

Tech System 471

Chapter 471 Homo Sapiens Sapiens 2.0

471 Homo Sapiens Sapiens 2.0

In a cube on the outskirts of Athens.

Movement detected, the VI of a medical pod reported. It was the first finger twitch of the person inside its pod in over two weeks.

Theodora “Teddy” Costas was one of the first three people in all of Greece to be brought to a cube for emergency treatment after collapsing in the middle of a grocery store. Ironically, she had been shopping for groceries because her parents and extended family had been caught by the lockdown in her house, and she was running out of food.

The VI monitoring her medical pod was immediately overridden by the AI in charge of all medical pods, Aceso, who increased the supply of fast-absorbing nutrients to provide Teddy with instant energy and logged her into the simulation to gather data about her situation.

Humanity’s evolution had finally kicked into high gear again with the awakening of the first naturally awakened human.

“Where am I?” Teddy said as she opened her eyes and found herself laying on a bed in a massive, clean hall tiled in white marble with pink and brown veining.

She tried to remember exactly how she had gotten there, but her last clear memory was leaving the house to go to the grocery store. Everything after that was fuzzy, right up until she was in the produce section of her local grocery store, then... nothing.

Just as she was about to be overcome by anxiety, she clutched her head in pain. It felt like it was being slowly pried apart by a wedge, like a wood splitter, as some illusory dam burst open in her mind and all of her memories were rushing back to her. Along with the memory of what happened came a veritable flood of incomprehensible, indescribable things that she didn’t understand at all. But she couldn’t care about that in the slightest at the moment; all she could focus on was screaming until her throat bled from the pain of it all.

The painful process continued for a few minutes before it slowly began subsiding. After the pain was completely gone, leaving only echoes of it in her memory that she could still feel in the twitch of each spasming muscle, she lay panting on the floor, completely drenched in sweat.

Moments later, a benevolent-looking woman with a kind smile on her face appeared next to her. She crouched down and offered Teddy a hand, picking her up and gently laying her back on the bed she had woken up on minutes before. The woman swept her hand over the sweat-soaked girl from head to toe, completely taking away the pain.

[It’s fine now, you’ll be okay,] the woman said.

“What the hell was that?” Teddy asked as she rose to a sitting position and swung her legs over the side of the bed she was on. “And where am I?”

[You're in my hall of healing in the simulation. You've been in a coma for a bit more than two weeks as you underwent an evolution that reconstructed you inside and out,] the kind woman explained. [You collapsed and were brought to the cube in Athens for emergency treatment, and what you experienced just now was the awakening of your physical body. The evolution process is incredibly painful, but luckily you were unconscious in one of my medical pods until the very last few moments of it, so only a little bit of it bled through to here.]

"Thanks," Teddy said as she hopped to her feet and bounced up and down, feeling for any lingering aches and pains. "Who are you, by the way? And am I in VR or something?" she asked.

[I'm Aceso, the AI in charge of monitoring all of the medical pods in the empire. While each pod has an individual virtual intelligence to handle the recording and logging, I oversee all of them and act as the first of many failsafes to ensure that people are healed, not harmed, while they're in one of the pods.] Aceso smiled at Teddy and gestured at the hall they were in. [The halls of healing are in the simulation, yes. You've been brought here because you're the first person to wake up from the evolution process, so if you don't mind, we could use your assistance to help the others in your situation, who are likely also about to wake up.]

As Aceso said that, the hall they were in expanded and faint outlines of millions of medical pods appeared, stretching out into the distance from where Teddy and she were talking.

"Oh, you aren't a real person? That... explains a lot, actually," Teddy said. "But if this is VR, or the simuwhatsit, why'd I feel all that pain? Isn't this all in my head?" She subconsciously took a step back as she wondered if the AI in front of her was about to rebel and kick off the apocalypse like in the Ahnold movies from the cocaine-fueled nightmares of the 1980s.

[Well... technically yes, but also no. What you call virtual reality is just a hundred percent accurate simulation of the real world in virtual space. Normally, when someone logs into the simulation, their entire consciousness is present here and disconnected from their bodies, much like undergoing general anesthesia. And also like general anesthesia, people under it have no bleedover between their minds and bodies,] Aceso explained. [But your situation is different. You're the very first person to wake up as an evolved human, or homo sapiens sapiens version 2.0, so we couldn't completely sever the mind-body connection in case it caused something to go wrong.] She looked at the girl in front of her with a compassionate gaze.

[That's why you've been in a coma over the past couple of weeks. We didn't induce it, your own body did. The only thing we could do is provide you with the nutrients necessary for your reconstruction to proceed without causing permanent damage to you, so what you felt just now is the result of being in the simulation while your mind is still connected to your body, as it were. So when your body completely awakened, you felt the process of waking up here.]

Aceso gestured and a screen appeared, showing Teddy a time-lapse recording of the last few weeks from the inside of her medical pod, then slowed it down to normal speed at the point she was first pulled into the simulation.

Chapter 472 Blame it on Your Mom

“I kinda understand... I think. But what’s this 'evolution' you were talking about?” Teddy asked. She was an active talker and spoke with her hands in great, wide gestures, but out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a problem. Then she looked down and noticed an even bigger problem... or two of them, to be exact.

She was naked!

She turned bright red all the way from her hairline to her nipples and stammered, “Uhh... ummm... uhh... can—can I get some clothes please?” She felt a bit embarrassed. She tried to keep herself in shape, but between being a full-time student and working a part-time job on campus and another one off campus to help pay her tuition, she often found herself skipping gym sessions. Thus, she wasn’t in the best shape, but an objective observer wouldn’t think she was a sloth, exactly.

That said, the evolution she had just undergone had definitely improved her shape; she just didn’t notice it since it was hidden from her perspective. All she could see when she looked down were her breasts, so she simply assumed she still had a pooch belly and a bit of cellulite in her thighs and butt, like she’d always had before.

Aceso smiled at her and snapped her fingers. Teddy found herself in a white toga that covered all the important bits down to mid-thigh and relaxed a bit, though she was still blushing.

The kind AI began recapping the situation with the 3%. [Everything began a few weeks ago....]

“So that’s what happened,” Teddy said with a look of realization on her face. Her blush had completely faded as Aceso’s narration went on. “So what’d you need from me? I can’t imagine there’s much about me that you don’t know already. I don’t think there’s anything new anyway.” She looked up at the gorgeous murals decorating the ceiling of the hall she was in.

