

Tech System 581

Chapter 581 Firefighting

The yeet pod fell through the atmosphere, its pitch black radar-absorbent paint contrasting against the fireball created by reentry. It was perfectly targeted at the center of the active fire, and if one were to look from above, it would look like it was flying directly into the Sun.

Soon, it smashed into the fire and disappeared from sight. The eerily silent blaze showed no changes, nor was there any sound of impact. But the yeet pod didn't care about any of that and the machine contained within immediately got to work.

The emergency workers watched as a pale, milky-white dome spread until it covered the entire area that was on fire. Then the flames began retreating, slowly at first, then faster and faster until it neared the center. The blaze, however, began fighting back at that point, wavering between invisibility and solidity as the dome starved it of mana.

About five minutes later, the blaze lost its final fight. It'd drained all of the mana captured in the dome to fuel itself, and the fuel had finally run out. The remnant wisps of flame gathered together in the shape of a human, then flared up with a bright yellow flash before the light faded and left a young man lying on the ground, naked and unconscious.

The ground around him looked like it had been transplanted directly from hell; it was charred to a reflective black sheen, the only imperfections the cracks that radiated from the crater the yeet pod had left when it impacted the surface.

"That's a spicy creme brulee," one of the onlookers muttered in an attempt to brighten the mood.

Within seconds, the emergency response task force vehicle drew the unconscious young man into its transport hold, where the police placed him in a stasis pod before the pilot brought the shuttle on course for The Hole.

Meanwhile, the rest of the emergency responders looked around, lost. Their SOP would normally be to look for survivors. If they couldn't find survivors, their task would then become collecting and identifying remains. But "the book" never mentioned what to do in the case where there was just... nothing. No survivors, no remains, no buildings, and no ruins of what used to be buildings.

There was just nothing there.

.....

Aron sighed, watching the entire process unfold. The sigh was a mix of disappointment and anger that he was struggling to control. He took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. "What's the casualty count?" he finally asked after mentally counting to ten.

{1,764 imperial citizens and 432 remnants died. 764 imperial citizens and 231 remnants were injured and are currently receiving treatment at the emergency aid station the first responders set up,} Nova answered.

"And what do we know about the awakener that caused the incident?" he asked. The answers would determine what action he would take as the leader of the empire.

Nova threw him a data file on one Sahro Hassan and he read through it as she dictated the important highlights. The file also contained the brain data scan that had been uploaded when Sahro was put in stasis, including the reasoning behind his suicidal attack.

Aron took his time reading the data file, tapping his desk with his finger. Nova remained quiet and waited for him to finish his thought process.

The silence stretched for more than thirty minutes before Aron finally asked, "How many remnants are there, total?"

{102,321,568. That's everyone who hasn't accepted imperial citizenship, including the primitive tribespeople that aren't in contact with the rest of humanity,} she said.

"How many of them are awakeners?"

{4,203,857 of them, sir. 1,385,714 of them have undergone our basic training program and the rest of them declined.}

"Schedule a meeting of the inner council," Aron said in a grim tone. "I have ideas on how to deal with the problem, but... I'm not in the right headspace to make a final call."

{What are your thoughts, sir?} Nova asked.

"Australia," he replied.

{Australia, sir?}

"Yes. Australia. You know how it started, right?"

{The British Empire exiled... oh. You're thinking of internment camps?}

"Mhm." Aron nodded. "But if we keep them on Earth, it won't solve the problem. And it would take a few months, maybe a year, before we could get a habitable dome ecosystem set up on, say... one of Jupiter's moons."

{Matrix protocol then, sir? I thought we discarded that plan as unfeasible.}

"That's why I need to call a meeting of the inner council. Right now, if I was forced to choose, I'd either just kill them all or enact the matrix protocol."

{And that would be counterproductive either way. People don't take kindly to disappearing entire populations, nor are they fond of genocide. Understood, sir. I'll schedule the council meeting for tomorrow, Earth time, and give the council members a heads up on what'll be discussed there. That should give them enough time to come up with solid ideas.}

"And it won't give the problem enough time to continue spreading out of control. That Hassan kid was one hell of a wakeup call, and I don't fancy the damage control we'd have to do if we don't act fast enough." Aron leaned back in his chair and went back to pinching the bridge of his nose and his brows, trying to prevent an incipient headache from worsening.

Nova began massaging Aron's headache away, then changed the subject. {Are your wedding plans coming along, sir?} she asked, despite knowing full well that everything was going just swimmingly with the wedding planning and preparations.

She continued massaging Aron's head as they discussed much lighter topics until his headache disappeared and he put the events of the day out of his mind.

.....

The response to Sahro Hassan's terrorist attack wasn't received nearly as well by the empire's citizenry. Over the past few weeks, tensions between citizens and noncitizens had been rising just as fast as the remnant-on-impy crime rate, if not faster. And once the media released the information they had on the attack, both sides had found a rallying point.

If the empire didn't respond soon, the two sides might just take things into their own hands.

Chapter 582 To Infinity, and Beyond!

Emperor's council chamber, the simulation.

"I agree with His Majesty. The remnants will continue being a problem and causing trouble as long as they're still on Earth," John said.

Aron had begun the meeting by giving his ideas on what should be done with the noncitizens, as Operation Boiling Frog wasn't working nearly as well as he'd thought it would.

"But where can we send them?" Minister Rogers asked.

Eventually, all of Earth would be populated entirely by imperial citizens and government functionaries, so isolating the noncitizens on an island or something would just be kicking the proverbial can down the road. Sure, "future them" would have more options to deal with them, but Jeremy was of the firm opinion that curing a disease was much better than simply treating its symptoms.

"There's a lot of moons in the solar system. Hell, Jupiter has 79 of them and we're still discovering more that count as moons. And Saturn has even more! I mean, we could also just draft them into ARES and stick them on Mars, too. Our 'retraining' program is highly effective, after all. And that would even save us the cost of building a habitat for the ungrateful fuckers," Minister Al-Mutairi suggested.

"But if you want my suggestion, I think we should go even farther afield. Even just having them in the solar system is a risk, 'retraining' or not. So I'm sure we could find a habitable planet out there somewhere that doesn't have any sapient inhabitants on it already," he continued.

Aron nodded in thought. He already knew of quite a lot of habitable, yet uninhabited planets in the Milky Way, and he was sure that was what Youssef was hinting at. The inner council members were among the very few who knew that the simulation covered the entire galaxy, not just Earth and Lab City. And Minister Al-Mutairi was very good at office politics; he had an absolute talent for giving people ideas while letting them think they were the ones that came up with them.

“If we pick a habitable star system—or even better, more than one so we can send them out with the minimum number of people to make a colony succeed—it should be very far away. That way it reduces the chances of them coming back and causing problems later... especially if we limit the tech we send them out with. Besides, they can be kept in stasis for the trip, that way it’ll just feel like the blink of an eye for them even if centuries pass in transit,” John agreed. He was all for limiting the size of the initial colonies as well; it would increase the number of generations the noncitizens would have to grow before they even had the numbers to start provoking an interstellar fight.

