SURVIVAL INITIALIZATION

THRESHOLD PROTOCOL

ACCEPT REGISTRATION?

YES NO

THE NULL ASCENSION · BOOK ONE



JULIAN DELPHIKI

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THRESHOLD PROTOCOL

A LitRPG Novel

JULIAN DELPHIKI



Thinking School

Threshold Protocol
Book One of the Null Ascension

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It describes outcomes better than intentions.

Rewards steer behavior.

Whatever classifies you can be tricked
into misclassifying you.

Three rules, written in blue ink on the inside of a wrist,
on a metro platform in Madrid

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PART ONE

Integration



[You have been selected for integration.]

CHAPTER ONE

Cold Boot

At 7:41 on the last Tuesday in June, Mara Vela was rehearsing, under her breath, why people would rather lose money than lose a streak.

"Loss aversion," she told the dark window of the Line 6 train. "Plus identity. By day forty-one it isn't a number anymore. It's who you are."

The window gave her back a tired woman in a linen shirt that had already lost its argument with the heat. Thirty-one, hair pinned up with a pencil because she couldn't find the clip, laptop bag strap cutting a groove into her shoulder. Behind her reflection the tunnel wall slid past, cables looping along it like black handwriting.

The carriage smelled the way Line 6 always smelled in summer: warm rubber, coffee, old sweat. A delivery rider stood by the doors with his bike wedged against the pole, earbuds in, nodding to something with a lot of bass. Across the aisle a man in a gray suit read a printed report, a ministry lanyard tucked into his pocket. Near the back, a paramedic in a SAMUR uniform slept sitting up, the professional sleep of someone who had learned to rest in thirty-second increments.

Her phone buzzed against her thigh. *Mamá*, again. The voicemail from Sunday was still there, a small red dot. She would call at lunch. She had been going to call at lunch since Sunday.

She opened her slides instead. Slide nine: STREAK FREEZE AS A PREMIUM FEATURE. Her VP loved it. Mara had built the model herself: let people pay a little to protect a habit they had stopped enjoying three weeks ago. The retention curve bent upward like it was grateful.

She had been proud of that curve. She was still proud of it, mostly. It was a beautiful curve.

The train slowed between Diego de León and Avenida de América, which it did sometimes. Then it stopped, which it also did sometimes. Then the lights went out, which it did not.

For a second there was only darkness and the sound of forty people deciding whether to be alarmed. The emergency strips along the floor flickered on, a weak orange glow. Someone laughed. The man in the gray suit said, "*Típico*," to nobody.

Then the blue came.

It didn't come from the ceiling or the windows. It came from the air a forearm's length in front of every face in the carriage, all at once, like forty phones lighting up in a cinema. Mara's panel hung in front of her eyes, a translucent rectangle with clean edges and text that stayed perfectly sharp wherever she focused. When she turned her head, it turned with her. When she shut her eyes, it was still there, not on the backs of her eyelids but somewhere behind them, waiting.

> `[THRESHOLD PROTOCOL — SURVIVAL INITIALIZATION]`
> `[You have been selected for integration.]`
> `[ACCEPT REGISTRATION? YES / NO — 0:60]`

The counter began to fall.

Somebody screamed. Somebody else said *Dios mío* over and over in the flat voice of a person who doesn't know they're speaking. The delivery rider pulled out one earbud, stared, and grinned like he'd been waiting his whole life for exactly this. A woman near the door jabbed at her panel with her thumb as if it were a touchscreen. Her finger went through it. The panel didn't mind.

Mara didn't touch hers. She read it.

That was the habit of a decade: before you react to an interface, read it. Who wrote this, and what do they want you to do? She looked for the small gray link every terms screen hid at the bottom. There wasn't one. She looked for a help icon, a close button, anything. Nothing. Just the question, the two answers and the clock.

`[0:51]`

The two answers were the same size.

That stopped her for a full second. She had spent years in meetings where people argued over the color of a NO button. You made YES big and warm and NO small and gray, and you called it reducing friction. Here they were equal, same font, same weight, same distance from the edge.

Either whoever built this didn't need to manipulate anyone, or they didn't care which one you picked. She couldn't decide which was worse.

"It's a hack," the man in the gray suit announced. He had stood up and was holding his report against his chest like a shield. "Augmented reality, some kind of attack. Don't press anything." He looked around the carriage with the authority of someone who chaired meetings. "I don't accept terms I haven't read."

