

Tech System 381

Chapter 381 Fireworks And Blankets

One by one, satellites were destroyed. Hundreds of thousands of sharp shrapnel bits flew chaotically through the space in orbit, furthering the mess with each satellite destroyed. The satellites broke apart into large chunks, and those chunks impacted each other, knocking off smaller and smaller fragments until they homogenized into a single swarm of tiny shrapnel moving around the planet at orbital velocity, completely uncontrolled.

The destruction in orbit continued apace, finally creating a deadly blanket that covered the entire planet. The promise of space had, at least temporarily, been denied to the citizens on Earth's surface.

It was even visible to citizens, as anywhere night fell, a gorgeous meteor shower lit up the night sky. And the day seemed dim as the sun's rays were scattered by the mostly metallic shrapnel speeding unimpeded around the planet. The equatorial areas of Earth, in particular, seemed especially gloomy and dim, a comparison only made more obvious by the normally sunny days they enjoyed as a general rule.

And wherever it was dawn or dusk, a gorgeous aurora was visible, backlit by the brief flashes of light that looked like fireworks. Even in the worst destruction, there would always be beauty.

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Every media network around the world was reporting on the situation, even those in Eden and Esparia. Around the world, public opinion had soured even further on the two developing nations, and even Panoptes was struggling to manage the situation on Pangea. Eden had truly become the world's enemy, and there were very few that stepped forward to defend them from the flood of public opinion now.

Everyone believed that Eden was lashing out in a futile rage, attempting to wreak as much havoc as they could before their demise, as nobody but Edenians and Esparians were aware yet that the coalition fleets had been intimidated into silence and an entire American carrier strike group had been effectively destroyed. Nobody but Aron and his AIs would ever be bold enough to livestream entire battles and commentate them like they were a low-stakes sporting event instead of a life-or-death struggle between nations.

And now, thanks to the "terrorists" of Eden, every service that relied on a satellite connection was now simply gone. Even the internet was struggling to cope, with freezing and lag being more common than stable connections. After all, satellites were meant to function as one machine, not millions of pieces of what used to be a machine.

The Hubble telescope, military satellites, spy satellites, communication satellites, and navigation satellites, among others, were now nothing more than small pieces of space junk and a hazard to anything that attempted to enter orbit.

The internet was only the first to suffer from the destruction, but it was shortly followed by the artificial bubble created by capitalists in space-related industries. A few hours ago, investors still had hopes of hitting a jackpot if the companies they invested in created a revolutionary, and useful,

new product. But now that news broke about the international space station and everything else in low earth orbit being turned into an unavoidable and deadly space hazard, rendering the space industry earthbound, well... those hopes came crashing down around investors' shoulders. The stock market immediately crashed as the space bubble burst and trillions of dollars of investments from around the world simply vanished like smoke in a wind tunnel. Regulatory bodies were forced to step in and halt the rapidly falling markets, but the damage had already been done at that point.

Eden had struck, and the world was no longer the same as it was before.

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“And there’s the justification we need,” President Trump growled after news of Eden destroying satellites reached him. Though it was an excellent *casus belli* for escalating the war between the coalition and Eden, he was still less than thrilled about the damage to the economy. Especially since his backers, the Morgans, would now be constantly howling for blood behind him, and that would definitely impact his quality of life.

Not to mention his approval numbers. Though they may have dramatically spiked when he declared war on Eden, they would definitely rebound and fall even further after news of how things were actually going for the allied nations inevitably leaked. After all, if you truly want to keep a secret, ensure that only one person knows it. And with 193 other “people” in the coalition, it would be impossible to keep the secret for much longer; the only hope he’d ever had was a rapid and overwhelming win at the outset.

September 11th and the war on terror had shown what happened to presidents who failed to deliver on the fast resolution to wars fared.

“Contact every nuclear power and invite them for a conference call in an hour. I want heads of state on the line, not just ambassadors and underlings. It’s time for us to reduce our nuclear stockpiles,” he ordered, surprising everyone in the situation room.

They had all thought that, with the overwhelming force they had at hand, trampling Eden would be as easy as falling out of bed. But they were wrong. Thus, while it was still early yet, the decision to escalate to nuclear weapons didn’t exactly strike them as unreasonable. Still, the procedures must be followed, for posterity’s sake if nothing else.

“Are you positive, sir?” General Mattis asked, his tone grave.

“What better time to act than now? They have yet to attack our forces at home, so none of our systems are out of commission yet. Plus, we don’t have enough stockpiled ourselves, so we need everyone to contribute. They’ve already shown us their missile defense capability, and that was just their fleet. Who knows what they have protecting their borders?” Trump explained, feeling slightly exasperated that anyone had the gall to question him at all.

“I meant, are you sure you want to escalate to nukes, sir?” General Mattis asked again.

Trump slammed the conference table he was sitting at. “Are you questioning me!? Just do what I fucking told you to do already! Who’s the president here, you or me? It’s me! I’M the president of the United States of Fucking America! I’M in charge! So go do your goddamn job or I’ll take it away from you and give it to someone who damn well knows how to fucking listen and follow direct orders!” he screamed, his face purpling in rage.

He panted for a while after his outburst, then clenched his fists and visibly calmed himself. He sat back down and, as if he hadn’t just exploded, said, “Also, prepare a speech for me to use after we nuke Eden. I’ll need to explain the situation and publicly feel sad bla bla bla. You know what to do.” A sinister smile crossed his face. He felt nothing at the thought of the losses the Edenians were about to suffer. After all, they were just peasants from a third-world shithole that was half a world away from him, and he was the leader of the free world. So why should he mourn peasants dying any more than he mourned the ants he stepped on or the flies he swatted?

Chapter 382 Political Theater At Its Finest

On the warfront in the Pacific Ocean, the battle had come to a stalemate. The coalition forces had stalled in their advance, shocked both by the effective missile defense put up by the Edenian fleet and the broadcast of the EV Heidrek crippling the Carl Vinson carrier group.

The fleets that had come on strong and in high spirits were now at a complete loss. They had been ordered to sink all Edenian vessels and attack the mainland, disgorging thousands of troops from amphibious landers under the protection of naval missiles and coalition airstrikes. And due to the complicated situation in their chain of command, they had effectively become a complete nonissue for the time it took their leadership to discuss a countermeasure, all while under the added stress of facing the overwhelming Edenian ships.

The stalemate didn’t last long, though, as new orders came down from high command. The new order was to retreat to a rally point and launch a retaliatory missile strike against Eden’s satellites in orbit. It was political theater at its finest; nobody thought the retaliation would be effective at all, and everyone thought it would be an enormous waste of money for no gain, but the politicians that issued the orders didn’t care. They had to be seen to do something, at least, and a retaliation for the loss of their satellites was that “something”.

Thus, the paralyzed coalition fleet soon regained its head and reversed course, heading for a spot on the equator to the east of Esparia while keeping a close watch on the opponents they were leaving in their wake. The sailors jokingly comforted themselves with the old saw, “we aren’t retreating, we’re attacking in another direction!” It had the benefit of technically being true, as well, so the sailors’ morale rose higher the closer they came to their destination.

Soon, they reached their destination and, in high spirits, another all stop order was transmitted to the fleet.

