

Tech System 251

Chapter 251 Political Points

The intelligence department immediately got to work. They soon came up with a plan to return Vladimir to his country with a story that would make his disappearance understandable, while still allowing him to return to his position without any suspicion.

As for Aron, he had already logged out and went to meet his family and friends. After all, he had spent more than 210 days in that hellish training compound without any access to the outside world.

After spending a week with his family and friends, he finally returned to work and had his first meeting with his CEOs and friends, Felix and Sarah, who seemed to have an idea of what the meeting might be about.

"Long time no see," Aron joked, as they had met last week during his pseudovacation, though he had spent most of it being grilled about his absence by his family. "How've you been?"

"I've been good. We didn't have much work to do, thanks to you," Felix answered.

"It seems like you already have an idea of what the meeting's about, so I won't beat around the bush," Aron said, then received a side eye from Felix. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Are you spying on us with those glasses?" Sarah asked, jokingly covering herself as if she was naked.

"No. Your body language just gave me that impression." Aron understood how they had come to that conclusion, though it was difficult to make them believe he wasn't spying on them now that his intuition was as monstrous as the rest of him after the training he had received.

"Now you can read body language? What exactly happened while you were away?" Felix asked, completely believing his friend's statement.

"I was undergoing a universal training program that was specially made for me, but you can also take it if you want. I actually recommend you do." Aron hoped his friends would undergo the same training he had, as he knew it would be helpful to them both physically and mentally.

"We'd like to try it, but only after we have some free time. It looks like you're about to bring us a heavy workload," Sarah said, hinting for Aron to return back to the main topic and not continue rambling.

"Okay. Soon, Alexander is going to announce the discovery of oil in several of Eden's exclusive economic zones. He'll be opening bids for a company to participate in extracting it for the nation. As you know, the process will take about two months to determine a winner... which will be us, because we'll know the bids beforehand. Also, we have connections with the government, and we're the ones that discovered it in the first place. So I want you to start preparing for it from tomorrow onward." Aron sent Felix a file with a step-by-step plan.

He turned to Sarah and asked, "How many users of GAIA OS are there?"

"Nearly three billion," she answered without needing to think.

"That should be enough to release a social media app with a substantial userbase." Aron had decided that it was about time he started actively farming SP, as he had been quite passive in his use of the system up to this point. But now, he could benefit from its new feature and buy certain knowledges piecemeal. His plan was to gain enough SP, not to buy one full knowledge category, but to buy small pieces of different knowledges and send them to the universal simulation for the scientists to work on. At the very least, they could look for other applications for the information.

"You want a social media app to sell ads? Or to harvest data?" she asked.

"Though I have a few more reasons for releasing it, I don't plan on immediately monetizing it. Instead, I want to use it to control public opinion more efficiently, since controlling it using other social media sites isn't as efficient or effective." Aron gave her one of the reasons for developing their own social media app.

"What features do you want it to have?" she asked.

"I'm still thinking, but the coding will be done the moment I have a solid idea. At the moment, Nova is doing research on what features people use the most and will come up with an app when she's done," Aron answered. "But a few of the features are already known, so you can start the promotion as it should be ready for release by the end of the month." He sent Sarah a document that had all the needed information so that she could use it in her promotional plan.

Following that, they continued talking about different things before Aron bade them farewell and left the office. The meeting had been face to face, despite VR being more convenient, as he liked the feeling of being with his friends in reality more.

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A convoy of three cars were heading in the direction of the presidential palace.

The cars, though they looked different, resembled the vehicles used by the president of Eden. Thus, they had also attracted some attention. People wondered if they had the same features as the presidential motorcade, or if it was just a good custom paint job. Though the cars were similar, they carried a dignity that was subtle, yet still noticeable to those with keen eyes.

The cars were traveling without stopping. Coincidentally, traffic lights were lining up to ensure that the convoy would only get green lights at every intersection. And when they reached the presidential palace, they weren't even stopped at the security checkpoint at the entrance; the gate was already opened for them, allowing them to pass through it without any problem.

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"Welcome." Alexander gave Aron a respectful smile as he greeted the incoming businessman at the entrance to the building, similar to how he would receive a foreign dignitary.

"Thanks. How've you been doing?" Aron greeted, giving Alexander a friendly smile in trade for his respectful one.

"Let's get inside and continue our talk there." Alexander pointed in the direction of the building.

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"Is it about time to announce the oil discovery?" Alexander asked after they had taken a seat.

"Yes. You should announce it a few days after you announce the upcoming presidential election. If you announce it before you announce the election, it'd waste the political potential of working out a deal for the country's benefit," Aron said. The announcement would give the incumbent 'temporary' president a leg up in the upcoming election.

Chapter 252 The Verdict

The following weeks went as planned; Aron didn't get hit with any unexpected stumbling blocks.

The soldiers that had been captured as prisoners of war during the Eden-Esparia war, as well as the first skirmish, were the first to be sent to Avalon Island to start their training. The ARES members stationed in Esparia were documenting the now out-of-work soldiers that wished to continue serving as part of the new Esparian military force.

Although many people liked the idea that their country was going to be protected by the powerful army that had overwhelmingly defeated them, there were still some that hated everything it brought with it. They thought Esparia shouldn't even have surrendered without putting up a desperate struggle in the first place, and having their 'enemies' train their new soldiers was... unpalatable, to say the least. It wasn't really surprising that many of the people in that group were among those who'd voted against surrendering and had chosen to continue the war, despite knowing that they had a high chance of losing even if they fought with everything they had.

Although they had voiced their opinions online about how the accord was a disgrace to their country, they did no protesting or other such things. Many of them had already suffered some trauma, as they'd known at least one person that had tried to fight back when the announcement had been made. And those people couldn't even be buried in one piece, as Eden had specifically chosen that group to act as a warning—a brutal one, but effective; it managed to keep people who would have otherwise resorted to even civil war in check and quiet with their tails between their legs.

The compensation for the families of the dead had started a few days after the signing of the accord, which, when counted in government time, was considered faster than the speed of light. Many other countries that'd paid reparations in the past had needed at least a few months before their compensation payouts even began. The process of ensuring that the applying people really had a relative among the casualties wasn't a problem for Eden at all. The Esparian soldiers that died were within the range of one or another of the Henry's Eyes scanners, meaning that they had been documented perfectly well. Everything about their faces and bodies was in Athena's database, making it quite easy to verify the applications.

Once the applications were verified, an initial payment would immediately be processed and delivered to the bank account of the relative's choice, and the payments would continue for a period of twelve months. The total payout would be enough to make sure the families left behind wouldn't be hungry for the rest of their lives, if it was wisely used.

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Rina was leisurely sitting in her office chair, slowly spinning around. It was a habit of hers that meant she was either thinking about something important, or something was distracting her. This time, it was the latter, as she was watching a news feed that wasn't native to America. It was from

Eden and showed a courtroom in which a trial was in its final phase. The judge was about to hand down his finding and would soon announce the verdict.

He adjusted his microphone and glasses as he began delivering his verdict with the customary closing judiciary remarks.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we stand at a point in history where we must confront the darkest of human desires. The accused stands before this court with the charge of crimes against humanity. During this trial, the prosecution has presented undeniable evidence of the charges, and the accused, Adolf Hermanes Juan Santana, is before us today to receive the court's verdict.

