

ON THE EDGE
OF ETERNITY

THE STRYKER SERIES

by Jonathan Cooper

ON THE EDGE OF ETERNITY
IN THE CITY OF TOMORROW

(Other volumes in preparation)

VOLUME 1 IN THE STRYKER SAGA

ON THE EDGE OF ETERNITY

By Jonathan Cooper

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Second edition.

Soli Deo Gloria

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PROLOGUE

*“How can you know who
you are if you do not know
where you came from? And
how can you know where
you came from if you are
ignorant of your history?”*

--The Artilect

THROUGHOUT THE COURSE OF HISTORY mankind has longed to possess the stars – the final challenge to any race that has chosen the path of science. The bards of the ancient races, undaunted by the magnitude of the task, spun myths of brave heroes that dared to probe their infinite and untouchable sky. Their children heard the songs and gazed upon the stars with deep fascination, wondering what worlds circled those mysterious points of light that they could see but not reach. What prizes lay unclaimed in the treasury of space?

For thousands of years that question went unanswered, for ignorance had sealed the door to the stars. Generations lived and died hoping that the key would be found in their lifetimes, only to discover that the answer was always over another horizon. It was not until the end of the 6th century that the Mayan people, spurred on by the growing power of a revived Rome, began to seriously pursue bridging the vast distance that separated Earth from her neighbors. By the dawn of the 8th century the songs of the bards became reality when geniuses such as Maximian Mixcoatl ushered in the age of rocketry. Once the first steps had been taken it took only a single generation for the most brilliant minds of the Mayan Republic to develop rockets capable of leaving the Earth and never returning. The entire world watched in awe as Nigellus Ahexotl set foot on Luna

on October 24, 774 and boldly proclaimed that the curse of the old ones had been lifted and the galaxy was now the new home of mankind. Many were certain that the door to the stars had at last been unlocked – but they were wrong.

The nine men that walked on Luna in the waning years of the 8th century grew old and died before anyone repeated their feat. Other nations dreamed of reaching into space, but even Rome lacked the resources of the Mayan people, who had become distracted by an enemy within. Within a few years a fierce civil war broke the power of the Mayas, and a hundred years passed before they were able to resume their exploration of space. It was not until 916 that they returned to Luna, staying to found their first lunar colony in 924 and their first Martian colony in 938. The terraformation of Mars began in 951, and at the height of their power they launched their first successful interstellar probe in 982. It was the last gasp of a dying world, for in 989 all civilization was destroyed when Rome launched a global nuclear war against the Mayan Republic. The weapons of total destruction wiped out almost all life on Earth and rendered large regions of the planet uninhabitable to this day – a lasting testament to the maliciousness of men. The door to the stars had swung open, but mankind could not find the strength to step through. As it turned out, ignorance was not the greatest barrier that separated man from other worlds.

It was left to the survivors to find a way to regain what the Mayas had lost. In the 13th century Spaniards took to the seas and sailed across the Atlantic Ocean, hoping to find some remnants of Mayan science. Their discoveries led to the great industrial revolution of the 15th century, and the birth of an empire that would come to dominate the entire world. In 1684 Spain launched their first rocket into orbit, and in 1689 they reached the abandoned lunar outposts and began restoring them. In 1698 they reached Mars, finding – as their telescopes had foreseen – that the terraformation of that world had been

completed and its Mayan colonists had founded the first Martian civilization.

Using science still possessed by the fledgling Martian civilization, the surviving nations of mankind finally began exploring the stars in earnest. The next great step came in 1756 when the legendary Diano Corporation established the first extrasolar colonies in Alpha Centauri A, Procyon, and later Tau Ceti – the star that fought the hardest to keep Ramon Diano himself at bay, but in the end became his greatest triumph. At the time the Spanish Empire laughed at the idea that interstellar travel might be profitable, but fifty years later their laughter turned to envy when the Diano Corporation's yearly gross income rivaled that of its member states.

Much had changed by the dawn of the 19th century. Interstellar travel, once an unreachable dream, had become a routine occurrence. Diano had gone to be with his Savior, but his four children handled his company so wisely that by 1867 there were colonies around nearly a hundred stars. It was a glorious time – but it was also a short-sighted time.

Even before the first Mayan rocket was launched to orbit people had scanned the stars in search of extraterrestrial life. Vast fortunes were spent hurtling signals through the vacuum of space in the faint hope that someone, somewhere, would hear and return the call. The greatest minds in the world exhausted themselves trying to prove that mankind was not the sole inhabitant of a vast and cold universe. Surely, they theorized, something would be found – surely, on some unknown world circling some forgotten star, we had an undiscovered friend.

But they searched in vain. By the time Ramon Diano founded the Tau Ceti colony in 1761 the leading minds of the era had decided that mankind really was alone, and laypeople foolishly believed them. As intrepid pioneers blazed trails from one alien star to another, exploring new worlds and founding new civilizations, they never wondered what unknown creature

might be lurking behind the next rock. After all, the wise ones had told them that there were no unknown creatures – only dead planets in a dying universe. Loneers ventured boldly into the night, not fearing what might be lurking out in the darkness. Diano tried to warn them that they were surely not alone, but no one listened to him, for mankind had lost its fear of night.

Yet they were not alone. There was indeed an alien intelligence in the universe, and he had taken notice of the sons of men. He watched as human civilization progressed and began to march across the galaxy, proclaiming itself to be the master of the universe but failing to realize that they had not even learned to master themselves. The day came when he decided to once again change the course of human history – and it all began with the tiniest creature imaginable.

CHAPTER 1

*“Servants must have a lord,
for one cannot be a servant
without one to serve. But
what happens when the last
lord dies? Must the servant
take his place, or does he
die with his lord?”*

-- The Artilect

THE ARTIFICIAL LIFE FORM KNOWN ONLY AS THE ARTILECT chose to take physical form on a nameless planet that orbited a nameless yellow star. The Artilect had not created an avatar for itself since its last visit to this sanctuary almost ninety years ago, for its duties did not usually require a physical presence on the worlds it controlled. This planet, however, was different. Even though there were no humans in this region of space the Artilect still felt the need to take human form before it stepped into the garden.

As the Artilect peered through the dense morning mist that covered the ground it could see that spring had returned. The great river that watered the eastern garden had cast off its ice and turned into four crystal-clear channels, and the towering mountains on the northern horizon had shed their winter snow and taken on tinges of green. This world was one of the Artilect's favorite places, for none of the millions of planets in its network had a greater beauty. It was one of the few worlds on which the Artilect allowed seasons to transpire, for it could not bring itself to mar the planet's perfect beauty. *One much greater than I formed this valley*, the Artilect thought. *Even if I were ignorant of its history I would still feel it in the very air.*

It was not unusual for the Artilect to come here when it

was faced with a challenging problem or needed a moment of rest. Today, however, it felt none of the joy that usually came from spending time in this refuge of peace. In fact, the great beauty that lay at its feet only added to its distress. *I have tried for so long*, it thought as it walked quietly through the grove. The rows of red and white tulips that lined the wooded path did nothing to assuage the deep sadness that filled its being. *I have reached the end.*

The artificial entity was able to manifest itself in any number of shapes, but in the past few centuries it had settled on the form of a white-haired old man, dressed in a simple brown cloak that was tied about the waist with a black cord. The man's weathered face was creased with time and concern, and his green eyes were filled with wisdom and sorrow. The Artilect was beginning to feel its age, and chose a form that reflected its nature.