After coming to a halt, the fleet was brought back to general quarters and an order to clear the decks was passed down. The missile-armed ships in the fleet separated themselves from the rest of the

vessels, and the entire fleet spread out, so as to avoid catching other ships in the wake of their attacks.

Once the decks were clear and the fleet had scattered, alarms rang out in every ship as VLS tubes opened, preparing their space-capable munitions to be launched. The alarms cut out, leaving only the red flashing lights in every compartment of every ship of the fleet, then they were replaced by a countdown.

“Three... two... one.... Firing.”

With a loud roar, thousands of missiles began their climb to orbit, headed on intercept courses that would wreak the same level of havoc among the Edenian satellite network as the Aeolus Air Force’s alpha strike had wreaked upon the rest of the world’s modern conveniences.

It only took two minutes for the fastest missiles to reach orbit, where they were immediately met with the hundreds of thousands of pieces of what used to be a functioning satellite network. The shrapnel shredded the first three hundred missiles, creating more shrapnel that joined the swarm of metal that was already in orbit.

The shredding continued as more and more missiles were destroyed, but eventually, seven missiles, through sheer luck, found openings in the layer of destruction and passed through. Over a thousand missiles had been launched, and seven of them made it through. The ratio was incredibly low, but those seven remaining missiles somehow remained on course to impact the Edenian satellites that had earlier moved to medium earth orbit.

They were relying on the surviving satellites, like the geosynchronous GPS satellites and the higher-orbital spy satellites to find their targets. After all, they obviously couldn’t rely on the fragments that remained in low earth orbit. Even so, the amount of electronic warfare in the higher orbits was still prohibitive, so three of the seven missiles ran out of fuel for terminal maneuvering and detonated prematurely. The force of the detonation, even in vacuum, was enough to clear swathes of shrapnel from the new “shredder blanket” in low earth orbit, but alas... there were simply no more missiles to take advantage of those gaps, and they soon closed.

Then, just as the four surviving missiles began their terminal maneuvers, aiming to create large clouds of shrapnel that would begin a second domino effect in orbit, the satellites that they were targeting began rising to a higher altitude in their orbital paths. The missiles, being reliant on programming that had been done prior to launch, detected that they had reached their target and exploded, creating clouds of shrapnel as planned.

Unfortunately, the targets of those missiles simply passed above the shrapnel clouds, leaving them far behind and suffering absolutely no damage whatsoever.

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Aron, now sitting in his command center in VR listening to the recorded last words of the astronauts aboard what used to be the International Space Station, paused the recording and looked at the main screen in the command center. It was showing the attempted retaliatory strike by the coalition fleet from beginning to end.

He couldn't hold back his smirk as he said, "I wonder how much longer it'll take them to escalate to the final phase."

[Not much longer, I think,] Nova replied.

"Shall we encourage them?" Aron mused. He thought for a moment, plans and counterplans flashing through his thoughts, then said, "No. They're already doing exactly what I want them to, and as they say, you should never stop an enemy when they're intent on making a mistake."

[True, sir. Want to listen in on their meeting? Our replacement is already in on it.]

"No. I have... more important things to listen to right now," he replied, unpauseing the recording he had been listening to earlier.

"Mom, dad... Sabrina.... I'm not going to be able to come home like we planned. Some... some things happened and I... well.... I'm sure you'll see it on the news. I'm being brave, dad. I'm really so... so happy that I had you and mom and Sabby in this life. And if there's a next life, I hope to be your family again...."

The recordings went on, and Aron listened to every last one of them.

Chapter 383 Everyone With Their Own Agendas

While the coalition fleet was headed toward their launch coordinates, a secret meeting of eight global leaders was taking place via conference call. They were discussing a crucial matter that would change the global landscape, both literally and figuratively.

"So you want to send everyone's entire nuclear arsenal to deal with Eden? You know you're risking nuclear winter by doing that. Plus, my science advisor says it'll affect the tides and weather forever if we wipe out an island chain the total size of Australia. Besides, did you forget that just Russia and the US alone have more than enough nukes to use on them?" Putin asked, adjusting the reading glasses he had added to his wardrobe a few weeks earlier.

"That won't be a problem," Trump replied. "We think they'll take out more than 70% of anything we send them, if not more. And even if a third of our nukes get through, we can always activate the kill switch on some of them. Besides, even if we don't kill most of what slips through, the worst that'll happen is a few tsunamis wiping out countries none of us give a shit about. You know it, I know it, everybody knows it. Trading a few countries nobody cares about for Eden is a good deal, I'm telling you."

Once Trump's translator finished translating, Putin replied, "But we don't really want them completely destroyed, though, no?" A mischievous smile flashed across his face as he spoke.

"No, no, no, we don't want that. We need their tech to be recoverable, after all," Emanuel Macron said in heavily accented English. Though he was the only one that

said it out loud, everyone on the conference call was absolutely thinking the same thing.

“Look... I know some of you are afraid of using nukes because you think your citizens will react poorly, but do you think those same people would care about nukes when Eden’s soldiers are slaughtering them? Of course they won’t! And either way, they won’t vote for your reelection whether you use them or not. If you use them, they won’t vote for you because you used them. If you don’t use them, they won’t vote for you because they’ll be dead. Your only hope of keeping your political careers now is if you bring Mr. Michael’s advanced technology back to your countries,” Benjamin Netanyahu said. He planned to use Israel’s entire nuclear arsenal without holding back in order to increase his pull in the political world. After all, nobody would find out if he used everything he had, and they’d assume he kept a decent number in reserve. That way, the belief that he still had nukes would deter other countries from nuking him. It would be a risk, but he was practically salivating at the possibility of being able to do anything he wanted to do without risking retaliation, not to mention being among the first to choose from the spoils of war.

Ram Nath Kovind, the newly elected president of India, chimed in, “We need time to prepare. And at the same time, we need to sign an agreement to prevent any of us from leaving behind stockpiles of nuclear weapons or using this opportunity to attack each other. If anyone violates the agreement, they will become the common enemy of the entire coalition, not just the countries whose leaders are on this conference call.”

Mamnoon Hussain, the president of Pakistan, merely verbally scoffed at the suggestion. “Fine, fine, whatever you say. Not like a piece of flimsy paper ever stopped you in the past, so Pakistan will sign the agreement but I’ll personally ensure that there’s someone keeping an eye on you all.”

“Of course China absolutely agrees,” Zi Jinping said. “We will be the first to sign this agreement and the first to enforce it if enforcement becomes necessary.” When it came to politics and power games, he would never trust anyone, so he would be the first to hold back a stockpile of nuclear weapons. After all, everyone was going to anyway, and the agreement he had just proposed would be nothing more than a polite fiction that would only fool the gullible.

He came from a country where political power came not from the support of citizens, but by being ruthless and savvy enough to win the constant internal struggles in the ruling party of the country, so his thought processes were slightly different from the rest of those on the conference call. They were, at least on the surface, democracies. And democracies had to care about the opinions of the proletariat voters who, Zi Jinping believed, should not hold any power or authority at all. The reason his country was so strong was because they kept people aligned to a strict hierarchy where everyone was content to remain in the places the government had determined were the best for them. Even the capitalists in China were the same; if any one of them were to get any funny ideas, they would be ruthlessly slapped back down among the masses and suppressed.