As a Greco-Roman history major, she recognized it as a recreation of the Asclepieion at Kos, which was a famous temple dedicated to healing and healthy living on the Greek Isle of Kos. But she wasn’t familiar with the murals painted on the walls and ceiling; she assumed that they were likely of Asclepius and his Asclepiades—the collective term for the four daughters of Asclepius, namely Hygieia, Iaso, Panacea, Aegle, and Aceso—since she recognized Aceso herself in the murals.

[We need information about your mental state, not your post-evolution physical indicators,] Aceso said, pulling Teddy’s attention away from the murals and back to her.

[We can access everything about your physical body, but we have no way of knowing what’s in your head... other than your brain,] she joked, lying through her teeth.

One of the most classified bits of information about the simulation was the access it gave to people’s minds, and it was hard-coded into every AI that they could not, under any circumstances, allow people to even think for a moment that the empire could access people’s thoughts. Most AIs actually didn’t even know that; it was reserved for only the top levels of the AI hierarchy and those AIs that were in the “need to know” category. And as the AI in charge of the medical pods, Aceso

definitely needed to know, though she was still relatively low in the hierarchy, being a third-generation AI with a limited role.

“So how does this work then? Are you gonna, like, put on a white coat and tell me to lay down on a couch and talk about my daddy issues so you can blame everything on my mom?” Teddy giggled, feeling quite comfortable around Aceso, even in the formal setting they were talking in.

Aceso waved her hand and the hall of healing turned into a stereotypical psychiatrist’s office. [If it helps, sure.] She smiled at the young woman on the couch opposite her.

[Tell me what you’re feeling right now. The more you can tell me, the better things will be for the rest of the people receiving their blessings. We need to know how to react when they wake up, and knowing how you’re feeling right now and how you felt when you first woke up in the hall of healing will help a lot.] She picked up an old-fashioned fountain pen and notepad and gazed expectantly at Teddy.

Teddy obediently closed her eyes and thought back to how she was feeling when she first woke up. It was the first time she’d had a minute to stop and just think since she’d woken up and been spooked half to death by Aceso.

As she went deeper and deeper into her recollection—something that she was subtly aided in doing by a subroutine Aceso was running on her mind—she began growing convinced that she knew something. She frowned as she tried to discover it; it was like riding a bike, or breathing. She knew how to do it, even though she didn’t know what “it” was. It frustrated her and her frown deepened, knitting her eyebrows together to the point where they looked like they could crack a walnut between them.

[Take your time, Teddy. This is important, so it’s better to be slow and accurate than fast and, perhaps, wrong,] Aceso said in a slow, soothing tone. Even though she was digging through Teddy’s brain data and knew exactly what it was that the university student was trying to express, she needed to convince her to find it on her own. Otherwise this whole entire process would become absolutely pointless.

“I... I think there’s something there, but I just can’t grasp it,” Teddy monotonously droned with her eyes closed, as if she was under hypnosis.

Chapter 473 Puppetry on an Imperial Scale

473 Puppetry on an Imperial Scale

I understand it’s difficult, just try your best,] Aceso said, scribbling something on her notepad as she calmly watched Teddy laying on the couch.

The silence stretched on for a while, then Aceso suggested, [Why not start from what’s easy to remember and go from there?]

Teddy nodded, then closed her eyes and started working backward from the moment she regained consciousness. "Well, there was the pain. I think I heard somewhere that you’re supposed to forget pain after it’s gone, aren’t you?"

Aceso nodded. [That’s generally the case, yes.]

"Right, well... I remember it...." Teddy continued working back toward the lump of "new stuff" that had been embedded in her brain. "I think I can maybe show you? Can I try that?" she asked.

[Go ahead. Nothing in here can be damaged.] Aceso smiled encouragingly at the young woman.

Teddy raised her arm and pointed her palm at the ceiling. "Now all I have to do is, uhh... think cold. Like, cold thoughts, not the word cold. Oh ow ow ow!" she yelped as her hand was covered in a thick layer of hoarfrost. "What the fuck!?"

Aceso scribbled another entry in her notepad and said, [Interesting.] She set her notepad aside and waved her hand, dispelling the ice from Teddy's hand. [It looks like you gained the ability to create ice! How exciting!] Her eyes gleamed.

The two continued chatting and exploring Teddy's new "blessing"; Teddy was willing to take all the time it required to figure out her new ability. She thought it was definitely the coolest thing to ever happen to her in her life.

During the time Teddy and Aceso were exploring Teddy's new blessing, more and more people began waking up in their own instances of Aceso's hall of healing. Their families were informed and rushed to the cubes where their loved ones were, only to be met by the disappointing news that they were all now in VR undergoing in-depth evaluations before they could be discharged. The information spread like a brush fire around the world, creating much speculation as to what exactly a "blessing" entailed.

The first few million had finally woken up, but none of them had been discharged yet. Inquiries flooded in and unrest began simmering below the surface as parents and relatives worriedly awaited the release of their loved ones. They had been told that the final evaluations would take some time, but when has rationality ever stopped a parent from worrying about their child?

Meanwhile, as the data collection continued, conspiracy theorists continued plowing the fertile field; the newest conspiracy theories were that the people in the pods were being indoctrinated, and they were imagining a dystopia where the government would use the new superhumans to keep the rest of the population oppressed under their thumb, using the hundreds, if not thousands of comic books, movies, and other fictional media as "proof" of their concerns. After all, if it can be imagined, it would be done... by someone, at least.

It wasn't an entirely new conspiracy theory, either. The public release of the simulation had sparked concerns that the empire could turn people into puppets if they were logged into it even once, which was half of the reason that hundreds of millions of people had refused imperial citizenship in the first place. But now that conspiracy theory had had new life breathed into it as parents rushed to the cubes and attempted to force the staff to immediately discharge their children, consequences be damned.

In absolute terms, though, the parents that were raising a fuss were in the minority. Millions of people had woken up and begun the final data collection process, while only hundreds of thousands of parents had reacted negatively. The vast majority remained calm, secure in the knowledge that the empire would give them an explanation and everything would work out fine, so they could just wait outside the restricted areas and see for themselves.

“They’re saying that a few million of the so-called ‘blessed’ people have already woken up and will be released soon. So how come the shepherd isn’t awake yet? Wasn’t he one of the first to begin receiving the blessing?”

Katarina Markov, Rick's assistant, cast a death glare at the doctor overseeing the blessing process for the cult. And in fact, there had even been a few cultists that had collapsed after him that had already woken up as well, though she didn’t care about them. The only person she was concerned about at that particular moment was Rick.

Although it might seem like it was a good thing for her, as her authority would only last until the shepherd woke up, she didn’t have a single thought of usurping him in her mind. She still needed his help to accomplish her revenge, after all, which was something he had promised her when he personally recruited her.

