

Tech System 521

Chapter 521 War Games: "Subtlety"

The next stage of the war game, testing the shield against a determined infiltrator from the inside, was scheduled for four days later. Considering the upper echelon of ARES had all been involved in the first stage from start to finish, one day was allotted for rest before the three-day preparatory period began for the second stage of destructive testing on the shield.

As John had been on defense first in the first round, he would be on offense first in the infiltration round. His task was to send a single reaper team into Ceres Station to take down the planetary shield in whatever way they could. They would be given limited intelligence to simulate spy action, including the number of defenders, types of defenses, and potential routes to the shield control stations in the planetoid-cum-space-elevator.

The confidence level of the intel wouldn't be high, but it would be generally reliable to form the framework of a plan around. The briefing John received set the confidence level in the intel package at 81%, which put it in the category of actionable intel, even if only barely.

Thus, a reaper team was handed the intel package and John wisely stepped back. He wouldn't be participating in the infiltration itself, and a distant commander shouldn't interfere with leadership decisions made in the field. Even though ARES had a vast advantage in real-time communications and leaders in the comfortable offices way back behind the front lines could, if they so chose, interfere in front line command decisions, the adage "train like you mean to fight" still applied. And since they couldn't guarantee their comms would remain stable for a multitude of reasons, it was best to leave it to the commanders on the field to execute the missions assigned to them.

.....

High above the North Pole in a high polar orbit was a stealthed space station. Home to ARES special forces, it was invisible to any known means of detection; even the empire would be unable to spot it if they didn't know exactly where it was in its orbit at any given time. It was one of the most sensitive of all of ARES bases, for one simple reason: it was where reapers were made, and almost all of their tech was classified at such a high level that it would never see the light of day.

Reapers were an odd breed. It should be illegal for anyone to enjoy the suck as much as they did, and they preferred spending all of their time in the simulation, taking part in the eternal war that Athena had hand crafted. Thus, even though the station itself was made to be extremely comfortable, with plenty of park space, facilities for rest and relaxation—yes, even brothels filled with whorebots—and all the luxuries any man could ask for, it was as deserted as a ghost town.

The only facilities that were active were the clinics, where the reapers would go to get new cutting-edge tech installed whenever Lab City would release an update. Those and what the reapers jokingly referred to as the "graveyards", as they were filled with the coffin-like extended stay VR pods that they spent almost all of their time in. Everything else was silent and dark, visited only by the occasional maintenance bot tasked with cleaning the area or performing minor repairs.

In one of those so-called graveyards was Reaper Team 22, who were in the simulation getting kitted out for their upcoming infiltration mission.

“So we get to blow up Ceres? Holy shit holy shit holy shit sometimes I fucking LOVE my job!” Master Sergeant Cuervo cheered. He was once his team’s demolitions specialist before being promoted to team leader, so any day with a big boom was a great day to be him.

“Sounds like a good day to me, too,” Corporal Cole “Snakeyes” Barrett said. Ceres Station was large, but it wasn’t big enough for him to really play his main role in the infiltration. After all, snipers were at a distinct disadvantage in tight corridors with multiple twists and turns, so he would also be carrying a heavy load of explosives.

Reaper Team 22 was many things, but subtle was most definitely not one of them.

The team dug into the intel package and spent the next few days planning, doing dry runs, and adjusting their plans before the big day. They definitely couldn’t afford another skyscraper incident; they had yet to live down the first one and were still taking shit from other reaper teams about it.

.....

Three days later.

The countdown timer once again ticked over to zero, and the reapers left their stealthed station via cold coasting. The most dangerous portion of the assault would be landing on the dwarf planet, so they split into two fireteams of five people, one led by Tekillya and the other led by Snakeyes, and each of them would individually land on the surface of the station in their individual IDMOs.

But man proposes and god disposes, and Tekillya was taken out by a lucky shot from the point defenses on Ceres Station. Howling with rage and spitting streams of profanity, he was forcibly switched from participant to observer, a devastating mental blow to the explosion addict.

Still, if he couldn’t witness the fireworks first hand, he could always watch them from up close. Thus, he chose to spectate over Snakeyes’ shoulder as the two fireteams ran rampant through the station.

The intel package had been oh so very wrong in terms of the number of defenders and layers of defense they would have to get through, and around every corner was another brutal firefight against hastily prepared fighting positions filled with what seemed like an unending stream of defenders. Intel had the defense forces listed as two ARES battalions, but Nyx—their opponent for the infiltration—had armed every single person on the station and thrown them behind slipshod and not-so-slipshod defensive positions along every hallway leading to the center of the station, where the critical shield installations were located.

The reaper team’s initial plan was to go in stealthily, using their knives to take out the patrolling defenders and relying on their technological advantage to keep them hidden. But they had overlooked one glaringly obvious flaw with that plan: they were going up against people with the same tech they had.

Thus, after more than fourteen hours, the final surviving reaper made it through to the center of the station, completely out of ammunition for his weapons, out of batteries in his Pappy, and his NUTS in tatters. He was even missing his left hand, having had a grenade detonated by a lucky shot while he was still in the process of throwing it.

Still, Snakeyes had made it, and he still had his explosive satchel charges. He knew he couldn't possibly make it back for exfiltration, so he armed the explosives and sprinted the last few meters between him and the nearest fusion reactor containment chamber.

His last words before the fireworks show began were, "SEE YA LATER MOTHERFU—"

Reaper Team 22 had accomplished the mission in a spectacular fashion, but with no survivors.

Chapter 522 Children Are Flighty Creatures

Within a day, the first hundred million new construction workers had been selected and notified to report for training. However, something seemed odd; there were no other movements on the construction side. No materials had been purchased, no construction equipment had been rented or bought, and so on, making people wonder what exactly was going on with the construction. Shouldn't there be piles and piles of materials and heavy equipment excavating the ground or laying foundations?

But those questions went unasked and unanswered as people recalled that Hephaestus Heavy Industries was the company behind this megaproject. They had a history of always producing everything they needed in house, from materials to machinery, and even their "staff", robots though they may be. The only difference now was the scale of the construction. HHI was known for operating under a strict veil of secrecy, sure, but how could they hide a project of this scale?

And taking it a step further, where would they even begin to source the materials? They would surely require iron, steel, cement, and everything else in the neighborhood of billions of tons, and the current mining industry would find it virtually impossible to deliver in that short amount of time.

One intrepid conspiracy theorist, who had been spoiled by panda-novels, even privately believed that a system apocalypse was coming and the materials would be created in VR and somehow taken out in reality by a person with a system, or perhaps a regressor, transmigrator, or reincarnator, but even he had to shake his head and abandon that train of thought.