{There are other options, you know,} Nyx said. {Humankind has a long history of internment camps, where they rounded up so-called ‘undesirable’ elements of society and put them all in one area. Hitler had concentration camps for the Jews, America had internment camps for Japanese-Americans, Trump rounded up ‘illegal immigrants’ and put them in cages. Joe Arpaio’s tent cities, and so on.

{We could also just send in the LEAs and ARES to forcefully round them all up and stick them in pods to brainwash them into perfect little cogs in the imperial machine.

{And if none of that works for you, we could always just kill them all.}

The words coming out of the petite AI’s mouth brought goosebumps to the humans in the room. Nyx tended to the extreme to begin with, but “just kill them all” was a whole new level of crazy, even for her.

That said, all Nyx was doing was saying the quiet part out loud. Everyone else in the room had had the same idea at first. But they had all discarded it, recalling Aron’s stance on genocide in general and how fragile the underpinnings of the empire still were even to that day. Thus, nobody had suggested it in the first place.

{What... did I say something wrong?} Nyx asked, her head tilted to the side as if she was genuinely confused.

Aron gave Nyx the side-eye and pinched the bridge of his nose as he sighed, “Isolating them sounds fine on paper, but it wouldn’t work in reality. They’d just use it to gain the sympathy of citizens and cause different problems.

“And brainwashing would be entirely too obvious. People don’t change like that. They aren’t AIs who can just modify a segment of their code to exhibit different behaviors. So if the remnants just wake up one day as hardcore supporters of the empire, everyone would immediately jump to brainwashing as the cause.

“Plus, it would jeopardize far too many other things, as well as basically admit that we treat peoples’ memories, personalities, and thoughts the same way we treat hard drives on a computer. From then on, absolutely no one would trust the empire at all, since there would always be the question of whether or not we brainwashed them into believing in us in the back of their minds.

“Besides, I don’t want to needlessly kill people. Killing is reserved for only when it’s absolutely necessary as a last resort.”

{I was just giving you my ideas...} Nyx grumbled.

Everyone went silent as they considered Aron’s words, and the silence stretched on for a few minutes.

Youssef was the first to break it, saying, “And even if we completely put aside all of those arguments against treating them like that, there’s still an entirely logical reason to isolate them. We should make good use of them, and I see an opportunity in this situation.

“For the sake of argument, let’s say the incoming visitors are indeed hostile. Thus, we need to plan for the worst-case scenario, which is,” he nodded at John, “that the empire loses the fight against them. If we keep the remnants here, or even in the solar system, they’d be wiped out right along with us. Assuming we even kept them alive in the first place.

“You see, humanity is a bunch of eggs, and Earth is just one giant basket. Right now, all of our eggs are in that one basket, so if the visitors come in and blow it up, we lose everything. But by pushing our diaspora plans forward and sending out colonies to multiple destinations across the entire galaxy in generation ships, then humanity as a species will definitely survive.

“Will some of those colonies fail? Sure. Maybe a lot of them will, and maybe even most of them. But there’ll still be some that survive, and ensuring the survival of our species is the best posterity that any emperor could ever ask for.”

With that, everyone else in the room fell silent and looked at Aron. It was obvious that his council had come to a consensus on how to deal with the noncitizens.

Aron tapped his fingertip against the table in front of him as he thought, shifting plans and extrapolating possibilities. Eventually, his finger stopped tapping and he said, “Agreed. Let’s begin the diaspora.”

The meeting continued for a short while as the council put together a plan to “encourage” people to go out and colonize the stars. But one thing was certain: whether they wanted to or not, the remnants would definitely be among those boarding the first wave of colony ships.

Chapter 583 Now Lie in It

The imperial press agency released news that Aron would soon be addressing the world regarding the current situation and his plan for moving forward after the recent Carrington event. The announcement was broadcast by the imperial news agency, then picked up by every other media organization and rebroadcast on their own channels. Not that it mattered much, since outside the empire, very few people still had working televisions, radios, or other electronic devices.

To counter that, the press corps took a page from the industrial revolution and sent LEAs to every corner of every street where people lived and parroted the announcement. They even went so far as

to generate large holographic screens to broadcast the information. It was telling that nobody really reacted to the gratuitous display of the empire's advanced technology other than a collective "meh".

Still, everyone made plans to gather around the LEA nearest to them the following day to watch Aron's broadcast live. To them, the empire was between a rock and a hard place, as everyone had a different expectation of the emperor. Thus, it would be impossible to meet all of them.

Some people, for example, wanted the empire to go full fascist. Not only would it solve the problem of rising supervillain crimes, but it would also prove that the empire truly was an evil organization and thus satisfy their need to be correct.

On the other end of the spectrum, however, were those who wanted incidents to be treated as isolated events. "It was only one bad apple, an independent event," they believed, and felt that compassion, education, and preventative treatment would go all the way in curing the problem at its root.

Those people, it must be said, were also the kind of people who believed that changing their profile pictures on social media would somehow solve problems, or that thoughts and prayers had the ability to end problems and cure suffering.

But while those were the two extreme ends of the spectrum, opinions and expectations among everyone fell somewhere in the middle. Most people had no idea what could be done, nor did they really think anything COULD be done to resolve the problem. They made up the silent majority of noncitizen sentiment, and most had simply decided to wait and see how things played out.

.....

The next day.

Imperial citizens had clustered around their televisions, phones, computers, and so on as they awaited the emperor's announcement. And noncitizens had gathered on every street corner, the atmosphere of a block party beginning to permeate the crowds. Some of the more entrepreneurial among them had even set up stalls and were selling snacks and drinks as well.

After all, most noncitizens were still accustomed to general incompetence when it came to governments trying to resolve problems faced by "the little guys", so they were taking things with a grain of salt and trying not to get their hopes up. The only reason they were even paying attention at all was because, over its short history, the empire had displayed an ability to handle situations that any previous government would have folded under.

Time slowly passed, then finally, the holographic screens appeared above the LEAs again, this time showing Aron's usual stage and podium. Soon, he walked into view and took his place behind the podium to begin his address.

"Greetings to all of humanity," he began, nodding his head.

"Yesterday, the city of Mogadishu was struck by a terrorist attack perpetrated by a young superhuman. It was the first of its kind, and showed exactly how much damage a determined person with superpowers could inflict upon their surroundings in a relatively short amount of time.

“More than two thousand people died. Imperial citizen or no, they were all brothers, sisters, parents, and friends to other people. They were all human, and their loss deeply saddens Us.