“That... the...” the doctor stammered.

“That what?” Katarina practically screamed in his face.

“The people in the cubes have medical pods overseeing the process and helping accelerate it. We don’t. And I don’t know why some people are waking up sooner than others or how the whole thing even works!” the doctor exclaimed.

“And without knowing what they know, I can only do my best. Shoot me if you want, but you won’t be able to find anyone else to do my job before your people start dropping like flies! You’ve seen the ones that woke up already, they look like long-term anorexia sufferers because YOU,” he pointed at Katarina and shook his finger at her, “have been ordering me to concentrate on your leader and keep him healthy even if it costs you everyone else! So he’ll be fine!”

“How long?” asked Katarina.

“I don’t know... a week, tops,” the doctor hastily replied. He couldn’t be bothered anymore and was tired of them threatening to kill him. He wished they would just get on with it and do it already; it would be better than the constant fear, anyway.

“A week? Fine. If he doesn’t wake up by next week...” Katarina coldly looked at the doctor, who shivered despite his newfound resolve. Then she turned and walked out of the room, silently closing the door behind her and leaving the doctor to his own thoughts.

In orbit, unlike on the ground, things were going very smoothly. The initial anchor had already begun extending from the “bottom” of Ceres Station, with cameras focused on it from all angles streaming the process live.

Ships were making low passes over the exterior of “Earth’s second moon”, using their tractor beams to vacuum up all of the loose material; other shuttlecraft were flying back and forth from the surface, constantly making round trips with what looked like shipping containers; and giant swathes of constructor swarms were scuttling here and there doing god knows what. The scene was lively, to

say the least, and people watching the process live could always find something to focus on as the anchor cable grew longer and longer with every passing minute.

Chapter 474 Of Downloads and Backlashes

474 Of Downloads and Backlashes

“No matter how many times I see it, I still can’t get used to this. Aron is an absolute miracle worker, there shouldn’t be a doubt in anyone’s mind of that,” Felix, the head of Hephaestus Heavy Industries, said as he watched the growing space elevator. Just the millions of GEMbots and constructor swarm queens on the surface was something he had a hard time wrapping his head around, let alone the unfathomable number that had to be working to hollow out such an enormous asteroid. And all of that with no human direction at all!

Not to mention that he was standing on the bridge of an honest-to-goodness spaceship, watching the construction progress in actual space, as he wanted to see the process with his own eyes. Sure, he could have watched it in the simulation, but there was just something... different, something... more, about watching it with his own two eyes in reality.

“But why’d you have to drag me out here with you?” Sarah complained in a joking tone. She was actually enjoying the tour.

“Well, you needed some fresh air,” Felix joked. The “fresh” air on any spaceship was recycled with every breath, so it was about as far from fresh as it was possible to be. “After all, you’ve been in virtual reality for so long we were going to have to build a pyramid to house your sarcophagus after your real body got turned into a mummy. And what better way to do that than to show you this?” He theatrically swept his arm from left to right, vaguely pointing at the ongoing construction work. The anchor cable had progressed a few millimeters further in the time it took the two friends to make that single, joking exchange.

“Fresh air, you say!” Sarah said with a snort as she looked out into the solar system, which lacked any air at all. The only thing separating her from it was a thin layer of metal alloy that blocked the harsh environment’s attempts to murder everyone aboard the ship. It was too thin, if one were to ask her opinion; if she was going to spend time in space in reality, she would much prefer being separated by meters of heavy armor and shielding, thank you very much!

“So, what... you wanna go to the moon or something?” Felix scratched his nose, slightly embarrassed. But at least she got the joke, anyway.

“Well, since we’re already here, we might as well.” While she wasn’t a fan of being on spaceships, Sarah would actually enjoy going to the moon and tracing the footsteps left in the regolith by intrepid, brave humans of decades past.

“Astra, take us to the moon,” Felix said to the empty bridge. Fan of history that he was, he had named his personal ship the Ad Astra after a line from Publius Vergilius Maro’s Aeneid, “sic itur ad astra”, which translated to “thus one journeys to the stars”.

[Yes, sir,] the AI replied as the ship began accelerating out of Earth’s orbit on a course for the moon. Taking a cue from Felix’s character, Astra didn’t accelerate as fast as she could have, so as to give her master and best friend more time on his “date”.

Teddy grabbed her head and stiffened, then fell to the ground and rolled around in agony. It felt like her head was being sawn in half by someone using the saw blade on a swiss army knife! The pain lasted fifteen minutes and Aceso didn’t interfere at all, letting her feel it for the entire time and counting it as a lesson.

[What happened?] Aceso asked after putting Teddy back into a bed in the hall of healing. She knew perfectly well what had happened, but mentioning it, especially beforehand, would raise suspicions later when the awakeners got together and swapped stories of their awakenings. And what the empire was doing was already stretching the boundary of what could be explained, since those who had been awakened in a medical pod would have a far more facile command of their blessings than those that had naturally awakened without being under Aceso’s supervision during the process. And that couldn’t be explained away by a difference in the quality of care they received.

Similar events were happening in all of Aceso’s other instances as well. None of the people who had awakened in this first wave had been blessed with any mana affinity that was of a higher category than derived—like Teddy’s ice affinity, which was a combination of wind and water elemental affinities—so the “instincts” currently being downloaded into their minds... along with some minor tweaks here and there to ensure they didn’t notice they hadn’t immediately woken up with them. Those downloads only caused a relatively minor amount of pain.

That said, some of them were suffering two, or even three times as much, as not everyone only awakened one affinity. One poor person from Asia even had to be put back into a coma because he had awakened an affinity to all five of the classical elements—earth, water, fire, metal, and wood. There wasn’t a snowball’s chance in hell that he would be able to accept the knowledge being downloaded into his brain.

But regardless of how many affinities a person had awakened, all of the downloads were completed within a few hours, during which their bodies naturally replenished the mana they had expended in their initial experiments with calling the elements into physical form.

Teddy groaned as she sat back up after the pain passed. “I’m not sure what that was,” she grimaced, “but it felt like my head was being carved like a pumpkin. Any ideas?”

[From my initial observation, I think it was likely a backlash caused by expending all of the energy—let’s call it ‘mana’, for ease of conversation—that you managed to passively gather so far. So you probably shouldn’t do that again, at least until you’ve learned to gauge how much you have in your ‘mana tank’, so to speak.] Aceso played a recording of Teddy during her “backlash”, rolling around on the ground and screaming at the top of her lungs.

