

## Tech System 491

### Chapter 491 A Completely Foreseeable Solution

When the negotiator mentioned that his hostage was almost dead, Kim Ho Song's hands stopped burning. However, the girl already had scorched flesh on her neck and had fainted once again. This time, though, she was actually on the brink of death, her brain having nearly been cooked by the heated blood flowing to it through her carotid arteries. Her situation was critical.

"Listen here, you unblessed peasant filth, I'm superio-" he began, but before he finished his sentence, something passed through the wall, buzzing like a swarm of bees, and hit the left side of his waist. It passed through his entire body, shredding everything around his pelvis and leaving a cavitation wake so severe that even his skin and the organs in his abdomen practically exploded from the overpressure and following vacuum. Then, after it passed through his body, it continued, passing through the other side of the vault and finally digging itself ten meters deep in the ground in the alley to the side of the bank. Only after it came to rest was the report of a gunshot heard and Kim Ho Song's brain received the message from his nervous system.

He screeched in absolute agony as his mind was overwhelmed by the signals from his body. He reflexively released his grip on the poor bank teller as his lungs dropped to the ground following his inhuman screech, cushioning him when he fell atop them. The bank teller crumpled on top of his chest, her head coincidentally having its drop cushioned by the erstwhile superhuman supremacist's chest. She listened to the last beats of his heart-or would have, had she been conscious-and his legs, jostled by her fall, fell to the ground on either side of her.

A single bullet had turned one person into a gruesome pile of flesh and organs, surrounded by a spreading red mist.

Not even three seconds later, a SWAT team breached the vault along with a RES-QR bot, which immediately began tending to the teller and failed bank robber. The teller was carefully lifted onto a gravity stretcher for transport to the empty pod awaiting her aboard the First Response Vehicle, while Kim Ho Song was decapitated and his head unceremoniously stuffed in a nanobag to preserve him for later reconstruction in a medical pod at the penal cube at the North Pole.

The researchers at Lab City had completely outdone themselves with the Mk. XVIII Nanite-Equipped Tactical Stasis device. The NETS was a black bag designed to loosely fit over a human head that, upon activation, would tightly seal itself to the contours of a person's head. They were equipped with a colony of healer nanites that would maintain blood oxygenation and everything else required to keep a brain active and healthy, along with a connection to the simulation to keep the patient from going insane due to the severe trauma their bodies had suffered.

As a backup, and sometimes primary, measure, they had a stasis field generator in them that would keep the interior of the bag in complete stasis for as long as they had batteries to maintain the field. Each specialized battery could last up to an hour, and they could be hot-swapped without losing field effectiveness. NETS were designed for medically evacuating ARES troopers who had been catastrophically injured and would have otherwise been deemed unrecoverable and listed as killed in action, and testing them in the simulation had proven their worth. Even though the soldiers

themselves despised being "headbagged", as they called it, they were still thankful that there was gear that would let them live to despise it.

Outside the bank.

Although the police had immediately cordoned off a 200-meter radius around the bank to prevent any harm, people were still tightly crowded around the cordon line and pressed against the windows of buildings with direct views of the bank itself. They had seen the massive police and emergency medical response, so somewhere deep inside, they knew there was danger to be had there, but they still wanted to see it for themselves. Among the looky-loos, most of them had pulled out their phones and were livestream the events, seeking their fifteen minutes of fame.

News channels had picked up the livestream feeds for rebroadcasting as well, pushing the bank robbery even deeper into the public consciousness with testimonials from people who were "on the scene", even though most of them couldn't even see anything from their vantage points. And even if they did have a view of the bank, it was still an exterior view and they had no idea of what was going on inside it.

The only thing they knew was that the police had been broadcasting a repeating message to stay indoors and behind the cordons for their safety, as the criminal they were apprehending was one of the blessed.

The media had learned their lesson after the second purge, for the most part, and were only rebroadcasting the livestreams without any added commentary or speculation, as any bias on their part at all would likely trigger a third purge among the media conglomerates. And they were running out of interns and fresh graduates from media majors in colleges around the world, so a third purge was something they absolutely had to avoid.

With the situation involving a superhuman, it spread even faster, with watchers from every corner of the world tuning in to see how the empire would deal with it.

Shortly after the world caught on to what was going on, they had their answer. A single gunshot boomed out from only god knows where, then the SWAT team barged into the bank alongside a scuttling RES-QR bot. Then there was only silence, followed by the SWAT team escorting a hovering stretcher and a portly man that had been painted red to the FRV outside the bank's front door for emergency treatment and evacuation to the cube on the outskirts of Pyongyang. Accompanying them was one police officer carrying an unidentified head-sized black object.

The police officers got back into their squad cars, the SWAT team got back in its truck, and the traffic officers took down the cordon from around the bank. The bank itself was still sealed with crime scene tape, but the entire crowd of police and emergency services workers simply just packed up and left with far less fanfare than they had arrived with.

Everyone watching was left confused as to exactly what had just happened inside the bank, but the empire remained mum on the subject.

## Chapter 492 The Hole

A few minutes earlier.

\*A superpowered individual is currently attempting a bank theft. Situation: rainbow. Casualties: one. Damage: white. Evacuation in progress.\*

The pod barracks in the cube outside Pyongyang dimmed and a red light began flashing. Ten extended-stay VR pods hissed open, revealing a squad of ARES troopers. They climbed out of their pods and jogged to the armory, where they drew their kit. They had already been briefed on the mission in the simulation, so they knew what they needed to do.

All that remained was to execute the plan.

The men had relatively few nervous jitters, trading jokes and insults back and forth as they drew their equipment, geared up, and headed toward the roof through the express deployment elevator in the middle of the enormous structure. An unenhanced, normal human would suffer severe injuries due to the G force of the elevator itself, but to the enhanced ARES troopers it felt like little more than taking off in a passenger jet would to that same unenhanced human.

As the elevator went up, they ran their self test programs on all their gear. Everything naturally came back all green, as gear was recycled and reprinted between missions to ensure that no damage due to wear and tear would accumulate, leading to avoidable deaths and injuries among the troops.

Seventeen seconds later, the elevator reached the roof and the troopers ran to the waiting shuttle, which lifted off and came to a stable halt three kilometers above the ground. The gull wing door opened and the trooper carrying a pulse rifle stepped in front of the opening and took a knee. He pulled his left elbow close in against his chest and rested the forestock of his weapon atop his hand, then pulled the buttstock tight against his chest. He gave a command through his HUD and his armor locked in position, ensuring he had a stable shooting platform.