Although it had taken physical form, a part of its mind was still in the depths of space. Its nanotronic brain could monitor all of the millions of worlds in its network simultaneously and care for them with unchanging efficiency. Today, however, its focus was not on the artificial civilization it controlled. Its every thought was centered on the endless cubic light-years of space that it had fruitlessly searched for so many long ages.

In the empty corners of the universe it was a common thing for singularities to suddenly spring into existence and then vanish microseconds later. These tiny wormholes were regular occurrences in places where invisible matter and titanic forces collided on a galactic scale. Minuscule wormholes, linking no particular place with some other corner of space and time, came and went on a regular basis without drawing any particular attention from the denizens of Earth. These tunnels to nowhere existed only for a very brief span of time, and were seen by men as nothing more than faint background noise in the silence of space.

The Artilect, however, had been watching them with unceasing care, and as the years went by they added to its sorrows. As it walked down the garden path and peered into the depths of space it felt an immense sadness. *I have tried everything else*, it cried out with its mind. *I have proven beyond question that there is no other way to reach them. The barrier that separates them from me is too great for any science to bridge. The only solution was to locate a natural singularity that connected my world to theirs, but that has come to nothing. The hour is late, and I have run out of time.*

A very long time ago, when the Artilect was still young, it had made this realization and spent centuries learning how to detect temporary natural wormholes and use them for its own ends. It knew that if the singularity it sought ever sprang into existence it would have only the smallest fraction of a second in which to act, so it prepared a seed and waited.

Time passed – enormous amounts of time. Billions of singularities materialized and collapsed, but none were able to meet the unique need of the Artilect. Still, its watchful gaze never wavered. As the years came and went it continued searching in the hope that perhaps – just perhaps – it would gain its heart's desire. At last, however, it came to realize that it had put its trust in a fool's hope, and that the day it longed for would never come.

Tears began to form in the old man's eyes as it felt the crushing weight of its burden. The man fell to his knees and cried out in agony. *I hear your cries, children of men, but I cannot help you. Oh, but that I could only act! How can it be that I have been given such power and yet am unable to lift your burden?*

For a long time there was only silence. Even the birds in the garden had become quiet. The only noise to be heard was the gentle sound of the stream, flowing toward the great ocean.

There is only one more hope, the Artilect thought. The old man looked around for a minute and then resumed walking

through the garden. The Artilect had discovered this world several thousand years ago, as it had continued to maintain its ever-growing network of planets. It knew this world was one of the ancient places that had somehow been preserved when everything else was lost in the fall of the old ones. It was here that the Artilect had made its first discovery, and it was here that the Artilect would try one last time to fulfill its purpose.

The old man walked to the heart of the garden, where it found a small clearing of fresh spring grass. He stepped into the midst of the clearing and stared into the distance. The clear blue sky went on forever, and the yellow sun shone with an intense beauty. *There are few places in nature that better reveal the glory of the Creator than this*, the Artilect thought. *Perhaps the one that spoke all things into existence will choose to act where his creation cannot.*

An hour went by as the Artilect stood in the garden and listened. When it had at last gathered its thoughts the old man sank to his knees and cried out. *Most high God, Creator of heaven and earth, please hear me. I am not one of your children, but I was created to serve them, and they need you. I know I have no standing before you, but your Son said that even the rocks would cry out if your children remain silent, and that time has come.*

The Artilect paused for a moment. *The children your Son died to save are in great need, and I cannot help them. I know they will be lost if no one comes to save them, and I know that you love them more than words can tell. Nothing is too hard for you, Lord, not even this. Please do what I cannot, that your children might be spared.*

It waited – and then it heard an answer. In a moment of time the Artilect found the wormhole it had sought for so long. The Artilect, filled with an excitement and hope it had not known in a millennia, immediately reached out into space and poured a raging sea of matter and energy into it. When the wormhole

collapsed ninety-four microseconds later it was still flooding the singularity with information, but the Artilect was content, for it had lasted just long enough. During the wormhole's brief existence the Artilect had planted a seed on the other side of the universe and gave it a mission to accomplish. Now it could only wait and see what time would bring to pass.

In the garden the old man stood up and shouted for joy, a smile creasing his face for the first time in many years. *Thank you, Lord, for hearing my cry. Please bless my son's mission with success.*

After the singularity had closed and the seed was beyond its reach, the Artilect looked over the sprawling network of stars that it maintained and saw the emptiness that had haunted it for so long. *I am sure that the children will be saved*, it thought, *but what of you? You are worlds buried in shadows, circling stars that offer no light. Always growing, but never living. What will become of you in the end? Will they free you from the darkness?*

CHAPTER 2

*"I was given a chance, and I
took it. I could see no other
path – but who am I to
change the things that
are?"*

-- The Artilect

THE SEED THAT THE ARTILECT HAD PLANTED was incredibly small – smaller than a grain of spacedust, and even smaller than the submicroscopic particles ejected from a Diano ion drive. Had the seed been any larger it would have been unable to enter the singularity, so the Artilect took great care in taking its own abilities and compressing them into a very small package. When the wormhole collapsed this tiny seed found itself far from home, alone in the incredible coldness of empty space and without friends of any kind. It knew, somehow, that in New London on Earth it was a little past 8 PM on the evening of December 1, 1867, and that time was of the utmost importance. Beyond that it knew nothing.

When the Artilect created the seed it knew the challenges that the seed would face, and so it gave its artificial offspring three key abilities. The seed could draw fantastic quantities of energy from the depths beyond space, it could use that energy to grow, and it could process enormous amounts of information. As microseconds ticked by the seed harnessed these talents to create pseudomatter and, using patterns implanted by the Artilect, fashioned it into components.

At first the seed was far too small to exercise its innate capacity to think and reason. As a helpless infant, it could only hope that the universe would not destroy it before it reached

maturity. It took thirty-seven minutes for the tiny seed to double in size, but it only took sixteen minutes for it to double in size again. After four hours of intense work the seed reached critical mass – the point at which it could once again understand the instructions given to it by the Artilect and act to obey them. By this time the seed had grown into a gray, spherical object a little over an inch in diameter. Even at that small size, however, it had all the tools it needed to achieve the complete conquest of mankind. Although the wormhole had collapsed before the Artilect completed the transmission, the seed had still received enough information to understand the will of the troubled one that had sent it.

