

Tech System 391

Chapter 391 The Consequences of Bragging

Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Members of the 82nd Airborne, one of the United States most elite infantry brigade, were rushing to set up defensive positions. Though Fort Bragg was where they trained and they had already-existing defensive positions set up for mock battles, those were nowhere near the things they actually needed to defend. That design philosophy was coming back to bite them in the ass at this very moment in time.

The EV Beowulf had already landed troops between Fayetteville and the storied fort and, having learned their lesson from the air assets in California that had survived for a staggering six seconds, the jets and hastily armed civilian aircraft at Simmons Army Airfield and Pope Field had been grounded until the enormous carrier had passed. Thus, pilots were still sitting in their aircraft in their hangars, awaiting a go order that would unleash what they thought was all nine levels of hell upon the Edenian invaders.

This was AMERICA! This was THEIR country! THEIR home!

And no red-blooded American would just lay down and surrender without a fight... or so they thought, anyway. Had they heard about how smoothly the ARES forces had been having it around the country so far, they might have thought differently. Or they might not; the US military brainwashing was highly effective, especially in Fort Bragg, home of the US Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command, better known as PsyOps Command. They had pioneered the military's brainwashing techniques, and Fort Bragg was their test bed.

Thus, morale among the American defenders was high. They had even been watching alien invasion movies since getting the news that the Edenian carrier was on its way, subtly influencing and reinforcing the belief in their inevitable victory.

Essentially, they were fucking around, and they were soon to find out.

Fifteen minutes after the Beowulf had passed, air patrols via Predator drones began, in hopes of spotting the ARES troops in the wilderness between Fort Bragg and the nearby Fayetteville. It only took them three minutes to find the troops, as they weren't even bothering to hide in their march up the main highway leading to the front gates.

A company of ARES troopers consisted of four platoons of forty troopers each, and Athena had designated a reinforced company to land for the assault on Fort Bragg. Thus, two hundred ARES troopers—five full platoons—were marching in unconscious lockstep straight along a road that provided them no cover or concealment. The drone, which was somehow rendered unable to get a clear picture of the incoming attackers, had resorted to using thermal imaging and completely missed the armor the troopers were wearing.

Aron's design aesthetics tended toward the minimalistic and bland. For example, the Cube in Avalon Island, which was exactly what it said on the tin: one gigantic, cube-shaped building. Thus, the armor that ARES was currently wearing, or the troopers at least, was the mass-produced Mk. VIII Streamlined, Lightweight, Efficient and Ergonomic Kinetic Protection Suit, or SLEEK suit.

Ten miles out from the front gate of Fort Bragg, ARES came under its first assault. An entire battalion of M109 Paladin mobile howitzers launched a constant stream of 155mm high explosive artillery rounds, effectively landing amidst the invaders with every shot. But none of it had any effect. One trooper was even struck directly by an artillery round and all it did was knock him down. He stood back up and immediately rejoined the rest of his company on the march toward Bragg.

The operator of the predator drone circling overhead paled as he watched it happen in real time. 'Are they even human!?' he thought as he stammered, attempting to report what he had seen.

Next to face the ARES company were the pilots. They had been awaiting their go order for quite some time now, and were more than ready to go drop some good old fashioned American Freedom™ on the Edenian invaders, and they did exactly that. Pope Field may have only been home to logistics and transport planes, but with a little ingenuity, a C17 Globemaster could carry a lot of bombs and people to push them out the loading hatch.

Protected by the civilian volunteers and the few combat aircraft they had, the fleet of Globemasters took off from Pope Field and dropped dozens of 500- and 1000-pound bombs around the ARES company. Out of a total of 140,000 pounds of explosives, they killed exactly two ARES troopers. And both of those had only been killed when they were directly struck by thousand-pound bombs.

The tradeoff for those two kills was their entire civilian volunteer wing, their single A-10 Thunderbolt II "Warthog" ground attack aircraft, and all of the Army's Cobra and Apache attack helicopters. All they had left now were three aging F-16 Fighting Falcons that were more display pieces than active service jets and the Globemasters themselves, which had remained outside the range of ARES weaponry.

It seemed that the Edenian assault was an inevitability, not an option.

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"It seems like there's a limit to the survivability of the SLEEK suit," Aron commented, watching the unfolding battle from the control center in VR. He was in a terrible mood, having already seen the nuclear detonations in Pakistan and India. In his wrath, he had ordered their capitals wiped off the map; how dare they use weapons of mass destruction in their own cities!?

Thus, he had shown them what true mass destruction looked like. In Nagasaki, a traditional Japanese torii gate had survived the detonation of the Fat Man nuclear bomb. But in Delhi and Islamabad, no two bricks remained unbroken, much less decorative structures. And that wasn't even mentioning Faisalabad and Bhawal, which had already suffered nuclear blasts in the megaton range. Those, he had leveled in compassion more than wrath; after all, being at ground zero of a ground-detonated nuclear blast, none would have survived regardless and their passing would have been much, much more painful than the quick deaths he had granted them.

"Indeed. We'll need to keep that in mind," Yoshiyuki Sankai, a copy of the head researcher of CYBERDYNE in reality and the leader of the virtual research team in Lab City, said. He brought up a screen and keyboard in front of him and started muttering to himself as he entered arcane equations into it, his fingers nearly a blur.

[They stood up rather well, though,] Athena remarked. [It took direct hits from thousand-pound bombs to take the two troopers out.]

“Indeed,” Aron agreed. He looked forward to beginning the resource harvest in the solar system; the research teams in Lab City had developed much more advanced hardware, but the most critical elements they required were only present on Earth in absolutely miniscule amounts. Thus, the truly advanced hardware at ARES’ disposal was currently limited to the Reaper teams and nyxian operatives. The Chinese had a saying: ‘use the best steel on the edge of the blade’, and Aron definitely agreed with that bit of wisdom.

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“Man I’m looking forward to dinner. Gonna order ribs, prime ribs, beef ribs, short ribs, babyback ribs, pork ribs, spare ribs, lamb ribs...” Private First Class Sombat Phongchai announced over the internal ARES communication network. He was the dedicated sniper of first squad, bravo company, third battalion, first brigade, first division of ARES and had been highly decorated for his actions in the VR training simulations.

Athena had decided long ago that VR missions counted for bravery awards just like real life missions would. After all, the knowledge that they would respawn was kept from the troopers during training missions while they were in progress; thus, the stakes, to them, were absolutely real. And so, she thought, should the awards be.

“And some cornbread, and corn cobs, and popcorn, and....” The chatter from PFC “Chatterbox” Phongchai was neverending, but so was the fire he was sending downrange at the people defending Fort Bragg and the battalion of artillery they were deployed around.

“Maybe some baked potatoes, potato salad, potato slaw, potato chips...” he continued as he accurately placed his shots through the heads of the infantry and the vulnerable points in the mobile howitzers alike.

“And cole slaw and salad, and....” He raised his hand to scratch his head, temporarily at a loss as to other slaw-related foods, but his other arm continued its accurate fire, scything down soldier after soldier like a farmer harvesting a field of wheat. “Hey Malone, what other cabbage stuff would be good to eat? You’re Irish, you should know cabbage, right?”

