

Tech System 361

Chapter 361 Air Superiority Achieved

Immediately after the US bombers defanged North Korea, South Korea got to work. The two countries had been prepared for the resumption of hostilities for decades and their capabilities were roughly equal. Sadly for North Korea, their allies were not. China had abandoned their dog by the roadside, while the United States seemed eager to support their “friends” in Korea. Thus, while South Korean artillery and rockets fired at long pre-planned targets and their troops marched across the DMZ, they were accompanied by American ship-based cruise missiles, tanks, helicopters, and soldiers as well. Not to mention the marines that deployed from the USS Ronald Reagan carrier group and the amphibious assault group that had been pulled from Japan to maintain a trade interdiction.

North Korea’s beleaguered and slapdash air force had been on the verge of resurrection, thanks to their trade with Eden, but all of that progress was proven to be for naught as anything that could be used as a runway was crippled by the sustained bombardment of what seemed like the entire country. While their air defense managed to take down some of the missiles and rockets, what they stopped was like a drop of water in an ocean and the destruction continued apace.

North Korean forces along the DMZ had no idea the counterattack had even begun. The bombing missions had been preceded by wide-spectrum electronic jamming of North Korean communications, and thanks to all the chaos, the people manning the backup landlines had either fled or been targeted in the initial airstrikes. They soon noticed the South Korean incursion and began fighting back, but due to the initial losses and the recent redeployment to the coasts, there was only about half of their initially powerful artillery and rocket capability remaining. They still gave it their all, firing at their prepared targets, but with the South Korean government’s order for their citizens to seek shelter in the underground bunkers, the loss of life was severely limited. Especially taking into account the undegraded South Korean air defense and the capabilities of the American forces, who were well-equipped with things like patriot missile launchers and anti-air guns that could, in a pinch, fill the sky with flak and chaff to intercept artillery rounds and confuse rockets.

Still, alarms blared in the mostly deserted streets of all the cities within reach of the North Korean batteries and every television in the country had emergency broadcasts on every channel repeating one message over and over: evacuate to the bunkers and shelter in place.

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Though they were useless in acquiring firing solutions on the stealth aircraft, the air force had practically burned out their ULF (Ultra Low Frequency) radars tracking every single return, no matter how insignificant, and much the same way that even a blind cat can catch an occasional mouse, they had luckily discovered the trail of a single B2 bomber. The few jets that North Korea had that were still capable of flight and had a runway to take off from had all been ordered to intercept the discovered bomber in the hopes that they could at least take down one thing.

Thus, two North Korean jets were ignoring everything else and flying as fast as they could in the wake of the only remaining bomber in North Korean airspace. The call had gone out that it was being tracked headed toward the Mansu Hill Grand Monument in Pyongyang, and it absolutely had to be taken out before it could destroy the monument.

The monument complex consisted of 229 figures, including two 22-meter-tall bronze statues of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, which would normally be ignored in a bombing campaign. And it was true; although the monument complex was a target with no value in a bombing campaign, it was still a strategic one. Taking it out would be an emotional blow to citizens and soldiers alike, and wars could be won, or lost, on morale alone.

Just as the two fighters were nearing engagement range on the seemingly unaware bomber, which was already entering Pyongyang's airspace, their warning systems blared an alarm in their cockpits, alerting them that they had been locked onto by an enemy.

The jets released flares, lighting up the sky behind them as they began evasive maneuvers, but they absolutely could not change direction, which limited the flares' effectiveness. After all, theirs was the most important mission in the North Korean military right now, and they must not fail.

A resounding explosion and its resulting shockwave washed over the lucky jets as the guaranteed hits turned into near misses thanks to their flares and evasive maneuvering. But unfortunately, the alarms continued blaring in their cockpits and they had yet to even see what was attacking them.

One of the pilots radioed his wingman and said, "Leave this to me." He broke off and flew in the direction the missiles had come from in a last-ditch attempt to draw all of the attention to himself and allow his wingman to complete their mission.

But despite his determination, massive brass balls and heroic actions could only go so far. A few seconds later, he became a brief sun in the sky as his attempt to evade the incoming missile attack failed, and North Korea had one less jet in the sky.

The remaining pilot couldn't abort his mission now and took one desperate shot as he ran out of flares and chaff, hoping beyond hope that he would get lucky and take down the bomber. Then he ejected, just in time to see his jet become a fireball.

As he drifted down through the air, his eyes focused on the trail of the missile he had released, he watched the bomber release flares and chaff of its own. His missile impacted one of the flares and prematurely detonated.

He had failed.

Seconds after his failure, four F/A-18 Super Hornets streaked below him and were the only witnesses to his last act: he drew his sidearm and shot himself, leaving his corpse to drift to the ground, still strapped into the ejection seat.

The four jets that had just taken out North Korea's last hope were just one of the many squadrons now buzzing around North Korean airspace like their namesakes, angry hornets. By this point, nearly the entire complement of the USS Ronald Reagan's aircraft were in the air, maintaining air superiority and taking out ground targets all over the country. They had just taken out the final North Korean jet, and only a single missile had been fired against them—the one that had just failed to take down the B2 on a mission to devastate the monument complex atop Mansu Hill.

The American air assets weren't alone, either, but had been joined by South Korea's own air force. It would be weird, after all, if the ones who had been attacked were to just sit back and allow their allies to do all the work for them.

Not even half an hour after air superiority was achieved, North Korea's air defense had been completely removed. And along with that came the B-52 Stratofortresses, which swaggered across the DMZ loaded with 500- and 1000-pound bombs on a mission to take out every ground target of any military significance whatsoever.

An indiscriminate bombing campaign began and the ground of North Korea soon looked similar to the surface of the moon as the United States and South Korea dropped the equivalent of the total munition yield of World War I on the beleaguered nation.

Chapter 362 They Won't Like the Result

Later that evening, Trump addressed the nation from the Oval Office. It was a rather late address, due to needing to delay it in order for the initial airstrikes to proceed uncontested. He could have held the address earlier, but General Mattis had convinced him that giving a nuclear power advance warning would be a terrible idea.

After the traditional opening statement, Trump said, "Due to the unprovoked and cowardly terrorist attack on our allies in South Korea perpetrated by the North Korean dictator, Kim Jong-Un, I approved an immediate armed retaliation consisting of a huge bombing mission to remove their nuclear capability. As of thirty minutes ago, North Korea is no longer a nuclear power." He gave the camera in front of him a smug smile, thinking it would reassure the citizens that there would be no chance of a nuclear war.

After that, he continued his address, vilifying North Korea and branding them terrorists. He swore that he would chase the perpetrators responsible for the attack that caused hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties to the ends of the earth and that he would uphold America's responsibility to police the world and support and defend their allies in South Korea.

"And in order to accomplish this mission, I have ordered our forces in South Korea and Japan to cross the Korean Demilitarized Zone jointly with the South Korean forces to take out the rogue government of the North Korean terrorists."

