

## Tech System 281

### Chapter 281 "Agent Orange" Player Two has Entered the Game

At the Mar-A-Lago golf course, a controversial figure known for his blond hair and very orange skin was golfing in his signature white shirt and white shorts, uncaring about all the turmoil he had caused when he'd announced the controversial idea of banning Muslims from entering the United States.

It wasn't the first controversy he had created, and it would be far, far from the last.

Just as he was about to hit the golf ball, his pocket started vibrating. He halted his swing and answered his phone, since anyone who could call him on this particular phone was someone who warranted an immediate answer.

"Hello," he greeted after he looked at who the caller was. The name made him smile.

"Hello, how's our next president doing?" came a voice from the other side of the call.

"George, what caused you to call me in the middle of the afternoon? You know I should be working hard on my campaign," replied the man. He was knowingly lying through his teeth despite knowing the other person knew what he was doing; they had eyes everywhere.

"I called because my father wants to see you this evening. Can you make it?" George said after their short greetings.

"I'll make it even if I have to cancel some appointments. I can't disappoint him at all," the man replied, then the two chatted for a while before the call ended. The orange man in white golf clothes returned to the game that had been interrupted by the phone call.

He punted the ball, sending it into the air... and straight off the course into the rough.

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That evening.

"Welcome," George welcomed the man he'd had a conversation with earlier that afternoon.

"I'm not late, right? Since I'm not the president yet, I can't really avoid the traffic," the man joked as he shook hands with George, then followed him into the mansion for the meeting.

Later, after they'd had dinner and finished their small talk, they moved to the family head's room to continue. The two men greeted a third in a serious tone, appropriate for the sober atmosphere.

"So when will you start using your power to support me in my bid for president?" the orange man asked. His goofy behavior was usually only on display when he was making speeches on the campaign trail. They were inevitably riddled with misinformation, but it seemed like he was an entirely different person in the face of the real power of the person in this particular room.

"I'm pretty sure we've already been supporting you for quite a while. We've already been helping you shape the narrative around many of your scandalous acts," Aubrey answered in the same serious manner.

"That isn't enough at all. I didn't think your family had fallen so far, to the point of only being capable of supporting me that much," Trump said in a slightly mocking tone. He wasn't satisfied by the support from the Morgans at all.

George, hearing the tone in which Trump said those words, couldn't help but take a deep breath. Trump had just kicked the bull's balls by saying that to the Morgan family head.

The reaction from Aubrey wasn't different from what George expected at all as he opened his mouth and said, "It seems like people are starting to forget who we really are, if even you—who we've decided to support—think that we don't have the same pull we once had." His voice was sepulchrally chilly.

Trump thought to himself, 'Looks like using his ego to force him to increase investment in my campaign backfired.' He belatedly realized what he had risked by provoking Aubrey Morgan.

Aubrey continued, "The only reason I decided to support you is because I want a president under our control to reduce the power the Rothschilds hold in congress. But that doesn't mean you're the only option. I can just as easily support Cruz, who's already ahead of you. The only reason I haven't is because he's already covered in Rothschild fingerprints, and you aren't....

"But that doesn't mean I can't fix him and ditch you if you become useless to me. Just because we decided to treat you with a modicum of respect doesn't mean you aren't a piece of shit or that we can't live without you. We don't need you, but you need us. Just your stupidity over the last two years alone can bury you under so much controversy that you'll suffocate in the deepest, darkest hole the law can bury your orange ass in!"

Aubrey took a deep breath to regain his composure, which had been shaken by Trump's earlier disrespect. It was unbecoming of a Morgan to be so crude in their speech.

"You either take what we give you and do what we order, or you don't think about entering politics at all. Am I understood?" he asked. They truly didn't need Trump, and Aubrey, in particular, was beginning to believe that he may become more liability than asset down the line. Currently, his biggest value was that nobody would ever believe the Morgans would work with a person like him, beneficial to them or not. His loose cannon attitude was completely contrary to the absolute control that a man like Aubrey Morgan demanded from situations he chose to involve himself in.

"Yes, sir." Trump could only bow his head and realize his mistake. He had been made complacent by the level of respect he'd previously been shown by the Morgan family head. "It seems I've misspoken. Please forgive my words, I had no intention of disgracing you at all."

Despite his flaws, Trump did have one decent quality: he had a certain low, animal cunning and viciousness that made him uniquely suited to disrupt the status quo.

"Since it's the first time, I won't hold it against you. But pull anything like that in the future and you have many more companies that can suddenly go bankrupt.... Keep that in mind," Aubrey said. He was unwilling to give the man in front of him any more face.

"Thank you," Trump said. He held this most recent grudge inside him and didn't show it at all, though he promised himself he would settle it in the future when he was the president.

"Now that we've resolved the misunderstanding, let's move on to the main topic of how we're going to get you elected." Aubrey immediately moved on, disinterested in prolonging the meeting.

Hearing his father say that, George immediately picked up the folders near him, handed them to Trump, and began introducing their contents.

"Our support will start from influencing the public through Fox News, Breitbart, and other right-wing media outlets, but the tone won't change at first. The media will gradually support you over the rest of the candidates, and we'll make sure that we only pick clowns that you can easily beat so as to not raise suspicions," George began. He pointed Trump toward each page and introduced them one by one, showing in detail what the Morgans promised in terms of campaign support. It included everything, from poll numbers and manipulation, to undermining his fellow candidates, giving him more air time on the media, and even went so far as to include opposition research ("Oppo") on everyone involved in the 2016 general election, including the democrats as well as those the Rothschilds had propped up on each side. No major family would ever choose only one candidate or side, in order to hedge their bets and ensure they came out as the ultimate winners.

When Trump saw the proposal, just the first page alone was enough to cause a smile to appear on his face. It was the level of support he had been expecting from such a prominent family.

## Chapter 282 The Reason

Satisfied with Trump's reaction, George continued the summary.

"We won't start with high-profile endorsements, but they'll go up in value along with the increase in your poll numbers. Your first endorsement will come from Sarah Palin, the former governor of Alaska and 2008 Republican vice-presidential nominee."

When Trump heard that name, he knew that they weren't messing around at all. And that was just the first in a long line of endorsements to come.

"She'll officially endorse you at a rally in Iowa, which should be, I think, on January 19th. That's about three weeks from now, and a few days after the sixth republican primary debate," he continued.

"In February, which should be the month you start overtaking Ted Cruz in the polls, the New Jersey Governor, Chris Christie, will start endorsing you after your wins—"

"Isn't he a candidate? And quite critical of me, as well," Trump interrupted. He wasn't sure if he had misheard something or not.

"Yes. He'll drop out of the race next month and endorse you along with former Arizona Governor Jan Brewer; Maine Governor, Paul LePage; and former Massachusetts Senator, Scott Brown." George gave him a look and continued, "In march Ben Carson will also suspend his campaign and do the same, but that'll be after Jeff Sessions...." He continued mentioning all the high-profile people who would be endorsing Trump to help increase his reach over a larger republican audience.

"They aren't fucking around at all" Trump thought. He realized that they hadn't been doing much at first because they were preparing for a big push in the beginning of 2016. And with them starting a rumor about Hilary Clinton's private email server—she was the democratic candidate the

Rothschilds were supporting—there would surely be an investigation into it that would heavily impact her campaign.

The Morgans themselves had hedged their bets on the democratic side of the aisle as well, and gone with the same strategy of supporting someone nobody would have believed they would ever support: the independent senator of Vermont, Bernie Sanders. But that would be a battleground for others; Trump only had to concern himself with the republican primary election, where his most likely opponent would be the Rothschild-backed republican, Ted Cruz.

George continued his explanation of how the Morgans would be supporting Trump, who remained quiet throughout. He would ask his questions after the Morgan heir finished.

"About Fox... I don't think it'll be possible to get their support. Roger Ailes doesn't seem too keen on me, or my candidacy," he said. He was mostly sure that they might have missed that in all the planning, but he wanted to be completely sure.

"You don't have to worry about that. You know what they say, there's no such thing as 'bad press.' As long as your name is mentioned, I'm sure a branding expert like yourself knows what'll happen. If he tries to stifle news about you, we can just replace him," George answered. It was like he was talking about firing a normal factory line worker, not the chairman of a giant media conglomerate like Fox News.

