**Athens**

Cassandra Hao Zhenyan

Elias Hao Zhenjie

Hao Shufen

Eirene Katraki

**Pan-Mediterranean Union**

Magnus Kolberg

Jacob Lancaster

Marcus Fairchild

Jackson Fairchild

Lena Fairchild

Sun Xiang

Vicente Vargas

Akiko Miura

**Geneva**

Charlotte Aucoin

Nathaniel Bergstrom

*Chapter 1 – The Cloud Garden*

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

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

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

That insignificance didn’t last long.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Are we almost there, do you think?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Tsk, I didn’t mean right now.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Elias just smiled and winked at her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. I have.”

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

With nothing more than some vending machine snacks to sate their now-ravenous appetites, the group boarded a mostly-empty monorail and sat down for the journey westward. The lights in the cabin were flickering intermittently, but the floor and seats seemed largely clean save for a small amount of vandalism. Nevertheless, Cassandra declined to sit on the chairs so many others had touched that day, purely for her own peace of mind.

The monorail was so smooth that one could hardly tell it was moving, were it not for the buildings outside flying past. Aleph Null’s investments in local infrastructure had paid dividends in both speed and comfort. Even though the route stretched a long way around the southern end of Mount Hymettus, still regarded as a protected area for ecological and historical reasons, Cassandra knew from experience that the trip would scarcely take twenty minutes, intermediate stops included.

As they sped further and further away from the airport, the buildings around them grew taller. Massive cranes stood alongside the apartment and office complexes, erecting ever more structures to contend with the ongoing population boom.

“We’re past the outskirts, now,” Cassandra explained. “Not at the heart of the city, but getting closer. You’ll be able to tell when we’re there.”

“Looking forward to it,” Akiko replied.

“Used to be this side of town was all ruins. Picture all these towers with the tops blown off or straight-up fallen over, covered in moss and vines. I’ve seen some pictures of it back in the day, and, honestly, there’s a sort of nice aesthetic to it, as long as you don’t think too hard about *why* it looks like that. At least there’s still Hymettus and the Acropolis if you want nice scenery.”

“Maybe we can go there together some time, if you don’t mind showing me around.”

Cassandra smiled. “Now there’s a capital idea! Hold on, look – we’re almost around the bend. You should be able to see the Cloud Garden right about…now.”

She pointed out the window as the monorail turned around the bend, climbing higher up a gentle incline towards the next station. Akiko’s eyes followed, and she beheld for the first time the neon expanse that was Athens proper. There were countless buildings of, all of them illuminated by signage, hazard indicators to ward off low-flying aircraft, and light seeping out from the rooms where night-shift workers still toiled. Even more cranes sat idle here, waiting to resume their work on the skyscrapers that intermittently dotted the landscape.

All of that paled in comparison to what Akiko could only assume was the Cloud Garden.

The name was certainly apt. It was a ziggurat tall enough to have pierced Montreal’s upper layer, eclipsing every other skyscraper in the city. The Aleph Null logo [todo: what does this look like?] shone down upon the city from atop the megastructure, and a well-lit glass enclosure formed its crown – an arboretum containing the titular gardens. Along the coast were four similar but smaller structures, connected by skybridges to the main building.

“Welcome home,” Cassandra said, while her friend looked on in awe.

“You seriously *live* there?” Akiko gasped.

“We do. The main building has apartments for core staff members, recreational facilities, most of our executive meeting rooms, and all the original laboratories from when Aleph Null was just one man and his cult-like followers experiencing a collective fever dream. It also has access to bomb shelters, anti-aircraft defense systems, and the same model of shield generator that the *Sunset Serenade* uses.”

“Sounds like a lot of eggs in one basket to me.”

“It is and it isn’t. The Cloud Garden is the nerve center of our organization, for sure, but important functions are spread out all over the city. Trade and Commerce is run out of the Piraeus Gateway further north, the Athenian Army Command has its own compound in the middle of nowhere, and, well, you already saw the airport on the other side of the mountain.”

“And you’re in charge of security for all that?”

Cassandra laughed and shook her head. “Heavens, no. My jurisdiction is limited to the Cloud Garden itself, unless our staff have cause to visit another facility, in which case I’ll coordinate with that place to make sure all our Is are dotted and Ts are crossed. Plus, each of the wings has a security team captain who takes care of things there.

“Okay, that sounds a bit less insane. Anyway, this is one hell of a cool city. Bet it looks even better during the day.”

“I think it’s best at dusk or dawn, personally. By the time we get home, the sun should be coming up. We can watch it from the arboretum.”

“I’d like that,” Akiko said.

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By the time the monorail arrived at the Cloud Garden station, it had started to rain, souring their plans to watch the sunrise. Cassandra, Elias, Akiko, and Shufen all disembarked and made their way inside as quickly as possible, where a night watchman was ready to admit them into the building. He scanned all of their identification cards, only to stop when he got to Akiko.

“I see you have a new guest, Director Hao,” the man said.

“She’s staying at the pleasure of my children, actually,” Shufen corrected. “Issue her a visitor pass, if you would.”

“Length of her stay?”

“Indefinite.”

“Name?”

“Akiko Miura. A-K-I-K-O M-I-U-R-A,” Akiko said, clearly used to having to spell it out.

“Perfect. Just let me print that for you.”

It didn’t take long for the guard to get Akiko’s pass ready, and soon she had a bright red keycard with her name stamped on it hanging from a cheap lanyard around her neck.

“It suits you,” Cassandra joked.

“Red always was my color,” Akiko replied, equally in jest.

“Since you’re with Lady Hao, I’ll assume you know how to behave yourself and spare you the regulation speech,” the guard said. “Enjoy your stay at the Cloud Garden, Ms. Miura.”

“Thanks. You t – ah, never mind.” Akiko’s face turned flush and she hurriedly turned away.

“Oh, one last thing. A letter came for you while you were away, Cassandra. Oddly enough, it wasn’t delivered through the postal service, just left on my desk.” He shrugged and handed Cassandra a red paper envelope with no return address. Her eyes narrowed.

“Thank you kindly. I think I know who this is from,” she said, oblivious to the suspicious stare she was receiving from her mother, and the amused one from her brother.

“Great. I almost threw it away thinking it was spam, but I have to admit the color intrigued me. Best of luck to you all.”

“And to you as well,” Elias replied with a jovial bow.

As they waited for the elevator to their suites on the fortieth floor, Cassandra looked at the envelope quizzically, memories flashing through her mind. The boy – man, by this point – who must have sent it hadn’t bothered to contact her in almost ten years, so why was this message showing up now? And why hadn’t he delivered it through the usual means?

“Are you going to open that?” Shufen asked impatiently.

“Once I’m in private, yes. It’s addressed to me, and me alone.”

“Very well. Just inform me if it contains anything important.”

“Ah, you can at least tell us who it’s from, Cassie,” Elias pleaded.

“…It’s from Xiang. I guarantee it.”

“Xiang? I wasn’t aware you still talked with him.”

“I didn’t. Not since I left for university.”

“Assuming that’s true, and not a cover story, I’ll be relieved to hear it’s not another paramour of yours inviting you for a tryst,” her mother scoffed. “Though I suppose I should consider myself fortunate that your particular brand of recklessness won’t result in unexpected children.”

“You’re one to talk about recklessness. Or do you mean to say you’ve finally found our father after twenty-six years of looking?” Cassandra asked in a half-jokingly venomous tone.

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

“Mistakes. Right.” Cassandra turned to Akiko. “Well, there you have it. This humble *mistake* welcomes you to our home,” she said with an exaggerated bow. Akiko, meanwhile, just smiled nervously, unsure how to respond.

“She didn’t mean it like that. You know mother treasures us. That’s why she tries to make sure we’re the best we can be,” Elias said.

Shufen did not deny his claims, but neither did she support them, or even reply at all.

Their next stop was the fortieth floor, where the Hao children’s apartments could be found, along with a dozen other families. There was a public lounge in the middle of the hall, which is where Shufen took her leave from the younger three.

“Elias. Cassandra. I assume you’re capable of making arrangements for Akiko from here on out?”

“You can count on us,” Elias said.

“I’m not the one counting on you. Worry about the girl. I don’t want to come back to find her dead or dying somewhere.”

“Oh, I’ll be fine.” Akiko replied, awkwardly flashing a peace sign.

“Very well. I’m going to make some calls and set up a meeting with the board. I’ll let you both know when that’s scheduled. In the meantime, get whatever rest you can without shirking your duties, because you’ll absolutely need it.”

“Understood,” the twins said in unison.

“Then I’ll leave you to it.”

With a curt nod, Shufen dismissed her children and their friend. She stepped into the elevator, hit the button for the forty-sixth floor, and was gone.

“I’m sure that meeting will be a fun time,” Elias said. “But first, a drink for everyone to celebrate our safe return. You two wait right here – I’ll be back shortly.”