After all, something so fantastic could only happen in the fever dream of a mad author, but this was definitely reality. He could be sure of that because every time he pinched himself, he felt pain.

But people had finally learned their lesson and settled in to wait for the empire's spokesperson, whoever it may be this time, to come forward and enlighten everyone. And they certainly weren't disappointed, as the response came quicker than expected and in a manner that made all arguments null and void in the face of the evidence they saw with their own eyes.

.....

Felix's office.

[We've repeatedly simulated and reviewed everything, so you can calm down. Manage your mannaries, boss, the possibility of things going wrong is so close to zero as to be statistically impossible. Sure, some extradimensional being could interfere, or something might happen on a quantum level... but really, it's impossible. Im-poss-i-ble,] Felix's AI butler told him. He had noticed a spike in Felix's heartbeat and wanted to bring it back down to normal.

"I'm not worried in the slightest—" Felix grinned, "—on the contrary, I'm excited!" He had been lost in thought considering how far he had come.

When the whole crazy journey had begun, he was just a first-

year law firm associate practically straight out of law school. But now, he was in a field that had nothing to do with the path he had thought his life would take. Instead of spending all of his time in law libraries, writing briefs, and handling tasks assigned by partners in a law firm, he was in an emperor's inner circle. A true blue fucking emperor! How cool was that?

His life had turned out better than he could ever have imagined, and it was all thanks to a single decision made on the spur of the moment. And thanks to that leap of faith, he was a billionaire! Not that money really mattered to him, as with his benefits and position, he found it incredibly difficult to spend any of his immense wealth to begin with. Anything and everything he ever could have wanted was simply handed to him, oftentimes without even needing to ask for it.

In this specific instance, though, he was even more excited than normal. Almost every little boy went through phases where they thought of what they wanted to be when they grow up. They would fall in love with the idea of operating big construction machines and building things, or even tearing them down, and they would fall in love with the idea of being an astronaut. Or a doctor, or a wizard, or... well, the list goes on and on, really. Children are flighty creatures at the best of times, after all.

But now he was actually living those dreams! He could play with all the big construction machines he wanted, and he had already left his footprints on the moon next to great men like Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin. And soon, very soon, he would be a real life wizard. How could he not be in a constant state of excitement? All of his childhood dreams were coming true one after another!

Not only that, he was personally contributing to building not just a building, but an entire new world. And he had the good fortune of fulfilling his dreams alongside his two best friends. He sometimes laughed himself awake in the middle of the night just dreaming about it.

"How much longer until the equipment arrives?" he asked as he jolted himself out of his own head and remembered what he was actually supposed to be doing.

[Two hours, boss. Lots of red tape now that the shield is up and it's been proven to be vulnerable to traitors,] his assistant replied. [The imperial space agency has to inspect everything before letting it pass through the shield, and since everything's coming from our moon base after coming from different locations from the asteroid belts, that's a lot of inspections that need to be done.]

"Then I'd better get going. I want to be the first person they see when they get to Olympus Minor," Felix said, rubbing his hands together in excitement. "I haven't forgotten those monsters since I first laid eyes on them in the simulation."

He rose from his seat and headed to the door in his office, then paused and called Sarah. When she answered, he said, "Hey you. Care for another date? There's something I want us to watch together."

After their trip to the moon, the two friends were teetering on the edge of another kind of leap of faith and, he thought, both of them wanted to explore new ground in their relationship. Working so closely together could bring people together or tear them apart, and for Felix and Sarah, their work had only drawn them closer and closer until only the thinnest of paper was holding them back from moving from friends to lovers.

Chapter 523 An Ammosexual Walks Into A Bar...

?A few hours later, outside the planetary defense shield.

There was no sound in space, so all was silent. And there was an almost hypnotic rhythm to the dance of barely visible satellites in the emptiness between the shield and the gorgeous blue planet acting as a backdrop. The only disturbance was the glowing blue trails of ionic thrusters traveling in a convoy that stretched from the shield to the surface of the moon, where Aron had built an automated logistics and distribution base.

If an observer were to stand atop Ceres Station and look up, they would see enormous vessels shaped and colored like planks of burnt wood, each of them blending in against the blackness of space save for the output of their ionic thrusters. Thousands of them were sailing in a line, headed toward the entry port of the now permanently active shield.

The frontmost vessel came to a halt a few hundred kilometers outside the shield as the convoy fleet commander reported their arrival to Ceres Station and requested permission to pass through the shield and enter Earth orbit.

“Approved, commander. Your entry gate is 32A. Lower your shields and pass through at Mach 1 for security scans as you pass through the inspection field,” the control operator broadcast on the fleet comms channel.

“Copy that, control. HHIS convoy 15 out,” the fleet commander replied, then signaled the convoy to move out as ordered.

One by one, the ships passed through the designated entry portal, and the commander didn’t know if he was imagining things, but he thought he might have felt the scans pass through his body. He looked out at the tunnel in the shield through his augmented reality view and gazed in wonder at the security measures he could see; he couldn’t even imagine the ones that were as invisible as the shield itself.

He shook his head and refocused himself, clapping his palms against his cheeks to get his head back in the game. He had an important job to do: deliver his cargo to the surface so that construction could begin on the new fortress cities.

.....

“ARES should’ve kept all of the old military gear instead of just a few for museums. But those idiots scrapped almost all of it!” a girl slurred.

She was sitting at the bar in a dive bar in the middle of the afternoon, a row of empty shot glasses turned upside down in front of her. Despite her gorgeous appearance, she was dressed like it was laundry day, wearing loose, faded sweatpants, an old My Little Pony t-shirt with most of the silk-screened art peeled off, and an old military camouflage jacket that was two sizes too big for her with one torn pocket. Her hair was disheveled and she was wearing a pair of Deadpool socks, and her “look” was completed with a pair of crocs.

She looked like she hadn’t slept in quite some time, and in fact, she actually hadn’t. She hadn’t showered, either.

Ever since the empire had “stolen” all of the military hardware she so loved, she’d been depressed, which explained why she was bellied up to a bar in the afternoon, day drinking. She was a military

otaku and certified ammosexual; instead of fashion magazine subscriptions and an extensive makeup kit, she subscribed to Guns & Ammo and had a gun locker. Her video game library, which was extensive, was filled with realistic first person shooters, and she even had copies of the now-defunct US Army recruiting tool, the America's Army video games proudly displayed in a shrine in a corner of her studio apartment.

Yes, a shrine. With candles and incense and everything.

She was curious about ARES, though, and the only thing holding her back from immediately signing up was that... she didn't know if their guns and other gear was badass enough. Thus, she had decided to wait and see at least a bit of it before diving in with eyes wide shut.

