

Tech System 541

Chapter 541 A Basket of Panic

As could easily be expected, people panicked and immediately started coming up with “explanations” of just what the hell was happening.

Crazy theories were thrown out like they were free, and people were blaming it on the aftereffects of using medical pods, a targeted mass assassination by the empire—which was an especially popular theory, as most of the deaths occurred among non-imperial citizens—a blessing gone rogue, and the side effects of the increase in “strange particle” density causing people to fail to adapt to it. Those were just the most popular among the many, many theories being spread by panicking people or those abusing it to gain fame.

@Blackdawn: [The empire is finally moving on us! Beware of those with overly solicitous behavior, because they all have ulterior motives! #masskilling #thesnap #thevanishing]

@Tervantas: [I don’t think it’s the empire doing this @Blackdawn. It’s more likely to be some blessed losing control over their superpower, or maybe just failure to adapt to the new particle density. #thinkmore #panicless #thesnap #thevanishing]

@Curtis1122: [@Tervantas @Blackdawn @GAIATech @ImperialPressCorps Tagging the empire. Can you please explain this for us? What the hell is going on?? #thesnap #thevanishing]

Soon after seeing the trends on social media, the imperial press agency released an emergency notification about the situation. They mentioned that it was still under investigation and that a formal response would be forthcoming as soon as the investigation yielded results. Anyone who wanted to follow the investigation was provided with a direct link to the Akashic Record, where they could be updated with the progress in real time if they didn’t want to wait for the official statement.

That calmed the masses a little bit, at least, but speculation continued running rampant and the statement was even used by some as “evidence” of their speculations being true.

The imperial health agency was just as busy as the imperial press agency. Though almost everyone affected by what Aron believed to be Rick’s death had died in an extremely spectacular fashion, some people—mostly imperial citizens who were affected by the phenomenon—had survived on the precipice of death and were hanging by a thread. Those people were placed in newly printed stasis pods until the researchers had time to figure out what was going on and how to prevent it, or stop it in its tracks.

At least stasis seemed to work, as it prevented their creeping decay from worsening. That said, however, they still looked like they had aged by at least fifty years. And it was hard aging at that, the kind that only underprivileged people would experience before the empire was founded and the initial medical pod restoration was carried out.

But for noncitizens, things were quite a bit more dire.

Imperial citizens collapsed like balloons that had a small hole poked in them, allowing the air inside to slowly leak out. But noncitizens collapsed more like balloons that had been violently popped and

simply disintegrated in a matter of seconds, or minutes at the longest. Thus far, they had only discovered a handful of noncitizens that had survived over an hour, during which time they were in excruciating agony as their bodies slowly collapsed and turned to dust before vanishing entirely.

It was more “evidence” that people pointed to that “proved” the empire was behind the attack. Nobody had yet linked the deaths to the cult, and if the anti-empire sentiment continued growing, the chances of the truth being believed would be almost nonexistent.

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Aron was in the emperor’s council chamber, meeting with his inner council. After the greetings were finished, his expression turned grave and he said, “So just what the fuck is going on?”

[It’s become more and more clear that everyone linked to the cult is dead, or dying, as a result of Rick Ashley’s death. We don’t yet understand the mechanics of it, but we’re studying the citizens in stasis and expect to have results soon. We’re at least sure that most of the imperials that were affected are in no way linked to the cult,] Gaia reported.

Aron heaved a sigh of relief. It seemed the empire’s cultist problem had resolved itself with the death of their leader, and he became even more certain of his earlier theory. It seemed that the mana drain effect had been applied to those who believed in the cult’s propaganda enough to be connected to the leader in some way. Through that connection, he had, either consciously or subconsciously, stripped them of all their mana in an attempt to force the body he’d just taken over into awakening.

On the bright side, there would be no survivors to form splinter factions and wreak their own brand of havoc, like similar terrorist organizations had in the past.

“How did you link them? And why are some imperial citizens affected?” he asked.

[Operation Hunting Dog had a lot of them already linked to the cult, either through financial contributions or material aid. There were also those linked to cells that we’ve already rolled up. There’s hard evidence and paper trails of people contributing, the others are simply statistically likely to have been involved in cult activities through their social connections to confirmed cultists. It’s circumstantial at best, but it holds water,] Nyx said.

Aron contemplated for a while, then nodded. “I’m no idealist, so circumstantial evidence is enough for me, as long as there’s enough of it. Did our operatives get any useful intel out of the cultists from Hartstene Pointe before they, I presume, vanished as well?”

“Yes,” Youssef replied. “They managed a full brain data download before the phenomenon began. We had a lucky break there, as one of the cultists captured was a member of Mr. Ashley’s inner circle who was privy to almost all of their planning. Combined with the evidence from the reconstructed Fisk building in the simulation, we also have a full picture of the entire cult.”

He smiled wryly, then continued, “Our luck was their misfortune—their reliance on analog methods and hardcopies of information would have made it impossible to destroy everything even if we’d used a more... traditional method of storming the building.”

Chapter 542 For Immediate Public Release... Mostly

[We also now know what affinity the cult leader awakened. He awakened with an esoteric affinity to faith-aspected mana. Knowing that gives us some clues as to its operation, so we have avenues to research that will prevent it from affecting us going forward. We'll know if we've succeeded for sure once our affected citizens have their disintegration permanently stopped,] Nova reported, as she was the one keeping track of the relevant research in the Lab City gold labs.

"That's a relief," Aron sighed. "About the evidence—is there any reason anyone can think of why we shouldn't make it public?"

There was a possibility that some of the cult's documents might need to be classified for national security, but as he had yet to receive a detailed briefing or any of the evidence himself, he couldn't say for sure.

The human members of his inner council looked to the AIs present at the meeting, as they hadn't had time to read through it themselves, either.

[There's some information in them with speculation that hits pretty close to the truth,] Nyx finally said.

"What speculations?" Aron asked.

[There's a trail of data that suggests the cult knew about our ability to read, store, and manipulate memory. Turns out the cultists I caught going into the simulation were simply just bait that the cult leadership threw out in order to prove or disprove their hypothesis. I apologize for missing that... I was too certain of my own abilities and our technological advantage and let those fish slip the net and did exactly what the cult researchers needed me to do.]

"It's okay, Nyx. Everyone makes mistakes," Aron comforted the most humanlike of his higher-order AIs. "Just don't let it happen again, understand?"

