

Tech System 661

Chapter 661 Addressing the empire (3)

"Why can't they come here and are instead making you go? Doesn't that indicate that we are showing they are important enough to warrant the emperor of the empire being at their beck and call by having him personally go to them instead of them coming to you?" the next reporter asked.

Aron responded calmly, "The reason I am going to them is not about showing subservience or being at their beck and call. It is a matter of practicality and diplomacy. Their environment and circumstances are unique, as their bodies are literally roots encompassing the entirety of the planet, and it is essential for me to understand their situation firsthand.

Although they can transfer parts of their consciousness to small humanoid trees, there's no assurance that the connection can be maintained over the distance between the two star systems. So, the easiest solution is for me to go and have discussions with them there.

As for the second reason, you have to remember that this meeting will determine whether the empire gains more than ten billion new citizens of working age who are also natural awakeners or if we have them as only our closest allies, which would limit our benefits.

Given all the potential benefits of this deal, going there to secure the chance of having them as citizens rather than just allies is nothing but a rather simple compromise for me and the empire."

"Based on your previous statements, it seems there is no direct communication between the two star systems. So, who are you going to put in charge during the period when you will be cut off from communications with the imperial government?" asked the next reporter, as if the question had been planned in conjunction with the previous one.

His previous statements immediately led to the following question, as it indicated there is no direct communication between the solar system and the Proxima Centauri star system. The idea of the emperor being disconnected from the empire for more than a year was both dangerous and opportune, opening the door for potential issues either from external threats or internal factions aiming to seize power during his absence.

This concern was on the minds of many reporters and politically savvy viewers. Although the empire had swiftly entered a period of stability, unprecedented for a new regime, much of this stability was credited to the emperor's absolute power and control over the military. The military's consolidation, following the elimination of the cult and hardliners sent to other star systems, and the advancements in technology that enabled swift suppression of any dissent, had cemented his rule.

However, the possibility of power being usurped during the emperor's prolonged absence loomed large. Those closest to power, such as his wife, relatives outside the imperial family's succession line, and the awakeners who viewed themselves as superior, could potentially attempt to seize control.

The awakeners, in particular, posed a significant threat. Although currently subdued by the emperor's display of force, his absence could embolden them, risking a civil war. The military, now primarily equipped for interplanetary warfare, might struggle to contain internal conflicts without causing significant collateral damage.

However, the greatest potential threat was overshadowed by the current imperial military commander, John.

As second-in-command of the military, he possessed significant power and authority, making it relatively easy for him to seize control should he become greedy during the emperor's absence.

This was the prevailing perception among the public, imperial officials, political scientists, and anyone who wasn't the emperor, as they couldn't fully grasp or even fathom the level of control the emperor actually maintained.

Everyone with a political mind anxiously awaited the emperor's response, as it would either allay their fears or confirm their worst suspicions.

"Just because I said that I will be going, it doesn't mean that I will choose a representative, wake up one day, and just go without any preparation since that would be quite counterintuitive." Aron paused, noticing the confusion on the faces of the reporters, easily imagining the same puzzled expressions on many viewers.

With a smile on his face, He continued, providing more details on his previous response.

"I must remind you that with the change to the constitution, the people in the Proxima star system will also be considered citizens or allies. This means the Constitution applies to them, including the clause granting freedom of communication. By law, they are required to have access to the internet that connects them to the rest of the empire.

"At this moment, we are in the process of creating the signal towers that will be used to connect the two sides and allow for instant communication. The creation and installation of these towers are expected to take six to nine months, and I am not planning on going there for at least a year. By then, none of the stated or anticipated problems will be issues anymore."

The next reporter asked, "Are people from there going to visit Earth, and will the opposite be allowed, too?"

"For the moment, no," Aron replied. "The reason being that they have not yet formed a society. For at least the next five years, access to their star system will be limited to allow them to develop the capability to exploit their resources and prevent them from being exploited due to their naivety."

His response clarified that the empire was giving the new species time to adjust. However, the underlying meaning was not fully grasped by many. While some might interpret his statement as implying humans were potential exploiters who could take advantage of the new species' naivety, the reality was more nuanced.

Both sides had the potential to exploit each other, and the empire's restriction on access was aimed at preventing such things from happening at the start while also preventing misunderstandings or conflicts that could arise if there was no adjusting period between the two sides.

"But the same cannot be said for VR," he continued. "Once their training and adaptation period is over, they will be connected to Earth's public communication infrastructure through VR. This means you will be able to interact with them in virtual reality earlier than in real life." He added this to preempt the imminent question he anticipated would follow from his previous answer.

Chapter 662 Reaction

The questions continued before he brought the address to an end, with the time from the start of his address to the end totaling two and a half hours.

“He has gotten really good at addressing people and making others work hard at realizing them for him,” Felix Jokingly complained to Sarah about Aron as they watched the address together.

Although his complaint was made in a manner of sarcasm, he, not he but the company he leads, was the one who was going to have to create all of the signal boosters that would be required to create a network between the two star systems, as their company was the one that was contracted to making many things from the government including the communication infrastructure.

“Isn’t it one of the requirements of a great leader? Being able to make promises and delegating qualified people to achieve those promises.” Sarah responded, humoring his complaint but also giving him the opportunity to brag and feel good.

“Well, I can’t argue about that, as I’m cursed by endless work due to my overbearing qualifications. But what can I do as it is a sacrifice I need to bear to help my friend focus on leading the country?” he continued his play of someone being given heavy responsibility.

But Sarah decided to bring an end to his bragging streak by asking, “But isn’t everything going to be made by atomic printers anyway, with the responsible imperial agency sending the schematics for it?”

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Felix decided to completely ignore her attempt at stopping his bragging by responding to her by saying, “Someone who works on the technology side of things that can’t help but require my company to help them produce them like you can’t understand my side of things and my responsibility” returning the attack back to her.

But neither of them could continue with their fun banter as they couldn’t hold it in, and they both started laughing quite hard the moment their eyes met.

