

GAMER ARMY

TRENT REEDY ◦-----



ARTHUR A. LEVINE BOOKS

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an obsessed gamer, whose motto, *ego sum maximus*, declares his confidence in
his own abilities, and whose parents are also deeply involved in ultra high tech (a little
too deeply sometimes); naturally he is thrilled to receive an invitation to join a tech
giant's virtual reality TV gaming contest—but as the games become more and more
intense and dangerous, he and his fellow gamers realize that something sinister is
behind this particular game.

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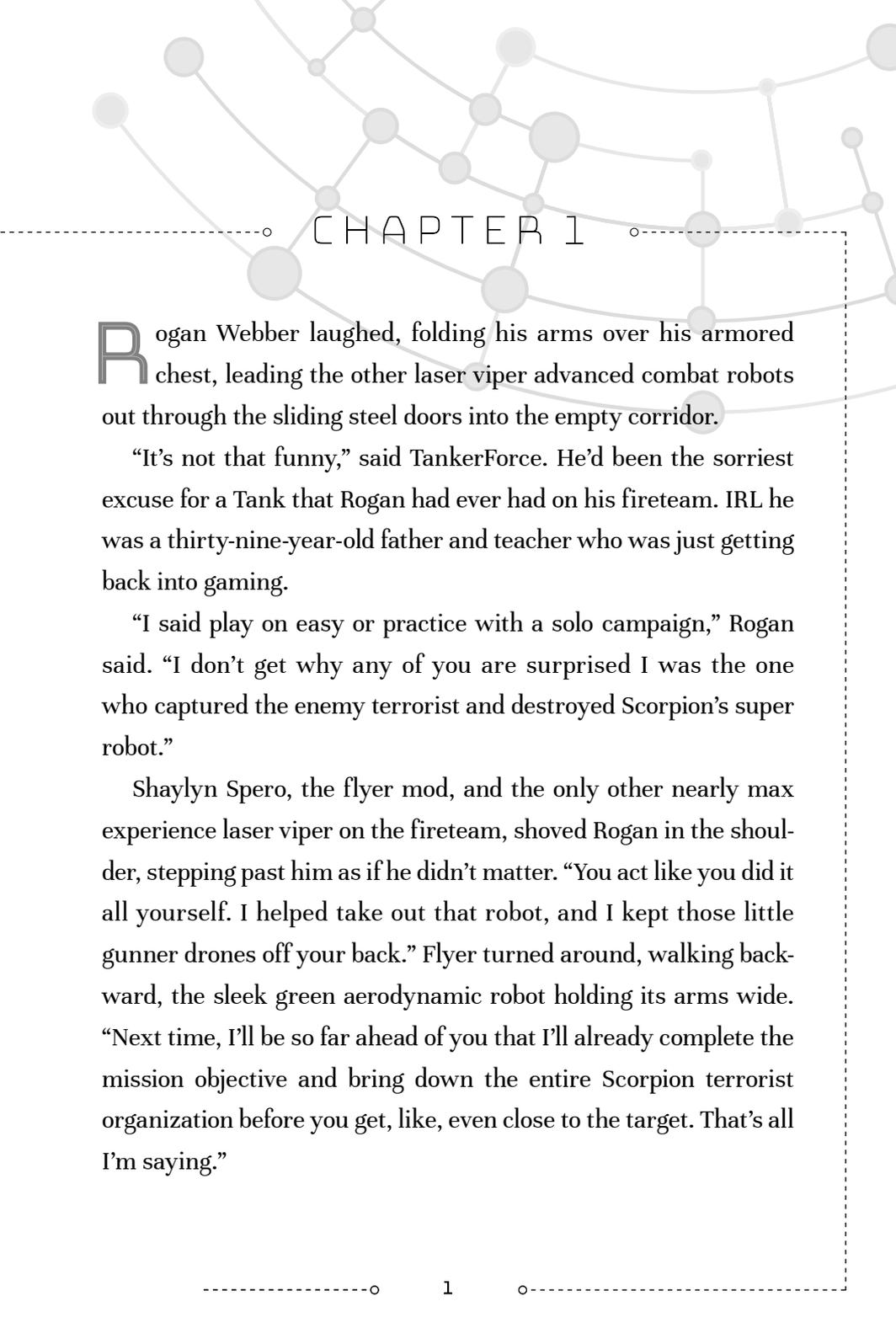
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CHAPTER 1

Rogan Webber laughed, folding his arms over his armored chest, leading the other laser viper advanced combat robots out through the sliding steel doors into the empty corridor.