[Yes, Your Imperial Majesty,] Nyx said, her usual laconic tone and expression replaced with grave solemnity as she dropped to one knee before him. [I swear that I'll never repeat a mistake in the future.]

"Good," the emperor said, then turned to the rest of his inner council. "We can classify that as gold-level information under Omega classification. It'll require keyword and letter clearance as well.... Let's see, the keyword should be 'dump', and it'll be classified under the letter 'S'."

"Is there anything else that shouldn't be released?" he continued.

Nobody responded, showing that there was nothing else that should be excluded other than the aforementioned research data.

"Okay then. Gaia, release the information to Mnemosyne for classification, second-eye passes, and release to the Akashic Record. Nova, continue tracking the research

in the gold lab and inform me as soon as there's an update on the situation of our affected citizens. Let them know it's likely mana drain, as the same thing happened during the assault on the cult compound in Washington.

"Nyx, Athena, and General Smith, send out our hunting dogs to search the cult cells' gathering points for any further information that might not have been present in the Fisk building. Jeremy and Youssef, you'll be joining me later.. we have an explanation to give and a victory speech to deliver to all of humanity, not just the citizens of the empire," Aron ordered.

"If there's no further business or additions—" he looked around at those present in the council chamber, then continued, "—and I see that there isn't, so meeting adjourned."

With that, everyone in the council chamber disappeared to prepare for the followup of the cult's destruction, leaving Aron alone in his council chamber.

Soon, he, too, logged out of the simulation and returned to reality. Though he had a speech to prepare, he needed to first heal his heart with his loved ones. Taking action himself was still affecting him; even though his mental state had stabilized, his emotions were still running amok and he needed to ground himself. And though Nova was an excellent counselor and therapist, the only thing that could heal a soldier's heart was love.

Love was one thing that he would never have with Nova. Or at least, not the kind of love he needed at that particular moment in time.

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Ten minutes later, on the roof of the Cube at Avalon Island.

Aron and Rina were back in their "spot" on the roof of the enormous imperial government edifice, lying cuddled together and gazing up at the sky.

"Do you think life is sacred?" he asked.

Rina pondered the question for a long moment, then sighed and shook her head. "No. Life is a cosmic accident, not something sacred or precious. If you create or remove a single life from the equation, the world doesn't stop turning, the sky doesn't weep blood, rivers keep flowing, and the tides keep... well, tiding, I guess." She shrugged.

She paused for a moment before adding, "But it also depends on what and who you're talking about. If it's your life, it's sacred to me. Just like I hope mine is to you. It's all about perspective. But the point is, in the grand scheme of things, life is just life. It's chaos from beginning to end, and chaos cannot, by definition, be sacred.

"At least not in an absolute, objective sense of the word, anyway."

The pair of lovers lapsed into a companionable silence for a time, then Aron finally broke the silence by saying, "Something weird happened when I was confronting Rick earlier."

"Oh?" Rina prompted.

“Yeah. I heard a voice. I’m pretty sure it was the esoteric mana that he awakened to.”

“What’d it say?”

Aron waved his hand and a video of his confrontation with Rick, recorded from Aron’s perspective, played on a virtual screen for him and Rina. Weirdly, however, the voice of the mana wasn’t caught on it, nor was the mana vortex.

He backed the video up to the point where the vortex first formed and manually added the details he recalled to the video file as it played, then paused it where the voice spoke and said, “Here’s where it spoke to me. It said, ‘you win for now’ before the vortex finally dissipated. And I can’t help but wonder what it meant by that.”

“It’s fine,” Rina said. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out in the end. You are, after all, the most brilliant man who ever lived.”

Chapter 543 The Whys and Wherefores

Before the panic and fearmongering could spread further, a notification was pushed to every device on the planet, imperial or otherwise. The emperor would shortly be making a speech explaining the whys and wherefores of the disintegrations.

The notification was enough to bring everything in the world to a screeching halt, as, other than those who were asleep and thus missed it or those doing important jobs, everyone sat and stared at their screens, upon which was displayed the imperial seal. Everyone was worried that the disintegration would be affecting them, their families, or their close friends, and they wanted to know what exactly was going on.

And whether they were imperial citizens or not, Aron had an excellent reputation, so his words bore the most authority.

As usual, Aron appeared behind a podium against a neutral blue backdrop, the seal of the empire proudly displayed on the front of the podium.

“Greetings to everyone around the world,” he began in a neutral tone.

“Earlier this year, the world suffered an unprecedented wave of terror attacks that took the lives of millions of people. And at that time, We swore a solemn vow to all of you. And today, We come before you to announce that We have kept Our promise and the cult of the progenitors has been eliminated to the very last man.”

He paused to let the news sink in as the screen behind him played a clip from his previous speech where he swore to end the terrorist threat immediately after the attacks took place.

“In addition to that, We have information on the wave of disintegrations and premature aging sweeping through the world. It’s the last gasp of the cult in its dying throes,” he said, dropping another bomb as if he was a B-52 during World War II.

“Everyone who turned to dust or aged by decades was connected to the cult in some way. Those who were disintegrated were directly involved in the cult’s activities,

whether by active participation or even something as simple as donating funds or equipment to their cause. And those suffering from premature aging were forced to cooperate with the cultists against their will.

“Yes, there were indeed imperial citizens among them, and no, Our empire doesn’t have the technology to invisibly disintegrate someone. Even if We did, wouldn’t it be a wasteful, unfair, and easy end to use it on people who deserve to receive punishment for their crimes and repent through service?”

Most of those watching understood the concept of crimes being punished by community service. Almost every country on the planet, prior to the founding of the empire, had that option available for criminals. After all, not every crime was deserving of jail time, let alone capital punishment.

Aron’s speech went on as people continued pondering the punishment issue.

“That said, it doesn’t mean that We don’t have an explanation of what happened and what caused it.

“The cult leader, who We now know to have been one Rick Ashley, was born and raised in a ‘militia’ compound in Montana in the United States. He was one of the Three Percenters, and his blessing was the power to instill belief in him, harvest it, and control others through his powers.

“We understand your doubts. Mr. Ashley was well over the age of people who underwent the blessing process, but We have to remind you of something: the day of the terrorist attacks was also the day that the first person began receiving their blessing.

