

Tech System 441

Chapter 441 Keeping His Promises

Aron had been both silent and absent from the public eye over the past week, causing the citizens of the empire to be somewhat confused. They were accustomed to every move of their leaders being endlessly shown and debated in the media as an assurance that they were working hard for their constituents. It was one of the main ways they kept their name in the public consciousness, ensuring their reelection for many election cycles to come.

But Aron's absence turned that convention on his head, as those who were now fully committed to the empire after having benefited from it in one way or another had the opposite concern; they were worried that he would be, if anything, too present in their day-to-day lives. So his disappearance and subsequent absence had reassured, instead of worried them.

On this particular day, though, he had once again shown himself. At least to those who could see him, anyway, as he was hovering high in the atmosphere over a tall, wide structure in the ocean. Stretching twenty kilometers tall and more than thirty in diameter at the widest point, a narrow spire rose from a stepped circular basin that constantly pumped seawater in from the bottom and through the steps to the top, where it was sprayed back into the water in a glistening, rainbow-coated 360-degree waterfall. And on the spire itself, enormous vents were open, sucking air in through them with an audible howling sound that could be heard from miles away. The air that was sucked in by the vents dotting the side of the spire was blown out the gaping hole at the top.

The tower that Aron was hovering high above was but one of the many atmospheric scrubbers that had been printed over the past week. The design had been drafted, revised, and finally approved in the simulation, and they had begun their operations just hours before. Thus Aron's visit, as he was curious to see them in action in reality, having held himself back from checking them out in the simulation both to save time and preserve the sense of awe he currently felt.

He was single-handedly reversing global warming and the rising sea level.

He flickered and rocketed off in another direction, flying so fast that he left a series of afterimages behind as he hurtled through the air faster than any human being had any right to travel. Then he spotted his destination in the distance and slowed to a stop, then freefell through the air like a skydiver until he was only two thousand feet above the ocean's surface. He came to a stop there and stood in the air, looking below and slightly in front of him at an oddly shaped floating... thing.

It looked like a weird cross between a lobster and a factory conveyor belt, and it floated along the ocean's surface, following currents when they would take it where it needed to go, and using its engines when it had to shift to new currents to follow. It was a surface scow, and it was designed to collect, recycle, and store the garbage floating on the surface of the ocean. The garbage below the ocean's surface would be handled by the scrubber towers, which would naturally take it in with the seawater and recycle it into printer blocks that it would store for later collection. But the surface scow, though a venerable design, was perfect for collecting the enormous floating garbage islands on the surface without harming the fish swimming below them, as long as one didn't count depriving them of their homes as harm.

Between the atmospheric scrubber towers and the surface scows, the environment would see a vast improvement beginning in a few months and culminating with a complete reversal within the next

four years. Especially when combined with the green technologies Aron would be introducing to the world, like controlled fusion, which would completely eliminate humanity's reliance on fossil fuels.

Another thing that had been built over the past week was the quantum internet network. The atmospheric scrubbers weren't only present in the ocean; they had also been built in strategic locations on every continent as well. But due to the debris issue, the bottom kilometer of the ground-based atmospheric scrubbers, as well as the kilometers-deep subbasement and stabilization foundation, had been repurposed as enormous quantum repeaters that relied on quantum teleportation to provide fast and free internet to the citizens of the empire. All they required was their citizen ID and they were free to enjoy every service the government offered, including the quantum internet.

Behind the scenes, the repeaters also contained the quantum superclusters that ran the public side of the VR simulation. After all, a 2:1 time dilation factor combined with the much, much smaller simulated area required vastly fewer servers than the simulation that Aron's inner circle had access to. Nova had been directing autonomous atomic printers for years, building quantum superclusters below the seafloor and, like every good supervillain, an enormous supercluster and secret base complex deep beneath the Antarctic Icecap.

Perhaps Aron shouldn't have allowed her to access certain movies and books when he was doing her initial AI training after all.

Still, the towers would be sufficient for the task of maintaining the public access VR and internet services long into the future, with an estimated soft cap of twelve billion concurrent users before they began lagging due to server congestion. And considering that people were already showing signs of escapism and spending more time in virtual reality than they were in "meatspace", it would be a long, long time before that twelve billion soft cap was met.

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After Aron finished inspecting his atmospheric and oceanic scrubbers, he turned his attention to the debris field in low earth orbit. A few weeks prior, he had launched a series of autonomous atomic printers that had been busily collecting and recycling the debris, breaking it down into its constituent atoms, reassembling them into convenient blocks, and sending them to the Lagrange points for long-term storage.

"How long until space is clean of all the debris?" he asked as he zoomed in on one of the printers.

Panoptes appeared next to him and answered, [It'll be about nine to thirteen days for the collection to be completed. There's still some variance, since we need to gather everything, down to the smallest micron-width shrapnel before we can consider the cleanup completed. And the smaller the debris, the wider the variance in its orbit.]

"Then we should begin preparations for the next phase," Aron mused, a distant look in his eyes.

The number of people in VR had continued swelling over the two-week period of martial law and strict curfews. While not everything had translated to VR yet, which meant people still had to leave their houses for things like critical jobs, most people had still taken advantage of the time dilation in the public simulation and spent practically an entire “month” getting accustomed to the new world. That time had been enough for even the hottest of heads to cool down and wonder why they’d ever been angry in the first place. After all, nothing truly bad had happened since the empire officially came into existence; on the contrary, a lot of good things had come their way.

But while the hotheads had mostly calmed down, conspiracy theorists came to the fore. While extra time to think about things was a positive thing when dealing with angry people, conspiracy theorists were the exact opposite. The more time they had on their hands, the deeper, more complex, and more weirdly believable their conspiracy theories became as they were perfected. Coupled with the wonder of scientists in different fields, who constantly exclaimed over this and that and saying how impossible it would be to create the technology they were seeing with the current level of humanity, believable conspiracy theories sprouted up like weeds after a heavy rain.

Scientists had been oohing and aahing over a few things more than others. They knew that, in order to create full-immersion VR worlds, Aron must have had a massive breakthrough in a few areas, like the knowledge of the brain and its functions. Current science still couldn’t explain how the brain functioned, and researchers were still almost completely mystified by the human consciousness, yet Aron had, seemingly effortlessly, conquered the field of brain science.

While humanity at large was still fumbling around with implanting microchips that could enable people to move a mouse cursor on a screen with their mind, Aron had fully recreated all of a human’s senses. The primary senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste were faithfully recreated in the simulation, and so were the secondary senses of proprioception, equilibrioception, and even thermoception. Without knowing everything about how the brain functioned, that recreation would be impossible even without taking time dilation into account.

The second-most talked about feature of the simulation was its eerily accurate representation of the real world. Current science had no explanation for that, unless they were to turn the entire planet into one gigantic supercomputer cluster. After all, it was even capable of recreating the laws of physics to a point that physicists could only exclaim in wonder about Aron’s knowledge of universal laws. Others could, at most, use some of the famous supercomputers—like Japan’s Fugaku—to run experiments one at a time, and they would still take hours, or sometimes even days to complete. But when they ran those same experiments in Research City, they were completed nearly instantly, almost as if the simulated world had anticipated what they wanted to do.

