

Tech System 271

Chapter 271 ...fuck

Without caring about what Arieih was feeling, Nova continued playing the recorded phone call between Charlotte and Terry.

Then it moved to video footage of Terry meeting the leaders of the different groups he had hired to ambush Rina. Unfortunately, there was no sound, but that was covered by the phone calls between him and their teams explaining the mission he was hiring them to do. Those recordings were accompanied by detailed transaction records of weapon purchases that he made to sufficiently arm them.

The recording soon moved on to the day Rina had been being driven from the Rothschild compound to the airport and showed that whenever the convoy deviated from the planned route, it was because an ambush was awaiting them. The ambush sites were shown as still images, with names and headshots linked to each individual shown in the images. They were matched to different 'dark' mercenary groups, those that were unafraid to get their hands bloody... as long as the price was right. Each of the leaders were highlighted, and still images were displayed that showed their meetings with Terry.

They were shown with every unplanned route deviation that Rina's convoy took until they reached the access road. Then a video taken from the follow car's rear-facing camera showed all of the mercenary groups chasing after the convoy until it split up. The video footage continued, showing the plainclothes ARES members dealing with the chasing mercenaries, then cleaning up the attack site to muddy the evidence.

The video ended there and was followed by the recorded phone call between Arieih and Terry, where Terry confirmed her death. It was the first time the mastermind of the attack had been recorded, but everyone in the room recognized the voice and they all turned to Arieih, death stares on their faces.

Arieih paled and broke out in a cold sweat as his heart pounded like it wanted to escape his chest. He prayed that the display of evidence would end soon, but that was simply just not to be.

The projector mercilessly continued, showing a few more pieces of evidence before ending with the recorded phone call from Terry to Arieih shortly after Rina was caught on camera during the Edenian parade. Arieih was shouting and raging about "the bitch" still being alive.

Then Nova released her control of the projector as the autoplaying file came to an end.

After the display ended, the room was as still as a mausoleum. Nobody moved, not even to bring the lights back up to full; everyone was pondering things that only they knew.

A few of them wondered why Arieih chose to go to such an extreme, despite the consequences.

Others wondered how Rina had collected all of that evidence without alerting her brother, who would have already started looking for countermeasures if he were to know that she had such a 'nuclear bomb' in her possession. They were sure he wouldn't be able to explain that amount of proof away, but perhaps a miracle could have occurred.

The family head was giving his son a death glare and sitting in his usual silence, but everyone in the room knew that this silence in particular was different. Anyone who tried messing with him right now would receive a punishment that would make them regret it forever. "Anything you want to say?" he asked, struggling to remain partial.

Flustered and panicking, Arie's voice broke as he screamed, "SHE'S FRAMING ME FATHER AND THAT'S ALL FABRICATED EVIDENCE!"

"Are you sure about that? You know that if we investigate and it's revealed that you lied about her framing you, the punishment would be doubled," the family head asked. Lying to him came with severe consequences.

"...fuck." Arie knew the family head wasn't joking at all and had no answer to his father's question. He knew when to advance and when to retreat, and now was definitely the time for the latter. Anything he said would result in just increasing his punishment, which would already be heavier than normal.

"Arie Noga Yehonatan Stav Rothschild, you are to be held on house arrest as our team investigates the situation. If it is revealed to be true that you attempted to assassinate your sister, you will be removed from the competition and have five generations of your descendants barred from participating in the future." The family head stood and walked to Rina, then calmly patted her shoulder and left the board room, officially marking an abrupt end to the board meeting.

It looked like Rina was now officially the next Rothschild family head, as no one was left in the competition but her.

That meant that she could now publicly use the influence she had already been using before by blackmailing the board members, but without worrying about someone raising a question about it. Now, they would simply attribute it to her being the next family head; they would never even consider the possibility of her having held leverage over them before the competition had ended.

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"Man, that was even better than a movie," Aron said as he watched the mess caused by his girlfriend in the board meeting. He had a bucket of popcorn next to him and was intermittently sipping from a soft drink that was as close to the flavor of Coke as Nova could make it. The taste of "cola" was something that not even Nova could simulate, which meant that humanity was doomed to forever be unable to answer the question of Coke's secret recipe.

"Hey Nova, this Coke tastes a bit... off," Aron said.

[Well, that's because nobody knows what Coke tastes like. Not even with all of my computing power could I simulate that,] she joked.

"I think we should consider going into the entertainment industry," Aron mused. The board meeting had excited him, as it was one of the things where, although he knew the result, he couldn't really tell what twists and turns would happen along the way. There was a constant increase in variables as more information was introduced into the situation.

[Movies and TV?] asked Nova.

"Yes. But at the moment, we should only start exploring and planning. As for when we should officially enter the field? Make it after we've released our own VR and AR devices," Aron answered, tabling the project for the future.

[Sir, it's time for Henry's lesson,] Nova reminded Aron about the upcoming class.

He had taken the responsibility of teaching his little brother and had been doing it together with Rina over the past month. Henry loved and hated it at the same time, as whenever he was good, he would receive a gift from his elder brother. But whenever he misbehaved, one of them would be taken away. It made him the most attentive student of all the kids in his age range, as he couldn't risk losing his things when he had worked hard to win them.

"Let's go teach our student," Aron said as he logged off. He wasn't really the one that came up with the teaching material; Nova was. After all, she had Henry's brain data and knew how to make things easier for him to understand, while also making him a critical thinker.

And thanks to the best teacher in the world being responsible for teaching him, Henry was rapidly growing in both knowledge and critical thinking skills. One day, when he went to a "proper" school, his assigned class would have everyone dropped down by a rank in the best student competition.

What a lucky child.

Chapter 272 Weapons of Mass Distraction

A month later, with a month to go before the presidential election, the candidates were campaigning with all their might. Their parties each had their own platforms and were trying to sway people to vote for them, and in their minds, things were going very well; nearly all of their rallies were filled with cheering citizens.

But all of the momentum they thought they had managed to build was crushed by a single announcement from the presidential palace.

"We interrupt this regularly scheduled program for a breaking news report," an announcer said as the show on the television was interrupted by them to make an emergency announcement.

"A team of researchers dispatched to Esparia in search of natural resources and minerals has discovered a large oil deposit in the Exclusive Economic Zone of Esparia.

"The deposits are in different places, but based on preliminary results, it's suspected that the fields combined equal the one discovered earlier in Eden. More details are to come as the preliminary results are verified by experts," said the reporter, her tone clearly hinting that she was excited and happy that Eden now had another resource they could exploit. She was especially thrilled that the profits would be used to benefit her country's citizens, including her.

After a short pause, she continued, "The presidential spokesperson expressed the president's happiness at receiving this unexpected news. Interim president Romero has already come to a decision on how the new oil fields are to be exploited, saying, 'In order to avoid wasting resources and to expedite the extraction of these new deposits, the company that wins the bid for extracting oil in Eden will also be made responsible for extracting the Esparian deposits. That will eliminate the need for another round of bids and streamline the extraction process.'

(Author's note: we're in the process of adding surnames to people; "Romero" is Alexander's surname.)

"The announcement has made the bid for Eden's extraction rights even more hotly contested, with many bidders requesting to adjust their bids, and others—who failed to pass the first review—clamoring to allow new bids altogether. However, interim president Romero declined, stating that the procedure would require too much time and delay the benefits to Edenian and Esparian citizens."

The broadcast resulted in an uproar from the Esparian citizens, with some of them even trying to organize riots to force their government to break the surrender accords, but they were only met with silence. They finally came to the realization that, for Esparia to even attempt to break the accords, their military would need to be able to defend themselves from an inevitable Edenian armed response. But that was already a non-option, as Esparia didn't even have a military anymore, and their retrained soldiers were unanimous in their refusal to violate the terms of their surrender.