“Over the last few months, ever since the event that... enhanced the Three Percenters, We have been devising strategies and making plans to deal with the inevitable chaos that the blessings would cause. And Our strategies and plans have worked. At least for imperial citizens, anyway.

“In Our empire, We directed the imperial blessings agency to implement schools and training facilities that teach Our blessed to control their blessings, and that training also instills in them a pride in humanity and a drive to serve their fellow man. It teaches them to be heroes and use their newfound power to better Our people and Our world, the cradle of humankind.

“We also, as a form of outreach, reached out to the blessed among noncitizens and offered them the same training. We offered to teach them to control their blessings, to bring light into the darkness, and to strive to make all of humanity better. And the outreach was working—roughly a third of noncitizen blessed took Us up on Our offer and enrolled in the imperial training program. Or hero academies, if you prefer.

“But sadly, not everyone was as determined to work for the betterment of humanity and the survival of the species.” Aron’s expression grew solemn and grave, and he grasped the edges of the podium in white-knuckled fists.

“And as you have likely already guessed,” he continued, “the perpetrator behind the attack was one of the millions of blessed who turned away from Our outreach. He, through his own selfishness, greed, and lust for power, discarded his humanity and allowed his baser instincts to control him and his actions.

And as a result of his decision, he lost control of his blessing and became the fire he intended to release, an accident that would have been completely prevented had he simply chosen to learn to use his new power.”

Aron paused to let that sink in, a slight frown on his face as his piercing gaze stared out at everyone watching his address around the world.

“That failure, people of Earth, is on Us. It is Our failure to do what is necessary, Our tolerance that allowed someone like him to act.

“Ever since We founded the Terran Empire, We have gone to extreme lengths to accommodate everyone. We allowed individual choice to dictate whether or not you joined Our empire, believing in the inherent goodness of humanity. We believed that, should Our empire simply continue to offer you all better, more comfortable lives, that you would eventually come to Us.

“And We made that conscious decision despite having the ability and power to simply force you all to join Us and unite humanity that way, rather than take the time for you to come to the decision to join of your own free will.

“Because what you all seem to have forgotten is that Our empire was formed due to necessity. Humankind simply cannot afford to squabble among ourselves anymore, not with the possibility that the approaching outsiders will be hostile to Our species.

“We tried peacefully uniting humanity. But the reward for Our efforts were greedy, selfish, incompetent world leaders that, in their lust for power and benefits, initiated a war with Us that would have destroyed what We needed to protect. Those same leaders are the ones that launched tens of thousands of nuclear weapons—enough to destroy the world dozens of times over—because We chose to be soft. We desired peace, therefore We acted with that peace in Our mind, Our heart, and Our hands.

“And We continued that desire for peaceful resolutions even after forming Our empire. We offered you the choice, and We gave you all the time you felt you needed to make that decision. But now, it has become obvious that a time limit must be imposed. And that limit passed when a young man, out of his own malice, killed thousands of his fellow human beings by throwing a superpowered tantrum.

“The Terran Empire maintains jurisdiction over Our citizens, making it easy to combat crime and offer everyone within Our borders—both physical and otherwise—a high standard of living. We have no rising crime, no unemployment other than by choice, no poverty. Everyone in Our empire can live free of most worries, safe in the assurance that they will be protected.

“And with the widening gap between imperial and non-imperial citizens comes jealousy. Noncitizens have been allowed to mingle with citizens, fostering resentment and hate when it should birth the desire to join the empire. And for that, you have Our deepest apologies.

“But that situation ends today. Because, in order to face the incoming aliens, humanity MUST stand united. However, due to the law that binds Us from taking more draconian measures and enforcing compliance, We cannot simply declare all of humanity under Our purview.

“That said, though, We can most certainly choose to separate the two populations.

“Therefore, beginning immediately and henceforth, We declare all noncitizens exiled from Our empire’s borders. To protect the freedom of choice and expression that people demanded of Us during the founding of Our empire, We will begin enforcing an exodus from Our imperial territory and will be providing all noncitizens transport

to their own place. A place where you can live in peace, knowing that you will no longer have to suffer the inequality of the factional divide of humanity. A new Australia, if you will.

“You have made your bed. Now lie in it.”

Chapter 584 Planting Seeds

Aron remained silent for a few minutes, simply staring out of the holographic screens with his piercing gaze. Then, just when people began to wonder if the broadcast had frozen, he sighed and continued in a much calmer tone, “While the diaspora is mandatory for non-citizens, We offer Our citizens a choice. You may choose to sign up for the colonization effort and join in the diaspora of humankind. We realize that not everyone can, or is willing to, pick up a weapon or don the white lab coat of a researcher. And you shouldn’t be forced to do so.

“Protecting this solar system, the cradle of humanity, is an important task, yes, and ensuring that humanity survives every storm that heads this way is indeed the duty of every human. But not everyone is a fighter, or cut out to contribute to the scientific advancement of the species. Not everyone is needed to farm, or other supporting tasks like that, and that’s perfectly alright.

“That is why We offer you the choice to contribute in a different way, by spreading seeds of Our civilization across the galaxy such that at least one of them will take root and grow. Humanity is a resilient species. A tenacious species. An adaptable species. And spreading out is a solution.”

Behind Aron, the backdrop changed to an image of Earth as seen from the moon appeared. Then the planet shrank as the image zoomed out, first to the Orion spiral arm, then to the entire galaxy, as seen from above the galactic ecliptic plane. From Earth’s position, a pale blue color began spreading, slowly at first, but proceeding faster and faster as it spread until the entire galaxy was overlaid with that pale blue showing humanity’s occupation.

“But know this: the trip will be one way and you likely won’t be able to return in your lifetime. The colony ships We are building as we speak are designed for one-way journeys, at the end of which, they will land and become fortress cities. And for security purposes, no navigational data or astronomical data will be maintained in the database.

“You will be sent with all of the tools and technology you’ll require to ensure that your colonies succeed to the best of Our ability. You will have access to all of the technology of the Terran Empire save only a few, none of which will negatively influence your colonies.

“The journeys themselves will be long. The planets We have selected are all over the galaxy and it’ll take a minimum of a few decades, or perhaps even millennia, for you

to reach your destinations. And there's no telling what'll happen to our solar system during your trip.

"The ships themselves weren't designed as generation ships. They're tough, durable, and will last the journey while the colonists inside will remain in stasis. So no matter how long the journey, to those undertaking it, it'll be just like going to sleep at night and waking up the next morning after the best sleep of your lives." Aron gave the people watching a knowing grin.

"To those who fear being sent to uninhabitable planets or already-inhabited star systems, you don't have to worry. Each of Our colony ships will carry scouting vessels that will scout your destination long before the colony ships arrive. And if Our database proves wrong, there are a number of backup locations chosen. The galaxy is a vast place and the number of planets that humanity can thrive on is in the trillions, so rest assured—you WILL have a home awaiting you at the end of your journey."