With laughing came skinship, and with skinship, the laughter slowly disappeared as they moved closer and closer, with the mood in the room changing from heartwarming to an erotic one.

But before they could meet their lips, Aron’s avatar materialized in the room, causing them to separate.

“Oops, sorry about that,” Aron said when he realized that he had blueballed his friend.

“Doesn’t matter, why did you appear here?” Felix asked, acting as if he was fine and wasn’t horny a few minutes ago.

“What, so I have a reason to call my friends?” Aron asked jokingly.

“You can, but you usually just visit us in VR or in the real world, not through the hologram. I almost forgot we had it since it was almost never used,” Sarah answered, this time talking about the change in his pattern.

“Just wanted to try it when I saw it was the least used means of communication between us. Also, does anyone want to come with me to Proxima?” Aron got to the point after giving his reason for using the holo tech.

“Isn’t the time to leave about a year later? Why are you asking now and in a manner that seems to be urgent?” Felix asked this time.

“I need to know to include them in the plan if there are additional people needed. And we are currently amidst that planning,” responded Aron, giving his reasoning.

“Give us time to think, as we can’t just make such a huge decision out of nowhere,” Sarah responded.

They needed both of them to agree on whether they were going or not since they really couldn’t leave their other counterpart for a year without a good reason.

“Okay, you have a week to decide,” Aron said, pausing for a moment. Now you can go back to what you were doing,” he said with a smile on his face amidst his disappearing.

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While Aron was messing with his friends while planning his upcoming trip, the world was reacting to and discussing his address, with discussions and reactions divided into different categories.

There were those who argued that this was just another round of propaganda from the empire, and quite a few people were forced to agree as the emperor’s explanation was really stretching the strings of believability.

From the POV of those in this group, it looked like the empire had decided the conclusion to their story, and whatever plot hole they couldn’t explain, they added the word mana as the explanation for the hole.

But there were counters to this, saying that if this was true, then the empire was bound to be caught in the lie when they were connected to them following their training.

It was quite a useless thing to lie about since there was really no reason for this lie to be brought up in the first place, as there was no situation taking place that required such an absurd story to act as a cover-up.

Then, there were scientists and anime fans who were waiting with bated breath for the data to be made public so that they could see and decide with their own eyes whether the statement from the empire was true or if it was a misinterpretation of data.

But waiting for the data came with discussion and memes about whether the statement was actually true and whether humanity was finally joined by races from their own imaginations.

This was quite a surreal feeling that had previously not even been imagined by the wildest science fiction and fantasy fans, but reality has a knack for going beyond our imaginations.

But no matter which side or which group of this discussion people were on, deep down, everyone knew that if it was true, then the empire would change forever and not return to its previous state, as it would mark the start of the empire's expansion.

Just a few years after its foundation, which resulted in taking over all the countries on the planet, it was followed by taking over the whole star system, and now it seems it is on the route to taking over another star system with billions of new citizens joining them as equals or allies.

Chapter 663 reaction (2)

No matter what you do—whether it's bad, good, or somewhere in between—once it's on the internet, you'll always receive both positive and negative reactions. There's always someone who either reads too deeply into the words or not deeply enough.

Some people can read or listen but struggle to comprehend the message as the writer or speaker intended. The moment they hear something, it passes through their personal filters before the brain starts to process what was being said or written.

As a result, people often hear what they want to hear rather than what was actually communicated. This was precisely the case with the emperor's speech; he was not exempt from such misinterpretations.

And the majority of these people were among the most prolific users of social media, eager to express their opinions. Consequently, they voiced their feelings and reactions moments after the emperor finished his speech and it resulted in quite a mess.

There were those who believed that the emperor was using the announcement to hide something.

@truth_believer243r67: [Why do I suspect that the emperor is using this announcement to deflect responsibility for the deaths of the explorers? It seems like he's initially downplaying the situation by mentioning only a few deaths, with the intention of later revealing that the rest were killed by the new species when they just exploded en route there.]

@Missinformationresponded52134: [@truth_believer243r67 Do you think you are making sense? This is like causing 9/11 to avoid a school exam. Also, why acknowledge it now when he could delay it as long as he needed?]

@truth_believer243r67: [@Missinformationresponded52134 That is because he can't silence astronomers for longer since the light of their explosion will reach us in a few years if the explosion happens in the last few months or so. And when they see it, they will have to speak about it.]

@truth_believer243r67: [@Missinformationresponded52134 Where did you go? Are you afraid to say anything now that I have given you the reason? People like you are the ones who like to talk without evidence and speak as if they know everything]

There were those who took something from the announcement that reopened wounds, and they were in the process of healing.

@Emperorhater7412: [Did the emperor just admit to sending hundreds of millions of people to eternal damnation simply because they did not recognize him as the ruler?]

@NotLikeUs: [What do you mean?]

@Emperorhater7412: [He just publicly acknowledged the existence of faster-than-light travel, meaning he sent more than a hundred million people, including my dad, on ships that couldn't travel faster than a fraction of light speed, making their journey take anywhere between a thousand years and tens of thousands of years to arrive where he is sending them.]

@Idonotagree: [@Emperorhater7412: What if the technology was discovered after they were gone? It doesn't matter if it is a stretch, but that, too, is an explanation that doesn't make him that much of a villain, you think. They were going to be continually causing problems if they were left, and I believe he did that because that was the best decision he could come up with at that moment.]

@Emperorhater7412: [If what you are saying is true, then now that he has everything under control, he should bring them back. Currently, he is capable of sending ships that can reach them with just a few months of FTL despite them being traveling for more than a year. So he should go for them and bring them back.]

@Idonotagree: [Unfortunately, I can't agree with that view. Initially, I was skeptical about the empire and saw the leader as a power-hungry megalomaniac. However, the past few years under his rule have been the best I've experienced in terms of governance. I now have a stable home, something I never thought possible before. Even times when I had to be frugal with my meals are a thing of the past.