“And that first person is none other than the late cult leader, Rick Ashley. The thousands of terrorists that believed in him strongly enough to sacrifice themselves in the suicidal attacks was what triggered the blessings to descend. After a thorough investigation, Our investigators discovered that the first of those to be blessed was the cult leader himself.

“His action of mass human sacrifice, both of his own followers and of innocent people, was the final blow to an already cracked and weakened dam that held back the flood of blessings. It was also what led to his specific blessing, which We will call the power of faith.

“Through that power, he was able to gather information from malcontents in the empire, as well as assume direct control of those who believed in him. Another aspect of it was that he was able to force people who otherwise wouldn’t obey him into obedience and compliance with his demands.”

Aron’s gaze grew stern as he continued, “Before he died, he was working on another attack that would’ve taken place during the New Year celebration. The plan Our investigators uncovered was

that he would control thousands of blessed people to wreak havoc and cause massive casualties, then frame it as an imperial attack on noncitizens.

“Thankfully, Our people were able to discover his plans before they could be carried out, and in a coordinated strike, eliminated all of the brainwashed and reprogrammed blessed that he had gathered in Amarillo, Texas.”

He paused to let people consider the potential consequences of an attack like that, then changed the subject. “During the operation to eliminate the clear and present danger to humanity, Mr. Ashley was also eliminated. And as a result of his elimination, those who were voluntarily connected to him suffered the same fate as him: disintegration.

“But that wasn’t all. Only those who were willing believers in the cult’s anti-human rhetoric were turned to dust. Those who were forced to believe are also slowly dying and Our researchers are currently searching for a cure to the phenomenon.

“Right now, Our imperial doctors are able to place the victims in suspended animation, putting a temporary halt to the disintegration process, but that is only a temporary solution. And it’s one that We are willing to extend to noncitizens as a courtesy and to alleviate the suffering of the innocent victims who were pulled into the cult leader’s schemes.

“So if you or anyone you know has been affected by the fallout of the cult’s demise, please contact your nearest imperial embassy or consulate and ask to speak with the outreach specialist.”

Aron grabbed the sides of the podium as he brought his speech to a close. “We founded the Terran Empire with the idea that humanity needs to stand united as one in order to face the inevitability of a hostile universe. Even if the visitors that are currently on their way to Our solar system are friendly, who can guarantee that the next visitors will also be friendly? Or the one after that?

“So even if you chose to decline the offer of imperial citizenship at the empire’s founding, Our doors will always remain open to you, and Our goal is not to make you suffer, but to allow you the freedom to choose your path. And as such, We will definitely not let you suffer the consequences of an attack on Us. Not now, and not ever.”

Chapter 544 They Eventually Grow Out of It

Aron had decreed that the remaining days of December would be an imperial holiday. As such, everyone was given the option of taking the ten days off for a paid holiday, or choosing to work for double pay. That included both government employees and private companies alike, a move that was popular with employees, but not nearly as popular with the enterprises employing them.

As for himself, on the other hand, he was still working without pay. After all, he had never taken a salary from the imperial treasury to begin with, save a ceremonial 1 END per year. Even as the emperor, he was still a government employee, so he had to be paid. But since the money was irrelevant to him, he only accepted a token pittance.

He was currently in his office dealing with state affairs. “With this,” he sighed in relief, “the case of the progenitor cult can be considered closed.” He flicked his eyes to the scanner and linked the final document to his retinal pattern and other biometric data, a measure that would ensure the information in the case file would be classified as deeply as it could.

The information contained in the investigation file was the very definition of “highly dangerous”, and as such it would be for the best if it were to never see the light of day again at all.

“We got lucky, Nova. If the cult had known how to train their own awakeners, instead of blindly fumbling about and failing as often as they succeeded, they could’ve been a much, much bigger problem,” he said, wiping a drop of nonexistent sweat from his brow.

{Indeed, sir, and that would’ve made it far more difficult to stop as well. If he’d scattered the cult’s awakeners around the world ahead of time instead of gathering them all in Amarillo for training, we wouldn’t have been able to identify and remove them before their programming activated and they started a slaughter.

{Our luck, I think, was that we happened to catch one of the inner circle in Washington, and you happened to trace his mana back to him. If you hadn’t drained all the mana in the surrounding area, it would’ve been lost in the background noise,} Nova said.

“Another part of our luck is that Mr. Ashley himself didn’t understand how to use his affinity.”

{Beg pardon, sir?} Nova tilted her head, something she had seen humans do when they were confused and seeking clarification on a point in conversation.

“If I were him, I would’ve kept even lower. Made a show of disbanding the cult entirely and gone deep, deep underground. So deep that nobody would ever notice my existence. And he had the tools to do just that without ever being discovered.”

{How so?}

“He could take people over and force compliance, right?”

{Yes, he could. But with our brain data updating every time they used a piece of DR gear, wouldn’t that have been discovered?}

“That was his mistake. He didn’t just take people over, he programmed them to act on his behalf. If he’d just taken them over and ordered them to forget they were taken over and act completely normal... the consequences to the empire would’ve been devastating once all of those individuals were activated.”

{I see. If nothing out of the ordinary was detected on our regular updates of their brain data, then he would’ve been able to continue taking over more and more people, up to and including our awakeners.}

“Exactly. And that’s what frightens me. Mana is a huge evolutionary step for the human species, but... it’s equally devastating. It’s the equivalent to stepping into the

nuclear power age in the 1940s and 50s, except instead of a few governments in control, it's everyone having their own nuclear arsenal. And even worse..." he sighed and trailed off, massaging his temples.

{Even worse, sir?} Nova prompted.

"Even worse, it didn't start with rational humans. The evolution began with irrational people during the time when we're the least in control of ourselves: puberty."

{I see your point. That is frightening.}

"And it's completely human nature, too. Do you know what most protest movements, anarchist groups, and eco-terrorist organizations of the 18th and 19th century have in common?"

{They recruit their members at a young age, sir?}

"Exactly. Anti-capitalist movements like the 99%, anarchist groups like Anonymous and other hacktivist collectives, and even eco-terrorist groups like the Earth Liberation Front consisted almost entirely of people between the ages of 18 and 25. It's something people eventually grow out of, but... unfortunately, now that same age range almost entirely overlaps with the age range of people who unexpectedly gain real power.

