Tech System 561

Chapter 561 New Year, New Tax Dodgers

The Voyager 2 probe spent an hour inside the stealth ship before being ejected. As the ship had matched course and speed with it, it continued on its way with no apparent changes. Unless someone happened to have been watching the entire process from start to finish, the disappearance wouldn’t even have been noticed.

Even for keen-eyed observers, if they noticed the disappearance it would seem like a sensor glitch on their side, as nothing about the venerable space probe had changed, at least outwardly. The only difference was that the insides of the probe had been swapped out for nanite colonies that took the shape of the components that were already there, but with the vastly increased capabilities of imperial tech.

The nanite colonies had vastly improved the sensors of the Voyager 2, though the communication issue had been a little bit trickier. Since radio waves were interceptable and quantum teleportation required more energy than the probe should be able to generate, the new method of communication with Earth was via ultrahigh frequency whisker lasers through a relay network of stealthed repeater probes.

Voyager 2 would passively collect material from the interstellar medium and print probes on its own from there on, and Captain de Groot’s crew would lay the remainder during their return journey.

The stealth ship laid the first probe, then began the journey home.

Another crew, meanwhile, had completed the same maneuver on the original Voyager and was also headed home. The two probes, one that had already left the solar system and entered the interstellar medium and one that would soon leave the solar system, would act as the vanguards in search of intelligent life in the galaxy, something that the simulation was incapable of predicting.

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While all that was happening in space, things continued apace on the planet. People had celebrated the new year and were returning to work, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, and eager to face the challenges of the year 3 AE.

They’d had the vacation of their lives. With the time dilation in VR, coupled with virtual travel being instantaneous, many people had joked that they would have nothing left on their “bucket list” after a few short years. They had even enjoyed their vacation so much that not only was their productivity increased when they returned, but they didn’t even grumble about paying taxes... much.

Everyone had received a notification of how much their income was, and a breakdown of their spending to aid in budgeting. The new currency had made it difficult to estimate the spending power people had in their hands, so the information was both helpful and timely. Thankfully, the taxes were low and the empire would accept either lump sum payments or a zero-interest installment plan

stretching their tax payment into four, six, or twelve equal payments. Thus, the vast majority of people found themselves with nothing to grumble about.

But as for those who had attempted to hide their income, thinking that the empire would be as lax as the previous scattered governments were regarding income tax, well... they had quite a rude awakening. There were no more tax shelters, and even putting their money under other peoples' names worked. The empire saw everything they tried and included it all in their tax settlement notifications, leaving billionaires to pay the same income tax as people barely eking out a living hovering just above the poverty line.

Even Aron's businesses were the same. Though he didn't have to pay tax on the token 1 END he received from the treasury as a "salary", his businesses weren't exempt. The only money that was considered tax exempt was money that was paid out from the imperial treasury; everything else, barring charitable organizations, was subject to paying taxes.

During the previous year, the empire had collected a one-time windfall in a lump sum as a result of people hiding their dirty money. Criminal organizations, such as drug empires, and other money like ongoing government operations from their "black budgets", had been seized. So had more white-collar criminal money, with people losing the money they had been hiding in tax shelters. Everything from people taking out credit cards in the names of their pets to people artificially inflating the value of artwork had been spotted, and the gains of those criminal enterprises seized right along with drug money.

And now, all usable cash—in the empire, at least—was tracked through the chips in the bills and coins themselves. Thus, not even cash could be used as a tax shelter; every bill and every coin had an owner, and with specified owners, it made cash just as easy to tax as electronic currency.

The ultra-wealthy weren't happy about what they saw as "draconian" tax collection and income tracking laws. It had historically been something of a game they played with the government and tax agencies, where they would see how much they could hide and avoid paying taxes on and the government tried to find and tax the undeclared income. But now they couldn't play those games, leaving them rather unhappy with the outcome.

At first, they had attempted the same thing they'd always done: resort to bribing officials to get the system changed to benefit the wealthy. But with no way to "lobby" the imperial government, at least not legally, they were completely at a loss. After all, if the officials aren't elected, there's no need for them to collect "campaign funds".

So they opted to attempt outright bribes, sending sacks of cash and other valuables to the officials along with promises of lucrative positions once they leave their cushy government jobs.

But that just spectacularly backfired on them.

Every government employee knew they were subject to constant monitoring of their job performance. Their training had even told them what to do in case someone attempted to bribe them: accept the bribe, make the promise, and report the person who bribed them to their superior. As a reward for reporting it, they could even keep whatever was used to bribe them, be it cash or otherwise.

If they didn't report it, however, they would be caught and sentenced to an even stricter sentence than the person attempting to bribe them. Accepting bribes was seen as even worse than the bribery

itself, and every single agency had a department dedicated to investigating the employees of that agency, much like the internal affairs division of police forces.

Little did they know, however, that the “people” responsible for catching them were the librarians keeping the record of their brain data in the Akashic Library. Every time they violated the rules, a report would be generated and sent to an investigator, who would “catch” the rule-breaker and punish them on the spot.

The ultra-wealthy had finally been met with a government that was impossible for them to influence in any way.

Chapter 562 Pomp and Circumstance

“You, the brave men and women of the exploration fleet, have volunteered to take on a task for the betterment of humanity. And for that, We salute you.” Aron snapped a salute.

He was standing on the stage against the backdrop of the empire’s virtual press room, delivering a speech to commemorate the exploration mission that was stopped at the inner edge of the termination shock layer of the heliopause. As it was Earth’s first manned mission to interstellar space—officially, at least—the exploration fleets and their escorts had turned out in their full dress uniforms to listen to the emperor’s remarks.

“Generations before the Terran Empire was conceived, a visionary was born in the then United States of America. Born to humble parents, he was a decorated veteran and pilot, who yearned for the stars. ‘What if?’ he thought to himself, but the technology to fulfill his dreams wouldn’t exist for decades after he began his dreams.

“So instead, he devoted himself to sharing those dreams of his in the hopes that they would inspire others to dream with him, and by doing so, he influenced generation after generation of people to seek the stars, to boldly go where no man has gone before.

“You, the brave men and women of Our exploration fleet, are the culmination of the hopes and dreams of every man, woman, and child who has ever looked up at the night sky and thought to themselves, ‘What if?’ And as you take this first historic step in the history of mankind, know that you go with those hopes and dreams.” Aron’s gaze grew fervent as he stared into the virtual “camera” in front of him, the viewing angle of everyone watching making it seem as though he was meeting the eyes of everyone watching his speech.