"Our duty as members of the judiciary is to ensure justice, even when faced with the heaviest responsibilities. We have a duty to our fellow citizens, to the victims, and to the principles that underpin our society.

"Throughout the course of this trial, we have heard accounts of unspeakable acts performed by the defendant and his regime. We have seen conclusive and undeniable evidence that backs up those accounts and would shock the most jaded of bystanders. The systematic and wanton persecution, destruction, and cruelty perpetrated by the defendant's regime cannot and must not go unpunished.

"Today, we enshrine the actions of Adolf Hermanes Juan Santana in history as a warning to future generations to not repeat the mistakes of the past, but to learn from them. To not fall victim to the consequences of power, but to be wary of and overcome them. Today, it is with a heavy heart and unwavering conviction that I declare the defendant, Adolf Hermanes Juan Santana, guilty on all charges. His actions have caused immeasurable suffering and violated the most fundamental principles of humanity and morality.

"Therefore, in accordance with the law of Eden, it is the decision of this court that the defendant, Adolf Hermanes Juan Santana, shall be sentenced to hang by the neck until he is dead. This sentence is not an act of vengeance, but a solemn affirmation of the value of human life and a resolute rejection of the horrors that his regime has inflicted upon our great nation.

"As for those complicit in the crimes before the court today, they, too, shall be held accountable for their actions and I charge the men and women serving the citizens of our great nation to leave no stone unturned in pursuit of the perpetrators that aided and abetted this defendant's crimes. I charge the citizens themselves with providing aid, relief, and comfort to those in that pursuit.

"Each and every one of us has the moral obligation to fight against injustice wherever it may be found. Some may argue that justice must be tempered with mercy, but it is our solemn duty to remember the victims who were denied that same mercy. Our actions today, and those going forward, are and will be a tribute to their memory and a pledge to never forget our humanity!

"May this judgment serve as a beacon of hope, a testament to the resilience of our great nation, and a warning to those who would contemplate such abhorrent acts in the future. Let it be known to all that tyranny and cruelty have no place in a just and united society.

"May the memory of the victims be honored, and may our nation heal and rebuild, stronger and more committed to the principles enshrined in our constitution.

"Court is adjourned." The judge brought down his gavel, marking the official fates of Adolf and his co-conspirators. Other than Adolf, only a few would receive the death sentence, while many more would be sentenced to ten years to life imprisonment, and all of them were sentenced to asset forfeiture.

The landmark verdict marked the final chapter of the previous government, closing one book and opening another. Hopefully, the next one will be better.

"He really went with the death penalty," Rina said in quite a surprised tone. Although she had also watched the press conference a few days before, she didn't expect the first person to fall under the sword of justice would be the former Edenian 'president'.

[Adolf's the perfect precedent, as he did everything in his power to ensure he remained in power. No one with a brain would argue that he didn't deserve what he got, but with so much evidence, even those without brains would realize that the sentence was deserved,] Ava said. And in fact, she was right—Adolf was the perfect precedent setter, which was why Aron had chosen him.

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The reaction of the Edenians could completely be imagined. Some people were even celebrating! To them, it almost seemed like they were dreaming as they received one piece of good news after another. Things were so good, in fact, that some even started worrying that something bad might happen to counterbalance the continuous streak of happiness that they were experiencing after consecutive years of hardship suffered under the dictator that had just been sentenced to death.

The celebration didn't stop with the citizens, either. Even the presidential spokesperson had held a press conference expressing the new government's happiness. The court had reached a verdict, and they were handing down a well-deserved punishment to a cruel criminal. But that wasn't the only thing the spokesperson was declaring; Alexander had declared the day of the signing of the Emanuel Surrender Accords a national holiday and would be holding a victory parade to celebrate their victory over Esparia, as well as the history-making verdict. The parade would be followed by an award ceremony, awarding medals to those whose performance was exemplary during the brief, but impactful conflict.

The celebration would be held a month later, giving everyone involved plenty of time to prepare.

Chapter 253 Plots And Schemes And Helicopters, Oh My!

With the announcement of the parade, the military movements in the country increased even further as groups of soldiers began arriving in the city to start preparing the location the parade would be held, while others were being sent to Avalon Island.

What was weird was that none of them were practicing marching drills at all, making people wonder if it was being done in secret or if the soldiers were just going to be walking out of sync with each other. Maybe it was a result of the government rushing the parade, wanting it to happen while people were still relishing in their victory. That would naturally result in some neglect, but many had come to expect huge things from their government—especially when it came to the military—after the two consecutive victories they had pulled out of the jaws of anticipated defeat.

That assumption was amplified even further when an article talking about what kinds of weapons might show up during the parade. One of them was a very modern-looking, intimidating helicopter

that had been seen in a video that looked like a continuation of the 1v5 between the Edenian lone fighter and Esparian squadrons.

The article had garnered much attention, as it came from the same reporters that published the video of the dogfight, resulting in many people starting to question where it'd come from.

Some people said it looked like a high-tech helicopter that was built thanks to data leaks from the US government caused by Chinese hackers. Others thought it was stolen by the PMC that guarded Eden, and now Esparia. A few thought that ARES had designed and developed their own helicopter, while still others speculated that it was just a good paint job that was used to disguise an already-existing helicopter.

Invites started rolling out from the Edenian government to the governments of every other country, as well as people who weren't politicians, but still had quite an influential position in the world. They wanted powerful businesspeople and many more to attend, since it wasn't just a military parade; rather, it was a day of celebration that included a parade.

"So, are you going to come?" Aron asked Rina as the two leisurely toured in the VR. When he'd logged in, he'd been informed of her being online and had decided to visit and talk with her.

"I should. I want to lay my eyes on your full forces, as I haven't seen them in their entirety. I only saw a small unit when they were protecting you," she replied, not hiding her excitement about the parade. She really wanted to see the mercenaries that had fought against a country's full-fledged military and won.

"Good. I'll send a team to pick you up and escort you to Eden. You shouldn't use your family's private jet, as that might attract more attention than we need," he said as they walked to a small hill overlooking some expansive, beautiful fields.

"Oh, you have your own jet?" she asked. She didn't recall having heard anything about it; the last time she had received information about Aron, he'd been traveling in a chartered jet.

"Not at the moment, but I should have a few by then," Aron cryptically answered, not giving a real explanation of where the fleet would be coming from.

"Sure. By the way, do you need me to help you retrieve your machine that was taken by the agency? I'm sure I can return it to you in a week, tops, if I use some of the connections built as a result of Ava's hard work," she said. She was still thankful for the new assistant, as she was immensely benefiting from having her by her side.

"No need. It's with DARPA now, not the FBI, but you don't need to do anything. It's exactly where I want it to be.... Plus, they won't be benefiting from it at all," Aron said with a smile that would make people think he was discussing something trivial.

"That's good, then," she said, followed by a few seconds of awkward silence. Then she finally found something to talk about and asked, "Now that you've completed the move to Avalon Island, are you planning on renouncing your American citizenship?"

"Not yet. Although keeping it means I'm still forced to pay American taxes, it should still benefit me for a few years before it becomes unnecessary," Aron answered, then continued, "How's the situation with your family competition?"

"Although nothing much has changed, my brother seems weirdly calm. At one point, I even asked Ava if anything weird was going on with him, but her response was that she has nothing that could be pinpointed as the cause of the change. It's just that the approximate time this change happened is somewhere around the time she was offline," Rina replied.