"So how do we prevent something like that from happening in the future?" Aron asked.

{I suggest a treaty, sir. You offer imperial training of non-imperial awakeners, but they'll be required to follow imperial law. There are enough of them blowing themselves up or going braindead from mana backlash that I think the suggestion would be received fairly well.}

"That could work... we could make it a part of Operation Boiling Frog."

{Operation Boiling Frog, sir?} Nova asked, puzzled.

"There's a saying about boiling frogs. If you don't want them to jump out of the pot, you put them in cold water and slowly bring it to a boil so they don't realize the temperature is rising and jump out," Aron said.

{But that would never work, sir.}

"I know. It's just a saying." Aron stood and brought up a screen, then started filling it with plans for the next four years. "By the year 5 AE, I want there to be no one on Earth who isn't an imperial citizen," he said, continuing to flesh out his plans.

{I see, sir.}

“And the way we’re going to do that is the same way as frogs get boiled. And we can start with awakeners. As long as they accept our trade of training for patrollers and enforcement, everything else will fall into place like a line of dominoes.”

{I’ll inform the Minister of the Exterior,} Nova said, then flickered for a moment. {Message sent, sir. Now... don’t you have a wedding to plan?}

“Shit! I almost forgot!” Aron waved his hand to dismiss the screen in front of him and initiated his emergency logout procedure.

Chapter 545 The Wedding Planners

Felix looked at Aron with a face full of disbelief. “Man... I know you’re the emperor and above us mere plebeians, but... really?” he asked in surprise as he swiped his hand across in front of him, closing the file he had been reading.

“What’s the problem this time?” Aron shot back, rolling his eyes.

“You have less than ten friends. Ten! Doesn’t that make you the least social royal in the history of the world? And! AND! Half of those are the people you dragged in to be the CEOs of your companies using magical contracts!” Felix scoffed.

He jokingly continued, “Can you even consider that friendship? And besides me and Sarah, don’t you have any friends from your time in school?”

“You seem to have forgotten how everything started. You and Sarah are the only two people that stuck with me when Rottem Morgan threw his little hissy fit and had me expelled under false pretenses after I proved him wrong in public. So however many I have now, it’s still more than two!” Aron playfully punched Felix’s arm, causing him to wince and rub it. “That means it’s a net gain, regardless. Shouldn’t you be congratulating me on my awe-inspiring social skills?” He struck an arrogant pose and looked down on his friend.

“Oh, really? Have you ever spent time with any of them without them being required to be there? Hmm?”

Aron went quiet, thinking back over the past few years and trying to recall if he had ever spent any downtime with his other “friends” outside of board meetings or formal events. Not finding any instances that he could recall, he realized that he had only ever spent time with them when they were required to be with him and his shoulders slumped a bit.

Sarah slapped Felix in the back of his head and he turned and pouted at her. “Knock it off, you two. Play nice,” she said.

The three friends went quiet for a while, then Aron said, “But I have more than five hundred people I can invite to my wedding.” He looked at Felix and Sarah with a smile that positively dripped with faked arrogance and true pride. “What about you two? Do YOU have five hundred people you can invite to your wedding?”

Sarah blushed all the way down to her chest. She was wearing a spaghetti-strap tank top and had fair, Irish skin, so the blush was very obvious. “Wh-wh-what wedding!?” she spluttered.

Felix, too, stammered something but couldn’t quite spit it out.

Aron looked at his friends and laughed, having scored another point in the trio’s long-running game where they tried to provoke each other into speechlessness. He tossed another file to Felix and displayed it on a holoscreen in front of him.

“What’s this?” Felix asked. The file Aron had thrown him was named `guest_list.qd` and it indeed had more than five hundred names neatly arranged in categories by how close Aron was to them.

He scanned the list and a subtle frown crossed his brow. “Why invite ARES troops to your wedding?” he asked. “Are you expecting an attack? I mean, I can understand inviting John, since he’s a minister, and of course you’ll be inviting government officials of sufficient rank.... But what about the rest of them? If someone’s going to cause trouble at your wedding, maybe you should hold it in the simulation instead of reality.”

“No, I’m not expecting any trouble at the wedding, and no, I can’t hold it in the simulation. It has to be held in reality. We can’t do all of our government functions, social or not, strictly in the simulation. Those troopers are just the first members of ARES, the ones that I personally recruited and interacted with face to face,” Aron answered.

“So what about the scientists? You haven’t interacted with any of them face to face.”

“I may not know them personally, perhaps, but I’ve been working with them in Lab City for centuries since stealing their brain data. So they deserve at least that much as the beginning of their compensation,” Aron replied. Lab City was no secret from his inner circle; the only thing that was kept from them was the existence of the system. After all, as the saying goes, “use the ones you trust, and don’t use the ones you don’t trust”. And Aron definitely trusted his oldest friends.

“I suppose that makes sense. But aren’t you worried about them possibly discovering something fishy about the situation?” Felix followed up.

“Well, yes and no. It isn’t like I absolutely have to tell them it’s compensation, you know. After all, they’re all incredible researchers that push the boundaries of science on a daily basis and my empire is going to be a science-focused one. We need to push our tech level as far as we can as fast as we can,” Aron answered, slightly bringing down the mood as everyone there was reminded that they were on something of a doomsday clock.

“But that’s beside the point,” he continued. “We’re here for a happy occasion, we have a wedding to plan!”

Everyone at the table took a moment to readjust their mindset and Felix lightened the mood by clowning around as they picked up where they left off in their planning.

The guest list was the first thing to be worked on and, between Aron and Rina, the guest list rapidly climbed to the thousands. It included close family members, close friends, work acquaintances, government officials, scientists, teachers, influential people, and Sarah even managed to get a lottery-style lucky draw contingent added to the list. After all, it wouldn't be very politically proper to introduce class divisions when Aron had been working so hard to eliminate all divisions that had historically plagued humanity.

Then they moved on to the venue, where it was decided that the wedding would be held in reality at a government tower that they would rush to complete. It would be hard to find a venue that could fit all of the guests they had invited while still having some form of meaning and pomp and circumstance to it.

Sure, they could hold it at a sporting arena if they wanted to, but it wouldn't have the same sense of gravitas that a newly completed government tower would. And although they would be holding the wedding in reality, it would also be open to everyone in the public simulation via livestream and those watching from home on other assorted devices, that way everyone could either say they were there or watched it live.