With the Esparian division soldiers already having finished their training, the Edenian division had retreated; the last batch had left the month before.

Some citizens who weren't among those calling for violence were happy that they had discovered such massive resources in their country. Especially since their country hadn't even tried looking for them. But what they didn't know was that Esparia had been searched before—and many times, at that—but no experienced company would ever have thought to look in the location where the oil was eventually discovered. Thus, it had been nearly impossible for the previous government to discover them.

The announcement had also resulted in the oil giants increasing their efforts to win the bid for the extraction of oil in Eden. Their home countries had cranked up the pressure on the Edenian government to choose their country's companies. Together with the pressure exerted by their countries after they lobbied them, certain companies took things into their own hands and attempted to bribe the members of the team they thought responsible for looking over their bids. Even millions of dollars would be chump change in comparison to the exclusive contracts on offer, so their bribes were extremely generous.

But all of those attempts were met with failure, and worse.

The worse came for them a few days later when their bids were automatically declined following an investigation into the companies' attempted corruption of the process. And they were declined with prejudice, meaning that no new bids from their companies would ever be accepted under any circumstances. Thus, they were effectively and permanently blacklisted from operating in Eden.

That was an effective warning, since the first unlucky company to be blacklisted and whose bid was thrown out was Gazprom, a prominent Russian majority government-owned oil giant that accounted for nearly 12% of all refined oil products globally. Eden's response of uncompromising removal essentially served to kill a chicken to warn the monkeys and was a strong announcement that corruption in the bidding process would not be tolerated, no matter who attempted it.

There was an inevitable backlash from the Russian government, who claimed they had been set up and it was a manufactured reason to remove them from the competition, but that statement was immediately deleted when Eden released the results of their investigation along with the accompanying evidence. It was an overwhelming amount of proof, which no one thought would be able to be manufactured within just a period of a few days.

That also acted as another publicity stunt for Alexander, who was now loved by nearly every citizen of his country. Thanks to him and Connect, every person in the country had access to continuous energy, clean water, and a reliable sewage system without having to worry about power outages or sewage spills. At the same time, the promise of lower prices had been kept word for word.

The world's reaction was that Eden was just lucky to have discovered such a huge amount of wealth in a matter of a few months. And it was definitely an unexpected windfall for the adversarial nations; nobody even knew that prospectors had been sent out until the recent bombshell of an announcement.

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"When should I announce the winning bid?" Alexander asked Aron, as he was the kingmaker behind the soon-to-officially-be President Romero.

It was Aron's decision to release news of the new discovery in order to kill the momentum of Alexander's political rivals. Other parties had been gaining traction among the public, and Aron wanted Alexander to win in a veritable landslide, one that would give him a proper mandate to rule and prevent a lot of trouble in the future. In politics, when one's support among the voting population reached a certain amount, their opponents would be very leery about opposing them. He also wanted people to suspect the election was rigged in order to test Pangea's ability to control the public narrative, so it would be killing two birds with one stone.

"Delay it until after you win. If you announce it now, people will claim that you're making a hasty decision in fear of losing the election. Although that isn't true, it'll still cause some problems," Aron answered. He and Alexander were in VR, floating above Edenia, though the city below them looked completely different from what it did in reality. If one were to look at it from afar, they would see many super-tall skyscrapers, and if they looked underground, they would see the comprehensive subway system that connected to the trunk lines spread across the country. The virtual city was also so clean that it practically sparkled; if it were in the real world, it would be considered an absolute marvel and one of the best cities in the world to live in.

But alas, it was only a concept at the moment. Aron was using it as a demonstration, showing Alexander what he had planned for Eden as a whole. It was also a good backdrop for the discussions they had, as well as a symbol of the bonds of friendship that had been developing between the men for quite some time.

Chapter 273 The Landslide

A month later.

89.97%....

That was the percentage of people who voted for Alexander in the presidential election, which didn't come as a surprise to anyone who lived in Eden. The man was a living legend who won by that much without even actively campaigning, but rather by letting his work speak for itself.

To celebrate his win, he announced a celebration rally to be held a week from the day the election result was announced.

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A massive crowd was gathered in one of the open fields in the city of Edenia and soldiers were everywhere, dressed in their finery with holstered pistols at their sides. They were the ones responsible for controlling the crowd of attendees at the celebration rally and ensuring the safety of the newly elected president. He would soon arrive, so they were doing their final checks, making sure that nothing dangerous was hidden in the crowd.

Not too long after that, a convoy of black cars arrived with a certain level of fanfare.

The security team came out of the lead and follow cars, then escorted the president to the stage. As they went, they made sure no one from the cheering public could get too near him, though Alexander still shook some of the hands that were being extended to him from the crowd. One woman even swore never to wash her hand for the rest of their life due to how much she idolized him.

When the president reached the stage, he immediately grabbed the microphone from the emcee and started delivering his victory speech; the crowd automatically went silent to listen to what he had to say.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your overwhelming support in this historic election. I have to say, it's quite a change from the days when we were overthrowing dictators. Back then, I was used to hearing, 'the people are revolting!' But tonight, I'm happy to report that you aren't revolting anymore—you're revolutionizing our future with nearly 90% of you joining the ongoing fight against corruption!" he joked. It was a slight dig at the other revolutionary leaders, who'd mostly sat out the actual revolution itself and had been little better than the corrupt regime they'd been fighting against.

He paused as cheering and chuckles erupted from the thousands of attendees who liked his opening. Then he continued, "What we've achieved for the citizens of our great country over the past few months was more than the previous regime had done for you in their entire time in power."

He was once again forced to pause for cheering and applause, then waited for it to die down before continuing his speech.

"And I promise you that for the next eight years of my presidency, that pace won't continue. Instead, it's going to accelerate! During my presidency, we're going to increase the investment in our country. We're going to work hard and pour our blood, sweat, and tears into making Eden a representation of the best that humanity has to offer. And when my time in office is over, I swear before the citizens of this nation and almighty God above that I will leave the country better than it was when I found it!"

It seemed the audience wasn't quite willing to let him speak as they broke out into another round of spontaneous cheers and applause, forcing him to stop talking again.

"But as they say, 'soonest begun is soonest done,' I'd like to take this opportunity to announce the company that my administration has chosen to partner with to extract the wealth that lies beneath our feet. That company is Connect, a local, responsible, and environmentally conscious company that put in a rather impressive bid.

"You may be familiar with them—they're already responsible for delivering utilities and building networks across this great nation. My team and I are fully confident in their ability to deliver on

what they promised in both ours and Esparia's Exclusive Economic Zone, as they've already shown their ability to enter new fields on short notice while delivering quality products at affordable prices. The most important factor is that they're a local company! My team and I are committed to raising Eden into a fully developed nation that can stand on our own as a shining beacon of justice, equality, and a high standard of living!

"And this historic day is just the beginning of the things we're going to do for the development of the country. Along with developing the oil industry, we'll be focusing on our defense industry. Our nation's neutrality will rely on our sons and daughters standing tall and declaring with pride that we! Stand! Together!" Alexander pumped his fist in the air as punctuation for that declaration. It had been shown all throughout history that neutrality was an impossible stance to maintain without the strength to back it up. Neutral, 'pacifist' countries could only choose to be so because they were actually the ones with the biggest fist.

"But that's not all! With the upcoming opening of two ports, a mega-airport, and the completed railway network, our economy will only grow stronger and stronger, proving once and for all that our great nation is no worse than any others on the face of the planet..." Alexander continued his long speech, but no one in the audience seemed bored at all; every word he said was gold, as they revealed many of his plans to develop the country.