“Sounds good. Thanks, Eli,” Cassandra replied.

As Elias wandered off to his suite to fetch the cider he had promised, Cassandra looked back at the letter in her hand and sighed. She carefully ran her finger underneath the seal flap to break apart the adhesive and removed the note within.

“You sure you wanna open that here?” Akiko asked. “I thought you said you’re waiting to do that in private.”

“I didn’t want to open it in front of my mother, because Heaven only knows what’s inside, and I don’t need to give her any more reason to judge me.”

“I mean, I’m an outsider, here, so stop me if I’m prying too much, but is it really that bad? Nothing she said seemed too out of line from where I’m standing.”

Cassandra sighed. “I know,” she said. “I know she’s right. When I was younger, I *was* reckless, and I definitely hurt some folks. I just wish she would give me a chance to prove I’m not that person anymore. That even if I’m not as chaste as she would like, I’m not putting myself or anyone else in danger.”

“She must trust you, at least a little, if she gave you this job. Like, you don’t put someone in charge of security if you think they’re a total flake.”

“That’s what I don’t understand! She knows I can handle myself. I’ve proven it every time we travel abroad without incident. So why act like I’m still some party-addled schoolgirl trying to smoke or screw everything she sees?”

Cassandra stopped to take a deep breath. Now wasn’t the time to get worked up, she knew, especially in front of guests.

“…Apologies,” she continued, straightening out her back. “I let my emotions get the better of me. You don’t need to be involved in any of this.”

“Heh, I think that’s twice today someone’s told me that,” Akiko smirked. It seemed to Cassandra like she was attempting to lighten the mood, so she smiled back, even if she didn’t find the circumstances around it particularly amusing.

“Well, let’s see what’s in this letter, then, shall we? This is definitely my friend Xiang’s handwriting,” she said, tapping the letter.

“How’d you know it was him from the get-go?” Akiko asked.

“When we were little, we used to write secret messages to each other and slip them into the red envelopes for New Years’, birthdays, and so on, in additional to the usual money. There hasn’t been any occasion for someone to send me one of these envelopes recently, so it had to be a clue to let me know it’s from him without posting a return address.”

“Wonder why he couldn’t just do that?”

“We’ll find out soon enough, I suppose.”

Cassandra’s eyes scrolled down the paper, taking in Xiang’s words, which were penned in Mandarin Chinese.

*Dearest Zhenyan,*

*I could fill a whole letter telling you how sorry I am for how things ended up, but I have neither the time nor the ink, so all I can do is ask that you hear me out. A friend of mine, someone you don’t know, was captured and held against his will by the Skywatch in Tuscany. I was able to arrange his escape, but for reasons I can’t disclose, I am unable to escort him to safety, so I have instructed him to head by foot to where you and I first met. As I understand you hold a high position within the company, I beg you to advocate for him when he arrives. You and your family are the only people I’m confident will be able to protect him.*

*I wish I could tell you more, but the risk that this letter will be intercepted is too great. Hopefully you understand.*

*Best wishes,*

*Xiang*

Cassandra stared at the letter for a moment, unsure what to do with it. She was tempted to throw it away then and there, but she knew it would be foolish to dismiss this news out of hand. After all, it sounded like this “friend” of his was coming no matter what, and, for all she knew, that one was innocent of any crime. Akiko certainly had been. At the very least, she could leave this letter with the Board of Directors and think about it no further.

No. That would be irresponsible. Xiang had written to *her*, and she had to be the one to deal with the situation he had presented.

“Cassandra? Are you okay? You’re…crying,” Akiko said.

A single tear fell from Cassandra’s eye and stained the paper. With her free hand, she reached up and wiped away the rest. “Just some old regrets, is all,” she said. “Damn, I’m being a poor host, aren’t I? And I’m not even the one who’s been ripped away from her friends and family. I don’t know how you’re holding up so well.”

“I’m sure the pain will come back, but, for now, I’m just kinda living in the moment. Then again, that’s easy for me to say when I don’t have ex…friends? Partners? Er, whatever this guy was to you sending letters to unbury all the old shit in my life.”

“Just friends,” Cassandra insisted. “I can tell you the full story some other time.”

“Yeah, no worries. I can hardly expect you to go pouring your heart out to some chick you met less than a day ago.”

“…Nonsense!” Elias declared, returning triumphantly with an armful of glass bottles. “We’ve all survived a crisis together. I’m sure my sister would trust you with her life by this point. So, what was that letter about? Or is it too steamy to share?”

Cassandra shook her head. “It’s about business. I’ll share it with the Board at the meeting later on.”

“Business? Xiang never struck me as the business type. People do change, though. No doubt he’s matured just as much as you have.”

“We’ll see about that soon enough.”

“That sounds good to me. Anyway, I got you some plain cranberry juice, and sparkling cider for myself and our lovely guest.”

“Thanks again, Eli,” Cassandra said, smiling and accepting the bottle of juice from her brother. She cracked it open and took a long sip while the others poured themselves glasses of cider.

“Have you two decided where she’ll be staying?” Elias asked after gulping down half of his drink in a single gulp.

Cassandra knew the polite thing to do would be to offer to share her own room, especially since the idea had already been broached. Akiko didn’t seem like she’d be a difficult roommate. If her appearance was anything to go by, there was nothing strictly unclean about her, and the two of them had gotten along well since their first meeting. However, despite all that, the very idea of sharing *her* space with another person on a long-term basis simply felt wrong.

“If there’s no space for me, I can sleep on the couches out here,” Akiko offered. Cassandra could tell that she had sensed her discomfort, and that only embarrassed her further.

“No, you can stay at my place until we find a suite for you” Cassandra blurted out before her instincts, which were crying out for her to stop, could get in the way.

“Are you sure?”

*No.*

“Yes.”

“Well, then I won’t refuse.” Akiko at least seemed pleased with this arrangement.

“Hmm, she’ll also need some clothes. Can’t have her wearing that stuffy stewardess uniform every day. I hate to impose, Cassie, but do you think you could loan her an outfit for the day? It might be a tiny bit big on her, but it’ll do until we get her some clothes of her own.”

“Um. Y-yeah, I guess,” Cassandra said. “I can spare her some pants and a shirt. She can just have them, honestly; I won’t need them back. Not sure she’d be okay taking my underwear, though, even if it’s clean. That seems…weird.”

“Well, I can tell you right now that your bras are too big for me,” Akiko remarked, looking from Cassandra’s chest to her own. “I mean, I really don’t mind wearing the same clothes for one more day. It’s not like I soiled these, or anything.”

“Well, then, we’ll just have to put a shopping trip first thing on the agenda. My sister can translate for you if you don’t speak Greek. We’ll be spending a lot of time together, I’m sure, so let’s set things up right,” Elias said.

“I’ll drink to that,” Cassandra replied, relieved that her wardrobe would remain her own.

The three of them clinked their beverages together and drank before saying their goodbyes and retiring to their own homes.

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“Since you volunteered to sleep on the couches in the lounge, I’ll assume you won’t mind if we set you up on the couch in here. Unfortunately, there’s only one proper bed, and it’s not that big,” Cassandra said, searching through her closet for a spare blanket. She found one with a lavender tartan pattern and tossed it over to Akiko, along with a spare pillow.

“Oh yeah, no problem,” Akiko replied. She caught the blanket, but then her hands were too full to receive the pillow, which landed unceremoniously on the floor next to her. “When I had an apartment in Montreal, there was a week where I slept in a sleeping bag on the hardwood floor because the company that was supposed to ship my bed got delayed. Heh, maybe that’s why I hate that place so much.”

“As good a reason as any, I guess.”

The apartment in which Cassandra lived was not large, despite her rank. The front door led into the living room, which was decorated in a sleek, modern style. The couch and an armchair orbited a mahogany coffee table that was well-polished, although it was hard to tell beneath the stacks of paper set neatly upon it. To the right was a cozy bedroom decorated with abstract art, and to the left were the washroom and the kitchen, which doubled as her home office. It was very quaint, and Cassandra preferred it that way – too much space would have been overwhelming for one who lived alone. However, she no longer *did* live alone, and the logistics of accommodating a second person for even a short time were causing sparks to fly in her brain, sparks that she dared not reveal to Akiko.

“There are snacks in the kitchen if you need something more to eat,” Cassandra continued, once again chafing internally at the idea that Akiko might not wash her hands before reaching into the pantry. “I’m going to take a quick shower and then collapse into bed for a few hours. I need at least that much *real* sleep before we start the day.”

“A woman after my own heart,” Akiko replied. She finished laying out her improvised bedding and wandered into the kitchen in search of the food her friend had promised.