People watching the speech wondered how Aron knew that, but he definitely wasn't about to tell them of the true capabilities of the universal simulation.

"In order to ensure the greatest chances of success, the cubes have begun being repurposed into training centers, where everyone will be trained to survive, and even thrive, at your destinations. You will become experts in various fields, fields that align with your individual interests. The training program will give you all of the tools that you need in order to build, and maintain, a thriving society on the planet you've been assigned to in the colonization program.

"Over the next two months, registration will be open to imperial citizens as we build new facilities for your use. The ones We already have will suffice for the noncitizens who are undergoing the forced migration. The training, however, will be the same for everyone... after all, it would do no good to send people to the stars without giving them all the tools they need to thrive, regardless of citizenship. As We said earlier, this is mainly to ensure the survival of humanity, and no matter who you are or what you believe, you are all still human, at the end of the day.

"We understand that many of you who are being forced to leave your homes for the vast unknown reaches of the galaxy are going to be angry. We came to this decision after a very long process of deliberation and with the input of the best minds that humankind has to offer. Our ministers and scientists presented Us with many, many solutions, but this was the one that survived the winnowing process. It is the solution that will ensure your liberties for generations to come.

“You will be given the opportunity to create your own civilization, your own government, from the ground up. You’ll have all of the opportunities that We had, and even more. You’ll benefit from the advances in science and technology that We had to painstakingly create over the past two years since the empire’s founding. And We know that a forced migration may appear brutal, but believe Us: it is the most merciful option that We had presented to Us.

“May your new homes be places where your dreams come true. We truly wish you the best.”

Aron gave the viewers a small bow, then slowly faded until the stage and podium was empty. Then the image on the screens changed to the imperial seal before they went completely blank, and were finally turned off, the imperial address finally having come to an end.

And the public reacted.

Chapter 585 Not My Circus, Not My Monkeys

Recife City, in the north of pre-empire Brazil.

“May your new homes be places where your dreams come true. We truly wish you the best.”

The people watching Aron’s address on the holographic screens above the LEAs were stunned into silence. The tailgate party atmosphere instantly cooled down and became glacial, as everyone watching was stunned into silence.

The silence stretched for minutes in the audience’s collective stare state, then a baby began fussing. The sound ignited the crowd, who collectively chose violence. They picked up sticks, rocks, pipes... one enterprising person even kicked over a stall and dismantled it through sheer rage and armed himself with a rather effective makeshift club.

Then the chaos began.

Chairs, sticks, pipes, rocks, and all kinds of other detritus rained down on the LEA, wielded by an angry mob. Thankfully, Aron had expected exactly that kind of reaction, so the LEAs merely remained standing and allowed themselves to be destroyed. The mob’s rage was soon vented and they collectively fell to the ground, panting, and looked at the pile of scraps that had once been a piece of advanced imperial technology.

After admiring the pile of lightly smoking scrap for a while and catching their breath, they took to the streets and headed toward the cube on the outskirts of the city. But they had also already learned their lesson from the last few “protests” and restrained themselves, intent on only damaging the cube itself.

Adelaide, in the south of pre-empire Australia.

In contrast to the actions of most noncitizens around the world, the Australians maintained their party atmosphere. If anything, the partying grew even more intense, with keg after keg making their way to the impromptu block parties from nearby liquor stores and grocery stores.

The general mood was rather high, and all told, Australian remnants had a much better relationship with their “neighborhood impies” than most. Thus, when the mobs moved out, their goal was to drag their imperial friends out of their homes to join in the celebration. It wouldn’t be the first time in the history of Australia that they had been forcibly emigrated, so by and large, they saw it as no big deal.

Besides, they had grown up on a continent that would qualify as a death world forbidden area among most of the civilizations in the galaxy. And even though they didn’t know that—nobody on Earth had had any contact with any of those civilizations yet, after all—they still knew the wildlife that already existed on and around Australia, so they figured their new home wouldn’t be any worse.

At least they wouldn’t have to worry about being dragged into any more pointless wars that were fought over matters that didn’t involve them, anyway. So on that front, their destination had at least one gigantic plus over their home on Earth.

Soon, the partying spread until practically the entire continent was inebriated to one degree or another. It only died down after it became apparent that the people had drunk the entire continent dry.

But as a completely unintended consequence, most of the imperial citizens in Australia had been talked into, or in some cases dared into, joining the Terran Empire’s voluntary colonization initiative. If their friends talked them into joining them, they would request a spot on that specific transport to join them. And if they had been dared into joining the diaspora, they would also join the person that dared them, if only to show that they hadn’t chickened out on their end of the bargain.

Australia’s reaction to the news could thus be considered fairly unique, when compared to the violence spreading around the globe.

.....

Imperial citizens, on the other hand, had a wide variety of reactions.

Though the prevailing majority of imperial citizens were rather dispassionate in their reaction, not having a dog in that particular race as it were, there were still a variety of responses by minority groups around the empire. Some were enraged by the highhandedness of the emperor, and were determined to protest the plan. Others were incited to sign up for the colonization initiative, either out of anger or excitement. And still more breathed a sigh of relief, as they had only recently joined the empire in order to survive the Carrington event of a few days before and still maintained their faith in their previous remnant governments.

Then there were those who were angry about the unilateral decision, but not angry enough to join protests. Instead, they became keyboard warriors and expressed their outrage on Pangea and other social media platforms, along with sending their thoughts, feelings, and prayers to those who were “the most affected by such a horrendous action on the emperor’s part”.

But for the silent majority, they just shook their heads and moved on with their lives. They didn’t care about the news at all, and found the reactions of others to be rather silly. Hadn’t they learned their lesson in any one of the recent protests? And as far as the social justice warriors, the majority felt that they simply didn’t understand how the world worked.

Besides, the empire had already built up a proven track record of success in their endeavors, so most people just wished the soon-to-emigrate people well.

Thus, by number, the reaction of the empire could be said to fall along the lines of “not my circus, not my monkeys”.

But of course, wherever there was one group with an opinion, there would always be another group that held the exact opposite opinion. So those people took to the streets and social media platforms to stage hastily conceived counterprotests, some of which grew violent. Medical response shuttles were a common sight in the sky for a few hours after Aron’s address ended, but thanks to them, the casualties were mostly limited in scope and severity.

The imperial police agency had been informed of the expected mess ahead of the address, so they were already in position and waiting for the rioters to “storm” the cubes, or other imperial brick-and-mortar offices. The directive had long come down to let them vent their anger on the LEAs, then any who were still stubborn enough to actually reach imperial property were to be arrested and processed along with the rest who were to be shipped off to colonies across the galaxy. Citizenship was to not be a factor in anything; if they were angry enough to march, they would be shipped off whether they were a citizen or not.

Thus, a mass arrest began. No matter which side of the issue they were supporting, getting violent would not be tolerated and they would be arrested all the same.

