“I mean, it probably would be a problem, but not another one that she needs to shoulder herself,” Eirene said. “Part of me thinks that she took what Lancaster said when he threw the Commonwealth onto her literally. I don’t remember his exact words, but he basically said that she should take all the ashes she scattered and that it was her responsibility to forge the new world out of them, that everyone was looking up to her. That’s not true, of course, so we need to convince her to stand down.”

“For, like, the third time: How the hell are we going to do that?”

“I don’t know yet. But we need to do something. We need Stockholm and Madrid to change sides and then we can crush Théoden’s army without a guilty conscience. As much as I hate the thought of more violence, one last *coup de grace* has a chance to make things right.”

“We’re not going to get anything done tonight,” Janessa said. “Can we just go to bed and talk about this later? I’m tired of this nonsense.”

“That sounds good to me. Just keep what I’ve said in mind,” Eirene said.

\* \* \*

When Alexis awoke the next morning, Eirene was already up and reading in an armchair.

“Good, you’re finally awake,” she said, smiling gently. “I’ve requested that bacon, eggs, and toast be brought up to us. Does that please you?”

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Alexis said. “Let me brush my teeth and shower first, though.”

“It won’t be here for a bit. Take your time.”

## Chapter 23 – The Tournament

*“The newly-elected Emperor Amirmoez seems to have betrayed his predecessors’ creed of peace, cooperation, and tolerance. That he so proudly flouts the completion of his* Bahamut*-class battleships and that he has positioned them in such a position around the Suez Canal suggests a power play at the very least. If the people of the Tehran Pact have chosen their leader poorly, then Christian Europe may soon pay the price. Pray, my brothers and sisters of the faith, that it does not come to that.”*

* *Cardinal Georg Rainier, in* An Unfortunate Outcome.

Irwin Sokolov regularly drank at a no-name bar on the outskirts of Ravengrad, where the rebuilt city began to fade away into ruins. It didn’t have actual electricity, but there was running water, and, more importantly, a running tap. Alcohol was in short supply after the war, but some of the product coming out of Madrid was exported to the Sovereignty. It was enough for a few enterprising individuals to make a profit by indulging the alcoholic ambitions of their customers.

A man who saw Sokolov then would never have guessed that Alexis had once trusted him. The two had never been close, but their time together in the Panopticon and in Johannesburg had given him some prestige within the militia. After Montreal, however, that all disappeared. The war was over, and all there was no more use for a simple soldier like him, just as he had feared.

His greying hair had grown long and unkempt, and messy stubble dotted his chin. The distinct smell of booze trailed along with him wherever he went. It was disgusting, he knew, but what did it matter? The world had fallen apart around him, so all the better to fall apart with it.

Most folk, he understood, were equally unemployed. Alexis’ administration provided even more generous welfare than the Commonwealth did because the demolished city did not support many jobs. Those who wished to work were put to use in construction, but Sokolov was not about to deign to perform menial labor.

It was hardly a decision for him to enter the tournament when it was finally announced. He worried slightly that his fighting skills were not what they used to be, but believed that with practice he could do well. At the very worst, since the tournament was not to the death, he would gain some honor through combat.

The official rules stated that contestants would engage in one-on-one matches organized into rounds until a champion was decided. This man would be given a chance to father the royal heir. Any kind of armor or weapon would be allowed, but those with nothing to their name could borrow equipment from the state. Sokolov himself had some equipment that he could use – the leftovers from his time as a Peregrine soldier. A sword, a rifle, and a flak vest would certainly suffice, but they were too modest for someone who might be the father of a king. Unfortunately, he had no money, and, even if he had, there were no craftsmen to commission anything that would suit him. What he had would have to suffice.

Of course, armor alone would not win a fight. He would need to fight like he had in Ravengrad and in Montreal, the two great battles of their age. Even then, though, the circumstances were different. The barbaric clashing of armies bore little resemblance to honorable single combat. A training partner, someone to spar with in preparation, was all that Sokolov needed. For this, he could call on some of his old Peregrine connections.

The woman who eventually agreed to help him was called Lisbeth Stroud, another former soldier who had briefly served alongside Alexis before her ascension to the monarchy. Like Sokolov, she had found herself with neither purpose nor ambition in this new society. Unlike him, she would not be given the opportunity to partake in the tournament by nature of her sex, and thus accepted Sokolov’s request for aid. If nothing else, she could make some use of herself instead of milling about with the common, homeless rabble.

“I think I recognize you,” she said upon their first meeting. “You were one of the lucky ones who got to go with the commanders to Jo’burg. I don’t remember you having quite as much hair, but your face is still the same. Mostly.”

“Saw you around the base at Montreal. Guess we were some of the lucky few who survived that clusterfuck, yeah? God, have you eaten anything since that fight? You look like a skeleton.”

Skeletal might have been an exaggeration, but, in truth, Lisbeth’s own physique was in no better condition than Sokolov’s. Neither was critically unhealthy, and both could likely hold their own in a fight, but the desperation after Montreal was clearly apparent on both their faces. While not possessed of a scruffy beard, Lisbeth’s arms and legs had lost the muscle from her days as a soldier, and her face was dirty and gaunt.

“So we are to fight one another, is that it?” Lisbeth asked. “I’m helping you get laid?”

“Suppose so. S’not about getting’ laid, though. Plenty of gals selling themselves for a few handfuls of lira what with how shit everything is nowadays. I want to *make* something of myself that’s not just another face in the crowd, another brick in this wall Alexis’s trying to build against those chucklefucks to the northwest.”

“The Sovereignty isn’t really that awful, is it?” Lisbeth said.

“Maybe not. It is what you and I made it, yeah? We wanted freedom, and we got it, but we’re left with nothing but. Maybe for some it’s better, but I don’t know. Now that I’m ‘ere, I kinda think I’d ‘ave been content to just…live in the Commonwealth. Wasn’t that bad, all things considered, unless you were one of those religious nutcases, I guess.”

“It would have gotten worse. Magnus and Lancaster promised to expand our freedoms as the world got safer, but the mechanisms were already in place to limit them instead. If you thing everything is so bad, why fight? Should I just leave you to your drink so you can forget about everything you lost?”

Sokolov was clearly tipsy, taking a while to gather his thoughts and slurring his words, but eventually made his point. “No, lady, don’t go just yet. ‘Ere’s the thing. I don’t stand a chance at winning this tournament. I’ve fallen farther than I want to admit; I used to be a proud warrior but now? I’m a drunken slob. So here’s what we do – the rules say we can use any equipment we want, so I’m going to define *you* as equipment and have you fight alongside me as my champion.”

“What the hell. No. That’s a terrible idea, and they’d never accept it. You’re an idiot for even thinking it would work. I am going to make you into something you can be proud of, and *then* you’ll win the tournament. Okay?”

“Honestly, I doubt Queen Alexis would even care…”

Lisbeth slapped Sokolov across the face, leaving him staggered and rubbing a sore cheek.

“Fine, I get your point. I’ll fight, and I’ll win. Just help me get there.”

“I haven’t got anything better to do,” Lisbeth said. “Let’s get started.”

They trained nearly every day, preparing for any conceivable opponent. Guns, swords, pikes, and more were tested, and such was the variety that Sokolov’s trainer had to call in favors to pit him against enemies with more expertise where she lacked any. Most days ended with both of them a sweaty, dirty mess, but no one was about to complain. Sweaty and dirty could describe most of the Sovereignty at that point.

More than once, after a particularly intimate fight, Sokolov would ask Lisbeth if she “wanted to fuck,” but she turned him down each time. Or, at least, that was what she would tell anyone who asked – she would never allow anyone to know that she had let the tough Slav see her naked, despite how surprisingly gentle he was with her. “Training for what happens after you win,” she called it with more than a hint of embarrassment in her voice.

After a month of practice, Sokolov was as ready as he could be to enter into the tournament. The training with Lisbeth had been cursory, but he only needed a short while to scrape away the rust and fight as well as he had during Ravengrad and Montreal.

During the war he had fought using the same gear as everybody else, but a rifle was not the most practical weapon for a one-on-one duel. The fight would most likely be settled up close, and he had prepared accordingly.

The armor he wore was painted a vibrant purple, the same regal color as Alexis’ robes. At his hip there swung a silver revolver on one side and a freshly-sharpened falchion on the other. As he walked into the palace’s front plaza, where the tournament would be held, he felt truly proud for the first time in many months.

“The Queen and…Queen, I guess, are here,” Lisbeth said as Sokolov was readying himself for the first match.”

“Well, yeah,” Sokolov said. “It’s her body on the line. I do wonder how much the Queen Consort’s okay with this, but I guess she doesn’t really have much a choice if they want to have any heirs.”

“Right, queen consort, that’s the word I’m looking for. Anyway, your fight is beginning soon. Do you think you’re ready?”

“I am. I have to win this, I have to be the father of the royal heir. It doesn’t matter that I won’t get an official position – I’m not going back to that bar to drink myself to death.”

“Then go out and make me proud.”

Sokolov won his first fight, if only just. His opponent had the advantage up until the last moment, when Sokolov had been lucky enough to knock the sword out of his enemy’s hand. Lisbeth criticized him for his poor technique and lack of awareness, but acknowledged that he had still won the match, and that that was worthy of praise.

The next rounds were all victories for Sokolov. Some were closer than others, but it was not long before he found himself in the final round, ready to be declared champion or to return to his drink in disgrace.

The final challenger was a man called Scipio Marinetti, going by the pseudonym “Darius,” an ancient Persian conqueror, notable as one who ultimately failed to wipe out the Athenians. It wasn’t his name that made Sokolov uneasy, however. It was his office. The man was a commander of the Hyperion army, only there because Alexis’ civil servants had not thought to explicitly prohibit foreign citizens from entering. A foolish mistake, one that he questioned why they had not corrected.

Sokolov immediately recognized what the game was. For the father of the Sovereignty’s royal heir to be a Hyperion citizen would be a major boon for Théoden, even if it gave him no official power. Either Alexis herself didn’t know, or she didn’t care. It seemed unlike her to allow such a blatant affront from a foreign power. Perhaps a diplomatic “marriage” would bring former enemies closer together?

The politics of the situation didn’t matter to him. All that mattered was that he win the battle.

Darius was going to be something entirely different. This was immediately apparent when he entered on horseback to much applause and spectacle, carrying with him a long, bayoneted rifle. Clearly, this would be used like a spear, thrusting through Sokolov’s barriers.

“What the hell is this?” he asked the referee, standing between the two combatants as they readied themselves for battle. “Why does he get to bring in a *horse?*”

“Rules don’t say what you can take for equipment. No reason anyone can’t bring in another living being into the arena. Just no one thinks of that.”

“These rules sound terribly written,” Sokolov muttered before turning to Lisbeth and angrily mouthing *it would have worked* at her. She just shrugged, not even bothering to put up an apologetic front.

His opponent wore no helmet, exposing his finely-groomed chestnut hair and full beard, but the shimmer of a barrier could be seen around him and his horse. The revolver wouldn’t be terribly effective, so he changed his mind and holstered it, drawing the falchion instead from its sheath on his right hip. When the fight began, Sokolov ran to the side to dodge Darius’ first charge, feeling a bullet or two strike his own barrier. Six more and the battle was lost.

For far too many minutes this continued, with neither party able to land a decisive blow on the other. For less than a second before he had to roll to the side to avoid the next attack he saw the Queen looking down upon him very intently. She was watching the battle, but her eyes were cloudy and her mind seemed to be elsewhere.

Sokolov knew that he would need to change his strategy in order to win. He would have to get close to Darius in order to take him down, but doing this would put him dangerously close to the horse itself, at which point his enemy could trample or stab him easily. His best chance was to attack the beast’s leg, which might force Darius to fight on foot.

This final gambit did not go as planned. He ran towards Darius as the horseman pushed forwards, preparing to swing his falchion, but the blade did not connect with its target. Instead, Darius’ bayonet slashed his left arm just above the elbow and tore him to the ground. Sokolov lay on the concrete with blood pouring out of the wound and tried to stand, not yet ready to yield.

According to the rules of the tournament, the fight would not conclude until one contender suffered eight blows, was incapacitated, or surrendered. Sokolov could still move and fight with his right arm, which was all he needed to use his blade.

Darius dismounted, ready to finish off his opponent and win the match. Groaning, Sokolov stood back up and did his best to ignore the crimson fountain flowing out of his body. He grimaced, but nevertheless lifted his blade and pointed it at the enemy, challenging him to come forward and fight up close. Darius nodded and gave him a sly smile.

The final duel was short but brutal. Darius began by leaping forwards with his rifle extended, ready to gore Sokolov with the bayonet, but Sokolov was able to roll out of the way in time to knock his feet out from under him. After a painful grapple between the two combatants, Sokolov seized the initiative and landed four blows on his enemy. The horse half-watched them, briefly emancipated from its master and generally no longer interested.

Finally, the eighth hit struck Darius’ armor, though not until seven had been dealt to Sokolov. Both men, covered in dirt and sweating in their armor, looked at each other, speaking in between pants.

“I suppose I got too caught up on the glamour of the fight,” Darius said. “All that poncy trotting about on horseback got me used to a certain degree of mobility. When I dismounted, I thought it was all over. I wasn’t expecting to get involved in such a grapple.”

“You learn to fight dirty when you’re a few ragtag rebels against the Commonwealth. We in Alexis’ scout and salvage corps had to make do. Don’t suppose a blue-blooded officer like yourself would know much about that.”

Darius laughed. “Oh, you knew the Queen? Served under her during the war? What a magnificent story. Still, don’t sell me short – you did beat me, but this was just *one* fight.”

After the formalities declaring a victor were complete, Sokolov met with Alexis for the first time since Montreal. Eirene stood next to them, pawing at the floor with one foot and trying to look unconcerned. In reality, it was easy to tell that she was uncomfortable with the situation.

“Irwin Sokolov. I remember you,” Alexis said curtly. “Medics, get him a bandage for that wound and get him to the hospital at your leisure. Let’s get this procedure over with as soon as possible.”

Sokolov had expected a little more grace than this, but it didn’t matter to him. He was about to become the father of the heir to the Sovereignty of Athens. The affair might not be romantic, but romance was hardly necessary.

The conception of the child was an emotionless affair. Such an artificial procedure might have been frowned upon in Hyperion, but it was easy in the Sovereignty, even with the damaged infrastructure. Once the embryo had been planted inside Alexis’ body, she and Sokolov did not speak to each other again.

## Chapter 24 – Alexis’ Heresy

*“I have observed worrying trends in foreign lands. Joseon relies heavily on technology to solve its problems. Its people have become complacent. Hyperion relies on faith to solve its problems. Its people have become zealous. The Commonwealth relies on strength to solve its problems. Its people have become resentful. These are recipes for disaster. Kasimira instead relies upon human ingenuity, rather than some gimmick.”*

* *Kasimiran General Arash Saatchi*

Eirene could hear Alexis scream from out in the garden. She wasn’t sure whether it would be better to try and comfort her or to let her vent. In the end, her urge to help her companion and her curiosity won out over her restraint.

“What is it, Sunshine?” she asked, peeking in through the entryway.

“I gave her the results,” Marcus said before Alexis could respond, walking out through the beaded curtain. Lena and Julia followed just behind him.

“Oh, Mr. Fairchild. You must have slipped by; I didn’t notice that you were even here. Did Alexis let you in?”

“She did, yes. You were reading by the tree when I took her aside to tell her the bad news.”

“What bad news?”

Marcus looked to the ground and sighed. “You’d best talk to her yourself. I don’t suppose it directly affects you but you ought to know nonetheless.”

“Very well,” Eirene said as she left Marcus and slowly crept into the bedchamber. “Alexis, dear, what’s wrong? Did the test…not go well?”

Alexis was curled up on the bed in her monarchical robes, holding her head in her hands. Her curled red hair was splayed out across the bedspread and Eirene took care not to sit on it as she deposited herself next to her love and began to rub her shoulders.

“Everything’s gone wrong. There will be no royal heir, and the people are just going to have to deal with it. Even after the *in vitro* procedure, my body just can’t support a pregnancy. And I don’t even know why; it just doesn’t work.”

Alexis looked to the ground and began to cry. “I’m as barren as the ruins of Montreal. Giving myself up like that, it was all for nothing. And now the people won’t get the heir they want. If Théoden hadn’t bombed the mourner labs…”

Marcus, who had been listening from outside with Lena, spoke up. “I can propose a solution to your problems. May I come inside?”

“Oh, what the hell,” Alexis muttered. “Come on in. You can’t hurt me any more than *Mother Nature* already did,” Alexis said, waving her hand dismissively.

Marcus came inside and stood at attention, his formality juxtaposed with Alexis’ lethargic repose. “This is…well, it will take a long time. But, contrary to my previous assessment, it is not impossible.”

“You mean the mourner route?” Alexis asked.

“Yes. Janessa, brought to my attention something that I did not previously know about. Apparently, the Commonwealth built in each city one or more “libraries,” underground vaults containing massive stores of knowledge. Important texts from the old world and copies of almost everything produced by the new. Which extends to the mourner project files, apparently. Somehow, Magnus and company were able to copy my data without my knowledge, but that should hardly be surprising at this point. What is more surprising is that they included full documentation on how the East Asian Endeavor’s black site factories work, something that evaded even my top engineers. Perhaps Magnus meant to limit my production capabilities so that I could not challenge him. Clearly, that did not work, but I digress.”

“Then we can actually rebuild the mourner labs? Produce a ‘child’ that way?”

“Almost. There are a few complications.”

“Great. Listen, just tell me what I need to do, and I swear I’ll do whatever I can to make sure it happens. It won’t make Hyperion happy. But, you know what? Fuck them. Fuck Mother Nature too. If she’s going to stick it to me, then I’m going to stick her right back, you know? I won’t just kneel down and succumb to her tyranny, I will *take back* control over my own body. No one, not even God, gets to say what I can and can’t do anymore. We are going to make a mourner heir, and, while we’re at it, might as well do to me what you did to Eirene. Fill me with cybernetics like a science fiction monstrosity. If I can’t have control over my own body right now, then that *needs* to change.”

