

Tech System 331

Chapter 331 Shotgun Suspicions

"Based on how fast our moles are getting removed by Ukraine's intelligence agency, there's no doubt in my mind that they're receiving strong support from another agency. The likeliest suspects are from the Chinese Ministry of State Security, since they had a cooperation with them, but that was probably severed after the UNSC vote. So now I suspect the British MI6, American CIA, Israeli Mossad, or even the Egyptian GIS. We can't rule anyone out at this point, but...." Vladimir paused to heighten the tension in the briefing room and let the others come to their own conclusions.

Seeing that his fellows had each settled on a suspect, he continued, "If this situation continues, our military operations will need to begin much earlier than previously planned. If they manage to remove everyone on our side with power in their country, they'll be welcoming us with bullets instead of flowers. " He was already quite satisfied with the reception, especially the suspicion he had cast on everyone but the true culprit hunting their intelligence operatives and gathered his thoughts, intent on pushing his plan further forward as he clicked through powerpoint slide after powerpoint slide showing images of Russian agents and sympathizers who had been caught by the Ukrainian government.

"Another thing we have to keep in mind is that we already know they're reorganizing their military. Together with putting pro-Russian politicians, businessmen, and leaders on trial for treason, it isn't a good sign for us. It shows that they're gearing up to fight, so we must act first to gain the advantage.

"The fight against Ukraine won't be as easy as the rigged referendum we called for in Crimea. That was a plan that could only have ever worked a single time, but they're probably certain we'll be trying something similar there. So if we act now, we can catch them while they're still in the chaos of reorganizing their military." The next few slides detailed the ongoing reorganization along with all the western forces supporting it. "Any questions?" he finished as the powerpoint came to an end and the lights in the briefing room came up.

"Why do you think the other forces are supporting them?" Putin asked, despite knowing the answer. He considered this briefing as Vladimir's final evaluation and it would determine whether the spy is worthy of real power and raising as a potential successor, or if he was just one of the many who thought themselves as geniuses while they were nothing of the sort.

"Getting allies closer to Russia means they have a shield and sword. By bringing people onto their side, they effectively cut off our maneuvering and leave us only one area we can send troops at them through. But the opposite isn't true, because the Ukrainian allies in Eastern Europe will certainly allow their passage, letting them strike at any point along our border. Thus, we would be forced to limit the number of troops we can use because we would have to guard our borders, while the Ukrainian defenders can concentrate their defense along a comparatively small area." That was the likeliest plan and reasoning behind it, according to Nyx. They had given him a detailed briefing after he informed them that he would soon be presenting the situation to his leaders.

A thin smile formed on Putin's face. He was extremely satisfied with the operative standing before him and the hard work he had done on behalf of Mother Russia. "Good," he said. "We'll move up the military operation to eight months from now. You will be on the planning team—any objections?"

"I would be honored," Vladimir said, trying to hide the happiness he was feeling at the moment, but in a subtly bad way so that those in the room thought he was easy to read.

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"Five... four... three... two... one.... Lift off" A massive rocket took off and pierced through the cloud cover that was still shielding Avalon Island from overhead observation.

"There goes our first middle finger toward the sanctions," Alexander said as he watched the first of ten rocket launches that were scheduled to take place over the next two days.

They had attempted to follow the accepted procedure as defined by the ITU, but had been met with delays, denials, and disdain. It was obvious that, so long as Eden was under UN sanctions, no orbital slots would be awarded to them.

"We don't have time to deal with their incompetence right now. We're up against a deadline," Aron sneered. He looked at his friend, who seemed to have aged a few years over the past couple of days.

"By the way, how did you find them? They're still outside visual range and will be for a few years yet," Alexander asked.

"Oh, that? It was quite easy..." Aron began.

"Mana, or 'dark matter', as people call it, exists everywhere in the universe. It's everywhere—in the depths of space, the hearts of stars, and even lingering between the cells of living organisms. As well as within them, I suppose. For the purposes of this discussion, you can consider the universe like a bowl filled with marbles. All we had to do was poke one marble and record the changes that happened in all the marbles connected to it. The moment you poke one, they all move.

"But mana isn't equally distributed through the universe, so those marbles can be big or they can be small. The bigger marbles represent areas with higher concentrations of mana, which tends to correlate with the mass of an object. And the bigger the marble, the easier it is to see," Aron continued, then paused to let Alexander's mind catch up to the new disturbing reality he found himself in.

"So, the new satellites we're launching are specifically designed to detect mana with a higher resolution. It's almost like upgrading from an old daguerreotype camera to an 8K DSLR camera, and will give us a much more detailed image of our approaching... guest. Once we have that, we can make and adjust our plans from there."

Chapter 332 Go Ahead and Try

When the rocket broke through the clouds, it was caught by all the surveillance satellites that were keeping an eye on Eden.

If it weren't for the rocket being too big to be considered a missile—its size rivaled the Saturn V rocket that sent astronauts to the moon—the observers would have thought that Eden was attacking them. After all, they hadn't made any announcements before launching the rocket after having been denied permission by the ITU.

Although many countries used their diplomatic channels to complain about the launch, Eden maintained that the rocket never violated any nation's airspace before entering space, so there was no need for them to inform anyone. They also took the opportunity to inform those nations that

there would be more than a few launches in the following days, so they shouldn't complain that they hadn't been informed in advance again.

As for the question of what was inside the rocket, Eden answered with a blistering retort. They maintained that it was nobody's business what they were doing, showing that the change in attitude was all throughout the government, not just the president's office.

Other than that, Eden continued their discussions with Esparia on the central bank situation. It was still in the negotiation stage as they fine-tuned their agreement, hashing out what powers the central bank would have compared to the monetary policies that their individual governments could implement in case of inflation and much more.

Hephaestus Industries had also gone into high gear, putting into practice the permission they had received from the government to work. They rapidly began producing everything that Eden had lost access to as a consequence of the trade and economic sanctions. They even sold them at a "loss" to Edenians and Esparians, to boot; nobody knew that the cost of production was basically zero, so they all assumed that the company was losing millions, if not billions, of dollars worth of profit. Thus, their reputation as a company only grew better and better.

Not only was Hephaestus producing their goods essentially for free in their automated factories, but they were also shipping them through Hermes, which meant the shipping charges were also being earned by one of Aron's companies.

Together with that, the arrival of Ukrainian grain and the zero-interest loans the Edenian government was offering for people to buy lands and develop them into farms was also seen as a windfall by the populace. Even though the lands on offer were barren and relatively low in fertility, that wasn't seen as much of a problem.

Especially after Asclepius Biotech introduced a new biofertilizer that promised to increase harvest yield by over 300%.

Alexander had never been so popular, not even immediately following the revolution that overthrew the previous dictatorship.