Chapter 586 Okay, so Maybe Some of the Monkeys Are Mine...

It took a bit more than six hours to fully quell the chaos, as the empire had been forced to focus most of its forces on angry awakeners at the beginning. The “Hero Academies” had yet to produce a graduating class, after all, which meant that non-awakened ARES members and reaper teams had borne the brunt of the awakeners’ ire. Even those noncitizens that’d taken the empire’s crash course on how to handle their new blessings had proven useless; some of them joined in the protesting, while the rest refused to aid either side.

At the end of the day, they were still in the group that was to be forcibly relocated, so that much, at least, was understandable. Aron could only thank who, or whatever, was watching over humanity for not having all of them join in the chaos and considered their noninterference a blessing. Even one noncitizen awakener going rogue could end up turning into another Hassan Event, and having millions of them doing that at the same time would almost definitely end poorly for humanity at large, much less the fledgling Terran Empire.

But thanks in large part to pappies, and in a much smaller part to headbags, the casualty count among the deployed ARES troopers had been kept relatively low, even in the face of rioting awakeners. Still, the non-awakeners had caused plenty of trouble while the rioting awakeners were being put down and transported to the cubes ahead of schedule. They, at least, would be segregated from the non-awakeners and the nonviolent awakeners and wouldn’t get a chance to interact with anyone else before they woke up on their destination planets.

The prevailing opinion among them was that training, no matter how harsh and spartan, would be much better than the alternative. The Hole still had plenty of space for inmates, and forced migration also sounded like a much better, not to mention more humane, option than being drafted into prison battalions and sent directly to the front line of any conflict humanity found itself in.

Even though, being awakeners, they would have an advantage in warfare, a life of constant battle interspersed with long stretches of stasis and training, sounded like a hellish existence to face.

Either way, once the awakeners had been arrested and transported to the nearest cubes, Aron, not to mention the rest of humanity at large, could wash their hands of them. Besides, it wasn't like more training would hurt them at all. In fact, it would even be good for them... especially since they were being put into the "Hero Program" track and would be subtly influenced by the training program that had been designed by the imperial blessings agency. And Nyx. Nyx had had a pretty big part to play in the training program designed to turn angry awakeners into heroes.

When she had approached the head of the agency, she'd laid out a convincing argument based on the long, long history of intelligence agencies and brainwashing. Thus, she set to her task with barely disguised glee, or at least a close approximation of that emotion; though she was still the most humanlike of any of Aron's higher-order AIs, there was still a thin barrier between her emulating emotions and actually feeling them.

As for the remaining noncitizens who were arrested during the protest, they were also put into pods. They formed a second segregated group that would also not be allowed to mingle with regular colonists and those who caused very little, if any, chaos during the protest. But again, it wasn't like more training would hurt them; on the contrary, it would help them quite a bit. It had always been a truism that ignorance breeds violence, and those who were being arrested during the protests upheld that in spades. Thus, the training they were about to undergo became the equivalent of the Job Corps program that the pre-empire United States used to run, where they would offer on-the-job training programs for people, then assist them with job placement upon graduating.

The imperial citizens who were arrested during the protests were detained pending trial. Though the likeliest option for them was to join the forced emigration, they would still be given their day in court to present a defense as to why they should remain on Earth, should they so choose. To streamline the trials, they were all given an option when they were first arrested: either "voluntarily" join the colonization effort, or be held in prison cells until their trial date, which could be as long as three months down the road.

Needless to say, most of them chose to join the exodus. At least there, they would have a hand in shaping their world and its social structure, unlike Earth. It hit home for some people watching from the sidelines as they realized that most of the citizens' anger was based in never having had the ability to determine anything for themselves.

Even in the US, which had touted itself as a haven of democracy, the people had only ever been given the illusion of choice. Every election turned into the same thing—it was like voting for cold turds on a paper plate or dried-up boogers on a silver platter. In the end, the people's voice had never mattered.

Still, the wave of arrests didn't mean that the protests had ended. Hundreds of millions of people were still protesting around the globe. But they were paying close attention to strictly following the guidelines and laws that not only allowed them to protest, but gave them guidelines on how to do so effectively. Not that they were difficult to follow, really; they pretty much boiled down to "don't hurt people, don't break things, don't demolish buildings, and don't start fires". Thus, the imperial police agency was mainly relegated to controlling the crowd to prevent trampling and such, or pulling people out of the mobs when they fainted.

Thus, although the number of protesters may have seemed alarming in a vacuum, the damage caused by them was actually minimal, not to mention mostly accidental.

Chapter 587 Preparation for the Diaspora

While the empire's military and law enforcement agencies were busy quelling the chaos incited by Aron's recent address, the ministry of the exterior was just as busy. Half an hour after Aron finished speaking, they released details of the colonization plan, including the destination star systems and breakdowns of the planets the migrants would be landing on. There were so many details that nobody thought it could possibly have been faked, though they did wonder just how the imperial space agency had managed to gather all of that information.

Every bit of information about the destinations was released, including the backup destinations and the backups of those backups. Accompanying it were details about the ships they would be sent on, the travel time they would take (though from beginning to end it would be spent in stasis), information on any threats—both detected and theorized—what kind of city the colony ships would become upon landing, the enhancements they would all receive in flight.... Everything was made transparent and publicly released with great fanfare, and anyone who was curious could easily find it, written as it was in language that would be understandable to anyone.

Once they entered the training program, they would be placed in a simulated environment that mirrored what they would find at the end of their journey, assuming that they didn't have to use one of the backup options. Their training would give them "real" experience and allow them to acclimatize to their new environment in advance, giving them a leg up so that, upon arrival, they wouldn't need to waste the first few years getting accustomed to basic things, like the different number of hours in a day. The first few years after landing would be absolutely crucial, and the less time they needed to waste, the better.

Included in the information was a section on how imperial citizens could apply to join the diaspora and what the process would entail for them, since they weren't part of the forced migration. There was even already a website set up for them to apply, should they be interested in doing so.

And a few thousand people had immediately made that decision, for good or ill. Whether it was in protest or for bragging rights, or even genuine belief in the goal—that being survival of the species—all of them were met with the same warning in the very beginning of the application process. Once they submitted their applications, they would have their choice locked in and would be unable to retract it, even if they later changed their minds.

If they did change their minds, they would simply be shit out of luck; they would be arrested and forcefully dragged to the training centers whether they wanted it or not. It was a good reminder of the irrevocability of certain decisions that people make, yet people still made the decision with the belief that, surely, the warning was just that: a warning. There was no way in hell it would ever be enforced... or so they thought, anyway.

Thus, screenshots began populating social media with the hashtag #ISignedUp or #StandWithTheDisenfranchised, and many others. All of the screenshots were the same: "<Name>, you have successfully applied to join the colonization effort. Please stand by while your application is processed. You will be notified within 48 hours of the result of your application."