Chapter 546 Good Behavior Leave

"So everything's final then?" Rina asked, gesturing to the list of people eligible for the lucky draw attendance at their wedding.

"Ah, wait... there's a girl that asked me for an autograph when I was on my 'European tour'. Come to think of it, I wonder if she ever solved the problem I gave her..." Aron looked around and saw the strange expressions on the other people at the table with him. He suddenly realized how what he had said could be misinterpreted and sputtered, "Y-y-you people! Who do you think I am!? Sheesh! She was the front desk attendant when I was checking out of the hotel and she recognized me and asked for an autograph. That would've been that, until Nova looked through her information and discovered she was a talented engineer, so she set a question that, if the girl answered it correctly, she'd find some rewards from Nova."

He shuddered at the cold shoulder he was expecting from Rina later. Even though he was almost positive they were just fucking with him, he had a sinking suspicion that he would be sleeping alone tonight.

Everyone went silent for a few seconds, then Sarah coughed in an attempt to disguise her laughter and the silence broke as everyone started chuckling. Everyone, that is, except Aron, who was less than impressed to have been made the butt of the joke.

[She did, sir. She's currently an employee at Hephaestus and was one of the engineers that helped with the final touches on the fortress city designs,] Nova said against the backdrop of Aron's friends' laughter.

"Add her to the list for a chance to attend my wedding in person," Aron said.

[Yes, sir,] she replied. She added the girl to the list and asked, [She's on it, sir. Anyone else?]

"I think that should be everyone, right?" Aron said as he swept his gaze across the other people at the table. They all shook their heads, indicating that they were fine with the lists as they stood.

"Looks like everything's settled," Rina said with a content smile on her face.

Everyone she wanted to attend her wedding was already on the guest list; even her father, who was still in jail serving his sentence, would be granted leave to attend the wedding. It was a privilege that was extended to all prisoners who were on good behavior and weren't facing execution for their crimes.

"If that's all, then we shall bid you two lovebirds adieu. Rina and I have somewhere to be that isn't shining a light on your romantic world," Aron said with a grin. He took Rina's hand and walked out of the room, leaving Felix and Sarah to their own little pink bubble.

The last thing Aron heard as he was walking out of the room was Sarah asking Felix, "So, how many kids do you want?"

Rina covered her mouth with her hand and snickered when Aron threw her the sound clip as they were walking down the hall.

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A peculiar-looking helicopter landed atop a luxurious skyscraper in Istanbul, attracting the attention of all who saw it. Only one person could be a passenger in that helicopter, and everyone knew who it was because of the ostentatious imperial seal on its doors.

The emperor's private seal was above the imperial seal, displayed in its full majesty, and everyone knew what it meant with just a glance. They had seen it more than once, after all, and every time it was either a very important occasion or some event that would change the lives of many, many people.

The peculiar helicopters were also something of an imperial fashion statement as well. Even though every vehicle introduced by the empire, whether it came from one of the emperor's companies or not, was at his disposal, he would choose to travel in this particular style of helicopter each time.

It wasn't the most advanced, nor was it the fastest, or the heaviest armed, and it wasn't even the most luxurious. It was, in fact, one of the older designs, and one that had faded out of use since the invention of gravity plating. What it had going for it, however, was one simple fact: the Emperor of the Terran Empire seemed to prefer using it.

"Welcome to the House of Hope, Your Majesty and Your Highnesses," a man of Indian descent said as he extended a hand to welcome Aron, Rina, and Henry.

"You don't seem too happy to see me, Jai. You're even sweating a bit," Aron said with a smile.

“To be fair, Your Majesty, we weren’t informed you would be arriving until you were about a minute away. So I had to drop everything and sprint all the way here,” Jai Chakrabarti, CEO of the Coeus Foundation, laughed, pulling a neatly folded handkerchief out of his jacket’s breast pocket and wiping the sweat from his brow with it.

“Well, are you hiding something?” Aron grinned.

“Unfortunately, Your Majesty, I’ll have to disappoint you. There’s nothing to hide in the first place, whether it be public or private.”

“Then what’s with that godawful expression, man? Lighten up a bit, will you?” Aron patted him on the shoulder.

“We need time to prepare to welcome you, Your Majesty. A surprise visit from the emperor of all mankind is probably the very last thing we expect on any given day.”

“There’s hundreds of children living here, Jai. If it isn’t always in a condition I can see without prior warning of my arrival, that just means it isn’t fit for children to live here in the first place.” Aron’s tone grew serious as he continued, “So is that the case, Mr. Chakrabarti?”

“Let’s go in and you can see for yourself, Your Majesty,” Jai said as he pointed at the elevator that had been waiting for them throughout the conversation so far.

“Sure, let’s go have a look, shall we?” Aron took Henry’s hand in his and wrapped his other arm around Rina’s waist, then followed Jai to the elevator as his emperor’s aegis airdropped in throughout the entire area, making that particular neighborhood one of the safest places on Earth.

Chapter 547 Child Rearing for Fun and Profit

Aron, Rina, and Jai were having a conversation in a room filled with toys, play mats, and small desks. Three of its walls were decorated with childrens’ art in bright primary colors and shapes, and a digital display adorned one wall. The sound of children at play drifted in from the windows.

“We’ve established a presence in every city in the world after finishing the last round of renovations. We’re still negotiating with noncitizens to purchase land from them so we can build our own schools, but that’s taking more time than we initially expected.

“We may actually have to continue using the renovated buildings until the completion of the fortress cities, since we’re now responsible for a little under a hundred million orphaned children around the world and the locals are putting up

stumbling blocks in our acquisition negotiations,” Jai said, his tone a mixture of satisfaction and frustration.

The total number of children being looked after by the Coeus Foundation made them the world’s largest privately owned orphanage, which was something Jai was definitely proud of. In his care was more than 95% of the world’s orphans under the age of 18. And over the past years the foundation had been operating, the number was even higher and the “Hope Alumni” had already begun contributing their share to the good work being done.

“How much are we spending every year for the entire House of Hope program?” Aron asked.

“Due to the stringent requirements for quality that you specifically demand, everything comes to around a hundred billion END monthly, or 1.2 trillion END yearly, give or take. Sometimes less, sometimes more... it really depends on one-time expenses like large purchases or construction, which we always use local contractors for.