Now alone, Cassandra took a deep breath and tried to reorient herself, focusing on the familiar space around her. The living room was still tidy. The bedroom was still tidy. The kitchen was still tidy. All was exactly the way she had left it before the trip. She was still in control, and nobody could take that away from her.

Next, she took a shower, keeping the water as hot as she could without burning herself, then gradually lowering the temperature until it reached a refreshing chill. She got out, washed her hands again for good measure, checked to make sure she hadn’t left any stray hairs in the bathtub - she hadn’t - and then left the washroom. By that point, Akiko was already lying on the couch underneath the blanket.

“You look comfy,” Cassandra said.

“Hell yeah, I am. This couch is softer than the bed I had back home.” Akiko paused. “Now that I think about it, my apartment’ll probably evict me, since I’m sure I’ve been declared either a traitor or dead by this point. At least I didn’t have any pets.”

“You have family, right? We can contact them and at least tell them to take possession of your belongings so you don’t lose those. Let them know you’re okay, too, but that you can’t come home until you know it’s safe.”

“If you’d do that, I’d really appreciate it. Man, I’m really stacking up debts, here, aren’t I?”

“You don’t owe me anything,” Cassandra said. “Anyway, I’m going to get some shut-eye, like I mentioned. See you in a few hours, Miss Akiko. Sleep well.”

“You too.”

Cassandra flipped the light switch and the room went dark, save for the distant city lights visible through the window. The two women quickly fell asleep, lulled by the gentle pitter-patter of rain against the glass.

*Chapter 2 – The Red Envelope*

Fueled by a few extra hours of rest, Cassandra and Akiko enjoyed their afternoon together. They had gyros for lunch at a local shop, the first full meal they’d gotten since the *Koylma* departed, after which they headed to the nearest shopping center to find Akiko some new clothes. The commercial districts in Athens were robust and ever-expanding to accommodate the burgeoning population, so it wasn’t hard to find everything they needed.

It helped that Akiko was an easy person to shop for. She was enviably attractive, with an elegant face, thin waist, and delightful curves around her hips and legs, the type on which any outfit would have looked good. Cassandra felt the urge to dress her up like a doll with all kinds of fancy clothes, and Akiko humored her desires at first. However, she seemed to prefer practical, comfortable clothes over high fashion, which Cassandra could respect, even if she didn’t feel the same way.

In the end, they went home with several new outfits for her, ranging from sleepwear to swimwear to business attire. Both of them returned to the apartment with bags over their shoulders, which they dumped at the foot of the couch that was Akiko’s temporary bed.

At that moment, Cassandra’s phone began to ring.

“You can change in the washroom while I take this,” she said to Akiko, who nodded and left with a handful of clothes picked largely at random.

Cassandra accepted the call and held it up to her ear. She didn’t need to hear a voice or look at caller ID to know it was her mother.

“Hello. It’s me,” Shufen said. Her voice came through as clear as if she were standing in the same room.

“Mother. I assume you’ve scheduled the meeting?”

“Yes. I was able to reserve conference room 2108 in the Agricultural Sciences center for us to present our story to the Board of Administrators, as well as a representative from the Athenian City Council. You’re expected there at six in the evening.”

“Six in the evening, Agri-Sci 2108. Got it. Anything else?”

“Bring that girl of yours. She won’t need to give a speech, but we should introduce her to the Board if we’re going to be sheltering her, just so they know what we’ve done.”

“You make that sound so severe. All we did was help a scared twenty-something escape an active warzone.”

“A scared twenty-something who’s now a fugitive from a neighboring superpower.”

“…Yeah, okay, fair enough. Was there anything else?”

“No. I’ll see you at the meeting.”

“Yep, see you then. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

Cassandra hung up and pocketed her phone, then looked at the washroom where Akiko was still changing.

“Miss Akiko?” she shouted so as to be heard through the door.

“Yeah? What’s up?”

“You might want to swap whatever you’re putting on right now for the formalwear we got. You’ll want to look presentable where we’re going.”

\* \* \*

Meetings were not commonly held after five in the evening, but this was the earliest hour that was available to everyone who would be attending. Cassandra knew most of these people well, all of them cut from the same corporate cloth. With as busy as their schedules were, it was a miracle that Shufen had been able to get them in the same room at all.

As they swung open the heavy oaken doors, Cassandra and Akiko were greeted by the familiar boardroom. In contrast with the contemporary style that the Cloud Garden’s architects seemed to prefer, it was distinctively baroque. There were bronze statues of historical figures along the walls, marble floors so polished that she could make out her own reflection, and a large chandelier at the very center, just above the round table where the board members sat waiting, alongside the City Council representative, a tall man whose name plate read Gregory Baros.

“Right on time,” Shufen said, beckoning towards a pair of empty seats. “Please, join us. I’m eager to begin.”

The two young women complied, taking their seats at the table.

“Thank you for assembling on such short notice,” the Director began. “I’ve called you all here to discuss yesterday’s events aboard the *Kolyma* and determine how, if at all, this affects our plans for the Strategic Technologies Conference. Our esteemed ambassador to the Union, Elias Hao Zhenjie, will appraise you of the events as we understand them.”

Cassandra raised an eyebrow as her brother stood up and smiled at the assembled board members. Evidently, her mother and brother had already conferred with each other.

“Yesterday evening, Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster boarded the airship *Kolyma*, on which myself, our Security Chief, and our Director were flying from Montreal to Athens, with a stop in Rome. His objective was to arrest Grand Marshal Vicente Vargas and his entire crew. Akiko Miura, who’s here today, was part of that crew. A stewardess, specifically.”

He gestured towards Akiko, who bowed to the assembled executives.

“Right now, we don’t know if the arrest was successful. I doubt Lancaster will volunteer that information to us, of all people. What we do know is that his attempt escalated after the Army personnel resisted arrest, putting all of us in danger. My mother wisely secured our escape by citing Article Four of the treaty of Napoli.”

“Article Four?” one of the Administrators asked, a wizened old man named Giannis Angelidou. “Article Four covers…”

“Research operations, we know. It was just a cute bit of last-minute statecraft to put pressure on Lancaster, and it worked. None of our personnel were harmed, so we don’t exactly have much grounds for a lawsuit. Not that I’m eager to get involved in a legal battle, hah. What’s important is that this points to an internal conflict within the Union that we need to be aware of.”

“Yeah, don’t want our neighbor’s house to burn down and take ours with it,” Cassandra remarked.

“My sister is right. If the Union is destabilized, we have not only the long-term threat of that chaos spilling across our borders, affecting our trade routes, and so on, but also the possibility that anybody we send to the Strategic Technologies Conference will be at risk. After all, Lancaster has shown that he doesn’t much care about collateral damage.”

“Are you recommending we pull out of the conference?” another Administrator asked.

“I wouldn’t say that. It’s up to my mother, of course, but I’d personally say we should go, if only to get more eyes on Union politics. My sister will make sure we’re safe.” Elias smiled at Cassandra.

“For sure. I’m definitely going to do another look over my security plans for Rome,” Cassandra replied. “Just off the top of my head, the rooms on the eighteenth floor and up of our hotel have a direct view of the Grand Balcony. I can pull some strings and rent out an entire floor; use it as a command center. I’ll also post sniper teams there to provide overwatch in case another fight breaks out.”

“Do you plan to inform the Union of these changes?” Shufen asked.

“Well, we kind of have to, don’t we? They’re absolutely going to notice us setting up shop in the hotel, so, as a sign of good faith, it’s probably best that we tell them we’re bolstering our security. Just not the specific details. They’ll understand.”

“Good. Let me know once you have a new draft of the security plan and we’ll go over it.”

“Will do,” Cassandra sighed. She was certain that her mother would have all sorts of suggestions, but, frustratingly, her advice usually ended up being solid, and she wasn’t about to let her pride endanger the company.

“For my part, I’ve already started making arrangements for a meeting with a Skywatch representative to make absolutely clear that we had no involvement in whatever Vargas was scheming,” Shufen added. “Most likely, that will happen during the conference itself.”

“And if they don’t accept that?” Angelidou asked.

“Then all of our lives become a lot more difficult.”

“Hmph. You must be *very* confident that they’ll take you at your word, given that you are openly harboring a fugitive. Unless you intend to extradite her when the Union inevitably demands it.” The elderly administrator pointed an accusatory finger at Akiko.

“That kind of matter is my job, and I don’t like to break promises,” Elias said.

Shufen raised her hand to silence her son. “The girl is an asset, albeit a small one. She has an amicable relationship with several army personnel who were implicated in the conspiracy. If we ever need to make contact with them, she’ll be able to aid us.”

“And, in so doing, tie ourselves to that same conspiracy?” Representative Baros said.

“I said *if*. We have no way of knowing how things in the Union will turn out. You’ll forgive me for hedging my bets.”

“On the topic of assets, there’s something else I think you all should be aware of,” Cassandra said.

“That letter from Xiang?” Elias asked.

