

Tech System 461

Chapter 461 The Farthest Frontier

During the terrorist attacks, the asteroid belt.

In the silence of space between Mars and Jupiter, a rocket engine had been decelerating for a few days as it neared the first marked object in the main asteroid belt of the solar system.

Many such vessels had been sent, each of them targeting specific asteroids in the belt. This one in particular was approaching 4 Vesta. Its velocity had already decreased to a point where it would survive if it impacted its target, but the engine continued slowing it down as it approached for a soft landing.

Initiating anchors.... Initiated. Deploying anchors for catch maneuver, the VI responsible for monitoring and controlling the vessel logged and reported back to the central AI.

Approaching target. Distance 600... 500... 450.... It continued reporting and logging the flight data as it approached 4 Vesta, continually updating the record as it happened.

When the rangefinder reported fifty meters remaining, the deployed anchors were launched and the tungsten “stakes” coated with a layer of electrical steel shot out of the vessel and penetrated deep into 4 Vesta, trailed by ropes woven of carbon nanotubes. They deployed side spikes, securing themselves within the body of the asteroid as the vessel reeled in the slack in the lines.

As the pulley system reeled in the slack, the VI piloting the vessel increased power to its thrusters, bringing the ship into positive delta v to maintain tension on the cables as the vessel was slowly winched to the surface of the asteroid. Once it was within five meters of the “ground”, the engines were finally shut down.

After the vessel powered down and rested on its landing gears, sliding doors on its ventral surface opened and a manipulator arm with a built-in atomic printer on it reached out of the vessel and got to work.

It dug deeper and deeper into 4 Vesta, disintegrating the material in its way and printing a longer and longer arm as it went until it reached a depth of 500 meters, where it finally met a layer rich in the necessary materials it required to create a larger printer without needing to cannibalize the vessel that had brought it to the second-largest asteroid in the main asteroid belt.

The process would take a few days, due to the difference in size between the miniature atomic printer on the manipulator arm and the printer it was striving to create.

Vesta wasn't the only asteroid targeted in the initial landing wave, either. All ten of the largest asteroids in the belt were targeted: 87 Sylvia, 89 Julia, 65 Cybele, 704 Interamnia, 52 Europa, 511 Davida, 10 Hygiea, 2 Pallas, and 1 Ceres. The landing sequence was the only difference; some of those asteroids, like Ceres, generated enough of a gravitational pull that the landing vessels could land normally.

Still, all nine of the other vessels in the first landing wave anchored themselves to the ground and dug an atomic printer-equipped manipulator arm deep into the substrate, where it would replicate itself and begin construction.

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A week later, while Aron was making his appearances at funerals around the world, the large atomic printer construction finally finished in the last asteroid, and all of them had built enormous fusion reactors deep within their individual asteroids.

Initiate startup sequence, the AI overseeing the ten VIs ordered.

The VIs loaded the new fusion reactors with fuel. This time, instead of relying on tritium and deuterium, the ten new reactors were loaded with the same fuel as the largest fusion reactor in the solar system: pure hydrogen. The researchers in Lab City had long abandoned the lower-temperature lower-power elements, deuterium and tritium, in favor of hydrogen, which required much higher ignition temperatures and far, far tougher containment methods.

A few minutes later, the hydrogen in each of the ten reactors was heated to hundreds of millions of degrees and ignition was achieved. Once the plasma in the reactors stabilized, the enormous generators came to life.

Initiate atomic printer self-test.

The printers ran their diagnostic subroutines as, despite being printed by another atomic printer, there was always a minuscule chance that a problem may occur due to external factors. No matter how small that chance may be, there was no harm in spending a few minutes running the self-tests.

Diagnostic complete. System status: green.

Beginning production.

The industrial-size printers began collecting material from their surroundings and printed harvester units to extend their reach. Due to their size, it had been deemed more efficient to send VI-driven harvesters out than to make the printers themselves mobile.

The work proceeded smoothly, with harvester after harvester leaving the industrial printers and drilling ever outward, returning load after load of material as they began hollowing out the asteroids they were housed within. Once a critical mass of harvesters was reached, the large printers then printed constructor swarms en masse, sending them out to reinforce the tunnels carved by the harvester units with the same hadfield steel and chromium alloy used for armor by the empire.

The industrial printer in 1 Ceres, on the other hand, was working on something different. All of the reinforcement the constructor swarms built had an additional element to it: gravity plating. It also contained not one, but twelve full-sized fusion reactors in the center of the 590-mile-wide dwarf planet.

Gravity plating, it had to be noted, was also what made it possible for the RES-QR bots to flip the bird at the laws of physics, as well as the eerie stillness of the hovering rescue ships used during the attack. It was capable of countering the effect of gravity based on how much energy was pumped through it.

And twelve fusion reactors could pump quite a lot of energy through the gravity plating in Ceres.

Once the reinforcement and building process was completed, Ceres was destined to be moved into geosynchronous orbit over Eden as the terminal for a space elevator and Earth's first common-use space station.

Even as the construction continued, the fusion reactors were brought up to their safe margin of 80% capacity and began the sisyphian task of deorbiting Ceres. After falling out of its orbit in the main asteroid belt, it would then be moved to its final destination. And by the time it took up its position, the interior construction would be complete and it would be ready for the first batch of imperial citizens that wanted to brave the farthest frontiers.

Chapter 462 For Posterity's Sake

Aron had found himself alone with Rina's mother just after attending his final state funeral. He had spent 72 hours nonstop visiting the funeral locations, prompting discussion among the people about whether he was among the blessed or simply superior to "normal" humans on a genetic level.

Many people easily "debunked" the possibility that Aron was among the blessed, as it was obvious that he wasn't in a medical pod in the process of receiving a blessing. In fact, he seemed perfectly fine as he flitted here and there, attending state funerals. Even though the wave of fainting people had begun a few days prior, even those who were among the first to be blessed were still in the medical pods and showing no sign of the process being complete anytime soon.

So that left the second option. It was an open secret that ARES soldiers were genetically enhanced, as they hadn't even tried to keep their performances to mere human levels. Thus, there were thousands upon thousands of video clips showing them exerting their monstrous strength even without their power armor on. And it only stood to reason that the Emperor of the Terran Empire would be at least as enhanced as his soldiers, if not even more.

The argument went back and forth, but little did they know that both possibilities were true.

There was also a third argument going around, propagated by conspiracy theorists and trolls. After the video that Rick's cult had released claiming responsibility for the terror attacks and calling Aron the devil himself, a small, but vocal, minority of imperial citizens began parroting some of the more troll-worthy quotes from it. It was hard to tell whether those were their actual beliefs or if they just wanted to see the world burn, but that crowd argued that Aron was using the power of the devil to keep himself going.