That was when Trump realized the full scale of the power the Morgans held. They were in such a lofty position that they could just remove the chairman of a huge company like it was nothing.

"Can you tell me what you really want from me after I win? I need to prepare for it," he said. He knew they hadn't told him everything, but he didn't care. If their goals didn't align with his, he wouldn't hesitate to cut them down after he won; his victory was never in question in his own mind. If the Morgans wanted something too heinous, he believed he could even kick them to the curb and win the election without them.

Instead of George, Aubrey opened his mouth and said, "A decade or so before 9/11, we installed a puppet dictator in Iraq and armed him. Remember when Iraq tried to take over Kuwait? It was around then. Do you remember when a few years after 9/11, Saddam's regime was discovered to have weapons of mass destruction and we took him down? Why do you think we did that?"

"Because you had evidence backing the invasion?" Trump answered. He wasn't sure of his answer, though, as he was sure that the full story hadn't yet been declassified.

"That's what most of the world believes, but the truth is that we'd been working on making the invasion happen even before then. After 9/11, we needed to show that we still had the biggest stick, so we used that stick to beat down the Taliban.

"But that proved insufficient, so we needed to use the stick again. We chose to use it on Saddam. We manufactured all kinds of excuses, WMDs just happened to be the one that stuck. After all, why would we really care about backwards savages who only had their weapons pointed at themselves and their local rivals?" Aubrey paused, staring straight into Trump's eyes.

Trump was a bit surprised to be hearing all of this information. He was positive it was still classified, if it was even known to anyone at all.

"But that isn't all there was to it," Aubrey continued. "We needed a war long before 9/11, which was why we planted the seed named Saddam. We would harvest that seed later, regardless, but the attack forced our hand. Still, it was beneficial in at least one sense. The long peace had been making it difficult for us to justify maintaining such an enormous military-industrial complex!

"So we invaded Iraq under the pretense of looking for WMDs, then officially took Saddam down after our 'inspections' provoked a violent insurgency aimed at removing his regime from power. And that was only one of the conflicts we brewed in the region. We took down the Taliban, we took down Saddam, we dismantled al-Qaeda, and we took down Bin Laden."

Even after all of that, Aubrey hadn't answered Trump's question at all. "Why do you think I told you all that?" he asked. His habit was always to test people to determine their worth coming to action.

"Because the reason you're supporting me lies in the explanation," Trump confidently answered.

Aubrey believed that anyone who was smarter than a goldfish could have figured that much out.

"And what might that reason be?" he asked.

"You need another reason to justify such a huge military budget. People won't ask why so much is necessary if we're fighting a war."

"Yes. We need wars to justify such a huge budget. And ones where we can exploit the targets afterward to benefit and enrich ourselves, too. Our targets need to be selected with care—weak enough to not cause too much damage, but strong enough to warrant our stay in their country for as long as possible under the guise of 'peacekeeping.'

"And not only that, they have to be rich enough to justify our initial... investment," Aubrey finished with a smile, as he was satisfied by Trump's second answer.

"So where's the next target? It can't be another country in the Middle East, and I don't recall any other enemies we can use. Or even anywhere that meets your requirements..." Trump asked.

"Eden-Esparia." Aubrey was speaking circles around Trump and leading him to a partially correct belief. Sure, he really wanted to plunder Eden and Esparia's riches, but that was only incidental.

What he really desired was to trample them for having the gall to stymie his first attempt. He had seen it as a blow to his honor and a personal affront to him.

Chapter 283 Resources, Human and Otherwise

Trump was a bit confused and surprised at the target mentioned by Aubrey. He had never thought of Eden or Esparia being the new targets. The only thing he knew about them was that they were some backwards shitholes that didn't even have golf courses!.

The silence continued for quite a while as the two Morgans in the room left Trump to digest the information in silence.

"Why them?" he asked after the long silence.

"Because they have a massive amount of untapped resources, so we stand to benefit the most from those. Plus, they're absolutely weak and the investment won't be that high," Aubrey answered. He absolutely wouldn't tell Trump his actual reason for choosing the tiny island nations. "Are you opposed?" he asked when he saw the look on Trump's face.

"No, I don't really care. I don't care about the reason or how we do things. As long as I can make America great again, I'll support your agenda with all my power when I win the election," he proclaimed, then laughed. "Besides, they don't even have golf courses!".

"Good. We've already finished the preparations on our end, so all you have to worry about is campaigning and winning the support of the American people... or at least their votes," Aubrey said, then deftly maneuvered the conversation onto other topics.

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"See you later," Trump told George, who had escorted him to the door where his car was waiting for him.

"I hope it's in the Oval Office," George joked. Both men smiled at each other as Trump got into the car he had arrived in.

The car left the compound after driving for ten minutes straight, and after a few more minutes, the smile on Trump's face disappeared, and he moved his mouth into a weird position. It was like his face had become stiff from having to constantly maintain an expression that he wasn't used to making for a long period of time.

"They really think they can control me," he said to himself. He wasn't worried about his driver overhearing him, as the man's family lived in Trump Tower. The minute he betrayed his master, only one end lay in store for all of them: death.

Just as he was about to work himself into a swearing fit to vent the anger he had pent up from being insulted by that high-horse asshole, his thoughts were interrupted by a phone call. He couldn't afford to ignore it, either, as it came on his most important burner phone.

"How'd the meeting go?" asked the voice on the other side of the call.

"It went well. And as you said, when I tried poking at their pride, they seemed very upset. I guess they can't handle being belittled," he said in a mocking tone. His little jab had been an intentional test to see just how much he could get away with; apparently, the answer was "not much".

"It was within our range of expectation based on their course of action. Ever since Aubrey became their family head, we've been profiling him. And up until now, our profile has almost never been wrong," said the voice. The pride they felt in that accomplishment allowed a slight accent to leak through. Even though their English was very fluent, it was obvious that they hadn't been raised in America.

"How about you give me a copy for my use to solicit the most support I can get from them? That way, you won't have to risk anything by personally making moves," Trump said.

"Let me remind you of one thing: there are things you can ask for, and things you cannot ask for. Until you win the election, your usefulness to us is... limited." The voice on the phone didn't even have the slightest fluctuation in its tone. It was apparent that the speaker was used to Trump's shenanigans and constant benefit-seeking behavior.

"Sure, but make sure you write down everything I want from you, because when I win, I don't want to have to ask again," Trump replied. If there was one thing he could be sure of, it was that he was always a winner.

"Don't worry."

The phone call was abruptly terminated.

Trump lowered phone from his ear said nothing, just looked at it with the same expression he'd had after leaving the Morgan family's compound. 'Everyone has a use, and the moment their usefulness ends their fate is to be abandoned. Useless people are nothing but waste,' he thought.

He put the phone back in his pocket and stared out the tinted window of his car. His mind was in overdrive, but nobody knew what he was thinking; however, judging from the look on his face, it must have been pleasant thoughts.

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In the Kremlin.

Vladimir was walking through the heavily guarded area, carrying a briefcase and wearing a neat, bespoke suit. He strode with measured, confident strides while maintaining a relaxed expression on his face. There was no nervousness at all to be seen anywhere in the man, despite being on his way to meet the president to brief him on the results of his latest mission.

When he neared the office, the soldier guarding the door wasted no time and automatically opened it without him even asking. Apparently, he was expected and had been given permission to directly enter.

"Good evening, sirs," he greeted in Russian as he put the briefcase on the table. He opened it, pulled out some documents, and handed them out to everyone in the room. "We've discovered that the Americans and most of the west are in the process of increasing their activity in Ukraine. Other than the non-combat support they've been providing, we expect them to soon send a detachment of their green berets to train their army.

"Along with them will come weapons, so they don't end up crumbling like when we took back Crimea. They'll use Ukraine as a shield against us...." Vladimir began presenting the findings of his recent mission to the people in the room. His professionalism, eloquence, and understanding of the situation impressed the people sitting at the conference table listening to his report. All of his claims were backed up by evidence, whether conclusive or circumstantial, and he even picked up on a few things that many others would have missed if they had been the ones assigned to the mission.

#### Chapter 284 An Evolution in Each Category

When Vladimir finished speaking, everyone in the room had a more detailed understanding of the situation in Crimea.

"Why's he leading an investigation in the field when he's obviously ministerial material?" Putin asked the head of the FSB.