“The very same.”

Cassandra took the folded-up letter from her pocket and opened it back up, reading the text exactly as Xiang had written it, except for the introduction. They didn’t need to hear that part. When she finished, she tossed the paper onto the table in front of her.

For a moment, nobody spoke up. Then Shufen leaned forward.

“So, you believe that ‘friend’ of his may be involved in this conflict?” she asked.

“It’s a possibility we can’t ignore.”

“We *also* can’t ignore the possibility that the entire story is a fabrication designed to rouse your sympathies. This boy may have committed a legitimate crime.”

“In which case, we’ll send him back and buy ourselves some good will from the Union. All I ask is that, when he arrives, we hear what he has to say, alright? The fact that he’s *specifically* fleeing from the Skywatch, right after we see Lancaster trying to prune his country’s own ranks, seems too perfect to be coincidental.”

Shufen pursed her lips and sighed. “Very well, we’ll hear the child out. I’ll warn you right now, though – I’ve no intention of letting you turn the Cloud Garden into a stable for your collection of strays.” She glanced sideways at Akiko.

“I’ll take in whoever I need to if I think Aleph Null can use them.” Cassandra said, staring directly at her mother.

“So you say. I simply hope they actually will be useful, and you aren’t letting any…personal biases affect your judgment.”

Akiko coughed. “I’ll do whatever I can to make myself useful to you,” she declared resolutely. “I may have been a stewardess when we met, but, like I told Cassandra, I have a bachelor’s degree in artificial intelligence, and apprenticed under Marcus Fairchild at the Defense Administration during my senior year. Hell, if you call up McGill, they’ll give you my credentials.”

“We’ll find you a job where you can start earning your keep,” Shufen replied. “That, however, is beyond the purview of this meeting, so, for now, you’ll act as my daughter’s retainer and assist her with whatever tasks she asks of you. I trust that isn’t too much?” Shufen asked.

“Not at all. Basically what I did back on the *Kolyma,* anyway.”

“Good. Then that leaves us with one last question. Cassandra, the letter mentioned that this fugitive would be headed to where you and Xiang first met. I have an inkling as to where that might be, but I’d like you to confirm it for me.”

“The Samekh Wing reconnaissance outpost in the Roman outskirts,” Cassandra immediately answered.

“That’s what I thought. You kids were both doing a ride-along with some of our patrolmen, if my memory is correct?”

“We were. You wanted us to watch that affair with Marinetti and get a sense of what our jobs would be like when we grew up.”

“Ironic, given that our work ended up having Marinetti extradited to the Union.”

“Yeah, ‘cause he was guilty as sh - well, they proved he was guilty. I’ll run a background check on this new ‘friend,’ and, if it turns out he’s a bad guy, we’ll send him back. Easy.”

Shufen frowned. “Very well,” she said.

“Do we have any estimates on when this fugitive will actually arrive at the outpost?” Representative Baros asked.

“The letter said he’s walking. I checked some numbers online while Akiko and I were out today and it’s looking like a four or five-day trip from Tuscany to Rome, including sleep and such.

“Then there’s a good chance he arrives during the conference,” Angelidou observed.

“If he does, that’s even better for us. All eyes will be on the Tower, meaning less chance of resistance in the outskirts. I’ll relay this message to the security personnel there so they can be on the lookout, and that should be that.” Cassandra snapped her fingers to emphasize her point.

The board members looked at each other, then back at Cassandra. Representative Baros was the first to nod, and the others gradually followed suit, with Angelidou being the last.

“Since everyone is in favor, it seems like we have some action items, at least. The Security Chief and I will draft a new security plan for the conference, and Samekh Wing will prepare to receive the fugitive from Tuscany. Cassandra, Elias, and Akiko, you all are dismissed. I have some other matters I need to discuss with the Board.”

“I’m glad I could be of service,” Elias said, bowing his way out of the room. The women also bid a respectful farewell to the Board and followed him away.

In the hallway outside, opposite the boardroom, was a window so large that a small aircraft could have flown through it into the building’s central lightwell. A lounge had been set up at the foot of this glass portal, and it was in this lounge that the trio reconvened.

“Rescuing a political prisoner amidst internecine strife. Things are finally getting exciting, eh?” Elias said, smiling like a boy playing his favorite part of a game.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Cassandra replied, walking up to the window and craning her neck to look at the sky. “Chances are, it’ll be a simple affair. Besides, neither you nor I will be on-site when this runaway finally shows himself.”

“Yes, Samekh will get to have all the fun. Pity.”

“And here I thought you enjoyed schmoozing with politicians.”

“Um, question,” Akiko interrupted, raising her hand politely.

“Go ahead, Miss Akiko.”

“What exactly *is* Samekh Wing? I mean, I can gather it’s some kind of military unit, but what’s it actually do?”

“The wings are joint task forces composed of Aleph Null security forces and the Athenian military. Each one is designated with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, keeping with the company’s name.” Cassandra explained.

Akiko still looked confused. “Cool, but, uh, why Hebrew letters, if you don’t mind me asking? Like, you’d think a company in Athens would use Greek lettering.”

“Well, we weren’t *founded* in Greece, but, to answer your question, I’m told it’s about mathematics. Aleph Null refers to the size of the smallest infinite set of numbers, because apparently some infinities are bigger than others. Don’t ask me why; there’s a reason I didn’t go into the science side of things. Point is, our founder invoked it to represent the set of ideal futures - still infinite in scope, but made as small as possible once our work has ‘severed those threads of fate we find undesirable,’ or something like that. If you want his motto verbatim, read the company handbook.”

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

“Unfortunately, he neglected to elaborate on that topic before Headquarters went missing somewhere in eastern Asia. Hmph. Figures that we’d be the ones having to do the philosophical heavy lifting.”

“I’m sorry, you said it *went missing*?”

“To demonstrate a spirit of international cooperation, Aleph Null didn’t build a headquarters in any particular country,” Elias said. “Instead, it operated out of an airship that moved wherever it was needed, delegating tasks to branch facilities like ours. There were stories that it even had a stardrive, the only functional prototype Madelyn-Rash ever made.”

Akiko laughed. “So what I’m hearing is that there’s good chance they just fucked off to space when everything started falling apart, and left us mortals to rot,” she remarked.

“Yeah, only if you believe Madelyn-Rash actually built a functional stardrive, which is *very* unlikely, to say the least,” Cassandra said. “The rumors are just, well, you know. Rumors.”

“For sure. But you gotta admit it’s fun to think about.”

“I won’t disagree with you there.”

Akiko walked up next to Cassandra and joined her in looking at the sky, which was beginning to turn to dusk. “When I was a kid, I wanted to go to space,” she said, sighing. “But then I learned that pretty much all space stations are run by robots, not like the old days, so I went into AI research to try and at least *touch* the stars that way.”

“Hey, who knows? They need human technicians up there every so often. There’s still a chance.” Elias gave her a cheerful bump with his elbow.

“I’m sure my younger self would be over the moon to hear you say that,” Akiko replied.

Sensing unease, Cassandra changed the subject. “The sun’s gonna be setting soon,” she said. “Since we have clear skies tonight, what do you say we go to the garden and watch the sunset from there?”

That put a smile on Akiko’s face. “I think that sounds wonderful,” she replied.

“Well, I’ll leave you ladies to it, then,” Elias said, giving them a farewell wave. He straightened his tie and sauntered off, his footsteps on the tile floor echoing throughout the empty hall.

\* \* \*

The Cloud Garden’s arboretum was filled to the brim with trees, between which wove stone paths and beds of exotic flowers, all kept healthy by a robust climate control system. A few researchers were still hard at work collecting samples from the latest batch of crossbred flora, so Cassandra and Akiko wouldn’t be alone, but that was fine.

Akiko sat down on a bench facing the sea to the west. Just like she had onboard the monorail, Cassandra preferred to stand.

“The water’s real pretty,” Akiko said, watching the Saronic Gulf glimmer beneath the setting sun.

“Sure is. On clear evenings like this I sometimes come up here to read until night falls, and sometimes even after that,” Cassandra replied. “Just basking in the ambiance, taking in the sweet scent of the flowers, and all that. Our scientists cultivated a lot of extinct or endangered species, thanks to the Global Seed Vault up in Norway, although not all of them are kept here, of course. This place is mostly decorative. An amenity for those of us privileged enough to live in the Cloud Garden.”

“Guess I should count my lucky stars that includes me, now, too.”

A cocktail of violet and carmine filled the sky. They waited in silence after that, simply enjoying each other’s presence as they watched the sun sink close and closer towards the horizon, and finally disappear.

