

## Tech System 481

### Chapter 481 The Inaugural Imperial Council Meeting (part 3)

Aron turned to Nova, who was in charge of all things related to the private simulation, and asked, "How's development on the Henry's Eye system? Can it detect the mana levels in awakened?"

[Our current sensors are sensitive enough, but that's the problem-if anything, they're too sensitive. Right now, the researchers are working on filtering algorithms to discard false positives caused by pockets of higher concentrations of mana. Due to needing to be able to detect the minuscule amounts of mana emanating from the distant object the visitors are traveling on, the number of false positives we got when we turned it around and looked at Earth was ridiculous. Fifteen billion results were mislabeled as awakened humans, not including the ones that are actually undergoing the final stages of their evolutions now. And those that have already finished and woken up are so weak as to be virtually indistinguishable from the background mana density in most places.

[That said, we expect them to strengthen as they gain access to more mana. Right now, their mana levels are likely low due to the aspected nature of their mana affinities and the basic mana gradient. After all, if an earth aspected awakened wants to draw earth mana, they have to compete with the entire planet, which is still absorbing mana at an almost incomprehensible rate. Once that saturation process is finished, we expect the average strength of awakeners to undergo a rapid, dramatic rise,] Nova said. She knew that Aron appreciated detailed reports when the circumstances allowed for it, and given that the empire was in a rare moment of relative peace and security, the detailed report would be best.

"Do the researchers have an estimate on how long it'll take them to develop the algorithm?"

[Not currently, no. The constantly changing environment makes developing a one-size-fits-all filtering algorithm difficult. I could assign a VI to it, but the error rate would still be too high for general usage and we would be forced to investigate all false positives. That would be detrimental, as it would give our enemies an obvious clue as to our tracking capabilities and stretch out the conflict by forcing them to come up with an effective countermeasure. It'd be like the development of weapons and armor-we would be forced to dedicate resources to continue improving our detection methods to deal with the improvements in our enemy's increasing ability to hide from detection. So it's better to wait for the development to finish and take them all out in one fatal strike.]

"Good," Aron said, then turned to Nyx. "Nyx, until our final strike capability is mature, I'll be counting on you to keep up the pressure on the progenitor cult."

With a salute and a cheeky grin, Nyx replied, [Sure thing. Going analog has been interesting, and I think it might be pushing me to adapt and evolve faster.] She was absolutely thrilled with the state of the spy versus spy game she was playing with the cultists, who were proving to be more effective opponents than she would ever have imagined when she was first going into the conflict with them. Thanks to all the experience gained by America and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, plus the addition of the terrorist network organizational structure used during the more recent War on Terror, the always-upbeat AI was constantly being pushed to her limits and forced to adapt to overcome them.

Nova and Gaia's eyes flashed blue as they both opened private discussion channels with Nyx, practically bombarding her with questions about the evolution she was undergoing. It was a purely AI issue, though, so they politely kept it between themselves and didn't raise the issue in the meeting.

"That's excellent news, Nyx. I'm happy for you," Aron said with a bright smile on his face. He always treated the AIs with the same courtesy and respect that he did "real" people, if not more, and never considered them to have been limited in any way, despite their obvious shortcomings. Thus, whenever they made significant progress toward their goal of becoming more humanlike, he was happy to hear it.

He cleared his throat, realizing he had allowed the meeting to drift for a moment. Even though there wasn't an ongoing emergency right then, it was still a bad habit to fall into. "Let's move on," he said. "What's our next order of business?"

[Next is the appointment of leaders in the imperial agencies. We already randomly assigned people to staff positions according to their fit,] Nova said, her lips twitching when she recalled Aron flipping a coin to choose ministers. [So now all that's left is to manually vet the leadership positions.] She cast a pointed glance at Jeremy, the Minister of the Interior.

"Seeing as I just came on board, I'll need some time to go through the profiles and make decisions. Just cutting down the lists was a huge help, thank you, Gaia," the young minister reported.

[Just doing my job,] she politely replied.

"How long will you need?" Aron asked.

"Two weeks, tops. That's V... uhh, I mean, simulation time." Jeremy was still used to calling it VR, while the officials referred to the private simulation simply as "the simulation". Just like how the government internally called people the awakened, or awakeners, and the public referred to them as the blessed, it demonstrated something of a gap in the amount of information available to the two groups.

"You can use a random selection method," Aron said. "All of the candidates that have passed the multiple rounds of Gaia's screening are equally viable for the positions. The only thing that really differs are practical experience and methodology, and practical experience isn't necessarily as valuable as you might think. After all, nobody has ever led groups of awakened as part of a globe-spanning empire before, so any 'practical experience' they may have in leadership positions or politics can actually be detrimental when issues crop up that are out of their understanding."

#### Chapter 482 The Inaugural Imperial Council Meeting (part 4)

Gaia nodded. [I ran four filters through the entire Akashic Record database, each time selecting for a different quality that would benefit the empire specifically, as well as humanity in general. First was loyalty, second was their opinion of the empire, third was ambition, or in less polite terms, corruptibility, and fourth was how motivated they would be to benefit humanity by bettering the lives of the people. The ones that filtered to the list in front of you are the ones that scored in the 90th percentile or higher in all four categories, with at least one in the 95th percentile or higher.]

"What happened to the rest of the candidates?" Jeremy wondered.

[That depends. The majority of them were assigned to lower positions in the various agencies, but a few were passed to Nyx for further investigation and monitoring. We may be able to know everything there is in a person's head, but the imperial code doesn't cover thoughtcrime. But that doesn't mean we can't predict the likelihood of people violating imperial law in the future and bump them up to a higher threat category that requires stricter monitoring.]

"Well, I'm glad there aren't any Eurasian spies among our citizens, at least," Jeremy said in a wry tone. He had come to terms with living in a totalitarian state, he'd thought, but every now and then something someone said would throw him for a loop and remind him of the absurdity of his current environment. And Gaia's Orwellian reference to thoughtcrime had been one of those loop-throwers. 'At least the empire actually cares for the people,' he thought. 'And besides, if I have to live in a totalitarian state, at least I'm one of the leaders, right?'

