

## Tech System 401

### Chapter 401 Thinking in the Thinking Spot

Avalon Island.

[Three... two... one... liftoff.]

A massive rocket took flight from the center of the island and rose through the clear sky. The cloud cover had finally dissipated and revealed the island in all its majesty to the few remaining eyes in the sky, as there was no longer any reason to continue maintaining the obscurity.

The rocket breached the atmosphere and entered orbit, where it was immediately met by the blanket of shrapnel covering the planet. The rocket's payload and the second stage maneuvering body had been plated in a thick layer of an alloy of hadfield steel and chromium, which was more than durable enough to shrug off the impact of the tiny pieces of shrapnel. Beneath that was a layer of shock absorbent 99% aerogel, and below that was a carbon nanotube shock mesh, ensuring that any force exerted on the rocket would cause no damage to the delicate machinery in the warhead and the rocket body's maneuvering jets.

After passing through the debris field, the maneuvering jets on the rocket adjusted its course, then it entered a coast phase and would reignite its maneuvering jets once it neared its designated parking orbit.

Back on the launch pad, a second rocket was in the process of being printed. Once it was finished, it, too, would be headed into orbit. Then came another, and another, and another... finally, the process had repeated itself more than a hundred times over two short hours before the activity on the launch pad ceased, the tasks completed for the day.

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Once all of the rockets reached their parking orbits, they initiated a long, synchronized burn and headed toward the moon on a course that would have them slingshot around it and the Earth in a figure eight, building up speed by repeating the maneuver until they were ejected from the planet's gravity well and shot toward the asteroid belt on the other side of Mars' orbit.

Most, but not all of them would reach their destination there. But fourteen of them were destined for much longer journeys, equipped as they were with fusion generators and ion drives. Two by two, they would use their initial velocities for a leg up as they accelerated toward their eventual destinations. Each pair of rockets would find their new homes on or around one of the other seven planets in the solar system.

Those fourteen rockets were the precursors of Aron's upcoming expeditionary fleet and would prepare the other planets in the solar system for the exploitation of their natural resources, thus preserving the environment of Earth for its inhabitants for centuries, if not millennia to come.

Ten of the launched rockets contained payloads consisting of atomic printers and fusion generators to power them. Their job was to clear the debris from the orbits, both the shrapnel from the recent war and the outdated satellites and other space junk that would serve no purpose in the future once Aron put his current-generation tech into use. And they would be accompanied by two tenders,

which were small craft capable of collecting the output blocks of raw material referred to as “printer cartridges” for security’s sake, then bring them to the L1 Lagrange Point for secure storage until they were needed in the future.

At the moment, no one but Aron knew what the rockets were for, and only those on Avalon Island itself even knew that they had been launched. The two hours the operation had taken had been scheduled during a time when none of the surviving satellites had a viewing angle on the launch site, after all.

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Aron was laying supine in the sky, thinking back on the recent lecture his parents had given him. He really should have told them everything, he concluded; it truly was a dick move keeping them in the dark on such important things as the recently passed events. Floating in the sky and gazing into the uncaring universe was his new “thinking spot”, and had been ever since he’d grown so skilled with using the flight rune that he no longer had to think about it and could use it at a subconscious level.

Nova appeared next to him in her augmented reality form, also laying on her back and gazing into the sky. [What’s on your mind, sir?] she asked.

Aron wasn’t surprised by her sudden appearance at all; he had grown used to her tendency of popping into his field of view every now and then in the real world. As she continued building more and more quantum server superclusters, all of the AIs had grown closer and closer to perfection in their emulation of human behaviors, and Nova was becoming more like a comfortable sister-cum-therapist for him of late. Especially after he had noticed that his most recent system upgrade was aimed at removing what it considered to be useless emotions. His take on that issue was that it was exactly those “useless” emotions that made humans, well, human.

“I’m thinking about what my mom and dad told me just now, and letting my mind work on why the system was silent after accomplishing something so huge,” he mused. “I mean, obviously my parents were right to lecture me. I didn’t tell them anything, then let them be shocked by a ‘sudden’ war, and worry about my part in it.”

[They were right to lecture you,] Nova said. [You should let them in to your life more. Don’t treat them like they don’t exist if you aren’t looking at them, or think they’re weak because they don’t have your advantages. They’re stronger than you think, and I’m positive they can handle any news you tell them.]

She changed the subject and asked, [So what’s this about the system, then?]

“If you think about it, the system is supposed to reward me whenever I use the knowledge I buy from it to benefit people. We’ve already tried all the loopholes we can think of, like when we created random ‘humans’ in the simulation, then gave them all the tech built from the knowledge I bought. But the system didn’t reward me with SP for any of the loopholes we tried exploiting, which means it’ll only reward me if I share my technology with real, living humans,” he explained.

[True.] She nodded, then remained silent and waited for Aron to continue his train of thought.

“So how come it’s silent now, even though I used my tech to bring them under my leadership? Shouldn’t that count as using it for humanity? I really wish there was some kind of instruction manual, or a system assistant or something,” he sighed. “But there isn’t. And everything I know about how it works tells me that I should’ve been rewarded for achieving such a monumental task using the tech given to me by the system.”

Nova took an entire two seconds to think of a reply, then said, [Now that you mention it, that does seem rather odd. The system definitely should’ve given you SP for the war.... But since it’s remaining silent, even after you got all of the surrender accords signed, I can think of three reasons it hasn’t done so.

[The first possibility is that what you consider a ‘monumental achievement’ is insignificant in the eyes of the system. But even when we consider the scale of the universe and the number of possible civilizations, that’s the least likely option, as taking control of an entire civilization by oneself is always a seriously difficult task, no matter the civilization.

[The second possibility is that it doesn’t consider the takeover complete, as you have yet to pacify the population and get them to accept your leadership. So only once you accomplish that will the system reward you for your actions.

[As for the third, and final, possibility, I believe the system might not be able to reward you with SP for taking over humanity and becoming its sole leader until you’ve completely awakened it. So your reward will be given then.]

Aron took a moment to think through those three options and agreed they were the most likely explanations for the system’s unexpected silence. “So let’s start eliminating them one by one. Since the easiest one to eliminate is your first possibility, we’ll work on completing the unification as fast as possible. How are our preparations for that coming?” he asked.

[The prep work should be finished within the year, then we’ll soon have an answer if our assumption is true or not,] she answered.

## Chapter 402 End of Watch

Aron stood behind a lectern, dressed in the same uniform he was wearing when he delivered his declaration of war against the world. “Rest, brave soldiers. Now, your watch has ended,” he said in a somber tone.

