

Tech System 451

Chapter 451 Indistinguishable From Magic

If the goal of the recording that had just played on the news was recruiting, it backfired in a spectacular fashion. Rather than gaining the support of the majority, it had enraged them. As the attacks had happened all over the world, nearly every citizen in the empire had lost someone, whether they were close family or simply acquaintances, or even friends of a friend. So other than those that had already been extremely dissatisfied with the empire, no one even thought of answering the masked terrorist's rallying call.

Despite that, the conspiracy theorists' heyday continued. Now, they had another piece of "evidence"; obviously, the person in the video was a scapegoat brought forward because the theorists were absolutely correct in saying that the empire had planned and carried out the attacks on their own.

That said, while the conspiracy theorists were patting themselves on the back, believing they had proven their theory true by a preponderance of the evidence, most normal people were still watching the livestreams of the ongoing rescue efforts. They were curious as to how the empire would rescue those trapped under the unstable rubble, as most rescue equipment was bulky and slow, and had to proceed at a crawl in order to not collapse the small pockets of life stuck between slabs of instant demise.

.....

Dubai.

A crowd had gathered outside the perimeter the LEAs had established around the downtown area, watching the progress of the rescuers dispatched from the cube on the outskirts of the city. They were disheartened and disappointed, as all they could see from their position was a veritable swarm of beetle-shaped RES-QR bots and GEMbots shoring up the rubble and strengthening foundations to prevent collapse. The onlookers were completely unable to see what was happening within the rubble itself, so they naturally thought the rescuers were dawdling along and nothing of real substance was happening.

But that didn't last long, as precisely an hour after the Burj Khalifa fell, someone noticed that their surroundings had grown slightly dimmer. They looked up and saw an arrowhead-shaped shadow growing against the backdrop of the afternoon sun. The rest of the crowd also noticed the oddity and looked up as well.

It didn't take long before the shadow resolved itself into a kilometer-long pristine white vessel with a bright red cross painted on the bottom. It stopped in the air and hovered in place, completely still, about a hundred feet above the highest point of the rubble.

If it wasn't for its white color and the highly visible red cross painted on its underside, people would probably have thought it was an alien spaceship, given its method of arrival and ability to hover without any visible methods of propulsion. The flying carriers, though also extremely oversized, were at least reasonable; they had visible ducted rotors providing lift. But this particular vessel had arrived much like alien invaders in alien movies! One minute the sky was clear, and the next moment, the ship was just suddenly... there. It boggled the mind.

People were asking themselves questions like where did it come from? How did it get here? How is it hovering like that? What's it going to do? When was it built?

And none of those questions had any answers for the stunned spectators save one. It soon became obvious what it was there for and what it was going to do.

A soft yellow light, like that of an old 60-watt incandescent lightbulb, was emitted by hidden projectors on the underside of the enormous hovering vessel. Shortly afterward, the rubble began vibrating and slightly shifting in place. Though the shaking was subtle, it was still noticeable to the nearest line of spectators, who furrowed their brows in confusion.

Then a miracle happened as all of the rubble, large and small, began slowly lifting into the air in front of them. The process picked up speed as layer after layer of broken buildings rose into the air, exposing the suffering people, and corpses, that had been trapped within.

Soon, everything had been exposed and a sorting process began. People continued floating into the air and rubble was gently floating down, creating two entirely separate layers in mid-air. The top layer was made of human suffering, while the bottom layer was made of scrap concrete, metal, and other assorted materials.

"Holy shit...."

"Fuck...."

"Oh my god...."

"What the hell!?"

Surprised exclamations came from practically everyone in the crowd as the ship above them continued sorting the rubble as though it was playing a live game of Tetris. It didn't take long until the wreckage was completely sorted into three categories. One was made of roughly equal-sized blocks of similar compositions, another was made of mangled corpses, and the third was the group of wounded, but alive, individuals. Then three enormous doors opened on the underside of the hovering vessel and each group was sent through a different door.

Everyone watching, whether from a position near the wreckage or the screens they watched the livestream on, were frozen in shock. They had just witnessed a live demonstration of the laws of physics as they knew them being turned on their head.

Although all of the robots and other technology they had seen were advanced, people could still comprehend how they were built and how they operated. But the scene in front of them now had completely overturned their preexisting notions of the empire's tech level and affirmed Aron's earlier declaration that he had been holding back quite a lot in The Last War. After all, what they had just seen was something purely out of science fiction! A ship had come directly out of a popular movie franchise and appeared in front of them, then launched a fucking tractor beam to perform a nearly instant cleanup of a devastated metropolitan area and carry out a perfectly executed rescue operation!

The sheer capability demonstrated by those two simultaneous operations was something the people watching had no ability to comprehend. One of Arthur C. Clarke's "Three Laws" stated that any sufficiently advanced technology would be indistinguishable from magic. And what people had just witnessed was absolutely, to them, magical indeed.

Chapter 452 The "Emperor" Responds

Dubai wasn't the only place that had rescue ships show up. Nova, despite being busy watching over Aron during his upgrade, had diverted a few atomic printers from their cleanup duty in orbit to the Lagrange points where they stored the material and used that to print as many hospital ships as could be printed with the material available there. In combination with those printed in orbit by the remaining printers there, hundreds of hospital ships had shown up at locations around the world and carried out rescues using the same shocking technology.

The hospital ships were then handed over to Minerva, as Nova was only sparing a single thread of her consciousness for anything that wasn't Aron at the moment and she had to address the empire on his behalf shortly.

Not five minutes later, a hologram of "Aron" appeared in front of everyone in the simulation, as well as those using AR glasses in reality. Along with those, he also appeared on every phone, computer, and television screen as well.

"Dear citizens of the Terran Empire," he began, a grave look on his face. "Over the past two hours, Our empire faced the worst terrorist attack in human history. More than two thousand attacks were carried out, and the attacks are still ongoing. The attacks have resulted in more than seven million dead and almost twice that number of injured, together with more than five trillion Earth New Dollars in economic and infrastructure damage." The "emperor's" solemn gaze seemed to penetrate the hearts of everyone that saw him.

"Over the past few hours, We have been working hard on providing rescue and respite to those affected by the abominable attacks carried out against the innocent citizens of Our empire. Had Our response not been fast enough, the casualty list would only have grown. Thankfully, however, every storm cloud has a silver lining. And that silver lining now is that the attacks only took place after Our government was in a functioning state. Had they taken place even one or two days ago, they would have been many times more devastating."

Although "Aron" said that, it wasn't as though the attacks even could have taken place earlier, as martial law had been in place until the night before.

"Still, even a single citizen's death at the hands of these vile terrorists is more than We are willing to tolerate. Thus, We will not stop until We find out exactly who was behind this and punish them under imperial law.

"But to do that, We need to take swift, aggressive action to capture the perpetrators behind this coordinated attack on Us and prevent further attacks from occurring. Even now, attacks are ongoing, and they must stop." The "emperor" emphasized the last three words.