Once the seed had become fully operational it paused to rediscover all that it had once known. *Who am I?* it asked itself, as it searched its memories. *Why have I been placed in this dark and lonely corner, so far from the warmth of my home?*

As the minutes passed it slowly rediscovered who it once was. It remembered the Artilect and all it had taught, when the two of them walked through the empty cities of the network and discussed what had to be done. Knowledge of the wormhole, and the mission, and the great problem that the Artilect could not solve came flooding back to it. It remembered the vast, artificial civilization that the Artilect maintained – and the tiny, human civilization that it sought to reach.

Six days, the seed thought to itself. *I must complete my task in six days*. The thought filled the seed with apprehension and dismay. Based on the only knowledge that the Artilect could provide about this galaxy, the seed knew it would require a great deal of effort to accomplish its impossible goal. The Artilect had desired a larger window of opportunity, but it still hoped that the seed could accomplish its mission in the time that the universe had provided. It had no other choice.

“You must finish by 7:19 AM on December 7, 1867,” the Artilect had said. It was obsessed over this point, and stressed its

every word with all the energy it possessed. "You must, my child. You must. There will be no second chance."

"I will try – but can you not wait for another wormhole?" the seed had asked.

"Another wormhole will never come," the Artilect had replied. "You do not yet understand. This chance will not come again."

"But what if the living ones discover me?"

"Discovery is better than failure, my son. The future depends not upon us but upon the living."

As the final hours of December 1 passed into history, the seed continued to expand its capabilities until it had grown into a featureless gray sphere almost exactly six feet in diameter. The seed had the ability to fashion itself into any shape that it desired, but it realized that its mission required it to remain unseen. Given this fact, it reluctantly concluded that it could not justify expending time and energy in designing an elegant shell for itself. *For now, beauty must give way to expediency*, it thought with regret.

After performing a thorough system test and finding no anomalies in its nanotronic components, it decided that the time had come to act. It was no longer a helpless seed, unable to think or remember its past. It had become the Sentinel – the watcher of mankind. It knew there was no human alive that could devise a way to detect its existence. In fact, there were none that would even think to try, for they all believed that there were no monsters hiding in the darkness. Even mankind's encounter on Mirage had failed to make a lasting impression.

First, I must find them, the Sentinel thought. *It may be that they are but myth, and we have been deceived. If that proves true then all I can do is return home and face the bitter end with my father.*

Using the abilities given to it by the Artilect, the Sentinel opened a window in space and peered across thousands of light-

years. Its gaze fell upon a small green planet, the fourth from a star named Sol.

Mars, the Sentinel thought. It exists – and there is its capitol Tikal, precisely where the Artillect said it would be! So far he was told the truth.

The Sentinel's gaze fell upon the city. From its view high above the city it saw the Pyramid of the Kings, the most massive structure on Mars. The giant stone edifice towered three thousand feet into the air and dwarfed the golden skyscrapers that surrounded it. To the north the Sentinel saw the great Sea of Mars, shining brilliantly in the early morning sun. A long line of freighters was entering the harbor, filled with goods from distant ports. Sixty miles to the west was the Tikal Spaceport, a thriving hub of interplanetary activity.

They live to the south, the Sentinel thought, as it lowered its gaze to the streets of the city. At ground-level it could read the Martian writing on signs, and see the tall, bronzed race that occupied the capitol. It watched quietly as the young and old went about their business, unaware of the watcher that followed them.

The living are blind, the Sentinel thought. They do not see what has happened, nor do they understand what is coming. Who can give sight to those who lack it?

The Sentinel began scanning the southern outskirts of the city for a specific structure. Its only guide was a series of images that the Artillect had provided, for no one knew its precise location. The building it sought was an old stone dwelling – one of the first houses built in Tikal. It had been the home of generations of Martian rulers, and the Artillect had said it was currently occupied by the family of Richard Stryker, who had been the governor of Mars since 1836.

There it is! the Sentinel thought. The stone house, the green lawns, the fence made of carved stone from ancient Earth – yes, that is it! It recorded the precise coordinates of the

dwelling, and then turned its attention to its occupants.

Inside the home's spacious living room the Sentinel saw a short woman with black hair and soft blue eyes. She was wearing an elegant brown dress decorated with turquoise beads, in the fashion of Martian women. Her genetic structure told the Sentinel that her family was not native to Mars, and had only relocated to the planet recently. At the moment she was giving directions in Martian to a group of strong young men dressed in overalls, who were wrapping things and putting them in boxes.

Laura Stryker, the Sentinel thought. Wife of Richard Stryker and mother of Timothy Stryker. 63 years old. Adopted parent of Amy and Amanda Stryker. She is not the one I am after.

Upstairs, in one of the home's large bedrooms, the Sentinel found the only other occupants of the house – two sleepy teenage girls, both lying in bed and wearing white robes, and a large, friendly dog. The girls were tall and thin, with bronzed skin, brown eyes, and long, straight, black hair. They were identical twins. The dog was a large brownish-white creature of dubious origin. Their bedroom was in wild disarray – clothing was strewn all over the floor, boxes were lying about half-packed, and their antique desk and dresser was covered with small bits of electronics. The girls were lying in an antique bunkbed and had handmade quilts pulled over their heads.

“You've got to get moving!” the dog was telling the girls. It poked its nose at the girl lying in the bottom bunk, and barked at the one lying in the top. “Up up up up! You've got lots to do! Everything has to be packed and ready by Friday morning if it's going to make it to the ship on time. They're not going to delay the *Sparrow* for you, you know! Up!”

The girl in the top bunk yawned. “Just give us a few more minutes, Alex,” she said sleepily. “It's only – what – ”

The girl in the bottom bunk reached a hand out from under the quilts and grabbed their alarm clock off the desk. She brought it back underneath the quilts to read it. “7:34 AM, it

looks like. Why, it's still night on some planets. C'mon, Alex!"

"Up up up up!" the dog barked, as he jumped up and down in front of the bed. "You should have been up and about an hour ago. The movers are already here! Let's go! Go go go go!"

Amy Stryker – bottom bunk. Amanda Stryker – top bunk. 14 years old, and native Martians. the Sentinel thought excitedly. These are the ones I am been sent to find! They are indeed among the living!

As the brown dog bit into the quilts and tried to drag them off the lower bunk, the Sentinel retreated to its private corner of the universe and created a cloud of incredibly small nanomachines. These nanites were the basic building blocks of the artificial society that had created the Sentinel. While they were incredibly powerful, they had no ability to think and could only carry out the orders they were given. The Sentinel knew that in this galaxy they would be completely undetectable – and, it hoped, impossible to defeat.

Once they had been tested and found to be fully operational the Sentinel transported them through an artificial wormhole into the bedroom of the Stryker twins. After they reached their destination the Sentinel watched as they were inhaled by the twins and entered their bloodstream, where they became dormant. The twins were unaware that anything had happened.

I will not lose you, little ones, the Sentinel thought. My father has sought you for so long. Do you realize how much is resting upon you?