On a more... earthy front, the recycling—both of the world's garbage and Eden's sewage—continued apace. As it would negatively impact too many nations, the UN sanctions had protected and continued the treaty that Eden had signed to act as "the world's garbage bin". Aron could only shake his head with a wry smile when he had read that clause in the long, detailed list of sanctions imposed on Eden. Apparently countries didn't want to deal with their own trash, and he guessed they thought it would be a humiliation for the developing nation.

He had decided not to incorporate a company into his corporate structure to deal with it though, instead having Nova spawn another Child AI, Hygieia, to specifically handle recycling and recycling alone. It was too important a task to leave unattended in case of an emergency, like what had happened during his most recent upgrade, so Hygieia was welcomed to the AI family and considered a subordinate of Helios.

He had to admit, though, that his naming scheme was becoming more and more difficult to follow as time went on. Gods of the Greek pantheon were limited in their relevance to modern-day issues, so he would soon be forced to branch out in other areas besides the military, which he had already done.

The world was quickly discovering everything Eden was doing from the information being posted online, or images from the commercial satellites in orbit. They argued back and forth until they finally settled on a startling suspicion: the netizens at large believed that Eden actually WANTED the sanctions applied to them. They certainly weren't suffering under them, and it definitely appeared that they had long been prepared for them, so the hypothesis fit all of the evidence available to outsiders looking in.

But the world wasn't just watching; lawsuit after lawsuit was filed against Hephaestus by companies that were outraged by the blatant violation of their intellectual properties. Just because they couldn't sell their products in Eden didn't mean they would allow anyone else to!

That said, the companies could shout and wail and send Cease & Desist letters all they wanted to and all Felix did was shrug and chuckle about it in their periodic update meetings. Since Eden wasn't a member of the International Criminal Court and thus didn't subscribe to its jurisdiction, they could piss and moan all they wanted to, but all the whining in the world wouldn't change the fact that they couldn't enforce any intellectual property laws against an Edenian company.

When one irate magnate threatened to violate the Connect Group's intellectual properties, Felix left a response on par with that of General McAuliffe during the Battle of the Bulge in WWII. His answer was a simple post from his official, verified account on Pangea that read, "Go ahead and try."

The same thing couldn't be said for everyone, though, as Aron and Sarah both received subpoenas to appear before the US Congress, which had set up a committee to investigate them for various perceived offenses, including public safety and national security concerns, antitrust concerns, privacy concerns, and their economic impact on American citizens.

"Hahaha they really subpoenaed us," Aron laughed. He had been in a meeting with Sarah discussing the next steps for GAIA when they both received the email notification from their lawyers in the US, who were the ones to actually receive the summons.

"The lawyers said we could challenge this in front of a judge and argue that they're exceeding their authority and that the request is unduly burdensome. But they added that it would be very difficult for our motion to be upheld, since there's politics at play that will make every American judge biased against us. So, at the moment, they're recommending we negotiate the scope of our testimony, request certain protections, and clarify the terms with the committee. We'll eventually have to go, but we can at least stall them for a long time before that happens. Long enough, hopefully, that this whole UN debacle is done and over with," Sarah said.

"Do you think any of that will be allowed?" Aron sarcastically asked. He knew the answer already.

"Likely not, since the lobbyist groups have invested way too much money into—"

"Shhh, it was a rhetorical question," Aron interrupted with a grin. "There's no need for any delaying tactics or protection... tell the lawyers to do nothing, and we'll go 'testify' whenever is convenient for us, but certainly no later than two months from now."

He was already thinking about how to use the upcoming congressional hearing to his benefit.

Chapter 333 All the World's A Stage, We But Mere Players

On televisions across America, a jingle played as the screens switched from commercials to a popular news show.

"Good evening. I'm Tucker Carlson, and for those that are just joining us, welcome to the show. With us tonight is Wilbur Ross, the Secretary of Commerce in President Trump's cabinet to discuss the harm that Eden and their state company, Hephaestus Industries and Manufacturing are doing to our country. Are we just going to watch as they continue causing harm to our citizens and democracy?"

"You mentioned the harm they're causing us, and I couldn't agree more. From the moment they began breaking international law and violating intellectual property rights on a broad scale to now, American companies have lost almost 150 billion dollars. And that number will only grow the longer we allow them to continue breaking the law." Wilbur Ross had been briefed by the Office of Public & Media Affairs and knew what he was supposed to say. Tucker Carlson, on the other hand, had been briefed by the Morgan family and knew what he was supposed to ask. The two were putting on a stage play in order to demonize Eden and begin raising public support for the eventual shooting war that would break out between the two countries.

"Also with us tonight is our own Tamara Holder, our legal analyst and host of the show 'Sports Court', which you can watch now on our website. Tamara, what do you think of the issue?" Tucker interjected. Tamara Holder was his favorite punching bag and the network's current mascot. She was what he considered a "classic bleeding heart liberal" and he always enjoyed cutting her arguments down.

"Don't you think they're justified in their response when we unilaterally decided their guilt and are punishing them for it? This country was founded on the principle of 'innocent until proven guilty' but just because they're poor, they're automatically guilty?" Tamara fired back. She was a criminal defense and civil rights attorney, so what the US was doing to Eden had struck her as very, very wrong.

"Are you sure you want to take their side like that? Do you think we implemented these sanctions because we enjoy them?" The secretary of commerce asked in retort.

"Yes!"

Secretary Ross was taken aback for a moment and his mind went blank, but then he wrenched his thoughts back on track and continued with the arranged script, casting a glare at the young attorney across the table from him. "No, you have to keep in mind that the sanctions were only implemented as a result of them denying UN inspectors free access to what the investigators need to prove Eden's innocence and completely clear them. Instead of acting like an innocent party, they're acting like they have something to hide. What could a little country like them be afraid of? What are they hiding? They're acting guilty!"

"But sanctions don't work! We've seen it in North Korea, Iran, Cuba, and even Syria. So all we're doing is punishing them and preventing them from joining the rest of the world and contributing to all of humanity—" Tamara began.

"I have to remind you, Miss Holder, that the sanctions aren't just being imposed by us, but by the entire UN," Secretary Ross interrupted. "Before you accuse us of violating our principles, you should take into account that they've already been tried before a jury of their peers—the United Nations Security Council—and been found guilty."

The people on the show continued arguing back and forth with occasional interference from Tucker to make the argument as wide as possible, even blatantly accusing Eden of possessing WMDs.

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"They're doing very well," George said as he watched the show from the comfort of his father's study along with his father. "But the speed the administration's moving at is too slow. If they don't hurry up, we won't be able to make a move until next year," he added, looking at his father to see what he thought of the timeline.

"Do you know how many years it took for us to make the American citizens see the invasion of Saddam's regime as something that needed to be done?" Aubrey asked instead of answering his son's question.

"About a decade, I think, from the moment his usefulness to us ended," George answered.

"Correct. So this plan taking only a year can be said to be ten times more efficient compared to the Saddam matter, but there are a few major contributors to that efficiency." Aubrey paused for a moment, then continued, "The first is the internet. With everyone on it, it's a great tool to manipulate public opinion. And the second is Eden's ridiculous response, which is making it almost too easy for us to paint them as a rogue nation that we have to deal with to maintain peace."