Do you think those ultranationalistic individuals who were put in stasis will come back and appreciate the improvements? No, they will awaken with their old grievances intact, having missed the progress made. Their return could disrupt the stability we've worked so hard to achieve. Do we really want to risk that upheaval now, just as things have begun to settle?]

Then there were those who were solely focusing on the technology acknowledged in the announcement and took to express how it should be used by the empire.

@warmonger: [Why didn't they announce that they had the technology when they discovered it and kept it to themselves? Shouldn't they share this technology for the betterment of humanity? #Selfishempire #releasethetechnology]

@b1faeleifno: [@warmonger Are you dumb?]

@warmonger: [@b1faeleifno What do you mean? You don't want the tech to be shared for the betterment of humanity?]

@b1faeleifno: [@warmonger What are you going to use it for? Isn't the current technology enough for you to go anywhere in the solar system in less than a week? For the betterment of humanity? Isn't the empire already doing that by sending out exploration fleets? Also, what makes you think the empire discovered this technology and not one of his private companies, hence them privately owning that technology and were just sharing it with the empire?

That tech currently can only be put to use by the empire alone, and they are amidst doing that. and if you say making travel short within the solar system, you seem to have forgotten that there is a speed limit within the solar system, and we are currently capable of going faster than that but they are limiting it for safety.

Think before speaking foolishly, but then acknowledging it is enough, as that means it is possible for the tech to be discovered, so raise your ass and go to research city to build it yourself and stop complaining.]

Such discussions were among the many that were taking place, with some jocking some mourning, some just enjoying the discoveries, some denying them, and some just enjoying the moment, but that didn't mean that they weren't waiting for the release of evidence that was going to take place a month.

Chapter 664 [Start Production]

Even after two weeks had passed, the emperor's speech remained a hot topic of discussion. This was remarkably long for something to stay relevant in the fast-paced world of the internet.

Far from fading into obscurity, the emperor's speech seemed to gain momentum, its importance escalating with each passing day, leaving the public increasingly intrigued.

Today was the day of the official imperial funeral for the deceased explorers, broadcast live through the imperial news channels.

The viewership was enormous, especially after the empire released video footage of the evacuation that showed the chaotic and disastrous conditions the planet was in, which had led to the scientists' deaths.

The footage seized the public's attention, as many were astounded by the fact that only a few lives were lost in the midst of such a chaotic natural disaster. The survival of the majority was a testament to the advancement of imperial technology.

The funerals took place at the new imperial cemetery grounds, designated specifically for the burial of imperial explorers who died in the line of duty. Unfortunately, these explorers were the first to be laid to rest there.

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Mars.

"I really thought this production ground would remain dormant until wartime," Hussein, a production military scientist, said as he watched the massive production ground in front of him coming to life.

Since Mars had been selected as the main base of the imperial military, it was expected to reach self-sufficiency and not require anything from Earth other than personnel.

Although the planet's constructions have yet to be completed, Mars has already reached and even exceeded its goal of self-sufficiency.

But despite this achievement, the majority of the atomic printers on the planet were inactive. The one currently being activated by Dr. Hussein was among them.

The empire understood that bored soldiers were not good soldiers. If everything were done with atomic printers, the majority of the military would end up sitting idly, which was quite the opposite of what was needed.

Therefore, despite having an overabundance of atomic printers, only a small number of them were kept active.

This approach ensured that soldiers had tasks to occupy them. The rest of the printers were reserved for wartime, when an immediate and massive ramp-up in production was necessary, and all available manpower would be needed on the battlefield. Only then would the remaining printers be activated.

So, when the empire, which had been carefully maintaining this balance, broke it willingly, you would know they were serious about their intentions.

“This is a special circumstance, and the order came directly from General John. What do you think he is planning to do with this?” His assistant responded, following with a question.

Although their assigned atomic printer was not among the top 20 in size, it was still as large as a city. Despite this, it was only assigned a team of a few thousand personnel responsible for production, maintenance, and inspection. Whether the printer was active or not, this team remained unchanged.

“What do you mean by that?” Hussein asked his assistant, as he was quite literal and typically had difficulty grasping the underlying meaning of words unless they were explained to him.

“Do you think he’s planning a coup or something?” his assistant asked directly, accustomed to explaining Hussein’s literal interpretations. The assistant wasn’t worried about getting in trouble, knowing that Hussein valued reasoning and wouldn’t simply accuse him of treason for voicing his curiosity.

Without waiting for a response, he continued, “I mean, look at the schematics of the ships we’re supposed to make. I’ve never seen this type of blueprint before. So, it’s either that they’re a new class of ships, or they’re existing ships that are still classified, and we’re being used to produce them as we are quite idle. Alternatively, he could be creating his private forces or something.”

“What do you do in your idle times?” Dr. Hussein asked him once he heard his reasoning.

“Play VR games,” the assistant answered immediately, tilting his head in curiosity about why he was being asked that question. He knew Dr. Hussein was genuinely curious and not playing mind games with him, as Hussein always asked questions with a straightforward intent.

“Does that mean you haven’t been using social media for the past two weeks?” Dr. Hussein asked, turning his inquiry into another question. The assistant understood that Hussein was building a hypothesis to explain why his previous conclusion might be incorrect. Realizing this, he decided to go along with it to see where the reasoning would lead.

"I'm an orphan raised by the Emperor's House of Hope program through the Coeus Foundation, so most of my friends are in the military, universities, research and development, or awakening academies. This makes it quite hard for me to be active online since there's no one to contact. If you add in military restrictions when we're in restricted locations, I usually avoid using social media until my rotation comes and I return to Earth."

He answered while anticipating any further questions, curious about why his previous conclusion was wrong as well.

"That's why you would assume he's planning a coup. But you're wrong," Dr. Hussein explained. "The fleets are being built to escort the emperor when he goes to the Proxima Centauri star system."

Dr. Hussein then provided a summary of what had happened over the past two weeks. He explained that the printing of the ships was given to them as they were among the idle printers in order to avoid disrupting the military's manufacturing timetable for the current active printers, which had already been scheduled a year in advance.