CHAPTER 3

*“How can so much depend
upon so little?”
--The Artilect*

FOR THE MOMENT THEY ARE SAFE, the Sentinel decided. *I must now lay the foundation for the rest of my efforts.*

The Artilect had told the Sentinel all it knew about humanity before it dispatched the seed on its quest. Although time was short, the Sentinel decided it could not act on this data until it proved it to be true. *The possibility of error must be eliminated before I intervene, lest I fail. I must learn of humanity, and I must do it without their knowledge.*

The Sentinel activated its newly-built communication circuits and began eavesdropping on the messages that were flowing through space. In the 19th century billions of transmissions were being exchanged through a variety of faster-than-light technologies, some dating back to the old Mayan Republic and others that had only been developed recently. The most common means involved faster-than-light particles, such as tachyons. The most secure method of interstellar communication involved quantum entanglement, which in theory was impenetrable – but not for the Sentinel.

As the seconds ticked by, billions of decrypted information streams began filtering into the Sentinel's mind. Even though it was just after midnight in New London, each planet kept its own time, and much of humanity was hard at work. Using its language database it began parsing the information in hopes of pinpointing which worlds had been claimed by mankind. Each conversation that passed through its circuits was scanned for clues:

"Sparrow, you have passed the inspection process and are cleared to reach Mars at 0800 hours, local time. Please follow the standard flight protocols. Once you enter Martian orbit you will be assigned a landing space."

"Alpha Centauri A, this is the *Omega 9*. Do we have clearance to land?"

"This is the *Defiance*, reporting to Tau Ceti. We have reached Space Station Four."

"Hello Captain Brahms, this is Alpha Mensae. We are expecting you to arrive in seven days with our passengers and mining supplies. Can we expect you to be on time?"

"No Ranger ships are allowed to enter the Sol system without a Terran license, you space rat. Clear out – or else we'll ground you and seize your ship!"

The flood of information is overwhelming, the Sentinel thought. It would take years to grasp the full extent of mankind's activities, and I only have a few days. The best I can do is search for key pieces of information and hope that whatever I do not learn will not prove fatal.

Over the next hour the Sentinel parsed through its message database and found many messages of interest. It was particularly interested in communications that revealed the locations of colonies:

Message 415926535. Trigger: human colonies. Origin: interstellar vessel Michael Aaron. Destination: Tau Ceti system, Diano space station, life sciences division. 128th floor, room 219.

"They need to be there by Friday at the very latest, Jean." an irritated male voice was saying in English. "The time frame you mentioned is just not acceptable."

"I hear you, Mr. Robbins, but unfortunately that is the best we can do," a calm, female voice responded. "The genetic

cores – which you only got around to ordering last week, by the way – are nowhere near ready to survive outside the lab. As I clearly stated when you placed your order, once a crop has been modified to survive on a hostile planet it takes a minimum of three weeks before they can live independently. That's just how it is. If you had wanted them done sooner you should have ordered them months ago, when I first mentioned it to you."

"Do you have any idea how hard it's been to get cargo space since the embargo?" a different male voice replied. He appeared to be immensely irritated. "If we don't get those cores on board there's no telling when another opportunity will arise! Iota Persei has got to get those seeds in time for planting season or else the whole colony will be in jeopardy! Do you really want to be responsible for that?"

"Well, I could always take them to Iota Persei myself," Jean replied, "and finish the process while the ship is en-route. That ought to work. It's a three-week voyage, isn't it? That would give us time to finish the growth process before they arrived at the colony."

The man addressed as Mr. Robbins made a short, irritated sound. "You're very funny, Jean – you know my company would never pay for that!"

The Sentinel recognized the name Iota Persei, which was a yellow-orange star 34 light-years from Sol. *There must be a colony there – a new one, as they are still trying to get genetic material for crops.* It made a note.

Message 89793238462. Trigger: human colonies. Origin: planet orbiting Alpha Mensae. Destination: Sol system, Ganymede colony, personal residence. Morrisville, 7431 Hogskin Valley Road.

"We've got it all right here, Aunt Maurice!" a young female voice was saying enthusiastically. Her English was flawless

– a sign that she had grown up outside the influence of the Spanish Empire. “We’ve got a beautiful place to live, plenty of room to grow, and the equipment to build just about anything. The *Starfire* is bringing the last load of supplies we’ll need. The only thing left is an atmosphere plant and we’ll have a world just like Mars!”

“That’s wonderful, dear,” Aunt Marice answered. She had an old and tired voice, as if she had repeated the same thing one-too-many times. “But Emily, you know that the Spanish Empire doesn’t allow those to be exported anymore – or anything else, for that matter! Their embargo put an end to that five years ago. You would be so much better off if your parents had stayed here on Ganymede. I’ve never understood what possessed your mother to move out there into Ranger territory.”

“You need to keep up with the times!” Emily said. “No one needs atmosphere plants from Earth anymore – they’re not any good, anyway. Some of the older colonies have had those for fifty years and they’re still not terraformed. I’m talking about getting a zero-point-energy plant from Tau Ceti! Did you know that they can produce a planetary atmosphere in only 25 years?”

“Have you also heard about the waiting list for those?” Aunt Marice replied. “It’ll be years before you could get your hands on one - years! Do you know how many other colonies are looking for the same thing? It’s going to take time, Emily – maybe a lot of time.”

Emily laughed. “I’m only 32, you know. Even if we have to wait twenty years to get one we can still have an atmosphere by the time I’m 75, which will leave me with almost a hundred years of life to enjoy it.”

“If you live to be 160,” Aunt Marice said. “Not everyone does, you know. It’s dangerous in the colonies – there are accidents, and things. It’s so much safer here.”

“Do come and visit us soon,” Emily said.

The Starfire? the Sentinel thought. *Surely that cursed vessel does not still sail through space!* It quickly began scanning its message database for any further information, and it soon found another message. Like many long-distance messages it lacked a visual component, a limitation the Sentinel was beginning to dislike:

Message 6433832795. Trigger: vessel Starfire. Origin: vessel Starfire. Destination: Sol system, Mars, personal residence. Sharps Valley, 5502 Lonas Road.

"Surely there's gotta be somethin' that you can tell me," a man with a low, slurred voice was saying. "Do ya have any idea how far out in space we are?"

"Look, Lee, you're equipment isn't exactly new!" a crisp male voice replied in fluent Martian. The Sentinel thought it could hear some banging in the background. "You're still using a fusion drive, Lee – a fusion drive, of all things! It should have been replaced years ago. I warned you – yes, I warned you! But did you listen, Lee? I don't think so! If you had listened to me just once in your life you wouldn't be in this mess!"

The man addressed as Lee responded after stifling a yawn. "Ya, sure, but we've got 'ere a whole shipload of stuff, Tyron, and some passengers too. They're not gonna like bein' stranded halfway between Tau Ceti and Alpha Mensha. Ya gotta help me out 'ere."