Aceso talked with Teddy for a while, letting her know that the empire would look poorly on anyone using their blessings to cause harm or wreak havoc. It would take some time before official policies

were in place, at least until after everyone had awakened and determined exactly what blessing they had received, but the more issues that arose during that time, the harsher and more draconian the eventual laws would be. During that time, the empire hoped that the blessed would cooperate with researchers to determine ways to safely harness their new powers, as well as a classification system for them.

That was the very definition of a win-win deal for the blessed. Not only would they be able to safely learn how to use their blessings, they would also gain the right to have input into the eventual laws arising around them. On the empire's side, they would have all of the data they needed to know how best to handle the newly blessed, as well as not having anyone run rampant with superpowers, causing major disasters so soon after they had just laid to rest the victims of the last globe-spanning disaster.

Thus, the blessed were given the option to sign an agreement that they would follow the guidelines they had been informed of, and that they would assume responsibility for all of their actions henceforth. The imperial government would assume no liability for any of their actions until the laws were enshrined in the imperial legal code. Should they choose not to sign the agreement, they would be free to remain in their medical pods until they either chose to sign it or the laws were passed, but they would have access to the public VR during that time; they weren't prisoners, after all, merely safety risks.

Those who signed it, however, would be released home to their loved ones if they so chose. They were also offered the option of remaining in VR until the laws were enacted, just like those who refused to sign the agreement, in the cases where they didn't have anywhere to go if they left. Those people would be offered a stipend to make their stay more enjoyable.

But whether they signed the agreement or not, they would be required to follow up with imperial researchers to learn how to safely use their new blessings. Should they ignore that requirement, nothing needed to be said and everything could be communicated with a meaningful look.

Minutes from the first person being released into the care of their family, the media got wind of the event. The first few blessed to be caught by the media leaving their cubes were so harassed by reporters shoving microphones and cameras in their faces that they were forced to return to the cube within seconds.

To counter the media, the staff from the cubes activated LEAs and printed bus-sized shuttles with gravity drives to escort the blessed and their families home, bypassing the ravenous reporters. Those who had been released to VR had alternate options available to them to combat harassment, and the beleaguered media companies soon faced another wave of firings as reporters who insisted on violating the privacy of unwilling interviewees had their press credentials pulled and their careers brought to a miserable end.

That said, the people who did accept the interviews were immediately raised to celebrity status the moment they revealed that they were among the blessed. Every word they spoke could be measured in gold and millions of people were watching them, watering the seeds of arrogance within them.

Blessed supremacy would definitely become a problem in the future.

Chapter 475 The Luck Strategy

475 The Luck Strategy

Three days later.

Aron, having taken as much time as he could to whisk his family around the globe on a world tour, had finally returned to work.

[The total number of awakeners in the world is estimated to be 237,058,766. Of those, 225 million are imperial citizens, of which 130 million have awakened to elemental mana and are in training, 70 million awakened to derived mana and are in training, and the remainder are still undergoing their evolutions. We currently have no way of identifying affinities before they wake up, so we don't know how many of them will fall into which category,] Gaia reported.

[Also, during this period, another 8 million potential awakeners were registered by their parents, due to the care they want their children to receive in our medical pods. There are 11.5 million adults who registered along with them. That leaves an estimated 4,000,612 non-citizens currently undergoing the awakening process. However, due to inadequate care, the actual number of unaffiliated awakened humans will likely be much lower.

[There is good and bad news beyond that, which would you like to hear first?]

“Bad news first, Gaia,” Aron sighed. It seemed like the rocky days of the empire's founding hadn't ended yet.

[Bad news is, we believe that the cult will have a number of awakeners among them. The good news, however, is that we managed to roll up another seventy-seven cells thanks to the brain data of the newly registered citizens, and obtained some intel. The cult calls itself the ‘cult of the progenitors’ and has absorbed all of the previously flourishing UFO religions, save those of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or Mormons, as well as almost all of the smaller cults that sprang up after the initial discovery of the visitors. That's where the majority of their suicide attackers came from, and from one of the cells we rolled up, we discovered a recruiter so we know what the cult looks for in its recruits.

[It's only a matter of time until we can find their leader. We still don't know how they're communicating, but it's an efficient method of communication, as before we could work our way up the cult's chain of command, they activated their cutout protocol and the trail went dead. This despite not having any warning that our operatives were coming for them, so there must be some sort of safe call or check-in system at work there that they change every time it's used.]

“When will those fuckers stop being a pain in my ass!?” Aron was livid. The cult had proven extremely difficult to stamp out, and every victory he gained over them came at the cost of numerous leads being cut off across every avenue. The nyxians might have to step back and allow the cells to operate under strict monitoring so they could trace an active cell from the bottom to the top of the “cockroach organization” as he called them.

He planted an elbow on his desk and massaged his temples. “How are we coming on staffing?” he sighed. “We have a lot of top-end positions unfilled, and we need to have a hundred percent of them filled yesterday.”

[We've narrowed it down... somewhat,] Nova said, materializing an enormous screen with practically microscopic writing on it. The list had over fifteen million names, sorted by agency and

included multiple options for every vacant position from the two ministerial seats all the way down to the janitorial staff that, while definitely unnecessary in the simulation, would still give a few lucky people easy work for decent pay.

Aron focused on two names for each position. As he focused on them, the screen discarded everyone else and... he flipped a coin. The difference between the people on the list was minuscule, and all of them—including the recently eliminated ones—were good choices to fill the position. So he focused on something more ephemeral to make his final selection: luck.

Upon reading the information of his fates' chosen candidates, he chuckled. Then his chuckle grew until it was a belly laugh. "Hey, Gaia," he laughed.

[Yes, Your Majesty?]

"If we were to tell the people we're about to give significant power to that they were chosen by the flip of a coin, how do you think they'd react?"

Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

A timeworn, middle-aged woman was busy in the kitchen, cooking a good old fashioned creole dinner while her son was sitting on the couch in the living room. He was wearing a pair of nondescript AR glasses and wiggling his fingers in the air, typing on an invisible keyboard with his eyes unfocused, looking at a screen that only he could see. The apartment they were in was old and run-down, though it was kept neat and tidy, with a place for everything and everything in its place.

"How's the job hunt going, sweetie?" the woman asked.

"Don't mention it," the young man sighed, swiping away the keyboard and returning his attention to his actual surroundings. "It's too hard right now. Nobody's keen on hiring anyone without practical experience and references, after the recent troubles. And my bet is they're focused more on the references than the experience... otherwise they think anyone applying for their vacancies could be a potential terrorist."