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"He's really becoming a good speaker," Aron said as he watched the speech. He was even pleasantly satisfied by Alexander's delivery.

[My training worked,] Nova joked, reminding him that she was the one that had taught him everything he knew about public speaking.

"Good job," he said, then turned to Felix and asked, "Is everything ready?"

"Yes." Felix, who was in the room with Aron, Rina, Sarah, and Nova as they watched the rally, continued, "We'll hold a press conference and announce the formation of a branch company that'll be responsible for extracting the resources...." He outlined their plan.

When he was done speaking, Sarah took over and said, "We've also finished preparing to sell the oil internationally, and have already registered the new company. And thanks to Rina's help, we even managed to acquire a few oil tankers. They should be delivered to us by the time the oil derricks are built."

Aron said nothing, just nodded his head as he listened to his inner circle speak. He was holding Rina's hand beneath the conference table, eliciting a secret smile from her. She'd been unable to suppress her joy since being officially selected as the next Rothschild family head after Arie had been proved to be the one behind the attempt on her life. He had already been banished back to their ancestral land in Israel as a punishment and was banned from leaving the immediate premises there for the rest of his life.

Rina had been quite active since then, as with her position, she had gained the power to change some of the operations of the family businesses. At least, she had that authority as long as the family head didn't overturn her decisions, which he rarely did.

And with her judicious exercise of that power, some Rothchild operations were shuttered, some were expanded, and others were praised for already being on the right track. The movements were

massive, to the point that people in the family had begun thinking that she had planned her current course of action for years. It showed them how dedicated she was to growing the family even higher than they already were; thus, her father had grown to trust in her to the point that he basically just automatically approved whenever she asked him for his support. Even if it didn't seem to be beneficial to the family on the surface, she was still able to break down her reasoning and justifications for her plans, causing her father to begin giving up more and more of the power he held in his hands as his trust in her judgment grew.

Her actions didn't manage to avoid the sensitive eyes and ears of the Morgans in the least, though, but they were still focused on figuring out how to take revenge on ARES to earn back their honor. And armed with the knowledge of their cooperation with the Rothschilds, the Morgans were now convinced they had a way to establish communications with an inside man who could give them at least some useful information on the mysterious PMC. After all of their efforts, they had been completely unable to find any useful information about ARES at all; it was almost like the company had simply appeared on a magician's stage from another universe and expanded from there. The most terrifying thing about them was the power they'd displayed, which had been amassed without alerting anyone at all during the buildup process.

Chapter 274 Echo Chambers and Incompetence

The day after Alexander's speech and announcement, all parties that had been involved in the bidding went crazy. Including those spectating "experts", of course.

Many of them complained about why the country had decided to trust an inexperienced company that had never been involved in the oil industry to drill the reserves.

Others that had watched Alexander's speech understood that he wanted to develop a domestic industry and chose a local company, Connect, as a way to kickstart their domestic growth. Even though they weren't an oil company, at least they had some kind of "drilling" experience... for whatever it mattered. Drilling for oil had nothing in common with drilling tunnels, after all.

The parties led by candidates that lost their presidential bid (the most popular of which having only received 2.45% of the votes) tried using that to sling mud at Alexander and paint him as corrupt and Connect as a company that bribed him. They insinuated that Connect wouldn't even be doing the drilling themselves, but would rather contract it out to another company. The inexperienced politicians thought it would benefit them after Alexander's term in office ended, and that they would be able to win the next election—or at least gain positions in the government in the upcoming round of elections—but they failed to account for one thing: Aron himself. There was no chance that Connect would fail in their task, or that they would violate the agreement between the government and the company.

Still, it would make Alexander's first few months or years in office rocky, and that's all they cared about. After all, if they couldn't have it, they didn't want anyone else to have it either.

With the international oil giants fanning the fire in an attempt to make the negative news as huge as possible and use it to further pressure the government into changing the winner of the contract, well... they simply acted as nothing but ammo for the other parties to smear the new president's reputation. That said, no matter how greedy, selfish, or incompetent Alexander's opponents were, they definitely wouldn't allow an outsider to benefit over them.

But the amount of backlash wasn't as effective as they had expected it to be, regardless, since the platforms they used to fuel the fire didn't have the user bases they once had. Most Edenians had already adopted Pangea, and when anyone tried using bots, they would be disappointed if they knew the actual results. Though from their end, everything looked like it was working, what they didn't know was that their instigation was only made visible to people that already shared their opinion. In later years, experts would call the phenomenon a social media echo chamber. For now, though, the people promoting the controversy thought they had achieved a great success and that "everyone" agreed with their points of view. This was despite them failing to sway anyone who didn't already agree with their opinions in the first place.

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The day following the speech, Felix called for a press conference. And the turnout was enormous, as many news outlets wanted to know what they would be saying.

Felix entered the auditorium in their headquarters building, which was now being used as a press room, and walked to the podium amidst the camera flashes. He cleared his throat, then greeted the attendees before immediately getting to the main point.

"Firstly, I'd like to thank President Romero for trusting in the domestic industry's bid and going with us as the sole extractor of Edenian and Esparian oil. I'd also like to take this opportunity to issue a promise to the citizens of both countries that we'll do the best we can to ensure the trust placed in us isn't misplaced. We'll ensure that the citizens of both nations will see the benefits, and we'll do so without an iota of corruption.

"To that end, we've formed a subsidiary branch of Connect: Helios. They'll be responsible for oil and gas, and any other form of energy, both now and in the future. By the end of the week, the contract will be in place and we'll immediately begin constructing derricks. We expect to begin seeing results within the month, and within three months from today, we solemnly vow that you will see the benefits as well.

"I'll now take questions from the press." With that, the announcement was over and Felix pointed at a reporter in the audience. "Go ahead," he said.

"What do you have to say about the increase in the cost of oil for Edenians over the past month?" the reporter asked. The abrupt increase was unexpected, and seemed to be specifically targeted at Eden.

"One of the companies we've been purchasing oil from, Gazprom, decided to terminate their contract with us. That forced us to increase the amount we import from others, and due to the abrupt increase in quantity outside the original contracts with them, we naturally had to pay a premium," Felix answered. He was firing shots, uncaring about the potential consequences of naming and shaming a global oil giant.

"Isn't three months way too fast? Will you be skimping on safety to accomplish an unreasonable goal?" another reporter asked.

"We were forced to expedite things on our end to combat the temporary price increase sooner. The faster we have at least one oil field producing, the better it will be for everyone involved and the sooner the price of crude oil drops for everyone."

The next reporter asked, "Is it true that you are planning on paying another company to do the construction and digging for you?" He was obviously one of those in the same echo chamber as Alexander's political opponents, or perhaps had been bought and paid for by one of the oil giants, or maybe she was just really curious and wanted answers.

"No such thing will happen, as the materials construction will be provided by Hephaestus Heavy Industries. They're already the ones responsible for all the construction taking place in Eden, including the ports, airport, and rail network. They've already proven themselves reliable and trustworthy, both to us at Connect and to Eden at large," Felix said. It was the first time Hephaestus Heavy Industries (HHI) had been mentioned and introduced to the world.

"Next question... you, in the red shirt." He pointed at a reporter in the audience wearing an ostentatious red shirt.

"Is it true that you bribed the president to choose your company under the guise of domestic business support? After all, you have no experience at all." The reporter seemed to have come to the press conference specifically to ask what he thought was a "gotcha" question. To him, it didn't matter whether it was answered or not, as everything coming from Felix's mouth would be considered a scoop.

"Instead of answering, let me ask you a very basic question," Felix began.

"Before we started providing electricity to the entire country, which we did at the end of last month, did we ever have any connection to the energy industry?" He waited for the reporter to answer.

"No," he answered. He suddenly felt like he was falling into a pit he had dug for Felix.