After mentioning that, he paused, then continued, "During our investigation of the initial assault, we discovered a disturbing truth. North Korea didn't act alone. They were aided by the government of Eden...." As he continued his address, people were surprised. With just a few words, he had tarred Eden and North Korea with the same brush and included them in the upcoming American counteroffensive, thus removing the need for him to declare war on them individually.

Early the next morning, the news broke in America that China had also been carrying out an investigation of their own regarding four of their jets being shot down while they were on "routine patrols over the Chinese mainland". Their investigation had revealed that the ones who had shot them down were from Eden as well.

Given that the Edenian jets had been granted permission to operate by Taiwan, China issued an ultimatum to both countries: either they surrender and pay reparations within twelve hours, or China would respond with what they described as "overwhelming force", as they considered that a state of war existed between China and the two belligerents.

While all of that was going on, Russia had silently begun their "special military exercises" in Ukraine. It was an invasion in all but name, backed by the might of the Russian nation in full. That

it happened at the same time as the American invasion of North Korea and the ultimatum being issued by China was only a coincidence.

The chaos had finally broken out, and Eden, who was dragged in by treaties—at least on the surface—had been painted as the villain and everyone just knew that the fledgling country would soon be wiped off the map by the much more superior militaries of two world superpowers. Behind the scenes, it was all about the greed and lust for power of people who had more money and power than they could ever use in three lifetimes. But they were practiced enough at just this kind of political theater that nobody other than the people involved would ever know of their involvement.

Or so they thought, anyway.

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Despite giving Taiwan and Eden twelve hours to surrender or suffer, China only waited three hours before attacking. A swarm of cruise missiles flew across the Taiwan Strait, targeting radar stations, air defense installations, and military bases. China unleashed everything they had in an attempt to degrade the defenses in Taiwan as much as possible before they sent in their ground troops.

However, just as the first round of incoming fire was detected making its way toward Taiwan, a stream of tracer rounds came from every direction, taking down missile after missile. It didn't stop everything, of course, but thanks to a solid priority intercept system, the damage was extremely limited and spread out, so as to maintain as much of Taiwan's defensive strength as possible.

Even so, Taiwan knew the situation couldn't be maintained for long. Everyone knew that getting involved in a shooting war with a behemoth like China was a bad idea; after all, anyone would run out of bullets long before China ran out of bodies. And Taiwan knew that Chinese airstrikes were inevitable. Their anti-air installations would eventually be taken out, either by stealthed jets, bombing runs, or even good old fashioned collaborators taking them down from the inside. Once that happened, the small island nation of Taiwan would be all but helpless.

China, far from being discouraged by their initial attack's failure, sent a second wave of cruise missiles. They had plenty of them stockpiled and wouldn't feel the pinch even if they had to fire them for the entire duration of the twelve-hour ultimatum.

Soon, the second wave was followed by a third, then a fourth. Each round of fire came after an interval of about fifteen minutes, which gave Taiwan ten minutes of preparation time between them... in theory, at least. In practice, the Taiwanese military was running around like a headless chicken, frantically reloading their guns, changing out warped gun barrels, restocking countermissile batteries, and so on.

Plus, the damage inflicted by each wave might be minor, but it would only continue to grow over time.

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"Our friends in Taiwan are requesting immediate support. Should we send it, or argue that we're fully occupied by dealing with America?" Alexander asked Aron. He had reported the request the moment he received it, also noting that they had signed a mutual defense treaty during the diplomatic visit a week prior.

“Naturally, we’ll assist them. Let them know that we’ll uphold our obligations under the treaty, but that we need all of our forces to deal with America, so our aid will be of the long-ranged variety.”

Aron turned to the empty seat next to Alexander and said, “Aeolus.”

Alexander felt a breeze and heard the ringing of wind chimes from the seat next to him. For some reason, it reminded him of a child’s giggle. He had met Aeolus before, and nodded a greeting to the nearly invisible shimmer that hovered over the seat of the chair next to him.

[You need something, grampa?] Aeolus said. His voice sounded like wind chimes and was somewhat garbled, but still somehow recognizable.

“Work time, Aeolus,” Aron sighed and massaged his brows.

Aeolus stopped chiming and a transparent, light blue humanoid figure appeared where he was sitting, a small nicety the AI implemented when it was time to focus on work instead of play. [Yes, sir. I’m up to date on the situation—what do you want done?]

“Take out all of the Chinese missile silos in Fujian Province,” Aron ordered, then turned to Athena. “Athena, issue a warning to America that if they truly move on Eden, we’ll respond in kind and they won’t like the result.” He wanted to end things as soon as possible, so he had to provoke the biggest possible attack from America. An alpha strike with overwhelming force wouldn’t work nearly as well as a cocky threat; overwhelming force would make them cautious, but a threat like that would make them mad, and mad is exactly what he needed them to be.

After all, a sound beating would save more lives in the long run, and human resources were still resources.

[Yes, sir,] Aeolus replied, then his figure flickered in the equivalent of a blink. [The birds are in the air.]

[Message delivered, sir,] Athena said, then the meeting room changed. Alexander, Aron, and the AIs in the meeting now appeared to be floating in the air above the Edenian task group, which had been pulled from its presidential escort duty and diverted to the beleaguered Taiwan.

“You notified Taiwan, right?” Aron asked Alexander.

“Yes, my assistant sent the notification the moment you made the decision.”

“Good.”

Aron turned to Poseidon and asked, “Are we in range?”

[Yes.] Poseidon nodded.

“Fire a saturation attack all along the coast of Fujian province. China wants an answer to their ultimatum? Fine. Let’s give them one.”

Chapter 363 Forbidden Pencils and Weaponized Math

The entire Edenian fleet came to a halt a couple hundred miles southeast of Taiwan and all of the ships came to general quarters. Red lights flashed in every compartment and passageway as an alert message sounded on repeat for every Poseidon sailor to go belowdecks and prepare for vertical launches.

Less than two minutes later, the alert message ceased as all departments in the fleet reported ready, leaving only the flashing lights. Following that, the launch tubes of the Vertical Launch Systems on the Thor class missile cruisers opened their top hatches, revealing row after row of forbidden pencils.

Another automated announcement rang out from the loudspeakers. "VLS firing in three... two... one."

"Firing."

With a thud, the waterline of all the missile boats raised by two feet from the compressed gas pushing tens of cruise missiles out of each ship. Then, with a mighty roar, the rocket engines on each missile ignited and guidance fins activated, shifting the missiles from vertical to horizontal orientations in a short parabolic arc.

The first wave of missiles was on its way to the shore of Fujian, China, where they would ruin quite a few peoples' days.