Still, the discussion had taken the limelight away from his personal shuttle, causing him to be caught between laughter and tears. He now knew what it felt like to be a star and have unrelated people discussing every last little detail about him.

Mothers, though, had different perspectives, a point that Virginia Rothschild was demonstrating now. "How are you holding up? You haven't slept for more than three days. Have you lost weight?" Question after question was fired at Aron without end.

"I'm fine," he sighed. "I'm a bit tired, sure, but what I'm feeling is nothing compared to the people who lost loved ones in an attack that we promised we could, and would, protect them from." He tried to project the same casual smile that was normally on his face and wasn't entirely successful, though it was true that he wasn't exhausted. His tiredness was purely emotional, as he had been keeping a refreshing rune active on himself over the past few days. Though it ate into his concentration a bit, due to the need to constantly supply mana to it, it was still enough to have kept him going for a short three days.

“I know it must weigh heavy on your heart, but you still need to take care of yourself. You can’t keep everyone from making evil choices, but if something happens to you, then....” She patted his back, then changed tack and continued, “Go get some rest. The work is neverending, but if you don’t rest, you won’t be.” She subtly pushed him in the direction of his room as she would do for her own children.

“I’ll go take a break, then. Thanks, Virginia, and I’ll see you later.” With that, he headed to greet his family, then go off to rest.

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While Aron rested, the rest of the military armament stockpiles were delivered to Avalon Island. At least those that weren’t stolen, hidden away, or simply forgotten due to shoddy recordkeeping on the part of the former militaries. With the last freighter unloaded, any military-grade hardware left anywhere else had immediately become contraband and anyone linked to it would be tried and convicted by the efficient imperial justice system.

That efficiency had already been proven by the initial sorting of the prisons and ongoing trials around the world. Almost all of the innocent prisoners who had been falsely convicted had been released and the true culprits behind their alleged crimes imprisoned in their place under the new imperial law guidelines. And once the fortress cities began being constructed, even those prisons would be emptied, as most of the punishments under imperial law involved labor, at least in some capacity.

The hardware itself was mostly sent to the pit for recycling, though one of each object was rendered safe, its engines, weapons, and any dangerous parts stripped from it, for display in a museum... once it was built, anyway. For now, the safed hardware would remain in storage in one of the warehouses in the Cube on Avalon Island.

Though the physical objects were placed in storage, “working” versions were available to be viewed, and even rented, in the simulation. Once that was announced, there was a flood of people visiting the War Museum of the Imperial Archives and lining up to rent the hardware and join special instances where they could reenact famous battles from the past, living their fantasies and learning about history through blood-pumping role play. The people could even experience firsthand what it was like to face the ARES troopers deployed in The Last War, though for security reasons, they were prohibited from “playing” as the ARES troopers themselves; anyone interested in that was directed to an ARES recruitment station instead.

The mass disarmament marked the official end of thousands of years in mankind’s ever-escalating quest to discover better, more efficient ways of killing their fellow man. That said, it had become something of a joke since Aron’s rise anyway, as the moment he began introducing 14th-generation military hardware was the actual moment humanity’s violent quest to kill each other with bigger and bigger booms was rendered obsolete. And the empire had recently even begun introducing the 75th generation of military equipment, no less.

In addition to that particular closed chapter in the history of humanity, the Imperial Archivist, who people only knew as Mnemosyne, informed the empire’s citizens that January 1, 2018 AD had been officially declared as January 1, 1 AE (After Empire). Everything prior to that date was labeled as

BE (Before Empire), so the year 2017 AD was now the year -1 BE, much like humanity was used to referring to things on the Gregorian calendar as BC and AD.

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Chapter 463 By Hook or by Crook

The lockdown had officially ended after the empire had completed the majority of the transitional work. Currencies had been exchanged, workers had been retrained, agencies had been built and fully staffed, and all seven billion citizens had registered for their IDs. The only ongoing work was the initial medical treatment in the imperial hospitals inside each of the cubes scattered across the world and the retrial of prisoners who had requested one. No matter how efficient the empire was—and it was VERY efficient—they simply didn't have enough medical pods or legal staff to handle that many jobs in a short period of time.

That said, imperial clinics had been built outside of the cubes, filled with row after row of shiny, brand new medical pods, and subordinate AIs had quietly taken on quite a few of the cases in the justice system. The two tasks would be completed over the next few months and had been downgraded to low priority jobs in the background.

Currently, the only thing the empire lacked was capable individuals to helm the imperial agencies and the three ministries.

But lacking the warm asses to fill those particular seats wouldn't prevent the agencies from operating, as the AIs responsible for general oversight of each agency could still issue orders even without official heads of the agencies. Filling those spots would also take time, as potential candidates were identified, recruited, and tested to see if they were the best person for the job. Sure, the Akashic Library had their constantly updated brain data, but that didn't give the whole picture of what a person was or how they would actually act when the metal hit the meat.

Free will was a bitch, and the brownian motion of sentient life was something that no amount of processing power would ever be able to account for.

Among the first agency to finish their transitional tasks was the imperial scholastica. They had one of the easiest tasks: unifying school curriculums. Though each country had had their own curriculum in the past, they all taught mostly the same things. STEM subjects were naturally combined, as math was math and science was science no matter what country was teaching it, while the more liberal arts-oriented subjects were either combined or eliminated entirely. Early childhood, late childhood, and adult education were strictly delineated, and with twice the length of time to teach, STEM and liberal arts would be given equal treatment under the new curriculums. At least in early childhood education, anyway, where children would be given a broad foundation before being sorted into a single path once their personalities had developed and their interests discovered and verified.

Along with the promise of free education and the chains of student debt being entirely eliminated through an imperial debt forgiveness program, the imperial scholastica's other task was similarly easy. They simply had to tally up what current students had already paid for their education and issue refunds. The refunds were strictly limited to current students, though, as refunding everyone

who had ever paid for a private school or university-level education throughout all of modern history would be a bit much.

That said, however, though former students hadn't been refunded the cost of their educations, they were still issued subsidies and credits to purchase goods and services offered at a premium by the government, like extra housing space or luxury decorations for their housing in the promised fortress cities, or through any of Aron's companies, like computer equipment, civilian-grade bionics and cybernetics, and so on.

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"Yes!" Henry exclaimed. "I can finally go outside after nearly a whole month!"