"I knew that we needed a reason before we do anything so that the public doesn't have a negative reaction.... But why do we have to waste so much time painting them as the bad guys when we could just fabricate an attack on us as a justification?" George asked.

"Why do you think we haven't attacked North Korea when everyone already thinks of them as enemy number one?" Aubrey asked.

"Because they have nukes?" George answered, tilting his head.

"No, it's because they haven't attacked us yet. They only rattle their sabers until just before we attack, then they stop. They only want attention," he answered, then continued in more detail, "America always fights from the moral high ground. Before we participated in WWII, Pearl Harbor had to happen. The same could be said for 9/11. Although unlike Pearl Harbor, the 9/11 attacks were unexpected. Still, it was justification enough to immediately mobilize our forces despite them being unprepared to fight a protracted war in the mountains.

"But in both cases, the attacks were just the final piece of the puzzle that allowed the entire country to fully rally behind the idea of war. Without them, there'd be no way for us to justify the horrors of war.

"So even after all of this preparation, we need them to attack us first. Whether they actually attack us, as bin Laden did, or whether we manufacture and provoke the attack, as FDR did in 1941 with Pearl Harbor and the Japanese, it still needs to happen before we can declare war."

He turned to his secretary and said, "Inform the CIA to start releasing the information we collected and fabricated that fits our agenda, as we need to use Eden's actions to give credibility to the president's statement."

"Yes, sir," the secretary said, then left the room.

"Do we have the questions congress is going to be asking them?" Aubrey asked.

"Yes. We'll be rewriting them based on the information we have and the optics we want to present, but we'll be fully prepared by the time of the appearance. Or at least as prepared as we can be—their lack of reaction and fighting is making me nervous, like they're planning something behind our backs," George said.

"Whatever they're doing to prepare, they probably aren't expecting what we've got coming for them at all. But still, we should try and find out what they're planning."

"I'll keep that in mind, father," George responded, then returned his attention to the TV, where Tucker Carlson's stage play was still ongoing.

Chapter 334 A Series of Win-Win Deals

Though the number of countries Alexander could visit had reduced, thanks to the travel bans, he didn't waste time complaining in Eden. Instead, he chose to visit what countries he still could—especially those suffering under sanctions—to strengthen their diplomatic ties and economies. After all, it was hardly ever the people in power who suffered, but rather the innocent citizens below them.

During each visit, he would somehow manage to come up with deals that were beneficial to both countries—Eden, as the manufacturer and exporter of goods, and the countries he visited, who would receive the cheap products they had sometimes never had. For instance, Cuba had still been using cars produced in the 1940s and 50s from before the United States imposed sanctions on them in 1958 until they struck a deal to import manufactured goods from Eden in trade for certain luxuries, like hand-rolled Cuban cigars. Plus, part of that particular deal washed back on the US in an unexpected way; with an official trade partner who wasn't willing to be bullied by the behemoth called America, the politicians and rich Americans who used to ignore the trade embargo with Cuba and purchase their products cheaply could no longer purchase them at all.

There was a lot of resentment there and Eden had helped vent it.

Another unintended consequence was that Florida, a state that had long relied on refugees and illegal immigrants from Cuba to provide dirt cheap labor, had found itself lacking employees in the hospitality, tourism, and landscaping industries as Cubans could now legally immigrate to Eden, who had opened their doors wide to them.

With similar deals worked out with North Korea, Sudan, Venezuela, Iran, Zimbabwe, and Syria, among others, the lives of a lot of the most oppressed citizens around the globe either already had been, or would soon be vastly improved. In turn, Eden would receive raw materials and immigrants from the countries. The Coeus Foundation had joined forces with Icarus Airlines to ensure that immigration was open between the countries, and the Edenian government's zero-interest farming subsidy loans coupled with advances in organic farming brought by Asclepius Biotech ensured that the new immigrants were settled as soon as possible. And with Panoptes monitoring Pangea and shifting the public discourse, the citizens of Eden were thrilled and proud to be able to offer the same increase in standard of living they enjoyed to the flood of immigrants to their country instead of the rage directed at governments in countries like Germany, where they had a severe problem with Turkish immigrants and refugees illegally crossing the border in search of a better life.

Some of the countries had specific requirements. North Korea, for example, required spare parts for their airline industry, oil, and food. They received more than they gave; though Eden wasn't

suffering a loss, they wouldn't gain much from them beyond the satisfaction of spitting in China's eye by driving a wedge into the relationship they'd had since before the Korean War.

Essentially, Eden became the provider for all of North Korea's needs that had been being provided by China, which was something of a diplomatic coup and feather in Eden's cap.

Venezuela, on the other hand, had very little need for oil, money, or other such resources. They enjoyed the finished consumer goods and would repay Eden with their vast gold deposits and national reserve.

At the same time, Alexander's team was also in the talks with Taiwan. Although Taiwan wasn't among the countries that were being sanctioned, what made it special was that it wasn't a UN member. That meant Alexander—or any citizen of Eden, for that matter—had no restriction on travel between them.

Among their talks and discussions before the meeting, they included the possibility of signing an acknowledgement recognizing Taiwan as its own country and not a part of China.

While Alexander's team was in preliminary negotiations with Taiwan, Sarah was having a meeting with the co-CEOs of Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), Doctors Mark Liu and CC Wei, who were visiting Eden. After a two-day-long meeting, they signed an agreement between TSMC and GAIA to sell Taiwan a photolithography machine capable of a 3nm process.

That would be a very lucrative deal for them, as at the moment, they had only recently received 7nm photolithography machines from ASML. And although they had yet to see GAIA's machines at work, they weren't worried; they knew it was a reliable company, and their Z and Q chips were also manufactured with a 3nm process.

The delivery of the first 3nm photolithography machines was scheduled for the day of Alexander's upcoming visit to Taiwan, which would be three months later.

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"We suspect Eden is attempting to leverage their industry to access WMD technologies from the countries we have under sanctions. It's the most likely reason for all of Romero's recent visits," Mike Pompeo, the director of the CIA, reported as part of Trump's daily briefing.

"I thought we were just using the threat of 'finding' WMDs to pressure them, but you're telling me they're really building a nuclear program?" Trump asked with some surprise, as it wasn't something that he was expecting at all.

"Unfortunately, yes. We have two theories at the moment. First, it was our accusation of them possessing WMDs that gave them the idea to acquire them, much like North Korea did. And second, they had already been working on it in secret, but our accusation forced them to expedite their plans and stop hiding their development program entirely," Mike said.

"The second theory makes more sense. From the beginning, all of their actions have been aimed at maintaining their neutral stance in global politics, and being a nuclear power would basically give them a shield, kind of like our Mutually Assured Destruction plan from the sixties," General Mattis, the Secretary of Defense elaborated.

"So, what're we supposed to do? The UN sanctions seem to have just made them stronger," Trump asked.