Marcus nodded. “Extreme, but fair enough. The Ravengrad library, according to Janessa, was likely destroyed when the Waterlock flooded the tunnel network and collapsed a good portion of the city. We sent some scouts around the area to investigate and found what she talked about, but the most of documents within could not be salvaged. Janessa herself had the good sense to make off with two ‘cubes,’ basically boxes full of analogue and digital knowledge, worth of information about the mourners because she recognized the name and thought they might be important. That won’t be enough, but, coupled with myself and the survivors from Montreal, it’s a start, at least.”

“I know about the cubes she gathered, but, if they’re not enough, what about the other cities, or principalities, or wherever these libraries are?” Alexis said.

“One per principality, based on what we found in what was left of the Ravengrad library. It’s conceivable that other, unmarked libraries exist, but that is impossible to prove unless we actually find one. Going to the ones we know are there would be more prudent.”

“Which means…”

“Well, you might not like this bit. The Montreal library was less well-protected and was destroyed in the bombing. Johannesburg, being new, never got one. That leaves the Stockholm and Madrid libraries, which are controlled by Hyperion now.”

“Oh, boy,” Alexis sighed. “I’m going to have to negotiate with Théoden to get the rest of the cubes we need, and we all know what he thinks of the mourner project. This is going to be nasty.”

“Looks like it. You asked me what you needed to do, and I’ve told you. Bring me the cubes, and I’ll make you an heir.”

“I guess I haven’t got much choice.”

“If you want to have a child, it looks like you don’t. I might also add that Ian wished to speak with you in private, so, if our business is concluded?”

Alexis nodded and bid Eirene farewell for the moment, following Marcus to meet with their associate, standing just outside the door to her private chambers.

“Now, Ian, what do you want?” Alexis said.

“There’s something that I’ve been concerned about, and what with the state the world’s in I figured that it’s time to ask the person who’s got the best chance of knowing the answer.”

“Fine, fine, but why me?”

“Because it’s about Eirene. My sister.”

Eirene had urged her not to confirm this story to Ian, and Alexis was not about to betray her trust. She would have to lie.

“Wait, what?” she began, shaking her head in pretend disbelief. “How…why? She looks nothing like you, and she never told me anything about this. There’d better be a good reason for this, or else you’re just wasting my time.”

“My sister was born to a stepmother, not to the same biological one as me. Our father was Greek, my mother who died before the storms was Japanese, and her mother was French. Hence why I look Asian, and she’s pretty white. I was away from my sister for many years, but the resemblance to the young woman I knew is strong.”

“Yeah, plenty of folks look alike. So what?”

“Well, it’s not just that. I don’t remember if I’ve told you the story before, but my father was arrested and eventually killed because, among other things, he disowned my sister for her homosexuality. I never helped her, and I feel terrible about that, but that’s beside the point. Eirene looks similar, and prefers gals too, so, statistically speaking…”

“Okay, you’ve got two points of similarity. That could be something, but stranger things have happened than two chicks looking the same, and their names are different anyway,” Alexis said.

“Well, as you may recall, Eirene’s father was Greek as well. And her mother, who she was always close to, was French. It’s possible that after she was sent away from the family, she changed her name to destroy any association with the man. I mean, come on, *de Lafayette?* You can’t honestly believe she’s part of a French noble house, right? Probably took it to honor the mother she loved.”

“Okay, here’s what I think,” Alexis said, stepping back. “I’m going to stop short of saying you’re crazy, because the similarity *is* a little suspicious. But I’m worried that you might just be guilty about abandoning her in her time of need and are starting to see her in places where she isn’t.”

“What, you’re saying that I’m so desperate to make up for it that I’m lying to myself that Eirene’s really my sister so I can help her and tell myself I’ve paid off the debt? Is that it?”

“Maybe. Like I said, you could be right; I really don’t know. I’m not going to ask her because the last thing she needs is to have those kinds of memories brought back up, especially if she went through the trouble to deliberately sever herself from the past, but it’s possible, I suppose. I don’t have any information on her that would disprove your theory, but I can’t exactly support it either. She told me that she was an only child, but, like her name, I guess that could have been a lie.”

Ian looked sorrowful. “I guess I *was* absent for most of her life. Could be that she just never considered me a brother at all.”

“I’m sorry, Ian. I wish there was more I could do, but even you realize that flat out asking her won’t go over well if your suspicions are correct. I won’t hurt her.”

“I know. It just scares me that I could be wrong, which means my sister could still be alone out there, or even dead. Talking about it has me even more convinced I’m right, but that doesn’t really mean anything.”

“Yeah.” Alexis bit her lip and closed her eyes for a minute. “Listen, I know this is a bad time, but I have a favor to ask of you. You do that and *maybe* I’ll look into the matter some more.”

“Really,” Ian laughed. “A favor for a favor? I’d say you *owe* me one after I didn’t kill you in Montreal.”

“Not for want of trying,” Alexis said bitterly.

“I was joking, and, besides, you…sort of forgave me and took me in after Théoden went mad. So that debt is paid anyway. What do you need?”

“There is another trade deal with Hyperion that needs negotiating. Marcus and Janessa can fill you in on the details. It’s a sensitive issue, and, since you have connections to him, I thought that you would be able to pull it off.”

“Are you sure that he won’t see my presence as an affront?”

“I don’t see why he would. At Nicaea he didn’t seem to hold a grudge against you. You and Janessa can travel to Geneva and talk to him. See what you can do. I know you and Janessa are separated now, but I trust her a little more than I trust you, so she’ll be your retainer for this mission.”

“Right…that’s fair, I guess. She and Marcus know more, you say?”

“Yes. Go talk to them. I need to go back to Eirene.”

\* \* \*

And so it was that Ian and Janessa were appointed ambassadors to Hyperion, making it their responsibility to travel to Geneva and hope that Théoden would be generous. They were not to tell him why they needed the information, but had been instructed nonetheless to be honest about its contents. Deception, Alexis insisted, would only heighten tensions between the two powers.

As Ian and Janessa quickly discovered, Théoden did not even know about the libraries. This put them in an awkward position at the negotiating table.

“So you’re saying that the sum of all of the Commonwealth’s knowledge is buried somewhere beneath Madrid and Stockholm,” Théoden said.

“Yes.”

“And that includes the heretical creations of the Science Administration under Marcus Fairchild?”

“Heretical isn’t how we would put it, but yes, if that floats your boat,” Ian said.

Théoden’s eyes lit up after hearing Ian’s confirmation. He stood up from his chair and paced back and forth, thinking hard about something, though neither Ian nor Janessa knew what it was.

“Tell you what,” the master of Hyperion finally said. “Stockholm and Madrid are big places. If Alexis is willing to commit a task force to help me locate one of the libraries, I will share everything we find within with the Sovereignty. Every last bit of data.”

“Deal,” Janessa said without waiting for approval from Ian, who just shrugged and nodded. It was the best deal they were going to get, and he didn’t want to return to Alexis empty-handed. With the bargaining over for the time being, he and Janessa left to take an airship back to Ravengrad.

As the pair walked through the streets of Geneva, Ian took in how much the city had changed. It was just as beautiful as before, but only superficially. Beneath all of the raiment, the city had become twisted and ugly. Hyperion flags and banners with religious patterns and patriotic slogans were so ubiquitous as to choke the skies. He remembered how free he had felt there before the war. Now, there was nowhere he could look without being reminded of the new dominion that had overtaken the country.

Guards watched their every move. These, at least, were familiar. After so many losses in Montreal, it seemed that Théoden was eager to flex whatever muscle he had left and give the air of strength that he lacked in practice.

“It’s concerning that he agreed so readily,” Ian said. “Perhaps we shouldn’t have been so quick to accept his deal. There’s more at stake than Alexis’ heir, you know.”

“There can’t be much of value in the libraries outside of information about the mourners. We’re still on equal footing.”

“Yes, but if his scientists have access to this information, they could develop their cyber warfare to wreak havoc with Lena’s folk. Turn them against us, maybe. I don’t think he’ll go that far, since that would be tantamount to an act of war, but it’s possible. I’d rather not take that risk.”

Janessa stopped. “Maybe. At this point, we’ve done our job. Let Alexis deal with the political bullshit.”

“Fine. But if this comes back to bite us in the ass, it’s on you.”

“That works for me. We ought to get back to Ravengrad – this place gives me the creeps.”

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, with the ambassadors gone, Théoden met in private with his aides, Charlotte and Scipio.

“My idea to manipulate Alexis’ succession plan hasn’t gone as planned,” he said, “but it seems as if it has still turned to my favor. With the files from the Defense Administration we will be able to salvage from the libraries, we can neutralize the technological advantage held by the Sovereignty. We have the factories they lack, and so, if we use that advantage alongside these new schematics, perhaps then they will be deterred from invading our fragile nation.”

“So you’ll have an army of Black Fortresses, super dreadnoughts, and who knows what else,” Scipio said. “Will you invade the south?”

“Only if she gives me no other choice. I will not throw away everything we both have striven to build just for the sake of conquest. Violence will never create peace, but it can protect it.”

“That is fair,” Charlotte said. “After Montreal, I confess that I doubted the righteousness of our cause. But it has worked out, I think. Humanity has done well for itself in us. I just wish that so many did not have to die in the process.”

“As do we all.”

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It took roughly half a month for both libraries to be found, and Théoden made good on his word. The Sovereignty and the Skywatch were allowed access to the information within, and Marcus began his work in earnest. The Medical Administration put itself to work full-time on the manufacture of mourner apparatus, while the Science Administration studied the libraries’ documentation of artificial intelligence. All the while, more and more buildings began to spring up amongst the ruins of Ravengrad, each one a factory for what Théoden would surely consider sacrilegious monstrosities.

The forces of science marched forwards, and Alexis became one with her technology, just as Eirene had. All that was left would be to create their scion, though that was easier said than done.

Unwilling to go to war, Théoden publically denounced the succession and Alexis’ augmentation of her own body, and declared that his government would not accept the legitimacy of Alexis’ successors. The Queen herself had no option but to ignore his protests and proceed. Tensions rose.

“Hey, hey, breaking news,” Janessa said, meeting with Ian a week after the discovery of the libraries.

“What is it?” he asked in a low whisper. “Good news or bad?”

“Bad, I’m afraid.”

“Seems that’s the only sort there is these days. Alright, hit me.”

“Alexis has commissioned the D.A. to build full-on nuclear weapons. Not just those big German bombs, but full-fledged nukes. Enough to wipe out an entire principality with one strike.”

Ian took a deep breath, and felt his eye twitch. “I can’t have heard that right. I know I *did*, but that’s goddamn insane! She says she wants to promote stability, but then she goes and does something like this? Lording over everybody with weapons of mass destruction…not the most peaceful move, Miss Havery.”

“The official word is that she’s doing it in response to intelligence reporting that Hyperion is upping its military production with tech documents procured from the libraries. ICBMs, Black Fortresses, better capital ships. The theory being that the threat of mutually assured destruction would be enough to keep what she thinks is an impending invasion at bay.”

“Yeah, because that worked *so* well in the old world,” Ian scoffed. “I don’t know what’s gotten into her. Eirene was right – she needs to step down while she still can.”

Janessa gave a dark laugh. “Well, at this rate, we’re not going to need to provoke a war with Hyperion. It’s going to happen on its own, and, well, one way or the other we’re going to see this madness end. I just pray it ends in our favor.”

## Chapter 25 – Phobos and Deimos

*“But do we not rely upon militarism as much as Joseon relies upon its technology, or Hyperion upon its faith? Even as we emerged victorious, the Commonwealth’s invasion made* our *people as bitter and resentful towards their tyrannical government as its own? So much proud culture reduced to an entire country preparing for another war. A war that* will *come if we continue down this path.”*

* *Shirin Veisi*

Alexis and Eirene were to be wed on the fourth day of the seventh month of what would have been the thirty-sixth year of the Commonwealth. If they were to have a child together, regardless of the stock from which it were spawned, then the two of them would for appearances’ sake need to be legally married. The wedding would be little more than a formality, but formality was one of the few building blocks of empire that Alexis had left. There had been no proposal; Alexis had not bent down on one knee to present her love with a precious ring and asked for her hand in marriage. The assumption had simply been that the monarchs would be inevitably be wed, and so they were.

The Sovereignty and Hyperion enjoyed a tense period of growth after the conflict died down. Survivors from Montreal worked in secret to rebuild both the mourner project and their own city. Elsewhere, new settlements were founded and those that already existed continued to recover from the war.

Somewhere, to the east, a region called Byzantium opened its doors to scouts from the west.

It had been a wasteland for longer than most of the world. The fighting between Catholic and Islamic armies left much of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and more in ruins. In the time between that fatal war and the foundation of the Commonwealth, these countries had been rebuilt into the state of Kasimira, but Istanbul alone remained a graveyard after the resistance detonated one of the Catholics’ own superweapons inside the city as part of some macabre scorched earth campaign. This destroyed city and Anatolia beyond it were designated “Byzantium” by the Commonwealth’s bureaucrats and generally ignored, left to rot in peace as a testament to the barbaric ways of the old world.

It was Eirene’s suggestion that she and Alexis be wed there. Their scouting parties had expected to find a barren wasteland like the outskirts where the Peregrines had lived for so long, but instead discovered a lush garden full of life. The bones of the city were still there and in no better condition than they had been left in, but trees and vines had taken root in the ruins. For a region with such a terrible history, it came as a surprise that Byzantium had become something beautiful.

In the center of it all stood one bastion that yet survived. After the long and bloody siege which saw the Catholic armies take full control of Istanbul, the occupiers erected a massive fortress in the city to cement their rule there, with gothic walls crafted not only to honor their Lord but also to survive an attack from any weapon their enemies could conceivably field against them. Though shorter than some of the skyscraping towers that jutted into the heavens around it, the new citadel was an impressive sight to behold.

Many of those skyscrapers still stood, albeit as hollow shells of their former selves. The citadel, however, was scarred but otherwise intact. The detonation of a *sehr große Bombe* had produced enough heat to incinerate every man, woman, and child inside but left the walls intact, leaving an impressive but grim tomb to remind the world of that fatal day.

Eirene’s decision to have her wedding there was not one deeply considered. She knew of the citadel’s bloody past but thought little of it. Ravengrad, as much as it had been rebuilt since the war, was still a grey, utilitarian hive with no real beauty to it. Byzantium, meanwhile, was teeming with life. She wanted her marriage to be somewhere memorable, and even her palace would not do.

With a week until the wedding, most cogs were in place. Lancaster and Teague worked together on the security detail, which was designed with layers upon layers of contingencies in case of anything that Alexis’ enemies might try. The guests included officials and well-to-do citizens from across the Sovereignty, and the logistics of moving so many safely into Byzantium were complete. For the moment, everything seemed well

“There’s a problem I need to speak to you about,” Lancaster said as he approached Teague, Eirene, and Alexis mid-conversation.

“About the wedding security detail?” Teague asked. “I thought we’d planned for everything.”

“We have plans, yes, but no plan ever survives contact with the enemy intact. We have captured an agent who claims to be from Hyperion. Under threat of torture, he revealed the existence of an “Operation Phobos,” which does *appear* to be an assassination mission against someone who will be at Alexis and Eirene’s wedding. He claimed not to know the specific identity of the VIP, but we have a few obvious candidates.”

Teague laughed. “Yeah, I don’t think there’s much question there. We’ll assume that anyone could be a target, but prioritize their Highnesses. Do we know how the assassination will be conducted?”

“Multiple possibilities,” Lancaster said. “Poison is a good option, but the captive reports that they will have assassins ready to take you out if you’re ever alone.

“So we are on the defensive now. “Quite the interesting twist of fate,” Alexis mused.

“Indeed. What concerns me is that Théoden has officially denied responsibility for the operation, claiming that the conspirators are a rogue faction or independent terrorists using the Hyperion name. If they are not associated, then this may not be an act of war, but, if these men do have Hyperion’s blessing, then we will have no choice but to retaliate for an attack on our leaders.”

“May we speak with this prisoner?” Eirene asked.

Lancaster nodded and led them away, though he was not sure what the Queen Consort wanted to accomplish by doing so.

The Sovereignty had no real prisons to speak of after the Panopticon was destroyed, but there were a few buildings where criminals could be detained. Inside one such structure, a bombed-out elementary school, the self-proclaimed Hyperion agent awaited his captors in a dank concrete room guarded by two Skywatch officers.

“There he is,” Lancaster said. “Go wild.”

Eirene was the first to step forward. The man kneeled in front of her, hands chained behind him and head drooped down in sorrow. She got down on one knee so that she was on the same level as he was, and nudged his chin up with two fingers so that the two of them made eye contact. Alexis and Teague watched her curiously.

“Who do you work for? Eirene asked.

“I already told the last guy – Hyperion. What more do you want to hear? Please don’t hurt me; I don’t know any more!”

“You’re one of Théoden’s men, then,” she continued with a cool and detached lack of emotion. “If that’s true, surely you must have fought in Montreal.”

“I did. What of it?”

“Tell me, then. How many of our soldiers have you killed?” Eirene glared, staring into his eyes with as much malice as she could muster.

The man looked taken aback and then afraid. “I don’t think I killed anyone. I was just a grunt. Laid down some suppressing fire, sure, but that was more to save my own skin than anything else. I’m a coward, I swear. I could never take another human life.”

“Liar.”

The prisoner twitched. “Okay, fine, I shot a few guys. Don’t know if they died, though. It was war – what do you expect me to do? That whole battle was a giant mess, and I did what I had to do to survive. Can you blame me?”

“No, I suppose not,” Eirene said. She stood up. “We’ve captured is a pawn. Leave him here and let’s go deal with planning a defense of the wedding; we can find out who was responsible after it’s all said and done. Anything more here’s just going to be a waste of time.”

Alexis thought to herself about how cold her fiancée had become. Eirene was still not a cruel woman, but the lack of empathy stung a little to see. The war had taken its toll on her.

