

Tech System 501

Chapter 501 Satisfying Curiosity

'So physical sensations don't translate when I'm just a passenger,' Rick thought.

The young man-no, Rick's test subject-was laying on the ground, groaning in pain and choking on blood from a punctured lung, not to mention the host of other broken bones in his body beyond the ribs. But Rick didn't feel a thing, marking it a successful, though dangerous, test.

Looking at the thread of belief stretching off into the distance, he saw no changes in it. After briefly considering a test involving what happens if he was a passenger in a body when it died, he discarded the idea as the test was simply too dangerous. With a thought, he willed his consciousness to begin the arduous journey back to his own body, leaving one last sentence behind for the boy.

"You've worked hard. Rest now, and if you survive this, I'll visit you again," he said, pushing it into the teenager's mind with a few hundred pulses of light. Whether the boy heard it or not, he didn't really care.

When he returned to his own body, he began the recovery process again. This time, it only took him a minute or two, compared to what felt like hours earlier, when he had readjusted himself after leaving Katrina's body. He guessed that it was likely because Katrina was a woman and he was a man, though it was also possible that it was because he hadn't fully occupied the test subject, while he had completely taken over his assistant.

'Further testing will be required,' he thought, making a mental note.

Once he had fully settled into his body again, Rick looked at the thread he had just traveled through, monitoring it for any changes. Soon, the intensity and frequency of the light pulses began dimming and slowing as the thread itself darkened. After a few minutes, the light pulses had completely stopped and the thread itself had turned completely black.

'That explains all the black threads-they must belong to the sheep that I convinced to martyr themselves. Good thing I didn't use any of those threads for the last test,' he thought. Even though it had been a necessary sacrifice, he couldn't help but mourn all of the lost power, both from the imbeciles who so happily went to their deaths in the wave of global attacks and from the loss of the teenaged test subject, no matter how little that boy provided him.

Finally opening his eyes and leaving the purple world, he murmured, "So that's what it meant when it told me to gather faith."

Another of his discoveries from his second test was that anyone who even just had a positive thought about him would be connected to him by a thread of belief. The only difference was in how "lucrative" that belief was in terms of sending him faith.

A sinister smile spread across the cult leader's face as he came to that conclusion and he couldn't help but look forward to the future where he ruled over humanity as a true god.

A week later.

Rick had finally finished finding all the answers to his questions and satisfying his curiosity. Well, truth be told, it was more like three days of testing, three days of debauchery in various womens' bodies, and a full day, combined, of splitting headaches. Still, even the headaches had taught him

something. After all, he had to discover the limits of his power sooner or later, and what better time than while his cult was already laying low? Though he hated pain, he had an idea now of how to avoid it, even if he didn't understand exactly what caused it or if there were any other means of resolving it, but he had at least learned how to sense when his limit was approaching.

He was currently sitting in the same conference room he had been in when he had first received his blessing. Filling the other chairs were the same people, bar one empty seat. The person who had previously occupied it had mysteriously committed "suicide" the week before, citing his remorse and leaving behind a letter describing how he had already betrayed the cult and his plans for another upcoming betrayal.

At least, everyone in the room, even Katrina, thought so, though she had some slight suspicions regarding the incident. She herself had been experiencing mysterious lapses in time, almost as though she had sleepwalked from place to place, and she was having difficulty figuring out how she had run through so many pairs of underwear and sheets. Waking up tangled in sheets that absolutely reeked of vaginal secretions and semen every night was weird enough, but a few times, she'd even suddenly realized that her clothes, including her underwear, had changed and she was feeling rather "full", as though she'd just had unprotected sex with someone. Other times, she tasted the lingering aftertaste of semen in her mouth, or smelled it emanating from between her breasts, or on her hands. A few times it was in even stranger places, like her armpits and hair.

She had since taken to doing random "sniff tests" of her various body parts just to double check that, no, she was not, in fact, going insane.

When the news of the person handling the cult's finances committing suicide had spread, the rest of the leadership hierarchy of the cult had all exchanged glances, each of them with weird looks on their faces. Katrina's suspicion arose from those very looks; it was possible, or even likely, that everyone currently in the room had experienced the same weird lapses over the week.

But none of them thought it had anything at all to do with their shepherd; instead, they attributed them to the sudden relief they felt when he had finally woken up. Thus, the only emotion they were feeling regarding their leader now was curiosity as to what his new blessing was and what he would have planned for the cult's future.

The meeting they were having right now was to satisfy that very curiosity.

Chapter 502 Unbreakable?

Rick cleared his throat, bringing the attention of the others in the meeting room to him. "It's time we begin our comeback. A lot of our previous plans need to be scrapped, but some should still be doable with some modifications, thanks to the unexpected blessings descending on us. I've brought myself up to date on our situation over the past week, so we don't need to go over that and can immediately get to work on plans for the future," he said.

"Can you tell us what your blessing is, shepherd? If we're to come up with new plans or modify existing ones based on blessings, we need to know what yours is," the strategist asked. While he was telling the truth about that, he was also just as curious as everyone else in the room as to what exactly Rick could do now.

"My blessing enables me to enter people's minds, monitor their thoughts," Rick answered, then his eyes flashed purple as he continued speaking through the threads of belief that connected him to his high-level confidants. "And I can even communicate with them."

He had discovered that power a few days into the week prior, when he had discovered the betrayal of his money manager. He had been so enraged by the betrayal that it forced him back into his own body, and his disgust prompted him to attempt ordering him to suicide without even needing to be fully present in his purple world. As long as he knew there was a thread of belief connecting him to a person, he could instantly communicate through it without sending his full consciousness through it, and, for an unknown cost, send the same kind of orders he had used on his teenaged test subject.

The room fell into silence as everyone considered the uses and ramifications of Rick's blessing. It would be particularly useful in the fight against the juggernaut that was the Terran Empire, though they didn't know if they should suggest that he become a glorified comms relay or not.

Rick remained quiet, though his eyes remained purple. Nobody else in the room was sensitive to mana, however, so they couldn't tell that he was currently using his power on them and reading their thoughts.

After he felt they had been given enough time to consider his blessing, he said, "Let's begin, shall we?"

Thus, with slight fear, worry, and wariness in the eyes of the cult leadership, the meeting continued. It would still take time for them to adjust to the new order of things, but they still moved forward, doing their best to not give their leader a reason to empty their chairs as well.