“You stand on the shoulders of giants who have come before you, lifted by the blood, sweat, and tears of our species’ effort over generations. You, the pioneers of space, are the culmination of the entire history of our world and the fruit of the tree of effort that generations upon generations planted before.

“From the first neanderthal who looked up and dreamed up fantastic dreams of the night sky, to the storytellers who told tale after tale of the gods. The astronomers who first saw pictures in the sky, the authors who wrote flights of fantasy set in the sprawling, infinite universe. The brave men of the Sputnik and Apollo missions…. We could list name after name stretching in a long unbroken line of heroes, dreamers, philosophers, and wonderers.

“But We are here to celebrate you, the first and greatest of Our people since the first to strap themselves to rockets and fling themselves into space to look down on this pale blue dot against the backdrop of the cosmos. So again, We salute you.” Aron, instead of giving another military salute, fell silent and bowed his head.

He maintained that stance in silence for a full minute before raising his head again and continuing, “Your journey has no set time limit, but We expect that some of you could be gone from the solar system for up to five years. You have earned not only Our gratitude and respect by volunteering yourselves to take up this onerous task, but also that of your brothers and sisters of the Terran Empire, be they man, woman, or child, public servant or private citizen, rich or poor, healthy or... well, healthy.” He paused and cast a cheeky grin into the virtual camera, lightening the mood somewhat.

Aron cleared his throat and his expression once again grew solemn, in keeping with the theme of his speech, and he carried on with his speech. “No one shall ever forget the sacrifices that you have volunteered yourselves for. All of you have earned a place in the history books of humanity with your intrepid determination to advance our species and leave the cradle of human civilization to take this first great step. You venture forth in Our name, and behind you stands all of humanity.

“During your voyage, some of you will face danger. Some of you may even lose your lives much like more terrestrial adventurers, explorers, and pioneers from the Age of Sail. You, the brave men and women of the exploration fleet, face the unpredictability of the unknown, much like the great explorers of the past.” The expression on Aron’s face went from solemn and grave to grim and imposing.

“But no matter the situation you find yourselves in, remember that the Terran Empire has trained you to the highest standard. Trust in yourselves, trust in your brothers and sisters beside you, trust in the leadership above you, and above all, trust in the undying thirst for exploration inherent in the human race.

“So go forth, sons and daughters of humanity, and explore! Carry out your duties with conviction and pride as you venture into the greatest unknown that the human species has ever faced. Be bold, brave, and undaunted as you carry the torch of Our civilization and the flag of Our empire to the stars!

“And know this: We have your back. Just as you trust in your chain of command, We, the Terran Empire, trust in and support you, no matter how distant your journey may take you.

“So go forth with confidence! Godspeed, ladies and gentlemen, and long live the Terran Empire!” Aron snapped to attention and saluted the virtual camera once more as his image faded from the stage and other members of the upper leadership of the Terran Space Fleet and Terran Exploration Fleet took the stage to deliver their remarks.

Pomp and circumstance had a long tradition in the armed forces, one that would likely remain unbroken until the heat death of the universe. Even as entropy closed in, the last living human would likely deliver a rousing speech to whomever found whatever media he or she recorded it on.

Chapter 563 One Hell of a Slippery Slope... or Two

Aron walked into his suite in the Cube and sat next to Rina on the couch in his lounge. He sighed and fell over on his side, resting his head on her lap.

She stroked his hair and asked, “Long day?”

“Five million,” he replied.

“Five... million?”

“Five million people are about to leave the solar system. It was... a lot. Never had a speech take so much out of me,” Aron sighed again.

“Why’d you have to do it personally? Couldn’t you just have someone fake being you to deliver the speech?”

“Couldn’t do that.”

“Haven’t you done it before?” Rina tilted her head, losing herself in thought as she petted her fiancee.

“I owe it to them to do it myself. They’re the first manned exploration mission humanity’s ever sent past the Oort Cloud and they’re risking their lives for us... no, for me. So the absolute least I can do is personally send them off.”

“Well, I guess... but just keep in mind that you can just like, make an AI or something that’ll write and deliver speeches on your behalf,” Rina giggled. “We have the technology. We can make him better... faster... stronger.”

Aron rolled over and looked up, trying to see Rina’s face but having his vision blocked by two obstacles. “I’m worth more than that, you know,” he groaned.

“Yes, yes. You’re worth the most.”

“Definitely worth more than a mere six million dollars, that’s for sure,” Aron grumbled, then turned his head and buried his face against Rina’s belly.

“Besides,” he continued, his voice slightly muffled, “I can’t do that anyway.”

“You can’t make a speechwriting AI?”

“Nope. You see, in order to do that, I’d have to do it based on my brain data.”

“Is that all? I mean, don’t you already have your brain data constantly being updated?”

“No. I don’t, you don’t, our families don’t… all those closest to me are exempt from brain data monitoring and uploading. It’s too… I dunno. Not invasive invasive, but regular invasive.”

“I see, I guess,” Rina said, moving her petting hand to the back of Aron’s neck and lightly massaging it.

“Besides, even if I could, I still wouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because then I’d get complacent, and that’s one hell of a slippery slope.”

“But you’d have more time for me and our family, no?” she asked.

“Rina, darling, beauty, wonderful love of my life… we have the simulation. And a very, very long life to begin with—we’ll be sick of each other soon enough.” He softly moaned as she switched over to lightly teasing him with her fingernails.

“I understand. Now, are we going to do it or what?”

“I must be the most henpecked emperor in history,” Aron laughed as he performed a feat of strength and flexibility that practically violated the laws of physics, ending up atop her on the couch.

Their lips met in a passionate kiss, and Nova politely stopped paying attention to the happenings in the room, simply flagging Aron as unavailable except for emergencies of red or higher classification on the empire’s threat index.

The lights in the room dimmed as the rustle of clothing falling to the floor mixed with the sound of soft panting and moans.

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The moment the emperor vanished, the members of the five exploration fleets, and their gigantic cityship escorts, logged out of the simulation as well, each of them climbing out of their pods.

As inspiring as Aron’s speech was, they had work to do.

Hours passed as the crew members performed their final checks. They weren't dragging their heels, but rather doing a detailed and thorough inspection on their newly printed vessels. Some departments even called for the removal of the bulkheads on their decks to physically check the systems hidden behind them. They were headed out of the solar system, after all, so no checks would be too invasive, too thorough, or too unnecessary.

Once everything returned green, the fleets brought their reactors up from standby power to full and humanity had officially taken their first step into a much wider universe.

Over ten thousand ships were heading out, though the number seemed much lower as most of the escort ships were still contained in their designated cityships. They were organized into five task forces, each named after the destination they would be heading to.