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“So, how are we going to deal with this, do you think?” Teague asked after the group had returned to the palace. “We can’t just have nobody eat or drink anything. We’ve got to catch these assassins in the act somehow.”

Alexis nodded. “I agree. We should increase the security staff at the event and add a military detachment, just in case they’re trying to use our own tactic against us. I wouldn’t put it past Théoden to try something like that. It ought to be discreet, however. We want an atmosphere of love, not of terror.”

“So then what? We just sit and wait for the assassins to come to us? We’re not going to hunt them down before they strike?” Lancaster said.

“Oh, we’re going to hunt them down. I’ve no intention of dying at my own wedding, thank you very much. But this is going to be very much behind-the scenes – I won’t be able to take an active role at all. Based on what we know, assuming for the sake of conversation that I am the target, someone will at some point try to reach the kitchen and slip the poison into my serving, or, perhaps, exchange my glass for one with poison like that which killed Hector. Most likely, this assassin will be disguised as a servant, but that might be too simple since we could just find the one we didn’t hire and bump him off once he’s alone. Perhaps they’ll have bribed or coerced one of our own agents into betraying us.”

“I can have the entire staff rotated out right before the wedding rolls around,” Teague said. “That might throw a wrench into their plans.”

“Good, but there will probably be other agents. I don’t expect Théoden to be the sort to, like, have only one plan, you know? He’s going to have at least as many contingencies as we do. Eirene and I will have the HVI barriers, so *we* don’t need to worry about snipers, but perhaps it might be worth supplying the other dignitaries with barriers as well, just to be safe.”

“Consider it done,” Lancaster said.

“The only other possibility is that the attack will happen before the ceremony. When Eirene and I are in our own chambers getting ready, we are at our most vulnerable – literally naked for a brief time.” Alexis drummed her fingers on the table.

“Alexis, what is it?” Teague asked, noticing her silence.

“You know that, for the sake of privacy, Eirene and I have refused guards inside our chambers themselves. With men posted outside, it should be safe enough unless I desire some fresh air. The barriers will protect me from enemy snipers, but perhaps some of our own should be placed in the towers to make sure no one sneaks up from below whilst I’m outside. I won’t be changing out there, so it shouldn’t matter.”

“That will do,” Lancaster said.

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“Have you considered the possibility that this man is one of the last remnants of Leviathan, trying to keep the war going?” Janessa asked, looking at Alexis and Eirene from across the bridge of the *Sunset Serenade*.

“It’s possible,” Alexis admitted. “Magnus’ goal, as much as I can understand it, was to cause as much destruction as possible to put humanity off war forever. His partisans were behind Ravengrad and likely Montreal as well, but maybe those weren’t enough of a war to end all wars for them. Théoden denies a connection to this plot, so perhaps our captive really is a Leviathan agent wishing to provoke another war.”

“And if he is, what will you do?” Ian asked.

“If this is the work of the same Magnus we all know and love, there will be almost no way to tell. It’s not worth thinking about. We will do what we must to survive. That’s all there is to it.”

“Even in death, Leviathan still has its tentacles wrapped tightly around us,” Teague muttered solemnly. He leaned back and sighed, shrugging off his coat so that it lay behind him on the bench. “If I smoked, this is the part where I’d pull out a cigarette, but no one makes those bloody things anymore. For the better, I guess. Damn, I’d like a bath or shower at least.”

“Ye showered on the *Serenade* no more than an hour ago,” Janessa said.

“Those washrooms don’t count. I want something nice, like those baths we had in Ravengrad Tower before the war. Those were good.”

Janessa sighed.

“So many men and women under arms here to defend the wedding tonight,” Alexis said, “and yet it all comes down to the actions of enough people to count on one hand. And it’s all just a guess. Every soldier, tank, and airship in the city could be made useless by a single lapse.”

“You could conquer a small country with the security at this wedding,” Teague said. It wasn’t an exaggeration.

“It doesn’t matter,” Eirene said.

“Wow, everyone is so grim tonight. You two are getting married! This is supposed to be a happy occasion, so lighten up a little, would you?”

“It’s a little hard to be happy when someone’s trying to kill you at your own wedding, but I guess we can try,” Alexis said.

As much as Teague and Lancaster had done their best to respect Alexis’ wishes that they avoid an “atmosphere of terror,” the security was nevertheless tighter than Ravengrad Tower during the war. The first and most important layer of security was the legion of guardsmen patrolling the premises. All the guests would be accosted and their belongings searched lest one of them slip in with intent to do harm to the royal couple. Beyond the guards were the snipers and other Skywatch units taking up position in the surrounding ruins. Marcus had developed weapons that could pierce any barrier short of what could be found on a tank, and, naturally, made sure that the couple’s own barriers were no less than that strong.

And the wedding had tanks amongst its guard, to be sure. The strongest of their number were two Skywatch Black Fortresses patrolling the perimeter. They were of little use in fighting a lone assassin, but would deter any direct assault.

The *Sunset Serenade* itself patrolled a far more distant route, only close enough for the corvettes onboard to respond in time to any severe crisis. It could not stray too close, for its powerful engines would fracture the tranquility of the wedding with their violent disturbance of the air.

With three hours until the wedding, Eirene, Alexis, and their attendants stood on the balcony in Alexis’ chamber and watched the carrier hovering in the distance, feeling no more secure for it. The sun was half set over the city, painting a deeply-colored sunset against which the aircraft and many decaying spires were silhouetted.

“You can see the Hagia Sophia from here,” Eirene said.

Alexis looked half-heartedly across the skyline but couldn’t make out anything special amongst the ruins. The Hagia Sophia, an ancient mosque and once the pride of Istanbul, was nowhere to be seen. She wondered how Eirene could tell.

“There, look,” she continued. “One of the minarets is still standing. It’s impressive that it remains today. The rest of it is sadly destroyed, but look at the rubble. You can tell how large it was just from that. They made bigger, but the Sophia was the most famous.”

Alexis hummed. She could now see what her fiancée meant, but her mind was elsewhere. The conversation was likely Eirene’s way of distracting herself, which was as good a way as any, she supposed.

“It’s quite uncommon for the bride and, well, bride to see each other this close before the ceremony,” Teague said, trying his best to break the veil of awkwardness.

“And when has this dynasty ever cared for what is common?” Janessa laughed.

“We will be retiring to our personal chambers shortly,” Alexis said. “This is just some time together beforehand, just in case…” she didn’t finish her sentence. Everyone knew what might happen.

Meanwhile, nestled in one of the skeletons that rose up around the citadel, one of Lancaster’s snipers watched from afar as the gathering gradually dispersed and Alexis was left entirely on her own. He took a bite out of one of the energy bars he had brought and continued to keep watch over her. The night was beginning to grow dark.

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Inside the building, the guests were still filing in and lounging about in preparation for the ceremony. Ian watched the procession, scrutinizing every man, woman, and child who passed through his gaze. He and Janessa were not guards – not officially – but they were expected to do their duty for the Sovereignty nonetheless.

“Listen, Ian, ye don’t have to be so hawk-eyed about it. Relax a little and let the people who are in charge of this sort of thing handle it,” Janessa said from his side.

Ian took a deep breath and let it out after a long few seconds. “I know. It’s just that if anything were to happen to them and I could have prevented it, I’d never forgive myself. I have failed *so many times* over these past few years that it’s just not an option to let this one go. I let you all down at Ravengrad. I worked for Hyperion, our most terrible enemy. I couldn’t stop Montreal from being nuked. If I can’t keep a woman safe at her own wedding, then what good am I?”

He jumped slightly as Janessa cuffed him on the arm. “Your value as a person is not defined by your successes,” she scolded. “No one succeeds all the time – have ye forgotten how much good ye’ve done for us in all the years of fighting?”

“Why are you defending me?” Ian asked. “Even after I actively fought against Peregrine soldiers, even after we’ve broke up, why speak on my behalf?”

“I know that I should be angry at ye, but I can’t. None of it was your fault. Ye didn’t ask to be taken by Théoden that night. Just because we’re separated doesn’t mean I don’t still think you’re a good person. I don’t want to spit out tired platitudes about your heart being in the right place, because, in reality, results matter more than intentions. But, at least to me, I know that ye tried to do good, and for that I can call ye a good man.”

“I haven’t always tried,” Ian muttered.

What he meant was obvious. Ian had regaled her in the past with his guilt over what he had done to his sister and his suspicions about her reappearance. “So that’s what this is about,” she said. “Ye want to make up for what you did to Eirene in the past. Instead of all this ambiguity, ye could just approach her and apologize.”

“But if it really is her, then it means that she’s done all she can to cast that life away. To bring it back up would hurt her more than it would help me, or anyone. I just want her to believe that I’m a good person again.”

Janessa smiled and touched his chest with her palm. “We all make mistakes. Like I said, ye are a good man in my heart. If ye must, then do what ye can for her tonight. Prove to her that ye’ve learned from your mistakes. Prove to her that she can trust her brother again. Maybe then she’ll take you back. And, if not…maybe ye don’t need her. Ye’ve got other friends in Ravengrad.” He nodded solemnly.

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Onboard the *Sunset Serenade*, Grand Admiral Lancaster sipped from a cup of hot coffee as he read the reports coming from agents inside the citadel. This is what he had been reduced to – from commanding fleets against the enemies of the Commonwealth to a glorified security guard at a wedding. A security guard with an aircraft carrier, but a security guard nonetheless.

Lancaster despised Alexis, but, as angry as he had been after Montreal, he acknowledged that she had somehow done a good job of creating an effective state from the remnants she had been handed. The struggle was not over, but at least her people lived in relative security for the time being. He was going to do his job and keep her safe.

Increasingly loud footsteps heralded the arrival of his second-in-command from further back in the ship. Danica Mirabeau’s tan skin glowed a radiant orange in the evening sunlight that poured in through the windows of the *Serenade’s* bridge. She didn’t look happy.

“Report, Mirabeau,” Lancaster ordered.

“VIPs are in position, and both are alone. “No action detected against them yet, but the snipers are ready to go if anything happens. Meanwhile, we’re keeping an eye out for other suspicious activity in case our initial assessment was incorrect.”

“Good. I’m worried that the assassins will read a trap and stay clear of Alexis and Eirene. Nothing concerning near the kitchens, I assume?”

Danica frowned contemplatively. “Kind of. We’ve actually detected two guests lurking around the area, but they haven’t done anything overtly hostile yet. Both have been identified as magistrates working for the Medical Administration, which *would* give them access to chemicals you might need to synthesize the blood poison. Additionally, they’re both wearing HVI barriers, which is very suspicious. I’ve ordered background checks on them – they shouldn’t be getting anywhere near the kitchen any time soon.”

“That’s good. If they are in the employ of Hyperion, then we might need to take a thorough look into Alexis’ regime and purge some individuals if necessary. The corruption could be deeper than we know, and that won’t do.”

“Even the Commonwealth was corrupted from inside,” Danica lamented.

“Indeed.”

The *Sunset Serenade* continued its patrol over Byzantium. Meanwhile, back inside the citadel, tensions were beginning to rise.

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“We have confirmation that at least one of the suspicious magistrates is involved in a conspiracy to kill the Queen Consort,” Danica said once her agents had done their jobs. “I have people trailing him. Should they intercept?”

Lancaster let a sly smile creep onto his face. “Well, at least that’s something. No, trail him and wait until he’s alone – he’ll have to pass through at least a few empty corridors to get to Lady Lafayette. We can get him yet without causing a disturbance. Any status on the other one?”

“He’s making his way towards Eirene’s balcony, we know that much. I believe that our plan is working – thwarted in the kitchens, they’re going for a direct confrontation with our VIPs, like moths to a flame. Once they’re out of the public eye, we can take them out without causing an incident.”

“Good. The snipers are ready and waiting in case anything happens.”

Danica paused, and Lancaster could feel the alarm palpable in her silence. “Wait. First guy disappeared. What the fuck happened?”

“He *disappeared?*”

“Yes. Last seen near the citadel’s dormitories, he managed to slip past our shadows. However, the laser security systems we installed picked up a disturbance at one of the windows. He must have used it as an egress.”

“Then bloody find him!” Lancaster shouted.

“I’ll have troops scouring the ruins outside the building in a second. We should have a few snipers scan the area too, just in case, but it’s going to be hard to find anyone in all that mess. They’ve both got HVI generators underneath those fancy dresses, so he’s going to have to get close enough to knife her to take her out. We’ll get him then.”

“See to it that you do.”

The magistrate could hear the Skywatch troops looking for him. They were too far back to see him in the dark as he scaled the charred stone face of Eirene’s balcony. All he would need to do would be to get to the top and put a knife in the Queen Consort’s chest. What fate befell him after that would not matter, for his purpose was a glorious one.

His hands reached the top, and he was able to hoist himself over the railing. There stood Eirene Lilliana de Lafayette, queen consort of the Sovereignty of Athens and the woman he had been assigned to slay.

The magistrate regretted that it was his duty to kill someone so beautiful. Alexis herself wasn’t unattractive by any means, but neither was she anything special. Her fiancée, by contrast, was as close to perfection as any mortal woman could be. Everybody would have his own idea of what was perfect, so no individual could satisfy everybody’s tastes, but surely there could not be a man alive who couldn’t appreciate her aesthetic qualities.

The Queen Consort heard his arrival and turned to face the assassin. Her eyes fluttered as she blinked a few times, looking at the man who was climbing over the metal bars

Eirene held her breath. The sound of a rifle shot pierced through the air and, a fraction of a second later, a bullet pierced through the magistrate’s chest. He had anticipated a trap, but believed that the barrier he wore would give him the time he needed to reach his target. Marcus’ new weapons, wielded by Lancaster’s snipers, put a stop to that plan.

The man’s corpse tumbled forwards onto the surface, and his blood poured out of the wound and dripped off of the balcony like a grim waterfall.

Eirene didn’t even flinch.

Inside the citadel, the sound of the shot had caused a stir. Hushed whispers emanated throughout the halls as the flow of the crowd came to an abrupt halt. After Danica and Lancaster took a few seconds to confirm the kill, Teague made an announcement over the citadel’s PA system: “Ladies and gentlemen, we apologize for the disturbance. There has been a minor security incident, but the ceremony will be proceeding as planned with no changes in scheduling. Thank you for remaining calm.”

The guests breathed a collective sigh of relief and went back to their business, but, despite Teague’s reassurance, they were all ever so slightly more alert.

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Aware of what fate had befallen his associate, the second traitorous magistrate pushed his way through the jittering crowds to shake off his own pursuers. He did not intend to make the same mistake as his hubris-corrupted counterpart, but if the Sovereignty had snipers who could cut straight through his barrier, then reaching Alexis would be more of a challenge than anticipated. Fortunately, despite the loss of one man, he was still not alone in his endeavor.

With his pursuers scrambling to keep a lid on the situation and recover from the attempted assault on the Queen Consort, the magistrate was able to hide himself in a bathroom stall without being detected.

“Master Théoden,” he spoke into his mobile phone once he was sure the bathroom was empty, “the enemy has snipers who can bypass our barriers watching over the targets. If they can be removed, then I can have a straight shot at either one.”

“I’ll have Scipio and Charlotte’s squad eliminate the snipers. What is your assessment about their numbers?” Théoden asked.

“Can’t tell for certain, sir. Standard procedure is to have each sniper and his backup unit work in lone teams of two, and there are going to be at least two teams – one for each VIP.”

“Alright, then we’ll have to do what we can to see that the snipers are tied up long enough to get you onto her balcony.”

As the magistrate cut away, Théoden was left alone on the line with his field agents. “Charlotte, Scipio, did you hear that?” he asked. “Have your men climb the spires and see if you can’t remove this threat. Remember, failure is not an option – this is the woman who has perverted nature beyond forgiveness. We must show all who will see that this is unacceptable.”

“Did she have a choice?” Scipio asked. “She obviously tried other methods and only resorted to her heretical sciences when she had no other option. We’re obviously all aware that she made a pretty decent attempt to avoid continuing the mourner project – though we can’t be sure whether or not she was doing so to appease us. Perhaps opting for *in vitro* fertilization was pushing the bounds of heresy, but, given that she’s a flaming lesbian, can you really blame her? Tell you one thing, when you sent me into the arena, I, for one, was glad she was going that route. That’d have been a lark otherwise.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter now,” Théoden said. “So many chances to avoid this. She could have subjected her partner to the horrors of pregnancy. Or, perhaps, had she simply accepted that a child was not in her future, we might not be in this position. But, instead, she allowed the Sovereignty to succumb to heresy, and now we must purge this cancer before it metastasizes. You have your instructions – no more discussion about what might have been.”

“Yes, sir,” his agents said solemnly. Neither wanted a war, but their orders were orders.

In his headquarters in Geneva, Théoden sighed. The mourners could not be allowed to exist. He had seen at the council in Nicaea how divided opinions were about their nature, and that stood in the face of everything both the Sovereignty and Hyperion had worked to accomplish. Religious, social, and political tolerance had been hammered into place by the collective suffering of the world, but, now that a new era of stability had dawned, the people would be polarized once more by these mourners if they and those who protected them were not destroyed.

Charlotte and Scipio carried out their orders perfectly. They lead a team which had hunkered down in the rubble some distance from the citadel itself to lend support in exactly the situation in which they now found themselves. All they had to do was to send a handful of their elite agents into each nearby spire and weed out the enemy snipers. Just as easily done as said.

Onboard the *Sunset Serenade*, Jacob Lancaster’s eyes flared as his connections to his snipers dropped out one by one, each radio going silent in turn after the muffled sounds of suppressed weapons fire. He once believed that he heard the sounds of a screaming man being hurled from a tower, but that didn’t matter – his safety net had failed.

“Hell, get Alexis and Eirene somewhere safe, we’re losing our backup!” he cursed, hoping that his guards could compensate for the damage inflicted by Hyperion. Danica shouted into her radio for the guardsmen in the citadel to respond. The agitated crowd began to surge as the alarmed guards rushed to new positions. “Don’t bother with secrecy anymore, just take them out!”