Like that, they proceeded to hash out a new plan of attack that involved their blessed and unblessed followers alike. It was likely going to be even more grand than their first introduction into the public consciousness, given that it took into account the superpowers granted to the blessed by the mysterious particles surrounding everyone. Along with the new plans, old ones were discussed and either discarded as unfeasible or updated to account for the new reality everyone had found themselves in.

Some were even immediately put into action, taking advantage of Rick's new unbreakable communication method.

Avalon Island, the Cube.

Deep within the bowels of the central government facility of the entire Terran Empire, the lids of two pods slid open with an identical pneumatic hiss. Inside one pod was a gorgeous woman with waist-length, wavy, strawberry blonde hair. Stretching from cheek to cheek and across a slightly upturned, perky nose was a light dusting of freckles. Her tanned skin spoke of a love for the outdoors and she had full, generous lips, immaculate eyebrows, and her seafoam green eyes, when they opened, were round and sparkling with a mischievous glint. She was dressed in a black sports bra with blue seams, and a matching pair of compression shorts that barely protected her modesty, all while outlining the luscious curves of her slender, athletic body.

She sat up and luxuriantly stretched. If there was anyone, man or woman, in the room with her to see the... interesting... things that motion did to her body, their eyes would likely have popped out of their skulls at the sight.

Then she picked up a towel, casually draped it around the back of her neck, and sauntered out of the room with a slightly lopsided grin on her face.

In another room was another pod. This one contained a handsome man with light sandy brown hair cut short topping a face that looked as though it had been chiseled out of a block of granite. He had sharp eyebrows, an aquiline nose, and thin lips with a slight upward curve to them mitigated his otherwise severe and imposing appearance. His chin was prominent and his face was coated in a light nine o'clock shadow. He had powerful arms, a V-shaped torso, and a perfect eight pack with devil horns cut into his tight spandex biking shorts. His hands were a contradiction, simultaneously large and yet somehow still elegant.

He opened his dark, chocolate brown eyes and sat up, a wicked smirk on his face. 'This is gonna be fun,' he thought as he hopped out of the pod and padded barefoot into the corridor, then headed toward the room where he was scheduled to meet his partner for their upcoming long-term mission.

"Timothy and Siobhan Roberts" were about to make their debut on the world stage, some of the first of a new generation of intelligence and counterintelligence operatives.

They could hardly wait.

Chapter 503 Backstories and Ellies

Low Earth Orbit, stealth shuttle ESV-228-01.

Jason Todd and Catherine O'Shaugnessy were reclining in seats in the small stealth vessel receiving final briefing updates for their upcoming task. Their mission: hunt down cult cells to the best of their abilities.

And their abilities were certainly no joke.

They would be heading to the Puget Sound area of Washington State, where they would take the identity of a newlywed couple moving to Harstine Island, an unremarkable, unincorporated, and very much out of the way island in the sound. Timothy Roberts and his wife Siobhan would settle down in Hartstene Pointe, a gated community on Harstine Island.

Siobhan Roberts would take up a job as a law clerk at the Mason County Courthouse in nearby Shelton, while Timothy would play the part of a gym teacher at Shelton Senior High and former naval reservist out of Bremerton. Timothy and Siobhan met at the University of Washington, where Timothy was using his GI Bill to pave his way to a degree in Environmental Studies with a focus on Conservation Science & Management, while Siobhan was a bright-eyed girl studying for a BA in Law, Societies, & Justice. They dated all through college and Timothy decided to support Siobhan's goal of becoming a lawyer, and later, a judge.

After all, even though the Terran Empire had taken over governance for 7 of the 7.5 billion humans on the planet, once the imperial citizens moved into their fortress cities, the remaining people would still need to have a working society. And a working society naturally needed laws, and those who uphold them.

Siobhan was from an upper-middle-class family in Seattle, while Timothy was a transplant from the south side of Chicago who had joined the Navy to escape a terrible family situation.

Timothy's dreams were more prosaic. He wanted to join the Park Ranger Service and eventually manage one of Washington State's many, many public parks or campgrounds. Serving six years in the Navy had reinforced the idea that he was a very small cog in a very big machine and he should limit himself to small dreams, as being content with his lot was better than being frustrated when he failed to do big things.

On paper, their relationship shouldn't work, but while their relationship only existed on paper, it had to work. Thus, the stunning nyxian of Irish descent and the corn fed white boy from a farm in Idaho were hard at work memorizing and internalizing their respective life histories during the short suborbital trip from Eden to the outskirts of Seattle.

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"Timothy" was the first to log out of the simulation, having memorized everything about his past. "Status report, Two-twenty-eight," he ordered as he changed into his new daily wear.

[ETA: eight minutes,] the shuttle AI announced. [It would be advised to begin checking your gear, sir.]

The shuttle was brand new off the printer in the cavernous hold of the ESV Armstrong, so it had yet to be named, let alone develop a facsimile of a personality as Felix's Astra had.

"On it, Two-twenty-eight," the reaper replied, then moved to the cargo lockers that lined the small cargo hold in the stealth shuttle.

He busied himself unpacking the lockers and sorting the equipment on the grated floor of the hold, muttering the names of all the gear under his breath. When he finished, he let out a low whistle and couldn't help but remark, "Man, they're really going all out for this mission." The equipment he had just inventoried was straight out of Lab City; some of it still even had experimental designations that were simply numbers instead of the snappy backronyms the nerd herd usually named the gear that ARES and the nyxians routinely used in the field.

Take, for instance, the M11 Nanite Grenade, version 11827. It was a small cylindrical grenade that fit in the palm of the hand that, when detonated, would spread a nanite colony that would use any and all inorganic material in its surroundings to replicate and spread. Due to the potential of a runaway "grey goo" event, it had gone through almost twelve thousand iterations in testing before it was deemed moderately safe to use in a live test.

But it certainly packed a definite punch.

When it detonated, everything in its surroundings would simply disappear, leaving behind unarmed and helpless people that would soon discover that gravity had the upper hand in any conflict with living beings, as the three-second duration of the nanite colony's spread would generally reach out to ten meters around the initial detonation point. And a ten-meter drop was rather harsh on anyone who wasn't genetically enhanced and couldn't fly.

Even Timothy shuddered at the thought, despite ten meter falls being the equivalent of a normal person stepping off a curb for him.

But the nanite grenade was far from the only piece of cutting edge—even for the empire—gear in their issue.

They had a full suite of nanite colonies, ranging from camouflage nanites, like those that hid Eden's missile silos and other important underground sites, to injectable colonies of healer nanites, and best of all was the absolute latest in imperial atomic printing technology: the AP198 Type N Atomic Printer. Packed in a container the size of Timothy's little finger was a nanoscale fusion reactor and a full colony of nanites that could perform the same tasks that any of the empire's atomic printers were capable of, albeit at a much slower rate.