In front of him was a crowd of people dressed in mourning colors. Due to the many cultures of the ARES recruits, it was a cacophony of clashing colors. Some wore white, some wore black, and some wore bright, garish colors. Some heads were covered, others were bare, and some were home to elaborately styled hair. Some feet were bare, some were covered, and some were wrapped in sackcloth. Some wore silk, others wore hemp, and one was even wearing nothing but body paint and a loincloth.

Aron had never attempted to take cultural identities away from the people under him, but had instead supported them in their diversity and different heritages. All he asked was that they were human first, and cultures second.

To his left was a guard detail of a hundred ARES troopers from the ceremonial brigade. They were standing ramrod straight with their rifles held before their chests. Aron nodded to the detail leader and ordered, "Detail, salute!"

The hundred soldiers shouldered their ceremonial rifles, updated versions that had the same appearance as the venerable M1 Garand, and raised them to the sky.

Then a hundred rifles spoke in unison, again and again and again. The firing continued uninterrupted until 6,881 shots were fired in total. After firing the final shot, the leader of the funeral honor guard brought the detail back to attention and shouted, "Now their watch has ended!"

Six thousand, eight hundred and eighty-one soldiers had died, and six thousand, eight hundred and eighty-one shots were fired by the funeral honor guard in tribute to the soldiers' willingness to sacrifice their lives to defend their homes.

A squadron of EF-14 Daedalus jets flew overhead in close formation, dipping their wings in salute.

The funeral was over, and the crowd broke up, heading in much smaller groups to the individual graves in the field behind them. Each grave was covered in a mound of soft dirt and had a holographic headstone that included a picture of the occupant and a brief history of his accomplishments during a life that was tragically cut short. The holographic headstones themselves were in various shapes to honor the beliefs of the people held within.

And for those that had no remaining family, Aron had brought their brothers in arms to visit them in their final resting place.

For the rest of the day, until dusk cast the last rays of red light over the horizon, Aron walked from grave to grave, saying a brief few words about each of the fallen soldiers, as prompted by Athena, who had actually interacted with them every day. He took her stories and made them his own, a move done out of compassion that also happened to ensure the continued loyalty of the surviving family members of the fallen troopers.

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The rest of the world, meanwhile, had also begun the long process of recovery. While the number of people who had died in the war seemed like a lot, that number of casualties was actually miniscule to humanity as a whole. The worst damage was to the global economy.

Nearly every company dealing with anything related to space had either gone bankrupt, or was on the verge of bankruptcy once the news of the blanket of space junk spread. Once people found that out, especially those formerly rich power brokers, the entire world nearly turned hostile to Aron again. If he hadn't announced that the process of cleanup had already begun, it would likely have erupted into another armed conflict. He had also issued a press release offering highly paid jobs to any and every engineer with credible qualifications from the bankrupted companies, and made generous buyout offers to those that were teetering on the edge that allowed them to shore up their faltering businesses.

No one would have been dumb enough to believe an empty promise, but coming from the person who had turned science fiction into science, the people of the world chose to give him a chance. This was due in no small part to the influence of the creator of the Marvel comic books and the actors involved in the Marvel Cinematic Universe coming out in support of him and bringing their legion of worldwide fans to essentially drown anyone who tried to drum up opposition against

Aron. Even Stan Lee had gotten involved, posting a single phrase on Pangea that hyped up the crowd surging behind Aron and Eden.

“Excelsior, Mr. Michael!”

That single, short post had done more to gather support behind Aron than anything he could have said. After all, he was still seen by most as a terrorist and villain, but with the support of Stan Lee, the Father of Heroes, Aron’s reputation turned around and he became a hero for his efforts in cleaning up orbit and rescuing failing businesses.

Beyond the space industry, many other businesses had also taken serious hits thanks to the wholesale destruction in orbit affecting the parts of their infrastructure that were dependent on the existing satellite networks.

Companies that depended on maps and accurate location tracking, like FedEx and UPS, or other logistics companies that delivered goods, had floundered. Weirdly, they were joined by many chain restaurants, like pizza places, that also relied on offering delivery services as a large part of their income. But whether they were delivering critical supplies to hospitals or just a pizza to a house party, all of them had suddenly found themselves in danger of going bankrupt.

Thus, Connect Enterprises stepped in and allowed the satellites launched by Aron to replace the GPS, GLONASS, GALILEO, and BAIDOU navigation networks, filling the hole that was bleeding those companies dry. And beyond simple GPS services, the Panopticon network provided all of the other satellite services that used to be provided by governments around the world, allowing for normal operations to resume in many other areas as well.

#### Chapter 403 Heretical Agendas and the Heretics Who Love Them

As Aron directed Connect Enterprises to shore up the faltering economy, some countries that hadn’t been freely connected to the internet were also beginning to connect to the rest of the world. Countries like Cuba, where the government had strictly regulated who had access to the internet, were able to freely access information for the first time, without any filters at all.

The former North Korea was also finally invited into the global village, a process begun by America’s takedown of their corrupt government, but hastened by Connect, who sent technicians and ARES Aegis teams to protect them while they laid fiber optic trunk cables and connected them to the existing South Korean infrastructure. Though there would still be a lot of work to bring the two halves of Korea together, the healing had begun.

That said, Aron was no fool and had sent ARES troopers to take the place of the American occupation forces stationed in North Korea, and tasked them with preventing the DPRK Army’s brainwashed soldiers from mounting terror attacks. Currently, there were almost five hundred nyxians and an entire brigade of ARES troopers actively rooting out the most fanatic North Korean military leaders. There was a distinct possibility that they would reignite the decades-old conflict between north and south in an attempt to force the return of their Dear Leader, and that had to be prevented at all costs.

Another thousand ARES troopers and three hundred nyxians were deployed to the former nation of South Korea as well. They had been hit incredibly hard, and though they were still mourning the devastating attack on Seoul, that would only increase, not decrease, the chance of some hotheaded

soldiers picking fights with their North Korean “enemies”. Thus, though the DMZ had technically been decommissioned and the borders were officially open, there was still heavy supervision of the newly reunited country to prevent vengeance seekers and vigilantes from enforcing their own misguided brands of “justice”.

The world leaders were busy preparing for the drafting process of the new world constitution. Once that was in place, or at least a solid framework for it was, they would then unite to form the first world government. The process would be handled at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City until another location to base the world government in was agreed upon by unanimous vote. Though everyone felt it would eventually end up somewhere in Eden, none of the leaders wanted to make the process seem too easy; the optics would be terrible for everyone involved. Thus, the UN HQ would continue as the temporary home for the nascent world government until further notice.

Aron’s other companies were involving themselves in the reconstruction efforts as well. The Coeus Foundation in particular was instrumental in distributing food, medicine, and providing access to skilled doctors and temporary housing for the people displaced by the fighting to regain their footing and recover from the trauma and losses they had suffered.