Basement dweller, NEET, otaku, hikkikomori.... She had been called many things due to her rather odd obsession. But despite that, she was usually a rather sociable person and had a broad network of friends who were similarly addicted to all things badass. One of whom was the man behind the bar, sighing as she continued her drunken diatribe. They could spout off facts about every gun going as far back as the Sharps rifle and enjoyed debating whether or not blunderbusses got a bad rap for being useless.

And with the Akashic Record having made all of the classified specs of all that military hardware freely available, she had become something of a military historian now, not just someone who lurked on the War Thunder forum waiting for classified material to be leaked there. In fact, her AI battle maid, Alita, had even been trying to talk her into applying for a job as a military history teacher in the imperial scholastica.

"I dunno why you're so sad. Ain't they gonna be available in VR in a few months? Didn't that... what's-her-name, the GAIA Tech lady? Anyway, didn't she announce that they'll be releasing a video game where you can use their hardware soon? So just chill. Here, have another shot, but it's your last for today. Gonna have to cut you off, or else I risk the bar getting shuttered." The bartender cast his gaze across the line of empty shot glasses in front of the girl, counting them in his head and comparing the number of shot glasses to the apparent weight of the girl sitting across the bar from him.

The conversation came to an abrupt halt as their glasses and phones pingged a push notification on them. It wasn't a priority notification, but they had both decided to set up constant keyword searches for certain things, and one of those had just triggered the ping.

The bartender's eyes glazed over as he began reading something only he could see through his AR glasses, and the girl fumbled to pick up her phone from the bar in her drunken haze. And they weren't the only ones, either; two more of the day-drinking regulars of Bugsy's Bar were doing the same.

All four of them were met with a livestream from Hephaestus Heavy Industries that was trending on Pangea. The bartender clicked on the link and was shocked to see a view from the ground, with dots rapidly growing in the sky.

Soon, the other three joined him in his slackjawed expression as they, too, clicked on the livestream link that had generated the interest notifications on their devices.

The enormous logistics vessels continued their journey, and soon, the entire convoy had passed through the shield. They split up from there, headed to different areas of the planet before initiating their deorbit burns and dropping into the atmosphere. However, having already entered the core of Earth's gravity well, they had disengaged their ion drives and were using their gravity drives to control their descent, ensuring a smooth, silent, and pollution-free journey the rest of the way.

As they reached an altitude of 30 kilometers above sea level, they turned and oriented themselves toward the site of their first deliveries and rocketed off at a speed that was incomprehensible for objects of their size and mass. Each of the thousand vessels carried the machinery required to dig the foundation for five cities—industrial atomic printers and ARCHies, primarily—and enough raw materials to lay the cities' foundations to cover for the atomic printers as they dug out the secret subterranean levels.

They would require another trip to deliver the materials for the construction crews to use, but that was no problem. The round trip from Earth to the logistics center in the moon base was only a few hours, after all, and if loading and unloading times were to be added, it would be completed in a day. That wouldn't inconvenience people too much, which was still a concern; even though the project was an imperial order, the company carrying it out was still a private enterprise and had to consider public opinion.

After all, private enterprises, even those owned by the imperial family, had no special privileges.

Soon, the logistics fleet vessels had reached their first designated delivery point. The people watching the livestream felt like their eyes would soon fall out of their sockets as they watched hundreds upon hundreds of five-story-tall robots, each of them with twenty-four eerily flexible tentacles extending from their back, leap from the side door of the hovering mothership in the sky. They carried a pair of enormous black boxes under their main arms and drifted to the surface like a falling leaf in October.

They were none other than ARCHies—Autonomous Robotic Construction Helpers, another brainchild of the nerd herd in Lab City. The researchers had decided that giant robots were a man's romance and, when faced with the need for a constructor swarm carrier, had decided to go all in on the robot aesthetic. Thus, the ARCHies were born. Tall and wide enough to carry hundreds of constructor swarm queens, with manipulator arms tipped with construction equipment and configurable arm attachments for heavy construction machinery needs, they were all-purpose kings of the construction field.

The only downside to them was that people who feared tentacles, like most Japanese girls of a certain age (read: schoolgirls), would probably get a severe case of the ick when they saw them for the first time.

As the ARCHies continued unloading the materials from the cavernous cargo holds of the logistics vessels, the people watching the stream had many questions in their minds, but they all boiled down to who, what, when, where, why, and most importantly, how. Who had built what they were seeing now? What were those things? When were they built? Where were they before today? Why tentacles? And how did they function?

After all, the robots were one thing, but the vessels themselves were another thing entirely. They were enormous enough that someone should have spotted them if they were built on Earth, so were they built by aliens and only delivered now? And the robots were another mystery. They were humanoid in shape, with two legs, two arms, and a head, all attached to a central torso, unlike the constructor swarms that resembled beetles more than anything else.

People were absolutely flabbergasted and stuck between wanting to immediately rush to the Akashic Records to learn more about them and wanting to stick around until the end of the livestream to see them in operation. Men were fascinated because giant robots and construction tickled their fancy, and women watched out of a sense of morbid curiosity.

After the ships were unloaded at the first stop, they oriented themselves in the direction of their next assigned city location and rocketed off once more, again at an incomprehensible speed. The ARCHies were left behind, and the livestream ended as the robots began their work. What happened next would remain confidential and classified, as it involved the security of the empire.

.....

In a stealthed government shuttle hovering high above the cracked, glassy plain that was once Islamabad, Felix and Sarah watched as the enormous logistics vessel rocketed off and the ARCHies on the ground started working.

Unlike what people assumed, most of the boxes the ARCHies had unloaded from the logistics ships contained atomic printers, and only a few contained printer cartridges. After all, the most advanced alloys the researchers in the materials science lab headed by Doctor Brechet required materials that weren't found on Earth and had to be collected from the solar system.

Even now, collector vessel after collector vessel was rolling off the line and sweeping the system like lawnmowers, collecting even the smallest specks of cosmic dust and forging them into pure material for use in atomic printers. No resource would be left unexploited, not even the tiny dust particles that floated in the endless void of space.

Sarah was stunned by the ARCHies. "But... but... but why tentacles!?" she asked, turning to Felix.

When the three friends were younger, they had nearly simultaneously discovered anime and had become rabid consumers of it. Their obsession was so overwhelming, in fact, that they had even refurbished an old VCR and picked up bootleg anime VHS tapes from eBay and other more... specialized websites. And some of the things the three had watched had instilled a lifelong fear of tentacles in the young Sarah.

Understandably so, even.

"Because they're flexible enough to reach difficult-to-reach locations. After all, the robots themselves are entirely too large for more delicate work, but construction isn't all about brute force and size. So they gave them tentacles to do that part of the job," Felix soothingly said as he wrapped his arm around Sarah's shoulders and pulled her into a side hug, understanding where she was coming from with her question.