“The 1.2 trillion figure only accounts for regular costs, like building maintenance and groundskeeping, the salaries of matrons, teachers, and healthcare professionals, ensuring the security of our campuses, and food, among other things.”

At first, Jai had been somewhat overwhelmed by the large numbers he was working with as a part of the Coeus Foundation. After all, he may have been born wealthy, but he had never handled this much money before. He had soon worked through his mental block, however, which was a good thing; after all, that 1.2 trillion was merely one of the projects his foundation was responsible for!

“If it’s just that much, there’s no problem with your spend. Don’t skimp on things in order to remain below your budget—you only need to report for the House of Hope program if your spending crosses the two trillion threshold. Over that, I’ll need an audit report on the books, but under that...” Aron waved his hand, “consider it petty cash.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Jai said, surprised. He’d been worried that Aron might be upset over the spending and had been prepared to put up a fight to keep the funding available, so the actual nonchalance in the emperor’s response left him feeling like all of his preparation time would have been better spent feeding dogs.

“So let’s begin the tour,” Jai said as he stood and respectfully gestured to the door of the classroom the group was in.

Rina’s face was full of excitement as she couldn’t wait any longer to go spend time with the children. And as for Henry, he hadn’t been there to begin with; his was one of the laughing voices drifting through the window from the playground outside.

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Five hours later.

“Until we meet again, Your Majesty,” Jai said as he and a few of the workers bid Aron farewell. Henry had exhausted himself and was asleep, piggybacking on Aron and drooling on his shoulder after four hours straight of playing with his new friends.

“I enjoyed the visit, and it seems like Prince Henry did as well. So we’ll most likely be visiting again in the future—or at least Prince Henry will,” Aron replied as he shifted Henry’s position to limit the drool somewhat. Rina seemed to have also greatly enjoyed her time at the House of Hope as well, given the brilliant smile on her face every time Aron had laid eyes on her.

“You’re welcome any time, Your Majesty,” Jai said with sincerity in his voice, then turned to Rina. “Your Highnesses are welcome as well, the children really enjoyed having you here.”

“We’ll keep that in mind, Mr. Chakrabarti,” Aron said, then boarded his waiting helicopter, which immediately left.

“You look tired too,” Aron said to Rina as he laid his little brother in a reclined seat and strapped him in. “You should take a nap.”

“I will, in a little bit. First, though, I have to admit that I’m rather curious about the House of Hope project and have a few questions.”

“Ask away.”

“I know you hate people living disadvantaged lives when they don’t have to, so that’s probably the main reason you’re spending all this money to raise orphans. But I can’t help but wonder if you have any ulterior motives as well, so... do you?” she bluntly asked. Why should she let questions eat her from the inside when she knows that Aron would always give honest answers to any question she asks him. He would also never judge her, either, a luxury she greatly appreciated after having been brought up in an old money family where judgment was the only constant.

Aron smiled and answered, “Yes, there’s a plan, though bringing it to fruition is contingent on a specific change in Earth’s recent circumstances.”

“So spill it, mister—what’s that devious mind of yours plotting?” she asked, curiosity having fully replaced fatigue in her mind.

Instead of answering her outright, Aron simply asked, “What’s the age limit of the people in the program?”

“From birth to eighteen, just like any other... orphanage....” Rina’s eyes bulged as she realized Aron’s plan from the question he posed to her. “Are you planning what I think you’re planning?”

Aron simply smiled and pulled her head over to rest on his shoulder.

Chapter 548 First, Change the Children

Aron nodded. "It's exactly what you think," he said. "The awakening phenomenon isn't over, and when people reach the early stages of puberty, the clock will start ticking down to their eventual awakenings as well. Thankfully, though, the process will be much smoother as it won't be as... abrupt as the first awakening was.

"So, to prevent the orphans who are soon to awaken, the House of Hope plan was brought forward and made the main thrust of the Coeus Foundation's activities. We will guide the newly awakened through their growth phase and seamlessly shift them into 'hero academies' as they reach the age of awakening. That serves a dual purpose—first, it'll prevent them from their desperation driving them to a life of crime, and second, it'll guide them into working for the empire instead of becoming part of private forces in the hands of noncitizens.

"Prior to the mass awakening of the three percent, we'd already made plans for the House of Hope project, but at that time, it was meant to raise generations of people who would be staunch imperial loyalists. We would raise them, teach them, and train them to work in whatever sector we needed them, but that became infeasible after the mana density reached critical mass."

Aron stopped speaking and waited for his fiancée's mind to catch up. She was a very intelligent and quick-witted woman, but exhaustion makes fools of the best. He sneakily carved a refresh rune in the air and pressed it to her, clearing the fog from her mind, then waited for her response.

The silence stretched for a moment as Rina's face scrunched up in thought. Then she finally asked, "You said there were other reasons. What are they?"

"At the time, unemployment, especially among the uneducated, was on the rise. If we hadn't done something to combat it, it would've led to an unrecoverable tailspin into another economic depression. So we overstaffed all of our programs that were run through the Coeus Foundation as part of that. With a staff to child ratio of one to five, that provided twenty million jobs to people who were of good character, firm convictions, and strong morals through the House of Hope program alone.

"Most of them work as caregivers and have been put through a crash course in early childhood education, but we also hired a lot of people that were made redundant in the fields of healthcare, as well as former orphanage staff members from around the world. We even went so far as to ensure that each House of Hope we built or renovated was multicultural to help break the cycle of ignorance that leads to issues like racism and sexism.

“We also focused on recruiting staff members that had lost their own children, either to miscarriages or... other, more violent, incidents. The goal is to raise the children to be morally upright and righteous in their convictions, and firm in their determination to do good to the benefit of humanity, after all.”

Aron and Jai were investing in the future, raising these children to be dominos in a long chain, whose good behavior and willingness to fight against injustice would build a better environment for humanity as a whole from the very ground up. It would be a generational change, and as such it would be more solid than anything the empire could enforce on people from the top down.

If you want to change the world, you must first change the children.

“That said, we won’t be forcing anything on the children. Instead, we’ll guide them and winnow the wheat from the chaff through multiple evaluations. None of us are so immature that we’ll believe in the inherent goodness of man or some bullshit like that. Some children, despite their guardians’ best efforts, are simply irredeemable. So those children, we’ll subtly separate from the rest and provide them an upbringing that encourages them to find a place they can express their nature without being punished for doing so.”