Alexander Bortnikov, the director of the FSB, was in the meeting room with the other ministers of the Russian government in order to debrief Vladimir after his mission. However, he'd never thought

he would be put on the spot by being asked a question like that, nor had he expected Vladimir would turn out to be such an effective field agent compared to his previous record.

"He's still under investigation. There was a mess about an FSB agent being kidnapped from their home, and," he gestured toward Vladimir, "that agent is him. He maintains that he doesn't remember anything between the time he was kidnapped and when he woke up in the hospital."

"What's your finding in that investigation? I recall that incident happened quite a few months ago, so you should have some kind of result," Putin asked.

"Nothing substantial. We can't tell if he was captured and compromised, or if everything's just as he says. So we decided to put him in the field until we know for sure," answered Bortnikov.

"It seems like you've found nothing, then," Putin bluntly said. Then he added, "Bring him to the Kremlin starting next week."

Vladimir had just been promoted from a field agent in Ukraine directly to Putin's inner circle of advisors.

"But sir... there's still a chance that he's been compromised," Bortnikov said. He couldn't immediately agree to promoting the man, not when he knew there were still risks and that Vladimir would be beyond his reach after entering Putin's inner circle.

"Just do it. If we find something later, we can deal with it then," Putin said in a tone that brooked no arguments.

"Yes, sir," Bortnikov said. Putin had put down his foot and he would risk his directorship if he were to argue the point any further. And if he displeased his leader, he risked being quietly disappeared to some gulag in Siberia that nobody—not even him—knew about.

The debriefing continued as the ministers, military leaders, and intelligence analysts raised questions for Vladimir to answer.

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Half an hour later, Vladimir was in a private meeting with Putin and Bortnikov.

"I was quite impressed by the level of information you found and the way you presented it," Putin said as he maintained eye contact with Vladimir, who had yet to receive permission to sit.

"Thank you, sir," Vladimir replied neither arrogantly nor humbly.

"That's why I asked for you to be moved to the Kremlin. I have a perfect use for a detail-oriented person like you—are you up for it?" Putin offered. If Vladimir declined, he would just order him to do the job anyway; nobody he wanted could ever escape his grasp.

"Thank you for the opportunity, sir," Vladimir replied. He sounded like he was holding back his excitement.

"Good. Bortnikov will brief you on your new task, and who your new team will be. Make sure you don't disappoint me." Before waiting for a reply, Putin stood and walked out the door, leaving Vladimir behind for the head of the FSB to brief him on his task.



Bornikov wasted no time in introducing Vladimir's new task to him. It marked the beginning of the soon-to-be-ex spy's climb up the Russian government ladder.

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Meanwhile, in Eden, the restructuring of Aron's companies was put into effect without any announcement being made to the public. The new companies were registered, the incorporation of the old companies was registered, and divisions were divested and picked up as the internal reshuffling took place. Everything was done in plain sight, but only for those who cared to look for it.

It wasn't until people noticed the changes on the companies' websites, or the new names on their utility and internet bills, that they realized what had happened. Just those subtle changes were enough to make them realize the companies were connected. They may not know exactly what the corporate structure was, or at least they wouldn't know without actively looking for it, but what was obvious was that Aron was among the leadership. That much was obvious—the new name on their internet bills was his own personal company, GAIA Technologies.

The intricate web of connections was only further deepened in their minds when Connect and Hephaestus released a joint press conference announcing that Felix was stepping down as CEO of Connect and taking up the position of president of Hephaestus Industries, Incorporated.

The internet immediately exploded, with conspiracy theorists crowing the accuracy of their conjectures from the proverbial rooftops. The link between Connect, GAIA, and Hephaestus was now confirmed, which meant Helios had also been a part of it all along!

The resulting war of words caused the websites that tried guessing Aron's net worth to more than double the amount, from thirty to sixty-five billion, making him not only the youngest self-made billionaire, but also one of the richest people in the world.

But while all that speculation was taking place, neither Aron, Felix, nor Sarah cared enough to even make an announcement. And even if they did, they didn't have the time, as they were busy preparing for the product launch that would be happening soon. Currently, they were in a meeting in VR for full-scale demonstrations of the new tech that was slated for release.

But first, there was another pressing matter that needed to be addressed.

[The list is out, and here's the people who are highly likely to agree to our offer. They're in very desperate positions, so they'll agree even if they know what'll happen to them,] Nova said, materializing profiles of the people and the industries they specialized in. She organized the lists so each of the candidates were sorted into the newly founded companies.

They were all fairly unknown people, making them perfect candidates to join Aron's conglomerate. Not surprising in the least was that they all had families that were in very precarious positions as well. Some had wives that had left them, others were on the verge of divorce, and there were even a few with other difficulties, such as long-term, chronic illnesses or other disabilities. There was even one on the list that had an abusive spouse, but couldn't leave them out of fear for their life.

As Aron read the profiles, he couldn't help but feel bad for all of them. But that was all he felt for them: pity. The same could be said for his friends as they joined him in silently reading the profiles; all three of them had the ability to separate emotion from "proper" business.

"The candidates are all people with some level of knowledge in their field, and they're all desperate enough to agree to our offer. Their individual situations should make it easy enough to convince any of them," Aron said when he finished reading the profiles. He didn't know what to think about his slowly diminishing capacity for empathy; it just seemed normal to him, thanks to his recent developments.

"Emotions are one of humanity's weaknesses, but also our strongest motivation," he continued.

He had realized that his reaction to everything in front of him was different than what one would expect from a "normal" human and finally noticed the impact of his evolution. It was a truly mysterious thing, being able to separate emotion from action, and he would need to reflect on how and why it happened. His current hypothesis was that his emotions would be numbed if they were deemed harmful at any given time. But the question remained: who, or what, was the one that made that call?

His friends continued reading, but they were slightly more "normal" in their reactions to the situations of the profiled individuals. They were fundamentally different from Aron, who had the ability to completely separate his two halves. Felix and Sarah could only try their hardest to achieve that.

At least for now, anyway.

#### Chapter 285 The Days of Their Lives (I)

As Aron and his friends continued their decision-making process, the people whose lives they were deciding were busily trudging along in their day-to-day lives. All they had were their aspirations, dreams, and the hope of a better (or vengeful) future. That was what forced them to keep moving forward despite their difficult lives.

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Robert Watson, a British immigrant to America, was one of the people on the list in Aron and his friends' hands. Currently, he was in a conference room with his lawyer. On the opposite side of the table from them was a woman wearing almost comically thick makeup. She was dressed in a leopard-print top that clashed with a wide, hot pink belt, a tight purple skirt that only came halfway down her thighs, flesh-colored stockings, and bright red stiletto heels with a four inch shiny chrome spike. She had bubblegum pink hair styled to the nines cascading over her shoulders, and on the table in front of her was an enormous bag covered in the Louis Vuitton "LV" logo, as if she was afraid anyone wouldn't know it was expensive. The rest of her clothes were obviously branded as well.

Sitting next to her was a man in his late twenties that looked like a Ken doll, wearing a bespoke suit. He had a million-watt smile and a face that had been plastered on bus benches all over Los Angeles. He was a divorce attorney and his name was known far and wide as an unethical shark more than anything else.

Robert had a morose expression on his face, but the woman sitting across from him was giving him a mocking smirk.

The silence was broken as Robert's lawyer said, "Thank you for coming today. We're here to discuss the division of assets in the Watson v Watson divorce case. Let's get to work, since no one in this room wants to be here any longer than we actually have to. Robert, please begin."

As Robert opened his mouth to speak, the Ken doll on the other side of the table interrupted, "Hold on there. Lisa has a few things she'd like to say first."

Before Robert or his lawyer could say anything, she opened her mouth and, in a shrill voice, began speaking. "The law entitles me to half of everything you have. But you're gonna give me more, or else—"

"Or else what, Lisa?" Robert tiredly said. His voice was hoarse and low, and exhaustion was writ across his face in big, bold letters.

"Or else I'll go to the newspaper! Your precious 'reputation' will be trashed. You owe me! I was the prom queen in high school and all of my friends married up, but instead of marrying a senator or a CEO, I married a pathetic sack of shit like you! I was stupid to ever think you would amount to anything at all, so you owe me everything for the youth I wasted on you! Now how am I supposed to support myself, eh? You think all this," she gestured at herself, "is cheap? What kind of man can I find now, eh?"