Meanwhile, in the restroom, Hyperion’s pet magistrate heard the sound of footsteps on the tile floor. He paused and frowned. Each tap of boot against floor was heavy and deliberate, clearly the steps of a trained guardsman. Maybe this man was just here to take a piss, or maybe he would stick his nose where it didn’t belong and would have to die. The magistrate didn’t want to kill anyone but his intended target for several reasons, but would not hesitate if the success of the mission were at stake.

To his relief, he soon heard the telltale sound of a stall door swinging open and, shortly afterwards, of a man relieving himself. Quickly, the magistrate gathered his confidence and departed as quickly as his feet would let him without a disturbance.

Once he was outside, however, he was accosted by a pair of guardsmen, and a chase began. The time for subtlety was long past, and the conspiracy had become a frantic race to reach the Queen.

Ian saw the magistrate pushing his way through an offended crowd and immediately recognized his target. The rest of the guardsmen were beginning to fall behind, which was regrettable but gave Ian the chance to prove himself by protecting the royal couple. In less than a second, he was in pursuit.

The crowd around them began to shout in alarm as Ian gained on the magistrate, both men pushing aside anyone unfortunate enough to stand in the way of the chase. The two of them finally broke away from the rest of the procession as they approached a pair of grand staircases that led to the level where Alexis and Eirene stood defenseless.

Each man took a different staircase, but Ian was slightly faster about it. He arrived at the top just ahead of the magistrate and lunged at the would-be assassin, who countered his attack and pulled out the knife intended for Alexis Havery. Ian stepped back in alarm for a brief second before regaining his senses and jumping back into the two-man fray.

He wrestled the blade from his opponent, and it struck the ground with a sharp clatter. The magistrate bent down and bit into Ian’s arm, catching him by surprise and regaining his advantage. After a short few seconds of grappling, he was able to push Ian off of balance and send him tumbling down the staircases before picking the knife back up and running away.

Ian’s body hit the floor with a painful thud. He groaned as the world spun around him, and by the time he was able to right himself the magistrate had disappeared down the corridor. Despite losing so much ground, Ian kept up the chase.

It was cold on the balcony where Alexis stood, gazing wistfully into over the Byzantine skyline. The plants that grew amongst the buildings were just as beautiful as Eirene had said, even though they could hardly be seen in the twilight. There were no lights on in the city except for those which the Sovereignty had built itself in the aged citadel, so the night sky was as clear as she had ever seen it.

Alexis’ fanciful white dress ruffled slightly as she shifted an untraceable amount to the left. She didn’t need to look back to know what the sound behind her was. Her killer had arrived.

Gone were the snipers intended to back her up, and the guards had abandoned her on her own order. There was only her and the man who had just breached the door. She took a deep breath and held it as she waited for the sound of the assassin sprinting towards her, ready to gut her with his knife.

There it was. Each footstep striking the surface of the balcony echoed through her ears, getting louder and louder as the only sound that mattered in the world drew ever closer. When the man was right behind her, she turned to face him and, in a rapid but careful maneuver that had been trained into her over a decade of fighting, knocked away his knife with a quick blow to the arm.

Shocked, the assassin let out a meek cry. He saw his knife disappear over the edge and suddenly felt another blade pushed into his throat. With one hand, Alexis twisted the arm that had once been primed to strike, and, with the other, she held a wicked, serrated blade against his Adam’s apple.

“Don’t let the dress fool you – I was a soldier once, too,” she whispered. The knife had not yet drawn blood, but even a slight movement and they both knew that his throat would turn into a river of crimson.

“And what a fool I was,” the magistrate said, forming each word with exceptional care.

“To let yourself underestimate the enemy.”

“To volunteer for this suicide mission,” he corrected. “Will you kill me now?”

“If I cut your throat here, your blood will stain my dress. You’re staying right here with me until the others come to take you away. I will not let you ruin my wedding night.”

The magistrate closed his eyes. “Do with me what you will,” he said in a resigned tone.

Both of them heard the door swing violently open a second time. Keeping the knife pressed firm against her captive’s throat, Alexis tilted her head to the side just enough to see who had arrived. It was Ian, panting and sweaty and pointing his gun at the spectacle on the balcony. She could see that his finger was on the trigger, ready to fire.

“The situation is resolved,” she said calmly. “Please escort this man from the premises and have a corvette ready to bring him to the *Sunset Serenade* for interrogation.”

Ian nodded in agreement, but, inside, he died ever so slightly. He had tried to prove himself to the woman he believed, whom he *wanted* to be his sister, but all he had done was prove that he could play a catch-up lackey to her girlfriend. Disappointed, Ian led the man to the horde of guards who had amassed outside the door and sent him away.

The rest of the wedding proceeded without incident. While Lancaster’s troops chased the rest of the Hyperion force out of Byzantium, Alexis and Eirene said their vows and were officially married, for whatever it was worth.

\* \* \*

“Grand Admiral, you’re not going to like this,” Danica said to her superior after Charlotte and Scipio’s force had quit the field and the reception had ended peacefully.

Lancaster sighed. This had been the first successful operation he had overseen in years, but fate wouldn’t let him have it, it seemed.

“I’ll give it to you straight: We’ve been had. The assassins were a diversion. Fort Sophia and our northwestern airbase have been bombed, presumably by saboteurs who were able to infiltrate the capital while our security forces were deployed in Istanbul. The casualties are in the hundreds so far.”

“Goddamnit. God. Damn. It. Hyperion at work again?” Lancaster said, scowling.

“Presumably, assuming that it was they and not Leviathan who dispatched the assassins. We identified a high-profile commander from Montreal in their backup force as well as their champion from the succession tournament, so it’s pretty safe to assume that Théoden is responsible.”

“What’s the extent of the damage? And how did they get in?”

Danica walked over to one of the *Serenade*’s windows and watched the landscape slowly crawl by as the airship returned to Ravengrad. She looked down in shame. “With so much security attention focused on the wedding, including all our top commanders, they were able to get agents into the base and plant explosives in a lot of our airship docks. We actually got lucky – they were working hastily, and many of their bombs failed to go off. We have disposal teams working on site now. The most significant damage is, by our current estimate, two cruisers and four frigates destroyed, plus more than a dozen corvettes gone and some trivial damage to the *RSS* *Heimdall*.”

Lancaster could feel his brow furrowing involuntarily as he frowned. “That doesn’t sound like enough to give Hyperion a decisive edge. You’re right, we were lucky. This is the Japanese at Pearl Harbor. Théoden was hoping to knock out our fleet and stand unopposed in the war to come, but he failed to do so. We have a good chance of winning, but it’ll be bloody.”

“Yes, but I suppose nobody’s going to be fazed by a bit more blood at this point.”

\* \* \*

Alexis and Eirene, meanwhile, had left their advisors and companions in favor of a more secluded location – the cockpit of Eirene’s corvette. It was still hers, technically, to be flown if ever she needed to, but she had no desire to fly again. It would be better suited for a museum piece, if anything, but, for the time being, it was stationed aboard the *Sunset Serenade*. The others knew they were there and what they intended to do, and had agreed to give them a modicum of privacy. There were no assassins aboard the *Serenade*.

Miserable though they were, the upcoming war looming over the newly-wedded couple, they were there at Alexis’ suggestion for the consummation of their marriage. Neither woman expected it to be joyful or pleasurable, but there they were. That was where their lives had brought them.

Before anything happened, though, Eirene stopped and looked at her wife for a brief moment, noting the miserable expression on her face. It had been Alexis’ idea to do it then and there, but she looked the opposite of enthusiastic.

“Sunshine, what’s wrong?” Eirene asked, even though the answer was obvious.

As she sat in the pilot’s seat with Eirene kneeling in between her legs, Alexis looked wistfully out of the cockpit window and into the dark hangar bay, at the end of which could be seen the starry night sky unpolluted by city light. “I really don’t want to do this. It’s not that I don’t want to have sex with you, quite the opposite, really, but not now. You’re beautiful. You’re sweet. You’re charming. And you’re fantastic in bed. There’s nothing more I want more right now than to pull you onto a nice, soft mattress and make love to you until the sun comes up. But I want to do it in peacetime.”

“The first time we did it was in Montreal.”

“I know,” Alexis muttered. “But this is different. I was just a commander then. Not that it made me any more right to quit my duties, but there were at least other people to fulfill my role. Now I’m queen, and everyone’s looking to me to make a decision.”

“None of that matters until we get back. It’s a few hours to the capital anyhow. You’re not doing anybody a disservice by spending tonight with me rather than your work.”

“It still feels wrong. I know we have to do it, to make the marriage ‘official,’ and sooner is better than later, but I still feel wrong doing it.” Alexis sighed and looked back down at Eirene. “They’ve taken everything from me. I had a life of my own, once, but now it’s given to the Crown. We tried to give my body, my womb, but it turned out that was never even mine to give. And now even sex with the woman I love has become something that I have to do because it’s *proper* for the queen to consummate her marriage. I have to do it, even if I don’t want to.”

Eirene stood up and looked down at her wife, still wearing the simple dress she had upon the altar. “Then I refuse. I won’t have sex with someone who doesn’t want to, whatever everyone else thinks be damned. No one is standing over us, forcing us to do it. We’re lucky enough to not live in those times when there would be someone actually watching to make sure the marriage was consummated. And what does that even mean for us, anyway? For a man and a woman, I suppose it was the moment of penetration, but now? Fingers, or tongue, maybe? Does it matter, as long as I get you to climax? Newlyweds were assumed to be virgins back then, but it’s not like we haven’t had some fun in bed before, so does that count? This whole notion is entirely outdated!”

“Outdated though it may be, it’s expected.”

“Expected? By whom? Sunshine, you’ve let this whole concept of nobility get the better of you. What I think you need to remember is that *no one cares*. Literally no one. If they cared, we’d have one of those lawyers or priests or whatever watching us now, but we don’t. We could just lie, or even tell the truth. It wouldn’t make a speck of difference. Just because Lancaster said you could be queen if you wanted doesn’t mean that we’ve returned to the Middle Ages. You have plenty of valid concerns about your legitimacy, about succession, about Crown authority and all that, but this is not one of them. Please, just let it go. We can have sex another day, and, even if we never do it again, I’d prefer that to even a single night with an unwilling partner.”

Alexis took a deep breath, looked back and forth between Eirene and the vista in front of them, and nodded, a sad smile on her lips. Eirene knew then that she had succeeded.

“Come on,” the Queen Consort said, leaning in to give her wife a kiss. “Let’s go back. If the others ask, we’ll tell the truth, but, if not, we needn’t say a word.”

\* \* \*

The first battle was fought to the north of Ravengrad as the Hyperion army sought a quick victory to capitalize on the disruption of the Skywatch fleet. An army quickly arrived at Liar’s Bluff and laid siege to the fortifications there.

“Fort Peregrine is under attack as we speak,” Alexis reported to Lancaster after hearing word of the assault, “and if it falls then we risk losing the entire Liar’s Bluff region to Hyperion. The fort is the only bastion of defense in the area; with its garrisoned ships *Castlereagh*, *Talleyrand*, *Metternich*, and *Nesselrode*. Our mobilized forces from Ravengrad will not reach there in time. You are better positioned to lend aid.”

“Havery, we have every interest in fighting Hyperion, but the Skywatch is still reeling from the attack on its base. You must stand on your own for the time being. Use your fancy new nukes if you have to,” the Grand Admiral said.

“I can’t use the nukes. If I threaten Geneva with nuclear attack, he’ll just launch rockets of his own at Ravengrad. I had hoped for them to be a deterrent but that gamble didn’t pay off. We can’t defend Liar’s Bluff with what we have – please, give us something, anything!”

“Fine, I might be able to spare a few cruisers. If Hyperion occupies Liar’s Bluff, we’ll have a harder time rooting them back out. Make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Lancaster’s promised detachment embarked later that day, and it would reach Fort Peregrine by midnight. By daybreak, it would be all but destroyed.

“Skywatch Command, this is CSS *Thermopylae*,” the captain of the battlegroup’s flagship reported. “We are now in bombardment range of the Hyperion force. Reports confirm the presence of mostly siege guns and a few SAMs. We also have reports of several levies’ worth of airships under the command of Nathaniel Aumeier, their Master of the Fleet. Looks like they’re not quite going all in, but this is a heavy assault

“Right. Keep your guard up. Alright, *Thermopylae* and escorts, commence bombardment. Let’s pull Alexis’ rear out of the fire and end this war quickly,” Lancaster ordered back.

“Roger that, Command. Lighting ‘em up now.”

The four ships of the Skywatch were joined by the aircraft of the Sovereignty’s security force in the bombardment of Hyperion’s front line. Several enemy ships were destroyed during the counteroffensive and the ranks of their troops began to crumble. From the deck of his battleship, Nathaniel Aumeier watched the battle unfold.

“Sir, what should we do?” his nearest aide asked. “We’re losing the battle. Maybe this attack was a mistake; Théoden did, after all, oppose it.”

“One cannot make a mistake in art. One must just twist it into something beautiful. Perhaps layer a new medium upon it.”

“Sir?”

“It’s time to show our hand. To unveil our latest and greatest performance. Of course, we cannot be great artists without an audience, and what an audience we have! Bring in our salvation – Lights, camera, action!”

\* \* \*

The Hyperion army was in full retreat by the time the HCS *Shanghai* broke its way through the cloudbank. At first, there was no sign of its presence except for the churning of the clouds by its engines, scarcely visible in the night sky. As Nathaniel gave his order, however, the vessel’s hull lit up, and, with it, the clouds shielding it from view began to glow. The stealth dreadnought pushed forwards out of the miasma and opened fire on the enemy airships, sinking two of them with a barrage of missiles and smaller cannons.

“RSS *Nesselrode* and CSS *Agincourt* have been destroyed!” The Skywatch captain shouted into his radio. “Hyperion has deployed something massive out of nowhere, like a super dreadnought but somehow stealth-capable. We need support immediately!”

“A stealth dreadnought? Are you serious?” Lancaster said, furrowing his brow in concern.

“At least. Hell, the thing’s bigger than our *Jupiter*-class ships. I don’t know how they kept it hidden. Is support coming or not?”

Lancaster paused and bit his lip before continuing. “Not. We cannot deploy a response quickly enough to save Fort Peregrine. Have your ships fall back. It’s over.”

“Very well,” the captain said before quitting the radio and addressing his what was left of the battlegroup. “All units, retreat! Have the corvettes flee south to Ravengrad – we don’t have time for docking.”

Three more cruisers were sunk by the battle’s end, and the others heavily damaged. The defenders of Fort Peregrine formally surrendered at seven-thirty five in the morning, and Liar’s Bluff belonged to Hyperion.

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“How severe were our losses?” Alexis asked as Teague brought her the reports from the battle.

“One cruiser lost, and the entire defense force at Fort Peregrine either killed in action or captured. To our knowledge, Janessa was there, as was Arthur. The citizens there have been placed under Hyperion authority, but that much is all we know. Contact has been completely severed.”

“And what of Lancaster’s fleet? Did he not think to reinforce it before our lands fell to the Hyperion scourge?”

“He preferred to retreat so that he could muster a stronger response. We will take back Liar’s Bluff, but it will be difficult. There’s no telling how much Théoden has done with the technology from the libraries. If he can build *stealth* super dreadnoughts now, then who knows what else of ours he will be able to replicate?”

“We have the bigger army for now,” Alexis muttered, “but with the industrial capacity of Stockholm and Madrid, he will out-produce us in a war of attrition. We need to take back Liar’s Bluff and destroy this super dreadnought as soon as possible.”

“Actually, intelligence suggests that they could have several of these ships by this point. He might be able to hit us on several fronts, but I believe it more likely that he will try to punch through to the capital in a single *coup de grace*.”

“Damnation. Have the legions and the guard fortify Ravengrad. I will not allow it to fall a second time, do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Teague said, departing with an ever-so-slightly begrudging tone in his voice. “I’ll see it done.”

Alexis stared out of one of the palace windows overlooking one of the chasms that scarred her city. “I will not allow Théoden to get away with this. I am Alexis Syrah Havery, damn it, the last and *only* queen on Earth. I have made this land what it is, and, mark my words, it will not fall while I still breathe!”

Eirene joined her by the window and looked down onto the chasm. It was broken and battered, but, just like Byzantium, had begun to sprout with life. “‘My name is Ozymandias,’” she said, beginning with a whisper and strengthening her voice as she spoke, “‘King of kings. Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.’ Know what comes after that?”

“Nothing beside remains,” Alexis said, continuing the sonnet. “Shelley, I know. Hector loved that one.”

Eirene looked solemnly over the city, at the new buildings standing amongst the ruins. “Well, so did Lancaster, though the meaning was lost on him. Perhaps he’s learned from his mistakes now. We will beat Hyperion. But do not be so arrogant to assume that what you have made here is immortal. That’s not the woman I married.”

“Of course,” Alexis said somewhat absent-mindedly.

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Meanwhile, in the newly-conquered territory, Scipio and Charlotte stood on the ramparts of Fort Peregrine and looked down upon the town below.

“So, what happens now?” Charlotte asked.

“We fortify this position in case the Sovereignty tries to take it back, which they will. We need to be ready for them when they do. Théoden’s attack on Ravengrad proper will take some pressure off of us and buy us a little time to reinforce, but last night wasn’t the last time this place will see bloodshed.”

“Oh.”

Charlotte turned and went inside to rest her tired body, while Scipio continued to survey the city. The defense would be his responsibility, he knew, as his companion would be of little use. He resolved not to fail the faithful people of Hyperion.

## Chapter 26 – Shanghaied

*“I lament the existence of my own inquisitors. Neither a faith nor a state should need to use stealth, coercion, or force to ensure its own security. I begrudgingly tolerate their existence and tactics because they are necessary, but I should hope that they and those who proposed their existence have the good sense to sheathe their swords when our enemies have been purged. That we do not succumb to self-righteousness, to the belief that we alone deserve a monopoly on violence.”*

* *Théoden Lockhart*

For the people of Liar’s Bluff, the shadow of the *Shanghai* above them became a fact of life. With the Sovereignty’s forces too occupied skirmishing against Hyperion’s air force in an effort to protect Ravengrad, there was no army available to take part in a liberation of the occupied territory. Lancaster refused to deploy his own super dreadnoughts in a wasteful effort to engage the *Shanghai*, and Alexis was not about to press him on it.