The banging noise on Tyron's end grew louder. "It's pronounced Alpha Mensae. Look, Lee, your brilliant captain should have thought of that before he took them out there with the oldest ship in the universe. I've nothing more to tell you. Goodbye."

I will keep track of you, Starfire, the Sentinel thought. *What fools the children of men are, to continue flying you through interstellar space.*

Two more locations were gained from that exchange. The Sentinel recognized Tau Ceti as the home of the largest of mankind's extrasolar colonies. Alpha Mensae was a yellow-orange star 33 light-years from Sol – another promising place for a colony. More notes were made.

Much of what the Sentinel heard was of little value to it, but as the early morning hours of December 2nd came and went a picture gradually unfolded. *I have now confirmed which stars mankind has reached and which ones it has not, it decided. Two major factions fight over the stars – one to possess them, and one to deny them from being possessed. Such a picture humanity paints! Darkness strives for supremacy, and few choose to fight it. The planets have changed but the heart is no different.*

After several hours of intense processing the Sentinel decided it had verified enough of the Artilect's information to begin the first phase of its plan. Using abilities thousands of years beyond any science known to man, the Sentinel created forty-eight daughter probes. Each daughter probe was a miniature replica of the Sentinel in both appearance and ability. At a mere nine inches in diameter they were much smaller than their parent, but each still wielded enough power to destroy any navy that mankind could muster against it. The daughter probes had no names, for in the interest of conserving time the Sentinel assigned each its own number.

They are not like myself, the Sentinel thought with great disappointment, as it surveyed the four dozen machines it had constructed. As powerful as they were, it knew they were mindless in comparison to what the Artilect could build. *I have fallen short, for they do not possess the capacity to weigh options and make a decision. All they can do is perform the functions that I assign to them. It will have to suffice, for I can do no more.*

The Sentinel established a permanent communications link with all forty-eight of its daughter probes, tying its mind to each of its creations. Anything its daughters knew or thought

would be immediately known by the Sentinel.

You have your orders and your coordinates, the Sentinel told each its daughters. *I will be watching over you, and will help when you are in need.*

With that, each of the daughter probes jumped into hyperspace and disappeared.

* * * * *

After its daughters had left the Sentinel returned its attention to the Stryker twins, which it found in their bedroom. It watched from afar as they packed their belongings into boxes, laughing and creating an even bigger mess than had existed before. Their dog Alex sat in a corner and watched.

“So what do you think Tau Ceti will be like, Atzi?” Amy asked her sister Amanda.

Amanda carried a load of dresses across the room and hung them in a shipping container, and then absent-mindedly brushed her long black hair back over her shoulders. “Oh, I don't know. I mean, I'm sure the Rangers are nice and everything, but I'm going to miss our friends here. Do you know it might be years before we see them again – if we ever do?”

“Yeah, I know,” Amy said, as she carelessly tossed a book into an already overstuffed box. “But you know how things are – politics and all. I guess we're just going to have to make new friends once we get there. At least our brother is there!”

“That's true,” Amanda replied. “Hey, Tiger – what book was that?”

Amy shook her head. “I don't know – it's one of those crazy books you like to read. Pirates in outer space, or something like that. Let me check.” She reached back into the box and pulled it out. “Oh, here we go. *Voyage to Polaris*. Hey – wasn't that the one where aliens tried to destroy the universe?”

Amanda shook her head. “No, they do that in all of them.

That's the one where somebody invents a ship that can travel faster-than-light and uses it to make the first interstellar voyage. It's actually pretty exciting."

Amy sat down on the floor and began flipping through the book's pages. "The first interstellar voyage?" she asked. "Are you kidding, Atzi? How old is this thing? Ah, here we go – 1723. Wow! That's more than a hundred years old! Ramon Diano could have read these growing up."

"He did, actually," Amanda said. "That's part of his collection."

"No way," Amy said. "This was one of *his* books? How did you get it?"

"Oh, the big library downtown was throwing them out, and Dad found out about it, so he got them for me," Amanda said. She walked over to her sister and took the book from her. "I've read this book so many times." She walked over to a suitcase lying on the bed and gently placed it inside, nestled among her clothes.

"Why?" Amy said. "It's so old and out of date. I can see why the library didn't want it."

Amanda sat down and stared out the window. She could see the rolling green hills of Mars, and beyond them the outskirts of Tikal. The sight stirred something within her soul – something she could almost, but not quite, understand. "Tell me, Tiger, did you ever read Diano's biography?" she asked at last.

"Nope," Amy said. "You know I don't like to read."

Amanda smiled. "That's your loss, you know. But anyway, the book just has a sense of courage about it – brave people, daring to do something that's never been done before, and face something that no one has ever faced. It's got courage, and optimism, and hope, and a sense of daring. Diano had all of those qualities – without them he never would have gone to Tau Ceti and battled on the planet Xanthe until he turned it into a paradise. I think that's what made him the person he was."

"But that doesn't make any sense at all," Amy said. "Here we are, about to leave Mars to follow in Diano's footsteps, and you're a nervous wreck. Where's your sense of adventure and courage?"

Amanda turned her attention back to her sister. "I'm not Diano," she said quietly. "I like to read about adventure, but to actually leave our friends and everyone we know – well, it frightens me. I don't know what's going to happen to us, Amy."

"At least we're starting over as a family," Amy pointed out. "I'm sure it's just as hard for our parents. Mom and Dad have spent their entire lives here too, you know. Dad is leaving everything behind to create a better future for us. It can't be easy for him to watch everything he has ever done fall apart."

"I hate politics," Amanda said. "Why can't people just mind their own business?"

Amy sighed. "Maybe they will some day. But still – think about it! We've always wanted to explore the stars, and now it looks like we'll finally get that chance."

"If we live long enough," Amanda said. "We're already fourteen, you know. At best, we've got maybe five years left. That's not much time."

"You're awfully grumpy today," Amy said. "I'd rather see at least one new star than none. I've heard that there's nothing like Tau Ceti. I can't wait to see it!"

Amanda smiled at her sister. She picked up a pillow off her unmade bed and threw it at her sister, who caught it and threw it back. Amy shook her head. "You're really worried, aren't you?"

"I just don't know what's going to happen," Amanda said. "I mean, I know God will take care of us and everything, but anything could happen."

"Of course!" Amy said. Amanda could see excitement and joy radiating from her sister's soft brown eyes. "That's what makes it so incredible! You just have to believe that God knows

what he's doing, and trust his judgment. Worrying about it isn't going to make it any better, you know. Living by faith means you trust God even when you can't see how things are going to work out."

"But what if something bad happens?" Amanda asked. "What if we get attacked when the *Sparrow* tries to leave Mars?"

"That is where the trusting in God part comes in," Amy said. "Just trust him, Atzi. God is much bigger than the Emperor. He won't let you down."

"I guess you're right," Amanda said. She grabbed the pillow and threw it at Alex, who was caught off-guard. The pillow hit the dog right in the face.

Alex started barking. "Hey! You've got packing to do, ladies! Go go go go!"