Integrating his HUD with the controls of the shuttle, he fine-tuned its direction, treating it as little more than an extension of his body as it made adjustments too fine for even the enhanced senses of his squadmates to detect. The shuttle's sensors fed an overwhelming amount of data to the trooper, whose onboard AI filtered it and displayed it in his HUD. Combining that data with images from security cameras and weather detection LiDAR from the Panopticon satellite in orbit above him gave him all the information he required.

"One shot..." he whispered as his fingertip quivered against the firing stud of his pulse rifle.

A single Type XVII penetrator round flew down the barrel and out with a great, cracking report. With a muzzle velocity of 6 kilometers per second, it would take roughly four seconds and some change to impact its target, Kim Ho Song, who was currently standing in the vault of a bank, holding a hostage in front of him by her neck.

One second passed.

"Please release her and tell us your demands. With her alive, there's a greater chance your demands will be met. But if she dies, that chance becomes zero, and the empire will come down on you with the weight of billions," the negotiator said.

Two seconds passed.

Kim Ho Song's hand stopped burning his hostage's neck.

Three seconds passed.

The target inhaled, preparing to unleash a vitriolic spew of insults at the hostage negotiator.

Four seconds passed.

“Listen here, you unblessed peasant filth, I’m superio—”

Impact.

“...one kill,” the sniper whispered, having just fired the longest sniper shot in history at just under 25 kilometers away from his target. “And may almighty God have mercy upon his poor, benighted soul.”

The initial stage of the mission completed, the gull wing door hissed shut and the sniper, now mobile, stood up and returned to his seat to the resounding applause, hoots, and hollering of the rest of his squad.

The shuttle, having been released to normal operations by the sniper, turned and flew to the bank at a relatively “sedate” pace, timed to arrive shortly after the perpetrator’s head bag was carried out the front door. It soon arrived and the shuttle door opened again, this time to allow a RES-QR to board with its cargo: one NETS’d head bag. The scene was so chaotic that virtually nobody had noticed a single squad transport land, receive a package, and lift off again.

The transport shuttle reached orbit, oriented itself toward the magnetic North Pole, and rocketed away, nobody the wiser.

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“The Hole” was the nickname that people in the know had given to Awakener Prisoner Complex #00001. Located nine kilometers beneath the sea floor at the magnetic North Pole, it was powered and kept warm by a vast geothermal generator sunk into the magma of the mantle. It was cylindrical in shape, about five hundred meters wide and three hundred stories tall, that was designed to contain hundreds of thousands of awakened prisoners in relatively minor discomfort.

It was a prison, after all, not a luxury spa resort.

{ARES transport 148721, you are cleared to land. Proceed to the central docking ring, bay 72. Understood you are transporting a single awakener, designation “Kim Ho Song”, present in a NETS head bag.}

“Roger, control,” the shuttle pilot replied. “Will proceed to bay 72 to unload our cargo—one RES-QR emergency rescue bot and one headbagged prisoner, designation ‘Kim Ho Song’.”

The pilot deftly made his way to the docking ring of The Hole, the only part of the enormous structure that was above the sea floor, camouflaged as it was by nanite guardian colonies masquerading as rocks, gravel, and various species of flora and fauna native to the seafloor in the hostile waters of the North Pole.

He navigated into the open bay and patiently waited for the docking bay to be evacuated of seawater before opening the door, allowing the RES-QR to carry his erstwhile “passenger” out of his vehicle and down a drab corridor.

“Better him than us,” the pilot murmured, then sealed his shuttle and waited for the docking bay to flood, whereupon he lifted it back to orbit and made the relatively quick flight back to the cube on the outskirts of Pyongyang.

Chapter 493 A Lot of Suffering, But No Lasting Damage

“Sir! Sir! A moment of your time, please?” a reporter that happened to be lucky—or perhaps unlucky—enough to be at the scene asked the hostage negotiator. He had been in the bank to make a deposit when the robbery took place.

Moments like these would make government officials’ careers in the past. They would use them to propel themselves to fame, then use that fame as a springboard to either work their way up into a higher position in the government, or quit their low-paying government jobs and enter the high-paying public sector. And it was all on the backs of the misery of others.

“No comment for now. The investigation is ongoing, and we’ll release a statement to the press after our work is completed,” the negotiator answered. As the on-site commander had rushed into the bank behind the SWAT team and medical rescue, the negotiator was temporarily in charge. But even though he could have given out some tidbits of information to whet the public appetite, thereby gaining a reputation and fame for an inevitable climb up the pay chain, he loved his current job and had no intention of leaving it. Thus, he was very much a by-the-books kind of operator. Besides, he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that the empire was very strict on corruption of any kind, and what they taught in the imperial police academy was essentially the word of god and must be obeyed. So even if he was willing to use those underhanded shortcuts and feed off the misery of victims, he would still refrain from doing so as the consequences would be... severe, to put it mildly.

Soon, the hubbub died down. The police packed up their cordons, the SWAT team left in their vehicle, the FRV was loaded and headed back to the cube, and everything returned to a semblance of normality. That said, it was only a semblance, as people now had proof of what they had only suspected before: super POWERS meant super VILLAINS.

With the bank’s surrounding businesses in the chung-guyok district of Pyongyang back in operation, the only thing left was for the forensics team, which had arrived after the police response was over and the scene declared “safe”, to do their investigation and recreation. The technology the empire routinely used was already enough to automate that process, but Aron had intelligently decided that duplicate effort was fine for most non-critical tasks. Had he not made that decision, unemployment would have been nearly at 90%, as pretty much every job in the empire could be easily handled by robots with upper-level VIs installed.

Ten minutes after the forensic specialists entered the bank, they finished their deep scan and packed up. Everything else would be handled in the simulation, at least on their end. The only task left to

them was to set up two guards outside the bank to wait for the crime scene cleaners to arrive to mop up what Kim Ho Song had inadvertently left behind after being violently and catastrophically introduced to the business end of a bullet.

All told, the bank was able to resume normal operations thirty minutes after the failed robbery attempt began, the only sign it had ever been attacked a slight discoloration on the desktop behind which the original bank teller worked where the wood had warped from the heat of the awakener's fire and the lacquer had needed replacement.

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The newly appointed head of the imperial police agency, Erik Schneider, had only been in office for two real-world hours before being met with his first problem. He had been celebrating with his family in VR, intending to take the world tour they'd never been able to afford before while he was undergoing his genetic enhancements, but he'd been plucked out of his home there and sent to his office, where he was informed about the ongoing situation and left to deal with it.

Thankfully, he had already read the imperial legal code long before his appointment, so it hadn't taken him very long to familiarize himself with the, thankfully, much thinner procedural manual for his new position. Through it, he had learned that, so long as he didn't fuck up too badly, the emperor wouldn't intervene and he would be left to his own discretion in most cases. And in order to not fuck up, all he had to do was follow the guidelines in his procedural manual.

