

A bead of sweat trickled down Ambassador Gene Mccallums neck, moistening the collar of his crisp white shirt. The usually busy US embassy was eerily still. The same could not be said for the sweltering streets of Beijing outside.

“Mrs. Glover, have all personnel evacuated the building?” Gene swallowed thickly. Despite the air conditioning it felt stiflingly hot.

“Yes sir. I...are we waiting for further instructions?” Sierra Glover twisted her fingers nervously, glancing at her boss. Gene opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by the ringing of his phone, causing both of them to jump. He held up a hand, Sierra nodded as he turned away and answered it. She had never seen Ambassador Mccallum so tense. With thirty years of diplomacy experience under his belt she had never seen him react with more than a raised eyebrow. Sierra wiped her forehead, and glanced out the third story window. When she became a Foreign Service Officer Sierra had never dreamed that she would be scared for her life. Of course she knew there would be risks, but as she glanced at the rioting mob below she wished she had become an accountant like her mother wanted her to be.

“Mrs Glover” Sierra whipped her head around.

“Yes?”

The ambassador sighed, “The plane is on standby. We’re leaving.”

Sierra nodded, slinging her handbag over her shoulder she followed the Ambassador out into the empty hallway. The clicking of their footsteps were accompanied only by the echoes of the jeering crowd outside.

“Hey!” A small bespectacled man ran to catch up with the duo, Sierra recognized him as a fellow Foreign Service Officer.

“Hello Donovan, you get the message too?” Gene clipped.

“Yes sir. They're getting really riled up out there. Have all the other employees already left.?”

“All lower level employees were evacuated a few hours ago. I was trying to get a hold of the Beijing police department but.. it seems they are’ unable to assist us’.” Sierra frowned at the sarcasm the last sentence was dripping with. Was the United States' relationship with China that bad? Hadn't the crisis with North Korea ended last week? A distant smash filled the stairway followed by the screaming security alarm. Gene's eyes widened as he pushed Sierra and Donovan in front of him.

“Quick! Get to the emergency exit!” Adrenaline rushed through their veins as they sprinted down the stairs, Sierra only paused for a second at the exit as Donovan sprinted to the sleek black sedan waiting with the driver nervously tapping his fingers. Sierra paused before turning and yelling back up the staircase.

“Gene!”

She turned and ran up the steps finding Gene leaning against the wall gasping for breath.

“Come on sir, we have to go!” Hooking her arm under his Sierra half dragged the Ambassador to the car, Donovan jumped out and hoisted him into the back seat. The car sped off as Sierra yanked the door shut.

“Quick! Check the pocket on that side! He has a bad heart...look for his pills!”

“Here!” Donovan pulled out the small orange bottle and shoved two small capsules into the ambassador's mouth.

The ten minute car ride felt like an eternity. Sierra couldn't relax until the plane had taken off and was cruising over the Pacific Ocean. She glanced over at her phone, the screen lighting up. Sierra bit her lip to try to stop tears of relief as the smiling faces of her husband and son looked back at her on her wallpaper. She tapped on the latest notification

- Hey Honey! Saw there were riots in Beijing on the news. Are you ok? Text me when you can. xx

Sierra swallowed.

-There were some issues, we are coming back early as a precaution. Are you and Nico ok?’

She stared back at the phone blankly.

“Texting your family?”

Sierra looked up, Donovan was standing in the aisle, looking awkward.

“Yeah, my husband was asking...” she trailed off.

Donovan nodded, his eyes wandering to the seat across from her.

“You can sit if you like.” Sierra said, gesturing to the chair.

Donovan mumbled a thank you before sitting down rather ungracefully. Sierra watched him as he kept fidgeting. She placed her phone next to her before staring expectantly.

“Have you seen what's been happening back home?” Donovan asked suddenly

“Uhh, what do you mean exactly?” Sierra blinked. She wondered how Donovan could think about anything except for the events of that day.

“I mean the riots? You know, against Diplo?” Sierra shook her head. Donovan took this as an invitation to enlightenment.