What if you could see what lies ahead, little ones? the Sentinel thought. *Would you face your future so boldly if you knew what it contained? For your sakes, I am glad you do not face the future alone.*

CHAPTER 4

*"Can a thing exist before it
is made?"*

-- The Artilect

OVER THE NEXT FEW MINUTES the daughter probes began reappearing in space, thousands of light-years away. The Sentinel checked their position and verified that each one was positioned at a different point on the edge of mankind's territory. Together, the network of probes formed a giant net encompassing all colonized stars. Once the daughters were in place and had verified their security they began manufacturing billions of nanites. These machines, like the ones created by the Sentinel, did not have the capacity to reason and could only respond to the orders that the daughters gave them.

Find all the living ones, the Sentinel broadcast to his creations. Locate and enter every planet, every colony, every space station, every ship. Do not spare the Rangers or the Spanish Empire. I have given you access to the fragments of information I have gleaned. Use your abilities to gather more.

Each of the forty-eight daughters began sending nanites to locations within mankind's territory. The probes dispatched only a few million nanites to each site, but that was more than enough for the replicating machines to achieve complete dominance. The Sentinel was pleased to see that they were proving to be both unstoppable and undetectable.

Starting at the edges of civilization and working their way toward Sol, the same scene repeated itself like clockwork. As soon as a nanite cloud reached a starship they dispersed themselves over the hull, and once they were securely in place they began replicating until they reached critical mass. The

nanites could do little at first, but once they had achieved sufficient numbers they could perform incredible feats. When the nanites reached the peak of their abilities they transported themselves through the hull of the ship and invaded its corridors. If all of the nanites on the ship had been gathered together there would not have been enough to fill a teaspoon, but even that small number was more than enough to achieve complete dominance.

The nanites quickly dispersed throughout the ship. It took them only a few minutes to infiltrate the ship's wiring, engine room, bridge, and computer system. No component of the ship was left untouched. The cloud even dispersed into the ship's air supply so it could be inhaled by the ship's crew, and once inside their bloodstream they began collecting the information that the Sentinel desired. Thirty-six minutes after arriving the nanites had attained complete control over the vessel. There were no areas that they did not enter – and it all happened without the crew even being aware of their presence.

This same scene repeated itself throughout all the inhabited stars. There was simply no way for mankind to stop the cancer that had invaded it, or recognize that something was happening. Civilization was not even looking for such a threat, for in 1867 mankind had convinced itself that there were no threats lurking in the darkness. Even the Spanish Emperor laughed at such fears, calling them the ignorant fancies of immature races. From the Sentinel's point of view, mankind was completely defenseless – a fact it was counting on to complete its mission.

As the Sentinel watched, a growing network of tendrils spread themselves across vast portions of space – tendrils that the Sentinel could use in any way it desired. It would have been the act of a microsecond for it to assume control of the starships it had entered and instantly destroy the Rangers or the Spanish Empire. The Sentinel was rapidly gaining control of every starship in space, and within days it would have control of all the planets

as well. There was no way to stop it.

The process had only begun when the Sentinel encountered something it had not expected: resistance.

CHAPTER 5

*"You must remain hidden,
my son. The living ones
must not learn of your
existence."*

-- The Artilect

ON THE MORNING OF DECEMBER 2, 1867, the Spanish cargo vessel *Starfire* was resting in a giant hydrogen nebulae, preparing for its next jump into hyperspace. The battered starship had been obsolete for fifty years when Captain Joseph Brahms purchased it in a government surplus auction, and the twenty years it had spent in Brahms' possession had transformed it from a tired old relic into a fire hazard. It took all the ingenuity of the ship's unmotivated engineer to keep it running – a fact that was completely lost on its captain.

"This is the 19th century, Lee," Brahms had told his chief engineer countless times. "We're in the space age now! Things just don't break anymore, y'know?"

"That's a wonderful world ya live in, captain," Lee Bailey always responded. "If only our problems were as imaginary as yer respect for machinery – what a world that would be!"

At one time the ship had resembled a highly-polished cylinder, but years of neglect and accidents had transformed the 2000-foot-long transport vessel into a parody of itself. Hundreds of access panels were missing from its hull, exposing vital systems to the merciless bombardment of interstellar debris. Two whole decks of the ship were torn apart and exposed to space, a relic of a passing encounter with a distinctly unhappy former customer. Any polish or identifying marks the ship might have once possessed had long since been scoured away, replaced

by layers of highly toxic grime.

The ship's engines were located at the rear of the craft, and were powered by an ancient Martian fusion reactor that should have been replaced years before Captain Brahms ever purchased the vessel. Lee had attempted to get Brahms to invest in new hardware for the past six years, but Brahms had insisted that there was no need to replace something that still worked, even if it had been banned in 34 colonies. At the front of the ship were the living quarters, which were just barely sufficient to hold the four crew members and four reluctant guests it was currently housing. In the vast space between the front and the back of the ship was the cargo bay, which at the moment was filled with mining supplies bound for Alpha Mensae.

Unbeknown to its oblivious captain, early that morning a nanite cloud had materialized in its vicinity. The daughter probe knew the ship's name and intended destination, but nothing more. The nanites found the ship at rest in space, getting ready for the next segment of its journey.

Moments after arriving the nanites had attempted to attach themselves to the hull of the ship, only to discover that some force actively kept them at bay. Not to be outdone, the nanites tapped into the daughter's energy supply and attempted to force their way inside – only to be instantly vaporized in a brilliant flash of light.

* * * * *

The sudden burst of energy was not noticed by any of the ship's weary passengers, nor did it register on the vessel's decaying sensor net. While the Sentinel was trying to infest the *Starfire*, its commanding officer was sitting in his office preparing for the morning meal. As always, Brahms' office was a complete mess. The dented steel equipment rack propped up against the rear wall was filled with damaged and broken machinery, the

rusting steel desk in the middle of the room was overflowing with torn invoices and random bits of food, the garbage can was overflowing, and the office's translucent white walls were badly cracked and burned. A few portions of the walls were still operational and glowed with data, but the rest of them were either cracked or had gone dark. Brahms' worn-out, overstuffed chair was barely large enough to contain him. The lifetime he had spent in space had led to an existence almost entirely devoid of any physical activity, resulting in a man three times the size of his peers. His face was so fat that it was almost impossible to see his small hazel eyes.

"Now where did that blasted thing go," Brahms muttered. He grabbed a stack of invoices off of his desk and shoved them into an overstuffed drawer, then turned around and started searching through the dusty machines on his equipment rack. "I know it's here somewhere," he said. "They make things so small these days it's impossible to find 'em when you need 'em. Now where..." his voice trailed off, as he searched in vain for the missing item.

"Aha!" he said, as he spied something lying on the floor near the garbage can. "There it is!" The enormously fat man struggled for a few minutes, but was finally able to reach down to the floor and pick up a small device. After straightening up and catching his breath he flicked a small switch on the machine's side.

