

Tech System 651

Chapter 651 A Thunderous Arrival

A few hundred meters away from Aron, a rolling black thundercloud was scudding across the sky in his direction. He lifted his right leg and, when he set it down, he had moved ten meters away from the children, placing himself between the cloud and them. Behind him, the two emperor's aegis members of his close guard activated the area protection feature of their PAPS, surrounding the children—and themselves—in a dome of solidified mana that glowed a faint blue.

Aron faced the incoming cloud, an unnaturally grave expression on his face as he raised his hand and a shield rune popped into being between him and the cloud. Milliseconds later, a lightning bolt impacted the shield and the crackling boom of thunder almost instantly followed.

“Interesting, interesting,” a voice filled with confidence drifted out of the dust kicked up by the lightning strike. “You reacted to my approach before anyone else... even before your security team. Interesting indeed!”

As the dust settled, a muscular man wearing nothing but a pair of tattered jeans was revealed. He had neat, chin-length hair and a well-trimmed beard, neither of which had a hair out of place; should anyone see him, they would never suspect that he had been a literal lightning bolt mere moments before.

The black thundercloud finally caught up to the man, hovering over the entire park. Lightning flickered deep inside it, lighting it up and dimming it section by section as the scent of ozone filled the air. The cloud was already thick enough to mostly block out the sun, but it continued growing thicker and thicker as it spread.

Behind Aron, the children in the PAPS dome were slumped on the ground, sobbing in terror. One of the aegis members had turned to them and was comforting them as best as he could, but... their job description and training never covered pacifying terrified children.

Nova, who was looking on from the nanoscale camera swarms that constantly followed Aron, sent a note to Athena to include that in future training for aegis members. After all, they wouldn't always be assigned to adults; there would inevitably be times they'd be called upon to guard high-value adolescents, or even small children.

“Cat got your tongue?” the half-naked man sneered when he saw Aron's lack of reaction. “Or are you buying time for your security to come rescue you, hmm?” As the man spoke, his voice became more and more distorted with hissing pops and crackling, like someone speaking through an old, cheap microphone.

He turned to where people were already gathering outside the aegis perimeter and smiled a brilliant smile for the reporters' cameras, both professional and amateur. Without looking back at Aron, and preening for the cameras, he loudly exclaimed, “Whatever it is, your security won't be able to react fast enough if I do anything to you.” He puffed out his chest, feeling more and more superior to the emperor of mankind as his taunting continued failing to elicit a response from the man.

The swings in his mood were quite rapid and erratic, just as one would expect from an awakener attuned to lightning. Not to mention the speed of his inane babbling—it had only been about fifteen seconds since Aron took his first step toward the incoming thundercloud.

Aron finally opened his mouth after five long, seemingly slow seconds passed. “No,” he said with a smirk. “I’m not buying time for anyone to arrive. There’s really no need for delaying tactics. My aegis are the best of the best of the best and they are always active and ready to respond to any threat to my safety.

“But you... you’re absolutely no threat to me whatsoever,” he sneered, his arms arrogantly folded across his chest.

“You pathetic, unawakened, useless piece of sh—” the rogue awakener began, but was quickly interrupted.

“As for my tongue being stuck, you were never the reason for my silence. You lack the importance to even make me blink in faint surprise. I was simply wondering what I’d ever done that would give someone the confidence to approach me, or any other member of my government for that matter, with a measly attack like that.”

He turned his back on the half-naked awakener and smiled at the children, gesturing for the two aegis members to herd them back to their parents, as the park was likely to become a battleground of awakeners very shortly.

The aegis members saluted, their armored fists crashing against equally armored chests as they stood ramrod straight, bowing their head in acknowledgement of the order. “Immediately, Your Imperial Majesty,” they chorused, then turned and activated the inbuilt tractor beams in their armor, lifting the children and surrounding them in a protective stasis field as gravity’s hold on them was overcome by the power of... mostly... human ingenuity.

“And who ever said I wasn’t awakened?” Aron’s feet lifted slightly from the ground as his eyes began glowing neon blue.

The rest of the aegis members on the perimeter chose that moment to act as well. They turned to face Aron, and, in one synchronized motion, their left knees and clenched left fists hit the ground, their right fists repeatedly banging against their chests in the imperial salute as they bowed their heads and chanted “Glory to the Terran Emperor!”

A large PAPS field drew itself between the aegis members and the emperor, locking Aron in with the obviously mentally imbalanced rogue awakener.

Aron grinned a savage grin at the man as he growled, “No, you’re no threat to me. You aren’t even really a threat to my aegis. You never were, you aren’t now, and you never will be.” He tilted his head from side to side, sharp snapping sounds ringing out as his neck cracked. “The only thing you’re a threat to is yourself!”

Chapter 652 Superiority Complexes are the New Chuunibyo

A few months after the Three Percenters had graduated from the awakeners' school and hero academies, reality had finally sunk in for them. The power they held in their hands made them walking weapons, and they could massacre entire towns of normal people, should they wish to do so. And human nature being what it is, most of them began feeling at least a little bit superior to "normies".

If their superiority complexes had stopped there, it wouldn't be a big issue. A little arrogance was fine, and could even be a good thing if it was properly restrained and channeled. After all, even Aron had to admit that he was more of a benevolent dictator that had been moving farther and farther away from human norms since he'd received the system. But with the age range of the first human awakeners being what it was, a good bit of them had taken their superiority complex way beyond what could be even remotely considered healthy.

Basically, hormonal teenagers are hard enough to deal with (just ask any parent who's ever had a teenage child). But when you gave those same hormonal teenagers Ultimate Cosmic POWAH, it shouldn't come as a shock to anyone with two brain cells rattling around in their heads that they would take things to the extreme.

Thus, a cancer began spreading through the awakeners as they came to believe that they should not only accept, but expect to be treated as superior beings in every aspect of their lives.

As a result, there was a growing sense of discontent from normal people, who were feeling the brunt of the awakened extremists. Awakened crime began skyrocketing, keeping the imperial blessings agency constantly overworked but well compensated, understaffed, and overwhelmed. The official policy was to brutally, and publicly, stamp out any extremism that began to show itself in the awakeners. And that had given rise to even more resentment on the part of the awakeners, which meant less people joining the imperial blessings agency, emergency services, and other government agencies and ministries.