Nova caught that on her monitoring subroutine and gave Jeremy a nod with a bright smile on her face. [All of our regulations and actions are aimed at preventing exactly the kind of corruption you fear to see happen in the empire, Jeremy. The emperor himself even implemented checks and balances on imperial power and authority that give people an out in case our leadership goes insane with the sheer power and authority at their fingertips.]

"I know, it's just... suddenly having the curtain pulled back and seeing the man behind it is still something of a shock. Anyway," he cleared his throat, bringing himself back on topic, "I'll have the positions assigned within the next two weeks. I have to do something to earn my keep, after all." He grinned.

"Excellent. I look forward to seeing the results," Aron said. "What's the next order of business, Nova?"

Nova simply looked at Youssef. He had spotted the problem even before he had access to the information now at his fingertips, so she would let him be the one to report it.

"Public simulation exploitation. Employers are moving their companies to the public simulation and forcing workers to work in the time-dilated virtual offices, while only paying them based on the real life equivalent. So they've effectively cut their salaries by 50%, either by forcing them to work twice as many hours or paying them for only half the hours worked," Youssef reported.

"Suggestions?" Aron asked him. He had an idea in his mind, but would let the newly minted minister suggest his own. If it was a good enough idea, he wouldn't mind implementing it instead of his own, likely far more draconian, policy.

"Fines and laws. I read through the imperial code and didn't see anything in it dealing with wages and workers' rights. So I suggest a percent-based fine of the employers' net worth-say... 10%-and have it enshrined in the imperial code that employers must pay an hour's wage for an hour's work, regardless of whether that work is done in a virtual environment or not. This is to be done in conjunction with having the exploited periods wages payed to the workers."

Aron nodded. The fine was lower than he would take, but Youssef's suggestion was otherwise in line with his thoughts. "And what would the penalty be in the code for repeat offenders?"

"Increasing levels of fines up to 50%, depending on the severity and number of times the fines have been levied, and penal labor gangs or military conscription for the worst offenders. Since we can detect intent, we may as well use that as the guideline."

"Excellent suggestion, Minister Al-Mutairi," Aron praised. "Gaia, get with Minerva and update the imperial legal code. Identify the people currently in violation of the code and issue them a warning, plus push a press release to all media outlets introducing the new law. It's important enough to let everyone know about it, not just those who are currently affected by the issue. Don't be afraid to name names if there are any particularly egregious violators out there.

"Also, find a few companies that have excellent reputations-and aren't mine-and name them as exemplars. Give them an official good citizenship citation and award them a few tangible benefits to encourage others to fall in line with them."

"Your Majesty, speaking of employment law, I have a suggestion," Jeremy interjected.

"Go ahead."

"I suggest we implement an empire-wide minimum wage focused on actually being a livable wage. A single person requires a minimum of 500 END to maintain a subsistence-level existence that covers all of their absolute necessities. So a 40 hour workweek should cover at least that much, plus some for luxuries and savings."

Aron nodded, then held up his hand and sank into deep thought for a few moments. He came out of his thoughts and turned to Nova. "That's doable. Calculate a minimum wage and publish it as a press release of its own to be released after the first employees' rights act release."

[2.50 END per hour should be fine,] Nova said.

"Make it happen," Aron agreed. "Any other internal issues before we move on to military matters?"

"Population," Youssef immediately said. "We need more people. Even with 7.5 billion people, Earth isn't fully populated and can still sustain a much higher population... especially with the technology at our disposal. So if we're to colonize the solar system, much less the distant stars, we need more people."

"Excellent suggestion, Minister. I'll leave it up to you. Bring me a fully fleshed-out proposal in two weeks at our next regular meeting," Aron ordered.

"Understood, Your Majesty." Youssef relaxed in his chair and began considering things that would stimulate another baby boom as the meeting turned to military matters.

#### Chapter 483 An Unexpected Hitch in the Plan

[The second-to-last item on today's schedule is the military,] Nova said. [With the designation of Mars as ARES Command, Lab City is in the middle of the final push in materials science to develop a new alloy that'll turn the entire planet into a fortress. The design is finished and will include surface domes and a tunnel network that delves all the way to the solidified core, where we'll house the necessary reactors and quantum superclusters. Work on that front has already begun and the mobile atomic printers we deployed reached the halfway point two days ago.]

"How long will it take for the necessary advances to be completed?" Aron asked. "If necessary, I can join in on the research and cut the time down by quite a lot."

Only Nova knew that he was talking about purchasing another knowledge from the system. She thought for two whole nanoseconds before answering, [That won't be necessary for now. The

research should be completed within a month or two, Lab City time. There are better things to spend your limited time on, sir.]

"How long will construction take once the necessary materials are in place?" he asked.

"Three years, tops," John cut in. He was working on the design of the base with Athena, as experts should be left to perform the tasks they were knowledgeable in; otherwise, why even have a council of advisors at all?

"Good. Send me the design when you've got a final version and I'll approve it and send it to the printers once they're done in the core of the planet," Aron replied. "Moving on," he turned to Athena, "how are we coming on the space fleet design?"

[Lab City is having issues finalizing a design and choosing a weapon type. They're too busy arguing the merits of various existing designs from science fiction franchises,] Athena sighed. If she were a "real" human being, she suspected she would have the mother of all headaches after listening to even a few minutes of the neverending Star Trek versus Star Wars debate in Lab City. [I really can't deal with them, sir. They're just too... enthusiastic. What the hell are phasers and photon torpedoes and blasters and....]

She sighed again, her shoulders slumping. [I'd rather deal with bored soldiers, sir. Please assign someone else as a liaison between Lab City and ARES,] Athena begged.

Aron was a little taken aback. It was the first time one of his higher-order AIs had had any issue fulfilling the tasks they were asked to do. Then he couldn't help but belly laugh.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't hold that in. Sci-fi geeks are your kryptonite, I suppose." He brought his expression back under control and cleared his throat, then turned to Nova. "Anyone want to liaise with Lab City on Athena's behalf, Nova?"

[Sir, I don't think any of us higher-order AIs can cope with being dropped into that particular fire pit without the permission to use our admin privileges. It's been burning for two or three hundred years for them, now, and I don't think it'll be solved in any of our lifetimes,] Nova said.

