

DARK ORBIT

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FADE IN:

EXT. LOW EARTH ORBIT - NIGHT

Silence. Stars. Then: a glint.

TIANLONG, a sleek Chinese communications satellite, drifts silently above Earth--its solar arrays unfolding like wings.

A smaller module--dark, cylindrical--approaches and docks.

Tiny thrusters puff. A mechanical clamp locks.

Inside the module: metallic cylinders, rows of them. Long. Dense. Too smooth to be innocent.

PUSH IN: a warning label in Mandarin and English.

> "KINETIC MASS PAYLOAD--ORBITAL USE ONLY."

The satellite stabilizes.

TILT downward and descend--slowly, deliberately--toward Earth. Clouds form. Atmosphere thickens. Heat shimmer.

EXT. TSMC MEGAFAB - HINSHU SCIENCE PARK - CONTINUOUS

A vast white complex unfolds like origami in the sunlight--rows of seamless fabrication modules connected by glass walkways.

SUPER: Taiwan

Every rooftop is white. Every surface gleams. This is the most advanced machine ever built by humans.

INT. TSMC - DAY

Hundreds of workers file into the industrial complex. They pass a group of investors--mostly Western, mid-60s, suits, lanyards--walking in formation behind a TSMC liaison.

CORPORATE LIAISON

Each of these fabs costs over twenty billion dollars to build. This one? Only operational for nine months--already at full capacity.

He leads them over to a computer screen beside the elevator bank, taps.

CORPORATE LIAISON (CONT'D)

We're the only facility on Earth
currently fabricating at 2
nanometers.

On the screen: a chip the size of a fingernail, etched with a
labyrinth of copper and silicon--a city for electrons.

CORPORATE LIAISON (CONT'D)

That's so small that each chip
contains up to 80 *miles* of wiring
connecting 57 *billion* transistors.

EXT. STANFORD UNIVERSITY CAMPUS, USA - SAME

Red-roofed buildings sprawl across rolling green. Palm-lined
walkways cut geometric paths between quiet academic quads.

CORPORATE LIAISON (V.O.) (PRELAP)

Our clients? Everyone.

SUPER: STANFORD UNIVERSITY

INT. STANFORD POSTDOC HOUSING - MAYA'S UNIT - SAME

On the counter: a coffee-ringed journal article draft, half-marked up in red.

At the top of the page, the title in bold: **Updated Modeling
of Epistemic Equality in the Governance of Space-Based
Deterrence.**

CORPORATE LIAISON (V.O.)

Our chips are in everything. Coffee
machines...

A Nespresso hisses. Steam curls.

MAYA RHEE (28, graduated school at 14, college at 17, PhD at
21) pops in a pod like she's loading a chamber.

CORPORATE LIAISON (V.O.)

Medical devices...

She slips in a discreet hearing aid, the movement practiced
and unthinking.

CORPORATE LIAISON (V.O.)

GPS systems...

Picks up her phone--no texts, just a calendar ping:
> "Stanford Space Governance Briefing--9:00 AM / Lab 3C"

Opens Uber. Sips. Watches the driver crawl across the map.

INT. TSMC ELEVATOR - MOMENTS LATER

The group steps in. Already inside: ALEX CHEN (35). Buzzcut. Flannel shirt. Red Sox cap in one hand. Badge: CYBER SECURITY.

He gives a nod. Doesn't smile. Doesn't speak.

INVESTOR #1
Twenty billion in one building.
Doesn't that make your board
nervous?

CORPORATE LIAISON
We don't think in terms of risk. We
think in terms of irreplaceability.

INVESTOR #2
What about cybersecurity? If
someone breaks in--digitally or
otherwise?

The liaison opens his mouth, but--

CHEN
Actually--
(beat)
Nobody stops every breach. That's a
myth. AI spots patterns, but it's
not omniscient.
(beat)
You don't stop threats at the edge
anymore. You track what they do
once they're inside.
(beat)
We look for pivot behavior. Not the
knock at the door--just the moment
the burglar reaches for the safe.

DING. The elevator doors open.

CHEN (CONT'D)
This is me.

He steps out. Gone in a blink.

The liaison exhales. Forces a smile.

CORPORATE LIAISON
Shall we?

INT. TSMC - CYBER INFRASTRUCTURE OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Chen enters. The room hums with blue server light--calm, clinical, alive. On his desk: a mini American flag.

