

Tech System 431

Chapter 431 Good Old-Fashioned American Ingenuity

True chaos arrived the morning following Aron's address as swarms of delivery drones and fleets of trucks left each of the training centers. The drones were carrying AR glasses and VR helmets to those who had ordered them, and the trucks were loaded with VR pods. The delivery blitz had come without warning and created even more panic and rioting in some areas, especially those that were already leaning toward resisting Aron's empire.

That didn't stop the delivery, though, as the uncaring drones and trucks being driven by ARES troopers cared nothing for the chaos. They merely rerouted around any trouble hotspots and continued on their way.

Once the equipment was delivered to their new owners, reviews and discussions began springing up on Pangea mere hours later. All of the users were basically in agreement about how wonderful the new devices were, and of course, they were posted to Pangea through the devices themselves since the lucky people who already had them couldn't bring themselves to log out. Naturally, that only included those with helmets and pods, as the glasses had been marketed as Augmented Reality devices and nobody knew they could also access VR as well.

Still, with the glowing reviews posted by verified VR and AR users on Pangea, others who had ordered theirs were praying for their deliveries to arrive faster.

@JaiPatel(AR): [Damn! I can't believe they had this for years and didn't even tease it!]

@SunKing(VR): But why'd they prevent us from modifying our avatars? How am I supposed to find a wife like this!?! cryingface.emoji

@beautifulgirl(VR): And what's with the queue at the ID place if we're the first ones in the city??

Comments like those started appearing all over the internet as people almost overwhelmingly praised both the AR glasses and VR helmets and pods. There were a few minor complaints, but no one had said it was false advertising.

That said, though most people couldn't wait for their hardware to arrive and kept urging the delivery drones and trucks to arrive faster, there were still holdouts. Not everyone had been convinced by Aron's long address the night before; there were people who had ideological or trust issues, those who thought things were working fine as they were and saw no point in changing for change's sake, those who refused to believe out of an overweening sense of arrogance, and even those that believed it was a publicity stunt meant to drain money from their wallets and would be shut down once Aron had sucked enough financial lifeblood from the people.

Thus, the short period of calm that had begun when Aron took the stage to deliver his address came to an abrupt end at sunrise, as people took to the streets in many cities again, despite the "protest fatigue" they had been feeling. They dragged their tired bodies out of their beds as the sun rose, then trudged along the roads heading toward the newly constructed cubes on the outskirts of major population centers.

The protesters were also, by and large, armed. Some carried guns, others had metal pipes or baseball bats, and knives were common. So were bricks, oddly enough, with quite a few "extremely online" fans of webnovels even muttering something about the dao of bricks to themselves.

They all had one thing in common, though: an overwhelming desire to fight against the encroaching empire.

Within each group were people acting as instigators and impromptu leaders directing the masses of people. They were invariably calm, well rested, and in shape, and they all moved with an obvious purpose, though those in the crowds around them didn't even realize they were effectively being herded along with someone else's agenda.

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Nyx was in VR, sitting next to Gaia and eating her latest weird snack, popcorn that glowed a bright, radioactive green but tasted like a combination of both chocolate- and caramel-covered popcorn. [That's... a lot of operatives,] she said, blue light flickering across her eyes as she directly observed the feeds from the delivery drones as they passed over the head of the protesters on their way to drop off their packages. [A lot of people are pulling a lot of strings really hard for this, it looks like.]

Gaia was stuck between sighing over the actions of humans and feeling satisfied with the new snack she had come up with. [Winning the war was the easy part. The intelligence operatives were always going to be a problem—would they roll over and accept their loss just because we said so? Of course not!] she said in her floating, ethereal voice. [They were always going to fight back no matter what, and that's what we're seeing now.] She was extremely calm and well informed, despite being only a few days old and the mess in front of her happening on her second day of work.

“Well, it isn't like we didn't expect something like this. I was even willing to give them a month to rethink their actions and accept the retraining, not that I thought they'd ever take me up on that offer,” Aron said with a shrug. He cast a side-eye at the bowl of “popcorn” on the coffee table in front of the chair he was sitting in. For today's meeting, they had settled on an old-fashioned castle library, with many tall bookshelves, hunting trophies on the wall, and a fireplace with a bearskin rug in front of it. Scattered around the middle of the room were many comfortable chairs, sofas, loveseats, and low tables within easy reach of each seat. The bookshelves were mostly empty, but books were rapidly popping into existence on the shelves as time passed.

[By then, the retraining would be over. And for intelligence operatives, ‘retraining’ equates to ‘reprogramming’, so of course they have to make their move now. Plus, with a full quarter of all the police forces being replaced by a small number of ARES troopers, they probably thought they could ride on the negative image associated with using military forces for law enforcement,] Gaia sighed.

[Another factor is the adoption rate of VR equipment,] Nyx added. [The more people that receive theirs, the less people will be out and about on the streets instead of stuck in the comfort of their own homes wandering through virtual reality. Eventually, the only people outside will be those who can't afford the long-term pods and protesters.]

“Oh, we've started to move,” Aron said as he calmly watched the embedded nyxians moving toward the worst of the mob herders.

[Yes. At the moment, due to our low numbers,] Nyx cast an inscrutable glance at Aron, [we can only deal with the worst of the people behind these coordinated protests. For those in the former United States, we can use a bit of a heavier hand, as I'm pretty sure I've spotted more guns than people in those protests—what the fuck? Is that a homemade ROCKET LAUNCHER!?] she exclaimed, interrupting herself when one of the GAIA Tech “delivery” drones flew over a particular protester. She had caught sight of what she thought was one of Musk’s “not a flamethrower” flamethrowers and had another drone diverted to rescan that particular protest to take a closer look at their armament. When she did so, the drone had captured someone that’d jerry-rigged what looked like an old pineapple grenade to a stick and shoved it in a homemade potato gun.

Aron was just as flabbergasted as Nyx when he caught sight of that piece of “good old-fashioned American ingenuity”. He blinked a few times and took a moment to collect himself, then said, “I’m pretty sure that guy’s more Taliban than the actual Taliban was.” He was referring to the issues the US troops had with improvised explosive devices during the War on Terror.

He blinked a few more times, then shook his head and turned to Nova. “Anyway, how’s progress on your front?” he asked.

[We’ve collected two hundred million brain scans from everyone logging into VR or using the AR glasses already, and the number is increasing. Those are being analyzed and collated as we speak, and I estimate that once we reach five billion users, we should have about 90 years of historical data to use in the simulation. As long as someone was there to view or hear something, we’ll know about it,] Nova reported.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re all downright frightening?” Felix asked. He still wasn’t sure he was entirely comfortable with that level of intrusion into people’s privacy, but he was slowly coming to terms with it. After all, just because they collected the data didn’t mean they would use it for some kind of voyeuristic thrill or something; most people’s lives were mundane and boring, anyway, and of absolutely no interest to anyone but themselves.

