

Velquis sat alone in his chambers. It was easy enough for the operative to do so; he had a garden to watch beyond the wall-window, as well as a mind especially attuned to its beauty. Reclining there in the lounge chair, the plantoid's first intimation of trouble came when an almost imperceptible light flashed in the periphery of his vision. The man recognized the glare of his quarters' communications console before the ringing sound came alive.

In an instant Velquis was out of his chair and standing before the screen. He tapped in confirmation and let text come through. The stream of usual information came. Velquis scrolled through it all at a decent pace; operation overview, site information, geographic coordinates, designated transportation, all discerned after a few moments of sight. With the data thus encoded, the man spared no time in entering his armory. Entering the adorning chamber and allowing the semi-rigid synthetic plates of his carapace to be properly affixed was easily the longest part of the armoring period at 30 seconds. By the time it was through, the other robotic arms of the device had gathered the correct articles from their respective places in his vaults; a simple autopiercer and carbon monoblade. He latched them both onto their respective holsters and walked out of his abode on schedule.

The journey from his hermitage through the central courtyard was fast. Site 19 traditionally had little activity, and that held true today. The few who did appear to be running tasks held their distance. Either way, it mattered little to the warrior who was now approaching the transport bay, finding a sleek black broadbird awaiting his arrival on the main strip. Velquis reached the open entrance hatch a few seconds ahead of schedule, the bay immediately shutting behind him. There in the cool glare of its hull Velquis could see a deeper glow beyond, a vague view of the pilot's helm. Velquis paid it little heed as he strapped himself down into one of the transport's chairs. He heard no sound from the operator, and just as well; the vehicle roared to life a second later. Velquis took the briefest of instants to sigh to himself. His mind fluttered into an inferno.

Dirty nuke codes

Potential to sell to Aldveri: negligible

If [30% chance] Liqian mercs, 90% chance no augments BUT if native [GDP Index 4000B Creds] 60% chance {greater than} Sigma level modifications

Aerial strike on watchposts, communications checks every 180 seconds

Time to reach vents

Vent data

BUT

Information backups; biological brains; information on which designated, nil

Collateral casualty cost given mission projections; negligible

SUNSET Override granted by Council

THEREFORE

Extreme Prejudice Granted

Velquis completed his calculations by the time the lander made its way to the operations's launch site in the woods surrounding the small outpost. Velquis exited as soon as the bay was open, senses flaring into a million trails of possibility as he took the first step on solid ground. He opened into a quiet sprint as soon as his hypersensitive perceptions were satisfied with a lack of danger. His mind took in a thousand more minor points as he pressed through brush, the standard affairs of wind speed and distance projections that made themselves known through a thin silicate visor within his suit's helmet. Velquis reached the end of trees after a minute's run. He was right by the southeast corner of the site, as planned, confronted with a crass ferrocrete wall and the observatory tower wedded to it. With a trained flick of the wrist, Velquis activated the hopper unit and allowed the delicate propulsion device to fling his body into the air. It was in this moment, one of the few moments in which the soldier felt truly helpless, that he saw his first target, a dumb-helmeted man who was gazing towards the north from his position in the thin glass bubble of the southeast tower. Velquis hit the glass exactly as he had projected and rammed a meters-length of rapidly drawn carbonsteel through the man's useless headgear. He hadn't had the chance to respond at all before he had died.

Velquis unholstered his autopiercer right after, aim immediately switching towards an identical tower 30 yards to the west. Eyes and visor combined to spy a lookout guard turning towards the place where glass had broke. Velquis fired once and looked long enough to confirm the fall of the body. Satisfied, Velquis assessed the other two towers and a concrete courtyard. The former, empty. The latter, holding a single individual looking around wildly. Velquis ran and leapt from his spot on the post, another minute tug sending him up into the air. The 60 and 30 foot lines emblazoned on his helmet passed by fast. To Velquis, the man's head steadied as a friend's does on the long-gone. The soldier thought himself lucky, to be able to see such a moment in the snapshot-sight of the elect. Yet as the man's confusion failed to cognize in the split-second in which he had been obliterated, Velquis couldn't help but feel dejected. Such love could only truly be shared between gods, not them and men.

Velquis turned from the corpse towards the lot's central building. He ran across the ground towards the building's western side, finding the access vent 20 feet up, exactly as had been etched in his memory. The man boosted one last time on burning wings, latching his fingers between the grate and bursting the metal. Latent reflexes kicked in as soon as he was in the crawlspace, the man's mind going over the building's blueprints on autopilot. There in the dim, dusty black Velquis passed by many forks, many vents, many potential exits. But he only punched through one metal grate, and effortlessly dropped onto sterile tilework. All around him rested banks upon banks of machinery, all limned with a faint blue glow. It was there in the haunted loom of the server room that Velquis first heard something come through his earpiece.

“3 minutes elapsed. Projected response imminent.”

Velquis calmly made his way to the central terminal and jabbed in his spike. Within half a minute it had already gone through millions of potential combinations and sought countless potential backdoors. By the time the minute had closed, it had succeeded. Velquis just took the time then to find the correct, unassuming settings page and wipe the banks. It would take some time, and so Velquis simply stowed his spike and began to wind his way through the maze of the server room towards the outskirts, where recall told him the door should be found. The operative found a sliding door and retrieved his autopiercer. For the briefest of moments, he stilled. Then he walked outside and went to work.

The first scout was right to his left, still coming down the corridor to inspect one of the obvious targets

of interest. Velquis shot him, but the man just staggered for a moment with only a grunt, as if in some chemical haze. That's when Velquis shot him again, this time in the head, and the man fell more permanently. Beneath his visor the soldier's brow furrowed briefly, and he began to dash down the corridor straight ahead of him, on guard for those who might prove a match to his mettle. The sounds of feverish speech and footsteps grew as he went through the spotless environs of the corridor, and so the man briefly took refuge in a side hall that seemed to lead to a utility closet of some stripe. The voices then turned, began to grow, and as Velquis' brain calculated their relative position from the sounds' strength, he readied his firearm in preparation.