"How about utilities like water and sewage?" Felix continued.

"No," he answered.

"How about the internet?"

"Not to my knowledge." He finally realized where he was being led.

"And how's the service from all of those industries we've entered been?" Felix concluded with a smile.

"Better and cheaper than it used to be," the reporter answered. He couldn't lie, as his credibility would tank and nobody would trust his reporting anymore.

"Then with those precedents being set by us, what should the people's expectations be now that we're entering a new venture?"

"That you'll be doing it in a better and cheaper way than it's usually done?" He answered, but wasn't confident in his answer.

"That's exactly what we're aiming to accomplish, and it's already in the works," Felix said, then chose another reporter to ask their question.

The reporter in the red shirt sat there in a daze, wondering how his immaculately planned question had been turned into highlighting his own incompetence. He had been stripped of any semblance of professionalism and dignity.

Felix continued answering questions for a while before declaring the conference concluded and directing any further inquiries to Helios' media liaison.

Chapter 275 Big Rig

At the same time the press conference was taking place in the Connect headquarters, an Edenian Navy fleet was towing a massive ship that looked like a toothbrush. They were headed toward the new oil field to begin construction of an offshore drilling rig.

When they neared the location, the fleet dispersed and started the process of patrolling and cleared out everything within twenty kilometers of the oddly shaped ship, which was released by its tug and dropped sea anchors to keep station where it was.

With the large ship now at a full stop, people watching would see it begin tilting as the bow raised and the aft sank. But the people aboard the ship were oddly calm, as they were expecting the movement; it was merely the ballast tanks being filled to adjust the ship's orientation.

Meter by meter, the rear continued dropping faster and faster, until the entire ship was completely vertical. Only about ten meters of the ship was left above the surface of the ocean while the rest had completely disappeared below.

The ship was actually an R/P FLIP, a FLoating Instrument Platform that was designed for scientific exploration of the ocean that could house researchers, workers, or any number of other mission-specific crew in reasonable comfort as they work far from any land mass. This one, however, was designed to perform a specific purpose: the construction of an offshore oil rig.

(Ed note: FLoating isn't actually a typo, that's part of the acronym "FLIP". These ships actually exist; you can find more info here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RP_FLIP)

Under the calm ocean surface, the underwater part of the ship got to work as an atomic printer was lowered from what was now the bottom of the research vessel. It began by printing a tether as it sank, keeping it connected to the platform it was being lowered from. Once it reached the sea floor, it dug into the sand beneath it until it hit bedrock and the internal batteries ran out of charge. Once that happened, the small fusion reactor in the FLIP began routing power to the printer, which reactivated, and reeling in any slack in the tether cable, effectively anchoring the FLIP to the bottom of the ocean.

With the printer now being provided the necessary power, it started digging further into the bedrock and maintaining the tether as it went. Eventually, the printer reached more than seven kilometers deep and the shaft the printer had dug out was reinforced to act as a pipe; the oil deposit was just a few meters away.

The printer then worked its way back up the newly created pipe for a few meters, clearing space for it to print a drill bit and shaft. Once that was done, the printer was hauled back up into the FLIP as it continued working on the pipe that would soon be transporting oil. Once that was completed, it worked its way back down the outside of the new pipe, building and attaching structural elements to it as it went, spiraling out from there to build the rest of the underwater pumping station. But due to the printer's small size and the adverse conditions on the seafloor, it took two full days for the undersea construction to finish before it was hauled back up into the FLIP and the ships departed the area, leaving everyone none the wiser as to what had taken place there.

Meanwhile, back at the Cube, the massive industrial atomic printers were busily printing prefabricated components that would be shipped out and assembled on site, while workers were being recruited and trained at the Helios offices in the Connect headquarters in Edenia. The platform would be completely assembled within the month, and ready to officially begin operations after the workers had undergone three months of training. If it weren't for Aron's desire to maintain the core secrets of his technology—the atomic printers and his VR pods—everything would be done in a matter of days. The months of delay were a necessary trade off.

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As all of that was happening, Aron was in the lab for the first time in a long while, looking through designs of different devices on a computer.

"Remove the atomic clock from this watch," Aron said, pointing to a smartwatch design. It had an atomic clock in it, allowing it to keep time as accurately as any human would ever need in their lives.

"Reduce the resolution of the camera on this phone by fifty times," he sighed, pointing to the design of a new smartphone.

[What's wrong?] Nova asked.

"I mean... how the hell do they expect me to release products that're a hundred generations ahead of any device that currently exists?" he jokingly complained, though he was rather happy on the inside.

[Isn't that why you're here? You're the one that decides what gets built as is, and what gets downgraded before it can be launched. That's why I told them to go all out,] she responded in the same joking tone, as she quite enjoyed spending time doing this with Aron.

"True, I suppose.... Remove the hologram display from this one," he replied and indicated another smartphone design. Even before his latest upgrade, he could multitask without losing focus at all.

"And the AR control from this, the X-ray camera from that, the DNA reader from that...." He continued for more than an hour removing futuretech from the gadgets one by one until they were bare bones of their former selves.

"Now list the features that I left in," he said. Nova waved her hand and a display screen popped up in front of him.

[Mana batteries]

Aron nodded; those were essentially frozen blocks of magic energy that were released as electricity on demand. They store a lot of energy in very little space and are capable of very rapid charging.

[Smart camera]

Aron was quite fond of those. They interfaced with the AI assistant in the GAIA OS and optimized the camera function on smartphones. They were capable of real-time recording in 4K resolution and 3D scanning, and the integration of the AI would allow for real-time image editing, within limits. The AI assistants would have a strict set of guidelines that determined what they were allowed to do, and how far they were allowed to go when it came to editing of still images and video footage.

Essentially, enhancement was fine, but deep fakes would be prohibited.

[Quantum display]

Instead of the traditional LCD, LED, and qLED or oLED displays, quantum screens were capable of near perfect black levels and infinite contrast. They also had unprecedented pixel density, ultra-fast refresh rates, and virtually eliminated motion blur. Quantum dots were used to allow for currently unheard-of brightness levels, which would let the screen be easily readable even in direct sunlight.

[Graphene CPU chip]

Aron had debated using quantum chips for quite some time. While he was quite familiar with quantum computing, he was still leery of it being "released into the wild", as it were. After all, once it was released, it would be reverse engineered. And due to Moore's Law, it wouldn't take long for others to begin nearing his own level, although they could never catch up to him. But it would still take away quite a few of the advantages he currently possessed even if their reverse-engineered knockoffs were even a third as capable as his.

[Q-com chip]

A Q-com chip was a quantum network adapter that served to deliver fast, stable internet speed. Although it was much faster than any other form of networking currently available on the market—basically around the 7 or 8G benchmark—it was definitely a power hog. Thus, transferring a full movie to a friend would put a lot of stress on a mana battery. That stress would increase as the distance the information was being transmitted increased, so to counter that, he would launch quantum communication satellites into orbit, thus reducing, or at least standardizing, the drain on the mana batteries in the mobile devices.

That said, the Q-com chip version that Aron would be including in his hardware would be camouflaged within a dummy network chip that would only be a few generations advanced beyond what was currently available. The Q-com chip itself was only a few nanometers across and would only be acting as an exclusive feature for GAIA TECHNOLOGY-made devices, so even pulling the device apart and inspecting it would allow the chip to remain unnoticed. It was also far less capable than even those included in the ARES headgear, or the Q-com chips in the glasses he had given to his close circle of friends, family, and acquaintances.

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The list was quite long, but after reading through it, Aron was satisfied that it was advanced, but not too advanced to be believable.