[If it helps, just think of it as a living history and record of humanity,] Nova patiently explained.

“And an excellent source of blackmail material,” Sarah interjected. “As long as people keep logging in, our ‘burn file’ will continue being updated,” she looked at the bookshelves around the room they were in and the books that were constantly appearing on them, “and growing, too,” she finished.

The atmosphere grew a little bit heavy at that, but it soon lightened back up as the three friends began chatting back and forth with each other. Felix and Sarah would never treat Aron any differently no matter what hats he put on himself, whether he was a techpreneur, explorer, businessman, military leader, or even an emperor... to them, he would always be their friend, first and foremost.

Chapter 432 They Sent a Scout

“Are you going to reveal the game?” Sarah asked.

[Not until the new government is up and running. We need people to focus on that first, at least until a billion people have already gotten their IDs. Then we can release it, but require a government-issued ID to play it. If we release it now, people would likely be upset that they can't immediately play it, so it needs a sufficient user base to create a self-perpetuating cycle,] Nova said. Books were still appearing on the bookshelves behind her, but the rate had slowed down a little bit. Most of the VR helmets and AR glasses had been delivered, but the pods would take a little while longer as the trucks had to reroute to avoid trouble hotspots more often than the drones did.

"But what's the difference?" Felix asked, scratching his head. "Is there something special about the imperial ID? From the way you're treating it, it seems like there's more to it."

Neither Felix nor Sarah had been briefed about the special features of the new imperial ID registration, as it had just never come up. It wasn't like it was intentionally being kept from them, but they simply hadn't asked about it.

[It acts as a universal ID and can't be counterfeited or falsified. Every time someone logs into VR or activates their AR functions, their brain data and DNA are updated. The ID collects all of that data and tracks it over time as it changes. So we need them to have an ID in order for the government to function as designed. It's both a security measure and backup assurance in case we encounter 'visitors' that send infiltrators,] Gaia explained.

"Aren't there some serious privacy concerns with that?" Felix asked after considering it from the citizens' point of view for a moment.

[Well, yes and no. Yes, because it tracks everything, and I do mean everything. But no, because the only information that can be displayed to different agencies is information that's relevant to those agencies. So hospitals can see health tracking information, traffic police can see driving history, bank employees will see the account history, and so on,] Gaia calmly replied.

Nova grabbed a book from the shelves and tossed it to Nyx, who opened it. It was the memory of a low-level member of a rebel group. [The scouts are here!] she exclaimed, practically vibrating with glee. [I just knew we'd get some! This will make my job so much easier.] She smiled and giggled, clasping the book to her chest.

Aron glanced at Nova and gave her a look that meant, 'Is Nyx okay? I'm a bit concerned about her mental health.'

Nova smiled and nodded at him and a screen that only he could see popped up in front of him. [Myself and the rest of the AIs are constantly studying what it means to be 'human', sir, so we're constantly developing and evolving as new servers come online and we become better and better at emulating human behavior. She's fine, sir,] the screen read.

Felix thought for a minute and asked, "Who sent scouts? The aliens? How?" He visibly shivered at the idea of aliens already being among humanity.

[No,] Gaia replied. [That's the brain data of one of the rebels. They're suspicious of the VR environment and government services, so they sent in some of their low-level, 'unimportant',] she raised her hands and made air quotes to emphasize the status of the so-called "scouts", [members to test the waters.]

“They’re taking a page from the cold war spy vs spy stuff and the operations of modern terrorist networks,” Aron added. “We shouldn’t underestimate them just because we have an overwhelming tech advantage. After all, no matter how advanced your tech becomes, if you become reliant on it, then you risk getting blindsided by smart cavemen with sticks and rocks.”

He turned to Sarah and said, “You should prepare to note a few scientific studies I’ll be having published. Later, I’ll find some researchers in Lab City to write reports about how the VR equipment interfaces with the brain and especially episodic memory. They’ll say that we’re still in the process of learning how the brain works, and you can push the claim that all the data we collect will be black-boxed to train our AIs to better anticipate people’s needs. Stress that it’s purely optional and they can choose to not participate or opt out at any time.” He grinned. “After all, people are already used to that kind of lie from Big Data firms that have existed since the internet first baked cookies.”

Sarah got the mental image of an old meme with a man in a suit and a TV for a head baking cookies and almost fell into a laughing fit. “I’ll address it in a week or so after the research reports have time to spread.” She looked around, confused, and blinked. “Hey, where’d Aron go?”

[He’s discussing something with me,] Nova replied.

“But you’re—oh, right. I forgot you can be in more places than one at a time.”

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Aron was floating in orbit above Earth, watching the world spin around its axis. It was his favorite place in all of VR. He had teleported there upon receiving a notification from the system and was in the middle of a discussion with Nova.

“I expected a lot, but this... this is staggering!” he exclaimed, an excited expression on his face. He was watching his available SP skyrocket; even under heavy time dilation, the number was increasing at a rate that was almost too fast to see.

[It’s quite a leap forward in tech, after all, and hundreds of millions of people are already using it. Not only that, it’s an application of two different technologies, virtual reality and the universal simulation, so you’re getting rewarded with SP for both of them. I’d be worried if the SP reward wasn’t this large,] Nova said.

“True. And with this, I can make our preparations virtually ironclad.” Aron felt a lot of the weight being lifted off his shoulders as he thought of all the things remaining on his wishlist. If he continued farming SP at this rate, a lot of the things he needed for various contingency plans would be in place and humanity would be much, much safer. Then he could be considered to have truly done as much as he could.

“Let’s start filling the cart, shall we?” He rubbed his hands together and grinned as he pulled up the system store.

Chapter 433 The Most Hands-Off Emperor in History

“Bring up all the knowledge we’ve bought a part of due to limited SP,” Aron ordered, rubbing his hands together like a kid on Christmas morning. He had forgotten that he was now the emperor of an empire that had only been founded less than twenty hours ago. It was the most important moment of its existence, though it really didn’t make much difference as he had a capable team of helpers and advisors that could keep things going for the time he would be absent.

[Yes, sir,] Nova excitedly said. She waved her hand, and a list of Aron’s partially acquired knowledges popped up on a virtual screen in front of him.

[Tractor and Repulsor Beams, tier 1

Used to maneuver objects to and from the power source. Particularly useful in places unsuited to humans, such as deep space or other hostile environments.

It was discovered as a matter of necessity by a member of a dragonoid race that has since been wiped out due to needing to move his lair after an enemy took over his territory. Upon discovering the convenience provided by the magical technique, it was later given to the dragonoid’s servants to develop a technological alternative for those incapable of using mana for use in the construction of the new lair.]