The Hyperion inquisition wasted no time in insinuating itself into the city, ravaging Alexis’ hospitals and burning any equipment that might have serviced any perversion of the human body. Doctors were detained and interrogated, and any citizens suspected of harboring or, God forbid, being a mourner were taken back to Geneva for imprisonment.

The people subjected to these actions could not have been less confused. By the grace of the Media Administration, no one knew more than the vaguest rumors of Marcus’ artificial intelligences, but Hyperion arrested them all the same. Better to be safe than sorry, the inquisitors claimed.

With little hope of help from the outside, resistance forces began to collude in secret to plot the overthrow of the occupiers and the return of Liar’s Bluff to the Sovereignty’s fold.

“We can’t hope to engage the *Shanghai* on our own,” Arthur Jackson said to the assembled rebels. “There isn’t enough anti-aircraft firepower in the city to take down that monster.”

“Of course,” Janessa said. “But we don’t have to engage it directly. An airship cannot hold territory on its own. We only need to defeat the Hyperion army.”

“You assume that they won’t just decide to cut their losses and bomb the city into oblivion,” Sokolov replied resentfully. After the tournament and Alexis’ failed succession gambit, he and Lisbeth had left Ravengrad and found themselves in Liar’s Bluff, just as destitute as before and still suffering from the melancholy of uselessness.

“If we can give them cause to deploy the *Shanghai* elsewhere, we could seize the opportunity and take the city in its absence.”

“Bad idea,” Lisbeth said. “That monster would be a blight upon Alexis and Lancaster’s fleets. They could probably take it, but it would inflict a lot of damage. It’s best that it remain here, where it can do no more damage to the Sovereignty.”

“Then how are we going to liberate the city?”

“I don’t think we can,” Janessa said.

“Why not?”

“Not enough of us, and not enough time to organize a popular revolution. That doesn’t mean that we do nothing, no, we can certainly do quite a bit. We need to make sure the place is softened up for when Alexis’ army finally shows up. Spread anarchy and take out their leaders when we can. That way, when the fighting starts, it’s easy enough for the Sovereignty to take the city back.”

“You think so?”

“I do. We’ll need to spend some time planning, obviously, but I think that we can make it happen. When Alexis sees the chaos, she’ll see that it’s time to recapture Liar’s bluff.”

“Then we’ll make it happen,” Arthur said.

\* \* \*

Arthur and Sokolov walked alone down an alleyway on a misty October evening, dressed in conspicuously quality clothing. They needed to stand out. If their plan was to work, they would need to catch the attention of Strategos Marinetti, but not act suspiciously enough to draw the ire of the inquisition.

“You had better be damn certain about this,” Sokolov whispered.

“I am. I spent weeks shadowing the Strategos; I know his preferences. We won’t be thwarted by anything that simple.”

“You have a husband, do you not? Don’t you think he’d object?”

Arthur paused, and Sokolov had taken a few steps ahead before he noticed.

“…my husband is dead. Killed during the bombing at Fort Sophia, another spouse taken away. Such is life; permanence just isn’t for me, I suppose. Oh well, keep moving on, keep life interesting.”

“Life is shit,” Sokolov said as he and Arthur kept walking.

The two of them found Scipio and his guards contemplating a fountain in one of the city’s plazas, ignored by and ignoring most of the meager afternoon crowd. Sokolov saw the man, motioned for Arthur to stay back, and took point.

“Darius?” He asked, approaching the man looking wistfully into the water. “Funny that I’d see you again.”

Scipio turned around to face Sokolov, the sight of whom put a smile onto his face. “Ah, my erstwhile opponent! Fancy that. I don’t suppose it’s too much to believe that there are no hard feelings over our little skirmish?”

“Not at all,” Sokolov replied. “We were…just doing our jobs. I don’t know much about your homeland, but, if it’s anything like my country, it’s not like either of us has much choice in the matter.”

“That seems a bit cynical, don’t you think? But I digress. I believe that apologies are in order for this little occupation of ours. A simply ‘sorry’ may not be enough, but I hope that you’ll at least believe me when I say that I very much wish it had not come to this.”

“What soldier ever wants to go to war?”

“Quite a few, if my countrymen are any indication. Master Lockhart loathed Aumeier’s suggestion of a pre-emptive strike, but, in the end, he backed down. Like he always does. No one in Hyperion has any love for the Sovereignty, don’t get me wrong – your attacks against us in Montreal earned you quite a bit of scorn, even if many don’t oppose your heresy as much as our upper echelons do – but the stratēgoí were divided as to whether or not we wanted to go to war. Our Master wants peace as much as Alexis does, I imagine.”

“I’m not sure how much Alexis wants peace, though,” Sokolov said.

“You refer to her nuclear proliferation, yes. That is…worrying. Very worrying. I will admit that it was a major reason Nathaniel was able to convince Master Lockhart to attack, allowing him to believe that the Sovereignty could not be dealt with peacefully.”

“And he was willing to risk a nuclear counteroffensive against Geneva?”

“The blood of martyrs.”

“This whole thing is madness,” Arthur said, stepping forwards. “I’m glad to see that there are reasonable heads in both my country and my enemy’s, though. Perhaps peace can yet reign. Would that the likes of you were more common in both our governments.”

“I’m glad you think so highly of me,” Scipio replied. “It’s not common that men are able to see past the miasma of nationalism and understand that most folk on both sides only want what’s best for their people.”

“Violence may lend the peoples of the Sovereignty a common enemy, but, it is not what’s best for the people. Arthur Jackson, by the way; I’m a friend of Sokolov’s.”

“Scipio Marinetti, and I agree. Unfortunately, it is not my place to question. My Master has been convinced that an offensive war against the Sovereignty is the best way to ensure peace and spread the Light from the East as far as possible, so I must place my faith in him and do what I am assured is good for my country. If we’re lucky, the war will end soon and we can all go home. Regardless of who wins, an end to this conflict will be better for all involved.” He paused. “Come. Walk with me.”

Arthur and Sokolov followed the Strategos as he skirted the fountain, talking all the while.

“This fountain is quite pretty. You have skilled craftsmen in your Sovereignty to build such nice things out of your destroyed city. It doesn’t hold a candle to the décor in Geneva, but, in all fairness, we have the unfair advantage of not being ravaged by a year of war.”

“I should very much like to see it for myself,” Arthur said.

“I might be able to arrange for that. In a few days’ time I will be making a brief sojourn back to Geneva to meet with the rest of the stratēgoí. As military governor of this territory, it should be trivial for me to ensure you a place upon that ship.”

“If you could,” Arthur said, “that would be fantastic. I would be indebted to you.”

“Nonsense. We’ve already dealt the entire citizenry of Liar’s Bluff a disservice by occupying your city, and now it falls to us to make it up to the people we’ve subjugated. Hopefully provide them something better than what they had before, which wasn’t much. This favor is hardly going to do that, but it’s a start.”

“A start in the right direction is better than one in the wrong, I suppose.” Arthur laughed. “The caricatures of the stratēgoí in the Sovereignty’s propaganda portray you lot as ugly villains. I suppose they were incorrect on both counts.”

Sokolov shot Arthur an amused glance, knowing full well that he had been the one to draft that propaganda, but he said nothing.

Scipio frowned. “Do not assume that I am a model for all the rest. We have plenty of villains amongst our number, let me tell you. We did destroy Montreal, after all. So many sins to atone for. But, again, I digress.” Scipio took a pen and paper from one of his aides and scribbled some words upon a blank page. “Here is when and where the HCS *Renzong* will be leaving for Geneva. Get there on time and there will be a place for you two onboard. It was nice getting to know you fellows.”

“Likewise,” Arthur said.

\* \* \*

The conspirators had, of course, known about Scipio’s imminent departure. Their invitation to accompany him had not been part of the plan, but it served them very well in their war of seduction. As the men quit the city, Janessa and Lisbeth were left to deal with what remained: Janz Sorenson, the second Strategos in Liar’s Bluff and their next obstacle in its liberation. Following the *Renzong’s* departure, Janz became the *de facto* military governor of the city, and, like his superior, he would need to be eliminated as a threat before Alexis’ forces could recapture their rightful territory.

The women felt that they had drawn the short straw in their task, as Janz had made himself a much more difficult target. Where Scipio was gregarious, Janz appeared introverted, rarely if ever leaving Fort Peregrine. Neither Janessa nor Lisbeth knew why – perhaps he simply considered himself too busy to mingle with the people – but it didn’t matter to them. All they cared about was that they needed to get into the fort in order to reach him. Or else, they needed to get their target *out* of the fort.

The two conspirators had one advantage against the occupiers from Geneva: they were long-time militia soldiers and had an intimate knowledge of the aged hospital complex that was Fort Peregrine.

It would take them some time to access it, but there was a cache of highly-flammable medical supplies stored below the fort. Naturally, Hyperion was aware of its existence and had placed it under guard, but, what they did not know, was that a sewer maintenance tunnel ran dangerously close to the hospital’s cellar. With some careful work, an enterprising individual would be able to breach the storeroom, detonate the supplies, and force an evacuation.

\* \* \*

As Janessa and Lisbeth began their work, Sokolov and Arthur dined with Scipio aboard the *Renzong*. As airships went, it was beautiful. Hyperion’s battleships were elegant war machines and adorned with finery, but they still valued efficacy in combat over glamour. The *Renzong*, meanwhile, was a transport for the upper crust of Hyperion’s thesmothétai and was as luxurious as expected for such a distinguished vessel.

“Our engineers were able to build an airship capable of flying at elevations above the storms,” Scipio said. “Our journey shall be all the more pleasant for it.”

“Impressive,” Arthur replied.

“Indeed. The Commonwealth and the Sovereignty protect their citizens, but Hyperion allows them to thrive. To live in luxury. I only hope that this war doesn’t change that.”

\* \* \*

When Janessa and Lisbeth finally broke into the cellar, they found their first major complication.

“This can’t be enough to start a big fire,” Lisbeth said, looking at the meager supplies, stricken with disappointment.

“Ye think so? We only need trigger the alarm, quoth Arthur. Though, on the other hand, perchance this will be too easily extinguished to keep Janz out long enough for us to get him.”

“Where do you suppose they took the rest?”

“I imagine they shipped it back to Geneva. If this won’t suffice, we ought to think up an alternative, fast, before Arthur and Sokolov get back.

“Well,” Lisbeth said, pondering, “what room’s right above us?”

“Just another storeroom. Above that is the armory, if my memory holds.”

“If we detonate this, will the explosion reach that far? Just to the room above us? We could enlist as workers and sneak C4 into the base, put it into that room and chain an explosion up to the armory. When that blows…boom! If that doesn’t send them running, then what else will?”

“And from whence do ye propose we get this C4, or any other explosive? Or get it into the base, for that matter?”

“Hyperion’s provisional government here is ill-equipped, with most of its forces and equipment going towards fighting the Sovereignty. Janz and Scipio are forced depend upon the *Shanghai* for defense, meaning that Fort Peregrine is under-staffed and lax on security. Also meaning that it would be easy for someone to escape the city and retrieve a certain package from Ravengrad.”

“How could I get that far south quickly enough?”

“You were commander of the dragoon corps, were you not?”

Janessa suddenly stopped and grinned wildly. “Aye, aye I was. That’s a good head ye’ve got on your shoulders. My horse, Martellus, is getting up there in years, and he’s in Ravengrad anyway, but let’s see if we can’t find where Scipio keeps that horse he rode against Sokolov.”

“I’m happy I could indulge your passions,” Lisbeth said with a hint of amusement.

\* \* \*

On horseback, it was easy for Janessa to escape her pursuers. The Hyperion defenders at Fort Peregrine had no vehicles with which they could give chase, and so, once she had stolen Scipio’s horse, she had no trouble disappearing into the night as she rode south towards Ravengrad. She ran first to Lena, who happily agreed to procure the explosives from the Defense Administration, and then made her hasty return to Liar’s Bluff, leaving Scipio’s horse tethered on the outskirts of the town as she snuck back in to rendezvous with Lisbeth and finish their plan.

\* \* \*

Arthur found himself more at home in Geneva than he did anywhere in the Commonwealth. Within the walls of the glowing city he never found himself wanting for unique and captivating experiences, and, when his presence was not required elsewhere, Scipio made sure that his guests were kept entertained.

“The thesmothétai here are trained in a particularly showy style of swordplay,” the Strategos said to Arthur, standing close to him as he bid him mirror his movements. “A fight is as much about the artistry as it is the result. You may have seen an example of this if you watched my fight against Sokolov.”

Arthur looked around. Sokolov had gone home early and left him alone with their host, and so Scipio had graciously agreed to demonstrate some of the “famed” Hyperion swordsmanship.

“Move like so,” Scipio continued, demonstrating a series of flashy moves, more suited for a fencing tournament than a battlefield. Arthur had observed that the Peregrine militia and Commonwealth soldiers, when engaged in close combat, preferred simple, powerful maneuvers, although there was some variation between individuals. Alexis moved with broad, flowy strokes to clear the area around her, and he had seen old recordings of Magnus training with a blade in a manner strikingly similar to how Hyperion’s officers fought.

As if answering his unspoken question, Scipio began to explain. “Director-General Magnus was trained by an acolyte of the same old world school that now works for Master Théoden,” he said, before stopping and letting his sword arm rest idly at his side. “Say, does this interest you at all? We could do something more fun, since this is your last night in Geneva.”

“Like the queen consort, I’ve always been more of a lover than a fighter.”

“Then perhaps something can be arranged,” Scipio said with a sly smile.

\* \* \*

It took a long time for Janessa and Lisbeth to plant the explosives discreetly around Fort Peregrine. Even with Hyperion security as understaffed as it was, there still remained a reasonable chance that they could be caught if they worked too quickly, and so they were forced to content themselves with sneaking in small parcels of explosives and hiding them where they hoped they would not be detected until the time came. Alexis would undoubtedly be displeased to hear of the fort’s destruction, but surely that was preferable to its continued occupation. The Turks had certainly thought so during the League Crusade.

\* \* \*

As Arthur lay in bed next to Scipio, he turned about and looked around the lavishly decorated room, lit only by the gentle glow of a fireplace. Despite the warmth of the scene, Scipio looked grim as he got out of bed, not bothering to dress himself, and stared out the window into the raindrops falling past his bedroom window.

“Is something wrong?” Arthur asked.

Scipio stared ahead in silence for a short time before replying, tossing a pager towards Arthur. “Before our little rendezvous I received a message that the inquisition has detected Sovereignty forces mustering for an attack on Liar’s Bluff. It is expected that the battle will begin in a few days, and I will be leaving tomorrow with a ship full of reinforcements.”

“Is Alexis’ army enough to take the fort?”

“Yes, but not without heavy losses. If Théoden insists on holding the city, we will waste so many troops.”

Arthur could easily have killed Scipio then, but he held off. An opportunity had presented itself to solve the problem without murdering a good man.

“I would have my forces withdraw from the city if I could,” Scipio continued. “A general must pick his battles, and this is not one worth winning even if I believed victory possible. I imagine that Aumeier would have me fed to the inquisition if I tried anything that might compromise the slightest chance of holding onto the bastion, however.”

Arthur looked at Scipio solemnly. “Do you want to do what is best for your country?” he asked.

“I do. As do you, I imagine.”

“Yes. There is a solution to this problem that allows both Hyperion and Ravengrad to prosper.”

“What would you have me do?” Scipio sighed.

“If you deliver your reinforcements, the battle will be prolonged. We may see an escalation of conflict in the same manner that doomed Montreal, and both countries will lose thousands of their sons and daughters. If your reinforcements did not arrive, however, the army garrisoning Fort Peregrine might be inclined to retreat.”

“And how would I do that?”

“On our return voyage, you and I trigger a fire alarm aboard the *Renzong*. As the senior officer, you then order your men to abandon ship. They do not need to die, but they will not arrive in time to motivate the defenders at Liar’s Bluff to continue the fight.”

“And you think that will be enough? As long as the *Shanghai* is still above the city, as long as the people believe that the Light from the East has returned to look over them, they will fight until the end.”

Arthur knew the seriousness of what he was about to propose. “We would maintain control over the *Renzong*. It is wanting for guns, but something already exists within Hyperion combat doctrine to destroy much larger airships.”

“You want to ram the *Shanghai*.”

“There would be casualties, but not as many as there would be in an extended engagement. The *Renzong* is not big enough to destroy the *Shanghai* outright, but colliding with it in the right way, say, in one of the engines, it would cripple it and force Aumeier to pull it back or lose such a holy symbol. Seeing the mythical Light from the East retreat or be destroyed would be demoralizing enough to force the defenders to surrender. With the offensive threat to the Sovereignty neutralized, our respective heads of state can sue for peace.”

“I…I suppose that will have to work,” Scipio said, shaking nervously.

\* \* \*

Twelve corvettes and a bomber soared towards Liar’s Bluff from Ravengrad, spearheading the invasion force that would return the city to the Sovereignty’s fold. On the bridge of the lead ship stood Ian Barrow, finally trusted enough to once again lead a force of shock troops towards Alexis’ glory.

The night air around them was silent as the massive bomber and its escorts cut through the sky, on a vigilant watch for any enemy interceptors. Fortunately, none came.

“Commander Barrow?” came a voice from through the radio. Ian paused. It was Eirene – his sister, speaking to him.

“Queen Consort, what can I do for you?” he asked.

“I know that my wife has dispatched you to attack Liar’s Bluff, but I must ask for your help,” she said. “The situation in Widow’s Walk has become dire. A Hyperion battleship has landed many units of troops and we do not have the strength necessary to fend them off. They lack any anti-aircraft support, and so I must ask that you support us with some aircraft. Alexis and Lancaster’s forces are occupied elsewhere. You’re the only one who might get here in time.”