"But... don't you already have constructor swarms?"

“True, we do have those. But they aren’t good at heavy lifting, and we need to hide the atomic printers from people.”

“And aren’t those... those tentacle monsters carrying constructor swarms? Since they can carry constructor swarms, again—why tentacles!?” Sarah had goosebumps at the sight of the giant robots.

“Should we scrap them then? Just say the word and we’ll feed them into printers and turn them back into stock,” Felix soothed her.

“I...” she sighed. “It’s fine. I’ll get over it. I mean, what if we get hostile tentacle aliens coming in the future? Am I gonna just roll over and die then? I’ll just treat this like a vaccine.”

Chapter 525 The Grand Poobah of East Westfuckistan

A few days later.

Rick was watching a recording of the livestream that he had smuggled out of the empire by one of his “unwitting lackeys”, as he called them. He had been spending quite a lot of his time compiling a list of imperial citizens who were disgruntled or dissatisfied enough with the empire that they became connected to him by a thread of belief. The faith they generated was absolutely minuscule, but that didn’t matter; what mattered was that he could use them.

The person he was currently using was one of his finest unwitting spies. Albert Harris was a former climate “activist” who was incited by the Earth Liberation Front and had a long history of protesting against fracking.

He had even glued himself to the ground during one protest, which had led to the arm being amputated. But with the empire solving the problem he was so adamantly against, and even reversing the damage caused by fracking, he was left with a gaping hole where his conviction used to be. The empire had taken away the satisfaction he felt by being a righteous fighter and wreaking havoc in pursuit of his strong belief and had given him nothing that he could use to fill that hole in his being.

So he switched gears and became an advocate for freedom and democracy, which had two consequences. First, he was unknowingly added to a low priority watchlist by his personal recordkeeper in the Akashic Record, and second, a thread of belief had formed that tied him to Rick, due to admiring him for having the guts to stand up to the empire, even if he still felt that the cult leader had taken the wrong path.

So he switched gears and became an advocate for freedom and democracy, which had two consequences. First, he was unknowingly added to a low priority watchlist by his personal recordkeeper in the Akashic Record, and second, a thread of belief had formed that tied him to Rick, due to admiring him for having the guts to stand up to the empire, even if he still felt that the cult leader had taken the wrong path.

But just that was already enough to tie the two together, a fact that Rick could use to manipulate him. And due to the strength of that admiration, it was even easier for the progenitor cult leader to

access him, requiring a much lower investment of his faith mana than many other of his unwitting lackeys in the empire.

Rick looked up from the tablet he was watching the recorded livestream on and, with a grave expression on his face, said, “We have a year, tops, before the empire becomes almost impossible to harm.”

Part of the information on the USB was an overview of the new fortress cities that would be constructed, and he had realized they were designed to make attacks, or even analog communications, virtually impossible. While the tour had focused on the layout of the cities and the aesthetics of the architectural features incorporated into the buildings, Rick had been paying more attention to the security features. With the tight surveillance that had zero blind spots, he knew that secretly communicating through anything but his blessing would be impossible.

And he was certainly unwilling to spend his time acting as a switchboard and go-between.

.....

The Cube at Avalon Island.

Aron and Sarah were in Aron’s working office. It was a standard office space, with a solid hardwood desk, comfortable carpet, and neutral seafoam green walls. The only luxury in the room was an oil painting of him and Rina that Rina’s mother had done as a gift for their engagement party.

But neither Aron nor Sarah paid it any mind; they were deep in discussion about GAIA Tech’s next bombshell innovation.

“The planned leak of our upcoming VR game created plenty of buzz, but we both know we haven’t done shit on that end yet. We haven’t even settled on what the game will be yet, and I had to pin your happy ass to your chair just to get a few minutes to talk about it? Sheesh, Aron! You know you’re a dick, right?” Sarah complained. She didn’t care if he was an emperor, a peasant, or even the Grand Poobah of East Westfuckistan; he was her friend first, and she would always treat him as such.

Aron paused for a moment, taken aback at the neglect inherent in Sarah’s complaint. He really had become a hands-off boss for all of his companies. On the one hand, though, it demonstrated his trust in the people he had chosen to head those companies up. But on the other hand, Sarah was right—it was quite a dickish move on his part.

So he took a few minutes to think about it as Sarah continued her tirade. He had a few ideas of games they should release, but he needed to winnow the list down to things that weren’t just mindless entertainment, but rather games that had some benefit to his burgeoning empire.

When Sarah finally paused to take a breath, Aron interjected, “I know you might’ve already thought of some possibilities, but I want the games we make to have some benefit to either the player or society as a whole. And especially to the empire. So let’s make our first game something that combines entertainment and current events in a way that’ll help people to adapt to different conditions in a short time.”

“Go on...” Sarah said, intrigued.

“How about this? The game should be set in a galaxy where humanity has already conquered most of the space. Say, 60% of the galaxy is in human hands and they’ve set up a galactic empire and are expanding through exploration, trade, and occasional conquest.

“We can run a contest to have people design alien races to populate the galaxy alongside humanity, both hostile and friendly. One of the benefits of crowds is that we can use them to crowdsource ideas, after all.”

Aron had entered what those who knew him called “game face mode”, where he completely fixed his focus on planning for events to come. This time in particular, he was laser focused on coming up with an idea for the game that GAIA Tech would soon be releasing.

“We need to ensure that it’s a hundred percent accurate to reality, and it’ll have two sides—the tech side, and the mana side.

“The tech side will focus on designing starships and exploring the galaxy, exploiting resources, engaging in trade with friendly aliens, and fighting skirmishes with hostile ones. It’ll be completely freeform and people will be able to do whatever they want to do in it, all while suffering the consequences of their own bad decisions and the benefits of their good decisions. It’ll subtly influence people to make the ‘right’ decisions, those that align with the values of the empire.

“The mana side, on the other hand, will be a lot like the old City of Heroes game. There’ll be capes and crooks, with the players taking the role of the superheroes, or ‘capers’, and VIs will take on the role of supervillains, or ‘crooks’. We can even use it to float the be a hero academy initiative the blessings agency came up with.

“For NPCs, we can use the brain data and genetic information we have on people to generate realistic characters that have low-level AIs running them. That’ll make it as close to reality as possible.

“First and foremost, though, it needs to be Fun, with a capital F. I know your boyfriend—hey!” Aron shouted as Sarah stood up and punched him in the arm over his desk. “I’m an emperor, you know... I could have your head for that!” He mock frowned at her and pretended that her punch actually hurt him.