Task Force Proxima was headed to Proxima Centauri, a solar system a little over four light years away that astronomers felt had a high chance of supporting organic life. Thousands, if not tens of thousands, of science fiction novels had mentioned the system, so of course humanity would choose it for one of the destinations in their inaugural exploration mission to the stars.

The others were headed to Teegarden's Star, about twelve light years away; Wolf 1061, which was about fourteen light years away; the TRAPPIST-1 system, at about thirty-nine light years from Earth; and LHS 1140, which was forty light years away.

Researchers from Earth had long believed those five were among the systems most likely to support organic life, and the AI that oversaw the Terran Space Fleet and Terran Exploration Fleet, Styx, had chosen them for the first expedition. Not only did they have atmospheres, but they were likely to have liquid water on the surface and their distribution in the galaxy provided a decent sample in terms of distance and direction from Earth. One was nearby, two were in a more middling distance, and two were a long distance from the cradle of humanity.

But more importantly, none of them were even remotely close to the visitors' flight path on their approach to the solar system. Thus, the exploration fleets would have no chance of forcing an early meeting with the extraterrestrials who were already on their way to Earth.

The fleets themselves were extremely flexible. Each exploration cruiser carried a reinforced company of ARES troopers, a squad of Reapers, a ship's guard of Aegis specialists, and a nyxian of every specialization. And each exploration fleet was made up of a hundred exploration cruisers.

And escorting each exploration fleet was a vast cityship, each of which acted as the mothership for close to two thousand ships of the Terran Space Fleet, along with a legion of ARES, enough fertilized zygotes to plant a colony on a habitable planet with sufficient genetic diversity to ensure their long-

term viability, and a full copy of the non-classified parts of the Akashic Record.

They also housed enormous atomic printers capable of virtually terraforming entire planets, given enough time, which was a first for Aron. He was so overprotective of the atomic printing technology that he had been determined not to let the technology anywhere outside the solar system, but he'd had his mind changed on the subject by Nova.

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A few days before the exploration fleet escorts left Mars.

[Sir, why not send printers with the explorers?] Nova asked.

“I don’t want the tech stolen,” Aron replied. “And by sending them with the fleets, we risk exposing them. It’s better if they make do with constructor swarms and GEMbots.”

[Isn’t that inefficient? For Operation Diaspora, the speed of deployment matters just as much as anything else.]

“The risk is still there, though.”

[Consider that our atomic printing technology is still tier one, and we’ve been working with it for years. It’s been studied in Lab City for centuries, even. So to anyone on our tech level, it’s basically black box tech, and anyone more advanced has likely already discovered and is using it. Given that that’s the case, why not put efficiency over security with the explorers, at least?]

“Because…” Aron sighed. Not even he could ignore the validity of Nova’s point. “You have a point, Nova. The exploration fleet is leaving the solar system, after all, so even if the tech is exposed, we have… options.” His expression hardened and grew colder than a block of permafrost.

If the explorers or their escorts discovered anything about the printers, well... space exploration was incredibly risky, after all, and at the heart of things, the cold calculus of ruling meant that the few could be discarded for the benefit of the many. And letting people get a hint of the atomic printers would economically devastate the newly formed Terran Empire at a time it could least afford it.

Thus, sacrifices could be made, though he hoped it would never come to that.

“Load the cityships with atomic printers in the black decks,” he ordered.

[Yes, sir,] Nova said, then her virtual image flickered. [Done, sir. We’re prepared for launch.]

Chapter 564 Objects in Motion

The fleets, despite being separated by light hours, simultaneously brought their gravity engines to full power and accelerated through the border of the solar system.

Aboard the TSF Proxima.

“Prepare for maneuvering,” Fleet Admiral of the Red Marco Bianchi ordered, then settled back in his chair, his job as the fleet admiral complete.

The captain of the cityship echoed the fleet admiral’s command, but his job was just beginning.

The cityship he commanded was colossal, measuring a full forty kilometers in diameter. It almost had to be; not only was it a mothership capable of containing thousands of other ships, ranging from the kilometers-long drone tenders to the hundred-meter length of the humble corvettes, they were also space-capable cities. They were designed to land on planets and would instantly become full, if small, fortress cities to kickstart colonization.

And once Aron had earned enough SP to upgrade to wormhole FTL tech, they would also act as mobile wormhole generators.

So, all in all, the cityships were some of the most capable in the entire Terran Space Fleet, but they had one weakness: mobility. They could zip around in straight lines like no other, with the enormous reactor and capacitor banks pushing their gravity engines to insane levels of performance, but stopping on a dime and turning while in motion were both maneuvers they were simply not built for.

It was nobody's fault but the laws of physics. The immense mass of the cityships would require much higher levels in materials science than Lab City had yet reached. Attempting high-speed maneuvers or rapid deceleration would simply tear the ships apart. It wasn't so much that they were fragile, because they definitely were anything but flimsy, but because the shearing force applied to the ships during high-speed maneuvering was simply too overwhelming for even the best materials the researchers in Lab City had come up with to date.

"Prepared for maneuvering, aye, sir," the helmsman responded as he brought the immense gravity generator up to its normal operational limit.

"Weapons, report status," the captain ordered.

"All green, Captain. Point defense tracks and debris tractors report ready."

Due to the maneuverability issues faced by the cityships of the Terran Space Fleet, passing through a relatively object-dense area like the Oort Cloud had to be done carefully. The speed at which the objects moved was incredible, but the speed the cityships could reach while still maintaining at least a modicum of maneuverability... wasn't.

Thus, not only did the helmsman need to pay attention to maneuvering and speed, but the weapons officer had to be prepared to deflect or eliminate any rogue object that the helmsman couldn't dodge. That said, it was still reasonably stress free, as while the universal simulation couldn't simulate the randomness of life, it was more than capable of charting courses through danger zones like the asteroid belts and the Oort Cloud.

Still, John had been raised on the philosophy of "train like you mean to fight" and the TSF would often be operating outside real-time communication ranges, so the procedure had been set to assume that they would never have access to the simulation.

"Helm, ahead half," the captain ordered.

"Ahead half, aye, sir," the helmsman replied, then pushed the engines to 50% of their full speed.

The TSF Proxima had begun her journey to interstellar space. And as though they were synchronized with an atomic clock, the other four cityships on their exploration missions simultaneously leapt into motion as well.

"Course plotted and autopilot engaged, Captain," the helmsman announced and a low murmur swept across the bridge.

“Point defenses released to automatic, Captain,” the weapons officer yelled over the din of conversation.