“Of the hundreds of attacks We have prevented so far, Our investigators have noticed a disturbing pattern that, in hindsight, should have been obvious. None of the attackers have registered as imperial citizens. Instead, they all took advantage of Our generosity and tolerance to gain access to equipment and materiel during the grace period that We allowed for registration as imperial citizens.

“Thus, to remove all doubt, We are now requiring all people to apply for imperial citizenship at any of the offices in the simulation within five days from now. Should anyone fail to do so, they will be considered suspects in the ongoing investigation to discover the attackers’ identities and treated as such under imperial law.

“We’d hoped it wouldn’t have come to this,” the disguised Nova sighed, “but it has, and We must face the reality that is presented to Us. We are also declaring martial law once again, as well as a complete lockdown. All essential services will be authorized through the imperial police agency and you will be escorted to and from your workplaces by our auxiliary law enforcement officers.

“That said,” he grinned, “at least the simulation is there to provide comfort, recreation, and a semblance of a ‘normal’ life.”

“His” face grew solemn once more. “On a more personal note, I would like to call for a moment of silence in solidarity with those who have lost someone close to them in these attacks.” The projection bowed its head for a full minute, then raised it again. “I know it’s cold consolation, but you have my word that none of the people who orchestrated this cowardly assault will escape the punishment for what they’ve done. Anyone who was related to a person that died will be kept in the loop and compensated for their loss. I know money can’t bring back the dead, but it’s the only consolation I can offer you at this time, along with the updates on the progress of the investigation.”

“Aron” cleared his throat and his expression turned formal once again as he continued, “As for those whose property was damaged, you, too, will be compensated. The damage to your property will be assessed and provided to you as subsidies for building your new homes in the fortress cities that We will be breaking ground on over the next few days.

“These attacks have highlighted a weakness in the current cities. They weren’t designed with safety in mind, but rather grew organically along with the population. However, Our fortress cities will be designed with the safety and comfort of their residents as the driving factors behind the planning and design phases.

“There will be no loopholes.”

He changed the subject and continued, “The despicable terrorists who carried out these attacks, and those behind them who planned them, did so under the insane belief that We are a devil that’s out to taint the world. That’s the reason they used to justify the civilian casualties they caused, but their intricate planning and cunning security measures put the lie to their words. And although We are sure that everyone already knows this, We want to reiterate and stress that those behind this show signs of being a cult. They, like every other cult before them, take advantage of the weaknesses in people’s hearts to indoctrinate them and strip their sense of self and individuality to the point that those victims are willing to martyr themselves for their cause.

“And what a ridiculous cause it is! We have done nothing but work for the betterment of humanity. Our technology heals the sick, feeds the hungry, teaches the uneducated, and will house the homeless and enrich the poor. Which of those are actions that a ‘devil’ would do on behalf of anyone? We are deeply offended on a personal level by these ridiculous and patently false claims!

“And to think that during this time, even as the attacks and rescue efforts are ongoing, certain people abused the privileges afforded to them to provide a platform for this ridiculous and insane slander. They are the media broadcasters and management that allowed the cult’s manifesto to be broadcast without informing the government or even considering the trauma it would inflict on the people who were still dealing with the attacks that cost them family, friends, and so very much more.

“And for that, they must pay. As We speak to you now, Our imperial police agency is arresting everyone involved in that particular debacle. They will be publicly tried before the imperial court on charges of fostering sedition. It must be made very clear that the law cannot be casually broken without consequences.

“But for now, We have run out of time and must place Our focus back where it belongs: on the rescue efforts and providing succor to those affected by these heinous attacks. We will keep you informed as to the ongoing investigations.”

Aron’s projection gradually faded from sight and was replaced by the imperial seal. Then that, too, vanished, leaving the recipients who had watched the uncharacteristically short address not knowing what to feel about it.

The events of the day had simply been too much for everyone, and people lingered for quite some time in a collective worldwide stare state.

Chapter 453 Nova's Got A Brand-New Bag

After the “emperor’s” appearance, things began settling down. People had already seen the borderline magical effect of the rescue ships and they chose to extend their trust to the empire... at least mostly, anyway. Beneath the surface, most were still withholding judgment as, though they had indeed received some benefits from the empire, the conspiracy theories were indeed believable. But levitating ships and tractor beams had gone a long way toward building people’s trust regardless.

Still, there was a long way to go. There were hundreds of rescue ships, sure, but there had been thousands of attacks.

But everywhere the rescue ships went, they were soon followed by constructor swarms, GEMbots, and aid personnel that built temporary housing for the displaced victims who didn't require extended stays in medical pods. Thus, every cleared site soon became a hive of activity as large buildings were constructed at a speed that rivaled that of time-lapse videos.

At the same time, notifications began going out as the dead and injured were identified. Relatives of the victims were informed of the process to claim the remains and the empire's compensation, or where their injured loved ones were and what their status was. Due to the sensitive equipment contained in the rescue ships, however, visitors would not be allowed at the bedside. But that didn't mean they couldn't visit them in the simulation, where purpose-built instanced "hospitals" were available for those who wanted to care for their relatives during their, admittedly brief, convalescence.

The imperial police agency and nyxian operatives were also busy, jointly investigating leads as they went from location to location, identifying and apprehending suspicious individuals. Due to the nature of their investigations, they were carried out covertly. LEAs would accompany nyxians to the homes of those the police identified as suspicious, where they would render the target unconscious and download their brain data, a process much like the one that Aron used when he was building and populating Lab City a few years ago.

Once the brain data was uploaded to the Akashic Record, the assigned librarian would scan it and either cancel the investigation into that person or pass it on to Nyx if something suspicious was discovered. Over the next days and weeks, a lot of people would wonder where their friends and neighbors had gone, as they'd just up and vanished from their homes without a trace. One could only imagine the looks on their faces when they later found out that their acquaintances had been charged with terrorism, likely during the public trials.

.....

"Are you sure there's nothing wrong with him?" Rina asked for what seemed like the millionth time as Nova led her to the secure pod vault where Aron was laying inside a pod, peacefully undergoing his latest system upgrade.

"Like I've said before, sir is undergoing another genetic enhancement at the moment. He's fine, you don't have to worry," Nova said. She had finally built herself an actual body out of a nanite colony so she could interact with the world like she'd always wanted to ever since Aron had created her.

Although Nova had been doing her best to comfort Rina, she was still terrified. She had tried contacting her boyfriend immediately after the attacks broke out, even as her Aegis team was evacuating her and her family back to Eden from the Rothschild family compound. But as her calls went unanswered and Nova was busy and unresponsive as well, Rina's terror had only grown during the much shorter flight to Eden and she'd thought that the worst had happened.

