

Tech System 531

Chapter 531 The Thunder Rolls

Just a few streets away from the courthouse in Shelton was an Irish pub. To tourists and locals, it was a gathering place for people to drink their worries away, eat “ethnic” cuisine, and, on St. Patrick’s Day, celebrate by gulping down cheap beer with even cheaper green dye added.

But to the cult of the progenitor, it was a beginning. Its basement was where Rick had first begun preaching his ideal of a new utopia where the progenitors would live hand-in-hand with the human descendants they’d left behind when they left to explore the vast universe. It was a shrine, a place of pilgrimage, and the closest thing to a holy site that the cult had, and it was why not just one, but two of Rick’s inner circle were present in such a flea speck town that was only included on maps out of a sense of obligation.

One of them was hidden, masquerading as the chief of police, and the other was the Hartstene Pointe Maintenance Association’s vice president.

The phone on the police chief’s desk rang, but sadly, the chief had already left. He was on his way to the basement of the pub, where he would rally with the cult members in town and arm themselves for a confrontation with the incoming raid. He was under no illusion that the cult forces would survive, but when cornered, even the mildest rabbit would bite. However, had he been in his office to answer that phone call, things might have perhaps played out differently.

But he wasn’t, so his fate was sealed.

He had about forty young, strong cultists, and another fifty or sixty old and young who were willing to sacrifice themselves, if necessary. Whether they actually would sacrifice themselves in the end was a question the chief was unwilling to ask himself, in fear of the answer, but at least they claimed they were. And that was all that mattered at this junction.

“They’re coming, hurry!” he said, waving the stream of people into the pub as people walking by curiously looked on, wondering what was happening.

“Can we make it through this, chief?” a panicky-looking youth asked as he passed the chief.

The chief only looked at him with a grim expression, then slowly shook his head. “Not likely, son. But at least we can spit in the devil’s eye while he drags us down to hell,” he solemnly said, then continued counting people and waving them past him into the pub.

The young man, already on the verge of full-blown panic, paled and fell weeping to the ground. Then a purple light flashed in his eyes and he stilled, then robotically climbed to his feet and trudged into the pub.

The chief had already put the boy out of his mind. In his opinion, it would be great if the kid ran; that way at least one person would survive what was coming to them. But it would also be good if the kid stayed, because it showed that the faith they had in the progenitors was strong, unbreakably

so. So when he saw the robotic movements, he thought nothing of it, thinking that it was just the boy's way of dealing with his fear.

He was an Iraq War veteran and had seen men break before, so the mindless zombie-like stumbling was nothing new to him. He couldn't hear the voice in the boy's head encouraging him to pick up a weapon and martyr himself for the progenitors, nor could he feel the internal struggle currently going on in the boy's mindscape. To the youth, it was already a fight to the death even before the actual fight to the death began. A fight, it had to be said, that he was gradually losing.

Soon, the struggle in the boy's mind ended and everything about him had changed. He was no longer David Taylor, a promising high school graduate and star pitcher headed to the University of Washington on a baseball scholarship, but Rick Ashley piloting a meat puppet. Everything about him had changed except his body, but no one was around that could notice it.

Shelton was a small town, sure, but it wasn't to the point where everyone was intimately familiar with everyone else's goings-on. And David was the only cultist in his family and circle of friends. He had been meaning to bring others into it, but his belief had never been that strong in the first place.

It was common for teenagers to flit from group to group, hobby to hobby, and place to place. Youth, before the mass awakening event, was meant for discovering the place people would fit for the rest of their lives. But now, Rick had taken that choice from David, forcing him to fight against an unreasonable force that would soon reap his life like a farmer scything through a field of ripe wheat at harvest time.

And it was all because of a single, simple fact: David was blessed. He had awakened and, after his awakening, his parents had fled with him to the small unincorporated bedroom town of Matlock, Washington. Though they had panicked and joined the empire in hopes of saving their only son, after he had come out of his medical pod, they quickly reverted to their anti-imperial beliefs and their desire for some illusory "freedom" had driven them to take their boy and run.

Thus, "David" walked up to the chief and said, "Let me help, chief. I'm blessed by water." As he spoke, ten baseball-sized balls of water condensed behind his head and shoulders and began rotating, spinning faster and faster until they became indistinguishable from a wheel and began to hum through the air.

"You sure, son?" the chief asked.

The boy nodded his head and looked to the north, where the reaper team would soon appear. "Yes, chief. I'm sure," he said.

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[Targets have congregated and are grouped up. Suggest indirect fire.]

"Roger that," the reaper team leader said. He marked the pub on the battle map and waved his hand at the heavy and demolition experts in the team.

No words needed to be said; they had access to the same information as the team leader did and immediately took a knee. A firing tube extended from each of their backpack-

mounted indirect-fire modules, loaded with a single round.

The heavy had a “bunker-buster” that would penetrate three meters into the ground before rapidly filling the space it fell through with a mixture of jet fuel and methane and detonating in a single fireball that would collapse everything around it thanks to the vacuum left behind after it petered out.

The demolition expert, on the other hand, had a more conventional high explosive penetrator round. It would fly over the heads of its target and explode, driving shrapnel into the ground much like a shotgun blast would into a target in front of it.

“Ready,” the two men reported, then waited for the fire order.

The squad AI, after confirming that civilian casualties would be kept to an absolute minimum through Overwatch, gave the team leader the green light.

“Fire, fire, fire,” the man ordered, and two streaks left two launch tubes.

The firers stood and rejoined the rest of the team, then everyone continued on their way to their destination.

Chapter 532 And the Lightning Strikes

?An hour before the strike in Shelton.

Aron walked through the hatch into the underground facility constructed by Jason and Catherine. He looked around in approval, thinking, ‘This is a good aesthetic, but it needs a little something... extra.’

He gestured for his escort to halt, then bent down and, perhaps in a fit of chuunibyo, clapped his hands and placed them on the ground. Unseen by his unblessed escort, a runic circle spread out from his hands and the floor, walls, and ceiling began changing. Line after line dug itself through the imperial steel alloy structure, leaving behind a mystifying, maze-like pattern.

The lines etched themselves throughout the entire base for an entire five minutes before the etching process was completed. Once they stopped, the runic circle under Aron’s hands began pulsing like a heartbeat, each pulse coming faster and faster as the process continued. Finally, the pulse was so fast it appeared that it was a solid light, then rune after rune flew out of it, traveling down the etched corridors in runic sentences like obedient soldiers marching in files.

It took another twenty minutes for the runic imprinting process to complete while Aron and his escort stood motionless at the end of the southern main walkway. Then his runic heart sped up as intent-laden mana flooded out of it, down his arms, out of his palms, and into the engraved runes, turning them white as the intent passed through them.

Another ten minutes passed before the process was complete. Aron rose to his feet and looked at the glowing, circuit-like pattern etched in the wall with satisfaction. He dusted his hands and said, “Let’s go.”