He had long grown bored with wandering around the areas of the Cube he'd been granted access to, and even a few of those he hadn't been. The AIs had a certain tolerance for his antics and had "accidentally" allowed him to access a few of the areas he'd been told he was restricted from, a measure meant to delay his inevitable boredom from lack of stimulation. Nothing was more stimulating to a child than figuring out ways to sneak into places they didn't think they were allowed to be in; their curiosity would allow no less.

It wasn't just Henry who was thrilled that the lockdown had ended, either. Aron hadn't allowed even the adults in his and Rina's families to leave the Cube for the duration of the lockdown. Sure, if a major emergency happened, they would be ushered out under the protection of their Aegis teams, but there was nothing on Earth that could threaten the Cube on Avalon Island so an emergency of that scale was... unlikely, to say the least.

"No, you need to study," Rose said.

Everyone, from the youngest preschooler to the oldest university post-graduate student, would be in the first batch to take the scholastica exams, which would place them in their initial tracks. For those in late childhood education, which began in the ninth year of classes, it would determine where they would be placed in their individual development path so their talent could be polished to a mirror shine.

"But moooooom..." Henry whined. "That's two whole weeks away! Can't I just study next week and go outside this week?" His small face wore an exaggerated expression of aggrieved misery.

"Why don't you just play in the simulation? You'll even have more time there," Rose suggested.

"But that's not real! And since it isn't real, I don't have fun there," Henry complained. He was one of the minority of people who didn't enjoy the simulation, since they couldn't bring themselves to forget that it wasn't real.

Rose sighed. "Okay. But you have to promise you'll study really hard next week, and no more excuses, okay mister?"

"Yay! Will Aron come with us?" Henry cheered, then grew sober when he remembered that his big brother only went out when it was required by his new duties.

Saddened by the disappointment evident in Henry's expression, Rose said, "Why don't you go ask him if he'll have time to come out and play with us?" She felt that perhaps Henry would have a better chance of dragging her older son away from his heavy responsibilities, even for a few hours, than she would if she were to ask him.

"Okay!" Henry exclaimed, then leapt off of the sofa and sprinted at full child speed to the elevator, on his way to the secure pod vault determined to drag his big brother out by hook or by crook.

Chapter 464 "I Really Liked Those Clothes, You Know"

"It should be any time, now," Nova said. She was in the secure pod vault with Aron, watching over Rina as the final stage of her awakening was progressing and documenting the changes in her.

"I'm actually a bit excited... and curious, and nervous. I didn't get to see anything happening during my upgrades at all," Aron distractedly replied.

Just as he was about to continue, Rina's pod beeped, a notification that movement had been detected. She was waking up.

Rina stopped absorbing the liquid mana in the pod, so Nova stopped the mana feed and allowed it to drain out of the pod and into the room, where it evaporated and joined the rest of the mana in the atmosphere. The mana density in the pod vault was so high it would awaken any five people, but to Aron, it was akin to a warm breeze on a hot day, practically unnoticeable.

After a few minutes of outward inactivity, Rina blinked open her eyes and released a low groan. Due to concerns about interfering with the awakening process, Nova had only supplied mana and observed the process, nothing more, so Rina was rather stiff and groggy after having laid still for so long.

Still, Nova had collected a wealth of data for the imperial archive's confidential records. There were akashic librarians collecting data on everyone else in pods undergoing the process of awakening, but those could only act as controls to compare Rina's awakening to. After all, Rina had a couple of advantages. Not only was she in the most recent generation of medical VR pod, but she had also undergone a round of genetic enhancement beforehand. Not only that, she'd had her awakening triggered in a location with a much higher mana density—the pod vault during Aron's own upgrade—and Nova had also "fed her" with as much mana as her body could handle during the awakening itself.

She found herself almost eager for the process to complete in others so she could compare the results. Her initial hypothesis was... exciting, to say the least.

Aron immediately cast a refreshment rune on her to remove her grogginess, causing Rina to jump in surprise. "The fuck is that!?" she exclaimed and rubbed her eyes. 'I must still be dreaming,' she thought, having seen lines of brilliantly glowing gold runes flowing from her boyfriend's raised hand to her body. But after rubbing her eyes, they were gone as if they had never been.

"Why'm I so... tired..." she mumbled, her heavy eyelids wanting to close. "I don't remember... sleep." No matter how hard she tried to remember what happened, she

failed to do so. To her, she was sitting next to Aron's pod and watching him undergo what she thought was a special genetic enhancement, and the next moment she was in a pod of her own.

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"Shit," Aron cursed, realizing he had used runes in front of someone who was now awakened to mana. It was too late for him to call them back, though, as they had already begun taking effect on her, calming and revitalizing her after she'd been laying flat on her back for an extended period of time.

Aron caressed her face with his still-glowing hand as she finished waking up, feeling refreshed thanks to his nearly instinctive cast of the refresh rune.

"Did you see those weird glowy things that appeared out of nowhere?" she asked. She had never been told of mana's existence, let alone seen it for herself before. But after her awakening, she was seeing the world through a whole new set of eyes and from a much higher viewpoint.

But due to her ignorance of mana's existence, she wasn't sure what she was seeing and thought it must be just the last bit of a lingering dream that she couldn't remember having.

"Yes, I saw them. More than that, though, I'm the one who drew them," Aron answered, twitching his finger in the air as though he was using a conductor's baton and causing the runes to lift from her body and back into her field of view.

"What are they?" she asked.

"They're runes," Aron answered. "These ones in particular form a spell I call 'refresh', that calms and energizes the people I cast them on."

Rina felt like that sounded familiar, so she thought for a moment, then blushed. She remembered all the times he had intimate moments with her into complete exhaustion due to his seemingly limitless stamina. Then, after pounding her half to death, she would always feel refreshed and ready for more after a short period of cuddling. Thus, he must have been doing the same thing to her every time he plowed her into a puddle of goo, as she was relatively familiar with the sensation she was feeling now.

"Care to explain what's going on?" She narrowed her eyes and glared at Aron. It must have been his fault. Did he bang her into a medical pod this time? Were his thrusts so fierce they caused brain damage and memory loss? Did he slam her into a concussed state? She had to know!

"Why did I wake up in a pod?" she asked as she grabbed the side of the pod she was in and tried lifting herself to a seated position. As she pulled, though, instead of rising to a more comfortable sitting position, she heard a loud cracking noise and the handle she was grabbing to lever herself upright broke off in her hand.

“Let me help you up. You’re a lot stronger than you used to be and your mind hasn’t quite adjusted to your new body yet,” Aron said, then picked her up in a princess carry and brought her over to a chair.