"How about we schedule 'exercises' near Eden in the Pacific? We can retask the US Carl Vinson carrier group and send them down from the South China Sea, or wait until they're free after their demonstrations to China and North Korea," Reince Priebus suggested.

"We can do that. The carrier group is already scheduled for a routine patrol in the Western Pacific, so all we'd have to do is add another exercise to their patrol and increase the scale," General Mattis mused.

"Do that, but we should also increase the DEFCON level to DEFCON4," Trump ordered. This increase in DEFCON level will allow for increased intelligence watch and strengthened security measures.

"How about we entice the nations Eden just visited by dangling the chance that we'll unfreeze some of their assets in return for breaking their treaties with Eden?" Rex Tillerson, the US Secretary of State, suggested.

"How about we increase the sanctions against Eden, too?" another member of the briefing committee suggested.

"We can assassinate some of their high-level politicians and frame China or Russia for it. That'll cause a dispute with another of the big five nations and bring them to our side," Mike Pompeo suggested.

"Let's negotiate first. Go with the carrot and stick approach—offer to relax the sanctions if they break the treaties they just signed, or crank them up if they refuse. Either way, add a travel ban between them and Eden to keep them from cooperating in the future."

The meeting continued from there, moving on from Eden to other important matters. An hour or so later, the meeting wrapped up, and people stood to leave.

"Mike, stay behind," Trump ordered. The rest left the room to start their work for the day; had the president required them, they would have been asked to remain.

When only the two men were left in the room, Trump looked at Pompeo and said, "So about that assassination...."

Chapter 335 I'm the Sole Owner

Inside the hall where the congressional oversight committee formed to deal with GAIA would be held.

A murmur was humming as the spectators spoke to each other in low voices. Reporters were hauling equipment this way and that, making sure that it was set up and working as they recorded B-roll footage of the audience and special footage of the notable figures in attendance.

A few minutes after the C-SPAN live broadcast began, members of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform started taking their seats, the last of them the committee's head representative Trey Gowdy, a republican from South Carolina. He had only been the committee head for a few days as a result of the previous head resigning a few weeks before.

After taking his seat, he picked up his gavel and rapped it against the sound block placed before him on the table.

BANG!! BANG!! BANG!!

"Good morning to all members of this committee, our esteemed colleagues, the press, the public, and our witnesses from GAIA Technology. I now formally call this hearing of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform to order."

The whole room went silent, as the hearing had officially started.

"We're gathered today to address a range of critical concerns related to GAIA Technology, a company that's undeniably changed the way many Americans live, work, and interact...." He gave a short opening statement, listing the things they would be investigating in today's hearing.

"To our witnesses, Ms. Sarah O'Connor, President of GAIA Technologies, and Mr. Aron Michael, CEO of Connect Enterprises, the parent corporation of GAIA Technologies, we appreciate your attendance today. We anticipate a constructive dialogue, and we expect forthright and transparent answers to our inquiries." Following his thanks to the witnesses, he finished his opening statement by reminding the committee members to keep their questions to the five minutes they would be given, and to keep their questions respectful.

"With that, I yield to the ranking member, Representative Mark Cummings for his opening statement." Rep. Gowdy gestured to a man sitting to the right of him. In front of him was a name plaque that read 'Rep. Mark Cummings (D-MD).

He thanked the chairman and gave his own brief opening statement, covering much of the same information as Rep. Gowdy had in his.

That was immediately followed by swearing in the witnesses. Aron and Sarah stood from their chairs, raised their right hands, and took the oath following Rep. Gowdy's words, then retook their seats and waited for the first question.

Thus, the questioning began.

Rep. Gowdy said, "Thank you, Representative Cummings. Mr. Michael, Ms. O'Connor, you have the option to provide opening statements. Mr. Michael, would you like to begin?"

Aron adjusted the microphone to align with his mouth and said, "I choose to waive my opening statement and proceed directly to questions." A murmur of surprise swept through the spectators in the room.

"Very well. Ms. O'Connor, would you like to provide an opening statement?"

"Thank you, Chairman. I also waive my opening statement and am ready for questions." The surprised murmur grew a little louder.

Many people used opening statements to pull the representatives and the public watching to their side and show themselves as the underdog, but the people in question today had both directly waived it. Not only that, they were very casual and nonchalant about it, setting a tone for how things would likely proceed.

"Thank you both. We'll begin with questions. Representative Jordan, you may begin," Trey said.

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman," Rep. Jim Jordan, a Republican from Ohio began. He turned to Sarah and asked, "Can you detail all products and services your company provides?"

"We have a game, BugZapper, GAIA OS, Pangea, a smartphone line, and computers as our products and services," she answered.

"Is your company responsible for the production of the physical devices that you are selling under your company name?"

"No, we have a partner that's responsible for manufacturing."

"Which company is it, and where is that company located?" Rep. Jordan asked, his eyes glinting.

"Hephaestus Industries and Manufacturing," Aron answered.

"Is that the same company that's been sanctioned by the US government for the infringement of intellectual properties of American companies?" followed the representative.

"Yes."

Aron's answer caused a small commotion to arise in the room. Over the preceding months, they had continuously been hearing about the losses of American companies following Hephaestus being allowed to produce all the sanctioned products in Eden.

"Are you saying that you're making the Americans buy products from a company that's causing huge losses in taxes for the American government?" the representative doubled down following Aron's response.

"I don't know how you see it that way, but you're technically correct. But you also have to keep in mind that our production contract with them was done before the Edenian government allowed them to do such a thing," Aron responded.

"Can you give us details about the ownership structure of Hephaestus Industries and Manufacturing? The committee needs to know if you're included in this blatant act of IP theft," Rep. Jordan asked.

"I'm the sole owner of the company."

The entire room was shocked into silence.

"Did you just confess to breaking the law by benefiting from other companies' IP without paying any compensation to them for it?" Rep. Jordan couldn't believe the man in front of him would be dumb enough to admit to breaking IP law in front of the entire country.

"It seems like you've misunderstood my response, Mr. Representative," Aron began. Refusing to use his name and just calling him "representative" showed how unimportant he was to Aron, who continued, "I never broke any laws. Everything I've done is perfectly legal in Eden."

"Mr. Michael, I'd like to remind you that you're an American citizen, which means you fall under the jurisdiction of the American law."

"I'd also like to remind you that I'm also an Edenian citizen, meaning their laws apply to me as well," Aron responded.

The questions continued from there. Aron was asked some difficult questions and answered them all truthfully without beating around the bush, increasing the number of people watching the C-SPAN broadcast as time went on.

"Can you detail to us how you handle user data? Including any past incidents that compromised public safety and the company's responses to those incidents," a representative asked Sarah.

"We don't," She responded in a clipped voice.

"Can you clarify?" the representative asked.

"I meant that we don't store any of the user's data anywhere," she retorted.

"Miss O'Connor, may I remind you that you're under oath. From our research, we discovered that you're paying Amazon for servers that you use for data storage and more, so please answer truthfully."