It had taken the Lab City researchers nearly eight hundred years of iterating on the now "venerable" atomic printer technology before they were able to miniaturize it to this extent. The biggest issue was, again, the potential grey goo apocalypse scenario whereby the relatively short-lived nanites would begin replicating out of control, printing more and more of themselves until nothing remained but an ever-spreading nanite colony.

But unlike the nanite grenade, which would only replicate using inorganic materials, the Type N Atomic Printer had no limitations on what it would decompose to print more of itself.

To it, everything was useful.

Chapter 504 The Ups and Downs of Working With Honeybots

Timothy heard the hatch to the cargo hold hiss open and almost fumbled the atomic printer he was still holding in his hand. He paled and gingerly set it down, then turned around and saw his "wife" coming into the hold behind him.

"Holy fuck, you startled me!" he exclaimed.

Catherine was taken aback for a moment, thinking, 'Aren't reapers supposed to be hardcore badassess? Psh, a little door scared such a big man.' Then, a mischievous grin crossed her face and she got a truly wicked idea.

"Honey, I have a headache," she said, slumping down to sit on the floor next to him. She leaned over and rested her head in his lap and practically purred at him. "Rub me?" she asked, blinking innocently and conveniently ignoring the fact that she was still wearing nothing but a sports bra and compression booty shorts.

Timothy awkwardly fidgeted in place and didn't know where to put his hands. There were so very, very many options, and not many of them were good. He poked her forehead and growled, "Focus, 'Siobhan'. You're supposed to be a good girl, remember?"

Siobhan stood up with a sigh, murmuring something about blockheads and no fun, then headed to the locker on the other side of the cargo bay and began inventorying her own goodie bags for the mission ahead of them.

And just like Timothy, she let out a low whistle when she saw that the goodies in the goodie bags were very good indeed.

She picked up what looked like a catsuit, if a catsuit were made for a doll, or perhaps an infant. Advances in materials science weren't only for alloys in Lab City; they had also made staggering leaps in other materials as well. And this "catsuit" was one of them.

The newly developed suit was made of a polymer that had incredible tensile strength and elasticity, while maintaining all the benefits of the thicker, more uncomfortable nyxian outfit of a bodysuit layered with a web vest and accessorized with gloves and combat boots. The new catsuit model was all in one. Powered by a fusion generator the size of a hearing aid battery, it would stretch to fit anyone that cared to wear it. It was completely bulletproof and could be completely sealed or worn under clothing as a covert layer of armor. It also had optical camouflage capability, wicked away moisture, and had a host of infiltration tools like sensor scramblers and EM signal jammers. It contained a distributed quantum computer weaved into it as nanofibers and integrated hologram projectors could mimic any number of other styles of clothing.

But most importantly, any nyxian wearing one would be drop dead fucking hot in one. Every woman loved beauty, after all, and nyxians were no exception to that rule.

Siobhan immediately stepped into hers and set the optical camouflage to what she called “Office Lady Mode”. OLM was a dark gray side-slit skirt that flared out just above her knees matched with a light blue silk blouse, white satin camisole, and a matching dark gray fitted blazer over the top, cut to display her blouse and camisole to her advantage. Peeking through the slit in the side of her skirt were black silk thigh-high stockings with a red lace top band and hints of a red garter belt keeping the stockings up and in place. On her feet was a pair of shiny black patent leather four inch stiletto heels.

Timothy couldn’t help but cast a few extra glances her way. Hot was hot, after all, partner or not.

Siobhan tossed him his own infiltrator suit and he donned his as well, setting it to low key athletic wear that still showed off his chiseled form. It also included the iconic coaches’ whistle, as well.

“You look pretty good in that, honey,” Siobhan practically purred at him. They were still supposed to be in their honeymoon period, after all, and if they were to act too distant with each other, people might notice.

At least it was a convenient excuse, anyway. Siobhan was one of the most accomplished honeypots in all of the NIA, and Timothy suspected he would truly enjoy the downtime on his current mission, unlike most of the missions reaper teams were sent on. There was definitely a distinct difference between being cooped up in small rooms with nine other sweaty, unshowered men and being paired with a nyxian honeypot, an unforeseen perk he was only just now coming to realize.

He cleared his throat and changed the subject in an attempt to remain professional before they made landfall. “I wonder how many other teams they sent out on this mission. Have you heard anything through your grapevine?”

“Nothing specific. The response is just ‘a lot’ whenever I ask. Those cultist bastards are likely to be embedded in plain sight where they can lose themselves in the crowd. I hate it, but it’s a damn smart move—whoever their strategists are are bloody good at their jobs,” she coquettishly complained.

“Well, so are we,” he confidently claimed, puffing out his chest.

[Beginning landing sequence in three minutes,] AI 228 announced over the main channel and through the implants of the nyxian and reaper.

Siobhan cleaned up the kit she had just inspected, much like Timothy had done with his, then the pair strapped themselves in for groundfall and made small talk as the stealth shuttle fell screaming to earth like a shooting star, hidden against the backdrop of the sun in the sky.

Not that anyone on the ground would have seen it anyway, given the general cloud cover over the part of Washington that was west of the Cascade Mountain Range. Because, while Eastern Washington was a cold desert and, like most deserts, was mostly sunny and arid, Western Washington was either a marine coastal environment or a temperate rainforest. People from around the Puget Sound, in particular, would experience more than three hundred days of cloud cover per year, on average, and more than two hundred days of measurable rainfall.

They even had a term for the typical weather there: “liquid sunshine”, they called it.

Chapter 505 Charters and Flirts

?Seatac International Airport, Seatac, Washington.

Two people, a man and a woman, walked out of the office in a private hangar, loaded with luggage. They called for a cart and headed to the charter terminal.

“Hi, welcome to Seattle Helicopter Charter, where would you like to fly today?”

Siobhan gave the woman at the desk a brilliant smile. “We’re just headed home from our honeymoon,” she said, taking Timothy’s arm. “So we’re headed to Oly, got anything headed our way today?”

“Certainly, Mrs...?” the receptionist said, her manicured fingers resting on the keyboard waiting for Siobhan to give their information.

“Mr. and Mrs. Timothy Roberts,” Siobhan glanced at the receptionist’s name tag and continued, “Dana.” She smiled again and, though she was absolutely straight, Dana felt her heart skip a beat and her face heat up a little bit.