He handed her a set of clothes, as the ones she was wearing had been disintegrated by the pod, but she tore them to rags trying to get dressed.

Without a word, he handed her a second set, which suffered the same fate, then a third, and so on. It wasn’t until her eighth failed attempt at dressing herself that he finally stepped in and put the clothes on for her.

She puffed out her cheeks and pouted at him. “I really liked those clothes, you know,” she said coquettishly.

“Here,” he put a pair of glasses on her face, “log in and I’ll explain everything in the simulation.”

Chapter 465 How to Draw

“So let me get this straight. While you were in the pod and completely incommunicado, you weren’t undergoing a genetic enhancement, but receiving an upgrade in your ‘blessing’?” Rina asked. “And because I was close to you when you were finishing, it triggered a blessing in me even though I finished puberty awhile ago? And not just me, but 3% of everyone from the ages of 14 to 22—kids, basically—are still unconscious as we speak?”

Aron had explained everything to Rina, leaving out only the system. The system’s existence would be kept solely between him and Nova, and he wouldn’t even tell his parents or little brother, let alone his girlfriend. Some secrets were dangerous, and the less those around him knew, the safer they would be and the less stress they would be under trying to keep his secrets.

The only person he could trust to keep his secrets, especially now that humanity had begun awakening to mana and would be rapidly developing special abilities that may include methods to read minds or force people to speak, was Nova.

“That’s the gist of it, yeah. There’s a longer explanation, but you can take your time to digest it,” he flicked a file with the explanation of the hows and whys behind the awakening process to her, “since there’s no point in overwhelming you with a massive infodump when you’ve just woken up.”

“So what’s with the golden letters? And you said you were ‘upgrading’ yourself, meaning you could use them even before. How’d you manage that?” she asked.

“One of the things I invented was a sort of... adapter that converts electricity to those particles and can force the blessing to happen in people near it. So I got mine much earlier than everyone who’s just now getting theirs and didn’t have to wait for the density to reach a certain level,” he said, not technically lying. “After that, I had plenty of time to experiment with it and figure out what my blessing can do. I mean, I’m still

learning more every day, but I'm pretty handy with it." He snapped his fingers and a large runic pattern appeared in the air behind him. It did nothing in particular, but definitely looked intricate and beautiful; it was one of the training exercises that he did every day to increase the speed at which he could condense runes, a necessary skill for someone who was unable to manipulate mana without using a runic intermediary.

That was all Rina needed to hear as her eyes flashed with wonder when she saw the gorgeous runic construct floating in the air behind Aron. She knew there must be more to it, but she'd never been one to demand that Aron share everything about him and had always been content with the things he did choose to share with her. That, to her, was an expression of one of the pillars of a healthy relationship: trust.

"Does that mean you're actually able to do everything you were doing during your spar with Nova in the simulation, but in the real world instead?" she finally asked as Aron's explanation sank in. And if that was the case, didn't it mean that Aron was a walking weapon of mass destruction? The attacks he had been dishing out in his fight against Nova were capable of wiping out entire mountain ranges, much less cities!

For the first time, Rina felt a twinge of uneasiness around her boyfriend. He was much, much scarier than people already thought he was. Not only was he staggeringly wealthy and a mad genius when it came to inventing advanced technology, but he could wipe out entire cities with the wave of a hand without even breaking a sweat at all. She didn't love him any less, but the realization of the actual power he had at his fingertips was sobering, to say the least.

"Yes," he said. "Now, let's see what you can do with your blessing. Begin by closing your eyes and resting in a comfortable position."

"I don't have to sit in some strange position and breathe weird?" Rina asked.

"This isn't a cultivation novel," Aron laughed. He wondered when she had found the time to read those strange webnovels.

Rina blushed, then awkwardly sat on the soft grass, arranging her limbs until she looked like a boneless rag doll. "I can't get much more comfortable than this," she said, her head on Aron's thigh.

"Now close your eyes and feel the area around you with your heart." He waved his hand and increased the mana density in the surrounding area tenfold, to better allow her to sense it. "In your mind's eye, picture your surroundings. Look for the glowing gold particles floating around you in all directions," he said, his voice low and hypnotic.

"I see them... this... this is amazing," she said, subconsciously lifting her arm and trying to grab a handful of the mana surrounding her.

"Now imagine you're a black hole, or a magnet... whatever image works for you that draws them into your body."

Rina pictured herself as a blooming flower, and the mana particles around her were bees and photons of light. They began flowing toward her in an orderly fashion, almost like they were dancing in a long, winding conga line. As they began entering her body, she felt a warmth in her chest, radiating out along her limbs to the tips of her fingers and toes, then back to her chest and up to the top of her head, forming a racetrack-like circuit within her.

“I feel it,” she said. “It’s warm and tingly. Is it supposed to tingle like this?” It was so pleasant she almost moaned in satisfaction.

“Yes, you’re doing great. Now pull them back into your heart and keep them there.”

She nodded and pictured the blooming flower again, but this time it was inside her, where her heart was. The tingling warmth faded from her extremities first, then her head, and finally her torso. All that was left of the pleasant sensation was a warmth in her chest that was almost uncomfortable, like her heart had turned into a burning coal.

“Okay, now what?”

“Now you open your eyes and stand up,” Aron said, a grin obvious in his voice.

Chapter 466 The Weight of Secrets

Aron brought up Rina’s status screen. It was similar to the one his system generated for him, as he had used it as the core inspiration for the runes he’d used in its creation. It displayed everything that was known about her, like her name, height, and so on. It also included two entries showing whether or not she was awakened, and what system of magic she had awakened to. The field showing her individual magic system was blank at the moment, however, as it had yet to be discovered.

But none of that mattered just then, because the most important and attention-grabbing field—at least for Aron and Nova—was the affinity section of her status, which read “Affinity: neutral”.

The excitement on Aron and Nova’s face couldn’t be hidden, prompting Rina, who had yet to understand the importance of mana affinities, to ask, “What’s got you two so excited?”

“Having a neutral affinity is wonderful! Based on what we know, we expect that the majority of awakened will have an affinity to a certain type of mana. Fire, water, lightning, and so on. There are an unfathomable number of them, ranging from the easy-to-understand elements to more esoteric types, like time, space, faith, and so on. If a person has an affinity to a type of mana, they’ll find that mana to be the easiest to draw and will face a lot of difficulty if they want to draw other types of mana. And some will be outright impossible to draw. For instance, someone with an affinity to fire would find it impossible to draw water or ice mana, and would have a really hard time drawing earth mana.