He reached out and pressed NO.

His panel went dark. A small gray dash appeared in the air above his head, about where a halo would be in a bad painting.

Mara watched it happen and felt her stomach drop in a way she couldn't justify yet. Nothing had hurt him. He looked exactly the same. He had a dash instead of a number, that was all.

`[0:38]`

The rider had pressed YES the instant he'd read it. A number now floated above his helmet, small and white: **1**. Two students near the back pressed YES together, holding hands, as if they were jumping off a pier. An elderly woman pressed NO, then tried to take it back, scrabbling at the air. The dash settled over her head anyway.

The paramedic woke up.

He did it all at once, the way people in his trade did: eyes open, hands moving before his face had decided on an expression. He looked at the panel, looked at the carriage, and said in a calm, carrying voice, "Is anyone hurt?"

Nobody answered. He glanced at his countdown, said "*Vale*," the way someone signs a form they plan to complain about later, and pressed YES with one finger. **1**.

> [0:12]

Mara thought: *Registration gives access.* That was the only asymmetry she could see. Whatever this was, the people who pressed NO had no panel. No panel meant no information. She didn't know what YES cost, but she knew exactly what NO cost: she would stop being able to read the rules.

She pressed YES at four seconds and hated how good it felt to choose the option that let her keep reading.

> [REGISTRATION COMPLETE. WELCOME, MARA VELA.]
> [Baseline attributes assessed. Primary skill assigned.]

The panel unfolded into a compact sheet.

```
MARA VELA — Level 1
HP 113/113 · Focus 68/68
Might 4 · Agility 5 · Perception 9 · Resolve 6 · Control 6
Primary skill: Pattern Sense (Rank 1)
Status: Unranked
```

She focused on the skill and a tooltip blossomed.

> [PATTERN SENSE — Perceive inconsistencies in rules, behavior and environment. Passive: occasional. Active: 15 Focus. Additional costs may apply.]

Additional costs may apply. Mara read the phrase twice. In her world that sentence meant a fee nobody would notice until month three.

Then the tunnel began to make a sound.

❦

It started as scraping, far down the line toward Avenida de América. Stone on stone, a patient rhythm, like someone dragging a bag of broken tiles across a floor one careful pull at a time. Then a second rhythm joined it, out of step with the first.

The carriage went quiet. Forty people holding their breath. The blue panels lit their faces from below, ghostly, so that for a moment the whole train looked like a room full of people telling ghost stories.

"Right," said the man in the gray suit, at a normal speaking volume that seemed enormous. "The station is two hundred meters that way. I'm not sitting in the dark waiting for a software update." He went to the doors and found the emergency release, a red handle behind a plastic flap. He pulled it with the confidence of someone who had read the instructions on many trains without ever needing them. The doors sighed open a hand's width. He forced them the rest of the way, sat on the edge, and dropped down onto the track bed.

"Sir," said the paramedic. "Don't."

"The power's off," said the man, already walking. "Obviously." His footsteps crunched on the ballast, then softened into the dark. Mara watched the gray dash above his head bob away from them like a firefly.

The scraping stopped.

Everyone in the carriage heard it stop. That was the worst part, afterward, when she tried not to think about it: forty people hearing the exact moment the sound changed its mind.

The footsteps kept going for three more paces. Then they didn't. There was a noise Mara would never describe to anyone, not even herself, wet and mineral at the same time, like a shovel going into gravel. The gray dash flickered once in the tunnel and went out.

A notice appeared in her panel without any sound at all.

> `[UNREGISTERED ENTITY REMOVED FROM INSTANCE.]`

No name. No level. *Removed*, like a line from a spreadsheet.

❦

The thing came into the carriage forty seconds later.

It used the open door. Mara saw it first as a shape in the orange floor light, low and wide, about the size of a large dog but built wrong: a body of glazed white tiles, the old beveled kind that lined every Madrid station she had ever walked through, held together by gray grout that flexed like tendon. It had

no head. It had a front, and on that front the tiles parted to show more tiles, edges broken sharp, rows of them, a mouth made from a demolition site.