"In the past, yes, we did use those servers to store information. During that time, our premium OS version's AI operations couldn't be fully handled by the phones, so we sent user data there for processing before it was sent to the users. But following the release of our smartphones, which are capable of doing the processing locally, we stopped hosting the users information on the servers we rented from Amazon and deleted all the data in them," she elaborated, making the prepared questions about American users' data security useless since they had testified that they are not storing even a bit of data.

The representative put aside a few pieces of paper that had become useless, thanks to Sarah's response, then turned to Aron and asked, "Can you list the companies you own in whole or in part for clarification purposes and to save everyone time?"

"Yes, I'm the sole owner of a parent company named Connect Enterprises and all of the subsidiary companies thereof," Aron said, then paused for a moment before continuing, "There are nine subsidiaries."

"Can you name them?" the representative asked with a smile on her face. She would name them from the list that had been provided to her if Aron decided to keep mum.

"GAIA Technologies, Helios Energy & Utility, Hephaestus Industries and Manufacturing, Coeus Foundation, Hermes, Plutus Ventures, Icarus Airlines, Asclepius Biotechnology..." he took a deep breath and stared the representative in the eye with a meaningful gaze, "and lastly, ARES Security Solutions."

Chapter 336 Idiots, Morons, and Assholes

The names of the companies that Aron owned gave everyone that heard them goosebumps. Although some of the people in the room hadn't heard of a few of them, they had indeed heard of the others, and all of them were very rich and very, very private.

Most of them knew of GAIA, Hephaestus, ARES, Icarus, and Asclepius; each of them were tentatively valued at hundreds of billions of dollars, which was why they were shocked to their core.

That was when they came to the realization that the man in front of them or on their tv or phone screens' net worth was nearing the trillion dollar mark. That would put him firmly in place as the world's richest man, with the difference between him and the second place more than 800 billion dollars. Billion! With a B!

But what absolutely mystified them was that Aron had only become a millionaire less than three years before, meaning that in the short span of three years he had gone from "moderately comfortable" to "money is just a scorecard for the game of life" without any aid from his family or friends and he was only twenty-three years old!

"Have you been paying taxes?" the representative who asked that wasn't surprised in the least, as he had already been informed about Aron's wealth.

"Yes, I paid more than twenty billion in taxes last year, but I fail to see the relevance of your question," Aron fired back.

"I'm the one asking the questions, Mr. Michael, not you," the representative sneered. "Are you aware that your OS has more than ninety seven percent of the OS market, which constitutes a monopoly under US law?"

"The same could be said for Google."

"We're talking about you today, not them. You know that, right?"

"Yes, and the answer to that is because our product is superior to other competitors, and unlike them, we haven't used any tactics to undermine our competitors."

The back and forth between Aron and the representative continued until the representative's allotted time for questions ended.

"How does your company contribute to research and development initiatives in the U.S.?" the next representative asked.

"Not much, as we have no research institute here," he responded.

"And why's that? Aren't you a US citizen? Shouldn't you be helping your home country?" the representative asked, framing Aron as unpatriotic.

"The very first product I produced and released to the public was forcefully taken from me by the US government. So why would I do my research here when the government always wants to steal my work out from under me?"

"How do you respond to claims that your company's practices have led to job losses or wage suppression in the US?" The representative moved to the next question without responding to Aron's question.

"That's categorically false. Even our lowest-paid employee working here is completely insured by the company and their net salaries after tax are all over a hundred thousand dollars, with yearly raises and other benefits."

"Are there any upcoming plans for expansion, job creation, or major investments in the US?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Why should I invest in a country that's insistent on levying sanctions against me in a blatant attempt to steal even more of my technological advances, Mr. Representative?" Aron responded quite bluntly.

The hearing continued in that fashion for the rest of the day, and the three days following that, making it the longest congressional hearing related to a private company in history. Aron and Sarah had undergone more than thirty hours of questioning by the hostile committee.

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From the first day of the hearing, it was the main topic in not only the political section of the internet, but the entertainment side as well. It was a weird situation, but understandable; Aron and Sarah were both incredibly attractive, even more than most actual celebrities.

Besides, both of them were way too blunt in the way they handled the questions. It was very fresh, since most people called before congress would go very far out of their way to hide whatever they could, answering almost every question with "I don't recall" or some variation on that phrase.

@Reallyman [Are you telling me this man became a trillionaire within just three years after being expelled from school? Are you kidding me?]

@nop [I can't believe it either, but I researched the companies he named and he should have much more than just a trillion]

@thetruth [Op, he was falsely accused before he was expelled, nothing more to say just clarifying it.]

@warmonger [You people seemed to have forgotten the most important revelation of the hearing. The man has a private fucking military under him, and it fought and won a war against a fully legitimate country's military. The video of Eden's pilot shooting down five planes in less than a few minutes is from his forces.]

@damn [Holy shit, why didn't we see it earlier when everything was in the open? All of his companies are named after Greek gods, from GAIA to ARES. But that won't happen again as I sat and did a very deep investigation and came to the conclusion that they're the ones who deliberately caused the Indonesia incident to provoke the UN to sanction Eden so they can benefit]

@nahthisiswild [Makes sense, since their company is now the only provider of many things. So he earns more money than anyone in the country... damn, brutal and smart at the same time]

The internet focused on many different topics, based on people's interests, but nearly everyone talking about them was mostly focusing on Aron being either a role model or scum of the earth.

The Morgans utilized it to their benefit, using every means possible to paint Aron as a greedy madman.

The committee began their deliberation, and at the same time, recommended that the justice department open an investigation into Aron and his companies. They were privately directed that they absolutely must find evidence of him and his companies breaking the law, and if that evidence didn't exist, they were to find it anyway. They were also instructed to pay special attention to ARES during their investigative process.

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Aron was in his private A380 with Sarah, heading back to Eden. He was leaning back in his chair, limbs akimbo, and pinching the bridge of his nose as he complained about idiots, morons, and assholes that shall not be named.

"How am I gonna explain this to my parents?" Aron had come to the realization that his parents would soon be asking him about his wealth and was trying to come up with a way to explain it to them as gently as possible.

"Why not tell them the truth?" Sarah suggested.

"I guess.... There's really no need to hide it from them, since the whole world knows about it now anyway," Aron said.

"Plus it'll make things easier on me since they'll be able to use the VR instead of traveling all over the place and risking attacks." He smiled when he thought of the mess his little brother would cause in the VR once he was introduced to it.

Chapter 337 A Long-Awaited Introduction

"Father's been asking why you're just letting the Morgans control your actions when you could've asked him to stop it, or at least have it under control," Rina asked Aron. They were together in one of his VR mansions, where they spent most nights.

"I'm setting the stage and giving them plenty of rope to hang themselves with, so there's no need for any of that. But I will need your family's help in a few weeks or months," Aron explained.

"Oh, what do you need?" Rina excitedly asked. It had been a long time since Aron had needed her help for anything, but now he was finally asking for it again.