“There’s also levels to consider, too. It seems like there are levels, from simple to complex, and those with simple mana affinities—like elemental mana—will find it

extremely difficult to draw from the next level of complexity, and almost impossible to draw from two levels up. Three or more levels higher would be impossible for them to draw. For an example, the fire affinity awakened I used earlier would find it extremely difficult to draw lava mana, almost impossible to draw kinetic mana, and wouldn't be able to draw any of the esoteric mana at all.

"We think that affinities can be manipulated. If you're in an area with a lot of fire, for example, you would probably develop a fire affinity. People who were in a walk-in freezer, or at one of the poles, would probably develop an ice affinity. Basically, based on what we currently know about awakening and mana, your environment plays a big part in the affinity you become attuned to.

"In your case, your awakening was triggered by the burst of high-concentration aspectless mana triggered by the final stage of my evolution. Then that was compounded by the flood of aspectless mana you were exposed to during your awakening process itself, thanks to being in one of the pods in the vault here. Those two factors likely resulted in you having a neutral affinity to mana," Aron excitedly explained.

"So what does that mean? I understand how it happened now... I think, but what can I do with neutral affinity? Does that mean I can only draw uh, what'd you call it? Aspectless mana?" Rina asked.

"Not exactly. Aspectless mana isn't usually present anywhere. Mana is something like a building block, and we aren't quite sure whether mana is present wherever the thing it's aspected to is present, or if aspected mana has to be present for a thing to form. Like earth mana. We don't know if the mana was what turned whatever basic building block the universe is made out of into rocks and soil, or if the rocks and soil themselves are responsible for concentrating earth mana in them.

"So your neutral affinity doesn't, and can't, mean that you can only work with aspectless mana. Instead, what it means is, you can work with ALL types of mana. So you can draw all of the elements, all of the derivatives, all of the mana from laws, and you can draw conceptual mana and perhaps even esoteric mana! I mean, the universe is fair, so your draw rate will likely be lower than an aspected awakened, but you, my dear," he cupped her chin in his hand and gazed lovingly into her eyes, "are a jack of all trades and master of all." Aron beamed at Rina.

"Does that mean I can use the golden letters like you?" Rina excitedly asked, imagining herself as a perpetual motion machine with the aid of the refresh rune.

"Unfortunately, no. My awakening was... unique, and related to my physique. You can't cast runes unless you have the same, let's say, mutation that I do." Aron

snapped his fingers and a model of his runic heart appeared, with a section highlighted like an illustration in an anatomy textbook that showed a portion of the billions of submicroscopic runic sentences carved into his heart.

“We also suspect that, since your awakening was triggered, rather than happening naturally, it’ll be difficult for you to learn to use your blessing. Those who naturally awakened should be able to instinctively use their blessings, but have you felt anything like that yourself? Without that instinct, you’ll have to learn everything from scratch. Either way, it takes repetition and training, together with researching the mana you want to use, to develop new abilities. So for now, we have to wait until we can gather data from the naturally awakened on how they use, and strengthen, their blessings before we can come up with a system for you to put your blessing to work,” Aron finished. Though he said that, he was already planning to buy beginner magical knowledge from the system and upload it to her—and the other awakened, for that matter, to act as their “instincts”—but he needed a cover for it that wouldn’t expose the system or his ability to upload information directly into someone’s brain. That was another secret he could only share with Nova.

Still, he was absolutely ecstatic that Rina was joining him as someone who could also use magic. Keeping that ability from her was beginning to weigh on him and he knew it would affect their relationship, eventually. Secrets are the heaviest thing known to man, and no matter how healthy a relationship was, keeping too many would cause it to crumble under their weight.

“We’ll know more in the future, but for now, you need some natural sleep. Your recent bout of unconsciousness can’t be considered ‘rest’, after all.”

Aron initiated a forced logout for the two of them and held her in his arms until they disappeared from the simulation.

Chapter 467 Enrichment

“Did sister Rina already wake up?”

When Aron opened his eyes, his little brother’s question was the first thing he heard. It would still be a little bit before Rina completed the logout procedure, but Aron, due to his intimate connection to the simulation, had completed his logout almost instantaneously.

“She did, yeah. What’re you doing here?” Aron said, ruffling Henry’s hair and eliciting an annoyed groan from the young boy.

“Mom told me to come ask if you would go out and play with us now that we can leave the Cube,” Henry wheedled. He was just shy of grabbing his big brother’s hand and dragging him to the elevator.

“Sure,” Aron laughed. “Let’s go play, I’ll bring you to visit the air and sea scrubbers.” Now that the empire had gone into full swing, he would focus on carving out as much time as he could to spend with his family.

“Yay! I’ll go let mom know so she can pack our stuff!” Henry exclaimed, then ran to the elevator. “Oh, I should let Uncle Herschel and Aunt Virginia know too. I’m sure they want to go out and have some fun with us, too!”

The elevator doors hissed closed and Henry bounced up and down until they opened again, then sprinted at full child speed down the hall to where the adults were staying to tell them the ‘good news’.

Around the world, people who, like Henry, preferred to live in the ‘real’ world had also left their homes. One explorer had discovered the air scrubber in the Thar Desert in Pakistan and posted pictures and a short video clip to his Pangea account, prompting others to take trips out to remote areas in search of other towers. The empire, meanwhile, hadn’t even bothered hiding their existence. Not that they couldn’t hide them, Aron and Gaia had just determined that it would be pointless to even try.

As more and more of them were discovered, people wondered what they could be. The discussion on the internet was wild... until someone checked the Akashic Record and learned exactly what they were, what they were built to do, how they worked, and much, much more. And when he posted that information in the form of a long forum post, instead of people getting upset that their entertaining discussion had been ruined, they were excited. All of those enormous towers had been built in the course of one short month! Didn’t that mean the fortress cities would be built just as ridiculously fast as the behemoth air and sea scrubbers?

Everyone had “built” their dream homes in the public simulation and they were all itching to move in!

The reveal and resulting discussion surrounding the air and sea scrubbers had also taken some of the spotlight off of the people lying unconscious in medical pods receiving their blessings, at least mostly, anyway. Conspiracy theorists were notoriously stubborn when it came to promulgating their pet conspiracy theories, after all, and had stubbornly continued denying that the empire had the best interests of humanity at heart.

Two weeks later.