“Shut up, chatterbox,” Corporal Malone snapped. “My ears are growing calluses!” He briefly took a knee and launched two of the eight indirect-fire fragmentation dumb rounds from his backpack-mounted missile launcher.

“Can’t help it, corporal. It’s kinda my thing, you know?” Another head exploded in the scope of PFC Phongchai’s pulse rifle.

“Zip it, you two,” Sergeant “Colonel” Sanders ordered. “They’re sending the Globemasters on another pass. System says to scatter and avoid taking direct hits, shit’s still deadly even though it’s just strapped-on junk.”

“Roger,” the corporal and private first class chorused.

Corporal Malone moved to cover on the side of the road and took a knee again. He dialed up the penetration warhead for the four missiles attached to his backpack launcher and waited for the jerry-rigged bombers to enter his range. He was joined by the other four troopers with backpack missile launchers as well. Sixteen AP missiles should easily put paid to the twelve cargo-planes-cum-bombers.

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An hour and a half later, the assault on Fort Bragg was effectively over and the base commander, Colonel John Wilcox, ordered the survivors to lay down their weapons and surrender. They had killed a total of four of the two hundred ARES troopers and suffered over 40% casualties in return. The reservists, veterans, and national guardsmen in Fayetteville hadn’t even had a chance to enter the fray before the surrender went out, leaving some distraught, and those who had been in combat relieved.

A mere two hundred ARES infantry had taken down the biggest known military base complete with artillery, air support, and all the trimmings. If they could do that, what was the point in fighting them?

Chapter 392 BANG!

TICK

“Sir, the first line of defense in Los Angeles stopped responding,” the Cheyenne Mountain liaison officer said.

TOCK

“Fort Eustis surrendered.” A hub of transportation and aviation was lost.

TICK

“Fort Smallwood lost connection to Cheyenne.”

TOCK

“Houston just went dark.”

“Space Force Command is down.”

“Mar-A-Lago....”

“Fort Knox has....”

“Coronado....”

TICK

“The Pentagon is being contested,” came another report.

The bunker below the situation room was in a frenzy, as it seemed like there was a competition over who could deliver the worst news to the president as fast as possible. Each analyst and liaison officer was shouting to be heard over the others, and that was just the most important information. The stream of defeats seemed endless and came in faster than even an entire large room like the one they were in could contain.

Base after base and city after city fell to ARES forces in every state. The NORAD joint bases fell just as fast, despite Canada having basically no dog in this particular fight. It didn't take long before America's Canadian allies abandoned their equipment, raised the white flag, and fled back to the north with their tails tucked between their legs. They said they were “reinforcing critical locations at home in preparation for the fight to come”, but everyone knew what they were actually doing.

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TICK

“Sir, things aren't going very well. What's your orders?” General Dunford asked. The constant announcements of the falling cities and military bases was getting to him; he had grown up in an era where the idea of American Exceptionalism was formally taught and strictly adhered to and was mentally unprepared for his entire belief system to be brought crashing down around him like this.

“They'll be at the White House in a matter of hours if we don't stop them before they arrive,” shouted DNI Coats.

“What can we do? Our 500 billion dollar per year military is surrendering to them in waves. So what can we do?” the acting secretary of defense sighed, a look of defeat on his face. “We're going down just like Saddam did years ago, only faster.”

“We should surrender,” the secretary of state suggested.

The acting secretary of defense slammed his palms on the table and stood up, leaning over it and casting a glare at the secretary of state. “You're a fucking coward!” he growled.

“You're calling ME a coward?! Your fucking department is the one responsible for protecting the country, but just what is IT doing right now!?” the secretary of state yelled back across the table.

“We're fighting to the last man before we surrender! We have never, are not now, and will never surrender to anyone until every last red-blooded American is dead!”

“You stupid son of a bitch. Just because you're not the one fighting on the front lines yourself and your family is safe from the attacks, you think you can parade your

pathetic bullshit in front of me? You think you can cover your fear in a flag and counter it with a patriotic attitude? If you're so gung fucking ho, why don't YOU go to the front line and fight yourself, Rambo?" the secretary of state sneered. "You're just wasting my air in here, you pathetic sack of shit! You only made it in here because a much better man than you was forced to resign anyway!"

"And you want us to roll over and be their slaves!?"

The secretary of state let out a frustrated shout and grabbed fistfuls of his hair. Then he raised his head and, with bloodshot eyes, shouted, "Did you even take a fucking second to think that I might have a plan? Did you even think for one fucking second to ask if I had a plan? I'm saying we surrender and preserve our forces, then prepare for a later counterattack to catch them off guard! We have no idea of what they're capable of—none! We need to know their true power level before we can make an attempt at round two, you fucking moron!"

TOCK

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TICK

While the cabinet members fought among themselves, each shouting to be heard over the others, President Trump had his own particular headache to deal with. He had heard a report of ARES forces being dropped into a mostly unpopulated area, seemingly as an afterthought or a mistake. The only reason the analyst had reported it to him was that it was somewhat out of character for the invaders, who had, up until then, only targeted areas of strategic significance. Even Las Vegas was a blow to an American industry, reliant on tourism as it was.

The location itself was somewhere nobody but Trump knew was of actual significance, and he couldn't mention it to anyone, either. That was what was giving him a headache.

'They know,' he thought. The Edenians were headed straight for the Morgans. 'How could they fucking know!?' 'Do they know about our deal? What'll they do if they capture us?' Question after question passed through the president's mind, none of which he had an answer to. But the questions continued coming, relentlessly trampling through his mind like a herd of elephants.

'Will they kill us? No, they can't do that. They need my cooperation, so at least I'm safe... but the Morgans will probably die. Also, they'll need the current government to cooperate, at least for a while, or the citizens will take things into their own hands and make it practically impossible to govern the country. And if they can't govern us, they'll have to retreat, so their victory will be short-lived.'

"Enough!" Trump shouted, causing everyone at the table to immediately pipe down and look at him. "Surrender, for now. Let's analyze the situation and choose a course of action when we know more," he continued in a calm, assured tone. He was

internally elated that the Morgans and Rothschilds would soon be eliminated by Aron's forces.

TOCK

Silence weighed heavily at the conference table; even the rest of the room seemed quieter, despite the shouting and hubbub still going on among the analysts and liaison officers. Everyone was weighing the president's order and seemed to be on the verge of accepting it, until....

TICK

"I can't let you do that," the Acting Secretary of Defense, Patrick Shanahan, said. He reached into his coat and drew a pistol, then pointed it at President Trump.

TOCK

BANG!

Chapter 393 Stay Tuned

"Welcome! We apologize for the lacking ceremonial niceties, but the situation was rather urgent and we prepared as best we could."

A stunningly beautiful woman was being led into a very luxurious meeting room, accompanied by a few seemingly standard-issue bureaucrats and a security detail of tall, well-built men in modified ARES uniforms with shields instead of stars on their shoulders.

"No problem, Prime Minister Netanyahu. We've been in worse places," the woman replied with a brilliant smile on her face. She took a seat across a conference table from the Israeli prime minister, accompanied by the bureaucrats. The security detail stood behind them, their impassive gazes and alert eyes seeming intimidating without being angry.

"So let's discuss the terms," she continued, the smile leaving her face.