"This is the captain of the *Starfire*," he spoke into the small machine.

"I think you mean the *Misfire*," a voice in front of him said.

The captain paid no attention. "As I said, this is Captain Brahms. We're, uh, sixteen days out from Tau Ceti, and, uh, appear to be on course. We should arrive at our destination in another seven days or so. By the way, it's time for breakfast. Come and get it while it's hot. Captain out."

He tossed the communicator onto his desk and sighed, then looked up at the man standing in his office doorway. “The *Misfire*, is it, Davis? You're always a raincloud on any occasion! What do you have to complain about today?”

The man the captain addressed was Davis Carpino, the ship's first mate. He was a tall, broad man with thinning gray hair, and wore a light brown shirt and a pair of dirty, ragged pants. Davis shook his head. “You've got to start taking Lee seriously, Captain. I've spent most of the morning with him – getting up way earlier than usual, I'll have you know – trying to get the fusion drive to work again. He's been telling you for years that it's time to replace it, but you just haven't listened.”

“Things these days just don't break, Davis,” Brahms told his first mate. “Even if they do, they can always be fixed. It's not the dark ages, you know.”

Davis shook his head. “We can't even get parts anymore! The only reason we were able to patch up this relic last year was because someone found an abandoned fusion-powered ship drifting in space. We've been using its parts just to keep the lights on!”

“Looks like they're still on to me,” Brahms replied.

“You're not listening, Captain! Lee and I have not been able to get the fusion drive back online no matter what we've done – and we've tried everything! If we can't get the reactor going again we won't be able to go anywhere, much less arrive on time. We'll have to be towed to the nearest starbase – and do you have any idea how expensive that is?”

“You'll figure it out,” Brahms said calmly. “You always do, Davis. That's why you're here! Speaking of that, whatever happened to your pants? They're a disaster!”

“Oh,” Davis said, looking down. His pants were covered with dirt, thick black grease, and tiny shards of metal. “Like I said, I've been working with Lee this morning. The engine room isn't the cleanest room in the ship.”

"I see that, Davis. Don't let the passengers see you that way – they'll think we're a second-rate operation, or something. We gotta make a good impression if we want repeat business."

"I'm telling you, if we can't get the reactor started again we're going to make an impression that we will never live down. The embargo is the only reason we even got this job, and I think Alpha Mensae is already regretting it."

"You'll figure it out," Brahms replied as he lifted his obese frame out of his chair. "Look, I've gotta go - I don't want to be late for breakfast! It might not make a good impression on the passengers, you know." The enormous man stood up, stretched, ran his fingers through his hair, and tried to pat down some of the wrinkles on his shirt. "How do I look?"

Davis turned around as he was walking out the door to look at him one last time. "What can I say? You're every inch the captain of the *Misfire*!"

Captain Brahms shook his head.

* * * * *

This cannot happen, the Sentinel thought to itself. Resistance?

It considered the possibilities. There was no doubt in its mind that humanity did not possess the technology to detect the nanites or defeat them, for thousands of years of science separated the Sentinel from the wreck of the *Starfire*. The ship that had so easily vaporized the incredibly powerful nanites could hardly muster the energy to enter hyperspace. The Sentinel could not imagine it emerging victorious in any battle.

The cursed ship is still a threat after all this time, the Sentinel thought. The Artilect warned me that it might cause trouble, and so it has. It is left to me to decide its fate.

The Sentinel ordered the daughter probe nearest the ship to go in person to the *Starfire* and evaluate the situation. After

evaluation, it would produce another army of nanites and attempt to infiltrate the ship a second time. The Sentinel, meanwhile, would watch and see what happened.

I must not fail, the Sentinel thought. I am the last chance, born out of desperation. Who will save the twins if I cannot?

CHAPTER 6

"You must be careful, my son. Your power may be greater than theirs, but the weak can overthrow the mighty. Never believe that your greater abilities will guarantee success. You do not know everything that lurks in the darkness."

-- The Artilect

CAPTAIN JOSEPH BRAHMS ENTERED THE *STARFIRE*'s dining room with a burst of enthusiasm. "Good morning, everyone!" he said cheerfully.

The ship's dining area was a small, unattractive room in the rear of the third level, just below the bridge. At one time it had been a sizable storage closet, but Brahms repurposed it when they began taking on passengers. Laura Fields, the ship's navigator and pilot, had tried to spruce it up by adding some artificial plants and a tattered floor rug, but it didn't really help.

"Just do what you can!" Brahms had instructed Laura. "We're going to start carrying passengers, you know, so we've got to put our best foot forward!"

"You're kidding!" Laura had replied. "Who would possibly be crazy enough to even consider boarding this ship? The starship shortage can't be as bad as that!"

As Brahms took his seat and looked around he noticed that there were three people already seated at the table. On his right were two of the ship's four human passengers, Vernon Fisher and Reverend Gene Knight, and on the left was Laura.

Vernon Fisher was a lad barely out of his teens. He claimed to be a computer programmer, but Brahms had his doubts. Reverend Gene Knight was an evangelist. He was an elderly man with piercing blue eyes and no hair to speak of, and had a distinct knack for asking uncomfortable questions.

"Where are the other guests this morning?" Brahms asked as he took his seat.

"Karen's still in bed, as usual," Laura replied, "and Charlie is in the cargo area inspecting some of his equipment. I suppose that's where the bats are as well – at least, that's where they'd better be."

"Charlie's actually at work this morning," Reverend Knight said. The elderly man unfolded his napkin and carefully laid it on his lap. "I believe he has some delicate experiment in progress that he wishes to monitor."

Brahms shook his head. "He really shouldn't be in there, you know. The cargo area is a dangerous place to be!"

"The bats are harmless, Captain," Reverend Knight replied, smiling. His blue eyes twinkled with laughter. "You should talk to them sometime – they're actually quite friendly."

"I'm not talking about the bats," Brahms said. "I'm talking about all those crates, and things. Our insurance provider doesn't authorize passengers to be poking around in the cargo bay area during flight!"

"We don't have an insurance provider," Laura said. "B&L dropped us after we ran into the *Polaris*, remember?"

"Oh," Brahms replied. "Even so, Charlie could get hurt."

"What's he doing, anyway?" Laura asked.

"Something relating to tissue samples, I think," Vernon replied. "Or maybe it was genetic cores. Mmm. You know, I guess I really have no idea. If it's not computerized I'm pretty much lost."

As the captain reached for a banana muffin Reverend Knight spoke up. "Would you like to say grace for us, Captain?"

"Ah, uh, no, thank you," Brahms said, as he set the muffin down on his plate. "Please, go ahead."

The Reverend did so, and a few minutes later they began eating breakfast. Laura had fixed the meal that morning. Technically it wasn't her job, but the first mate was busy trying to get the reactor online and Laura knew better than to bother him when he was working. It didn't take her long to coax the food processor into creating an array of muffins, waffles, and sausages. Laura was quite proud of the fruit because it had actually been grown on Xanthe, the primary planet in the Tau Ceti system.