Jason and Catherine, having long shed their cover identities as Timothy and Siobhan Roberts, exchanged a glance before Catherine asked, “Pardon my curiosity, Your Majesty, but... what’s that?” She pointed at the wall, which was faintly glowing even to her, who had yet to awaken at all.

“That?” Aron looked at her and grinned. “Just decoration. You can’t have high tech without glowy bits, Miss O’Shaughnessy.”

Catherine froze, her mind practically broken at the thought of the emperor of all humanity doing something so... so whimsical. She wasn’t quite sure how she should react and her brain was on the verge of a shutdown.

[Sigh, you’ll get used to him,] Nyx’s voice whispered in Catherine’s “ear” through her implant.

At heart, Aron was still young, and he did occasionally act his age.

Catherine jogged and caught up to the rest of the group as they entered the control room at the center of the underground facility.

“Status report,” Aron ordered, any trace of whimsy absent from his face as if it had never been there.

“Approximately twenty-five minutes ago, the cult leader in the HPMA received a warning from the cultists in the town. He’s been gathering the residents in the community center building here,” Jason said, pointing to a flashing red dot on the detailed topographical map floating above the main command terminal. “We expect the entire community will be there within another ten minutes from... now.”

Catherine took over and said, “The demographic breakdown of the community suggests that we’ll be facing anywhere from twenty to twenty-five awakeners. We can’t be sure what affinities they’ve awakened, but the odds are that they’ll either be elementalists or derived elementalists, so we should be prepared for that.

“It’s extremely unlikely that there will be any law or higher awakeners, as this is just a small cultist base in the grand scheme of things, and we believe they’ve been moving their high-powered ‘guns’ to their main base in preparation for whatever they’re planning.”

“Do you have any plans for handling them?” Aron asked.

“Overwhelming force,” Jason grinned, “and an extreme technological advantage.”

Aron nodded. “Continue.”

“There’s about 440 residences in Hartstene Pointe, and over the past few months, the Hartstene Pointe Maintenance Association has been helping the cult forcibly buy out the residents that previously lived here. They first started by purchasing all of the vacant properties after the people that used to live in them sold them following their registration as imperial citizens. Then they moved to more overt tactics, like seizing the vacation homes that were unoccupied due to the season.

“About six months ago, they brought in... undesirables, and started being more blatant about their goal—”

“Undesirables?” Aron cut in. “What do you mean by that?”

“Well, Your Majesty, Washington has a high number of seasonal migrant workers that get hired by the parks to clean them up in preparation for opening. And a lot of those people are seen by the more affluent members as ‘undesirable’, meaning they would feel uncomfortable with them moving into a protected, gated community like Hartstene Pointe.

“Then, all the cult had to do was raise the petty crime rate and those rich shitheads couldn’t flee their gated compound fast enough.” Jason pretended to spit on the ground at the thought.

“Understood, continue,” Aron said, a similar look of disgust on his face.

“So they raised the crime rate and the HPMA pretended to be helpless. They offered to assist in listing and selling the remaining homes, and the entire takeover was complete a month and a half ago,” Jason finished.

“Since then, they chased out the migrant workers with the assistance of the chief of police and the judges at the courthouse,” Catherine said. “And we’ve been tracking them since. Every ‘resident’ here at Hartstene Pointe has a tracker embedded in them.” She pointed at the map and all of the trackers were displayed on it, moving toward the clubhouse in real time. About twenty of them were headed in the opposite direction, toward Indian Cove Marina.

Aron looked at his emperor’s aegis team leader and said, “Collect the runners and bring them here. Quietly. And don’t be seen.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the aegis team leader said, then the team moved out.

“It’s a shame Rina isn’t here,” Aron sighed after his emperor’s aegis left.

Jason and Catherine traded glances, then Catherine asked, “Your Majesty?”

“You need four people to play spades, and there’s only three of us here.”

Neither of the operatives knew what to say to that and were dumbstruck, caught between laughter and tears.

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Commander Yamaguchi Takeyama and his team reached the marina and hid themselves, waiting for the fleeing cultists to arrive. By his estimate, they would have about a seven minute wait.

Eight minutes later, the first fleeing cultist came into view. Takeyama shook his head and gestured to the aegis member nearest the cultist to take action. Soon, the cultist was rendered unconscious and disappeared into the shadow beneath a decorative hedge.

The process repeated itself until seventeen cultists were captured.

Takeyama looked up and asked the air, “Update, Overwatch?”

[No escapees remaining, Captain,] the AI reported.

“Roger that, we’re headed back to base.”

[Copy, return to base. Overwatch out.]

Chapter 533 The End of the Beginning is the Beginning of the End

The emperor’s aegis was the best of the best of Aegis, and well deserving of their title as the most elite special force under the ARES umbrella. Though their training focused primarily on defense, a wise man once said that the best defense was a good offense. Of course, nobody knew exactly who first said that, and sports coaches and military strategists around the world all laid claim to it coming from one of their forebears, but whoever said it was still an incredibly wise man.

Thus, the emperor’s aegis was also unparalleled in all areas. They could perform counterintelligence operations with the grace of a nyxian, special military operations with the ease of a reaper, and were still the strongest shield standing between Aron and those who would wish to target him.

So capturing a few terrified cultists was as easy to them as drinking water or snapping their fingers.

Twenty minutes after they had captured the last fleeing cultists, they returned to the underground base, where the prisoners were put in the holding cells for Aron to experiment on.

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Aron stepped into the prison section of the facility and glanced around. On the surface, it looked no different from the rest of the base, with softly glowing runic lines in incomprehensible fractal patterns on the walls, but these ones were different. They had been laid with the intent to detect, trap, and trace any mana coming from any source that wasn’t him.

He stepped into the first cell, where a naked man was secured to the wall with clamps on his upper and lower limbs and around his neck, chest, and waist. Aron waved his hand and a refresh rune flew to the prisoner, waking him from his induced slumber.

The man looked around, turning his head from left to right, then realized he had been captured. “Please, please,” he begged, “I didn’t do anything. I swear, I didn’t—AAAAAAAGH!” He twitched as twenty thousand volts passed through his body from the restraints.

Tasers ranged from fifty to eighty thousand volts, depending on the manufacturer and whether they were intended for civilian or government use. However, tasers would often not only incapacitate their target, but would render them unconscious as well. Therefore, the voltage Aron was applying to the imprisoned cultist was much, much lower; it would inflict pain, while leaving no lasting damage and without rendering him unconscious.

“What do you want!?” the man screeched, his voice breaking.

“I want to see what happens,” Aron calmly replied.

“Wh-what happens when?”

“When you kill yourself.”

The man was flabbergasted; he had no intention whatsoever of suicide! “I don’t want to die!” he screamed.

Just then, a purple light flashed in his eyes and his expression went slack. He stopped struggling and stuck his tongue out, intending to bite it off and bleed to death.

{Got it, sir,} Nova told Aron.