"Please state your terms and we'll try to accommodate them as best we can," Benjamin Netanyahu said. He appeared to be much more calm than the members of parliament seated beside him and the nervous security detail behind them, who kept casting what they thought were surreptitious glances at the ARES Aegis team behind the Edenian negotiator.

"We won't ask for too much," said the woman. "Just unconditional surrender." Another brilliant smile appeared on her face as the Israeli representatives across the table from her nearly choked to death on their own saliva.

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Moscow.

"Leave us," said the woman who had arrived to "negotiate" with President Putin.

“You, too,” he said to his own entourage.

Both sides’ people left the conference room, leaving only two people seated across the long, oval, white-topped table from each other.

“Whew, I’m finally almost done with this shit,” Vladimir sighed after confirming the two were alone in the room. It had been swept for bugs earlier and Nyx was actively monitoring it now.

“Did you really have to sink the Admiral Kuznetsov?” he whined. “There were far more important targets than that!”

“You can ask Athena when you see her. She’s the one that drew up the strike plans,” the nyxian answered. All of the negotiators sent by Eden were nyxian honeypots, as even straight women would respond better to a beautiful woman than a man. Especially one that had been enhanced and designed to meet the impossible standards of beauty that Nova had determined based on the golden ratio and evolutionary advantage theory. “I’m sure she’ll be happy to hear from you,” the nyxian sniggered.

Vladimir paled at the thought of facing the strict taskmistress. “No need, no need,” he said, waving his hands. “I didn’t like that ship anyway. It’s good that it got destroyed!”

Russia had suffered the fewest casualties in the unification war, only around ten thousand in total, before Vladimir had ordered a cessation of hostilities and general surrender. Thus, the situation there was still rather optimistic and there were a lot of surviving military leaders that were confused as to why Russia had given in so easily.

“How are things in the rest of the world?” he asked. Nova had continued messing with the World Wide Web, even after the coalition countries began toppling like unstable dominos, so he had no idea what was happening outside of Russia.

“Well, we have some time to waste anyway,” the nyxian cast Vladimir a flirtatious glance, “but if you want to chat about something so boring, I guess I can comply.” She heaved an exaggerated sigh of disappointment, her shoulders slumping forward.

Vladimir could have sworn that she even squeezed out a small tear, making her eyes glitter, and he shuddered. ‘Honeypots are downright terrifying,’ he thought, though he didn’t show it on his face.

“Firstly,” the nyxian said, now all prim and proper business, “we’ve sunk every active submarine in the ocean that isn’t one of ours. As for the rest of the coalition fleet, they were either sunk or boarded and captured.

“The European Union is in the process of negotiating a collective surrender. Turkey, however, is still bitter about the suspension of their accession negotiations with the EU, so they’re still stubbornly holding out. Even after we bombed their bridges in the Istanbul Strait and took out their air force, their army is still trying to fight back. But

that won't last long, as without their bases, there's only so far they can go relying on the supplies they managed to smuggle into the mountains. Once those are gone, they'll either surrender or starve.

"Australia didn't make much noise. All we had to do was drop a platoon in Canberra and they almost seemed happy to surrender. I don't think I'll ever understand those people," the nyxian said with a shake of her head, bemused by the Australian attitude toward life in general. They were, by and large, a very sanguine, phlegmatic people with a distinct sense of humor about their own situation. Thus, the only people that weren't confused by their willing surrender and "it's your problem now" attitude were the Australians themselves.

"The most interesting part was in Mexico. With part of our initial retaliation being launched from there, practically the entire country's military descended on FOB Odysseus in Culiacán Rosales. That wasn't the surprise, though—what surprised us is that all of the cartels joined forces with them. So when they arrived and got their asses kicked up around their shoulders by the garrison we left there, they retreated and formed a perimeter while they waited for their air force and army to arrive...."

As she continued her narration, Vladimir intently listened and a map of the current world unfolded in his mind.

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The next few hours were the most stressful hours of the entire war, at least for the populace of the countries being invaded by ARES, as Nova continued conducting a symphony of digital information and psychological warfare on the entire world. She had mostly restored access to the internet and, assisted by Panoptes, was carefully curating everything the world was allowed to see. She had truly taken the "hearts and minds" style of warfare popularized by America in the 1960s by then-President Lyndon B. Johnson and made it her own. The things she spread were horrifying, to say the least, and caused the public of every country to pressure their governments into surrendering.

The images of the craters where Islamabad and Delhi used to be were particularly useful for that.

That, plus the ongoing chaos and rioting around the world, had the citizens scared shitless and very susceptible to Nova's propaganda campaign.

A mere seven hours after the first shots were fired, though, silence returned to the world. The Edenian carriers were busy picking up the troops they had dropped and surrender negotiations were ongoing in the ten "chickens", as Aron called them, referring to the saying that talked about killing chickens to warn monkeys, but in the rest of the world, silence reigned supreme. Even the riots petered out and died down on their own.

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The silence, though it seemed like it would last forever, was broken a few short hours later as nearly everyone on the planet received a notification on all of their internet-connected devices, televisions, and radio stations.

The notifications were sent to every citizen of every country in the world, but they all said the same exact thing. No matter what channel they turned their televisions to, what address they entered in their internet browsers, or what radio station they tuned their radios to, they all said the same exact thing and nothing else.

“Stay tuned for an upcoming announcement.”

Chapter 394 My Dearly Defeated Opponents

Avalon Island.

Aron walked into a small, dark room with a table and three chairs. A hanging light swung over the table, its dim light barely illuminating anything and leaving most of the room in the darkness as it swayed to and fro.

“Long time no see,” he greeted the two men seated at one side of the table.

“I don’t remember us having met at any time,” George Morgan replied in a quavering voice. He couldn’t hide his nervousness, earning him a slightly disappointed glance from his father, who was in the seat next to him.

“But we’ve been conversing with each other for quite a long time, now, haven’t we?” Aron sneered as he took a seat across the table from the Morgans..

“We have?” Aubrey responded in mock surprise. “Perhaps there was the illusion of a conversation, but in order for a conversation to happen it requires two people, no?” He folded his hands and rested them on the table, a slight smile on his face. “So it can’t be a conversation. To me, it seems more like a lecture.”

“Fine,” Aron shrugged, “we’ll call it a lecture. If that’s the case, it was one that you forced me to give.”

The light continued swaying from side to side over the table, casting Aron and Aubrey’s faces in occasional, moving shadows.

“In fact,” Aron continued, “I would have been perfectly content to continue being what I used to be. I would’ve graduated from school, started a career... perhaps even married my childhood friend. I would’ve had a small house with a mortgage and a white picket fence, two kids, maybe a dog or two.” He shrugged. “But Rottem Morgan took that from me.”

“Who?” Aubrey said with genuine confusion on his face. Had the name not been brought up here, he truly wouldn’t have remembered that cast-off chess piece of his from so long ago.

“OH!” Realization dawned on his face. “Rottem. I have to apologize for him, actually. I didn’t know before he failed that he was such a waste, and had I known that, he never would’ve crossed paths with you.”

Aron barked a sharp laugh. “No, no,” he waved his hand, “I really have to thank you. You see, it was ultimately your ‘failure’ that... stimulated my potential, shall we say, and ultimately gave rise to the man I am today.” A cold smile fixed itself on his face as he crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair.

Aron wasn’t kidding. Had he not been in the situation he was in, the system might never have found him and he truly wouldn’t be the man he grew to be. So he did owe the disgraced professor, at least a little bit.