It only took him about ten minutes to have a good understanding of how the entire attempted robbery had gone down, and what the police response had been. He still had yet to go through his introductory data files, which every agency head had received, but with the evidence and reports presented to him, he didn't need it. The robbery was a slam dunk open-and-shut case through and through. He had the trifecta: means, motive, and opportunity had been identified, leaving nothing to be investigated. And even without that, he still had eyewitnesses, physical evidence, and beyond that, he had the absolute holy grail of any police investigation—a high-res security camera recording of the crime itself being committed!

If he couldn't do his job to perfection with all of that at his fingertips, well, he might as well resign.

"Schedule a press conference," he said to the empty room. As an agency head, he was allocated a specialized AI assistant to act as a secretary and aide in the simulation. That was in addition to his personal AI butler, which had been transferred to his VR pod for the duration of his genetic enhancement and implant procedures. But just because this was his first time working with his official AI didn't mean he wasn't already accustomed to them; he had long been a user of the GAIA OS both on his home computer and his phone, so he knew that they were competent assistants even "straight out of the box" without having learned anything about him, personality-wise.

{Invitations sent, sir. The press conference is scheduled to begin in seventeen minutes public simulation time, at 3PM on the nose. That's five hours from now, so you have time to explain why you were plucked from a family celebration,} the assistant said, reminding Erik of the time dilation difference between the government simulation and the public domain.

“No need. She’ll understand—she was a cop’s wife, and now she’s a high-level government staffer’s wife. The only difference between the two is that a government staffer is far less likely to be shot, stabbed, or otherwise injured in the line of duty. Hopefully, anyway,” he said with a wry smile. “So right now, I just need to earn our keep.”

{Understood, sir. Might I suggest, then, that you begin working your way through the introductory data dump? It’s a large file, and you should work through it in sections so you can internalize the information more efficiently.}

“Heard,” Erik said, then went over the report of the bank robbery one last time before pulling up his “Introduction to the Empire Handbook”, as his associates had named it. It contained all the information he had the security clearance to know at his level, so it was basically the same dump that Jeremy and Youssef, the new Ministers of the Interior and Exterior, had received... but it contained much less information and only that related to his job.

“What should I call you?” he asked his AI aide. “I already call my butler Alfred, so how about... Gordon. I’ll call you Gordon.”

{Understood, sir. Would you like to update my settings for initial configuration or allow me to adapt independently?} Gordon asked.

“Not right now. Put a pin in it. Run a keyword search for the word ‘awakeners’ as related to my position as the head of the imperial police agency, including the information from the handbook.”

{Yes, sir,} Gordon replied. {Prepare for data download.}

Erik leaned back in his chair and relaxed. He had already undergone a data download before, so he knew what he was in for: a whole lot of unnecessary agony and suffering, but no actual lasting damage. He had been advised to not rely on data downloading, however, and to save it for emergencies and things he needed to know like the backs of his hands as he would still need to recall the information downloaded into his brain to bring it into active memory.

Soon, the download—and the screaming—began.

#### Chapter 494 Erik's First Time

Public simulation, press briefing room.

The imperial police agency press conference was scheduled for 3PM, and everyone that’d been invited to attend had arrived five minutes early. Considering they had only been given seventeen minutes of lead time-or eight and a half minutes, real time-it was impressive that not a single person was missing from the list.

Precisely as the clock ticked over to three, Erik materialized behind the podium, attracting the attention of the audience, all of whom were curious as to just who he was.

He didn't waste any time, much to the audience's satisfaction, but immediately began speaking. "Good day, ladies and gentlemen of the press and everyone watching from the comfort of their own homes. My name is Erik Schneider, and about two and a half hours ago, Earth time, I was appointed as the head of the imperial police agency." Though he was speaking in his native German, thanks to the magic of imperial technology and virtual reality, everyone listening heard, and saw, him speaking fluently in their own language.

His self-introduction, along with the brief time he had been in office, caused a commotion in the briefing room. Nobody had been informed of the vacant positions in the government agencies being filled yet, as Aron had wanted to wait until the first round of genetic enhancements and implants had been completed before informing the public.

"Along with myself, various other officials have been appointed to fill every vacancy in the government agencies, from the ministers down. Their identities will be made public once the safety of the individuals in question, and their families, has been assured. That is all I will say about that, and I will not be taking any questions on the matter. It isn't my place to speak about imperial staffing, so let's get to the main subject, shall we?

"After a careful and thorough investigation, we discovered that the perpetrator of the attempted robbery of the Pyongyang branch of the Bank of the Universe via usage of his blessing was Kim Ho Song, age twenty. He is a tertiary branch member descended from the former Kim regime in what was once North Korea. He recently underwent an evolution and gained the superpower of fire control, thanks to his blessing. And as a result of most of his family being arrested for crimes against humanity and various other lesser charges, his financial situation was dire after the asset forfeiture that the charges required.

After going from luxury to poverty, he grew angry, which fostered a sense of discontentment with the empire. But when he received his blessing, that discontent grew greater, eventually turning into a sense of superiority and rage. He felt that, as a member of a superior branch of humanity, he deserved all the luxury he could ever want. Thus, the chain of events culminated in attempted robbery, attempted intentional murder, felony assault with a blessing, and sedition. He was apprehended red-handed in the midst of committing his crimes, so though his guilt is apparent, he will be transferred to Awakened Prisoner Complex One, also known as 'The Hole', to await trial for his crimes.

"According to the imperial legal code, there is only one sentence for crimes committed using superpowers: twenty years of service in an ARES penal battalion, Earth time. No early parole will be granted, though prisoners in penal service to the Terran Empire can redeem themselves through appropriate acts of heroism in service to mankind." Erik stared into the eyes of everyone watching, his gaze solemn and cold.

"Thus is the fate of anyone that thinks they can use their blessings to commit crimes of any nature. Simply by using your blessings to commit crimes, you will be caught, and you will be sentenced to a minimum of twenty years in a penal battalion, sent to the front line of any conflict that arises during that time period. With great power comes great accountability, and you will be held accountable for your actions as a member of homo sapiens beatus. This much, I promise you."

After finishing the presentation of the evidence, Erik cleared his throat and continued, "With that, our investigation is considered complete and has been closed. We've already forwarded it to the imperial judiciary for prosecution. Any and all evidence collected in the course of our investigation



has been made available in the Akashic Record for public viewing, should you wish to do so. I'll warn you now-the evidence collected is very graphic, so view it at your own risk. Any questions?"

A sea of hands went up in the briefing room and Erik pointed to one of them. "Yes, you in the blue shirt."

The chosen reporter rose from his seat and asked, "When will the empire reveal the list of the appointees to the public?"