“Do we need anything more from this one?” Aron replied.

{No. More samples will be needed for our trap and trace, though.}

“Good thing we have spares, then,” he coldly said, then turned to the prisoner. “For crimes against humanity, I hereby sentence you to death. The sentence is to be immediately carried out.”

The voltage being passed through the clamps increased. Thirty thousand volts... forty thousand... fifty thousand.... Soon, it reached as high as 250,000 volts and the scent of burning flesh wafted off of the captured cultist along with wisps of smoke. Once the equipment measuring his vital signs registered complete brain death, the electricity stopped flowing.

Aron coldly watched the execution from start to finish. It wasn’t that he was unaffected by the brutal execution, but rather that he was enraged by the cult and felt that they all deserved to die in agony for their betrayal of the human species in service to yet-unknown extraterrestrial forces.

He turned and walked out of the cell, then into the one across the hall. The prisoners were secured to the walls, so the doors were open and the man in the cell had watched the entire process of the interrogation and execution of the first prisoner.

“I’ll talk! I’ll tell you whatever you want to—AAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!!”

Aron didn’t even bother asking any questions and proceeded to immediately pass judgment.

Half of the prisoners were thus executed before Nova managed to capture the signature of the foreign mana, so all that was left was to develop a countermeasure for the suicide signal to prevent high-value targets from dying before their secrets could be extracted.

Thirty minutes later, Aron, having completed his experiments and executed the remaining captives, stepped back into the control center. He looked around, meeting the gazes of the people within, then said, “Gear up and move out.”

Five words had decided the fate of everyone on Harstine Island that wasn’t an imperial citizen.

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The LEAs in the woods surrounding the house where “Tim and Siobhan Roberts” had lived deactivated their optical camouflage and formed up in neat ranks outside the entrance to the base. Shortly afterward, Aron, followed by a pair of operatives and his emperor’s aegis, stepped out.

They were all wearing suits of mechanized power armor, a step up from the NUT suits and designed for frontal combat rather than special operations. Aron took a knee and pressed his palms to the ground again, silently modifying the shield he had placed around the community earlier. When he had first carved it, it was set to allow entry, but no exit. Now, it would deny both entry and exit, as well as shrink and expand as he willed on the fly.

And without a word, they moved out at a bounding run, quickly reaching a speed of 100 miles per hour as they rushed directly toward the clubhouse, where nearly a thousand enemies—or rather, unwitting targets—awaited their arrival.

Due to the need to gather intelligence from the cultists, the LEAs and humans alike were armed with charge rifles, charge pistols, and stun batons. No lethal weaponry had been issued and none would be allowed, as they were almost a hundred percent sure that one of the cult's leaders would be among the people they were set to apprehend.

Not even five minutes passed before they found the first sentry line, which was manned by two middle-aged men in hunting camouflage. Two shots were fired, one by Catherine and the other by one of the emperor's aegis members, and the sentries were neutralized without being given an opportunity to report. A LEA stepped out of formation and shackled the cultists, then sprinted back, leaving two unconscious, shackled people behind for the following maintenance bots to collect and bring back to the base.

Another two minutes passed and the imperial assault team reached the main body of the cultists. 263 imperials collided with over eleven hundred cultists in a shockingly swift, one-sided massacre. Less than three minutes later, 263 imperials still stood, surrounded by 1181 unconscious cultists.

Aron ordered a squad of LEAs to circle the community center and take out the remaining sentries, then placed a small black cube on the ground.

The cube dissolved into a cloud of nanites and sank into the ground, where it would spread out and scan for any underground hideouts the cultists may have. Meanwhile, the remaining LEAs and the two operatives spread out to look for any camouflaged entrances that might lead to a cultist hideaway.

Eight minutes later, the swarm VI of the nanite colony reported that they had found a small underground chamber with six cultists in it. One adult and five teenagers, who were suspected to be awakeners.

Aron sneered, then shrank the shield to just the area around the community center. Closing his eyes, he drove his consciousness deep into his mana heart and triggered it to absorb all of the mana inside the shield, save for the mana that was naturally present in his people and protected by his own runic mark.

As the mana drained from the surroundings, a strange phenomenon occurred. Everything was drained of color and appeared in greyscale, like a black-and-white movie. Then, it began wavering like a mirage before ultimately disappearing. Soon, a perfectly hemispherical crater was all that was left where a quaint community center had once existed. In the middle of the crater were six cultists, and surrounding them were 240 LEAs.

Six charge pistol shots were fired, six people were shackled, and the assault on Hartstene Pointe was over.

Chapter 534 Neutron Soup, But Not Much

Aron's eyes flashed gold as he looked at the unconscious cultists in the crater. He noticed a purple worm wriggling its way out of the eye of one of the awakeners and attempting to flee. But since his shield blocked all mana from passing through in both directions, the purple worm could only bang against it like a fly on a windowpane.

He stepped off the rim of the crater and slid down the steep side. "Why did everything disintegrate when I absorbed all of the mana?" he asked Nova.

{Have you heard of the saying that all matter is mostly emptiness, sir?} she replied.

"Refresh my memory."

{Atoms are over 99.9% empty space. If they were blown up to the size of a football stadium, the nucleus would be the size of a marble in the center, and the electrons would be microscopic specks of dust orbiting around the outside of the stadium in the parking lot.

{So when mana is injected into matter, it fills that empty space up, like turning the entire stadium into a huge swimming pool, or perhaps part of an ocean. Normally, if you pull out a cup of water from it, it'll just flow in from somewhere else and the total amount of water is rebalanced.

{But what you did was artificially divide out a certain amount of 'water', then forcibly extract it. When you did that, everything else collapsed and the electrons met the protons in an annihilation reaction, leaving only the neutrons of the atoms. So somewhere in that crater, there are pure neutrons, though there aren't enough of them to really have an effect on their surroundings,} Nova explained.

"That's..." Aron began, but trailed off at a loss for words. "So if I were to drain all the mana out of a saturated star, I could collapse it into a neutron star?"

{Theoretically, yes, sir.}

Aron reached the bottom of the crater on autopilot, lost in the possibilities and feeling slightly overwhelmed by his phenomenal cosmic powers. Thankfully, though, with the simulation the way it was, he would never be forced into an itty bitty living space.

He shook his head and came out of his reverie; he had more important things to do, so he would consider his power later.

Walking up to one of the unconscious cultists on the ground, he squatted down and stared at him, attracting the attention of everyone else in the crater with him. However, their eyeballs didn't disturb him at all, as he was too focused on what he was doing to care about them.

His pupils shrank and widened as if they were microscopes being adjusted by focusing dials. Then he raised his head and looked in a certain direction. He stood and turned to his emperor's aegis, then nodded.

"Catch up," he said. Then, with a shocking sonic boom, he shattered the shield he had carved as he passed through it on his way to... somewhere else.