The captain’s expression grew stern. “Can the chatter, ladies and gentlemen. Do your jobs,” he growled.

The hum of conversation died down, people at the various stations on the bridge exchanging glances with each other.

Space was inherently dangerous, especially danger zones like nebulas and asteroid fields. And even though the autopilot was run by the ship’s AI, there was always a chance that a rogue asteroid or debris from two objects colliding nearby would impact the ship. Given the armor and redundancies built into each vessel, small impacts like that—even when dealing with the extreme speeds the ships were capable of reaching—wouldn’t be likely to cripple or destroy any of the heavier ships of the line in the TSF, but it could put them behind schedule as they would be forced to stop to repair the damage.

Yes, every ship in the TSF and TEF had shields, but hardware had limitations. Each impact on those shields would reduce the lifespan of the shield generators themselves, so in order to maintain the highest state of combat readiness they could, the shield generators wouldn’t be online during routine maneuvering. After all, why would they take the damage that could be avoided simply by slowing down to a reasonable acceleration and top speed?

Fleet Admiral Bianchi nodded approvingly. He came from a long line of sailors that stretched all the way back to when Italy was still a hodgepodge of city-states. His ancestors had salt in their veins and the sea in their hearts, having sailed ever since the glassmakers of Venice peddled their wares at the beginning of the Italian Renaissance. And that tradition had carried through the centuries, with a Bianchi at the helm of everything from coasters to the enormous cargo vessels in the empire’s merchant marine.

Now, a Bianchi had stepped out into the vastness of space to command an entire fleet on his own. The responsibility weighed heavily on the man’s shoulders, but the pride in his spine refused to let him bow under the weight and kept him standing firm on the shoulders of centuries-long tradition.

“Captain, you have the bridge. I’ll be in the flag bridge,” he said.

“Yes, Admiral. I have the bridge,” the captain replied, and the admiral left the bridge.

The captain turned his attention inward to the augmented reality display generated by his quantum microcomputer implant. The ship’s structure itself seemed to vanish, leaving him feeling like he was the one moving through space, not the ship he was on. He entered an almost meditative state as he gazed out into the vastness of the universe, awed and humbled by his insignificance in the face of the void.

Chapter 565 Inconceivable

Captain Trishan Das continued gazing into the void of space, something that caused his lips to quirk up into a slight smile as he wondered whether Nietzsche would roll over in his grave or not. After all, he was definitely misusing the idea, despite space being just as endless as the abyss spoken of by the German philosopher.

Still, he was in a philosophical mood and couldn't help but think back on all of his struggles growing up poor in rural India. In fact, if it weren't for the efforts of Jai Chakrabarti, the Coeus Foundation's CEO, he would still be living in a mud hut with a rusty corrugated steel roof over his head. So Captain Das had good reason to be thankful for the Terran Empire, as it had personally uplifted both him and his family.

His mother, father, and little sister were some of the first to design their home in a fortress city, and Trishan himself was here, the captain of one of the largest spaceships ever built. He had to admit that, if his younger self knew where he would be today, he would probably laugh himself to death and accuse whoever told him his future of being the most outrageous liar he'd ever known.

Shaking himself out of his daze, he brought up his monitoring screens and got to work.

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News agencies from around the world had broadcast Aron's speech to the explorers, then followed it with footage of the cityships beginning their journey into interstellar space. The complete lack of any reference objects was enough to prevent people watching from figuring out the speed of the enormous vessels, though that didn't stop people from trying.

Scientists from around the world had already begun discussing it and trying to work out the potential acceleration of the TSF ships, even going so far as to resurrect old internet forums like stackexchange, MathOverflow, and the Polymath Project, which had all fallen out of usage with the introduction of Pangea Home and the Akashic Record. Panoptes viewed the discussion with something like disdain, since none of the estimates were anywhere near the real performance of the ships; as it turned out, the majority of humanity simply couldn't conceive of the technological capability of the Terran Empire.

Up until that point, after all, they had been relegated to the most fantastical of science fiction writing.

And it wasn't just mathematicians and physicists who were interested, either. The space craze had spread, and almost everyone on Earth had been bitten by the space bug. So nearly everyone watched the speech and the departure that followed it, but it didn't spark much conversation among laypeople. Only a few days had passed since the solar system had been made available to everyone, so most people soon went back to focusing on designing, building, or even buying their own ships.

Even if they couldn't explore interstellar space, they thought, at least they could explore the solar system. It was perhaps a more modest goal than the lofty explorers of the universe at large were fulfilling, but the solar system humanity grew up in still had plenty of mysteries to be discovered. Or so they thought, anyway; Aron had wisely classified and hidden away most of the information gathered by the simulation and the probes he'd sent out to map the system, manned and unmanned alike.

It wasn't that they had discovered anything dangerous, exactly, but more that he wanted to foster a spirit of exploration in the people of Earth. And simply giving them the detailed map and all the answers to their very many questions would run counter to that goal.

Another reason not many people were hyperfocused on the broadcast was another shakeup in the empire's economy, specifically in the commodities market that dealt with mineral and other material resources. News of the upcoming asteroid mining industry had shaken the foundation of the

historically stable market, and “savvy” investors nearly sent the entire economy into a tailspin as they rushed to sell their commodities stocks before the market completely crashed.

Everything that was considered valuable on Earth, like gold, silver, platinum, diamonds, and many others, was actually quite common in the vastness of space. In fact, most scientists believed that Uranus literally rained diamonds! The methane in the atmosphere would break down thanks to the sun’s rays, creating carbon atoms. The resultant carbon would then fall deeper into the gas giant’s atmosphere, where the pressure would compress them into diamonds.

Whether or not the mining ships that people were now busily designing could actually gather those diamonds was another question entirely. But even if they couldn’t collect them now, that didn’t mean they would never be able to.

If the empire hadn’t already announced strict controls on importing resources from the depths of the solar system, the economy would have already spiraled into a recession. But by the simple expedient of limiting the amount of mineral commodities from space and prohibiting any mining on Earth itself, the disaster had been staved off. Any surplus over and above the mandated import limits would be sold to the empire, and the process was automatic. As mining ships dropped off their loads at the processing stations, the empire would take it from there and everyone would be satisfied with the outcome.

The empire would receive vast stocks of mineral resources, the miners themselves would be handsomely paid for their efforts and finds, investors could rest assured that the commodities market would remain stable, and manufacturers that relied on those raw resources would be able to purchase them from the empire at a reasonable price. It was a flexible model and would easily transition from an empire that was bound to a single solar system all the way to a galaxy-spanning empire that stretched from one edge of the Milky Way to the other.