Eden, in fact, was like that. If the entire world was to be compared to a communist state, Eden would be the upstart capitalist attempting to make waves. It was up to the world to slap them back down into the mud where they belonged, then strip them of their assets and redistribute them for the good of the ruling party. That thought process was exactly why China was so willing to be the first country to betray the fledgling republic of Eden in the beginning, and so far, their schemes had been wildly successful beyond their most optimistic estimates.

None of them knew, after all, that they were all simply monkeys dancing in Aron's palm, or that he had predicted every single move the entire world was now making with almost perfect accuracy. Had they known that, things might have proceeded along a completely different track, because what mortal would dare to spit in the face of a walking god?

But unfortunately for them, they had been kept in the dark.

Occasionally missing content, please report errors in time.

Chapter 384 Cry Havoc...

The moment the conference call ended, work began on drafting the agreement proposed by the president of India. Since time was tight, they could only afford a few revisions to accommodate one demand from each of the leaders, making the process highly abbreviated and incredibly fast. From the end of the meeting to the agreement being signed by the ambassadors of each of the eight remaining nuclear powers.

The signing itself was seen as of monumental importance, and as such, the Pakistani president's demand had been the easiest to incorporate in the agreement. Unlike China, which wanted the technological blockade imposed by the west removed, or India, who wanted territorial concessions along the India-China border, the only thing Pakistan had requested was that the signing be held in Aiwan-i-Saddar, the house of their president.

The United Kingdom wanted Brexit to be expedited and the negotiations to go in their favor, the United States wanted to place military bases in the other seven countries involved, France wanted the UK and US to publicly acknowledge the French Resistance's efforts in WWII, Israel wanted the other seven nations to publicly acknowledge their rights in the Gaza Strip, and Russia wanted the sanctions imposed on them due to the Russo-Ukrainian war lifted.

Once everything had been completed and triplechecked, the ambassadors from each nation, having been granted the delegated power to sign the new accord, gathered in the Aiwan-i-Saddar and, with a minimum level of pomp and circumstance, signed it.

Once the accord was signed, the nuclear powers immediately got to work.

All eight countries' nuclear arsenal keepers had long been on their highest alert and the tension in the air in those countries, or at least their halls of power, was so thick it could practically be cut by a knife. The tension had ratcheted up so high, in fact, that despite being purposefully kept unaware, the entire world felt a sense of oncoming dread. It was almost like a dormant fortunetelling gene had awakened in humanity's DNA, warning them of a potential oncoming disaster.

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Washington DC, midnight.

President Trump was in the situation room, the “nuclear football” open and resting on the conference table in front of him. A cord stretched from the big, black briefcase to the phone handset in his hand as he read from a card pulled out of the case.

"Tango, Sierra, Victor, Foxtrot...."

"Authorization received, Mr. President. Standby for final confirmation."

A few minutes later, the voice on the other end of the phone said, "Authorization confirmed, Mr. President. Launch sequence initiated." The call immediately ended; the launch sequence had been initiated and could no longer be stopped.

The same process, though with different steps, was also happening in China and the other six nuclear powers. One by one, the launch process in each country was initiated.

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Somewhere in the Indian Ocean, on the bridge of one of the UK's Vanguard class submarines.

"Bring us to firing depth," the captain ordered in a heavy tone. He had received an order that he'd hoped to never receive in his lifetime from the admiralty.

"Aye, captain," the helmsman replied, then began the process of ascending the sub.

While the sub was ascending, the captain began the firing sequence. He first informed his first officer, then the two pulled the case from the captain's safe. Opening it with both of their keys, they pulled out a plastic card that contained a slip of paper with the authorization codes for nuclear launches on it. The captain, under the witness of his first officer, weapons officer, and the coxswain, began reading the code from the case as the first officer checked it against the code that had been transmitted to them.

Once the code had been verified as valid by all three officers and the enlisted coxswain, the weapons officer returned to his station and brought up the separate system that would program the nukes' targets.

"How many missiles are to be armed, captain?" he asked.

"The order says all of them, lieutenant commander." Large beads of cold sweat were trickling down the captain's forehead and spine. Even though he wasn't the one making the decision, his actions still weighed heavily on his very soul.

"Target?" the weapons officer asked, his voice cracking on the question. Never in his life would he have expected to be the one to fire his full payload of nuclear missiles dry.

"Eden, lieutenant commander. Coordinates are on your console," the captain answered.

The coxswain received a call to a handset on the bridge. "Understood," he said, then hung the phone handset back in its cradle. "All trident missiles are loaded and armed, awaiting final order, captain," he reported.

A heavy silence settled on the bridge as everyone turned their gazes to the captain, waiting for him to give the final order.

After more than thirty seconds passed, the captain ordered, "Fire, and may god have mercy upon our unworthy souls."

"Three... two... one..." the weapons officer counted down. "Firing."

The seals holding the blow hatches of the sub's missile tubes released and a heavy thud shook the entire vessel. Then the crew felt as if they were suddenly twenty pounds lighter; the entire sub had been pushed down into deeper water as all of its missile tubes simultaneously released a burst of pressurized nitrogen that would carry their "passengers" to the surface, where the rockets would ignite and the missiles would begin orienting themselves for the long trip to their target.

After firing its nuclear payload dry, the submarine immediately performed a series of evasive maneuvers and emergency dives, quickly moving as far as it possibly could from the location it had launched the nukes from.

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Somewhere in a classified location in Russia.

Giant pneumatic machines hissed to life, opening a heavy armored hatch concealed beneath a layer of soil. Dirt and detritus dropped into what seemed to be a bottomless hole as the two sides of the door folded open, dropping their layer of concealment into the missile silo beneath. As soon as the doors had fully opened, the low thud of a controlled pushing charge echoed out of the silo, followed closely by a missile, which ignited its rocket engine and began its climb to the thermosphere.

That was just one of the over 3,000 silos that, in conjunction with their nuclear attack submarines, comprised Russia's 4,447 nuclear missiles; all of which had been simultaneously launched and were currently in their ascent phase.

"Why are we nuking an ocean?" one of the two people in the underground silo wondered.

"Who knows? There must be a reason behind it. Maybe it's a warning shot or something," the other person replied, then returned to reading a rather lurid romance novel. Now that their missile had been launched, the two of them could relax and do whatever they wanted as they awaited the truck that would soon come to pick them up.

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The same general process was happening in every nuclear power as they all shot their nuclear arsenals almost completely empty. In the course of about a single hour, nearly every single nuclear weapon on the planet, roughly twelve thousand missiles and bombs in total, had been launched. The airstrikes had been authorized and launched hours before, and the operation was timed to have the bombers closely following the missiles—intercontinental or otherwise—as they began their descent phase and terminal maneuvers.

Due to the sheer number of missile launches and bombers, it was impossible to hide from the general population. People living near silos discovered the launch trails, and people beneath the flight path of the bombers saw flight after flight of distinctive, large aircraft flying overhead. Even some “lucky” passengers on cruise ships spotted trails reaching into the sky from the submarine-launched missiles.