"As I said at the beginning of my prepared remarks, I will not be taking questions on the subject of imperial appointments. The decision lays in the hands of the emperor. Next question... you in the yellow dress."

"What measures have been taken to ensure that supervillains can't escape their prison to inflict further harm on normal civilians?" the second reporter asked.

"Excellent question. Without going into specifics, I can tell you that The Hole has taken appropriate measures to ensure civilian safety. It is in a remote, classified location and out of reach of the majority of people without very specialized transport vessels. Vessels, I might add, that are held securely under imperial control. As far as jailbreaks are concerned, don't worry, this isn't a comic book or movie. Escaping The Hole isn't a simple task and its location alone virtually guarantees that escapes will fail, even if the blessed in the facility use their superpowers to aid in the attempt. Beyond that, there are multiple layers of security both inside and outside The Hole.

"Currently, the empire maintains a monopoly on violence, so anyone that attempts to escape from The Hole will very quickly learn what that means. Next question." He pointed at a man in a dark gray suit with a striped blue and silver tie.

"Will the imperial police agency increase the security level in their jurisdictions to prevent such crimes from happening again?" the man asked.

"Security levels will absolutely be increased. Sadly, we cannot guarantee that we can prevent all crime, but we will ensure an extremely rapid and overwhelming response when crimes are reported. Especially by the blessed...."

Questions continued coming one after the next, until Erik had answered all of them and the questions began repeating themselves with different wording. Once he was sure that all of the relevant questions had been answered, he called an official end to the press conference.

The media interns responsible for monitoring the Akashic Record had long since seen the result of the investigation and the recording of the events during the robbery, as gruesome as it was. The only question that was left unanswered for those who had seen that security camera footage was where the bullet came from. All the video showed was a bullet passing through the walls of the vault and dismembering and disemboweling Kim So Hong before disappearing through the wall on the opposite side. They were also curious about the NETS head bag, but the Akashic Record informed them that any information on that device was classified and not available for their level of security clearance.

## Chapter 495 One Hell of a Precedent

The video of the sniper firing from the door of a hovering shuttle was completely unbelievable to people that found their way to it in the Akashic Record. Not to mention the distance it was fired

from, just the fact that it had enough power to penetrate a reinforced bank vault from one side, essentially disintegrate the person it hit, then penetrate a second reinforced vault wall was incredible enough. And that wasn't even mentioning that the sniper had no visual on his target and was firing completely blind!

The people that saw it had chills running down their spines and goosebumps all over their bodies. Especially considering the empire hadn't hidden that capability, which made them wonder just what actually was hidden in the classified files of the Akashic Record.

Thus, they took the footage and posted it online, either in its raw version or with different edits, and through that method, the empire's capabilities finally filtered down to non-citizens. Although the internet was freely available for everyone, citizen and non-citizen alike, people that had refused the offer of imperial citizenship had no access to the Akashic Record.

The discovery of the empire's capabilities, and the havoc that superhumans could wreak, terrified the non-citizens. Realizing the level of danger they were in, as the empire definitely wouldn't expend any effort on their behalf, millions of people rushed to apply for imperial citizenship. But as they had sat on the fence for too long, and even drifted to the wrong side of it, the empire certainly wasn't about to make the process easy on the new applicants, nor would they offer them the same free perks that people who had signed up for citizenship during the grace period received.

Though they were unhappy that they would be charged a premium for housing and the initial visit to the cubes to undergo their genetic corrections, given the choice between safety and financial stability, they still overwhelmingly chose safety. Especially those who had families and loved ones to consider. They simply had to queue up and patiently wait for the imperial immigration agency to approve their requests for citizenship in the Terran Empire.

That said, there were still hundreds of millions of holdouts who believed that even if there really were supervillains once the non-citizen blessed woke up with their superpowers, there would certainly be superheroes as well. Thus, though their convictions had been shaken and they were filled with a not inconsiderable amount of uncertainty and fear, they managed to somewhat conquer their fears and remain firm on their decision not to join the Terran Empire.

The only question remaining on everyone's mind was what was going to happen to Kim Ho Song. While they knew the punishment he would receive, and they were positive that he would be found guilty, given the preponderance of the evidence against him, how exactly was the empire going to put a severed head on trial? No matter how many times they watched the recording of the young man's fate, all they saw was his gruesome death and his head being dragged out in a sack. Was the imperial judiciary really going to try a corpse as a defendant? And not even a complete one, at that!? Even if they were, what kind of due process would a severed head be afforded?

That, if true, would most certainly set one hell of a precedent for future trials in the empire's justice system.

A month later.

"Drag out the spy and make sure to loosen his tongue! Who bribed him, and what did they bribe him with? What does he have to gain by killing the shepherd?" Katarina Markov ordered the men following behind her. They moved forward and started dragging the doctor out of the room they were in.

Panicking, he shouted, "If there was something to gain from keeping him from waking up, why would I be stupid enough to do it when I'm the only possible suspect!?" He was frantically struggling in the grip of the two large bodyguards that accompanied Katarina everywhere she went.

"So why, then, despite most of our resources being invested in the shepherd, is he the only one who hasn't woken up? Everyone else was already awake three weeks ago! Why is Rick the only person who's still in a coma now? Six weeks! It's been six... fucking... WEEKS!" she screamed.

The doctor, knowing that his fate would be dire if he were dragged out of his office, replied, "Although it's rare, there are still people in the empire that haven't woken up yet. And they've got the best resources available to anyone on the entire planet!"

Over the past six weeks, anyone who had annoyed Katarina Markov had been dragged to the target range, where they were tortured to death by awakeners learning to use their new superpowers. The doctor himself had even patched some of them up, and the parade of third degree burns from fire-aspected awakeners and the various injuries caused by projectiles was staggering. There were even a few that were brought to him suffering severe frostbite after being encased in ice that was as hard as steel, or half drowned after having their heads surrounded by a sphere of heavy water. Thus, he could only tell Katarina of the situation in the empire as a last-ditch lifesaving measure.

"You think I didn't know that?" she spat. "I listened to the same reports as you did!"

While the two were arguing back and forth, the only person still in an infirmary bed in the room twitched his right index finger and his eyelashes fluttered despite there being no breeze, both of which went completely unnoticed by the arguing pair.

His heart rate, as displayed on the monitor beside the bed, began rapidly climbing. From a slow and virtually unnoticeable five beats per minute, it soon reached a dangerous level as the man's body was finally beginning to stir.

Moments later, his eyes opened.

#### Chapter 496 The Purple World

Rick's eyelids fluttered and he groaned, fighting the urge to fall unconscious once more. It felt like they had been attached to twenty-pound weights as they fought against his command to open them, and his entire body ached with a bone-deep fatigue. Although he had been unconscious for the past six weeks, there was no portion of him that could even remotely be considered to have been "resting" during that time.