Even some of the "normies" were against it, as every awakener caught in performing any crimes, whether it be murder, arson, or other crimes of similar weight, were headbaggged and thrown in the pit to join the growing ARES penal legions. And to normies, that reeked of humanity's shameful past of slavery and segregation. There again, human nature raised its ugly head and humanity began showing signs of splintering, this time over the treatment of awakened criminals.

Some normies were perfectly fine with the status quo and honestly believed that awakeners were inherently superior beings. Others still espoused equality above all, and still others actually benefited from the situation, usually friends and loved ones of the awakener supremacists.

And what Aron was facing now was obviously an awakened supremacist.

"Are you an AS?" he asked.

"Haha! You're quite the smart one—you caught on quite quickly!" the rogue awakener said, spittle flying from his lips as he began gearing up to deliver his perfect manifesto that would definitely cause the emperor to withdraw his neutral stance in awakeners' affairs and take the side of the supremacists.

Hell, he was even half convinced that Aron was actually an awakener in disguise, so he should obviously agree with the supremacists!

The sneer on Aron's face disappeared, replaced by a blank, apathetic mask. "Since that's the case, I really have nothing to talk to you about," he said, then turned to walk away.

"So that's it!?" the AS rogue said, contempt writ large across his features. "You just... run away!?"

He capered up behind Aron, who was walking away, and tried evoking a reaction out of the impassive emperor. He turned to the audience—especially the reporters studded here and there within—and mocked, "This is all the so-called 'great' Terran Empire has! Hahaha!"

Aron stopped in his tracks and slowly turned back around, coming face to face with the AS rogue. Not a hint of fear could be seen in him. "Okay, so let's hear your well-thought-out manifesto. I'm sure you have one, right?" He smirked and folded his arms across his chest again, a light smile playing across his face, though it was less playful and more... murderous.

The man obviously failed to read the room and scoffed with a scornful smile on his face. He felt his power was being appreciated, and that his beliefs had made even the emperor of all humanity stop and listen to him in fear, despite all the security surrounding him.

"First," he said with a mocking courtly bow, "allow me to introduce myself. I am Alejandro Garcia, and I have awoken the superior power of lightning. That makes me superior to unblessed scum like you normies, because I hold absolute power over your pathetically weak selves...."

He went on raving like that for a solid ten minutes, getting so involved in his lunatic ranting that arcs of electricity began crawling all over his body.

"There's no need to explain further, as I have the power to enforce awakened superiority over any unblessed scum I happen to feel deserves a reminder of their place beneath us. But me, and others like me, have been facing a single hindrance: you. You've been blocking our ascent to our rightful place, so I'm here to deal with you and kick off our glorious movement!" He struck a power pose, with one hand on his hip and the other pointing directly at Aron's face. He was looking forward to seeing the fear on the face of his target as he began the process of once again attacking the emperor, who was standing in front of him.

However, he'd obviously forgotten what had happened the first time he'd attempted a full-speed, full-power attack on Aron, who had changed his position. He was now standing there, leaning forward and sticking out his chin with his hands clasped behind his back. It was as if his whole body was screaming "HIT ME! GO AHEAD AND FUCKING HIT ME ALREADY!"

Alejandro Garcia, late of the former nation of Spain, was about to have a really, really bad day.

Chapter 653 A Truth

Lightning, contrary to popular belief, doesn't move at the speed of light. The invisible "leader strike" travels from the cloud to the ground at around two hundred thousand miles per hour; a far cry from the speed of light, which travels at upwards of 670 MILLION miles per hour. But what people think of when they look at lightning isn't the invisible leader strike, but what's called the

“return stroke”, which heats the air in the ionized pathways left behind by the leader strike, turning it to plasma. That travels significantly faster, at around a third of light speed or 60,000 miles per second.

So when the people surrounding Aron and the awakener supremacist, Alejandro Garcia finally blinked their eyes clear of the temporary blindness caused by seeing a return stroke at incredibly close range, all they saw was the emperor of mankind standing in the same position he had been, slightly leaning forward with his hands clasped behind his back and his chin jutting out. But behind him was a headless corpse, still standing on its feet, and a fine red mist suspended above the neck, which was spraying arterial blood from where its head should have been.

Then, they finally heard the cracking whine of a pulse rifle round echoing out from one of the white and silver towers circling the park they were standing in and understood what had happened. Someone had stupidly attacked the emperor of all mankind, assuming that the visible security was the only security that Aron had accompanying him.

It was a fatal mistake.

Aron relaxed his stance and turned to the newscasters in the distance, their cameras all focusing on him. As the corpse behind him finally fell with a thud, he said, “Thus is the fate of anyone who attempts to overturn the foundation of Our empire. No mercy shall be shown to those who believe themselves better than others by a simple quirk of chance, a cosmic event that just so happened to land in their favor.

“Awakeners are no better or worse than everyone else. All of humanity is equal. Equal in terms of opportunity, and equal in terms of squandering or grasping those opportunities. We all live, we strive, we succeed, we fail, we love, we laugh, we cry, we mourn, we bleed, and in the end, we all die. Some, perhaps, sooner than others. But that doesn’t change the fact that no human is inherently better than any other.

“As for this man, his crime wasn’t his words. We are not a petty man who would execute one of Our citizens simply for espousing their beliefs, no matter how wrong they are. But that man—” Aron gestured at the corpse on the ground beside him, “—took his wrongheaded beliefs and attacked Us. He has paid the price for his mistake, and it was the last mistake he will ever make.

“So far, We have allowed the discussion of equality to continue on without weighing in for or against. But We have seen what’s happening around Us. We’ve seen the divisions fostered among Our people by these supremacists. And We’ve seen your suffering and pain as those who mistakenly believe themselves superior enforce their wills upon you, Our beloved people.

“Here and now, We promise you this: no longer! Things that threaten to divide humanity will no longer be tolerated! Anyone that seeks to enrich themselves by begging others will find themselves on the opposite side from Us. And We will not be merciful! We will bring down the full might of the Terran Empire upon the

cancerous blight growing in the dark, the so-called criminals of the popular phrase 'capes and criminals'. As will the full force of the empire be brought to bear on those unawakened that agree with such an insidious, divisive opinion as awakened supremacy.