First dozens, then hundreds, then thousands, then hundreds of thousands of videos were soon posted on the internet as everyone around the world uploaded their shocked reactions to the sightings. Fear and panic broke out as the news rapidly spread that total nuclear war had broken out, and doomsayers began preaching the end of the world in either nuclear fire or nuclear winter.

Riots broke out everywhere as people rushed to the stores to first panic buy everything they could, and then it devolved into outright looting and robbery as a kind of “every man for himself” thought infected the rioting crowds.

Soon, the violence became bloody as the first shot was fired, then more, and people began dying in droves as wannabe warlords cropped up in neighborhoods around the world. They had yet to even verify the news or listen to one of the still-absent government announcements, but to some doomsday preppers and other ammosexuals, the overwhelming nuclear launch was effectively the wettest of their wet dreams.

It hadn’t even been ten minutes since the launches had concluded, yet the situation had already devolved to such a low point. The launch itself was the trigger that released the valve on all of the stress that had been building since the announcement that humanity was no longer alone in the universe had been made.

Chapter 385 ...And Let Slip the Dogs of War

Already knowing that the remaining satellites were currently unreliable due to all the jamming and other electronic warfare happening in orbit, the missiles had been programmed with strict courses. Thus, the accuracy should be decent enough to saturate such a large target; the total area they were aiming at was the size of Australia, after all. So the missiles were using initial position determination. The blanket of shrapnel orbiting the planet prevented most forms of celestial navigation from working, so the missiles had to rely on IPD, which was made possible by accelerometers and gyroscopes working together along with knowing the initial launch coordinates to determine where the missile isn’t, thus telling it where it is.

The main benefit to using the backup initial position determination navigation system was that it had absolutely zero reliance on any outside information to determine distances and directions, so it was completely immune to hacking in any form, much less electronic warfare such as jamming.

The bombers themselves would find their way to Eden via dead reckoning. For them, the mission would be much easier, given that all militaries basically trained the same way. They spend 99% of their training time learning to deal with the issues that come up 1% of the time, and for pilots and sailors, navigating by dead reckoning was definitely one of those 1% issues.

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The moment the first ICBM was launched, it was detected by the Panopticon satellite network and reported to Panoptes. In a matter of nanoseconds, the report had made its way to every AI involved

in Aron's military, plus Nova and Aron himself. All of the people and AIs involved knew the plan, so they reacted without any need for specific orders to be given.

Athena issued an alert to all personnel, then personally took control of the entire military infrastructure, assigning sectors to her subordinate AIs to swat down the thousands of incoming missiles and bombers.

The distribution of sectors allowed the military AIs, even including the assistant AIs in the equipment, vehicles, and vessels, to pool their computing resources in real time and acted as a guarantee that no accidents would happen. Nova had learned her lesson since her panic reaction during Aron's last system upgrade, and would carry that with her for the rest of her digital life.

Poseidon was the first to act. Stealthy submarines from the Edenian force rose to firing depth and launched the first interceptor missiles, repeating the process of launching the missile, printing a new launch cover, evacuating the launch tubes, printing new missiles, and launching again. All told, the submarine fleet took out nearly all of the submarine-launched nukes, then sank the subs that launched them. It was both retaliation and warning; retaliation for the launches themselves, and a warning that Eden would not let the coalition forces do whatever they wanted.

[Sir, Poseidon has already taken out the submarine-launched weapons. Our other forces are online and awaiting your orders.] Only after all sectors had reported ready did Athena update Aron on the progress, though her update was redundant as both Aron and Nova were already tracking the situation.

"It's finally time to end things. Let's get on with it," Aron sneered, standing up from his chair and clasping his hands behind his back. He turned his attention to the main monitor in the control center, which showed the real-time position of each land-based missile and the paths they were taking on their way to Eden.

"Aeolus, it's your turn. Teach the idiots that launched this attack a lesson."

[On it,] Aeolus replied, then got to work.

Thousands of missile silos across Eden snapped open and atomic printers mounted in the walls got to work printing ICCMs (InterContinental CounterMissiles) and launching them as soon as they were ready. Over the next eight minutes, the sky noticeably darkened as wave after wave of upscaled beehive swarm missiles launched, forming a cloud of countermissiles that was dense enough to eclipse what little sunlight passed through the junk in orbit.

Then the silo doors closed and billions of nanites flooded out of disguised vents, swarming over the closed doors and assembling themselves into the shape of innocent foliage. Soil, sand, blades of grass, shrubs... even organisms like earthworms and ants were formed by colonies of nanometer-scale robots, which served as both camouflage and a last line of defense for the hidden silos.

Aeolus had sent nearly 14,000 countermissiles from his ground-based silos, almost two for every nuclear ICBM launched. And once those countermissiles released their submunitions, the count rose to nearly a hundred thousand interceptor missiles.

Then, after the countermissile launch, came the interceptors. Practically everything that could fly and shoot was scrambled and sent on intercept missions to intercept the bombers carrying nuclear bombs across the ocean. Short-ranged fighters, medium-ranged interceptors, and even the extended

range hybrid multirole jets of the Aeolus Air Force all took flight. With guidance from their assistant AIs and the impeccable VR training the pilots had all received, the entire roster of combat-capable jets was in the air in less than four minutes from receiving the emergency scramble order.

Then... there was no then. Every single nuke, no matter the delivery method, was easily swatted out of the sky over the vast Pacific Ocean. Destroying them over the sea had also ensured that the radiation would have almost no negative effects on anything; after all, the concentration of radioactive particles when dispersed over the roughly 350 billion cubic miles of seawater that covered the majority of the planet.

“Nyx,” Aron said.

[Yes,] she replied.

“Make them pay.”

[With pleasure, sir.]

Chapter 386 The Result of Hubris and Greed

Somewhere off the coast of Somalia, Edenian Forward Operating Base (FOB) Ganymede.

The former terrorist-cum-pirate stronghold that had been repurposed into a hidden Edenian military base by Reaper Team Eight had been on high alert since the beginning of what Athena was calling the Unification War. The base’s primary purpose was to act as a “5R” base, or fiver for short. The five Rs were rally, resupply, rest, recuperate, and reinforce. But it was just as well-armed as any other Edenian installation, whether at home or abroad, thanks to atomic printers.

The base was equipped with everything an entire ARES division could possibly need. Weapons, uniforms, shelf-stable meals, medical pods, and so on were hidden deep in underwater warehouse complexes the size of city blocks that were maintained by maintenance bots. After all, while atomic printers were capable of incredibly rapid printing, it wasn’t nearly as fast as simply handing something that had already been printed to someone that needed it.

As the panic around the world peaked and chaos reigned, FOB Ganymede sprang into action. Swarms of camouflaging nanites broke their cover and entered concealed vents, revealing enormous, armored hatches. The hatches snapped open, revealing huge missiles inside as alarms around the base blared warnings to immediately seek cover.

A minute later, the alarms ceased their audible warnings and only flashing red lights remained as each silo disgorged a missile. The missiles’ destination: the launch sites and remaining nuclear weapons of the eight remaining nuclear powers.