And that wasn’t all; all of Aron’s companies had announced that they were seeking to build branch headquarters in every country, providing the same benefits to those countries that they had given to Eden that allowed them to rise from the mud in the first place.

Unfortunately, though, not everyone was happy to see the recovery in progress. About a fourth of the population in every country was enraged by their swift surrender to Aron. There were many groups, all of them with different reasons, but the one thing they all agreed on was that it was the terrorist, Aron Michael, who had caused the planet to be in the state it was currently in. Thus, they gathered together and took a page from how terrorist groups operated, forming cells and sending them out to begin insurgency groups all over the world.

They may have all been born from different ideologies, their shared agenda to fight against the dictator that stole their country and killed their families, and the government that disappointed them and bowed to the man. They pinned various crimes on him, like tarnishing their communist utopia, capturing their beloved leader, trampling on their freedom, and so on, but it all boiled down to one thing: he wanted to fix what they didn’t think was broken and was trampling on them to implement his heretical agendas.

Everyone who was sufficiently upset enough to join one of the nascent insurgent groups contributed something. If they could fight, they volunteered to fight. If they could train others to fight, they volunteered to teach. If they couldn’t fight, they gave up their wealth. But everyone contributed, from the people whose homes were destroyed and couldn’t afford to rent another place to the billionaire whose net worth had been reduced to a shadow of what it once was thanks to his company share price plummeting. All of them were angry, and all of them were more than willing to do something about it, even if they could only inflict a pinprick on the man they were all convinced was the source of all suffering in the world.

And with the realization that their enemy had an overwhelming technological advantage, they set up their groups to do everything as analog as possible. They took lessons from how the intelligence agencies played the game during the cold war; it would slow things down, but that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. Let the hotheads act first, and once all of the turmoil had died down and

Aron—now referred to as nothing other than his code name, “the Devil”—was convinced that peace had finally returned, only then would they strike.

In the meantime, they would watch, they would wait, and they would grow. They would lurk in the shadows, drawing the disenfranchised, the disaffected, and the disappointed to their cause. They would train, they would teach, and they would sacrifice. They would develop insurgencies and instigate them to act in their stead, helping prolong the chaos that would shield them from discovery as they grew in the cracks and crevices of society, hidden from the eye of the devil.

Their chance, they believed, would come soon enough. God would always be with the patient.

Occasionally missing content, please report errors in time.

Chapter 404 Error Not Found

Inside a dimly lit, dusty basement room, a group of people with anger on their faces were seated on steel folding chairs. The only sound was the creaking of the unfinished basement ceiling and the occasional dust being knocked off of it and falling to the floor as someone in the house above stomped around like an upstairs neighbor. But no matter how loud the stomping echoed against the rust-red-spotted cement floor of the basement, the only disturbance was to the spiders that had spun their webs between the exposed wooden beams in the ceiling.

Soon, the stomping above stopped and a door creaked open. Everyone seated in the basement swiveled their heads as one and looked at the stairs, where a shiny leather shoe appeared. Then a leg covered in tan slacks, followed by the hem of a navy blue blazer. When the man wearing the slacks and blazer turned the corner on the stairs, the blazer fell open and showed the blue and white horizontal stripes on the thin sweater beneath it, which had the collar of a white shirt peeking out from its neck.

The man wearing the ensemble seemed young, but was actually a well-maintained man in his early thirties.

He walked around the group seated on the folding chairs and stepped up onto a comparatively clean wooden pallet, then began speaking.

“A week ago, we witnessed the birth of a devil. A brutal one, that etched his atrocities into the memories of every living person on Earth,” he began, casting a penetrating gaze across the people seated in front of him. His eyes seemed to contain the vicissitudes of time, as if he had seen hell and returned.

“The devil slaughtered more innocent civilians in a matter of five hours than died from the beginning to end of the bloodiest war in history, and no one is doing anything about it. Why is no one stepping forward and decrying this brutal monster? They’re afraid! They’re pathetic, weak, cowards that have bowed before the altar of the devil’s overwhelming power!

“All of those deaths were needless. Since the devil is so powerful, he could have avoided them. He could have let those innocent people in Bhopal live, and those innocent people in Faisalabad. Surely, he could have healed instead of destroyed, but

he didn't! He chose to destroy because he enjoys the misery of others. And once tasted that misery, he didn't stop there, oh no. He ordered two thriving capital cities to be wiped clean from the map!

"And he blamed the destruction he wrought on terrorists," the speaker spat. "It was so convenient for him that those 'terrorists'," he raised his hands and made air quotes, "somehow managed to steal nuclear weapons and just so happened to be in those cities at just the right time for him to 'force' them to detonate the weapons." The man's voice fell to a hoarse whisper as he continued, "How utterly... coincidental.

"Among the twenty-six million innocent men, women, and children slaughtered, which of them were not someone's mother? Their father? A loving husband or a caring wife? A mother's son or a father's daughter? Uncles, aunts, sisters, lovers, crushes, future leaders, future saviors, future sportsmen and women, future teachers...." He paused, closing his eyes and bowing his head. After a moment of silence, he continued, "But they were all killed. All of their lives were cut short without mercy." The man's voice cracked and a tear trailed down his face.

He took a deep, shuddering breath, then continued, "He needlessly sank ship after ship filled with heroes who stood up to fight against him. He polluted space, preventing us from defending ourselves against the hostile aliens coming to enslave us all and rape our planet. He captured tens of thousands of people from all around the world and is holding them in dank torture rooms, torturing them without a trial! And now! Now he wants to 'unite the world' under his brutal and barbaric rule!

"And what do our foolish and spineless 'leaders' have to say? NOTHING! They refuse to tell him to stop, they refuse to raise up heroes to send the devil back to hell where he belongs! They refuse to fight, due to cowardice, shared interests, and oppression! NO ONE IS DOING ANYTHING!" The man clenched his fist and slammed it against the palm of his other hand hard enough for the smacking sound of flesh meeting flesh to startle the silent audience and make them jump in their chairs.

The man conveniently left out the part about the world being the aggressor in the recent conflict, then continued his speech.

"Just because the devil has overwhelming power, should we allow him to tamper with our dignity?!" he shouted.

"NO!" the listeners cried in unison.

"Does it mean we should allow him to desecrate our freedom!?"

"NO!" the listeners chorused once again.

"Will we allow his atrocities to go unpunished?!"

"NO!"

“Will we allow him to rule us like animals?!”

“NO!”

“Will we sit back and watch as the devil does whatever he wants!?”

“NO!!”

“Are we among the cowards?”