"Now to figure out which features to include in what," Aron said, then settled in for a long think about the issue. He was planning on releasing hardware this time, not just software, so any and all smart devices were in the running for a feature-rich release from GAIA Technologies.

Chapter 276 Peace, Love, and Save the Whales

New Year's Day, 2016

While some were still celebrating the new year and making resolutions that were doomed to fail, others were still living with the horrors that had happened in November of last year. A few terrorist attacks had claimed the lives of more than a hundred people.

With the release of Star Wars: the Force Awakens the month before, the entertainment section was also still quite riled up, as the movie had achieved a box office success within the month of release.

With all of that happening in the last three months, changes had also occurred in Eden. The Eden of now was completely different from the Eden of the past.

Aron was standing in front of a massive pit with a diameter measured in kilometers. As he gazed into it, the screaming of displaced air came from the distance as a maglev train neared the pit and soon entered a bridge that crossed it.

The train slowed down a bit as it passed through the bridge, and the moment it neared the center of the pit, the containers it was loaded with were ejected from the train with enough force that they directly cleared the bridge and started falling into the pit.

The containers continued picking up speed as they fell, then crashed to a pile of other containers that were already at the bottom of the pit. All of those containers had arrived in the same way.

"How long until it starts?" Rina asked as she appeared on a chair behind him.

"A few minutes, at least. The last train should arrive before the process begins," Aron answered, momentarily breaking his staring competition with the pit and turning to smile at Rina. Then he returned to his staring contest, as he was trying to find the limit of his ability to multitask. The best way he could come up with was to try thinking of as many things as possible at once. Once he stopped being able to simultaneously develop on his thoughts, he would know where he stood.

As he did that, Rina just watched him with a loving smile on her face. She liked seeing him focused on whatever he was doing.

The screaming of displaced air came again as another train passed over the bridge to deliver one last batch of containers for the first phase of the project.

"It's starting," Aron reminded Rina. But she was already prepared; she put on her glasses and stood near Aron, joining him in looking into the pit.

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With the last container finally falling, Nova took over and stopped supplying power to the entire rail that led to the bridge. It was a last resort measure, but a prudent one, as when all of the thousands of failsafes fail, the improbable becomes probable. That was a lesson she had learned just a few months ago. So now, no matter how impossible something seemed, she would always prepare for the worst-case scenario.

[Disintegrator #0000001 'Trashman' is coming online. Everyone in the vicinity should evacuate,] Nova announced over all of the radio frequencies and Q-coms within two kilometers of the pit. The announcement repeated three times to make sure that anyone who was near the pit would hear it.

With the warning broadcasted, she started the process of bringing the Trashman online. The first step was something that could only be seen through the AR feature on Aron's inner circle glasses. If Rina wasn't wearing hers, for example, she wouldn't have seen the shield that appeared and expanded to cover the entirety of the pit. Even though it was invisible to the naked eye—at least for everyone except Aron, and perhaps his little brother—the shield had sealed the entire enormous pit, making it impossible for anything to enter or leave it.

With the shield now online, it was followed by the disintegrator that covered the entire bottom of the pit coming to life. It immediately began disintegrating the thousands of containers and whatever their contents were along with them, separating them atom by atom.

"Wow," Rina said. She couldn't believe she was witnessing materials being disintegrated and broken apart, leaving their component atoms to scatter everywhere in the pit. They created a cloud of fog and filled the 'dump', making it impossible to see through.

After thirty minutes of continuous operation, everything that had been in the pit was turned into a cloud of various atoms. Although they hadn't been collected, yet, that changed when the disintegrator ceased its operation. With the disintegrator offline, the collector came online and began sorting atoms and compressing them as building blocks of pure elements, then moving them into dedicated storage areas for later use in the atomic printers.

Once the collection, sorting, and storing was finished, the shield was powered off. It would no longer be needed until the next 'garbage collection'. Every part of the recycling system was systematically power cycled then completely shut down before Nova returned power to the section of maglev track leading to the pit from the trunk line.

Soon, more trains began arriving and routing themselves to the storage facilities, where they picked up the stored material and headed to their next destination: the underground warehouses that existed to feed the element-hungry atomic printers in the Cube.

"The efficiency is off the charts," Rina exclaimed. She'd watched the entire process from start to finish and been amazed by it; the bottom of the pit was now as clean as it was before the containers had been thrown into it.

"It could've been more efficient, but that would've been overkill." Aron wrapped his arm around her waist and headed toward the futuristic helicopter they had arrived on. The pit had no access paths other than the maglev rail that passed through, and that was a completely secured line.

"Is your curiosity satisfied?" he asked.

"Yes, but you could've just told me about it. You didn't have to go so far just to answer my question," she replied, flashing him an embarrassed smile as she thought back on the question that had brought them to the pithere.

She had asked why they sought to be the main receiver of everyone's trash during the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations that had ended with the signing of a trade agreement by the United States, Eden, Esparia, and eleven other Pacific Rim nations. Many countries considered it Eden's way of reaching out and trying to develop a friendly relationship with those countries. Some of them had even been the previous 'trash bin of the world' and were now facing problems. Their citizens were naturally unhappy about becoming global trash dumps, and there were numerous health issues that arose from it that were only barely offset by the money they received for providing the service.

Basically, it was a dirty job that not even Mike Rowe would have wanted when he was still hosting his tv show.

"I just needed a reason to take a breather. I've been spending too much time in Lab City, figuring out which products we'll be releasing. That took time away from you, which isn't a good thing," Aron said as they boarded the helicopter. He took the pilot seat and started putting on his seat belt; Rina naturally settled into the copilot seat and they both put on the specialized pilot's version of the ARES helmet, taking their safety very seriously.

Chapter 277 All Eyes on Eden

Aron and Rina's conversation continued as they toured the skies of Avalon Island before heading to Edenia.

"It's quite surprising how fast Eden started mixing with other countries. It even managed to join the UN, though that seemed to have been made easier with your discovery of oil," Rina said.

The UN Security Council had acted with surprising speed when approving Eden's application, especially since Russia and China knew nobody else would be allowed to harvest the Edenian and Espanian oil fields.

"Well, there's a reason they call it black gold, after all. It's pure wealth and power, and it all boils down to how much we can produce. The more we can produce, the better we can stabilize the global market if a crisis arises in the OPEC nations," Aron responded as he expertly piloted the helicopter.

"Although I know how you're planning on pumping the oil, I wonder what the people who expect you to fail will think. They're all just waiting for you to fall on your face and go begging to them for cooperation. But you've wildly exceeded expectations and you don't even need more than 1% of what you're pumping to feed all of Eden's requirements for it. You've become a global exporter almost overnight!" she said.

The workers had finished being trained a few months before, and had taken over the offshore platform that'd been sitting idle for nearly two months in the wait for workers. The production speed had stunned everyone, and proved Alexander's decision was correct; his party had even won more than 90% of the parliament seats. He could almost be considered a dictator himself! There was actually a term for that in politics: a benevolent dictator. They wielded absolute power, but not only for themselves. Instead, they worked for the people under them to benefit.

"The people almost couldn't believe that everything was ready so fast. We only released the report and announced the completion and we upheld our promise to deliver within three months. Luckily for us, it just so happened to begin a few days before the parliamentary election. There's even a bunch of conspiracy theorists that cropped up on Pangea, I guess because the timing was fertile ground for them. The thing is, some of them are right," he let out a hearty laugh that was joined by Rina.

When the helicopter reached Edenia, they flew over the major projects that Hephaestus Heavy Industries had either completed, or made major progress on. Most of them were completely finished, with only the rail network lagging behind a bit. But even that was mostly completed, with only the minor lines left to build; the trunk lines were already in full operation, becoming the heart and vessels of the country's economy.