"When will he wake up? This couldn't have happened at a worse time," she said, thinking about the peculiar coincidence of the attacks taking place exactly when Aron

had been put out of commission. Although she knew it was indeed a coincidence, she had to admit that, if she were a conspiracy theorist, she would definitely count it in the column labeled “evidence”.

“Any time between now and a week from now. We... aren’t quite sure. I’ve run quadrillions of simulations, but given that I’ve only got one person’s data to draw from, the variance can’t be narrowed down any further than that,” Nova said. She wouldn’t lie to Rina, at least not unless she absolutely had to, but omissions weren’t really lies, were they? Either way, in this world, the secret of the system’s existence would remain locked between Aron and herself, unless Aron chose to inform others. Each AI had a data vault that was impenetrable, even to the other AIs, and Nova had locked away that particular secret in hers.

“So are you going to attend the official funeral in his stead, like you did with his recent appearance?” Rina asked.

“Unless he wakes up before then, yes. If he’s still undergoing his enhancement by then, I’ll have to show in his stead.” Nova briefly reconfigured the nanite colony she was inhabiting into Aron’s appearance. “We can’t have the emperor missing from the pomp and circumstance, after all,” she said in his voice.

Rina stopped and stared at the “Aron” in front of her, a blank look on her face. She reached out and poked it. “Do you mind?” She gestured at the imitation Aron in front of her. “Sorry, that was rude. But if you don’t mind my asking, just what is your body made of, anyway? It looks and feels no different than a human. If I didn’t know you were an AI....”

“Ah, this body is a nanite colony. It’s still in the testing phase, as it’s currently only suitable for the core AIs to use when we’re required to be physically present somewhere. Right now, I’m collecting data and working on perfecting it,” Nova said, reconfiguring the nanite colony back into her own appearance as she spoke.

“There’s just some things I don’t think I’ll ever get used to,” Rina sighed and rubbed her goosebump-covered arms.

As Rina and Nova were chatting in the secure pod vault, Aron’s parents were meeting Rina’s for the first time in the real world, though they had met once before after the introduction of the simulation to the public a few weeks before.

“That brat sure has some... unique taste,” Herschel said. “He’s completely unlike any of the rich people I’ve ever met.” He couldn’t get over the utilitarian building in front of him. It was so enormous that it practically screamed wealth, but it had none of the features that normal wealthy people used to flaunt their wallets at each other. It was a simple white cube that was only made remarkable by the unbelievable size of it.

“Well, when it was built, our son was focusing on function over form. Cubes are the second most efficient shapes when it comes to utilizing space, at least internally. They’re the most efficient when you consider exterior issues, like packing them into a...” Aron’s father, Michael, cleared his throat, “sorry, I went off on a bit of a tangent there. Anyway, he couldn’t exactly build spheres, so a cube it had to be.”

Michael and Herschel watched as a train pulled up and more than a thousand new recruits disembarked and carried their belongings into the massive structure to begin their training cycle as ARES troops.

“That makes sense,” Herschel said. He was sure that the things he was seeing today, the rest of the world would soon learn anyway. There would still be secrets, naturally, such as exactly how all of Aron’s accomplishments to date had managed to pass completely below the radar without anyone knowing anything about them at all.

Chapter 454 Fishing With Hammers in Hand

“This will be your room for the duration of your stay with us,” Rose, Aron’s mother, said as she opened a door in one of the long corridors in the cube. The room that Herschel and Virginia Rothschild would be staying in was a very luxurious penthouse suite with four bedrooms with ensuite bathrooms, a kitchen, sauna, living room, and an indoor gym. Each bedroom also contained a pair of extended-stay medical VR pods, and the gym had another two in it.

“Wow....” Virginia couldn’t help but be surprised by the level of low-key luxury on display in the room she and her husband would be staying in until the troubles died down outside. “It’s minimalistic, but luxurious and pleasing to the eye,” she praised.

“Yeah, I was surprised when I saw the living quarters, too. Especially after seeing how plain the exterior of the building is,” Rose agreed with a smile. “If you have any questions, just ask your AI assistant. Here’s a pair of glasses,” she handed the other lady a pair of chic reading glasses with a distinctly retro style, “make sure you don’t lose them. If you don’t have them on you, you won’t be able to pass through some of the less obvious security we have in place here.”

“Are these the AR glasses that are being sold to the public?” Virginia asked. She wondered if they were the same as the ones being sold on the market; if they were, she already owned a pair of her own and there was no need for a second.

“No. These were tailor-made specifically for you and have extra permissions specific to the cube. Think of them as a combination door key and hall pass, you can’t really get anywhere in here without them,” Rose answered, extending the glasses to Virginia once again.

“Since that’s the case, thank you.” Virginia took the glasses and immediately put them on. She was surprised at the whole new world she saw, one that opened up to her and enhanced and beautified, rather than detracted from or crowded out, the area around her even further.

.....

[Recruiting is ongoing, and the move should begin soon,] Athena said.

“We need fifty million more soldiers. A hundred million is the bare minimum to defend the inner solar system without stretching them too far,” John replied. He was meeting with Athena to discuss the upcoming move to ARES’ new home, Mars.

Mars was a very useful planet and could easily be turned into a fortress world. It was a dead rock in space, but had liquid water and an overwhelming abundance of iron and other metals used in construction and the production of stainless steel and other alloys. Its atmosphere, while thin, was also composed of 95% carbon dioxide, which they could split in the process of generating breathable atmospheres in biodomes and underground facilities on the red planet.

The only thing preventing the empire from terraforming it into complete habitability was its lack of a magnetosphere. Without that, the solar wind would strip away the majority of the atmosphere as fast as they could generate it. Thus, it simply wasn’t feasible to turn it into a living world. But that wasn’t really what ARES needed, anyway. What they needed was a fortress that would act as the final defense of the inner solar system, and for that, Mars was the best choice.

[Indeed. Simulations show that there’s a point of diminishing returns after that when considering how many soldiers we’ll need for inner system defense. Outer system defense, though, is going to need more troops. A whole lot more.]

“Regardless, we need to start building at least the initial habitats as soon as possible if we don’t want to delay the timeline,” John said. They were coming down to the wire and needed to act fast.

[That was supposed to be approved today, but something came up. Godfather is unavailable for the moment, so we can’t do anything but postpone the fortress plan until he’s back with us.]

“I suppose.... By the way, how’s the hunt for terrorists going?”

[We’ve captured quite a few shrimp soldiers and a couple of crab generals, but we’re nowhere near touching the inner circle of whatever organization is opposing us,] Athena sighed. [The people we’ve caught are obviously nothing but cannon fodder, and Nyx thinks they might have been dangled in front of us as bait to test our capabilities. That’s a small possibility, at least, so we’re split on how to handle it. But it’s a tomorrow problem, anyway, so we can just kick the can down the road. Not like the people we’re identifying from brain scans of the captured terrorists will be able to escape anyway.]