As Velquis shot the first two guards down, he realized from their helmets and immediate deaths that they were merely unaugmented. Unfortunately, but interestingly, the sound of a grenade clattering onto the floor of the hall he was hiding in indicated that someone was a touch above. Velquis' feet immediately pushed him backward, the man almost flying in his leap towards the door at the hall's end. He reached it in a second and entered, slamming the door behind him in another. There in the dismal confines of some janitor's closet, Velquis could hear the explosion going off and shrapnel embedding itself into the closet's door. After waiting a moment for the predicted response of the assailant entering the corner to assess his handiwork, Velquis found it partially fulfilled when he opened the door and found a similarly-suited figure to himself peeking out from behind the wall. Velquis immediately fired, the round finding its mark a little ways away at the man's right shoulder instead of his helmet. Taking advantage of the time given from concussive force, Velquis sped through the hallway, preparing his gun for the finishing round when-

The man fired his gun. Velquis recognized that it was cartridge-based, with chemical propellant, particularly as it had only barely pierced his armor and left a small flesh wound that he could feel with his heightened tactile recognition. But still, such a response time after being shot could prove troublesome. Velquis raised his autopiercer to fire, but found his aim thrown off at the last second when the man dodged, clearing enjoying some of the same enhanced reflexes as Velquis. The operative gave him no time to react as he did so, though, merely drawing out his monoblade and leaping after the man. He was able to pin him there on the ground, though actually getting the blade through his pretty little helmet was proving more difficult. His arms were on Velquis' own, after all, and Velquis just knew that he was waiting for the opportunity to draw the knife that was strapped to his chestplate's harness. The operative did have to admit that he liked this sort of combat. Both expressionless, visages hidden by opaque, reinforced glass. Not even the usual huffing and cries of battle could reach beyond either of their own helmets. It felt a bit more disconnected than what he was used to, Velquis had to admit, but it paid dividends in how minds met.

Yet it was unfortunate how the meeting would have to be cut short, Velquis thought as he started to make headway in his pushing. It was clear that the man's *muscles* were giving way now, a glaring gap in the gene-mod package. Just to himself, Velquis smiled, the man edging the blade ever closer to his enemy's helmet. Though, it would really do naught but scratch the glass if he had no force behind the initial thrust. So Velquis decided to ease his muscles lightly, knowing what would result. In brief exultation, the enemy soldier pushed away the arms that had been subduing him, immediately grasping at his knife. And to his credit, he did succeed in retrieving it. It was just that he didn't manage to get a strike in before Velquis had taken advantage of the opportunity and ended the meeting with cracked glass, blood, and a sword plunged directly through brains.

Velquis dispassionately retrieved his armament and assessed the area again. Only three down, and there were certainly more around. Velquis resumed his sprint down the hall, finding two new corridors on either side of him and a flak-suited guard to his left. Velquis shot the man and continued down the

corridor. This scenario repeated itself a few more times, as Velquis would find a lone searcher and eliminate him without much fuss. It was after one or two radioed back, though, that he began to find less of such men. And it was as he turned one corridor only to be greeted with a barrage of automatic fire that he realized where they had gone.

Based on the number of voices in the cascade of barked orders, fears, and insults, Velquis was able to determine that the rest of the facility's personnel were all huddled in this corridor. And, based on the echo of their magazines dropping onto the ground, it seemed as though they were reloading in turns to safely enable suppressive fire whenever he so much as peeked his head out from behind cover. There was no doubt that they had a separate set of guards to cover the other angle of their corridor, if he tried to turn back and come back at them from behind, so really his only option was to take the projected injury index and head into the corridor autopiercer blazing. His wounds would only be mild, after all.

Velquis leapt into the hall and a few stray shots dimpled his armor. The man dashed forward, first firing his autopiercer and levelling a few guards. Then, after the shots started to penetrate his flesh, he was right at their now terrified firing line and began to draw his blade. He aimed for the prime arteries of course, so as hasten their descent into unconsciousness and subsequent relief from pain. But this didn't reassure those who saw comrades' necks bloodily slashed. That was when the usual screams came, cries of fear, or for vengeance. Some of the latter came from decent fighters, as one assault rifle round that pierced a tendon could testify to. But in the end, it just didn't matter as Velquis leapt from man to man, snuffing out lives with singular strokes. Every action was immediate, automatic; desire wedded directly to actualizing. Every time he would see every minute crevice of a face, Velquis would want to kill and in the wanting was the doing and so green was stained with red and bodies became beautiful roses. And in his supersensory perceptions even he was a rose, thorns pricking at every single last man until none could stand. The scarlet hurricane paused then, a belated eye of the storm forming as Velquis stopped his dance and realized there was no one left to dance with him anymore.

For a moment, Velquis felt sadness of a sort.

Then his mind remembered that the operation was complete, and practiced reflexes immediately stowed his weapons and began to lead him on the most efficient route out of the complex.

The route didn't take too long to find fruition, given the lack of guards, and Velquis made his way out of the building, complex, and back towards the transport's clearing within the span of five minutes. Silence still reigned between him and the still nigh-invisible pilot hunkered down in the helm, even as Velquis stood in the bay with crimson stripes. So, as he always did, Velquis sat down in his seat and waited for the flight to finish.

The debriefing was minimal and perfunctory given that success was always assured. So by the time Velquis had made it back to his quarters and stowed away his garments for the evening, his mind was still ensnared by the day's events.

Velquis reclined in his chair and looked on at the garden.