Just the completion of the trunk lines alone had attracted the attention of the rest of the world, as the project had achieved its current success at a speed everyone would consider impossible. Things like

the sheer scale of the network, which spanned thousands of kilometers. Yet all of that had taken just a single year concept to completion. And that was while the company was still constructing three other megaprojects and had completed a fourth! There were still two megaports and a mega-airport, plus the utility infrastructure. It was completely unbelievable... almost magical, some would say.

Another attention-grabbing thing about the rail network was that it was completely comprised of maglev rails. Eden was the only country that had managed that, as most other nations only used maglev for local public transportation, while they relied on the aging and sometimes crumbling rail infrastructure that had been around since the early 20th century for most intercity and interstate/international transportation other than Japan with their shinkansen line which was the only example this network could be compared with if you don't consider the sheer size of the Edens network.

Experts speculated that it had to have cost an arm and a leg to accomplish that on such an enormous scale in such a short period of time. That, too, acted as a major surprise for anyone who decided to investigate HHI, especially after they found out that it was a private company that had never even had rumors spread about. People were flabbergasted; didn't that mean that a single company with a fairly few people had invested all of that money and would be the only ones benefiting from the network's operation?

That was a lot of money!

Economists estimated that the rail network alone would require more than \$50 billion to build, so where did the money come from? Banks all around the world that were capable of lending significant amounts were the first to deny that they had loaned anything to anyone that was earmarked for any construction projects in Eden at all, let alone a megaproject like a countrywide rail network!.

With just that project alone, Connect was valued at over \$100 billion. But that wasn't all of their projects, as people began estimating the amount of investments and profits for the utility infrastructure, along with the two megaports and the mega-airport that were already considered to be among the world's largest.

All of those projects were solely invested in, and operated by, a single company: Connect. The only other company involved was Hephaestus Heavy Industries, which was awarded no-bid contracts for all of the projects and the amount was confidential. That led some people to believe that the companies absolutely must be state owned and operated—especially since no company in their right minds would keep that amount of liquidity on their balance sheet—but a few people had either connected the dots between three long-time friends or already knew the truth: the companies were wholly owned by one Aron Michael.

However, most of those people were considered crackpot conspiracy theorists. Aron was famous for only one thing: GAIA Technologies was his company. How could he have time to run more than one company, even if he had friends to take the day-to-day operations on? It was one thing to sit on a board, and many people sat on multiple boards of directors of different companies, but to actually be an owner of them? That was too much work for one person to do in a day that was limited to 24 hours!

All of the speculation was only made possible because the companies were private, so there was no requirement to report the names of their owners, or any employees, really. Thus, people only knew that Connect was headed by Felix Hanover and Sarah O'Connor was the CEO of GAIA Technologies. Aron was still in public memory as the owner, but only barely; he had mostly faded from public view at this point, and only the truly powerful were still keeping an eye on him and his movements.

But still despite all the secrecy, there were still people that suspected there was a shadowy figure at the helm of all of those companies. Hephaestus Heavy Industries, GAIA Technologies, Helios Energy, and Connect... just what was the connection there? There had to be one, and all of the theorists mostly agreed on a single name: Aron Michael. Still, they couldn't quite accept that. Perhaps due to his age, or maybe because of his humble beginnings, they suspected that there was an even shadowier shadowy figure behind him and were arguing about which major family scion it was.

"So when do you plan on releasing the products you've been hard at work on in Lab City?" Rina switched the topic to what Aron had been spending most of his time doing. She had been very curious as to what he'd been planning, especially since he specifically teased her with it as an upcoming surprise.

"I plan to announce and simultaneously release them on February 15th," Aron said as he landed the helicopter on the roof of the tallest building in the city, his company's temporary headquarters.

They disembarked and took the waiting elevator to the meeting room, where they would be holding an in-person meeting with Sarah and Felix. They had decided to meet in person as they would be restructuring the companies for more efficiency and eliminating redundancies. Nova had earlier highlighted the waste in all of those companies that was a result of the lack of consolidation.

Aron sat at the head of the conference table and greeted his friends, marking the beginning of the restructuring process. Rina, who wasn't officially involved in any of the companies' operations, left the room to tour the city after pecking Aron's cheek.

"Let's begin," he said.

Chapter 278 Restructuring and Reprogramming

With Aron's words, the meeting started and Nova immediately materialized in front of them. She sat in her chair as she took the position of secretary, but also the restructuring project manager.

[Let's start by listing the companies and what they've been doing before I explain the reconstruction plan. That way it'll make sense.

[First is GAIA Technologies, which introduced Gaia OS, Pangea, BugZapper, and a hit game to the world. It was also the first company Aron built and later incorporated a law firm, which still acts as the company's legal department.

[Next is Connect, LLC, which has been providing internet, electricity, water, sewage services, and transportation throughout Eden.

[Then there's Hephaestus Heavy Industries, which is responsible for the production of all physical products that all the companies need.

[And last, but not least, is Helios Energy, which has been awarded the contract to extract and refine the crude oil deposits in Eden and Esparia.

[In order to manage the security of Eden, Esparia, and the rest of the companies, ARES Security, LLC, was established.]

Nova had listed the current companies under Aron and delineated their areas of responsibility in a succinct, easy-to-understand fashion. Everyone nodded as they listened and looked at the display screen next to her that showed infographics on each company as she mentioned them.

[That's our current list of properties, but the bloat and redundancy is beginning to grow. So to combat that, I suggest a restructuring as follows....]

Aron handed everyone a folder, so they could follow along with the presentation in hardcopy form.

[First, Connect, LLC will become Connect Enterprises and divest the departments that aren't administrative, such as human resources. They'll also take over the legal and IT departments from GAIA Technologies. Connect, LLC will be renamed Connect Enterprises and act as a parent company for the rest of our companies, which will operate as incorporated subsidiaries.

[So GAIA Technologies will become GAIA Technologies, Inc. and will be responsible for the software and hardware product sales, including BugZapper, GAIA OS, Pangea, and GAIA Games. They'll also absorb the internet utility from Connect and launch GAIA Broadband.

[Helios Energy will become Helios Energy & Utilities, Inc. and will be responsible for oil extraction and refining, as well as delivering utilities to customers, like electricity, water, and waste disposal.

[Hephaestus Heavy Industries will become Hephaestus Industries and Manufacturing, Inc. and will be responsible for manufacturing any product required or designed by the other companies under the Connect umbrella. They'll also be in charge of land speculation and development, as well as construction.

[ARES Security, LLC will become ARES Security Solutions, Inc. and will provide security services to all of our companies, as well as armed forces, mercenary companies, and private security for high-value individuals,] she said.

Essentially, all of the administrative departments in each company would be divested and taken over by Connect, which would in turn divest their utility and rail divisions, becoming a centralized administrative resource for all of the subsidiary companies under it.

[In addition to those changes,] Nova continued, [there will be a few more companies incorporated under the Connect umbrella.

[First is Hermes, Inc., which will be an import/export company responsible for bulk international freight as well as shipping within Eden and Esparia. They'll be taking over the rail network that Connect will divest as well.

[Next is Plutus Ventures, Inc. It'll be a venture capital and hedge fund that'll provide macro and micro loans, either as venture capital or angel investing. They'll be the ones responsible for all financial aspects of the companies under the Connect umbrella.

[Then comes Icarus Airlines, Inc. That'll be our passenger airline and low-volume, high-value shipping service. It'll operate out of our new airport here in Eden as its main hub.

[There are a few more companies we'll be launching and incorporating under the Connect umbrella, namely Asclepius Biotechnology, Inc. and the Coeus Foundation.

[Asclepius Biotechnology, Inc. will be our medical research branch. There, we'll research and develop medicines and medical hardware. They'll also operate a number of teaching hospitals, local clinics, and a medical school.