And one thing ensured that smuggling wouldn’t exist: quarantine. Sure, there were indeed greedy people, but the only people licensed to mine in space would be those who passed the most stringent of security checks that included personality scanning via brain data. Part of the processing that was done at the processing stations in the Trojan asteroids was a scan that detected and eliminated any possible microorganism, preventing potential disease outbreaks that humanity wasn’t equipped to handle.

After all, H.G. Wells had thrust the idea that aliens could be defeated by something as simple as the common cold. Thus, it was obvious that the same concept could work in reverse, wiping out humanity just as easily as an earthly virus had wiped out the invaders in War of the Worlds.

Chapter 566 Two Compilers

Aron had decided to handle the solar resources like that because he believed that only the empire would have the capability to swallow such gains without harming itself. Any private sector enterprise given the vast mineral rights to the entire solar system would cut corners to increase profits, which wouldn’t be beneficial to the fledgling economy in the least. He had learned of the dangers of monopolies from history, with shining examples like the Rockefeller family highlighting the path that he should definitely not take.

In fact, he had even gone so far as to take a page from communism, insofar as everything not specifically recognized as private property—like privately owned land on Earth—had been designated as property of the empire. So while asteroid miners may own their own mining ships,

they had to request mineral rights from the empire. Prospecting could be done within limits, but in order to exploit their finds, they would require a permit from the imperial resources agency.

The IRA was the ruling body that had been created to ensure that any resource exploitation was done with safety and sustainability in mind. They had a responsibility to ensure that nothing entered the Earth that could potentially harm either the people or the planet itself. After all, humanity, when left unchecked, didn't exactly have the best track record when it came to things like environmental conservation.

The empire municipalizing all solar system resources had a second, and more obvious, benefit. It allowed the tracking and inventory of the exact amount of resources they had on hand, as well as preventing tax dodging by underreporting a mining company's gains.

And despite the minority of people who tried to drum up anti-monopolistic sentiments, the government holding a monopoly on the solar system was still a net positive for all. Despite the people who didn't know any better, not having bothered to take advantage of the educational resources provided to them for free by the empire, the benefit could be seen everywhere.

For example, the government, being by its very nature a not-for-profit enterprise, could sell those raw materials to the companies in the industrial sector for an extremely low price. Thus, the final products would also remain within a reasonable price range for consumers. And with companies like GAIA Tech, HHI, and others, Aron could fairly compete with the other companies springing up in the industrial and manufacturing industry, ensuring that all prices were kept low and "fat cat" capitalists couldn't use the cheap raw materials to pocket an extreme profit by hiking up product prices to a ridiculous degree.

That was one of the problems with capitalism; the profit-centric ideals would often lead to a minority of people bleeding the majority for everything they could and driving a wealth gap wider and wider. It needs to be said that scarcity wasn't a problem, but unequal distribution of wealth most definitely was. Thus, by municipalizing resources and entering the market with his own companies, Aron had cut that wealth gap off at the pass and ensured that it wouldn't immediately destabilize the fragile balance of the empire's new economy.

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The sound of tapping at a mechanical keyboard clicked and clacked in what could only be said to be an otherwise extremely advanced lab. The person typing was the only one in the room, and the machinery was currently in a dormant state and completely silent.

The man typing was doing so at a monstrously fast speed, with more than five hundred lines of intricate code appearing on the quantum dot screen in front of the white-coated typist.

That continued for more than eleven hours. The sound of the keyboard neither sped up nor slowed down and the person doing the typing moved nothing but his forearms and fingers. He didn't even change position for the entire time until he suddenly halted his typing with the press of the enter key, then stretched his arms and shook the fatigue from his hands with a satisfied grunt.

But although he had stopped typing, the screen in front of him continued generating line after line of code. The system was compiling the raw code he had typed into it into a kernel, testing it line by line for any logic mistakes or other problems that may occur once the code was implemented and run as an executable program.

“Any major errors?” he asked the empty lab.

{The compiler is still running, but so far it’s looking good, sir,} Nova replied as she materialized next to Aron, who was staring at the ceiling as he waited for the process to be completed.

{I do have to say, though, that you’re quite good at coding. You didn’t even have to stop and think at all—it’s almost like you were the creator of the coding language. And the code you wrote helped me quite a bit, too... human ingenuity really is interesting,} she praised as she internalized the code Aron had written and began compiling it through her own compiler. It was hard to believe Aron had written it in the span of half a day.

“It’s how the system works. Anything I buy from it is assimilated into me, giving me an instant mastery of whatever knowledge I’ve bought. The good and bad of it is that I’m getting the distilled wisdom of the pioneer of the knowledge. It’s good because it saves me centuries, or in some cases, millennia, of my own research, but it’s also bad in that I’m only getting the perfected form of it. So I can’t look back on past mistakes to help me progress further.

“Look at the printers, for example. It took dozens of researchers in Lab City hundreds of years just to miniaturize it, and it wasn’t until I purchased the nanotechnology knowledge that we were able to take atomic printers down to the size of a suitcase. Up until then, the smallest we could make them was still the size of a luxury SUV,” Aron complained, though Nova knew it was just his way of humblebragging.

Thus, he was surprised when he was met with nothing but silence. He tilted his head and looked at Nova. “What’s the problem? You just went silent on me,” he asked.

{My own initial check is complete. The compiler is still working and will be done soon, but even with the raw code right in front of me, I can’t get the full picture of just what this code is meant to do. But what I’ve gleaned so far is... unbelievable, at best. I’m pretty sure this isn’t even the complete code,} she said.

“What makes you say that?” Aron asked with a smug smile on his face.

{I’m not entirely sure. There are obvious loopholes and hooks for new code to be injected, but that’s standard for any code that you’ll want to update in the future to add features to. But what really made me think that is that this code doesn’t seem to do anything. And I don’t believe you would spend so long manually coding a program that doesn’t work, so there has to be more to it.

{If I were to hazard a guess, I’d say that this is only a third of the total code you’ll need to successfully run this program. It almost seems... dormant, like when it’s completed, it’ll be a living program of sorts.}

“You’re right,” Aron said with a smile. “Both in that it isn’t complete, and that there’s still two parts missing.”

{What’re the other two parts? I can’t find anything that looks like it would fit this segment in my knowledgebase,} Nova asked. For the first time in a long time, she was unable to comprehend

Aron's thought processes. She had a few theories, but she wasn't confident in any of them; they were all equally likely, or equally unlikely as the case may be.