"Not too long ago, We stood before what should have been a symbol of unity among humans, a united leadership that should have strove for peace, justice, and unity. And while We were there, We saw that it did anything but. So, We replaced it, because humanity MUST. BE. UNITED!" Aron hammered his fist against his other palm to emphasize the last three words.

"It seems that some have forgotten that humanity must stand united thanks to an outside, potentially hostile, force heading our way. Yet what I see now are people striving to return to the days of tribalism, of humanity being as disunited as a dish of loose sand. They have forgotten why We have done the things We've done. We eliminated hunger, poverty, homelessness, unemployment, and war. We've increased the standard of living for everyone, doubled your lifespans—and then some—and We've taken humanity and dragged Our species out of the dirt and into the stars!

"And was it the so-called 'superior' awakeners that did all of that? Did they do ANY of that?" Aron paused in his impromptu speech to let his points sink in, then continued, "No! The people who pushed humanity to the stars, the people who feed humanity, the people who study the mysteries of existence and push human technological boundaries to a point that every single day is a day with a myriad of discoveries, both scientific and technological... have almost entirely been Our unawakened citizens.

"So the claim of 'awakened superiority' is an outright, utter lie. It's a lie perpetuated by those who feel strong, and in their minds, they think strength should be used to bully the weak.

"They have no idea what true strength is. But We will show them precisely what it is. That, Our dear citizens, is another promise I am making to you, and another promise that will. Be. Kept!"

Aron took a deep breath and his expression returned to his usual impassive, authoritarian gaze. "We are not a despot, however, nor are We a tyrant. If you truly desire change, then fight for it with your words, with your ideas, with your passion. If you truly feel superior to your fellow humans, then show it through your actions, your deeds. Be better. Take the high road. Do good. Enrich and encourage your fellow human beings.

"But whatever you do, do not use violence. Do not bully the weak. Because if you do...." Aron turned his head and glanced at the headless corpse next to him. "If you do," he continued, softer this time but with Nova ensuring that his words were clearly recorded by the cameras in the distance, "then this will be the only end you face."

Without another word, he turned and strode toward his shuttle, his back ramrod straight and steps steady and even, ignoring the shouted questions of the journalists in the distance. He had just given them a truth, and they would need time to digest it before he spoke on the matter again.

Chapter 654 The Dispatch

As Aron approached his personal shuttle, the aegis members surrounding the park rose to their feet and deactivated the PAPS dome, then collapsed into two files behind him and followed him into the aircraft. Once everyone had boarded, the hatch hissed shut and the shuttle lifted off on a suborbital hop to the Cube at Avalon Island. It was still the center of the imperial government, as Aron had decreed that his imperial palace would be the very last building to be constructed, and the construction would only begin after everyone else had been settled into their new homes.

{Sir, we have a dispatch from Proxima Centauri coded for your eyes only,} Nova reported the moment Aron settled into his seat.

“I wonder what happened that warranted sending a dispatch,” he said. There were very few things that would merit the sending of dispatches across the vast gulf between Earth and the exploration fleets, so the news was either very good, very bad, or had far-reaching implications that might affect future exploration missions to star systems even farther from humanity’s cradle.

But that would have to wait until he reached his office, which was the only place that had equipment secure enough to scan his personal biometrics. Eyes-only dispatches were one of the few things in the Terran Empire that had to be handled in an air-gapped system with physical verification. Thus, Nova continued reporting.

{Some of the journalists on site livestreamed your confrontation with the rogue awakener, Alejandro Garcia. Currently, public opinion is divided into two camps—the majority opinion is on your side. It was obvious that you were under attack, so they believe the use of force was justified, and some are even calling for the sniper that took out your assailant to be awarded a medal.}

“Hmph,” Aron snorted. “If I have to give out medals every time I’m attacked in the future, it’ll devalue the awards and make them cheap. Have Panoptes quash the award idea.”

{Yes, Sir.}

“Anything else of note come out of that?”

{Yes. Some of the detractors are saying that you set the conflict with Mr. Garcia up yourself as a false flag operation to issue a warning and a statement to awakeners that you can easily have them killed any time anywhere. They’re justifying it by claiming it’s impossible to hit lightning with a bullet from kilometers away,} Nova reported.

“Well, I suppose it must seem that way to them. And we can’t prove it either way without declassifying some of our predictive targeting algorithms, so just ignore it for

now. If no crackpot conspiracy theorists had brought that up, we'd have had to bring it up ourselves since it's a surprisingly reasonable line of thought."

{Understood, Sir. What's the threshold for Panoptes to step in on it?} Nova asked.

"Hmm... let's say thirty percent. Once it hits saturation with that many of my detractors, have Panoptes start separating them into their own bubbles. And notify Nyx and Mnemosyne to keep a closer eye on the crackpots, along with the awakened supremacists."

{Yes, Sir.}

"Anything else?"

{Not at this point, Sir. It's fairly early, so the dust is still settling. We'll know more in a day or two and be able to make a more accurate forecast, especially after Mnemosyne gathers the data during the next few logins to the simulation.}

"Put out a press release and push it to all devices so everyone is informed, then. Should move things along faster so we can see where we stand with the supremacists," Aron ordered, then settled back in his seat and closed his eyes to rest for the remainder of the ten-odd minutes until he reached the Cube and would need to deal with the next pile of shit that dumped itself on his shoulders.

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Avalon Island, the Cube.

A pristine white and gold shuttle landed on the roof and settled in the secure docking cradle. The side hatch slid open with a whoosh and Aron's aegis detail disembarked, arranging themselves in two rows, facing outward with their pulse carbines relaxed, but at the ready. Once they were situated, Aron hopped down from the shuttle and strode toward the elevator.

"Where's the dispatch?" he asked the empty air.

{Waiting for you in Lab O in the basement. Are you going there first?} Nova said.

"Yes. I'd like to see this new ship class in person first. The dispatch has already waited at least six months, it can wait a few more hours." Aron passed through the open elevator doors, all of the security protocols and handshakes already handled by the ever-efficient Nova.