[And last, but certainly not least, is the Coeus Foundation. That'll be our charity company, as well as endowment management. They'll fund and operate private schools at every level, from pre-kindergarten all the way through university, including post-doctoral degree programs. They'll also be in charge of managing a charity fund whose purpose is to uplift and increase the standards of living in rural, poor, and underserved areas around the world,] Nova finished.

Aron, Felix, and Sarah watched as the AR display popped up infographics for each of the new companies, then read through the hardcopy reports in front of them. Nova had only outlined general responsibilities, and all three of those who were physically present in the room were interested in the intricate details.

Silence descended in the room as they pondered the things that would happen if they were to go forward with the plan.

"Since it'll increase efficiency and cut costs, I don't see why it shouldn't be adopted. What do you think, Felix?" Sarah said.

"I just have a few questions about the new companies," he said.

[Ask away,] Nova said, welcoming the questions.

"Based on your presentation, you mentioned other companies would be created. Does that mean they already have products to release, or would they be incorporated later?" he asked. His main focus was on Asclepius Biotechnology, a company that he had little to no information about. He had his guesses, but wanted to know exactly what it was.

[Asclepius Biotechnology will deal with everything about life. From food, to medicine, and everything in between. Initially, though, it'll focus on improving the health of Edenians. We have a promise to keep about healthcare, after all. Once that standard is raised, we'll introduce cures to most of the currently 'incurable' diseases, like certain cancers and chronic or seasonal illnesses like the common cold and flu. In the future, they'll produce the nutrient solution required for extended stays in the VR pods we're planning on eventually releasing,] Nova explained.

"What'll happen to my position as the CEO of Connect? I can't imagine having Sarah under me in the chain of command..." he glanced at the person sitting next to Nova, "let alone Aron!" he nervously laughed.

"Each of you can choose to be the president of any of the companies we'll have under Connect Enterprises," Aron said. He wanted to keep his friends around him more than he needed their expertise anymore, since he could be made an expert in any field at a moment's notice. Perhaps he

had needed their help at one point, but currently he kept them around out of sentimentality and for the same reason Roman emperors and commanders kept aurigae slaves.

(Ed note: an auriga was the slave who, historians believe, would whisper "memento mori" into the ears of powerful Roman authorities (such as the emperor, senators, legates, and even gladiatorial champions) to remind them that they weren't perfect and were only human.)

"I've always been interested in building things. Remember my LEGO collection?" Felix chuckled. "So I guess I'll take Hephaestus."

"I'll stick with GAIA," Sarah said. "How about the stock market? Shouldn't we create an exchange to facilitate the buying and selling of shares in the country? That would give us quite a bit of power over the companies here." Sarah recalled the profit that the NYSE and Nasdaq were raking in. Many people even thought of them as government entities, despite them being privately owned companies.

"We're still waiting for the government to implement regulations in terms of securities exchange before we can consider entering that market," Aron said. "Once they do, we can cooperate with the Rothschilds, which will give us an immediate legitimacy in the field. There's also the banking issue... but basically, at the moment, it all boils down to one thing: Eden is simply too poor right now to make the securities exchange business viable."

Felix raised his hand and asked, "So who's going to head up the rest of the companies? Sarah's keeping GAIA, and I'm taking over Hephaestus, so... I hope you aren't planning on us being the presidents of EVERYTHING." He was a little bit worried and wondering if there would be enough hours in the day for all the work he would have to do if that were the case.

Aron just gave him a slightly evil smirk.

"...right?" Felix nervously snickered.

"You're right," Aron laughed, amused by his nervous friend's expression.

Felix heaved a sigh of relief and shot an annoyed glance that implied payback at his friend.

"Who'll be running them then?" Sarah asked, curious at what Aron would come up with. She was sure that the people who would be chosen as presidents of the new companies would need to be made aware of the VR world and have their own set of glasses, at least, to facilitate the smooth operation of the new companies. There was no other way to effectively interface with the AIs, after all.

"You know about personality adjustments, right?" Aron asked, despite knowing that they knew. He was priming them for the next bit of information.

When they nodded, he continued, "After hundreds of thousands of personality reformations performed on our soldiers, in order to make them more effective but also prevent them from revealing the existence of VR, we discovered that we could entirely change a person's personality if we wanted. Furthermore, we can implant an AI of our own design into them, essentially replacing the person they once were," Aron said. Sarah and Felix felt a slight chill run down their spines at the idea, having heard it for the first time since he hadn't told them about the vlad?m?r incident.

"So a thought occurred to me... why don't we use that tech to hijack the bodies of deserving criminals? We'd technically be 'rehabilitating' them and turning them into productive members of

society, that way. Plus, we'd be filling high-level holes in our human resources department, making it a two birds one stone kind of deal."

Aron had just dropped a massive nuclear info bomb on his friends, and though he looked confident on the outside, he nervously awaited their responses.

Chapter 279 The Evil Thoughts Of Good People

Silence was the only response Aron received from the other two people in the room as they contemplated his idea and attempted to come to terms with it.

It was their first time facing such a morally gray decision. And although many people who'd reached the lofty heights of the three people in the meeting room had done so after many despicable deeds, neither Sarah nor Felix had ever had to make a choice like the one before them. They had been given their high and mighty positions simply because of their friendship with Aron and his trust in them; they were the only two that had stayed by his side besides his family when everyone else had abandoned him during the Rottem Morgan debacle, after all.

Thus, they had never been faced with such difficult decisions before. They were completely unlike Aron, who'd had to deal with the death of all the people that had died in the Eden-Esparia war. That said, he had only managed to overcome that without any significant guilt thanks to the system doing all the hard work in the background and adapting his personality. But at the time, he hadn't realized what was happening, nor did he think it was strange to feel no guilt over the conflict; instead, he had found it justifiable, as the Esparians were standing against him and interfering with his goals.

"But wouldn't that attract too much attention? If someone that, as you said, is deserving of death immediately got a position of power in one of your companies, wouldn't it negatively affect your image? You'd also bear the hatred of those who were previously harmed by those criminals," Felix mused. He had thought about it, not from the perspective of the criminals in question, but from the people that would be affected by the choice.

"For them to earn legitimacy, they'll need to be from the industry in question. So they'll already have a bad reputation, but can't be in prison. So I think I have the same question as Felix." Sarah had reached the same conclusion as Felix.

"But do they really have to be from the industries in question? I've already created a precedent of making people CEOs no matter their age or experience, so what's different about making underqualified people presidents of a subsidiary company?" Aron said, pointing at them as the main examples of that precedent.

"We can be explained by people investigating our past, as they'll discover that we're your friends. They might come to the conclusion that we were your only choice at that time, since you couldn't trust anyone but us with your money due to our history," Sarah said. She couldn't deny that her position was entirely due to nepotism, though she at least had somewhat of a background in business management. But who in their right mind would be dumb enough to entrust such a huge business to a newly graduated student?

"It also might make our companies a target for the people they might've harmed. That won't be good, because as far as I remember, we've already got quite a big target on our back. The Morgans alone are looking for anything they can use to attack us," Felix added, reminding Aron of the

Morgans, who were weirdly quite determined to bring them down. And their silence only indicated that they were planning something devastating.

"That's true," Aron agreed.

[Why don't we find someone who has a good reputation in those fields, but isn't president material yet? We can also filter them out based on their position and drive—we'd look for people who can give up anything to achieve their goals. That way, we wouldn't need to do more than just slight personality adjustments to guarantee loyalty and confidentiality,] Nova interjected. She was talking about making the potential presidents sign a runic contract to avoid future problems, something he hadn't used since the VR reprogramming had started being widely implemented. But she wasn't willing to allow anyone into Aron's inner circle that had even the remotest possibility of being a backstabber in the future, and the personality adjustments weren't quite as ironclad as runic contracts. At least, not as new as the technology was now, anyway; perhaps they would be an option in the future, but she was focusing on the now.