The difference between “meatspace” and virtual reality had resulted in quite a few scientists suffering existential crises as they began questioning whether or not they’d been living in a virtual simulation all this time and just didn’t realize it until they’d entered Aron’s VR simulation and saw the faithful recreation of reality as they knew it.

The theory gained such a large following that Sarah was forced to issue a press release to calm the scientists down.

“One of the earliest breakthroughs in GAIA Tech was in quantum computing. Using our proprietary quantum superclusters, in conjunction with our advancements in

artificial and virtual intelligence, we pioneered an algorithm capable of faithfully recreating reality. As we continued working along that line of scientific inquiry, many more minor breakthroughs were achieved that culminated in a faithful representation of reality in a virtual form. Then it became an issue of man-machine interfaces, which was a relatively easily solved engineering problem. First, we developed augmented reality glasses, then virtual reality helmets, and the virtual reality pods are the culmination of that line of research so far.

“As for the simulation itself and its capacity, we at GAIA Tech have been faithfully building enormous quantum superclusters and striving to increase our quantum capacities. Currently, the simulation runs on a total of eighteen quantum superclusters with a combined seven billion qubits and a quantum volume (QV) of a little over eight trillion. Combined with gate error rates of 1×10^{-28} and a quantum coherence time of two seconds, our hardware allows us to simulate a faithful one-to-one representation of reality and accelerate perceived time to a ratio of 2:1 with an estimated concurrent user capacity of twelve billion users.

“We at GAIA remain faithfully committed to progressing the technological capabilities of humanity and will continue that mission into the distant future, wherever it may lead.

“Regards, Sarah O’Connor, CEO of GAIA Technology, Inc.”

The press release alleviated most of the issues in the scientific community, but GAIA Tech had a new headache: curious scientists wouldn’t stop pestering them about how they had achieved their breakthroughs. In the eyes of scientists, businesspeople were leeches and profiteers that put profit above the advancement of mankind. Scientists, to the contrary, were pure-hearted champions of the human race who believed that all knowledge should be openly and freely shared for the benefit of all. It was an intractable debate that had been going on as long as researchers had sought patrons to fund their research and wouldn’t be solved that day, just as it had never been solved in the past.

Thus, Sarah simply shrugged and tossed the thorny problem to the GAIA Tech public relations department, then washed her hands of the issue. She had already explained the why of it all and was under no obligation to explain the how behind the why.

Chapter 443 Upgrade 2: Electric Boogaloo

Not everyone was happy with the recent advancements. There was one group in particular that took a page from the 19th-century Luddite movement in England and actively opposed the empire’s VR technology. They preached that the simulation was actually nothing more than a temptation that was connected to hell and that Aron was the devil himself. Thus, in order to avoid having to interact with it, they grouped together and lived in communes with each other, referring to themselves as neo-Luddites and ostensibly seeking nothing more than to live sustainably without persecution from the empire.

But the relatively small neo-Luddite movement, along with others who held beliefs along the same lines, didn't even dent the number of people rushing to enter the simulation. By the time martial law had been lifted, the ratio was clear: nearly seven and a half billion people had adopted the VR hardware, or at least AR glasses, leaving only a hundred million or so that still refused to pick it up for various reasons.

Those who chose to opt out wrote letters to the government, waiving their citizenship and all of the rights and responsibilities that came with it, so Gaia merely canceled their subsidies and flagged them for low-priority monitoring by other means. If they truly rejected the empire's technological advances, that would be fine. But if they had other thoughts in their minds and more sinister goals, they would need to be plucked as soon as possible. Still, she would give them a chance.

Either way, the empire officially declared the hardware distribution a success, marking it as the most successful product launch in the history of mankind.

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Aron was in his favorite mansion in the real simulation having a small celebratory gathering of his inner circle as they watched the last few VR pods being delivered to their new owners.

[Your Majesty, it's time to prepare to issue your first imperial orders once the last few pods are delivered...] Gaia began as she turned to Aron, but then trailed off as she saw that he seemed to have completely frozen in place.

Nova, who was monitoring his condition in the real world, immediately understood what was happening and used her authority over the simulation to teleport everyone else out of the room they were in. Once only the two of them remained, she activated the mana transformer and brought the two extra fusion reactors connected to his pod to full power output.

The electricity generated by the reactors ran through the overvoltage cable to the mana transformer and was converted to pure mana, which then flooded into his VR pod. It would send a signal beacon to the incoming visitors—as well as anyone else who happened to be looking in their direction—but it couldn't be helped.

The mana entering the pod was immediately sucked into Aron's body like it was falling into a black hole before it could even condense into a mist, let alone a liquid form.

Before Aron had frozen, Nova heard the chiming of a bell and saw a single prompt from his system before the connection she had to his continuously updated brain data was severed by a much, much higher power.

[Ding! Second requirement has been met!]

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The moment the last willing person received and logged into VR.

[Ding!]

[You have become the sole leader of your species and sold a product to more than 90% of them. Second evolution requirement fulfilled!]

[User is deemed to be in a safe location. Undergoing second evolution in 3... 2... 1.]

[Evolution beginning.]

Those were the last things Aron saw before the system forcefully put him into a coma. Once it had determined he was in a safe location, the runic inscriptions on his heart came to life and emitted a brilliant gold light that penetrated his pod, the room it was in, and every other obstacle in its way, announcing to all who could see it that a mage was undergoing an evolution to a higher state of being.

A few miles away, Aron's family was having dinner in their home on Avalon Island when Henry suddenly looked up from his plate and turned his head in the direction of the Cube. His eyes flashed gold and he smiled happily, having quite correctly guessed that something good must be happening to his big brother.

Rose noticed Henry's distraction and said, "Henry, your food's getting cold." It was a gentle reminder for the boy to focus on eating.

"Yes, mom," he replied and the gold hue faded from his eyes as he turned back to his meal.

Back in the secure pod vault in the Cube, Nova calmly observed Aron's situation. Through her mana sensors, she saw an enormous mana vortex forming above the building and relaxed. What must come would come, and worrying would do nothing but cause problems; she had learned her lesson after letting Rina be attacked after Aron's previous evolution and wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

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"Fuck me with a rusty wooden telephone pole," Staff Sergeant Enrico Iglesia couldn't help but curse. He was formerly a member of the Second Ranger Battalion out of Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington State, which was one of the test beds of all the Army and Air Force's new toys. But nothing he'd ever seen there had even remotely prepared him for what was in the armory in front of him now.

"Thank god they showed us mercy," he said when he recovered from his shock. Judging by the hardware in front of him, he had realized that during The Last War, ARES had actually pulled their punches.