Things had finally gotten on track. Once the empire was functioning at peak capacity, the economy began picking up. The events of the past few months had devastated everything, but most of the actual damage had been to the fragile economy. The space bubble bursting, followed by a shooting war, followed by mass protests, followed by a lockdown, then worldwide riots, then another lockdown, a wave of terrorist attacks.... People had been petrified, and when the emotion that economies are the most sensitive to is fear. So it wasn’t surprising that it had taken so long to wrench it back on track.

The empire had been fighting a losing battle against the crashing economy at first, but the past few weeks had seen it stabilize, and finally, begin climbing again. Stopgap measure after stopgap measure was rescinded, and the new flat tax stimulated spending to the point where the rapid fall was followed by a just-as-rapid climb.

The biggest contributor to the newly burgeoning economy, however, was the empire's compensation to its citizens. The past few weeks of relative peace had allowed the super-efficient imperial treasury to calculate and disburse payments to those affected by the recent riots and attacks, as well as those who were included in the imperial scholastica's debt forgiveness program. Combined with an initiative by the Bank of the Universe to offer low- or zero-interest loans to people and the imperial housing agency's buyback of unused and unwanted real estate together with people's house who have finished the mortgages of their houses to incentivize their movements to the fortress cities but also to use the lands for the reconstructions of the fortress cities within the former cities, the atmosphere among imperial citizens could be described by three short words: buy, buy, buy!

And it wasn't as though they had nowhere to spend that windfall of cash, either; Aron's companies had been releasing product after product and partnering with small, medium, and large businesses to sell, sell, sell!

Thus, trillions of Earth New Dollars had been changing hands, not only helping the economy climb, but also enriching the lives of imperial citizens all over the world. But much to the dismay of those who had waived their rights and privileges and chosen not to register for imperial citizenship, the purchase of the shiny new gadgets was restricted to those with imperial IDs. Unbeknownst to them, it was just another method devised by Nyx to narrow the field she and her nyxians would have to investigate to find the remaining cultists, who were still a threat despite cell after cell being identified and taken down.

Although the economy news was heartening, at least to those who were paying attention to it—like Herschel Rothschild and other members of the former “elite” class—most people simply took their increased quality of life in stride. The vast majority of humanity had no interest in the economy, nor did they know about the secret war between the empire and the cult. But they definitely cared about the “Three Percenter”, those who were still lying unconscious in medical pods around the world, receiving their blessings.

Chapter 468 The Citizens Need Answers

As people's attention was split between the media's reports on the growing economy and the progress of the Three Percenter receiving their blessings, a breaking news story intruded into the public consciousness via a link on everyone's devices and a special report on every television screen and radio station. Following the link took people to a report about a bright light discovered in space headed toward Earth at an almost unimaginable speed.

Located a few days before by a member of Australia's Anglo-Australian Observatory in New South Wales' Siding Spring Observatory, it had at first been dismissed as a scanning artifact caused by a glitch in their system, or perhaps even a smudge on the telescope's lenses. After taking the telescope offline and cleaning the lenses, they scanned again, only to make the alarming discovery that a meteor of unconscionable size was rapidly approaching Earth. But Australians being Australians, the discovery was met with a resounding “meh” and they simply sat down to identify the meteor before publishing what they claimed “will perhaps be the last scientific article ever published by a member of the human race”.

And to their surprise, the meteor was identified within a matter of hours. The only confusing thing was why would 1 Ceres suddenly break its stable orbit and approach Earth with what appeared to be a stable acceleration?

The Anglo-Australian Observatory astronomer who wrote the report skyrocketed to immediate fame when the media company interns that had assigned their AI assistants to constantly scan new entries to the Akashic Record for newsworthy events frantically pushed the report up their chains of command, leading to the broadcast. But by that point, when the newsrooms' fact checkers verified the information on the Akashic Record, they saw that Ceres was decelerating and would reach Earth within a day.

Then, the old habit of "selling fear" raised its ugly head again and the news anchors broke in with a breaking story about how Earth was doomed to be destroyed when a rogue meteor impacted it.

The broadcast was noticed by Gaia, who issued takedown notices within seconds of the news anchors mentioning that the world was about to be destroyed, along with cutting the broadcast off the air and reporting the issue to Aron, who at that point was seriously regretting the laxity in his lese majeste laws.

He wasted no time and immediately logged back in to the simulation and took to the podium again to address the situation. He could only internally apologize to Henry and his family, sending them a note that they could go ahead and plan whatever trip they wanted to take and he would be there with them, but he couldn't be involved in the planning due to a situation that required his immediate attention.

As he was logging in and taking his place behind the podium, Nova issued an "invitation" to the media to attend the imperial briefing, where they would be allowed to ask questions after the emperor's prepared announcement. Naturally, the media all complied, rushing to log in to the simulation via the link provided in their invitations, which were actually just thinly veiled imperial commands. Having operated in politics for decades, the newly instated heads of the broadcasting companies—their predecessors having been shitcanned and blackballed for the previous snafu with their uncontrolled broadcasting of the cultist manifesto—knew what awaited them if they didn't send their representatives to the briefing in a timely fashion.

Aron panned his gaze across the sea of reporters, all of whom felt chills pass down their spine as they felt an emperor's displeasure for the first time. None of them had ever seen him in person before, as the cleansing carried out in the broadcast conglomerates after the cultist manifesto fiasco had been extremely thorough; many previously famous newsrooms had been left with only interns and experienced backstage crew.

"As you have discovered, there is an asteroid from the main asteroid belt approaching Earth at high speed and is expected to reach the planet within the day. But what you weren't aware of, due to slipshod fact checking and upper-level management still subscribing to the philosophy that 'fear sells', is that there is no danger to the planet from the dwarf planet Ceres' approach."

Aron gripped the sides of the podium, his entire bearing emanating righteous anger despite the lack of any expression on his face as he continued, "Had you, the media, actually done your jobs and

investigated the phenomenon—something that Our policy of transparency in governance has made extremely simple—you would have discovered that.

“But you either failed to do the research and investigation, or you were ordered to jump the gun and spread fear and panic among the citizens of the empire, still intent on profiting from the resulting chaos and misery. Regardless, it makes no difference, the news is out and the citizens need answers. So, answers they shall have.” The podium beneath his hands creaked and groaned as he gripped it with all the force he could muster, becoming more enraged with the media as the seconds ticked past.

“So allow Us to elaborate on the situation. Two weeks prior to the empire’s formation, We sent ten unmanned vessels to the main asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter as part of an ongoing mission to survey and explore potential strongholds to use as a line of defense should the visitors prove to be headed our way with less-than-friendly intentions. The first ten vessels were to identify the ten largest asteroids in the belt and begin constructing nine sortie bases from which ARES can lead the defense of Earth.”