"Yeah about that... it was an oversight on my side, and it shouldn't happen again. We're expanding our server capacity to several magnitudes above what it was previously, so you can rest assured. But you should still be careful, as such a drastic change might mean something huge is coming your way." The moment Aron heard her explain her situation, his new intelligence senses started tingling. So he wasted no time in warning her to be careful, but also telepathically asked Nova to order the ARES members in his old neighborhood to delay their move to Eden and keep an eye on her. At least until she visited Eden; they could hitch a ride on the jet he would send to pick her up.

"I'll make sure to keep an eye out," she replied with a sincere smile of happiness. "Are you going to be showing new weapons during the parade, or just the ones you had before the war?" she asked.

"We'll show some new ones, as that'll act as the launch and introduction of them to the world, but nothing fancy. Except for the helicopter—that one's an unplanned reveal, but since the cat's already out of the bag, it kind of forced our hand. At least we can use it to introduce the world to our advanced research capabilities, so people won't react aggressively in the future when the big guns come out," he answered, giving her a hint of what was going to be in the parade.

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"Here's the report, sir," Aubrey's assistant said as he handed him and George the preliminary report on ARES. It was all they could find in the short period of a few weeks; the research team was still working to gather more information.

The Morgan father-and-son pair wasted no time and opened the files, then carefully read them. They were extremely curious as to who might be behind the up-and-coming PMC.

"Why's everything in this garbage highlighted as nothing but speculation?" Aubrey raised his head and asked, dissatisfied by the report. Nearly everything in the document was highlighted as nothing but speculation or guesswork based on what little evidence they had collected in that period of time.

"Sir, the company has no history of being registered in or deployed to any country before they showed up in Eden. And the info there's under tight lockdown. ARES even acts as the INFOSEC (Information security) branch of the country, making it difficult to get any information about them.

"Nearly every bit of evidence we managed to collect during the past few weeks is from OSINT (Open Source Intelligence) through pictures and videos that were uploaded during the war from both the Eden and Esparian sides. And nothing about that gave us any details, making it impossible for us to know if any of our collected evidence is credible or not," the assistant said in a slightly worried tone.

"I'm sure the investigation team isn't dumb, but have they tried to get an inside man for more information?" George asked.

"Yes. We looked for people that we could say with some assurance have been members of the force for a longer period. But we couldn't even find a single one, so we had to deliver the preliminary

report in such a vague way. But the upcoming parade should give us enough new and credible information to be able to at least pinpoint who they're affiliated with if we can track back the manufacturer or seller of the weapons that will be shown on the parade. That should be shown during the parade, as such a large number of them would at least leave a trail. Then we can use that trail to track who it might be connected to."

"Make sure the next report only has credible information. I don't want more speculation like in this shitty document," Aubrey said as he tossed the document on the table in front of them. He wasn't planning on continuing to read it, as unfounded nonsense wasn't something he should be tainting his head with.

"Yes, sir," the assistant replied and heaved a sigh of relief in his mind, then immediately left the room to deliver the new orders.

Chapter 254 Launch Day

With advertisements rolling out about the upcoming social media app that GAIA was working on, it became a talking point among the users of their OS. And coming from a company that could now be considered a behemoth with more than three billion customers, word quickly spread. After all, most people used a GAIA product on more than one device, leading to the advertisements working their way through more than fifteen billion devices.

During the less than a year that the GAIA corporation had taken to rise to fame, they'd met with, and overcome, many obstacles from others, including Google and Apple.

The crackdown from two massive companies continued, both of them trying their best to hinder the growth of the GAIA OS, as each had their own operating systems that had dominated the field before the upstart company's newer, and better, OS was released. When the OS was becoming relevant at the start, they had been desperate to make it impossible to download, but failed. Each and every blockade they put up, the GAIA OS would immediately respond to and break through. Then they tried threatening, and also filed, a few lawsuits, either jointly or individually, for copyright infringement. The people in charge still wrongly thought of Aron as a kid with a lemonade stand, not as the chairman of a large, multinational corporation.

GAIA, however, responded with the same vigor. Their legal department was no slouch, having previously been its own firm that specialized in copyright and tech law prior to being acquired. The latest round of fighting had just begun, but the court had already made some initial rulings on motions in their favor despite the company itself having moved to Eden.

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Two weeks later.

Aron had named the app Pangea. That was the supercontinent that used to exist on Earth, millions of years ago. It was a name that was meant to symbolize bringing everyone in the world closer together. Not to mention, it suited his naming tastes quite well; after all, his other two 'public' companies were named after the earth itself (GAIA) and the desire for connectivity and progress (Connect).

It had finally been released, and millions of people, whether due to curiosity or brand loyalty, created accounts. It was quite easy, since their IDs from the GAIA OS could be directly imported, allowing them to immediately begin using Pangea without having to customize it further.

And as those pioneers first opened the app, they were met with something that no social media app had had when it was first launched: an active user base. It was all thanks to the AIs that had been built to make the app look lively for the first batch of users. They were the most important ones to retain, as they would be the ones sending the initial feedback on the app.

One of the things that tied people to their current systems and prevented them from moving from one to another was the history they built up on each app. Whether it be Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, or any of their smaller competitors, the time people had spent on those platforms had already built up a history for them. Thus, the social media giants weren't too worried about their apps losing relevance. Pangea had solved that issue in an ingenious way; all its users had to do was request the app move their entire history over to the new platform, regardless of where it came from.

With more and more people using that function, the app became more lively. Not to mention, much more addictive and likely to hook first-time users.

But although that made the normal users try it out, the feature's real importance was to influencers. They would have hesitated dedicating themselves to a startup—at least without being paid—but were instead moving over in droves after they realized they could migrate everything to the new platform without having to invest too much time.

Even better for them, Pangea allowed one-tap cross-posting and follower consolidation, so the influencers would no longer have to carefully craft each tweet, story, post, or anything else individually. Their followers, thanks to the cross-posting and consolidation feature, would already follow them on Pangea, if they were users. So there was no downside to the move, but plenty of benefits attracting them.

But all of those features were dwarfed by one single function that made Pangea different from any other social media app: the AI integration. AI was something that GAIA was a world leader in and they had no competitors. The AI in Pangea could be seen everywhere, and users could customize it in many different ways, making their personal experience much more fulfilling.

It allowed for things like fact checking, advanced search, and many more. The integrated AI could do it all... as long as people were subscribed to GAIA Premium. Thanks to the OS being integrated into the app, the world became nothing but one street speaking one language, and anyone could start an argument with anyone else without any nuances being lost in translation. After all, GAIA Premium included a translation algorithm that was hands down the best in the world.

With big names like pewdiepie, Cole Sprouse, Lewis Hamilton, Kim Kardashian, and others making their move to the app, their fandoms followed. And that was no small number of people.

"How many users do we have now?" Aron asked Sarah in their virtual meeting room. It was filled with holographic screens showing different data sets regarding Pangea's launch.

"With the app successfully being launched five hours ago and having faced no bugs or crashes so far, we've already reached 215 million users. And nearly half of them are still engaged. That's

unprecedented, even for the current social media companies. We expect the number to continue increasing as the other side of the world wakes up, and the explosive growth should continue for more than a month before it stabilizes. Then we predict that the user base growth will slow down and be on par with other platforms' growth. But by that time, we should have about a billion registered accounts with a quarter of them expected to be daily users," she reported. She had fully prepared for the launch.

"How is the reaction, is it positive?" he asked.