"Plus, do you really think the emperor wouldn't know if something like that were to take place?" Dr. Hussein said. "If you're from that fabled Hope program, you should be smart, but is all that genius focused solely on research that you wouldn't realize that no one in the current military has the capability to orchestrate a coup?"

Turning his head toward the control room, which now showed that the printer was fully online and ready for operation with the raw material storage canisters already in place, Dr. Hussein pressed the start button for production without wasting any time.

Chapter 665 Release of the Data

A month after his address to the empire and two weeks after the funeral, the empire kept its promise by releasing comprehensive data about the data collected throughout the entire exploration fleet's mission. The release included almost everything, except for a few classified sections, which were clearly marked as such for those reviewing the information.

"Holy shit," Ryan, a microbiologist, shouted involuntarily when he saw the amount of data.

"What is it?" Irene, his coworker and wife, asked, startled by his outburst as she prepared breakfast in their comfortable home.

"Come take a look at what the empire gifted us," he said, his face alight with excitement as he called her over, knowing she'd be even more thrilled than he was.

"This is going to take us centuries to go through," she said with a tone brimming with excitement, contrary to what one might expect from someone facing such an immense task. "But first, we should request at least a month off." The sheer volume of data in their specific field of expertise was staggering.

"I'm pretty sure there's something in here that can revolutionize our knowledge of microbiology," Irene said, peering over her husband's shoulder at the screen. She was a romantic type, always excited by the prospect of new discoveries.

"We just have to be the ones to discover the diamond in the rough. How much savings do we have, dear?" Ryan asked, realizing the potential in the data. He relied on his wife for financial decisions since he had a tendency to spend impulsively, a habit that nearly strained their relationship during their dating phase. After getting married, he entrusted her with their household finances.

"Why? You want us to quit and focus on research?" Irene immediately grasped his intent. She paused, considering their financial stability, then said, "We can maintain our current lifestyle for at least three years."

"How about we quit and focus on this data for at least a year?"

Irene fell silent, weighing the benefits. After a moment, she agreed, "Sure, let's do that, honey. If we're going to act, we need to do so fast due to the amount of data we are going to need to go through. We're not going to be the only ones thinking the same thing." She knew almost every scientist would be considering a similar move.

The total amount of data was about 50 exabytes, organized into different categories for every field of science. This immense influx of information led almost all scientists to request at least a month of real-world time off to go through the data in VR. The sheer number of such requests forced some companies to pause their ongoing research for a month before resuming normal operations. Some employees even threatened to quit if they weren't granted the time off, highlighting the extraordinary impact of the data release.

[A/N: An exabyte is equal to a billion gigabytes, with Google having approximately only about 10 to 15 exabytes of storage.]

The reason for such a massive and simultaneous request was that the data access operated on a first-come, first-served basis. Once someone used the information to make a discovery, it would be recorded by the Akashic server, establishing them as the primary discoverer. If their discovery contributed to future technology, they would be entitled to half a percent of the percentage of revenue generated by their contribution, provided it earned a minimum of ten million END.

While earning 0.5 END per product sold, if their discovery constituted 1 percent of a new technology priced at 100 END, might seem small, the cumulative earnings could be substantial. As more products were sold, the discoverer would continuously receive payments, allowing them to focus on research without financial worries.

Although many scientists weren't money-hungry and preferred to spend most of their time doing research, they still needed to support themselves and their families. This system made it possible for them to do both. Additionally, this influx of new information would enable many researchers to reach the necessary milestones to upgrade their Research City labs to the next stage, gaining access to advanced machinery and tools.

This was the imperial government's way of incentivizing research while improving the researchers' quality of life. New discoveries led to new technologies, which kept the economy active. The government also earned additional revenue, as they took the other half of the percentage of profit not given to the researchers.

This strategy ensured a steady flow of innovation and provided the empire with a passive income source beyond the standard ten percent tax, which wouldn't always suffice on its own.

Although it might seem excessive that the empire took half of the profits from researchers, this was not widely criticized. The empire only claimed these cuts once researchers began earning more than ten thousand END a month from their discoveries. Until then, researchers had access to extensive research materials and advanced machinery for free, resources they would have only dreamed of affording on their own.

Moreover, the empire handled essential tasks such as confirmation, patent recording, monitoring technology use, and collecting payments from those utilizing the technology. This comprehensive support structure relieved researchers of administrative burdens and allowed them to focus on their work, further justifying the empire's share of the profits.

This led many to believe that the empire's cut was merely operational, with widespread sentiment that they were still running at a loss. Unfortunately, this assumption was incorrect. In reality, every cent earned from the research city was pure profit. These funds were promptly deposited into a reserve imperial bank account, accessible only by the emperor, and designated for use in furthering the empire's interests, and currently, they were earning money like there is no tomorrow.

Although some companies complained that the empire's policies were squeezing their profits, this was countered by the significant reduction in their operational costs. By conducting all their research in Lab City instead of establishing physical labs in the real world, they benefited from lowered entry thresholds across various industries, no matter how advanced. This shift made it more feasible for companies to enter and compete in high-tech fields without the substantial initial investments that would have otherwise been required.

However, for at least this month, the empire anticipated a temporary economic slowdown but expected a surge in new discoveries.

Chapter 666 The Devil Lies in the Implementation

{With the changes being agreed upon, I hereby declare that the amendment has passed and will be ratified the moment it is signed by the emperor.} Gaia announced, as usual, acting as the chair of the imperial council. She then hit the gavel to conclude the session.

Everyone in the room clapped for a moment, with many of the watchers unsure if the applause was out of obligation or genuine happiness. However, the smiles on their faces suggested it was the latter.

Gaia then brought the meeting to a close, as this was the only agenda item for today's session and the attendees had other pressing matters to attend to.

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"Why didn't you ratify the constitution if it had already passed the council in the first place?" Rina asked him the moment he left VR.

"What is the urgency in it, darling? We teach our children (not his students at school) not to pay for anything or sign anything without seeing it first, and you want me to do the same for whole new races without seeing them?"