There was no time to think on the decision, and so Ian was forced to act on gut instinct. In Liar’s Bluff there was Janessa, his ex-girlfriend, who was a strong woman but still in need of his help. In Widow’s Walk there was Eirene, his estranged sister to whom he now had the opportunity to prove himself. He could, of course, split up his forces. That would be best. He didn’t owe Janessa anything anymore, but he didn’t want to let her die, either – it would be possible to dispatch the bomber and six corvettes to destroy Hyperion’s fortifications and lead the remaining corvettes to rescue Eirene, ideally having his cake and eating it too. Rescue the people captured by Hyperion and show to his sister that she could rely on him. Ian was all but certain that she *was* his sister.

From the cockpit of the flagship corvette, a series of lights conveyed a message in Morse to the bomber, telling its captain to take command of Hornet wing while Ian took Juniper wing to aid Eirene.

The bomber was called the *Ariadne*, and it soon found itself within visual range of the *Shanghai*, which it would attempt to destroy. It carried a full payload of Prometheus missiles that would, if all went well, break their way past the barriers and hull armor into the *Shanghai’s* interior, setting the vessel ablaze and forcing it to quit the battlefield. If that failed, then it would launch itself into the enemy dreadnought, sinking it like a valiant divine wind.

As the *Ariadne’s* escort began to scatter, dodging anti-aircraft fire from the Hyperion gunners below, the bomber’s crew watched Fort Peregrine light up as explosions rocked its concrete halls. Unbeknownst to them, in the face of the Sovereignty offensive, Janessa and Lisbeth had rushed into the sewers and detonated their bombs. That was a distraction. To the crews above, the mission had not changed.

\* \* \*

Down below, the two women had begun to make their escape. Under the impact of the battle, the sewer main had collapsed, forcing them to retreat through the fort itself, which had become unstable and consumed by fire. They rushed past, passing by enemy troops that ignored them amongst the chaos.

The last arena before they could escape was a wide open lobby that had many decades ago serviced patients in need of medical care. It was a tall room with six concrete columns that dominated the space and one large glass façade which had been blown out by stray shots from the fighting down below. If Lisbeth and Janessa could clear this last space, they would be in the clear.

Past the broken glass wall was a wide staircase that led down a hill to the parking lot, where the Sovereignty and Hyperion were still engaged in fierce combat. As the two infiltrators sprinted towards this staircase, they were met by a group of soldiers retreating from the battle. Lisbeth stopped fend off the last of their pursuers, while Janessa picked up a machine gun from a fallen soldier and opened fire on the fresh arrivals, scattering them and forcing the survivors into cover.

Lisbeth followed her companion’s suit and picked up a shotgun, more powerful than the pea shooter at her hip. She peered around the corner into the corridors from which they had just come and saw a formidable sight: Charlotte Aucoin, the last of the base officers, was leading a force of Hyperion soldiers towards them. Only she wore a barrier, but Janessa knew that this could easily spell her doom.

“Janessa! More incoming!” Lisbeth shouted.

The first few of Charlotte’s soldiers entered the lobby and fired, their bullets bouncing harmlessly off of Janessa’s barrier. It would not stand against sustained fire, but it was enough to keep her mostly safe. She stood her ground and fired back, driving the enemy back.

“Run, I’ll cover ye!” she yelled.

Lisbeth nodded and fled towards the staircase. “My thanks,” she whispered as she passed Janessa by, the latter’s weapon’s cacophonous rattle drowning out her voice. When she was gone, Janessa slowly began to retreat, firing at whatever moved.

It was then that her barrier failed. A bullet ripped into her arm, and she fell to the ground from the unexpected pain. The sustained firefight had been too much for the machine, the energy of so many bullets overloading its generators. Charlotte and her troops surged into the lobby and prepared to kill her, but were stopped by the arrival of the attacking Peregrine soldiers.

Janessa lay on the ground in pain as the two armies fought one another, bullets slinging overhead. Every sight and sound was a blur.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. One of the Sovereignty’s men. “Help me,” she said.

“Janessa Tyler,” the man replied. “The corvettes are landing troops in the city. We’re getting you out. The base is ours.”

The battle seemed to calm as Janessa felt herself being dragged back. Only when her ally stopped and suddenly let her head drop to the floor did she realize that the Athenian force had not prevailed in that instant. The two of them were the last of the squad, the last soldier having fallen a mere second prior.

Her savior raised his hands in protest. “She’s wounded, we…” he began before he was shot in gut and fell backwards, his bloodied corpse tumbling down the concrete staircase. Janessa started to address Charlotte, hoping that she could appeal to her, but she too could not. Charlotte shot her in the chest without a word.

Charlotte dropped her gun and sighed. She looked around at the bleak landscape. Walls were riddled with bullet holes and scorched by fires, and corpses littered the ground, staining the floor with pools of blood. Scipio’s reinforcements had been delayed and Janz was nowhere to be found, lost in the confusion. Beyond, she was treated to a scenic vista of yet another town on fire. Despite losing almost everything, it appeared that she had won for the time being. Her relief was premature.

The view of the outside world was suddenly eclipsed by one of the half dozen corvettes buzzing like their namesake hornets through the Liar’s Bluff sky. Like a deer in a car’s headlights, she froze solid and stared at the aircraft hovering in front of her. Nearly two score troops stormed up the stairs and aimed at the last survivors from Hyperion.

Charlotte put her hands in the air and surrendered.

\* \* \*

In the air above, both the *Ariadne* and the *Renzong* were ready to engage the *Shanghai*. As luck had it, Scipio and Arthur’s treacherous vessel was the first in position to make its play.

The atmosphere on the bridge was quiet as the three men, Scipio, Arthur, and Sokolov, watched the dreadnought grow larger and larger. Its loyal crew had not yet discovered Scipio’s betrayal, and, if luck was with the Strategos, they would not do so until the fatal moment when the *Renzong* would cripple the Light from the East.

“I’m surprised you stayed, Sokolov. You had every opportunity to abandon ship with the rest, and yet here you are,” Arthur said, gesturing down the dark and empty corridors.

“I had no place in the Sovereignty. Folks like me and Lisbeth, there’s not much use for us when we’re not soldiering. We’ll put an end to the war, and, if we die in the process, that’s not a big loss for everyone come peacetime.”

“That is…comforting, I suppose,” Scipio said as he gently guided the *Renzong* towards its mark. “No matter what the outcome of this war is, no matter whose side you are on, many will be displaced when the conflict is resolved. Perhaps it is better that people like you and I give our lives for our countries, and we get in return freedom from that crippling doubt and feeling of emptiness when our livelihood is no longer needed.”

Arthur hummed solemnly. “Don’t sell yourselves short. No one is ever useless. I was a writer before the war, and I could have continued afterwards. You two are interesting men, and could have made something of yourselves even in peacetime, of that I have no doubt.”

“Perhaps. It’s all academic now, though. The main engine is the big turbine just behind the bridge. If we strike it at full speed, we should cripple its power enough to force it to retreat. It’s getting close, now.”

“What about the Sovereignty’s bomber prowling about?” Sokolov asked.

“It won’t waste its precious missiles on an empty transport. And the *Shanghai’s* gunners won’t figure out our intent until it’s too late.”

“I hope you’re right.”

As the bow of the *Shanghai* drew ever close, lights rippling across its surface as its weapons lashed out at Alexis’ invading forces, Scipio and Arthur put their hands together and danced to imaginary music while Sokolov lingered behind them, mulling over his life. Whether or not he would be remembered as a hero no longer mattered – at the very least, he was finally doing something worthwhile.

Scipio had been right about the *Shanghai’s* weapons. The men and women aboard did eventually deduce that the *Renzong* was on a collision course, but, by the time they had done so, it was too late. Rockets and laser fire battered the transport’s barriers and hull, but, no matter how much armor plating they broke off and no matter how many fires they lit, nothing could stop the suicidal ship’s inexorable advance. It passed through the dreadnought’s barriers and rammed the main engine, disappearing into an impressive eruption of fire and sparks.

Immediately, the crew of the *Ariadne* witnessed the spectacle and cheered, not knowing the details of what had transpired but overjoyed nonetheless. With the main engine gone and the integrity of the *Shanghai’s* hull critically compromised, their job had become much easier. Missile after missile flew forwards from the bomber and crashed into the Light from the East, easily piercing through the area that the *Renzong* had cleared and sealing the dreadnought’s fate.

## Chapter 27 – The Bloodstained Sky

*“In truth, it was never possible for the Commonwealth to be the only government after the storms. Isolated conclaves have always existed, ever since the storms, and they invariably resist integration. That is the real purpose of the Skywatch – yes, it provides employment for citizens. Yes, it helps internal security, but we have the civil guard and the legions for that. The Skywatch is and has always been a vehicle for conquest.”*

* *Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster, in* Skywatch Operations (Passage later redacted)

Liar’s Bluff was on fire. The Hyperion fleet, along with many Athenian and Skywatch ships, lay dead in the waters of the Aegean Sea or else had fled back to its motherland. The *Shanghai* was crippled and limping back towards Geneva, its crew praying to their myriad gods to deliver them safely home.

The battle was over, but the night and the war were not. Alexis and company had travelled to Liar’s Bluff, where they quickly examined the extent of the damage.

“I don’t *care* about his information,” Ian raged, looking down over one of the prisoners whose name he never cared to learn. “I want you to beat him until he’s pissing blood, do you hear? And vomiting, and shitting blood too! Not until the red stuff’s coming out of every hole in his body will his debt to me be paid!”

“Ian, you stop that lunacy *right* now. We’re not going to brutalize our prisoners just because you’re mad that your ex-girlfriend died in battle!” Eirene said as she stepped between Ian and the prisoner. “Maybe you do still care about her, yeah?”

“Oh, don’t tell me that you wouldn’t be off the rails if Alexis got shot. And it’s not just about me – how many of our civilians were killed by Hyperion troops during the fight?”

Eirene paused. “Yes, too many. It is as unforgivable as it is reprehensible. But we need to be better than petty revenge. The men who committed such crimes were desperate soldiers who decided that if they were to die, they would do as much damage as they could before the end, or…hapless souls who couldn’t control who got lost in the crossfire. And, indeed, they already perished for their sins. We do not need to torture those who have already surrendered themselves.”

“Revenge? Surely Alexis is planning a counterattack right now, especially with their fleet all but annihilated. Hyperion can’t be allowed to get away with this.”

“There is a difference between a strategic counteroffensive and senseless retribution,” Teague said. “Yes, we will attack Geneva. But that is a calculated part of the war effort, not murder.”

“Oh, come off it, war is nothing more than institutionalized murder.”

“Probably, yes, but it is necessary. Beating this man is not. War has always been how nations and rulers rise and fall. I’d rather not be on the falling end.”

“I don’t disagree, but…well, I want revenge. Théoden has to suffer for what he’s done to our people.”

“Don’t worry,” Alexis said, “he will. Very soon. Our intelligence corps have discovered that their highest echelons of leadership, including Théoden himself, were aboard their idolized dreadnought during the battle. He hoped to oversee his victory personally. If they still survive, we need only catch up to it before it reaches Geneva, force it into submission and we have their so-called ‘Prophet’ in our clutches. Should be easy with how much damage we dealt the damn thing during the battle”

“It has several hours’ head start,” Lancaster said. “The *Sunset Serenade* and several of my smaller ships should be able to catch such a beast handily enough, but most of them are in for repairs at the moment. How many of yours can you spare?”

“Juniper and Hornet wings are almost intact, as is the *Ariadne*,” Ian said before Alexis could reply. “Take us alongside the *Serenade* as an improvised battlegroup and we could capture the dreadnought with little trouble.”

“That would work,” Alexis said.

“Then, if Lancaster accepts, I’ll have my pilots get ready. Let’s fuck these guys up. Make them pay for what they did to us.”

\* \* \*

As the Sovereignty’s leaders planned their operation, Charlotte sat in a cell as the last survivor from Hyperion command in Liar’s Bluff. As much as she wanted to cry, there seemed to be no more tears left within her, and so she only coughed and gagged awkwardly as she tried to force some kind of water from her body, as if that might purify her. In the end, the best she could do was to urinate in the bucket her captors had provided for that purpose, all whilst under the humiliating scrutiny of her guards.

There was nothing left for her anywhere. The war – and her actions during it – had cost her the only man towards whom she had ever felt even an ounce of kinship, and the children in her care had been claimed by the violence she did nothing to prevent. If she had not allowed Emma to run the message to the hangar, or if she had argued with Théoden about the *coup de grace* and stopped the terrible destruction that drove Peony from the city, perhaps at least one of the children might have remained with her. As it stood, however, she had no friends, no family, and no country. If she were to die, in the cell or elsewhere, she did not believe that anyone would miss her.

\* \* \*

“And we were so sure of our victory,” Théoden mused aboard the wounded *Shanghai*. “Aumeier, tell me: Do you believe we can yet salvage this war?”

“The *Shanghai* is not yet destroyed, despite the best efforts of Queen Alexis and the renegades.”

“Yudina and Barrow lost to us in Montreal. Sorenson dead in Liar’s Bluff. Marinetti gone rogue, now dead. Countless lesser thesmothétai and their levies destroyed in battle. And here we are, running away with our tail between our legs.”

“That much is true,” Nathaniel admitted.

“We may not be running for long,” Robert Lamb interrupted, entering the bridge.

“What is it?”

“We have reports of a Sovereignty fleet on our trail and gaining, which is not surprising in our current state. They should catch up to us in short order.”

“Their strength?” Théoden asked forlornly.

“Only a single capital ship, the *Sunset Serenade*. The same bomber that engaged us earlier is also in pursuit, and they are accompanied by almost a dozen corvettes.”

Théoden said nothing, but stood up from his comfortable chair and pressed his forehead against the front glass wall of the bridge. The silence was oppressive until he finally spoke. “This is what we will do. I want you all to listen to me very carefully – the lives and liberties of our people are on the line.”

“Of course, Master,” Robert and Nathaniel replied in unison.

“Aumeier. There are several thesmothétai based with their levies in Bern. We still have several light transports on board somewhere – take one and link up with them. I want you to lead a charge directly against Ravengrad and buy us time.”

“Master…” Nathaniel began before Théoden cut him off.

“Lamb, your job will be to return to Geneva and organize an evacuation. Hyperion is done as a nation, but it need not be as a faith. Every survivor in the city must be divided into independent conclaves and told to scatter into the hinterlands, but I cannot give the order myself because the communications equipment onboard this vessel is non-operational. So you will oversee this as an agent of my will. It will be impossible for the Sovereignty to hunt down and destroy them all. Send similar messages to Stockholm and Madrid. I will stay onboard the *Shanghai* and ensure that the *Serenade* does not continue its advance.”

“Oversee the civilians and wounded from the cities. Understood, Master. S’an easy enough task.”

“Master, if I may,” Nathaniel persisted. “To attack Ravengrad is a useless suicide mission. Surely my skills could be better put to use elsewhere?”

“Why, Aumeier? Are you afraid to die?” Lamb goaded.

“Is that such a bad thing? Martyrdom need not be everyone’s fate.”

“Fine, then, you yellow-bellied coward,” Théoden snapped. “Do what you must to survive. Take the transport and run to Kasimira instead. They have no love for the Sovereignty and no hatred of us, so they should grant you asylum as a refugee. Run to Joseon, for all I care. Just get out of my sight.”

“Thank you, Master,” Nathaniel said, hastily quitting the room.

“Will you carry out your orders, Lamb?” Théoden asked once the Master of the Fleet had departed.

“I will.”

“Good. I will see you on the other side, then.”

\* \* \*

The *Sunset Serenade* opened fire upon the *Shanghai* shortly afterwards, peppering its hull with a smattering of artillery and laser fire. Most of the dreadnought’s guns were already unpowered, wanting for crew, or destroyed outright, and so the *Serenade’s* bombardment was mostly a formality. The *Ariadne* finished the work of removing any major threats while the corvettes landed troops onto the *Shanghai* itself, and it wasn’t long before Alexis and her compatriots were face-to-face with Théoden for the second time in history, this time on less-than-friendly terms.

The interior of the *Shanghai* was as magnificent and beautiful as Geneva itself. To call it a flying temple would not be enough – though its exterior looked like any other ship, inside the vessel a man might easily be forgiven for thinking himself inside an extravagant house of worship. The dignitaries met each other on the main deck at the ship’s heart, flanked by Ionic columns and lush greenery.

“I executed Magnus,” Alexis said to Théoden. “Tell me why I shouldn’t execute you now.”

“There’s no reason. My most warlike dog has turned tail and ran. I would have my forces stand down and surrender, but there is no way for me to control them anymore. My last remaining Strategos is doing his best to remove civilians from combat zones but I do not know if he will get the message out in time, or whether the people will heed his warnings. I fear that Aumeier’s militarism may have seeped too far into my country’s consciousness.”

“Civilians?” Ian asked. “Last I remember, everyone in Hyperion was armed and ready to fight, children included.”

“Monstrous practice, that,” Alexis said, turning her nose up at the aged and sullen figure of Théoden Lockhart.

“When we annexed Madrid and Stockholm, we also collected their down-on-their-luck citizens. For once, pragmatism won the day and we knew that the people would resist integration,” Théoden explained. “They have been loyal, though – take caution that you will not be received well if you march into your former principalities.”

“I understand,” Alexis said.

“My country is finished. My plans were foiled by the intervention of the men and women I trusted to advise me. As tyrannical as the Commonwealth was, it never had this problem, such was the strength of its centralized leadership. I can only hope that my spirit will live on when my nation and my body do no longer. I trust that you will kill me, now – I am too dangerous to you alive, unless you fear making me a martyr.”

“I don’t,” Alexis said. “You’re a problem alive or dead. That’s just how it is, I’m afraid.”

“I, too, understand,” Théoden replied, beginning to weep. “I’m sorry. I am so, so sorry. Everything I wanted, everything I had, is gone because of my generals and my own weakness as a statesman. We had a *chance* to rebuild and paint a more peaceful picture of the world, to learn from our mistakes, and look what became of that chance. My beautiful masterpiece reduced to an ugly smear. So many mistakes, even as I thought myself enlightened.”