"Yes. Using AI to create an atmosphere for first-time users while also using the data from their accounts to curate their personal experiences allowed us to avoid being pigeonholed into a single niche category. That would be counterproductive in the first place," Sarah replied.

Aron found himself thinking about privacy and couldn't help but smile and laugh at the situation he found himself in.

"What's up?" Sarah asked, curious as to his reason for the sudden laughter.

"I found myself counting the number of laws I think we might've just broken in that short period of time," he said with the smile still on his face.

It caught Sarah off guard, as she didn't expect that to be something to laugh at, and the absurdity resulted in her laughing as well. "Even if it's a crime, so long as they can't prove it, it doesn't matter. Certain countries might think of banning Pangea over privacy concerns, though, which would make them believe they have leverage on us," she mused, pointing out some of the disadvantages they had to accept following the successful move of the company.

"You don't have to worry about that. I'm pretty sure it won't be the first lawsuit in the saga of United States v. GAIA Technology. Hell, they might even use the same excuse to force us to show them our source code again. That'll never happen, of course, but we can expect a few subpoenas to appear before Congress in the future," Aron answered.

"And who'll be going for those?" she asked. "Me?"

"It depends on whose name is on the subpoena. It'll most likely be you, though, due to your citizenship, but my name might also be on one. Even Zuckerberg's been called before congress a few times." Aron chuckled again, amused as he imagined himself sitting before congress being grilled by politicians who knew nothing about technology, trying to provoke him into saying something they could use against him. They might even pass a law, or just completely ban the app.

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The buzz continued, with people in Eden being at the forefront of the new platform. They all knew that the company that had released the app was from their country, and they wanted to show their support. But it didn't stop there, as the Edenian officials also immediately created the first official governmental social media accounts on the platform. They were immediately verified and had their names displayed in gold, signifying that they were official government organization accounts.

But other than Eden, no governments had registered yet, as they were waiting to see the number of users before they made a decision on whether or not they'll create accounts on the new platform.

Chapter 255 The Ceremony Begins

Pangea's massive and explosive growth continued for two weeks, reaching a billion users without any decrease in the trend showing at all. At the same time, it managed more concurrent users than any of the major social media sites.

Though it wasn't like that growth hadn't caused any problems. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were all trying to figure out how Pangea was growing so fast. Mark Zuckerberg, Jack Dorsey, and Adam Mosseri were all flustered and had been on hours-long conference calls every day trying to figure out a way to stem the outflow of accounts from their platforms. With a billion registered users on the upstart app, and a little more than half of those being active at any given time—as reported to Aron through the ALM (Active in the Last Minute) metric of Pangea—the three social media giants were beginning to appear desolate. It was a downward spiral the three CEOs were trying their hardest to stop.

Some people were even discussing the reason why they were panicking when a few different social media sites had already been just fine existing alongside each other, but the irony was that the discussion was taking place on Pangea.

The consensus was that it was due to the app having the ability to port the data from their previous social media accounts and upload them in the new app without any compatibility issues. That meant people had no need to return to their previous social media platforms, since their followers and people they followed would automatically be consolidated on Pangea from every one of their existing social media accounts. It also had a new, cooler, and more aesthetically pleasing appearance, not to mention a better discovery algorithm that ensured the media they saw in their Panthalassa was tailored to their interests. Thus, the time people would normally spend scrolling through multiple social media platforms was now all dedicated to one: Pangea. (Ed note: Like Pangea was the name of the mega continent in the past, Panthalassa was the name of the combined ocean that surrounded it. So, like Facebook has a wall and Twitter has a feed, Pangea has the Panthalassa)

Also, ads being nonexistent was another factor, as not a single ad came from the app itself; only advertisements posted by normal people were present, resulting in the users being able to scroll through the posts without being annoyed.

At the end of the second week of the app being live, a rather... unique live broadcast was climbing to the top of the trending page. What made it unique was that it was being live-streamed by the Eden Defense Ministry. It had two hundred thousand viewers, and the number was climbing as the livestream rose through the trending topics.

Pangea users weren't the only ones watching, either. Millions of people were watching the same footage, just on different platforms. Even more millions were watching it on television. The live footage was being simulcast by multiple channels in multiple countries, much like the Olympics are broadcast every two years.

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Edenia, the capital city of Eden.

In the country's capital city, a newly constructed city square was completely silent. It was an odd situation, as there was an entire ARES infantry division on it.

The division was standing completely still without moving an inch in the middle of the road, arranged in rows of five abreast and columns of ten, separated by exactly three feet of space between each group. If someone were to walk past with a measuring tape, they would find it exact to the inch.

Following the last box formation was row after row of military vehicles, like tanks, armored personnel carriers, and cargo trucks carrying different military hardware was behind them. There were many of them, all parked with the same precision as the soldiers at attention, their drivers standing on the side to present themselves for inspection.

Contrasted against the still, silent soldiers and vehicles was the Edenian official parade band, formerly of the Edenian military. They were playing the Edenian national songs, like the call to colors, and many newly composed music for the military, among others. People almost wouldn't be able to believe it was being played by a military marching band, as those who knew music would discover that every single note being played by each instrument in the band was in tune. The former military band could rival the best orchestral bands in the world, like the London Symphony Orchestra or the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.

Everyone was waiting for the president of Eden to arrive to begin the ceremony.

The international guests began arriving first. Many countries had sent their ministers of foreign affairs, while others sent a member of parliament, but many developing countries had their presidents or vice presidents in attendance. The nations from the UN Security Council—America, Russia, China, France, and the UK—only sent junior diplomats, or none at all. The ones who didn't send anyone to participate in the celebration still sent letters of congratulations and some flowery apologies for being unable to attend.

Once all the guests had arrived, a motorcade pulled to a stop near the podium where the international guests were already sitting, and the waiting honor guard opened the door of the center car for the president to come out.

The moment Alexander stepped out, the citizens attending the event live went crazy, shouting their approval to the president, who turned to them and waved before being escorted to the stage that was made for him and the foreign dignitaries. When he reached them, he greeted a few before taking a seat as the military band played the last song before the program officially started.

After the music ended, there were a few moments of silence before John took to the podium and ordered, "Parade rest!" His authoritative voice was immediately followed by the sound of the soldiers' boots hitting the ground as they moved from attention to parade rest.

"Attention! Present the colors!" he ordered, and the military band began playing again. Together with the music, the sound of a few synchronized marching steps came as the Edenian color guard took the field. (Ed note: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vHzDyrhVvc>)

Their steps were calm and neither fast nor slow as they marched toward the stage in front of them and presented the Eden flag.

"The color guard is responsible for carrying the flag," said the emcee of the event, which caused people to wonder where he was. After all, he was nowhere on the stage. "Please stand for the Edenian national anthem," he continued.

The color guard reached the stage and presented the flag, then held their positions while the band played the national anthem.

As the first notes of the song echoed out, John came to attention and ordered, "Division! Present arms!"

The entire infantry division, as well as the drivers of the vehicles and John himself, raised their right hands in the Edenian salute.

After the national anthem finished, John ordered, "Division! Order arms!"

Every participant in the parade formation lowered their arms and resumed standing at attention.

Then, the next order came. "Division! Parade rest!"

Everything was being caught by the cameras that had been placed all over the field, then sent to the different channels' broadcasting boxes. The precision impressed quite a few people around the world, and ignited the patriotism within nearly every Edenian viewer's hearts. Some of the international viewers, though, thought the country was being smug and showy before the parade had even started.