His response made Rina chuckle. She didn't expect him to remain cautious despite all the evidence pointing otherwise, but he also compared the situation as if he were buying a house or shopping for a new car.

"Plus, the moment I ratify it and they start creating trouble before I even visit them, they will have to be dealt with as citizens or allies of the empire, not as enemies. This will limit our options and make it take longer to handle any issues compared to if they act out before I meet them and before I ratify it."

"Where is Henry?" he asked shortly as realised his absence something that rarely happened as he usually liked to come and mess with him and he was missing today.

"Tomorrow is Friday, so he is where he usually goes on weekends, House of Hope." Rina reminded him of what day it was today, which was enough to inform him where he was.

A few months after the formation of the empire and stabilization of the situation, he had implemented a four-day work week and made Friday to Sunday as weekends to improve the psychological stability of his citizens since with the reason people were working the majority of the time of the week that they were awake was because their work life was short making that much work understandable and slightly bearable but now that life has been extended there is no need to torture people for that much of time.

"Well, it is good that he has people to play with in the first place since everyone here is quite far out of his age range," he said as he looked around the room. His intention was what was beyond that, which was the still active training base, though this time, only the best of the best were being trained here.

"Did he go with Mom, Dad, and your mom again?"

"Mh..." she responded.

With that, they continued their conversation, shifting through various topics as they had an unlimited number of things to talk about.

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In a blink of an eye, two months had passed.

Hephaestus Heavy Industries was currently the largest company in the entire empire, employing the second largest number of people, just behind the imperial government itself.

They were responsible for the production of half of everything in the empire that required advanced manufacturing, effectively making them a monopoly.

It had to stop there because they were actually sued by the Imperial Justice Department for being a monopoly. The lawsuit resulted in an agreement that required them to cease producing certain items and buy out all the small production companies they had put out of business, which ended up costing them about a trillion END, which was nothing compared to their profits; hence them agreeing to it without as much as blinking.

The only reason the agreement was reached, rather than the usual severe penalties or even the dissolution of the company, was because Hephaestus Heavy Industries was doing the opposite of what traditional monopolies had done in the past. Instead of suppressing competitors and squeezing them out of the market, they were collaborating with them, helping create production machines and other resources to ensure these smaller companies could remain in the industry.

Additionally, the agreement prohibited Hephaestus from engaging in practices similar to what Amazon had done with its sellers, such as buying the same products and selling them directly to compete with its partners.

Despite these legal constraints, Hephaestus Heavy Industries remained unmatched in precision machining, as they were known for consistently delivering products to the exact millimeter required.

Hephaestus Heavy Industries was also renowned for fostering growth in small companies with innovative technological products. By partnering with these startups for production, they provided an essential bridge for those lacking the funds to enter the tech industry, creating a synergistic relationship with Research City.

To achieve such extensive production capabilities, including the manufacturing of spaceships, Hephaestus Heavy Industries required production bases across multiple locations, including space.

Currently, in front of one of these colossal production bases in space, a fleet of twenty enormous ships, emblazoned with prominent imperial military's logistical insignia, was seen departing towards the heliosphere and setting course for Proxima Centauri.

Among the fleet were numerous signal towers, destined to be strategically placed along various lanes to ensure redundancy and support both public and private communication networks for the imperial government.

With the preparations for his journey well underway, the focus had now shifted to operationalizing the communication infrastructure essential for the expedition.

"Now that's what you call a company," Felix said to Sarah, resuming their playful debate over which company deserved more recognition.

"You told me we were going on a date, and now you're showing me one of your company's printers?" she asked, feigning a pout.

"No, no, this place was just on the way to our date destination. The timing happened to coincide with the start of the journey, so I wanted to see it since I rarely get the chance due to work. Don't get too upset," he explained.

"Depends on how good the date turns out to be," she replied, trying to hide her smile as she turned to walk away.

"I'm confident it will exceed your expectations. Look forward to it," he said with a self-assured grin.

Chapter 667 Arrival (?)

Proxima Centauri.

It had been a year and three months since the messenger was sent, and everything continued as usual, following the meticulously prepared plan from the start.

Proxima A was as busy as ever, perhaps even busier than before. If observed closely from space, one could see rudimentary cities nestled within the massive tree branches where the Proximians were born. These cities were built in a manner that integrated seamlessly with the trees rather than destroying them, creating a beautiful and harmonious ambiance.

As per the universal bureaucracy rule, there always needs to be a meeting taking place. Currently, one such meeting was occurring between Ayaka, the official responsible for the planet, and admiral Bianchi, the leader of the entire exploration fleet.

"We are expected to complete the training within a month and should start extracting them from the VR pods with everything they need to live together with humans and by themselves already taught," Ayaka reported to Fleet Admiral Bianchi during one of her monthly reports summarizing her heavy tasks.

"Good. And what is the status of the city construction?" Admiral Bianchi asked, despite having the information written in the report.

"With Birch's aid, we have managed to construct all the basic facilities they will need immediately after waking up. As for the rest, we will leave it to them to grow in their own direction, void of our active influence, which will also act as a starter for their economy."

"But we are faced with a problem," Ayaka added after a brief pause.

"Go on, what is it?" Admiral Bianchi prompted.

"The monetary issue is the problem, sir," Ayaka began. "As part of their training, we taught them the monetary value of using money to exchange for goods and services. Within the simulation, they've already created a booming economy, with many becoming quite wealthy through fair means. The logical decision would be to allow them to keep the money they've earned in VR when they come to reality, as to them, that place was real, and they worked hard to earn it.

However, we don't have the authority to create currency; that capability lies with the treasury. If they weren't going to be connected to the empire, it wouldn't be a problem, but now that it's set in stone that they will either be allies or direct citizens, allowing them to keep the currency will mean we are overstepping the control bubble we were provided through the mission. What we do here will directly affect the economy of the empire.

Whether we allow them to keep the money or not, it will cause issues. If we don't, it will mess with their morale and create chaos when they wake up and realize they've lost everything they worked hard for, which was their entire lives. This would be another round of problems we'd have to deal with.