"Oh, I don't know, Lisa. Maybe pick from one of the ones you cheated on me with!"

"Well if you weren't such a miserable failure, I wouldn't have cheated on you!"

"You...!" Robert couldn't help but clench his fists under the table, close his eyes, and take a slow, deep breath. In a monotone, he continued, "You don't get it, do you? Most of what I had, I earned before the marriage, and you're not entitled to any of it."

"Oh? I don't remember signing a prenup! So let's just go to court then, Bobby. I'm sure you'll be happy to keep everything but your reputation, you... you... you spousal rapist! Yeah, I'll tell them you raped me!" Lisa said with a self-satisfied smirk on her face. She had wasted the best years of her life married to the man across from her, and not a single one of her many lovers over the years was capable of supporting her in a manner she would like to become accustomed to.

Sure, maybe they could afford one luxury bag, or a dress—her outfit that day had been given to her by no less than four different men, for instance—but not a single one had the power, or the bank account, she desired.

The back-and-forth argument between Robert and Lisa continued, with both lawyers trying their hardest to get words in edgewise and just praying that their clients wouldn't say anything incriminating that could be used against them when this divorce inevitably went to trial.

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Ryan Walker was another person on Aron's list.

Currently, he was laying in an adjustable bed in the living room of a small downtown apartment. The sounds and smells of low-income urban living drifted in the open window along with a shaft of light that illuminated the dust floating through the air. It wasn't an unusual scene, as he was always either in this bed or in his electric wheelchair.

That was a customized prison, just like his bed, as the only things he could move were his face and a single finger.

He spent most of his time on the internet, trying to chase away the shame of being unable to provide for his wife. They had promised to support each other through school, but after she finished supporting him, and before she could finish her degree, he had slipped on a patch of icy sidewalk on his way home from work one night and fell directly into the path of an oncoming snowplow.

The city was as sympathetic as they could be, considering it was a no-fault accident, and had covered his medical expenses and enough for them to at least subsidize their living expenses for a few years, but as he couldn't work, his wife, Amanda, could only drop out of college to take care of him. Luckily for him, GAIA OS was capable of accommodating his disabilities, enough so that he could earn a meager income editing webnovels for indie authors. It wasn't much, but it was honest work, though it was a complete waste of his master's degrees in biophysics and neurobiology from Cornell University.

He used to run drug trials for AstraZeneca, but that was obviously out of the question now.

A few minutes later, keys jingled and a beautiful woman walked in the front door. She was wearing jeans that had all the color washed out of them and a loose, long-sleeved t-shirt with a logo that was so faded it couldn't be made out anymore. Her rich brown hair was in a ponytail that flowed out of her baseball cap and down her back to her shoulder blades like Willy Wonka's chocolate river.

She was carrying two paper bags full of groceries and mincing her way through the cluttered, cramped living room toward the kitchen. She set the bags down on the counter, then gave Ryan a kiss on each cheek and his forehead.

"Good morning, starshine, the sun says hello!" she chirped. It seemed she was just the kind of naturally upbeat, happy person that couldn't be brought down even if a mountain landed on her shoulders. Ironically, that upbeat attitude only made Ryan feel even worse.

She worked an arm around behind his shoulders and her other under his knee, then slid the hoist under him and lifted him into his chair. Then she moved the attached computer monitor around in front of him where he could see it and turned on the webcam. The AI assistant installed could track his eye movements through it; that was mostly how he managed to browse and work.

He immediately got to work as his wife went back to putter around the kitchen. Soon, the inviting smell of bacon and sound of sizzling eggs made its way to his ears along with his wife's humming.

A few minutes later she brought a tray to the living room, loaded with bacon, eggs, fresh hash browns, and french toast, with a glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice and one of milk. Ryan wasn't much of a coffee drinker, but he definitely loved OJ.

A tear fell from his eye, and Amanda noticed it. "What's wrong, love?" she asked.

"I just feel like a burden. You supported me all the way through two master's degrees, and I couldn't even hold up my end, much less be the breadwinner you deserve. You should've been a museum curator by now, not a night shift cashier at the truck stop! You work so hard to support me... I wouldn't blame you if you went for a divorce. Then you could be happy and baggage-free, maybe

even reach your dreams. You could fall in love again, with someone who could love you the way you deserve, not a burden you—"

"You shut your mouth right this instant, Ryan Herbert Walker!" she interrupted. "I love you, not your money, not your degree, and not your job. We're getting along just fine, and I swore before God that we would be together for better or worse. Just because worse happened doesn't mean I love you any less, so you get that thought out of your skull right now, you hear?" Amanda was a lovely soul and could forgive almost anything, but people insulting her husband or talking down about him was a line she wouldn't—couldn't—allow anyone to cross.

Not even her husband himself.

"...yes, dear," Ryan could only say in a quiet voice as he silently cried.

Amanda saw the continuing tears and downcast expression on his face and wrapped him in a hug. "Cheer up, baby. At least now you can say 'it can't get any worse' without making things worse, right! Silver linings and all that...."

'I swear I will find some way, somehow, some day, to repay this wonderful woman for being the best and brightest part of my life,' he thought as he and his wife cried in each others' arms, his breakfast growing cold and forgotten on the tray table next to them.

## Chapter 286 The Days of Their Lives (II)

Rachael Richardson was a logistics manager at the Amazon headquarters in Seattle, Washington. Currently, she was sitting in her office reviewing some paperwork.

Her cell phone rang and a jolt passed down her spine, then she reached in her purse to grab it. Her heart was pounding and her hands shook so bad that, after she got the phone out, she fumbled it and it dropped to the floor. Coincidentally, the phone landed face up and she saw the name of the caller on the display.

Her face paled and she scrambled out of her chair, then got on her hands and knees and picked up the phone, hitting the button to answer it as fast as she could.

"H-hello?" she breathlessly said.

"The phone rang more than once."

"S-s-sorry... I dropped it when I was picking it up."

The voice on the other side of the call was silent for some time, then it said, "Don't let it happen again."

"I won't," Rachel said, an obvious quiver in her voice.

"I'll be home at 7:30. I want grilled shrimp for dinner."

"Y-yes. I'll have it on the table and ready when you get home." "Good. See that you do."

The call ended with a click.

Rachael heaved a sigh of relief and slumped to a sitting position on the floor behind her desk. 'I am a powerful woman. I am strong. I am worthwhile,' she repeated to herself, a mantra that kept her from bursting at the seams every time she heard that man—her husband—speak.

She had married young, right out of high school. And things had gone well, at least for the first few years. She went to college and got her degree in logistics from the University of Washington's Seattle campus, while her husband had joined her, studying criminal justice at the same campus. The two were wildly in love and it was the happiest time of her life.

She didn't know when, but at some point, things had begun to change. Her husband, Tom, went to the police academy after graduation, while she started a job at a local Amazon warehouse handling logistics. It wasn't a glorious job, nor was it a glorious dream, but Rachael was a very down-to-earth and solid person. She didn't need big dreams, and neither did she have them. Simple dreams, simple pleasures, simple... person. Overall, she was content; as long as she had Tom by her side, she would be happy.

Or so she thought.

Soon after joining the police academy, Tom's temper changed. Where he was once caring, he became cold. Where he was boisterous, he became silent. He would come home at the end of each day in a bad mood, and nursing injuries. Whenever Rachael would ask what was wrong, he would only grunt at her to mind her own business.

A few days before he graduated from the academy, he hit her for the first time. He was apologetic, and swore to never do it again, but... he did. And then again, and again, and again. Soon, Rachael was wearing thick makeup and sunglasses when she left the house to cover her bruises. Her wardrobe changed from sundresses to jeans and long-sleeved shirts. Her relationships with her friends suffered, especially after they saw one of the black eyes she had suffered. She claimed it was an accident and she was just being klutzy; "80% of all accidents happen at home, haha," she laughed. Her friends, though, knew better.

So she stopped going out with friends. Her friends soon became acquaintances, and lunches became never-kept promises to "get together some time". Outings became phone calls, then texts, then occasional emails. And soon, she was completely isolated.

She put all of her passion and energy into her work and soon rose up the corporate ladder. Tom had done the same—his career as a police officer led him straight up the chain of command, and he had become the chief of Seattle's South Precinct.