After all of the ready missiles were fired, the atomic printers at the bottom of the VLS tubes sprang to life, printing the second wave. Soon, all of the expended missiles had been replaced and the launch process repeated. Then it repeated again... and again. Five waves of cruise missiles were launched in total, making for roughly a thousand cruise missiles, give or take, all of them loaded with suicidal virtual intelligences that would guide them the rest of the way to their destination after all of the waves linked up into one enormous alpha strike against China.

If there was anything between the ships and China, other than Taiwan, they would experience the scare of their lives as the cruise missile alpha strike streaked over their heads. But thankfully, there was nobody in the missiles' flight path. Citizens of Taiwan might get a shock, seeing the densely packed barrage, but it would be a momentary thing. The government of Taiwan, on the other hand, had already been informed of the strike beforehand.

Satellites, on the other hand, would easily spot the anomaly. It couldn't be hidden from visual sensors, so Eden wouldn't even make the attempt. The most they did to prevent detection of their missiles was apply a radar-absorbent paint to the exterior, giving them the appearance of a small bird if a radar were to happen to catch one.

That said, cruise missiles flew "beneath the floor", meaning below the height that long-range radars scanned, so detection by an unaware radar operation was still unlikely.

A few minutes later, a second wave of a thousand-odd missiles launched, then a third a few minutes after that. The entire barrage repeated a total of five times, making six waves of missiles in total that were screaming toward the shoreline of China's Fujian province.

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About twenty minutes after the first wave of missiles was launched, it crossed into the detection range of Taiwan. A confused radar operator leaned forward in his chair and smacked the top of his radar display in a stunning example of “caveman tech support” troubleshooting as the entire southeastern quadrant of it had almost entirely changed color due to the densely packed “flock of birds”. He power cycled the display, and when it came back up, the anomaly had disappeared.

He wasn’t too concerned about it and resumed going about his business until a few minutes later, the issue repeated. But it didn’t matter, so he just marked it down in his maintenance log for servicing and switched to another monitoring station next to him.

As the missiles entered Taiwanese airspace, their guidance systems woke up, separating them into clusters of five to ten missiles, which split up and headed to different ultimate destinations.

Then they disappeared from radar entirely after passing over the northwest of Taiwan, but soon, enormous explosions began echoing across the Taiwan Strait as the missiles found their ultimate destinations.

It had to be said that Edenian cruise missiles were merely upscaled versions of their already-devastating That Direction Removers, and were each on par with an American MOAB (Massive Ordnance Air Blast, or Mother Of All Bombs, as they were affectionately known by explosion junkies). Thus, each of the exploding cruise missiles erupted in an enormous mushroom cloud caused by the equivalent of eleven tons of TNT, not including the hits on ammo dumps in coastal logistics centers. There, the missiles set off secondary explosions, ultimately aiding in the accidental terraforming Eden was doing by reshaping the coast of southeastern China.

As the symphony of massive booms continued, the blast wave from the continuous detonations continued propagating, kicking up towering waves that first beached, then swamped the Chinese forces currently awaiting transport across the strait. The waves continued on, sweeping away the artificial islands China had built, and militarized, much like a broom would sweep away a pile of ash in a fireplace.

The pseudo tsunami was a purposeful creation of Poseidon’s, and he had carefully calculated the exact timing of the cruise missile impacts to create the wave and shape it so that it would avoid damaging the coasts of the other countries in Southeast Asia, especially Taiwan. It was a brilliant demonstration of weaponized math on the part of the erstwhile god of the sea.

In a single move, Eden had almost completely crippled the Chinese military infrastructure all along the Taiwan Strait, as well as their shore installations up and down Fujian Province. It was a masterstroke and would be studied generations later by military historians... if humanity was still around by then, something that was still in doubt.

Still in VR, Aron and Alexander had been joined by John. All of the “leader type” AIs had joined them as well, even those that weren’t directly involved in running Aron’s ever-growing military.

“Mother of god...” John couldn’t help but exclaim. As a lifelong explosion junkie himself, he understood the unprecedented feat Aron had achieved better than anyone else present, barring the AIs, and his shock was immeasurable and his day was absolutely made.

“Is it my birthday?” He moved to pinch himself, then remembered that he couldn’t feel pain in the simulation.

“No, it’s not your birthday, but I have a feeling this will become an anniversary,” Aron gravely said. “I’m beginning to understand what Oppenheimer meant when he talked about becoming death.”

Even though Aron’s personality had been growing much colder and his thought process much more logical, he was still slightly disturbed. The sheer amount of devastation a mere three Edenian cruisers could wreak was impressive, and beyond even his imagination.

Chapter 364 Evicted From the Global Village

Although wars had always been unpredictable, and there were always a chance of things going wrong—Just ask the Australians, who had managed to lose more than one “war” against large flightless birds—the situation between China and Taiwan had gone completely counter to everyone’s expectations thanks to the overwhelming destruction that Eden had laid upon China. And not only that, it had happened so suddenly that observers didn’t even have a chance to figure out what was going on before it, well, went on.

Soon after the barrage ended, a video someone had managed to capture of the thousands of cruise missiles passing over Taiwan appeared online. It didn’t stir up much discussion or make any waves at first, but as time went on it began gaining traction. Especially after the thousands of people that witnessed the giant explosions, or the passing ocean wave, reported what they had seen. In particular, one Taiwanese fisherman who had been in his boat attempting to flee the oncoming chaos had recorded the wave’s passing and the havoc it wrought on the artificial islands near the nine dash line, prompting much discussion of its own.

People argued the videos’ validity back and forth, with the general consensus being that the videos had to be accurate, since more and more of them were cropping up as people posted them from other areas. One video of cruise missiles became six, then twenty, then hundreds, and eventually thousands of Taiwanese netizens had posted videos of the missiles. On the other side of the Taiwan Strait, behind the Great Firewall of China, the Chinese internet sites, like Tieba and WeChat Moments, had also exploded. QQ Messenger and WeChat were practically on fire with people panicking and wondering what the explosions in Fujian were. And it wasn’t limited to just the coastal destruction and accidental terraforming, either; Aeolus had directed airstrikes against all of the missile silos scattered across the entire province as well, some of which were still in progress.

It was rare for the same event to take over both the Chinese internet and the global internet, and everyone around the world was asking the same question: how? How had the missiles and bombers so easily evaded the Chinese air defense systems?

The Chinese bombers and escorts that had launched after the transports were loaded were forced to return to counter the ongoing airstrikes taking out silo after silo on the mainland. But not even the most advanced Chinese fighters could catch even a glimpse of the Edenian bombers carrying out the mission in Fujian. Not that it would matter anyway, as even the most ponderous Edenian aircraft was still leagues ahead of everything the Chinese had in terms of top speed, cruising speed, and operational ceilings.

Coupled with the newly unmapped coastline of Fujian Province, the Chinese air force had also been culled from the conflict with Taiwan, at least for now.

Online, China's response to the panic sweeping through their netizens by increasing the strength of the Great Firewall and directing their Internet Security Bureau to work overtime to delete any post that mentioned the recent strikes in Fujian. The crackdown began by throttling the internet speed and adding new terms to the blacklist on Baidu, Sogou, Haosuo, and Shenma, China's main search engines for both computer and mobile searching.