{Understood, Sir.}

The elevator doors swished shut and the pumps attached to the shaft pulled a vacuum in it before the elevator shot down toward the lowest basement level beneath the Cube at close to five hundred miles per hour. Lab O was located roughly three kilometers underground and was the physical counterpart to Lab City, with the digital scientists operating drones and robots that could manipulate physical materials. It was also where his own personal lab was situated.

Once he reached his lab, he walked in and looked at the ten-meter-diameter sphere that was the newly designed Meteor-class Messenger Boat. It was a matte black sphere without any obvious construction marks and looked like nothing more than a solid lump of some unknown metal. He let out a low whistle and muttered, "Impressive."

He truly was impressed; the design was excellent and served its purpose well. As he looked at it, layer upon layer "exploded out" in his AR view, showing the thick armor plating, internal machining, and even the miniaturized warp engines and fusion reactor. Not to mention the quantum server, which was about as big as the one he had first used to run Nova and the simulation of Earth.

With a gesture, he set a nanite swarm to work disassembling the messenger boat. It would take about two and a half hours to take apart, so he decided to use the time to read the dispatches from Task Force Proxima. Thus, he walked into his secure office attached to Lab O and settled into the recliner used for offline memory updating and review.

He placed his hand into the recess on the armrest of the chair and it read his fingerprints and took a DNA sample from the base of his palm. Once the fingerprints were matched, a visor slid over his eyes and flashed a blue light, reading his retinal pattern as he recited the gibberish phrase he used as a voiceprint password.

{Identity verification complete. Welcome, Emperor Aron Michael,} the monotone voice of a VI said into his ear.

"Implement air gap protocol," Aron ordered.

{Implementing,} the VI replied.

Aron's implant disconnected from the network as the security blast doors came down over the doorway to the office. Once they sealed, a connection formed between the doors and walls, where runic script turned the room into a mana void, along with completing the faraday cage built into the walls.

Once the air gap was complete and tested, Aron logged into the local network and began reviewing the DNA-encoded memory recording. His brows furrowed with a frown as he reviewed the information of what had taken place on Proxima Centauri b, and especially when the recording reached Birch demanding to meet with him in person regarding the status of the trees' children.

After the recording came to an end, he remained reclined in place, his finger tapping at the arm of the chair he lay recumbent in.

Chapter 655 To go or not to go, that is the question (1)

Within the time-accelerated VR's private space, Aron, Gaia, and Nova sat silently, gazing at the scene before them. Aron was struck by surprise, while Gaia and Nova struggled to reconcile what they saw with their prior understanding of reality, based on the data they had previously used to gauge the world.

This silence continued for more than ten minutes as each of them digested the information in different styles.

Without surprise, Aron was currently digesting the information about Liafu, which, to him, was the second most important piece among the messages sent. He realized this knowledge was something he would only have learned if he had bought advanced-level mana knowledge, if not higher, as it

was a worldview-altering revelation. Despite not changing the current events, this information was akin to discovering a new fundamental law of the universe. It didn't impact ongoing matters but provided a framework to understand previously unexplainable phenomena and offered a new tool to exploit in the future.

"So, just as the laws of physics are the fundamental laws of the universe, mana also has its own fundamental laws, some of which have gained consciousness," Aron said, his voice steady and reflective as the scene around them faded. His words were not directed at Gaia and Nova, who were beside him, but rather served as a means to vocalize his thoughts.

He continued, more to himself than to his companions, "Does that mean all other laws might also have gained intelligence?" He paused, contemplating the implications. "It should be the special properties of mana that are the differentiating factors in gaining intelligence. But that's just a theory at this point in time. Contemplating it any further without a means of proving our theories is pointless."

Aron knew that diving deeper into such philosophical and theoretical discussions would not be productive without concrete evidence. "I currently need to go through more of the information," he reasoned. "I'll leave it to the scientists to do the thinking for now."

With a sigh, he shifted his focus back to the task at hand. He wanted to review and digest all the information uploaded to him, as his role demanded a comprehensive understanding of every discovery. Unlike the leaders of previous nations, who often made decisions based on fragmented knowledge or trusted their assistants, who most of the time had other agendas they wanted to progress, Aron believed that his awareness of every detail would prevent him from being manipulated into doing someone else's bidding, issuing misguided or harmful orders.

He reflected on the past, thinking about how many disastrous decisions were made because leaders acted on incomplete information. Those mistakes had led to unnecessary conflicts, resource wastage, and even loss of life.

He then moved on to the next section, then the next, and then the next without stopping. Seventy-two days in VR-accelerated time passed with Aron learning about everything the Proxima Centauri exploration fleet had discovered. From the special minerals not found in the solar system to the intricate formation of the planet, every piece of information was thoroughly absorbed. By the end of this period, Aron and the two main AIs, Gaia and Nova, had completely digested all the data, embedding it deeply into their understanding.

"This is the best result we could have ever fathomed, even if we had thought of it in the first place," Aron said, clearly satisfied with the exploration fleet's discoveries. "Most of the time, they selected the best option among the choices they had, based on the limited connection they had with the imperial palace."

{Yes, and they have even gained us more than ten billion new working-age citizens, allowing us to not worry about the manpower shortage that was starting to show itself,} Gaia responded, her focus on the influx of new people who would join the empire.

Usually, humanity was considered quite adept at adapting to new technologies and implementing them in their lives, but this was typically counted in decades. With the formation of the empire, however, that timeline was reduced to mere months. Spaceflight, once one of the most expensive endeavors imaginable, became cheaper than pre-empire plane tickets with a single announcement.

The empire's opening of space access was followed by an immediate start to the production of affordable ships by a company owned by Aron.

This rapid expansion into a vast industry, coupled with the empire's efforts to make it accessible to almost everyone, presented a challenge. The industry, a million times the size of Earth, offered an ever-increasing number of jobs, risking a manpower shortage within a decade of its development.

However, in just a few years of the empire's existence, several factors mitigated this risk. Complete health rejuvenation for all citizens, combined with secure housing, abundant food, and numerous incentives for having children—such as low-cost and subsidized necessities free and high-quality education—led to a significant baby boom. This boom indicated a continuing trend for the coming years as the costs of raising children were expected to keep decreasing.