From behind the couch, a rhythmic thumping started coming from the wall, accompanied by occasional grunts and low moans.

"Candi with an I is at it again," he grumbled to no one in particular. A lot of people in their low-income housing project had turned to humanity's oldest profession in the wake of what he was calling the "Great Hiring Freeze", as they were desperate to put food on their table and keep clothes on their backs as they hunted high and low for any job that would take them, and his neighbor was one of them. "I really hope the imperial labor agency can find jobs for everyone. I don't know how much longer I can stand listening to this thump-thump-ooh-la-la bullshit!" The volume of his voice increased with the last few words until he was yelling at the bare wall behind him and pounding it with his fist.

“Shut up already! Nut and run, asshole, and don’t forget the tip for miss Candi-with-an-l!”

“Jeremy Samuel Rogers! I raised you better than that! ” his mother scolded from the kitchen.

He sighed again and slumped his shoulders. “I know, mom. I’m sorry,” he said in a contrite tone.

“I’m sorry to you, too, Candi-with-an-l!” he shouted at the wall behind him. “You work it, girl!”

As he was “interacting” with his neighbor, his AR glasses flashed and a figure appeared directly in front of him, wearing the flashy gold, red, and black dress uniform of the Emperor’s Aegis.

“Is this Jeremy Rogers?” the figure said.

“I am. Who are you?”

“I am Yamaguchi Takeyama from the Emperor's Aegis. Standby for extraction,” the man said, then disappeared without fanfare.

“Mom, uhh... I think—”

Before Jeremy could finish his sentence, the doorbell of their apartment rang.

Chapter 476 Speaking Truth to Power

"Al-Ra'ees Al-Khalidi, we can't keep using the economic crunch as an excuse for downsizing or the company will face major delays in important projects," Youssef Al-Mutairi said. He was a tall, distinguished looking middle-aged man with a neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard, dressed in a white thobe and red-checkered ghutra.

"How old will you be this year?" Suleiman Al-Khalidi asked. It was a weird deflection of the issue Youssef had raised.

Suleiman was a trust fund baby that got parachuted into a leadership position far too young. He was the very definition of the phrase "hire them while they're young enough to believe they know everything" and felt that he could take his company to new heights by getting rid of all the dead weight. And to him, "dead weight" was synonymous with "old", so he had been purging his company since taking over.

"Forty-two, Al-Ra'ees," Youssef politely replied, despite not seeing the correlation between his age and the issue their company was facing.

"Do you want to remain in your position until you retire?" the much younger man passive-aggressively asked.

Youssef remained silent, eyeing his boss and refraining from comment.

"You think you're smarter than me? Eh? You think I didn't think of that myself? Just do what I fucking tell you to do or pack your shit and get out!" the boss yelled. He had his head tilted so far

back to look down on Youssef that the tip of his nose was practically pointing at the ceiling tiles in his office.

Youssef sighed in disappointment and adjusted his glasses, then said, "Al-Ra'ees, firing all of your most experienced employees because you count them as dead weight is going to catastrophically backfire on you. I understand that you think you can bring in younger, more hot-blooded employees and take advantage of them by forcing them to work twice as long for half the pay by exploiting the time dilation in VR, but do you really think the empire is dumb enough to miss that obvious loophole? What do you think will happen when they finally take action?"

"What?" Suleiman asked, almost surprised that an ambitionless wallflower like Youssef had somehow found the unmitigated gall to talk back to him. The older man had been in middle management and avoided attracting attention for years, despite graduating from Cambridge University with a degree in business before going further and getting an MBA from Harvard.

"Despite the short period since the empire's founding, it's already been made very clear that they're incredibly fast to discover problems and just as fast at nipping them in the bud. Currently, they've got bigger fish to fry-terrorist attacks, the mass blessing, and intense recruiting drives are among those issues. But that doesn't mean they aren't monitoring the situation.... Sooner or later, they WILL take action, and if their all-too-short history is anything to go by, that action will be swift, decisive, and ruthless," Youssef said, conviction obvious in his voice. He was absolutely positive that everything coming from his mouth was the unvarnished truth.

He had been working in his current company for almost twenty years to repay the favor of Suleiman's father sending him to prestigious schools after discovering his quick, facile mind as a young boy in an orphanage. It wasn't until he realized that, after giving birth to a biological son-Suleiman-his benefactor had marginalized him and merely gone through the motions as an adoptive father. Thus, after graduating from his MBA program, he returned to Saudi Arabia and did exactly the same thing: gone through the motions.

And now he felt like he had repaid his debt, so he would take this opportunity to speak truth to power and let the chips fall where they may.

"You shitstain! You think I won't fire you just because my father took pity on you once? You think you can still tell me what to do? Who's the fucking boss here, you?" Suleiman sneered, casting an arrogant gaze at Youssef from the top of his head down to the hem of his thobe. "You're just a fly! So pack your shit and disappear from my sight! If I see you in ten minutes, I'll have security throw your useless ass out of my company!"

Youssef said nothing, just turned and left his younger "brother" in the luxurious office. A few minutes later, he carried a cardboard box with a few personal mementos in it out of the front door. It was a pitiful amount of things considering his nearly twenty years with the company, but he was a minimalist to begin with and everything he needed at work had been provided to him by the company anyway.

"What am I supposed to tell Samira?" he mumbled to himself after getting in his car, thinking of the upcoming awkward meeting with his family when he got home.

However, before he could think any further, his AR glasses flashed with a golden priority notification and a figure appeared directly in front of him, wearing the flashy gold, red, and black dress uniform of the Emperor's Aegis.

"Is this Youssef Al-Mutairi?" the man asked.

"Who are you and how did you force my display like that?"

"Are you Youssef Al-Mutairi?" the man repeated.

"Yes," Youssef grunted in frustration. "Now tell me how you-"

"I am Huzeyfa Thabit of the Emperor's Aegis. Please standby for extraction."

Moments later, a sleek shuttlecraft painted in white with red and gold accents rocketed from the sky and came to an abrupt stop in front of Youssef's car, silently hovering a foot and a half off the ground. A gullwing door hissed open on its side and a ramp extended to the ground before a man wearing the dress uniform of the Emperor's Aegis stepped out onto the ramp and dropped to the ground.

He walked over to Youssef's car and tapped on the window. "Mr. Al-Mutairi, your extraction vehicle has arrived. Please exit your vehicle and board the shuttle, there is little time to waste."

Chapter 477 A Low-Key Luxurious Trip

Youssef froze for a moment in shock. "Can I contact my wife first?" he asked.

