

Storm Front

“My goodness, is that fire still burning?”

Kassandra glanced up from her book to the television. Her mother had just changed to the news channel, where an Old Worlder was covering updates from Alpha.

“I’m here in the Lunar Colonies,” the reporter said. “East Keibetsu Ring, Solenoid Alpha. Where the fire that started over two days ago is still raging...”

Father Cyril sat down next to Kassandra’s mother. “Truly awful,” he said.

“Isn’t it?” Mary replied.

Kassandra went back to her book.

“..Tensions between Colonists and Old Worlders have increased dramatically, with acts of violence and vandalism at an all time high. Consisting of 26 percent of the population, the largest of any Solenoid colony, Old Worlders have long since been subject to-”

The reporter shrieked, dropping her microphone to the ground. Kassandra’s parents gasped, and she looked up at the TV again.

The reporter pressed her hand to her forehead, blood streaming through her fingers. The camera spun around to face a group of tall men. Colonists, with brightly coloured hair, and tattoos winding down their arms. The group laughed, and kept walking down the street.

“Go back to Earth!” one of them shouted.

“Yeah, go ruin your *own* planet!”

A bloody rock flew into frame, which smacked a Colonist in the chest, “Go fuck yourself!” the reporter screamed.

The TV cut off.

“That’s horrible!” Kassandra said.

Father Cyril sighed, “It’s getting really bad up there, isn’t it?”

Kassandra thought for a moment, then closed her book, and sat upright. “... This isn’t going to affect your deal with the Ainsworths, is it?”

Her parents looked at each other. “We don’t know,” her mother said. “It’s complicated.”

Kassandra got up, “Where’s Father George?”

“He’s faxing them right now,” her mother said, “don’t interrupt him.”

* * *

Kassandra knocked on her fathers door, and slowly peered inside. Father George was hunched over his desk, in front of an electric typewriter. A spool of fax paper sat next to him.

“Father?”

“Not now Kassandra.” He didn’t look up from the typewriter.

“Did the Ainsworth’s say anything?”

“I said not now.”

“Did they cancel the deal?”

“Kassandra!” He paused. “... How do you know that?”

Kassandra walked around behind her father, and looked at the fax that sat on his desk.

COMPANY NAME: Witton-Ainsworth Corporation

ADDRESS: 12 Bainesbury Avenue. London, England. EC1A2AY

FAX NO#: 4417-126-984

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TO: George Witton

FROM: Cameron Ainsworth

DATE: 16-6-2274

=====

MESSAGE:

Unfortunately, due to complications with the developing situation within Solenoid Alpha, the Ainsworths will be unable to comply with the large-scale Helium-3 exportation deal, discussed on 22-3-2274.

Discussions can continue when the situation has been resolved.

Sincerely,

Cameron Ainsworth.

“That’s it?” Kassandra said.

“They have a lot going on,” Father George said. “They’re in a Colonist-Old World Partnership; every one of their locations in Alpha probably has its windows smashed.”

"That doesn't excuse it!" Cassandra said, "people need that energy! That amount of helium-3 could power dozens of cities for years!"

Mary and Father Cyril stood at the door.

"The deal's been cancelled," Father George told them.

"But he doesn't seem to care!" Cassandra said. "Father, tell him he's being ridiculous!"

"Sweetie," Father Cyril said. "It's like we told you, it's complicated."

"No! That's not good enough." Cassandra stormed out of the room.

* * *

Kassandra sat down at her desk, jammed a piece of paper into her typewriter, and angrily typed out all her thoughts. She scanned it through the fax machine in Father George's study, and immediately screwed the paper into a ball, and threw it in the bin.

She waited impatiently for a response. It wasn't until later that evening that she got one.

COMPANY NAME: Witton-Ainsworth Corporation

ADDRESS: 12 Bainesbury Avenue. London, England. EC1A2AY

FAX NO#: 4417-126-984

=====

TO: Kassandra Witton

FROM: Cameron Ainsworth

DATE: 16-6-2274

=====

MESSAGE:

Good evening Kassandra. I'm sorry to hear about your dissatisfaction with the decision regarding the helium-3 exports, however, we will not be overturning our ruling on the matter.

Sincerely,

Cameron Ainsworth.

This too, was immediately screwed into a ball, and thrown in the bin. She spent the next few minutes pacing about her room, practically seething.

He's not going to listen to me, Cassandra thought, what am I supposed to do?