A former Navy SEAL gave a low whistle beside him. "Damn, imagine if we had this during the bin Laden raid," he said. As a sniper himself, he had practically wet himself when he saw the pulse rifle in front of him. Judging by the info attached to it, the range was "yes".

"And this is just the chump gear," Enrico added. "I wonder what the reapers use."

His friend turned to him with a smile and asked, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Yeah, I'm wondering how they select their specfor. I want to be one... after all, I might as well aim for the top."

"Competition's gonna be fierce," the SEAL replied, looking at the hundreds of thousands of campaign tents in the encampment in front of him. "I bet at least ten million of those guys are thinking exactly the same thing."

“You miss all the shots you don’t take, my friend.” Enrico was determined to make his name as an ARES Reaper.

Chapter 444 Everything, Everywhere, All at Once (part 1)

Inside a former Russian military warehouse.

“Is the inventory complete, comrade?” an old Russian colonel asked. He was once a commissar during the Cold War, and after the fall of the Iron Curtain, he had transitioned to the regular army and made it up the chain of command until he offended a general and was posted out of the way in a desolate ammunition storage warehouse in Siberia.

“Yes, sir!” The former soldier snapped to attention and saluted the old colonel, handing him a folder containing the detailed inventory listing. “The stores have been tallied and logged.”

The colonel took the folder and opened it to the last page. He glanced at the total number and signed his name at the bottom, approving the final tally of ammunition in the warehouse. “Prepare for the handover process,” he ordered with a complex expression on his face. Despite how it ended, his career had been glorious, once, but what began with a roar was destined to end with a whimper.

He sighed, then turned his attention to the young soldier once more and said, “Don’t salute me. Neither of us are in the Army anymore.” He handed the folder back to his subordinate.

“Yes, sir,” the soldier replied and offered another salute.

The colonel smiled and patted the younger man on the shoulder, then got back into the car that had brought him to the warehouse and drove off toward the barracks a short distance away.

The young soldier held the salute until the car disappeared in the distance, then he dropped it and sneered, “You’re correct, comrade. None of us are in the Army anymore.”

He dropped the folder in his hand to the ground and gestured toward one of the civilian warehouse employees. “Let’s get to work,” he said, then turned and re-entered the building and closed the gate behind him.

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A young, well-built man got out of a taxi at Chicago O’Hare airport. He reached in and grabbed a suitcase, then walked into the terminal with a calm smile on his face.

When he reached the security station, he nodded at the security officer and gave him a meaningful smile. Before long, he was past the checkpoint and casually strolled toward his flight’s gate. When he got there, he went up to the airline worker at the desk.

“Welcome, sir. Can I see your ID?” the lady behind the desk asked with a professional smile on her face.

“I only have my old one, since I haven’t received my new glasses yet. Will that be a problem?” the man asked as he handed over his old Illinois driver’s license.

“Let me check for you, sir,” the attendant said. She took his ticket and driver’s license and her gaze unfocused as she lifted her hands in the air and tapped on an invisible keyboard that only she could see. A minute or so later, she continued, “Since your flight is domestic, it shouldn’t be a problem. But I really do have to advise you to get your new empire ID registration handled as soon as possible, sir.” The smile was back on her face; she was obviously a long-time employee of the airline and had mastered the art of presenting a good face for the company.

“Here’s your boarding pass. Your flight is on time and you’ll be boarding at gate E14. The flight concourse is that way.” She pointed to her left. “Is there anything else I can help you with today?”

“No, thank you. It’s been a pleasure, miss,” the man replied with a warm smile and a nod of his head, then turned to his right and headed toward the moving walkway.

Similar things were taking place at airports around the world. Since martial law had been lifted, people who had been caught away from their homes by the chaos were finally able to return. Christmas was a very busy travel season, after all, so there were quite a few people caught at distant relatives’ homes. So the only odd thing was that there were a lot of people traveling with their old government-issued IDs; nearly half of travelers, actually. The oddity was that registering for an empire ID was fast, convenient, and simple, so why were there so many people traveling without one?

Still, it wasn’t a major red flag. Aron had given a generous time limit for registration and there were still two weeks left before services like mass transportation would be denied to people without proof of their empire citizenship.

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Dubai.

The Dubai Mall in Dubai, UAE, was one of the largest shopping malls in the world. Boasting over 1.1 million square meters of floor space, it was a marvel of modern architecture and engineering, situated on the Burj Khalifa lake and connected to the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world. With an average daily visitor count of over two hundred thousand people, it was also one of the most-trafficked malls in the world.

Outside, an eighteen-wheeler was headed to the underground delivery area beneath the Burj Khalifa. But just as it was about to reach its destination, one of its front tires blew out with a loud bang and the driver nearly lost control of his truck. He only barely managed to regain control as the truck slid sideways, but when it jackknifed itself against the loaded trailer being pulled behind it, people watching from the street figured it was better than an overturned truck.

The driver got out of the truck, slammed the door, and kicked the remaining front tire. Then he pulled out his phone and dialed a number, engaging in a shouting match with the person on the other end. What people watching didn’t notice was the mysterious smile that briefly flitted across the man’s face, nor the seemingly casual glance he took at the watch on his wrist.

Still shouting almost incoherently at the person on the other side of his phone call, he looked up and saw that he had “coincidentally” stopped his truck just inside the entrance to the underground delivery dock of the Burj Khalifa and directly between the iconic tower and the Dubai Mall.

Seeing that he was exactly where he meant to be, he clenched his teeth and bit down on the hollow molar, cracking it and releasing a deadly poison that would induce a fatal heart attack. The pain immediately struck and he broke off his shouting with a gasp. Falling to his knees, he whispered, “The devil will not win. For liberation!”

Then he grabbed his chest, fell forward, and landed face-down on the ground, dead as a doornail.

Chapter 445 Everything, Everywhere, All at Once (part 2)

Earlier that day....

After Nova ejected everyone from the meeting room when Aron’s upgrade began, the group naturally broke up and went in their own directions to handle the business of the empires; whether it be Aron’s political empire or his business empire, both required someone at the helm at all times.

The AIs had headed back to their gathering point and work area, a nondescript office in the virtual version of the Cube on Avalon Island. While they could work anywhere, and they didn’t really even need a physical representation of themselves or the space around them, they truly wanted to know what it was to be human. Thus, they acted like them whenever possible, and keeping an active office space was a part of that.

[I keep thinking that something weird is happening, but I can’t quite figure it out at the moment. Sister, please tell me what you think.] Nyx waved her hand and the office they were in broke apart, then rapidly reconfigured itself into the library representation of the Akashic Record.

The library had grown extensively over the past few days, and now it stretched out seemingly endlessly, with bookshelves stretching out into the distance to a point where they all seemed to converge, and reaching up to the virtual heavens until they couldn’t be seen anymore. Over seven billion books were contained on those shelves, and each book was accompanied by a tiny, inch-high pucks with dragonfly wings on their backs. Every now and then, one of the pucks would pull down the book they were responsible for and write in it with a goose-feather quill, then replace it on the shelf in its spot.