He waved his hand and a map of the solar system as seen from above the elliptic appeared over his right shoulder, with markers and labels showing the position of the nine sortie bases currently under construction.

“Though they are currently the only line of defense We are building, as Our defense and fortification plan progresses, the main asteroid belt will become Our last line of defense. Thus, it needs to be the strongest shield and tallest wall that humanity can build, so it was started even before the formation of the Terran Empire, giving it the longest possible lead time for construction and reinforcement. We will not speak more on that, as the Akashic Record is available to any who wish to know more, saving only critical details that are still classified.

“But there was a different plan for the largest object in the main asteroid belt, 1 Ceres.” The display over Aron’s shoulder changed from a top-down view of the solar system to a close-up image of Ceres, with detailed information about it directly next to it.

“Ceres is a dwarf planet and the first of them to have been visited by humankind. It has an average diameter of 590 miles and is made up primarily of water ice, rock, organic compounds, and various metal and other mineral resources. The size and makeup of it made it perfect, both as a resource gathering point and as the endpoint of the first space elevator built by humanity.”

A timelapse video of the proposed construction replaced the Ceres fact sheet displayed over his shoulder. It showed the dwarf planet being moved into stable geosynchronous orbit, then a line of

woven carbon nanotubes extending from it to a currently unnamed island in the Eden-Esparian Archipelago, where it would be anchored deep within the Earth's crust.

"This is one of the many plans that have been put into place in order to reach the target goal of fifty percent readiness within Our promised timeline. Assuming that everything goes to plan, humanity's defense should reach that readiness goal long before the five-year period that We promised approaches."

His gaze swept across the reporters in the audience again, much of his anger finally restrained. "Any questions?"

Chapter 469 And Answers They Shall Have

"Any questions?" Aron asked.

With that, every reporter in the audience raised their hands, all of them eager to ask the first question the emperor would answer since his investiture.

Aron wasted no time in casually pointing to a random reporter in the audience. "You, ask." He was obviously still dissatisfied with the media and wouldn't bother treating them kindly at the moment.

"Thank you for the opportunity, Your Majesty." The reporter bowed, then asked, "How will the effects from Ceres gravity be mitigated so they don't have any impact on the tides and weather?"

"We'll use the same technology that you saw in the rescue ships following the terrorist attacks. Our researchers discovered artificial gravity some time ago, and that opened up an entirely new branch of physics dedicated to manipulating gravitational fields. Part of Ceres has already been prepared for habitation, and the internal structure reinforcements and walls all incorporate gravity plating, which allows the controller to manipulate Ceres' gravity well. Thus, it will have no effect on Earth's weather or tides," Aron explained.

"Next question." He randomly chose another reporter to ask their question..

"How long will the space elevator construction take, and what safety measures will be implemented to protect it from the debris field in orbit?"

The entire audience was teleported to space, giving the reporters the fright of their lives before they remembered the briefing room was in the VR simulation. "As you can see, you're currently in high orbit above Earth. If you look down, you'll notice that almost 95% of the debris has been cleaned up. By the time the elevator reaches the planet's surface, the remaining debris will all be cleaned out as well. But to protect from things like micrometeor impacts and other junk that may accumulate over time, Our researchers have developed an alloy capable of withstanding the impact of debris. Otherwise, how do you think the vessels that We launched into the asteroid belt got there?"

“Regarding the length of the construction process, it will last around three months after Ceres arrives in geosynchronous orbit. Most of that time will be spent hollowing it out and testing the organics in its makeup to ensure they aren’t harmful to humanity, and if they are, eliminating or recycling them using chemical processes to convert them to a beneficial, or at least non-harmful, substance. So the exact length of time it takes to build it depends on the test results, but We anticipate no more than ninety days from start to finish.”

Aron randomly pointed to another reporter. “You, speak.”

“Who is doing the construction? Is it the military, or is it being outsourced to one of your companies?”

Apparently, not every bad apple in the media bunch had been caught in the recent purge, as that soon-to-be-ex-reporter had just insinuated that the Emperor of the Terran Empire was abusing his authority, not to mention enriching himself at the citizens’ expense. After all, whether the construction was done by the military or by one of Aron’s companies, he would still directly profit from it, giving rise to questions about conflicts of interest and monopolies. The reporter would likely even have directly mentioned that to drum up some profitable controversy, if they weren’t limited to asking questions arising directly from Aron’s prepared remarks.

Aron frowned and made a mental note of that particular reporter before answering, “The construction is being done by Hephaestus Heavy Industries, as ARES currently lacks the manpower and training required to build such a large, intricate structure. Much less building it in high geosynchronous orbit.”

After Aron finished answering, the reporter that asked the question unceremoniously disappeared from the briefing, his press credentials revoked and his continued employment in journalism in limbo pending an investigation into him. Draconian as it may be, the newly formed empire had enough controversy already and didn’t need more people stirring the pot and drumming up negativity in the populace, so “bad” reporters like that one would be plucked from the press pool as they were found.

Aron continued, “In addition to the space elevator, Hephaestus Heavy Industries will also be responsible for the construction of our fortress cities, as well as any other defense-related construction in the future, at least until ARES expands to a point that they can field construction battalions. Next question.” He pointed at another random reporter in the audience.

“What are the chances, if any, of catastrophic failure of the gravity plating, and if it fails, what would the consequences be? What plans are in place to deal with a catastrophic failure to ensure that it doesn’t fall out of orbit and impact the planet?”

“The empire has space tugs capable of pulling Ceres out of orbit in case of a catastrophic malfunction. Failing that, there are scuttling charges that ensure that, if it were to suddenly fall out of orbit, it would be broken up into harmless pieces and become nothing but a pretty meteor shower. Still, the chances of that happening are so slim as to basically be zero. Next question..”

“Will citizens be able to watch the capture and orbital insertion as it takes place?”

“Yes, it will be livestreamed to everyone interested in watching it. Humanity’s first space elevator is a milestone in the development of the species, and We plan to handle it with all the pomp and circumstance it deserves.”

The question and answer segment of Aron's press briefing continued until the reporters began repeating questions, or simply rephrasing them and asking them as new ones. Aron, though he was internally furious with the media, continued answering them in great detail, sometimes providing additional visuals that made his answers easily understood by everyone, whether they were knowledgeable in the subject or not.

Finally, the time came for him to end it. “As usual, more information can be found in the Akashic Record for those interested in learning more about our space elevator.”

With that, Aron disappeared from behind the podium, leaving behind billions of curious people and a whole host of online discussions and wars of words.