He changed tack in the conversation. “Do you know what they say about fish and guests, Mr. Morgan?” he asked.

“I’m sure you’ll enlighten me,” Aubrey replied. He waved his hand, as if granting Aron permission to continue. His upbringing had cemented his behavior at a very young age and, as intimidated as he was—and he had to admit that he was actually quite intimidated by the young man seated across from him—he could never act as if he were in anything but full control of whatever situation he found himself in.

“After a few days, they rot and start to stink,” Aron bluntly said. “So you have to throw them out.”

“Is that so? But I am neither guest nor fish. So what does that have to do with me?”

“I’m afraid, Mr. Morgan, that your entanglement with me has come to an end. You were a useful whetstone, but, like the fish, you’re rotten and it’s time to throw you out.” Aron sneered, uncrossing his legs and leaning forward across the table.

“I’m sure we’ll see about that,” Aubrey replied, a mysterious smile flitting across his face. “But I have a question.”

“Go on.” Aron nodded.

“Now that you’ve caught my son and I, what are you going to do with us? Torture? Imprisonment? Execution? Parade us in some trumped-up kangaroo court in your little tinpot tyranny then send us for a public beheading in the city square? Seize the Morgan family’s assets and declare us persona non grata?” Aubrey calmly listed off a number of possibilities. His son, on the other hand, wasn’t quite as calm and could only tremble in the seat beside the elder man.

Aubrey turned his head to his son and barked, “Stop sniveling! You’re a Morgan, so act like one!”

He cleared his throat and turned back to Aron. “Well? What’s it going to be? What is our fate, now that we’ve fallen into your hands? History is written by the victors, after all... so what will history say about us?” he finished and stared straight into Aron’s eyes.

Aron stared back at Aubrey with a mocking smile on his face. "What makes you think I'll do any of that?" he sneered.

"You obviously want what we have," George interrupted. "You're merely a nouveau riche, drunk on your little pile of gold and power, but we," he gestured to himself and his father, "are the Morgans. Generation after generation, we've built an empire of power, authority, and wealth. A reputation that can't be built in a single lifetime, let alone a few short years.

"We are what you can never be, no matter how hard you try. We are the elite. We are the kingmakers, the power brokers, the people that drive the world. You... you're a petty little tyrant sitting on a throne of garbage and calling it gold," he sneered. "So of course you want everything that we have."

"Oh, really?" Aron smirked. "But I'm afraid that I already have everything of yours, and then some."

George and Aubrey both cast condescension-filled gazes at the young man across the table from them.

"It seems you disbelieve me." Aron shook his head, then waved his hand and a holographic screen appeared floating in the air between the two sides. Slowly scrolling along the screen was a list of the Morgans... former assets and a visual representation of them being drained and shifted to Aron's accounts.

"I'll leave you to watch as your empire crumbles, your power is stripped, your kings are dethroned, and your treasury is emptied. Enjoy the fruits of your labors, Misterns Morgan," Aron calmly said, then stood up and turned to leave the room, leaving his two defeated opponents gazing at a screen showing them the dismantling of everything built by generation after generation of their ancestors crumbling around them.

Aron opened the door, then paused and turned. "I would say 'until we meet again', but I'm afraid, my dearly defeated opponents, that we never will," he said, then walked out of the room and closed the door behind him.

Chapter 395 What Comes Next?

"And so the Morgans have fallen," Rina sighed.

"How did you think things would go down?" Aron asked as he walked beside her down the long hallway in one of the Cube's deepest subbasements.

"I don't really know. One of the many ways I'd pictured it was in some dramatic shootout between you and them, but... I never once imagined their whole family would go down like fruit being plucked from a tree," she said.

“Well, the world does have a way of surprising us, I suppose.” Aron grinned at Rina, then they both laughed. “By the way, have you heard anything from your father lately?”

“Yes, actually. He contacted me to tell me to run as fast as possible before the nukes. He said he’d tried his best, but there was already a war and there was nothing he could do,” she answered. She would never hide anything from him, and honestly didn’t believe she would ever even be tempted to.

“Do you think he really tried to stop it?”

Her shoulders slumped a little. “I don’t know,” she sighed. He seems to have changed since I decided to disobey his order to return to America. And when I told him you could deal with things, well... he started getting involved in the family businesses again. Before, after I dealt with my so-called ‘brother’,” she scoffed, “he’d stepped back into more of an observer role. I guess he thought I was going to die and was acting accordingly.

“What are you planning?” she asked and squinted at him. Aron never asked anything without a reason for asking.

“I’ll leave it to you, since the Rothschilds never did anything against me in the first place. So let me know if you need me to do anything to help and I’ll do my best,” Aron said, his voice considerate.

“Thank you.” Rina was grateful that Aron wasn’t planning anything to deal with her family as he had the Morgans. She knew that both families were rotten to the core, after all, and at their heart, the Rothschilds were no different from the Morgans. The only difference was that the Morgans had acted against Aron, while the Rothschilds hadn’t. Thus, they had earned a stay of execution for the moment, though her boyfriend wouldn’t hesitate to pluck them out as he had the Morgans if he felt it necessary.

After all, he was on a timer and up against a rather intimidating deadline.

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“They really did it,” Herschel Rothschild said, loudly enough that his wife could hear it. He was staring at his phone, which was displaying the notification of an upcoming announcement.

He knew it must be coming from Aron, too, as he had been keeping tabs on the ongoing war. Now, he finally realized that what Rina had told him about Aron having a plan to deal with the nuclear attack wasn’t just hot air; she hadn’t been blinded by love and he really had dealt with things quite neatly. Up until this moment, he had thought the boy was too full of himself to the point of feeling invincible and had overwhelmingly underestimated the forces arrayed against him.

Virginia heaved a sigh of relief. She could finally rest easy now that she knew the danger to her daughter had passed. ‘You’re really going to kill me, child,’ she thought as she dialed Rina’s number. Even though she had heard Herschel say everything was fine, she still wanted to hear her daughter’s voice; no mother would ever stop worrying for their daughters, much less Virginia, who loved hers more than most.

And although she and her husband had connections, nothing at all was being released by Eden, so all anyone had to go on at the moment were the reports that Nova and Panoptes were carefully curating and releasing on the internet. Virginia wasn’t stupid; she knew that most of it was propaganda and she would need to hear it from her daughter for any firsthand account of how things were in Eden.

“What’s that boy going to do next?” Herschel muttered to himself, but loudly enough for his wife to hear again.

“What do you mean by that?”

“After war comes rebuilding. Although the amount of damage might not seem as bad as it could be, considering everything started and ended in half a day, the actual damage is still quite a lot higher than any war ever fought. And I’m not just talking about the missile strikes, which is already unfathomable enough, but also the economy.

“Everything, and I mean EVERYTHING, was brought to a halt. Even market trading is still suspended, and every second the market stays suspended causes millions, if not hundreds of millions of dollars in damage to the economy. And even when trading is resumed, the market is going to face a panic sell as everyone tries to pull their money out at once. If it isn’t handled well, the Great Depression of 1929 will look like a normal dip on a day trader’s tracker.