Chapter 256 Heart Attacks And Lockstep

After the national anthem ended, a long and beautifully written speech was delivered by Alexander. A few of the attending citizens even cried, as the speech hit just the right notes for the citizens.

Immediately following the speech, Alexander stepped off the raised platform and into the car he had arrived in, which had been fitted with microphones on the roof as he stood the car's open sunroof.

The same thing was happening in the car behind him, but that one carried John, who was wearing his dress uniform.

The cars started and drove to the head of the parade formation, signaling the beginning of the inspection.

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While the ceremony was in progress, Aron was on the podium alongside the dignitaries from all over the world. He was wearing a bespoke suit, which was only to be expected since it was a product of an atomic printer. Although he was calmly sitting in his chair and watching the events unfold, he still attracted attention whenever a camera panned across the dignitaries. He was obviously seen every time that happened, and, thanks to the several evolutions the man had undergone, he was almost inhumanly handsome.

Although he hadn't posted anything since being expelled from school, he still had nearly fifteen million followers across all of his, obviously verified, social media accounts. Thus, people who were interested in his company knew who he was, but many people only knew him from the pictures he had posted in the past. That said, his fans were insatiably curious about the youngest self-made billionaire in history.

Another thing that attracted people to him was that he was different from other young billionaires, who were very keen on ensuring that everyone knew they were young and rich. They would also announce that they planned to save the world—or at least make it a better place—like the CEO of Theranos, whose company was facing more and more scrutiny as a result of not having a workable

device despite their claims. At the beginning of the year, they had still been valued at \$10 billion, but Aron, who was said to be worth three times or more, could be said to not exist at all in comparison. There wasn't even a single interview of his in any archives at all, and the only picture of him that had been caught after he became a billionaire was from one of his rare visits to his headquarters. He was also in the background of a few peoples' pictures from when he was touring Europe by himself. Other than those, no recent pictures of him could be found at all.

People thought the difference between him and other young tech entrepreneurs was that he didn't need investors' money to expand his company. After all, his products didn't need any investments; he had begun earning with BugZapper and hadn't stopped his inexorable march forward.

Alas, contrary to the hopes and dreams of investors everywhere, Aron had never experienced any liquidity crisis. What they didn't know was that that would still have been true even if he had never bagged more than \$10 billion in contracts from NATO in the beginning. The contracts stipulated partial payment up front, resulting in the man becoming a billionaire in a matter of minutes. And all of it was in cash, not shares or fixed assets. That initial fund had removed even the slightest possibility of the company going public due to a lack of liquid funds.

The third thing attracting attention was the beautiful woman sitting to his left and leisurely talking with him, as if they were closer than everyone else there. She had bright blond hair and light hazel eyes, which made her more mesmerizing. Her smile seemed to stun the world, and considering that she was publicly enjoying the company she was keeping, it would be completely impossible for a bystander to think that she had survived an assassination attempt just a week before.

The camera panned back to Alexander, who was inspecting the military forces with John's car behind him.

The inspection took exactly ten minutes before the two returned to the stage and John took to the podium once again.

During the time it had taken them to drive back to the stage, the soldiers had moved into parade rest and were waiting for the order to begin marching and officially kick off the parade.

But before the parade began, the Archangels put on a display of precision flying. The live feed switched to the camera facing the sky as the four fighter jets appeared in the distance, initially seeming like nothing more than small black dots until the camera zoomed in. Those watching from home could see the jets on their screens, while the people attending the show live had to wait for them to draw near.

Soon, the jets were visible to everyone.

The emcee wasted no time and satisfied the watchers' curiosity, saying, "The sound you're hearing, ladies and gentlemen, is the approaching fighter jets that are here to do an airshow. They're the famous Archangel squadron, piloted by the same people that shot down a combined total of forty-five enemy aircraft in our victory over the now defunct dictatorship of Esparia, who is now our friend." The announcement only increased the excitement of people watching the spectacle.

As the emcee had said, the fighters finally neared the square and began putting on a performance. They were executing maneuvers that were known as nightmares for pilots like it was a walk in the park, and doing it with flair and precision. They almost seemed robotic, and even put the famous

Blue Angels squadron to shame during their more than a minute of joint maneuvers. The squadron flying was followed by a solo performance from the pilots, who each showcased something different, which almost put those watching in a trance. The final soloist even almost caused some people to have mild heart attacks, thinking that something had gone wrong; he had pulled a "Zero Knot" maneuver.

Before that, he had performed other flashy tricks that were different from the previous pilots, but before his last stunt he approached the ground in a straight, high-speed dive before pulling up and heading back to the sky in a straight line with the afterburners at full power. It was like he intended to leave the earth's atmosphere, but after gaining a bit more than five hundred meters of altitude, the afterburners disappeared and the pilot put his jet into a stall before it fell from the sky.

People thought the aircraft had malfunctioned mid-show and were worried they would be witness to a tragedy at the beginning of a celebration. Some of them even closed their eyes, but soon opened them back up. The pilot, upon reaching the two hundred meter mark, reignited the jet's engines and pushed the throttle to the stops. Thankfully, it didn't reach supersonic speeds—as that would have taken a few eardrums with it—but it gave people an idea of what the parade would be like.

With that exciting end to the air show, John gave the series of orders that would begin the parade and the soldiers moved out. The infantry marched in lockstep, as though they had one mind in many bodies. Following them were the vehicles, both wheeled and tracked, lined up row after row like there were invisible rulers between them.

Chapter 257 Efficient Chaos

A week before the celebration.

[Miss, they've arrived to pick you up,] Ava informed Rina. The escort from Aron had arrived outside her mansion after going through all the security checks and inspections. They were there to bring her to the airport, then onward to Eden.

"Sure, let's go," she said and immediately stood from her office chair. She would be taking nothing with her except her phone and the glasses she was wearing. She wasn't even packing changes of clothes.

Coming out of her office, she found her secretary and the guard who had taken over for Terry already waiting for her; they would be going with her. "Let's get going," she said and walked past them. They nodded and started walking behind her.

"Miss, do you think it'll be fine to go with those people without any of our guards?" asked Alex, Rina's head of security.

"You don't have to worry about that, we'll be perfectly safe with them. Plus, I don't think a single private jet can accommodate all of them, and your people, too," Rina said. She knew she would be safer with ARES than with anyone else.

"Good evening," greeted a female driver who was responsible for driving the car that Rina would be taking with her secretary.

Rina returned the greeting and smiled at her as she boarded the car with Alex and her secretary before the doors were closed behind them.

"Very comfortable," she said, finding herself sinking into the seat and feeling like she was being massaged.

Wasting no time, the convoy left the mansion. Rina and her secretary were in the middle car, with two cars ahead and behind her. All of them drove professionally as they left the Rothschild's compound; it took more than ten minutes of driving before they reached the gate to leave the compound and passed the security checkpoint.

A new burner phone rang with a text at the same time the convoy left the compound. And with that text, certain gears were set into motion.

Ava attempted to pinpoint where the text was going, but failed. The only thing she knew was that the phone that had received the text was in the same state as them; it had been destroyed before she could find its exact location.

Despite failing, she still informed Rina about the message and that it might be about her, as no one in the compound that she had been monitoring fit the message. They were all still comfortably sitting at home, while Rina was the one who had left.