If I fax him again, he'll probably take even longer to respond. It'd take weeks to have a proper conversation.

It has to be in person, she decided. He can ignore my faxes all he wants, but he can't ignore me. I won't let him ignore me.

She grabbed a change of clothes, a notepad, a portable cassette recorder, and a mobile telephone, and shoved them in her backpack. She packed up her typewriter and placed it alongside it. After a second thought, she grabbed an instant camera, then slid it all under her bed.

* * *

The next day, Cassandra made sure to wake up well before her parents. She got dressed, grabbed her bag, and snuck into Father George's office. She grabbed her passport, then located his wallet, and took his credit card, and a small amount of cash. She then wrote a note to explain her absence, and apologise. She left it on his desk.

Once outside, she hailed a cab.

Kassandra leant her head against the car window, and watched her house, and the rest of her street, go by.

After a while, she saw the Heathrow Spaceport in the distance.

Kassandra's backpack started beeping: her mobile phone was ringing. She fished the device out of her backpack, and held it to her ear.

"Kassandra, what the hell are you doing?" came Father George's voice.

"I'm going to Alpha," she said, "I'm going to fix this."

"Are you fucki-" the phone was wrestled out of Father George's hands.

"Sweetie?" Father Cyril said over the top of his spouses arguing, "you can't go to Alpha, it's not safe there. Come home now, okay?"

"I'll be okay, Father. I won't be more than a few days."

"No, Cassandra, you don't understand," her mother said, "Old Worlders are dying up there, they're being blamed for the fire."

"What about the people who need power?" Cassandra replied, "Old Worlders are dying down here too."

Another pause. She could hear her parents talking in the background, and it sounded like the phone changed hands several times.

“Cameron’s right, you know,” Father George said. “You can’t change his mind.”

“I have to try,” Cassandra said.

* * *

The Heathrow Spaceport wasn’t as busy as Cassandra had expected. The foyer was mostly empty. She could see more Regen peacekeepers posted around than actual travellers.

She walked inside, and up to one of the counters.

The woman didn’t notice her at first, she was fiddling mindlessly with her pen. “Oh. Sorry, hello.”

“When’s the next flight to Alpha?”

“Offworld flights leave from Finley Station,” the woman said, looking up at the panel of screens. “There’s a flight in 20 minutes.”

Kassandra waited anxiously at the departure gate. She’d been overseas when she was younger, but she certainly hadn’t been offworld before.

My brothers do this all the time, she told herself. There’s nothing to worry about.

There were around twenty other people at the gate, all of which were Colonists. It made a part of her feel slightly uneasy.

Boarding the spaceliner was, as far as Cassandra could tell, a similar experience to that of an Old World aeroplane. It took off horizontally, but was soon soaring up into the sky at high g’s. About 15 minutes later, the captain announced that they were in orbit.

At that moment, Cassandra felt weightlessness for the first time. She looked out the window, and saw the Earth slowly turning below her. She took the opportunity to snap a photo with her camera.

Once the ship was docked at Finley station, a few of the Colonists flew gracefully down the aisle. Many others, including Cassandra, slowly fumbled from railing to railing, as they made their way into the station.

The wait for the next flight was around 45 minutes. Cassandra spent the time in the station’s spinning ring, which had shops, bars, and restaurants. They were all run by Old Worlders, except for one bar. One of its windows had been smashed, and the Colonist cleaning it up gave Cassandra a glance as she walked by.

The flight to the Moon felt a lot calmer. As the whole trip would take about a day, Cassandra took the chance to sleep.

After arriving at a similar yet noticeably larger station above the Lunar Colonies, Cassandra took a flight down to Solenoid Alpha.

* * *

The North Alpha Spaceport was a massive complex. The tall architecture to accommodate for Colonists' heights made Cassandra feel like a child again. It seemed a lot busier than Heathrow; Cassandra felt as if the lower gravity made it easier to rush from one place to another.

At the end of the arrival gate, a large mural took up the whole wall. Originally, Cassandra could see that it said 'Welcome to the Lunar Colonies!' But now, scrawled over messily in yellow spray paint, it read:

*WE ARE NOT
YOUR PLANET B*

Looking down at the plaque, she saw that the mural was over 150 years old.

Since there were no cars in the Colonies, Cassandra took the tube out of the spaceport, then hopped on and off trams till she found her way to the Witton-Ainsworth building she knew Cameron to be in. She could feel people glancing at her the whole journey. And she'd spotted a few armoured trucks patrolling around, closely followed by half a dozen Regen peacekeepers.