“And after the market suffers a panic crash, a run on the banks will follow. Everyone will need money to spend, but with banks losing everything in the market crash, their ready cash reserves won’t be enough for people to withdraw and they won’t have enough liquid capital to cover the rest. After that, well... after that comes nothing but chaos.”

“Why do I feel there’s a ‘but’ coming?” Virginia asked.

“Because there is one. Despite the negative trend, a few people will come out the winners in the economic battlefield. Those will be the real winners of the war and will have their pick of trophies to pluck from the losers.”

“Oh my god,” Virginia exclaimed. She understood what her husband meant. Usually, the winners of a war would choose to take “war reparations” from the losing side, but they can only take a certain amount. Otherwise, the losing country or force might just choose to fight to the last man instead and the winner would only rule over scorched

earth and ashes. But in this case, Aron was the sole winner, and he had been up against the entire world! So essentially, the whole world was a shopping mall and he was about to go on a buying spree.

The thought of all of that falling into a greedy and insatiable man would cause panic in anyone. She desperately hoped Aron wouldn't be greedy or insatiable.

"And our family is one of the potential war reparations, and a tempting one at that. Thus, my initial question: what's that boy going to do next?" Herschel didn't quite have the same level of faith in Rina's decision as his wife did, hence his worry.

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"How far do you think we can bend the branch before it snaps?" Aron wondered.

[The information Panoptes and I have been releasing outside has the entire world in a panic, thus most of our demands should be met. But if we pass a certain point, we'll push everyone into a 'last stand' mentality. So during your announcement, I'll be actively monitoring the situation and will update your prepared remarks based on people's reactions to what you're saying. If it starts going too far, I'll pull you back, don't worry.]

"Okay. List the things I can immediately take, and the things we'll be taking over time as people become used to the new power structure," Aron said.

Nova waved her hand and a screen appeared with two bulleted lists. The others in the room began reading and their eyes grew wider and wider the more they read. Aron would be taking quite a lot from everyone in the name of 'reparations'.

[Looks like I'll be busy for quite some time,] Athena said. The reaper teams, especially, would be busy for the oncoming days, months, or even years. Among the demands were things that would generate insurgencies all over the world, which would target ARES' greatest weakness: manpower.

Three million soldiers sounded like a lot, but when compared to the entire world, it really wasn't.

"Now on to another topic. Our casualties." Aron nodded to Athena, who popped another holographic screen next to the one that displayed Nova's lists. "We suffered 8,492 casualties overall in the assault, including the dead and wounded. Our two largest losses were in Faisalabad and Bhepal, where ISIS was caught smuggling stolen nuclear weapons and decided to detonate them there instead of carrying out their initial plans. Those two detonations accounted for almost a full quarter of the total losses in the assault.

"The wounded will be healed and returned to full strength over the next two weeks. We'll document the process and use it as propaganda and proof for an upcoming product release." Medical pods were on Aron's list for potential upcoming Asclepius Biotech products. They had been before, but the time wasn't ripe. Now that the unification had begun, though, he would revisit the issue; thus, having documentation of the pods and proof of results would be important for that.

“After they’re healed, they’ll be given two weeks of paid leave before returning to continue their service.

“As for the deceased, their families will receive three times the standard death compensation and lifetime access to services offered through the Coeus Foundation for three generations regardless of need. We are also focusing on collecting their corpses, or at least those we can, anyway, and returning them for honorable burial on Martyr’s Island.” Aron gestured and a map of Eden showed up with a pin pointing to the newly constructed graveyard, which would be the permanent resting place for the nearly 7000 dead, including 2000 empty coffins.

“Their dignity will forever be protected. They are honored martyrs and are to be treated as such,” he continued, his gaze growing sharp.

Despite the system’s best efforts to the contrary, the deaths still weighed heavily on his conscience. Now it was up to him to ensure they hadn’t died in vain.

Chapter 396 The Declaration (part 1)

The hours inexorably ticked by and the time for the announcement arrived. Everyone with any device that would allow them to watch it was glued to their screens. Those that didn’t have one were huddled with those who did, some even violating the curfew to visit and watch.

So far, the governments had remained completely silent ever since the “stay tuned” message had popped up everywhere. None of them had either confirmed or denied that they would be releasing an announcement, so the people could only default to believing it would be a government spokesperson showing up to let them know just what the hell was going on.

On billions of screens around the world, the notification suddenly disappeared and was replaced by a white podium with no insignia on it at all, backed by a sky-blue stage curtain hanging behind it. Affixed to the podium was a single microphone.

Shortly, Aron, dressed in a neatly tailored suit, entered from the side of the screen and took his place behind the podium. He placed his hands atop it on each side and looked straight into the camera, then began his speech.

“Greetings, ladies and gentlemen,” he began. The speech was live translated and captioned in whatever language people were watching in spoke as he continued, “I hope you are having a good day.

“Two weeks ago, a situation arose that continually escalated as the days went by. To bring everyone up to speed, I’ll narrate the events that occurred.”

As he spoke, the curtain behind him vanished and was replaced by a screen that provided visual context to the events as he continued narrating, “Everything began months ago, with the discovery of massive oil deposits in Eden and Esparia. One of my companies, Helios Energy & Utilities was awarded the contract to extract the oil by the Edenian government. The Edenian government then negotiated a deal to ship crude oil to China.

“But unbeknownst to anyone, save perhaps those personally involved, China had no intention of negotiating in good faith and planned to stage a hijack of the oil shipment and force Eden into paying the fines as stipulated in the unfair contract that China had forced upon them.”

The screen behind Aron showed the agreement, with the relevant section highlighted. He paused, allowing the people watching to digest the information, then continued, “When our transport convoy was peacefully passing by Indonesia, outside their territorial waters, the hijacking attempt took place and was foiled by the intervention of the Poseidon Navy’s Merchant Marine fleet.”

Here, the screen displayed the satellite footage of the attack, complete with recordings from the bridge of the EV Pacific Voyager. It was the same footage and evidence the Edenian Ambassador to the UN, Miss Olivia Foster, had presented at the UN Security Council hearing between Eden and Indonesia.

“We presented this same evidence during the UN Security Council hearing,” the screen cut to a still image of the UNSC chamber from the day of the hearing, “but we were found to be culpable by majority vote of the security council.”

The still image was overlain by the result of the vote, showing the unfairness of the process itself and how biased it was against Eden.

“During the hearing, in order to not offend China too badly, we held back some critical evidence in the belief that it wouldn’t be necessary to point fingers.”

The screen switched to showing a recording of the Chinese submarine that had been jamming the radio signals during the ‘hijacking attempt’, then voice recordings of those Chinese officials who were involved in the planning and carrying out of the attempt were played. Aron remained silent to allow the evidence to play out before the entire world.

“Unfortunately, due to withholding this crucial evidence, the permanent members of the UNSC were able to be influenced by China to vote against Eden. Then greed kicked in. The capabilities demonstrated by my merchant marine fleet were coveted by the permanent members and they began plotting in the dark to take what I have, using Eden as a lever against me.

“But I’m just a businessman, albeit one that’s provided products crucial enough that they couldn’t target me or any of my companies. Thus, they implemented broad and crippling sanctions against the country my companies call home.”

The screen cut to a display of the UN sanctions against Eden.

“During this time, President Romero of Eden contacted me for help, and I willingly did my part as a citizen and resident of Eden. I did my best to ensure that my fellow citizens would not starve and could maintain more than subsistence-level standards of living....”