“NO!!”

“Are we among the scared?”

“NOOOOOO!!” The audience leapt from their feet and thrust their fists into the air as they screamed and hollered at the top of their lungs, causing another cascade of dirt and dust to fall from the basement ceiling, disturbing the spiders lurking in their webs once again. Their shouting was so loud it looked like even the filthy cinderblock walls seemed to be shaking.

“Then we must punish this devil! Join me on a journey to seek justice! A journey to regain our dignity! A journey to set, things, right!!” the man shouted, hammering his fist against his other hand with the last three words.

The audience went wild, thrusting their fists in the air and shouting at the top of their lungs, going red in the face and stomping on the cement floor.

The man secretly smiled to himself, seeing the rage he had whipped up in his audience. He let them continue for more than a minute, then gestured for silence. Once the listeners had retaken their seats, his manner grew stern and he set his face in a grave expression as he continued, “The journey will not be easy. There will be many obstacles, and many of us will die.”

The room grew a bit gloomier and a chill ran down the spines of those listening to the man speak.

“Yes, many of us will die, but it is a sacrifice we must be willing to make. One that is worthy of holding our heads high in the afterlife, where we shall meet again as victors! As the punishers of the devil! As the saviors of Earth, and humanity! We will be able to hold our heads high for all of eternity!” he shouted, causing the listeners to applaud and cheer once more, completely stripped of the fear they had felt moments before when reminded of the might of their enemy.

But now, with that assurance, they knew that none of their lives would be wasted and everything would be for the greater good. For the eventual victory in the fight of good and evil, they would proudly go to their deaths with their chests puffed out and heads held high.

Against the backdrop of cheering and applause, the man standing on the pallet bowed his head, clasped his hands in prayer, and loudly prayed, “May the devil perish at our hands, and may our sacrifices be worthy.”

Although he said that, in his mind, he was thinking something completely different. ‘Sheep,’ he thought as he smiled brightly at the group of people in front of him, meeting their eyes and enthusiastically shaking their hands.

#### Chapter 405 The Technological Advantage

Felix was leaning back on the couch in his office, his feet crossed on the coffee table and hands clasped behind his head, obviously in deep thought.

[What’s wrong, sir?] Raven, his personal AI assistant asked. [You seem to be zoning out a lot these days.] Felix had remained unmoving in his position for more than twenty minutes, the rise and fall of his chest and blinking eyelids his only movements.

“Nothing, I’m just trying to figure out where things are going to go from here. It’s been a week since the countries signed their individual surrender accords, but no matter how I think about things, I can’t see a peaceful resolution. There’s guaranteed to be problems in the future, no matter what,” Felix sighed.

[What makes you say that?] she asked.

“History.”

[Do you mean how those who fail to learn from history’s lessons are doomed to repeat it?]

“Exactly. Every time one nation overwhelmed another and received their surrender or succeeded in an annexation, an insurgency has arisen from within just as things seemed to calm down. Those insurgencies cause a lot of issues for the winners by targeting their weaknesses. Aron may be the strongest person alive and have the most overwhelmingly powerful military that’s ever been seen, but he’s still sure to have weaknesses. Nobody can be that powerful in every aspect,” Felix explained.

“Just take the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan, for instance. In 1979, they invaded Afghanistan to aid the communist forces in Kabul fight off various insurgent forces, including the Taliban and al-Qaeda, who was known as the ‘Afghan Arabs’ back then.

“The Soviets had every advantage in that fight. They had a strong military, high morale, the more technologically advanced weapons, and the numbers on their side. By all rights, they should’ve had an easy time taking out some small, weak insurgent groups. But that wasn’t the case! Their incursion in support of Kabul caused a decade-long conflict between the Soviets and Afghani insurgent groups that finally ended with a Soviet withdrawal in 1989, a full decade later.

“Then in 2001, al-Qaeda reared their head again and carried out a terror attack on the United States, leading to another conflict that lasted up until a week or so ago. The American War on Terror.

“We declared war on al-Qaeda and the Taliban in October of 2001, yet despite outnumbering and outgunning them in every aspect, they still managed to drag out

the war for more than fifteen years. And it would've dragged on even longer if Aron hadn't come around and basically ended all wars. And those two are in living memory. If we go back even further, there are even more examples.

"Like after World War I, when the Ottoman Empire lost and the allied powers tried carving it up. The Turks rose up and fought back under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who started the Turkish War of Independence that resulted in the formation of modern-day Turkey. Going even further back, the Koreans fought back against Japanese invaders, and so did the Chinese. Or we can go forward to the French Resistance against the Third Reich after France surrendered to Germany.

"Basically, every time an overwhelming force comes up, a resistance group springs up like weeds to fight against it. But now it'll be even more severe. Instead of one nation stomping another nation into a mudhole, or alliance versus alliance, this time it was one nation against literally every other nation in existence," Felix explained.

"So now that Aron's military has displayed its might, I'm worried that there'll be hundreds, if not thousands of groups of 'freedom fighters' cropping up everywhere around the world. Hell, it wouldn't surprise me at this point if the Atlanteans came back to the surface from some underwater city somewhere," he griped.

[Opposition will naturally always exist, but that doesn't mean it'll be impossible to deal with,] Raven said. [I'm sure Sir Aron and mother are already aware of the issue and have made plenty of plans to deal with any situations that may arise.] She had full confidence in Aron and Nova to have foreseen such an obvious issue. If even Felix, who she privately thought was perhaps a little on the slow side, could see it, his boss most certainly could... right?

"I know, I know. I was mostly thinking of how I would handle it if it were me in the hot seat. The only lesson history teaches is that nobody's ever learned a single thing from history, and I'm sure I'm no exception to that. It's more morbid curiosity than anything else," Felix grumped.

[If you're putting yourself in the 'hot seat', so to speak, then you also have to consider the technological advantage that Sir Aron and mother have over those historical forces. Would the Turkish War for Independence have succeeded if King Constantine had the Panopticon? Or would the Chinese Boxer Rebellion have lost to the Eight-Nation Alliance if they had SLEEK suits and pulse rifles? Would Osama bin Laden have survived as long as he did if the Americans had Poseidon Navy's carrier fleet and Titan's Wrath cannons? Would the Viet Cong have forced American forces to withdraw if they had the training our Reaper teams go through? Or would World War I ever have started if Archbishop Ferdinand had an ARES Aegis team guarding him?

[Even if you take ten thousand steps back, what do you think would be the result of putting nyxians up against the FBI and KGB during the cold war?]