From the outside, they seemed an idyllic couple. She was a successful corporate officer at one of the biggest corporations in the entire world, and he was a man riding a rocket up the rungs of political power.

Nobody would ever have guessed the reality of what went on behind closed doors.

But Rachael was one of two women on Aron's list. She didn't know it yet, but her life was about to undergo a drastic change... and so was her husband's.

...

Elizabeth Oppliger, besides being on Aron's list, was a Swiss grad student at Oxford University. She was working on a postdoctoral degree in their environmental sciences department, and her thesis was about renewable energy and environmental impact.

Her thesis advisor, Jacob Kingsley, was a world-renowned scientist, and quite a prolific author. His name was on almost too many theses to count and it covered many fields in the environmental sciences. He seemed to have delved deep into every subject and could be considered something of a modern-day renaissance man.

Elizabeth was in the lab, sitting at a computer and compiling a meta-analysis on a number of studies she had participated in, from her first year of university to the present. A very driven woman, she knew exactly what she wanted to do and had meticulously planned every step. This was the last one: publishing a comprehensive meta-analysis of all the data she had collected over nearly ten years. Backed by the behemoth Oxford University and the industry titan, Jacob Kingsley, she should have no problem publishing her thesis in a high-impact scientific journal, like Nature Energy, which was issued a CiteScore of 81.6 by Scopus. Her

second choice, Energy and Environmental Science, only had a CiteScore of 54.4, so every advantage she could get working for her was something she would fight for.

Especially since it would drive her career from that moment forward. Her ultimate goal was to develop alternative, renewable energy sources that were beneficial to the environment in the long term, so she absolutely needed to make a splash the instant she entered the industry.

"How close are you to finishing your draft, Liz?"

Elizabeth turned around in her chair and saw her thesis advisor. "I'm just about to do my final checks and proofread it. I'll have the draft in your hand by the end of tomorrow," she said.

Professor Kingsley nodded, then put on his suit jacket, picked up his keys, and walked out of the lab. It wasn't unusual for him to leave early and arrive late, which had surprised Elizabeth when she first met him, but she was used to it now. She just assumed that he must be doing all of his research from home, something that quite a few people did now.

The next afternoon, she knocked on Professor Kingsley's office door. "Come in," he said from inside.

Elizabeth opened the door and walked in, then handed him a USB drive with her draft thesis on it. He plugged it into his computer and verified the file, then said, "You can go."

Elizabeth nodded, then headed home for the day. Her part of the work was almost finished, a capstone to an academic career spanning ten very long years. All she had to do now was wait for her thesis advisor to return her draft with remarks, then polish it and submit it to her chosen journals.

She heaved a sigh of relief and settled in to wait.

Over the next few months, she asked Professor Kingsley when he would be finished reviewing her thesis draft on multiple occasions. He would always brush her off with a murmured "soon" and a wave of the hand. The man, who was once so warm to her, seemed to have grown as cold as coffee left on the counter overnight.

As the publication date for Nature Energy drew closer, she grew more and more concerned; she had hoped to be published this year, as she was definitely not getting any younger as time passed. She had her life meticulously plotted in three-year blocks. This was the year she would be published, next year she would begin working, and the year after that she would start the long climb to a

management position. Any delay would throw quite a monkey wrench into the finely tuned gears of her life.

Time continued to pass, and soon, her copy of Nature Energy arrived. She had nothing better to do but wait for Professor Kingsley to return her thesis, so she idly thumbed through it as she was coming up with new plans for her life. Her original plans were in the gutter, now.

As she browsed through the journal, she almost missed a rather special thesis contained in it. Almost. But how could she miss the title of a paper she had put nearly ten years of effort into?

She read it closely, and was shocked—the thesis she was reading was the one she had planned on submitting to this very same journal! The only difference was the name of the author: Jacob Kingsley, PhD.

The world spun as all of her plans came crashing down around her. She fell to the floor, unconscious.

...

The last man on Aron's list was laying on a filthy mattress in what could only be very generously considered a "shack". His name was Jai Chakrabarti, and it was his twenty-seventh birthday.

If someone had seen him a few months earlier, they would never have imagined him where he was now, wearing a torn, dirty suit, leather shoes that had all the finish worn off of them, and a pained expression.

He was born with a silver spoon and a golden heart, and spent the first twenty-six years of his life using his father's money to help people less fortunate than him. Then his father, the last remaining member of his family, died. With his father's death came the revelation of a great secret: a connection to the mafia. And not a good one, either; as it turned out, his father had begun building wealth from a "loan" provided by the mob.

One that he hadn't paid back. Instead, he had chosen to purchase a new identity and run with the cash before using it to develop software that he then sold to online betting websites.

Now, the mob had caught up to him. Or what was left of him after the car accident, anyway. His picture was next to his obituary in the newspaper, and a mafia soldier had just so happened to see it. Next thing Jai knew, he was answering a loud knock on his door and greeting some very, very large and angry men.

It wasn't bad enough that the government had taken almost half of his father's money in the name of "estate taxes", or that his father's business partners—the betting websites that operated in the grayest of gray areas—had taken all of the business, but now the mafia had come calling to collect the rest. Jai had had no choice but to give in and give up; his only other option had been too dire to consider.

He was lucky that he had been able to keep the clothes on his back. It wasn't that the mob enforcers weren't willing to take them, as the suit he was wearing cost nearly 10,000 rupees, and they definitely hadn't felt sorry for him. It was more that, in giving in and giving up, Jai had signed over all the money he had and immediately run in the opposite direction.

Like father, like son, one could say. Both of them were runners.



What about the law? The law didn't care. They only protected those who could afford to be protected by them. And Jai was no longer one of those people... but the leaders of the mafia most definitely were. So he did the next best thing—he moved to Rajanpur, Punjab, and built a little shack for himself from some corrugated galvanized steel sheet he found at the dump. Another one of his prizes from there was the stained, worn-out mattress he was currently laying on.

He hadn't eaten in days, and could only distract himself by plotting vengeance on those that had brought him to this point: the mafia, his father's business partners, and the government of Maharashtra.

Oh, yes.... They would pay.

#### Chapter 287 An Offer They Shouldn't Refuse

Back in the office, Sarah and Felix had just finished reading through the five profiles Aron had shortlisted from Nova's master list. The rest of the names on the list would also receive job offers, but the five names on the short list were slated to be the presidents of the new subsidiary companies.

Robert Watson, a low-level Boeing executive, would be joining Icarus Airlines as the president.

Ryan Walker would be heading up Asclepius Biotechnology, where his experience and connections in the world of Big Pharma would come in handy. And, having been a researcher himself, he wouldn't just be an "empty suit" executive, either.

Hermes Inc., Aron's new import/export company, was just waiting for the arrival of Rachael Richardson. She should be able to simply slot into the job, having run the logistics department of a giant like Amazon.

Elizabeth Oppliger would soon be heading up Helios Energy & Utilities. She didn't know it yet, but she would soon.

And Jai Chakrabarti would soon be taking over the charitable branch of Connect, the Coeus Foundation.

Nova herself would continue running Plutus Ventures; no mere human, no matter how "enhanced", would be able to replace her in that position.

"Since you've read through them, do you two have any objections?" Aron asked. Sarah and Felix might have found better candidates in the comprehensive list.

Neither of them said anything, so Aron nodded. "Good, it's settled, then. Nova, let's get them in for a meeting."

He swiveled his chair around so he could see the large screen on the wall behind him, and Felix and Sarah turned theirs to watch as well. There were five live feeds being displayed on the big screen, one from each of the Nyx agents Nova had ordered into the field earlier that day. She brought up the first feed and it filled the entire screen, where a hand was knocking on a door in a hallway.

...

"Come in," said the voice in the room.

The Nyx agent entered Rachael's office, then closed and locked the door behind her. She took out a small black cube and set it on the desk, to ensure nobody could listen in on the conversation that was about to take place, then sat in the chair facing the desk and said, "We need to talk."

"About what?" Rachael asked.

The Nyx agent began listing the details of Rachael's life, and she grew nervous. She picked up the phone on her desk to call security, but there was no dial tone. "Don't worry, Mrs. Richardson. I'm not here to hurt you—in fact, it's just the opposite. I'm here to offer you an opportunity... a way to get away from your husband and improve your situation. And all you have to do is agree to a meeting," the beautiful agent explained.