"Shepherd!" Katarina shouted as she rushed over to his bedside, the doctor and the two men she had ordered to drag him out of the room forgotten.

The doctor in question fell to the floor himself, the men holding him aloft by his arms having dropped him. He rushed to the bed and muscled Katrina out of the way, then injected an ampoule of adrenalin directly into Rick's heart, helping him win the battle against the fatigue accumulated over his past six weeks of unconsciousness. As a side effect, it would also force the blessed into a fight-or-flight mode, thus prompting their blessings to manifest, which had been accidentally discovered when the first person to awaken from their forced evolution had buried an entire basement in gravel as their earth affinity was stimulated by the drug.

They had also learned a harsh lesson on the drawbacks of overdrafting one's abilities that day as well, as the blessed collapsed and turned catatonic due to the agony of forcing himself so far beyond his limit. When they dug the blessed out and saw the results of the catastrophe-three dead and one catatonic- their following experiments became much more cautious and they had finally pinpointed the correct dosage to use to force the blessings to manifest without causing many casualties or injuries.

"Nothing?" Katarina and the doctor looked at each other in confusion as Rick's blessing failed to be activated. Both of them were surprised, as he had obviously undergone an evolution. So why had nothing happened despite using the correct dosage of adrenalin to force the cult leader's blessing to be made manifest?

"Sir.... Sir.... Sir...!" Katarina shouted at Rick, whose gaze had grown vacant and withdrawn. His body lay still and she was caught between fury and terror. Fury toward the doctor, who must have fucked something up; and terror toward the future, as she still needed Rick to aid her in her pursuit of vengeance.

But there was no response from the newly blessed cult leader; he remained indifferent to every attempt to provoke a response, no matter what they tried.

"His blessing's already been activated. The only thing we can do now is wait for the adrenalin to wear off before we try anything more drastic. If we disturb him now, he might lose control of it and harm us," the doctor said. This time, everyone listened to him and the thugs even left the room, taking seats on the chairs lining the hall of the makeshift basement turned third-world hospital ward.

Rick's eyes had opened and he was vaguely aware of his surroundings, but before his eyes could adjust to the light they hadn't received for the past six weeks, he had been injected with adrenalin and forced into a fight-or-flight response. His heart pounded and his vision shrank to a pinprick of light at the end of a very long tunnel as his higher reasoning capacity was disconnected, leaving his hind brain to make the decision whether to fight or flee. Then, the odd things began.

His vision once again broadened to include his entire field of view, but it didn't stop there. All the colors he could see were tinted with shades of purple, with white objects now appearing in pastel lavender shades and black objects seemingly replaced by identical replicas built entirely from deep violet material.

But compared to the rest of the things happening to him, the color shift quickly became the least of his concerns. As he focused on trying to see reality as, well, it really was, he noticed fine, glimmering white threads attached to him from somewhere off in the distance. As they resolved themselves in his vision, he saw that they were pulsing toward him, bright dots traveling through the threads to his body like drops of water slowly traveling through a clear tube.

'What the fuck is this shit?' he asked himself. He looked down and saw so many threads attached to him, like silk from a spider's spinnerets, that he glowed a brilliant white in his own currently distorted vision. He tried counting them, but the way they were shifting and vibrating made the count completely impossible, so he gave up when he lost count for the fifth time.

Instead of attempting to count them for a sixth time, he focused on the brightest one with the most rapid... flow, for lack of a better term. It pulsed and writhed far more energetically than the rest of the threads attached to him, and as he focused on it, his vision blurred and he fell into a deep purple nothingness. When his surroundings came into focus again, it was as if he had moved to a different

position. The cognitive dissonance between what his body was telling him-that he was laying supine in bed-and what he was seeing confused the ever living fuck out of the man.

'What the actual fuck?' he shouted in his mind. While he felt himself laying in bed, though the feeling was rapidly fading as the rest of his mind caught up to his eyes, what he saw was a shriveled, starved version of himself laying in a bed in front of his eyes.

In his field of vision, he saw the blindingly white glow coming from "his" body shifting and writhing before trailing off into the aether around him. All except for one. The brightest of the threads led from the base of his left index finger directly to his new viewpoint, or perhaps through it.

He tried closing his "eyes", and a rich purple darkness closed in around him. Within the tranquil silence, he heard someone say, "Is he really okay? If something happened to him, I'm going to burn the doctor alive. No, that's too good for him... I'll torture him until his mind breaks, then throw him to the perverts and have him fucked to death. How dare he not take care of my savior's health, even with his life on the line?"

Along with the words, he began feeling foreign, intrusive emotions carried along with them. The intrusive thoughts and emotions grew more and more dangerous and complicated, which was an unpleasant sensation to him; after all, he hadn't felt any kind of emotion in quite a long time.

'Calm the fuck down, Rick,' he ordered himself in a hail mary attempt at regaining his emotional even keel, despite knowing there was nothing he could do to control what was happening to him.

However, much to his surprise, silence returned once again. When he opened his "eyes", he saw that the flowing pulses of light were now flowing from his body to... wherever, or whomever, he was in. The feeling was almost orgasmic, with each of the pulses coming in a more concentrated fashion through the single many-times-enlarged thread that connected his physical body to his ethereal self, and his exhaustion seemed to melt away as a result.

But before he could settle in and really properly enjoy himself, he heard a woman's pain-filled scream and felt a splitting headache. He momentarily blacked out, then his vision returned to normal, and from the viewpoint of his own body. The screaming continued and there was the thud of a body falling to the floor, so he turned his head to see if his suspicions were correct.

## Chapter 497 Kids Have Big Mouths

Katrina briefly brought Rick up to speed on the Three Percenters, and what had happened to him. He fell into a daze for a while, considering the situation, then clarified, "So I spent six weeks in a coma receiving my blessing. How long did it take everyone that received theirs? And why did mine take so long?" He had just woken up and his brain was still a little fuzzy. To him, the time had passed in an instant and he just remembered a fierce, tearing pain in his head before he collapsed. But even that memory was fading, as all memories of physical pain do, a convenient defense mechanism that humanity had.

"Yes. Although you were among the first to receive your blessing, it took this long for you to wake up due to resources. The empire's blessed started coming to around the second week, while ours mostly started around day twenty. While we have access to the Biogen that the tyrant's company developed before the war, that's likely

generations out of date now and the medical pods in the empire surely use more advanced nutrients to go with their more advanced delivery system," she explained.