Aron went still for a moment, then, with a grunt, rose from his chair. He paced around the room with his hands behind his back, as if he was a wise old sage about to give advice or perhaps an anecdote about his earlier life. It was a fair comparison, too, as his mental age was far, far beyond his physical age due to spending so much time in the time-dilated environment that was the universal simulation.

"After the initialization of Project Loki, I, and everyone else in my inner circle, came to the conclusion that everything we've been doing are preventive measures. And since none of us can be sure whether our incoming visitors will be friendly or hostile, we can't fully commit to a single course of action, either.

"So this," he gestured to the screen, where the compiler was still running, "is the solution. It's a seed that can either cause a civilization to flourish, or infect them with a plague that will destroy them, given time. Whether it sprouts or spreads will depend on whether or not the visitors are friendly. And it doesn't matter if they're carbon based, mana based, or otherwise, this is the core of a weapon that can target any of them.

"I call it Project Protagonist."

Aron was speaking in a calm tone, as if he was talking about the preponderance of cats on the internet, not civilization-ending weapons.

"Project Protagonist isn't a weapon that'll wreak havoc on its own, like a bomb or something. Like I said, it can either help a civilization, or destroy one. I came up with the idea a few months ago, and only recently figured out how to bring it to fruition.

"The code is just the easiest part of the project. I don't even know if I can successfully write the remaining two parts, either, and just figuring out if it's viable or not will cost quite a few billion SP. Even then, that'll only make it slightly more in the realm of possibility rather than a sure thing.

"And even if I do create it successfully, I'll only need to make a few of them. That, in and of itself, is actually a good thing. If there are billions of them, they won't be worth anything, and might even backfire on humanity. Especially since, with its capabilities, the weapon itself will possibly spiral out of control if I need to use more than a few dozen of them.

"That's all I can say for now. It's too early to know if it'll succeed or not, so I'll withhold commenting further. But I look forward to your guesses as the project progresses," he finished with an arrogant smirk.

He walked back to his desk chair and sat down, then minimized the compiler that was still cascading a visual reference of his code on the screen. Then he pulled up the Lab City research database and entered something in the search field and hit enter.

The screen changed to look like the format of a scientific journal, which contained an internally published research paper about the latest generation of nanites that Lab City was working with. In the time they'd had to work on it after he downloaded the nanotechnology knowledge into them, the researchers had already reached the 2846th generation of nanites.

Aron frowned for a moment, then closed the window with a sigh and said, "Looks like it'll take a few centuries for the nanotechnology research to catch up to my needs."

Nova noted that down and created an action plan to increase the speed at which she built new quantum superclusters, increasing the time dilation that Lab City was under. Since its residents were completely digital and had no physical limitations, there was also no limit to the time dilation they could operate under without being detrimental to their continued existence. The only limiting factor was her server capacity.

She also set a reminder to herself to remind Aron after each century that passed in Lab City as well, or after every hundred new iterations of nanotechnology. At each of those milestones, he could take another look to see if the technology had reached the necessary level of advancement.

That was the level of convenience Aron had grown used to since Nova's birth a few years before. She was the backbone that allowed him to focus on the big picture as she dealt with the million complicated, or even simply mind-numbingly boring, tasks that were required to reach his goals.

{So from what you said, the remaining two parts have to do with carbon- and mana-based life forms in some fashion, right?} Nova asked. She had already devoted a small block of her processing power to figure out what Aron had planned. So when she saw him lean back and relax in his chair, it was the perfect time, in her mind, to ask.

After all, he wasn't doing anything right then but spinning in his chair as he waited for the compiler to finish its task.

"Yep. I'll need a few things from the system to accomplish that. Plus, I bet the things I need will also give us quite the insight into alien life forms," he said as he stopped spinning in his chair.

He opened his system's shop and granted Nova live access to his vision so she could "read over his shoulder", so to speak. And there it was, listed in easily readable text floating in Aron's vision, courtesy of his system's shop.

Chapter 568 Branching Out

[Organic computing, tier 1

Drawing inspiration from the remarkable complexity and efficiency of their species' biology, the ********** combated the lack of mineral resources on their homeworld by branching computing into a different path. Instead of using silicon and metals, they discovered the ability of DNA base pairs to store information and developed a system of computing around that, creating complex and powerful computers from their own DNA. It was the final step that allowed them to

become an interplanetary civilization, ruling over vast swathes of their home galaxy until they fell at the hands of the **********.

Price: 178,000,000,000sp]

[Runic computing, tier 1

*****, a former noble of a race enslaved by their technologically superior neighbors, took a side path upon his discovery of the fundamental runes that underpin all of creation. Knowing that he couldn't trust his fellow slaves, as many quislings and traitors were among them and he had no way of distinguishing them from his loyal compatriots, he utilized his accidental discovery of runes to create something that he thought would save his species.

Unfortunately, while his skill was enough to advance computing technology far beyond even the technologically advanced ******'s wildest imaginations, his skill with other technologies couldn't keep up and his rebellion ultimately failed. As it turns out, using an enemy's last-generation technologies against them is not the key to successfully rebelling, a lesson that ***** learned the hard way.

However, his ingenious, and some may say epoch-making, computing advances were preserved and iterated upon by the *******. The rest of his species, on the other hand, was not so lucky, meeting their end to the last sapient.

Using *****'s runic computing technology, the ******* swept through multiple galaxies before finally falling under the weight of their own slave empire and spiraling down into extinction.

Price: 250,000,000,000sp]

Those two options were hovering in Aron's view. Nova, seeing them through his eyes, joined him in contemplating whether or not it was worth purchasing one, both, or neither. They were each superior to the quantum computing technology the empire currently used in at least one benchmark.

Biological computing was capable of containing enormous stores of data, though its processing speed was considerably lower. After all, while DNA was remarkably efficient and compact, the process of encoding and retrieving data was positively lackadaisical in comparison to the instantaneous operation of qubits or even the near lightspeed operation of traditional silicon computer chips.

And runic computing had a much faster processing speed, but the cost of that speed was lower storage capacity. Most of the runes were taken up by core processes, limiting the data they could store. Operating a runic computer would be much like installing the GAIA OS on a computer from around -50 BE. In order to do that, it would require vast server rooms full of towering behemoth servers just to contain the operating system itself. By comparison, qubits were microscopic, and even the old magnetic storage platters found in imperial citizens' hard drives were more efficient storage media.

Aron tapped his pointer finger on the desk in front of him as he delved deep into his thoughts. The contemplation was understandable, as if he was going to branch out in his computing technology, he would definitely need to buy all of them together. Combining the flexibility of quantum computers

with the speed of runic computers and the enormous storage capability of biological computers... the thought was almost intoxicating.