Above it the System had helpfully written:

> [GROUT CRAWLER — LV 2]

The delivery rider was closest to the door. He was also the one who yelled. He swung his bike around by the handlebars to put it between himself and the crawler, and the frame clanged against the pole, and the crawler went for the noise like a dog going for a thrown stick. Tiles slashed. The rider went down with a cry and a spray of blood across his shin, and the bike went over on top of him with a crash that set the whole carriage screaming.

The crawler turned in a slow half-circle. People surged toward the back. A student tripped. Someone stepped on her hand and she shrieked, and the crawler's front swung toward her.

Mara stood very still.

She hadn't decided to. Her body had decided, the way it had once decided on a mountain path near Cuenca when she was nine and a dog had come out of a farmyard and her mother had grabbed her arm and said *quieta, quieta*, still, and they'd stood there until the dog lost interest. She stood still now and she watched, because watching was the only thing she was good at.

Movement didn't bring it. The elderly woman with the dash was shuffling sideways along the seats, and the crawler ignored her completely. A man near Mara was trembling so hard his keys jingled in his pocket, and the crawler's front tilted a fraction toward him. Then the student cried out again, louder, and the whole body swiveled toward her and began to move.

> [PATTERN SENSE: Passive trigger.]

There was no voice, no explanation. It was more like a sensation, like the moment you notice a typo on a slide you've already presented: a small hot certainty. *It isn't hunting by sight. It's listening.* And something else, a second itch beside the first, at the back of the crawler's body. One tile in the mosaic was wrong. All the others were white. That one was cobalt blue with a fragment of painted lettering: an **N** and part of an **O**. A tile from another station, from a sign, set into the creature like a keystone.

Mara slid her phone out of her pocket.

She opened the clock app by touch, an action she had performed every morning for ten years, and set a timer for five seconds. She thumbed volume all the way up. Then she leaned out through the gap in the doors and threw the phone underhand down the tunnel, as far toward Diego de León as she could.

It clattered on the ballast somewhere in the dark. For three seconds nothing happened. Then it went off, her alarm tone, a bright cheerful marimba she had chosen years ago because it was impossible to sleep through.

The crawler stopped. Its front tiles turned toward the door. Then it went, fast and low, out of the carriage and down into the tunnel after the music.

And Mara thought, absurdly, *Mamá's voicemail was on that phone*.

❦

The paramedic was already on the floor beside the rider.

"Name," he said. "Tell me your name."

"Rubén." The rider's teeth were clenched. "Rubén Ocaña. Is my bike okay?"

"Your bike is great. Your leg is less great." The paramedic had pulled a pair of trauma shears from his cargo pocket and was cutting the rider's trouser leg open from the ankle up. Mara got a glimpse of the wound and looked away, and then made herself look back, because looking away felt like a luxury someone else was paying for. A long ragged cut along the shin, bleeding steadily but not spurting. "I'm Ivo. I'm going to put pressure on this and it's going to hurt and you're going to swear at me, and that's fine. Who's got a belt?"

Mara pulled hers out of its loops before she'd thought about it and handed it over.

Ivo looked up at her. In the blue light his face was younger than she'd expected, late twenties maybe, broad and stubbled, tired around the eyes, and completely calm in a way that seemed to cost him nothing at all. Above his head: **1**.

"Gracias. Kneel here. Push down on this with both hands. Harder. Like you're angry at it."

She pushed. Rubén swore at her in a long, inventive stream that was half Spanish and half the English of online gaming. Ivo laughed, once, approvingly, and cinched the belt above the knee.

"The phone," Ivo said, without looking up. "That was you?"

"It hunts by sound."

"You figured that out in—what, ten seconds?"

"It ignored the woman who was moving and went for the man whose keys were jingling."

"Huh." He tied off the belt. "Most people would have run."

"I'm not fast," said Mara.

He looked at her then, a quick assessing glance, the kind she imagined he used on people at accident scenes to decide who could hold a bag of saline and who was about to faint. Whatever he saw seemed to satisfy him.

The marimba stopped.

Down the tunnel, the scraping resumed. Closer.

"It's coming back," said someone at the rear of the carriage, in a whisper that carried the way whispers do.

Mara looked at the door. Forty people, an injured rider, and a creature that was going to follow the next sound anybody made. The train was a metal box designed to be loud. Every door, every seat, every buckle was a bell.

"It has a weak point," she said quietly. "A blue tile at the back. It doesn't belong. It's from a sign."

"How do you know it's a weak point?"