One of her thugs came into the room carrying a thick stack of folders and stood by the door. Katrina gestured to him and he handed her the folders, which she glanced at and passed on to Rick. "Here's a detailed breakdown of everything we've managed to gather on the blessed, the blessing, and everything else that's happened over the past six weeks you were in a coma."

Rick got into a more comfortable position in the hospital bed and calmly began reading through the files contained in the folders. He was curious about his blessing, sure, but before he tried using them again he first wanted to understand them. The feedback he had suffered from his first attempt had taught him a harsh lesson on the usage of his power, and though the memory of the physical pain had faded, the lesson itself remained. Especially the loss of control; that was something he absolutely could not tolerate.

As he read, his shock grew greater and his eyebrows practically climbed all the way up to his hairline. The sheer amount of information alone was unbelievable and he was having a hard time imagining the lengths to which his people had gone to gather it under the circumstances they'd been in during his absence.

"We gathered all of this over the past six weeks?" he asked, raising his gaze from the documents for the first time since Katrina had handed them to him. "What's our confidence level in this?"

"The information is straight from the empire, and we're pretty sure they know a lot more than is easily available," she swiftly answered.

"Looks like having the entire world under your control really helps in data collection," Rick sneered, feeling a brief twinge of helplessness that he ruthlessly stamped out in his heart before it could manifest on his face. "So how'd you get this? The empire must be going to great lengths to not leak important information like this."

"From the public," she answered.

"The public? Just like that?" He blinked in surprise.

"Yes. This is what all of their blessed are taught the moment they wake up. It was also publicly available in their knowledgebase for anyone to view, an effective measure to prevent accidents. And from there, it was a simple task of just... asking. The Three Percenters aren't just imperialists, after all, so the information spread rapidly from there.

"Besides, the blessed are still just kids. Kids with awe-inspiring superpowers, sure, but kids nevertheless. And when have you ever met a kid that could keep a secret? There's a reason security clearances take age into account as a determining factor in how much information people are allowed to access. So the kids that woke up first scrambled to publicize the information, whether in interviews with reporters, posts

on social media, or even just bragging to their non-imperialist 'friends' about the superhero academies the empire is going to build for them."

"Has it been verified?" he asked. Though he had set rules and guidelines to sieve the good information from the bad, he'd been in a coma for six weeks and a lot of things could go wrong in far less time than that.

"We've already cross-referenced it. Hundreds of millions of people received the blessing, and they all have friendships that travel across the wall, so to speak. As it turned out, they were all saying the same things, with the only difference being small changes based on their individual blessings," Katrina replied with confidence and pride on her face. She had gathered more than a thousand people to watch more than a million videos, relentlessly filtering the information in each and discarding anything that differed into separate confidence levels. Once that had been done, she'd gone even further and had her people go out in small groups to gossip and brag with the non-imperialists that'd received blessings, or even those who had friends who received them. As a former member of the FSB herself, the intelligence analysts she had trained were her pride and joy.

They were all she had left, after all.

Rick grunted, then continued reading the files in his hands, making sure everything he read was etched into his mind and unlikely to be forgotten. As he read, he slowly began developing an understanding of the blessings as a whole, including the division of their power, their source, and the mysterious particle in the atmosphere and how it related to the strength of their individual blessings. Something inside him felt... different, though, like he was destined for more, so the information he had on hand was leaving him somewhat unsatisfied.

However, the more he read, the more questions he had.

"Why didn't our people wake up with those so-called 'instincts'?" he asked. "The imperialists all said they 'just knew' how to use their blessings as soon as they woke up, and it only required a brief time for them to put that knowledge into practice... but nothing like that was reported by our blessed, or any of the non-imperialists for that matter..." That specific bit of information had been printed in a different color in the files in his hand. The analysts had erred on the side of caution and considered it unverified and unverifiable, but it was still a point they felt should be included in the record.

"And how'd the empire have so much information ready? No matter how you look at it, they had to have put in a lot of research time to get this much." He gestured at the thick stack of paper in his hand. "Did they know about the particles in the atmosphere before people started evolving?"

“And if that’s true, does it mean the tyrant already knew about and was prepared for it?”

The more questions arose, the wilder his speculation grew. And the wilder his speculation grew, the uglier his expression became. Because if his theories were true, he was up against a much bigger beast than he had originally thought.

#### Chapter 498 Questionable Ethics

After finishing the files in his hand, Rick frowned. The information he had at hand didn’t quite track with the sensations he was feeling. Ever since he had woken from his coma, he’d had an idea of how to use his blessing, almost like there was someone whispering in the back of his mind. It left him unsettled, and unsure of who to trust in his inner circle.

“Leave me,” he calmly said after closing the last folder in the stack.

“Yes, shepherd,” Katrina said, then everyone left the room. Katrina had a spring in her step, the thugs didn’t have much in their heads at the best of times, and the doctor could only wipe the cold sweat from his brow and practically sprint out of the room.

Once the door closed, Rick leaned back in his chair, getting comfortable, and focused on the little voice in the back of his mind. It led him into a trance and most of the colors in his world faded away, leaving everything in shades of purple again.

Time slowly passed as Rick sought the state he was in when he had first come out of his coma, where he could visualize the threads connecting him to... elsewhere. He had his suspicions about what those threads were, but it would still require him to personally verify them as no one else seemed to be even the slightest bit aware of their existence.

Once he felt the difference in his surroundings, Rick opened his eyes, casting his gaze around his own purple world. He peered into the violet and indigo shadows, reaching out his hand in wonder and attempting to grasp them in his hands, curious as to whether they would feel as soft and luxurious as they looked. Failing to grab them, though, he opened his clenched fists and waved his hands through the pastel lilacs and light lavender, comparing them in his mind to still water. But his hands simply passed through them without raising the expected ripple.

He sighed, then closed his eyes again and decided to seek clarification from the unintelligible voice in the deepest, darkest corner of his mind.

After what seemed an eternity, he was finally able to make out what seemed to be two words.

§Sssssssseeeeeek ffffffffaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiithhhhhhhhh,§ the voice seemed to be saying. It had no identifiable characteristics to it, and sounded more like a soft whisper echoing through a very, very long tunnel from an unimaginable distance away from him.

‘What do you mean? I don’t understand you...’ he thought, hoping that the voice would respond.

§Ssssseeeek fffffaaaiiiiiithhh,§ it repeated. Then it repeated itself again, and again, and again, each repetition growing louder in Rick’s mind until it drowned everything out and, with a thud, he felt himself flying backward!



He looked in front of him and saw his own body slumped in the chair he had been sitting in when he decided to start investigating his powers. Connected to it were thousands of threads, each of them a shade of gray or white, and a few of them darker or brighter. Some were actively pulsing, flashes of light traveling toward him like information passing through a fiberoptic cable. Others were in various shades of gray, with the pulses of light traveling through them at varying speeds and intensities, while even more—the majority of them, actually—were deathly still, almost as though they had withered away with no more light to travel through them.