He cleared his throat and continued, “Anyway, I know Felix rotted his brain reading all those LitRPGs a few years ago, but I never got into them. I just thought the game itself was never fun to play and it always came across as forced to me.

“So we need to make our game fun. And we can incentivize some things, like I’ll direct the ministry of war to buy the warship designs players come up with, and the ministry of the interior can buy the civilian ship designs. You can also do regular

tournaments and contests with prize pools for winners, or allow livestreamers, and so on, but what you absolutely Can Not Do,” Aron stressed the last three words, “is monetize the game through real money trading. Just make a fun game and people will flock to it....”

Aron continued in that vein for another twenty minutes or so, then paused and asked, “So what do you think?”

Chapter 526 A Not-So-Modest Proposal

The Cube, Avalon Island.

“Finally, a moment of peace,” Aron said as he lay on the roof of the enormous edifice. As utilitarian as it was—from the outside, at least—it was still his home and the place he was the most comfortable. No amount of busyness or rushing caused by the day-to-day operation of the Terran Empire would ever disturb his peace there; it would all just fade away and become background noise in the background to his ears whenever he was present in the real world.

Even now, as he lay gazing into the sky on the rooftop, the work of the empire was endless. Helicopters, space vessels, and other vehicles continued landing and taking off around him as if he wasn’t there. Maintenance robots, haulers, and other assorted purpose-built robots streamed around him like ants around a stick, carrying cargo to and fro. His small section was ignored by them, as Nova had cordoned off the area he was resting at.

“Yeah, some alone time is nice, every once in a while... outside the bedroom, I mean,” Rina coyly responded from her place next to him, her head pillowed on his arm and her arm draped across his chest.

Although she’d had a little bit of alone time with him as a couple during their recent vacation, there hadn’t been much. After all, it had been meant as a family trip for everyone to get to know each other better. Though they were acquainted with each other, the Rothschilds and the Michaels had only been that: acquaintances.

Plus, Rina had been busy lately, spending time in the simulation practicing her mana usage. Even with knowledge downloads, practice was still required to gain proficiency in actual usage of the skills implanted into people. And Rina, though smart and talented, was no exception to that time-honored rule.

Aron hummed in agreement as they cuddled on the busy rooftop, lost in their own little world. “How’s your training coming?” he asked after a short, companionable silence.

“It’s... difficult,” she said. “I mean, I’m okay at it, but I much prefer to avoid combat. I’m just not much of a fighter. It is nice to have something to do, though, and I feel... conflicted, sometimes.” She sighed and looked at Aron’s chin, her second-favorite feature of his face after his eyes.

“Conflicted?” He frowned. “Why should you feel conflicted? I mean, it’s not like you HAVE to fight.... You’re going to be the Empress of the Terran Empire, so if you’re forced to fight, then we have much bigger problems.”

“It’s not that, it’s just....” She sighed again. “It’s... I don’t know how to put it into words,” she said, then paused to gather her thoughts. “You know my family was just as bad as the Morgans, so I sometimes feel like I have to make myself useful to you, like it’s a necessary part of making amends.”

“You really don’t, you know. Nobody put their thumb on the scale either way in your family’s case—the innocent were let go and the guilty have already been punished. It was absolutely fair, and the burden doesn’t fall on you to bear.”

The imperial judiciary had been firm, but fair to the Rothschilds. Though they were no longer among the ultra-wealthy after paying so many financial penalties for the crimes they committed across the generations, they were still rather well off. And they had paid for their sins, not only financially but through other punishments. Ariele, for instance, was currently serving a sentence in the simulation and would soon be headed to the Trojan Asteroids to serve a sentence in reality as a minerals processor once the infrastructure was built and mining began.

As he said that, Rina pointed her finger to the sky and a small, intricate magic circle filled with beautiful moving patterns appeared above her fingertip. A ball of fire ignited in the circle and floated above it, then began wavering as she tried in reality what she had learned in the simulation earlier. But she failed, and, instead of morphing into a flower, the fireball began destabilizing and she flicked it away, launching it with the intent of being as far away from her as possible before it finally detonated.

The security VI in charge of monitoring the Cube noticed the uncontrolled and unstable fireball. It calculated the route it would pass through and, within milliseconds, diverted all the flights that were likely to cross its path.

“How about you?” she asked, frowning at her failed attempt to show off. “Too busy to train lately?”

“Nah. I’m back to being a hands-off emperor after finishing the shield. Everything else is on track and doesn’t need my interference. There’s a reason that ministers and agency heads exist. After all, if I had to do everything myself,” he shuddered at the thought, “I think that even I would die of exhaustion. So, for now, at least, I’m relatively free. The only thing we need now is time.”

“Don’t jinx it,” Rina giggled and playfully hit him on the shoulder.

“Oh, shit,” he said, looking around in mock panic. “Remind me when we go back inside... I should really find a piece of wood to knock on,” he laughed.

Aron's laughter proved infectious, and, if there were to be a human observer, they would probably give the couple a weird look or two before quickly moving their gaze away after being exposed to the very public display of affection.

Soon, the two calmed down and Rina moved her head from Aron's arm to his chest as he played with her hair. But after moving her head to his chest, she heard—and felt—his heartbeat increase and his breathing hitch.

"Aron? Are you okay?" she asked, her body stiffening in worry. She lifted her upper body and supported herself on an elbow, looking at his face with a worried expression; she hoped he was okay, as if anything were to happen to him it wouldn't just be a disaster for her, but for the entire human species.

He visibly calmed himself, then took a deep breath and mustered his courage. "Rina Rothschild," he said, then got up on one knee. "When we first met, it was because I had a utilitarian goal in mind. I wanted to use you and was willing to offer you my aid in exchange. But once I got to know you, something started changing in me.

"You became a part of me, an indispensable one. Then, during your family heir competition when your brother was trying to assassinate you, I finally realized that I had feelings for you. I wanted you to walk beside me through this journey called life. Only after realizing that did I know what it meant to call another person my other, better half."

He pulled a small box from his pocket, then opened it and continued, "Rina Ariel Rothschild, will you marry me?"

Chapter 527 Cutouts and Catpaws

Aron, John, Gaia, Nova, and the heads of the imperial police agency, the Nyx intelligence agency, and their AI counterparts were seated around an oval conference table in Aron's working office. Aron and Nova were there to receive a briefing on the imperial security situation and the progress of Operation Hunting Dog.

"We've managed to take down seventeen hundred cult cells around the world, adding up to a little more than seven hundred thousand cultists. But unfortunately, we've so far failed to discover how they're communicating with other cells and their leadership. That said, some things happened when they were captured, or a few hours later, that attracted our attention and we're still investigating," Arielle Richards, the head of the NIA, reported.