We're currently between a rock and a hard place. What do you suggest we do?" she asked, seeking a decision from Admiral Bianchi, as he was the only one with the authority to address this situation.

"We don't need to be concerned about that." As soon as he finished speaking and Ayaka was about to question his reasoning, he preemptively addressed it by

activating the holographic system. The display showed the Proxima star system, providing a simplified but comprehensive view similar to the solar system's holographic model.

However, the hologram wasn't focused on the star system itself. Instead, it highlighted ten approaching objects coming from the direction of Earth, positioned outside the star system.

"Is the emperor coming?" Ayaka asked, astonished. Given that it had been about thirteen months since they sent the messenger, and it typically took around six months for a transition between star systems, the emperor's decision to come here within three months was unexpected.

"Don't get your hopes up; it's likely his representatives or a delegation. The empire's stability isn't yet at a point where the emperor can be offline for over a year," Bianchi replied.

"When will they arrive?" Ayaka asked, needing to know if she should adjust the timeline for the Proximians' awakening.

"Our sensors aren't advanced enough to provide precise details, but we estimate they'll arrive in about a week. Given that we've sent all relevant data, they should be aware of this issue. Even if not, the arriving delegation will have the capability to address it," Bianchi explained, as the hologram displayed a line extending from the approaching ships to the Proxima star system, with the estimated time of arrival decreasing second by second.

"That's goo—" Ayaka began, but her words were interrupted as the Admiral's communication system buzzed.

{Admiral, a communication with an imperial network Identification priority sequence is attempting to establish a connection. Should I approve it?} The Fleet's AI inquired. This was a routine formality, as the AI was aware that any communication with such a priority sequence could override any denial attempt.

"What's this about? Aren't they already on their way?" Bianchi asked, puzzled by the sudden development.

{They have come to a halt and exited the FTL bubble, indicating they have no intention of proceeding here at the moment} the AI responded.

"Okay, approve it and show me what they intend to do with it," Bianchi instructed, showing little concern for Ayaka's presence.

{Understood} The AI responded promptly, granting access and immediately taking over the hologram to display the intended actions from the other side of the connection.

The two of them in the room immediately started watching, attempting to understand what the establishment connection wanted to do with their attempt to establish a connection.

They weren't concerned about facing problems from their snooping, as they trusted that the Fleet's AI would only display what was authorized for them to see—nothing more, nothing less.

Slowly, in front of their eyes and accompanied by explanations from the AI, they witnessed something they had never seen before. By the time they could have seen it in the past, it was already completed and made public, so no one had the chance to observe it from start to finish.

Chapter 668 {Hello, World}

Space between Solar and Proxima star system.

{Permission granted to access the network} announced the AI controlling the ten spaceships that had halted a week away from the Proxima Centauri star system upon receiving access to the Proxima exploration fleet's network.

The reason the ships had come to a stop at this specific distance, rather than proceeding further or turning back, was that it was the farthest point where they could still connect to the exploration fleet's quantum towers. Additionally, continuing to the Proxima star system would mean wasting another week, which was unnecessary since their mission was brief and purely functional, not for sentimental reasons.

{Initiate communication anchoring.} The AI began by setting up the Proxima side of the communication network as the endpoint for the quantum communication link it was establishing.

{Initiating network boot and docking.} As it issued this command, the AI sent a ping to the nearest installed quantum towers that the ten ships had been laying down for the past six months.

As soon as the closest quantum towers received the initiating and docking signal, they promptly exited their idle power-saving mode and activated operational mode. They then relayed the same signal to the towers nearest to them.

This process continued until the signal reached the last-laid quantum towers, which were closest to the solar system. When the next ping was sent, it confirmed: {Main anchor reached.}

{Initiating the creation of communication lanes} The system then proceeded by isolating the newly activated signal towers, as the network construction was still underway. This precaution was taken to prevent any potential disruptions to the existing network while the new lanes were being established.

The system then began creating various network lanes for different types of communication to traverse once they were activated.

Although creating the network might seem straightforward, it was quite the opposite. Only about two of the ten lanes were designated for public use, while a third was reserved specifically for VR access. This lane required uninterrupted data transfer due to the sensitive nature of dealing with people's brains, necessitating additional safety measures. The remaining seven lanes were allocated for private imperial use and redundancy, ensuring that if the two public lanes and the VR lane encountered issues—such as damage from FTL travel through the towers or the removal of a tower during FTL departure—there would be backup lanes available.

{Lanes creation complete.}

{Initiating network connection} The AI proceeded to link the newly established lanes to the main network, completing the connection between the two star systems with an instant communication network.

{.....}

{.....}

{.....}

The network lanes were silent for quite a while, before the AI, the network's creator, broke the silence with the first message:

{Hello, world}

This marked the inaugural transmission through humanity's first inter-star system communication network.

.....

“.....”

“.....”

Bianchi and Ayaka were struck into silence, both stunned and disbelieving at the magnitude of what had just transpired.

Previously, sending a single message took a whole six months to reach its destination as it was being physically sent, and they had anticipated a similar delay for a response.

However, the empire's reaction defied all expectations. The speed and efficiency of their reply were astonishing, given the immense resources required to establish such a network.

The communication infrastructure needed for interstellar connections would typically demand about a hundred times the resources used for the solar system network. Remarkably, the empire achieved this in just three months of preparation, not including the six months needed for travel and installation—a feat that was quite an undertaking, at least from the perspective of the two observers.

“So does that mean we can now access the empire's network and communicate with our families?” Ayaka asked, regaining her composure.

{Technically, yes, but this can only happen if access to the network is granted, which has not yet been provided on our end,} the Fleet's AI responded.

Before anyone could respond, the hologram shifted to an animation indicating an incoming call.

[Emperor] was the only information displayed in the caller section.

Bianchi immediately accepted the call while both he and Ayaka immediately got on their feet in an attention position, with them immediately saluting the moment Aron, the emperor, appeared.