The influx of new working-age citizens from the Proxima Centauri exploration further alleviated the potential manpower shortage. The empire's proactive measures ensured a steady growth in population and workforce, supporting its expansive ambitions and securing its future.

{But we will only reap the full benefits if they join the empire. It seems that requires Sir Aron to physically visit them before they decide whether to join us or become our ally,} Nova interjected, reminding Gaia of the requirement, even though she was sure Gaia hadn't forgotten.

Instead of responding to Nova's statement, Gaia turned to Aron and asked, {Will you be visiting them?}

{Sir?!!!} Nova asked upon not receiving a response to Gaia's question.

But that, too, was met with silence from Aron's side. He could be seen tapping on the armrest of his chair, clearly deep in thought, weighing the pros and cons of both choices before him. To go or not to go, that is the question.

But that didn't last long as he abruptly stopped tapping on the armchair. He turned to Gaia and Nova and began, "Ten...

Chapter 656 To go or not to go, that is the question (2)

"Ten billion awakeners are too important for me to merely have them as allies when we have the option of welcoming them as citizens," Aron stated decisively. He paused, contemplating the next steps. "The challenge is understanding their requirements," he continued, his mind already strategizing on how to approach this critical decision.

{I don't know what it is, but if anyone among humanity can fulfill their requirements, it's you.} Nova responded confidently. {Based on what they did during the meeting and those memories from Kim Ho So, it seems like they've given a requirement that could potentially be met. Otherwise, they would have made it clear. From what they've shown us, they don't seem to have a concept of lying. However, that could also be part of their strategy. But based on everything we've seen, they don't appear to be the type to deceive.} Nova's perspective offered a cautious optimism about the awakeners' intentions and the potential for a fruitful alliance or integration.

"But first, it looks like we need to change the constitution," Aron said with a sigh, recalling the recent speech he had just hours ago in the real world, facing the public as a headless man laid beside him.

Although he had mentioned that the constitution could be amended if a compelling reason was provided, Aron hadn't anticipated that such a reason would arise mere hours later.

{So, you are going,} Gaia said, understanding Aron's decision from his statement.

{Yeah, but not immediately. As the emperor, you still have things you need to complete before thinking of going,} Nova interjected, wearing her hats as Aron's personal secretary, assistant, and more. She ensured Aron understood that despite his eagerness to meet species from the fantasies of books and anime now becoming reality, he couldn't depart whenever he wished, as he had and could do previously.

"I know, I know. Plus, before I go, the infrastructure needs to be completed before I can even think of heading there," Aron acknowledged. Despite the empire's current state of peace, he felt a strong need to remain connected and updated about Earth's situations and occurrences.

{When the time comes, are you going to announce your departure to the people?} Gaia asked, seeking clarity on Aron's plans.

"I have to, since even the change in the constitution must be done publicly, with reasons provided for why the change is necessary," Aron replied solemnly. He lowered his head, his gaze drifting into the distance as he continued, "But first, we have to acknowledge the existence of FTL travel to make everything coherent, despite many already suspecting its existence."

Aron reflected on the many classified or undisclosed technologies and discoveries that would need to be declassified or publicly acknowledged. One thing was slightly making him nervous, if that was even possible in the first place. It was the reaction of the family members who had their friends and families sent to another star systems with sub-FTL ships when the empire already had that technology on their hands, but that was to be dealt with when that time came.

{I will start coming up with a plan, and we should have everything ready for you to leave within three months,} Gaia said, taking charge of organizing the preparations and wanting to use this as an opportunity to give Aron time to rest after his intensive period of absorbing and digesting information in VR.

"Thanks," Aron replied gratefully before bidding them farewell. He was confident in Gaia's ability to plan effectively, knowing that he would need to approve any decisions before they were implemented.

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"I heard you were in LAB O a few hours ago. Did something new pique your curiosity enough to rush back here and implement it?" Rina asked after Aron arrived at their house. Finding her in the living room, he immediately went and rested his head on her lap, and she started playing with his hair.

Rina's response to his hours-long disappearances was typical for her; she had grown accustomed to them over time. Her only curiosity lay in what Aron was dedicating his time to during these absences.

Whenever he vanished like this, Aron invariably returned with creations that fulfilled the dreams of engineers around the world. These discoveries were enough to cement his reputation as a great engineer should he choose to publicly publish them under his name. Unfortunately for the world,

these inventions would take longer to reach them, as they were stored in his private invention library. Only his and the Lab City researchers' inventions were housed there, accessible to the CEOs of his companies when they needed new products or solutions for their inventions.

Aron achieved these feats in just a few real-world hours or the equivalent of seventy-something days in accelerated VR time. His ability to innovate and create groundbreaking technologies in such a short span was unfathomable to her and even his closest friends as they didn't know of the existence of the system.

"No, I was going through the data the exploration fleet had sent back," Aron said in a low voice, turning his head to face Rina's stomach, clearly enjoying their moment together.

"It arrived today?" Rina asked in surprise. Despite knowing it was coming, she hadn't focused on the exact arrival date, so the news caught her off guard.

"So, anything interesting from it?" she asked eagerly, excitement evident in her voice.

"Do you want to see it?" Aron replied, offering to share the discoveries.

"If you're tired, we can do it later," Rina suggested, trying not to pressure Aron into showing her the data if he needed rest.

"Don't worry about that. Let's go and see," Aron insisted, rising from the couch where he had been lying. He gently lifted Rina and carried her to their bedroom, where their VR pods awaited. Her surprise at being swept off her feet was followed by delighted laughter as he set her down near the pods.

They shortly logged into the VR, where Aron started showing him summaries of the discoveries, with him going further into details whenever a discovery attracted her attention.

Chapter 657 A messenger (1)

The next day.

Rina could be seen adjusting Aron's tie, ensuring it looked dignified and matched his full black suit, as if he were heading to a funeral.

"If I didn't have the lesson already planned, I would have come with you," Rina said as she finished adjusting his tie and wiped the nonexistent dust off his suit, doing a couple of double takes to make sure everything was perfect.