"What anomalies?" Aron asked. He had only been monitoring the broad strokes of the investigation progress during his daily briefings, so this was the first time he'd heard of anything out of the ordinary.

“The cult has a comprehensive system of cutouts and catspaws that makes it difficult to investigate. And we don’t know yet what exactly triggers them being cut, we only know that they’re indeed being cut out either during, or shortly after their capture.

“Then there’s the determination that the cultists have to die. It’s not unheard of for brainwashed cultists to suicide on capture, but the weird thing is that the suicide rate is a hundred percent. Usually, even the most fanatical organizations have around a sixty or sixty-five percent suicide rate. The weirdest thing, though, is how the suicides take place.

“There’s a certain expression people have when they’ve resolved themselves to die, but what we’re seeing on some cultists’ faces is a struggle. It’s like they aren’t willing to die, but they’ve received an order they can’t disobey that forces them to die, no matter how unwilling they may be. Our current theory is that there’s some kind of programming that’s only triggered when they’re captured taking over and forcing them to their deaths.

“We’ve managed to salvage some brain data from the leadership of the cells, but not much. It’s like we have a leak somewhere and they know we’re coming, so they implement countermeasures in advance. Only when we catch them completely by surprise can we salvage any of the brain data or headbag them to put them through the Lazarus protocol.

“Adding to the weirdness is that there’s no indicator in their brain data that there’s any kind of suicide programming. None at all, no matter how deep we dig. All we can find is memories of normal analog communication methods, like dead drops and ciphers.”

“Do you suspect an awakener is involved?” Aron asked. The involvement of an awakener was the only remaining theory that could explain the anomalies.

“That’s the likeliest explanation, yes. That said, we have yet to narrow down what the actual affinity, or affinities, might be, but we do have a short list of possibilities,” Police Commandant Schneider said.

“Also, as mentioned in previous reports, when the awakenings began and we announced what was happening, there was a wave of disappearances among the noncitizens. We can’t be sure, as we have no data around them other than what was available pre-empire, but we now believe it was the cultists behind the disappearances. It’s likely that they abducted the noncitizen awakeners and nursed them through the process at one of their facilities somewhere.

“Furthermore, we have yet to discover any awakeners in any of the cells we’ve taken down since the awakening, so that supports that theory. If that is indeed the case, they must have a training base somewhere and are currently busy training their awakeners for another wide scale attack. After all, the only thing they have that can hurt us now are their awakeners.”

“Makes sense,” Aron said. “But what we still need to know is how they communicate. Without knowing how they communicate, we can’t intercept their communications. And without being able to intercept their communications, we’ll be forced to the back foot and only able to react, but not act. Any ideas, Nyx?”

[We can only continue developing our detection abilities. Until we can get a more granular view of the mana involved, we’ll have to remain in a passive stance and can only continue Operation Hunting Dog as we’ve been doing. Of course, we can also take more draconian measures—]

“Absolutely out of the question,” Aron interrupted. “I will not be responsible for massacring a significant portion of the human species.”

[That’s not what I meant by draconian. We can simply move noncitizens to internment camps so they can be supervised. And during the move, we can force them to use the simulation to register as noncitizens, so we’ll have a brain data dump on them and can monitor the cultist agents among them.]

“This is not a fascist empire. Moving to the fortress cities will naturally separate the noncitizens from the populace, and that’s already in the works. There’s been too many instances of internment that hasn’t worked out for the governments involved, and we can’t afford that kind of backlash now. The empire is too young and our foundation is still settling,” Aron sighed.

“So all we know is that they’re planning something with awakeners, and we can’t even be sure of that?” Aron rubbed his temples. The tension of knowing that something was coming, but not what it was, had had him on edge over the past months. Not only that, he was irritated that he had so far failed to deal with the progenitor cult despite it being almost a year since the attacks had taken place.

He had made a promise to his people and was so far failing to deliver on it.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then opened them and asked, “You said there’s a list of suspected affinities, right?”

What’re those?”

[Anything having to do with communication and control. If nothing else, the abnormally high suicide rate of captured cultists helped us rule out pretty much everything else. So it has to be something that can make someone do things they wouldn’t normally do of their own free will, whether it’s like a hidden program or not. If we can figure out whether it can be implanted or if it requires assuming direct control, we can narrow it down even further.

[Right now, I'm leaning toward a combination of the two. Being able to assume direct control of a cultist means they can also bury control programming in that cultist's subconscious mind, which explains why there's nothing in their brain data,] Nyx answered.

"That's... less than good," Aron mused, pondering what someone could do if they had those abilities, and how much harm they could inflict if they had sufficient planning time.

The moment that thought passed through his mind, possibility after possibility arose in his thoughts. His advantage in this area was on full display; he had the full set of applicable knowledges, unlike others, who only received bits and pieces of the knowledge he possessed.

All it would take was a bit of time, and he would know which affinity, or affinities, were being used, and the specifics of their usage.

"I'll need to deal with this personally. No one will be safe until I do," he said with a determined gleam in his eye.

Unbeknownst to Rick, his fate had just been sealed.

Chapter 528 Planned Obsolescence

Aron wasted no time after sealing Rick's fate and immediately got to work. He turned to Gaia and asked, "How long would it take to do a deep scan of everyone with any connection to an imperial institution? And I mean all of them, all the way from the ministers at the top to the janitors at the bottom. And ARES and the nyxians, too, for that matter. We need to know if they've experienced any memory loss or any abnormal activities that don't have an explanation."

[A day, Your Majesty. It would be faster, but to do it without alerting anyone will require them to be logged into the simulation of their own will, so I'll have the recordkeepers do it shift by shift. The employees who aren't scheduled to work the day we choose will almost all be in the simulation anyway, since it's still fresh and new to them so they spend all their free time in it,] Gaia replied, generating a timetable for the deep scan along with a detailed plan for its implementation.

"Good, start the scan as soon as possible," he said.

Then he turned to Nova and asked, "How's the progress on miniaturizing our psionic shielding?"

[It's ready for use, sir,] she answered.

"Then, together with the deep scan, let's upgrade all of the government issued access devices to include psionic shielding. We can't risk any of them being compromised in any way—not now, and not in the future. So psionic shielding tech will be integrated into everything starting with the release of second-generation public devices as well.

"We can use planned obsolescence to force them to upgrade piecemeal. The general public is a low-risk category anyway, and in the meantime, we can just have the recordkeepers do continual deep scans to catch blank spots and abnormal activities."

[I've updated the new schematics and sent them to the factory for printing and distribution,] Nova said. She and Gaia had already worked out a distribution plan while Aron was talking about the upgrades and the need to introduce planned obsolescence into their products.