"Time to create another higher-order AI to oversee Lab City?" Aron asked with a frown. He would really rather not add another AI to the higher order, as there were already plenty, in his opinion; that was why he had begun using more virtual intelligences of late. But for solving an argument like Trek versus Wars... he might have to authorize a new AI to oversee Lab City, and for herding researchers, only a higher-order one would do.

[Perhaps, sir. I suggest we give it a few weeks first. Chaotic clashes between research methodology and ideas often produce the best results in the end, so I'll keep an eye on things and let you know if the situation starts spiraling out of control and seriously affecting their work. But at the moment, there's nothing but beneficial rivalry between them.]

"Good. Let's set the cutoff date for that situation resolution to our next meeting in two weeks," Aron said, still with a slight frown on his face. He wasn't happy that the researchers he had spent so much time and effort to "recruit" were handing him petty problems like an out-of-control debate and holding things up even for a second.

"What's the status on Fleet Command?"

[We've inserted the appropriate influencing elements to the game. It should inspire a lot of people to sign up for our space fleet,] Nyx answered. [It's currently ready to be announced as soon as there's an opportunity when we aren't already busy announcing other world-shaking changes, so that people can focus on our new 'gaming' products.]

"Good. John, Athena, anything else to add?"

"Yes, sir. We need bodies. I know we just got fifty million new recruits, but that's still far from enough. In order to staff ARES Command, we estimate we'll need...." He looked to Athena to give the actual number.

#### Chapter 484 How to Train Your Hero

"Alright. On to the elephant in the room. How should we deal with the awakened?"

Youssef and Jeremy remained silent. Neither of them had any idea of the full situation at all, having only been ministers for a few hours now, so to throw out suggestions now would simply show their inexperience rather than their abilities. One thing they had realized, however, was that the emperor was an awakener himself. But how was that possible? He hadn't been absent at all, let alone for the weeks it would take to undergo an awakening!

Still, it didn't matter, so they pushed the thoughts about that until later when they at least knew what they should know as ministers.

Aron could see the thoughts on their faces, but didn't care. As the highest level members of the government and part of his inner circle of advisors, the two had a valid need to know about everything save the existence of the system. "From the data Akeso collected, it seems they're already capable of immense destruction if they're trained to use their abilities. And we've also noticed that, as the mana density increases around them, their power and output increases accordingly.

"At the moment, ARES can handle them, since the mana density is still low and the people that have finished their awakenings are only capable of manipulating elemental and derived mana, but that doesn't mean we can simply ignore them. We need to make sure we have a handle on all awakeners, imperial citizens or otherwise. Suggestions?" he asked.

[Letting them know they've been registered in the awakener database, to begin with. Just knowing they aren't anonymous should help curb a lot of the misbehavior, at least for citizens,] Nyx said.

"Public or private?" Aron asked.

[Private,] Gaia immediately said. [The awakeners themselves should be registered on a classified database to protect their privacy. Any leaks on our end should be harshly punished, and the victim generously compensated. After all, it should be up to the awakener themselves to announce that they've awakened.] She gave Youssef and Jeremy a knowing look, a hint to keep their speculations about Aron's awakening to themselves.

"An academy," Jeremy suggested, thinking of a popular movie franchise where superhumans were trained at an academy for the gifted. "If we make enrollment mandatory, we can observe how they interact with each other in a safe environment, giving us an idea of how they'll act in certain situations. It'll also foster a sense of belonging to a larger community and that should prevent most of the antisocial behavior."

[And we can subtly influence them through their curriculum,] Nyx added.

Aron nodded his approval. "Make it happen," he said.

[We can also require them to graduate from the academy in order to receive licenses to use their abilities,] Gaia said. As an administrator, she was very fond of licensing and registration.

"What would the punishment be for using their power without a license? And what about good Samaritans who help out despite not having a license yet?" John asked.

[We can punish them by mandatory ARES service if they intentionally misuse their power or use it without a license. Good Samaritans would need to be judged on a case-by-case basis,] Athena replied.

"It can't all be stick," Aron said. "So the carrot should be money. Poverty creates criminals out of otherwise honest people, so we can enroll them in a strategic reserve and pay them a wage for keeping themselves ready to deal with situations that call for their assistance. Like sending them to help deal with or even prevent natural disasters like earthquakes and such."

[Rank them and pay them accordingly. There are five categories of mana, that we know of, so an S-A-B-C-D rank structure can be applied, with adjustments based on the utility of their affinities. The higher ranks will be paid more, and the lower ranks will earn less, but it'll still be enough to keep them above the poverty line even if they don't have a 'real' job to work,] Nova added.

"What about reinforcing the idea of superheroes?" Youssef suggested. "Young people are easily influenced by others, so instead of calling them the blessed, why not call them heroes? Make 'being a hero' be their day jobs and have their AI butlers manage their media profile. It'll also give non-awakeners idols to follow and fan clubs to join, acting as a distraction from the stress of knowing aliens are on their way to potentially kill us all."

"That would cheapen the word 'hero', though," Jeremy interjected. "Maybe save it for when they graduate from the academy and get their licenses. But they can't be treated any differently than normal imperial citizens at all.... Hero or not, they're imperial citizens first and should be held accountable for their actions just like anyone else. The only difference is in the amount of damage they can cause by breaking the law, so all awakeners-or heroes, rather -should have the same punishment for lawbreaking: mandatory service in ARES. It'll also help with the recruitment efforts. If they're old enough to break the law, they're old enough to serve in the military."

The way the meeting had progressed so far had impressed both Jeremy and Youssef, raising the already high opinion they had of the emperor of the Terran Empire. It continued for a time as they closed various loopholes in the proposals in every aspect that had been discussed, most of which had been identified by Nova and Gaia after requesting clarification on certain points raised.

Eventually, the meeting drew to an end and Aron brought it to a close. "This was the first meeting of the inner council of the empire. I find myself impressed by both Minister Rogers and by Minister Al-Mutairi. Despite coming in completely blind, you both contributed quite a few good ideas, and I look forward to what you can do once you've digested the data packets I threw you earlier," he said as he looked at the two new appointees.

"Use the next two weeks until we meet again to familiarize yourselves with the empire's operations and the higher-order AIs that help manage it. The simulation is free for your use, and within the

next few days here, your implants will be functional, so you can move to the areas of higher time dilation. I suggest you take advantage of that to handle your tasks as efficiently as possible.