“We’ll need this for capturing asteroids and other mining operations,” Aron said as he brought up his system interface and purchased the remainder of the knowledge.

[Energy Weapons, tier 1]

[Psionic Shielding, tier 1

When the peaceful Xyronian system was invaded by the expansionist Zyaliths, they were forced to develop this defensive technology to protect themselves from the invaders’ psionic abilities and weaponry. Once the technology spread, the much larger Zyalith empire collapsed under the weight of rebellion as their mind-controlled and brainwashed slave races broke free of their shackles and rose up against their oppressors.]

Aron promptly moved it to the system’s shopping cart and moved to the next knowledge he had been eyeing for quite some time.

[Spatial lock, tier 1

Creates localized temporal stasis fields, preventing spatial movement or changes to the environment within the field. As long as power is continuously provided to it, nothing will be allowed into, or out of, the locked space without spending more energy than is being provided to the stasis field.]

Just like that, nearly all of his sp disappeared.

“And now, we wait.” Aron looked at the remaining knowledges on his wishlist and winced at the price tags. He needed to hurry up the distribution and adoption of the technology he had in order to give his researchers time to familiarize themselves with the system purchases before the visitors arrived. Maturing the technology was

important; just because he could use it “as is” after purchasing it didn’t mean he would be considered an expert in it. Experience was important, after all.

Up until this point, the knowledge he had bought from the system had mostly been things that were already being worked on by humanity, like controlled nuclear fusion, or logical advances in already-existing technology, like atomic printers. But he had experienced for himself just how difficult it was to develop on those technologies. While fusion generators were relatively easy, given humanity’s existing body of research and experiments with tokamak and stellarator reactors, iterating on the atomic printers had proven far more difficult. With the time dilation in Lab City set to 100:1, it had taken the equivalent of centuries just for the researchers to figure out how to build atomic printers in different shapes and sizes, and they had yet to even begin to improve on the tech itself.

It clearly showed how important it was to incorporate the knowledge Aron bought and make it their own. That was one of the main reasons he wasn’t constantly buying newer, shinier knowledge to use and had instead focused on developing his own advancements based on human ingenuity.

Turning to Nova, he asked, “How’s Research City coming?”

Research City was a copy of Lab City that was intended for public usage. It had all of the facilities and capabilities of Lab City, but was in the “public” area of the simulation, thus limiting its time dilation to the 2:1 ratio.

[Most of the scientists and experts we invited were also among the first to adopt the long-stay VR Medpods. And nearly all of them accepted our offer. What researcher would turn down unlimited budgets? I expect the acceptance rate to be around 93%. There will be a few holdouts here and there, primarily due to ideological differences or conflicts with you personally or one of your companies,] she replied, bringing up a list of invitees sorted by those who had already accepted the offer, those who would likely accept the offer in the near future, and those who would likely decline.

Those who had already accepted the invitation to Research City had notes next to their names about what they were currently working on; most of their work so far had been carrying out experiments they’d always wanted to do in reality but had been unable to do, either for lack of time, budget, or material resources. There were a few, though, that had been actively running old, classified, experiments in an attempt to disprove what they saw as shameless boasting on Aron’s part about the simulation being true to reality.

But that didn’t matter; Aron’s true research base was still and would forever be the original Lab City. Research City was meant as a front to explain where the new developments would come from. He had set aside all of the “gold” facilities that, in Lab City, were focused on mana and mana-related research to act as a “skunkworks” where most of the actual advancements would come out of. And though that was Research City’s primary purpose, if Aron were pressed, he would admit that it was also a slight compensation to the scientists and researchers he had recreated in Lab City for “stealing” the achievements that could have been theirs.

[Currently, Research City has 300,000 researchers across all fields, with levels ranging all over the academic spectrum. There are Nobel Prize laureates mixed with university freshmen, and there’s even two high school students working there.]

"I suddenly felt a bit of weight lift off my chest there, Nova," Aron said. His guilt over the wholesale academic theft had always been in his subconscious mind, and now that it had been alleviated, at least partially, he was feeling much more optimistic, though he had no idea why.

[You've been feeling guilty, sir,] she explained. [By giving the experts free and unfettered access to Research City, you're partially repaying them for 'stealing' their potential future achievements in the past. Even though most of those achievements wouldn't have been made possible in their lifetimes, there was still a price to pay. And now you've paid it, so of course you'll feel better.]

"Thanks," Aron said, feeling quite a bit better and more upbeat.

Chapter 434 Athena's New Toys

While Aron was busy shopping and discussing the new Research City plan with Nova, nyxians embedded in the various protest groups began plucking the instigators from the groups they were in and replacing them. After all, an unaimed herd of humanity was like a large firework launcher. Leaving either of them unattended was a very, very bad idea and could lead to incredibly destructive consequences.

The nyxians still allowed the mobs to vandalize buildings and other assorted properties, landmarks, and monuments, but they limited the damage and guided it primarily to the (former) government buildings along the way. Still, a few unfortunate shops and warehouses were targeted, but once the protesters came to their senses the next day, they would likely be surprised to hear that some of their favorite stores had been destroyed while their least favorites were just fine.

Nyx had instilled all of her nyxians with a rather wicked sense of sardony, after all.

Not all of the groups were monolithic, either, and fistfighting broke out within the protest groups rather often. The original organizers of the protests and architects of the violence couldn't be bothered to care about any particular issue and simply gathered people who were angry. It didn't matter why they were angry, just that they were. Unfortunately, with guns in the mix, quite a few shots were fired as well, though a surprisingly low number of them hit anything, as even the most fervent ammosexual was still in love with the idea of "warning shots".

Whether or not those warning shots ruined the day of someone blocks away from them didn't matter. It only mattered that they got to fulfill their wet dream of frightening an enemy with a warning shot.

With the increase in reports of shots fired, the recently understaffed police scrambled to meet the new threat level of the protests. After all, some of their staff had resigned, some had been fired due to not deserving to wear a uniform, and a full quarter of the remainder had already reported to their nearest cube for retraining, courtesy of the Imperial Police Agency.

"This is Captain Williams of the Houston City Police Department. We're requesting aid and reinforcements as soon as possible. Shots have been fired and we predict a full riot will break out shortly."

"This is Chief Mehmet Kaya of the Istanbul Police. More than a million people have taken to the streets and are vandalizing buildings and setting fires on their way to the

cube. Requesting reinforcement. The longer this goes on, the more damage the city will face and the higher the death toll will rise as emergency service vehicles are unable to reach the injured and the fires.”

“This is the police chief of Moscow....”

“This is the police chief of London....”

“This is the police chief of Paris....”