"A meeting? With who? And what's that?" Rachael gestured at the cube the agent had placed on her desk.

"That? That's just a toy to make sure our conversation is, and remains, private. The meeting is with my boss, and you won't even have to go anywhere to have it." She pulled a pair of chic sunglasses from her pocket and set them on the desk. "Put these on and you'll have all the answers you need."

Rachael thought for a moment, then, remembering what she would be in for when Tom got home from work, picked up the sunglasses and put them on.

...

Robert Watson had just left his contentious divorce settlement meeting and was sitting on a bus bench, leaning back and tiredly rubbing his eyes as he waited for the bus to take him home. Nothing had come of the meeting except more hard feelings and a guarantee of the next meeting taking place in a public court room.

A beautiful woman in a professional suit sat on the bench next to him and said, "Rough day? You look bushed."

Robert just glared at her out of the corner of his eye. He wasn't in the best of moods to begin with, and was definitely in no mood to speak to a stranger, especially another fucking woman.

The woman, however, had other plans. She looked at the exhausted man next to her and asked, "Wanna change your life? I can give you information that would guarantee your wife will sign a no-contest divorce decree... if you're interested in that. Or I suppose you could be like everyone else and just air your dirty laundry in divorce court."

Robert shot her a dirty look and said, "You've got some balls. How do you know who I am? How did you know about... her?"

The Nyx agent gave him a silent smile, then leaned back against the backrest of the bus bench, which ironically had a picture of Robert's wife's divorce attorney on it.

"Fine. I'll play. What do you need me to do in exchange?" he sighed.

The agent pulled a set of black sports sunglasses out of a pocket and handed them to him. "All you have to do is put these on, and all your questions will be answered."

...

Ryan was sitting in his wheelchair, working. A word processing program was open on the display screen of his computer, but it grayed out, and a pop-up window appeared on his display.

"Do you want to change your life? Y/n..." it read.

His AI assistant popped up on the screen and playfully flew around the weird pop-up, then turned to "look" at Ryan. [You should say yes, you know,] the little fairy said.

"Oh, why should I? This seems sketchy."

[Because the person who sent you that popup can let you walk again. All you have to do is open your front door.]

At that exact moment, someone knocked on the front door of Ryan's apartment. His wife was asleep, and he didn't want to wake her. Plus, he was a bit weirded out by this sudden situation; just because there had never been a hacked GAIA OS install didn't mean it wasn't a possibility that his had been hacked.

[Trust me, you're not getting hacked. The woman outside will tell you everything you need to know.]

Ryan decided that there was really nothing to worry about. He had nothing to steal, so the person at the door probably wasn't there to steal anything from him. He controlled his electric wheelchair to the bedroom and said, "Amanda? Wake up, sweetheart. Someone's at the door."

Amanda groggily woke up, brushed her hair out of her face, and sat on the edge of the bed. "Someone's... here?" she yawned.

"Yeah. Some weird shit's going down, but... well... I think we should listen to what they have to say. They're here to make an offer or something, I guess."

She nodded, then pulled her hair into a loose bun and secured it with a letter opener from the nightstand next to the bed. She pulled on some sweatpants and a t-shirt and followed her husband back to their cramped living room, then opened the door.

A stunning woman stepped across their threshold, then closed the door behind her and locked it. She gave Ryan and Amanda a beautiful smile.

"Mind if I sit?" she asked. ...

In Oxford, Elizabeth Opplinger was sitting on the couch in her living room, fuming mad. She had just gotten off the phone with her thesis advisor, who had told her to her face that he had never received her thesis draft. To her face!

The man had apparently traded his sense of shame for a pair of gigantic brass balls.

She was completely at a loss as to what to do. Ten years.... Ten fucking years! Ten years of her life was just gone, and she had nothing to show for it. All of her plans and her future came crashing down around her ears and bent her back like a mountain had landed on her shoulders.

'Should I go to the dean?' she thought, then immediately discarded that thought. Professor Kingsley was a famous draw to the university, and people from all over the world—including her—had

applied to be admitted to Oxford for him, and him alone. So the dean would never take her word over his!

'Maybe the media?' she considered, but again, immediately discarded the idea. She had no evidence, and Professor Kingsley, the thieving asshole, had made sure to not say anything that incriminated him on the phone call she'd just had with him.

As she was frantically trying to come up with ideas, someone knocked on the door of her apartment. She ignored it, but the knock came again. Then again. And again, until finally....

"What!?" she screamed as she opened the door.

"Hello yourself, miss Opplinger. Mind if I come in?" the beautiful Nyx agent asked as she slipped past Elizabeth and strode into her living room.

She sat down on the couch and said, "That Kingsley douchebag sure is an ass, isn't he?"

"Wha- how- why- what the fuck!?" Elizabeth spluttered. She was absolutely confused by this seemingly random turn of events.

"Wanna get back at him?" the agent questioned in return.

"How? I have no evidence, it's my word against his... and he's THE Professor Kingsley, while I'm just grad student number however many.... There's no chance," Elizabeth sighed, then slumped to the recliner across from the couch the agent had settled into.

"Oh, evidence? Evidence is easy. We've already got plenty of that, and we can give it to you, if...."

"If what? I don't have anything anyone would want. So what do you want from me?"

"All you have to do is put these on," the agent pulled a pair of rimless glasses out of her pocket, "and all your questions will be answered."

...

Jai Chakrabarti was having a very good day. He had gone dumpster diving and found most of a takeout container of chicken curry that someone had thrown out with their garbage. As he sat down and looked up at the sky in thanks, his very good day suddenly became very bad.

Three people had seen him sitting with the takeout container in his lap and were now surrounding him.

'Why me?' he thought, gazing up to the uncaring sky.

"I see you got some food, Dalit. But that's too good for a Dalit like you, so hand it over," the tallest of the three said.

(Ed note: "Dalit" is the name of the caste formerly called "untouchable" in India. It's the lowest of their social hierarchy, and the Indian officials have been trying for decades to combat the prejudice levied against Dalits in society there.)

"Please, I haven't had anything to eat all week! I'll die if I don't eat something soon!" Jai begged. He had learned that hunger pangs weren't dangerous. It was when the hunger pangs went away that he was in danger of dying of starvation.

"You really want to steal our food?" The thug slapped one of his fists into the palm of his other hand, and his lackeys sniggered.

A feminine voice came from the entrance to the alley. "Oh come on, boys. Let the man eat in peace. He's got places to see, people to go... wait. Scratch that, reverse it. He's got places to go and people to see."

The thugs turned their heads and glanced at the entrance of the alley, where they saw a stunning white woman wearing a black sleeveless top and tight black pants that were neatly tucked into the top of a pair of matte black combat boots. Her flaming red hair was pulled into a tight bun at the back of her head, and she was wearing a pair of glasses with cherry red frames.

The lead thug laughed and leered at her. "Well hello there, beauty. How about you come spend some time with us real men and leave this pathetic Dalit to lie in a pile of shit like he deserves?" he sneered.

"Oh, I'm sure I can think of something to do with you boys... but I'm not sure it'll be as fun for you as it will be for me. So last chance, boys," she cracked her knuckles and loosened her neck by leaning her head from side to side, "you can leave right now and I won't stop you." She smirked.

The three thugs were infuriated and charged the tiny woman.

She laughed and danced her way through them, expertly applying joint locks and dislocating each of their major joints at an impossible speed.

Before the first thug had even fallen, she had already disabled all three of them. Soon, there were three thugs wailing and rolling around on the ground.

The agent turned to Jai, who was frantically eating the discarded curry, and said, "Hey, you hungry? Let's go grab something to eat."

Chapter 288 I Agree

"Welcome, and thank you all for accepting the invitation." Aron appeared in front of the group of people who were still wondering where they were and how they got there. They had no idea of what was going on at all.

The moment they noticed Aron's appearance in the room with them, they were so surprised that some of them even jumped out of their seats.

"Sorry about that," Aron said moments after Nova teleported them back to their chair. At the same time, she was generating a calming effect in their virtual minds.

"Was that magic?"

"How'd we get here?"

"Where is this place?"

"Why can I walk?"

"Where's my wife?"

The moment they calmed down, they started shooting question after question at Aron, who remained quiet throughout the interrogation. Nova tracked the questions being asked and organized them in descending order of importance for Aron to answer when the people in front of him ran out of questions to ask. Soon, they realized that Aron hadn't said anything in response and fell silent, waiting for the man to start speaking.