The speech continued, detailing the events and casting a bright light on all of the dark room dealings and behind-the-scenes politicking that power brokers around the world had aimed at Aron's companies. People watching the speech-cum-presentation were shocked at the naked greed and arrogance displayed by those in power.

Aron finally came to the most recent events.

"Three weeks ago, in Taiwan, China attempted to encroach on Taiwanese airspace during President Romero's state visit. The Aeolus Air Force, a division of my security company, ARES, warned the jets off, but they ignored the warning and continued on their course, leaving the defending jets of the Aeolus Air Force no option but to open fire and shoot them down."

Aron paused, allowing the recordings of Zi Jinping and his ministers planning an incident to play out, followed by the incident itself where the four J-20s were shot down over Taiwan.

"What followed was a period of silence from their side. We had hoped they would abandon their scheme, but we were proven wrong shortly after that, as a Chinese operative instigated a Chinese loyalist in the North Korean Army high command to commence an artillery bombardment of Seoul, also during a diplomatic visit by President Romero."

Aron paused again, allowing the recording of the basement room to play out, along with identifiers of the person who had made the call that linked them to the Chinese Ministry of State Security.

"And as everyone knows, their plan was a complete success. It resulted in hundreds of thousands of South Korean civilian casualties, followed by the complete decimation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

"But it didn't stop there. The United States, led by President Trump, captured the leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-Un, and during his 'enhanced interrogation', he was led to implicate Eden in his unprovoked terror act against South Korea. Due to the graphic nature of the video footage itself, I will only be playing the sound file of that incident."

The screen switched to a blank, blue display and the voice recording of Kim Jong-Un being tortured by CIA "interrogators" played out.

"Who was responsible for the attack? It was Eden, wasn't it! Admit it, you fat piece of shit!"

Screaming and sobbing was the response, along with the sound of fists and other objects impacting flesh.

"Admit it! Admit that Eden ordered the attack and all this pain will stop!"

A slap was heard, then whimpering.

“Stop! Stop! I’ll say it! It was... it was... it was all Eden! That bastard Romero forced me to do it!”

Chapter 397 The Declaration (part 2)

The screen once again showed Aron and he cleared his throat, then calmly continued going through every event that escalated the tensions one by one, each of them bringing the entire world closer to the brink of the war between Eden and the rest of the world.

“You should have realized by now, but I will say it in plain speech. Neither I, nor Eden, nor Esparia, had anything at all to do with any attacks. We have been acting in self-defense and good faith ever since the beginning. The only mistake I made was in taking the first step back.... I should’ve known that when I would take one step back, my enemies would only take two steps forward against me. So I kept stepping back, standing down, and deescalating the entire time until I had to draw a line and say ‘this far, and no further!’

“This far, I will retreat, but I will retreat no more. I drew that line, and this was the result.”

The screen switched and showed Aron’s speech that began the Edenian defense and eventual offensive.

After the recorded speech played out, he remained silent, his head bowed, for a number of minutes. Just when people thought he was done speaking, he murmured a barely-audible “Amen”, and focused his intense gaze on the camera once more.

“In the end, we won the war,” he said in a grave tone. “But there were casualties. Many of them. An incredible number, in fact, especially considering that the war only lasted for seven hours from the time the first shots were fired. Almost eight million soldiers were killed in the offensive.”

The screen behind him displayed the number 7,687,902.

“Hundreds of thousands more were injured.”

Beneath the number of soldiers killed in action, another number appeared: 408,115.

“And, sadly, there were also civilian casualties. Many of them were the brave men and women who volunteered to fight beside their nations’ militaries, but even more of them, sadly, were not. During the fighting, two nuclear weapons were detonated. They had escaped the destruction of all nuclear stockpiles only by virtue of ‘bent spear’ incidents in both India and Pakistan that nobody had yet become aware of.

“The cowardly members of ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, had stolen a nuclear warhead from India and Pakistan’s stockpiles, thanks to collaborators and

sympathizers embedded deep within those two countries' governments. When the shooting started and the metal hit the meat, the terrorists were in the process of smuggling the warheads out of the countries, their ultimate destination the United States. But due to a freak coincidence, they were stalled in Faisalabad and Bhepal, where the terrorists made the decision to detonate them in place instead of continuing on as planned.

"Unfortunately, I had no knowledge of the planned attack, as the fog of war is impossible to defend against. So I, in my wrath, ordered a saturation bombardment on the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, and the Indian capital, Delhi. Due to that, as well as other minor incidents in the ten countries invaded, there were many civilian casualties. The ones I am responsible for shall forever weigh on my shoulders, and for them, I deeply apologize and swear to do my utmost to compensate the surviving families of those unjustly slain during the war.

"If you were one of those affected, you will be notified by one of my representatives shortly to discuss compensation for your losses. No amount of money or things can ever replace what you have lost, but I cannot resurrect the dead. No one can."

Aron bowed his head again as the screen behind him displayed another shocking number: 26,196,853.

Another two minutes later, he lifted his gaze and refocused on the camera, then continued, "In addition to Islamabad and Delhi, I also ordered the complete destruction of the remains of Faisalabad and Bhepal. That was done partly out of wrath, but mostly out of compassion. I judged that it would be more compassionate to provide those people a quick end, in order to spare them the lingering, painful deaths that were suffered by the survivors from the Nagasaki and Hiroshima bombings in 1945 due to the radiation released from the atomic bombs dropped by the United States.

"I have also ordered a full-scale cleanup effort to scrub the radiation from the despicable detonation of nuclear weapons by the ISIS terrorists in those two cities.

"But I cannot, and will not, accept full responsibility for the death toll. The greater burden falls upon the shoulders of your leaders and those controlling them. Their greed and lust for power overcame their rationality, to the point where every single remaining nuclear power ordered a saturation nuclear strike on the Eden-Esparian Archipelago that would have wiped out not one, but two entire countries in the thousands of nuclear fireballs."

The screen switched to show the launch of a single warhead, then split and showed a second, then a third, then a fourth... ultimately, all twelve-thousand-odd nuclear weapons that were launched were all simultaneously displayed on the screen, creating a photographic mosaic of the leaders of the United States, China, the United Kingdom, Russia, Pakistan, India, Israel, and France, all standing around a table in a dimly-lit room.

Nova had made it obvious exactly who was responsible for ordering the combined nuclear strike against Eden through a clever usage of the images of nuclear launches.

“If it weren’t for the fact that the Poseidon Navy and Aeolus Air Force had the capability to defend against the launches of more than twelve thousand nuclear weapons, the entire population of two countries would have died, either by being within the initial range of the impacts or due to the painful, lingering effects of radiation. An archipelago that’s roughly the size of the entire Australian continent would have been rendered uninhabitable for centuries to come, thanks to the greedy actions of a few, and the entire world would have risked an even worse nuclear winter.

“It was for that reason that I removed every nuclear weapon held by anyone. Those that held them had proven beyond a shadow of a doubt by their own actions that humanity is not yet ready to bear the weighty responsibility of civilization-ending stockpiles of indiscriminate weaponry.”