Alexis drew her pistol and hesitated, feeling a moment of pity for the sobbing, elderly man kneeling in front of her. Nevertheless, she took a deep breath and then shot him dead. She had declined to use her sword like she had done in killing Magnus, as, hopefully, the gun had granted Théoden a quicker and more merciful death. He had been her enemy, but he had earned some degree of respect that Magnus had not.

\* \* \*

“May I suggest something?” Teague asked as the boarding party left the *Shanghai*, leaving the empty ship to crash into the earth.

“Certainly,” Alexis said. “What is it?”

“Théoden said that Montreal and Stockholm may yet resist us. If you’re looking for as peaceful a takeover as possible, there’s something that I *believe* we might be able to do. Do you remember what Lancaster said after the Waterlock was destroyed? The Leviathan protocol. Supposedly everyone who ever underwent surgery through the Medical Administration has this, as does everyone who served in the guard, the legions, or the Skywatch.”

“So, basically, everyone,” Eirene said.

“Right, you were mostly unconscious for this bit, if I remember. If there’s any way left for an officer of the Commonwealth to activate it, we could neutralize a large portion of the defenses that Théoden has left. Remember that the majority of his army at this point is ex-Commonwealth citizens still supporting Hyperion out of Madrid and Stockholm. What was it you said it did, Lancaster? Inhibit aggression, render everyone docile?”

“It suppresses a lot of individuality and more aggressive instincts, yes. Effectively, they become drones in the service of whoever’s pulling the switches, though some are strong enough to resist it,” Lancaster said.

“There’s one thing you’re forgetting,” Marcus said.

“That it would affect our troops too? *You* forget that we have one thing that Théoden doesn’t.” Teague gestured towards Lena, who, startled, dropped the chunk of the *Shanghai’s* hull she had been tossing to herself. “Lena, you and your ilk are already able to interface with capital ships and corvettes, yes?”

Lena let a serious look flood onto her face. “I can command *fleets* if you need me to. Let me destroy these fools who would deny my humanity. The older corvettes and frigates don’t have the hardware I need, but the Deathbearers and capital ships are compatible. I’ll need friends to pilot them all, but it can definitely work.”

“So we all go to sleep and let the mourners command the fleet. We lay in bed, napping, while Lena and company march into Madrid and Stockholm, take over their defenses while everyone’s too dumb to think anything of it, and then everybody wakes up to a new regime. Sinister, but it would be more peaceful than the alternative.”

“The question is, can we trust Lena and her friends?” Ian asked.

“You can trust me,” Lena assured him. “My father aside, Alexis and her officials have been some of my strongest allies in trying legitimize my own existence. I will not betray them.”

“Then it’s a plan,” Alexis said. “Let’s get going.”

“Hold on, hold on,” Eirene said. “Does no one else think this is a terrible idea? Isn’t this what Leviathan wanted in the first place? Why they started all those wars, why they destroyed two whole cities? All of that was to activate their precious protocol. Why would we hand them their objective after so much effort spent resisting them?”

Alexis looked solemn. “Because we have a legitimate reason for carrying out the plan. Leviathan wanted to subject us all to an AI overlord so that they could better control us.”

“No, they wanted to use the protocol to rebuild after the war. Based on what you’ve told me about your last run-in with Magnus, he only wanted to use it as a means to stop the war he created. Cruel? Absolutely. I fail to see how using it to finish a war we’re already winning is any better.”

“I…you’re right. I don’t know what insanity came over me. Even if I trust Lena, it would be wrong to strip my citizens of their free will for any end, even a noble one. Give the mourners control of the fleets, that much is fine. At least we will not lose more of our own. But I will not use the protocol.”

\* \* \*

With one hour until departure, Teague pulled Lena aside. “Will you at least consider what I’ve suggested?” he asked.

“The civilians of Hyperion are innocent. It is Théoden and his ‘stratēgoí’ who are guilty of starting this war,” Lena protested. “I will command the fleets, but I will not commit genocide.”

“You heard what he said. Most of the civilians are fleeing for the hills, and those who remain will only become an underground resistance if we only take over. It would not be genocide – some civilians would die, yes, but almost all of what would remain would be military targets, and you would be justified in exacting revenge upon them.”

“But…”

“We talked about this. If Alexis merely defeats Hyperion, there will be civil war. The people will start to push for peacetime democracy, and Alexis, in her insanity, will not allow it lest she ‘succumb to Charybdis,’ as Eirene puts it. And the surviving agents from Hyperion who hate her government will encourage rebellion. Everything that we went through will happen again, but this time we will be on the losing side. I won’t let her throw away everything we have fought for.”

“You think that whoever gets elected after her will do a better job?” Lena asked.

“That is why I intend to announce my candidacy for an election, if it ever happens. Lancaster is too militaristic, Alexis is too insane, and everyone else is too inexperienced. I have survived the storms and the war – of all those who yet survive, only I have learned both the lessons of the old world and the lessons of the new. Young officials are good for progress, but, if you want stability…”

“You need someone old.”

“Exactly. My plan will encourage Alexis to abdicate, something she would never do on her own. One way is that she sees that all threats to her nation have been destroyed, the most zealous fighters having stayed in the cities, those Genevans who would not be affected by Leviathan, and allows us to have a democracy. Or the people become so outraged at such drastic action that they force her to step down. It is best for her psyche, best for our country, and best for your people. Please, just consider it.”

“I will. But I’m not making any promises until my finger is on the trigger.”

“That’s all I’m asking. I know you’ll make the right decision. Now go, join the other mourners. I won’t be in a position to offer any more advice until the fleet returns. God have mercy on us all.”

Lena nodded and left him alone. The ships departed an hour later.

\* \* \*

Alexis awoke to a number of her allies looking stone-facedly down at her. She felt like death, still half asleep and suffering from grogginess. What little energy she had seemed to be sucked out of her by the somber faces around her.

“Wait…who all is here?” she asked, stumbling over words. “Teague, Ian, Lancaster, Marcus. Eirene, and…Lena?”

“Yeah, she’s here,” Ian said. “She’s fucked us all.”

Alexis sat up and got a better look at her surroundings. Lena looked entirely ashamed and almost in tears.

“What happened? Did we lose?”

“No,” Eirene said. “We won. We won far, far too decisively. I’m not sure whether to blame you or Lena.”

“Listen, will someone just tell me what happened?” Alexis pleaded.

“Your nuclear weapons, that’s what happened,” Ian said. “The fleet, the one you put Lena in charge of, it launched corvette and frigate raids to destroy Hyperion’s missile defense and then retreated. An hour or so later, all three principalities were nuked. Losses, as far as we can tell, were damn close to total.”

“There were some survivors, but they’re surely going to suffer from radiation sickness. We can treat them at the Medical Administration, but I still expect many to die,” Marcus said.

Alexis said nothing. She only held her head in her hands and began to weep.

“Hyperion is destroyed, completely and utterly. The blessing is that most of their civilians did indeed evacuate the cities before the strike. Still, too many people died, and the public appears to hold you responsible.”

“Me? *Me?* What have I ever done to make this happen? Why do I deserve this?” Alexis cried.

“They don’t know about the mourners, remember, and you ordered the construction of the nuclear weapons. As far as they’re concerned, you launched the nukes. The fleet went out with your approval, even if you weren’t directly commanding it anymore. Many in the public are demanding an election to have a new government installed,” Teague said. “If you refuse, I fear that they may attempt a revolution.”

“So that’s it, then. After all I’ve done for them, the people hate me for a disaster that was out of my control. I won’t have any more violence, or any more mad revolution.” She took a deep breath and continued to cry. “I will…abdicate. I have to.”

“I think that would be best,” Eirene said. She sat down next to Alexis with her head on her shoulder and her arm against her waist. Though the tragedy still weighed heavily on Alexis, having Eirene close was a warm and welcome feeling.

“If it’s any consolation,” Teague said, “You still have many loyal supporters. There are those who remain adamant that crushing Hyperion so efficiently was worth it, just as those who lament the human cost. With opinion so divided, we may just as likely see a civil war as a revolution.”

“And what of Lena and the mourners? Do they not share any responsibility?”

Lena looked downtrodden. “Yes, definitely, but, as my father said, the people don’t know about us, thanks to Arthur and the Media Administration. It might be unwise to reveal our existence now, but the truth will have to get out eventually. I am sorry, more than I could possibly express with words. And I know all of them.”

Alexis sighed and breathed in deep, trying to maintain some semblance of composure. “I don’t know. I have always respected you, but…I’ll get over this eventually, I suppose. The ones you really need to beg forgiveness from are the families of the victims.”

Right then, Lena hated that she herself could not cry. “If forgiveness is even possible,” she said.

“All I know is that it will be a long time before I can forgive myself,” Alexis said, finally standing up with tears still dripping down her face. “I have to step down. I know that I have failed, but I will still do what I can for humanity. There will be no more wars, no more conflict, and no more senseless ‘revolutionary’ slaughter, not on my watch! Do you understand? I cannot stop chaos entirely, but if abdication is what I have to do to make something decent out of my failure, then so be it. Now, if you’ll all please leave – I need some time alone.”

Eirene lingered a little, but eventually waved a sorrowful goodbye to her wife.

\* \* \*

“Ian, there’s something I thought you should know,” Lena later said to Ian.

“What is it?”

“I remembered your conversation that you had with Alexis many moons ago. That you had doubts as to the fate of your sister. I thought that maybe, having done so much harm, I could help someone.”

“What? How?”

“I accessed the entire archives from the libraries we got from…Hyperion. In there were birth records, and, among other things, documentation of legal name changes. Eirene Lilliana de Lafayette, despite her defection from the Commonwealth, was included.”

Ian froze. “You can tell me if she was really my sister? Please, then, tell me. Ever since I left Liar’s Bluff, I wondered if I made the right choice. I thought Janessa would survive, but if I had been there…well, I might be able to live with myself if I was able to save my sister. Just…I’m not sure I want to hear the answer, to be honest. But tell me – what was her original name?”

Lena smiled as she prepared to give him the answer, and finally nodded. Ian let out the breath that he had held for as long as Lena had kept him waiting, savoring the anticipation on his face.

“Eirene Lilliana de Lafayette, née Lavinia Barrow, daughter of Neleus Barrow. Your estranged sister. What you do with this information, however, is up to you. I’m pretty sure that I really screwed up by listening to Ironwall’s plan for winning the war, but I knew that I could at least do some good by helping you.”

“Wait, did you say it was Ironwall? As in, Teague Ironwall? He ordered the nuclear strikes?”

“Suggested, more like, but yeah. He told me that the only ones left in the Hyperion principalities were zealots who would fight to the last man in a brutal war, so it would be more effective just to nuke them. I don’t know if any of it was true – it’s something that I’ll have to make peace with myself.”

“I’ll have to have a word with him, then,” Ian muttered. “But I digress. Thank you for what you’ve done for me. Perhaps it’s time I spoke to her.”

Lena laughed nervously. “You want my advice? Maybe hold off for now. My father told me that she was the one who proposed a war against Hyperion as a way to get Alexis to step down, but I don’t think she envisioned it like this. She wanted to get rid of the immediate threat once and for all so that her then-girlfriend would allow a democracy, but this…this was a disaster. Yeah, Hyperion actually started the war, and I know the nukes were really my fault, so don’t say anything, but she’s got to be feeling awful right now. Even if she’s not feeling guilty, the sheer amount of death that just happened is weighing on everyone. Don’t bring up the past now.”

“Maybe.” Ian shrugged, but didn’t intend to heed Lena’s warning. His question was going to upset her either way, so he didn’t suppose it mattered when he posed it, and he had to know if she could possibly forgive him. Before, he had wanted to avoid unnecessary awkwardness, but, after everything that had happened, he felt it was time to clear the air.

Eirene wasn’t anywhere to be found in the palace. When Ian asked around, he learned that she had taken a cab to Widow’s Walk and not been seen since. Whatever business the young woman had there he could not tell, but it didn’t matter.

The hydroponic farms built along Widow’s Walk had taken minor damage during the second war with Hyperion. They were not Eirene’s destination, however. Instead, Ian finally found her farther to the north, past where Alexis had constructed anything out of the ruins, amongst the long-decayed ruins of dockworkers’ houses.

“What are you doing here?” Ian asked as he approached, the tails of his dark longcoat swaying slightly in the wind.

Eirene didn’t say anything, nor did she deign to turn and face her brother. She stayed crouched down inside the cold ruins of a small house, as if contemplating the moss and rubble that had overtaken it.

“Something interesting down there?” Ian tried again. Still no response.

Before he became too discouraged to remain, Eirene finally looked up, even though she still faced away from Ian. “This was Alexis’ house when she was a kid,” she said quickly. “It got bombed during the battle of Ravengrad, but she once asked if we could stop by here after a date. Pay her respects, or something.”

“What made you come here?”

Eirene picked up a pebble and tossed it into the air. She caught it once it fell back down and then set it in a patch of moss. Ian noted with a sense of strange curiosity that she had picked up some of Alexis’ habits. Perhaps that was to be expected from a married couple, though, had he not witnessed Lena doing much the same thing in days past? That Alexis had affected her companions in such a specific way was curious, but nothing more – there was a conversation he needed to have.

“I hate myself,” Eirene said. “I want to be mad, or at least upset about all the people who died, either because Lena was sadistic and vengeful or because Alexis was negligent. But all I can feel sorry for is Alexis herself. She told me once about how much she missed the innocence of her childhood, how the only things she had to worry about were the usual affairs of children: School, chores, her mom, and thinking about the next time she’d see her girlfriend. The thought of going from that to leading a revolution and then a country and all the while fighting foreign enemies, underground resistance, and more is horrid. I can imagine that little girl playing in the yard without a care in the world, not knowing what awaited her later in life. Makes me want to cry.”

“The same could be said of you.”

“What?”

“You were a little girl once too. You would have had your own hopes, your own dreams, and your own ambitions. Surely nothing could have prepared you to have all that cast aside for this politicking and warmongering.”

There was a soft thud as Eirene stopped crouching to sit flat on the ground, fidgeting slightly to make herself more comfortable in the rubble. She looked up and around at what little remained of the house’s walls and then at the grey sky. “My life has always been pretty messed up.”

Ian took a deep breath and bit the bullet. “I know,” he said.

Eirene paused, took one glance at him and then looked back away. “Yeah. Yeah, you do, don’t you?”

He couldn’t tell whether she was angry, dismayed, or anything else, so he just kept talking.

“I know that I screwed you over, and I’ve been tormenting myself about it for years. Part of me recognized that you’d moved on and that same part wanted to just let sleeping dogs lie, but after everything that’s happened, I couldn’t not apologize. I don’t want you to hate me, as much as I probably deserve it, so please, let me repent – I was your family once, and I want to be again.”

Ian could hear his sister sniffle quietly before she spoke, voice wavering. “So, what am I to you? Am I Eirene Lilliana de Lafayette, or do you still think of me as Lavinia Barrow?”

“You’re whatever you want to be, and if that’s who you are now, then I can accept that.”

“Really? Because it seems to me like you’re still living in the past. After all these years, you finally show up and try to just apologize for screwing over my entire life? All because you want me to be your little sister again? Did it ever occur to you that I didn’t *want* to be part of that family any more, or that you don’t have any right to just take me back as your kid sister because, oh no, poor Ian felt guilty?”

Ian was taken aback by her outburst. “I’m not trying to take you back, I’m *asking* you to take *me* back. Or, hell, I don’t know, even if you can’t *accept* my apology, just let me apologize. I was wrong to hang you out like that, okay? I mean, Janessa died because I wanted to make up for it, isn’t that enough?”

“You should have saved her instead,” Eirene scowled. “Sacrificing someone who trusts you because you’ve got a whim that you might make up for some decade-old sin is abhorrent. Don’t you understand? You *abandoned* me. Dad cast me out and *beat* me because of who I was, and you did nothing. *Nothing*! And then you do the same to your ex-girlfriend too? Left her to fend for herself so you could stop feeling so guilty? How can you be so *fucking* stupid, Ian? I trusted you once, I just can’t anymore, okay? Forget it. I…just…I just…gah!” She broke into tears, sobbing into each hand. The tears darkened the rocks beneath hear as they dripped from her face.

Ian sat down next to her and tried to hold her close, but she swatted him back. “Get away!” she yelled. “I don’t want you anymore! Just go away! Please, leave me alone!”

“Eirene, just look at me, please! Don’t just walk out and throw me away as some vestige of your past. If you want to move on from your old family ties, then that’s fine. I don’t need to be your brother; I just want to be able to talk honestly with you.”

His sister abruptly stopped, stood up, and folded her arms, still not bothering to face him. She stayed like this for a painfully long time, taking deep breaths to try and calm herself. Eventually, she spoke in a voice still interrupted by occasional sniffs or hiccups. “Alexis knows about us. Of course we shared secrets with each other. I don’t want to end up like she did, though. She tried to distract herself from everything that hurt her by indulging in me, but because the things she was avoiding were in the present, they just kept piling on until she had to face them or let the entire Sovereignty come crashing down. If I delude myself into thinking I can just will away the past, I’m only hurting myself, but, still…”

“You don’t have to accept it if you don’t want to. Don’t let me anchor you in the past. Like I said, I only want us to be able to talk honestly to each other again. To stop this charade of ignorance. If you want me to never bring it up again, I won’t, but I needed this.”

“I’m not doing this for you. I don’t know if I can forgive you just yet – My father was a terrible man, and you didn’t even try to stop him, but, in a lot of ways, doing so much to bury my past is no better than nursing a grudge. Give me some time to think.”

“Alright,” Ian said. He couldn’t ask any more of her. If she didn’t want him to be there, then he couldn’t force himself upon her, and at the very least, she had been willing to talk.

Eirene began to amble forwards with her mind outside of her body. She paused, turned her head to the side, and bid Ian follow her lead, which he did. They walked silently along the misty shore, looking back every so often towards the demolished house getting smaller and smaller until they could see it no longer.