It was a simple acceptance screen, but it brought home the fact that the emperor, and by extension, the Terran Empire as a whole, was serious.

Beyond the first few thousand applicants, there were millions more imperial citizens poring through the colonization plans and the application itself, either for content creation or interest. Content creators posted videos and messages on social media platforms either in support of or hating on the program, while those who were interested were checking to see if the empire had indeed done their due diligence.

If the interested people felt they could thrive, as Aron had promised, then they would go through with the application process. And most of the millions of interested citizens felt that they could, so they put in their applications. Especially since, as imperial citizens, they were given the option to choose which colonies they wanted to go with. At least within reason, anyway, as there was still a limited number of slots in each colony. They would at least get preference over noncitizens, though, which was one of the differences between being forced to go and choosing to go.

Either way, the number of applications only continued growing over time, as people made their choices.

Aron also chose to extend an amnesty to those prisoners serving life sentences for crimes committed before the founding of the empire. Those who'd at first had no possibility of parole suddenly found themselves offered a new life on a new planet. Those serving sentences in excess of thirty years were also given the opportunity to join them in their new leases on life, but those who were awaiting execution or serving relatively short sentences of 29 years or less weren't given the same option.

Along with the extension of the human lifespan to two hundred years came with a new perception of "long" and "short" time, after all.

That said, there were relatively few death row inmates to begin with; the empire was nothing if not efficient. The only evidence they required to deny all appeals and hasten the legal process beyond all reasonability was a simple brain scan, and even as backed up as the justice system was, the process never took more than a month from trial to execution.

But almost every one of the prisoners serving life sentences, including the leadership of pre-empire countries, chose to accept the empire's offer and apply to join the diaspora. For them, there would be no downside. Upon being sent to prison, they had been given the same basic genetic enhancements that any imperial citizen received, which meant their life without parole had gone from perhaps twenty years to, in some cases, more than a hundred and fifty years.

Now, to not only be released, but to be given an opportunity to claw their way back into positions of wealth and power? In their minds, anyone that refused that offer was an absolute moron of the highest order.

However, what they DIDN'T know, or rather, what wasn't included in the information released by the ministry of the exterior, was that along with all of that training would come some very subtle subliminal reprogramming.

It wasn't anything too intrusive, though. The reprogramming was mainly to bolster their drive to survive and withstand the early years of their colonies. But it would also be reinforced that they would simply not want to return to Earth after they awoke, and they were directed to influence their descendants in the same way.

The programming wasn't generational, as Aron hadn't felt the need to buy genetic recall of any tier, but given that the first landing would be the one that shaped the new civilizations from the ground up, it shouldn't be an issue.

Chapter 588 Envy Faded, Leaving Only Admiration

While outside, the frantic chaos incited by news of both the forced migration plan and the imperial colonization signups was ongoing, a small number of people were holding a very important meeting. Aron, Rina, Felix, Sarah, and Aron and Rina's families had gathered to discuss the wedding, though it had weirdly taken a different turn with everything that was going on outside.

"Are the remnants really causing that much trouble?" Aron's father asked. He wasn't worried about anyone in the room with him, as the Cube on Avalon Island was the safest place in the entire solar system.

"They're..." Aron began with a sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. "They're idealists, and it's too easy to turn that idealism into extremism. That makes them highly volatile, and if they remain on Earth, they'll have to remain under constant monitoring. Their potential to cause mass destruction is also immense—just look at what happened in Mogadishu. It took one person mere minutes to slaughter thousands, and if he wasn't stopped, the best-case scenario is that he would've burned himself out after turning the entire city to ashes.

"Worst case, he wouldn't have stopped at the city and would've eventually ignited the atmosphere. Our weather satellites already showed a global increase in temperature by 1.5 degrees. Global, not local. There's an entire group in Lab City working on ways to reverse that temperature rise, because Hassan did more damage to the world in five minutes than thirty years of global warming managed to accomplish."

"Worst case, he wouldn't have stopped at the city and would've eventually ignited the atmosphere. Our weather satellites already showed a global increase in temperature by 1.5 degrees. Global, not local. There's an entire group in Lab City working on ways to reverse that temperature rise, because Hassan did more damage to the world in five minutes than thirty years of global warming managed to accomplish."

Aron laid out the truth because he trusted the people in the room with him to not panic. Besides, they were all smart enough to know if he tried feeding them any misinformation to begin with.

"No need to bring up bad news here. We're here for a happy occasion," Aron's mother interjected. She would be damned before she let her son's wedding get put on the back burner again. The children had been engaged long enough, it was time for them to finally tie the knot come hell or high water

.....

A month later.

The imperial wedding day had arrived and a celebratory atmosphere had descended upon the entire Eden-Esparia archipelago. A large crowd of tens of thousands of people had already surrounded the park outside the first government spire to be completed. It was the core of the fortress city that, when it was completed, was to be named Eden, after the country that Aron had grown so far in.

The Eden Government Spire was the tallest building ever built by humans, stretching an entire kilometer into the air and overtaking the previous record holder—the now-destroyed Burj Khalifa—by a little more than a hundred and seventy meters. And wrapped around the base of the spire was a well-manicured and planned park, with a reflecting pool sandwiched between two rows of standing monuments like a diamond on a necklace set with emeralds.

The wedding was set to take place on the steps in front of the government spire, with the groom and bride's invited guests and the lucky lottery winners seated on the plaza between the steps and the reflecting pool directly atop the imperial seal laid in mosaic.

The entire area had been decorated with meticulous attention to detail, and for the event, looked more like a botanical garden than a dour government edifice. And hanging behind the stage where Aron and Rina would be joined in matrimony was a gigantic, thirty-story-tall Terran Empire flag, above which was the imperial family's coat of arms.

The venue was an oasis of peace and tranquility among a fortress city that was still very much under construction. If one were to turn around from their position facing the government spire, they would see tower after tower stretching into the distance in various stages of completion, along with cranes, gantries, and the normal detritus one could see at any construction site.

But considering that the day had been declared an imperial holiday, none of the construction vehicles were in use and the entire city seemed completely abandoned, though with a sense of the abandonment being very much temporary. Tools were neatly placed where they belonged, vehicles were neatly parked and stowed so as to minimize the possibility of accidents, and the streets, which had been laid before any of the buildings began construction, were clean and free of any debris so as to accommodate the crowd that had long been expected to descend upon the partially completed city for the emperor's wedding.

Precisely an hour before the wedding was to begin, the imperial band stood from their seats and began playing soft music, barely able to be heard over the low roar generated by thousands of people in casual conversation. Then vessel after vessel began arriving, landing on the manicured lawn to either side of the plaza and dropping off their load of invitees before flying off again to pick up their next load of passengers.