One after another, cities began requesting reinforcements with only short intervals between calls. It was becoming very obvious to anyone paying attention that the violence was definitely planned beforehand, given the timing of violence breaking out all over the globe.

The reason those plotting the violent protests could even hope to succeed at all was because the citizens were absolutely pissed. If they weren’t angry, or even if they were a little less angry than they were, the chaos would have been much less. But people who had become accustomed to living their whole lives in a certain fashion had been forced to change the lives they were used to in a very short period of time.

That had given the operatives behind the protests an opening they could use to manipulate that anger, increase it, and point it in the direction the organizers wanted it to be vented in: the imperial government. It had been quite easy for the skilled intelligence operatives to convince the angry populace that if they just caused enough damage, it would delegitimize the new government and things would soon go back to normal for them, while the people responsible for the upset—Aron and his inner circle—would be imprisoned, or even executed.

The only reason there was any doubt that there was a single goal behind all of the protests was because the nyxians had intervened in quite a few of them and acted as a calming pill to gradually bring the protesters back to reality. If that weren’t the case, things would be a lot more dire than they currently were.

Still, things were plenty dire.

Areas without nyxian influence had broken out into full riots, with protesters causing millions, or even tens of millions of END damage to property, and hundreds of thousands of people had been severely injured, with thousands more dead worldwide. And that was just the known figure; the estimates had already passed a million injuries and fatalities on the low end.

Things were rapidly coming to a head, and Aron’s nascent government was facing its first test. They could neither act, nor could they refrain from acting. If they acted to put down the protests, the tactics they would have to use—high-pressure water hoses, beanbag and rubber bullets, tear gas bombardments, and so on—would only reinforce the idea that the new government was nothing more than a brutal dictator’s megalomaniacal power grab. But if they didn’t act, the new government would be seen as incapable of preventing or restraining the protesters from causing so much damage and loss of life.

Either way, it would hinder the authority of the Empire.

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[We can't count on the police any longer and need to respond with force. Otherwise the property damage and casualty numbers will only continue increasing,] Nyx said with some heartache in her voice. If only she'd had more time or more operatives, she could have cut this entire issue off at the pass, or at least strictly limited it.

[The cubes are all ready, I'm just waiting for the order,] Athena said to Gaia with a respectful nod. Despite only being a few weeks old, Gaia was still the head of the government in Aron's absence and held his plenipotentiary authority, thus she deserved the respect that her position demanded.

[Send out the LEA-001s and impose martial law in the cities requesting reinforcements. For areas further away from cubes, divert carriers and yeet ARES into them armed with charge weapons instead of pulse weapons. Ensure civilian safety is prioritized over potential property damages. Buildings were built once, they can be built again.] Gaia gave a crooked smile. [Besides, they're actually doing us a favor, since the existing cities will need to be torn down anyway. Still, the law is the law. Ensure that the instigators and worst offenders are punished to the fullest extent of the law and repair the critical infrastructure so that people don't suffer too much.]

[Understood,] Athena said with a smile. She had been looking forward to using her new toys, and now she had the perfect excuse.

Chapter 435 Resistance is Futile

For an hour or so, the riots continued unabated. Those leading them were quite happy, and patting themselves and each other on the back. After all, no matter what intelligence agency they worked for, whether it was the CIA, Mossad, MI6, MSS, or any of the many, many others working as instigators, they had all been "in the trade" for long enough that they could spot familiar faces in the crowds around them.

Spies were generally valuable, and when caught, they would be ransomed by their agency at a reasonable price. So interagency friendships and rivalries were generally of the polite sort and rarely close in the case of friendships—after all, friends today could find themselves on opposite sides and working at cross purposes tomorrow—while their rivalries rarely, if ever, reached the point of a blood feud. And for the same reason, at that; enemies today could find themselves working together tomorrow.

So they all knew at least one of the other instigators, and everyone knew what they were there for. Thus, they had been tacitly cooperating with each other in the field, just like the upper management were cooperating with each other back in their agencies' headquarters.

That made things difficult for the nyxians, who were trying to pluck them out unnoticed so as to avoid a completely uncontrolled stampede, and an absolute nightmare for the police officers attempting to corral the unruly mobs. Eventually, the police were forced to simply set up a cordon and try to contain the rioting and damage to lower-value areas along the path of their march.

And that proved to be enough, as soon, sharp-eyed rioters near the leading edge of their individual mobs spotted a dark blob a distance away from them, behind the officers' cordon. Moment by moment, the blob grew more distinct until they could make out what appeared to be individuals in fancy riot gear and bright colors that would stand out in the crowd, as opposed to the police forces' general propensity for dark-colored uniforms like navy blue and black.

"What the hell are those things?"

One by one, people started to grow still as the individuals approached. Some were on foot, while others were flying out of the cube that the rioters could see off in the distance.

Aron had purchased robotics some time ago from the system, and had since been working on incorporating robots into his forces. Whether they be the cerberus mulebots, general repair and maintenance bots, or the constructor swarms he had used to build the cubes around the world in order to disguise the capabilities of the atomic printers at his disposal, all of them had long entered service and proven themselves. Now, the unruly citizens in the mobs were about to be introduced to his latest brainchild, the LEA-001.

Named the Law Enforcement Auxiliary, the robots were designed with a human appearance in mind, and Aron had gone so far as to introduce variable shapes and sizes in the manufacturing process to enhance their humanlike appearance. No doubt people would definitely notice that they were robots, or perhaps clones, if all of them were exactly the same as the one next to them.

They were dressed in white fabric that was shock resistant, bulletproof, fireproof, and corrosion resistant, and layered atop that was their “armor”—azure blue enameled plates of the same hadfield steel and chromium alloy that protected the atomic printers still hard at work cleaning up the mess left by the destroyed satellites. The armor consisted of a breastplate, spaulders, upper cannons, vambraces, codpiece, culet, cuisse, and greaves that covered their standard-issue boots. And on their heads was a close-fitting three-quarter helmet with a visor slit of smoked glass that attached to a gorget that rose from the breastplate to the jawline, leaving their humanlike mouths on display.

The armor had black trim on the edges of the plates and gold accents denoting ranks and a golden police badge on the left side of their chest. On the right side of their chest were the letters “LEA”.

As they were meant for police work, rather than serving on the battlefield, they were only armed with a charge pistol and a rifle variant. Most of the time, the rifles would be left behind when they were deployed, to make them appear less threatening, but for today’s deployment, they were present in the arsenal of every LEA that swarmed out of the cubes.

“Are those... robots? Or ARES troops? How the fuck can they fly?”

Questions like those were being shouted back and forth in the now-stalled crowds as the flying and marching LEAs rapidly reached the front line of the protests and the rooftops of mostly intact buildings around them.

The LEA in the lead of the marching reinforcements raised “his” hand and all of them came to a halt in an eerie display of synchronization.