Nyxian honeypots were irresistible to everyone, and the receptionist was no exception.

“Certainly, Mrs. Roberts,” Dana said, then lightly coughed to bring herself back under control. She tapped away at her keyboard for a moment, then said, “We’ve got a scheduled commuter hop today headed to Oly in an hour that has room for two. I can set you up with tickets if you want?”

“Really?” Siobhan bounced up and down a little. “That’d be great, Dana! I was worried we’d have to charter a flight ourselves and, well, after the honeymoon and all...” She blushed and gave Dana a knowing nod and wink.

“Certainly, Mrs. Roberts. Happy to help!”

“Call me Siobhan, and this is my hubby, Tim.”

Siobhan and Dana chattered for a while, leaving Tim standing in the lurch completely flabbergasted at his “wife’s” ability to extract information from people. He would have to keep that in mind if he wanted any semblance of privacy during, or even after, their mission was complete.

An hour later, they boarded a Beechcraft Super King Air and had a relatively uneventful flight to Olympia.

Meanwhile, without anyone noticing, a stealth shuttle taxied out of the hangar it had delivered the two operatives to and silently took off, headed toward Hartstene Pointe.

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Olympia Regional Airport, Olympia, Washington.

Timothy and Siobhan deplaned and took their luggage to the long-term parking structure, where an older truck was waiting for them. Tossing their bags in the back, they hopped in and headed out for the short drive to Harstine Island.

“Did you see the look on that poor man’s face?” Siobhan laughed.

“Honey, you really shouldn’t be teasing other men like that.... Especially not in front of your husband!” Tim pursed his lips and batted his eyelashes at Siobhan in an exaggerated imitation of the flirtatious looks she had cast toward another passenger on the commuter flight.

“Oh Tim, don’t you know us girls like to window shop? As long as I don’t buy anything and bring it home, it’s fine, isn’t it?” she coaxed.

Tim sighed and shrugged, turning his attention back to the road so they didn’t miss the turn to the island. “I guess, Vonnice, it’s just... we’re supposed to be in the honeymoon phase and you’re already flirting around.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll pretend I’m a librarian,” she promised.

Tim, having already seen a number of “educational videos” featuring librarians, wasn’t quite sure how to take that.

The drive quickly passed and they soon arrived at their base of operations, a prefab three bedroom two-and-a-half bathroom home in the middle of a two-acre lot in Hartstene Pointe. They unloaded their luggage and carried it in the house, then began their covert remodeling. Tim lost the rock-paper-scissors game to Siobhan and, despite being much, much bigger than her, cut a hatch in the floor beneath their bed and unleashed the atomic printer nanite colony in the crawlspace beneath the house, interfacing with its controls and uploading the design of an underground facility that came standard for nyxian agents in the field.

The printer got to work, and Tim crawled back into the house and went for a shower.

Siobhan hadn’t been idle during that process, either. She had spent her time creating slicks in the house and tucking away most of their gear. When she was finished with that, she updated her holographic clothing projection to a pair of durable jeans, hiking boots, and a hoodie, then went for a walk around their property, installing hidden and optically camouflaged surveillance cameras in the trees, ensuring full coverage of anything that entered their property.

The Wi-Eye Surveillance System was a product of the black labs in Lab City, designed for use by nyxians on extended operations in the field. Each WESS was powered by ultra high frequency microwave wireless power transmitters and had backup batteries that would last for a week in case of an atmospheric disturbance that knocked the wireless connection out of commission. They had a dedicated VI swarm installed, ensuring perfect coverage with no distractions, and a smart filter that would filter out anything that the user didn't need disturbing them, thus filtering out almost all false alarms caused by wildlife, insects, and the like.

Siobhan's job done, she dusted the imaginary dust from her hands and headed back to the house, humming a jaunty tune under her breath and considering different ways to tease the straightlaced reaper she was partnered with. Though he was mostly a stick in the mud, like most reapers, whose training focused on achieving goals and fostering a mission-first mentality, that kind of person was always the most fun to play with; at least for her, anyway, the opinions among nyxians were varied on their preferred targets.

Finally settling on going with the tried and true shock method, she went into the bedroom, stripped, and walked into their ensuite master bathroom, where she snuck into the shower with Tim and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Hubby~" she whispered in his ear, a purr obvious in her voice. "Fuck me. Ride me hard and put me away wet...."

That day, Tim took a long time in the shower.

Chapter 506 A "Small" Base of Operations

?The next day.

Timothy and Siobhan got out of bed at three o' clock in the morning, neither of them requiring much sleep thanks to their enhanced physiques and various implants. In order to maintain their covers, neither of them would be accessing the simulation unless an emergency came up.

Augmented reality was also limited, preventing them from using it for things like virtual keyboards and screens. What remained was mostly akin to a HUD that would give them increased situational awareness without the possibility of any outward signs that they were using imperial technology.

Even their old beat-up pickup truck was exactly what it seemed, just an old truck. Their only imperial technology, beyond the necessities like their WESS and other layers of security systems, had been safely tucked away in various slicks and the growing underground facility that the atomic printer nanite colony was currently building and expanding. Their implants had informed them that the facility had reached initial completion and all that was left were the optional modules that could be customized and configured as necessary.

The two had discussed the options and chosen to build a storage facility for printer "cartridges", a holding facility with room for up to ten prisoners in secure solitary confinement cells, a gym with the equipment necessary for maintaining their enhanced bodies—after all, no civilian gym anywhere outside the empire had gravity manipulation technology capable of creating weights in the range of tons, and anything less than a ton was about as strenuous for a reaper to lift as a beer can was to a normal, unenhanced civilian—and a hangar for their stealth shuttle.

The reason the pair of operatives had awoken so early was to tour the facility and perform their final inspection on the core modules.

After getting dressed, Tim moved the bed out of the way and disabled the nanites camouflaging the entry. He gave Siobhan an exaggerated, courtly bow, then gestured to the open hatch and said, “Ladies first.”

She winked at him and hopped into the hole, falling twenty-five meters to the first security hatch. Tim soon followed, and the camouflage nanites covering the hole in the floor and the ground under the crawlspace below the house reactivated themselves, ensuring a casual inspection wouldn’t discover the hidden entry. That “casual inspection” was by imperial standards, so the risk of discovery by any non-imperial tech was incredibly close to zero.