“It’s not that funny,” said TankerForce. He’d been the sorriest excuse for a Tank that Rogan had ever had on his fireteam. IRL he was a thirty-nine-year-old father and teacher who was just getting back into gaming.

“I said play on easy or practice with a solo campaign,” Rogan said. “I don’t get why any of you are surprised I was the one who captured the enemy terrorist and destroyed Scorpion’s super robot.”

Shaylyn Spero, the flyer mod, and the only other nearly max experience laser viper on the fireteam, shoved Rogan in the shoulder, stepping past him as if he didn’t matter. “You act like you did it all yourself. I helped take out that robot, and I kept those little gunner drones off your back.” Flyer turned around, walking backward, the sleek green aerodynamic robot holding its arms wide. “Next time, I’ll be so far ahead of you that I’ll already complete the mission objective and bring down the entire Scorpion terrorist organization before you get, like, even close to the target. That’s all I’m saying.”

The engineer and healer mod vipers followed her, saying nothing, probably mad or embarrassed about being almost totally left out of the last battle.

TankerForce hung back with Rogan, his giant feet clanking on the floor as they walked. Tanks were large, with a ton of armor and weapons, and Rogan's stacked Ranger was no noob, so the two of them hardly fit side by side. "You're good, kid. One of the best gamers I've ever seen."

Rogan sighed. Here was another old guy, calling him "kid," acting like he was so much better just because he was old. Like it should be a shock that a twelve-year-old would be a good gamer. Apart from some strict age rules for the adults-only nightclubs and the teen hangouts around Virtual City, what did age matter in digi-space? Rogan had chumpified tons of old guys in lots of games, but especially in *Laser Viper*, his favorite.

They emerged into the massive *Laser Viper* war room, the expansive domed chamber packed with advanced combat robots, the hangout for out-of-game players. Gamers could meet and joke with one another, form fireteams for group campaigns, and trade tips about the missions.

"Of course you think he is," Shay said. "Rogan always gets his Ranger up front, never mind the rest of his team. He only cares about stealing all the achievements and XP even though it was totally a team effort."

"I was right in the center of the danger," Rogan said. If he hadn't rushed into the middle of it all, the others probably would have been destroyed. Why shouldn't he earn the best rewards when it had

been up to him to risk the most? “You all helped a little, but I’m the one who got the job done.”

“Who flew in to save you from that rockslide?” Shaylyn shot back.

“I *said* you helped. It was fun. But I now have a level one hundred viper and three upgrade points. So I’m heading to the upgrade bay to buff my Ranger. Don’t worry. You’ll get better someday. You know? *Ego sum maximus.*”

Shaylyn’s metal hands clanged on her metal head. “Stop saying that! It’s so dumb!”

Once in an MMORPG, an ogre had dropped a Latin phrase before a devastating battle-ax attack. Wikipedia later told him the words meant “Fortune favors the bold.” The ogre had sounded so cool that Rogan had been slow to defend himself. After that, a quick Google Translate gave Rogan his own motto: *Ego sum maximus*, Latin for *I am the greatest*. Cocky, maybe, but that was part of being a great gamer, and if it threw Shay off balance, well, he’d take every advantage he could get.

Rogan ditched the others and went to the upgrade bays. Leveling up to 100 made available new abilities that would make his Ranger even tougher. He installed titanium alloy close-combat claws—basically three six-inch razor-sharp claws on each hand that popped out like Wolverine’s.

As if those weren’t cool enough, he finally hooked up the tech he’d been waiting for: fifteen-meter grappling cables that could be fired from each arm. The ends of both cables looked like frayed steel ropes, but they were really programmed steel microfibers.

If he fired a cable at a brick wall or other solid substance, the tiny filaments would weave into the microscopic gaps in the surface. He could then reel the cable back in, pulling the object to him or pulling himself to the object. Rogan had watched videos of other leveled-up Rangers just killing it with these cables, swinging through battles like Spider-Man. He smiled. Shaylyn's flyer wouldn't be the only one in the air anymore.

When he finished the upgrade, Rogan left the *Laser Viper* building on Gamer Avenue, transforming in an instant from a tough fighting machine to his regular, barely customized avatar. His fairly generic kid body, for whom he'd bought a black leather jacket and a *Gamer 4 Life* T-shirt, picked up the pace—he had to get home soon.