“Well the Mason Maverick case has been ruled on, the software found him guilty and sentenced him to death. So..you know who Mason Maverick is yeah? Good, well lots of people don't think he's guilty so the riots have been starting across the country and in Houston the courthouse was burned down. Now I don't know about you but...” Sierra rubbed her hands over her face, trying to listen to Donovan but she could feel sleep tugging at her eyelids.

“Hey Donovan? I don't mean to be rude but I am exhausted. Can we continue the conversation later after I catch some sleep?”

“Oh...yeah sure. I'm sorry I didn't mean to disturb you..” Donovan stood.

“Thanks. And thank you for helping me get the Ambassador in the car.”

“No problem.”

Sierra sighed, grateful for the silence as she glanced at her family's faces on the screen before drifting off to sleep.

Ambassador McCullum sighed as he looked at the two sleeping Foreign Service Officers, he chastised himself for not leaving on the first plane. He gingerly walked to the bathroom and splashed his face with water, he frowned deeply as he saw the many lines tracing his face. They look like they've gotten deeper. He knew his wife would call them worry lines. He smiled thinking of Matilda, what would she be doing now? A short knock rapped on the door, Gene clutched his chest, willing his heart to stop beating so fast.

“Ambassador? We will be landing shortly.” The calmly neutral voice of the flight attendant said. Gene grimaced as he remembered his work was far from over.

Sierra yawned as she forced her eyes to stay open. She felt like she would gladly fall into a coma. She envied Donovan for being allowed to go home, but she reminded herself Gene wouldn't have asked if it wasn't an emergency. She tried to focus on what the Ambassador was saying.

“Beijing was not the only embassy attacked, Elizabeth Berens and her team are on their way back from Mogadishu. The Somali people are blaming the United States for the economic crisis, and I can't say I blame them.” He gave a grim smile. Sierra glanced out the window at the DC skyline as the car cruised along, the grisly weather did nothing to lighten the mood. “I'm sorry you have to come with me Sierra, I know you must be missing your family. .” Gene continued as the car parked and they all got out. Sierra mustered up a smile, “I'm grateful that you trust me enough to help.”

“Gene! Thank you for coming in such short notice!” The Secretary of State rushed over pulling the ambassador in for a firm handshake

“Hello Malcolm. Of course, duty first.” Gene responded, turning to face Sierra. “This is Sierra Glover, Foreign Service Officer.” The two exchanged quick pleasantries. Malcolm Fairchild led the two into a large office, Sierra looked around at the other figures waiting for them. There was Howard Kelly the Secretary of Homeland Security, a tall skeletal man with keen dark eyes. Next to him was his assistant. Seated on the sofa was an authoritative woman, her hair slicked back in a bun that looked immovable. Racquelle Price, the head of the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization. In the corner both seated at a small table where to intellectual looking men, who Sierra had never seen before, they were both murmuring amongst themselves over a tablet, brows furrowed in anxiety. Sierra moved and took a seat on the opposite sofa to Ms. Price, who acknowledged her with a nod. On the coffee table were three notepads, four pens, and one recording device. Why did they get such an old device? Why not use Diplo notes? Sierra's train of thought was broken when Malcom's voice commanded their attention.

“Alright everyone, I think most of us know why we are here, but just to be sure I will reiterate.” He paused, all eyes glued on him. “To put it lightly, American international relations with the following powers have all but collapsed: China, Somalia, Russia and North Korea. This has been in the making for the past eighteen months, thanks to our pal Diplo. It would seem we don't have as much control over AI as we thought. As you know we are at a point where Diplo manages almost all of our trade agreements and negotiations, so much so that we can barely decipher the thousands of documents it has fired off to other nations. This has caused an embarrassing lack of management from us, and it seems the negotiations and treaties Diplo has made has angered some nations. In the last 48 hours Diplo has put sanctions on Somalia thrusting them into economic panic, made an arms trade agreement with North Korea and renounced the 2029 alliance with China over North Korea resulting in Russia siding with China if any war should occur over this mess. Unsurprisingly anti-American sentiment has been rampant in these countries over the past few days. Which has culminated into violent behaviour towards American embassies.” He gave a sympathetic look to Gene