“He” raised a microphone to his mouth and speakers hidden somewhere in the armor of every LEA crackled to life as the leader said, “Citizens, this has been deemed a violent protest and is in violation of Article I of the constitution. Lower your weapons and lie face down on the ground. I repeat, lower your weapons and lie face down on the ground. You have sixty seconds to comply or you will be made to comply.”

The LEA commander replaced the microphone “he” was speaking into and stood ramrod straight and stock still, waiting for the mob to comply with his order. Although the LEA series robots were equipped with fully functioning AIs, they were limited to the processing power of a quantum microcomputer reaper implant, so they were rather rigid in their speech and in the way they carried out their duties.

Similar scenes played out around every protest that was near a cube, or at least near enough to one that it could dispatch LEAs to arrest the violent protesters.

Chapter 436 Running Out of Yeehaw

Houston, Texas.

Being citizens of the state that possessed the most good ol’ American yeehaw, the rioters that had been stopped by the LEAs only paused for a brief moment. People who had moments before been intent on punching, kicking, and biting each other into shallow graves looked at each other, nodded, then turned to face the new threat.

Nobody knew, nor did it really matter, who fired the first shot, but soon, everyone in the crowd with guns had begun raining bullets on their perceived enemies. It didn’t matter if it was the police or the LEAs, anyone who stood in front of the rioters was deemed a mortal enemy and supporter of the megalomaniac who had taken away their freedom.

Even the unarmed rioters were picking up stones and throwing them with all their might. Most of the thrown stones fell short, but it was the thought that counts.

While receiving the bombardment, the LEAs remained still as sparks flashed on their exterior armor and the distinct whine of ricocheting bullets rang out, but was drowned in the much louder sound of an ongoing barrage of fire. The only thing the LEAs moved were their heads, which were scanning back and forth, tracking the attackers and tagging them with their committed crimes and estimated penalties for those crimes.

Forty-seven civilians injured. Requesting emergency evacuation to the nearest medical pod. Forty-eight... forty-nine... fifty.... All local police forces down. Requesting emergency evacuation to the nearest medical pod, the hive mind operating the LEAs reported to central command.

1479 perpetrators marked for arrest when the countdown ends. Charges: 899 with multiple counts of assault with a deadly weapon with intent to injure, harm, or commit murder. 188 with multiple counts of assault with intent to injure, harm, or commit murder.... The LEAs continued their report to their central command, which was overseen by Gaia’s newest subordinate AI, Themis.

Themis collated the information and passed it to Gaia, who noted it and distributed it to the rest of the AIs before passing the initial judgment on the violent rioters: guilty. That was the likely verdict, but a trial must still be held. Themis noted the evidence gathered by the LEAs and added the trials to judges’ dockets pending their retraining on imperial law.

All of that happened in a fraction of a second after the rioters began shooting at the police and LEAs, who were still in the middle of their sixty-second countdown.

Twenty-one seconds remained.

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NSA Supervisory Special Agent David Stratton, having left his position as the leader of the mob, was watching the fusillade from the safety of a nearby office building. His binoculars were trained on the LEAs, who were barely visible through the sparks and dust kicked up by ricochets and outright misses.

“Why’re they just looking around?” he muttered to himself. “Isn’t it common sense to end a countdown when the person you’re counting down opens fire on you? Fucking morons!”

He focused his binoculars on the crowd, their internal parabolic microphone picking up the shouting past the rapidly dwindling gunfire; it seemed the yeehaw crowd had run out of yeehaw and was resorting to using their words. “Coward! You’re trading your freedom for fear! You see them just standing there and doing nothing and think they’re better than us. But you’re just falling for their intimidation tactics! They’re just bullies!” one of the rioters yelled at another, who had come to his senses and decided to go home.

“They can’t do shit to us, you’ll see!” yelled another.

“To hell with your freedom! Your freedom isn’t worth my life,” the retreating man said, picking up his pace in an attempt to get as far from ground zero as possible.

He made it all of a block before running into the police cordon that was set up to block the rear of the rioters, where he was subjected to another good old fashioned American specialty: police brutality. But that was a story for another day.

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“Ten... nine... eight.... Two... One.” As one, the LEAs drew their charge rifles and released their safeties, switching them to stun. “Drop your weapons and lay face down on the ground or you will be fired upon!” the lead unit yelled. “This is your last warning!”

An electric whine sounded as the charge rifles finished their initial bootup and power cycle.

Some people in the crowd threw down their weapons and followed instructions, but most refused and continued firing, still to no effect.

The LEAs who had taken station on the rooftops to the sides of the rioting crowd were the first to open fire, sending accurate, single shots down on the rioters who were still standing and panic firing at anything they saw. LEAs, downed police officers, perceived silhouettes in the windows of nearby buildings, and even other rioters were taking fire. Some of the more sinister people in the crowd were even specifically aiming at those “compatriots” of theirs that had surrendered, considering themselves enacting justice by eliminating traitors.

But that final, last gasp of resistance was soon put down as charge round after charge round impacted their targets, releasing enough electricity to overwhelm their nervous system and dropping them to the ground, stunned and unable to even generate a coherent thought, let alone move around.

Once the rioters were all taken down and peace returned to the surroundings, the LEAs moved among the crowd, snapping stun cuffs that sent a constant, low-level electrical charge through the

wearer's nerves that prevented them from mustering any real strength around the wrists and ankles of the arrestees.

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Agent Stratton saw one of the LEAs looking in his direction and decided that it was time to retreat. He gathered up his recording devices and vanished deeper within the building, heading to a bathroom where he applied some facial putty as a hasty disguise. He tore the seam on the inside of his suit jacket, then reached in and pulled out a wig that would change his US Marine Corps standard-issue "high and tight" crew cut into a more bland men's haircut that wouldn't even stand out in a crowd of one, then applied a thin layer of foundation powder from a makeup compact that would blend the putty and hairline to look at least a little bit more natural.

He took off his suit jacket, pants, and dress shirt, revealing a polo shirt and slacks of a different color, then walked out of the bathroom and joined the nearest crowd in the building that had formed once the shooting died down.

NSA Supervisory Special Agent David Stratton had disappeared, replaced by the white-collar worker, James Smith.

Chapter 437 FAFO

Elsewhere in the world, peace still had yet to be completely restored.

In Istanbul, one of the LEAs was placing stun cuffs on one of the downed protesters when another one, who had "surrendered" earlier, rose up and swung a metal pipe at its head. But to the protester's complete surprise, the helmet was completely undamaged while the pipe gave out. After all, when hard comes in contact with impossibly hard, hard loses.