And everything was being broadcast live for anyone who cared to watch it. But it wasn't like they could watch anything else, as the imperial wedding had taken over every single television channel, and even professional livestreamers had decided to take the day off from doing their own thing and rebroadcast the wedding as amateur commentators. Those who wished to experience it in person, but hadn't been invited or able to join the crowd surrounding the plaza and park entrances, could log into the public VR and experience it as though they were there..

The clock ticked down until, by ten minutes before the wedding was due to begin, all of the invitees had arrived and taken their seats, awaiting the beginning of this once-in-a-lifetime event.

.....

Even those who were too lazy to attend the wedding in VR, or who were otherwise occupied, couldn't help but sigh in amazement as Aron walked out of the front doors of the government spire. Already an extremely handsome man, the bespoke suit he was wearing was tailored to show all of his best features. It was as if his handsomeness had a dial that, previously sitting at a comfortable eleven, had been cranked up past its stops all the way to thirteen.

During all of his personal addresses to the world, he had never been trying to look his best. In some cases, any amount of primping and preening would be too much. But now that he had put actual effort into his appearance, the difference was staggering. Every woman on Earth, straight or not, was deeply envying Rina her luck in landing such a handsome, rich, and powerful man, and every man on Earth, also straight or not, wanted to be Aron right now.

The band continued playing until a minute before the ceremony was to begin, when they switched to the classic wedding march, signaling that the bride was about to arrive. Everyone's eyes moved to the door of the building, including Aron's. And precisely on time, the doors opened and two small children walked out, scattering rose petals on the red carpet Rina would be walking down to reach Aron's side.

Soon, Rina followed, her hand held in the crook of her father's arm. The father and daughter had their heads turned to each other in conversation, then Rina laughed and faced forward. Her gaze met Aron's and she smiled, putting the Sun to shame with her radiance.

She was already beautiful enough to incite envy in everyone watching, but when she smiled... envy seemed meaningless. The gap between her and every other woman on the planet was too wide; it would be pointless to envy her, because no one would ever be able to compare. Thus, the envy faded, leaving only admiration in its wake.

When Rina and Aron came face to face, everyone couldn't help but acknowledge that they were indeed a match made in heaven. It was the first time Rina had ever appeared in public, and no one could imagine a more perfect debut for the Empress of the Terran Empire.

Earlier, upon the announcement of Aron's upcoming nuptials, many had speculated as to who he might be marrying, and whether or not the wedding was a political move to consolidate the emperor's power. But that thought had quickly passed, as Aron had no need to consolidate his power; there were no challengers. There could BE no challengers. He held the political power, the military power, and immense wealth. In business, his companies had no peers, either. Thus, the wedding could only be one thing: a love match, which was something rare for people in power.

No announcement had been made as to the bride's identity, and no clue had been leaked at all. So no one knew anything about her, much less that she had been married before. After all, both the Rothschilds and the Morgans had considered it a black mark on their reputations, and both families had gone out of their way to hide the divorce.

But that said, there were still a few people who knew about it.

Chapter 589 Here's to His and Her Imperial Majesties

"I do," Rina said as Aron slipped a wedding band onto her ring finger.

"Then by the powers vested in me, I declare you husband and wife," the wedding officiator said, then turned to Aron. "You may kiss the bride."

The crowd at the venue broke out in applause and cheers as Aron leaned down and passionately kissed his empress.

But not everyone was as happy.

The sound of shattering glass rang out in a small suburban home in South Central Los Angeles, followed by a scream of rage.

“That fucking BITCH!” Rottem Morgan shouted as he watched his former wife remarry. This time she was definitely marrying up, though he refused to admit that, when she had married him, she’d been marrying down. But deep in his heart, he knew it.

He felt like he had just discovered his woman cheating on him. And not only was she cheating on him, she was cheating on him with his worst enemy. And beyond that, she was doing that thing he really liked that she would only do on special occasions while he got to do it whenever he wanted and not just on special occasions! The only thing he could do, though, was stew in helpless rage as he continued morbidly watching the rest of the traditional wedding events, unable to tear his eyes from his television screen.

It was probably for the best that he didn’t know that he himself was the initiator of Aron’s “blessed life”. Aron had received the system after Rottem did his level best to ruin his life, and everything had quickly happened after that. Had that never happened, Aron wouldn’t have written BugZapper, nor would he have created Nova, GAIA OS, the Olympus and Zeus personal electronics, BioGen.... The list went on and on, but the heart of it all was that Rottem’s mistake had been Aron’s fortune.

As he watched Rina throw her bridal bouquet over her head and behind her to her laughing bridesmaids and the women invited to the ceremony, Rottem could only pick up his whisky bottle and drink from it. After all, the latest in a long string of his bad decisions was throwing his last glass against the wall in his impotent rage, leaving him forced to drink from the bottle.

The wedding continued for a while after that before smoothly transitioning to the reception party. Rina disappeared for a few minutes to change out of her wedding dress and into a sleek white evening gown that, while still absolutely gorgeous, was far less inconvenient to wear.

The emperor was married and the empire had grown more stable because of it. Soon, heirs would come, ensuring the dynasty for generations to come. The only thing that had marred the otherwise perfect ceremony was the lingering hubbub over Aron’s forced migration decree and the controlled chaos of the imperial colonization program. Those being forced to leave their homes wished the pair nothing but the worst, in contrast to the celebratory atmosphere that pervaded the wedding reception.

.....

“Whew,” Rina breathed in Aron’s ear as they sat at the head of a table on the lawn next to the plaza where the wedding had taken place. “I can finally breathe. And pee! I didn’t know I’d need two of my bridesmaids just to help me pee!” she grumbled through the brilliant smile on her face.

Aron couldn't hold back a chuckle at the mental image and clasped hands with her under the table. "Well, Mrs. Michael, I'm glad you're finally potty trained."

Rina playfully slapped at his shoulder, then the newlyweds turned their attention to Felix, who was drunkenly trying to embarrass Aron by telling an anecdote from when they were younger. Aron facepalmed and laughed at the silly story and Rina laughed so hard she couldn't even sit up straight.

Felix, seeing that his job was done, concluded by saying, "But it all worked out in the end. Aron, Emperor dude, Your Imperial Majesty, and so on... you're a lucky man. You've found the love of your life and I wish you a blissful marriage and a happy family in the future." He raised his glass and continued, "Here's to His and Her Imperial Majesties, long may they reign!"

Aron chuckled and raised his glass to Felix and gave his own toast, "To my brother in all but blood, Felix. With friends like you, who needs enemies?"

Everyone who merited a table near the bridal party laughed as they stood and raised their glasses as well, then they all drank them empty.

Soon after the toast, the chefs wheeled in the wedding cake. From where people were sitting, it almost looked as tall as the government spire the reception was being held at! Stretching a full twenty tiers into the sky, Aron guessed that whoever had baked it had had to incorporate gravity plating into the design in order to keep the enormous thing from falling over. It was decorated to within an inch of its life, and nowhere on it could anything as plebeian as "frosting" be seen through the layers upon layers of elaborate decorations.