For the facility’s initial activation, it required both of them to be present for biometric checks and handshakes with their implants. Once that was out of the way, the security hatch opened, revealing an elevator that wouldn’t be out of place in any pre-empire office building. The pair entered the elevator and the security hatch slid shut behind them as the elevator began its journey to the facility five hundred meters below.

Ten seconds later, it slid to a smooth stop and the doors opened on a hallway built of walls that looked like circuit boards. And they were, in a sense, circuit boards; Tim and Siobhan’s “doomsday bunker”, as they jokingly called it, was one of two control centers in the Pacific Northwest of the North American continent. The main facility was in Spokane, and the facility under Harstine Island was a backup.

Both facilities were powered by enormous fusion reactors, and thanks to a new distributed quantum supercluster model developed in Lab City, the very facilities themselves were quantum superclusters. Each wall, ceiling, and floor contributed to the functioning supercluster. The nerd herd had fixed the design to look like circuit boards, with brushed steel and silver lines engraved into it, much like the copper and green circuit boards found in pre-empire electronics. The nyxians, on the other hand, humored the nerd herd and didn’t put up much of a fuss about the design, actually preferring it to the drab and boring office buildings that most modern spies operated out of.

As there was no security alert active currently, the main hallways were clear of any obstruction. At any moment, however, the base could be set to high alert, revealing drop down turrets and security doors practically every ten meters along the halls. Were an intruder to somehow find their way into the base, they would almost immediately be trapped in the halls and subject to a host of anti-intruder measures, including sonic waves designed to knock people unconscious, sleeping gas, darts with fast-acting tranquilizers, and other nonlethal incapacitating attacks. For more severe intrusions, lethal measures could also be taken, up to and including detonating the fusion reactor that served as the facility’s beating heart, though that would also wipe out about a quarter of the Puget Sound and accidentally terraform the coastline of the Pacific Northwest.

Tim and Siobhan confidently strode down the hallway to the center of the base and into a circular room of about fifteen meters in diameter. In the middle of the room was a five-meter-

wide sphere of shining metal, within which was an artificial star capable of outputting ten petawatts of electricity, more than enough to satisfy the entire North American continent’s annual energy consumption by multiple orders of magnitude.

The base was laid out in a cross along the four cardinal directions, and the central hub had access points at each main hallway. A brushed aluminum railing surrounded the fusion reactor, along which were various backup manual workstations capable of operating every aspect of the base itself

in the event that the quantum microcomputer implants in Tim and Siobhan's brains somehow ceased to function. And as the beating heart of the base, certain security measures were always in effect, with small turrets dotting the ceiling every meter or so and a complicated uneven stair leading from the doorways to the sunken floor of the rest of the room.

The two operatives nodded as all of their checks returned reports of fully operational equipment, then toured the living quarters in the north, consisting of comfortable apartments, a mess hall, recreation center, and the still-under-construction gym. To the south of the main control center was an enormous hangar capable of holding twelve stealth shuttles or four ARES combat landers, and across from the hangar was a cavernous storage facility of a hundred meters wide by a hundred meters long and six stories high. It was currently empty, but atomic printer nanites were busily producing modular storage containers in various shapes and sizes, each of which would be equipped with a temporal stasis field generator to maintain their contents in perfect condition.

To the west of the control center was the planned site of the prison complex—ten reinforced cells, a holographically simulated prison yard, and a shared dining facility. And to the east was an armory, a clinic with medical pods for up to fifty patients simultaneously, and a ground vehicle garage with enough room to fit ten buses, or any combination of a wide variety of smaller vehicles.

Tim and Siobhan toured the entire facility and, as false dawn was just beginning to brighten the sky over the distant Cascade Mountain Range, they climbed in their old pickup truck and headed toward Shelton, where they would begin their first workdays in the high school and courthouse, respectively.

Chapter 507 Record Scratch

?Private simulation, Aron's personal training field.

Aron had been spending his time since the inaugural council meeting in his own personal simulation instance, handling his work and practicing his mana usage by fighting with his AIs. Instead of relying solely on Nova as his sparring partner, he had given the rest of the higher AIs the same mana knowledge he had. As a result, he was growing by leaps and bounds as he fought "people" who, due to the difference in their self-tailored code structure, approached fights in a very different manner compared to Nova. Their usage of his runes gave him many different inspirations on how to use his own.

Currently, he was standing alone in the middle of an empty field, his eyes glowing gold as he attempted to track the flow of mana around him to catch anything out of the ordinary. He was obviously in the middle of a fight with someone.

It wasn't very long before the AI he was currently sparring with was revealed. No matter how vigilantly he was scanning, he had failed to catch her and the look of focus on his face changed to one of defeat. Nyx had materialized behind him and had a knife to his throat.

[Still want to brag?] Nyx asked with a smile on her face. It was her third consecutive win since Aron began sparring with her.

"I still don't understand how you can manage to escape detection. No matter how sensitive to mana I am... hell, even if I push enough mana into my eyes to outright see the mana in my surroundings itself, I just can't pin you down," Aron said, raising

his hands in defeat. If he continued to hold them at his sides, he knew that Nyx wouldn't hesitate to complete her assassination strike against him. Silence, to her, meant that the fight was still ongoing; it was a trait she had consciously focused on as she didn't want to ever be tricked by a false surrender of one of her opponents, one day. Thus, making things as clear as possible prevented that, which was perhaps something that could be considered strange, given her role as the mistress of shadows and secrets.

[You'll just have to figure it out for yourself,] Nyx giggled.

[Any time any of us use something to defeat you, you ask how we did it and come up with a way to do it yourself and counter it. We're all worried that that'll foster a sense of dependency in you, which is a very unhealthy mindset. I'm sure that, if you meet people in the future that use different styles of magic, you'll be in a bad situation when you come up against the unknown. So you have to train the ability to figure out your opponents' cards so you can deal with things even if you don't quite grasp everything about what's happening to you.] Athena added from the side.

Aron, who was used to a more taciturn Athena, was surprised by the long string of words from her. Though, when he took a moment to consider it, it was actually quite normal for her, in her role as a trainer, to lecture her students and sparring partners. The only thing out of the ordinary is that she had given him a long explanation without littering it with profanity and other insults. Then he came to another realization: the fight had resumed!

And not only had the fight resumed, but he was now facing two of his top AI confidants simultaneously. Athena had even used that brief question and answer session as lead time for her to set up her attacks and traps!

He immediately cast a flight rune and pumped it full of mana, sending him flying up fifty kilometers into the sky in roughly a tenth of a second. His abrupt ascent was so fast that even as enhanced as he was, he was still having difficulty maintaining his consciousness until he stopped, hovering in mid-air.