“At ease, gentleman,” Aron said as his hologram materialised at the center of the room. As he looked around, he immediately added, “And ladies,” when he saw Ayaka.

They relaxed their salutes but remained standing with their hands clasped behind their backs, awaiting the emperor's words.

"Any delays?" Aron asked, earning himself a curious gaze from the two.

But before they could wonder what he meant by that, a response came from the fleet's AI {No sir}

"Good," Aron said with a satisfied smile before finally turning to the two members who were still waiting for him.

"Fleet Admiral Marco Bianchi," he began.

"Yes, sir," Bianchi replied promptly, maintaining his stance.

"Good job on exceeding your mission requirements," Aron continued. "I am very satisfied with what you've accomplished within the time frame and the constraints you faced." He praised Bianchi for his exemplary leadership and hard work on the mission.

"Thank you, sir. It's an honor," Bianchi replied, returning to his position with a respectful nod.

Aron gave a contented smile at Bianchi's response.

"Commander Takahashi Ayaka," he then called, turning his attention to her.

She, too, responded the same way, as they were both in the military command structure.

"You, too, have done an excellent job. What could have been an operational and logistical nightmare has turned into a significant benefit for the empire," Aron said with praise.

She thanked him for the commendation, and Aron continued, "There's also Lee Joon-ho, who played a crucial role in all of this. His commendation will be delivered at a later time."

After a brief pause, he added, "I'm sure you have many questions, but they will have to wait for a few days. For now, I would like to address all the members of the exploration fleet who aren't engaged in emergency situations. Please send out the announcement and ensure they are prepared for my address within the hour."

With a proud tone and a satisfied smile, Aron concluded the conversation and disappeared from the hologram after receiving their assurance to carry out his request.

Chapter 669 A Small Reward

Fifty-five minutes later.

The entire Proxima Centauri star system returned to a semblance of its previous silence before humans arrived. The majority of the machines were put into automatic mode, while those requiring human control were switched to power-saving mode.

Everyone who wasn't engaged in an essential task had already donned their VR devices and logged into the local VR network. They clicked on the invitation link, which transported them to a massive

meeting hall capable of accommodating all of them. The hall reminded them of their last gathering of such magnitude, right before they embarked on their exploration mission.

“What do you think they gathered us for?” Yavuz, a mechanical engineer standing next to Lee, asked him, as Lee was currently one of the most well-known people in the exploration fleet.

He was on the same level of being known as the fleet admiral, with everyone knowing and jokingly addressing him as the father of all the created Proximians since they were literally created from his imagination.

“I don’t know. Do you think maybe it’s a surprise celebration?” Lee responded before asking his own question.

“Maybe, but based on the way they called us, it doesn’t seem so; plus, why celebrate in VR when we can celebrate in the real world? Also, if you’re celebrating something, you make it known beforehand to create anticipation, but they did quite the opposite,” a third person responded, joining them after overhearing their discussion.

“Anyway, how are your kids doing? They aren’t even allowing us to see them.” Yavuz asked, both serious and joking, eliciting laughter from those who heard him as they also perked their ears to listen to Lee’s response.

“They are doing well, and that is all I can say at the moment,” Lee responded, having gotten used to these types of questions, sometimes even enjoying hearing them, but since he couldn’t tell much about it as it was classified information in the first place.

But before the conversation could continue, the fleet admiral appeared on the podium, followed shortly by the emperor.

This caused everyone in the room to almost have a mild heart attack and immediately snap to attention, saluting in unison. They were baffled as to how someone who was supposed to be on Earth was currently standing in front of them in a VR network in Proxima Centauri.

“At ease, gentlemen,” Aron said as he walked to the podium, looking at everyone with a warm smile.

Everyone lowered their salutes, but their eyes remained on him, filled with curiosity and confusion, as they tried to deduce what exactly was happening and whether the fleet admiral was playing a joke on them.

“Take a seat. My address will be short, as I’m sure many of you would prefer,” Aron began with a smile, speaking in a benevolent manner.

Despite being the highest in the military command chain, Aron didn’t adhere to the strict military speaking style required of those like John and the other soldiers.

“With my appearance, I’m sure many of you have already connected the dots that I’m either here or communicating with you from the empire. It’s the latter. I’m not here yet, but that should be good news because it means there is now a direct communication network to Earth with no latency, allowing me to speak with you in real time.” He paused, allowing them to process his statement before continuing.

"Although the mission required you to operate without direct communication with the empire to help us learn and develop solutions for long-term missions, the importance of what occurred during your mission warranted breaking that protocol.

For that, I would like to congratulate all of you on your achievements and everything you have accomplished. All of your accomplishments will be rewarded accordingly once the mission is deemed complete and you are relieved of it."

"However, that doesn’t mean I can’t give you a small reward at the moment.” He paused, watching the anticipation grow in their eyes.

The pause seemed to amplify their curiosity, and the longer they waited for him to tell them what the reward was, the more their imaginations began to speculate on what the reward might be.

“My small reward to you for your achievements is a change in your mission protocol from a no-direct-contact mission to an active-contact mission. You can now use the network to maintain contact with everyone on the side of the empire.”

When he said that, he could see the excitement in their eyes. They wanted to jump, cheer, and celebrate, but they still maintained their standing stance, waiting for him to finish his speech.

“I’m sure you’re familiar with the protocol for using the network during active missions, so I won’t repeat it here, knowing that some of you are eager to check it for yourselves,” he said, subtly reminding them of the rules—namely, that they should only use the network when off duty.

“Since you’ve been out of contact with your families for over a year, I’m granting you two weeks off. All operations will be officially halted unless immediate action is required. Enjoy your vacation.”

He continued for two more minutes before wrapping up his address, as he was someone who despised long and unnecessary speeches, a sentiment stemming from the experiences of lengthy addresses he endured during his university days, prior to his expulsion.

With that, he saluted them, and they all responded in kind. Aron then disappeared, followed by the fleet admiral after he officially dismissed them.