The pâtissière delivered the top tier of the cake to the wedded couple herself, smoothly sliding it to the table in front of Aron, along with a cake knife. He would cut out the first slice of wedding cake himself and he cast a mischievous glance at Rina, then smooshed the cake across her face and chortled like a schoolboy.

Rina returned the favor, but in a much messier fashion. In lieu of a cake knife, she simply grabbed a handful of cake and smeared it all over the emperor's face, then pointed at him and belly laughed.

Aron wiped a glob of frosting out of his eyes, then grabbed Rina's cheeks and drew her in for another kiss, this one tasting of a delicious red velvet cake.

Soon after everyone had received a slice of cake, the band began playing and Rina stepped out on the dance floor, accompanied by Aron for the first dance. As Aron was an extremely busy man, they hadn't choreographed anything particularly special, but the pair's genetic enhancements ensured that they still gracefully moved across the dance floor.

The night continued and the reception finally came to an end in the small hours of the night, leaving Aron and Rina to fall exhausted into bed, too tired to get up to any hanky panky.

"Goodnight, Mrs. Michael," he whispered in her ear as they lay in bed, still dressed as they were too exhausted to even strip out of their clothes.

"Goodnight, husband," Rina whispered in return and planted a soft kiss on the tip of his nose as the house VI turned down the lights in the bedroom.

Chapter 590 Thoughts and Prayers

A month later.

Though Aron and Rina were on their honeymoon, that didn't mean the empire would cease functioning. Simply because the emperor was absent didn't mean government employees could stop doing their jobs. And with the efficiency that had been baked into the very underpinnings of the empire, they always overdelivered on their promises.

The forced migration and colonization programs were no exception.

The imperial space agency, in conjunction with the NIS and imperial police agency, had completely rounded up all of the noncitizens and sent them to the cubes for training. At the same time, the imperial immigration agency had sorted through the backlog of applications for the colonization program and was already well underway on transporting them to their training cubes as well. That said, there was a difference between a polite invitation and a late-night knock on the door.

Imperial citizens received polite invitations as well as arranged transports that, to a limited extent, were scheduled so as to accommodate their own schedules. It gave them time to say their farewells, not only to the people they would be leaving behind, but to the planet itself; they would never return, after all.

Noncitizens, on the other hand, weren't given the same courtesy. They were given a date by which they must report to their nearest cube for processing, and informed in no uncertain terms that, should they fail to arrive on time, they would be treated as criminals and arrested. Though the timeline for their reporting was short—usually within a matter of hours, or days at most—those who chose to accept their fate would still receive at least some privileges, such as increased cargo space on the colony ships and the privilege to select the world they would end up on. In contrast, those treated as criminals would be allowed no cargo or colony selection. They would also face much harsher training programs that had almost no allowances for personal time or relaxation breaks.

However, they would only find out the details after being arrested. The language in the “invitations” was purposefully left vague and lacking in details.

And perhaps because of the vague threat—which was along the lines of someone using “or else” when speaking—an “underground railroad” of sorts sprang up among people who fancied themselves some kind of resistance, or freedom fighters. It made them difficult to capture, but once the NIS was involved, the underground railroad was rolled up within a matter of days. It could have been done even faster, but the nyxians wanted to ensure a 100% capture rate, so they took their time.

For the imperial citizens involved in the drama, their punishment depended on how willing their participation was. It ranged from minor fines for more mundane, or even incidental, violations and went all the way up to having their citizenship stripped from them. And for those who were stripped of citizenship, well... they joined the forced migration group whether they liked it or not.

Furthermore, they did so as criminals.

And speaking of imperial citizens, those who regretted their impulsive signups and wanted to change their mind found themselves sorely disappointed. They would report for training as scheduled, or they would be given the same treatment as the people of the short-lived, ill-fated “resistance movement”. So those who had signed up in a fit of anger, means of protest, or for simple attention and bragging rights had discovered another long-held saying that held true: there is no cure for regret.

Another large group of citizens hadn't signed up for the colonization effort, but when seeing how it was being implemented for remnants, couldn't help but get their backs up. The collective memory of most of humanity still hadn't let the horrors of concentration camps, internment camps, secret police, and other hallmarks of fascist states fade. Some of them, the less emotional ones, even attempted to sue the empire, only to be informed of how the empire handled that kind of thing.

Part of the imperial charter that Aron had drawn up years before with the aid of his inner circle and the higher-order AIs granted the Terran Empire what was known as sovereign immunity. In practice, that meant that the government would automatically be immune from criminal prosecution and civil lawsuits, though they, in the person of the empire or the head of the imperial judiciary, could waive that immunity and allow the trial to proceed. So, did they do that now?

Of course not.

The empire's sovereign immunity and blithe continuance of what was seen as a pogrom against the "poor, disenfranchised remnants" generated another small group of imperial citizens who decided to demonstrate against it. They would livestream themselves mutilating their own body parts, chaining themselves to government buildings, epoxying themselves to streets, and there were even a few cases of self-immolation. Those who were less intense, but still upset, would hold prayer vigils, or even sit-in protests. One school district in particular had organized an offline sit-in where the students, their families, and teachers locked themselves in the school building and refused to leave in some so-called "solidarity" with the disenfranchised.

And of course, social media saw a flood of people changing their profile pictures in protest of the imperial government and offering their thoughts and prayers to the "victims". For some reason, that particular knee-jerk reaction had proven difficult to overcome.

But the empire didn't care. Those who chained themselves to buildings were arrested, stripped of citizenship, and sent to join the poor unfortunate souls they were protesting on behalf of. Those who caused actual damage, such as gluing themselves to roads or forcing maglevs to stop by standing in the middle of the maglev tracks, and so on, were first fined, then arrested and sent to join the forced migration. The only ones who escaped that fate were those who successfully managed to kill themselves in their misguided protesting; everyone else was simply rounded up and shown the proverbial door.

The ministry of the interior and the agencies under it had long grown used to practically every decision Aron made provoking some idiot or other, or even groups of them, to join in some crusade or other. As long as they weren't damaging property, harming people, or inhibiting the function of people whose only crime was simply doing their jobs, they would be left alone. But the instant the protests crossed any of those lines, the imperial police would come down on them like the fist of an angry god.

One of the unintended, but very welcome, consequences of Aron's forced migration and colonization programs was that it was acting as a very effective method of winnowing out those who hadn't accepted the empire, or their positions within it, and forging a truly united culture that considered themselves humans first, imperial citizens second, and further distancing them from the divisions that kept the species fractured before the empire's founding.

But no matter how high quality a steel ingot may be, it would never be anything more useful than a doorstep or paperweight without a skilled blacksmith repeatedly pounding it with a hammer.