Rina, who believed she was perfectly safe in the hands of Aron's guards, just asked Ava to continue keeping an eye on the situation.

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As the convoy headed down the road carrying its load of VVIPs, the cars all slowed down in unison, then turned right, catching Rina, Chloe, and Alex equally off guard. They knew the route they should be taking, and this wasn't it.

"Why'd we make an unplanned turn?" asked Alex, who was sitting in the front passenger seat of the car.

The female driver said nothing and just pointed at the tablet set into the dashboard. The moment Alex laid his eyes on the tablet, the screen changed into a 3D map of the surrounding area. To his surprise, it wasn't a Google or Apple app, but data that had been collected and was being rendered in real-time by the cars themselves. Alas, his surprise was soon overshadowed when the screen moved to about a kilometer in the direction of their planned route, and he saw a car with people inside it packing weapons no different from terrorists. They even had RPGs to the baggage place of the car!

"Looks like that message was really about me, after all," Rina said when she saw the display through the augmented reality lenses of her glasses.

"Turn around! We need to inform the family security about this so they can reach us in time," Alex said and immediately keyed his satellite radio to inform the family. Normally, it could reach the base station no matter the distance, but no matter how he tried, he received no response.

"They were prepared for you and jammed the radio," the driver told him after he had been trying to contact the security base for a while. She had let him try it first, not wanting to waste her energy on explaining things like she would have if she had stopped him before he made the attempt.

"Did they only jam our frequency?" he asked as the convoy made another turn to avoid another car that was similarly armed.

"Yes. It looks like this is being done by someone who knows your system inside and out," she answered, hinting at who the culprit might be.

While all of that was happening, the only ones panicking were Chloe and Alex, who was worried about Rina's safety. But while those two were afraid, the people with them were calm.

The convoy continued avoiding contact with ambushers until they were on the only road leading to the airport. It was a long, straight road with no intersections, meaning they couldn't take any more turns to avoid the cars that were chasing after them.

The chasers thought that they had finally cornered them and could deal with them, but alas, it was all planned by the ARES security detail. The moment the road they were on reached a sufficiently unpopulated area, three of the five cars in the convoy changed to the right lane: the one Rina was in and the two directly in front and behind her. As for the other two, they remained in the left lane and slowed down. They were left behind by the speeding, but still stable, cars that continued their journey.

Although they were now separated, everything happening behind them was displayed on the tablet set into the dashboard of the car.

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Inside the remaining cars.

"We have five minutes to deal with them and clean up before this turns into a shitshow," said the team leader as he pulled down the back seat and removed one of the assault rifles stored in the hidden compartment. It looked like an AR-15, but the looks were all it had in common with that rifle. Everything else was different; in fact, it was a Gauss rifle. The other soldiers also picked up their weapons and linked them to the sunglasses they were wearing, then powered them up.

Once everyone was armed, the drivers slammed on the brakes, and the cars skidded for a bit before fully stopping. The doors sprang open, and the soldiers dismounted the car with guns raised.

"Who the fuck are—" the lead chase car's driver began, but was interrupted by the sound of a blown tire as a Gauss round hit it from nearly a kilometer away.

The ARES members didn't stop firing, either. Even though the front car was spinning out of control due to having its tire taken out while the car was moving at full speed, their aim didn't falter, and they disabled the following cars as well. Then they sent a microexplosive round down range, triggering the rocket-propelled grenades to explode as the drivers were frantically occupied with attempting to avoid colliding with each other.

"Holy shit," Alex said as he watched the massacre taking place behind them. He was experiencing a few complicated emotions as he realized that they really were safer with these strangers than the family guard, just based on the tech in this car alone! That in itself would be a game changer for any security detail, but the efficiency with which the massacre was being executed was also incredibly impressive. The ARES detail said little to nothing at all; the soldiers had seemingly trained to the point they could act as one body and one mind.

Though some of the cars had managed to avoid destruction and a few armed people came out of them to try their luck with scattered return fire, mere survival was the most their luck could bring them.

Alas, their deaths could be chalked up to 'natural causes'. After all, anyone will naturally die if their head explodes.

All ten of the attackers' cars were soon taken out, with the people in them dying in different ways. It would surely present the FBI investigator with plenty of nightmares in the future, but the local police could count themselves lucky that a fight like this one was something the police wouldn't be trusted to handle.

The soldiers immediately boarded their cars again and headed to the pile of wreckage to do some 'cleaning'. They burned a few things, tore apart a few more things, and generally just contaminated the scene even further to make the investigation as complex as possible. Then they loaded back into their cars, put their gauss rifles back into their hidden compartments, and left in the opposite direction of Rina and the rest of the convoy.

"Where are they going?" asked Rina, who seemed calm, but was internally angry. She had seen worse.

[To find and capture the one behind the attack,] Ava said. She brought up the evidence she had collected and her interpretation of it. The most damning piece of evidence was the communication records from the cell towers, showing where the person the attackers were communicating with was. ARES also had that information, and the rearguard team had been directed to capture him or her.

Alex, hearing that, knew that the Rothschild security force was nowhere near that level of efficiency. ARES seemed to have handled the attack while simultaneously figuring out who was pulling the strings. Then, they had disrupted the evidence and even began another operation to apprehend the mastermind and interrogate them on who was ultimately responsible for attacking them in such a heavily armed manner.

Chapter 258 A Magitech Flying Fortress

"Wow..." Rina had finally managed to calm down over the remainder of the car ride, but was flabbergasted when she saw the plane that was waiting for her. A 'super jumbo' A380 was waiting for her in the private jet terminal at LaGuardia Airport, since there were no private airports in New York that could handle a jet of that size.

"When and where did he even buy it?" she asked in surprise, as she knew that it took some time for a custom plane to arrive.

[He bought it from Transaero Airlines, a Russian company. They were having some financial difficulties and were forced to sell some of their Airbus A380s. He got two of them,] Ava answered after requesting the information from Nova, who allowed access to it as it wasn't a huge secret. The news just wasn't publicized, like most things about Aron.

As Rina was talking to Ava, a ramp lowered at the end of the jet, revealing its massive cargo hold. The cars the group had driven to the airport made their way up into the hold and the ramp lifted, sealing the entrance.

"I don't think a commercial airplane has cargo ramps like that, do they?" she asked, pretty sure that the planes Aron had bought were certainly modified after the purchase. But the timeline still didn't add up; whether they were special orders or modified post-purchase, the jet would still require several months to be completed.

[They were sent to Avalon Island for modifications.]

Hearing that, Rina knew the plane in front of her wasn't one that Aron had bought from the Russian company at all. His purchase might just be a smokescreen, so people wouldn't be asking where he had acquired the plane.

"He's finally acting like a rich person," she said with a smile as she realized that Aron had bought two planes with a price tag of more than \$100 million each, just so he could build similar-looking jets and people wouldn't ask where the hell he found them.

And she was right; the planes that landed at Avalon Island were nowhere to be found. They had immediately been sent to the atomic printer for scanning and decomposition into their component atoms before a new plane with advanced tech replaced them. From the outside, the only apparent modification was the paint job—Aron's jets had gold stripes with the initials ARN on the tails of the massive planes.