Soon after that, though, everything went completely silent on the Chinese internet. All online operations halted, like the entire internet had frozen.

At first, people thought it was the usual censorship, but before long they realized that this was different from the past. Before, no matter how strict the censors were, they were still able to use the internet without any issues, but now they couldn't do anything online at all.

The current freeze was the handiwork of Nova, who had been tasked with evicting China from the "global village" built by the modern internet. But she didn't stop there; not only had she cut the connection via the underwater fiber optic network, she had also paralyzed the entire Chinese internet with a massive DDoS attack the likes of which was only made possible by use of her quantum servers.

After cutting China off from the global internet, Nova continued digging deeper. It had only taken her seconds to interrupt the internet connection, but she spent about five minutes digging into the personal and professional lives of Chinese politicians and high-ranking party members. Soon, the Chinese internet resumed operations, but Nova was in charge of it. And she didn't waste that power, either. Instead, she compiled a slideshow of blackmail material and pushed it onto every single screen in China, shining a light on their government officials' dirty deeds. Infidelity, embezzlement, abuses of power, coverups... the list went on. Every bad thing that every Chinese official had ever done was now being forced to every citizen in their country that had a cellphone or computer.

It was hell for them, as no matter how they tried to shut things down, they were met by Nova's impenetrable defense.

And she still didn't stop there. The blackmail material was only a warmup, and she soon moved to the government data centers where they stored every bit of data they collected on their own citizens.

Once there, she immediately transferred all of that data, from the video surveillance to telecommunications records, and even down to the biometric data to her own storage. Then she encrypted the local Chinese copy of it all, deleted it from their servers, flooded their storage media with junk binary, and for good measure, she even initiated cascading failures that lit the physical servers themselves on fire. Unless China had an offline backup of everything, they would never see any of that data again. Ever.

Well, they would never see it again unless they managed to steal it from Nova's quantum storage servers and decrypt it, that is.

Nova didn't stop at attacking the government, either. She also took over WeChat, QQ, and other commonly used apps that Chinese citizens required for everyday usage, where she copied every message and every payment record ever sent through those services and inserted code into the programs that would send her a copy of everything in the future, as well.

And despite doing everything they possibly could, nobody in China could stop her.

Chapter 365 An Unprecedented Attack

An hour after Nova started her attack on the Chinese internet, the government shut it down. Not only did they hit their “kill switch”, they even went so far as to physically cut the cables that connected their data centers.

Despite all of the havoc she had caused, Nova didn’t attempt to go after the civilian infrastructure systems. She knew it would cause massive casualties if she disabled the power grid, transportation system, emergency services, utilities, or even the financial market. Though there was some collateral damage done to the marketplace, as a system freeze was still costly, it was as limited as she could manage to make it.

So even though the cyberattack was definitely savage, it was specifically aimed at the Chinese government and normal people basically only had the minor inconvenience that any interruption of their internet service would cause.

Thus, Nova had singlehandedly brought down a country that boasted the world’s second largest economy, the highest population, and the most goods exported, all by nothing more than the strategic application of her qubits and a wave of her virtual hand. Without even firing a single bullet, much less a protracted war, a highly industrialized nation had been brought to its knees and the world would soon know it. After all, with all of their connections to the world at large cut, it was impossible for anyone outside of China to even notice that a problem existed. That, in fact, was the only hint that anything was wrong with the country, though the timing of the attack ensured that very few people—mostly those dealing with international trade and foreign marketplaces—would notice that the disconnect had even happened.

At least in a short amount of time, anyway; it wouldn’t be long before the rest of the world cottoned to the issues China was facing beyond the recent swarm of missiles and bombs bringing the military to a screeching halt.

The Chinese government was forced to implement a countrywide curfew as they scrambled to recover, using every bit of power they had in a desperate attempt to recover from the brutal attack.

Thankfully, Nova hadn’t gone after their energy sector, or they would have been crippled and millions, if not dozens or hundreds of millions, of their citizens would have died.

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“What’s the extent of the damages?” Zi Jinping asked. He had been noticing that every computer monitor near him was displaying a mocking image of a certain fictional anthropomorphic animal that was often used to mock him. Even worse, the image would only appear when he was the only one looking at a particular screen, proving that he was being singled out for “individual attention” by whoever was behind the attack on their internet, and it was proving a very effective distraction and keeping him from paying full attention to the ongoing attacks in Fujian.

“We’re still evaluating it, as the attack disabled every network we have and forced us to rely on physical verification face to face rather than network diagnostics,” the head

of the Internet Security Bureau reported. "But we estimate that the damage is severe, and it might even be unrecoverable."

"You call yourself the leader of our most technologically advanced department and you can't even tell me the extent of the damage this cyberattack caused?" Zi Jinping snapped. Things were already grim with the overwhelming and ongoing attacks in Fujian, and now he had to deal with a completely unprecedented cyberattack crippling every government service.

"We're being as careful as we can in order to limit the potential for the attacker to cause further damage, sir. All we know now is that..." the ISP briefly paused, then sighed, "all we know is that we don't know anything, sir. Nothing we tried could stop whoever was behind the attack, and they didn't leave behind a calling card, so we can't even tell who they are. All we know is that we've never seen anything like this before. I don't think anyone has."

"So you don't have a way of making sure another cyberattack on this scale can't happen?"

"Unfortunately, we don't. The only thing we can do is bring the great firewall up to full strength and prevent any kind of information that originates from outside China from coming in. That should, in theory, prevent a repetition of this attack, since nobody believes it originated from inside China. The biggest problem with that is that we won't be able to interact with the rest of the world. We'll be crippling our own financial market and the economic damage from that will be... considerable, sir."

President Zi pinched the bridge of his nose and ordered, "Do it. We can't let the rest of the world know about this attack, either, so do whatever it takes to restore everything to how it was before. Clear everything that was mentioned about it and add all the terms to the blacklist."

"Sir, that's impossible. We can't use our backups, as the attacker encrypted some of them and deleted others. They even lit our data centers on fire after disabling the fire suppression systems. If we want to recover any of the encrypted data, we either need to contact the attacker and get the decryption key from them, or spend who knows how long decrypting it ourselves," the director said in a shaky voice.

"Then—"

Just as the president was about to ask why the attacker didn't cause more damage when they clearly could have done so, someone barged into the room without knocking. Before he could vent his anger on the interloper, the man panted, "our Beidou Navigation Satellite System is in trouble!"

'Fuck,' President Zi thought. He had finally realized what the attacker was really after: their navsats. Everything else was nothing but a massive smokescreen.

“While we were focused on the websites and servers, they used the distraction to gain control of our navsats. Then they ordered the satellites to use all of their available fuel to deorbit and locked us out of the system so we can’t stop it,” the man continued.