[Should we introduce planned obsolescence schemes for all of our products, or just the DR devices? After all, not everyone constantly upgrades their hardware to the latest and greatest bleeding edge technology. Especially when the cost of the product is equal to two months of living expenses for them,] Gaia asked.

Another AI faded into existence, her form flickering between real and illusory. She wore a long robe with the hood and cowl pulled up, decorated with symbols that shifted and changed from moment to moment, never letting anyone get a solid grasp on what they were before they were already something else. Her hands were hidden in her sleeves and clasped in front of her; she was none other than Mnemosyne, the true librarian of the Akashic Library. [What section of the general public should we focus our resources on with the continual deep scans?] she asked in her haunting, echoing voice.

“For now, focus on the most vocal people, both positive and negative. For the rest, monitor in waves as your processing power allows. We can't interrupt the functioning of the Akashic Record if we don't want to tip our hand.”

[I suspect that if the cult is planning something, it'll be happening very soon. The longer they remain inactive, the more stable the empire becomes. So I believe they'll be carrying out their next attacks before our fortress cities are completed,] Gaia interjected. [So everyone in the empire needs to undergo at least one deep scan before then, and we can modify the scanning priorities after that.

[But as this has pointed out a hole in our security, the deep scans absolutely must continue in the future as well. With mana density on the rise, we'll only see more and more awakeners and there's no predicting how many will have similar affinities as the ones we're dealing with now.]

“The attack is likely to take place during the new year celebration,” Aron said after some thought. There would be an empire-wide celebration of the first full year since the empire's founding, and if the progenitor cultists wanted to do significant damage, that would be their best opportunity. After that, the window for hitting the empire where it hurts would begin closing.

[They've likely gained access to some of the imperial training courses on how to use mana through taking over one or more of our awakeners. So they'll likely be using that in their next attack, which means the damage they can deal will be vastly more than their first wave of attacks,] Nyx pointed out. [And the worst part is that we have no way of knowing who or where the noncitizen awakeners are. Plus, unlike normal weapons, we can't inspect them and put a limit on their power.]

Aron turned to Nova again and asked, “Speaking of detection, how's the fine-tuning of the Henry's Eye system coming?” If they had solved the problem of sensitivity and granularity, everything else would be a walk in the park.

[Research is still ongoing, but we've developed an algorithm that should help narrow the search area even if the hardware isn't where we want it.]

“Okay, then use our current satellites to do a deep scan of Earth and highlight all of the large mana concentrations that might be a gathering point for noncitizen awakeners. It’s a hail mary play, but now is the time for those,” Aron ordered.

He turned to Athena and continued, “Have ARES on standby, as there’s a chance of situations growing out of control.”

[Yes, sir!] Athena saluted.

“Have your people prepare for emergency extraction. They’re the tip of the spear, and the tip is always the first thing people see when it’s coming at them,” Aron said, looking at Nyx.

[We have extraction plans already set,] the petite spymistress said. [Most of Operation Hunting Dog was successful, but with the suicide programming it’s becoming more and more obvious that we won’t get the results we’d hoped for out of it.]

“Anyone have anything else to add?” Aron asked, scanning his gaze across the people in the room. He waited for a while, then continued, “Okay then, meeting adjourned. I have to prepare some things on my end before I move out and get to work.”

He fully expected to be spending the next ten days looking through all of the mana blobs revealed by the satellite scan of Earth, so he needed to bid his family farewell.

Chapter 529 It Begins

?The moment the meeting ended, Hephaestus and Mnemosyne got to work. Hephaestus had already received the updated schematics for the DR gear version 2.0 and the massive industrial atomic printers inside the Cube switched from what they were doing to printing hundreds, then thousands, then hundreds of thousands of new DR gear. As most government officials used both glasses and pods, the printing and delivery would take a few days.

But Mnemosyne’s job could immediately begin. She directed the individual librarians in the Akashic Library to begin doing immediate deep scans on the people they were monitoring. A full 80% of the government officials were immediately scanned, while the others would be scanned as they came on shift and began working.

The civilian scans, however, would take some time; unless it was absolutely necessary, no orders would go out to interrupt people’s daily lives. Not only would it increase dissatisfaction and resentment among the populace, it might tip off the target and startle them into hiding deeper. But the priority list was set, and anyone with sentiments toward the empire that crossed a specific threshold, either positive or negative, would be the first to be deep scanned.

Aron had also informed Sarah of the new 2.0 hardware update to the DR gear, and she began generating buzz around it. Increased clarity! Decreased mental fatigue! Higher immersion! The buzzwords released by the public relations machine of GAIA Tech were endless, and the ad campaign was in full swing.

Meanwhile, Gaia also released a memo to the government employees saying that they would be given the DR 2.0 gear for free as a government perk. What went unsaid was that anyone who chose to continue using their original hardware would still be strictly monitored, and soon replaced. It

wasn't just a security issue, but rather one of mentality; the empire wouldn't be well served by workers that disdained the new and clung to the old.

Technology advances had been sped up to the point that keeping up with it was one of the core responsibilities of the uppermost echelons of society, let alone the government.

Athena and Nyx were also busy. They had spent the past few months laying out an enormous net called Operation Hunting Dog, and it was finally time to draw it in. The orders went out and stealthed shuttles began moving, carrying strike teams to the hidden bases that had identified cult sympathizers and cult cells, while the operatives themselves retreated to their underground facilities, as they had been the face of the operation from the beginning and couldn't risk being captured, no matter how far-fetched that scenario may be.

.....

Thirty minutes later.

Aron was on the roof of the Cube, waiting for the special stealth shuttle that was being printed for him. He would be personally heading out with only a single emperor's aegis team and a team of reapers to deal with miscellaneous issues. At first, he had argued against the inclusion of anyone else, but Rina had put her foot down and exercised her authority as his fiancée. He would bring them, or else.

And emperor or not, Aron was a man first. Thus, despite his unwillingness, he would bring along the extra people.

'It's time for this to end once and for all,' he thought as he boarded the sleek stealth shuttle, the other members of his expedition already inside and waiting for him.

As the emperor's shuttle lifted off and oriented itself for a suborbital hop to its destination, Athena appeared in her virtual form. She saluted Aron, who nodded at her and said, "Status report."

[We're currently heading to one of the cells we've identified and been tracking during Operation Hunting Dog. We believe it's the cell of a mid-level recruiter and local boss, so the process of the capture and resulting suicide programming being carried out should provide more information for you to use than can be captured in recordings. After all, our recording technology still can't detect minute mana flows.]