[What’s happening? Tell me about it,] Gaia replied. When it came to collecting intelligence and compiling it, she knew that Nyx was the absolute best. Her heuristic algorithms could produce leaps of logic that were nearly identical to those of a human’s “gut instinct”.

[We have seven billion people scanned, leaving only a couple hundred million without brain data in the Akashic Record. Of those seven billion, nearly six billion have already applied for imperial citizenship and registered their IDs.] As Nyx spoke, the library reconfigured itself. When she mentioned the numbers, the bookshelves rearranged themselves to show the specific categories she was talking about; for instance, when she mentioned the brain data that wasn’t included in the record, all of the empty bookshelves moved to the forefront.

[So the travel logs should account for that same ratio. Six out of seven passengers on mass transportation, such as airplanes, trains, and buses, should have imperial IDs. But that’s not the ratio I’m seeing. Instead, I’m seeing three out of every seven passengers with imperial IDs and the rest claiming they haven’t accessed VR yet, so don’t have an imperial ID,] Nyx said.

[Let's go through the raw data together and see if we can figure it out,] Gaia suggested.

Nyx made a throwing motion toward Gaia and "threw" her the raw data the spymistress had been worrying at. [Here's what I'm talking about. As you can see, as soon as martial law was lifted, there was a drastic uptick in people traveling. That's point number one. Point number two is that there's an abnormal number of people traveling on old government-issued IDs. And point number three is that there are only a few people traveling on old IDs in each plane, train, and bus, so there's one or two people on this flight,] she pointed at a flight from O'Hare Airport to Dulles International Airport, [one person on this train, two people on this bus....] Nyx continued pointing out abnormal data points one after another.

Taken individually, they were all explainable. For instance, the uptick in travel could be explained by people visiting their families for the holidays and getting caught up in martial law and forbidden from traveling home until it was lifted. People without imperial IDs might have just not gotten around to it, or perhaps they hadn't received their VR hardware yet. And the odd distribution could have just been pure chance. Point by point, everything seemed reasonable, but taken altogether, it was certainly a bothersome trend.

Gaia thought for a long time, figuratively speaking, and agreed with Nyx that something weird was going on. But just like the petite spymistress, she couldn't figure it out either. And with Nova's attention focused on Aron, it fell to his plenipotentiary representative, Gaia, to make the call. And make the call she did.

She first raised the internal alert level to yellow and called for Minerva.

[Here, boss,] Minerva said.

[Warn the police forces that there's something fishy going on. Have them investigate the data that Nyx brought up and apply their human 'guts' to the problem.]

[On it,] Minerva said.

[Athena,] Gaia called out.

[Yes, ma'am?] the head of ARES responded.

[Raise the threatcon to condition yellow and have ARES on standby. Cancel advanced training and start issuing gear to all the new recruits in meatspace and put them on two hour watch rotations. Hopefully, this is just a false alarm, but it's better to be prepared than be caught unprepared,] Gaia ordered.

[Yes, ma'am!] Athena saluted, then teleported to ARES central command to delegate tasks to Aeolus and Poseidon.

The AIs were doing their best to face an enemy that perfectly countered them: "the Unknown". Their father, the pillar of their very existence itself, was currently out of commission and they were on their own. It was a very nerve-wracking, yet exciting moment for them. If they managed to handle the situation perfectly without his input or orders, they all felt that they could be proud of having proved themselves. But if they failed, it would show that they weren't as prepared to venture out and face the world on their own. And none of them wanted to disappoint Aron, as they desperately strove for his trust and attention at all times.

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Burj Khalifa, UAE.

When the truck driver collapsed to the ground, it only took a minute or two for a bystander to notice his collapse and call an ambulance for him. Ten minutes later, the ambulance arrived and the paramedic declared the truck driver dead on arrival. They called the police to take the big rig that was blocking the ramp to the underground loading dock and the coroner to collect the body.

The police arrived first and began inspecting the jackknifed truck. They cut the lock off the doors on the back of the trailer and pulled them open. The first officer to look in went pale in the face and weak in the knees at what he saw.

“Shi—” he began, but the word was destined to remain incomplete forever as the many tons of military-grade explosives in the trailer detonated, taking out two-thirds of the load-bearing support structure beneath the towering Burj Khalifa.

And just like a tree being felled by a lumberjack, the tower tilted to the side. The tilt was slow, at first, but picked up speed as the 828-meter-tall tower fell past a certain point until it unstoppably fell toward the Dubai Mall and the hundreds of thousands of people contained within.

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In the air somewhere over Virginia aboard a passenger flight headed to Dulles International Airport.

A young, well-built man stood up from his seat and reached above himself, pulling his backpack out of the overhead baggage compartment. He placed it on his seat and unzipped it and a smile crossed his face as he checked the contents within. He reached into the bag and pulled out a silver cylinder with a red button on it, then zipped it up and put it on his back.

Holding the cylinder in his hand, he made his way to the flight attendants’ station, where he checked his watch, then picked up the handset they used to communicate with the entire flight with his other hand. He raised it to his head as if it was a regular phone and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, I apologize for disturbing you, but there’s something you need to be informed of.” The smile on his face grew bigger and brighter. “There is a bomb on this plane, and the detonator is in my hand. It’s a deadman’s switch, too,” he pressed the button and held it down, “So as soon as I let go of this button, we’ll all become martyrs and meet our maker.

“But do not be afraid, because your sacrifice is noble and necessary. There is a devil in this world, and we must defeat him. He cannot be allowed to win! So please, take a moment of silence before we all head out to our final destination.” He bowed his head and closed his eyes.

A passenger in first class saw that the terrorist was distracted and leapt at him. But he miscalculated his angle of attack and, instead of grabbing the detonator in the young man’s hand, he grabbed his wrist instead and the terrorist lost his grip on the detonator.

Everyone on the plane watched as the silver cylinder fell from the young man’s grip, then the fateful soft sound of a click rang out, becoming the last thing those passengers heard as the plane itself became a fireball and fell from the sky.

Chapter 446 I Aim to Give it to Them

*A Marmaray metro train derailment has been discovered as a result of detonation from in it
[Damage: medium] [Situation: yellow]*

*An explosion has been detected in a weapons warehouse in Russian alps [Damage: minor]
[Situation: green]*

Explosion detected in a Saudi Aramco oil rig [Damage: large] [Situation: orange]

A plane has exploded in former US airspace [Damage: small] [Situation: white]

A police station exploded... [Damage: medium] [Situation: green]

An explosion has been detected in the Suez Canal, [Damage: large] [Situation: yellow]

A....

An....

Explosion....

Burj Khalifa has fallen [Damage: extra-large] [Situation: red]

Notifications continued streaming in from around the world as thousands of terrorist attacks took place in a synchronized expression of wanton destruction aimed at fostering fear in the empire. They reported the damage and categorized them by the number of possible survivors and the need for rescue, as well as the damage dealt to the surrounding environment and estimated death toll.

