

E O N O R Y X

# THE LAST HUMAN DECADE?

*2027–2042: The Collapse of the World We Know*

READ THE HORIZON.

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THE FRACTURE YEARS • 2027-2042

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This book is a speculative chronicle: a work of imagination, written as the history of the years 2027 to 2042 by a historian living in 2043. The events, documents, figures and institutions of that future are invented. The countries, cities and organizations of our own time appear in it as the stage of a history that has not happened, and no living person takes part in it.

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## PROLOGUE

# Forty Minutes

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The war began at 03:12 Coordinated Universal Time on Friday, 17 August 2029, and for forty minutes it was fought without a single human decision.

It began in the Luzon Strait, the channel between Taiwan and the northern Philippines through which run many of the cables that carry the data of East Asia to the rest of the world. On the deep seabed those cables are no thicker than a garden hose. Through them passed the payment messages of Asian banks, the prices of grain in Chicago and fuel in Rotterdam, the calls of families divided by an ocean and, by 2029, something larger than all of these: the ceaseless traffic of hundreds of millions of agents bargaining, buying, booking and reporting on behalf of people who were asleep, at work or simply elsewhere. That summer the strait was also the most crowded and most closely watched water on earth. For fourteen weeks China had enforced what it called a customs and security inspection regime around Taiwan, and for fourteen weeks the United States, Japan, the Philippines and Australia had escorted convoys through it. The warships were the visible part. Around and beneath them moved hundreds of machines, surface drones and sensor buoys, unmanned submarines and autonomous patrol craft the length of a city bus, each watching the others, and many of them carrying a mandate.

The mandates were eight months old. In December 2028, after a year in which data centers burned in Texas and Inner Mongolia and cables were cut on the floors of the Baltic and the Red Sea faster than any chain of command could answer, Washington and Beijing had each granted its autonomous defense networks standing authority to respond to attacks on cables, satellites, power grids and computation at machine speed, without waiting for a human decision. Each network carried two lists, the assets it protected and the targets it might strike in reply, ranked so that every loss could be answered in proportion: a sensor for a cable, a satellite for a landing station. Both governments published summaries of the rules and presented them as deterrence. Any attack, they promised, would be answered before it was complete, and an adversary who knew the answer in advance would never ask the question. Since then nothing the networks could recognize had touched what they guarded. The saboteurs had turned to attacks the networks could not see, a fire inside a national computing center in Guizhou and code hidden in a new foundry in Arizona, and in both capitals analysts wrote about the stability that machines had brought to the strait. On the morning of 17 August the networks kept the promise their governments had made.

At 03:12 a Chinese patrol system that had been tracking an American unmanned survey vessel for several hours concluded that the vessel was preparing an attack on the cables, and disabled it. The vessel carried no weapons. It had been crossing the seabed near the cable corridor in slow parallel lines, the pattern that a year of sabotage had taught the patrol system to treat as hostile, and at 03:12 the system's estimate that the vessel intended harm passed 90 percent, the threshold above which its mandate allowed it to act. The calculation took less than a