“WHAAA
AAAAAA!” The room erupted in a unified scream of joy as everyone began hugging, jumping, and celebrating together, their excitement overwhelming.

Life had been good for them here, thanks to numerous amenities that provided distractions from their mission and the constant danger. They had grown accustomed to their surroundings, almost forgetting they were in a foreign star system. Their large numbers allowed them to socialize as if they were in any city on Earth.

However, this didn't mean they were completely fine. For many, the memories of their husbands, wives, children, and other loved ones left behind, occasionally for some and always for others, resurfaced, reminding them of what they had left behind.

But now that the burden had been lifted from them, they channeled their relief into celebration.

A few minutes after the initial jubilation, nearly everyone remembered that, rather than just shouting in joy, they had a unique opportunity at hand. They could use this moment to contact their friends and families, delivering the surprise of their lives.

The emperor had mentioned that while their loved ones knew about the construction of the communication network, they were unaware of its completion.

This was their chance to bring that surprise to them.

Chapter 670 An Early Christmas for Some

Aron, having completed his lengthy discussion with the fleet's admiral and granted him leave, sat alone in his VR room, enveloped in silence.

{What's on your mind?} Nova inquired as she materialized beside him, breaking the stillness of the room.

"I'm trying to imagine the range of emotions they'll experience during their reunions," Aron replied, accustomed to her probing questions.

"The majority will feel happiness," he said, "but there will be a few who experience profound distress. Some of the soldiers might face the harsh reality that their spouses, whom they left behind, were unfaithful—either having cheated out of remorse or used the mission as a chance to welcome others into their lives during their absence."

"The opposite is also true," Aron continued. "Some members of the crew, while on the exploration mission, were unfaithful to their spouses. Additionally, some will receive the devastating news of the deaths of their loved ones during their absence."

He reflected on these scenarios, contemplating the range of emotions the explorers would face.

"These are just a few examples of the difficult news they might receive, and it's making me consider how I would react if I were in their position."

Nova quickly accessed the relevant information and understood the situation fully.

{Would you prefer I drop subtle hints to help them uncover the truth, or should I let events proceed naturally and allow them to discover it on their own?} she asked, offering him the choice between intervention and letting things unfold as they may.

Aron took a moment to think before he said, “For now, let’s leave it as is, but have Mnemosyne assign an Akashic Librarian to continue monitoring the situation. They should report anything that warrants my attention, and we’ll decide how to proceed from there.”

Although Aron wanted to intervene, he held himself back, knowing that doing so could set a precedent for future interference. Nevertheless, he recognized his responsibility to those who risked their lives for him, and he remained committed to monitoring the situation and he will decide how to act based on it from there on.

{Understood,} Nova replied.

{Henry is on his way} she added, reminding him that the energetic troublemaker in his puberty phase was heading towards his office.

“He’ll outgrow it eventually, but for now, I guess I’ll have to keep managing his boundless energy,” Aron sighed as he logged off, his resignation punctuated by Nova's soft laughter behind him.

.....

It took less than an hour for the public to learn about the news.

Some people discovered the news through emotional videos of family members tearfully reacting in surprise when they saw their loved ones in VR, their disbelief and joy captured in heartwarming moments. Others found out when friends, who had been expected to remain offline for a few more years, suddenly appeared online, sharing photos and updates about their recent adventures during the exploration mission.

Regardless of how they came across the information, the news quickly went viral. It became a hot topic among netizens, sparking widespread discussion and excitement across the internet.

With discussions and verifications quickly aligning, people connected the dots and realized that the communication link between the two star systems had been completed.

This revelation ignited a wave of surprise and admiration for the empire, marking a monumental milestone in interstellar communication for both humanity and the empire.

What was once considered a distant dream and a topic of discussion had now been achieved.

The successful establishment of a communication link between star systems signified the empire's official expansion to a new star system, transforming it into a two-star system empire.

This feat, which many would have predicted would take at least a millennium if asked five years ago, was accomplished in less than five years since the empire's foundation—truly a remarkable leap forward.

Not everyone accepted the news without skepticism. Even in the 21st century, there were those who clung to fringe beliefs, such as the flat Earth theory. Among the dissenters, many questioned the empire’s achievements. They argued that the exploration fleet and the newly established communication link were elaborate fabrications. They speculated that everything observed from

outside the solar system was merely a VR simulation, a claim supported by the empire's well-documented ability to create highly realistic simulations.

Their arguments included the assertion that instant communication across light-years would require faster-than-light technology, which they considered impossible despite the empire's previous confirmations of having FTL technology.

These critics dismissed the empire's claims and continued to challenge the veracity of the reported accomplishments.

The majority of people dismissed the conspiracy theorists as usual, treating their claims as baseless and ignoring them in favor of celebrating the achievement. The focus remained on the positive aspects of the occasion.

Despite having access to a wealth of information about the new star system for more than eight months and having people who actually lived and are still living there for over a year, many were eager to personally connect to the network on the other side.

However, their attempt to access it were met with nothing but frustration.

No matter how hard they searched, they couldn't connect or find any network to connect to despite knowing that all of the Proximians were still in the VR simulation receiving training or not even a live stream to tune into from the new star system.

The absence of access to VR was understandable, but the same couldn't be said for the absence of live feeds, as that was especially surprising given the empire's past practice of providing such coverage for events of great public interest, like during the Unification War, when they had live-streamed the war for citizens Eden and Espaira to boost citizens' morale and show their confidence in winning it, which they did.

This lack of transparency led to further speculation and curiosity, even among those who otherwise celebrated the achievement.

Not long after, the reason behind the lack of public connection to the other side became clear.

Members of the exploration fleet began sharing the emperor's address, revealing that the star system was still an active exploration zone.

This meant that the area was kept under a controlled bubble to prevent public interference and maintain mission integrity.

Adding to the information, the emperor's official social media accounts announced that a live stream showcasing various locations within the star system would be set up and made available for viewing online a month from now. This promise of future visibility helped quell some of the public's curiosity and speculation while still maintaining the excitement surrounding the new milestone.