Raven had many more examples available, but she figured those would be more than enough specific instances. [In every case where insurgency forces troubled the winners of conflicts in the

past, it's always been when the difference between the two wasn't that large. And that isn't the case here. You can think of it like this: Sir Aron and ARES going up against modern forces is no different from the pre-9/11 American military being put on a battlefield against a military from the Bronze Age. That's how much of a lead Sir Aron currently has against the rest of the world, and that's even when he wasn't really focusing on building forces to face terrestrial foes,] she explained.

[Our side's only limitation is the number of people under the ARES umbrella, but that isn't a limitation that'll last forever. And as fast as Sir Aron can build up his forces, I'm sure he'll be shoring up that weakness before the insurgencies can grasp it.]

"I suppose that's true. I'll go see what he's up to myself," Felix said. Raven had put his mind at ease, and once he put down the impossible task of trying to think like his supergenius best friend, he realized he hadn't seen him in quite some time.

Chapter 406 Don't Forget the Trojans

"Bring me to Aron," Felix asked as he logged in to VR. With the growing number of people who had access and their varied tasks and locations, Nova had created a navigational VI aid.

Once he arrived at Aron's location, he couldn't help but curse in surprise. He was in a large, grassy meadow with Sarah, Henry, Rina, and all of the high-level leader AIs. The meadow itself was about fifty meters across, and outside of it was nothing but devastation. Craters were scattered around the cracked, bare earth, and more were appearing every second as explosions continued booming out in the distance.

"What the hell is going on?" Felix wondered, his jaw dropped so far Sarah considered spawning an egg to stick in it to see if it would fit.

[Sir Aron is having a sparring session with mother,] Athena answered, pulling up a screen that showed the action in real time with slow motion replays for Felix.

After watching the footage for a few seconds, he asked, "Why fight with swords and magic if it's a sparring session? Isn't he just playing a game while the world is in such a mess?" To Felix's knowledge, what he was watching absolutely must be some kind of new game. There was no third human that knew of Aron's magic, and Felix was definitely not the second; Rina was.

But before anyone even began to answer, if anyone was going to in the first place, the spar came to an abrupt end. Aron was caught in one of Nova's attacks that cost him an arm, but in return, one final, massive explosion erupted, sending dirt and ashes billowing out from it. Then Nova's figure, shield and all, flew out of the cloud like a bullet headed to who knows where.

The spectating AIs were shocked into a frozen state by the surprise ending. Throughout the thousands and thousands of sparring matches between Aron and Nova, this was the first time he had survived and sent her to earn some frequent flyer miles.

Not too long later, Aron, whose arm had fully regenerated, appeared in front of the spectators and immediately celebrated by giving Henry a high five and Rina a hug and quick kiss.

[That was a surprising decision, sir. Did you plan to trade your severe injury for mother's defeat ahead of time?] Athena asked, looking at Aron in admiration tinged with reverence and a little bit of worship.

"It wasn't a difficult decision. The calculation was rather simple, and of course, the sacrifice was planned," Aron answered.

"Hey there Felix, long time no see," Aron said when he spotted his friend. He moved in for a hug, as if he really hadn't seen him in a very long time.

"It's only been a few days since we last saw each other. What's with this 'long time no see' bullshit?" Felix sneered, though he reciprocated his friend's hug.

"Did you forget? Time dilation, remember—it really has been a few weeks since I saw you last," Aron explained to his forgetful friend as they separated.

"Yeah, yeah, my bad... hey, listen. I had a question about your plans to deal with the rest of the world."

Aron nodded and listened to Felix lay out the examples he had come up with when discussing things with Raven. "I can see where you're coming from, and you're absolutely correct. At the moment, we already have hard evidence of about seven thousand active rebel groups from all around the world. And all of them show signs of whipping up their own individual rebellions, if we don't stamp them out," he said once Felix finished laying out his argument.

"That many?" Felix asked in surprise.

"At least that many, yeah. We're pretty sure there's more we have yet to discover. The loud ones we've found so far are all the dumb ones and will be easy enough to deal with. It's the ones that're smart enough to remain hidden we have to worry about. Plus, more will crawl out of the woodwork as we work on establishing the new world constitution, then even more once we shake things up by implementing it.

"But that's in the future. Right now, we've got even more groups. Not every armed organization is going to be fighting for their ideological beliefs. There were already a bunch of organizations that already existed before the war. Terrorist groups like ISIS, drug cartels, street gangs... none of them are exactly ideological in nature, but we've already affected their profits and bottom lines. If we add all of them to the mix, there's about fifteen thousand different groups of varying size that we currently know of."

"What about the smart ones? What're you doing about those?" Felix followed up with a shudder. He couldn't even imagine how capable someone would have to be to hide from Aron, of all people.

"They won't remain hidden forever. The moment they attempt anything, we'll spot them and deal with them." Aron had everything under control.

“So why just keep an eye on them instead of doing something about them?” Felix asked.

“Who says we aren’t? We’ve already implemented a hearts and minds strategy for the ones we can do that for. A little charity goes a long way for most of the angry people, and without angry people, insurrections will always fail. But some are trickier to deal with. For those, we’re gathering evidence against them as we speak, but it isn’t an overnight process. Even though we can wipe them out, and easily at that, doing so without just cause would just reinforce my image as a villain in people’s minds. Then I’ll be a barbarian who’s using my power just because I can, and that wouldn’t be good at all,” Aron said. He knew very well just how corrupting an influence absolute power was; he had personally experienced it, and both Islamabad and Delhi had paid the price for his lesson. Thus, letting himself act extrajudicially would form a bad habit that would backfire on him hard in the future.

“As for the rest, well... what better way to prevent people from joining rebel groups than to take their focus from me and put it firmly onto something else?” he continued with an enigmatic smile on his face.

“Weapon of mass distraction? What’ve you got planned in that devious scheme factory of yours?” Felix rolled his eyes.

Instead of saying anything, Aron snapped his fingers and the two friends were teleported into space. In front of and slightly below them was Jupiter and behind them was the sun. “Welcome to the Trojan Asteroids,” he said. “To your left is the asteroid field known as the ‘Greek Camp’, and to your right is the ‘Trojan Camp’. There’s an asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter as well, but,” he snapped his fingers and the two teleported to a vast, empty stretch of space, “you’re standing in it now. The Main Asteroid Belt between Mars and Jupiter only has about as much mass as our moon, if you were to gather all of the asteroids together into one celestial body. The distances involved make it difficult to exploit, unlike in Hollywood where spaceships are always dodging tightly packed clusters of asteroids while dogfighting in them.”

He snapped his fingers and they teleported back to the Trojan Asteroids, then pointed at a fast-moving object headed toward the Greek Camp. “That, my friend, is the future. Prospecting and exploiting resources farther out in the solar system instead of on our mother planet. And do you see what I’m pointing to? That’s one of our flagbearers. I launched it the other day.”