The missiles launched were different from normal ICBMs. While they were still orbit capable, they seemed much narrower and the reentry nose cone heat shield was a sharper cone shape. They were Type II Kinetic Kill warheads, otherwise known as rods from god. The scientists in Lab City had neatly sidestepped the difficulty of lifting such enormous masses into orbit to arm, or rearm, satellites with them and designed a specialized ICBM that would act as something of a sabot shell around the penetrator core. Thus, they could only barely be considered multistage munitions.

The first stage of each missile was enough to reach orbital heights, where the initial adjustment would be done with canisters of compressed gas contained within the housing of the second stage.

At that point, the first stage would detach, leaving something that looked much like a bottle rocket behind. Once the initial direction adjustment was completed, the coast phase would be skipped and the second acceleration stage would be activated and the missile would accelerate the entire rest of the way to its target. Upon reaching 2000 meters in altitude, the second stage would detach and the terminal maneuvering of the now hypervelocity penetrator would begin, the suicidal onboard AI guiding it to its ultimate destination as the second stage rocket engine detonated behind it, ensuring the security of the technology.

The rod from god that remained massed over a ton and would be traveling at roughly Mach 40 at that point, and deliver a staggering impact of nearly 1.4 billion newtons of force to whatever it hit.

After the first round of rods from god were fired from the camouflaged silos, a second round was rapidly printed and fired as well. Then a third, a fourth, a fifth.... Twelve waves of missiles were launched before the base fell silent again and the flashing lights ceased. The nanites retook their places, camouflaging the silos, and everything was the same as it was six minutes earlier.

The other three FOBs also launched their own missiles. Some launched more, others less, and the launches went mostly unnoticed, save for those from the former cartel compound in Culiacán Rosales, Mexico. FOB Odysseus was in a populated area, unlike the other three, so the launches couldn't be hidden there.

Thus, they didn't even attempt to hide. Just the opposite, in fact; an entire reinforced battalion of ARES soldiers rushed out of the main compound one after the other, like clowns emerging from a clown car in a circus tent. They set up a guard perimeter and simply remained in place, defending the base from curious onlookers and enemies alike.

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Just under a minute after the Edenian missiles launched, the first missile breached the atmosphere and entered orbit just below where the predicted junk swarm would pass by. Two minutes after that, every Edenian rod from god had entered their orbital tracks. Ten seconds after that, the missiles in the swarm began orienting themselves toward their targets.

Eight seconds later, the missiles' initial orientation was completed and, in two separate waves, they activated their second stage rockets.

The first wave was targeted at missile and air defense networks in the target countries. America's multilayered THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) network, Israel's David's Shield and Iron Dome, Russia's S300 missile defense system... all eight nuclear powers each had their own name for basically the same thing: a nationwide network of missile countermeasures designed to stop incoming weapons of mass destruction.

The prevailing theory of rods from god assumed that the rods themselves would be nothing more than solid lumps of tungsten, or some other metal that would survive an unpowered orbital reentry. That was the only way such a system could be made cost-effective. But no one could have possibly imagined the sheer number of countermeasures packed into the "dumb" Edenian munitions.

Each one had a multilayered electronic warfare suite that turned it into the equivalent of a blank spot in both automated and manned detection systems. And if that were to fail, there was still the radar-absorbent outer layer of the rods, which combined specific geometric shapes designed to

reflect radar waves away from the rod with a radar-absorbent material that the researchers in Lab City had developed and iterated on until it could withstand the stress of a powered flight through atmosphere at Mach 40.

Thus, every single missile countermeasure, no matter how vaunted, failed spectacularly before the might of Edenian technology.

Missile defense sites, anti-air batteries, countermissile silos... everything targeted by one or more rods from god was simply erased from existence, leaving the countries targeted effectively naked in the face of the second wave of rods, which targeted the silos that launched the nuclear missiles and the airstrips that launched the bombers carrying nuclear bombs. They even targeted the remaining nuclear stockpiles that six of the countries thought they had cleverly hid, as well as every site involved in the production of anything having to do with nuclear weapons. Uranium mines, nuclear centrifuges, rocket manufacturing factories... all of them simply ceased to exist when the suicidal AIs guiding the rods violently introduced themselves to each facility.

Emergency systems meant to inform citizens in case of disaster were activated in every country targeted by the Edenian saturation strike. They all passed the same message: shelter in place.

The people behind the nuclear attack on Eden had missed the clue of the Panopticon network's rapid launches. Then they had missed the clue of the Indonesian pirate elimination. After that, they failed, in their hubris, to realize the vast disparity in technology demonstrated by the Poseidon Navy's defense against the conventional missile attack. Instead of standing down after that, they instead ignored the military might demonstrated by a single frigate demolishing an entire American carrier group. Still, in their greed for the advanced technologies and arrogant belief that since they had never been beaten, they never would lose, they authorized a nuclear strike using nearly every nuclear weapon on the face of the planet and even that failed.

It was only now, after Eden finally retaliated, that the powers that be and those behind them realized that they had completely, utterly, and unrecoverably fucked up.

Chapter 387 Oops

As the retaliation strike was underway, huge troop movements were taking place back in Avalon Island and on each of the Edenian carriers in the fleet. The Aeolus Air Force had mobilized its entire transport fleet and was even printing more; massive ET-14 Argo transport jets, based on the Antonov An 126 airframe, were rolling out of the hangar one after another. They only stopped to load full complements of troops in each jet.

After the jets were loaded, they immediately took off and headed toward the carriers in the distance, where they landed, disgorged their troops, and immediately returned to Avalon Island to pick up another load.

At the same time, amphibious landing craft were also loading up and bringing full complements of troops to the enormous aircraft carriers. The fleet was still relatively close to Eden, at only roughly 500 kilometers away, so the trip was short enough that the landing craft were heavily overloaded for the trip.

As the troops were being transported, a major operation was underway inside the carriers. The carriers were overengineered, and the researchers working on them in Lab City had designed them so as to take advantage of the low crew count. Thus, most of the space inside them was actually

empty and could be set up in a number of configurations. Requiring only two hundred sailors to crew each carrier at full capacity, the remainder was dedicated to engines, capacitor banks, reactors, and the configurable cargo area.

The cargo area could be switched at any time to one of three primary configurations: aircraft hangars, fleet transport and drydock, or troop transport. Currently, they were set to the “default” configuration, with cavernous aircraft hangars occupying most of the space.

An alarm suddenly rang out on the EV Beowulf. Three long horn blasts were followed by a repeating announcement by the ship’s AI: [All hands, prepare for reconfiguration. Repeat: all hands, prepare for reconfiguration. Sixty seconds to reconfiguration. Fifty-nine... fifty-eight....]

As the announcement repeated on the 1MC, the crew of the Beowulf headed to designated safe zones, where they wouldn’t be affected by the atomic printers that were about to sweep through each hangar, decomposing everything down to the decks and bulkheads. Once the printers finished their sweep in one direction, they reversed course and headed back the way they came, printing angular teardrop-shaped objects at precise intervals on every deck inside the newly cleared cargo area.

On deck, the landings and takeoffs continued, a synchronized aerial dance where one jet would land, disgorge its complement of 400 troops, then take off again. All four of the flight lines were in continuous operation, averaging one jet landed on each flight line every minute. Over the course of the next hour, each carrier loaded almost 100,000 troops by air alone.