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The aegis team headed back to the base, where their stealth shuttle was, leaving Jason and Catherine to clean up the mess and transport the unconscious cultists back to the prison cells in their base for processing. The prisoners would soon be sent to the Hole, where they would await their public trial and sentencing.

"I can't help but wonder.. just how strong is he, anyway?" Jason mused.

“I’m curious about that, too,” Catherine said, looking in the direction that Aron had flown off in. “What he did in our base was already big enough, but now this....” She pointed at the crater that used to be a quaint little community center.

“What he did to our base? Didn’t he say that was just for appearance’s sake?” Jason asked. “Do you think he did something else? I mean, there’s a bunch of patterns and lights and all, and they do look really cool, all sci-fi and shit.”

“He was probably just brushing us off. It’s likely something that only he can activate, so there’s no real need to tell us the details. After all, if we can’t use it without him, it’s useless to us, isn’t it. And hey—aren’t you gonna follow him?” she asked.

“No, we have to finish cleaning up here. He’s got the aegis on his tail anyway, and isn’t there still a reaper team in town that’ll go after him, too? Besides, the base is ours. I’m sure we’ll get orders from higher,” he pointed a finger up to the sky, “if we really need to move out. So I’m just gonna stay put and wait for orders. I’ll count it as part of the 98%.”

“The 98%?” Catherine tilted her head quizzically. “What do you mean?”

“Haven’t you ever heard the saying that ‘the military is 98% boredom and 2% pants-wetting terror?’”

“Well... I have now.”

Jason turned to the LEAs and pointed at one of them. “You, take your squad and bring these cultists back to the cells in the base. I’d say don’t be seen, but....” He looked around. “I don’t think there’s anyone left to see us. So make it fast, they’ll probably be waking up soon and we need them shackled before that. Don’t forget the mouth guards, either. I know biting off tongues won’t kill people, but it’ll make it hard for them to talk and there’s no sense in wasting resources to heal them in our medical pods if we don’t have to.”

Finished giving orders, the reaper turned and strode off, heading back to base.

“Wait for me!” Catherine coquettishly said as she jogged up to him and wrapped herself around him like an octopus. If anyone were there to see that other than the LEAs, they might have wondered if the two had actually fallen for each other.

But that was something that no one but Jason and Catherine knew, and they certainly weren’t going to tell anyone.

Shortly after the operatives and LEAs left, a constructor swarm arrived and rebuilt the community center from the ground up exactly as it was before. Imperial technology certainly gave an entirely new meaning to the term “cleaning up”.

Chapter 535 Contingency Plans

‘I wonder how skilled this guy is with his affinity,’ Aron thought as he broke past Mach eight. He was still tracking the little purple worm as he flew, even though it

hadn't stopped accelerating yet. 'I can't afford to be mind controlled. The empire can't afford it....'

Mind control was a truly problematic ability, one that Aron's currently structured shield rune wouldn't be able to fully protect him against until he took the time to adjust it and train with the new runic structure. Habit was both good and bad, and in the heat of battle, he really didn't want to be using new runes that he hadn't practiced with.

The same could be said for the mind control tech that was on him, as there was a slight possibility that it would fail, and no matter how low the possibility is, it is not a good idea.

Besides, he didn't have time to modify it now regardless; the worm he was tracking was still speeding up.

Everything would depend on whether or not the mana had taught Aron's target. He certainly hadn't released any information on how to use law mana or higher, so the person he was tracking down must have an esoteric affinity. And that likely meant there would be unforeseen issues during the upcoming fight.

But despite Aron's erratic thoughts and the other things going on in his mind, his eyes still glowed golden as he focused on the purple worm in the distance. If he hadn't absorbed every bit of mana in the shield earlier, he wouldn't have been able to distinguish it from the background rainbow of colored motes in his vision; in fact, he was already having difficulty spotting it now, even knowing it was there.

"There you are," he murmured under his breath as he watched the worm fly into a tall office building and not come out the other side. He came to a full stop and hovered over the office building, calling up the map of his surroundings to figure out where he was. If there were imperial citizens around, he couldn't just go in guns blazing.

He increased his altitude to the edge of the stratosphere as he looked at the map. "Amarillo, eh?"

It turned out that he had flown all the way to Amarillo, Texas, and was currently hovering above the Fisk Building. It wasn't the tallest building in the city by far, but it was one of the oldest and a very well-known feature of the downtown cityscape. Standing just over fifty meters tall, it had long been added to the National Register of Historic Places, having been completed in 1927 and once holding the crown of the tallest building in the city, though it had fallen out of the top ten since then.

"Nova, what do we know about Amarillo?" he asked, and a demographic and historical breakdown appeared before him in a virtual display window. "Hmm, 73% imperials... I'll need to take a stealthier approach.

"How about the mana map of the city?"

{Excluding the possibility of a false positive, it's high. Scans show it as a level eight location centered around the Fisk Building and thinning from there as it reaches out to the city limits,} Nova responded, overlaying a mana density image in Aron's view of the city.

Aron nodded and opened a compartment in the thigh of his SHIT armor (Super Hard Intermediate Tactical armor), pulling out a dozen small black cubes the size of standard casino dice. He threw them down toward the city and they disintegrated into nanite colonies, linking their swarm VIs to his HUD.

“Give me a real-time street-level view of the city, especially the downtown area around the Fisk building. Also, search for underground facilities that aren’t included in blueprints,” he ordered, and the status display representing the nanite supercolony in his HUD turned yellow to indicate that they were currently on mission.

Finding himself with some time on his hands, he continued reading the information about the city below him as he hovered in the sky under a veritable fortress of invisibility, stealth, and concealment runes.

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“The fuck was that?” Rick groaned as he felt the mother of all headaches slam into him. He rubbed his eyebrows and called for Katrina to bring him some painkillers as he digested what he had just seen.

The lackey he’d been monitoring had been in hiding underground, but rather than dig out an entrance into the sealed bunker, the empire had just... deleted the entire fucking ground, knocking the last remaining cultists unconscious in the process. And the worst part was that he had no clue how they had done it! One minute, everything was fine, then the next minute it was over.

It was like someone flipped a switch and everything fucked off to somewhere else, leaving the people behind in the lurch!

“They’re getting closer and closer to me. I need more time! Just a few more weeks and everything will be in place,” he muttered as Katrina came into his room with a glass of water and two pills. He took them from her and swallowed the pills dry, then guzzled the water.

She kept her head lowered and only looked at him out of the corner of her eye. She was worried about his mental health; lately, he had been talking to himself more and more and relying on pharmaceutical aids more than was remotely healthy. ‘At least he’s keeping his illegal drug habit under control,’ she thought. ‘But I don’t know how much of that is his self control and how much is just the lack of availability after the empire swept up all the drug traffickers....’

Rick looked up at her and shouted, “Get the fuck out!” He threw the empty water glass at her in a momentary rage. “Go make yourself fucking useful somewhere!”

Katrina could only nod and quietly leave the room. Then she heard him shout through the door, “And clean up this fucking mess!”

