

December 2002

The world was never the same again.

It was a cheesy line, but Cerion knows it aptly described the world at the present. Ever since the war in the Middle East was launched, the world was turned upside down for the average citizen.

Cerion snorted. Who was he kidding? Everyone felt the same way. There was no 'average' person feeling sorry for himself. The initial months of the war were the worst as fuel prices shot up like a rocket climbing into the upper atmosphere. Once fuel prices went up, everything else became super expensive: food, medicine, electricity, water, rent, and interest rates all skyrocketed.

This squeezed the average household's savings and blew a massive dent in the middle class of almost all nations.

Of course, like all events in life, there was a flip side to all the suffering. The oil companies made a killing in the international market. Oil-rich nations of the world made the most of the opportunity. In the US alone, the major oil corporations were making a killing out of the fossil fuel business, and even after the 'official' end of the war, they were making a killing. He couldn't really complain, considering the first thing he did after the 9/11 attack was to up his stock purchases in the fossil fuel industry. He was not above using the situation to his advantage because he had a considerable hand in the whole war. While he was not directly involved in the fighting, he had shamelessly profited from it.

He supposed he was a full-blown war-profiteering capitalist asshole. In his past life, he had his fair share of 'socialist' moments where he found all sorts of reasons to blame capitalists who profited from war and diseases. But now, he was a shameless hypocrite who enjoyed the fruits of everything he considered immoral in the past.

While he didn't own the bullets or the missiles in the war, he helped design quite a few of them with his new tie-up with Hammer Industries. Justin Hammer was now over the moon with all the lucrative defence contracts coming his way. Their tie-up was somewhat tricky to pull off, considering Vex Corp was also involved in some forms of defence contracts with the military. But Cerion had been careful to engage in contracts not competing with Hammer Industries. He did that by focusing more on increasing the defensive capabilities of the Army, Navy and Air Force rather than selling them guns and missiles. He left the guns and missiles in the hands of Hammer even though Cerion had Optima go through much design rejig for the weapons Hammer Industries put in the field. Most of their stuff was utter garbage and a danger to the user more than anyone else. Therefore, it required some rejigging to get most of Hammer's weapons to function as intended.

It was an unusual tie-up, considering the nature of their cooperation. But from Cerion's perspective, the tie-up with Hammer Industries kept his hands clean in public. After all, he was indirectly arming the bloated US military with even more powerful guns and missiles while making a shit ton of money. It was blood money, and that kind of money brought a lot of PR problems to the other companies he owned and co-owned. Therefore, his cooperation with Hammer Industries remained airtight under a vast amount of paperwork and contracts. At the same time, their tie-up was publicised in the form of tech support, mainly software and cyber security.

Cyber warfare was a legitimate battlefield acknowledged by all major nations. The same could be said for major corporations, especially with major contracts with the military-industrial complex that props up the NATO alliance. Under that guise in public, Cerion could float the tie-up with Hammer Industries before the people and his investors without too much scrutiny. Of course, those who

looked closely would see a deeper connection. But that was not something Cerion had to worry about anytime soon.

For now, he had his bases covered.

That was why he could sit back and relax with his buddy Justin Hammer as they showed off the new toy to the observers from the military.

“Don’t you think it’s a little early to celebrate?” Cerion asked with a raised eyebrow, accepting the champagne poured by Hammer’s butler while sitting in the observatory with big ass screens showing live video feed of the demonstration.

“Who am I kidding? This is a done deal; you know it better than me, Cerion. So, let’s celebrate!” Justin said giddily, savouring the taste of champagne as he drained the glass.

“I suppose you’re right.” Cerion grinned at his business partner. “So, you’ll be making a killing from this contract. This calls for a proper celebration.”

“Prepared to be dazzled, my friend. I’ll be smothering you with a party that’ll make even the angels of heaven jealous.” Justin boasted, grinning from ear to ear while positively thrumming with excitement in his seat.