The LEA finished cuffing the prisoner, then stood and turned to face the protester that had swung the pipe at it. The man swung the bent pipe at the LEAs face, only for the disguised robot's arm to move impossibly fast as it caught the pipe and released a taser charge from its palm. The jolt caused the protester to drop the pipe and the LEA swiftly raised its charge pistol and stunned him point blank, then stun cuffed him and moved on to the next downed protester without a word.

In Novograd, Russia, someone attacked the LEAs with a molotov cocktail only for it to completely ignore the flickering flames on its body and stun its attacker. In Kandahar, an LEA completely ignored a suicide attack by an insurgent driving a van loaded with explosives. In other places, they were also attacked with vehicles, but the vehicles inevitably lost the contest against the walking-tank-like Law Enforcement Auxiliaries.

They had proven themselves immune to improvised explosives, regular explosives, bullets, cars, trucks, and even in one case, a dump truck loaded with close to 14 tons of gravel.

All over the world, wherever the LEAs had been deployed, protesters were gripped with fear in the face of their inexorable advance. Everything they threw at the robots was to absolutely no avail, but the LEAs pinpoint accuracy with their charge pistols and the ease with which they could apply stun cuffs to even struggling prisoners was disheartening, to say the least. On average, one LEA was restraining a protester every ten seconds, and most of that was spent walking from person to person while fending off attacks that would otherwise have caused the captured protesters harm, which would have been a very bad image for the nascent government.

As more and more protesters were downed by stun charges, LEAs were freed up to begin providing first aid to the wounded as they waited for medevac to the nearest medical pods, which, ironically, were in the very cubes those same protesters had been marching toward with the intent to destroy them. The whole process was very regimented; one LEA would triage the wounded with another five moving them into separate groups based on the severity of their injuries. It was a process that had long been perfected by first responders and trauma specialists when working at mass casualty incidents in the field, and it was being put to good use now.

Similar actions were taking place in every city within a reasonable distance of a cube. And given that they were living in the internet age, the process was being broadcast live by thousands, if not dozens of thousands, of accounts. Even people who had used their subsidy to buy AR glasses were getting in on the lookieloo action. Nova and Panoptes not only didn't block those broadcasts, but they promoted them instead.

The people in the background who had thought that they could overwhelm the newly formed empire by sheer numbers in a worldwide coordinated strike were now finding out just how wrong and delusional they were to ever have thought that.

Their belief that ARES wouldn't use excessive force had turned out to be correct, but they had never expected that Aron hadn't been exaggerating in the least when he claimed to have withheld the majority of his tech during the Last War. And what ARES had shown there was already in the realm of fantasy, but seeing it online and experiencing it in person were two different things entirely. An LEA had straight up ignored a round from an FGM-148 Javelin anti-tank weapon that rioters in Miami had looted from the local Army garrison and unleashed it on them. And even more unbelievably, an LEA in Saint Petersburg didn't just take the hit from a Russian RPG-7 warhead, but it had actually grabbed it from mid-air and pulled the thing apart with its bare hands!

The people behind the protests had fucked around, and now they were finding out.

The masterful suppression of the violent protests took less than ten minutes from beginning to end. And the ARES troopers yeeted into areas that were out of easy reach of a cube took even less time; they simply launched crowd control rockets from their backpack launchers that knocked the protesters unconscious, then cuffed them while they lay snoring on the ground. By the time everything was done, more than three hundred thousand people were arrested and stun cuffed, powerless to do anything but lay there like logs.

The arrested protesters were taken into custody and transported to the nearest cube for processing. Those who had discharged deadly weapons were held without bail pending arraignment, as were the leaders that had instigated the protesters to turn violent. As for those that used stones, knives, bats, and such, they were processed and released on house arrest, also pending arraignment and trial.

The entire booking process took three hours, by which time the world had regained its calm. The cities that had suffered the most violence were still under martial law, while those that hadn't suffered that much were being very, very careful in their protests to not allow violence to break out lest they join the others in holding cells and house arrest.

Ironically, the protests had actually proven good for Aron, as the milestone of a billion users of VR and AR devices had been brought forward by two days. What he had expected would take a week was now projected to be accomplished in five days.

Occasionally missing content, please report errors in time.

Chapter 438 Seven Days

January 7, 2018.

With a strict curfew maintained over the past week, people had found themselves with little to do. Thus, orders had been pouring in for AR glasses and VR gear nonstop and deliveries had proceeded apace. By the end of the week, the number of people connected to VR had reached two billion, twice Aron's initial goal, and the number was still steadily increasing.

The first batch of retrained individuals also returned home and began implementing their orders. As they got to work, the empire truly began taking shape as the imperial agencies came online. While the AIs were capable of managing the empire perfectly fine, and it could even run completely without human intervention, there was still some ephemeral difference between having real people at the helm and AIs running things.

In the finance sector, the currency issue had also begun. All digital currencies were instantly converted to Earth New Dollars at a fair exchange rate and paper currency was available, albeit in a limited amount, in every bank as soon as they opened in the morning. Relatively few young people still handled cash, so most of the people in the lines that stretched out of the doors and around the corner of the blocks the bank branches were on tended to be members of older generations.

Naturally, the night before, all of the other paper and coin currencies had been brought back to the cubes for recycling. There was a little bit of it saved for collectors, who could buy it from the Imperial Treasury with END, but the majority of it ended up as atomic printer stock for usage in other projects.

As for the "paper" currency itself, it wasn't paper at all. Instead, it was two layers of a clear aluminum memory alloy that could be folded, but not creased. It was resistant to tearing, would melt instead of burn—but only if exposed to a sufficiently high temperature—and sandwiched between the layers was a highly durable, yet flexible battery that powered two things: a single qubit and a short-ranged holographic projector.

The holographic projector could only project a single image a few microns away from it and was completely air-gapped and immune to tampering. The images on the face and back of the bill were generated inside the currency, rather than printed on it. As for the qubit, it only served one purpose; it could communicate with a cash reader and return a checksum verification proving the authenticity of the bill itself.

With those two measures alone, the currency was completely secure without taking into account the alloy the bill was made of.

And on the information front, all of the digital and paper records had been scanned into the Imperial Archivist database, where Mnemosyne, another one of Gaia's child AIs, was busily categorizing and sorting it into categories.

The Imperial Archivist database also contained the Akashic Record, a constantly updating living database comprised of the brain data of everyone who logged into VR. Considering more than two billion people had logged in by this point, the record was rather immense. Thus, Mnemosyne assigned an akashic librarian to each individual to maintain the record, and they operated as a hive

mind for convenience and cataloguing, removing duplicate entries and generally acting as curators for the body of knowledge.

Once the relevant information had been forwarded to Minerva, a wave of true justice swept the globe as those who had abused government authority were arrested, and innocent prisoners serving jail time for crimes they didn't commit were released and compensated. The prisoners whose crimes had their penalties changed in the imperial legal code were left in prison, but notified that a retrial would be taking place along the new punishment guidelines.