The remainder were in transit in their amphibious landing craft, which were estimated to arrive in about five hours.

Those five hours weren’t wasted, either. The atomic printers were hard at work printing the equipment the troops would be issued. Power armor, pulse carbines, rail rifles, fusion torches, atomic decouplers, back-mounted drone systems and rocket launchers, pulse shotguns, plasma projectors, multirole grenades... the list goes on. Every weapon designed by the mad geniuses in Lab City was at every soldier’s disposal, and they were experts in all of them after the vicious training Athena put them through in VR.

Once the transport ships reached the carriers, enormous doors slid back, exposing the newly configured troop transport decks for the landing vehicles to unload their troops into.

Altogether, each of the enormous carriers now held almost 250,000 troops.

Once the troops were loaded, the enormous exterior doors slid closed and each teardrop-shaped object on every deck simultaneously opened like a blooming flower, the walls becoming ramps that the infantry marched up squad by squad, taking their places and preparing for transport.

After the drop vehicles were loaded, a siren sounded on the carrier’s 1MC and through speakers on the flight deck. [All hands, prepare for liftoff. Repeat: all hands, prepare for liftoff. Liftoff in 60 seconds... 59... 58....]

Once the countdown reached zero, the ship’s AI announced, [Liftoff.]

A deep, groaning rumble sounded throughout the Beowulf and the lights flickered as the capacitor banks emptied themselves and the reactors went to full military power. Deep within the ship, the ballast tanks were being pumped empty and filled with air, increasing the buoyancy of the vessel.

Soon, four enormous, stubby wings appeared above the water as the increased buoyancy lifted them out of the briny sea. After they breached the surface of the sea, they lifted up on tracks and locked in place level with the flight deck.

Each stubby wing had a ducted six-blade rotor that spanned fifty meters in diameter, and each rotor was rapidly spinning up to speed. As the rotors spun up, the enormous carrier finally broke free of the ocean's grasp and began gaining altitude.

1000 meters... 5000 meters... 10,000 meters.... The Beowulf, joined by its nine sister-ships, halted its ascent near the far edge of the stratosphere at 60 kilometers above the ground and the struggling reactors dropped to normal safe output and the capacitor banks began charging again.

Once the carriers reached their cruising altitude, they broke off and headed in different directions. Their main initial targets were China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Israel, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Eight of the carriers headed to those countries, while the ninth headed to Central Africa, and the tenth headed to South America.

The unification was about to begin.

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In the ARES Virtual Command Center.

[Oops,] Nova giggled.

Aron raised an eyebrow and glanced at her. "What happened?"

[I may have 'accidentally' let a satellite feed of our carriers launching slip through the jamming we've been filling orbit with,] she snickered.

"Why?"

[I want them to know what's coming for them, and know that they can't stop it. Besides, there's no hiding our carriers anyway, so a visual won't really matter.]

Aron grunted his assent and turned his attention back to the main viewscreen.

Chapter 388 A Foot-Long Pole in the Ass

EV Beowulf, somewhere high above the Pacific Ocean.

To the sailors crewing the enormous vessel, everything had returned to normal and it was no different to them than any other day. Whether on the surface of the sea or flying in the stratosphere made no difference to them. If anything, it was perhaps even more relaxed as there were no exterior operations while at altitude, so they were restricted to the areas inside the ship to perform their duties.

Exterior duties, while flying, had been delegated to maintenance bots that were controlled by a subroutine of the AI, Beowulf.

For the passengers, on the other hand, things were a bit more exciting. Once they had been loaded into their assigned drop vehicles, they had logged into VR and were conducting training missions in environments that simulated the areas they would soon be deployed to. Athena didn't request a 100% accurate simulation, as that would be rather processor-intense, but for the simulated environments to be accurate while the enemies were not. In other words, troops destined to fight in

the jungles of South America would have training missions in the jungle, while troops headed for urban areas would undergo simulated missions in the cities they would drop into.

Though things were more exciting and varied for the troops in the transport decks, it was still just another Tuesday for the elite ARES troopers.

As the Beowulf sped toward its destination, her enormous rotors propelling her at close to the speed of sound, work inside her transport decks proceeded apace as the printers continued working. The troops would require resupply, so spare weapons, ammunition stockpiles, replacement armor, and so on were printed as well. In addition to those were helicopters and large transport drones that would be responsible for actually delivering the equipment to the troops in the field, as well as hot meals.

It had been said before that armies march on their stomachs, and that had held true throughout the history of mankind. All a soldier in the field needed to remain content with their lot and perhaps even happy was a hot meal that didn't come from a can or bag and clean socks and underwear. No matter how dire or harsh the conditions of the battlefield were, any army that had those three things was a content and happy one with high morale.

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White House, inside the situation room.

A secret service member standing behind the president raised his hand to his ear, listening to a report as the deputy undersecretary of defense burst into the room and headed directly to the newly appointed interim Secretary of Defense, Patrick Shanahan. General Mattis had been forced to resign as a result of the destruction of the USS Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group.

The secret service member and acting secretary Shanahan simultaneously paled after hearing the latest news.

"Mr. President, we need to evacuate as fast as possible," the secret service agent said, grabbing Trump's arm and hauling him bodily out of his chair. Luckily, there was a secure bunker beneath the situation room and the elevator that led to it wasn't more than a few steps away.

The rest of the joint chiefs, their aides, and acting secretary Shanahan followed.

President Trump understood that asking questions now would be pointless. He would be briefed once they reached the bunker. But until then, all he had to do was cooperate with the secret service and not add to the incipient chaos. Left to himself, he began thinking of some very frightening possibilities; evacuating to the bunker beneath the situation room was very much a "last resort" defensive option, after all.

As the elevator doors closed, everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"Apologies, sir, we needed to move as fast as possible. Missiles are on the way to Washington," the head of the on-duty secret service team informed Trump. They were now officially cut off from the outside world for the duration of the elevator trip to the bunker, roughly 2500 feet below ground level. The elevator ride would take a few minutes to travel that nearly half a mile.

“What do we know right now?” Trump asked acting secretary Shanahan.

He turned to his deputy undersecretary and nodded for him to explain the situation. He himself was still not entirely up to speed, as the most important information would always be transmitted first. In this case, that information was simply “missiles are on their way to Washington.”

“Sir, operation radiant dawn failed. And moments after its failure, we detected a retaliatory strike from Eden and, of all places, Mexico. We suspect there were more, but we can’t be certain. Our subs that participated in the operation have already been sunk, sir. They knew where we were and were just waiting.”

“What are their targets?” Trump asked.

“Cheyenne Mountain is tracking them as best they could. Based on their initial trajectory and numbers, we estimate that they’re targeting THAAD, but we can’t be certain until the missiles reenter the atmosphere and we can pick them up on radar. That is, if we can detect them at all...” the undersecretary reported.

The elevator ride continued in silence, each person within musing on the possible repercussions of the retaliation and what would be targeted. Everyone in the elevator, save perhaps Trump himself, knew what it meant for their air and missile defense systems to be targeted.

Eden was about to move.

A few minutes later, the elevator doors opened to a bunker that had become a hive of activity.