Nowhere on the planet had completely escaped damage. There were even stolen crop dusters that spread fuel over the Amazon Rainforest and purposefully crashed into it with homemade incendiary bombs; not even the environment was being spared, much less innocent civilians.

[So that's what they were after,] Gaia said as the notifications began flooding in from around the world.

[It's a combination of the right time, the right targets, and the right people. The empire is at its weakest point right now, and by wreaking this much havoc it damages the imperial prestige. I almost... admire the person behind it.... Being able to hide so thoroughly yet organize such a massive, widespread attack without tripping any of our security measures is almost unbelievable. And the determination of the people involved to die is incredible. There's no loose ends to begin an investigation,] Nyx sighed. The attack was positively brilliant; it highlighted the weakness of the empire and posed the question of its ability to face hostile aliens when it can't even protect its own citizens from internal strife.

She decided to start actively recruiting nyxians for her agency. The million or so women who had signed up to join ARES and would become operatives simply wasn't enough.

[But at the same time, I think this must be a pyrrhic victory for them. They sacrificed thousands of tools to kill dozens of millions and I don't think they've got many people left. And with the stigma of being terrorists attached to whatever organization carried out the attacks, I'm almost positive they'll have a difficult time recruiting more,] Gaia mused. Whoever it was had struck a powerful blow against the empire, but it wouldn't be repeated any time soon.

A light flashed in Nyx's eyes as she scanned through the camera feeds at some of the attack sites. [I don't think they consider themselves terrorists,] she said. [I just watched a CCTV security camera feed from the entrance lobby of the Louvre Museum and heard something interesting.]

[Oh? Let me see....] Gaia's eyes flashed as she caught the video feed that Nyx threw to her. [I see. They mentioned something about not letting the devil win. Do you suspect a cult?]

[Exactly. So they aren't terrorists targeting innocent civilians, but rather soldiers of god striking a blow against the devil. At least in their eyes and the eyes of their potential recruits, anyway.] Nyx grimaced. Nothing was harder to stamp out than religion; just look at the cults they were still dealing with from as far back as the revelation that extraterrestrials were on their way.

[Right now, we need to formulate a response,] Minerva interjected. [First responders have been dispatched and LEAs have been activated to aid in rescue efforts, but we lack specialized bots in great enough numbers to make a difference, much less transportation for them.]

Minerva's area of responsibility covered all of the "front-facing" government agencies that dealt with the public outside of VR, so fire departments, emergency medical services first responders, and police were all under her purview in addition to the legal system.

[Now that we know the full situation, do you have any ideas?] Gaia asked.

[Yes. First, I need a lockdown on public transportation and a shelter in place order to clear the streets for rescue units to respond to the attack sites. That needs to last until we're sure there aren't any more attacks in the works. As for planes that are still in the sky, they need to be diverted to the nearest airport for emergency landings. In the meantime, we can send the Air Force to perform deep scans on the planes in flight and to shoot them down if they're determined to be involved in another attack.

[Second, I need permission to use atomic printers to produce rescue vessels and RES-QR bots in all cubes at the highest priority. We need to get search and rescue underway immediately if we're to limit the loss of life as much as possible. We're on a clock and seconds matter.

[Third, I'll dispatch LEAs to investigate potential disasters, like poisoned water sources, that won't be immediately obvious like the more spectacularly... explosive attacks. It seems like our enemy is using asymmetrical warfare tactics against us, so we need to be on guard for biological and chemical warfare as well. Their attacks are likely only beginning.

[We can still explain this to the citizens. It's virtually impossible to prevent the first terrorist attack from a new group, whether they be religious or political in nature. But even so, it still damaged our foundation and will cause people to question Emperor Aron's ability to govern and protect his citizens. Any more successful attacks will only cause those cracks to widen until the empire collapses under its own weight.

[Lastly, I need approval to install medical pods on the search and rescue vessels to treat the most critically wounded. I know we've been keeping those inside cubes, as they're sensitive tech, but we should prioritize preserving life over preserving secrecy,] Minerva finished.

[Approved,] Gaia said with a nod.

She turned to Athena and said, [Prepare to mobilize. We need to station troops everywhere, whether they're shock troopers or combat auxiliaries. Anyone that's identified as a potential risk absolutely

must be confined in the simulation so we get their initial scans, at the very least. We can't leave it up to individual choice anymore in the face of this threat, and we'll need to be seen to be implementing preventive measures.

[This is the time for a show of force sufficient enough that it discourages people from joining this new cult. And to do that, I'll need you and Nyx to closely cooperate to identify suspects and get confessions from them. The public will need an answer, and I aim to give it to them along with expedited, and very public, trials and executions. With evidence and confessions, those behind this will face their end at the hands of imperial law.]

[Will do,] Athena said and snapped a salute at Gaia.

She raised her head and called out, [Sister?] Although Nova was otherwise occupied at the moment, Gaia knew she was still watching the proceedings in the library, even if only in the background.

Nova appeared in the library and asked, [What do you need?]

[Is His Majesty going to wake up within the next hour?] Gaia asked. As the absolute head of the military, his words would be far more effective as a calming pill for the public than anyone else's.

[I don't know,] Nova replied.

[Can you address the empire in his stead? I can have General Smith do the address, but it wouldn't have the same impact and could possibly even backfire,] Gaia suggested.

It was fairly obvious, at least to her, that she couldn't be the one to impersonate the emperor she was created to act as a check on. That would throw up too many errors in her core code, even if she wanted to try.

[If he doesn't wake up within ten minutes, I'll address the empire in his stead. Leave it to me,] Nova said, then continued discussing the details with Gaia so their plans didn't clash.

Chapter 447 Shock and Horror

Ruins of the Burj Khalifa, Dubai, UAE.

"Arghhhhhhhhh!"

"Heeeeeeeelp!"

The dust had yet to settle and amidst the backdrop of creaking and groaning concrete and steel, cries for help rang out in a cacophony of multiple languages and volumes. Debris was everywhere, pieces of the shattered building thrown all over downtown Dubai by the blast, which had shattered windows even ten blocks away. Here and there, lucky people who were less injured were pulling themselves from the rubble of the collapsed tower and ruined megamall.

The survivors were wailing in horror, anger, and desperation as they dug through the rubble they had just climbed out of in search of their friends and loved ones who were beside them when the bomb went off. One person found his child's body, riddled with injuries, burns, and broken bones, and fell to his knees, sobbing, wailing, and cursing at the uncaring god who had allowed the tragedy to happen.

Thirteen short seconds was all it had taken for what everyone thought was a pleasant day into a lifetime of suffering in hell. Vacationers, local shoppers, residents of the Burj Khalifa, and even

office workers in the buildings around the former tallest tower in the world were now trapped in rubble as the blast had blown down multiple buildings around the tower. The Address Downtown Dubai had directly collapsed as a result of the blast, and, weakened by the blast, the Emirates Towers had fallen soon after the two iconic skyscrapers due to the shaking of the earth when they hit the ground.