"Eden will be calling an emergency meeting in the UN, and I'll need America's vote," he said.

"What's it going to be about?" she asked. She would need to know what the meeting would be called for in order to convince her father to go with his request.

"It's about forming a united government on earth. We need to be united in case of foreign entities arriving," he said, then remembered that, in his urgency to deal with things, he still hadn't told her the news and added, "Let's head to Lab City. I'll be able to explain things in more detail there."

Half an hour later.

"I'll ask my father, but even if America agrees, China and Russia will likely use their veto. They'll never relinquish the power they have at the moment," Rina finally answered after taking a bit more than twenty minutes to calm herself after receiving the shock of her life from Aron and Nova. Finding out that they weren't alone in the universe would be one thing, but who would ever be able to handle the news that, not only were they not alone, but their celestial "neighbors" were coming to pay a visit with any kind of equanimity?

"I know it might be a useless endeavor, but we need it to be done. I have to try every peaceful avenue of uniting the planet before using force. If I were to just skip straight to using force, there would always be people believing things could've been done peacefully and resisting the new government," Aron explained.

"But why do you want America to vote for it and not use their veto?" she asked. She couldn't imagine a scenario where Aron would want to peacefully join hands with the country that had treated him so shittily. He just wasn't that kind of person.

"I want it that way so that, in the future, when they start doing their selfish, arrogant bullshit, we can use their vote to highlight their hypocrisy," he said.

"But if father knows about the vote, he'll almost surely be against it," she said.

"Just don't tell him what the vote is for. You can ask for forgiveness later instead of permission now," Aron teased.

"I'll try." She hugged Aron to try and calm down again. Apparently, the shock of the revelation had yet to completely pass.

Aron said nothing, just hugged her back and rubbed her back as he gave a signal to Nova with his eyes to help calm her down.

...

"Yes, it's true," Aron sighed. He was in his parents' living room in reality with his parents and Henry, who was running around and playing with his toys. The boy was certainly using his break from school very wisely.

"So... you're telling me that what they're saying about you being a trillionaire is true?" his father repeated, not knowing whether he should be proud of his son or scared that a human could have that much money.

"That's their guess, based on the public data they have about my companies. The real number should be quite a bit higher, actually," Aron respectfully corrected.

His parents were shocked into speechlessness at the thought of that many zeros in anyone's bank statement, let alone their son's.

"Wow, can you buy me a robot?" Henry was the only one in the room that could speak after Aron's last response. His parents were still suffering a small mental shutdown.

Aron turned to his little brother and, with a smile on his face, said, "How about I give you one now?"

"Yes!" Henry jumped in excitement as he ran to his big brother.

"Put these on," Aron said as he handed his parents and little brother, who had climbed onto his lap, individualized pairs of AR glasses.

"The rest will be easy to explain with those," he added when he saw his parents giving the glasses in their hands weird looks.

After Aron's reassurance, they put the glasses on and discovered a whole new world.

"Oh my god," his mother exclaimed, echoed shortly by her husband as they came to the realization that they were in a completely new environment. Instead of a nicely appointed living room, they were now in front of a vast, beautiful flower garden with blooms of many colors scattered here and there. It looked like a field of wildflowers more than a cultivated, formal garden.

[Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Michael,] Nova said as she appeared out of nowhere, looking like an angel in her beautiful white dress. But despite her looks, she still scared the shit out of Aron's family with the sudden appearance; Henry even immediately hid behind his big brother.

"Don't worry, Nova's just one of the people responsible for overseeing this world," Aron explained as he patted Henry, who was still behind him, on the head.

"This... world?" his father asked, tilting his head.

"Yes, this world. A digital counterpart of the real one." He raised his hand, attracting their attention to it. "In here, everything is possible." As he said that, his hand changed, first robotic, then a tree, then back to normal. A flower materialized in it, then shortly disappeared and was replaced by a model of Optimus Prime, which he placed on the ground as he said, "Whatever I want can happen here." Moments later, the Optimus Prime model grew, then its eyes opened and it turned to Aron and bowed. Aron nodded to it, and it picked up Henry to go off and play.

Aron turned to his parents with a smile on his face. "This is what my company's been working on."

Chapter 338 Meeting the "Other" Family

"Mom, Dad, I have a few more people to introduce you to," Aron said.

A tall, upright woman dressed in an ARES uniform appeared. "This is Athena, the woman who manages ARES and trains them.

Athena bowed and said, [Nice to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Michael.]

A burly, handsome man wearing thick denim pants, boots, and a leather apron appeared. "This is Hephaestus, who helps me with manufacturing all the things made in the automated factories," Aron said.

Hephaestus nodded at the Michaels.

A petite, slender figure that seemed cloaked in shadows was the next to appear. "This is Nyx, she's the one that helps us investigate things and defends us from most of the underhanded things other people try."

Nyx beamed a smile and said, [Mr. and Mrs. Michael, I'm so happy to meet you finally!]

"And these are Plutus, Asclepius, Hermes, Icarus, Helios, Coeus, and Hygienia. They all help with the companies named after them—well, all except Hygienia. She helps Asclepius and Helios, but her main duty is waste management."

Plutus was a fat, bald man with long earlobes dressed in gaudy robes and enough "bling" that it should be measured by weight, rather than numbers. [Hello,] he said with a smile and a friendly wave.

Asclepius was a tall, thin middle-aged man wearing a white robe and stethoscope draped around his neck. He nodded toward the Michaels with a grave face.

"Don't mind him. He's just a very serious person," Aron chuckled.

Hermes was a teenager, wearing a sturdy pair of pants, a t-shirt with the Dave Matthews Band logo on it, and a pair of sandals. He hopped from foot to foot as he gave Aron's parents a friendly smile and said, [Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Michaels. We've all been looking forward to meeting you!]

Icarus was a young man in his twenties, dressed in an old-fashioned toga. He smiled and said, [Hi, I'm Icarus. We've sort of met already, on your flight here from America and some of your flights around the world. But it's a pleasure to finally meet you face to face.]

Helios looked like he was in his late twenties or early thirties and was tall, well built, and handsome. He was dressed in a shining suit of gilded armor and gave Aron's parents a brilliant smile as he shook their hands. [Hello! I'm so happy to meet you as well!]

"There are still a few more," Aron said to his still-speechless parents. "There's Panoptes, Aeolus, and Poseidon, but they're a bit shy, so they weren't willing to come out and see you. Panoptes helps out with Pangea and my satellite network, the Panopticon. Aeolus and Poseidon are in charge of the Air Force and Navy, respectively. I'm sure you'll eventually meet them someday."

A few minutes passed with Aron's AI family awkwardly standing behind him and his real family speechlessly staring at the group. Finally, his father recovered and said, "Uhhh... nice... nice to meet you all? I'm sorry, this is just a bit of a shock. My wife and I were thinking that Aron had a bit of a lacking social life, but we, well... we didn't know he had so many, uhh, friends."