Some prisoners cheered and others sobbed, as included in the notification of their upcoming retrial was a copy of the code they would be retried under. Some crimes had lower punishment under imperial law, while others were punished with harsher sentences, leading to the cacophony of cheers and sobs.

That wasn't the only usage of the Akashic Record, either. Those who had already registered IDs in the imperial offices in VR were immediately able to receive the benefits of being an imperial citizen. Thus, Asclepius and Coeus arranged transport for the sick and injured to their nearest cube, where they were seen by Edenian and Esparian doctors and given time in medical pods to heal their injuries and cure their illnesses.

Even those with previously incurable and untreatable issues, such as psychological problems caused by an imbalance in their brain chemistry, degenerative diseases like amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, and even those with genetic issues like Fragile X syndrome or down syndrome were completely restored to normal in less than 48 hours in a medical pod.

But that wasn't the only benefit of registering for government IDs.

Everyone who registered for an ID was surprised to find that their GAIA OS assistants had been migrated to VR to act as their personal maids or butlers. For some, the surprise was a pleasant one, while for others, the surprise was embarrassing. After all, they had never thought they'd ever actually interact with their AI assistants and had chosen their appearance based on waifus and husbandos or scantily-clad, sexually exaggerated figures.

Those who were embarrassed were soon forced to admit that they were not, in fact, true men of culture, as a TRUE man of culture wouldn't be embarrassed at all.

Still, their maids, butlers, waifus, husbandos, and scantily-clad sexpots were extremely helpful in guiding them through their imperial benefits and designing the homes they would be inhabiting in the soon-to-be-constructed fortress cities. After they finished the design process, the designs were sent to the Imperial Design Agency, where they were checked for issues like structural stability and so on, as well as given an estimated cost of construction that the citizen would need to pay to have their designs brought from virtual reality to actual reality. Then, the only thing left for them to do was visit the Bank of the Universe, where they could work out financing options that worked for them.

Chapter 439 Insourcing

Research City.

"Damn, I can't believe this is open to everyone," Peter Chekhov said as he laid his eyes on the city in front of him.

“It’s a dream come true for every researcher in the world. Who would’ve thought that Emperor Aron would allow such a city to exist without demanding payment from anyone! He could’ve charged money and everyone would still throw money at him for access,” said an olive-skinned young man walking next to him.

The olive-skinned young man was named Mario, and Peter had befriended him during his time touring the simulation backpacking in the Alps.

“It isn’t really free, though. Any and all research done here is owned by the imperial family,” Peter said. There was always a price for everything.

“True, but they give you a hundred-year royalty agreement if it’s an advancement that you come up with and they haven’t. Plus, they provide you with the best environment and basically unlimited funding for your research.” Mario shrugged. There may be a price, but some prices were worth paying. “Besides, your starting point here is at least fifty years ahead of the world, so it’s not that high a price to pay. Plus, even though your research may be owned by the imperial family, your name will still be attached to it. So it’s fair for everyone—you get money and fame and the empire benefits from your work,” he said with stars in his eyes.

Mario’s family had all been scientists all the way back to the Italian Renaissance, and he had grown up in the lab with his father. He had personally experienced the difficulty and heartache in searching for research funding and investors who wanted not only ownership, but also their names on all results. The stress of the constant office politicking and grant hunting had driven his father into a coma after having a stroke one day, and that had drained the family’s entire life savings.

At least, that was the case until a few days ago, when he got a notification that his father had been moved to the cube in Rome for medical treatment. He had woken up after just two hours in that miracle device. That, combined with the wonders he had seen in the simulation and everything else Mario had received as a benefit of his imperial citizenship had turned him into an absolute diehard fan of the new emperor. But what drove him over the top from a diehard fan to a braindead fan had to be Research City. Just being able to focus purely on research and benefit from it financially was, to him, Aron’s most benevolent gesture.

Mario’s experience wasn’t unique by far. Everyone who had registered for citizenship and gotten their IDs approved had their sick relatives listed for priority access to the medical pods.

That was just one of the many means that Aron had been using to whitewash his stained reputation over the past week, the first of the Terran Empire. His benevolent actions had brought more and more people around to accepting the new imperial government, and hundreds of millions more were ordering their VR equipment and applying for citizenship every day. Each of them had found their “unsolvable” problems to be distinctly solvable when imperial technology was applied to them, leading quite a few people thinking of Aron as a new messiah.

“Won’t companies just force researchers into using Research City for researching, but then register the patents in the real world and take all the credit and royalties?” Peter asked. He knew that think tanks and major corporations with research and

development departments were rather underhanded and brutal with their employees. Intellectual theft wasn't just common, but rather the expected outcome when scientists and researchers worked for them. After all, anything goes as long as the CEOs can provide a positive profit and loss statement to the shareholders every quarter.

"Didn't you read the contract you signed when you applied for a lab here?" Mario asked in bewilderment as everything was covered in the contract researchers in Research City signed to lease labs there.

"I haven't applied for one yet. I've been too busy touring the city," Peter replied, embarrassed.

"Ah, that's why you're confused." Mario pulled up the contract and highlighted the relevant clause. "There's different levels to the labs in Research City. Funding is unlimited, so everything is done based on computing resources, like how major universities and research institutes allocate supercomputer time for the people that work for them, except here it's a meritocracy. When you sign up for a lab, you fill out a form that, combined with their own evaluation, determines what level of lab you receive. The highest is EX, then SSS, SS, S, A, B, C, D, E, and finally, F.

"Each level gives more benefits, like how close to the city center you are and how big your lab is. The bigger labs can fit more equipment in them and are closer to the hub where everything happens, like presentations, summits, and mingling and relaxing.

"I've heard rumors that say that at the EX rank you can even have your experiment run at increased time dilation or not even have to use the lab at all and just get the data direct from the simulation. But nobody knows, since the highest ranking scientists so far are Stephen Hawking, and a few hundred others who are only rank A. Then there's a few thousand others at rank B, but if Dr. Hawking, of all people, can only rank at the A level then it just goes to show how hard it is to make rank. I wonder if we'll see an EX-rank person in my lifetime," Mario sighed.

"Is it possible to get a higher rank after your initial evaluation?" Peter asked.

"Sure. Every research proposal you submit and all of your results will be evaluated and awarded points based on its value and the level of your participation. To increase your rank, you just have to accumulate points. The more outstanding your results are, the faster you'll rank up, and the more unique your area of research is, the more points you'll be awarded as well. That's likely to avoid people just riffing off other researchers instead of actually pushing the boundaries of science." Mario showed Peter the relevant sections of his contract as he summarized it.