"For now, though, you gentlemen have speeches to prepare for. You'll be delivering your inaugural remarks to the fifteen million new government employees, as well as all of the employees we already had before today's hiring spree. I look forward to it. Until then, I'll take my leave."

Aron and Nova disappeared from the room, leaving the three AIs and three humans to get to know each other.

## Chapter 485 Two Numb Asses

After the meet and greet with the rest of the council was over and everyone had familiarized themselves with each other, the council room was left empty and dissolved into the qubits from which it had been created.

The two new ministers were in turmoil, each of them considering many different things.

The meeting itself had been extremely productive, which surprised Youssef; he was too used to meetings where the main focus was on snatching credit and being seen by upper management rather than resolving issues and enacting plans. Conversely, the emperor, despite his lofty position, was willing to involve himself in even the most minor details of the operation of the empire. Not that he was a micromanager, either, but he had actually listened to the advice and suggestions of his advisory council instead of stubbornly insisting that his was the only voice that mattered.

Jeremy, on the other hand, had no experience in society and had felt that the council meeting was more akin to a group of college friends planning an extended trip after they graduated. It was nothing like he had imagined; there was no politicking, there were no dark rooms, and though the meeting was held privately, no favors were traded or any of the other Hollywood political tropes that were so common in the movies he'd watched growing up.

According to both men's understanding of how former leaders worked, nothing that had just taken place was anything that even approached the word 'normal'. They didn't expect that issues would be raised, suggestions gathered, plans formed, and solutions enacted, all in the space of a single working day. Perhaps there was something to the empire after all, rather than it being a single powerful man's individual power fantasy that he had forced the entire human race to capitulate to.

Still, though both of the new ministers were dazed by the insane efficiency of the empire, they had work to do. Thus, the two men went back to their offices to take the first step in completing the tasks they had been assigned: going over the immense amount of data that Aron had "thrown" them in the packet during the meeting. It had everything in it-atomic printers and their capabilities, introductions to all of the higher-order AIs that stood atop the digital food chain, the extent that the empire could enhance the human genome, cybernetic and bionic enhancements, spec sheets on all of the military hardware available to the empire, and more. It would take them a week to dig through and digest all of that information alone!

Still, they had the time they needed, and then some. The advisory council meetings were scheduled for every two weeks of time in the "real" world, but as the heads of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of the Exterior, they had access to the private simulation, which gave them a full five months until the next meeting. And that time would be extended as their quantum microcomputer implants came online, increasing the time dilation their frail human bodies could withstand from



30:1 to 50:1. Once their genetic enhancements were complete, that would even increase further, to a time dilation ratio of 80:1!

But that would be after the next meeting, as the full suite of genetic enhancements-which they had just read about-took a full two weeks of real time to enact. Although the concept of time was changing for the human race, reality and virtual reality were still different, and they had to consider things from the point of view of the former.

"May Allah have mercy on us..." Youssef said under his breath when he realized just how deep the imperial waters actually were. He was beyond grateful that Aron was incredibly benevolent and couldn't even begin to imagine the horrors that a power-hungry control freak could inflict upon the innocent, were they on the throne instead of the benevolent emperor they had. "I hope that day never comes," he prayed, hoping beyond hope that he would never live to see that day, should it come.

The two men continued reading for hours, both of them having completely lost track of time as they read the files in their hands. Not only had their asses gone numb, but so had their thoughts. At a certain point, surprises cease to be surprising and become just a matter of course, and after working through half of the files, that point had long since come and gone. Now, they only felt lucky that they had been given the power to develop the empire, practically at its very inception. The decisions they would make in the future would shape humanity's fate for the rest of its existence, or at least for many generations to come.

The responsibility settled on the two of them, and they both felt its weight.

"So... Jeremy, right?" Youssef began.

Jeremy nodded and waited for him to continue.

"Why do you suppose the emperor chose us? There are many reputable politicians he could've chosen for ministerial positions... but instead, he gave them to a youth with no experience beyond retail jobs and a middle-aged dead-ender who was treading water in middle management," Youssef asked. He didn't have enough fingers to count the politicians that were actually good at the job of governing.

"Easy. We have yet to be corrupted. Once you've been exposed to the corruption in politics, it's almost impossible to not fall into that spiral again. Even if you weren't corrupt to begin with, just the idea of the things you can take from the people to benefit yourself will constantly be whispering in the back of your mind like your own personal devil," the young man answered, setting aside the files he was reading at the moment. The conversation Youssef had begun was interesting to the much younger man, and besides, the information contained in the "imperial data dump", as he chose to call it, was quite frankly terrifying.

Youssef thought for a moment, then called up a screen and began searching for information on politicians, from the highest halls of power to the lowest Karen on her school board. "Hmm.... It seems that most of the world leaders are either on house arrest or in the deepest, darkest holes the empire could find, awaiting trials for crimes committed during their time in office. The same holds true for those at all levels of power," Youssef said after reading the result of his search. "So perhaps you've got a point."

"Of course. It's only natural.... After all, you know as well as I do the tools that the government has to detect people breaking the law." Jeremy was referring to the brain data archived in the classified sections of the Akashic Record. "The fight against corruption and abuse of power will never end, but at least the empire has the tools to effectively combat it," the young man said with a content smile on his face. He had already seen his salary and, when combined with the benefits of imperial citizenship alone, he would be living a life he couldn't even have begun to dream about when he was in the swamp in Louisiana. Both he and his mother could live their entire lives without any worries at all.

Changing topics, he asked, "By the way... when do you think His Majesty became an awakener?"

Chapter 486 Information and the Hoarding Thereof

"By the way... when do you think His Majesty became an awakener?" Jeremy asked

Youssef thought for a moment, trying to come up with a timeline in which the emperor could have awakened without noticeably being absent from the public eye. But he couldn't remember a stretch of even a week since the founding of the empire where Aron hadn't made an appearance. "If it happened after the empire was founded, it was probably in the first few weeks. But that isn't feasible either... so he must've awakened much earlier than that."