Cerion merely shot the man a grin while taking small sips of the champagne. Hammer was a likeable character despite several of his oddities. The man went out of his way to be happy all the time. And Hammer had some unhealthy obsession with Tony Stark, which worked in Cerion’s favour. It was now no secret that Cerion’s meeting had gone south with Tony Stark. He made it known through third parties to attract the right crowd, and his ploy worked like a charm. There were a gazillion people in the world with a hefty bank account and a bone to pick with Tony Stark. So, he found no shortage of friends and investors over their common enmity against the CEO of Stark Industries. Even if Cerion was disappointed Tony rejected his offer to collaborate, he transformed the rejection by Stark into an opportunity.

His focus inadvertently fell on the screens where the USAF officers worked on their Predator drone.

“Well, it looks like the boys are ready downstairs. It’s time to dazzle these old generals.” said Justin, patting him on the shoulder before walking towards the centre stage.

“Good luck,” Cerion whispered to Justin Hammer, leaning against the seat while observing the show.

“Welcome, everyone. So, I promised everyone here a good show and won’t disappoint you with a long speech. Today, I’d like to introduce you to a weapon system I call Sunsphear. It’s uniquely designed to tackle multiple threats in the sky utilising hypersonic missiles paired with advanced radars and EWS.”

“Two birds with one stone is what we’re going for here. Now, without further ado, let me introduce you to Sunsphear, the spear tip of advanced weaponry in our skies.”

Justin gave the go-ahead signal.

“Please direct your attention to the UAV on the screen. It carries a Mach 2 missile. For demonstration purposes, the UAV, the missile and a surface hanger are the target of Sunsphear.”

The Predator drone quickly took to the sky with a single missile armed in its arsenal. Another screen came to life, showing another crew standing in a desert with a missile system nearby.

“Target acquired. Sunsphear engaging.”

The huge console carrying the missile system aligned itself at an angle before a missile was fired. Live images, as well as projected models of the missile’s flight path, were shown on the screen.

“Our advanced radar systems can pick out targets even from great heights, and shortly, you’ll see the speed as well.” Justin explained.

The missile closed in on the Predator drone quickly, easily crossing Mach 5 speed, and then five small miniature missiles escaped from a small compartment on the missile. They quickly formed a perfect circle before falling into a spiral manoeuvre that made it impossible for the UAV pilot to pull the Predator out of harm's way. At the same time, the Predator launched its Mach 2 missile. The miniature missiles of Sunsphear blew the Predator drone out of the sky. But it didn’t end there. The main missile continued to follow the Mach 2 missile launched by the UAV. Suddenly, a panel opened up on the missile and launched another five miniature missiles. They executed the spiral manoeuvre before destroying the Mach 2 missile.

However, the show didn’t end there. The main missile turned on its own and struck a surface target using satellite targeting.

“Well, there was a correction to my earlier statement. I meant to say three birds with one stone, not two.” Justin cheekily added.

Following the demonstration, there was a tech briefing for the military observers. Sunsphear is a perfect weapons system to keep the sky clean of enemy aircraft and rockets. It was also capable of being repurposed as an air-to-surface missile with some modifications.

As Justin said, there was no doubt whether the military would purchase the weapon system. With the war in the Middle East turning into a quagmire and expanding into neighbouring states of Saudi Arabia, the military was looking for an edge. Sunsphear promised to deliver that edge against the proactive players in the Middle East like Iran, Iraq, Qatar, etc.

However, selling powerful weaponry and making billions was not the sole goal in Cerion’s focus.

The money he made from the defence contracts had been poured into his new company that was preparing to launch in a few months, as well as the clean energy project. It would take a few more weeks for everything to settle in before he could officially announce the company. But he was in no hurry. He had two models of clean energy vehicles in hand to showcase to the whole world.

But starting today and the next two weeks, he made it a point to clear his otherwise busy schedule. After six hours of flight and an hour of driving through the moderate traffic of Virginia, Cerion arrived at his destination. The family home of Fosters had undergone some modifications.

'Who am I kidding? The whole thing got rebuilt from scratch.' Cerion mused.

Parking the car on the side of the driveway, he picked up the luggage and approached Jane's house. Before he reached the front door, Jane appeared by the door, holding it open for him.

“You came.” Jane breathed, throwing her arms around his neck before he could set the luggage down.

“Of course I did. Jacob would feel better if we spent Christmas together and went to visit him.” Cerion pressed a kiss on the side of her head.