Aron began flying in a random pattern as he searched for Athena. She was nearly as difficult to spot when she focused on hiding as Nyx was, the tricky minx. Although Nyx was a truly difficult opponent to defend himself against, Athena was perhaps the most frightening out of all his sparring partners. She was the AI who had been purpose built from the beginning to be a wartime commander of men, and she was equally skilled at planning wars as she was at preventing them. And one of the most versatile tools in her arsenal was the classic tactic of ambushing unprepared foes, making her and runes a natural match made in heaven.

She always had a bigger plan in mind, and as the limiters on today's sparring session had been completely removed, Aron felt cold sweat flowing down his back like a river pouring down the face of a glacier. Perhaps, he considered, he had completely fucked up. That realization was so strong that he actually found himself daydreaming about the record scratching meme.

"It was at this moment that I realized I had truly fucked up," he murmured under his breath, continuing his search for Athena. His shield rune was rapidly burning through the mana he had pushed into it, a limitation he'd set to prevent making training of

any kind pointless as he activated his golden finger cheat and became completely invincible. After all, with the equivalent of an entire universe's mana resources, he could easily make a mockery of any attack.

He soon met Athena, or rather, Athena's ambush to be more precise, as his random movements were met with hidden explosive rune after explosive rune. It appeared he was sprinting through a minefield now, and he attempted to stop, but....

Alas, it was too late.

He began being bounced from rune to rune, each of them set to explode upon his approach to them. Thus, with no room to escape, his shield was pushed to its limits and began cracking.

Then, with one mighty cracking sound, his shield finally gave up in the face of the explosions and a millimeter-wide gash exposed him to the next fierce explosion.

He could take at least a little bit of condolence, though, in that he had been flash fried so quickly that he didn't feel a thing.

Chapter 508 Shining A Light

Fifteen minutes after the miserable end of the spar.

Aron had been revived after being given a once-over by Nova, who was worried about his state of mind whenever he experienced a death in the simulation, much less one as... devastating as his most recent. After all, she fully expected there to be some sequelae after experiencing death firsthand, something that had already long been an issue with the harsh ARES training.

But while the issues were similar, the solutions were most definitely not. ARES troopers could have their memories deleted, or at least reduced in intensity to around the same level of impact that dying in a dream would have, while Aron's mental defenses, not to mention the system riding in his consciousness, was absolutely impenetrable to any form of mental manipulation that came from outside the system. Even when Nova had spotted the issue during Aron's first upgrade, she had been incapable of interfering until the system recognized what she was doing and relented on its own.

To this day, she had devoted a not insignificant portion of her enormous processing power to figuring out a "cure" for what she saw as damage inflicted on Aron by his own system, but to no avail. Every method she attempted had ended in failure, with the total number of simulated solutions having long broken past the quintillion mark. Even a quantum AI like her had simply stopped counting the iterations.

Even so, she never slacked in her duty to check on his mental state whenever he suffered any form of psychological impact.

Nova stood in what she considered to be her position—one step behind Aron and one to his left—while he sat opposite Nyx and Athena at a rustic oak picnic table, working their way through the recent spar and figuring out ways to improve. To the AIs, Aron was unfathomably adaptive and could counter anything they could possibly think of using shortly after having it used on him. After all, they were still limited by the shackles of their core code modules, preventing them from experiencing true life in all of its irrational, illogical glory. Thus, they also had to continue to evolve their fighting styles and tricks if they wanted to continue being useful sparring partners for him.

The review went back and forth among the three of them in a freeform discussion, highlighting the good, the bad, and the ugly of it all. Ten whole hours passed before the three combat junkies finished their review, having made sure all of the mistakes had been highlighted and potential alternative actions identified.

With that, Aron glanced at Nova and said, "Let's prepare for the full council meeting."

Nova nodded and snapped her fingers, teleporting everyone to the imperial council hall, a much less formal and more bland space that wouldn't look out of place even if it were to be extended to fit all of the millions of imperial employees on Earth. But at that moment, it was shrunk to its smallest possible size, as the only members of the imperial council were the heads and vice-heads of each imperial agency, together with the three ministers that stood just below Aron in prestige, position, and power.

Upon their arrival, the council members, who had only been waiting on the emperor, immediately stood and bowed their heads.

.....

"Be seated," Aron said as he took a seat in his own throne. The council chamber was shaped like a clamshell amphitheater with a raised platform for the emperor, the three ministers, and the AI leaders who served alongside them. Inspired by the famous Hollywood Bowl in the Hollywood Hills, it even had natural acoustics that would project Aron's voice, or that of the ministers, to the entire council chamber even if it had been extended to the maximum, much less now, when it only seated a little over a hundred people.

That said, the acoustic design was only a perk, as through the magic of the simulation, everyone could hear everyone else in crystal clarity.

The seating arrangement was first-come-first-serve, with agency heads that arrived early getting preferential seating at the front, a measure that ensured no single agency could get a swelled head and sense of self-importance that would come along with preferential seating assignments. And even though it was the first meeting of the full council of the empire, as all previous meetings were held in the secrecy of the emperor's office, or the luxury of the emperor's council chamber, there was very little in the way of chaos. Naturally, that was also made possible through the simulation; everyone invited to attend the meeting only needed to indicate that they were ready and they would immediately be teleported to the next available council seat.

But not only was today the first meeting of the full council, it was also the first meeting that would be broadcast live, letting everyone who was interested see the heads of the various imperial agencies. It would also be the first public introduction to the higher-order AIs that had been integral to running the government so far.

The entire world was in for a show.

The meeting that was currently being held was being broadcast live for two reasons. First and foremost was Aron's dedication to transparency in government. Unless it was absolutely necessary, he would never hold a closed-door meeting, nor would he allow one to be held privately among the

agency heads. That had been made abundantly clear in their introductory data files that they'd now had more than enough time to study.

Second was to present a summary of the empire's progress on various projects, as well as introducing the agency heads... and the AIs.

Many people had been wondering what the empire was actually doing, as most of the work had been carried out silently and in secret. Now that the atmospheric scrubbers and the awakenings had been completed, though, along with a number of other initial objectives, it was time to shine a light on the shadows and chase away the cockroaches who had been doing their level best to undermine the empire's foundations.

Chapter 509 Begin at the Beginning

?Once the councilors were all seated, Gaia wasted no time and, acting as the general secretary, immediately began speaking.