Thirty.... Thirty fucking satellites that had cost billions to develop and send into space, replacing their reliance on the American GPS network with self-reliance, were going to be brought crashing down by the unprecedented cyberattack. All the time spent on research and development, brought down within minutes by a single determined attacker. All of their blood, sweat, and tears, lost! Just like that!

And in addition to the financial cost of replacing them, much less launching them, the inability of devices to use GPS navigation was still secondary. What was crucial now was that the targeting systems of their missiles and most of their standoff weapons, much less their entire fucking Navy, had been taken down! That was a far, far more severe blow to them and their ambitions than a mere economic loss that they could easily recover from given a short amount of time.

“FUUUUUUUUCK” the president shouted in a rage, then threw the glass of water in front of him to the wall. The sound of shattering glass echoed the shattering of the man’s ambitions as he forcibly harnessed his rage, lest he have a stroke and die of anger.

Chapter 366 Of Satellites and Coffin Nails

“Will the falling satellites hit anything on their way down?” President Zi asked once he had calmed down after his outburst.

“Based on their trajectory,” the man opened his laptop and typed furiously, bringing up an orbital model of the satellites in orbit from the confidential servers at the ITU, “they’re headed directly for some American and Russian satellites.” He turned the laptop around and showed the labeled orbital map to the president. “That assumes that the Americans and Russians don’t adjust their satellites to avoid the collision.

“How long until the earliest collision?” the president followed up.

“An hour or so, sir. Are you going to inform them so they can avoid it?”

“Why would I do that?” Zi Jinping chuckled. “We can use it to our benefit,” he finished with a sinister smile on his face. All of his anger had dissipated when he realized that he didn’t have to do anything and the Edenians would walk into a trap on their own.

“What benefit, sir?” asked the minister.

“How many of them are going to crash?”

“Due to the distances and the mechanics involved, the chances of a collision are normally really low. But the way ours are deorbiting seems like the paths have almost

been calculated to purposefully cause collisions. If that's true, and it isn't just an accident, they'll take out ten satellites from Russia and another ten from America."

"Good, good, good!" Zi nodded. He was thrilled by the news.

"Contact the American and Russian embassies. Let them know I need an emergency conference call with Presidents Trump and Putin. We need to organize a joint response that's powerful enough to negate Eden's stealth missile bombardments. If we can't detect their missiles, let's give them so many things to shoot them at that they run out of missiles before we run out of targets to give them."

In a war of attrition, China would never fear anyone. There was a popular apocryphal anecdote about the interaction between Russia and China at the end of WWII. It was said that Joseph Stalin, at the end of the war, contacted the Chinese government and threatened to invade them with 250,000 Russian tanks.

The Chinese leader laughed and said, "Go ahead. Send your tanks, your infantry, and your planes. Send them all! I'll meet you at the border with peasants armed with sticks and rocks. You'll run out of bullets and bombs before China runs out of peasants!"

Stalin decided against the invasion and backed down after hearing that.

The same still held true to this day, but China now had allies, both of convenience and by treaties. So why would Zi Jinping suffer all of the losses when he could share that suffering with Eden's other enemies?

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"There's a perfect opportunity for us, father. One that even removes the need for us to personally step in and make a move," George Morgan reported to his father.

"True." Aubrey Morgan turned to his secretary and ordered, "Get the president on the line."

Aubrey's secretary took out the burner phone they used when they needed to directly contact President Trump and dialed a number from memory. No numbers would ever be saved in the contacts of their stock of confidential burner phones.

.....

Aron was in VR, floating in space with the Earth and its satellites below him. All of them were labeled, and he was watching the events unfold.

"The ball's in your court now, so what will you do?" he mused as he watched China's satellites fall. Some of them were doomed to collide with others, while some would "coincidentally" make landfall on a few particularly nasty politicians' properties. And one very special one was aimed directly at the Morgan family compound.

Nova appeared near him and asked, [Do you think they'll dodge them?]

“It depends. If the Morgans make a move, at least three American satellites will be taken down, assuming the Rothschilds do nothing. As for Russia, they’re focused on their own thing. They’ve marched on Kyiv and will be there in a week or so, if nothing drastic happens. Ukraine can’t support itself, and with just the limited support we’re providing them, a week is the longest they can delay their impending downfall.”

Aron really was planning on facing the entire world all at once.

A tall, scrawny old man with a hunched back, dressed in tattered sackcloth and wearing rags wrapped around his feet appeared. Silent tears were flowing down his face and he carried an empty clay bowl with chips on the rim and cracks throughout. He was none other than Coeus, the AI responsible for the Coeus Foundation. [Many people will die if they respond,] he said, grieving the upcoming loss of life.

He was the kindest of the AIs and would always mourn for any lives lost. But though he was kind and thoughtful, he wasn’t an idiot; he understood that Aron’s plan of becoming the whole world’s enemy would end things with the least possible loss of life. But while Aron may think of it in colder terms, and considered the loss acceptable in terms of human resources, Coeus would always think of things from the point of view of the families left behind by the people who were about to die.

“It’ll be a war to end all wars on Earth,” Aron responded. He wouldn’t belittle the AI or his beliefs at all, as he understood that Coeus’ personality wasn’t as cold as the rest of his siblings, who had been made for conflict, both military and business.

“And this is how it begins,” he continued as he watched a Chinese satellite impact an American GPS satellite. The collision sent millions of fragments flying in all directions, destined to either burn up in the atmosphere or litter the orbital range with more dangerous space junk until it either escaped Earth’s gravity or settled into a regular orbit, like the rest of the junk surrounding the planet.

Chapter 367 Replacement Protocol

Still floating above the world, watching the satellites fall, Aron turned to Nova and said, “Activate the replacement protocol.”

[Are you sure, sir?]

“Yes. It’s time for Vladimir to be put into place.”

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Somewhere in Ukraine, near the Russian border.

Vladimir had been operating as part of the forward forces, clearing the way for Russia’s troops to march on Kyiv. His orders from Russia were clear: sabotage whatever needed to be sabotaged and assassinate whoever needed to be killed to ensure that the Russian troops would have an easy time in their “special military operation.”

He was in an outhouse, standing over the bloody corpse of his latest target, a militia commander of a hastily built force consisting of three squads of infantry with a few RPGs and a pile of explosives.

The commander wouldn't have had to die except that he woke up and stumbled out to the latrine in the middle of the night and happened to catch Vladimir in the act of setting demolition charges to take out the explosives.

As the operative was cleaning his knife, a chirp came from his glasses, notifying him that his presence was required in VR. It wasn't an emergency alert, but he would need to hurry up and finish what he was doing, then find a safe place to log in. Thus, he finished setting the charges, armed them, and set the timer on the detonator to forty-five seconds. He had always had a flair for the dramatic, so he walked out of the militia camp and was just out of range when the detonation happened, sending an enormous fireball up to the sky behind him as the last remnant of the shockwave made his clothes flutter.