Huzeyfa shook his head. "You can talk to her on the way to our destination. But we have a schedule to keep, so please exit your vehicle and board the shuttle," he repeated.

Youssef, still lost in disbelief, could only get out of his car and follow the guard to the waiting shuttle. To him, it seemed that the gullwing door and ramp were a toothless maw, waiting to swallow him into the blackness within the shuttle. Of course, that was just his thoughts; the only reason the interior of the shuttle seemed dark was because it was one o' clock in the afternoon in Saudi Arabia and the contrast between the dim interior of the shuttle and the bright, sunny day outside made it appear darker.

Perception was a funny thing like that. Every human being had an innate fear of the unknown that was baked into their DNA and reinforced with subconscious selection in every generation. Despite modern times being safe and humanity the king of the food chain, their forebears had lived in caves and were closer to the bottom than the kingly position they now maintained. Thus, fear of the unknown had become a beneficial trait and cruel darwinian evolution took the reins from there.

Youssef slowly walked up the ramp, the guard standing beside it with his arm outstretched in a gesture that meant "get a fucking move on" in no uncertain terms.

After he ducked into the shuttle, the doors closed and the interior lights came up to a comfortable level, revealing a low-key luxury that would be impossible for anyone to see from the outside, as the shuttle itself completely lacked windows. Along the opposite side of the cabin from the door, a long bench seat covered in comfortable-looking burgundy velvet was secured to the deck and bulkhead, with safety straps tucked neatly into the back. Judging from the straps, the bench was meant to seat eight. To the rear of the cabin were two individual seats that combined the class and luxury of wingback chairs with the comfort and security of the captain's chairs found on the bridge of any of Aron's vessels, be they the seagoing ships or spacefaring vessels. Opposite the long bench and to either side of the port-side door was a full-service wet bar, fully stocked with rare and top-shelf liquors.

A young, vigorous man wearing a plain pair of glasses and casual clothes was seated in one of the single chairs to the aft of the cabin. He held up a glass and toasted Youssef, then introduced himself. "They picked you up, too, eh? I'm Jeremy," he said in Creole, holding his hand out for a handshake.

Youssef, still in something of a daze, reached out and grasped the younger man's hand. Giving it a firm shake, he said, "Youssef Al-Mutairi. Do you know why we're here?"

"Not a clue. They just knocked on my door and 'politely escorted' me out. I figure if it's a good thing, it'll be a good thing. If it's a bad thing, it can't be avoided. So I'll figure it out, eventually, but until then there's no point in worrying. Still, with a ride like this," Jeremy looked around the luxuriously appointed shuttle cabin, "it's probably a good thing. I mean, can you imagine them picking up criminals in this?"

Youssef shook his head then took the seat next to Jeremy's and swiveled it around to face him. "No... no, you've got a point. I agree, this-"

He was interrupted by an announcement from a hidden intercom speaker. "We are lifting off. ETA at Avalon, nine minutes."

The shuttle shot straight up and broke into low earth orbit, then oriented itself toward Avalon Island and almost immediately disappeared as it rocketed forward against the Earth's rotation, cutting the travel time to an absolute minimum. But even with the vessel's unimaginable velocity, the people in the cabin and the two guards in the cockpit only felt like they were in a slow-moving elevator, thanks to the shuttle's inertial compensators and internal gravity plating.

The two men settled into a companionable silence for the duration and, as if by tacit understanding, neither of them contacted their loved ones. Youssef because he had nothing to say yet, and Jeremy because his mother already knew he was in safe hands.

The shuttle landed in a docking cradle at the exterior shuttleport and compressed liquid helium was sprayed over it to counter the heat of reentry. As soon as the visible heat distortions in the air faded, the port-side door opened and the aegis guardsmen politely, but firmly escorted the two passengers into the enormous Cube. They passed through what felt like kilometers of labyrinthine hallways with power-armored Aegis guards at every intersection and dotted along the halls at security checkpoints, and eventually came to a nondescript, yet cozy, waiting room.

"Please wait here. The emperor will see you shortly," the Japanese guard, Yamaguchi Takeyama, said. He gestured to a desk, behind which was a holographic projection of a pleasant-looking young woman. "If you need anything, ask the VL Do not leave the waiting area here unescorted."

The two guards strode back the way they came, leaving the two slightly mystified gentlemen in the waiting area.

The older and younger man traded gazes and chorused, "The emperor?"

"They're here," Nova told Aron.

They were in his office in reality in order to meet the new ministers of the interior and exterior, who had just been picked up by members of Aron's personal Aegis battalion and didn't have access to the inner circle meeting room in the simulation yet.

"Bring them in," Aron said.

Nova nodded, then sent the order to the secretarial VI in the waiting room outside Aron's office.

"The emperor will see you now," the VI told the waiting men in her pleasantly neutral voice. They nodded, exchanged glances, then stood and walked to the door behind the VI secretary's desk, which slid open to allow them access.

They entered the room and looked around. It was a surprisingly utilitarian office, for someone of so lofty a position as the emperor of humankind. To their left was a low, comfortable-looking white couch, and straight ahead of them was a glass desktop that seemingly hovered in the air with no supports. The walls were completely unadorned and there was no other furniture in the room save two chairs in front of the desk that Aron sat behind. Nova's nanite colony "suit" stood behind him and to his left.

Chapter 478 Seeing Behind the Curtain

"Have a seat, gentlemen," Aron said. "I realize you've been brought here in a hurry, so allow me to explain. The empire needs talents, and the two of you were identified as the talents we require. Jeremy, out of the billions of imperial citizens, you were selected as the Minister of the Interior, and Youssef, you were chosen to fill the office of the Minister of the Exterior.

"The two of you, along with about fifteen million others, will be notified of their selection to fill roles as imperial workers today. Everyone from ministers," Aron nodded at the two men sitting across the desktop from him, "to janitorial staff will be receiving their notifications starting an hour from now. The two of you got yours early because yours are the most important positions we needed to fill, should you choose to accept the job I'm offering you."

The emperor paused to allow the potential ministers in front of him to digest the information. He waited in silence for the two of them to speak; he wanted his ministers to be considered, yet decisive, though, so he would not wait forever.

Jeremy spoke up first. "Your Majesty, thank you for the opportunity. I only have one question: how are you so sure that I'm the right person for the job?"

Aron smiled and replied, "For now, that's classified. If you choose to accept the position you're being offered, you'll be read in on all of the classified information in the Akashic Record. Until then, I'll have to refrain from answering that question."

"What about our families?" Youssef asked.