*Chapter 3 – Overlord*

Aleph Null’s preparations for the Strategic Technologies Conference were proceeding apace. As they had agreed, Shufen and Cassandra produced a revised security plan that largely matched the Security Chief’s proposal during the meeting. The most significant addition was that their team would now travel to Athens via the company’s one and only airship, the ANS *Peregrine*, which could carry with it a full complement of troops and was heavily armed itself. There was some concern that the Union would view such a move as a provocation, but Shufen and Cassandra both agreed that Athens’ military strength was so much lower than their neighbor’s that they could not possibly be viewed as a threat.

Their delegation at the conference would consist of the usual suspects. Shufen and Elias would be the ones to actually enter Unity Tower, the capitol building of the Union, while Cassandra would oversee their security team from her nest in the adjacent hotel. Now appointed as her retainer, Akiko would also be there to help out. Cassandra had assured her that their work would mostly be of the “hurry up and wait” variety, and she should bring a book to amuse herself, so Akiko had selected a random science fiction novel from her host’s bookshelf.

Before the main event began, however, there was the business in the outskirts to take care of. The staff from Samekh Wing were holed up in a dilapidated warehouse deep inside an abandoned industrial district. It rarely saw any form of foot traffic, and for good reason. Ivy crept up the crumbling brick walls, trash and debris littered pothole-ridden streets, and unknown chemicals pooled around burst pipes. The smell alone could have kept an army at bay.

Cassandra went alone, driving a worn-out old van that could have featured on a true crime documentary. Its exhaust pipe spat out smoke as she pulled up to the warehouse and hit the breaks, bringing the vehicle to an abrupt stop, after which she hopped out and waved her hand about to try and usher away some of the dust. The sulfurous odor made her grimace. Those who worked at this facility were brave for putting up with such conditions, she thought.

Her contact at the warehouse was another long-time friend of hers, a security officer named Eirene Katraki. Although she was Cassandra’s senior in years, she was her junior in rank, which, thankfully, did not seem to bother her much. After Eirene volunteered to fill an open position there in the Roman outskirts, the two had corresponded only infrequently, and Cassandra was eager to catch up.

One of the loading bay doors began to slide up, revealing a small contingent of security personnel. Eirene was, naturally, at the front, her attire in a characteristic state of disrepair, to the point that she had cast aside the jacket entirely and wore only a tattered tank top alongside the company-issued cargo pants. Her bare arms bore scars and tattoos both, and Cassandra could have sworn that several new marks in both categories had been added since last they met. Even her otherwise unassuming visage was adorned with a bandage across the nose that seemed very fresh. It was an open secret that Aleph Null’s security forces maintained the old tradition of recruiting from local gangs to bolster their numbers, and Eirene’s rough appearance was evidence of this.

“Cass! Wow, it’s been far, *far* too long since I saw my favorite lady in the flesh,” Eirene said, hopping down from the loading bay while her staff stood back. “How’s life been treating you? I heard that *malakas* Lancaster gave you some grief on the trip back from Montreal.”

“Life’s been treating me fine, thanks. The incident with the Skywatch was a real headache, but we were never in any real danger.” Cassandra replied.

Eirene snapped her fingers and pointed at her friend with a sly wink. “I knew you’d handle anything they threw your way.. Good show,” she said. “What about ol’ Eli? Is he holding up alright?”

“Oh, yeah, he’s doing quite well for himself. I think he’d rather be here dealing with Xiang’s fugitive friend, but he’s needed in the city to prepare for the conference. Frankly, so am I, so we’d best make this briefing quick.”

“Splendid! Glad to hear your dear brother’s life is looking up, too. Shame you can’t stick around, though, cause I’d really love to treat you to a meal. We’ve got the latest and greatest in MREs for your dining pleasure if you ever want to drop by again.”

“Now *that* is a tempting offer. I just might have to take you up on that once this mess is over,” Cassandra laughed.

“I’ll make sure to have the kettle ready to go when that happens. And, by ‘the kettle,’ I mean the FRH, but that’s basically the same thing, yeah? Anyway, please, come in, come in. We’ll, uh, talk more inside.” Eirene patted Cassandra on the back and beckoned for her to follow her back into the warehouse. Cassandra obliged.

Once the loading bay door was sealed back up, Eirene took Cassandra into what used to be the manager’s office of the warehouse and lay back in the patched-up armchair, throwing her legs up on the desk. “So, what’s this hot gossip that’s so important you had to tell me in person?” she asked, cocking her head inquisitively.

Knowing full well that her mother would have chastised her for doing so, Cassandra also slouched back in her chair, echoing Eirene’s air of relaxation. “It’s actually pretty simple. Almost inconveniently so,” she began. “At some point in the next few days, while the Union is distracted with the conference, a young man will arrive at this facility. I don’t know his name or what he looks like, but it’s not like anybody else is going to come wandering by, so it should be obvious it’s him. If you ask this guy who sent him, he’ll tell you he was sent by a man named Sun Xiang.”

“Sun Xiang, got it. Anything else I should know?”

“There’s a chance that Union forces will be in pursuit. If they show up asking questions, you know what to do.”

“Tie them up, drive them out to the harbor, and toss them in with concrete shoes?”

“I mean, you could do that, but I think my mother would be happier if we didn’t cause a diplomatic incident.”

“Aw, she’s no fun,” Eirene sulked.

“Yeah, tell me about it. Jokes aside, chances are that they won’t bother you if you tell them to take it up with our embassy instead. If they do decide to force the issue…well, I trust in your judgment.”

“We’ll get this kid safe to Athens, don’t you worry. Even if I have to give my life to do it.”

“Wow, a little morbid, don’t you think?”

Eirene shrugged. “Eh, kinda. Like you said, probably gonna be an easy job. But, just in case it isn’t, won't you stay here a bit longer to share my last meal with me?” She gave her an exaggerated, cheery smile.

“Rene, this is a simple job. You’re not dying any time soon. Once we rescue Xiang’s friend and the conference is over, you can come over to the Cloud Garden for dinner. Eli would love to see you again, and you can meet the gal we rescued from the Kolyma. She’s pretty nice, so I’m sure you two will get along great.”

“Fine. I’ll hold you to that, you know !” Eirene said with a smile that failed to hide her disappointment.

“I wouldn’t dare disappoint.”

\* \* \*

The hotel at which the Athenian delegation would be staying was a welcome change from the dreary conditions of Samekh Wing’s warehouse. Diplomats and corporate executives visiting Rome were accommodated there, and so it was made appropriately luxurious. Aleph Null had paid a pretty penny to reserve an entire floor for their ‘command center,’ but Cassandra believed that it was worth it to ensure there were no disruptions from the other guests.

Leaving the piece of refuse she called a car in the hands of the valet, she took the elevator to the thirtieth floor of the hotel. From there, the security team would be able to clearly see the Grand Balcony, the glass-enclosed overhang on which the main event would be held.

Cassandra swiped her keycard at the door to suite 3010 and headed in. Immediately inside, Akiko and a few other officers were busy setting up equipment and sweeping the area for bugs, while that room’s sniper team stood nearby, discussing their plan of attack should the worst come to pass. Before talking to anyone, she immediately made a detour to the washroom, where she washed her hands - once again in triplicate - and moistened her face with a washcloth in an effort to clean herself of the outskirts’ impurity. Once she was satisfied that her exposed skin was no longer tainted, Cassandra returned to the others.

“Chief Hao, it’s good to see you,” one of the officers stepped away from his work to say to her.

“Likewise. What’s the status of the command center?”

“We’re in the middle of sweeping for surveillance devices now, ma’am.”

“Have you found any?”

“None so far, no.”

“Alright, keep at it. Renting this place won’t have gone unnoticed, so the Union had ample time to bug the rooms. If we can, we should check the floors immediately above and below, too; as thoroughly as you can manage without upsetting the hotel. I asked for clearance to do a full search when I spoke with management but got stonewalled.” Cassandra scowled at the memory.

“Understood. I’ll pass that order on to the men,” the officer said with a firm nod.

“Thank you. What about the cameras and sentries?”

“We have access to the hotel’s CCTV system, so you’ll be able to monitor all the hallways on this floor, plus the stairwell. Private rooms are obviously a no-go, but we have guards in them, too. Two guys and a sniper team in each room facing the Tower, just like you wanted.”

“Probably more than we need, but the extra manpower will come in handy if the Skywatch makes a move against the army at this conference.”

The officer looked uneasy. “Ma’am, if I can speak freely?” he asked.

“Of course,” Cassandra said.

“I worry that the sheer size of our force here will prove…cumbersome, in the event that we have to exfiltrate the Director and her entourage. There’s something to be said for a leaner fighting force in such an event.”

“You’re not wrong, but our men in the tower are the only ones who’ll be handling exfiltration if things go south. Well, them and the sniper teams. I wanted a big contingent of guards here just to keep the place secure from Union spies, since there’s a good chance we’re in Lancaster’s bad books after the *Koylma* incident.”