"Let's start by answering your questions before we get down to business, since we have as much time as we need," Aron said. He pulled up the holographic screen that was filled with the questions they had asked him moments ago and started answering them.

"You're within the virtual reality world I created, but your bodies are safe under the watch of the person who gave you the glasses in the real world. Your bodies haven't moved from where they were when you put the glasses on," he said, making more than three questions from the list turn green and vanish.

"Yes, your wife is safe," Aron said. A screen appeared showing the inside of Ryan's house, his wife sitting at his bedside as she watched the woman that had given him the glasses. The agent was just silently standing near her and watching the situation.

"How?" Ryan asked, surprised, when he saw the video feed of his body calmly sleeping in the same room that he—no, his consciousness—had been moments ago.

"As for who I am. Some of you already know me, and for those who don't, my name is Aron Michael and I'm the founder and owner of GAIA Technology, as well as a few other companies that'll soon begin operations." Those who hadn't known who he was now knew that they were meeting the fabled creator and founder of one of the world's most well-known companies.

Aron gave them some time to digest the information before he continued answering the remaining questions. The list of questions on the holographic screen before him turned green one by one as he spoke. After a few minutes of answering their questions, the screen in front of him finally vanished.

"Now that all of your questions have been answered, let's move on to the main topic," he said, then paused for a moment as he allowed for the focus of everyone in the room to return to him before he continued, "I gathered you here because I have a life changing offer for all of you... if you choose to accept it."

"What offer?" Jai asked. He just wanted to hurry up and accept, as he was sure that whatever Aron was going to offer would be a hundred times better than his current situation.

Feeling that he had gathered enough curiosity from them, Aron smiled and answered, "I want to offer each of you the position of president in one of my new companies."

When those in the room heard that, they couldn't believe their ears. It didn't make sense for him to need them to be parachuted into the top position in companies owned by one of the youngest multibillionaires in the world.

"Do your companies need a scapegoat? Is that why you're offering such a position to us? You want us to take the fall for you and receive punishment in your stead?" asked Robert, who was the second calmest person in the room—right behind Jai, who was ready to take any offer provided to him no matter how bad it was. It couldn't be worse than what he had now.

Aron couldn't help but laugh at that silly idea. Although the question didn't violate common sense, he hadn't expected to hear it at all.

"No, no, nothing like that at all," Aron said. Five holographic screens appeared at the center of the table they were sitting at, and on each holographic screen was a different name and logo.

"These companies are new, but have been registered and already have products ready to launch. I need people I can trust to helm these companies... and who can I trust more than those that're heavily indebted to me?" he said, and the screens that had only names on them started listing what they would be focusing on. Everyone at the table focused on something they knew that lay within their field of expertise, except Jai, who read all of the companies' details planning to agree to whatever he was offered.

"It seems like you already know which companies you'll be offered, so read the details and let me know if you agree," Aron said. Moments later, a thick folder appeared in front of each of the candidates and they wasted no time in opening them. They all read the content in their own folders, despite everyone in the room having already made up their minds to accept the offer. But it was still good sense to know the details before they took such a wild leap of faith.

Aron, seeing how they all reacted, smiled in happiness as he finally realized the real reason that Nova had specifically chosen them. It wasn't just their desperate living conditions, but also because they were good at their jobs. That was definitely something that a messy life could greatly affect. And knowing that these five in front of him hadn't let their lives affect their professionalism, he also understood that they were all obviously a cut above the average.

He said nothing and left them to read the folders in their hands in detail while observing their reactions. It was quite a fun pastime for him; he had developed the habit of watching people react to the things he gave them. That wasn't due to arrogance or a feeling of superiority, but simply because he found the reactions amusing.

And the reactions coming from them were definitely out of this world.

The files in the folders included the products each company was slated to release soon, and those were the primary cause of the surprise reactions among the candidates. They were each knowledgeable in their own fields, and the products they saw were hundreds of years, at the very least, beyond even what the most insane theorist could ever propose. That only surprised them even more.

After a few hours of reading with the caution of a surgeon, they finally finished and, with surprise on their faces, raised their heads.

Ryan immediately asked, "Is everything in the file true?" Contained within his folder was a medicine that could heal his condition in a matter of a few weeks, or even days, depending on the level of the cure he received.

"Yes. It's already been researched, and it will be one of your incentives if you accept the offer," Aron said, then turned to the rest and asked, "So what's your decision?"

Ryan kicked off the round of answers. "I agree!" He didn't care about anything else, since the moment he saw the medicine, he saw a hope of repaying his wife's love and care for him.

"I agree."

"I agree as well."

...

One by one, they each agreed to the offers in front of them and the smile on Aron's face grew bigger and bigger with every acceptance. His companies finally had presidents... or at least they would, after he settled their issues over the next few weeks.

## Chapter 289 The First Of Many

Two weeks later.

Aron was standing in the middle of Avalon Island with Rina, Felix, Sarah, his parents, and Alexander in a glass building that was strong enough to face a bomb head on and receive only a few scratches.

The new presidents were also in attendance, but only in VR. They couldn't attend in person yet, as they were still inside the pods receiving their genetic enhancements and treatments, which wouldn't end until a few days later. It had only been three days since they'd started receiving the enhancements; it had taken a full week and a half to settle their grievances as Aron had promised.

As the people in the room watched through the wall, a sound started coming through the speakers. "T minus ten minutes. All systems are currently go and weather conditions are favorable for liftoff. Please remain in a safe viewing area."

"Wow," Henry said as he gazed at the massive rocket on the other side of the wall.

A few kilometers away from the room, a massive rocket was at rest on a launchpad, looking very majestic as the entire area surrounding it had been emptied hours ago. Though, "emptied" might be the wrong word, since the entire launch area had been printed by an atomic printer, including the transport that moved it to the launch area. They couldn't print the rockets on the pad, as that increased the risk of the printers being discovered, so a transport was still necessary.

It was the first of a series of launches planned to take place over the span of the next two weeks. They were setting up a satellite coverage net to cover all the needs of ARES and GAIA Tech, so as to prevent the possibility of economical and technological isolation, but also to build their own self-sufficient infrastructure.

"T minus five minutes. The rocket's internal systems are transitioning to launch mode." Henry had his face stuck to the wall, as he didn't want to miss a single detail of the launch.

"T minus three minutes," came an announcement. The rocket's guidance system took control and started conducting final self checks to ensure all the systems were functioning nominally. The checks came back all green, and the launch was set to take place as planned with no delays.

"T minus one minute" was followed shortly by "T minus thirty seconds."

With that announcement, the Radial Outward Firing Igniters started spewing sparks below the engine nozzle as the engines themselves began a rapid pressurization process in preparation for ignition.

"T minus ten seconds."



"Nine."

"Eight."

"Seven."

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As the countdown continued, the engines started spraying pressurized propellant into the "sparklers" and the coolant system went to work flooding the launchpad with water as the gantry fell away from the rocket. A cloud of white steam surrounded the rocket, then flared outward almost like a shockwave.

"Three."

"Two."

"One."

"Liftoff."

With that, the rocket engines released a flood of pressurized propellant and the rocket finally began its struggle to break free from Earth's gravity and fly past the Kármán Line.

Slowly at first, but picking up speed, the rocket began winning the fight against the gravity holding it to the Earth's surface and rose to the sky with a long trail of white exhaust behind it. It soon passed Mach 1 and left its own exhaust behind as it continued climbing into the air.

The cloud covering Avalon Island was split apart by the powerful vehicle as it started its journey to orbit. Control surfaces on the rocket came to life, allowing it to make final adjustments as it rose through the layers of the atmosphere.

"Max q" was soon announced, letting everyone watching the launch know that the rocket had reached equilibrium and the thrust was safe to increase again. The rocket was now past the most dangerous point of the launch.

(Ed note: Max q is the point at which the pressure differential between the launch vehicle and the atmosphere is at its highest point. This is the number that engineers use to determine how much load the rocket or shuttle needs to bear during the launch.)

Shortly after max q, the speakers announced first stage separation and half of the launch vehicle fell off, while the other half accelerated even further. The first stage fired its final retro-rockets, guiding it down to the waiting recovery team; it was paramount that no hardware be captured by anyone outside of Eden—or more specifically, Avalon Island—to prevent tech snooping.