So why was he hesitating?

Simple: the costs were staggering. And once he went down that route, he would have to continue down it, tier after tier, with the SP cost increasing exponentially. Plus, it would delay the technological advancement of his empire, as his population would need to increase to pay the SP cost, but that population increase would necessitate more advanced technology, and so on. It was a catch .22 that would last for quite some time.

And right now, he was finding it difficult to justify paying the cost out of his “emergency SP fund”. The 800 billion SP he currently held in reserve would be cut by half, and then some; it would severely limit his options when the visitors arrived, especially if they were hostile and so advanced that his current technology couldn’t handle them.

{If Project Protagonist succeeds, you won’t need the emergency fund at all. So if you’re confident in that plan, then spend the SP. Also, combining the three computing branches will render our network more flexible and less prone to a single point of failure in case we end up butting heads with aliens who can hard counter any one of the branches,} Nova said, interrupting Aron’s thoughts. If it could be called an interruption, that is; he was also considering the same things, but it was different once the thoughts were spoken aloud.

“True.” Aron nodded, then stopped tapping his finger on his desk, having come to a decision. “And besides, if I always stop myself from buying things now in the worry that I’ll need the SP for different things in the future, well... that’s a weakness I can’t allow myself, or my empire, to have. Thanks, Nova.”

He lifted his hand to the system display window and tapped on the button labeled [BUY] for both the biological and runic computing knowledges. 428 billion SP drained from his total balance and the display screen changed.

[Thank you for your purchase. Install now? Y/n_]

“See you soon,” he said as he mentally confirmed the installation and logged out of the simulation. Nova had already put his physical body into a deep sleep inside his pod and his virtual face only twisted in pain for a fraction of a second before he disappeared from the simulation and his consciousness joined his body in its sleep.

Installing knowledge from the system was an extremely painful process to begin with, even when only dealing with a single knowledge. Aron, however, had decided to buy both of them and install them simultaneously despite knowing of the downsides. It would send him spiraling into a level of pain that Nova didn’t believe his consciousness could handle without shattering, despite his thousands of (sometimes agonizing) deaths during his training in the simulation.

His choice demonstrated once again his deep trust in Nova. He was no masochist to begin with, and Nova was the only one capable of sending him into what was essentially a medically induced coma before the pain really hit with its full intensity.

Chapter 569 Mo' Technology, Mo' Problems

While Aron was assimilating the new knowledges and deep in Nova's medically induced coma, the top minds in the imperial space agency were in a meeting with Styx, the AI that headed up both the TSF and their agency.

"How reliable is this?" Dr. Musa Aminu, the head of the ISA, asked as he blinked the holographic file displayed in his glasses closed.

"We're 95% confident, sir. Some time within the next week, another Carrington event is expected to take place. And based on the sunspots we observed along with the increase in solar winds, we believe it'll absolutely dwarf the event from 1869. The most damning piece of evidence we have is that it's happening off season.

"Normally, the Sun acts up on a predictable eleven-year cycle, and the last solar maximum was only five years ago, so—"

"It wasn't 1869," Agency Head Aminu calmly said. "It was -149 BE."

"I'm not sure that's relevant, sir," the researcher said. "A change in calendar doesn't mea—"

"It means exactly what it means, Doctor Yao. If this event is as epoch-making as you say it'll be, then we must be absolutely meticulous. If for nothing else, consider it for posterity's sake."

"Understood, sir." Doctor Yao cleared his throat and continued, "It'll be more devastating than the event in -149 BE, sir. It might even be a civilization-ending event, given our reliance on technology."

Musa nodded, lost in thought. The entire room fell into an uncomfortable, anxious silence before he sighed, "Styx, please inform the higher-ups of the oncoming mess and call an emergency meeting. Tell them that there's a seventy-odd percent chance that we'll be hit by a historic coronal mass ejection within the next week."

Styx flickered into visibility, then blinked. [An emergency meeting will be held in thirty minutes with the emperor's inner council,] he said. [They're currently being briefed on the issue and will need a detailed presentation from you.]

Dr. Aminu nodded to Styx, then turned to the other researchers in the conference room. "Prepare a presentation on the event. I'll leave it to you to present it," he ordered.

"Yes, sir," they chorused, then left to prepare their presentation.

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An hour later, after the briefing.

"How devastating will the impact be?" John asked, having finished reading and digesting the information.

"And should we announce the event ahead of time?" Minister Rogers interjected.

“If the coronal mass ejection hits Earth, we predict it’ll be a civilization-ending event. It won’t be an extinction-level event like the Chicxulub meteor impact, but odds are good that it’ll drive us back to before the industrial revolution, at the very least. The power grid will go down, utility services will go down, a massive electromagnetic pulse will impact the entire planet, and people all over the world will see the aurora.

“In short, with our reliance on advanced technology and electricity, the event will be devastating,” Dr. Yao explained. “As far as making any announcements, I’ll defer to the council for that decision. It isn’t in my wheelhouse, so to speak.”

“We should make an announcement as early as possible and implement rationing to prevent panic buying,” Minister Al-

Mutairi said.

“We should go further than just implementing rationing. Declare martial law and issue a shelter in place order,” John suggested.

“What about methods to prevent it from hitting us?” Minister Rogers asked. “Can we block it somehow?”

“Theoretically, an object of sufficient size and mass should work. But we’re talking on the order of planets, not man-made objects. A Dyson sphere might work, but… it’s far too late to consider a solution like that. And if we’re going to attempt to stop it, we should do it as far away from earth as possible. A CME of sufficient size can even strip the atmosphere from planets along with a not-insignificant chunk of their crusts,” Dr. Yao answered.

“What if we move the home guard fleet as close to the Sun as we can and have them link shields?” John asked.

[That wouldn’t be feasible, General Smith,] Styx replied. [In theory, enough of our ships linking shields should be able to block a coronal mass ejection, but if this one is as big as our data suggests, then even if we used everything we had—

including the ten thousand ships we just sent on the exploration missions—it wouldn’t fully block it.]

“Wait… shields?” Minister Rogers asked with a slight frown, obviously considering something. “What about the planetary defense shield? Isn’t this kind of thing exactly what it was meant for?”

Dr. Yao’s eyes lit up. “We have a planetary shield? Can it handle the full brunt of the incoming CME?” he asked. His security clearance level wasn’t high enough to have any information on the full brunt of the incoming CME?” he asked. His security clearance level wasn’t high enough to have any information on the PDS, so the information, in his mind, changed everything.