“He did say we weren’t on his list, though,” Akiko chimed in, having finally finished the task she had been working on.

“He did, but he still tried to detain us at first. On the off chance that he considers us guilty by association, there’s no need to let his goons listen in on us,” Cassandra replied.

The security officer nodded. “If that’s what you think, then I won’t complain any further. This is your party, after all. Unless you need me for anything else, I’ll get back to work, let you two ladies catch up.”

“Thank you. Dismissed.”

The officer saluted and rejoined his comrades in preparing the room, leaving Cassandra alone with Akiko.

“I see they’ve been putting you to work,” Cassandra noted.

“I volunteered. Security ain’t anything I’d ever claim to be an expert on, but it would have been super awkward to just sit around reading while they worked, so I asked if there’s any, like, simple labor I could help with. Ended up helping them set up the screens to watch the security feed and the conference livestream.” Akiko shrugged.

“Good, I’m glad you’re settling in.”

Cassandra continued into the room, and Akiko dutifully followed her. Next to the window, they stopped and looked out together towards Unity Tower. Though it was narrower than the Cloud Garden, it was quite a bit taller, and its distinctive black exterior accented with flags and imposing statues exuded an aura of authority.

“So, your mom’s in there, huh?” Akiko asked

“Mm-hmm. The Prime Minister’s speech should start in…” Cassandra checked the grandfather clock on the adjacent wall. “...two hours. Two hours and twenty minutes, I guess. If either Lancaster or Vargas makes a move, chances are it’ll be either then, or at the closing ceremony two days from now, since they’ll both have an excuse to bring a lot of troops into the Tower. Doesn’t mean we can just relax in the meantime, though.”

“Hey, you were the one who told me to bring a book,” Akiko reminded her.

“That is true. I’m sure I’ll find some way for you to earn your keep, though.”

“I’d appreciate it if you did. Even if it’s just, like, going on a run to get you a pizza, or something. Anything to keep me from climbing the walls.”

Cassandra laughed. “If these next few days are so boring that the only thing I can find for you to do is fetching a pizza, then I’ll consider myself blessed,” she said.

\* \* \*

“Daleth Overwatch, this is Daleth one-two. Radio check, over,” Elias’ bodyguard said, his voice leaping from his mouthpiece to Cassandra’s headset over a background of classical music.

“Daleth one-two, this is Daleth Overwatch, I read you loud and clear, over,” Cassandra replied.

“The video feed should be up and running soon,” Elias himself chimed in. “You’ll be able to see everything as if you were here yourself. Ah, shame you can’t have any of this food, though. It’s really quite excellent. Over.” As he spoke, Elias took a sip of wine from the glass he was carrying and let out a satisfied sigh.

“Well, you can always bring some back for me. Whatever you think is best, I have faith in your taste. Over.”

“Haha, copy that, Daleth Overwatch. Out.”

Cassandra leaned back in front of her screen and grabbed a slice of pizza margherita from the takeout box next to her. It was actually quite good, she thought, so she wasn’t too jealous of her brother and mother.

Moments later, one of the dark monitors in front of her flashed into life. On the screen, she could see a wide view of the grand balcony and all the assembled guests, who were sitting on folding chairs. That, at least, was one thing she had over Elias at the moment - her own selection of furniture was far more comfortable. A podium had been set up so that the speakers would face the audience with the city at their backs, and three enormous screens had been erected to project any visual aids, with the unfortunate side effect of obscuring her snipers’ view of the event.

Elias, meanwhile, continued to help himself to the buffet. He stacked his paper plate with warm bread rolls, steamed and salted vegetables and a generous serving of noodles lathered in aioli sauce. It wasn’t a particularly fancy meal, but it had been prepared with care.

While he was on the way back to the Hao Family’s table, he was hailed by a handsome older gentleman accompanied by a petite, nervous-looking woman, whom he would have wagered was a few years his junior.

“Excuse me,” the man began in a formal tone, “are you the ambassador from Athens?”

“I certainly am,” Elias replied.

“Perfect. I spoke with your mother not long ago, and she gave me your description, though I doubt I would have needed it. You really are her spitting image.”

Elias smiled. “I’m sure it helps that there are few other men of Chinese descent at this particular soirée.”

“Then you and I have something in common. I have seen no other Swiss in attendance tonight, my companion excluded.”

The young woman gave Elias a nervous wave.

“Ah, you must be the delegation from Geneva. I heard tell of your alliance with the Union but didn’t expect them to extend an invitation to such a fresh partner! Pleased to make your acquaintance, both of you.”

“We argued fiercely to secure our spot at this event. Allow me to introduce myself properly. My name is Nathaniel Bergstrom, deputy mayor of Geneva,” the man said, shaking Elias’ hand stiffly.

The young woman did not extend a hand to him, merely electing to nod in his general direction. “And my name is Charlotte Aucoin,” she said in an awkward, stilted manner. “I am a junior officer of the technology regulation task force…you may know it better as the Inquisition. Many like to call us that, but I promise you, we are not so harsh.”

“Very prestigious,” Elias said, although it was not lost on him that both were subordinates to other, more powerful members of their respective organizations. Perhaps Geneva too suspected a degree of danger at the conference and had elected not to send the highest echelons of its leadership, much like the mayor of Athens had also remained at home.

“Have you heard anything about what the Union intends to present at this first panel?” Nathaniel asked.

Elias shook his head.

“Pity. Neither have I. They must want to keep it tightly under wraps. And yet, this conference, while not open to the public, is hardly secure itself, what with it being streamed live to those who could not attend in person. Anything they announce will be known to all the world’s leaders by tomorrow morning, so why the secrecy now?”

“A flair for the dramatic, perhaps?” Elias suggested. “You wouldn’t ask a movie director why they don’t tell us the ending before opening night.”

“That’s a fair point.” Nathaniel turned around to look out over the balcony, beyond which the Athenians’ hotel could be seen, a distant silhouette against the evening sky.

“Your delegation is staying at the Hotel Augustus, yes?” the deputy mayor continued.

“We are. You seem to know a lot about us.”

Nathaniel laughed. “Hardly. I was talking with your mother before, remember? She mentioned it. I’ve heard that hotel is quite luxurious; sadly, our budget was too tight for us to join you there. Charlotte and I are staying in a rather basic establishment several miles south of here. It’s a far cry from our accommodations in Geneva.”

“Well, if I’m ever in Geneva, I’ll have to see that for myself. Given that we now have the Union as a mutual ally, I’m sure there will be cause for me to travel there sooner or later.”

“We would be happy to host you in such a case,” Charlotte replied.

Meanwhile, in the shadow of one of the projector screens, Director Hao Shufen and Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster met face-to-face for the second time that week.

“Lady Hao, I’m glad you could attend,” the military man said, bowing respectfully. “You have my deepest apologies for that mess aboard the *Kolyma*. It was my mistake for letting things get out of hand.”

“Apology accepted, Grand Admiral,” Shufen replied in an icy tone.

“You can rest assured that the treasonous officers and their staff won’t cause any more trouble. I hope that our collaboration will continue for the benefit of all mankind.”

“As long as the terms of our treaty are upheld, it will. If I may ask, though - what fate befell Vargas and his crew?”

“The survivors have been detained and are undergoing questioning as we speak. The Skywatch also has possession of the *Kolyma* itself, along with all of its computer data, passenger logs, security camera footage. Anyone with even the loosest tie to that conspiracy will be dealt with shortly, and you can rest easy knowing the skies are safe.”

“Good. I have little patience for those who threaten me or the people under my protection,” Shufen replied. “However, I still find myself uncertain as to what their crime actually was.”

“That information is, I’m afraid, quite classified. I can tell you that they stole sensitive data with the intent to use it against the Union, but that’s all.”

“I see. As long as this little spat of yours doesn’t escalate to the point my company or my country has to get involved, you’re free to keep your secrets.”

“Naturally, if anything comes up that may impact Aleph Null’s operations, you have my word that you’ll be the first to know.”

“That would be appreciated. We do have some formal requests to make, but those can wait until our actual meeting.”

“Of course,” Lancaster said, taking a sip of the deep red wine in his own glass. “In the meantime, I hope you enjoy the conference. We have some exciting news to share with the scientific community.”

Shufen didn’t respond verbally, but raised her glass towards Lancaster. They clinked them together and drank before going to look for their seats as the conference began.

\* \* \*

As soon as the clock struck eight, the music playing throughout the Grand Balcony fell silent, its sudden absence urging the crowd to do the same. Once they had done so, an unassuming old man in a navy blue suit made his way up to the podium, using an engraved cane to support his walk, and began to speak.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Union and its allies,” he began. “Thank you all for honoring us with your presence. While our numbers are thinner than they ought to be, due to the recent incident, it nonetheless gladdens me to welcome so many bright minds to the Strategic Technologies conference. It gladdens me even more so to introduce our keynote speakers for the night: Marcus Fairchild, overseer of the Science, Transportation, and Defense Administrations; and Prime Minister Magnus Kolberg!”