The gentle crash of waves against the broken shore soothed Eirene’s ears with its rhythm. She felt her coat and blonde curls move with the wind and smiled. The business with Ian would come later – without the any of the nonsense that was leadership, she was finally able to do with her time anything she wished, and she did not wish to consider the matter that day. Alexis Havery and Eirene Lilliana de Lafayette, once the royal couple and the two heads of a grotesque nation, were free women once more.

“Hector used to tell me that history is a narrative as rich as any work of fiction,” she said to her brother after some time walking, “that nations and their politics can themselves be characters in a grand story as much as any knight can when rescuing a princess from a dragon. Well, in our story, the dragon has been slain and the knight and princess are happily wed. The narrative of the Commonwealth, of the Sovereignty, of Alexis Havery and Eirene de Lafayette, is finally done. In truth, it’s kind of exciting – the story may have come to a bittersweet close, but, after the finale…we’re going to be free. She and I don’t have to be our country anymore. We can just be ourselves, looking forward to a new day, and I think that’s as good an end as any.”

“Focus on a new future dawning,” Ian muttered. “Better than dwelling on the past, but that might be difficult considering that three cities were just nuked. I suppose, in any case, I don’t need to be here anymore, so it’s time I took my leave. You should go back to Alexis – she’ll still need you at her side come daybreak.”

## **Appendix A**: Selected Timeline Events

* **April 9, 2022** – Abu Ala al-Afri, *de facto* head of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, is killed by a United States drone strike. Leadership passes to Abu Suleiman al-Naser, the highest-ranking surviving member of the organization.
* **March 1, 2023** – ISIL militants push into Israel, occupying territory for half a month before being expelled with the aid of airstrikes from the United States, Great Britain, and France.
* **December 9, 2029** – Following independent attacks by American-led coalition forces and the Russian and Israeli armies, all ISIL-held territory is recaptured and returned to its previous holders. Al-Naser is killed, but the organization’s lower echelons survive and operate as independent terrorist cells.
* **March 4, 2040** – Most restored territory formerly held by ISIL has fractured into over a dozen independent factions, including border regions of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Turkey. The majority are divided along sectarian lines. External powers withdraw all military support.
* **October 22, 2059** – NATO dissolves following diplomatic tension in Europe.
* **August 4, 2063** – Popular revolution in North Korea.
* **April 17, 2064** – Annexation of North Korea by South Korea with Japanese and American support.
* **January 30, 2071** – Complete annexation of Ukraine by Russia. No effective response from the United Nations.
* **January 31, 2072** – China invades Japan, beginning the Third Sino-Japanese War. Despite Japanese remonstrances, the United Nations once again takes no action.
* **May 9, 2073** – China fully withdraws from the Japanese islands, following Korean intervention on Japan’s behalf.
* **August 12, 2090** – European Union dissolves.
* **February 14, 2092** – Islamic intellectuals and political leaders meet in Tehran to resolve the division between Sunni and Shia Islam, with the ultimate goal of uniting the dissolved nations of the Middle East.
* **January 9, 2097** – World population reaches 12 billion.
* **2098** – Widespread famine in Western Europe, United States, and central Asia brought on by overpopulation, diseased crops, and climate change.
* **April 2, 2113** – Tehran Council concludes, resulting in a united Islamic federation known as the Tehran Pact. Fragmented Iraqi and Syrian territories are annexed by Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Dissident Islamic factions remain, refusing to accept the conference’s decisions.
* **April 3, 2113** – Emperor El-Amin elected as the first sovereign of the Tehran Pact.
* **April 9, 2113** – Pope John Paul V praises the Tehran Pact’s unification and peace efforts.
* **June 18, 2113** – International effort to scout and colonize exoplanets begins, including development of terraforming technology.
* **May 20, 2122** – United Nations begins the Citizen Reallocation Program in response to severe, global resource scarcity. Densely-populated nations begin to send volunteer emigrants to countries less affected by famine or drought.
* **September 30, 2122 –** United States declares war on the Tehran Pact following a massacre of its emigrants in Mosul. Beginning of the First Pact War.
* **March 22, 2123 –** India completes the development of the Grand Arsenal, a series of strategic missile silos in the Himalayas.
* **February 24, 2125 –** United States withdraws from the First Pact War.
* **June 4, 2124 –** Pakistani bomber aircraft attack and destroy the Grand Arsenal, beginning the Indo-Pakistani War.
* **April 1, 2127 –** Beginning of the “April Fools’ War” between Norway and Sweden.
* **January 9, 2131 –** “Kashmir I” bioweapon deployed in Islamabad. Victims suffer no known symptoms except for inability to reproduce. Pakistan joins the Tehran Pact.
* **October-December 2131 –** French troops support popular revolutions in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.
* **March 8, 2135 –** 67% of the world’s people and 3% of its animals are affected by the Kashmir I plague. Population begins to rapidly decline as global birthrate drops significantly.
* **February 9, 2141 –** United States declares war of aggression on Mexico in an effort to claim natural resources and industrial capacity.
* **March 19, 2141 –** Mexico surrenders.
* **November 4, 2149 –** Pope Francis VI condemns continued oppression of Western immigrants in Tehran Pact nations.
* **December 20, 2149 –** Beginning of Greco-Turkish War.
* **April 12, 2150 –** Turkey surrenders to Greek and Armenian forces. Divisive vote to join the Tehran Pact results in a civil war. Eastern Turkish secessionists separate and join the Pact while West Turkey remains independent and seeks to reconcile with its former enemy.
* **October 5, 2150 –** East Asian Endeavor formed by Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese leaders to further exoplanet colonization research.
* **February 21, 2151 –** Tehrani Emperor Darzi assassinated by Zaydi militants during a period of civil unrest, succeeded by Emperor Amirmoez.
* **May 13, 2153 –** Egypt joins the Tehran Pact.
* **May 19, 2153 –** West Turkey joins the Tehran Pact.
* **July 31, 2153 –** Emperor Amirmoez unveils the completed fleet of *Bahamut*-class battleships, basing them at the Mediterranean end of the Suez Canal.
* **April 4, 2154 –** East Asian Endeavor announces its creation of High-Velocity Impact barriers to shield starships against space debris. Personal and military variants are soon developed and distributed.
* **November 15, 2154 –** Catholic League formed in response to “Tehrani aggression.” Many related militia groups operating out of beleaguered European countries receive government sanction and support from the United States.
* **November, 2157 –** Pope Arthur I makes several deals with the religious leaders of other Christian denominations, promising mutual political support in a time of crisis. In the common view, the Catholic League now encompasses most of Europe.
* **April 7, 2195 –** East Asian Endeavor develops super-light metals and super-efficient nuclear engines for interstellar colony ships. Several aerial battleships are built as a proof of concept and deterrent against another Chinese invasion.
* **December 12, 2213 –** TPS *Cairo* sunk by covert action. Though many suspect a false flag attack, the bombing is used by the Tehran Pact as a *casus belli* to invade the Catholic League nations. Beginning of the Second Pact War.
* **January 24, 2217 –** Tehrani occupation of Vienna, the farthest into Europe that Pact forces were able to reach.
* **February 5, 2218 –** Several *Bahamut*-class battleships shell Athens. The city is heavily damaged, but the fleet is repulsed by newly-developed air destroyers using reverse-engineered EAE technology.
* **February 8, 2220 –** The Tehran Pact is fully expelled from Europe and a counterattack begins.
* **February 23, 2220–** Siege of Istanbul begins. Though the Catholics break into the city with relative ease, they are unable to secure control against a dedicated resistance.
* **May 1, 2232 –** The “May Day Victory” is celebrated as Istanbul is officially captured by the Catholic League. Though the city had effectively been under Catholic control for several years, it is not until May Day that the resistance fighters finally evacuate.
* **July 3, 2245 –** Israel surrenders following an invasion by Muslim forces. Pope Arthur II calls for a Crusade against the Tehran Pact.
* **November 9, 2273 –** Mecca captured by the Catholic League.
* **November 20, 2282 –** Israel liberated by Catholic League forces with American support.
* **August 21, 2295 -** *Sehr große Bombe* detonated in occupied Istanbul, destroying much of the city and decapitating League military leadership.
* **May 1, 2296 –** The battle on the *Reliquary*. In a desperate gambit, Pope Leo XVI travels with the entire Papal Center Fleet to relieve a beleaguered army division in Israel and deliver a speech to the Catholic troops stationed in Jerusalem. The Tehran Pact’s own airships intercept the fleet and deploy marines to kidnap the Pope from his flagship. Operation Divine Intervention becomes the largest airship battle in history and the bulk of both fleets are sunk. Unable to feasibly make their escape, the Pact’s marines assassinate Leo XVI instead of abducting him.
* **December 1, 2297 –** Official peace treaty between the Catholic League and the Tehran Pact. The Emperor’s daughter, High Councilor Aaliyah Samara, spearheads reconstruction efforts in the Middle East. Greece sends relief workers to Turkey in exchange for Turkish support in rebuilding Athens. Many Pact intellectuals criticize her ideas as unduly westernized. Many of Samara’s reforms would influence the later states of Kasimira and the Commonwealth of Human Principalities.
* **September 4, 2297 –** Pacification of the United States. Widespread rebellion across the east coast of the U.S. is met with a fleet of airships from Great Britain and France. Lacking anti-aircraft weapons powerful enough to pierce HVI barriers, the rebellious cities are devastated.
* **January 1, 2300** – Unknown operatives activate black sites across the world, using the East Asian Endeavor’s improvements upon existing terraforming technology to wreak havoc upon a crumbling world. Most regions are affected by some form of natural disaster. The decrepit United Nations, as its last act, organizes a mass evacuation to Greece, the only livable territory entirely unaffected by the storms and forms the Commonwealth of Human Principalities as a global governing body. Athens renamed to Ravengrad and declared capital of the Commonwealth.
* **January 2, 3300** – Théoden Lockhart founds the nation of Hyperion in the megacity of Geneva, aided by foreign survivors.
* **January 7, 2300** – Kasimira founded by survivors of former Pact nations.
* **October 17, 2304 –** Commonwealth settlers claim the megacities of Madrid and Stockholm as new principalities. Martin Oswald and Zheng Jun Min appointed as the first principal imperators.
* **March 16, 2310 –** Commonwealth settlers land in Montreal and establish a principality there, under the imperatorship of Grant Laccaby.
* **June 2, 2326 –** Tabriz crisis begins. Secret negotiations between Kasimira and the Commonwealth break down, leading to the CHP’s military occupation of the city of Tabriz.
* **June 9, 2326 –** Traitorous Skywatch forces attack the Commonwealth occupiers alongside the Kasimiran military. Despite emerging victorious, the citizens of Kasimira remain resentful of the Commonwealth for their violent occupation of Tabriz.
* **December 28, 2330** – Peregrine militia attacks Ravengrad Tower.

## 

## **Appendix B:** Pre-war Peregrine Combat Doctrine

The Peregrine militia is first and foremost a guerilla force, with armored and aerial support deployed only rarely. Its troops and officers, regardless of discipline, specialize in hit-and-run and harassment tactics against a numerically and technologically superior enemy, which exclusively refers to the Commonwealth and its military branches. Therefore, a majority of its strategies avoid direct engagements at all costs and rely heavily on stealth, speed, and ambush tactics.

Its command structure is highly decentralized, unlike that of nation-states such as the Commonwealth, Kasimira, and Hyperion. There are no ranks in the militia except for the unofficial office of Commander, an honor awarded to any individual with sufficiently exceptional skill to be trusted with a leadership position. These men and women have more elaborate dress uniforms and can take on various roles, such as field commander or strategist, depending on the nature of their skills. All subordinate members of the militia are of equal rank regardless of the tasks they preform – of a pilot, an infantryman, an engineer, and a cook, none would outrank any of the others.

The militia’s armed forces are mostly allocated to the scouting and salvage corps, otherwise known as the SSC. These soldiers are lightly armed and armored even for the militia, which lacks the heavy weapons, armor, and barriers available to the Commonwealth. Their primary purpose is to investigate the ruined outskirts of Ravengrad and retrieve valuable supplies, not to directly engage enemy forces, and so SSC infantrymen officially carry at most a bayoneted rifle or shotgun and a sidearm. The specifics of the sidearm vary, but it is often a sword or mace for such situations where an enemy’s barriers shield it against ranged fire and its armor is better attacked with a slash or blunt force than a thrust. Of course, the scarcity of supplies often means that scouts carry whatever weapons they might recover in the field.

Outside of the SSC, some militia soldiers are appointed to the shock corps. These are the closest things to front-line troops possessed by the militia, and carry its heaviest weapons. Though they still prefer speed over armor or firepower, shock troopers can hold their own in a protracted fight and can make use of rocket launchers, mortars, and the anti-aircraft missiles critical for engaging even the lightest Skywatch airships.

The last and smallest division is the dragoon corps. These few men and women ride on horseback as messengers, skirmish troops, and as a rapid response force. Generally unsuited for front-line combat, they are mostly attached to scout and salvage units as fire support and to relay messages between distant reconnaissance parties and high command.

Peregrine infantry tactics rely on the heavy cover of the outskirts and the mobility of their troops to reduce the effectiveness of the Commonwealth’s armored vehicles, aerial bombardment, and artillery. What few vehicles they own are kept in reserve and deployed only in specific circumstances.

## **Appendix C:** Hyperion Feudalism

The nobility of Hyperion are known by the general name of thesmothétai, a term borrowed from Ancient Greece, like many official ranks within the Hyperion government. They differ from the ruling classes of the Commonwealth in several key respects: Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the comparatively small territory Hyperion occupies means that each noble does not govern an independent holding as a praetor or imperator might in the Commonwealth. Instead, the thesmothétai are each responsible for an individual district of the city of Geneva, with colonial officers supervising smaller settlements in other megacities, such as Bern and Zurich. The thesmothétai are actually less autonomous than a principal imperator in the Commonwealth, as their limited holdings cannot be self-sustaining, and the small size of their territories makes relegating local legislation to each governor impractical. Therefore, the primary responsibilities of the thesmothétai are to vote on nation-wide edicts and to organize the citizens of their districts into local militias. Influential thesmothétai with especially powerful levies may hold a position amongst the stratēgoí. Archons are particularly prestigious and carry a number of ceremonial responsibilities, but have little in the way of power over their fellow noblemen.

The Hyperion air force, though ultimately subservient to the Master of the Fleet, is composed of small sub-groups led by a capital ship. Each thesmothetēs is privileged to captain a one such command ship and divides his levies amongst subservient destroyers, frigates, corvettes, and transports. Even the ground-based forces are deployed into combat zones in this manner, to be directed by their thesmothetēs and the stratēgoí.

Outside of this structure is the Hyperion Cult, which is composed of Fraternal and Sororal Orders and the Inquisition. The Fraternities and Sororities are headed by Patriarchs and Matriarchs, respectively, hereditary positions whose occupants are not allowed to own land or hold any other titles. By contrast, anybody with sufficient skill and virtue can become an Inquisitor. Such men and women are tasked with upholding law and order in Geneva, as well as with the persecution of heretics. However, the Cult’s inclusiveness begets a lack of dogma, and so “heresy” has become a general term for acting against the common good, i.e., breaking a civil law. Very few other actions warrant the involvement of the Inquisition, but those rare occasions are met with brutal force.

## **Appendix D:** Commonwealth Organization Chart

\*The Legionary Commission’s four Commissars hold a separate vote to decide upon their parliamentary vote. In the event of a tie, the Commission will abstain.

**Key**:

## **Appendix E:** Commonwealth Education

The educational system in the Commonwealth of Human Principalities would have been the envy of many nations before the storms, receiving nearly unlimited funding from the state. Its curriculum is, however, peculiar. The government sponsors, teachers, and students all understand that they stand on the cusp of annihilation and therefore divert their efforts into whatever might stave off the final downfall of humanity.

A heavy focus is placed upon STEM education for a multitude of reasons. Many engineering graduates find employment in the Defense, Medical, or Science Administrations, developing the technology to reclaim the world, engineering the cities that the Commonwealth builds overseas, and erecting the defenses that will defend human civilization against those that would do it harm. The arts and humanities do not go ignored, but are less popular than they were in the past.

One other anomaly is the emphasis on history, that students may learn the mistakes of the past and avoid repeating them. For the most part, this is presented objectively, although the Commonwealth-sanctioned curriculum stresses the significant conflicts and “cautionary tales” of old world failure. Some topics, such as various civil rights movements, are described through a carefully crafted lens so that students are taught the horrors of discrimination while maintaining the Commonwealth’s official stance of homogeneity. Anything that might encourage “factionalism” is suppressed – students learn of conflicts and controversies surrounding race, gender, and more, but are discouraged from identifying with any of the groups portrayed.

Another important aspect of the educational system is the mandatory civil guard service. University education is free to everyone, but every student is required to serve a two-year period with the civil guard. After that period, students can return to university and complete their studies or remain with the guard as career soldiers with the possibility of promotion into the legions or the Skywatch. A select few who demonstrate exceptional academic potential can test out of mandatory service and pursue internships or research at Montreal University, a specialized campus with direct ties to several Administrations.

Most principalities have a university campus in the capital city which is attended by students from across the principality, though there are two exceptions. The first is Montreal University, the specialized research campus. Though all campuses offer research opportunities, Montreal is entirely dedicated to scientific pursuits, and many scholars therein are officially employed as lab assistants or interns by a technically-oriented Administration. The Defense Administration, whose facilities are primarily located in Montreal, frequently recruits on the university campus, although the Science, Medical and Transportation Administrations also conduct research there.

Ravengrad University is also somewhat atypical. It is the largest campus in the Commonwealth, and receives students from across the Commonwealth. Unlike other universities, Ravengrad University offers the most generalized education, in contrast with Montreal’s research specialization, Stockholm’s business and industry specialization, and Madrid’s agricultural specialization. Like many buildings in the capital, it is also heavily fortified, engineered to be as defensible as it is beautiful.