Athena wasn't worried about Aron in the slightest; she knew that, with his current abilities, while he may not be the most outstanding offensive powerhouse, there was nothing on the planet that would be capable of even mussing up his hair. She even agreed with him that the reaper and aegis teams were completely unnecessary, though she also saw Rina's point in that emperors should have a certain amount of dignity and not be forced to do some mundane tasks for themselves.

"Got it. Let's try to keep some of them alive, then."

One of the aegis members handed him a briefcase. He opened it and pulled out a small black cube, then closed the briefcase and handed it back to the person that had given it to him. He closed his eyes and pressed the cube against his forehead, where it dissolved into a nanite colony and spread across his face like ferrofluid.

The nanite colony rippled for a minute or so before finally settling down into a featureless black mask. Aron reached up and pulled off the mask, revealing a different, yet still handsome, face beneath it.

Silence reigned in the shuttle, as the realization finally hit home among the reapers and emperor's aegis that the emperor was indeed going into the field and would be actively participating in the cult cell takedown. At first, they had thought they were there to protect him as he spectated from the side, but after listening to his conversation with Athena, it seemed... they would be the spectators instead?

But something seemed rather off to them. From the display in their headgear, Aron had no defensive gear on. No armor, no pappy, nothing. He was wearing normal clothing and wasn't even carrying a weapon! How was he going to fight? Then it dawned on them—he must be armed and armored to the gills, it was just that their detection methods couldn't penetrate the masking of his advanced tech.

After all, he was the one that invented everything, so of course it only made sense that he would keep the best things for himself. At his level, it didn't even count as selfishness, but would rather be considered good sense. He was an emperor, and his person SHOULD be inviolable!

Thus, the reapers and emperor's aegis settled down and performed the final checks and last-minute maintenance on their gear. Though the maintenance was unnecessary, as ARES gear was printed fresh before each mission and recycled afterward, it was still a time-honored pre-battle tradition that the superstitious armed forces would never abandon.

Chapter 530 Storm Warning

In orbit above Avalon Island.

Aron's stealth shuttle had reached apogee and was about to descend. Its target: Shelton, Washington. He called up the reports by the operatives who had been assigned there and began reading them during the short trip.

Jason Todd and Catherine O'Shaugnessy signaled that they had found a cult base a few months prior. Not just a cell, but a full-blown base. They hadn't been able to infiltrate it, but they were positive that the entire gated community of Hartstene Pointe was a disguised cultist base. Once they had discovered that, they'd opted to lay low and continue their covers as Tim and Siobhan Roberts, fully immersing themselves in their respective roles.

Months later, the call to go to ground had gone out, and the two had been living in their underground facility since. On the surface, they had gone to care for an ailing relative, even going so far as to hire one of their suspected cultists to house sit for them until their return. But instead, they had parked their old truck in the Seatac Airport's long-term parking garage and returned to their base via their own stealth shuttle, ESV-228-01, now called Bob. There was no rhyme or reason behind why it was named Bob, the two operatives just had a silly sense of humor.

Aron quietly snickered at the name, then continued reading.

The entire town of Shelton was also compromised by the cult. The town council, the chief of police, the two judges in the courthouse, and even the school board had all become card-carrying members of the cult of the progenitor. Thus, during his assault on the cult compound, he would have no

backup from the local government, nor any cooperation. The best he could hope for was that they would hunker down and stay out of his way.

[Beginning deorbit burn,] the shuttle's VI announced. The interior of the vessel was just as stable as if it was sitting in a docking cradle, thanks to the gravity plating, but it had already oriented itself nose down and begun a rapid descent past the Karman Line.

Aron set aside the file and his expression grew grave. He began constructing a rune, one that was similar to the planetary defense shield he had just put in place earlier in the year, anchoring it on the shuttle itself. As it was much, much smaller than the planetary version, it wasn't nearly as noticeable and nobody even batted an eyelash at it.

[ETA: thirty seconds,] the ship's VI announced.

The reaper team members exchanged glances, then triggered the jump hatch in the floor of the shuttle. "We'll establish a landing perimeter for you, Your Majesty," the leader said, then gestured for the team to jump out of the hatch for a HALO drop.

They rocketed toward the ground, separating from the shuttle and passing beyond terminal velocity during their powered descent. Soon, they landed, creating small impact craters at each landing point, though they had still gone unnoticed as their target landing zone was a small clearing in the forest behind the house that "Tim and Siobhan" lived in. Thus, it was covered by a WESS and the team could be sure that nobody was around.

Ten seconds after the reaper team landed, the emperor's stealth shuttle came to a halt a meter from the ground in the dead center of the reapers' perimeter. Also at that time, Aron's rune was completed and a gold-tinted white dome expanded out of the shuttle and around Hartstene Pointe.

The camouflaging nanites disabled their camouflage and trickled into their storage units, revealing an escape hatch in the ground. The hatch opened and a full battalion of 250 LEAs marched out of it and took their positions in a neat formation. They saluted the shuttle as its gull wing door opened and the emperor's aegis team stepped out, followed by the emperor himself.

"Reapers," he began. "Your mission today is to silently secure the upper echelons of Shelton. Bring them to the clubhouse here within two hours. Do not, under any circumstances, allow them to contact anyone. Move out!"

"Yes, Your Majesty!" they chorused, then started sprinting toward the shore. To avoid potentially exposing themselves, they would swim across the Puget Sound, then run to the town of Shelton twelve miles away.

To them, it was an easy day.

Aron turned to the LEAs and ordered, "Spread out and engage camouflage. Do not allow yourselves to be discovered." Without waiting for a response, he entered the hatch leading to the underground facilities, followed closely by his aegis team.

.....

In the office of the Shelton police chief, a ringing sound came from a desk drawer.

The chief opened the drawer and pulled out the false bottom, then picked up the ringing burner phone. Something must have happened; his handlers would never contact him through anything but the secure landline on his desk.

“Aunt Helen’s birthday party is in a few hours. Are you still coming?” the person on the other end of the phone said.

The chief paled for a moment and his heart pounded like it wanted to escape his chest. “Oh! I almost forgot,” he said. “Do you need me to bring anything?”

“Sure, bring a couple cans of baked beans and some beer. The weather’s nice today so we decided to have a cookout instead of taking her to the country club at Lake Limerick for dinner.”

Things were worse than the chief had imagined; not only did the empire know about them, but their strike teams were already on their way. “Okay. I’ll stop by the store on my way and bring a 12-pack of Sam Adams. How many people are coming?”

“Oh, probably twenty or so,” the voice replied.

“Okay then. So two cases of Sam Adams and say... four cans of beans. Got it! Should I come by early to help set up?” the chief asked.

“Sure, be here in an hour and you can help decorate,” the voice replied.

“Alright. See you then,” the chief said, and hung up. He had a lot to do and little time to do it in.