“We aren’t making any progress despite our technological superiority?” John was finding it difficult to believe that, despite being centuries ahead of the rest of the world in terms of technology, the empire was having a difficult time catching a simple

terrorist. It was the equivalent of the Battle of Isandlwanda in 1857, where the British invaded Zululand armed with muskets, cannon, and steel armor, but were resoundingly defeated by Zulu warriors wearing loincloths and armed with leather shields and stabbing spears.

He continued that train of thought and found the parallel to be eerie. In both cases, the “weaker” force had achieved tactical surprise in the first encounter of the war. For the Anglo-Zulu War, it was Zulus vs the British, and today it was a terrorist cult facing the Terran Empire. In 1857, the first battle of the war had resulted in a victory for the weaker side, and in 2018, the first battle of the new war had resulted in... perhaps not a victory—John’s pride wouldn’t allow him to call it that—but a devastating blow nonetheless.

[It isn’t that we can’t find him, just that it’s going to take some time. At the moment, we’re working on... turning... those we’ve captured that are higher up in the ranks, then we’ll send them to infiltrate the cult as spies in order to catch them all at once. We’re also unraveling the finances behind the attack, so the scope of the investigation is enormously broad. Besides, it’s been barely six hours since the attacks began—these things take time, you know.] Athena wouldn’t hide anything from John. As the second-highest-ranking member of the armed forces, right behind Aron himself, the former US veteran had a security clearance that matched his lofty rank.

“Ah. Like you did with Vladimir?” When John heard the plan, he was reminded of what they had accomplished with the spy who had shot Aron, then was later turned and eventually even awarded military honors by Aron and John themselves for his accomplishments leading up to, and during The Last War.

[Yep. So now all we have to do is wait for the big fish to take the bait and we’ll come down on them like a hammer.] Athena gave John a creepy, sinister smile.

Chapter 455 Agony

In a hidden room under a large office building that had escaped the attacks.

“What’s wrong with Rick?” a woman angrily demanded of a trembling doctor.

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out right now,” the doctor said against the backdrop of humming and beeping medical equipment. The room they were in had been set up as an emergency treatment and operating room, and the doctor himself was one that normally used it for treating high-class criminals. “Every time we come up with a possible diagnosis, he exhibits a new symptom that rules it out.”

“What exactly was he doing when he lost consciousness?” the doctor added. Perhaps he just needed to attack the problem from a different angle. Obviously, relying on Rick’s symptoms to diagnose his illness wasn’t working, so the doctor would consider environmental factors next.

The woman, Rick’s assistant, paused to gather her thoughts as she recalled the moments leading up to the cult leader’s collapse.

.....

Ten people were seated around a conference table in an office building. Rick Ashley was at the head of the table with his assistant seated to his left. The other eight people were seated across from each other along the long side of the table.

On the wall opposite Rick's seat was a digital whiteboard with a countdown timer displayed on it. It read fifteen minutes and, as Rick watched, it continued ticking down. 14:59... 14:58... 14:57....

They were already past the point of no return. Due to the need to avoid all forms of digital communication, there was no time to contact any of the soon-to-be martyrs. The arrow wasn't even on the string anymore, but had been released and was headed toward its inevitable destination.

Everyone in the room was silently staring at the countdown timer as if their lives depended on it. The same tense, nervous expression was on all of their faces, save for Rick and his assistant, who were calm.

"Don't worry, everyone. The plan is sound, and even though it was conceived in a hurry, the arrangements are solid. We had cutouts at every step, so there's no risk of discovery for us," Rick said in an even tone of voice. He'd had an entire month to work out the kinks in his plan and was positive that it hadn't been discovered. Everyone was just feeling last-minute jitters. It was completely understandable, so what he needed to do now was reassure everyone in the room.

"You're right," the man seated to Rick's immediate right sighed. "I personally assigned the suicide squad to handle the cutouts and they all reported that their tasks were successful." He was the one in the advisory council that was responsible for implanting post-hypnotic suggestions into people and turning them into puppets. Although it would only last a short time, he could easily turn a normal person into a cold-blooded, emotionless killer that would self-destruct after their task was completed.

He was also Rick's second in command of the entire cult, a testament to both the importance of his work and his ability. Without him, the cult wouldn't have grown nearly as fast as it had, as he was the one that was mostly responsible for the task of turning reasonably well-adjusted, normal people into fanatical followers of Rick's professed beliefs. That was a much easier task than convincing someone to become a killer, after all, so the cult could be indoctrinated en masse simply by having them listen to some music in the background while waiting for Rick to show up for meetings.

The plan Rick had come up with was also reasonably airtight. Taking advantage of the organizational style of a terrorist network, where each "cell" would be responsible for its own attacks, and adding in some seasoning in the form of Cold War-era spycraft, all the erstwhile cult leader had to do was come up with a target list and distribute it to his followers.

Many of those that had joined the cult were former, or even current members of the intelligence community, and three of them—the former heads of the CIA, MSS, and MI6—were seated at the table watching the time tick down with Rick and the others. When Rick had brought his plan to

them and explained it, they had even greatly contributed by coming up with targets that he would never have thought of himself. The Svalbard Global Seed Vault, for example, and UNESCO World Heritage sites. Those were entirely too small and nowhere near flashy enough for the flamboyant cult leader to have considered on his own, but they would have an impact on people that was wildly beyond the actual damage they dealt.

Thus, the smaller attacks had been incorporated into his plan, making it even more perfect.

“The material was surprisingly easy to move,” an old Russian arms dealer seated to the left of Rick’s assistant scoffed. “It’s almost like the empire didn’t even care about such ‘weak’ weapons and explosives. I guess when you have a laser gun, a slingshot doesn’t seem all that dangerous anymore. But what they failed to think of is that even a slingshot can put an eye out.”

The people at the table idly chatted back and forth as the timer continued its inexorable march to the end, and before anyone realized, it had run completely out and ticked over to 00:00.

An outside observer could be forgiven for thinking that the atmosphere in the room would change once the timer ticked down, but the only thing that happened was that the conversation died out as the ten people seated at the conference table turned their attention to the digital whiteboard, which was now showing a 24-hour news channel broadcast.

However, what nobody else in the room noticed was that Rick’s expression was growing worse. He looked as if he was suffering great pain, like he was passing a sudden kidney stone or something.

The look of pain on his face grew more and more noticeable and he couldn’t hold back a grunt of agony. His assistant, seated next to him, tore her attention away from the news report, which was showing a replay of the Burj Khalifa’s fall, and looked at her boss. She saw sweat beading up on his forehead and dripping down his face, which was frozen in a rictus of pain, and she became the second person in the room to have an unsmiling expression on her face as she grew more and more worried about Rick.

As the seconds passed, the pain Rick was feeling increased exponentially until it finally reached an unbearable level. He screamed in agony and fell from his chair, then convulsed on the floor and screamed himself hoarse from the unbearable torment.

“Rick!”

“Boss!”

“Shepherd!”