“Status report,” General Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff snapped as he strode out of the elevator.

“Sir!” A defense intelligence agency analyst snapped to attention. “THAAD is down by 98% overall, 100% in populated areas and around our silos. Our OCONUS installations all report heavy losses. Former and current nuclear stockpile sites are confirmed down, all missile silos are down, and Cheyenne reports a second incoming wave of attacks. Estimated target is our nuclear stockpile sites, silos, centrifuges, and manufacturing sites. No sign of any other targets now, but sir... we’re having trouble tracking the incoming birds. They’re ghosts, sir.”

“Shit,” General Dunford cursed.

“What happened?” Trump asked.

“Sir, if they only took out our stockpiles and silos, it’d mean they’re just removing our nuclear capability. But taking out THAAD means they’re definitely planning an invasion,” the general said.

“Did anything we launched have any effect at all?” Trump asked, as if he hadn’t heard the general’s response to his earlier question. He had looked at his watch and

realized they should have heard something by then, but he might have missed it during the minutes-long elevator ride to the bunker.

“Radionuclide monitoring discovered radiation in the atmosphere, so odds of a successful detonation are high. If they did hit, it would explain the retaliation strike. But we can’t be a hundred percent sure, so we dispatched a dragon lady—quite a few of them, actually—to give us a visual on site since satellite monitoring is either down or unreliable.”

“Options?” Trump asked. He felt like his head was being cooked in a pot of boiling water and everything was going wrong for him.

“We’ve already begun the government continuity program, sir. Congress is being evacuated to the nearest shelter as we speak, Vice President Pence is on his way to Camp David, and Nightwatch is in the air and on patrol. We’ve called up the standby reserves, retired reserves, individual ready reserves, selected reserves, and the national guard, inactive and active. Hell... we even called up the civil air patrol, sir.

“The coalition fleet is headed back toward Eden to confront the Edenian Navy, for all the good that’ll do, and our submarine fleet is en route back to the coast for submarine warfare. The four carrier groups we didn’t send with the coalition fleet are patrolling the Atlantic and Pacific coasts and we’re prepared to lose our assets in Guam, the Philippines, Alaska, the Dominican Republic, and Hawaii.

“We activated the national emergency broadcast system and implemented a strict curfew. State and local police have begun implementing it and the national guard is being deployed along with FEMA to aid in enforcing it.

“We’ve also—” the analyst continued, but was interrupted by the sound of a toppling chair and a loud curse.

“Repeat that! Are you fucking positive!?” someone shouted.

“Control yourself!” General Dunford snapped. “Report!”

Instead of responding, the man pushed a few buttons on his console and pointed at the large screen on the wall in the front of the bunker. “See for yourself,” he said.

The screen showed a visual taken from one of their high-orbit spy satellites. The video showed the takeoff procedure of the Edenian carriers from start to finish.

“The video is backed by our beyond-the-horizon radar. Ten of those... whatever they are... just took flight and headed in different directions. One of them is headed our way and will likely arrive off the west coast in about two hours,” he dolefully

announced, then fell on his ass when he tried sitting back down, as he forgot his chair had fallen.

A pindrop silence engulfed the room. It felt like, just when they thought they knew everything about their enemy, a foot-long pole was shoved up their ass to prove them wrong.

Chapter 389 Yeet.

Somewhere over the coast of California.

Edwards Air Force Base and Naval Air Station North Island had both scrambled all of their pilots and put everything in the air that had guns. Some of the crop dusters in Southern California, being retired Navy and Air Force veterans, had heard the news through the grapevine as well. And being infected by a greater-than-normal amount of “good ole’ American YEEHAW” had volunteered to strap guns to their civilian planes and join the war effort.

All of them, active duty and volunteer alike, were in the air like a swarm of bees as they awaited the arrival of the EV Beowulf. Not that it would do much good, really, considering that the Beowulf had a much higher flight ceiling and cruising altitude than any current-generation aircraft, whether military or civilian. Even the vaunted Dragon Lady could only reach a cruising altitude of around 21 kilometers, a far cry from the Beowulf’s 60.

Still, they would pose an issue to the invasion forces that would be dropped in California, so the order was passed down for the Beowulf to take them down.

Sprinkled across the Beowulf’s sides and belly were dozens of Mk. XIV Titan’s Wrath cannons, hundred-meter-long guns with a barrel diameter of 96 inches, mounted on massive gimbals that would allow them to freely rotate in three dimensions. Designed for use while the carrier was in flight, they had a host of options available to them, yet none of them applied—the guns were simply too strong!

The ship’s AI had three current orders:

First, to limit civilian casualties and collateral damage as much as possible. Aron was adamant in his interpretation of “human resources” and would allow no avoidable waste of any of Earth’s resources; all would be needed in the years to come.

Second, to ensure the safe delivery of the Beowulf’s complement of troops to their designated combat zones. This was the order the AI was operating under when it alerted the captain that she had detected armed aircraft.

And third, to take out any valid military target along the way through whatever means were appropriate. The key word in this standing order was “appropriate”. Firing a Titan’s Wrath at a fighter jet, especially from above, was rather... inappropriate. Without taking into account the collateral damage and potential civilian casualties, it would still be akin to using an old Civil War-era sixteen-pound cannon to kill a single gnat that was buzzing around your ear.

Considering her three standing orders, the Beowulf mused over her options for three nanoseconds, then decided that the Metalstorm was the most appropriate response.

[Captain, I have detected incoming combat aircraft,] she announced on the bridge. [Request permission to assume control of anti-air weapons designated ‘Metalstorm’.]

“Granted, Beowulf. Happy hunting,” the captain replied.

[Thank you, sir. Estimated time of operation: twelve seconds... eleven... ten... nine....]

As the countdown continued on the bridge, Metalstorms emerged from hidden hatches on the carrier’s hull, and the main guns were retracted into hidden hatches of their own. The gimbal-mounted anti-air and point defense weapons swiveled around, each tracking individual targets. They opened fire, and then... there was no then.

Every military aircraft stationed in Southern California, along with the civilian volunteers, ceased to exist when met with thousands of 30mm rounds fired from a weapon that should not exist on Earth, yet did.

[Operation complete, captain. Returning control to weapons.]

“Thank you, Beowulf.”

[You’re welcome, sir.]

The captain crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair, then took a sip of his coffee and asked, “How long to the drop zone, helm?”

“ETA ten minutes to drop zone one, captain,” the helmsman replied.

“Good. I anticipate a smooth drop. Comms, sound the ten minute alert in the training simulation for the designated troops.”

“Aye, sir. Alert sent.”

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The Beowulf reached her first drop zone over Los Angeles in Griffith Park and a hatch opened on the side of her topmost transport deck. A mechanical arm reached out of it, carrying four ARES drop vehicles, each of which contained ten troopers. The arm bent upward, then accelerated down, hurling the drop vehicles at their target location at an incredible velocity.

The scientists in Lab City called the drop vehicles the Mk VII Thunderhammer Aerial Assault Lander. But the troops? The troops had a much simpler name for them.

Yeet pods.

A soldier that lacked a dry sense of humor couldn’t really be called a soldier at all, really. And ARES troopers were nothing if not soldiers.