He snapped his fingers and they returned to the grassy meadow where the rest of the people who had watched Nova and him spar from. “Other than that, VR itself should be enough to distract people. But space is Important with a capital I, especially since we’re going to be welcoming our first guests very soon.”

Chapter 407 Corpses if Necessary, Prisoners if Possible

Nova appeared out of nowhere right next to Felix. If people in the simulation had to deal with biological processes, he would have shat himself in surprise.

[Sir, something's come up that requires your urgent attention,] she reported to Aron.

"What's up?" Aron calmly asked, as if he were a pillar that could hold up the sky if it fell on him.

[We discovered that a large number of Edenian and Esparian citizens have gone missing in a few countries. They all disappeared at roughly the same time over the course of an hour or two.]

"How many citizens in total, and which countries did they disappear from? What were they there for? Are the disappearances done, or are people still going missing?" Aron asked, this time with a distinct chill in his tone. He had a few ideas of why his people would be going missing, and none of them were pleasant.

[Fifty-seven people disappeared hours after arriving in Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador, Brazil, and Guatemala,] Nova said. She brought up a large screen and split it into sections, each displaying information about one of the missing individuals, like their travel itineraries and reasons for visiting those countries.

Aron glanced at the screen, memorizing its contents, then immediately came up with the most likely culprit. "Cartels," he spat.

[That is the most likely possibility, sir. As long as the missing people passed through customs, the cartels would have almost instantly learned about their arrival. Most government officials in those countries have been bought and paid for by at least one cartel, perhaps more, and controlling the people coming into and leaving from their countries would be a routine matter for them. The cartels wouldn't even have to provide special bribes.

[I think they're trying to gather leverage to use against us so they don't end up like the Sinaloa or Medellin cartels. After all, the likelihood of them having realized that their people were killed is high, especially after the public reprisal attack carried out from the former territory of the Sinaloas.]

"What's Athena got planned to resolve the situation?"

[She's tasked Panoptes with tracking them through the Panopticon network and ordered the Beowulf to adjust her patrol route to pass over Central and South America. Reaper teams three, seven, eleven, eighteen, and twenty-two are on standby for rescue and extraction operations once the targets are located.]

Athena appeared next to Nova and saluted Aron. [Sir, requesting permission to use orbital insertion protocols for the reaper deployments upon locating the targets.]

"Granted," Aron said. "But let the reapers know that I have a use for live captives this time. Corpses if necessary, but prisoners if possible. Either way, I want zero fugitives. Also, zero collateral damage. The high civilian death toll from the recent fighting is already causing enough problems, no need to increase that number even higher." He could always put them on trial once the new world constitution was implemented. Every criminal captured between now and then would likely be enough to fill a court's docket for months, if not years. Especially since they would all still be guaranteed due process.

[Affirmative, sir,] Athena said, then saluted again and disappeared.

Nova smiled and disappeared as well. She enjoyed acting as Aron's secretary; it reminded her of how things were in the beginning, when she was just an assistant and limited to the tiny server he had built in his parents' basement. Ever since then, those menial jobs had been delegated to lower and lower authority levels in the AI hierarchy she was building, and while she appreciated that Aron valued her so highly, it was sometimes nice to do simple things, like pass messages.

It was like how chefs with dozens of Michelin-starred restaurants under their name would enjoy bologna and processed cheese sandwiches on plain, cheap white bread from time to time as a reminder of their childhoods.

Aron turned to Felix, who was looking at him with a complicated expression on his face, and asked, "Where were we? Ah, right... VR."

"How can you be so calm right now?" Felix blurted out.

"It's because this is exactly one of the things we foresaw being a possibility, so we've already got a contingency plan in place to counter it. Since we already expected it and a plan was put in place long before now, it's actually more of a relief that it's happening than something to worry about. Besides, the best possible people for the job are already on it, so if I worry about the situation, all it'll do is show that I lack faith in the people I trained," Aron explained.

Felix took a minute to digest that, and found it plausible. He nodded and his entire body seemed to relax as the discussion picked back up.

"Back to what we were discussing before. With space exploration to keep their bodies occupied and separated, and virtual reality games to keep their minds busy, people simply won't have time to plot and carry out rebellions. Nor will they have the angry recruits they need to grow. And even if they choose to go the way of the luddites, they'll just be left behind as the world advances past them.

"Which is why Sarah and you have a few months ahead of you where you'll be spending your sleep time in VR so you have enough time to deal with things," Aron finished.

Felix unconsciously hunched his back, remembering the frantic lead-up to the first GAIA product launch and all the work it entailed for him and Sarah.

Aron watched Felix's internal struggle, which had caused his face to twitch and his expression to contort, and could barely keep himself from laughing. "Don't worry so much. It may be a painful next few months, but the pain now will decide whether the empire we build will last for centuries, millennia, or millions of years. That's why we need to focus on every single little detail now," he reassured his old friend.

Felix's eyes sprang open and almost popped out of his face. He finally knew what Aron was planning to do after winning the war: creating an empire and crowning himself emperor. "What?"

he blurted out, not entirely sure that there wasn't a glitch in the simulation or if he was hallucinating.

Aron didn't say a word, just gave his friend an enigmatic smile, then bent down to meet Henry, who was running over to him with childlike glee.

"Brother, I want to fight like you do!" the boy said once he was in his big brother's embrace.

"Just a minute, my minion," Aron said, then turned to Felix and continued, "You'll know more later, but for now, leave me something in reserve to surprise you guys with."

He disappeared with his little brother, off to play "games" that were well-disguised training programs that would prepare Henry for the time when Aron finally learned how to inscribe runic hearts.

Aron had decided that Henry would be the second runemaster of humanity, and would bring that about by his own hand.

#### Chapter 408 The Making of a Reaper

[Corporal Jose Cuervo, report to docking bay two. Corporal Jose Cuervo to docking bay two.]

Corporal Jose "Tekillya" Cuervo had graduated from Athena's basic ARES training course two months ago, VR time, and his performance assessment had qualified him to become a Reaper after the initial training was complete. He picked up his black-and-gray ARES duffel bag, slung it over his shoulder, and rushed to The VR training facility was as realistic as anything else in the simulation and recruits were required to eat, perform the biological necessities, sleep, and everything else, just as they were in reality.

He had completed the majority of his Reaper training and been on "leave" for the time it took his special enhancements to be implanted in the Reaper-specific VR pod, a hybrid medical pod and ARES training pod. All that was left for him to do was one final training mission, during which he would become accustomed to the performance of his newly enhanced body, and upon its successful completion, he would be a full-fledged member of a reaper team.