The saying, "It's always sunny in Virtual City," was only partially true. The city was set to East Coast time, but daylight perception hours were different for everyone. It might be midnight in New York, but someone from Hong Kong, for whom it was noon, would see Virtual City in full daylight. And for Rogan, the two-hundred-foot-tall statue of William J. Culum was casting a long shadow in Culum Square as daylight faded in Seattle.

On the street in front of him, a Lamborghini, Ferrari, and an old 1960s Batmobile raced past. A man chased them on a hovercycle, laughing the whole way. Rogan watched them tear away down the canyon between the hundred-story buildings.

A clown lunged and roared at him, his face stretching and long sharp fangs showing. Rogan kept walking. The blue-green holoscript bio-bubble above the clown showed the guy was nineteen. Who could be that old and still think pop-scares worked or were

funny? From the beginning, William Culum and his team at Atomic Frontiers had hard-coded Virtual City to be violence free. Nobody could hurt anyone else here, so why be scared?

Not for the first time, Rogan wished he had enough credits or real-world money to enable site-to-site transport. Every few years, initiatives sprang up, demanding the feature be freely enabled for everyone in digi-space, but they never succeeded. Too many businesses wanted to sell virtual vehicles and needed people walking by their stores and ads. So Rogan continued down the street, past the movie theater, karaoke club, and coffee shop. Farther down, bright light spilled out of a crowded store where people shopped for digital clothes for their avatars. The place sold everything from tuxedos and formal ball gowns to jeans and T-shirts to space suits, saris, and sombreros.

Three fourteen-year-olds jumped from the top of the two-hundred-story Sky Mall, laughing and somersaulting all the way down. One of them chickened out and tapped back to the real world about fifty feet up. The other two vanished in flashes of white light upon impact, their avatars sent back to their Virtual City starting points with safety violation warnings.

Two blocks away, a group of about a hundred people from all over the world held up signs and chanted loudly, demanding official United Nations recognition of Virtual City as an independent nation with the same standing as established IRL countries.

High above the skyscrapers, a giant green-and-yellow zeppelin glided through the sky. Airships cost millions of credits—tens of thousands of real-world dollars. In the large gondola under this

particular ship hung the Virtual City home of Mario Alvarez, the fifth-ranked gamer in the entire world. Rogan had watched a video about his airship. It had three decks, with a dance floor, a boxing ring, and a sweet retro arcade with built-in video games.

Millions of people played and worked in Virtual City. Some worked there full-time. Some spent nearly all their time there. Mario Alvarez held the world record: nine and a half months' uninterrupted time in digi-space.

Mario Alvarez was the best. Someday Rogan would take the title and be even more famous.

Always and everywhere, on the sides of buildings, buses, and airships, even on *people*, advertisements competed for game credits and real-world dollars, promising satisfaction, instant access in digi-space, and same-day, even same-hour, delivery by drone IRL.

Just another day in Virtual City.

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Rogan smiled as he reached his fiftieth floor apartment. His happiness shattered against the door, though, which had been affixed with an ugly blaze-orange sheet of digital paper.

NOTICE OF E-VICTION! OVERDUE RENT! SECOND WARNING!

Rogan Webber, being the current occupant of #509 Mega Modern Building 5, Virtual City, is hereby reminded that rent must be paid in full, with a 450-credit late penalty no later than . . .

Rogan skipped all the legal jargon he had already read in the first notice, his eyes drawn to the last few lines again.

. . . by the aforementioned date and time shall be *immediately e-victed from the aforementioned premises*, with all access thereto restricted. All digital property within the premises shall immediately become the property of Mega Modern Digital Property Management Corporation.

Rogan sighed and entered his cozy little rent-overdue apartment. He loved the tiny place, and was lucky to have it. Virtual City real estate was expensive, and some digi-homes and offices cost more IRL dollars than some IRL properties. His apartment was more valuable than plenty of properties left out in the middle of the so-called brick-and-mortar blight, once business had migrated to digi-space. He'd saved gaming credits for three years to score this place, but he hadn't really thought about how he would continue paying rent. He'd assumed he would become an even better gamer by the time rent was due, and that he'd have more credits by then.

Only it hadn't worked out that way.