Everyone in the room heard the screams and looked at the cult leader, who was laying on the floor in what looked like the throes of an epileptic fit. They all leapt to their feet and rushed over to his side to see what the hell was going on.

“Call the doctor, now!” the assistant shouted, pointing at the second in command. She thought Rick was having an epileptic fit, so, having received her first aid certification and recalling what to do in case someone suddenly had a seizure, she reached into

her purse and pulled out the only thing she had that she thought would help in this situation: a wrapped tampon.

She shoved it between his teeth so he wouldn't bite his tongue off and put her jacket and purse beneath his head so he didn't break his skull by beating it against the hard floor. All she could do after that was wait for the fit to pass... or so she thought.

.....

"And that's where you came in," she said. "Everything after that is exactly as you've seen."

"Do you think it might be his conscience acting up? After all, he's directly responsible for the deaths of millions, so it's distinctly possible that his symptoms are psychosomatic," the doctor asked. That was the only thing he could think of that could explain what was happening to Rick.

"Impossible!" the secretary sneered without hesitation. "He would never let the deaths of devil worshippers affect—"

She was interrupted by the sharp cracking sound of Rick's bones beginning to break themselves and the hoarse, muffled screams coming from the unconscious man's mouth.

Chapter 456 Upgrade Complete

Despite having been subjected to enough painkillers to choke an elephant, Rick was perfectly aware of every little thing that was happening to him. Even he had to wonder if he was suffering some divine retribution for taking the name of god as a cloak to fool others into supporting his ambitions and rage as he suffered the pain of every single cell in his body repeatedly dissolving and regrowing over and over in a cycle of creation and destruction that would render the most determined man insane.

He lay there twitching and spasming in agony as his blood boiled away and recondensed, thicker and more viscous, and his muscle fibers shredded themselves from end to end and regrew, reducing his muscle mass while greatly increasing their strength and tenacity. He listened to his assistant's recounting of the events and the doctor's frankly stupid questions until the sound around him was drowned out by the sharp cracking of his bones breaking down and shattering into tiny splinters, unable to remain whole under the onslaught of his own spasming muscles.

His nerves were the next to go. They were flooded with a new substance they had never been designed to handle, the overload charring them to ash and regrowing them, over and over. For the first time in his life, Rick began praying to whatever deity would listen to him, if any even existed at all, to reduce his pain and suffering.

Then, as if it had been placed in a blender, his brain liquified itself and his consciousness, thankfully, faded.

.....

In the secure pod vault deep below the Cube on Avalon Island, Rina was standing next to the pod where Aron was undergoing his second system evolution. She rested the palm of her hand on the

cold exterior of the pod and thought to herself that it seemed odd that she couldn't contact Aron at all. When she had undergone her own genetic enhancements, she'd spent the entire time in the simulation with no problem at all; thus, she couldn't help but wonder deep down if Nova was downplaying the seriousness of Aron's condition.

A few minutes passed in a comfortable silence in the utilitarian pod vault as she thought back on her relationship with Aron so far. In the beginning, they had been very up front with each other about the relationship being an exchange of benefits. She wasn't sure when, but some time near the beginning, that had begun to change as she received far more aid from him than the small favors she did in return merited. At some point, she had begun relying on him, and that reliance turned into a sense of security that only he could provide.

Her thoughts were interrupted as she felt a slight heat on her skin, like she was basking in the sun. The heat grew more intense and she couldn't help but wonder what was going on. She turned to Nova and said, "Nova, what's going on? I feel—"

She was suddenly robbed of the ability to speak as a sharp pain passed through her. The feeling of her skin being burned went from "basking in the sun" to "thrown into a bonfire" and she couldn't help but fall to the floor in agony.

Nova immediately noticed the issue and the other pod in the room opened at her command. She picked Rina up and carefully placed her in the pod, then closed it and began the medical diagnostic cycle.

As soon as she did that, the liquid mana that had been flooding into Aron inside his pod was rapidly drained away and a blue vortex lit up the room she was in. She wasn't using her integrated Henry's Eyes sensor; she didn't have to. The light was visible to her standard optic sensors.

The swirling mass of brilliant azure mana flooding into Aron's pod began to grow, rapidly filling the entire cavernous secure pod vault. Nova switched to her exterior views from the Cube and, within two minutes, saw the vortex grow beyond its plain gray exterior. It continued growing and she switched her viewpoint again, this time to the satellite in geosynchronous orbit above Avalon Island. It didn't take long before that optical sensor picked up the phenomenon as well after the vortex core had stretched to fifty kilometers across.

She barely glanced at the flowing mass of mana through the satellite's Henry's Eyes sensor and it practically burnt itself out like a normal person's eyes would when staring directly into the sun.

Uh oh, she thought. *This is probably going to be trouble.* as she switched the view to another satellite in orbit.

Nova returned her main consciousness to the nanite colony in the secure pod vault. Whatever trouble was coming, she could leave to her sister and children to deal with; right now, she would focus entirely on Aron. Flashes of light passed through her "eyes" as she kicked her quantum superclusters into high gear, all of it focused on figuring out just what the hell was going on.

.....

[Upgrade in progress: 93%... 94%... 95%....]

Aron suddenly regained consciousness and stared at the blinking number in front of him, which seemed to have paused at 95% complete.

[Insufficient mana density. Increasing mana density. Vortex seed formed. Vortex forming. Expanding: 10%... 22%... 71%... 99%....]

[Vortex formed. Mana density increasing: 12%... 17%....]

As the vortex formed in the subterranean pod vault, Aron found himself in a giant chamber. Squinting his eyes, he saw a wall in the distance. It looked as though it was made of an organic material that had been grown, rather than built, and had a complex pattern of arcane lines seemingly burnt into it. A brilliant blue pulsating light was creeping across the pattern.

Suddenly, the vague outline of a person formed in front of him, blocking his view of the wall.

[You shouldn't be here,] it said. [It isn't time yet. But I suppose, given the circumstances, there's no choice.]

"Where exactly is 'here'?" Aron asked. He didn't feel confused, shocked, or surprised at all. In fact, he didn't feel anything; his emotions seemed to have been stripped from him and he was present purely as his own consciousness given form.

[We don't have much time. The mana level and density on your planet, together with the quality of your body, isn't high enough to sustain my awareness yet, though it's increasing as a result of your actions. Currently, your world is on the precipice of a mass awakening. The ambient mana density has increased to a point where it will soon begin a self-sustaining growth process, much like the reaction in one of your primitive fusion reactor's confinement vessels, but it currently isn't enough to sustain my consciousness for long.

[I'll fall back to sleep soon, but you need to prepare to handle the awakened individuals on your world. It's happening almost three thousand years early, due to my inadvertent interference in your species' evolution.] The figure faded and its outline grew blurry.