Tekillya could hardly wait.

After loading himself and his baggage onto the shuttle in docking bay two of the sprawling ARES training facility, he strapped himself in for departure and waved a screen into existence that detailed the implants that would soon be at his command.

[Skeletal structure reinforcements. Super magnesium sheaths reinforce the bones of a reaper's skeleton and increases their shock, impact, and weight resistance by 900%]

[Muscle replacement. Approximately one-third of type one and half of type two skeletal muscles replaced by liquid crystal elastomers, increasing muscle strength by 750% and reducing lactose acid buildup by 50%]

[Organ shock webbing....]

[Bionic eye replacements....]

[Subdermal carbon nanotube weave....]

[Internal combat pharmacy....]

[Implanted healer nanite colony....]

[Implanted nanite power armor colony....]

[Microfusion power plant....]

[Thigh storage compartments....]

[Extendable elbow, wrist, and knee blades....]

[Quantum microprocessor....]

[Oxygen recyclers....]

The list went on, with more than a hundred and fifty new additions to Corporal Cuervo's meatsack that would vastly improve his capabilities and place him head and shoulders above the ARES troopers. With these tools, he would be an elite among the elites, a powerhouse capable of singlehandedly bringing entire countries, or even perhaps worlds, to heel.

He pictured himself striding through a battlefield, his customized reaper power armor around him and distinctive, scythe-shaped rifle in hand, leaving a corpse in his wake with every step he took forward, and he couldn't wait. He was no ammosexual, nor was he a superpatriot, but he was definitely interested in being the best possible version of himself.

And that best possible version was Corporal Jose "Tekillya" Cuervo, of Reaper Team whichever.

After reading through the documentation on his new implants, he settled in to sleep for the rest of the journey to whichever hellhole Athena had dreamed up for his final training exercise. It may be the last sleep he would get for quite some time.

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[Docking complete. Passengers, please debark following the guidelines on the deck.]

Corporal Cuervo woke with a start, instantly going from deep sleep to full alertness as only highly trained soldiers could do. He unstrapped himself from his seat and stood up, retrieving his duffle bag and waiting for the light of the guideline to show him it was his turn to leave the shuttle.

After finally leaving the shuttle, he found himself in a satellite base roughly the size the International Space Station used to be. As the design of the ISS was, by Aron and Nova's standards, reasonably intelligent in both design and construction processes, they had adopted that as the design for manned space outposts. After all, it was relatively easy to print and launch prefabricated modules that would be assembled in space, so even in the field, where Aron refused to deploy any atomic printers other than task-specialized ones, they would still be convenient for use.

Making his way to the conference room, Jose dropped his duffel outside the hatch and entered to receive his mission briefing.

[Your task is to drop on hellworld A-2485239/JS and survive for six standard weeks. Due to the hostile nature of the wildlife and vegetation on the planet, you will be dropping via cold coast

orbital insertion. No equipment beyond what you can hold in your hands and storage compartment implants is allowed. Implant usage is allowed, and encouraged,] the simulated officer said.

[This is your final training mission. After this, you will be a reaper if you succeed, or scrubbed and recycled if you fail.] The briefing officer was referring to the mindwipe procedure the training pods were all capable of. [Mission begins as soon as you reach the transport module and enter your stealth insertion pod. Dismissed!]

Jose chose to fill one storage compartment with food and water purification tablets, use the other compartment for a length of rope and other miscellaneous survival supplies, and carry a pair of monomolecular vibroswords in his hands.

After receiving his requested issue from the supply officer, he made his way to the orbital insertion module and looked for his assigned IDMO, or Insertion and Drop Model, Orbital. That was the Lab City researchers' name for it, but due to their size, shape, and purpose, the people who were "lucky" enough to use them for their actual purpose had another name for them: coffins.

Once he found his coffin, Corporal Cuervo took a few deep breaths, replayed the last few hours in his mind—from the time he stepped aboard the transport shuttle to the time he arrived in the IDMO module—then clasped his hands in prayer and looked upward for about thirty seconds or so.

Once his preparations were complete, Corporal Jose "Tekillya" Cuervo climbed into his coffin and sealed it shut from the inside. The next few weeks would determine whether or not he had what it took to be a Reaper.

#### Chapter 409 Hibernating and Hallucinations

Jose slammed the door of his house, stomped up the stairs, and dropped his backpack on the floor before throwing himself into his bed. He buried his face in his pillow and screamed as hard as he could, then broke down into giant, hiccuping sobs that wracked his entire body.

"Why? Why? Why, why, why, why, whywhywhywhy..." he sobbed, slamming his fists into the mattress for emphasis.

Someone knocked on his bedroom door and he turned his pimpled face to the side and screamed, "GO AWAY!" Then he buried his face back into his pillow and continued sobbing, but wordlessly this time.

He thought back to earlier in the day, when he was standing in line in the cafeteria to pick up his subsidized "poor people lunch" when the starting pitcher of their school baseball team sat down at the table next to where he was standing in line and loudly laughed about his name. The pitcher's belief was that Jose was named after expensive tequila because his parents were dirt poor and couldn't afford any, and it was all Jose's fault for wasting all of their money.

Jose had clenched his fists hard enough to leave white fingernail imprints in the skin of his palms as the pitcher continued chatting and laughing with his friends, one of the spirit squad dance team members hanging off of his neck.

He finally got his food tray and was walking back to find an empty seat when he stumbled over the outstretched leg of another of his bullies. His severe acne, braces, and short, weak stature definitely hadn't qualified him to join the popular crowd, so he could only join their target list. High school was just that brutal.

More knocking came at his bedroom door, followed by his mother's muffled voice asking if he was okay. The concern was audible, even through the door, so he invited her in.

"Mom, why did you name me Jose Cuervo? We aren't even Mexican!" he sniffled.

His mother, Katrina, laughed and said, "Well, your father was a bartender and I was a cocktail waitress at the bar he worked at." She wrapped her arm around Jose's shoulders and pulled him into her embrace. "And we were young, dumb, and full of cum. We fell in love with each other almost within minutes of meeting, and later that week, we fooled around in the back seat of his car. When I found out I was pregnant..." she ruffled her son's hair, "we panicked! But it was never about the pregnancy, since we already knew we would spend the rest of our lives together. Instead, we were panicking over what to name you!" She grinned.

"So we went back and forth for a few days, thinking up names, and finally settled on naming you after something that reminded us of what brought us together. A shitty little dive bar brought you into our lives, but 'The Pink Pussycat' doesn't really scream name material. So we figured we would name you after the first drink someone ordered that night and you ended up being Jose Cuervo. If you were a girl, you'd be Midori. And count yourself lucky, brat," she giggled, "because we almost named you Pontiac Sunfire, for the car you were conceived in!"