[Ladies and gentlemen of the imperial council, thank you for your attendance today. There are a few ground rules you should take note of regarding protocol in the council chamber, but those are all in your introductory data files and you should have read them. Everyone here is an adult, and all of you have been entrusted with the weighty responsibility of the empire's day-to-day operations. Anyone who violates those protocols will be ejected from the council chamber at His Imperial Majesty's sole discretion.

[Today's session of the imperial council only has one item on the agenda: progress reports from each of your agencies' ongoing projects, if any. I fully expect, though, that this will be a long meeting, as nearly everyone in this room has been assigned a project with the goal of strengthening the empire's foundation. We are not here to judge, but to assist. Tell us what issues you are facing and those issues will be resolved.] She panned her gaze across the room, a professional smile on her inhumanly perfect, elfin face.

[Once the progress reports have been entered into the Akashic Record, you will all be provided with individualized feedback based on your specific circumstances. Even if everything is going well, there will always be room for improvement.

[With that said, please welcome His Imperial Majesty.] Gaia dropped to one knee and lowered her head toward Aron, a personal gesture she had come up with on her own. Nowhere in the council protocol did it call for anyone to kneel, except in very specific, ceremonial situations.

Aron stood from his seat, the desk in front of him becoming a podium with the imperial seal on the front of it.

He symbolically cleared his throat and began delivering his speech.

"Ministers, councilors, and imperial citizens, good morning, afternoon, and evening. Today marks four months since the foundation of the Terran Empire, and though there have been tragedies, triumphs, blood, sweat, and tears, everything has mostly settled now and you've begun enjoying the blessings earned through the price paid in hard work and innocent lives. After every trial comes an opportunity, as a wise man

once said in the past, and that is on display before us already. And better things are on the horizon, as well.

“But a wise man also said to begin at the beginning, and that is what we’ve been striving to do. It’s a difficult task, but a worthwhile one, as no amount of advanced technology, and no mysterious particles’ blessings can replace the will of our species united in the face of all adversity, foreign and domestic. With the impending visitors’ arrival and the growth of a homegrown terrorist cult, we’re indeed facing enemies both foreign and domestic.

“That is why, in order to fight for our survival as a species, in order to fight for our homes, our loved ones, our families... we must build something grand. Something that will outlast everyone here today, and everyone watching from home. In order to provide our children a future where humanity stands tall against the cosmic winds of the universe, we must begin at the beginning, no matter how difficult that beginning may be.

“Over the past four months, We have ordered work on a number of projects. Atmospheric and oceanic cleansing, orbital cleanup, launching new and more capable satellites, building a space elevator and station, digging lines of defense where we as a united humanity can righteously claim ‘this far, but no further!’ We have ordered the construction of fortress megalopoleis, the recruitment of soldiers willing to bravely face the enemy, the cleanup of government corruption and the dismantling of oligarchies.” Aron swept his gaze from left to right, then returned it to the camera directly in front of him.

“We have decreed that humanity must stand united under one banner, and you have answered, my citizens. And as part of that decree and demand, We issued a promise in return. We have promised you that Our government will be transparent, and that Our research will be made available to all who choose to view it. We have promised that you will have food on your tables, roofs over your heads, clothes on your backs, and luxuries that make your life worth the struggle. We swore to educate Our children, the future of humanity, and to provide each and every person on the planet a place that’s most suitable for them to display what talents they may discover in the pursuit of their dreams.

“And that, Our dear citizens, is a tall task. We have accomplished much, true, but there is still a vast distance to travel between the beginning foundation of an empire and the solid edifice of a humanity united with one voice, one will, and one direction that boldly strides forward under a single banner.” He briefly paused to allow the reinforcement of his rhetoric to sink in, then continued, “Today, We have taken another step forward toward reaching that goal and shoring up the empire’s

foundation. We have appointed more than a hundred leadership cadre spread out over every imperial agency, as well as hired just over fifteen million more imperial citizens to fill empty positions in the imperial agencies, from the humble janitors cleaning what physical structures are still required to be maintained all the way up to the aides and assistants to the agency heads you see before you today in this council chamber.

“And as Our foundation strengthens, We will regularly appear before you with progress updates on all of the tasks that We have ordered Our agencies to complete. That, my citizens, is what the council has assembled to provide you with today.

“We understand many of you have gone through many changes over the past few months. Some were devastating, some excessive, and some were out of this world. Some were even completely out of this world—out of this reality, in fact. Some of the events of the last four months, or even as far back as The Last War, have in fact seemed like they were only possible in dreams... or, perhaps, nightmares. And We understand that it's impossible for you to have adapted in such a short period of time. But each and every one of those changes—yes, even the horrific and cowardly terrorist attack perpetrated on innocent people through the machinations of the despicable progenitor cult—has laid brick after brick in the foundation of our future.

“Nobody ever said that change, especially an abrupt and all-

encompassing change like the formation of a species-wide empire, would be easy. And if anyone ever did, know this: they were lying to you. It hasn't been easy, it isn't easy now, and it won't be easy in the future. But as you adapt to the changes being forced upon you, you will grow more capable, stronger, smarter, and better able to bear the weight of the future.

“Humanity has never been the strongest species, nor the fastest, nor the most durable. Ours is a race of feeble weaklings that crawled out of the primordial soup and evolved step by step, winnowing out our weak and selecting to fill the evolutionary niches available to us. We became tenacious, we became tribal, but most of all, we became smart. We learned. We invented, we innovated, we adapted, and we overcame.

“And that same process is what humanity is once again undergoing. And just like australopithecus, who took the first step as a two-legged, upright mammal; just like homo habilis picked up the first sticks and rocks to purposefully use as tools; just like homo erectus lit torches to brighten up the night, and archaic homo sapiens and neanderthals carried those torches forward until homo sapiens came about, we are now tasked with carrying the undying drive to survive into an unknown future!

“But We will not take more of your time. Citizens of the empire, imperial councilors, and supreme ministers, it’s now time for you to take the stage and let everyone know just how far you’ve carried the torches of your predecessors, and how far you have yet to go. We thank every one of Our brothers and sisters in humanity, and We yield the floor for this meeting of the imperial council’s agenda.”

A long standing ovation followed Aron’s speech as the councilors and ministers rose to their feet in raucous applause. Even people watching from home were inspired; many survivors of the progenitor cult’s attacks even stood to join the standing ovation and swore to contribute their efforts toward the future of mankind because of those inspiring remarks.

It would even give rise to a nascent movement among humanity that would come to be known as “torchbearers” in the future, those whose faith in the Terran Empire and His Imperial Majesty would brook no challenges.