[Don't worry, Mr. Michael, we all love Aron just as much as you do. You can consider us your grandchildren, actually,] Nova said to ease the tension a little.

"G-grandchildren!?" Aron's mother, Rose, spluttered.

[Oh!] Nova blushed. [Yes, we're all Aron's children. You see, he created us—well, me, really, then I created my brothers and sisters. We're artificial intelligences, and we've been looking forward to finally meeting you in person for as long as we've been alive.]

Aron's parents froze again, and minutes passed. Then an hour passed, and Aron turned to Nova with a look of confusion on his face and asked, "Did we break them, or did we break the simulation?"

[I... I'm not sure,] Nova replied. It was the first time she had encountered this issue and she didn't know how to proceed.

...

Once Aron's parents recovered, he took his family on a tour of the sim. They visited Lab City, various nebulae in space, and even had the wondrous experience of standing far above the galaxy, where they could gaze down and see the "milk" of the Milky Way. From there, they wouldn't have been able to see Earth, except for the fact that Nova generously highlighted it, making it much more obvious against the background of space when surrounded by bright stars. The only thing he held back was the incoming "visitors"—he didn't feel the need to have them worrying and stressing out on his behalf. He also refrained from mentioning anything about his system, mana, or magic in general.

After finishing his introduction to and tour of the VR world, Aron left his parents in one of his mansions and gave them almost unfettered access, second only to his own and on par with the lead researchers in Lab City, then Nova teleported him to a restricted area.

[Congratulations, sir,] she said with a knowing smile on her face.

"Yeah, thanks for that. Keep an eye on them so they don't get injured."

[Don't worry, they're in safe hands. It's almost time for your next meeting,] she said.

...

"We have finished sorting the evidence of our incoming guests and creating a presentation. Now we're just waiting for your other preparations to be done before we call for an emergency session of the UN Security Council," Ambassador Foster, Eden's representative on the UN General Assembly, announced to Aron and the rest of the people in the meeting room.

"Then call for it in two weeks. Our preparations are nearly finished, and we already know what the result is going to be. The emergency session is just a formality and a justification in the future. It'll be a footnote in the history books, or at most a chapter," Aron said, raising goosebumps for a few people in the room over how nonchalantly he was discussing the possibility of kicking off World War III.

"Then we'll deliver the request for an emergency session right away," Ambassador Foster responded.

They continued their discussions, revisiting the evidence that would be shown to the UNSC during the meeting and how they would make it known to the world. The news would be released on Pangea before the UNSC session, allowing them to put on a front like they were doing their best.

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A week after the congressional oversight committee hearing, the Department of Justice announced that they were opening an investigation into Aron for human rights violations, unlawful use of intellectual property, violating sanctions imposed by the US by doing business in Cuba, Syria, North Korea, and Iran, and more. If they took it all the way to trial and he was found guilty, he would receive fines in excess of a hundred billion dollars as well as five hundred years or more in prison sentences.

Not only that, it was in addition to the investigation being directed by the House oversight committee in Congress regarding GAIA's monopoly and all the other accusations levied against him as a result of his testimony before the committee.

Together with those announcements, the Morgans continued trying to destroy his reputation by paying people to post fabricated "evidence" against him on social media. What was laughable was that they were also having it posted on Pangea, with the idea that if he attempted to block it, it would simply justify their accusations and prove them all to be true.

But contrary to their expectations, Aron didn't bother blocking any of it. The posts were all performing very well on Pangea, or so they thought, as they had no idea that all of the interactions were only with one entity: Panoptes. Panoptes had dedicated a full 3% of his allotted processing power to tricking the Morgans into thinking their plan was going very smoothly.

As for the situation on other social media apps, nobody could be bothered to care about those, as everyone in the know knew that all of the hubbub would be forgotten in a week or so.

Chapter 339 Just in Case

A week later, the Edenian presidential office announced a press conference, claiming they would reveal something the entire world would definitely need to know.

The announcement attracted attention from much of the world; people were curious about what such big news would be. Especially since most of the world saw Eden as the bad guys, thanks to the constant work of the Morgans, the Chinese, and a few organizations that had joined together after suffering tremendous losses thanks to the Hephaestus IP issue and other movements on behalf of the Edenian government. Thus, speculation ran rampant all over the world; people were talking about it around the water coolers at work, on every social media site, every tv news broadcast on every channel, and it had even been discussed in many backrooms. The powerful people that moved behind the scenes were sure they had won and that Eden was about to capitulate, giving in to their

every demand in order to repair their reputation on the global stage, which had sunk even lower than North Korea's had ever fallen.

Precisely at 11:58 on the day of the announcement, the press room of the Edenian palace was filled with reporters from all around the world. Cameras began rolling and livestreams began on the internet, but President Romero was yet to take the stage, leaving the viewers eagerly glued to footage of an empty podium with the Edenian presidential seal embossed on the front of it and a single microphone jutting from the top.

Not long after that, Alexander entered the room and calmly walked to the podium with a neutral expression on his face.

"Citizens of the great nation of Eden, ladies and gentlemen watching from home, and friends and enemies around the globe, good afternoon," he greeted, already firing metaphorical shots as he began his speech. "Thank you for joining me today. Although our announcement was abrupt, it was issued due to an emergency situation that requires us to inform the world. So I won't be apologizing for the short time you had to prepare your 'gotchas' for me." He paused and took a deep breath.

After the short pause to gather himself, Alexander switched from firing shots to dropping bombshells. "About four months ago, the Panopticon satellite network we launched discovered an object approaching our solar system at a quarter of light speed. At first, we thought it was just a scanning artifact. Due to the distance it was observed at, that was the likeliest issue. So we checked again, but the object was still there. Then we checked again. And again. And again.... We checked until we were blue in the face, but...." He paused again, bringing his focus back to his prepared remarks.

"But no matter how many times we checked, the object still appeared on our scan. So after those continuous tests, we decided to create specialized observation devices, which we recently launched into the Lagrange points around Earth and the Sun. They are capable of a much higher resolution on a newly discovered frequency, giving us a much better view of the universe around us, or at least a ten-light-year radius of it.

"And the result of those scans is: the object exists. But at least we saw it in a higher resolution." The screen behind Alexander displayed the result of their constant data collecting over the past four months.

"Due to the importance of the discovery, we've already called for an emergency session of the UN Security council to discuss how we're going to deal with it. And just so you can verify it yourself, your space agencies, or even your amateur enthusiasts can go to our government website, where we've already announced the coordinates of the discovery so you can check it for yourself.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we hope that the UNSC will approve our emergency session request following your countries' verification of the discovery we made. Together with that, we invite everyone to download the data and verify it for yourselves..

"It is with the utmost sincerity that I say this: it is time for humanity to unite and combine our resources. If we can do that, I firmly believe that there is nothing humankind cannot overcome," he said in a grave tone, as if he knew the sheer, bloody-minded uphill battle he was about to face on the battlefield of politics.