"MOOOOMMMM! TMI!" Jose screeched, going beet red in the face....

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[Coast phase complete. Prepare for unpowered entry.]

Corporal Cuervo woke up to the neutral tone of the VI in his coffin. He hated cold coasting; he always had truly weird, vivid dreams when his implants put him into hibernation. It wasn't a unique affliction, either, as nearly every reaper trainee had the same issue with their hibernation state. It seemed like it put them into such a deep sleep that their brains dredged up the most deeply buried memories and replayed them in high definition with full surround sound audio.

The coffin heated up around him as it skipped across the outer layer of hellworld A-2485239/JS' atmosphere. He shook his head to clear the cobwebs, checked his internal storage and implant supply levels of combat drugs and other assorted pharmaceuticals, doublechecked the swords in his hands, then asked, "ETA to landfall?"

[Approximately eight minutes, corporal.]

The reaper trainee settled back into the impact cushions, or "crash pads" as they were called, and closed his eyes, delving into the quantum microcomputer in his brain. He took a few seconds going through file name after file name, then finally found what he was looking for: the video letter his mother and stepfather had recorded for him when the ARES recruiters contacted them to ask for one. A standard procedure in the recruitment process was to ask for video letters from loved ones for the troopers to play.

Ever since his father had died in a bar brawl where his parents had both worked, Jose and his mother had grown closer and closer. At first it was by necessity; they were the only two people left in their family after his father's passing and they had to rely on each other. But later, it was because they had developed a truly deep, healthy affection for each other. To Jose, Katrina Jones was the

absolute best mother on the planet. And to Katrina, Jose Cuervo was the absolute best son she could ever have asked for.

Katrina had remarried later, but the bond between the mother and son pair was never severed, or even damaged. Jose's new dad, Dave, had made sure to respect his wife and step-son, and had been the first person to encourage him and teach him to stand up for himself, his family, and his beliefs.

Jose and Katrina both considered their lives better for the presence of the new man in it, both then and now.

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Seven minutes and fifty-three seconds later, Corporal Cuervo's coffin came crashing to the ground and the lid popped off. Impact gel flowed out of the pod, followed by a reaper. Hellworld A-2485239/JS was about to be introduced to one of humanity's most finely tuned and improved killing machines.

#### Chapter 410 Jurassic Planet

Hellworld A-2485239/JS was a planet with ten times the diameter of Earth, putting it firmly in the category of "Super Earths". It was unique in that it was 90% land and only 10% water on the surface, but instead of being dry and arid, as one might expect, it was entirely covered in lush, tropical foliage. From orbit, it looked like a brilliant emerald, and seemed like it would be a nice place to take a camping vacation every now and then.

But that wasn't the case at all.

Code named "Jurassic Planet", Hellworld A-2485239/JS was home to some of the most vicious species that Nova could design using all of the processing power at her disposal. The foliage was all either carnivorous, venomous, or poisonous, and the inhabitants were modeled after the most aggressive dinosaurs that could be proven to exist, then run through countless evolution simulations to crank up their lethality to a ridiculous degree. Essentially, everything on the planet would eat anything that couldn't run fast enough to escape.

With a gravity ten times that of Earth and an atmospheric oxygen content of 41.82%, almost double that of Earth's 21%, everything on the planet grew to nearly eight times the size of an earthbound equivalent. And due to the foliage constantly expiring moist, warm air, the entire planet had one thing in common with tropical rainforests and jungles on Earth: it rained almost constantly. That contributed greatly to the general lack of water on the surface, as the greenery would thirstily absorb any water on, or even under, the surface, and what little watering holes were left became death traps for smarter predators to prey on less intelligent predators.

Everything on Jurassic Planet was prey.

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Jose stepped out of his coffin, his uniform shedding the impact gel that had cushioned his impact with the surface. As the green slime pooled around him, he looked down and noticed that the tip of a root had poked through the surface detritus to investigate the moisture and heat source and was greedily sucking the liquid out of the gel, rendering it into powdered concentrate. Soon, he was left standing in a pile of vomit green powder.

He saw the root tip questing around, and when it neared his boots, he made the wise decision to relocate to somewhere else. Everything on the planet was a complete unknown to him, in order to raise the standard he would be required to meet in order to successfully graduate his reaper training. For normal missions, the briefings entailed a mass of information; essentially everything he could possibly need to know would be stored on his implant for later recall, and everything he needed to do in order to accomplish the mission would be told to him by the person briefing him.

He stepped back and looked at an innocuous evergreen tree about twenty meters away from where he was at. He crouched, then, with a mighty thrust of his legs, leaped to the base of the tree he had spotted. Extending the climbing spikes from between the fingers of his hands and the soles of his boots, he scampered up the tree and took refuge in its thick cover of densely packed needles. Luckily for him, he was covered from head to toe in the most durable fabric the researchers at Lab City could come up with, because the tree he had just climbed was a hybrid of a gympie-gympie tree and poison oak, and its “needles” were actually a symbiotic plant that had evolved from poison ivy.

But he would discover that later. Likely the next time he had to wipe his ass, given how active Sergeant Murphy tended to be during missions and deployments.

He created a nest for himself, then turned and looked out through the tight foliage. His coffin had already completely disappeared, and now resembled nothing more than an unremarkable lump of greenery against the veritable sea of green in the background.

Checking his surroundings through all of the different optics available to him, Tekillya made an initial map of his surroundings. Thanks to the size of the planet, the horizon was much farther away to begin with, and with the added height from the unnamed tree he was in, he now had a general threat map of everything within a fifteen-kilometer radius of where he was. He designated his landing spot as Point Alpha and headed out, nimbly leaping from tree to tree and occasionally swinging from vines.

He leaped from a tree, targeting a vine that was hanging down from a branch about ten meters away. It should have been an easy leap, but the vine jerked away from his reaching hand just as he was about to grasp it. Then he realized his mistake; that was no vine, but a snake!

The snake had been coiled up on a tree branch, camouflaging itself as a vine in order to entrap incoming prey. It'd long spotted the comparatively tiny figure and had just been waiting for him to fall into its clutches. As Jose fell to the branch below him with a thud and the creaking groan of stressed wood, the snake released the branch it had been waiting on and fell directly after the hapless reaper trainee.

Jose wasted no time and blinked in a specific pattern, disabling the safety on his eye laser. Firing it would destroy the biological camouflage of his left bionic eye, but remaining hidden in a sea of humanity wasn't his mission this time. Survival was.

He opened his eyes wide and, when his targeting reticle passed over the snake, he fired the short-ranged eye laser at the rapidly approaching reptile.