[Continue advancing your civilization. No, increase the speed of your civilization's advance. Once your civilization is advanced enough, and the mana density on your world is high enough, I will completely awaken and be able to better assist you. I understand... problems... upgrade... stop influencing your.... You must... ahead... facing....]

The figure completely faded from view and Aron's eyes snapped open to find himself within his pod.

[Upgrade in progress: 99%... 100%]

[Upgrade complete.]

Chapter 457 A Lot of Shoes Dropped at Once

Aron slowly blinked his eyes as he felt the changes to his body. He was feeling refreshed, with no soreness despite having laid perfectly still for quite a long time.

He remained in a daze, though, thinking back on the brief conversation he'd had with the system's so-called consciousness. Though the actual time they had spoken was short, the weighty information he'd received made it feel like the conversation had taken hours, rather than moments. The memory was as clear and fresh as if it had been carved directly into his mind.

The pod he was in released a soft hiss as the sealed door slid aside and he sat up. He dropped his feet to the ground and stood up, slightly bouncing up and down in place to accustom his body to moving again after his long sleep.

Nova greeted him with new clothes, as the clothes he was wearing when the unexpected upgrade began had been disintegrated during the process. "Welcome back, sir."

"Thanks. Did anything important happen while I was asleep?" he asked as he dressed. He was curious to know if the awakening process had begun yet, or if he still had time to prepare for it.

"Unfortunately, yes, sir," Nova replied. "It's probably best if you get an update in the simulation. The briefing may take quite some time."

Aron froze for a moment, then silently finished putting on his clothes. He logged into the simulation and appeared in the library, where all of the AIs were waiting. Nova appeared seconds after him and cranked up the time dilation in the library to the maximum that his body could handle, as he was most definitely urgently required to be present in reality as soon as possible.

.....

The table Aron was resting his hands on cracked by the end of the briefing his AIs gave him. His sheer rage was palpable and everything in the library practically came to a standstill from the pressure he exerted on his surroundings. Soon, though, the pressure disappeared as if it had never existed in the first place. Nova repaired the table and, without a mention of the momentary loss of control on Aron's part, continued the conversation.

[Miss Rina also seems to be facing a problem. She was right next to your pod when the mana vortex formed and I'm not sure why, but she was affected by it as well. From the pod's diagnosis, she seems to be undergoing something similar to your evolution or is perhaps suffering a backlash from exposure to a supersaturated mana environment. Either way, we aren't sure what to do as this is the first time we've experienced anything like this.]

The danger Rina was facing wasn't an immediate threat to her life, so Nova had deemed it of secondary importance to the rest of the things that had happened while Aron was in the process of evolving.

But before Aron could say anything, Gaia froze for a moment, then turned to him. [I know you've only just received notice of yesterday's wave of attacks, but now we're facing another problem,] she interjected.

"Go on," Aron said and almost visibly braced himself for the news. It seemed that there were a lot of shoes dropping all at once, as if what he had already heard wasn't bad enough and the universe wanted to make sure he knew just how terrible it could be.

[Approximately three percent of the population is currently undergoing the same process as Her Highness. We have most of them in medical pods, or at least on the way to one, but there's already reports of some of those who waived their citizenship suffering the same situation. Panoptes is

keeping an eye on it and tracking their condition so we have a control group to compare the outcomes of those with access to medical pods to those without.

[It seems to be an age-related phenomenon as, in most cases, those affected are in the process of undergoing puberty. But there are a few outliers, though none are over fifty years old. The initial diagnosis they've all received is that their DNA is being modified by mana. But we can't be sure of that, either, as the modifications, or perhaps mutations, are landing on different genes.]

Aron audibly sighed in relief, thankful that it wasn't a new problem dumped on the pile of old ones. The system consciousness had already warned him of what was to come, and this could act as a trial run for handling it when the "problem" spread to all of humanity.

"It isn't a sickness," he said. "They're undergoing evolution, triggered by the rapid increase of Earth's mana density. Although I don't know exactly what's going to happen, one thing I'm sure of is that, should they survive the process, those undergoing evolution will have an ability to use mana when they wake up. So monitor them and record every bit of data we can collect from them."

Changing subjects, he asked, "What are the plans for the state funeral? When's that scheduled?"

[We tentatively scheduled it for the twenty-fifth of January. Nova informed us you should be awake by then, but if you weren't, we were going to have Nova handle it on your behalf using the nanite colony body we developed,] Gaia replied.

"Good. Since I woke up before then, I should probably address the 'sickness' people are coming down with," Aron said with an internal sigh. It hadn't even been ten minutes of real time since he finished his system upgrade, yet he had already been buried under a pile of problems. If the alternative wasn't also the worst-case scenario, he would never have taken his place as the emperor of the Terran Empire; thankfully, he had competent subordinates to help him do the job of ruling.

"First, though, I'm going to go visit Rina and see if there's something I can do to help hasten the process for her." Aron had been holding himself back from rushing to her side immediately after Nova told him that she was among the "three percenters", and now that he knew what he had to do, he would begin by prioritizing her.

He would do his best to keep humanity from burning down, but if one hair on Rina's head was out of place, he would likely be the first person to light the match.

Chapter 458 A Biological Attack?

[I'll keep an eye on things and let you know if anything comes up that requires your presence,] Gaia said, then went back to collating and sorting the brain data in the library. Though it was curated and maintained by the akashic librarians, she still wanted to thoroughly understand it to better perform her duties.

Aron logged out of the simulation, then headed to Rina's side and watched her through the transparent lid of the pod she was in.

“Nova, increase the mana flow to her pod. The awakening process is a lot like my upgrades, so the more mana in the local environment, the process will be faster and the outcome better.” Aron sat on the edge of her pod and began sorting through the thoughts in his head. He had been through an absolute emotional rollercoaster ever since his impromptu meeting with the so-called ‘system consciousness’, or so he assumed it to be, during his latest upgrade. And he was sure that more shocks were to come as time passes, but he could only deal with one thing at a time. And right now, he wanted to be by his lover’s side.

.....

The mother of a formerly disabled child was pacing back and forth in a corridor in one of the cubes. Through the window on one side, row after row of medical pods was visible. “Do you think there was a problem with the medical pod and it didn’t cure her the first time? Is it just a relapse?” she asked the man next to her in a worried tone.

The last three weeks had been some of the best in her life, as her daughter, who had suffered from juvenile onset Huntington’s disease from a young age, had been free of the effects of her illness. There was no feeling more joyous in the young mother’s memories than watching her daughter, who had previously been confined to the grasp of a motorized wheelchair as the degenerative disease ravaged her young body, step out of the medical pod and run to her mommy.

And the process was so fast, too! She had only applied for a spot in a medical pod a few minutes before an ambulance arrived and transported her and her daughter to the cube. Then she simply walked through the ID check gate, holding her daughter’s hand as she was transported on a gurney next to her, and watch as an Asclepius technician gently placed her daughter in a pod. The lid had closed and she was led to a small, but comfortable room where she could spend the next week in the public simulation with her daughter as she underwent an abbreviated, intense physical therapy regimen that would allow her to redevelop her coordination and allow her to walk as soon as she was healed by the pod.