"I don't. I know it's wrong."

Ivo considered that for exactly as long as it took him to wipe his hands on his trousers. Then he reached up beside the door and pulled a fire extinguisher out of its bracket. It came free with a click that made several people flinch. He hefted it, red steel, maybe six kilos.

"Then we test it," he said. "Carefully. One rule at a time."

"We need it facing away from us."

They looked at each other. They looked at Rubén's bike, which lay on its side by the door, front wheel still slowly turning.

"Bell," said Rubén through his teeth. He'd followed the whole conversation. "The bell on my bike. It's loud. It's really loud. People hate it."

They set it up in under a minute, which afterward Mara found hard to believe.

Ivo stood beside the open door with the extinguisher raised, his back flat against the carriage wall. Mara crouched on the opposite side. Rubén, propped against a seat with his leg stretched out, held the bike upright by its frame so that the handlebars and the bell were right in the doorway. Everyone else had retreated to the far end of the car and was doing a very convincing impression of furniture.

The scraping arrived at the door. Tiles clicked on the step. The crawler's front came over the threshold, swaying, tasting the silence.

"Now," Mara breathed.

Rubén rang the bell.

It *was* loud. It was a piercing double brrring that hit the carriage walls and bounced. The crawler lunged at it. Its mouth closed on the front wheel and tore the rubber off the rim in one wet bite, and as it did, its back end swung around toward Ivo, and the blue tile was right there in the orange light at chest height.

Ivo brought the extinguisher down like he was driving a stake.

The tile cracked. The crawler shrieked, a sound like a tray of crockery hitting a stone floor, and the gray grout all along its body went slack. Tiles began sliding off it in sheets. It tried to turn, but its legs came apart under it, and Ivo hit it again in exactly the same place, and the blue tile split in half, and the whole creature collapsed into a heap of rubble that looked like what it was: the old wall of some station, smashed.

Silence. Then Rubén started to laugh, high and slightly hysterical, and someone at the back of the carriage started clapping and then stopped, embarrassed.

```
[HOSTILE DEFEATED: GROUT CRAWLER (LV 2).]
[XP +30. Contribution: Identification, Coordination.]
```

Mara read it and felt a warm, ridiculous pulse of pleasure, exactly like the one she felt when a test came back positive. She despised herself a little for it, and felt it anyway.

Across from her, Ivo was staring at his own panel. His face had gone very still.

"What did you get?" she asked.

He turned the panel toward her. You could do that, apparently: a twist of the wrist and the text faced outward, legible to others. It was the first time Mara had seen someone else's panel up close. Same clean font. Different words.

```
[XP +9. Contribution: Final blow.]
[ASSIST LOGGED: Medical treatment during engagement.]
[XP REDUCED — EXCESSIVE ASSISTANCE.]
```

"I landed the kill," Ivo said, "and it docked me for treating him." He nodded at Rubén. "It penalizes helping."

Mara looked at the words. Then she heard herself say, in the precise voice she used in sprint reviews when an engineer reported a bug that wasn't a bug, "It penalizes something it calls *excessive assistance*."

"Same thing."

"It isn't, though." She was thinking aloud, which she did too often. "If it penalized helping, it would say so. It made up a category. Categories have edges. Somewhere there's a threshold where assistance becomes excessive, and somewhere there's a definition of what counts as assistance at all." She stopped. Ivo was watching her with an expression she couldn't read. "Sorry. It's my job. Was my job. I design reward systems."

"For what?"

"A fitness app. Streaks. Badges."

"So you're the reason my sister walks around the kitchen at midnight to close her rings."

"Probably," said Mara, and to her surprise he smiled.

The System did not understand kindness. It understood flags. She didn't say it out loud. It felt too much like a slide.

❦

They walked to Avenida de América along the track bed because there was nowhere else to go.

It took forty minutes to cover two hundred meters. Mara went first, because she had the plan, and she hated that the logic was that simple. Every step had to be placed. Ballast was the enemy: loose stones that rolled and clicked. They walked on the sleepers where they could, the concrete ties set into the track bed at regular intervals, and they walked in single file, and nobody spoke. Thirty-one registered people with the blue light of their panels dimmed as far as they could make them go (it turned out you could, with a sort of mental squint), and nine with gray dashes, who had no panels and walked in the dark between the others, holding on to shoulders.