Chapter 398 Come on Baby, Nyx Does the Twist

“I know I sound brutal, or perhaps power-mad, but the current situation the world is facing will not allow for complicated attempts at grabbing power. We need every iota of focus aimed at one goal, and one goal only: the incoming adversaries from the sea of stars,” Aron said, his gaze firmly locked on the camera lens.

The screen behind him displayed the recent rioting and attempted rise of warlords that happened after the launches of missiles was first made public, as well as countless other incidents of attempted, or successful, power grabs that resulted in unified preparations being made impossible.

“So because of that, I’m going to include demands in the surrender accords I’ll be signing with your countries over the coming days and weeks. They’ll be aimed at immediately beginning proper preparations to welcome our incoming... friends.” His lips quirked on the last word in a smile that wasn’t a smile.

“The recent war ended with my victory. Every single country that declared war on me surrendered. No truce, no cease-fire, just surrender. Had they not surrendered, I would have shown no mercy and the war would continue until they surrendered or ceased to exist. It was the last war that will ever be fought by humans, and the largest ‘civil’ war in all of history. I say it’s the largest civil war because after this, we will be one Earth, one humanity, standing undivided against the rest of the universe, which we have recently learned we are not alone in. So, yes, there will be demands, and those demands will be met.

“Or else.”

“At the moment, my military forces are still conducting operations, capturing those behind the war. But for those of you who are rightly concerned that you may be forced to bow to an unending stream of demands, let me reassure you right now. That will not be the case. I am only demanding ten things from every country.

“My first demand is your unconditional support of a united world government without the bloat and politicking that the United Nations had. As a part of this demand, all of your countries will be withdrawing from that toothless organization and participating in the creation of a world constitution. The process of this will take months to complete, at a minimum. But that has to happen because the rest of my demands hinge on a united world government existing in the first place....”

Aron’s address to the world continued as he listed the terms he would be demanding as part of the surrenders.

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As Aron was delivering his address, the rest of the world leaders were meeting with someone none of them hoped to ever meet again.

[So, have any of you changed your minds?] Nyx asked the world leaders, including key members of each government.

They were in a large amphitheater, a copy of Madison Square Garden, each country seated in the stands and separated from each other. For instance, all of the Chinese members were seated in one section, and all of the Americans in another. It was the same for every country. All of them were separated by invisible, soundproof walls.

No matter what part of the world they were from, or what their country’s style of government was, they all had one thing in common: an expression of fear was on their faces as they looked at the gorgeous woman that seemed made of shadows standing on the stage in the middle of the amphitheater.

When they had first found themselves there, they still had an overweening pride in themselves and an accompanying arrogance, despite their fear at having opened their eyes in a completely different location from where they were when they blinked.

Nyx had personally appeared on the stage once everyone had taken their place in the stands. To them, they had all appeared simultaneously, though in reality, some were present for hours before others showed up, but they had been kept unaware of the passing of time. Aron’s plan was to convince them to peacefully sign the surrender accords and support his demands with a minimum of governmental interference. Thus, he had individually met with all of the world leaders before sending them to the virtual Madison Square Garden, and to ensure they spoke the truth, he removed their ability to lie or prevent themselves from speaking.

Their answers had greatly disappointed him.

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“Why should I surrender to you when I can continue causing trouble for you as long as I’m in office?” Trump had replied.

“I’m going to use this time to create as much opposition to you as I can by inciting my citizens, while at the same time figuring out how to kill as many of you ignorant peasants as I can until you bow and scrape before me and beg me to reassume my rightful place as the leader of my people.”

“I’m going to accuse you of detonating the nuclear bomb in my country to turn everyone who lost something to it against you, making it impossible for you to control anything or maintain any power at all.”

“I’m going to destroy everything in my country that can support your agenda, leaving you a kingdom of scorched earth and ashes to ‘rule’ over, bumpkin. I will grind you back into the mud where you belong so that everyone on Earth dies together. If I can’t have the glory, why should I let you, eh?”

After hearing the same response in different words from every single person he asked, Aron sighed and snapped his fingers, sending them to the stadium in a suspended state to await Nyx’s personal form of “tender loving care”.

[You are all here because you’re pathetic, weak, useless, scum. You’re leeches that feed upon the body of humankind. You’re mosquitoes that spread your disease from person to person, generation after generation. Don’t deny it. I know you don’t believe me right now, but....

[I have a full month to show you just how wrong you are.] She gave them a brilliant, flirtatious smile and a wink.

[Let’s get started, shall we?] she giggled and snapped her fingers, sending everyone to their own individual white rooms.

Chapter 399 Even Adult Men Fear Their Mother's Wrath

[So, have you changed your minds?] Nyx asked, sending shivers down the politicians’ spines as they recalled their last month in the white room.

Only silence answered her, so she continued, [Maybe you’ll be able to answer after another trip.]

She slowly raised her hand as if she was about to snap her fingers when everyone in the amphitheater stands suddenly groveled before her and shouted, “Please don’t send us back there!”

[Then wake up and go do what you’ve been ordered to do,] Nyx said, then snapped her fingers and logged the politicians out of VR.

In the situation room bunker, Trump opened his eyes, finding himself laid out on the conference table. He raised his hand to his face and felt an unfamiliar object that was kind of like a pair of glasses. ‘I don’t think I wear glasses?’ he thought as he opened his eyes and sat up. He pulled the object off of his face and it was indeed a pair of unfamiliar glasses.

A sharp pain shot through his head as he recalled what had taken place right before he fell unconscious.

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TICK

"I can't let you do that," the Acting Secretary of Defense, Patrick Shanahan, said. He reached into his coat and drew a pistol, then pointed it at President Trump.

TOCK

BANG!

A sonic wave burst in the room, powerful enough to cause a visible distortion in the air but gentle enough to not break bones or send people flying. It was, however, enough to knock everyone in the room unconscious.

As he was beginning to fall, he noticed a soldier taking off his... her? hat and shaking her head as her face changed from masculine to feminine and long blonde hair fell like a rippling wave to her waist.

He found her extremely memorable, too, as she was the only one in the room that was still capable of standing.

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He lowered his hand from his face and put his feet on the ground. "Time to get to work," he said, looking around the room and realizing he was talking mostly to himself, as the others weren't quite all awake yet.

But it didn't take long before they, too, finished the logout procedure and removed their glasses with shaking hands.

"Yes, sir," they chorused, then began working on carrying out the orders they had received from Nyx. Aron's address was still continuing live on every screen in the bunker.

"All of the evidence I've provided here, together with even more evidence of gross negligence and outright corruption have been posted on the Edenian Ministry of the Exterior website and has already been made publicly available.

"Thank you all for your time," he bowed to the camera, then stood ramrod-straight again and resumed staring at the camera, "and I hope our next meeting is under far more pleasant circumstances."

Aron's address was complete; he had brought the rest of the world up to date on everything that had been happening.

He turned and left the area that had been synchronized with the flow of real time, as he had delivered his speech from the relative safety and comfort of virtual reality.

"What's the situation?" he asked as soon as he appeared in a conference room just after leaving the time bubble he had been in for his speech.

[Nyx has released all of the high-level and other important people needed for the unification to progress, and they've already begun working to that end. Apparently they didn't like the white room.] She smirked. Aron felt she was becoming more humanlike as her processing power increased.

[Our carriers will continue their patrols, ensuring a rapid response in case any issues arise....] She continued her report, listing out all the points of interest Aron would need or want to know.