Chapter 470 The Three Body Problem

After Aron faded away, billions of people rushed to the Akashic Record to read about the space elevator for themselves. The emperor was, after all, the most famous, not to mention powerful, celebrity on Earth. And as they read, more and more discussions sprang up on Pangea that ran the entire gamut of opinions. Some bashed the empire for attempting something so dangerous that it risks wiping out humanity with Ceres like Chixculub wiped out the dinosaurs, while others countered with the idea that he had obviously practiced it thousands of times in the so-called universal simulation. He must be positive that it would work, since he is also on Earth and wouldn't escape if the shit hit the fan... or the meteor hit the planet, as the case may be.

Still, both sides agreed that it was a risky plan; the only thing they disagreed on was whether or not the risks had been taken into account and mitigated.

Astronomers, physicists, and engineers, on the other hand, were among the many excited, but also depressed people. They were excited because, after all, the information that had been made public in the Akashic Record was likely true, so they were thrilled that they would see, and perhaps even use, a space elevator in their lifetimes. But they were also depressed, because the things they discovered let them know just how many centuries they were behind the empire's achievements. Millions of them flocked from the Akashic Record to the imperial scholastica to read the university curriculums in their current fields immediately made the decision to apply to go back to university for refresher courses because they couldn't handle the disparity. They were respected experts in their field, and the idea that they were so far behind an upstart like the empire disturbed them on a very deep level.

None of them were quiet about it, either. Their collective reentry into the ivory tower of academia prompted hundreds of millions, if not billions, more people from every profession to join them. Everyone who was in their profession for the love of it made the decision to go back to school, especially after finding out that they could learn how the empire's “current” technology was made, from the code behind the simulation to the engineering and manufacturing of GAIA products.

Nothing was hidden, and even knowing that what they would learn would be at least a generation behind the empire's current achievements didn't dissuade them. They were sure they could use the knowledge to innovate and develop programs and products that were, if not exactly on par with GAIA Tech's products, at least competitive with them, given time.

And time was something they now had in abundance, since there were now 48 hours in every day. Some of the most overconfident or greedy among them even laughed themselves awake while they were sleeping because they dreamed of counting giant piles of Earth New Dollars until their tongues went dry and fingers cramped into uselessness.

A day later.

Billions of people were glued to their screens, AR displays, floating in virtual space around what would be Ceres Station's new home, or even crowded around the site of the new space elevator—an as-of-yet unnamed island in the Eden-Esparian Archipelago—hoping to watch the final approach and deceleration of the dwarf planet that would soon be orbiting Earth.

Regardless of where they were watching from, the approach was animated and highlighted, with prediction lines drawn from the asteroid labeled with speed indicators. They could watch it in real time, as well as follow the prediction line, should they so choose. There was even a safety line, where Ceres would be accelerated into a slingshot maneuver around the Earth, taking it back into the depths of the solar system in case any accidents happened during the deceleration and parking process.

Under the eyes of billions of people, Ceres soon passed the line of no return and smoothly entered Earth's orbit. It went around once, twice, and a third time, still decelerating, until it finally drifted to a "halt" relative to a position directly above Eden, where it remained in a geosynchronous orbit around the equator, the perfect position for a space elevator. Everyone watching cheered at the sight, but the loudest cheers came from space enthusiasts, who all shared a single thought: 'We can visit space in our lifetime!'

The Edenians and Esparians among the audience quickly put down their phones, closed their laptops, stood up from their couches, or logged out of the simulation and ran outdoors, hoping to catch a glimpse of "Earth's second moon". And there it was, brightly shining in the sky and appearing even larger than the moon due to its closeness to the surface.

Earth had become a planet with two celestial satellites.

Still, people weren't endlessly excited about it. Instead, they still harbored a few doubts deep down.

@Tempest: [They did it! Those madmen brought an entire MOON to us! Thank you, Your Majesty, for fulfilling the wishes of billions of people around the world that wanted to go to space]

@ScorpienRed: [@Tempest u should hold off on hope cuz we might get hit by hurricanes and title waves bro]

@Tempest: [@ScorpienRed Oh ye of little faith. If the scientists can make kilometer-long ships hover and move without propulsion, making a moon hover without weather is just an issue of scale. They did it once, they can do it again!]

@ratnu: [@ScorpiianRed @Tempest 90% of solving a problem is knowing that it can be solved. The other 10% is just engineering. I'll reserve judgment, if there's no effect on tides or weather I'll livestream myself eating shit upside down!]

@Tempest: [@ratnu I screenshotted that lol. I'll remind you in a week and be sure to tune in to watch your livestream.]

@ScorpiianRed: [@ratnu lololololololol me 2]

Discussions like that were all over Pangea, while the experts refrained from commenting, not wanting to be disproven either way should they support one side or the other. They would soon know if what they had read in the Akashic Record was true or not. If it wasn't, devastating and sudden changes in tides and weather patterns would begin showing up in a week or so, and they would cause irreversible damages another week after that.

After the first few hours passed without issue, the enthusiasts were soon shifted firmly into the believer camp with very few doubters. Some of the more technologically savvy enthusiasts had even set up recording equipment to record and track the "new moon" and linked it with the automated weather reporting from the imperial oceanic and weather agency (IOWA) to track any changes. But as time went on, more and more people would abandon those recording and tracking setups, rendering them projects much like wildlife tracking and recording with motion-activated webcams were a few years ago. At that time, a trend had swept the globe that had people worried about wildlife conservation efforts, but just like every other trend, it soon passed, leaving millions of webcams scattered about the wilderness areas in more developed nations, like America, Canada, and some countries in Europe.

Regardless, now the only question that remained—at least in the eyes of the space enthusiasts—was just how they would build such a long cable in such a short period of time. Experts had a theory, given the organic compounds that made up a lot of Ceres' mass, but even though they'd been told about the process it was still difficult to wrap their heads around. Things that seemed borderline magical, like artificial gravity and tractor beams, were ironically easy for experts to understand; those could be chalked up to a vast difference in technological levels. But things that were already within humanity's grasp were incredibly difficult to accept for them. Carbon nanotubes could already be produced in small amounts in laboratories, so they rationally knew it could be done, but there was some mental block preventing them from believing that it had already been done. Perhaps it was ego, perhaps it was something else, but the fact remained that experts found it difficult to believe that hundreds of kilometers of reinforced, woven carbon nanotubes could be laid out that fast, let alone produced in one strand of such an incredible length.

As the world's eyes were glued to high geosynchronous orbit, someone, somewhere, opened their eyes.