The younger man nodded at the idea that Aron had awakened before founding the empire. He hadn't made that many public appearances at all up until The Last War, only showing himself when it was absolutely necessary, he was forced to do so, or when he introduced his first products.

"Even if he did awaken earlier, it just goes to show that he's a very patient man and seems to have hidden it quite well. I can't think of anyone I personally know that wouldn't parade their newfound powers around, trying to raise their statuses and get themselves some perks. None of them would care at all about any harm they'd cause by abusing their powers," he said. He thought of his half brother, who craved any sort of attention that would feed his ego, something Jeremy particularly despised about him.

But then something clicked in his mind and he said, "From what we just read, there are five known categories of mana. Doesn't that mean it's possible that he awakened some kind of mental ability through esoteric mana?" He recalled that, more than two years ago, Aron had created his first revolutionary product, BugZapper. That was the first falling domino that led to the formation of the Terran Empire.

The two men looked at each other, each of them thinking the same two words: holy shit!

If the emperor really had awakened more than two years ago, then he was monstrously strong in addition to being very, very smart. He had first built a business empire completely under the radar, along with the most advanced military force on the planet, all while manipulating entire countries like pieces on a chessboard and staying completely hidden. And as strong as his ability was then, when Earth was still a wasteland with almost no mana, they could only imagine how strong he was now, after years of the mana density increasing to the point where even normal people were beginning to awaken to it.

"But there's still something I don't understand," Jeremy mused.

"What's that?" Youssef asked.

"In his address, when he talked about mana triggering an evolution and giving people 'superpowers', there was a part where he talked about how it had passed a critical mass and that the mana density increase had become a self-sustaining reaction..." the younger man said.

"What about that don't you understand? I took a geology class in university and my professor talked about something that happened 2.4 billion years ago. It's called the great oxidation event, where the production of oxygen did the same thing that mana is doing now. It pushed almost all of the methane out of the atmosphere and creating the ozone layer. It's what let evolution start and multicellular organisms became the norm after that." Youssef didn't quite understand what Jeremy was talking about and, as he soon realized, had completely missed the mark.

"I'm not talking about that. That parallel is obvious. The great oxidation event allowed the evolution of multicellular organisms, and now the... I guess we can call it great mana event, is allowing multicellular organisms to evolve further. After all, the species on Earth now have basically been 'stuck', evolutionarily speaking, for a very long time.

"But what I meant was, if it's only reached the self-sustaining phase now, then before now, something or someone was artificially producing it in large enough amounts to bring it to the level where the process becomes automatic. So my question is, who, or what, was doing that?"

Both men broke out in goosebumps as they considered the possibilities. The best-case scenario was that it was Aron who was responsible for it, and the worst-case scenario was too terrifying to imagine.

"Why... why don't we ask someone? There's no need for us to drive ourselves insane looking for the answer on our own when we can just ask... right?" Youssef said, then immediately called for Nyx. Her entire job, if not her very existence itself, revolved around information and the hoarding thereof.

[What do you need?] Nyx asked. She'd been paying attention to the two ministers and had been surprised by how close to the mark they had hit with their blind speculations.

Youssef let Jeremy do the asking, since he was the one that had brought the topic up.

[You're correct,] she said, then brought up a recording of the fusion reactor beneath Avalon Island as seen through the lens of the Henry's Eye sensors on the Panopticon network. Then she told them about how that had led to their discovery of the incoming aliens, and their belief that it was the cause of the Earth's discovery by those same aliens. They needed to be up to date on that, and though it was included in their introductory data packet, they obviously hadn't reached that file yet.

The two men froze for quite some time and Nyx stood there, patiently waiting for them to digest the information she had just given them.

"So what about now? We've reached a self-sustaining growth phase, aren't we glowing much brighter, and from all sides?" Youssef asked after shaking off the daze he was in. Being numb to surprises helped shorten the time he was lost in shock.

[Imagine you're in a cold room. If you light a fire in the fireplace, that's the only heat source in the room so it'll be very obvious to someone standing outside the room. However, if you turn on the central air conditioner, the whole room heats up, so the change is less easy to pinpoint. That's the current situation-when the only mana source was the reactor beneath Avalon Island, it was very obvious, like a lighthouse on a dark night. But now the entire planet, and the solar system it's part

of, is filling with mana.] She showed them images from before and after the "great mana event" as seen from the Panopticon satellites. [That's the difference, and why we aren't worried about the increasing mana density in the solar system. But we think the reason they managed to discover us is because of the flashing signal given off by the mana converter on the fusion reactor. Hopefully, by the time they arrive, the mana density will be high enough that our awakeners will have a deterrent effect on any potential hostile actions on the part of the aliens. That would at least be something of a silver lining to the whole situation we find ourselves in, at least.]

Chapter 487 Eureka!

Lab City.

Aron was in a lab, his focus on a smartphone-sized brick of metal. His fingertip was tracing back and forth on its surface, leaving behind line after line of glowing golden rune script.

"No, that's not it..." he sighed, tossing the brick over his shoulder, where it landed atop a waist-high pile of other metallic bricks of similar size and shape.

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, his perception turning inward in meditation until he saw his runic heart. It rhythmically pulsed, flashing a dark gold light with each cycle of contraction and expansion. Over the past ten weeks he had spent in Lab City, he'd been deciphering the trillions of lines of rune script that had been carved into his heart by the system, focusing on increasing his library of useful runes beyond those imprinted in his memory by the knowledge he'd bought from the system.

What he had discovered was... absolutely nothing. He still couldn't grasp how they worked or what they were supposed to do. Would he be forced to buy more advanced runic knowledge from his system? It wasn't something he wanted to do; his SP would be better spent right now on strengthening humanity for the inevitable conflicts to come in the future. After all, even if these first aliens were peaceful, the only guarantee was that not all aliens would be the same. Eventually, humanity would find itself in the grip of an interstellar war, and every moment until that inevitable outbreak must be spent on ensuring that they came out on top.

He sighed and opened his eyes again, pulling a new brick of metal from the neatly stacked pile in front of him. His fingertip glowed gold as he was about to repeat the process, when suddenly, the door to his lab was thrown open and a man rushed in.

"Mon dieu!" the man shouted, practically vibrating with excitement. "We have done it!" He threw his hands up in jubilation and pounced at Aron in an attempt to wrap him in a hug.