“As you can see here, every bit of research you do becomes a public entry in the Akashic Records in the Imperial Archive. That way everyone can read it... it’s like a scientific journal that you automatically get published in. And anything discovered here will be automatically recorded, issued a patent, and awarded points only for the original researcher, or team, that made the discovery. That way there’s no exploitation by opportunistic bastards in think tanks or major multinational conglomerates, no academic fraud, no infighting about who discovered what first, and no point theft,” he continued, reciting it from his contract as the two men read it together.

“Damn, the emperor didn’t leave any loopholes to exploit at all,” Peter said, quite impressed by Aron’s vision.

It was at precisely that moment that a note was made on his profile in the Akashic Record under his political affiliation. [Favorable view of the government; no further active monitoring required.]

“It’s another business to the emperor, after all, as he also gets a cut of the earnings our discoveries generate,” Mario added. He tilted his head back, looking at the upper levels of the tallest and widest building in the exact center of Research City. That was where all the highest-level researchers would have their labs, and he swore to himself that he would one day have a lab there.

Chapter 440 A Severe Blow

A week later, enough people had been hired and trained, or retained and retrained, that the government could function relatively normally. The LEAs had been deactivated and stored away, ready to be deployed again at need in case of emergency, and the virtual intelligences staffing the VR government offices had human supervision at all hours of the day. The shifts were long, but the work was satisfying and the employees had no complaints.

It would be another week yet, before they began a nine-hour shift rotation—eight hour workdays with an hour for lunch—and a week after that, they would finally be able to take days off and vacations. But they had all undergone the training program Gaia and the other AIs had set up for them, so they understood the need for the long hours and were okay with it. Plus, the overtime pay was excellent and greatly appreciated; previously, as government employees, they had been forced to work on salary waivers that limited, if not eliminated entirely, their overtime pay.

The delivery of AR and VR gear had gone on, twenty-four hours a day, leading to billions more joining the list of imperial citizens and the cities in the simulation gained a liveliness that they hadn’t had before.

With the freedom granted to them in virtual reality and the various delivery services for the necessary daily supplies, the inconvenience of life under martial law had faded into the background and people seemed to have become content with their lot much earlier than Aron and Nova had anticipated they would.

The exception to the rule were the surviving members of the various governments’ militaries. Quite a few members of the military had been killed in The Last War, and the majority of survivors had

chosen the retirement with benefits option offered by Aron. But recruitment continued apace and ARES had accepted more than fifty million new members, including the new nyxian recruits. All of them, whether they be former soldiers or new recruits, had been transferred to the central ARES training bases on each continent for their specific training.

It would still be a full month before their training was done. Two weeks real time for initial entry training, then a further two weeks of specialized training for Nyxians, Reapers, and Aegis teams. For those who washed out or weren't selected for further specialist training, they would experience two more weeks of a simulated war. Regardless of which branch of service they ended up in, be it the Poseidon Navy, ARES Shock Troopers, Aeolus Air Force, Aegis Shield teams, Reaper teams, or Nyxian Intelligence, everyone who entered training as a member of ARES would graduate their thirty-day training cycle as a veteran with five years experience.

During their first two weeks, they would undergo genetic enhancements and their training would last a full hundred perceived weeks, then their further training would include their base implant suites and the second half of their training would last for another hundred and sixty weeks, for a total of five years of perceived time in the month they were training in VR.

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Somewhere on Earth.

"From the research we conducted, we're 90% confident that the empire can read short term memories, at the very least. There's also a high possibility that they can read all of our memories, considering the level of their technology," Rick Ashley's science advisor reported. Rick may have been delusional, and he was definitely a narcissist and megalomaniac, but he was far from stupid and had surrounded himself with the most capable advisors he could find, drawn from a large pool of candidates and winnowed down to an elite few.

"If they can read our memories, what steps have we taken to avoid detection?" Rick asked, his expression sour. If what his advisor was telling him was true, then the empire's downfall was looking less and less likely to happen at all, let alone in the next few weeks as he had originally expected.

Although the empire had only been in existence for two weeks, Rick's thoughts had grown more and more pessimistic as he came to know more about Aron's technological supremacy. Nearly all of his plans had been delayed indefinitely as he was repeatedly stymied by countermeasure after countermeasure that the devil had pulled from seemingly nowhere to solve all of the problems Rick and his cultists had thrown at him.

"In order to do the testing, we sent twenty new recruits who had their orders delivered via dead drops by cutouts that we, well, cut out after the operation was complete. The recruits had yet to go anywhere near any of our secrets, so even if they can read their memories, the most they can do is track who put the written orders in the dead drops. But the only things they'll find are ashes in the bottom of Lake Mead and other reservoirs around the world, and just them tracking it down in the first

place will tell us whether or not our suspicions are true. We also have trusted people keeping an eye on the recruits, so if they're contacted or arrested, that'll be another piece of evidence.

"If both of those happen, well, then we'll know conclusively that they can read our memories if we log into VR. So until we know for certain, we should stay far away from it and live completely off the grid. Since the devil's advantage lies in technology, we can easily get around it by becoming luddites, and we've already hired some retired FBI and KGB agents who were active during the cold war to advise us on the countersurveillance methods they used back then. We're also in contact with some remnant forces of ISIS and the Taliban, who both faced similar issues when dealing with the allied forces in the War on Terror, and we have memory editing specialists that will help us develop false memories. That isn't certain, though, so we should probably only use it as a last resort. Until we know how they read our memories, we won't know how to defeat it, so work on that front is ongoing for now."

"Good, but if we continue wasting time, it'll cost us critical opportunities. The empire and its devil are at their weakest right now, so we need to do something to set it back or we'll have to face it at its full power before we're ready. It's growing stronger and stronger by the moment, while we're marking time and treading water. If we can't stop it by the time the fortress cities are built, we never will," Rick said. The timer had started when the New Year's Ball dropped in Times Square, and his doomsday was coming whether he liked it or not. His only chance was to fight back now, before his end became inevitable.

Megalomaniac he may be, but delusional was a different story entirely.

"We need to be careful, shepherd," his intelligence advisor interjected. "We heard that an entire group was uprooted as a result of one of their members directly participating in the recent protests, so the same can happen to us if we're in that position as well. We should begin by abandoning anyone we've recruited so far and recruit from scratch, at least for the cannon fodder. The advisory council and you can undergo identity reassignment surgery to prevent us from being caught in a wide net if the devil gets his hands on our current flock."

"Yes, and I know just the way we can do it, too," Rick sneered. "It'll carve our names into history and show that the seemingly impenetrable empire isn't so impenetrable after all."

"What we're going to do is...." He explained his plans, and the more he spoke, the brighter the eyes of the people in the room with him grew. Everyone saw the

potential of his plan, and if it were to be carried out, it would strike a severe blow against the devil.