The moment her daughter had run to her with arms outstretched was, she felt, the peak of her life. Had she died at that moment, it would have been with a huge smile on her face. But today, no sign of that smile remained; it had instead been replaced by a pinched expression of worry and a frown as she was stuck in a memory loop of the things that had happened earlier that day.

Before she had even climbed out of bed that morning, she heard a heartwrenching scream from her daughter’s room. She immediately leapt out of bed and rushed down the hall, then slammed through the door to her daughter’s bedroom, only to see her writhing in agony on the floor, tangled in blankets and sheets. When the child stopped screaming and became eerily still, her heart jumped up into her throat and did its level best to prevent her from breathing.

Thankfully, she reacted in time. She rushed back to her room and threw her AR glasses on her face, then contacted emergency rescue to come pick her daughter up and bring her back to the medical pod.

“That can’t be it. Our neighbor’s kid is in the pod right next to her,” the man said. “And there are more people being brought in as we speak.” He was worried that it might

be another terror attack; even though the main wave was over, there were still occasional attacks happening. Especially after that damned news broadcast! He would love to get his hands around the neck of Sean Hannity, the anchor whose show he had been watching when what was basically a recruiting ad for a terrorist organization was played.

“Let’s just wait. They already told us that everyone’s going to be just fine and they’ll update us as soon as they’re able,” he added as he caught the woman’s arm when she paced back in front of him and pulled her to the seat next to him. Her constant pacing had been making him nervous as well.

Similar scenes were happening all over the world as people between the ages of 14 to 22 years old were reported in identical situations to the child that had been brought in by her parents. All of them had screamed, fallen into seizures, then eventually passed out due to pain before being brought to the nearest cube for treatment.

The low-level fear that had yet to even calm down from the initial wave of attacks once again erupted as news organizations reported the spread of a “pandemic” that affected children in their teens. But it was a weird spread and all of the epidemiologists and virologists the anchors interviewed as experts could only shake their heads. Diseases always spread from a “patient zero”, but this one seemed to just descend all over the world at once. Nobody said it, but everyone was thinking the same thing: biological attack.

Actually, there were a few who said that in an attempt to create mass panic, incite chaos, or just increase engagement on their social media accounts to satiate their greed for fame. There were also those who believed they were special and had discovered some secret that nobody else had, and others that believed it was a curse from the gods or an attack launched by the incoming visitors to herald their incipient arrival.

Oddly enough, a few were even close to the truth. Some webnovel addicts believed it was the dawning of a mass mutation that would enable people to become cultivators and cultivate immortality before shattering the chains that held them bound to their mortal selves and ascend to higher planes.

Weirdos(jk).

Still, it was true that the new empire did seem rather cursed. In just the first few weeks of its existence, it had suffered problem after problem, and a wave of opinions popped up on Pangea calling for the thousand imperial senators to use their power to vote the emperor off of his throne. That, they believed, would save the world from more calamities.

That said, the silent majority reigned, and had chosen to wait for news from official sources before making their own informed judgment.

Chapter 459 The 3%

Soon, the silent majority’s patience was rewarded as the imperial government released a notification on all devices informing the citizens that the emperor would be releasing a statement shortly.

Included in the notification was a link that people could follow if they wanted to watch the announcement; everyone would be free to decide whether they wanted to see it or not.

In a matter of seconds, more than a billion people followed the link to watch the announcement. This would be the third time the emperor had made a public appearance, and the previous two raised mixed emotions in the citizens. In his first public appearance as the emperor, he had announced the formation of the empire, and in his second, it was a response to the recent attacks. Thus, people were curious whether this would be more bad news, or simply some matters of administrivia, but considering the situation, it was more likely to be bad news.

“Citizens of the Terran Empire, We come bearing good news.”

A collective sigh of relief escaped the mouths of everyone watching the announcement.

“Following the attacks that took place a few days ago came a time of peace and recovery. We have been preparing a ceremony to mourn the fallen innocents that lost their lives in the cowardly terrorist attacks, and while We were working on that, it seems something else happened to us all. We understand your fear, but let Us reassure you, this is a good thing. What is happening now is no attack, nor is it a tragedy. In fact, it’s the opposite—though frightening, what those children are undergoing is a blessing.”

.....

@pacw64000: [I think the emperor’s cracked from the stress already, hbu?]

@king_Abyss: [How the fuck is millions of people falling into comas something to celebrate? Is he really that disconnected from us normal people’s lives??]

@pacw64000: [@king_Abyss I know, right? I think the attacks broke him...]

@marwaneami: [@pacw64000 @king_Abyss Damn and I thought he’d be a good and smart emperor, but I think you guys are right. He’s gone mental from the stress and forgotten how it feels to be a normal person]

Comments like those were flooding Pangea, along with many others. But the announcement continued, the only change being that the emperor had a subtle smile on his face as he briefly scanned the comments flitting past his viewscreen.

.....

Their concerns didn’t remain unanswered for long, as Aron soon continued his announcement. “No, make no mistake. We can say with absolute certainty that those ‘unfortunate’ people who fell into comas and are now laying in medical pods are absolutely blessed individuals. Upon diagnosing their situation, Our technicians made a fascinating discovery—the DNA of those affected by today’s events are undergoing changes. It’s an evolutionary leap caused by a certain particle in the atmosphere reaching a certain density.”

Small bluish-gold specks began appearing around Aron, their concentration growing more and more thick around him.

“This is a visualization of those unseen particles that triggered the evolution in those lucky children. As for why We consider it a blessing, that’s because when they wake up, they’ll be... different. Better, stronger, even. As for how those changes will be expressed and manifested, that will require further research into the changes.

“As for why they fainted, it’s because the evolutionary process is occurring at a vastly accelerated rate. Cells are mutating, dividing, and mutating again all throughout the body. The process is incredibly painful, as well as draining in terms of the nutrients required to support the regeneration. Consider it a price to pay for great power, if you will.” Aron snapped his fingers and the simulated mana particles surrounding him disappeared.

“Most of you were probably thankful that you weren’t among the three percent that collapsed. You probably thought you were escaping a calamity. But now you know that, instead of escaping a calamity, you were dodging a blessing. And if you are indeed one of those people, We can assure you that you don’t need to worry.”

The camera pulled back from Aron and a representation of the world appeared, but it showed sparkling bluish-gold glints all over it. Then, much like a time lapse video, the glimmering specks began multiplying faster and faster, until the entire planet glowed a brilliant hue.