“Like ARES?” Rina interjected. After all, in most situations, arson, murder, and bombings would get one thrown in prison. But in the military, those same actions would get those same people rewarded with medals and glory.

“Indeed.” Aron smiled. “We’ll subtly manipulate them into joining our military, where their talents will also be put to use. Over the years they’re being raised in the House of Hope, they will never, not once, be unmonitored, and all of their actions and talents will determine their futures. And even if only a minority of them join the imperial government, it’s still worth it.

“Besides, the alternative is for them to end up on the streets or as victims of forced prostitution, sweatshops, organ farms.... The list of potential bad ends for orphans goes on, especially those who have been picked up by shady, underfunded orphanages relying on unreliable donations or criminal consortiums backing them.

“The House of Hope program is a closed orphanage system that will not allow for adoption or outside fostering of the children we raise in it. If anything, it’s more like a boarding school for all ages, where the caregivers care for the children, the children care for the younger children, and all of them are given the best of the best when it comes to providing them with the tools to lead a successful, happy life once they age out and become Hope Alumni.”

“Now I’m really curious to see how the so-called ‘Hope Alumni’ influence the empire in the future,” Rina said with a smile.

Currently, the empire was being held together by spit, chewing gum, and baling wire, through Aron's overwhelming military might and technological prowess. No one was foolish enough to think that all imperial citizens had been completely willing when they joined the empire. They were merely in it either in pursuit of the benefits offered to imperial citizens, or in fear of the dystopian nightmare that they felt noncitizens would be suffering through once the fortress cities were complete and the two societies finally completely separated.

Thus, raising his own imperial adherents was a masterstroke of planning from Aron's side and displayed his forward thinking. It was becoming more obvious as time passed that the Terran Empire would long outlive its founder and first emperor, and Rina, whose curiosity was finally sated, closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 549 Outpost 134

Somewhere in the solar system.

An asteroid the size of one of Mars' moons floated alone in orbit around the sun, in all its majesty. Formerly a cosmic dust-covered rock, it had been completely worked over and half of it had been cut off, leaving a flat surface from which grew an enormous docking tower. The half that remained was still a natural rock, though the cosmic dust coating it had been swept away, leaving the surface clean, while the docking tower was made of a dark gray hadfield steel alloy, as most of the empire's hardware in space was.

A study in contrasts, the natural half of the asteroid was dark, while the docking tower was brightly lit with brilliant flashing lights and painted signage highlighting the various docking bays of different sizes.

[Outpost 134, this is ISA-EV-343398 on leading approach, requesting approach lane and docking assignment,] the captain of a kilometer-long vessel reported.

[Outpost 134 copies requesting approach lane and docking assignment. Come to zero thrust and prepare for inspection, 343398,] the tower replied.

[Roger, coming to zero thrust and rolling out the welcome mat, 134. 343398 out.]

A bright yellow light shone from the tip of the docking tower on the imperial outpost and flashed over the exploration vessel. It turned green and the comms crackled to life again.

[Welcome to Outpost 134, 343398. You're assigned to docking ring seven, dock seventy-one alpha. Please be advised that you and your crew will be subject to ARES authority while docked and that most of the outpost is restricted to civilian personnel. Trespassers will be dealt with expediently.

[With that out of the way, enjoy your shore leave, and happy New Year. Outpost 134 out.]

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Inside ISA-EV-343398.

'Despite spending more than six months in deep space, the beauty hasn't faded,' Captain Kim Miller thought. She had never imagined she would be able to even ride

to orbit, much less deep space in the solar system, and had given up on her childhood dreams when she turned thirty.

Who would have imagined that, eleven years later, she would be at the helm of an enormous spaceship overseeing the docking procedure with a space station that could only have come from the fever dream of one of the authors she grew up reading? Definitely not her, that was certain!

“Helm, line us up for the catch and reverse thrust to minus fifteen hundred FPS relative,” she ordered.

“Aye ma’am, lining her up and preparing for catch maneuver,” the helmsman replied.

The ship’s executive officer, Dennis Campbell, tugged the imaginary wrinkles out of his uniform as he stood beside the captain and gazed at the display on the fore bulkhead of the bridge.

“I’ll never get used to this, I think,” he said. “I mean, it’d be one thing if all of the outposts were built to a standard template, but... we’ve visited an average of one outpost every two weeks and they’ve all got their own character. Isn’t that amazing, Captain?”

“Status report, Mr. Campbell. Save the observations for when we’re not docking a million ton vessel with an outpost the size of Deimos and focus on the task in front of you,” the captain rebuked.

“Aye aye, ma’am. All stations reporting all green and cleared for the catch,” the XO reported, feeling chastened. Captain Miller was right; even though it was a routine procedure, they had experienced enough potential catastrophic failures during their training in the simulation to know that they needed a hundred percent of their focus when performing the complex line-up and catch procedure.

Captain Miller acknowledged the report, then asked, “Three-ninety-eight, any update on our schedule?”

{No, ma’am. Nothing in the database right now, just a week of shore leave for the New Year celebrations and a note to attend a briefing on station here in Outpost 134,} the ship’s AI replied.

“Looks like we’ve got some proper shore leave this time, not just a refuel and refit cycle,” the ship’s engineer, “Scotty”, excitedly said. No matter what their name was before joining the imperial space agency, all ships’ engineers were called Scotty, just like all medics in every branch of the military were called Doc.

“Scotty” had joined the dangerous exploration mission for two reasons. The first was curiosity; he just plain wanted to know what was out there and whether it would go bump in the night or be like diving into a pot of gold. And the second reason was the

generous bonuses he could earn, bonuses that would go a very long way toward supporting himself in a manner that he would like to become accustomed to.

After all, the strict regulation the empire was still under while its fledgling economy grew to a point where it would be independently viable ensured that five hundred END was enough to survive in the empire. But there was a vast gulf between survive and thrive, and he desperately desired to bridge that divide by sating his curiosity.

It would be killing two birds with one stone.

Going into the program, he had thought that it would be more dangerous than it'd proved in actual practice. The only times he had "died" were all in the simulators, where the crew's instructors would throw them into desperate situation after desperate situation, waiting for them to fail so they could chew them out afterward. Eventually, however, they began succeeding, and their number of successes grew until they had been assigned to an exploration vessel.