As Father George had predicted, one of the large windows framing the front of the entrance had been shattered. Cones had been placed around the glass, which had yet to be cleaned.

Kassandra walked inside, and after seeing no one at the reception desk, sat down on a nearby chair. After a moment, a Colonist walked around the corner. She had a large bandage across her cheek, and was talking on a cordless phone. The woman sat down at the desk, then hung up.

Kassandra walked up to the counter. "I'd like to speak to Cameron Ainsworth."

"Well tough shit, he's busy."

"My name is Cassandra Witton," she said, "tell him I'm waiting."

The woman rolled her eyes, then picked up the cordless phone. "Cameron? There's this girl here, she says she wants to talk to you... Yes... Cassandra Witton... Got it." She hung up the phone. "Third floor, elevator's on the left."

As she waited in the elevator, she thought over again what she was going to say.

The elevator door slid open, and Cameron Ainsworth stood against the opposite wall. He stood up straight, and walked down the hall. He waved for her to follow. "Come on," he said.

* * *

They both sat down at Cameron's desk.

"Let's hear it then."

"You're making a mistake cancelling that deal," Cassandra said, "you have a chance to make millions of people's lives a whole lot better."

"You mean make millions of *Old Worlders* lives better?"

"Oh we're going straight to race are we?" Cassandra sighed, "I thought you had an actual reason."

"Of course I have an actual reason. It's our public image," Cameron said. "And race is a big part of that."

"How?" Cassandra said, "Your whole business involves trading with Old Worlders."

"And that was perfectly fine until *now*," Cameron said. He placed his hands on the desk. "It's a very volatile situation, Cassandra. Our window was smashed purely for working with the Wittons. Can you imagine what they'd do if we handed away the Colonies' *most valuable* and well known resource to them? I'd be putting the lives of myself and my employees in danger, I'm not going to risk that."

He got up, and walked over to the window behind him.

"Cassandra, come here."

After a moment of hesitation, she joined him by the window. He motioned out to the colony before them. "What do you see?" he asked.

A skyline of low rising concrete and metal buildings stretched before her, stopping at the edge of the dome a few kilometres ahead. A flicker of orange caught her eye, emanating from a building in the distance.

"I see the fire," Cassandra said.

"No, that's not the fire." He pointed up to the roof of the dome, "That's the fire."

Cassandra looked up, and saw a cloud of smoke.

"It's engulfed the entire east side of Keibetsu, that's almost 30 rings down. Even if the fire itself hasn't reached the upper rings, it's affecting the entire colony."

Cassandra stared out the window. She'd never realised how *big* Alpha was; she thought that what she could see was all there was, but somewhere below, there were thousands who had to face the effects of that fire.

“What I’m trying to say, Cassandra, is that that fire was the final straw. This hate that’s been festering for the last 200 years, it’s going to lead to more than just firebombings. I can’t get my company involved with that.”

“How do you know that everyone will react negatively?” Cassandra asked. “Can’t this deal be seen as offering an olive branch to the Old Worlders? Can’t this be a way to fix things?”

Cameron said nothing for a moment. “You met Eve downstairs, right?” he asked.

Kassandra nodded.

“She was cleaning the window when a group of Colonists chucked a rock at her. The glass cut her cheek open.” He folded his arms, and looked back at Cassandra. “Colonists already hate us just for working with you, do you really think they’ll take it positively?”

Kassandra stared silently out at the colony. It didn’t look bad at a distance, but Kassandra realised that she’d already seen what it was really like: In broken windows, racist messages, and hateful glances. “I just thought...”

“I get that you’re trying to help your people,” Cameron said. “But I’m trying to help mine.”

“I never cared about *my* people,” Kassandra replied.

Cameron laughed. “*Of course* you did, because you sure as hell never cared about mine.”

“I do!”

“Really? Because if you knew how bad it was over here, if you’d put even a *single thought* into how this deal would affect us, you’d never have come here.”

“I...”

Father George’s words echoed inside Kassandra’s head.

“... You were right,” she said softly. “You- You *are* right.”

Cameron sighed.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “You’re right. I thought I could fix everything, but...”

“You *were* being stupid,” he said. “But I know your heart was in the right place.”

“That... doesn’t *mean* a whole lot, does it?”

Cameron slid his hands into his pockets, and looked out the window again. “It means a lot more than you think.”