Ivo and one of the students carried Rubén between them in a chair made of their crossed arms. Rubén did not complain once. He bit down on the strap of his thermal backpack and breathed through his nose and occasionally, when the pain spiked, squeezed Ivo's shoulder so hard Mara could see the knuckles whiten.

The tunnel was wrong.

At first it was small things. The cables along the wall should have run in straight lines and instead they climbed in slow spirals. The emergency lights should have been spaced every twenty meters and instead they clustered in threes, then disappeared for long stretches. The air was cooler than it should have been and smelled faintly of wet plaster, like a building site after rain. Once, Mara put her hand flat on the wall to steady herself and felt the tiles under her palm shift, slightly, the way a sleeping animal's flank shifts when it breathes.

She took her hand away and didn't put it back.

They found the man in the gray suit about halfway. Mara saw the pages of his report first, white rectangles scattered on the track, and then she saw him, and then she made herself keep walking, because stopping would make the others stop, and stopping was noise. Someone behind her made a sound in their throat, and someone else hushed them, gently, and they went on.

She noticed, because she noticed everything and couldn't switch it off, that his lanyard was still in his pocket. The ministry logo. A name she couldn't read in the dark. She would never know it. The System hadn't thought it worth recording.

Unregistered entity removed from instance.

Ahead, light. Not blue: a warm, dirty, ordinary yellow, the sodium glow of a station platform. They came out of the tunnel mouth into Avenida de América one by one, climbing up onto the platform edge by a maintenance ladder, and stood there blinking.

It was and wasn't the station Mara had walked through two thousand times.

The tiled walls were the same pale cream, the advertising panels were the same (a perfume brand, a bank, a musical at the Gran Vía), the benches were the same molded steel. But the platform went on too long. It should have ended at a staircase after a hundred meters, and instead it simply kept going into a haze of yellow light, the tiles repeating and repeating like a mirror reflected in another mirror. The ceiling was higher than she remembered, and above it, through gaps that hadn't been there yesterday, she could see other platforms, other levels, stacked at angles that made her eyes water. A staircase climbed up from the middle of the platform toward a mezzanine and then, halfway, turned sideways and kept climbing along the wall.

There were people here already. Dozens. Survivors from other trains, other tunnels, huddled in clusters along the platform with their blue panels glowing. Every one of them had a number or a dash floating above their head. Mara saw a **2**, a **1**, another **1**, a **3**. She saw a dozen people sitting together on the floor, all with dashes, and a ring of empty space around them that no one had decided to leave on purpose.

A number made comparison effortless, and effortless comparison became hierarchy before anyone admitted choosing one.

Ivo set Rubén down against a pillar and immediately began checking the belt and the wound and the color of his lips. Mara stood beside them, swaying slightly, and realized she was shaking. Not dramatically. Her hands simply wouldn't stay still.

She found a pen in her laptop bag, under the charger for a phone she no longer had. She uncapped the pen with her teeth, pushed up her sleeve and wrote on the inside of her left wrist, small and neat, the way she used to write formulas before exams.

1. *It describes outcomes better than intentions.*
2. *Rewards steer behavior.*
3. *Whatever classifies you can be tricked into misclassifying you.*

She looked at the third line for a long time. It wasn't hope. Hope was warmer. This was leverage.

"What are you writing?" Ivo asked, without looking up from Rubén's leg.

"Rules."

"Theirs or yours?"

"I don't know yet," said Mara, and that was the truth.

Her panel shimmered. A summary had arrived, the kind of report she had designed a hundred times: clean, colorful, cheerful.

```
[ENCOUNTER SUMMARY — TUNNEL SEGMENT 6-14]
[Efficiency 71% · Damage dealt: Low · Time: 48:12 · Style: —]
[Rating: C]
```

She almost closed it. She had seen thousands of dashboards and had learned to let her eyes slide over the numbers to the thing that mattered. Then the hot small certainty came back, unasked for, stronger this time, and her Focus bar dipped by a sliver.

```
[PATTERN SENSE: Inconsistency detected.]
```

She looked at the header of the very first window she'd ever seen, still pinned at the top of her panel like a banner. THRESHOLD PROTOCOL — SURVIVAL INITIALIZATION. Then she looked at the summary again: efficiency, damage, time, style.

Forty people had walked out of that tunnel alive. One hadn't.

The System had counted everything except that.