A few minutes later, the painkillers kicked in and Rick could be considered about 90% recovered after his most recent body hop. Though he didn’t know it, the turbulence he’d experienced when pulling his consciousness back into his real body had been caused by the ‘worm’ bashing itself against Aron’s shield, as well as the mana trace the emperor had left on it to ensure he didn’t lose it.

He turned on the desk light and pulled open the small filing cabinet full of neatly sorted contingency and emergency plans his think tank had come up with, then pulled out a folder and opened it, skimming over the contents.

As he read, lost in thought, he started tapping the desktop with his knuckle in a rhythmic fashion, almost like he was a metronome keeping time for a struggling music student during their practice session. ‘I have to rush some plans forward and prepare some leverage in case my base is discovered. It’ll give us time to evacuate and move to the backup facility, or at least most of us....’

He closed his eyes and entered the purple world, looking for a specific thread of belief.

Chapter 536 Emergency Measures

Amarillo, Texas.

In the Oakdale neighborhood of Amarillo was a shabby, dilapidated one-bedroom house. Its windows were boarded up and the outside was covered in graffiti, and the front lawn had overgrown with weeds until it spilled out over the curb and onto the street. Inside, a young man was sleeping on a pile of old U-Haul moving blankets.

He opened his eyes, a purple glint flashing through them, and sat up. He pulled an old flip phone out of his pocket and called the imperial police agency’s non-emergency number, then reported that a homeless person was squatting in the house he was in, then sat back to wait for the police to arrive.

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door. The young man opened the door and, as he had expected, two men in neat imperial police uniforms were standing on the porch.

The taller of the two officers gave a friendly smile and said, “Hello, sir. I’m Officer St. Pierre, and this is my partner, Officer Mendoza. We received a report that someone here may be having some issues with housing. May we come in and have a chat?”

“Ah, um... sure, thanks for coming, I guess?” the young man replied. “Oh, right—I’m uhh, Dave. Nice to meet you,” the young man nervously stammered and stretched out his hand for a handshake.

Officer St. Pierre returned the handshake, but the moment their hands touched, “Dave’s” eyes flashed purple again, followed by the same purple glint passing through the police officer’s eyes. They returned to normal fast enough, though, that Officer Mendoza didn’t catch the abnormality.

“Dave” turned to Officer Mendoza and repeated the process, then both officers stood before him like statues with blank looks on their face.

“The empire sure creates some strong willed people,” the young man complained to himself, knowing that he would be having another massive headache waiting for him when his consciousness returned to his own body. He’d had to drain nearly all of the faith he’d gathered over the past two weeks to break the mental defenses of and take over two mere imperial police officers! The overdraft from that would be downright vicious, especially since he needed to force all of it through a single thread of belief and work remotely.

In absolute terms, sure, it wasn't that much; he had over a million threads of belief now, and his daily income of faith pulses was in the hundreds of millions, so he still had plenty of faith left. But using so much at once would still give him some problems.

"You know what to do, right?" he said, looking at the human statues in front of him.

"Yes, sir," they chorused in a monotone, then turned and left.

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'Hmm... thousands of awakeners spread all through the city, living like normal people. Almost none of them are registered in the imperial awakener's database, nor are they imperial citizens. Looks like I've found the right place,' Aron mused to himself. He was so high in the air that the entire city below him was the size of his pinky fingernail.

'And although all of it can be solved if I just deal with you....' He focused on one particular video feed from his sensor swarm that showed a man sitting in an office with a pair of guards outside the door. 'I can't simply just do that without risking whatever programming you've planted in them erupting after your death and turning the streets of my city into rivers of blood.'

"Fuck!" he shouted.

Without the awakeners being registered in the imperial awakeners database, or even being imperial citizens, there was no way of telling what affinities they had awakened to. Add to that the level of destruction that even known awakeners are capable of dishing out in a short time, he feared that pulling out the cult from the empire's side would be devastating to citizens and noncitizens alike.

He thought for a moment, then asked, "Where's the standby force?"

{The emperor's aegis is fifteen miles outside town with their stealth fields engaged awaiting further orders. ARES is on high alert and the Amarillo cube called a full force recall ten minutes ago. Police and fire have been notified and are on standby. They're calling in all of their members who aren't already on shift as we speak,} Nova answered.

"Suggestions? We need to take out all of the targets at the same time I deal with the cult leader," he asked. He was currently focused on how to kill the cultists, rather than capturing and parading them in front of the empire for a public trial and sentencing. But that said, the thousands of awakeners in the city would provide a substantial number of troops in the empire's penal legion, so if they could be captured without risk of civilian casualties, he would much prefer it.

{How about snipers?}

"Can we get enough of them here in such a short time? There are thousands of targets and they all need to be taken out at the same time."

{Athena says she can have them all mobilized and present in twenty minutes.}

“And what about the penal legion? If we kill them all, wouldn’t that be a waste?”

{They can’t be saved, sir. Who can guarantee that whatever programming they’re under won’t erupt in the future? It’s better to wipe them out now than have them explode down the line and wreak havoc.}

Aron thought about it and conceded the point. He already knew that they would have a problem with “supervillains”, and cutting these thousands of awakeners out now would mean fewer problems in the future, but he still sighed at the waste.

“Okay. Tell them to be fast about it. I’ll use that time to make my final preparations,” Aron said, his expression grave. He was about to execute quite a few people without trials, and he felt that it should be handled with the gravity and solemnity it deserved.

Chapter 537 Downfall (part 1)

“Nova,” Aron called out.

[Yes, sir?]

“Can you reprogram the surveillance nanites to search for any explosive devices and disarm them?” he asked.

[Yes. They’ve already spread through the entire city, so detection will be easy. But they’ll have to gather to disarm, won’t that mean we don’t have real-time eyes on all of the targets?] Nova said.

“It depends on how many there are. If there’s just a few of them, we can call the bomb squad for disposal. If there are a lot, we’ll have to use the nanites.”

[Understood, sir. I’ve reprogrammed them to search for explosive devices, the new scan will take a little over four minutes.]

Aron nodded and turned over on his back, gazing up at the sky above him. It was daytime, so he couldn’t see the stars, but Nova helpfully overlaid them on his vision, knowing his habits as she did.

The next few minutes passed in silence, then Nova said, [The scan is complete. The nanites found four explosives—one on the I-40/I-27 interchange, one at the airport, one at Carver Elementary School, and one at Amarillo College.]

“Have you informed the police to send out disposal experts?”

[Yes, sir.]

“Good. Retask the nanites for surveillance and monitoring again.”

[Right away, sir.]

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ARES Reaper Command.

Athena was rather satisfied with the empire’s armed forces. Not only was each and every trooper multiple cuts above any military ever created in the history of humanity, but she even had the best special forces under her. Every single reaper was trained to a high standard, and all of them could

quite easily be called a one-man army. They were proficient in every aspect of warfare, from tactics and strategy all the way down to individual skills.