[If we switch it from passive to active defense, then, sure. We'll also need to move all of our shipping under the shield or behind Jupiter,] Nova answered. [And during that time, nothing will be able to pass in or out of the shield.]

"Does it need to be fully active? Can we just activate the half that's facing the sun when the CME hits?" Minister Rogers asked.

[Technically, yes,] Nova said. [The shield is set up such that any of its hexagons can be activated independently of the rest. But it wouldn't be a good idea, as the coronal mass may wrap around it due to the Coanda Effect and hit the planet regardless. So, to counter that, we'll need to activate the entire shield at full power.]

[We should let it hit the planet,] Nyx interjected, immediately attracting the attention of everyone in the room.

A moment of silence ensued, then every human in the room burst into a clamor.

"What!?"

"Do you have any idea how devastating it's going to be!?"

"Are you insane?"

The outburst continued for a full three minutes before John slammed his hand on the conference table and shouted, "SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

Chapter 570 Absolute Deniability

John turned to Nyx and said, "Continue. What're you trying to say?"

{I'm saying we should keep the shield in its passive mode and allow the Carrington event to happen,} she said in her trademark disinterested tone.

"Why should we do that?" Dr. Aminu said, a look of shock still lingering on his face. Was he on the ground floor of an AI apocalypse? A bead of cold sweat dripped down from his temple as he fruitlessly tried to rein in his emotions.

{A few reasons, actually,} Nyx said. She paused and looked around the room before continuing, {Other than the people in this room and His Imperial Majesty, no one knows that the planetary defense shield even exists in the first place. It's always been in its passive mode, making it invisible to everyone. Bringing it to full strength will reveal it, making its existence a matter of public record.

{That wouldn't be a problem, but there's no need to reveal our trump card like that. After all, a trump card our enemies know about isn't very useful, now is it?}

Before Nyx could continue providing her other reasons for not using it, she was interrupted by Dr. Aminu. "That isn't a good enough reason for bringing humanity back to pre-industrial levels! Especially since we don't even know for sure what the visitors' intentions are. For all we know, they could just be interstellar traders, or maybe they're a branch of humanity that left for the stars long ago. The only thing we can be sure of is that we know absolutely nothing about them.

“And let’s say, for the sake of argument, that they are in fact hostile. By letting a Carrington event of this magnitude just impact Earth and drive us back to where we were in the 1800s, wouldn’t that just make us easier pickings for them?” Dr. Aminu was so worked up that he even forgot his earlier insistence on using the new imperial calendar.

The other humans in the room, minus a few, nodded in agreement with Dr. Aminu’s sentiment.

{You interrupted me too soon,} Nyx began. {As I said, there are multiple reasons to allow the CME to hit Earth unimpeded, but you stopped me when I’d only mentioned the first of them.} Though she was speaking in a chiding tone, she understood the interruption was done with the best of intentions.

{So let me dispel your worries first. Helios Energy considered the possibility of a massive electromagnetic pulse when they first designed the power grid and other infrastructure upgrades to the empire. Over the past year, they’ve been upgrading the utility infrastructure across the globe, at least in areas that have accepted imperial rule. So far, over 95% of the upgrades have been completed and the rest can be rushed to completion over the next few days.

{Since the upgrades include hardening against an EMP attack, we’ll survive it just fine without interruption. The same can’t be said for areas that rejected imperial rule, though. They’ll still be devastated. But who cares? It seems you’ve all forgotten Operation Boiling Frog.}

When Nyx mentioned Operation Boiling Frog, looks of realization flashed across the faces of the ministers in the room. Dr. Aminu and his subordinates, on the other hand, still looked lost and clueless.

Dr. Yao raised his hand and began, “What’s Operation Boiling—”

“It’s classified, Dr. Yao,” Minister Rogers interrupted. “So forget you ever heard it.”

Dr. Yao lowered his arm and clasped his hands together, looking down at them. He, just like everyone else in the room, understood the need for classification and compartmentalized information. He didn’t particularly LIKE it, but he understood it.

Nyx didn’t care about the reaction of the imperial space agency’s researchers and continued, {Since all of the imperial infrastructure and the empire’s newly introduced technologies can withstand the EMP without any problems, it means only those that still use legacy tech will be impacted. Nearly all of their technology will be rendered useless through force majeure, so the empire can’t be blamed for the failure of their critical infrastructure.

{Besides, even in its passive mode, the planetary defense shield will still block a lot of the CME. By my calculation, the EMP that results from the remainder of the ejection that actually impacts the planet’s magnetic field should be just enough to cripple non-imperial infrastructure and last-generation imperial products. It’s the perfect deniability for the empire, since we’ll be hit as well. It’s just that the hit we take will be in the non-essential category.

{We can even warn the remnant governments of the upcoming Carrington event, making us the ‘good guys’ in this situation, especially after we offer outreach that mitigates the loss of life the event causes even to noncitizens. At the same time, we can stress that imperial tech should hold up just fine, but to be safe, all imperial gadgets should be powered down when the event hits,} Nyx

finished, her tone as calm as if she had just been reading the dictionary aloud and not talking about a potential civilization-ending event.

A shocked silence descended on the conference room after Nyx finished explaining her reasoning. The imperial space agency staffers in the room figured out quite a bit about Operation Boiling Frog from the explanation; they were far from stupid, and the petite AI's suggestion gave them enough to tease out a general idea of what the operation was for.

To them, it was completely new information. But despite that, they understood the reasoning behind the possibility of the empire simply allowing the CME to proceed without any active attempt to stop it, even though they were more than capable of doing so. After all, despite the semblance of peace that had recently returned to Earth, there was a very limited time frame in which to turn that facade into lasting reality before they had potentially hostile aliens showing up on humanity's doorstep with a broken society that would be easy to exploit should they be so inclined.

That said, not everyone in the meeting was in agreement with Nyx's suggestion. And with the emperor's absence, they couldn't come to a decision even if any suggestion was unanimously approved. So before the situation could devolve, Gaia appeared and took charge of the meeting.

{Let's end it here for today, ladies and gentlemen. I'll deliver all of your points to the emperor when he's available, and let you know what his decision is once he comes up with one.} Though her tone was diplomatic, she still shot Nyx a loaded look; the feisty mistress of intelligence had let classified information slip, purposefully or not.

But with Gaia's involvement and her position, she had the authority and the duty to act as Aron's plenipotentiary whenever he wasn't available. As such, the meeting was dismissed and everyone disappeared from the virtual conference room, followed by the room itself vanishing into the aether.

It would be a waste of resources for it to remain in existence when not in use, and efficiency was everything to the Terran Empire.