Since she had decided to focus on magic research, and with Aron's aid, Rina had been making significant breakthroughs in the field of magic use. These advancements even surprised Aron, who already had high expectations for her. Rina's intimate understanding of magic, being a user herself, gave her an edge in her discoveries—an advantage Aron lacked since he couldn't use magic without runes in real life.

Although he could use magic normally in the universal simulation, Aron didn't have the luxury of time to practice it due to his numerous responsibilities. Additionally, he preferred not to use the higher time acceleration unless absolutely necessary, as the disproportionate amount of time spent in the simulation compared to real life created a disorienting disconnection from reality, a feeling he didn't enjoy.

As a result of her advancements, Rina was now delivering special lectures at various universities on topics related to mana and the use of magic to access and harness it. These lectures had been quite successful, and today was one of those days, hence her statement.

"Don't worry about it, and good luck with your lecture, Love you," Aron said, kissing her goodbye.

"Love you too," she responded, with a blush on her face, despite being married for more than a year she couldn't help but feel her heart flutter whenever she heard him say those words.

Aron left their house with a smile on his face as he liked teasing her at every chance he got, heading to the elevator that was already waiting to take him to the roof.

As soon as the elevator door closed, Aron's smile slowly faded away. He transitioned into work mode, assuming the demeanor required for his imperial duties, which demanded a more formal and serious approach than his usual casual self.

Upon boarding the imperial shuttle, it immediately took off, having been prepared and waiting for his arrival.

"How far apart are the families we are visiting?" Aron asked, seemingly speaking to the void from his room in the shuttle. This would appear strange to an outsider, as he didn't have a human secretary.

{Two of them are in the same city, and the rest are in different cities on different continents. Taking into account travel and meeting times, it will take a few hours before today's schedule ends,} Nova responded as she materialized from the nanomachines reservoir in the room. She was dressed appropriately for the occasion, in full black, matching Aron's attire.

"How do I approach this?" Aron asked, revealing his uncertainty as he tapped the sides of his chair.

{You can take a look at the bullet points I prepared for you,} Nova suggested. {I kept it brief because of your photographic memory. If I showed you the full version, you'd likely follow it to the letter, which wouldn't be ideal. The rest should come from you, naturally and sincerely.} She handed him a piece of paper materialized from some of the remaining nanomachines.

Aron picked up the paper and began reading through the bullet points in silence as the shuttle continued its journey.

The journey continued until the shuttle landed in the center of the city, at the government building, the tallest structure in the area. This landing spot was necessary, as the shuttle required a large open space, and Aron couldn't just land anywhere without causing disruptions—like interrupting children playing in parks. As a result, he typically landed at central government buildings. From there, he would be transported to his destination via a motorcade, which was always prepared in advance. Today's motorcade had arrived the previous night, ready to ensure smooth travel to his meetings.

Aron stepped off the shuttle and was greeted by the city's highest-ranked imperial official, who immediately extended his hand to welcome the emperor.

Aron reciprocated the greeting and continued the small talk, engaging with the city leader. During their conversation, the official invited him to a banquet that had been prepared in his honor.

“Thanks for the hospitality and invitation, but unfortunately, as stated in the report sent to you, the emperor needs to be in different cities within a few hours. So, we have to decline your invitation and head to our destination as quickly as possible,” Nova intervened. She knew that Aron’s current mood wasn’t really welcoming of enjoying as he was on the way to deliver bad news to quite a few people, hence her timely interjection.

“Sorry for that, sir. Please, this way,” the city leader responded promptly, pointing in the direction of the elevator. Aron reciprocated with a polite smile and, along with his Aegis—those who had accompanied him on the shuttle—began walking toward the elevator with serious expressions, fully aware that their duties had now commenced.

A few minutes later, a modest-sized motorcade departed from one of the large gates of the massive imperial government building.

The motorcade moved swiftly through the well-connected city, and it didn’t take long before it arrived and came to a stop in front of a one-story house in a quiet neighborhood.

The security team immediately disembarked from the motorcade, joining the team that had arrived earlier to secure the perimeter with one of Aegis members approaching to open his door.

Taking a deep breath, Aron said, "Let's get to work," as he stepped out of the car and began walking towards the house. He gestured with his hand to the security members who were planning to follow him, indicating that only Nova would accompany him inside.

Knock *knock* *knock*

Silence fell as Aron waited for the door to be opened, and the rest of the neighborhood gathered from the distance to see what had brought a convoy of cars and heavy security to their quiet streets.

Shortly thereafter, the door was opened.

Chapter 658 A messenger (2)

There was silence in the room, briefly interrupted by the sound of a woman crying. In any other circumstance, this would be distressing, but here, it was an expected reaction as she had just received news of her husband’s death.

It was the emperor himself who had shouldered the weighty responsibility of delivering the news of the Proxima Centauri exploration fleet’s casualties.

Both he and Rina were sitting in silence, their faces reflecting the gravity of the situation, allowing Rachael who was sitting in front of them to cry and process the devastating news for a moment, as the weight of the news warranted such a reaction in the first place.

“I’m sorry for showing this side of me, but I can’t help...” Rachael attempted to regain her composure and apologize for her emotional reaction, but she struggled to control herself and soon resumed crying.

Nova rose from her seat beside Aron and moved to sit beside Rachael. She gently embraced her, offering a comforting shoulder to cry on. Rachael leaned into the hug, her crying intensifying as if a floodgate had been opened.

This continued for more than half an hour, with Nova providing unwavering and highly needed comfort to Rachael until her intense crying gradually subsided to a level where conversation could resume.

Throughout this entire period, Aron remained silent and respectful, his reverence for Rachael's grief evident, allowing her the time and space she needed to digest the heartbreaking news in her own way.

"I know this may not be much consolation during your time of grief, but I hope it allows you to mourn without the added burden of financial worries for yourself and your children.

Every imperial official on duty in hazardous conditions has a life insurance policy, and the lump sum payment will be deposited into your account by the end of today.

Following that, you will receive monthly payments from the Imperial Veteran's Affairs Department for the next century.

The official burial ceremony for those confirmed deceased will take place in two weeks, but we will coordinate further details when you are ready. The department responsible for managing these affairs will visit you soon to assist with organizing matters like work and other practicalities.