Thus, each and every one of them was a highly qualified sniper. The only thing that the official snipers in each team had that the others didn't was a personality profile that fit being a sniping specialist. Just like the demolitions experts all enjoyed the spectacle of big booms, sniping specialists enjoyed the thrill of the hunt and taking down high-value targets unaware.

So when every single team—barring the one that was still on cleanup duty in Washington—got the same orders to pick up sniper kits and move out, they logged out of the simulation, moved to the quartermaster, and picked up rifles that were already set to their personal specifications. There was no hesitation or nervousness in their actions; it was clear that, to them, it was just another Tuesday.

The teams neatly filed down the station's arms to the docking ring, jogging to their individual stealth shuttles in single file and peeling away from the group as each team reached their shuttle.

Once they were loaded into their shuttles, they leaned back in their seats and triggered the augmented reality briefing.

[There are over two thousand targets that require simultaneous precision takedowns currently incognito in Amarillo, Texas. Lethal means only, no saving heads for later headbagging. These targets are likely to be programmed by the progenitor cult and could take hostile actions at any time without warning. They are all awakened, and none of them are in the database, nor are they imperial citizens....]

The briefing continued for a few minutes before Athena asked, [Any questions?]

One of the reapers raised his hand, and the others in his team chuckled at him. He sheepishly put his hand down and said, "Yes, ma'am, I have a question."

[Go ahead, corporal.]

"Since they're all awakeners, doesn't that mean our targets are... kids?"

[Technically, yes. But also no. They're targets that have been programmed by the cult to attack innocent civilians. Will that be a problem for you, corporal?] Athena said.

"No, ma'am," the corporal replied, though he was obviously in a shit mood at the thought of carrying out a wholesale slaughter on teenagers.

After that question was asked, every single reaper, all three thousand of them, felt the weight of what they were about to do settle on their shoulders. Taking down the targets in front of them today meant saving hundreds of thousands, if not millions of lives tomorrow.

It was the cruel calculus of war, a lesson that was only now being brought home in their minds.

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Somewhere over the Gulf of Mexico.

The EV Beowulf was headed toward the coast of Texas at full speed, expecting to meet a cargo of stealth shuttles carrying reaper teams along the way.

The massive supercarriers were still fulfilling their duties as patrol craft for the empire, and the Beowulf was just the one that happened to be nearest to North America when the bell rang. Before

the empire had taken its initial shape, the ten supercarriers had each been assigned a specific patrol area, but now all ten of them had the entire planet as their patrol areas, a measure that came about because the world had just gotten smaller, in a metaphorical sense.

“How long until we pick up our cargo, Wulf?” the captain asked.

[Eight minutes, thirty-seven seconds, captain,] Wulf, the ship’s AI, answered.

“Very well, maintain course and speed. Inform higher that we’re en route and on target.”

[Yes, captain.]

[Yes, captain.]

The landing operation a few minutes later went without issue, and soon, the Beowulf reached Amarillo and the reapers spread out over its flight deck. Each was assigned a target marked with tracking nanites. A few hundred of them had obscured, or otherwise unreachable targets, so they switched out their pulse rifles for charge pistols and monomolecular-edged combat knives, then leaped off the deck of the Beowulf, engaging their optical stealth systems as they fell to ground.

Their strikes would have to be done in a much more up close and personal fashion.

Within minutes, all of the reapers were in position and ready to strike. All they needed was the final go/no-go order from Aron himself.

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[Everyone is in position, sir. They’re just waiting on your orders,] Nova informed Aron.

“Then I guess I shouldn’t disappoint them,” Aron said, then closed his eyes and fell from the sky. He oriented himself head down and fixed his eyes on the Fisk building, where Rick was currently in his penthouse office.

The freefall from the stratosphere took three minutes, during which time Aron split his focus and crafted two equally intricate runic circles. One of them, he called the ‘phasing’ rune. When activated, it would allow him, and anything within three inches of him, to phase through solid matter.

The other, he called the ‘disintegration’ rune. It would disintegrate anything and everything around it that wasn’t protected by a mana shield.

Aron reached the window of Rick’s office. “Begin the operation,” he ordered, then stepped through the sealed window.

Over two thousand gunshots rang out from kilometers away as he walked up behind Rick, whose consciousness was currently absent from his body, and said, “This is a much easier ending than you deserve, you terrorist scum.” Then he rested the palm of his hand on the top of Rick’s head and triggered the disintegration rune.

Rick’s body broke down layer by layer, from the top of his skull. His hair went first, followed by his skin, then what little fat he had on his body, his eyeballs.... Soon, Rick had completely been reduced to nothingness.

Aron nodded in satisfaction, then walked to the center of the building, a disintegration rune around him ensuring that everything vanished when he came into contact with it. Soon, he reached the center of the building and closed his eyes.

The disintegration rune around him rapidly grew until it overlapped the edges of the building itself, and Aron let himself freefall.

The Fisk building, and all of the people within, were reduced to complete nothingness in the time it took him to fall from the top floor to the bottommost subbasement.

[Sir, we have a problem,] Nova told him when he reached the ground.

Chapter 538 Downfall (part 2)

?“What’s the problem, Nova?” Aron asked.

[Our Henry’s Eye sensors detected a very large surge of mana headed west from your location. It stopped in a local store a few miles away,] she replied.

“Possibility of a false positive?”

[Low, sir.]

“I’ll check it out,” Aron said, then rose into the air and rocketed away in the direction of the mana surge.

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Outskirts of Amarillo, Texas.

Greg Bauer hummed as he paced up and down the aisles in the Tractor Supply Co. in Amarillo. He was a farmer, but today, he was buying things that no farmer needed. Or rather, things that no farmer needed in the amount he was buying them in.

Every now and then as he came across something, his eyes would flash purple and, without thinking, he would dump it in his cart. He had already filled three carts and parked them at the front of the store for later checkout. It was to the point now that the employees had started giving him weird looks when they passed him while doing their routine tasks.

Suddenly, he grit his teeth and collapsed over his cart, moaning in agony as his eyes rapidly flashed between purple and their normal green. His body trembled as his jaw locked shut, preventing him from making more noise than a slight whimper.

Inside Greg’s mind, a war was happening; Rick’s consciousness was attempting to fully take over his body and make it his own!

Soon, he stopped shaking and stood normally. His face twisted into an enraged expression and, uncaring of the dirty looks from the cashiers, he stomped out of the store and into the parking lot, where he climbed into his truck and closed his eyes.

Greg had lost the battle and become Rick.

“God fucking DAMN IT!” he cursed, pounding his fists against the steering wheel. “All of that effort, all of my work, all gone!”

He continued his tirade for a few minutes before calming down and submerging his consciousness in the purple world.

As soon as he entered the familiar purple world, a voice said in a menacing murmur,
§Yyyyyyoooooooooooo... ffffffffaaaaaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiiiillled....§

“Failed what?” he asked, frantically looking around for threads of belief and finding none.