He couldn't lose his apartment. It was his sanctuary. When he was by himself in his virtual apartment, it was because he chose to be alone, safe in his own space, and somehow that wasn't as boring or lonely as his IRL house where his parents were often too busy to spend time with him.

Rogan had painted his apartment walls black with sparkling stars. He'd spent some credits on some cool Zelda, Mario, and Metroid posters in which the images moved, Harry Potter style, with Link slashing his sword at an Octorok, Mario leaping for a 1-Up Mushroom, and Samus Aran blasting Mother Brain. He loved those games. Even after decades and dozens of sequels, in gaming, the classics never died. There was no kitchen in his place, because what would have been the point of one? You couldn't eat anything you hadn't scanned in from the real world anyway. Best of all, the bed, beanbag chair, and his desk and computer were all scanned in from real-world anchors. So the steel hover chair was actually a plain plastic-and-fabric office swivel chair IRL, but usable here in Virtual City. Rogan could sit down and do his homework in his own virtual apartment.

Now his stomach rumbled. He checked the antique grandfather clock in the corner of his living room. It was 6:18 already, but when Rogan crossed his fingers to activate the floating blue-green holo-script screen in front of him, he wasn't surprised to see both Mom and Dad online in his family contact list. He didn't bother logging out and shutting down, but simply slipped off his headset and then his gamer gloves, surprised as he often was by the darkness outside the game. He had switched on the laser torch lights in his apartment, but his IRL bedroom was nearly pitch black.

He felt a light, pointed nudge against his hand and smiled. "Hey, Wiggles." He reached out and scratched his fuzzy black-and-white spaniel mix behind the ears. "Sorry, pooch, but I was in the middle of a *Laser Viper* battle." Rogan turned on a lamp, placed his hands

on either side of the dog's face, and raised Wiggles's little pink nose to his own face. "You hungry too, buddy?" Wiggles jumped around, panting, happy and hungry.

Rogan switched on the hall light on the way to his father's game room, petting his impatient dog again to apologize for being late with his nightly dinner of dry pellets. "Dad?" he said, poking his head inside.

His father stood in the middle of the room, wearing his VR headset and gamer gloves. Only one small desk lamp by the computer provided any light. Dad carried the Eagle Sword of Azeroth as he walked in place, moving his character in game. He'd ordered the sword in a Virtual City shop for over fifty thousand credits, and a delivery drone had dropped it off in its special carrying case a few hours later. The sword was equipped with computer chips, which worked much better with the VR sensors in the room, and it was properly weighted to improve its owner's fighting skills.

"Dad?" Rogan tried again.

"Yeah," Dad said.

"Are we going to eat soon?" Rogan asked.

"No," said Dad.

"Well, I mean, it's getting late. I'm kind of hungry and—"

"Trust me, he's right down there around those rocks. It's a mega ogre." Dad laughed. "You're going to want my sword for this, Zarganon."

Rogan sighed. Dad had one of the best VR headsets on the market, complete with the most high-quality noise-canceling headphones available. He couldn't hear anything but his game.

Of course, Rogan could log into *Warcraft Universe* and search for his father’s avatar across the seven worlds, but that would take forever.

He timidly reached out to touch Dad’s shoulder.

“Look out! Lightning bolt!” Dad shouted, ducked, and swung his sword.

The foam-plastic blade smacked Rogan in the face. He stepped back, holding his hand to his hot, stinging cheek and watery eye.

“What?!” Dad lifted the headset a little to see. “Rogan?! What are you doing! You OK? Hey!” He crammed the headset back down and frantically swung his sword back up. “I’m hit! I’m hit bad! I’m almost — Where’s our healer?!” He pushed half the headset up. “Seriously, you OK? I told you not to bother me when I’m in a campaign!”

Rogan nodded. What else could he say?

Dad slipped the VR headset back down. “No, all good. My son got in the way, that’s all. Wait!” He spun around and tried to bring his sword up again, but cursed before throwing it to the floor and pulling his headset off. “Great, an enemy goblin just took my head off with a sword! A weak little *goblin!*”

Dad turned to Rogan, his face a little red, looking like he was trying to control himself. “Really great. My Paladin is dead and has to respawn. My whole guild is about to raid a dangerous dungeon for some major gold, and now I can’t help them! What is so important that it couldn’t wait, Rogan? What?”

“Nothing.” Rogan kept his hand on his stinging face. “Sorry. I didn’t know you were in the middle of such an important part.”