and Sierra. “ You might also be wondering why our Secretary of Homeland security is here considering this is an international issue.” Malcolm jerked his head at Howard Kelly. ‘The American people have been growing despondent at the use of AI in court procedures The highly publicised trial of Mason Maverick has appeared to be the straw that broke the camel's back after he was sentenced to death on Monday. Houston's court house was burnt down in protest at a riot today. We fear this is only the beginning. Many local magistrates have had bomb threats on their residents and violence and riots have spread across the states. To put it frankly the American people don't trust us, the national guard has been deployed to aid in riot control but all this has done is reinforce the anti-government sentiment and there is fear this may start a civil war.” the Secretary stepped back gesturing to Ms. Price. Smoothing her perfect bun she rose.

“ We at the Bureau of conflict and stabilisation have been trying to decipher what exactly has gone wrong with Diplo. This forced our attention to Agora Novas parent company. We along with the FBI found a systematic trail of corruption. Diplo was trained on Agora Novas servers, being fed information that would serve their purpose. We all know Agora Nova as the largest AI company in the world. “ She placed a stack of papers on the coffee table. “ A lesser known fact about Agora Nova is its founders are also the owners of Nova Tactical Robotics, or NTR. One of the largest military contractors in the world, with clients such as China, Somalia ,Russian and North Korea, to name a few. Diplo's training at Agora Nova was to prepare it to manufacture a conflict to help boost the company's profits. Even today after the attack on Beijing NTR's stock prices rocketed up 300 points. Dr. Lennox and Dr. Hadid have been working tirelessly on how to delete Diplo from our servers.” The two men at the table raised their hands in acknowledgement. “ Agora Novas founder and creator of Diplo Nick Bass has also conveniently fled to Russia this morning.” She sat down as Malcom stepped forward again.

“ Here's the tricky part, if we go and raid Agora Nova, NTR or try to bring back Nick Bass we are facing the likelihood of fanning the flames of conflict, as their clients are already hostile. They may see a freeze on Agora Nova as an attempt to cut off their supply to more weapons and security. We are on *very* thin ice right now.” He sighed, the room was filled with tension, Sierra's heart thumped in her chest.

“ I was on the phone to the president this morning, and we believe after discussing our options with the Negotiations and Support Unit that our only option is to get in contact with the other members of the United Nations Security Council and call an emergency special session of the United Nations General Assembly immediately. If we can get eight more members to agree then maybe we will be able to resolve this conflict in person. We will present our findings to the council about the deliberate deception by Agora Nova and NTR for financial gain and call for an international investigation to discover the extent of the corruption, and bring to justice those who participated. “ The secretary stood breathless, he then turned to Howard Kelly, his shrewd eyes engaged and focused.

“ Howard, you know your role?”

“ Yep. Act 803 is in the process of being replaced and all magistrates in the states which implemented it have been informed. Cases that Diplo proceeded over will be deemed a mistrial. Any defendant who has been wrongfully convicted will be exonerated immediately.”

Malcom nodded, "Excellent. "

Sierra held her husband's hand tightly as their eyes were glued to the tv screen. The past week had been torture for Sierra, the possibility of war seeming ever present with each alarmist headline. She almost wished she was back in the office, it would at least occupy her mind. As she glanced at her husband and son those thoughts soon drifted away. She looked back at the tv screen, Mason Maverick had been found not guilty. The riots had calmed, and American morale seemed to be on the rise.

".. now we are getting news from the extended emergency special session of the United Nations General Assembly... it would seem the situation for now is stable. China, Somalia, North Korea and Russia all stating they are to aid the United States in an international investigation of Agora Nova, Nick Bass has been extradited from Moscow and will be awaiting trial.... "

Sierra let out a breath that she felt like she had been holding in since Beijing. She squeezed her husband's hand as she flicked off the tv.