There was an eruption of applause as the two distinguished gentlemen walked up on stage. Marcus Fairchild was clearly the older of the two, with wrinkled, pale skin, a thinning hairline, and a neatly trimmed beard. Magnus Kolberg, by contrast, was fairly young for a world leader, just on the cusp of middle age. He was tall and thin and clean-shaven, with a pair of golden spectacles set upon his pointy nose.

Listening in from her nest in the hotel, Cassandra frowned. The introductory speaker had introduced Marcus Fairchild as the overseer of three separate administrations, an unprecedented concentration of power that must have been a recent development. Those from Aleph Null had treated with him before, but only as the overseer of the Defense Administration. Now, he was able to dictate what technologies the Union pursued, how its weapons were used, and how its people could travel. He was an especially dangerous cog in the machine, one by which far too many others were driven. It was an ill omen for the stability of such a superpower.

Once the applause died down, Magnus stepped forward and began to speak in a raspy Norwegian accent. “No doubt you are all aware of the incident aboard the *Kolyma*.” he began. “I am as troubled as you are to learn of such treason within our highest echelons, but I assure you that the situation is entirely under control. I’d like to begin our presentation today by commending Grand Admiral Jacob Lancaster for his decisive response to the conspiracy, and by congratulating my friend Marcus Fairchild for his appointment to the offices left vacant by two of the guilty parties.”

It was hard for Cassandra to tell through the live feed, as high-quality as it was, but she could have sworn that Marcus looked less than pleased about the news. That made two of them, she supposed.

“Thank you all for your appreciation and understanding,” Magnus continued after the crowd finished a second round of applause. “Now, Mr. Fairchild, why don’t you tell all these kind ladies and gentlemen what we have for them tonight? I’m sure they’re all excited to hear what you’ve been working on for so long.”

Marcus nodded and stepped up to the podium, right as Magnus stepped back. “Time to begin the main event,” he said with a knowing smile, already sure that his peers would be suitably impressed. “Now, I assume you are all familiar with the Rho AI, and the Nicaea Agreement that followed its birth?”

The assembly seemed to nod in unison, to his apparent satisfaction.

Marcus making a reference to Rho was unsurprising. Developed not long before the Aleph Null was founded, it had been the first AI sufficiently self-aware for some to argue that it deserved human rights, although the United Nations ultimately declined to extend them. The fall of the old world saw all of the factories able to produce Rho’s hardware destroyed or repurposed, but some few copies of the AI itself were rumored to remain ‘alive.’ As far as Cassandra knew, none of these could be found within the Union.

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

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

“Indeed. The Technologists had begun work on their own AIs, the sacrilegiously-named ‘Holy Spirits’, but were forced into hiding before their dreams could be realized. Most of my own work is based on the research they left behind.”

“Work that you’ve now completed, I assume?” said one of the guests in the front row, a portly young man from southern France, judging by his accent.

“Completed? No, our work will never stop, but we have made a breakthrough. The Rho technology is well-documented, and we could reproduce it, but the hardware it requires is inefficient, requiring an enormous computer and a lot of power. Thinking we could do better, we turned to the Holy Spirits, which are far more advanced.”

“Are?” asked the old man from Geneva to whom Elias had spoken earlier.

Marcus smiled. “Very perceptive, Deputy Mayor Bergstrom. What I, alongside Messieurs Kolberg and Lancaster, learned during a foray into the ruins of Jerusalem is that the Technologists were able to produce a working copy of the Holy Spirit AI. The Luddites wanted to destroy it, of course, but the Holy Spirits can run on a computer no larger than a consumer laptop, making it easy to hide backups right under their noses. In fact, we found ours lurking inside the computer system of a Crusade-era air destroyer, indicating that the Technologists infiltrated the Papacy in order to use its war as a sort of test bed. The poor thing was serving as a glorified targeting computer, ensuring that all the destroyer’s shots found their marks up until the war ended, and the ship was mothballed, trapping him inside for almost two hundred years.”

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

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

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

“I wouldn’t go that far, but that’s beside the point. What I’m trying to say is that, by studying the Holy Spirit, we were able to partially reverse-engineer it, applying what we learned to our own AIs. My dear Lena, if you would?” Marcus asked, beckoning someone forth from the assembly.

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

“Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you my daughter, Lena Fairchild.”

The guests nodded in acknowledgement, a low murmur filling the room as they realized who – and what – she was. Lena bore no resemblance to her father. Brown skin rather than pale, black hair instead of blonde, and the most piercing eyes anyone in attendance had ever seen. This discrepancy could have been the result of adoption, but, in the current context, could only have meant one thing.

“They’re called Mourners,” Marcus said, his face full of pride. “My late wife once joked that, because we’d forsaken our personal lives for this project, the AIs would be the only ones to mourn our passing, and the name stuck as a bit of dark humor. In any case, Lena here is the result of that experiment. No more house-sized computers. An entire, self-aware AI contained in a superior android chassis. Nigh indistinguishable from a living human…on the outside, at least.”

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

“Pleasure to meet you all,” she said with a reassuring smile.

Cassandra’s eyes widened.

“Did you know about this?” Elias whispered to her through his microphone.

“Not in the slightest,” Cassandra replied. “Our work with the D.A. was about developing a new spacecraft to supply orbital installations. However, I wonder…Akiko, you said you worked under Marcus Fairchild for a year. Did these ‘Mourners’ of his ever come up?”

Akiko finished chewing a mouthful of pizza and swallowed it. “Hm? Oh, not directly, I don’t think,” she said once her mouth was clear. “That kind of thing would have been *way* above my pay grade, I’m pretty sure. But we did study these “Holy Spirits” that he’s talking about, so it’s totally possible that some of my research did get involved. I could give you a whole write-up on their specifications if you wanted.”

“I think my mother would appreciate that, thanks.”

“Yeah, sure thing.”

Back on the Grand Balcony, a stern-looking man in a Trade and Commerce administration uniform leaned into his microphone. “That’s all well and good,” he said, scanning Lena with a critical eye, “but what exactly is the point? This seems like a lot of expense for little practical benefit.” Listening in, Cassandra was wondering the exact same thing.

“Maybe he’s about to reveal that we can upload our own minds into these ‘Mourners’ of his,” another guest said, a sly smile on her face.

Marcus laughed. “For a time, we were excited by the idea of digitized human consciousness, but it was not to be. No matter how we approached the problem, we were unable to answer the obvious question: How you know it’s really you? Until we can bridge that gap, we’re at a bit of an impasse.”

“Ah. Pity. I was looking forward to becoming an immortal cyber-woman.”

“One day, perhaps. But I digress. No, the main advantage of our Mourners is that they can be mass-produced at low cost, making them…viable substitutes for a human military force.” There seemed a hint of disgust in his voice, Cassandra thought.

“Unmanned drones have been used for centuries, but, unlike those robots, Mourners can actually hold territory like regular infantry,” Magnus said, joining his co-presenter at the podium. “A single AI ‘program’ has enough processing power to remotely control an entire squad of bodies like Lena’s, without any risk to itself, assuming that its central processing unit stays off the field. Though the Nicaea Agreement does not require it, we intend to only utilize willing volunteers, enforce strict and regular psychological evaluations, and afford all Mourners full constitutional rights, lest you worry about provoking some sort of robot uprising.”

“You needn’t worry about our loyalty any more than one of your human soldiers,” Lena added. Her voice was surprisingly melodious, without a single hint as to its synthetic nature.

From his table, Elias could see his new acquaintances from Geneva eyeing Lena with suspicion. “That may be so,” the woman named Charlotte said, “but Lancaster just stated that one Mourner can control multiple bodies. Does that not increase the damage a single one of you can do if it does go rogue?”

“You’re not wrong, especially since Mourners aren’t limited to android chassis like my own. They can control all kinds of vehicles as well, as long as we install the proper interface, but I don’t need to remind you that we’ve dealt with mutinous airship crews before. You haven’t already forgotten the *Kolyma,* have you?”

“I have not. My concern is not about whether you can destroy a rogue artificial intelligence. It is about how much damage will be done before you do.”

“Not to mention, we don’t have the infrastructure to easily build replacements for these airships. There’s a reason we’re still using ancient vessels like the *Kolyma*,” the man from Trade and Commerce said.

“All of that is true of human crews. Ideology can spread like wildfire aboard a ship and turn them mutinous in a heartbeat. The point is, Mourners aren’t any riskier than human soldiers, and the extra manpower will give us a huge advantage against our rivals. To our knowledge, none of them have even come close to matching this technology.”