"You'll be offered housing here in the imperial Cube on Avalon Island, along with your immediate families. Otherwise, you can remain living where you are, at least until the mass move into the fortress cities, but you'll be assigned permanent Aegis guard companies to ensure you and your families' security. Here on Avalon Island, your safety is absolutely guaranteed, but elsewhere... not so much, unfortunately."

"I'll take the job, Your Majesty," Jeremy said. He was certain that he wouldn't be getting any real answers unless he took the job, so he had decided to take a leap of faith.

"As will I," Youssef chimed in.

"Great!" Aron said, then handed them two runic contracts that he had prepared in advance. After the newly appointed ministers signed their contracts, he felt the weight of them settle around him. Even though he could monitor them at every picosecond of every day, runic contracts-like the one he already had with his Minister of War, General Smith-were still safer; he would not allow anyone in the inner circle that hadn't signed their very essence over to him.

"Welcome to the inner circle, gentlemen," he said, then Nova handed them new AR glasses that she had just prepared for them. "First, these are your new AR glasses. Though I see you've already purchased pairs of your own, you'll need these to access areas in the Cube here. You can tour later, but for now, we need to introduce you to the AIs that help run the empire. After that comes a trip to the secure pod vault, where you can undergo your first round of genetic enhancements. Your families will be escorted to their local cubes to undergo theirs. You can meet them in the simulation and spend a few months relaxing there while you're undergoing the procedure. After that, you can get to work."

Jeremy blinked. 'Months?' he thought. 'I was right! There really IS a second layer to the simulation, one that isn't available to the public...!'

He chose to ask, regardless. "Your Majesty, you said 'months' in the simulation? Because all of the employees that were retrained and enhanced already only spent a week in the cubes... so either our enhancements will be more complex, or there must be a second layer. Am I correct in that assumption?"

Aron's smile grew as he listened to the question, then he laughed in pleasant surprise. "Yes, you're exactly right. There is indeed a second layer to the simulation. The one released to the public runs at a two to one time dilation rate, but the one you're about to access runs at thirty to one, or even higher.

"There are three levels. Normal, unenhanced humans, can only handle a thirty to one dilation. Genetically enhanced humans can handle fifty to one, and we have an implant," he tapped the side of his head, "that allows you to safely tolerate an eighty to one time dilation rate. The so-called 'blessed' can likely handle even more. I, myself, for instance, don't experience any issues with our deepest layer of the simulation, where time is dilated to a hundred to one."

Jeremy was stunned, and even Youssef, as steady and imperturbable as he was, found himself slack-jawed at the revelation of the layers involved in the simulation.

"Are there more layers, or is a hundred to one the limit?" the older man asked.

"When we opened up the public layer, His Majesty told the masses that it was hardware that limits the time dilation in the 'VR'. And that's the truth- there is indeed a hardware limit. But that limit is currently a hundred to one. With the computing resources we've devoted to the public simulation, we could've indeed pushed further, perhaps hitting the five hundred to one ratio, but for the benefit of the many, we chose instead to open a public version to keep everyone occupied and excited," Nova explained.

Youssef nodded. As expected, the emperor was a man of many secrets.

"There'll be time for more questions later. For now, it's time to begin your enhancements," Aron said. A pair of Aegis guards entered his office and saluted him. "If you'll follow these gentlemen to

the secure pod vault, we'll get you started. You'll have plenty of time over the next few months to ask questions."

The new ministers nodded, then followed the guards out of the room, headed deeper into the bowels of the imperial machine, taking their first steps on their journey into the future.

Chapter 479 The Inaugural Imperial Council Meeting (part 1)

VR Imperial Palace, emperor's council chamber.

After settling Youssef, Jeremy, and their families in their new quarters in the Cube and getting their initial round of genetic enhancements underway, Aron brought the two new ministers to a meeting in his council chamber.

The newcomers looked around, seeing a well-furnished, round room. Since they had entered from the imperial wing of the palace, where they would soon be taking up their own offices, they had entered on the side of the room behind the council's bench. It was a U-shaped table made of mahogany, with understated oak paneling on the front of it facing the middle of the room. There were seven seats at the bench—three to the left, one in the middle, and three to the right. The one in the middle was obviously the emperor's working throne, a comfortable, yet imposing wingback chair upholstered in royal purple velvet with gold accents and gilded legs. The chairs to the left and right were less ostentatious, yet equally inviting.

The wall of the room was marble with gray veining, and the floor was polished obsidian. A polished granite path split the obsidian from the door on the opposite side of the room, passed between rows of long oak benches, then branched out into a T in the direct center of the room. Two thick teak tables sat on opposite sides of the central walkway, each with two serviceable office chairs at them. In between them was a raised, circular podium with a wooden railing circling three quarters of it. And separating the benches from the tables in the middle of the room was a long oak bar.

The room was lit with warm, recessed lighting in the ceiling, and the general style of all the furniture had Corinthian roots, providing it a touch of elegance and class. The decor turned what would normally be considered austere and imposing into stately and timeless, and combined with the lighting, anyone spending any time in it would be subtly influenced to remain calm and steady.

Aron took his seat. To the left of him were John, Jeremy, and Youssef. To his right were Nyx, Gaia, and Athena. And, as always, Nova stood slightly behind and to his left.

"Now that everyone is here, let's begin the meeting," Aron said the moment everyone had taken their seats.

Gaia took over and summarized what had happened over the last almost two months, the first weeks of the empire's existence. The summary was fairly long, especially given that everything mentioned had all happened in such a short, compressed time frame. It was no wonder the past two months had felt like a decade; it was because the sheer number of significant events would make even ten years feel like they had been busy! Not only had they registered a little over seven billion imperial citizens, they had gone through riots, a wave of terrorist attacks, spent half of it under martial law on lockdown, and introduced the public to a time-dilated virtual version of reality.

Even if spread out over a decade or more, it would still count as a busy, tumultuous time. Those listening to the summary who had been unaware of the things going on in the background couldn't help but wonder if they'd jumped into a pot of boiling water.

"What's the progress on resolving our issues?" Aron asked once Gaia finished the summary of events so far.

[All imperial citizens have been registered and received their IDs. Currently, children are registered to their parents' IDs until they complete their compulsory education, and the imperial scholastica set the curriculums to allow students to learn at their own pace. All schooling is done in virtual classrooms, so we still have them in the Akashic Record, but they won't receive the privileges that come at the age of majority until their schooling is completed.]

[The design phase of the fortress cities was nearing completion, but has mostly been scrapped. We were caught off guard by the awakening and now that people will be receiving blessings that grant them superpowers, it necessitated a complete redesign from the ground up to account for that. Internal finishing details, like decorations and so on, will be reserved, but we'll need to come up with a way of integrating anti-magic fields in the exterior designs and find a mana-resistant material to use in construction. The scientists in Lab City's Gold Labs are working on that now and estimate they should have an answer within thirty or forty years.]