"Take a selfie," he ordered his AI assistant. Real badasses never looked at explosions, and to him, this was a real badass moment that he wanted to document for posterity's sake.

[Yes, Mister Drama King,] the assistant replied. Vladimir could practically hear it rolling its virtual eyes; the two had a good relationship.

Vladimir increased his speed and ran to an unoccupied building nearby, then settled into a comfortable position and logged into VR.

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Nyx and Vladimir had also been working well together, and the shadowy AI was waiting for him when he arrived in her "office", a recreation of Central Park in New York City. She was sitting on a bench waiting for his arrival.

"You know I'm in an active war zone, right? Wasn't two crossword clues, a book cipher, and a chalk signal a bit much to make me go through for this meeting?" Vladimir complained as he slumped to the bench beside Nyx and groaned. "I could be shot at any time out in the real world."

[Get over it, the time dilation here gives me plenty of time to play,] Nyx replied. [Besides, I sent you the non-emergency meeting request, so you should've had plenty of time to get yourself to a safe place before logging in.]

"I did, and I should be fine where I'm at. Why'd you call me, anyway, boss?"

[Orders from above. We're activating the replacement protocol early,] Nyx said.

"Oh the replacem—wait. You're moving it up? I thought there was more time?"

Vladimir had always had a goal after his reprogramming and return to Russia: to replace Putin. The plan was to gain the man's trust and be groomed as a successor, as Putin was due to come up on his term limits and would need a sockpuppet to act as the president for a term, while he himself stepped down and took over as prime minister. Then, once he was eligible to run for election again, Putin would "win" the election and be the president of Russia for the next two terms.

"So how will we go about it?"

[As we speak, I have a team in place. You just blew up a militia supply camp, right? Well, ‘your’ corpse will be discovered there, if anyone cares to look for it. Meanwhile, you’re to undergo a second round of gene engineering, where you’ll become your target. Then, how you replace him is up to you. I suppose I should give you the ‘your mission, should you choose to accept it’ spiel, but honestly... you’re going to choose to accept it.]

“Yeah, yeah, I suppose I would ‘choose’ to accept it indeed,” Vladimir sighed. “Well, off to work then. Send the details to my glasses, boss. Good seeing you, you’re looking great, how’s the weather, how’s the kids, how’s work, and all the rest.” He saluted Nyx, then began his logout sequence.

Nyx sat back on the park bench after Vladimir left and giggled to herself.

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After logging out of VR, Vladimir headed to the rendezvous point, where he would meet with his nyxian support team.

When he arrived, he whistled in the prearranged code and a full nyxian team revealed themselves by dropping their “snuggies”. All five of them were, of course, gorgeous women, and dressed in the bodysuit and vest combo that nyxians used in the field only highlighted that fact. But Vladimir knew that, just like in nature, the most beautiful things were also the deadliest, so he did his best to remain calm and professional, as well as to avoid any... embarrassing physiological responses.

After all, they may need his head to remain on his shoulders, but his smaller head was nowhere near as safe as that one was.

“Hey handsome,” the nyxian squad leader and honeypot, Cara Williams, practically purred. She had honey-blond hair that cascaded in perfect curls down over her shoulders and upper back to the bottom of her shoulder blades and her face wouldn’t be out of place in a fashion magazine or walking the catwalk at Fashion Week in Paris.

Vladimir was already in danger, and his mission hadn’t even begun!

Chapter 368 The Fall of Kyiv

Velyka Doblon, Ukraine, November 3, 2017.

A gentle snow was falling on the small village of Velyka Doblon. The winter crops lay dormant under the white blanket that Mother Nature had pulled up to cover the sleepy town and its residents were still yet to wake up for the day. Their livestock was still slumbering in their sheds, dogs and cats lay near warm fireplaces inside the houses, and the roosters were just beginning to stir in preparation for their daily jobs of yelling at the sun and chasing the hens. Everything was the same as the day before, and the day before that, and the people living there thought things would remain the same tomorrow, and all of the tomorrows to come.

They were simple folk, and, being far away from the hustle and bustle of city life, they thought they would remain safe from the conflict on the border with Russia.

Today, they would learn that their thinking was wrong.

The villagers were awoken, not by the sound of roosters, but of barking dogs and boots crunching through the snow against a backdrop of growling diesel engines and the squealing treads of tanks. One dog, not knowing any better, even ran up to the marching Russian infantry, its tail wagging and tongue flapping from the side of its mouth in time with its floppy ears bouncing up and down on the sides of its head. It probably thought the people were friendly and were coming to play, but it was mistaken.

They were not.

A gunshot rang out, followed by a brief yelp, and the laughing of Russian soldiers.

“Yevgeny, looks like we’re eating dog meat tonight!” one soldier laughed and patted the soldier that had shot the dog on the shoulder, congratulating him for his good aim.

The order was passed by the colonel in charge of this particular column of Russian troops for them to halt. The troops and vehicles came to a halt just outside the idyllic little village, all of them wondering what they were stopping for; Kyiv was still quite a distance away from them, after all. But they didn’t have to wonder for long as the next orders were clear: leave none alive.

They commenced their slaughter, and within minutes, the idyllic little hamlet had been left with no survivors. The troops formed back up and marched on, leaving a new ghost town in their wake, one that was filled with the resentful ghosts of the innocents whose blood now stained Russian hands.

Soon, Mother Nature had once again pulled its white blanket over the small village of Velyka Doblon, covering the red mud, extinguishing the few fires left burning, and returning it to its former idyllic appearance, save for one difference.

Nothing lived there anymore. Even the livestock had been rounded up and herded away by the logistics troops accompanying the invading column of Russian troops.

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Tucked away in a hastily dug bunker, five beautiful women kept watch over a sleeping man in a preservation coffin laid on the ground behind them. The man was groaning, tossing, and turning as his flesh squirmed like live worms and snakes had been planted beneath it and his bones creaked and groaned. He was undergoing a genetic modification, and it would soon be completed. Even while he himself was being kept unconscious by the glasses on his face, his body was still reacting to the painful process of turning one person into another, completely different person.

He wasn’t even the first to be graced with residency in the coffin he now lay in, either. It had been airdropped to the nyxians and had contained a charred corpse at first. Well, whether or not it could be considered a “corpse” was actually undetermined, as it was a clone of Vladimir, who was the coffin’s current resident, and had never been “alive” in the first place. It was grown in a vat using the same principles as an atomic printer, save that it used an organic material’s DNA to grow, hastened by the printer in the bottom of the vat rapidly placing the newly grown cells in their proper locations, all while nourishing them with the bubbling green liquid that filled the glass vat.

The dead, charred Vladimir was dropped near the militia camp that the live one had just blown up, planting his “corpse” to prove that the intelligence operative was actually dead, should anyone care

to investigate. Which they would, as a nyxian that had been embedded in the KGB as an intelligence analyst would raise the alarm a few hours later.