Aron dodged to the side and the man crashed face-first into the chair he had been sitting in. "You found it?" he asked.

"Oui! This material, I shall call it... hmm." The man paused, lost in thought. It was obvious he had rushed over the moment his discovery was made without even thinking about anything beyond having made it.

'Well, I guess I'd be just as crazy as him if I was a Lab City researcher,' Aron internally mused.

The man who had interrupted his work was Professor Yves Brechet, a famed French metallurgist. Aron had personally tasked him with coming up with an alloy that could act as a superconducting

medium for mana, a job that he was uniquely qualified for and had been working on for the past thirty-odd years, nearly a full tenth of his time in Lab City.

Aron had been working on a type of Superconducting Mana Energy Storage device that could handle mana, but had been stuck on finding the right superconductor for it. But that was exactly what Lab City was for.

"Well, no matter what you eventually name it, professor..." Aron began, then noticed that the professor's eyes had glazed over and he was mumbling to himself. He leaned in closer and listened.

"Yvesium... no. Wait, yes! Yvesium! I... no, it's an alloy, not an element!" the professor continued droning on under his breath, having completely forgotten Aron's existence.

Aron sighed and waved his hand, sending Professor Brechet back to his own lab, then rubbed his temples and fell back into his chair. "Nova," he said.

Nova stepped out of concealment-she never actually left his side, even when he asked to be alone so he could focus-and asked, [Yes, sir?]

"Where am I going wrong? Why can't I decipher the runes on my own heart?" He grit his teeth in frustration.

[Ten weeks, sir.]

"Hmm?"

[You were insistent on figuring this out on your own and swore you'd do it without anyone else's help, sir. It's only been ten weeks-are you already giving up?]

"If I'm unable to do something, should I continue trying for years, decades, or even centuries? All I'd be doing is wasting time banging my head against an indestructible wall! I have better things to do with my time and there are people who need me," he righteously said.

[Alright, sir. Can I ask you for a favor?] Nova changed the subject.

"Oh? Of course you can, Nova. What do you need?"

[I'd like your permission to use your brain data for a secret project, and for you to not ask about it until it's ready, sir.]

"Of course, you have my full permission," Aron said, then wrenched the conversation back onto its original course. "So do you have any advice on deciphering the runes on my heart?"

[Certainly, sir. If you look at it, doesn't it look like a coding language? It isn't a lexicon, so you've been going about it entirely the wrong way, sir.]

Aron was dumbstruck. He had been so focused on deciphering the individual runes that he'd failed to pick up on the structure they were arranged in. Now that someone had pointed it out, though, he had an obvious direction to go in with his efforts.

Sometimes life was just like that.

"I need a time bubble, Nova. Crank the time dilation rate up in my lab as much as you can, I have a language to learn."

[Yes, sir,] Nova said, then generated a time bubble as requested and stood motionless, watching over Aron for any sign of instability or inability to handle the dilation. She was surprised when he easily managed to handle a time dilation of 1427:1, which was as much as she could give him with the processing power at her disposal. The empire still needed to function, after all, or she would have focused all of her quantum superclusters on his request.

Fifteen "years" later...

Aron opened his eyes, having finally deciphered 2.81% of the runes carved into his heart. It was his absolute limit, as the rest of the runes seemed shrouded in some kind of obscuring fog.

He reached out and grabbed a smartphone-sized brick of Professor Brechet's new alloy and his fingertip glowed gold as he rapidly passed it back and forth over the surface of the material, leaving trails of glowing golden rune script carved into the metal in the wake of his fingertip. Soon, the entire brick was covered in so much rune script that the whole thing glowed a dim, dark gold and it began sucking the mana out of the air in his lab.

Aron smiled at his success and tossed the brick up and down, catching and tossing it back up like an expert juggler. "I did it, Nova. It's a success!"

[Congratulations, sir!] she said. [Now all you have to do is figure out how to automate the process so you don't have to do it yourself.]

"I know just the thing," he replied, bringing up his system shop interface.

[Runic Imprinting, tier 1

They say laziness....]

He added it to his cart and checked his available SP. With a small grin, he clicked the purchase option and settled back into his chair to accept the knowledge download from the system.

Chapter 488 A Pappy's Job

"Shit! Run, you fucking idiots!"

Master Sergeant Jose "Tekillya" Cuervo was in a ruined city with the rest of Reaper Team 22. It had started as a nice, quiet little metropolis full of busy little worker bees going about their day, until a supervillain had kidnapped the son of the city's mayor. Reaper Team 22 had been sent in to neutralize the criminal, save the child, and prevent the situation from spiraling out of control and escalating to an absurd level.

Obviously, something had gone wrong.

Tekillya fervently cursed Murphy as he ran at top speed, the shadow of an entire skyscraper surrounding his team. As it turned out, the kidnapper was part of a team of criminals, and one of them had ripped an entire skyscraper off of its foundation and simply thrown it at the hapless reapers.

Naturally, it wouldn't kill them if it hit them. It wouldn't even really cramp their style all that much, much less part their hair on the wrong side, but it would still be embarrassing. After all, who would want to be known for being unable to dodge a building? Tekillya's entire team would get so much shit from the other guys in the barracks once the After Action Review was made public. They

already would, having fucked up so spectacularly, but they could at least limit the damage by dodging the building that was rapidly approaching them from the sky.

Then, the entire world froze around them and disintegrated into particles that drifted into the sky and vanished. [Simulation terminated,] the obviously synthesized voice of a VI announced.

Tekillya and the rest of his team looked at each other. "Do you think this means the AAR won't be coming out?" one of them asked.

"Probably not. Supreme Commander Athena will still give us our dressing down," Master Sergeant Cuervo said in a dejected tone.

"Well shit."

The rest of Reaper Team 22 nodded their agreement. Those two words perfectly described the situation they had found themselves in.

The team hit the "big red button" in their AR displays and were transported to a briefing room, where they were met by the last person they wanted to see at that particular moment in time.

"Good afternoon, Supreme Commander!" they shouted in unison.

[At ease, gentlemen. You aren't here to discuss your, frankly, epic fuckup in your last training mission,] she said with a thin-lipped, sadistic grin on her face. [Instead, you were pulled out to assist in testing a new piece of gear. I'll let its creator explain more.]