He continued speaking for a few more minutes, explaining how they came to the conclusion that it wasn't just a planetary body in the vastness of space that coincidentally had an orbit that would pass through the solar system. He couched it in layman's terms and never forgot to mention that a more detailed and technical explanation could be found on their official website.

"I will now take questions," he concluded, resulting in all the reporters in the room raising their hands. No one wouldn't have questions after being told aliens might be coming for them.

Alexander pointed at one of the reporters, who said, "Jim Sterling, BBC News. What do you expect to come out of the UNSC meeting you've called? Shouldn't you have called a general assembly session instead of a security council session?"

"Excellent question. Resolution 377A, 'Uniting for Peace' lays out a specific method for calling an emergency special session of the UN General Assembly that will result in joint military action. According to that resolution, a general assemblythe specific emergency session can only be called for if the UN Security Council has met, voted, and failed to come to a resolution. In order for the general assembly to meet, it requires seven votes in the UNSC or a majority vote in the general assembly. So, that being the case, we're moving as quickly as we can to present the issue to the general assembly." He pointed to the next reporter to ask their questions.

"Samantha Clark, Associated Press. Why are you telling us this now, instead of later when there aren't so many things happening on the global stage?" the next reporter asked.

"I'm telling you this now because we must assume the worst-case scenario is true: that the object is a crewed, hostile vessel. Letting you know so far in advance is to give everyone time to prepare for its arrival." A collective shudder passed through the reporters in the audience and they went completely silent. Thus, he clarified, "It isn't proven that they're hostile, and it'll be even better if they aren't, but it's better to prepare for the worst while remaining optimistic and hoping for the best." Alexander looked directly into the camera.

"Just in case," he emphasized.

Chapter 340 The Results Are In

"Do you expect the UN to come to a good resolution?" the next reporter asked.

"Our hopes are high, since it's the only way for us to be prepared by the time they arrive".

"When are they going to arrive?" the reporter followed up.

"We aren't sure. Our observation period hasn't been long enough to determine that, so it depends on whether they're accelerating, coasting, or decelerating. Flying a spaceship isn't like driving a car—you accelerate part of the way, then coast part of the way, then decelerate part of the way. If you plan it right, acceleration and deceleration should take the same amount of time, but we don't have time to get into the more complex physics behind it. Basically, our estimates right now put them arriving around ten years from now at the soonest, and no later than twenty-eight years from now. So we need to get our affairs in order and prepare so we can face them as a united front within the next ten years." Alexander pointed to the next reporter.

"Do you think we're capable of facing a civilization that can travel at a quarter of light speed?"

"At the moment, there's zero chance of that. But if we unite as a species and work together, pooling our resources and pouring them into research, then, by the time they arrive... we'll be ready. All the

divisions that plague humanity right now have developed us to where we are, but they also hold us back. Think of humanity as a train. Right now, there are two hundred train cars, each with one engine pulling each of them. But if we put all the cars together and link them up with all the engines, the train will go much faster." He moved on to the next reporter.

"What are the results you expect from the UNSC meeting?"

"A unified military front and a unitary representative of humanity."

Alexander continued answering question after question for more than an hour without stumbling once. Finally, he directed the reporters to the Edenian Space Agency website, where they could find more information, and the Edenian Official Press Department, where they could submit further questions to be answered in the form of either a press release or a website FAQ.

...

The world immediately reacted. All countries with space programs announced that they would immediately halt all current observation missions and redirect them to the given coordinates. Most hoped to disprove the Edenian discovery, while a few rare supporters hoped to prove it. Beyond that, physicists and mathematicians around the world began working on analyzing the data provided both by Eden and the results of their own countries' investigations, ironically proving what Alexander had said about needing to come together as a united front true.

Still, when the experts and authorities began their investigations, whether they supported Eden or not, they were surprised when they dug into the data.

The main surprise was the sheer amount of it. There were hundreds of satellite images gathered by Eden, and terabytes of data overall. Thus, people with faster internet connections would download it, copy it onto portable hard drives and super high-capacity USB drives, then mail it to their fellow researchers.

The reason for the exaggerated file size was because it contained many proofs and new equations, as well as practically an entirely new branch of orbital and cosmic mechanics. And each equation required its own set of proofs, plus redundant equations that were solved and proven in different ways. There was virtually no chance that the data was mistaken.

That said, the evidence was so groundbreaking that there existed no specialists in the newly created field of study. Thus, mathematicians and physicists the world over called for quite a few conferences to discuss the formulas, their proofs, and the new branch of physics that had been discovered.

At those conferences, they divvied up the work of checking through the enormous amount of raw data and the interpretations they had been provided of it. Once the initial checking was completed in a distributed format, they would come together again to perform the final checks. Still, it would be an uphill battle; almost no one could believe that Eden, whose space agency was barely known before the press conference, had people who were smart enough to discover an entirely new branch of physics by themselves.

It would definitely be a bitter pill to swallow for all the ivory tower elites, none of whom had been contacted by anyone in Eden at all beyond headhunting messages from the Coeus Foundation, who wanted to recruit them to lecture at the soon-to-be-completed university campuses in the fledgling nation.

By the second week of hard work by many physicists and mathematicians, they found that the calculations were true. But on the visual confirmation side, things were still being rendered by various supercomputers. Though they were delayed, results were still expected over the next few days after the data verification was finished.

And of course, Eden wasn't involved in the proof and verification process, as that would taint the results. They were occasionally consulted for clarifications, when necessary, but no mathematician or physicist who has ever proven a problem that stumped the entire math or physics world had ever been involved in verifying their own proofs, nor would they in this case.

...

"So what you're telling me is that it's true?" Trump asked during his daily briefing, which had been expanded to add the directors of NASA and DARPA as a result of the specificity of the issue.

"Unfortunately, yes. We finished rendering the images gathered by our equipment, and the results were similar to what the ESA came up with," the director of NASA explained.

"Why does it look like grainy things and dots when the Edenian's data showed things pretty clearly?" Trump asked after he had opened the briefing folder.

"We don't know exactly how they managed to get such detailed data when even the best of our equipment can only capture this. We think it's because of the task-specific deep space satellites they recently launched. Of course, something that's dedicated to doing one thing will do that one thing better than a machine that's broad in application," the director of NASA patiently explained.

"I know you're about to ask for an increase to your budget. We can make it happen, don't worry," Trump said as he pinched his eyebrows. He finally understood why every president entered office with a full head of vibrant hair, but left with sparse gray hair.

He turned to his Chief of Staff and said, "Get the press corps on this. Make the announcement and contact this month's UNSC president and... 'suggest' that they call the emergency session as soon as possible." Trump leaned back in his chair and delved into his thoughts.

'We're even losing the space race now. How the hell can we call ourselves the most advanced nation in the world, yet not be the ones that discovered this? We can't let them take the initiative now, and they should also be thinking the same,' he thought.

As for how they had managed to make the discovery when the object was yet to be visible in the real world, well... that was for the discoverers to explain themselves.