Thus, he was caught unawares by how easy the job of ship's engineer was made by the automated maintenance bots and constructor swarms at his disposal. The only times he would have to step in would be when the multiple layers of failsafes failed and left him as the sole bulwark between a successful mission and a failure that led to some, if not all, of the crew dying miserably when all systems went down and the vessel went Dutchman.

He supposed that was the reason that justified the large bonuses he was paid; the risk of space exploration was minute, but very, very real.

Chapter 550 Curiosity Vs Security

"So, did you figure anything out?" the communications officer, Lieutenant Perez, asked Scotty.

"Not a damn thing," Scotty answered, clearly frustrated. "The empire is more than it seems on the surface."

Scotty was almost sixty years old and had spent the past thirty years of his life on the bleeding edge of engineering as a professor emeritus of MIT. Then he was one of the first people to successfully graduate from the engineering track of the imperial space agency's training program, making him among the most skilled engineers on Earth.

But despite all of that, he still had no clue as to just how the hell the empire had built so many outposts throughout the solar system, when just a year before, man had barely set foot on the moon. And to top it all off, not a bit of the empire's space program had leaked whatsoever! Not the outposts, not the ships, and not even the machines used to build the outposts and ships or the tools used to build the machines themselves!

His innate curiosity was absolutely murdering him.

"Looks like you need higher security clearance, my man."

"Yeah, sure seems that way, doesn't it?" Scotty sighed and slumped his shoulders. He knew the difficulty of increasing security clearances and how long the process took,

having undergone security vetting at the highest levels before during his career at MIT.

“You aren’t giving up, are you? You’re out here risking your life to sate your curiosity, so you can’t give up now!” Lieutenant Perez said.

“Yeah, sure seems that way, doesn’t it?” Scotty sighed and slumped his shoulders. He knew the difficulty of increasing security clearances and how long the process took, having undergone security vetting at the highest levels before during his career at MIT.

“You aren’t giving up, are you? You’re out here risking your life to sate your curiosity, so you can’t give up now!” Lieutenant Perez said.

“No, I’m not giving up. I was just thinking about the process of grinding my way up the chain of security clearances. Right now, I’m just a tiny speck of dust compared to the real movers and shakers in the empire. And earning trust takes a very, very long time. I was with MIT for twenty years before I finally got onto a top secret project, and that wasn’t even keyword or letter clearance!

“And now, with our lifespans practically doubling, who knows how long it’ll take for me to climb the ranks again?” Scotty explained in a resigned tone.

“Now that you mention it, I wonder how the empire is going to deal with retirement. It used to be that people could retire in their early sixties, then spend their twilight years gorging themselves on the fruits of their earlier labors. But now, with the average lifespan skyrocketing to two hundred years, and the time dilation in the simulation doubling that, can you imagine how people will react when they realize they have to work for hundreds of years before retirement age? Ha! People will absolutely revolt when that particular nugget of information hits home.” The comms officer shuddered as his whole body broke out in goosebumps.

“I’m sure the Powers That Be have already thought of that. They’ve thought of everything else, after all, so I doubt there’s anything two specks of dust like us can contribute,” Scotty sighed again.

Commander Campbell noticed the comms officer and engineer merrily chatting away instead of paying attention to their job and shot the two men a look. They stiffened for a moment, then turned back to their consoles, staring at them and performing the last-minute tasks in preparation for the catch maneuver.

The others on the bridge noticed as well, and turned their attention back to their respective tasks as the outpost slowly caught up to them, relative to their position.

Time crept by until the ship’s AI announced, {Bolter limit approaching, report status for catch maneuver.}

All of the bridge officers did their final checks and signaled their readiness.

“Helm, bring our speed to minus fifty FPS relative,” Captain Miller ordered, then triggered the ship’s AI to announce the imminent docking completion.

All of the lights in the exploration vessel dimmed to a soft yellow and three whooping alert tones sounded as the AI announced, {All hands, prepare for docking. Repeat: all hands, prepare for docking.}

The announcement played three times consecutively, then the countdown began. {Docking in ten... nine... eight.... One....

{Docking complete. Welcome to outpost 134.}

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“Damn! I wonder what the fuck they’re hiding here.... Blocking access to more than ninety percent of the base? And one of the biggest of the ones we’ve seen, too!” a crew member said in annoyance as he carried his duffel bag down the boarding ramp of the ship. He was looking through the map for the “meatspace” R&R facilities that were sure to be anywhere people were.

He had to admit that the empire truly had a gift when it came to designing spaces that made people feel comfortable, with the general aesthetic being a blend of high-tech minimalist design and nature. Most people would assume that all spacers would want to immediately hit a bar, get shitfaced, and find a “date” before holing up with liquor bottles and “licker bottles” when on shore leave, but Ordinary Crewman Sanchez would beg to differ.

What spacers wanted the most when they were freed from their various tin cans was the feeling of not being on a fucking tin can. Drinking and fucking came second and third, or maybe it was flipped and came third and second, but first place—by a very long shot—was definitely just normal open space that smelled like anything. The empire had very good technology, sure, but there was just something about the smell of home that they missed the most in ships where the air was recycled to perfection and there was no smell at all.

It was like those psychology studies that talked about sticking people in anechoic chambers eventually going crazy because they couldn’t hear the sound of their own voice reverberating off the walls around them. But what spacers missed wasn’t the sound. Sound, they had aplenty. But smells? Yeah... they missed smells.

OC Sanchez’ bunkmate heaved a sigh of annoyance at the repetition of his bunkie’s complaint. Every single time they docked at an outpost, it was always the same damned complaint; the only thing different was just how much of the outpost was deemed as off limits for the crew.

“It’s a fucking military base ferchrissakes! Do you expect a goddamn red carpet?” he complained.

“Fuck off, Flores. Just let me bitch in peace, asshole,” OC Sanchez snapped.

OC Flores zipped his lips and headed to the base rapid transit shuttle in silence. The rest of the crew that had been released to shore leave in their batch exchanged glances and they all came to the same decision as Flores: just ignore Sanchez and he would fade into the background.

Living in close quarters as they did, tolerance and shutting up went a long, long way toward preventing conflicts from escalating. And with such a hardass captain and XO, nobody wanted to be called up on a captain's mast.