"I think that'd work best for our image, while also allowing us to gain quite willing and hard workers," Sarah said. She was completely ignoring the morality of the so-called 'mild' personality manipulation.

'Looks like my friends are growing up,' Aron thought as he realized they were slowly becoming capable of making tough decisions... at least as long as they had solid reasons behind them. "Let's go with that, then. Nova, you can start looking for people who fit the description," he said, putting a start to the search for specific kinds of people. He would wait for a few options to be found before he decided which among them would luck out and receive the offer of their lives.

[Yes, sir,] Nova said, and a portion of her computing power immediately got to work as she used Pangea for the task. It had long become the most-used social media app and had more daily users than even YouTube. Pangea topped them by about two hundred million more daily users.

"Now that that's solved, we need to come up with a decision on when and where we'll build the new conglomerate headquarters," Aron said, moving on to the next topic. Then he noticed the strange looks on his friends' faces and asked, "You two look like you've got fish bones stuck in your throats. Spit it out—what's wrong?"

Sarah and Felix looked at each other, communicating without words, then Sarah asked, "You haven't... 'adjusted' us, have you?"

"Of course not!" Aron said. "You two are my oldest, closest, and best friends, and I completely trust the both of you. Now let's get back on topic, there's still a lot to do today."

Felix cleared his throat. "Since the new HQ can't be at the city center, how about we build it close to one of the ports and surround it with a 'company town' for our workers to live in if they want?" Felix proposed. That would be his dream, as well as a heaven for the workers.

"I suggest we build it on an island, instead," Sarah chimed in, only changing where it would be built. Instead of near one of their ports, she thought it would be better to build on another island.

"Let's see the proposals and plans Nova comes up with before making a decision between them," Aron said, leaving Nova to come up with plans based on his friends' suggestions before they come to a decision on where to build.

[Can I also include my suggestion in those proposals?] she asked.

"Sure, since it'll increase the options we have, and also might have an insight we forgot to take into consideration." Aron completely trusted Nova and wouldn't treat her as a simple worker or servant.

The meeting continued as the three friends hashed out the details on what would be the most important place on Earth in the future.

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While Aron continued his meeting, Rina was in the middle of a phone call. Her father had called, asking why she wasn't returning home and spending her time in Eden instead.

"Father, I don't really have to be there for the work to get done. I can give all the orders remotely, and have been doing it for quite a while without a problem," she said.

"Are you seeing someone there?" he asked. He'd had his suspicions for some time, but couldn't find any proof. Nothing had been made very obvious between Rina and Aron, and he wouldn't send a private investigator to investigate his daughter—and heir—as it would only show he didn't trust her.

"...yes," she replied. It was time for her to just reveal the truth and let the chips fall where they may. She wasn't worried about her father's approval anymore, nor did she think it was necessary in modern times.

She received nothing but silence in reply, and it stretched for quite some time.

Chapter 280 Meet The Parents?

"Who is he?" Rina's father asked.

"You know him, father," she said. She didn't need to mention Aron's name, as she was sure her father would know who she was talking about.

"You know that isn't how our family does things, right?" Her father was slightly displeased about her course of action going against their traditions.

"I know," she replied. She wasn't even planning on trying to explain, since, like Aron, she hated lying when there was no reason to.

There was silence from the other side of the phone once again. Rina's father hadn't expected her to be so bold, but realized that she was serious about her relationship.

"I feel safe around him, and he's someone who was on my side even when I was in a difficult time," she continued after a while. Aron was very important to her.

"But..." As the family head was about to say something about Aron's low class upbringing, he remembered that he had no right to lecture her daughter after having allowed her brother to marry her off to a scumbag like Rottem. Rottem was from a mere branch of the Morgans—which was even an enemy family! At the time, he had justified that decision by telling himself that he hadn't broken any rules, but he still felt like it would be hypocritical of him to lecture her about Aron now.

"You'd better bring him to meet me. Then I'll decide what to do about your relationship," he sighed. That was as far as he could compromise on the matter.

The compromise brought a smile to Rina's face, since if she were ever to be put in a situation where she had to choose between Aron and her family, she would choose Aron without a second thought. She didn't agree to bring him without question, though, and replied, "Yes, I'll tell him and let you know what he says."

"Haaaa...." A disappointed, but interested, sigh came from the other end of the phone before it hung up with a click. Rina's father had mixed feelings about her situation; he was disappointed that his daughter had been "stolen" from him, but at the same time, he was interested in the person who could make her behave like that.

Rina put down the phone and heaved a sigh of relief, thanking god that the worst outcome hadn't happened. If it had, and she chose Aron over her family, it would mean that two behemoth families—the Rothschilds and the Morgans—would be his enemies. One Morgan family was enough.

Even so, if the worst ever did happen, America would suffer for it; she knew her home country could never face her boyfriend on an even playing field and would only lose miserably if they were to come into conflict with him.

Putting her phone back into her purse, she rose from the chair she was sitting in and headed to the meeting room. Ava had told her that the meeting was coming to an end.

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"Did you wait long?" Aron asked as she met him at the door of the meeting room.

"No, I'd just finished checking out the building when Ava told me your meeting was almost over," she answered as she hugged him and waved to Felix and Sarah. They were still in the meeting room, planning to continue their discussion about the upcoming product launch. It was likely going to break records, and even topple the first iPhone product launch.

"Good, then let's hurry—we promised to meet mom and dad for lunch," Aron said. He took her hand and walked to the waiting elevator to leave the building.

"Now that you mention fathers, mine said he wants to meet you. He called earlier, and I told him I had a boyfriend," Rina said with a serious face. Aron froze, causing Felix, Nova, and Sarah to laugh; they had heard Rina's "confession" and found it hilarious that Aron was going to have a "meet the parents" moment with the Rothschilds.

The pause was momentary, so short that only those who had received enhancements would notice it. Aron returned to his normal state and turned to Rina with a smile on his face. "Sure, no problem. Is there a specific date that I have to be there?" he asked.

"No, he just wants us to visit when we're free," she answered as they continued their walk to the elevator.

"That's good, then. I think we should go after the product launch." Aron wanted to impress his future father-in-law with at least a few accomplishments, and the timing was about right.

Rina understood his reasoning, so she smiled and said, "I'll tell him you agreed to come, then."

"Mhmm...."

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Meanwhile, in the Rothschild compound's family head mansion, Rina's father was sitting with his phone in his hand as he called for his secretary.

The secretary came to the room as fast as he could, barely managing to maintain his dignity. "Sir, you called for me?" he said after entering the office.

"I need you to bring me every bit of information you can find on Aron Michael," he said. He wanted to know the history of the man his daughter seemed to have taken a fancy to.

"Yes, sir." The secretary immediately left the room, not caring why he would even want the information about that person at all.

'Let's see who you really are,' he thought. Once he knew everything about Aron, he would decide whether or not to interfere in his daughter's relationship. Not just anyone was worthy of being a Rothschild, after all, but if Aron was, the family head would be happy for his daughter.

He was feeling very tired at the moment due to being swamped with work as it was the start of a very tumultuous and important period in the US government and a moment which would decide the level of influence they would have in the government for the next four years; a presidential election- was nearing hence requiring him to do his best to ensure their candidate wins the election, as losing meant the presidential power will be going to the Morgans, which was something he didn't want to happen.

To rejuvenate himself, he left his office and headed to see his wife, whom he dearly loved. His relationship was quite different from a normal marriage between big families, who consider weddings more of a business transaction than anything else.