From this angle, he could tell that they didn't actually connect to every part of him, but rather to specific spots on his body, like clusters, or perhaps nodes. Thousands of threads were connected to his every joint, with even more clustered around his head and heart.

§FFFFFFFAAAAAAAAAAAAAIIIIIIIIIIITHHHHHHHHHH!!§ the voice roared at him, jolting him out of his reverie.

“What do you mean ‘faith’!?” he shouted as loud as he could, but as if he were in a dream, his mouth opened and shaped the words... but no sound emerged from his lips.

Then he looked around him, trying to detect the particles the empire claimed were saturating everything in the world, and even space beyond its atmosphere, but didn't see a thing at all. He internally cursed the useless empire and the vicious tyrant that helmed it, then focused on the only thing he had left to investigate: the threads connecting him to... elsewhere.

§Ssssseeeek ffffaaaaiiiiithhh,§ the voice softly repeated one last time before falling silent. Rick almost felt like there was a certain satisfaction in its final utterance and wondered what exactly ‘it’ was.

His consciousness drifted back into his body after the voice left, as if the mysterious speaker had been the one keeping his incorporeal form separate from his body in the first place. Then, recalling the screaming and the head splitting pain he had felt earlier, he chose to investigate one of the darkest threads connected to him this time. And as he focused on it, an almost vantablack thread connected to a node just below his right collarbone, his vision went dark and he felt a chill pass through him that he could only describe as the chill of the grave.

He opened his eyes again and continued investigating his threads, one by one, until he got tired of the slow and steady approach and decided to go with the one he had first experimented with: the brightest thread with the fastest light pulses. It was connected to the base of his left index finger and he cautiously focused on it, ready to draw back at the first sign of a repeat of what had happened to him earlier.

Opening his eyes, he saw a luxuriously tiled wall with a tall, brushed aluminum fixture attached to it and spraying scalding hot water onto “his” body.

He soon realized where he was and what was going on; his consciousness had descended on his secretary, Katrina's body! He was seeing the world through her eyes, and couldn't help but wonder how far, exactly, he could take the connection they shared. First, he tried controlling her eyelids, blinking them open and closed like a toddler with a flashlight. Then he manipulated her body into moving her head around, looking at the shower products on a shelf built into the wall next to her, and around the rest of her bathroom, separated as she was by a simple glass partition.

Then, he grew daring.

Assuming control of Katrina's right arm, he began softly teasing her bellybutton with it, all the while keeping his "ear" open to her thoughts, which, while still remaining strictly professional, were focused on him and his importance to the cult... and to her eventual revenge.

Her businesslike thoughts interrupted his mischievous derring-do, at least for a minute or two as she continued lathering and rinsing her body before turning around and leaning her head back to let the water run through her short hair. When she reached for her shampoo, Rick intercepted the movement and turned it into a quick fondle of her breasts, simply to see if he could.

Opening himself to the physical sensations of her body was as simple as flipping a switch, to him, and he enjoyed the thrill of sensation traveling from Katrina's nipple to the pleasure center in her brain. Then he withdrew back into her subconscious, once again becoming a silent observer.

Katrina continued her shower unabated, with no sign, either physical or mental, that she was carrying a passenger within her, and obviously no memory of the quick fondling she had just given her own tits.

At that point, Rick began feeling the strain of the connection and rapidly traveled along the thread connecting him to Katrina, returning to his body and opening his own, physical eyes with a chuckle.

#### Chapter 499 Hypotheses and Tests

'So she doesn't remember what I made her do at all,' Rick thought as he opened his eyes, returning to his purple world. He had tested many things on Katrina and she seemed to have no recollection of anything she'd done under his control, despite all the things he'd made her do to herself.

The only test that had failed was the one where he attempted to take control of a single body part, but he wasn't sure why. Taking over her entire body had been simple, like putting on new clothes, so why would he be incapable of taking over individual body parts? He wasn't sure, but he felt it was likely because he lacked the fine control necessary to do so. Thus, more training and experimentation was in order.

§Gaaathheeeeeerrrrr ffffaaaaaaiiiiithhhh,§ the voice in the back of his mind chanted, but Rick only had the vaguest idea of how to go about that.

When he'd looked down at his body and noticed that the thread connecting him to Katrina had slightly dimmed, and the pulses of light had decreased in frequency and intensity, he'd thought it odd. But with the voice's subtle guidance, he learned that what connected him to Katrina was "belief", and the pulses of light was "faith".

'How do I gather faith?' he thought as hard as he could.

§Aaaaannnnssswerrrrr theeeeeemmmmm,§ the voice unhelpfully replied, then fell silent.

'Answer what?' Rick screamed in his mind, but garnered no response from the mysterious, echoing voice in his mind.

He looked at the thread connecting him to his secretary again and noticed that it had recovered some of its luster, and the pulses were once again increasing in frequency and intensity. It seemed that whenever he used the faith of his believers, it would soon recover. Thinking about it, Rick found it very similar to the information he had read earlier regarding the absorption and use of the

mysterious particles permeating the planet. Perhaps he had been overthinking things when he noted the differences between his experience and the information he'd been given; after all, his secretary had the brightest thread of belief and the most intense pulses of faith in him, so she was unlikely to have fed him misinformation.

He felt the beginnings of a headache forming between his eyes and, with a long, drawn-out exhalation, came back to reality. Color permeated his world again when he opened his physical eyes and massaged his temples with his fingertips.

"I need a new test subject," he muttered under his breath, unwilling to experiment on his most fervent believer and source of faith until he learned more about his blessing.

With his consciousness returned to his physical body, though, he discovered a somewhat odd side effect of his newfound power. He felt out of place in his own body. Looking down, he still expected to see breasts, and he was inundated with foreign emotions and intrusive thoughts for a while. Most of the thoughts aligned with the things Katrina had been thinking in her shower. He also still felt uncomfortably aroused, echoes of the actions he had forced Katrina to perform in the shower playing out across his own skin, with the accompanying difference and, dare he say, increase in sensitivity to them.

Rick fought against the sensations and thoughts, coming back to his normal self after about an hour. In the future, he would most definitely need to take the aftereffects into consideration when physically possessing people through their threads of belief. It also implied a certain cooldown period, during which he would likely be ill advised to "body hop" between his followers. If he couldn't bring himself back to normal between each possession, he instinctively felt that the risk of losing himself in the thoughts and sensations of others would be too high. It was a consequence that a narcissistic control freak like him could simply not tolerate.