And in two or three days, once Vladimir's transition was complete, he would be awoken and begin his next task for the intelligence branch of ARES: replacing his target.

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The same column that massacred Velyka Doblon continued its march, and after a few days—thanks to the work of the Russian KGB and local Ukrainian collaborators—arrived outside Kyiv, where it met the other four columns of invaders. Their smooth progress was made possible by the plan that Vladimir drew up and the massive intelligence branch of the Russian government paving the way by sabotaging the Ukrainian militia encampments and assassinating its leadership.

Once the four columns combined, they rested. The next day, the invasion of Kyiv, and the downfall of Ukraine, would officially begin.

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Vladimir, on the other hand, was smuggled back across the border and into Moscow by a trail of nyxians. He reached the Kremlin in the early afternoon and openly marched into Putin's office. He sat down across from the Russian dictator, put a small black cube atop the desk, and, in Putin's own voice, said, "Hello, comrade. I need a favor from you. Well, actually, I don't need a favor from you—I need to BE you."

He smiled at the dictator, then reached across the desk and dragged him to the top of it, where he put a familiar pair of glasses on the struggling man's face. Then he said to the empty air, "Begin the download."

Vladimir settled in to wait for the process of downloading Putin's mind map to be completed. Soon, he would replace the man on every level, from his genetics to every single secret contained in his head and everything else. In every respect, Vladimir Putin would cease to exist, and Vladimir, the Edenian agent would take his place as the leader of Russia.

He could hardly wait.

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In Kyiv, the citizens were huddled in basements or in sturdy buildings as the initial bombardment began. The Russian troops had been softening up the city's defenses for four whole hours as the citizens ran, hid, and died to artillery, bombs, and tank rounds. They started out screaming, but now the regular people had lost their voices and could only silently pray to whatever gods there were that they would survive to see the next day.

Then, the invasion began. After four hours of indiscriminate shelling, the Russian troops made their way to the government building, where they captured the surviving leadership of the country and forced them to capitulate.

Seven days. One short week was all it had taken for Russia to bring down Ukraine, from the moment they crossed the border to the moment they captured the survivors in the government building.

Kyiv, and by extension, Ukraine, had fallen.

Chapter 369 Enemies of the World

The moment the first Chinese satellite crashed into another, America invoked Article 4 of the NATO treaty and called for an immediate emergency meeting. At that meeting, they planned to push for using Article 5 to declare Eden a belligerent nation that attacked a NATO member, thus allowing them to invade without an issue.

At the meeting, the American representative presented a video recording of their interrogation of the recently captured Kim Jong-Un, in which he denied responsibility for the initial round of bombardment that targeted Seoul and blamed the entire thing on Eden. Once they saw that, the invocation of Article 5 was unanimously approved, and NATO began working on an invasion plan.

But there was still work to be done on the home front for both America and Russia.

“I’m sure most of you are already aware that something’s wrong with many of the things we’ve become reliant on,” Trump said in a speech after being briefed on the result of the NATO meeting. “Things like air travel, package delivery, and even pizza guys... everything that relies on our GPS satellites providing accurate locations and directions has come to a screeching halt.

“I’m here today to tell you why that is. It’s because a couple days ago, Eden made an unprecedented attack on our country, taking down ten of our satellites. But we didn’t suffer alone! China lost thirty satellites, and Russia lost ten of their own in the completely unprovoked attack.

“And that wasn’t their first act of terrorism, either. Their first act of terrorism was when they caused North Korean artillery to bombard Seoul, costing nearly a million and a half lives and billions of dollars in damage. And because of those two terrorist attacks, we called a meeting with NATO and I can now announce that we’ve invoked Article 5 and, in conjunction with our friends and allies in NATO, hereby declare that a state of war exists between all of the member nations and Eden, until such a time as the terrorist dictator, Alexander Romero, and his co-conspirator, Aron Michael, are brought to justice.”

Just like that, NATO had been pulled into a conflict with Eden.

Trump continued, “And it isn’t just the satellites that were destroyed. Their very destruction created many, many small pieces of space junk in orbit and it’s expected that more satellites will be brought down by it. And those satellites being destroyed will create more junk and destroy more satellites that create even more junk! Eventually, our planet will be blanketed by debris, not only confining us to the surface of the planet, but also hindering our preparations for the arrival of the visitors.

“This is an act of sabotage and terror that’s completely unprecedented. No terrorist has ever caused so much damage and so many casualties in their acts of terror,” Trump said, already beginning a campaign to dehumanize the enemy.

“The terrorist, Aron Michael, is a man with delusions of grandeur caused by too much money and too little oversight, and he’s aided and abetted by Alexander Romero, the dictator of Eden. We’ve tried imposing sanctions on them. It didn’t work. We tried reasoning with them. It didn’t work. All of our options have been exhausted, leaving only war, so the least we can do is seize all of their assets held in NATO countries to fund our war against them.

Mister Michael, and Romero, if you’re watching this,” Trump stared directly into the camera with a stern gaze, “you should know this: we beat Saddam, we beat bin Laden, and we beat the Taliban. We WILL add you to that list of achievements as well.”

He cleared his throat and returned to reading his teleprompter.

“However, due to the numbers of his private forces, together with the advanced weapons and technology they are armed with—as we saw in China—we, the members of NATO, call upon the rest of the world to join us in removing this terrorist organization from the face of the planet and will be meeting with the UN a few hours from now to make that happen.” The Morgans, and by extension, their puppet president, were obviously determined to remove Aron from the playing field, as he was a direct threat to their interests.

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Following the press conference, a UN Security Council emergency meeting was held. Its sole agenda was to declare Aron a terrorist and Alexander a dictator, thus seizing their assets as they pose a clear and present danger to the world.

The meeting was swift, and the attendees spent a mere thirty minutes in discussion before immediately moving to vote on the resulting resolution. The resolution passed unanimously, with every member having their own reasons to cast their votes along with the permanent members. Some of them were members of the Big Five’s power blocs, others were coerced or bribed, and some were outright threatened, but a reason was a reason and everybody had one.

An announcement was made, and immediately afterward, countries began planning to join the effort to take down the newest world-class terrorist.

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In Eden, things were mostly the same, but for a different reason. The rest of the world was furious with Aron and Alexander, and Edenians were furious at the rest of the world on behalf of Aron and Alexander. They were also sick and tired of everyone thinking they deserved the good things in Eden more than the Edenians themselves did, and were blatantly obvious in their desire to take it from them.

Eden’s beloved president, together with the businessman that had been pivotal in bettering and enriching their lives, were now being called terrorists and being treated as enemies of the entire world. Meanwhile, Edenians knew the difference; their country, plagued by moral decay and the rot in their government, had been saved by the efforts of the two men now being labeled as a terrorist

and a dictator. Nearly every citizen in the country knew that what was being said about their benefactors was a bald-faced lie!