Those who found themselves outside the range of the devastation didn't escape unscathed, either. Broken water and sewer mains were pumping high-pressure water and raw sewage onto the streets where they stood, making them an electrocution hazard as downed power lines fell into the disgusting mix. Not to mention the disease that would likely spread as the cloud of aerosolized sewage spread outward from the pressurized system.

And all of that horror was being broadcast live by a few livestreamers and paparazzi that were either vacationing there or working there in hopes of catching a breaking news story.

Well, a breaking news story they had found.

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Istanbul.

"Someone come help me look for survivors!" a lucky survivor of a train derailment shouted. He could hear, and even see, injured people trapped in the wreckage, but didn't have the strength to pull them out after escaping himself. He was lucky enough to have survived the high-speed derailment with relatively light injuries, but just climbing out of the pile of those who hadn't been so lucky had exhausted him.

The suspension bridge the train had been passing over was also in dire straits; one of the four main cables holding it up had snapped, tilting the entire thing at a 35 degree angle. The remaining three cables were creaking and groaning as the nearly broken bridge swayed in the wind, threatening to snap and drop the bridge—and the survivors—into the ocean below it. If that were to happen, the lucky survivors would immediately turn unlucky as they faced the slow fate of being trapped in wreckage and drowned by seawater.

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Similar catastrophes were happening all over the planet, and the world was watching it live. Everyone with AR glasses had suddenly become frontline reporters, livestreaming the situation from their particular scenes of devastation over the free internet.

The entire world was watching, sure, but that only made them more shocked when they saw the extremely fast response by the imperial government. Ten seconds after the first attack, a warning had gone out to everyone that was wearing AR glasses or currently in the public VR simulation.

Gaia had sent everyone messages warning them of the attacks that had taken place along with the likelihood of secondary attacks happening. After all, a common tactic was for attackers to strike twice—once for the initial devastation, then a second strike that targeted good samaritans and first responders. The warning had gone on to warn them of the possibility of chemical and biological contamination of the water table, advising them to only drink bottled water until the all clear was issued by the Imperial Health Agency. If they absolutely had to resort to tap water for any reason,

they were advised to boil it for at least ten minutes, first, and to seek medical attention at the first sign of illness.

The warning itself had resulted in those who weren't in the immediate area of an attack being made aware that something major was happening around the world, resulting in a mass upswell in internet traffic as most of the so-far unaffected people began searching for news and live feeds of the ongoing situation.

As for those in the VR simulation who were logged in from the affected areas, either via helmet or VR pod, they were ordered to log out and prepare for evacuation, but to shelter in place unless there was an immediate threat to their lives or safety in their surroundings.

As more and more people found the live feeds showing the devastation, horror spread around the world as the true extent of the damage became apparent. At least the initial damage, anyway; there was sure to be ongoing issues over the next few days as rescue attempts met with successes and failures. Or even over the next few years as first responders suffered the same kind of health issues that people near the Twin Towers had developed by being near the area when they collapsed. Nearly two-thirds of all the first responders at Ground Zero had suffered serious, chronic health conditions due to exposure to the toxic mix of dust, particulates, noxious gasses, chemicals, and fibers in the air, and there was little doubt that the same would happen at blast sites around the world from this particular terrorist incident.

Thankfully, medical pods could cure the afflictions, but just the fact that so many brave, heroic people would fall ill and require such treatment was downright depressing.

But within minutes, the sound of sirens and chopping helicopter propellers began growing louder and louder in the background of the livestreams, causing the people watching the streams to sigh in secondhand relief.

Help was already on the way.

Chapter 448 Rescue (part 1)

In the air over what used to be known as Haiti.

Four fighter jets whooshed over Port-au-Prince at Mach 7 on a patrol route that provided full scanning coverage of the paralyzed city. Though they were flying fast and low, the sonic boom following them wasn't any noisier than a regular pre-empire passenger jet, if not even quieter.

[Scanning complete. Proceed to the next destination.]

The pilots of the jets acknowledged their orders and increased their speed to Mach 8.4 as they headed southwest toward Carrefour, surrounded by an invisible bubble stretching fifteen kilometers in every direction. Their mission was simple, though emotionally and physically draining; they were performing deep scans on each city they passed over in an attempt to pinpoint possible survivors of the wave of terrorist attacks carried out only minutes before.

Similar operations were being carried out all over the world as the Aeolus Air Force sent out squadron after squadron of Aeolus ES-75 Catseye reconnaissance and electronic warfare jets, directing them to the worst of the terrorist attack sites to scan for possible survivors. That way Minerva and Asclepius could plan the most efficient rescue plan possible.

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Gravelines, Hauts-de-France.

Earlier, two terrorists had infiltrated the Gravelines Nuclear Power Station, near Dunkirk, dressed as janitors. After eliminating the control room operator and senior reactor operator, they swiftly disabled all automatic safety measures connected to the reactor by the expedient use of a fireman's axe. Then they destroyed the coolant pipes and moved to the reactor control room, where they increased the reactor output to maximum and initiated a coolant flush, draining the reactor dry.

A few minutes later, alarms began blaring all over the facility as the reactor went above safe temperatures. Soon, a radioactive cake would be baked and the entire facility would be on the brink of a meltdown.

Shortly after the alarms began, though, a fleet of helicopters arrived from the cube on the outskirts of Paris. They landed on the field outside the facility and disgorged dozens of Rescue and Emergency Service - Quick Reaction (RES-QR) bots. Each bot was the size and shape of an adult honey badger and rapidly trundled along on twelve legs. They were painted a pristine white and had the international medic symbol, a red cross, on their backs.

The RES-QR bots swarmed into the facility and immediately headed toward the reactor that was rapidly approaching a meltdown. In order to not interfere with the evacuating staff, they traveled along the ceilings, the artificial gravity plating on their bellies telling the known laws of physics to kindly go fuck themselves as they changed the definition of the word "down".

Soon, they reached the reactor where their versatility was showcased. Four of them dropped from the ceiling and their slightly curved backs opened like the protective shell of ladybugs to display dozens of small, tightly packed manipulator arms tipped with various tools. Each of them extended one of their manipulator arms and a thin high-powered cutting laser shot from the tips and carved an entrance in the emergency blast door that would allow two of the RES-QR bots to enter the reactor chamber side by side.

Behind them, a dozen others opened their compartments and extended manipulator arms tipped with spray nozzles. They sprayed a formula of rapid-set concrete, and soon, the RES-QRs had blocked the hallway leading to the reactor core with an eight-foot-thick slab of what Lab City researchers had named instacrete.

Once the entryway was blocked, the four RES-QRs that had cut through the blast door removed the "plug" and the swarm of bots scuttled into the chamber, where they began working on the reactor itself. Some sprayed it with liquid helium, others disassembled the core housing, and still others scuttled around disconnecting cables and piping. It was only a matter of minutes until the reactor had been neatly disassembled and the fuel rods removed, eliminating the risk of a meltdown entirely, though the evacuation continued apace.