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After the four yeet pods were released over Los Angeles, the Beowulf made her way northeast, dropping ARES platoons across the Southwestern United States, then turned toward the Pacific Northwest, then the Midwest, the South, and all the way up to the northeastern tip of the contiguous United States in Maine.

The largest landing, though, was in North Carolina. An entire reinforced battalion of ARES troopers was dropped between Fayetteville, North Carolina, and Fort Bragg, the largest military installation in perhaps the entire world. Occupying more than 250 square miles and home to more than sixty

thousand active duty combatants, plus another couple thousand Air Force personnel, Fort Bragg would be the hardest target in the entire North American continent.

Especially if the veteran population and reservists of Fayetteville were taken into account, which would add another fifty thousand or so to the tally. And being a southern state that had almost no limits on gun ownership or specific gun bans, roughly half of the households in Fayetteville could at least be called an armed civilian militia. Those highly motivated individuals would add another hundred thousand combatants to the mix.

There were, combined, a total of over a hundred thousand of America's most elite infantrymen, regular infantry, veterans, and reservists. Add another hundred thousand civilian militia and two thousand airmen and the ARES battalion had an uphill climb ahead of them, especially since the American forces would have the home ground advantage.

And all of that was before taking into account the current worldwide panic, chaos, and looting. Rioters and looters had run rampant, and the first stores targeted by them were those that sold guns and ammunition.

It would be one hell of a first live mission for the ARES troopers to drop into.

Chapter 390 Fog of War

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

An enormous shadow was cast over the entire city as the EV Brunhild passed over it. The shadow didn't linger long before moving, and in fact, never stopped. Then, shortly after it passed, a screaming whistle grew louder and louder as four angular teardrop-shaped objects came crashing down in Aterro de Flamengo, a park that bordered the city's waterfront and several of its storied favelas. An enormous cloud of sand and dust was raised by the impacts, making it impossible to see the objects hidden within, had there been anyone on the beach to witness the impacts.

The hiss of pneumatic pistons triggering was followed shortly by a single resounding thud and a brief breeze that blew the dust cloud in swirling circles. Soon, the dust cleared, revealing four yeet pods, their hatches lowered into ramps and ten ARES troopers standing in neat formations in front of each. With each squad of troopers was a Mk. IX Cerberus Mulebot loaded with bulky boxes filled with gear.

Without a word, the troopers moved out as the yeet pods spontaneously caught fire and melted into slag.

Soon, the distinctive whines and thuds of capacitors charging and discharging enveloped the formerly bustling metropolis of Rio de Janeiro, accompanied by screams, explosions, the whistling scream of indirect fire weapons, and the creaks and groans of crumbling buildings.

The chaos lasted an hour, then 40 ARES troopers and three Cerberus Mulebots marched back to the beach. The only sign that they had even been in combat was the blood dripping from their armor, and one trooper had a slight limp. He had been caught by the collapse of a skyscraper and twisted his ankle pulling it out from the debris. All that remained was to set up a perimeter and guard the extraction point for the troops dropped all over South America, who would soon join them as their missions were completed.

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Democratic Republic of Congo, Africa.

General Mabuto Nzagi was starting his day as normal, waking up in a bed filled with naked women. He sat up on the edge of the bed and picked up the mirror on his nightstand, then cut a line of high-quality cocaine from the loose powder on it using the business card of an American “businessman”—in other words, a CIA-backed arms dealer—and snorted it with a rolled up US hundred dollar bill.

He slapped the naked ass of the girl closest to him in the pile of flesh that lay atop his bed, a sign of the previous night’s debauchery, but she didn’t respond. He slapped it again, still to no response. Then he leaned over and shouted in her ear, “Wake up!”

Three of the seven girls laying naked on the bed grumbled and sat up, but the other four remained silent and still.

General Nzagi frowned and looked closer at the girl whose ass he had slapped. She could be considered a pretty flower, at least for a twelve-year-old prepubescent girl from an impoverished area of the DRC, but her eyes were open and glassy and her neck was discolored with bruises shaped like his own hands. Her chest was unmoving, neither rising nor falling with her breathing, and her nose and mouth were stained with white powder residue. She was obviously dead and had been for a while.

He looked over the other four unmoving girls on his bed and noticed they were in much the same condition, then at the three who had responded to his earlier shout. They had scrambled out of bed and were crouched in the corner, huddled together and shivering in fear and from the cold air blowing directly on them from the air conditioner vent on the wall by their ankles.

The general lit a cigarette, then stood and draped a bathrobe over himself. “Clean this up,” he ordered, then headed to his bathroom to shower.

He turned on loud music while he was showering, so he failed to hear the screams and was caught completely unaware by the pulse munition that blew through his wall, then his head, and finally the wall on the other side like they didn’t exist.

One of the warlords plaguing the Democratic Republic of the Congo had just been eliminated and he didn’t even know he had been invaded.

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Around the world, similar situations were taking place. ARES suffered relatively few losses in their initial assault, and only two complete defeats.

Both of those defeats came at the hands of Pakistan and India, where two of the nuclear weapons had escaped the bombardment of the rods from god completely by chance. The Pakistani and Indian leadership had been completely unaware that ISIS had stolen them in preparation for an attack on the US. Then, when ARES had dropped on the cities ISIS was currently smuggling the warheads through, the terrorist cells behind the thefts had detonated them there once they realized their plans would be impossible to successfully bring to fruition.

Thus, Islamabad and Delhi paid the price for the nuclear warheads detonated in Faisalabad and Bhopal.

While ship-to-ship combat mostly didn't involve explosive rounds, save for widowmakers, ship-to-ground combat was different. Without having to worry about through-and-through penetration, like they did when firing on oceangoing ships or airplanes, the researchers in Lab City had developed a specialized round for the Hugin class carriers.

Designed as a proof of concept for Aron's space warfare doctrine, which would favor modular construction and multirole ships, the enormous carriers also had their own complement of special ammunition types. Their eventual targets would be much sturdier than anything found on Earth, after all, thus the birth of the Type XIX HEI round, which would fly "safed" until it detected a significant mass within a certain range, then it would arm itself on a hair trigger and explode on impact with that mass. It was judged to be wholly unnecessary for any of the naval munitions fired from thirty- or sixteen-inch guns, thus it was only printed for the enormous ninety-six-inch Titan's Wrath cannons that the Hugin class carriers were armed with.

Faisalabad had been home to between 750,000 and a million residents, but most of it had been wiped out in nuclear fire. Due to its size and relative importance to the area, ARES had an entire thousand troops deployed to it and all of them had been lost in the blast. The EV Arngrim had returned after detecting the nuclear detonation and removed what was left of the city from the map via sustained bombardment under its Titan's Wrath cannons. Then she proceeded to Islamabad, where she removed that city from the map in a similar fashion. After all, with no news of the thefts anywhere, none of Arons AIs knew that it wasn't the countries' leaders that decided to detonate the warheads.

Events in Bhopal and Delhi proceeded in much the same fashion as the EV Ragnar Lodbrok visited them.

What had once been two thriving national capitals had been reduced to a series of smoking craters, the ground in some places baked into glass by the heat of the sustained bombardment of Type XIX High Explosive Impact rounds.