On the wall behind him: a black carbon-fiber baseball bat labeled FIREWALL in clean block font--half joke, half philosophy.

Opens his terminal. A fresh alert pings--low priority.

Chen reads it, frowns slightly: GPS packet anomaly. He flags it, types a note.

CHEN
(under his breath)
Let's not be stupid.

He moves on. The ping keeps blinking.

INT. STANFORD - AUDITORIUM, SPACE LAW PANEL - MORNING

A modest lecture hall. Slides projected: orbital trajectories, treaty excerpts, a map showing nuclear strike times from orbit.

At the lectern: DR. HENRY KAPLAN (60s), strategic theorist, persuasive and clear-eyed. Picture on screen of the young Hiroshima bombers standing next to a plane.

DR. KAPLAN
In 1945, the Enola Gay took six hours to fly 1,500 miles to Hiroshima.

He clicks--an image of a Cold War missile arc appears.

DR. KAPLAN (CONT'D)
Then came ICBMs. Intercontinental ballistic missiles shrank that window to thirty minutes. Just long enough--for identification, classification, analysis, and a rapid counter-response.

He advances the slide: a red line between Beijing and Taipei.

DR. KAPLAN (CONT'D)
The Cuban Missile Crisis mattered because proximity changed everything. A warhead in Cuba meant five minutes from launch to impact.
(MORE)

DR. KAPLAN (CONT'D)
Not long enough for certainty. Not
long enough for diplomacy.

He clicks again. A slide shows a satellite in low Earth orbit.

DR. KAPLAN (CONT'D)
An orbital strike platform? That
drops response time to seven
minutes--anywhere on Earth.
(beat)
Deterrence depends on second-strike
capability. If you can't respond,
you can't deter. That's why the
Outer Space Treaty prohibits
weapons in space.

A hand goes up--calm, confident.

MAYA (O.S.)
Actually, that's not what it says.

Heads turn. Maya steps into the aisle.

MODERATOR
Go ahead.

MAYA
Article IV prohibits "nuclear
weapons and other weapons of mass
destruction." That's it. You can't
orbit the bomb. But you can orbit a
satellite that becomes one--at the
right moment, under the right
instructions, with the right
kinetic configuration.

Some murmurs ripple through the audience.

DR. KAPLAN
Fair point.

EXT. ORBIT - TIANLONG - SAME

Tianlong drifts against the starfield. A modular panel unfolds.

DR. KAPLAN (PRELAP)
Conventional systems are
strategically risky, sure. But
unlike nuclear weapons, they're not
existential.

Its body tilts, rotating slightly on a controlled axis--reorienting its vector toward Earth.

Silent. Subtle. Intentional.

BACK AT STANFORD

MAYA

That's the myth.

(beat)

Depends what you drop. A tungsten rod from low Earth orbit hits like a small nuke--no warhead, no launch warning, just kinetic impact.

Her tone shifts slightly--not performative. Personal.

MAYA (CONT'D)

Imagine you're on your way to work. No sirens. No blip on a radar. Just a column of fire where two city blocks used to be.

(beat)

I've run the math. You wouldn't even know what hit you until the cloud was already rising.

(beat)

The Outer Space Treaty says no weapons of mass destruction in space. A little light devastation is still on the menu, though.

The room stills.

Kaplan studies her. Nods, slowly.

DR. KAPLAN

It's a good point... and I thought I was going to be the Cassandra in this room.

MAYA

I'd love to be wrong. But the physics aren't cooperating.

He returns to his notes. Maya slides quietly into a seat beside her academic mentor:

DR. JAMES CARROLL (60s), authoritative, composed--one of those men who's been the smartest person in every room he's ever entered. In 1998, that room happened to be Stockholm. Full of Nobel Laureates.

CARROLL

You're not gonna win every room by
out-nerding the generals.

She turns. Carroll approaches, genial but measured.

MAYA

I'm not trying to win.

She's already got her phone open clicks on a notification:

INSERT

A globe of green satellites, but one flashes red, with data:

- > Tianlong--Course Correction Logged
- > Secondary Burn Detected--0.8 m/s
- > Signal Disruption: L1-L6 GPS bands--Active

END INSERT

MAYA (CONT'D)

I'm trying to get ahead of the part
where we say, "no one saw this
coming."

Carroll studies her. His smile fades just a hair.

CARROLL

You can't carry it all, Maya.