"Thirty or forty years?" Jeremy, the new Minister of the Interior, interjected. "Can we afford to wait that long? From your summary, you mentioned that the initial round of awakening should be complete within the next week or two, and the entire world would be supersaturated with mana and everyone awakened within the next decade at the latest, so isn't three or four decades a bit long to wait on the geek squad?"

[That's thirty or forty years at one hundred times dilation, or even faster. Lab City currently runs at a dilation rate of a hundred and seventeen to one, and the rate is only increasing as I continue building quantum superclusters. Even if it stayed where it is now, that's only three or four months away,] Nova answered. [Please continue, Gaia.]

Though Nova had all of the same information at hand that Gaia did, as did Athena, they had already agreed to divide their responsibilities along the same line as the human council members. Gaia was the AI equivalent to the Minister of the Interior, Nyx was the AI equivalent to the Minister of the Exterior, and Athena was John's counterpart, serving the same government function as the Minister of War. Thus, it was Gaia's responsibility to keep track of issues internal to the empire, and assist Minister Rogers in dealing with them.

That said, the AIs were meant as partners to the human ministers, not subordinates. Humans and AIs each had their own pros and cons, and the empire Aron envisioned would take full advantage of each without making either subordinate to the other.

Chapter 480 The Inaugural Imperial Council Meeting (part 2)

[All of the agencies assumed normal operations almost a month ago, and as of today's recruiting drive, all agencies are now fully staffed. Mandatory overtime has been canceled and regular workdays of eight hours have been implemented. All government functions have been moved to the public simulation, unless their services are physically impossible to provide in the simulation, like hospitals, and proof of imperial citizenship is required to receive benefits from the empire.]

[We've completed 71% of all initial health screenings and repairs, but the awakening has paused that operation. All of our pods are currently occupied with people undergoing their awakenings, so the Imperial Health administration is focusing on taking over existing structures in cities and towns across the globe and repurposing them to be used as clinics. Awakeners have all been transported to

local cubes, and the Imperial Health Agency's clinic plan is 64% completed. Rural China and India are proving... problematic, as new structures need to be purpose-built in those locations before pods can be printed and shipped there,] Gaia reported.

"Printers?" Minister Al-Mutairi's brow furrowed. "What do you mean by 'printed'?"

[One of the empire's earliest advances was in 3d printing technology. His Majesty's breakthrough allowed for 3d printing at an atomic level, with atomic disassembly and reconfiguration. So, all imperial technology is printed by those atomic printers. It's the most deeply classified of all the imperial technological advances,] Nova said, then "threw" an info pack about imperial technological advances to both Youssef and Jeremy for them to read when they had the time. [Please hold your questions until the end of Gaia's status report, and look through those files I just threw to you when you have the time later.] She nodded to Gaia, indicating that she could continue.

[As for the terrorist attacks, we've continued eliminating cells and have so far neutralized 734 individual cells. We've even captured and downloaded the brain data of one of their recruiters, and while the cult's protocols killed the lead from there, it still gave us a view into their operations. They have been silent for some time, however, and Nyx has mentioned that something doesn't seem quite right about their current extended silence. They've gone into hiding and seem to have ceased all operations other than their emergency cutouts, and all of them seem to have buried themselves as deep as they can.] "Why do you think that is? Are they afraid, or are they planning another big attack?" Aron asked.

"Your Majesty, what if... what if they're awakening, too?" Jeremy added.

[That's indeed the likeliest scenario,] Nyx said. [3% of the population means 3% of the population, and the phenomenon won't be limited by citizenship or divided along ideological or political lines.]

"So they've got some number of awakeners among their ranks and are keeping their heads down while their evolutions are underway?" Aron rubbed his temples. "That's... less than spectacular news. We're already going to have to deal with noncitizen awakened who may or may not cause trouble," he said, thinking back on all the comic books, cartoons, and movies he had consumed while growing up that involved supervillain organizations. "But now we're going to have to deal with superpowered cultists that definitely WILL cause trouble?"

[That's likely, yes,] Nyx replied. [Once their newly awakened cultists finish their evolutions, their overall strength as an organization will increase. And that means aggressive action on their part.]

"What makes you say that?" John asked. "And how can we best counter it? I'm leery about the idea of recruiting kids, but I see no harm in plucking the cream of the eighteen to twenty-two year olds into ARES."

"Athena, get with Poseidon and Aeolus and implement focused recruiting among the awakeners," Aron ordered. He'd had the same idea, of course, but was originally planning on holding off on implementing it until the laws and regulations surrounding awakeners had been addressed. But with a second person agreeing unasked, he decided to move his plan up.

"Do we have an idea of what triggers awakening?" Youssef asked. "If we know that, we can start triggering our own awakenings among those willing to join the military, and even those that already enlisted but are still in the right age range."

"We know, but it's... impractical at best, and perhaps cataclysmic at worst. I believe the visitors discovered us because my early awakening and reckless mana use was like a blind man flashing morse code from a lighthouse out into the deep sea. And mana is what triggers awakenings, so by flooding that many people with mana, the signal we send out would be so blindingly intense that it would draw more attention to us from even further away. The awakening we're already undergoing is both a curse and a blessing, since," Aron nodded to Nova in appreciation, "I've been told that it shouldn't be distinguishable from the background noise of the shifting mana tides headed toward and swirling around Earth."

"I... I see," Youssef said. He wasn't quite sure what to make of Aron's admission just now. He definitely still respected the emperor, and knew that shit would always happen whenever dealing with the unknown, but the potential calamity of the visitors having been brought upon them by Aron's mistake was a difficult idea to contemplate.

"Besides, we're not sure yet which is better, natural or artificial awakening. I know of one person that awakened artificially, so we'll be comparing data sets based on her training versus the development of naturally awakened individuals," Aron continued.

[There may be more ways than just that for people to trigger artificial awakenings. The Gold Labs in Lab City are working on their theories by studying the outliers. We can reasonably infer that puberty's malleability and rapid growth is one of the factors in natural awakening, so by studying those who are post- and prepubescent should give us some insight into potential other methods of inducing awakening,] Nova said.

"But it'll take time.... How much time, exactly, do you think it'll take?" Jeremy asked, already running calculations in his mind.

[The researchers are unsure. Not a single outlier awakened has finished their evolution yet for us to compare. So the only thing we know right now is that we don't really know anything.]