§Yyyyyyyoooooooooooo... ffffffffaaaaaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiiiillled...§ the voice repeated.

Rick thought for a moment, then shouted, “I DIDN’T FAIL! YOU failed ME!!”

§Iiiii diiiiiiiid nnnnnnnnnnooooooooothiiiiinnng!§ the voice replied, a hint of emotion—rage—in it for the first time.

“I did everything right!” Rick yelled. “I prepared to welcome the progenitors! I spread chaos! What right do you have to take my body from me!?”

§Iiiii diiiiiiiid nnnnnnnnnnooooooooothiiiiinnng!§ the voice repeated, its rage becoming more evident.

“No... no, no, no no NO! I refuse to accept this!” Rick shouted, then closed his eyes and attempted to pull the threads of belief he’d had to his new body.

For what seemed to be a long time, he pulled and pulled, but to no avail. He tried visualizing different things, like in the imperial information he received before, but there was no result. His teeth ground together until his gums started bleeding and he screamed, “GIVE IT BACK! GIVE MY BELIEF BACK!”

§Taaaaaake iiiiiiiit theeeeeeeennnnnnn,§ the voice replied. §Iiiiiiffffffff yooooooooooooo caaaaaannnnn.§

Rick struggled for what seemed like hours before, finally, a single thread of belief attached itself to him. He knew who it was the moment it anchored itself to his new body’s purple world—it was his faithful secretary and strongest believer, Katrina Markov.

Then, another thread attached to him, and another.... Soon, threads were attaching themselves to him in the tens, hundreds, even thousands at a time. The impact was intense, and in the real world, his body was writhing in pain, veins visibly popping in his skin like a bodybuilder after a hard workout.

§Yyyyyyoooooooooooo ffffffffoooooolllll!§ the voice in the purple world sneered.
§Ffffffffaaaaaailllllllure meeeeeeeans deeeeeeeathhhhhh! Yyyyyyyoooooooooooo
oooooooooooo brrrrrrriiiiiinnnnnnng yyyyyyoooooooooooo deeeeeeeathhh
clllloooooosserrrr!§

Rick screamed as he began bleeding from his eyes and ears.

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A sonic boom echoed through the parking lot of Tractor Supply Co. as Aron abruptly stopped in the air and looked down. His eyes turned gold as he scanned for mana signatures, then he looked up in

shock. An enormous purple whirlwind of mana had formed above a new model pickup truck in the parking lot!

It was filled with the shape of faces and all of them screaming and wailing in fear, agony, and protest as they were sucked deeper into the whirlwind. Many more face-shaped blobs of purple mana were streaming in from the distance as well.

“What the...” Aron began, then trailed off as he stared at the thing that was so far out of his experience that he didn’t even know where to begin.

He dropped to the ground next to the driver’s side door of the pickup and looked at the man inside. He was an older middle-

aged man with white hair and a bit of paunch. But Aron recognized him immediately—he was the cult leader! Though he had no idea how the man had accomplished it, he had stolen someone else’s body and was undergoing a very, very rapid awakening process.

Aron couldn’t allow that to continue, so he snapped his fingers and a shield extended from him and surrounded the truck. It blocked the whirlwind outside of it and the new cult leader’s body within was forced to wake up; the time since the process had begun was far too short, so he had yet to fall into a protective coma.

“It’s... it’s you... tyrant!” the cult leader panted, agony still etched in his expression.

“Call me whatever you want, I don’t care,” Aron said. “Any last wishes?”

“They’re... coming...” Rick said. “And you... you can’t... hahahahaha!”

“I can’t what?” Aron asked.

Rick said nothing, only continued maniacally laughing as blood spewed from his mouth. He soon calmed himself, however, and tilted his head back to look up at the sky, then screamed, “I REGRET!”

He continued screaming his fury and hate to the heavens, even as his body began to crack and flake off in the breeze. He screamed until his vocal cords bled, until his lips, teeth, and tongue turned to dust. Even after he could make no more sound, he raised his fist to the sky as his body crumbled to ash in the driver’s seat of the pickup truck he had been sitting in.

Aron gazed at the ash for a moment, a complex expression on his face. Then he turned his gaze upward, where the purple whirlwind still remained outside his shield.

The face-shaped blobs had stopped coming to join the whirlwind and the vortex continued turning in the air, though more slowly now.

§Yyyyyyoooooooo wwwwwiiiiinnnnnnnn... ffffffffoooooorrrrr nnnnnnnnoooooooooowwwww...§ the vortex murmured to Aron, growing more faint as it spoke.

“I’ll win next time, too. Now begone,” he replied, waving his hand as if he was shooin away a fly.

Soon, everything returned to normal, leaving Aron alone in the parking lot with his thoughts.

Chapter 539 Now Back to Your Regularly Scheduled Program

Katrina Markov was sitting at a desk in a small, windowless room that had been used as a janitor's closet before. To her left was a door and on the wall in front of her was a cork board filled with pictures, sticky notes, and small pieces of crumpled paper, napkins, and discarded cups. All of the items pinned to the board were connected by red strings; it looked like a conspiracy theorist's dream.

She'd had a bad feeling all day and needed to calm down. Looking at her "evidence board" was the way she took her mind off of problems and bad feelings, so she'd been in the room ever since Rick had retreated to his office with strict orders to leave him undisturbed.

'Who... who did it?' she thought.

She'd been investigating the murderer of her husband and child for four years, and had uncovered what she believed to be the tip of a conspiracy iceberg. Whether or not it actually was a conspiracy was debatable, to say the least, but at least she believed it to be one. What still eluded her, however, was the person at the top.

Suddenly, she felt a sharp pain in her chest and couldn't help but gasp.

'What was that?' she thought. She was in good health and still young at only 28 years old. She controlled her diet very well and exercised daily, and there was no history of heart disease in her family... so why did it feel like someone just stabbed her with an icepick?

The sharp pain came again, more intense this time.

She grabbed her chest and bent over in her chair, panting. 'No, I have to get to the doctor,' she thought.

But before she could stand, the pain came a third time. This time, rather than a piercing sensation, it was as if something important had been violently ripped out of her chest. She felt something flowing out of her, slowly at first, but speeding up as the seconds inexorably ticked past her.

She tried to stand, but fell to the floor and could only crawl toward the door of the small room she was in. As she crawled, her skin began cracking like shattered porcelain. She looked down at the fine web of cracks on the back of her hand and screamed. She continued screaming and crawling even as she slowly crumbled, as her arms and legs dissipated, until her vocal cords disappeared.

The last thing Katrina Markov saw in her life was the handle on the door to the room she had spent countless hours in, chasing her obsession.

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"You know, imperial tech is cool and all, but... I kinda miss doing things the old-fashioned way," Catherine complained to Jason in the control center of the underground base they were in.

"What do you mean by that?" Jason asked, curious.

"The whole... brain dump thing. It's just too easy—it takes all the fun out of interrogation."