The plane Rina was boarding could go head-to-head with fighter jets and survive while maintaining its operational capability. It could also fly for basically forever, as it was powered by a miniaturized fusion reactor that provided more electricity than it would ever require. The excess electricity was run through runes that converted it into mana, which was fed into the engines to generate enough thrust to outrun anything it didn't want to fight. The key word there is 'didn't want to', not 'couldn't', as there was nothing on Earth that could threaten the powerful hybrid Magitech jetliner. Aron had even further reinforced it by engraving a massive shield rune that covered the entire superjumbo jet, turning the whole thing into an impregnable flying fortress.

"Please." The driver of Rina's car gestured for her to board the plane so they could begin their journey.

As Rina walked up the stairs to the plane, she asked, "Aren't we going to wait for the rest of you?"

"No, their stay's been extended so they can investigate who was behind the attack. They'll join us in Eden later," the woman respectfully answered.

"Oh, that's good then."

Although the exterior of the plane had impressed the Rothschild daughter, the inside was even more impressive. Despite being luxurious, there was no sense of tasteless nouveau riche extravagance in it. Instead, the decor had a certain dignity and gravitas to it.

After onboarding everyone who was going to Eden, the plane taxied to the runway, having paid a premium to jump the line and take off after just a short wait, causing the commercial flights to have a slight delay in taking off.

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"Where am I?" Terry asked as he opened his eyes and found himself bound to a chair. Another person was similarly bound in front of him, but his vision was blurry, and he couldn't tell who it was with certainty. All he could tell was that their head was bowed, as if they'd fallen asleep sitting up.

But although he couldn't see their face, he had a hunch as to who they were; their wavy hair reminded him of his girlfriend.

The moment he thought about her, he finally remembered everything that had happened.

He had been watching as the mission went tits up. Things had started out well; they had successfully bribed an inside man and placed ambushes on every route leading away from the Rothschild compound that Rina could have taken to go anywhere. But somehow, their target had anticipated the ambushes and neatly avoided them, then turned around to fight once the situation had turned in their favor. So one of two possibilities was true: either they knew where the ambushers were, or they were lucky.

And after having seen how easily their target had mowed down the hired mercenaries that lay in ambush, Terry didn't think luck had anything to do with it. He had spent \$20 million for nothing!

He would even have suspected that they had been betrayed, except he'd taken precautions against that. Every group of ambushers was hired from a different mercenary company, and none of them—not a single one—was privy to the whole plan. They all had different instructions and were multiple independent parts of a whole that didn't know each other at all, so betrayal was an impossibility among impossibilities!

Although he was shocked by the skill displayed by that bitch's guard detail, he hadn't been afraid. The video stream he was watching from the comfort of his command post had been routed through so many VPN servers that there was even a two-second delay before the video even arrived.

The two of them had thought themselves perfectly safe, as they had faith in the security of their command post (which was just a fancy way of saying "Katrina's basement"). Nothing should have happened to them due to the paranoid fixer's security surrounding her house in a two-kilometer radius, which should detect any intruders with plenty of time for them to escape through a tunnel.

"Looks like our security was useless," he said when his memory reached the point where he had been knocked unconscious by an unseen attacker. His overconfidence in Katrina's security measures had resulted in them being caught so off guard that he hadn't even realized they'd failed until he woke up tied to a chair.

"How're you doing?" Footsteps clicked against the floor from behind him, then he saw a man come into focus in front of him. It was someone he would never have expected to see in a thousand years.

"You seem to have failed your mission," said a man who looked no different from Arie Rothchild.

'Oh shit, my fear came true,' he thought as he eyed Katrina, who was in front of him. She had assured him that no such thing would ever happen.

"What excuse do you have to give me?" asked Arie as he took a seat in a chair.

'I'm pretty sure that there wasn't another chair in the room, or maybe I was just so focused on how we got here that I didn't pay much attention to where "here" actually was. Yeah, that has to be it....

There's no way he could've just materialized a chair out of thin air, right?' Terry thought as his brain went into overdrive, trying to come up with explanations for the weirdness that had happened during the mission. He was sure that if he said everything exactly as it had happened, Arieih wouldn't believe him. Hell, he wouldn't have believed it himself if he hadn't seen it live with his own eyes.

'Yeah, that's right! I have the footage, so I can use it as an explanation... but for that to work, I need him to not have destroyed anything in the command post when he was capturing us. How the hell did he even reach us without us knowing, though, anyway?'

Question after question appeared in Terry's mind, as the more he answered, the more surfaced.

Chapter 259 Mind Games

Terry paused for a moment, thinking of how he could explain what had happened, then said, "Sir, although I can explain, it'll be difficult to believe. So it's better if I show you what happened, instead. Can you bring my computer from the house? There's a video of the entire event." He was trying to avoid explaining at all.

"No need to wait—I brought them all with you," Arieih answered, then took out his phone and called someone to bring the computers that had been taken from the house.

During the wait, Terry asked, "By the way, why isn't she waking up?" He tilted his head toward Katrina, whose head was still hanging down.

"Ah. She'll be asleep for a while, as the dosage of our tranquilizer was the same for her as it was for you. So it'll take her longer to come out of it. Don't worry, she'll wake up in a few hours... but that'll be the least of your problems if you don't give me a reasonable explanation for your failure." As Arieih was speaking, the door opened, and a man brought in a thick laptop. Terry immediately recognized it as his.

"Tell me the password," Arieih said after he received the laptop and turned it on.

"Why don't you untie me first? It's very complicated, and I memorized it by rote muscle memory and not my mind," Terry said, struggling against his bindings.

"So you can try pulling the same shit on me that you pulled on Rina? I'm not an idiot, like that bitch. Just tell me the fucking password," Arieih coldly said. He was almost like a completely different person, judging from his tone.

Terry immediately told him the password, as he knew that if he played any more games, his punishment would only be heavier.

Arieih successfully entered the password on his second attempt and immediately navigated to the location the video files were stored in at Terry's direction. He played the videos and audio recordings, silently watching and listening to everything that had happened; it took him more than half an hour to comb through all of them.

"It seems your failure really wasn't your fault. Those bodyguards were just better than the thugs you hired," Arieih said, prompting a sigh of relief from Terry, who thought they were in the clear.

But that feeling of safety was thrown out of the window when ArieH continued, "But you still spent more than fifty million of my own slush fund for your failure. I need a result that can justify the loss of so much money... what do you have in mind to soothe the pain of my loss?"

ArieH didn't care that everything that happened during the assault could be considered an act of god or force majeure, and couldn't accept the loss of so much money... or at least that was what Terry thought as he said, "Although it wasn't our fault, we still should've been prepared for something like that. I hope you can give us another chance, as the survivors of our first attempt are still waiting for further orders. Since they've already been paid, they can't turn me down, and we can come up with a better plan for when she returns." He hoped his plea would be accepted, because he knew that if it wasn't, they would be in for a good old torture session.

"No need for that," ArieH said, then paused, causing Terry to almost have a heart attack before the Rothschild heir continued, "But there's indeed a way. I want you and her to personally lead an operation. If you succeed, I'll consider your debt paid."

Terry could only helplessly reply, "I'll definitely accomplish the mission."

"When she wakes up, someone will be here to brief you on the mission," ArieH said, then stood up and left the room, closing the door behind him. The two people left inside were still tied to chairs.

'We survived,' Terry thought. That hadn't been assured, since they had been captured. And although he could have fought back and threatened ArieH with the evidence they had set aside for just that occurrence, that would be considered something of a nuclear option that would only guarantee his destruction while not having much hope of harming ArieH.