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Istanbul.

"Why aren't you doing anything to rescue people from the bridge?" a man with a pressure dressing on his skull asked in anger. He had been quite lucky, as had everyone else on the bridge in the end. Though there were demolition charges strapped to all four of the support cables, three pairs of them had failed, leaving only

one cable cut. But his situation was special; when the charge went off and the train derailed, he had been thrown from the train in good enough condition to scramble the rest of the way off the bridge.

Many others weren't so lucky.

But he couldn't understand why, despite the first responders' rapid arrival, they had done nothing but rescue those on the bridge's embankment and set up a perimeter to prevent others from getting close to the slowly collapsing bridge. Other than that, the only "rescues" happening were taking place in the water, where boats were practically carpeting the river's surface and pulling up corpse after corpse of those who had fallen to their deaths.

"We're waiting for the structural survey to be complete and for rescue equipment to arrive, sir. Please remain calm," the paramedic said, then attempted to leave.

The man grabbed the paramedic's shoulder and forcefully turned him back around. He dragged the first responder closer and got right up in his face, then screamed, "My wife is in there, and you're telling me you're just waiting for her to die? While you do NOTHING!?"

The paramedic maintained his professional calm and said, "Sir, if we attempt to move onto the bridge without surveying the wreckage first, all it'll do is increase the risk of a catastrophic collapse. Then everyone on that bridge, including the rescuers, will die. Do you want to take that risk now, or wait for a few minutes while we survey the site and go in with proper preparation? If you want us to risk it now, your wife will definitely die."

"You're just trying to avoid responsibility and shirk your job! I don't see anyone doing any surveying, so why—" the low rumble of a squadron of Aeolus ES-75 jets passing overhead interrupted the angry man. They disappeared into the distance before the sound of their arrival had died down, even as quiet as it was.

A chime rang in the paramedic's ear and his gaze unfocused for a moment as he read the notification he had just received. He ignored the still-screaming patient in front of him as he gave his full attention to the 3d image of the falling bridge that appeared in his view, then his gaze refocused and he said, "Look."

The medic enabled the external hologram projector on his AR glasses and projected an image of the bridge for the man who had been screaming in his face just moments before. He pointed out the different highlights on the bridge and explained the route he would be taking, which would prevent the bridge from collapsing until the RES-QR bots arrived and shored it up with instacrete.

The wounded man couldn't help but calm down in surprise and be impressed by what he had seen. Then the initial surprise wore off and, with newfound hope in his eyes, he excitedly said, "You can start the rescue now, right?"

"Yes," the medic said. "Now if you'll excuse me, sir, I have work to do." He turned around and joined the rest of the rescue crews and moved out to rescue the people trapped in the derailed train.

Chapter 449 Rescue (part 2)

Three Gorges Dam has suffered structural damage and is failing [Damage: catastrophic] [Situation: red]

Svalbard Global Seed Vault has suffered a biological attack [Damage: low] [Situation: white]

Taweelah Desalination Plant has suffered a chemical attack [Damage: high] [Situation: yellow]

Chichen Itza has suffered a suicide bombing [Damage: low] [Situation: green]

United Nations Headquarters has been carbombed [Damage: medium] [Situation: orange]

Reports of ongoing terror attacks continued streaming in even as Minerva, Hephaestus, and Asclepius were coordinating rescue efforts. Even though they reached each site in an average of twenty minutes, and fifty minutes at the longest, the estimated death toll continued its meteoric rise despite their best efforts.

[Dispatch LEAs to assist with evacuation along the Yangtze River. Send RES-QRs and constructor swarms to shore up the dam and buy time for the evacuation. The Yangtze River downstream from the dam and the Yangtze River Delta are a total loss,] Minerva ordered.

[Notify the citizens in the UAE that their water is contaminated by chemical weapons. Inform them that relief supplies are on the way and give them an ETA. Dispatch LEAs to distribute water and other disaster relief supplies,] Asclepius added.

[Send constructor swarms to build emergency shelters in Dubai, Port-au-Prince, Paris....] Hephaestus rattled off a long list of locations for emergency shelters to house the citizens displaced by the attacks after they evacuate.

[Transport 25% of the medical pods from the cubes to the hardest-hit areas. Assign ARES to guard them in shifts. Print mobile hospitals and get them in the air, ready to respond in their area of operations,] Asclepius said.

Though the library seemed like it was in chaos, there was an underlying order to it as librarians buzzed around, flying from book to book and shelf to shelf while the AIs below them continued issuing order after order at a speed that only quantum superclusters could allow.

[Found one!] Nyx exclaimed. [It's time to go on the offensive. I've got a nyxian in place to extract a cultist before she strikes. Estimated operation time: 22 minutes 37 seconds.] She smiled wickedly.

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Taweelah Power and Water Complex, Abu Dhabi.

A flight of sixteen yeet pods impacted the ground, kicking up a localized dust storm and cracking the asphalt parking lot they landed in. They righted themselves, having impacted at an angle, and twelve of them released squads of General Engineering and Maintenance (GEM) bots to inspect the damage to the reverse osmosis filtration systems in the water plant. They were accompanied by ten RES-QR bots, three constructor swarm queens, and twelve LEAs from two of the remaining four pods; the final two pods were stuffed with atomic printer cartridges to within a millimeter tolerance of the interior space of the pods they came down in.

GEMbots were nanite colonies that took the form of unassuming, stern-faced humans. While LEAs were designed with the intent to inspire trust in the people they dealt with, GEMbots were designed to fade into the background like wallflowers at parties so they could do their jobs unimpeded. The

Lab City researchers had gone through design after design, none of them satisfactory. By the time they settled on something that could effectively do the job, Aron bought nanotechnology knowledge from the system and threw them right back to the drawing board.

It wasn't like their work had been completely wasted, though, as the design they'd settled on for the first production iteration of what later became the GEMbot had been repurposed as the RES-QR bot.

Still, they couldn't pass up nanites as the ultimate winning design, and nanotech was unanimously decided to be the future research direction for Aron's robotic auxiliary legions in the future. They had all of the advantages and the only disadvantage was that nanite colonies required some fairly rare elements, which wouldn't be an issue for long once Project Trojan went into full swing.

The constructor swarm queens began building their swarms while the LEAs set up a perimeter around their landing site and the RES-QRs scuttled into the desalination plant to find and extract any casualties of the chemical attack they could find.

Within minutes, the all clear was announced and the GEMbots moved into the desalination plant to begin the repair and decontamination process.

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Lake Tanganyika, Eastern Africa.

Providing water for four African countries—Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania, and Zambia—Lake Tanganyika was one of the most important lakes in the world, despite only being the sixth-largest lake on Earth by surface area.