There are more details, but they are less relevant to your immediate situation. You can request more information whenever you are ready. I'm sorry, but this is all I can say for now. I want to emphasize that your husband's sacrifice was not in vain.

Thanks to such sacrifices, we have made a world-changing discovery, which will soon be shared with the public," Aron spoke in a compassionate tone. At the same time, Nova continued to comfort Rachael, who still rested on Nova's shoulder, listening quietly.

As previously stated, there was a comprehensive life insurance policy in place for imperial officials sent on dangerous missions such as exploration or military duty.

This ensured that families received a substantial lump sum payment to address immediate financial needs, allowing them to focus on mourning their loved ones. In addition to this lump sum, they would receive monthly payments ranging between two to four times the minimum wage for a period of a century.

Furthermore, additional benefits were extended to the children of the deceased. These included free public transportation, which, in the context of the empire, facilitated access to virtually anywhere as each completed city boasted comprehensive public transit networks connecting all parts of the city. Monthly allowances were also provided throughout their education, along with various other privileges directly administered by the empire.

These benefits were structured for two primary reasons. Firstly, they served as an incentive for individuals to join and serve in the imperial government. Secondly, they were designed to discourage recklessness and ensure that decisions resulting in fatalities were carefully considered, as each death incurred significant repercussions, both personal and societal. This approach aimed to minimize unnecessary loss of life and uphold the welfare of those serving the empire.

As for the heads of missions attempting to falsify or misattribute deaths to avoid the associated financial liabilities or investigations, such actions were virtually impossible to conceal. All individuals participating in these missions were equipped with nano implants that continuously transmitted real-time data to communication nodes of the empire, whether public or private. This data was meticulously cataloged and made available for scrutiny by Virtual intelligence systems tasked with verifying mission reports.

Furthermore, the writers of these reports were subject to scrutiny by their assigned memory virtual intelligence, which would analyze the intent behind the reports in light of the data collected by the nano implants. If discrepancies were found between the reported events and the objective data, investigations would ensue to ensure accuracy and accountability in mission reporting. Thus, the system ensured transparency and deterred any attempts to manipulate or misrepresent mission outcomes.

Aron spent the next half-hour with her, comforting and reassuring amidst the difficult news.

When the time came, he rose and bid her farewell, knowing he had to deliver this heartbreaking news a few more times before his duties for the day were complete.

He walked out of the house alone, leaving Nova to spend more time with the wife of the deceased as they awaited the arrival of some Aegis members who were sent to pick up her children from school and bring them home.

As he made his way out, Aron paused when he noticed a flagpole erected in the yard of the house. It was now flying the imperial flag, its colors replaced entirely with white, and adorned with the imperial seal—a symbol reserved for funerals. This solemn display indicated to anyone who saw it that someone inside had died in the line of duty.

"It's going to be a heavy day," Aron sighed after boarding the car, acknowledging the emotional toll of delivering such news.

Despite the system's previous attempts to modify his brain to alter his ability to feel, he fortunately discovered and managed to stop it and mitigate its effects. However, some remnants of those modifications remained, enabling him to handle heavy situations while still allowing him to feel the emotions pertaining to them.

{Better to be the one delivering it than the one receiving it}, Nova remarked as she materialized in a new body inside the motorcade, her other copy still consoling the wife.

"I don't even want to think of that," Aron replied solemnly. The thought of being on the receiving end of such news was something he dreaded, knowing it wouldn't end well for the one who caused the bad news.

He pushed the thought aside as they continued their journey to deliver the sad news to the other families.

Chapter 659 Addressing the empire (1)

As Aron and Nova visited the different families to deliver the sad news, the rest of the empire was left wondering about their activities. Videos circulated of them arriving at ordinary houses, spending a few hours inside, and soldiers raising a white imperial flag in front of each house before departing. The sight of the white flag, symbolizing the loss of someone who died in the line of duty,

sparked widespread curiosity and concern among the citizens, who speculated about the nature of these visits and the tragic news being shared.

With these visits occurring randomly and often on different continents, many people dismissed the idea of them being surprise visits. This conclusion was further supported by the sight of the white imperial flag, a symbol previously only seen at official burial sites like war heroes' cemeteries or the burial grounds of those who had fallen victim to cult attacks. The presence of the flag indicated a somber purpose behind the visits, leading the public to speculate about a recent tragedy affecting multiple families across the empire.

But the speculation didn't last too long as some of the family members of the deceased had told the neighbours who had visited them which spread from there, or some distant relatives using this as a means of gathering clout on the internet but the gist of the reason behind his visit was made known and with the imperial press secretary still remaining quiet on the situation people started coming up with their speculations of their own.

With the reason for Aron's visits revealed, news spread that the visited families had members on the exploration fleet. This led to widespread speculation about how the news reached the empire if the fleet was still supposed to be in transit. People wondered if the number of dead was limited to those visited or if there were more casualties, with Aron visiting families randomly and others set to receive the news later.

Although millions were aware of the existence of FTL transportation within the imperial arsenal, ninety-nine percent of them were currently on an exploration mission. The few who remained on Earth kept this information to themselves, as it was still classified technology. This left the public with nothing but speculation, leading people to create their own theories and narratives in the absence of official acknowledgment or leads.

Some speculated that the empire possessed FTL capabilities, but these claims were largely dismissed with scientific arguments emphasizing the impossibility of surpassing the speed of light. Others theorized that the Proxima Centauri Fleet might have blown up mid-way and that imperial observatories had observed this, prompting the delivery of the grim news. Another group suggested that the emperor was using this situation to divert attention from the recent controversy involving an awakener who was killed for attempting to attack him. Each theory, regardless of its basis in reality, added to the growing tension and demand for official clarification from the empire.

The speculation didn't last long. Shortly after, a notification went out announcing that the emperor would be addressing the empire. Since this was not an emergency address, it wouldn't override all broadcasts but would be aired on government-owned channels and any other channels that chose to carry it.

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Upon the arrival of the scheduled address, Aron materialized in front of his usual address room in VR. The room was still in use, as the construction of the imperial palace had yet to begin, and his current address remained operational for other tasks within the still privately owned island. This made VR the only place where he could address the empire while also having reporters from all over the world present to ask questions.