They spent most of the day preparing for Christmas, which involved a grand shopping spree to stock up the kitchen, decorate the house with lights, cut up a proper Christmas tree and turn it into a place to hold many colourful baubles with figurines of little angels. There was also a lot of cleaning up to do, as well as the house had gone unused, with Jane spending almost all her time in Culver. While they ate lunch from a restaurant while shopping, dinner was prepared by Jane's own hands. His attempts to help in the kitchen were thwarted, and he was assigned the boring dish-cleaning duty for his troubles.

When the table was set, Cerion had nothing to complain about as he ate the most hearty steak with mashed potatoes and a side of crispy broccoli. Then there was his favourite Eggnog with a pint of alcohol to spice things up.

"It's so delicious." Cerion said, chewing down a slice of steak, followed by enjoying some broccoli.

"Thanks. I've been taking cooking lessons from the net after I got tired of takeouts." said Jane.

"You never told me this," Cerion said in surprise.

"Only because I didn't want you to stop cooking me whenever you visited." Jane chuckled, looking at the affronted look on his face.

"Speaking of which, weren't you supposed to be busy with that expo next month?" Jane asked.

"I don't need to be fussing over all the details. Like most leaders, I delegate. That's what a good leader does." Cerion put on a pompous air that cajoled a giggle out of Jane.

"You mean you dumped all the work on some poor guy's head who was supposed to enjoy Christmas." said Jane, with a raised eyebrow.

"Meh. They'll get over it when they get the paycheck and spend all of it in a nightclub overnight." Cerion shrugged.

"Surely, you're joking." Jane scoffed.

"I call it Californication. Spend too much time in one of the big three; you become bluer than the Circassian Sea." Cerion joked.

"Do I need to worry about you undergoing this Californication?" Jane asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Hello! Outer space alien here." Cerion waved and pointed to himself. "No one is turning me red or blue."

"If I can make you wear a Christmas cap, anything is possible." Jane said confidently, to which he had no comeback.

"I see. Then let me show you what I'm capable of, Earthling." Cerion raised his fork in a threatening manner.

****** Lemon Scene (Available in discord channel for patrons) ******

Cerion stared at the headstone that carried the name Jacob Foster. It was right next to the headstone of Jane's mother, Christine Foster. He set a bouquet of flowers on each grave while Jane knelt before

the graves of her parent with her eyes closed in prayer. He liked the peaceful ambience of the Lutheran church in Fishersville. The cemetery was surrounded by a meadow with an occasional willow tree in between, giving some ample shade. It was a peaceful day with less snow than usual in Virginia in December. He was hardly complaining as the roads were less slippery, and there was no cyclone blowing all the joy of Christmas out of the window, which was a godsend in a place like Virginia.

He was brought out of his inane musings when Jane climbed to her feet while rubbing the corners of her eyes.

“Hey.” Cerion wrapped his arm around Jane’s shoulder.

“I’m okay.” Jane muttered, shooting hesitant looks at the church across from the cemetery.

“You want to go to the church?” Cerion asked softly.

“My mum used to bring me here when I was a child.” said Jane.

“Let’s pay the church a visit then.” said Cerion, leading Jane towards the beautifully decorated church.

Ever since he learned of his ‘ascension’ to the status of an angel from the Ancient One, he had become less antagonistic towards ‘big G’. While he was far from a regular Sunday church visitor, he had attended some gatherings in several churches. He was not the only one hedging their bets on the ‘big G’ at the moment. Most people in the US were far more churchy than usual after the events of last year. For now, heaven and hell were far too close for humanity that they became pious overnight. Even staunch agnostics like Jane found comfort in faith after the tragedy that befell her family. So, he wouldn’t be surprised if the families in states like Nevada turned hardcore believers overnight. It was a bad year for atheists in the western hemisphere.

After a silent prayer session, Cerion led Jane towards his Chevrolet Camaro, but finding two familiar faces near the parking space near his car made him blink in surprise.

“Do you know them?” Jane whispered, noticing his reaction.

“Yeah,” Cerion muttered, staring at the two Eternals near his red Camaro. “Wonder what Gilgamesh and Thena want?”