MAYA

I'm not.
(beat)
Just this part.

She flashes the phone to Carroll.

MAYA (CONT'D)

You seen this?

Red spikes begin rising from a pinpoint above Taiwan.
Interference waveforms pulse--spreading across the Pacific
like ripples.

MAYA (CONT'D)

That's not drift. That's
deliberate.

CARROLL

Log it--in case we have to escalate
this to Langley.

INT. TSMC - CYBER INFRASTRUCTURE OFFICE - SAME

Alex Chen flips through telemetry windows. His NASA mug steams quietly beside him.

Another analyst, WEI-TING LIN, young and podgy, irreverent, with a faint scar near his temple, leans in, grinning. There's a hacker's glint in his eye--the kind that comes from a checkered résumé.

A flash drive hangs from his lanyard like a trophy.

WEI-TING LIN
(in Mandarin)
You still won't speak Mandarin?

CHEN
(in Chinese)
You jerk.
(in English)
Don't make me.

WEI-TING LIN
You're from Taiwan. Don't you have
any cultural pride?

CHEN
My parents are from Taiwan. I'm
American. I speak the language that
matters!

WEI-TING LIN
English?

CHEN
C++.

Alert ping.

> GPS DRIFT THRESHOLD EXCEEDED--TIER 3

Chen frowns. Swipes up flight maps. Coordinates blink.

CHEN (CONT'D)
Shit. This could throw off shipping
lanes. Flights, container
routing...

Lin leans over, already half-smiling.

WEI-TING LIN

Don't worry. If the world burns,
we'll just jailbreak a weather
satellite and ride it out from
orbit.

Chen gives him a side-eye. Lin grins wider. He's only half joking.

EXT. SOUTH CHINA SEA - EARLY MORNING

A cargo ship glides silently through fog. Steel-gray water. Containers stacked five-high. Only the hum of turbines and the sea.

INT. BRIDGE - SAME

The crew watches monitors. GPS displays. Navigation overlay. Smooth course.

One crewman frowns--points to a jitter on the map.

CREW #1
(in Mandarin)
Did our position just jump?

CREW #2
No--map refresh. Keep heading 080.

The ship icon flickers again--off by half a kilometer. Then again--further.

EXT. SHIP - SAME

The bow begins to list left--barely perceptible at first.

BRIDGE

CREW #1
(in Mandarin)
Are you shifting course?

HELMAN
No--we're holding!

CREW #1
Then why are we turning?

The captain rushes in. An alarm chirps. GPS warning: Signal Integrity Lost.

CAPTAIN
Override it!

HELMSMAN
It's not us--it's the signal!

The ship banks violently in fog. A metal container snaps its latch--crashes sideways into the next.

Screeching metal; Chain reaction.

BELOW DECK

A crewman lurches. Slams into bulkhead.

Steam jets from a fractured line--scalding heat fogs the space.

Another crewman screams. Someone's on the floor--not moving.

HULL

The ship grinds sideways across reef rock. The sound is unnatural. Final.

Metal tears open like foil.

CARGO BAY

Cold seawater rushes in. Containers break their restraints--tumble and crash into the flooding hold.

EXT. OCEAN - WIDE SHOT

Containers spill into the dark water, one by one--enormous dice cast by invisible hands.

INSERT - NEWS FOOTAGE

Grainy drone shot: a cargo ship, half-submerged off the coast of Taiwan. Containers hang loose. Some washed ashore--one cracked open, spilling bundles of children's toys.

Footage cuts to a body, face obscured, carried in by surf surrounded incongruously by colorful plastic toys.

NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.)

The cargo vessel Hai Yun 6 ran aground early this morning, triggering questions about Taiwan's maritime security--and its role in the escalating standoff with Beijing.

Quick cut:

- Map overlay: **Taiwan Strait / GPS anomaly zone**
- B-roll of TSMC fab
- Election posters fluttering in Taipei

NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.)

With over 60% of the world's semiconductors produced in Taiwan, the upcoming election and control of this island isn't just political--it's strategic.

END INSERT

INT. PENTAGON - HALLWAY - DAY

GENERAL ELAINE BROOKS (50s), crisp, unsparing--the kind of calm that comes from seeing pressure as a privilege--walks briskly, tablet in hand.

SUPER: The Pentagon

She stops. Watches the crash footage play silently.

STAFFER (O.S.)

The Council's ready for you.