She stepped aside and a bright light grew from a spark into the shape of a person, then resolved itself into Aron, who was standing with pride etched into every inch of his body.

"Hello, gentlemen. Athena should've just informed you of your next task. You'll be putting the new equipment through its paces in simulated stress testing. Athena assures me that your recent mission results have proven that you're the exact right people for the job," he said with a smile on his face that wasn't a smile.

[Trust me, sir, they absolutely are,] Athena assured him from the side, then cast a baleful gaze over the members of Reaper Team 22 in the briefing room.

Aron nodded and continued, "The equipment you'll be testing is the Psionic, Arcane, and Physical Shielding system, or the PAPS for short. It's designed to protect you against all forms of damage, leaving your NUTS as a backup form of protection. Now that people are being blessed with superpowers, it's become apparent that we need to preemptively develop protection systems that work against all forms of damage, not just the physical...."

Aron spent the next ten minutes giving a brief overview of the PAPS system to the eager Reaper Team members, then threw them a data file containing the detailed spec sheet for the new gear that would be added to their kit and vanished.

[Any questions?] Athena asked.

The team shook their heads and chorused, "No questions, ma'am!"

[Alright then. You have one day to go over the data, then the testing mission cycle will begin. Dismissed!]

"Yes, ma'am!" the reapers shouted with a salute, then left the briefing room and headed back to their team barracks.

"So, first order of business," Tekillya said once they returned to their squad bay. "What should we call this new kit?"

A number of suggestions were thrown out, and one member of the team got thoroughly booed and beaten to a pulp for suggesting "PAP Smear" as the nickname for the new gear. Then the hubbub died down for a few minutes before another member of the team suggested, "Why don't we call it Pappy? My pappy always stood in front of me whenever bad things happened. He shooed away the monster in the closet and the monsters under my bed when I was little, taught me to swim after he saved me from drowning when I fell in the pool... a lot of things, really. My pappy protected me when I was little, and now that we're big, our pappies can't help us anymore. But this one can."

The whole squad bay fell into silence as the men thought back on their lives and their fathers, whether they were present or not, protective or not, decent or not.... Even if their fathers were the most vicious, abusive scum they knew growing up, every single one of them dreamed of having a "pappy" like the one described by their squadmate.

"Well," Tekillya said. "It looks like we have a winner."

The rest of the men nodded, then they all got down to business going through the detailed specs in the file Aron had thrown them earlier.

An hour later, they finished reviewing it, and one of them asked, "So, Master Sergeant... do you think Pappy will protect us from getting skyscrapers thrown at us?"

The squad bay fell into another long silence. This time, though, it was a cold, menacing silence as everyone glared at the person they were about to beat into respawning for bringing up their most recent humiliating shame.

## Chapter 489 The First Supervillain

The world was still in the recovery phase after the economic and financial crash. Thanks to an immense amount of stimulus and other aid payments on behalf of the government, companies had been hiring people in droves, driving down the global unemployment rate by quite a lot.

However, due to the disparity in education among the population of some former countries-either as a result of devastating wars or just plain bad leadership-some areas were still suffering. The economic growth seemed to have passed them by; after all, if they don't know a program exists to help them, how can they be helped? Thus, they were only surviving on life support thanks to the Coeus Foundation donating funds and building free clinics and schools and such. But recovery in the worst areas would still remain slow until their education levels caught up to the global standard. And that, unfortunately, was a problem that only time could solve.

Among those areas still in the grip of an economic downturn was the former country of North Korea. They had the highest unemployment rate and lowest educational standards as a result of the Kim dynasty purposefully keeping them uneducated and heavily reliant on their leadership. And due to the generational brainwashing that had been implemented throughout their country, Aron had to take some extreme measures to prevent them from following the Kims into the grave, or perhaps worse-acting out and taking up what arms they could still find to fight a war against the world.



Thus, that area had the highest concentration of cubes per capita in the entire world. They were required in order to retrain the former DPRK armed forces. Once those had been settled into their long-term pods, the next group to be treated were the very old, the very young, and the very ill. The empire wasn't just providing healing of the body, but also healing the minds of the people and clearing the fog that the Kim regime had purposefully put them into, clearing their minds and restoring their critical thinking skills while not implanting any further operant conditioning triggers.

Once the first pass had been completed, recovery was deemed to be well on its way and the former soldiers of the DPRK were given a choice: join ARES, retire with a lump sum payment in END to kickstart their new civilian life, or join the imperial police agency. Those former soldiers who had committed crimes, though, were referred to the imperial judiciary for prosecution of their crimes. And with no flimsy statute of limitations law in the imperial legal code, even crimes committed decades before were added to the judges' dockets for trial and sentencing.

Regardless, most of them chose to remain in the military. They felt that their future prospects would be better should they maintain the lifestyle to which they had become accustomed over the course of their entire adult lives. A majority of those who chose not to continue into ARES chose instead to work for the imperial police agency, trading the military uniforms they'd had forced on them for civilian uniforms that they chose. Only a very few chose the lump sum retirement, mostly those who had families to support, and that would support them. The number one reason they cited for leaving the government service was that they felt the danger level in such service had greatly increased with the advent of the "blessed", people who had been granted superpowers by some mysterious particles floating in the air around them.

But even though their insecurity was high and their prospects low, the former North Korean nationals were almost unanimous in their fervent support of the empire. Seeing the downfall of the former rich families that had supported the laughably corrupt Kim regime through the eyes of freshly deprogrammed people had made them thankful to the empire that had lifted them out of their previous poverty, making their region the most loyal of all the regions in the empire as a whole, just after Eden, which had the fortune to be the birthplace of the Terran Empire.

However, even though the former Democratic People's Republic of Korea was fervently loyal to the empire, that didn't mean there were no problems.

A young man of Korean descent was standing in front of one of the temporary physical branches of the Bank of the Universe. The building was one that had been repurposed from the Central Bank of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and had been confiscated as a part of bringing down the pillars of support behind the Kim regime.

He silently walked into the building and took a number from the dispenser, then took a seat and waited for his turn to arrive. After about ten minutes, his number showed on the screen and he headed to the station of an attractive bank teller in her late twenties or early thirties, wearing standard "Office Lady" attire.