A few minutes passed with nothing happening in the room, then Katrina shook her head. She had started waking up from the tranquilizer gas ArieH had used on them.

"Are you alright?" Terry asked as she raised her head with a groan. It sounded like she had received a thorough beating.

"Where are we?" she asked when she completely came to and realized they were bound in a room she didn't recognize.

"I don't know. All I can say is that we're in one of ArieH's black sites. He's the one that captured us...." Terry detailed everything that had happened while she was sleeping.

"Shit," she said when he finished his summary of the events, as she knew that they were only alive because ArieH wanted them to do another job. His investment in them hadn't gone well so far. "But we can make it like our failure never happened if we accomplish the new mission," she continued, trying to calm herself. She knew that, since the moment they had been captured, there were very few things they could do to help themselves. As they had been taken from inside her so-called 'secure' basement without them even realizing that they were being attacked, things were looking grim for them.

Their capture meant they had never been safe and had always been watched, which didn't make her feel very good at all. But despite that, she tried to hide her displeasure, as she was sure they were being watched. "Did he tell us what he wants us to do for him?" she asked.

"Not yet. I think he was waiting for you to wake up so he could tell us both," Terry answered as he eyed the girl with love in his eyes.

Seeing that, Katrina felt frustrated. She didn't know whether to feel happy or upset for her man to be watching her with those eyes. Plus, their relationship would be used against them, so she tried to warn him with her eyes. Terry caught the glance and understood her warning, so he tried to change the way he was looking at her. But he knew it might have already been too late, and they had just handed Ariele more leverage to use against them.

As if what he already had wasn't enough.

Chapter 260 Wicked Plans

Rina had been watching the conversation between the fake Ariele and Terry, who had no idea that the Ariele he was talking to was a fake.

She wasn't angry at her brother's attempt to kill her at all, but disappointed instead. She would have been angry if he had succeeded in killing someone close to her—something that would've happened if she were under the protection of her own security team at the time the attempted assassination had taken place. But now that she'd survived it and had solid evidence in hand, she was... oddly happy. With the evidence she had, the competition between the Rothschild family's potential heirs would officially be in the bag. Her brother had broken one of the family's strictest rules: never attempt to take a relative's life, especially one of the direct descendants. Competition, within strict limits, would grow the family, but killing a relative—even if said relative was the most useless waste of space ever—would be harmful to the family at large. It was doubly important that all direct descendants survive, as any deaths would reduce the number of direct descendants from which future generations' family heads would be chosen.

The punishment for attempting such a thing was being removed from the competition and having five generations of the perpetrator's descendants banned from competing for the position of family head. And even if the other direct descendants didn't reproduce, the position would still go to a branch family member until the five-generation ban was over, at which point the opportunity would return to the punished bloodline.

But for that punishment to be implemented required a substantial amount of solid evidence, since, if arbitrarily imposed, it would incentivize people to accuse competitors of failed assassination attempts in order to remove them from the competition. Alas, as if God wanted it to happen, Terry had just so happened to attack at the very worst—or best, depending on who was asked—time. During the attack, she had been under the direct protection of the last people anyone would want investigating them, as nothing could be hidden from ARES.

Absolutely nothing.

And even if they didn't want to investigate, Rina had since worked out a deal with Aron. The ex-bodyguard was to be handed over to be used by him in return for evidence that proved her brother's involvement in the attempt on her life.

"It really worked," Rina said in surprise.

"Told you so." Aron smirked. If all went according to plan, Terry would be spending a long time in prison and she wouldn't have a chance to personally exact her revenge on him. Thus, he had asked

her permission before going with his initial plan, as he could always come up with another alternative.

"With this tech, you can make anyone think they're meeting with anyone else! And as long as you act like the person they think they're meeting, it's no different from having a polymorph spell in real life...."

"Though we can easily do that, I'm planning to limit who and under what conditions it can be used. After all, if everyone can do it, there's no telling what chaos would ensue," Aron said in a display of self awareness. The mimicry tech would definitely have to be an exclusive feature.

Exclusive to him, that is.

"But why do you want them to attack DARPA? I'm sure that if the FBI realizes you're trying to get it back by force, they'll move it to one of their black sites. Or even Area 51, and that would make it... impossi...." She stopped talking and her voice trailed off as something like an explosion hit her thoughts when she realized she had accidentally glimpsed Aron's plan.

Aron said nothing, just smiled. "The more secret the base they send it to, the better. I hope they send it to one of the joint bases they hold in cooperation with other militaries, as that'll give me exactly what I need," he said. From the very beginning, his aim had been to have the device in one of the military bases so he could gain a connection to the Department of Defense's classified, secure network.

"Why? If you wanted to hack it, I'm sure it would be easy for you, right?" Rina asked.

"The hack was already done last year, but the data transfer is where we're stuck at. The military has its own air-gapped network, meaning that nothing from that network is connected to the rest of the internet. And that means...." He didn't need to finish his sentence, as he knew she was smart enough to get his point.

And he was right, as she immediately remembered the ability of his quantum computers to instantly transfer data, no matter the file size. The moment one was connected to the military network, the US Military's restricted database would be like his own personal playground. At least, as long as he wasn't discovered, but that would be quite a stretch. Although he hadn't received any communications from the trojan planted in the military network when they had seized BugZapper, he was sure that it was smart enough to hide itself for an extended period of time. That was one of the reasons it was so scary.

"Fuck," Rina softly said, chewing on the inside of her cheek. She was beyond impressed by the long-term planning Aron had been doing. 'Looks like I'm not going back anytime soon,' she thought, and she had a very convincing reason as to why she shouldn't: she needed to make her brother think she was either dead or afraid of another attack happening when she returned from Eden after surviving his first attempt.

The two continued chatting for a little while longer before Aron bid her farewell and left, as he had another meeting with other people.

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Arieh was pacing back and forth in his office, nervously waiting for a phone call that never came. The delay was making him more and more nervous.

Amidst his back and forth pacing, his secretary burst into the room and, without saying anything, ran to the tv and switched it to a certain channel before ArieH could even reprimand her for entering without knocking.

Just as he was about to vent his frustration on her, he focused his eyes on the tv and the words were stuck in his throat. The news was broadcasting a breaking story. Although it was from CNN, which was a channel known for saying that everything was breaking news, this story was one of the few that definitely deserved that designation.

"...rlier today, on the road leading to LaGuardia Airport, what initially appeared to be a devastating accident is now being investigated as a possible terrorist attack, sending shockwaves through the city."

The camera cut to a shot of the road ARES and ArieH's people had fought on, which was now blocked by emergency vehicles.

"More than ten vehicles were destroyed in a catastrophic series of events. Some were heavily damaged by what appears to be high-caliber weaponry, while others were consumed by raging fires caused by the fuel in the affected cars. However, the most disturbing aspect of the incident is the mysterious projectiles that seem to have claimed the lives of most of those in the vehicles."

The faithful camera panned over to display the charred wreckage left by the fighting.

"The projectiles, which have yet to be located, left no traces behind, as if someone meticulously cleaned the scene. That's raised suspicions that foul play was involved. Local authorities and federal agencies are working in collaboration to get to the bottom of the incident as soon as possible."

The station cut to B roll footage of the FBI standing next to a couple of police officers and speaking to each other about something.

"The FBI has been called in to assist the NYPD anti-terrorist division in their investigation. Special agents are currently combing through the wreckage for any evidence that may shed light on this perplexing case...."