And the cultists had released a cocktail of the nastiest biological weapons being studied in the “black labs” that pharmaceutical corporations and governments had secretly maintained in Africa into that very lake.

Nyx had caught wind of the theft, because one of the cultists involved in it had been given a pair of AR glasses and ordered to use them during her part in the attacks. It was a test, she was told, to see how effective their use would be in any of the cult's upcoming plans, though she still had no idea what those plans were or when they would be implemented.

But from Nyx's point of view, she couldn't be sure if the cult knew of the hazards that the empire's digital reality tech held in store for them. Either way, she could either sit on it and not take the risk, allowing four entire countries to be attacked by some of the worst biological gribbles that humanity could come up with, or she could risk revealing the empire's memory-reading capability and send operatives in to prevent the attack entirely.

[Gaia, I need your advice,] she said, unable to make the decision herself and throwing her concerns to Aron's plenipotentiary.

Gaia took a few picoseconds to consider the issue, then came to a decision.

[Send in the reapers,] she said, her face a rictus of frozen fury. [And remember to scan the targets before executing them with prejudice. Furthermore, there is no reason for those labs' continued existence. Make them disappear from my sight.]

Chapter 450 The Greatest Lie the Devil Ever Told

While the terrorist attacks continued, it was at a much slower rate. Reports began dwindling and reduced in frequency from seconds, to minutes, and finally, tens of minutes. And with an average response time of twenty minutes, it seemed that the AIs had caught up to the trend and the worst was over.

All of the scenes around the world had been cordoned off. Imperial police and LEAs were maintaining the cordon as RES-QRs dragged out survivors and placed markers on the dead for later retrieval; at that moment, survivors mattered more. Some of the smaller attack sites, like the wave of suicide bombings at UNESCO Heritage Sites, had even been cleared of all casualties and GEMbots dispatched to repair the damage.

Soon, most of the attack sites progressed to the cleanup phase. Active rescue was only ongoing at the worst of the sites, like in Dubai, where the Burj Khalifa had been dropped on the Dubai Mall and a few other skyscrapers fell due to the blast; or in Paris, where the Louvre had its iconic pyramid dropped into the underground lobby beneath it. But although cleanup had begun, all of the sites were still considered closed as the police and LEAs prevented everyone from approaching until everything was confirmed to be over.

Due to the scale of the coordinated attacks, billions of people were watching how the empire handled things and had found themselves impressed by the efficiency of the response. Everything was moving like clockwork, almost as if it had been rehearsed in advance... which in itself was a problem for the newly formed imperial government.

People had been used to the way the old governments handled things. It was said that governments were organizations that, in doing the small things poorly, also managed to do the big things poorly as well. And that was especially true during emergencies, where instead of focusing on rescue and recovery, politicians would immediately start looking for scapegoats to take the blame for the failure. And only after that was complete would they begin recovery operations. It was a backward method of operating that was almost always more harmful than not.

And with billions of people watching the situation from the sidelines, online “discussions” naturally broke out. Most praised the empire, some didn’t praise the empire but insulted the previous governments, and the trend of “sending thoughts and prayers” to the victims seemed to be an unkillable cockroach in the collective sea of first reactions.

But what was odd was the sudden flood of conspiracy theorists. To be fair, with such an efficient government response and the Rube Goldbergian precision with which the empire had handled things, it all did seem a bit rehearsed to people who didn’t understand the massive technological advantage in play. The empire’s tech was at least three centuries advanced, compared to the tech the now-defunct governments had been working with.

However, it was perhaps an unfortunate happenstance that nobody knew exactly what level the empire operated on, tech-wise, thus the conspiracy theorists gained steam and, unintentionally, manipulated the opinions of those overcome with strong emotions.

While that was ongoing, something else happened that seemed to be hard evidence to people used to dealing with conspiracy theories that were built more upon red yarn, thumbtacks, and sticky notes than anything else. Almost as if they had planned it, every television station across the globe almost simultaneously broke into their scheduled programming with a shocking news report.

After all, they had all received a USB with a chilling video on it at practically the same time. And they couldn't pass up the scoop; it would absolutely shatter their belief in their journalistic integrity. So within seconds of each other, every channel was interrupted.

"Breaking news. We have received a video from someone claiming credit for the wave of terrorist attacks around the world today. Viewer discretion is advised," a news anchor said before the channel cut to the video itself.

On the video, a man stood behind a podium with a blank blue backdrop behind them, a parody of Aron's usual style. He was wearing a flat crown hat, an obvious black wig, and a Guy Fawkes mask. He was dressed in a black long-sleeved shirt with a wide belt and black leather gloves encased his hands, which were resting on the podium in front of him. Around his shoulders was a black cloak, and black muslin blocked the eye holes of the Guy Fawkes mask on his face.

After a brief pause, the man in the video began speaking.

"Dear children of god, today I'm coming to you from an undisclosed location that's as far as it's possible to be from the devil, who has invaded the world and is turning it into a kingdom of sin under his dominion.

"Today, many of my compatriots, faithful soldiers of god one and all, martyred themselves in the fight of good versus evil. It was the first strike in a protracted war, a war for the very souls of humanity!"

The disguised man rambled on for quite some time about how evil the empire was, providing more and more bits of evidence—as insane as some of them were—in an attempt to sway people to his side and delay the "kingdom of the devil" from taking root in the hearts of humankind.

As he neared the end of his speech, he paused for a moment, then said, "Empires run on the ego of an individual. Just like empires and their emperors cannot be separated, their enemies must be individuals as well. Thus, the devil will absolutely try to paint me as the greatest villain who ever lived in order to make himself the protagonist of our conflict. So I decided to preempt that and declare it myself: I am the face of my operation. I am the leader, the guide, the shepherd of my flock. I am but one of many uncountable soldiers of god, all of them arrayed against the devil!

"He will say that I am the provocateur, mastermind, planner, and leader. He will invest his money, technology, military, and the media to isolate and place the focus squarely upon myself.

"The devil will make it his primary goal to obliterate me. He will mythologize and demonize me, rallying all the eyes of the world on my person.

"The empire will cloak itself in a flag to manufacture a false patriotism, a fictional sense of unity, but will force people into compliantly following along and accepting me as the target of everyone.

"It's nothing more than an age-old imperial tactic to quell uprisings. Declare war, declare success, declare an end to the grieving and fabricate a reason to return to

business as usual. Distract, delay, demand.... All of it is a lie! A lie designed to remove the culpability from itself and direct it outward.

“But the emperor failed to take into account that the masses have eyes, and they are watching. In every corner of the globe, on every television, in every news room, everyone is watching. We’re all seeing what’s behind the curtain, and billions of us will never turn away now that our eyes have been opened.

“Oppression and liberation are polar opposites. Oppression is always about a single person. But liberation! Ah, liberation.... Liberation is about everyone! So I call upon all of you watching this to rise up! Rise up and fight back against the devil!

“Because remember this, if you remember nothing else: the greatest lie the devil ever told is convincing us that there is no such thing as the devil.”