“Good. Keep me up to date on things. Right now, I need to have a talk with mom and dad.”

[Yes, sir. Good luck,] she replied.

Aron winced and muttered, “Thanks. I'm really gonna need it.” He slowly trudged toward the door to log off. At the pace he was moving, it was obvious he was more than a little concerned by his parents' potential reaction to recent world events. No matter how big or how powerful a man grows, he will still never outgrow his parents' wrath.

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The moment Aron's address had ended, each country's leader immediately followed up with addresses of their own. They all began the same way, with an apology to their people. After apologizing, they elaborated on their plans for the near future and how the new world order was going to be, then blew happy little clouds of sunshine about how they would emerge from this trial even stronger, as one united species in the face of outside enemies.

Still, the look of defeat and shame on the faces of the various leaders was something no one had ever wanted to see. Not only was it disappointing to their supporters, but even their detractors reacted poorly to the addresses. The former were depressed and ashamed, while the latter were enraged by the damage their “leaders” had caused their own countries.

And while some leaders had it easier, others weren't so lucky. Thus, all those unlucky leaders could do was extend the lockdown for another day to give their populations time to calm down, as well as for the various governments to assess the damages they had each suffered in the brief, but impactful war.

However, the citizens didn't react as expected. Instead, the individual addresses had acted like water being thrown into boiling oil as people grew more and more furious as they discussed the situation.

Anger, worry, fear, and every other negative emotion that could be felt and expressed were definitely being both felt and expressed. Especially those who discovered they had lost relatives or close friends and loved ones during the brief fight.

But the true extent of the damage was yet to be known to anyone, save perhaps those who had inflicted it.

Chapter 400 Of Flames and Those Who Fan Them

People all over the world were discussing the wonder of the modern-day David and Goliath fight between the coalition naval forces and the Poseidon Navy of Eden. It was unbelievable to them—especially the Americans, brought up as they were on a steady diet of American Exceptionalism propaganda—that a “developing nation” like Eden could come out the winner in the conflict at sea.

After all, it had only been around two short years since the country began rising out of its dictatorial roots. So for them to defeat, and quite resoundingly at that, the forces the rest of the world had gathered against them was incredibly unbelievable.

Despite lacking quite a bit of information, some armchair generals had mashed up the information that they did have into some semblance of “the entire story” and felt they had a grasp on how things had actually happened. But with Nova and Panoptes having been the ones that curated the information released in the first place, none of those “entire stories” matched at all. So that sparked even more debate on the subject, leading to a mess of negative emotions spreading through the entire internet as peoples’ personal bubbles collided with each other.

The internet had so many flame wars going on that the whole thing had practically already burnt itself to the ground, and that was the situation Edenians and Esparians found themselves in once Nova publicly reestablished the archipelago’s connection to the global village.

So what did they do when they saw all that mess? They jumped right in and happily contributed to it, of course! They may not have been able to pick up a rifle and fire a shot during the war, and they sure weren’t on the ships that beat back the coalition navy, but when it came to an internet war of words? That was a battlefield the citizens of Eden and Esparia were more than capable of fighting on! Their heads were full of patriotic pride in themselves and their nations and their bellies were full of suppressed rage at the intolerable bullying they had been suffering under for the months leading up to what historians were already calling The Last Civil War.

Thus, they got to work, much to the delight and amusement of the onlooking AIs. Aeolus, the mischievous little windbag he was, even convinced his “big brothers and sisters” to covertly help fan the flames even higher.

Aron, who, upon hearing of the situation on the internet, quickly heaved a secret sigh of relief and rushed back to “deal with it”, postponing the inevitable lecture he was definitely going to receive from his parents until later. And if he had his way, “later” would then become “much, much later”.

[Are you going to stop them?] Nova asked.

“Stop them? Why would I want to do that?” he replied. “Just look at how much fun they’re having!” Aron was feeling slightly giddy himself after the tension and stress of the weeks and months leading up to the war was released with his overwhelming victory.

Basically, he was taking a brief vacation while other things went on in the background.

He turned his attention back to the screen displaying the situation and Nova sat beside him. She manifested a bucket of popcorn and they passed it back and forth as they watched the flame war that Nova’s children were eagerly fanning.

The first thing the Edenians did was announce that each branch of ARES had had the audacity to broadcast everything to them live. That alone shocked the world even more than the vague news and propaganda released by Nova had!

@Banaman: [You’re calling me a liar? Then watch this! video.mp4 video2.mp4]

@thehigh3lit3: [dude ur p good @ fake vids bro]

@Banaman: [Fake my ass! I recorded this straight off the livestream. Go smoke another blunt]

@CheshirePhoenix: [lol wtf. @thehigh3lit3 I have friends in Eden and can confirm. Everyone there saw it happen.]

@KimJongUnDidNothingWrong: [FREE OUR DEAR LEADER!!! FREE OUR DEAR LEADER!!!]

@Banaman: [@KimJongUnDidNothingWrong Dude who the fuck are you? Go back to your mama's basement and cry more about getting your ass stomped by someone we steamrolled, dumbass]

@Tempest: [Hey everyone check out this game I got for free on obviousphishingscamsite.virus! Just click this link to get your own copy: <https://tinyurl.com/pwntuuu>]

@Hitman_047: [The war was just the beginning.]

@TrumpDerangementSyndrome: [President Trump was right! Eden really IS a menace! WAKE UP, SHEEPLE! Rise up and join me in the fight against the oppressors!]

@CheshirePhoenix: [Ok @Pangea, who let the insane asylum escapees in? I wasn't aware that they had social media access in prison psych wards. TIL I guess.]

@Curtis1122: [Holy shit I just watched the vids. I didn't think that kind of thing could ever happen outside a movie or a novel]

@Yoyo99_: [This is a pic of the USS Carl Vinson. Vinson.jpg]

@Banaman: [Thanks @Yoyo99_ it's nice to have a before pic to go with the after lol]

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That was just one of the more polite threads Aron read through, but Edenians were posting video evidence everywhere, some of which had been reposted by veritable legions of Pangea Social AIs while others, mostly the ones that contradicted Nova and Panoptes' carefully curated narrative and propaganda, were quietly sent to their own social bubbles where they could have their "flame war" with Pangea Social AIs instead of the general worldwide public.

The most popular posts with the most likes and shares were those with video footage of the carriers lifting off. After that came recordings of the EV Heidrek crippling the USS Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group, then the destruction of the satellites and the offer the Edenian pilot, now identified as Lieutenant James "Reverend" Jones, had made to the doomed astronauts aboard the International Space Station. Then, in a distant third place, was the nuclear launch—which had even hilariously alarmed Gandhi into vehemently denying his involvement in the nuclear strike—and the Edenian defense against it.

And after that were video recordings of the yeet pods landing in New York City. A netizen there had captured the footage on his phone and uploaded it in an attempt to show just how evil Aron was with his "faceless, jackbooted goons trampling over the freedoms granted by American democracy".

With the addition of the information and videos so "kindly" provided by the Edenian and Esparian netizens, people finally had enough information to piece together a coherent, mostly accurate narrative of the entire war. And that narrative taught them one very important lesson: in the face of

the prevailing belief that Aron's military might would fail when faced with that of the entire world, ARES had dominated anyway.