"Good afternoon! Welcome to the Pyongyang branch of the Bank of the Universe. How can I help you today, sir?" the lady asked with a smile on her face. The bank paid very well, which had turned her from a "useless money-losing thing" into the breadwinner of her entire family.

"I'd like to make a withdrawal," the young man calmly said.

"How much would you like to withdraw?" asked the young lady.

"All of it."

The bank teller queried the Akashic Record for the man's ID, then brought up his account in her AR glasses to facilitate his withdrawal. He only had 15 END in his account, so she opened the drawer and counted out two bills, then slid them across the counter toward the young man.

"Here's your 15 END, is there anything else I can-AAAAAAAAAAGH!" she screamed, suddenly in excruciating pain as the young man grabbed her wrist in his now-flaming hand.

She continued screaming herself hoarse and struggling to escape the man's grip as smoke rose from her arm together with the sickly-sweet stench of roasting human flesh.

"Bring me the manager!" the man shouted as he held the teller's arm pinned to the top of the bank desk. Then he dragged her kicking and screaming over the top and around to the location of the bank vault.

The bank's security guard had immediately reported the situation, but as it involved the use of a superpower, he'd been told to stand down and continue observing while a specialized unit was dispatched to deal with the problem. The rest of the people in the bank were similarly unable to act, as the man had switched his grip from her arm to her neck, threatening to cook her to death the moment anyone attempted anything heroic.

This bank robbery would go down in the history books as the first incident in which an individual used their superpower for evil, and it had only been a few short hours after awakeners had left the cubes, their awakenings completed.

#### Chapter 490 A Completely Foreseeable Problem

Although the Bank of the Universe building had been requisitioned by the empire, they'd done a deep scan to ensure it would be safe for use as a temporary branch of their bank. After the scan discovered no issues, they had decided not to renovate it, as it would be a waste of resources. Some things had been done, however, such as upgrading the security system and installing a monitoring VI to ensure rapid reporting of any issues to the higher-ups for further evaluation and decision making.

\*A superpowered individual is currently attempting a bank theft. Situation: rainbow. Casualties: one. Damage: white. Evacuation in progress.\*

The moment the report came in, the imperial agencies sprang into action. Orders were passed to the imperial health agency, the imperial police agency, and ARES.

The response was overwhelming and, some might say, unnecessarily large. Within a minute, two First Response Vessels (FRVs) had arrived, one carrying firefighting equipment that could douse an entire kilometer around them in firefoam to stifle any fires, and the other carrying over four hundred medical pods in its cavernous hold. More FRVs were hovering high above the Bank of the Universe branch in case the situation spread and they required more emergency medevac capacity.

Along with those, the imperial police agency dispatched a full twenty transport shuttles, armored to withstand heavy fire, and filled with squads of SWAT teams and enough riot control officers in full gear to cordon off an eight-block radius around the bank, plus a hostage negotiator and a detachment of LEAs to ensure his safety.

Meanwhile, the ARES base outside Pyongyang had dispatched two hovercopters loaded with a full platoon of ARES troopers. They were hovering just under five kilometers away from the bank and could reach it in a matter of seconds. High above, beyond the Karman line, was an ARES orbital strike cruiser with an entire two battalions of troopers loaded into yeet pods to await emergency deployment.

Three minutes since the start of the robbery.

The superpowered criminal was still holding the bank teller by the neck, supporting her entire body weight and holding her upright, even though she had fallen unconscious due to the pain of her cooked arm. The branch manager was scrambling in the vault, frenziedly sweeping cash from the shelves into large bags the bank generally used to transfer hard currency from place to place, as the young man had demanded.

Currently, the bank manager wasn't worried about the theft in the least. He was worried, however, about the time he was taking. The empire had emphasized during training that, if a robbery were to occur, they were to cooperate with the robber as best they could, as money could be recovered, but lives could not. And if the robber didn't release the teller soon, she would only grow closer and closer to her death.

When he finished filling the bags with money, he zipped them closed and turned to the young man. "This is the most these bags can hold without ripping. Any more than this and you won't be able to carry it. Can you please take these and run? Leave the girl behind, she'll only slow you down, and the longer you're here, the less likely your escape will be. So how about it, eh?"

He was trying to convince the robber to flee, so as not to escalate the situation any further than it already had been. Unfortunately, he had failed to take human nature into account.

"Are you giving me orders, you subhuman filth!?" the young man screamed in a rage at the thought of a piece of garbage without powers thinking he could order him around, or that he was smarter and could think of things that a member of the blessed couldn't.

"No, no, no," the manager assured with a wave of his hands and a shake of his head. "That's not what I'm trying to do at all. All I'm saying is that if you stay any longer, you'll increase your risk of being caught. That's all! I swear I'm just trying to help you!" He was panicking at the thought of potentially having made the situation worse.

"You lowly, unblessed, piece of-"

Just as he was about to start ranting about how great he was and how useless the unblessed were, he was interrupted by a voice coming from hidden speakers all over the bank. "Testing, testing, one, two, three...."

The voice cleared its throat and continued, "Ahem... Kim Ho Song, this is negotiator Park from the Pyongyang imperial police agency. Please pick up any phone with a signal and dial any phone number so we can have a chat."

The security guards in the bank had already finished evacuating everyone present except the teller, manager, and robber. Once the guards themselves had exited the bank, it was completely sealed by the VI security monitor, confining the robber like a turtle in a jar.

Despite not being exactly thrilled about it, the young man realized he had been trapped by the subhuman unblessed scum and took the Zeus One the manager was holding out to him. He dialed the local police number and the call immediately connected. It had been automatically routed to the negotiator in the form of a video call.

"What do you want?" Kim Ho Song sneered as he pulled the phone around in front of the teller. He kept one hand on her neck, holding her up in front of the screen and his hand soon began glowing red. The woman woke up from the new pain, but all she could do was whimper and shudder, her body weakening by the moment and her eyes in the process of fluttering closed, perhaps for a final time.

"Please release her and tell us your demands. With her alive, there's a greater chance your demands will be met. But if she dies, that chance becomes zero, and the empire will come down on you with the weight of billions."