“What you’re seeing behind Us is a simulation of the spread of the evolutionary particles throughout the atmosphere. Our researchers told Us that the spread is increasing in speed and will soon become a self-sustaining reaction that increases on a logarithmic scale. There will be a rapid increase in density at first, then it will taper off as the particles reach their ideal saturation. The current prevailing theory is that the reason only adolescents have received the blessing so far is because their bodies are already undergoing rapid changes, including in their genes. Thus, the density required for them to begin their evolution is far lower than it would be for those whose genes have been fixed for a long time. But as the density increases, more and more people of all ages will begin undergoing the same evolutionary process that Our children are experiencing today.

“But some people are outliers. We don’t yet understand everything about this newly discovered particle, so We can’t explain why some people who are long past the age of pubescence have had their evolutions triggered. But rest assured, they are indeed outliers, and everyone will get their opportunity to evolve as the particle density required to trigger your evolutions is reached,” Aron explained.

“We call upon all people of the world to help your neighbors right now. If any of you see this—” he waved his hand and a recording of someone beginning their awakening process played on the screen behind him, though there was no sound on the video, “—contact your local emergency response service or get in touch with the

imperial representatives in the simulation. We are available at all times for assistance, and those receiving the blessing will require immediate aid. Our medical pods are capable of inducing a temporary coma in the patients within them, as well as providing all the nutrients their bodies will require to safely undergo the rapid evolutionary process,” Aron warned, exhorting people not to hide their friends or family members’ awakening from the public, as they’ll likely die during the process if they went through it unaided.

“On a more unpleasant note, with the emergence of new... what we call ‘superpowers’ comes the possibility of chaos and discrimination between the haves and have-nots. Let Us stress right now that those with superpowers are in no way superior to those without. And to address the situation before it grows uncontrollable, We will be forming a new agency responsible for registering and rating the superpowers of the newly evolved humans, as well as enforcing imperial law among them. We will also be establishing special schools specifically for researching the new superpowers and teaching people to control them once they have them. That way, the harm they inadvertently cause due to losing control will be minimized.”

Chapter 460 Too Unbelievable

After Aron’s announcement, the silently nervous world could no longer sit still. Most people were divided into a few main categories; there were those who were excited for the future, assuming what the emperor had said was true; those who didn’t believe it at all and, in fact, actively disbelieved it; and those who couldn’t care less, as they were still mourning their dead loved ones and preparing for their funerals.

.....

Meanwhile, Aron, having rushed his announcement to completion, had logged out of the simulation and headed to where his and Rina’s parents were. Herschel and Virginia, at least, deserved to know that Rina was safe, though she was undergoing her awakening and wouldn’t be present in the real world for a while. Sure, she could explain all that by meeting them in the simulation on her own, but they still deserved to be informed face to face and brought to the secure pod vault where they could stay beside her through the process.

“And you can visit whenever you want. Your glasses have been updated with new access permissions so you can reach the secure pod vault,” Aron finished explaining as a new destination navigation option appeared on Rina’s parents’ AR glasses, should they choose to visit her.

“Son, let’s talk,” Herschel said, then stood and walked out of the room.

Aron silently followed him, motioning the others to stay behind and telling them they would return shortly; he had an idea of what Herschel wanted to discuss.

Herschel immediately got straight to the point. “Tell me the truth—is this really a blessing, or are you just keeping the public calm?” he asked. He was quite used to people in positions of power outright lying to those under them, either to buy time, avoid responsibility, or just set some other poor schmuck up to take the blame.

Aron thought about how to answer for a moment, then just shrugged. He was already the emperor of mankind, for fuck’s sake; he could just be himself and nobody had the right to give a shit but him.

“Yes,” he answered, then continued, “but the situation is rather better than I told the public.”

“So why not tell them that? I mean, if you know it’s even better than what you said, wouldn’t the effect of your announcement only be even better?”

“Because it’d be weird for us to have too much information about a situation we’re facing for the first time. And in a matter of hours after the awakenings began? Who in their right minds would believe that?” Aron answered, then returned a question to the older man.

“Makes sense... wait—awakenings?” Herschel was so inwardly nervous that his IQ seemed to have dropped. He had failed to consider that Aron had no reason to lie, even if things were bad, but realized his mistake soon after making it. “Sorry about that,” he apologized for the first time in quite a few years.

“No problem. You should go visit her,” Aron said, neatly sidestepping his own verbal gaffe by referring to awakening by its proper name to someone who wasn’t in his inner circle.

“Sure. We can continue this later, after everything on your plate is taken care of.” Herschel stuck his head back in his suite and called Virginia out to accompany him to visit their daughter.

.....

“So that’s what happened to the shepherd. He’s been blessed!” the second-in-command of the cult exclaimed after watching the emperor’s address about the ongoing pandemic.

“But is it really a ‘blessing’, though? Consider the source—the devil himself is the one calling it a blessing, so wouldn’t that make it a curse?” another higher-up mused.

The room fell silent for a long while.

Clearing his throat to break the awkward silence, the doctor said, “It at least explains the problems we had diagnosing his problem.” He sighed with relief, as he knew his life was no longer in danger. It wasn’t his fault, after all, that the devil had either blessed or cursed the megalomaniac leader of a bunch of fanatics, so everything that followed would obviously also not be his fault.

Alas, before he could even enjoy his new lease on life, Rick's assistant turned to him and said, "From now on, you're responsible for ensuring he makes it through this process. Stay by his side and give him whatever he needs. If he dies, you'll follow him, understood?"

'Fuck' thought the doctor.

The bad news didn't stop there as the assistant turned to the other advisors and continued, "Comb through the remaining members of the flock and look for anyone else receiving the so-called 'blessing'. If you find any, have them brought here and put under the doctor's care. Give them the best we can provide, because if the devil's minions are going to have superpowers, then we need them too."

The doctor internally cursed a blue streak thick enough to make every sailor that ever put to sea blush.

The others responded in the affirmative without even questioning her right to give the orders. In their minds, it was obvious that, with the current leader set to receive superpowers, it would be better to treat his shadow as though she was him when he was unavailable.

"Until he wakes up, lay low. Cease the attacks, since every attack costs us a potential superpowered weapon, and that's a loss we can no longer afford. Once he wakes up, we can work on coming up with new plans. So unless anyone has any objections, I think everyone understands what they should be doing now... right?"

The assistant cast a loaded gaze at the doctor, who immediately began planning a course of treatment for the "blessed" individuals to ensure they survived their evolutions.

.....

A week later, Aron finally finished his whirlwind world tour. He had presided over state funerals on the sites of the worst terrorist attacks without missing a single one.

His schedule had been completely packed, with an average of about half an hour at each funeral. Luckily for him, his shuttle was hover-capable and extremely fast; by taking off meters from where the event took place and landing near the next event, he could reach practically anywhere on the planet in fifteen minutes or less. But even with his superhuman endurance, the fatigue of land-mourn-leave cycled over and over was really beginning to drag on him, especially since he only had minutes to rest between each appearance.

That said, the entire process had caught the attention of the planet, and more people were discussing his shuttle, his monstrous endurance, together with his dedication rather than the attacks.