Thus, as with everything in his life, he needed to keep a ruthless hold on himself no matter what he was doing. He would treat his power usage like he treated his drug habit and strictly ration himself on both fronts. After all, the highs and consequences of both were quite similar.

After another ten minutes of rest, he began relaxing and preparing to return to the purple world for another test. This time, he chose the darkest thread, which should be enough to support or disprove his earlier thought about belief and faith being what linked him to others. He also wanted to discover if there was a reason for the differences between threads, and if he was correct in assuming that Katrina's belief in him was the strongest and her faith the most fervent.

Another unknown amount of time passed and he finally returned to the purple world, then opened his eyes again and began searching through the thousands of threads attached to him. Quite a few of them were still vantablack, with no light traveling through them at all, and he felt a certain sense of imminent doom when he considered using them to test his new blessing. Thus, he discarded them and continued searching until he found a dim, almost ephemeral gossamer thread, through which light with the intensity of a firefly seemed to casually, and very occasionally, saunter through at a sedate pace in fits and starts.

"That's the perfect one to test with," he thought and dove into the thread, traveling along it as fast as he could.

But unlike his testing with Katrina earlier, this transfer wasn't immediate, nor was it smooth. On the contrary, he continued hitting pockets of turbulence, causing him to fear for his life. Or worse,

having his consciousness trapped outside his body to wander the world as an incorporeal ghost while his physical body was left behind in a vegetative state.

Still, he persisted, holding on and taking mental note of the process. His newest theory was that it had something to do with distance as well; the thread he was currently traveling along just "felt" like the destination was further away than simply down the hall and into another room.

When he finally arrived at the end of the thread, he opened his eyes and looked at a nearby clock. Though he didn't know where he was, exactly, or who he was inhabiting, the clock indicated that ten minutes had passed during his trip down the thread of belief. It seemed that time was somewhat subjective in the purple world, as it had felt like he'd been traveling for hours thanks to all the turbulence. Or perhaps he had crossed time zones, which was a far simpler-and thus likelier-explanation.

After noting the time difference, he looked around and noticed a pair of AR glasses on a table next to "him". He momentarily fell into a quandary before remembering that the body he was in wasn't his, then began listening to the conversation in his surroundings.

#### Chapter 500 His Best Standing Long Jump

'I hate it! Fuck my life... my dad died to a supervillain for nothing! He wanted to join the empire from the beginning but mom said no. But after he died, she couldn't run to the recordkeepers to apply for citizenship fast enough. Dumb bitch!'

Rick had found himself in the mind of a teenage boy. He listened to the stream of consciousness for a while and learned what the boy and his family had gone through over the past few weeks. Not only had the kid's mother's refusal to join the empire driven a wedge between her and her husband, one that they'd even been contemplating divorce over, but his girlfriend's family had also chosen to join the empire during the first amnesty period. The boy blamed his mother for the resulting breakup as well.

All of his rage had been directed toward his mother, but then one day he'd had a thought. If the empire had the power to enforce the law on rogue supervillains, why did they ignore the havoc that'd been wrought among the people who waived their imperial citizenship? He wasn't old enough to truly understand politics, so he was still mired in the typical teenage thought process of good and evil, black and white. Supervillains were evil, so if the empire was good, they should do something to stop them, citizenship or no citizenship. Thus, the empire itself must be evil as well.

Oftentimes, the simplest thoughts were the most powerful, and that belief that the empire was evil had been enough to generate a thread of belief in Rick, who, though the boy had no idea who he was, had been the only person to ever lead a successful strike against the evil empire and its wicked leader.

Though the thread was tiny, and it didn't generate much faith, the very fact of its existence had given the cult leader access to the boy's thoughts and body.

'Don't worry, boy, you're already doing something for us,' Rick thought, planning to continue watching the teen go about his day. Being a passenger in the boy's mind would allow him to gather firsthand information on the day-to-day functions of the empire, as well as testing a number of his more brutal ideas. After all, the boy wasn't worth much in the first place, so there was no silly moral dilemma for him to pretend to struggle with.

But his ideas of an extended stay in the boy's body were thrown out of the proverbial window when he focused on the thread connecting him and the teen. He saw that the white pulses of light were traveling from his physical body to the boy at a staggering rate. The pulses were thousands of times more frequent and intense than he was receiving from the angry youth. His heart practically fell all the way to his feet when he considered the backlash he would soon suffer, despite the constant "income" from the tens of thousands of others feeding him their belief and faith.

Still, the comparison between the expenditure he was paying out now and the cost of inhabiting Katrina's body taught him a little bit more about how his powers functioned and their limitations. The darker the thread, the more difficult it would be to connect with the person on the other end, and the more infrequent the pulses, the less he gained from them and the more he would spend if he wanted to connect with them.

"Go to the roof," he whispered in the boy's mind, curious as to whether direct orders would work, and if so, how much steeper the cost would be to use those instead of forcefully assuming direct control of a person and shoving their consciousness to the side.

The young man paused for a moment and tilted his head, his mind going blank as he lost his train of thought. At that very moment, if he could see the thread linking him to Rick, he would risk blindness as the intensity and frequency of the light pulses traveling along it made it appear to be a second sun, if said sun had been compressed into a straight line. All he could hear in his mind was a vague voice repeating the words "go to the roof" over and over, getting louder and clearer with each repetition until it was practically shouting in his now throbbing head. Soon, he couldn't take it anymore and robotically marched toward the stairs leading to the roof of the apartment building he lived in with his mother.

Along the way, Rick continually gave orders, forcing him to do different things like stop on the stair landing, stand on one foot, stick out his tongue, poke himself in the eye, and crawl backward up the stairs on all fours. He kept a close eye on the thread of belief to see how it reacted, as well as track the changes in the light pulses headed from him to the teenager, and came to the conclusion that the thread itself would exist as long as the belief it represented existed. In terms of the cost to order the linked person around, the more complex or harmful the action-or the more out of character it was-the more faith Rick would have to expend to force the target to perform it. But as long as he could support the expenditure, the person on the other end of his thread had no choice but to follow the orders being given to them.

After a time, the boy reached the rooftop as ordered. He looked around in confusion, wondering why he had climbed all the way up to the roof of his apartment building when he heard that same sibilant, chanting whisper in his mind.

"Jump off the roof," the whisper repeated.

The boy struggled against the order as hard as he could. He knew that, despite only being a four-story building, if he were to follow the order, he would be severely injured, or even dead.

But alas, after Rick spent a hundred thousand units of faith, if he were to count each individual light that pulsed along the thread as a single unit, the teenager could no longer struggle. In the same robotic fashion as he had climbed the stairs and performed all of the actions Rick had ordered him to during his ascent, he waddled to the ledge, crouched down, and, with all of his might, performed his best standing long jump.