As for the second stage of the rocket, it soon started its orbital insertion burn. The moment it reached a parking orbit was announced, and the rocket released its payload: a Q-com satellite.

The rocket had admirably completed its task and began a coast phase, after which it would reorient itself and perform a short deorbit burn, then fall back into the collection area. Just like its first stage had; there was no longer a need for the payload to be protected anymore.

(Author's note: a parking orbit is a preliminary orbit that satellites or other vehicles enter to wait for a window to enter a higher or lower orbit, as needed.)

"Is it over?" Henry, who had been watching the entire launch with excitement, asked when the screen showed the darkness of space.

"If it was a normal launch it would be almost done. But for this one, it isn't finished yet. After reaching the parking orbit, the satellite has to perform a series of burns to transfer to a geostationary transfer orbit. Once it does that, which will take a few hours, it undergoes another coast phase before finally performing another series of burns to reach the desired geostationary position...."

Aron explained orbital mechanics to his little brother for a few minutes before realizing that Henry's eyes had long glazed over. So he ruffled his hair and said, "Not yet. It'll be a few hours still. But the exciting part of the launch is done—the rest is all math."

Henry's reaction to the launch had given Aron a clue as to what the boy would pursue as a career in the future, and he gave his younger sibling a bright smile.

"That was sooooo cool, brother!" Henry exclaimed. "It's almost worth doing the extra math homework for!"

"Oh? Only 'almost'?" Aron joked, and everyone in the glass room chuckled along with him at the younger boy's crestfallen expression.

"Yeah, I guess... it's almost enough to convince me. But there's a few games coming out soon that I think might just push me that bit extra," Henry wheedled. It was apparent that he had been taking to Nova's lessons incredibly well. Perhaps too well.

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As the launch was taking place over Eden, a few countries' intelligence analysts—both in their military and their space departments—had identical looks of disbelief on their faces. When they had received an order to monitor Eden's launch, they'd been sure it wouldn't succeed at all and had prepared popcorn. As far as they knew, Eden had zero space capability and had never done any testing at all, so how could they possibly have successfully launched a rocket into orbit?

But reality was determined to disappoint them. It seemed like someone in Eden had gotten extremely lucky, and they knew that a very comprehensive investigation was about to begin. Someone had obviously leaked and allowed Eden to join the space race, and heads were guaranteed to roll in the near future. They had already ruled out poaching, as there were no rocket scientists that had been poached from established companies at all.

## Chapter 290 All His Stuff Is There

The launch wasn't secret at all, since it was being broadcasted live for anyone interested in watching it. At the moment, that consisted of a few rocket science fans who tuned in, but most of the watchers were the Edenian citizens themselves. They were absolutely thrilled to watch their first domestically made launch take place. A good example of how huge the interest to the launch was for the citizens of the country was that the launch was being broadcast through nearly all of the domestic news channels, which all had a higher viewership than their usual average for that specific time.

Although they hadn't been planning on keeping it a secret, they still hadn't planned to announce it, but that idea was squashed as the news of them applying for more than fifty orbital spots was leaked by someone from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU).

They'd had to apply, because first, it was required to be given a specific band of frequencies that weren't yet used in those orbits. That way they could avoid having more than one satellite in the same orbit using the same frequencies, which is something no one wanted to experience—anyone who had ever put a microphone too close to a speaker it was hooked up to would know exactly why. Another reason was that if they arbitrarily launched a rocket without telling anyone, it raised the possibility of it being considered a ballistic missile and might even be shot down. In the absolute worst-case scenario, it could even trigger a nuclear event. Even though Aron could create a new frequency, and even though he could use orbits that were impossible for modern technology to reach, and even though he and his close friends and loved ones would be perfectly fine in case of nuclear war, the Earth was still his home, and he didn't want it destroyed.

He kept all his stuff there.

Plus, it would make the next few months of Alexander's life hell, as even if it didn't trigger the worst-case scenario, it would still be quite an international incident that risked having Eden face serious sanctions.

Thus, they decided to benefit from GAIA Tech's publicity department and made an announcement publicizing the launch. It was pretty much common knowledge that "communications satellites" was just a polite euphemism for "spy satellites", though, so the reaction was understandable.

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NASA Mission Control Center, Merritt Island, Florida.

A group of people were focusing on screens that showed different strings of data, with the main display mounted on the wall in the front of the room showing a satellite feed. At the moment, half of the screen was showing a satellite feed filled with the image of a cloud bank that limited the visibility of the island beneath it.

The other half of the screen showed the Edenian livestream of the launch. Currently visible on that side of the screen was a massive rocket with the GAIA Technologies, Inc. logo on the side of it; the countdown was currently at T minus one minute.

The moment the countdown reached thirty seconds, everyone started focusing on the screens in front of them. They only occasionally glanced at the massive screen in the room as they watched the data feeds on the screens in front of them.

When the rocket lifted off, there was nothing but silence in the room. None of the people there wanted to disrupt another person's concentration, as they were sure that the rocket would most likely face an unplanned rapid disassembly—or in other words, blow up—and they didn't want the distraction to cause them to miss it.

Alas, nothing of that sort happened as the satellite footage on the main screen showed the rocket punching through the clouds and leaving a brief gap in them. With all of the satellites focused on that unnatural-looking cloud bank, they had collected nearly a petabyte of data on the island beneath it for later use and analysis.

The more they waited for the rocket to fail, the more anxious they grew as the launch reached its parking orbit without any problems. It was practically a miracle, as they knew that it was the first launch of an upstart company with no previous experience or reputable experts.

"Now that's gonna generate a mountain of long paperwork for us," the team leader sighed. He was the one responsible for monitoring the launch in case it turned out to be an ICBM test or something similar.

"We'd better get started on it, since the moment it reaches its destination we'll have to include that in the report. So by that time, we'd better be done with the first part of the report if we don't want to spend the next week on it," said the assistant team leader as he tried to hide his impressed expression.

The same was happening for China, Russia, and any other country that had orbital surveillance capabilities. A country with oil and other resources having the ability to launch exoatmospheric missiles was something they wanted to be as aware of as possible.

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With the successful launch, celebration was in the air in Eden. People were happy and proud that their country had done something that not every country had managed to do. Especially without help, at least from what they'd heard, as no company had yet to come out and said that they were doing joint research. Sensitive technology like that was generally never done cooperatively, as anyone who could successfully launch a rocket into space could just attach powerful explosives to one and send it to a certain direction on earth. Thus, rockets were very strictly regulated, classified technology.

GAIA technology had just posted about the successful launch and their joy that it had gone well, then announced that they would be continuing the rest of their launches as planned. It was only made possible because they had different orbital slots for each launch. That allowed them to rapidly process launches at different times, as every time they had an orbital window, they could launch another one without having to wait for the lanes to clear.

And they really kept that promise; their livestream ran 24/7, even showing the rockets being transported, though only partly through their journey. They weren't about to show a livestream of the Cube, after all.

Practically every six hours, another rocket would be successfully launched, to the point that it was an ongoing cycle. By the time one satellite was in its transfer orbit, a previously launched satellite would be ready for the final verifications. The whole sequence of launches was really abnormal; they weren't even doing a single test before each rocket was loaded into the gantry and launched soon after.

Still, they were all successful launches. Some people called it luck, but they were continuously proven wrong over the next week, as the livestream wasn't cut even once. If it weren't for the changes in the air and the day/night cycle, they would have thought that it was a looped video.

The act of sequential launches with a 100% success rate had caused a number of countries to grow nervous, as the more successful launches there were, the more important the resulting investigations would be. Everyone considered the launches an impossibility; not even "big" countries like the US

and Russia had a perfect track record in their space programs, after all. So for an upstart company like GAIA to muscle their way into the space race—which was a game for industrialized, "first world" nations to play in—while still being categorized as a "developing nation", something must have gone wrong. Someone, somewhere, had leaked something that gave GAIA their technology.

And that could not be allowed to stand, so a massive mole hunt began in the spacefaring nations.

But it wasn't just countries that were interested. Even people who normally didn't care about the space race or think it would ever have anything to do with them grew interested in Eden's nascent space program. And along with the increase in attention came odds and betting sites, which was something that Nova was taking full advantage of.