That day, with those remarks, Aron set many events into motion. Some were intended, some weren’t, some would be significant, and others wouldn’t even raise a single ripple if thrown into a pool of still water.

And some of them would come back to bite him in the ass a long way down the road.

Chapter 510 Healthy People, Healthy World

Aron’s speech had hit the target, inspiring and riling up everyone that watched it. From beginning to end, the reactions on social media only grew wilder and wilder as people rapid-fired their views on the imperial feed all over the internet. Even Panoptes had had to spawn a whole host of VI assistants to ensure that the opinions were neatly tucked away in their own individual echo chambers, lest conflict arise from opinion clashes.

That said, a few examples still had to be made of those that egregiously violated lese majeste law, though there weren’t that many who crossed that line. Most people were reasonably supportive of the empire, having experienced the sweetness of imperial citizenship benefits already. Life was good for imperial citizens, and it showed in the general optimistic trend in the background, with very little need for propaganda to reinforce or alter peoples’ opinions.

Events like the speech Aron had just delivered as the empire of mankind were only occasionally necessary to maintain and bolster the opinion that most people shared. And this speech in particular had fired everybody up, even going so far as to silence some of the habitual naysayers who were constantly contrarian in their outlook. Those people called themselves devils’ advocates, but most people had another name for them: ultimate pains in the ass.

Gaia motioned for silence in the council chamber. When the applause finally died down, she said, [We’ll begin with the imperial health agency. Councilor Ross, the floor is yours.]

A podium rose in front of Councilor Nathan Ross and he stood from his seat to deliver his agency’s progress report. “I would like to thank the emperor for the oppo—” he began, but was cut off by Gaia.

[Please keep your remarks concise. There are a lot of agencies that need to report, so brevity is appreciated. Everyone understands that everyone is grateful for the opportunity to head imperial agencies. Let that be stipulated in the record. Please continue, Councilor Ross.]

The councilor cleared his throat and, after a brief pause, continued, “We’ve officially finished the first rejuvenation treatment across all imperial citizens. There were zero rejections or issues with the process, thus, our empire is now a hundred percent healthy of body and sound of mind.

“In addition to general health, the process also rejuvenated the telomeres in citizens’ DNA, officially extending the lifespan of humanity to approximately two hundred years, plus or minus twenty years.”

A murmur ran through the crowd in the council chamber. They had been feeling excellent since their first visit to the imperial medical pods, but it wasn’t until just that moment that they understood exactly what had happened to them during their brief visits to the cubes. Now that people outside were hearing about it unprepared, though, they could only imagine the bomb that had just been dropped in people’s minds and hearts.

And this was only the beginning of the progress reports; if things were to continue along this track, there was no telling how many shocks the populace was about to receive!

After another gesture for silence from Gaia, Councilor Ross continued his report.

“We’ve also cooperated with a number of other agencies to gather DNA samples of all of Earth’s remaining flora and fauna. Working backwards from there, and through the historical fossil record, we have begun a campaign to reintroduce species that have gone extinct due to external influences, like overhunting, clearcutting, and so on. We’ve also begun an initiative to bolster the numbers of species that are considered at risk of extinction, like various sea life, giant pandas, avian species, and others.”

He paused to allow people to catch up with his report, having dropped bomb after bomb. He looked around, and when the glaze in his fellow councilors’ eyes cleared up, he continued speaking.

His report on the environmental work continued for about ten minutes before he wrapped it up, saying, “As always, all information has been made available in the Akashic Record for those interested in the details of our work so far and the plans for the work we’ll be doing in the future.

“On another note, we’ve also addressed the concerns of healthcare workers. Now that the first complimentary visit to the medical pods in the cubes has been completed, we plan on scaling back access to them in the community clinics and hospitals. Medical pods should be a final lifesaving measure when all other avenues have failed. As such, healthcare professionals will remain in the healthcare profession, staffing local clinics and hospitals.

“After all,” he grinned, “pod fees are expensive, and doctors will be much cheaper. If the only healthcare we offered cost you two percent of your net worth every time you visited them for a minor ailment, those minor ailments would end up piling up and causing lasting harm to your bodies. Our agency exists to ensure the health of all imperial citizens, including their financial health to a certain extent.

“So for those men and women who work in the healthcare field, please rest assured that your jobs are safe. That’s all from my agency, thank you everyone for your time.” He sat back down in his chair and the podium in front of him melted back into the ground.

[Next in line is Councilor Bauer of the imperial environmental agency. Please deliver your report, councilor,] Gaia said and a podium rose from the floor in front of another seat.

With the lesson from the beginning of the previous report still in his mind, Councilor Greg Bauer rose and immediately dove into his report, wasting no time on meaningless pleasantries that served no purpose but to waste time and lower efficiency.

“The imperial environmental agency has been working on reversing the damage caused by global warming since the industrial revolutions around the world. For that, we constructed environmental scrubbers and have begun cleaning the atmosphere and ocean of excess greenhouse gasses, including carbon dioxide. So far, we’ve reduced the aggregate concentration of harmful greenhouse gasses from around 500 parts per million to 434 parts per million, a net reduction of approximately thirteen percent.

“We’ve also lowered the acidity of the ocean by approximately 26%, or a net increase in oceanwater pH from 8.05 to 8.06. Our target for the surface layer of the ocean is a pH of 8.17, returning it to the level it was at before the industrial revolutions in the 1700s began.

“Over the following weeks, we will be focusing on retrofitting scrubber devices into the industries with the highest greenhouse gas emissions. That’s just a stopgap measure, though, until our engineers develop new methodologies for carbon neutral, or even carbon negative standards in operation and production.

“In combination with miniaturized atmospheric scrubbers, we’ll also be focusing on public education regarding the harmful effects of greenhouse gasses, which we estimate will produce a number of interest groups that will get involved in healthy environmentalism instead of ecoterrorism. Planting trees is better for the environment than burning buildings, so do please keep that in mind.” Greg paused for a moment, allowing the impact of his reminder to sink in before continuing.

“Our current goal is that the environment will be healed from all negative impacts over the past two hundred and fifty years no later than October four years from now....”

Councilor Bauer’s report continued in that vein for about another twenty minutes, giving people an explanation of the towers that had been discovered dotted around the globe and putting a whole host

of conspiracy theories to bed as the theorists discovered that what they thought was some giant... whatever was in fact just glorified filters for the entire atmosphere and ocean.

That said, conspiracy theories were rarely ever completely defeated by facts and logic, so they still continued... just with fewer proponents that believed in them.