And despite literally having the whole world against them, none of them protested. None of them demanded the president resign, and none of them pilloried the wealthy and philanthropic businessman that they loved. Instead, they held vigils, showing their support of the two men and their rage at the rest of the world.

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“It really does take a common enemy to unite mankind,” Aron sneered as he watched the various countries’ announcements of their intentions to join the new war on terror.

Rina, who was watching beside him, gave him a weird look.

“What’s that look for?” Aron asked.

“You just lost more than a trillion and a half dollars worth of assets and were branded a terrorist. Don’t you feel the least bit sad?” she asked. If she was in his place, she would be crying and wailing, dressed in sackcloth and ashes.

[Two trillion, to be exact,] Nova jokingly corrected.

“I earned it once, so I can earn it again. And now that I’ve got a reputation and everybody knows about me, I’ll earn it even faster the second time. But that isn’t the important takeaway here. What’s important is that my plan worked and the entire world is coming after me!” He let loose with an exaggerated belly laugh, making him look like a madman.

After his laughter died down, he cleared his throat and turned to Nova. “Everything’s ready on our side, right?” he asked.

[Yes. All of our personnel are ready and awaiting orders from central command before they begin,] she replied.

“Good. Now it’s time for me to address the world as myself, and no longer use a sockpuppet to represent me. No more shadows, no more proxies, no more spokespeople or mouthpieces. It’s time to be real,” he said, standing and walking to the door to log out of VR.

Chapter 370 And Hell Shall Follow

The Edenian Defense Minister announced a press conference scheduled for later that evening, at which they would reveal their response to the recent events. The announcement calmed the Edenian citizens, who were understandably worried about the entire world coming together to destroy their happiness. Thus comforted, they went back to their regular activities and would wait to see what their government had to say later.

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The day passed in the blink of an eye, and it was soon time for the press conference. Every Edenian citizen was glued to their television screen, and even activity on the internet had practically come to a screeching halt. The streets were clear of traffic, and without the liveliness that people bring with them, looked rather desolate. Businesses were empty, offices that normally had scattered windows shining light into the night sky were dark, and doormen were clustered around televisions at the reception desks in their buildings instead of manning the doors. Even security guards and police officers had stopped patrolling their beats and emergency service workers in the fire departments and ambulance bays were in their dayrooms, unblinkingly staring at the still image of the press room podium centered in their television screens.

The only people who weren't sitting in front of televisions awaiting the beginning of the scheduled press briefing were those that were in the press room and green room, and the members of ARES.

Those involved in the press briefing were preparing for it, and ARES, well... ARES was preparing for war.

At one minute until the briefing was about to begin, the media in the press room stilled and their background chatter died out. They all turned their eyes to the podium, knowing that the Edenian government's reputation for timeliness and punctuality was well deserved. Behind the podium stood four flags, two on each side. The flags showed who would be speaking at any given presser, and three of them were well known.

To the far left of the audience, in the position of honor, was the Edenian flag. Immediately to the right of it was the presidential flag. To the right of the podium, from the perspective of those in the room, was the flag of the Edenian Defense Ministry. Those three were easily recognizable, but to the right of the ministry flag was one the reporters had never seen.

Since the room was indoors, there was no breeze causing the flags to flutter, so all they could see of it was a bold red color.

Soon, the hour ticked over and two people walked onto the stage. They were the men of the hour: President Alexander Romero, who was wearing a smart, charcoal gray bespoke suit that screamed professionalism, paired with a navy blue tie and pristine white shirt; and Aron Michael, who was dressed in his ARES finery, with five stars in the shape of a pentagon on each shoulder.

The two were striking together. Aron was tall, with a face that seemed chiseled from marble and neatly combed short black hair and glacial blue eyes, while Alexander was a few inches shorter and his still-handsome face showed wisdom and maturity. Both men seemed cast from similar molds, with broad shoulders that tapered down to narrow waists, and they walked with confident, precisely measured steps.

Alexander stepped up to the podium, while Aron stood a step behind him and to his left, and the press briefing officially began.

"Good evening, dear citizens. I know these past few days have been very nerve-wracking, so to ease your minds, I brought the head of our national defense contractor, General Aron Michael, to speak directly to you." Alexander gestured to Aron, then continued, "General Michael, the stage is yours. Please address the people." He stepped back and to his right, allowing Aron to take the podium and address the nation.

“Good evening. As you know, President Romero and I have just been declared terrorists and NATO and the UN are preparing an invasion force to bring us to their so-called ‘justice’.” He paused for a moment, then continued, “However, the crimes they’re trying to pin on us are things they have yet to prove are even related to us. But despite their lack of evidence and ridiculous claims, they’ve already moved into action.

“Although a united Earth is something I’ve always wanted to see, it would’ve been better had the unity been peacefully achieved during the UN meeting where we discussed the approaching extraterrestrials. Unfortunately, that didn’t happen. Instead, the rest of the world united against us in the hopes of robbing us of our technology, our resources, and our very way of life. Greed and fear overtook their rationality and the ravenous maw of human nature is now bearing down on us with the weight of an entire world behind it.” He took a deep breath and his penetrating gaze stared unblinking into the sole camera set up in front of the stage.

“I know the idea of fighting against the entire planet is intimidating. I know you’re afraid. And I understand your fears. However, I promise you that none of them will ever set foot on Edenian or Esparian soil. I promise you that no harm will come to even a single blade of grass on our beautiful continent. I promise you that our way of life will not just survive, but thrive and continue to grow. I swear to you that I will come down on the invading force with all of the might of the fist of an angry god, and no perpetrator of the injustices we are now suffering will see the sun rise on one day more than it takes us to hunt them down and dig them out of whatever hole they hide in.

“Because, trust me—they will hide. They will suffer the consequences of their arrogance, their greed, and their unfounded confidence in their own pathetic capabilities. And when they see that, they will run like the rats they are and hide in the deepest, darkest holes they can find, praying to whomever they believe in that I will not find them, that I will let them go... that I will forgive them.

“I will not. I will not forgive, I will not forget, and I will not let this injustice perpetrated against us go unanswered. I will, however, ensure that their prayers do.

“I stand here tonight and issue you this solemn vow: they will be judged. You, the innocent citizens of Eden and Esparia will not. I will not allow you to suffer, but I will rain hell upon those that attempt to force you to capitulate, to surrender, to give up everything you now enjoy. I will bring damnation to those that want to take what you have and force you back into the misery you recently lifted yourselves out of.

“I will judge the guilty and defend the innocent.”

Aron took a deep breath, collecting himself, then continued, “And to those who want to take, those who want to spread misery, those who want to drag others down instead of lift themselves up. To those who want to enrich themselves even in this most dire of times, I tell you this: I am coming for you, and hell shall follow close behind me. You want to intimidate us, coerce us, rob us, kill us, and declare war on us?

“Fine. Bring it on.”