“Interrogation isn’t supposed to be fun, you know.” Jason gave her an odd look, wondering if the woman he was with was a psychopath or just bored. With women, he thought, there was a fine line between the two and he had never been good at telling the difference.

“I know,” Catherine sighed, spinning around in her chair. “It’s just... it takes something away from the whole spy game, yanno?”

“I get it. It’s kinda like how reaper enhancements make it feel like we’re bullying little kids on the battlefield, right?”

“Exactly! You know you’re built for bigger and better things, but you’re stuck on easy mode even if you normally play on hell difficulty,” Catherine said, pouncing on her partner.

Their playful banter was interrupted by a screech from the direction of the prison cells. They exchanged glances, then Catherine leaped off of Jason’s lap and sprinted to the locker where they kept their emergency gear. Jason followed shortly after.

“The fuck was that?” he asked.

“You’re asking me, but who am I supposed to ask?”

They grabbed their kits and sprinted to the prison, weapons held at the ready. But when they got there, the sight they saw was... disturbing, to say the least. The cult members they had captured were dissolving into sparkling particles that drifted in the air and fell to the ground before disappearing.

They looked at each other again, for a long minute, until Catherine broke the silence and said, “So... how are we supposed to report that?”

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Minutes later, on television screens around the globe, a breaking news cutin began.

“We apologize for interrupting your regularly scheduled broadcast with this breaking report,” the anchor began. “Just minutes ago, people around the world began collapsing.”

The screen switched to a shaky cellphone camera recording of someone on the ground in the middle of a crowded supermarket, an almost inhuman screech ripping out of their throat.

The news anchor switched to voiceover narration and continued, “Reports are coming in from around the world of a wave of brutal disappearances. Everyone affected exhibits the same symptoms: extreme pain, collapse, and finally....”

The video cut to another location, this one in Times Square, which had been damaged, but not completely destroyed, in the attacks at the beginning of the year. A woman was rolling around on the ground, wailing and shrieking and tearing at her hair. She began cracking, then finally dissipated

into dust and a wave of panic passed through the crowded landmark as people stampeded out of the square, thinking it was some kind of biological or chemical attack.

The narration continued apace. “They disintegrate into dust from the outside in,” the news anchor said in a grave tone.

“According to the Akashic Record, there’s been thousands of reports so far, and they’re still coming in.... My producer just informed me that the number is now in the hundreds of thousands and still rapidly climbing.

“We here at the imperial broadcasting agency are now asking that if you, or anyone you know, is currently or has been affected by these disturbing events, please report it to your nearest imperial official as soon as possible. Otherwise, please remain calm and shelter in place. More information will be announced as the event unfolds.

“Thank you, and now back to your regularly scheduled program.”

Chapter 540 Aftermath and Investigation

Aron turned and looked around the parking lot. He had thought they were alone, but now he realized that, other than him and the pile of dust that used to be a cult leader, there were others who had witnessed the events.

A short distance away, people who had been loading supplies in their cars and trucks were pointing at him. Thankfully, things had happened so fast that none of them had had time to pull out their phones and start recording before everything was over. And people further away had been too absorbed in their own errands to pay attention to a distant argument.

Only a very small portion of the population was awakened and could actually see anything happening. To everyone else, it just sounded like a normal argument, if they could even hear it at all. And not everyone—especially not the kind of people (read: farmers) that shop at Tractor Supply Co.—were constantly recording everything in hopes of catching a major event that would give them a boost in visibility on the internet.

Aron, however, had scanned and recorded the entire process of Rick’s disintegration. It was, after all, something he would very shortly need to get to the bottom of.

Only after everything was over and done and the imperial police had arrived did he breathe a sigh of relief and rocket off, intent on boarding his personal shuttle and heading back to Avalon Island to supervise the aftermath.

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“Give me an update on the situation,” he said after he boarded his shuttle and began the journey back to the main Cube.

[There were a number of large bombs discovered, but the imperial police successfully defused them. The cult was in the process of building new ANFO bombs, but they were intercepted in a... rather weird way,] Nova reported.

“Weird way?” Aron asked. He was pretty sure they had only targeted the cult’s awakeners, so hearing that something weird happened to non-awakener cultists was a bit unexpected.

[The awakeners were successfully assassinated. 2,493 awakeners were targeted, of which 2,118 were neutralized by long-range sniping. The others were beheaded to ensure the kill. None of them were able to make any waves.

[But other than that, there are a number of people who are disintegrating in the same fashion as the cult leader—who we now know was Rick Ashley, a native of Montana who grew up in a militia compound—and we believe they were the cultists and other followers of the progenitor cult. The first instances of people disintegrating happened moments after you attacked the Fisk building and killed Mr. Ashley.]

“Are they only happening here?” While it did seem to be connected to the cult leader at first glance, correlation is not causation, so Aron had to rule out some environmental factor or planned attack by an unknown cult awakener that had slipped the net.

[No, sir. The phenomenon is occurring all over the world. We’re still getting reports of it happening, and the number is now in the hundreds of thousands and still increasing. There’s a significant number of them that we’ve already identified as linked to the cult and were tracking in Operation Hunting Dog, enough to statistically rule out other possibilities for the disintegrations,] Nova said. She was paying attention to the reports and updating the numbers in real time as they came in.

She waved her hand and a virtual screen appeared with a map of the world on it, littered with dots of different colors. Red dots were confirmed cultists that had disintegrated, yellow dots were for suspected cultists that were also disintegrating, and orange dots were for people unrelated to the cult, but were also disintegrating.

Disturbingly, there were also blue dots here and there that represented imperial citizens that had also died the same way.

[We don’t yet know the mechanics of it, or why exactly it’s happening, but from all the available evidence, it appears that the cult is dying with its leader.]

Aron went silent after hearing Nova’s report as he thought of why something like the disintegration phenomenon was happening. A few minutes before his shuttle reached Avalon Island, he came up with a working theory. “It’ll require further investigation, but I think what happened is likely to be related to Rick taking over another body after I killed him in his office. The death of his followers might be the price he had to pay, or perhaps, given the nature of the disintegrations, his followers are just being drained of enough mana to artificially awaken the new body.”

He recalled the mana vortex that had formed when he caught up to Rick in his new body and became more sure of his theory, but still said, “We’ll look into it after everything’s settled. But for now, I’ll be resting.”

Aron closed his eyes and leaned back in his seat, trying to rebalance his mental state. It was the first time he had personally taken action, and the experience was much different than simply ordering

others to kill on his, or the empire's, behalf. He hadn't expected that he would be affected at all, but reality had slapped him in the face.

Nova went quiet, but that didn't mean she stopped working. She was still busy coordinating the cleanup of the various sites where cultists had disintegrated, including the personal effects they had on them when the phenomenon began. She, like Aron, thought that his hypothesis was correct; but also like Aron, she would fully investigate, looking for evidence for and against the hypothesis before coming to a final conclusion.