Charlotte folded her arms. “Perhaps. And yet I would guess the lot of you have more grandiose designs than marching east with an army of plastic people,”

Lancaster nodded. “The obvious next step is to upgrade ASPIS. Right now, it’s controlled by a Rho AI, but maintaining an obsolete system like that is increasingly problematic. Replacing it with a Mourner would help us future-proof the weapon. Only for targeting, mind you. Arming it would still require confirmation from myself and Skywatch orbital command.”

Cassandra had some familiarity with ASPIS thanks to her work with the Defense Administration. The “Automatic Safeguard Protocol with Intelligent Subsystems” was an allegedly defensive superweapon, although its specifications were highly classified. All she and her friends knew was that it involved several weaponized satellites, and that the weapon had never once been used in battle.

It occurred to her that this may have been the end goal of the Defense Administration when they reached out to Aleph Null’s aerospace division. A modernized space fleet would certainly make it easier to retrofit these satellites. She made a mental note to have her family take them to task on the matter later on.

“Of course, many of you are likely, and rightly, concerned about the cost of this endeavor,” Magnus said. “I won’t lie. It will be expensive. Just ferrying ammunition to the ASPIS batteries is already a major undertaking, to say nothing of a comprehensive retrofit, and that’s after cost of the Mourners themselves. So, a question for the audience – how would you propose we fund this little project of ours?”

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

Magnus nodded. “Certainly, it’s a possibility. However, our citizens might not react favorably towards a tax unless they believe they’ll see some benefit, and the rewards for this project are too long-term for the layperson to grasp. To them, it will look like we’re simply sucking up their hard-earned cash.”

“We might be able to get more support by claiming it goes towards national defense, which isn’t a lie, but we would need to prove that we face sufficient threats to justify it.”

“We’ve been getting hit hard in New England. Perhaps we can use that?” Lancaster asked.

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

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

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

Cassandra felt herself losing interest. There was still the ever-present threat of violence, and so she could not afford to let herself be inattentive, but the longer the night went on, the less likely that seemed. When the presentation concluded after endless back-and-forth about trade, taxes, and scientific concepts that went well over her head, it seemed like they were in the clear, at least for that night.

And then the Grand Balcony exploded.

“What fresh hell was that?” Akiko shouted, bolting to Cassandra’s side.

“I-I don’t know,” Cassandra stammered, tapping the side of her monitor in disbelief. Immediately afterward, both of them hurried to the window, where they were treated to the sight of an inferno spreading throughout Unity Tower. “Daleth one-two, Daleth four-niner, this is Daleth Overwatch, do you read?” she shouted urgently into her headset. “I repeat, Daleth one-two, Daleth four-niner, this is Daleth Overwatch, do you read?”

“Daleth Overwatch, this is Daleth one-two, copy loud and clear, over.”

Cassandra breathed a sigh of relief. If Elias’ bodyguard was alive, then so was he, most likely, although that still left their mother unaccounted for. “Roger, Daleth one-two, what’s your status?” she asked, beads of sweat dripping from her forehead into her eyes.

“VIP one-two is with us, en route to the primary evac point,” the bodyguard reported. “No sign of VIP four-niner, over.”

“Shit, shit, shit,” Cassandra muttered to herself, doing her best to keep her composure. “Uh, Daleth one-two, proceed as planned, then make your way to the secondary evac point. Daleth Overwatch will rendezvous with you there, then continue to the Samekh Wing outpost. Over.”

“Wilco, Daleth Overwatch. Out.”

“So we’re leaving?” Akiko asked.

“We’re leaving.”

In a haste, Cassandra gathered up the security guards in her nest, and, together, they fled the building, facing no resistance. A horde of emergency vehicles had already accumulated in the boulevard in front of Unity Tower, but, after a brief encounter with law enforcement wherein Cassandra provided proof of their identities, they were allowed to leave and meet Elias at the nearby park, which had been designated as their secondary evacuation point in case of a crisis.

As soon as their eyes met, Elias and Cassandra rushed into each other’s arms. Time stopped while the twins embraced, lit by the streetlight and blazing tower behind them.”

“I’m so glad you’re safe,” Cassandra said, tears still welling in her eyes. “But mother – you really didn’t see any sign of her?”

“She survived the blast. I saw it with my own two eyes. Alas, we were separated in the stampede that followed, so I couldn’t tell you where she is now, nor why she isn’t responding to the radio. Deep breaths, okay, Cassie? Mother wouldn’t want us to panic.”

Cassandra hadn’t even realized she was hyperventilating, but, now that he had pointed it out, she knew he was right. Panic was unbecoming of one in her position, even if it was pure nepotism that got her there. She inhaled deeply, letting the cold night air fill her lungs for one, two, three, four seconds, and then exhaled for even longer. A few more cycles, and, at the very least, it no longer felt like her heart was about to leap out of her chest and splatter all over Elias’ jacket.

“Alright, everyone,” she announced to the group, which now numbered over a dozen men and women. “Like I said, our next stop is Samekh Wing’s warehouse. It’s a few hours from here by foot, the night is dark, and the terrain is hazardous, but it’s the only place we know is safe.”

“Do we even know that?” Akiko asked. “There was that thing with Xiang’s buddy, so we could be walking into a shootout if shit hit the fan while we were gone. Well, it kinda already did, but you know what I mean.”

“Eirene would have informed me of anything like that. Unless some disaster struck that killed everyone there instantly, we can be confident the warehouse is secure.”

Akiko looked back at the burning building and bit her tongue.

“Anyway, that’s enough chit-chat. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover, so let’s get moving,” Cassandra continued. She felt as far from “in control” as she could have possibly been, but knew she needed not to show it. At least, more than she already had. It was hard enough to command respect as a twenty-eight-year-old woman – a girl, many would say – and she didn’t need to look like a crybaby on top of that.

Thankfully, Elias had her back. She didn’t know what she would have done had he not been there.

\* \* \*

*Chapter 4 – J’accuse!*

The road leading to the warehouse was shrouded in silence, a tranquility that would have encouraged Cassandra were it not for the Union air destroyer hovering in the skies above.

“Damnation,” she whispered. “You were right, Akiko. That ship up there must be jamming their communications so they couldn’t get a message out.”

“This fellow must have been quite important for the Skywatch to mobilize such a vessel. Seems we have a modern-day Helen of Troy on our hands,” Elias remarked.

“Except I don’t think Lancaster is after our new friend for his beauty, unless I’ve woefully misjudged his character.”

“Should we fall back?” Elias’ bodyguard asked.

Cassandra paused. Her first instinct had been to say no, that they needed to press onward and rescue who they could from the warehouse. However, the more rational part of her knew that such a plan would only put more lives at risk, especially with noncombatants in tow. With this in mind, she ordered them to take shelter in the nearby ruins while she alone made contact, and to return to Rome if they did not hear word after one hour.

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

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

“Hey, Cass, good to see a friend. Not sure why you’re here, though. Thought you and your family would’ve been off to Athens by now,” Eirene said.

“You haven’t heard the news?” Cassandra asked, to which Eirene shook her head. “We were watching the conference like we were supposed to, when a goddamn bomb went off. Not sure who planted it. Everything fell apart after that, and I lost track of mother, so I figured my best bet was to come here.”

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

“You may have been right that it’s not an easy job, but I’m not letting you give up just yet. What happened, exactly? Spare me no details.”

“Not many details to spare,” Eirene said. “Kid came down from the north, just like you said he would. Practically delirious, but he said the right name, Sun Xiang, so we let him in. Few hours later, some Union troops come after him and start shooting, no questions asked.”

“They didn’t even ask you to hand him over, first?”

“Sure didn’t. We fought back, of course, and repelled the first wave. Guess they realized we weren’t who they thought we were at that point, ‘cause next time, they sent in a guy to talk. Told him he’d have to take it up with our embassy, just like you said, and he agreed, but called in the airship to make sure none of us make a run for it in the meantime.”

“I see,” Cassandra said. “This night just keeps getting worse. Is this all that’s left?”

“Not the only survivors, but the only ones left in the warehouse? Yeah. We’ve been having people sneak out one-by-one the same way you came in, since a big retreat would be easy for that destroyer up there to spot, and, you know…boom.” Eirene made an explosive gesture with her hands to emphasize the point. “At least we have something they seem to want, though. They totally could bomb us to bits, but, no, no, they need our guy alive.”

“And to avoid further antagonizing Athens.”

“You seem really confident that they give a shit about what we think.”

“They cared enough to let me and my family go during the *Kolyma* incident.”

“Yeah, yeah, I guess. Anyway, this was, oh, an hour or so ago, so it would’ve happened after the bombing you talked about. Wonder if the two are related.”

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

“True. I’m sorry.”

A solemn silence filled the room.

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

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

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

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

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

“Mind if I go take a look?”

“Sure, sure, might as well before we all get bombed to bits. I’ll be staying until the last of my guys is clear of the building, so, you know, take your time.” 41

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

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