After his usual brief greetings, he got straight to the point. First and foremost, it is with a heavy heart that I confirm the tragic loss of our exploration fleet to Proxima Centauri. The brave men and

women who embarked on this mission knew the risks involved, and they made the ultimate sacrifice in the pursuit of knowledge and the advancement of our empire.

To the families and loved ones of those we have lost, I extend my deepest condolences. As you may have seen, I have been personally visiting the families of the deceased to offer my support and ensure they receive the benefits and assistance due to them. This is a small gesture in the face of such a profound loss, but it is my hope that it provides some comfort during this difficult time.

As for why we are only announcing the deaths of a few members and not the entire fleet, as many of you speculated, it is because they are not in transit, the Proxima Centauri exploration fleet had already arrived and started their mission more than a year ago," he paused, knowing the weight of his words required a moment for the audience to process.

"Yes, I know it seems impossible to have achieved this without traveling faster than light, given the distance is more than five light years. So, I will take this moment to officially acknowledge faster-than-light travel's existence. All of our exploration fleets have arrived at their destinations, some just a few weeks ago." He paused again to let the significance of his statement sink in.

"Now that the question of travel has been addressed, many of you must be wondering how we received the news of their deaths if they are five light years away. Currently, we don't have direct communication established with them due to the high energy requirements. Instead, the communication was delivered in the traditional way, by sending servers back with the information. These messengers arrived yesterday; hence, our verification of their deaths only happened yesterday."

He then proceeded to delve deeper into how the deceased would be honored and what medals would be provided, creating an impression that this address was primarily about satisfying people's curiosity regarding his recent activities, thereby diverting attention from the imminent announcement he intended to deliver once he had paid due respects to the deceased. For those privy to the upcoming announcement, it was clear that it would overshadow everything said before, which was why he dedicated significant time to honoring the dead and giving them the spotlight at the outset.

Chapter 660 Addressing the empire (2)

"With the servers having reached us, it also means the data they collected throughout their exploration period has been sent back, along with many surprising discoveries.

With my previous statements, I'm pretty sure that many of you are likely wondering the same thing: whether we are still alone in the universe or if there are aliens on the planet." He paused, allowing the tension to build, and everyone watching felt their anticipation grow.

"It's more complicated than that," he said. Before the reporters could interrupt, the scene shifted to a visual presentation.

The screen showed part of the exploration fleet arriving at the planet, indicating that he chose to show rather than tell.

The scenes shown were carefully selected anchor points that summarized the entire situation. The montage concluded with the image of the newly created races being placed into standardized VR

Pods, providing enough explanation before the scene returned to the emperor standing at the podium.

Both the room and the viewers who watched the recap were silent, their minds struggling to process the information while simultaneously resisting it due to its unbelievable nature.

Had it not been presented by the emperor, they might have dismissed it as a movie or game promotion, which seemed more plausible than a summary recording of a star system five light years away.

"As I previously stated, it is complicated," Aron continued. "We had found life before, but it was at a microbial level, which was expected since the planet had all the necessary conditions to support life. However, we didn't find intelligent extraterrestrial life—at least, not initially. But we had a significant hand in their creation."

He dropped another bombshell.

"We share 99 percent of our DNA with them because they used one of our members as the foundation for creating these new species. This makes them nearly identical to us, except for a small percentage that affects their appearance and their natural affinity for mana. Unlike us, they do not need to awaken to these abilities; it comes naturally to them.

"In addition to sharing the same DNA, we are also currently responsible for their education and upbringing. This is taking place in a time-accelerated virtual environment before they leave the pods they are currently in" he paused before he continued shortly after.

"More data about them will be released after the science department reviews and verifies it for accuracy." he paused once again, preparing everyone for his following statement.

"And with that explanation out of the way, I would like to announce an upcoming amendment to the constitution." he paused once again, having finally gotten used to the faces of surprise with every new piece of information that he was providing, he was even enjoying some times.

"This amendment will expand the definition of humanity within the First Amendment and encompass who is included under human rights. The meeting to finalize this will take place next month, after we have finished analyzing the data and determined we have enough information to classify the situation correctly.

With that, I mark the end of my address and open the floor to questions."

He barely finished his final sentence before everyone in the room raised their hands.

Without Aron needing to say anything, every reporter knew that raising their hands would automatically enter them into a raffle. This process ensured that reporters would be chosen randomly to ask their questions, preventing favoritism and ensuring that difficult questions could not be avoided by the addresser.

"Throughout the address and the video summary of the new species, you avoided mentioning their total number and if it is possible for them to be created again whenever desired?" asked Nshimirimana, a former citizen of South Africa, who was the first reporter given the opportunity to ask questions.

"Their total number is ten billion as of now," Aron responded confidently. "As for your second question, no, they cannot be created anymore through that means. The amount of mana required to achieve it is almost impossible to gather again within a few million years. However, they can multiply through birth just like us." He answered without hesitation, knowing this would be one of the easier questions posed by the reporters.

"Since we share more than ninety-nine percent of our DNA with them, can humans interbreed with them?" the second reporter asked, echoing the curiosity of many anime fans who were still in disbelief.

"Yes, it is possible," Aron replied. "In the same way a Chinese person can have a child with a Nordic person." As he said this, he could sense that the lives of a few people had been changed for the better, and he suspected the exploration fleets might soon see a surge in applications.

"Why do they resemble some of our characters from famous media?" the next reporter asked.

"It is because, in addition to copying DNA, they also read the memories of the individual they were created from. This individual was very well-versed in those media, so those characters became the template for creation. You will learn more about them once we release the full data on the situation from start to finish," Aron answered, indicating that he would not be providing further details on this topic and suggesting that reporters should not waste their questions on it.

"How are you going to deal with the other side that contributed the majority to their creation? And based on your statement of amending the constitution to include their creation, what is to become of them? Also, does this amendment mean that they are joining the empire as equals to us?" the next reporter asked.

"At the moment, the amendments to the constitution will only encompass the created races, not their creators. The matter of them joining the empire as equals is still under discussion with our creator counterparts. We currently have two options: one is for them to join the empire, and the other is for them to become our closest allies. To determine which path we will take, I need to visit and have discussions with them first."

And as always another bombshell was dropped.