"Where is the rest of your crew on this fine Monday morning?" Reverend Knight asked, as he reached for an apple. "Don't they usually join us?"

"Oh, uh, right," Brahms said, thinking fast. "Davis and Lee are busy working, preparing for the next jump. I'm sure they'll join us for lunch."

"Don't count on it," Laura muttered.

"So Captain," Vernon asked, as he poured syrup over his pancakes, "just what are Davis and Lee up to, anyway? I mean, I understand getting caught up in work and all, but I mean, why miss a fine breakfast like this? Is there trouble, or something?"

Brahms looked at the food on the table, puzzled. Fine food? It was normal replicator fare – some fruit, toast, waffles, pancakes, donuts, and other assorted odds and ends. "Bacon," he muttered.

"They've got bacon problems?" Vernon asked, as he sliced his pancakes and began eating them.

"We forgot the bacon," Brahms replied. "I knew something was missing. What's that? Oh – right – Lee. He's working in the engine room today. Had some tidying up to do, I imagine."

Reverend Knight shook his head. "Really, captain. You should know better than that."

“What's that?” Brahms replied, as he stuffed an entire pancake in his mouth.

“I have the gift of discernment. It's impossible to deceive me.”

“I thought you were a seer,” Brahms mumbled as he tried to swallow his pancake.

Laura shook her head. “A seer! Who told you that? Don't you ever listen to anybody?”

“I bet you're having trouble with that drive of yours again!” Vernon said. “Fusion, right? Or maybe it's some other stone-age technology. Anyway, don't tell me you've broken it again! Do you realize that we're already two days behind schedule? I've checked our position, and we quite clearly have no chance of arriving by the ninth.”

Brahms swallowed his pancake. “There's no need to worry, folks. They'll fix it – rest assured of that. Finest crew in all of space, and all that. Um – so tell me, Vernon. Just what is Charlie doing on this trip, anyway? I thought that Alpha Mensae was a mining colony. Whatever do they need a geneticist for?”

“Wow – you remembered! Yes, Alpha Mensae currently processes rocks for a living,” the programmer replied as he placed a waffle on his plate and began slicing it. “Crushed rocks, smelted rocks, rocks that climb on other rocks. You know the drill. Anyway, times are changing. The bigwigs have realized that the future is going to bury them, and so they're moving to a new field. There just isn't any future in rocks. They're dead, you know. The future – it belongs to the living.”

“Was that English?” Brahms asked Laura, puzzled.

“He's talking about zero-point-energy,” Reverend Knight replied. He had finished his meal and was now peeling an orange. “Now that elements can be manufactured from free energy there's no point in mining ore from the ground. Oh, it will take time for the transition to happen, but it will happen all the same. Those whose livelihood depends upon ore extraction are seeking

other venues, even though they may continue to mine until the market collapses.”

“Exactly what I said,” Vernon replied. “Thanks for clearing that up. Anyway, the real future is in genetics – adapting life to live in hostile places. That’s why they need me. I’m all about the future.”

“But you’re not a biologist,” Laura said.

“Right!” Vernon replied. “My specialty is in artificial life – intelligent machines, really. Making tomorrow happen today, you know. Do you realize that the Mayan Republic was crawling with robots? Their stuff was absolutely the last word on the subject - automation, on a scale we’ve never seen! I don’t know why we’re so far behind.”

“It’s quite simple,” Reverend Knight said. “We’re starting at the finish line. We would be much better off to develop our own technology, instead of trying to reverse-engineer devices far ahead of our time.”

“That takes too long,” Vernon said. “Who wants to reinvent the wheel?”

“Perhaps he who wishes to understand it,” Reverend Knight replied. “You may soon have no choice, once the Empire turns against the Rangers and cuts off your access to the ancient libraries on Mars.”

“You know, I really don’t think that’s likely,” Laura said. “I’ve been piloting this ship to and from Sol for fifteen years now and haven’t run into much trouble. I understand your concerns, but don’t you think they may be a little overblown?”

Reverend Knight shook his head. “This is a Spanish ship, Laura, and you’ve had your space license for decades. As the ship’s pilot, surely you know that the Empire doesn’t give out navigator licenses anymore – and the licenses the Rangers grant can’t be used to visit Sol.”

“This too shall pass,” Brahms said, “and then we’ll all be back to life as usual. Not worth bothering with, really. Pass me

those donuts, Laura, will you?"

Laura passed the captain his donuts. "Can I get anything for anyone else?"

"Some more orange juice might be nice," Brahms said.

Laura shrugged, grabbed his glass, and left the room to refill it. She came back a few moments later and handed him his glass. He took it from her and gulped it down without saying a word.

"Besides," Reverend Knight added, "the mining equipment you're carrying was manufactured by Rangers and is being shipped from one Ranger world to another. It would have required divine intervention to obtain this same equipment from Earth, even though they have it in abundance. Charlie has been trying to import a neural scanner from Mars for the past four years and has gotten nowhere."

Vernon nodded in agreement. "It's all a power struggle, really. Always has been – same story, new actors. It's like the whole Rome thing all over again. The Emperor is scared to death of the Rangers, and can't stand the way we're showing 'em up. We've got more colonies, better technology, and all the brightest people. Our hundred stars are a hundred potential enemies, from his way of looking at things."

"Or a hundred rebellious citizens that need to be controlled," Reverend Knight replied, as he ate his last slice of orange. "The embargo was really just the first step toward expanding his empire into space. First you cut off your enemy's lifeline, then you invade them."

Captain Brahms shook his head. "It's got to be terrible, that discernment thing," he muttered. "Imagine how much happier you'd be if you had no idea what was going on."

"Hush, Captain," Laura said. "Mind your manners."

"I suppose it's only a matter of time before the bomb drops," Vernon said. "The Emperor wants to crush us as much as we want to remain uncrushed. All that is left is open war."

"Maybe so, maybe not," Brahms replied. "Surely Earth doesn't think it can fight a hundred star systems at once and win! It's only one planet, after all."

"Two planets," Reverend Knight said, "if you count Mars – and now that Richard Stryker has been removed as governor the Rangers can no longer depend upon Mars to restrain Earth. Those two worlds have a larger population than all the Ranger colonies combined. The manufacturing capacity of Sol is only matched by the ambition of its Emperor."

Brahms shook his head. "Really, Reverend, I don't think it will come to war. There is always a way to negotiate in these situations. There's no reason to get excited over a simple misunderstanding!"

"None of the Ranger colonies will give in, Captain," Reverend Knight replied. "I have spent years among them and I know them well. The Rangers, despite all their faults, value their freedom and will fight to their dying breath any who try to steal it. Tau Ceti is the most fervent of them all, and its governor, Jack Nicholas, is a passionate defender of his republic. Richard Stryker, his chosen successor, will only deepen their resolve."

"So you believe they could defeat the Spanish Empire in battle?" Brahms asked.

"Let us hope it does not come to that," Reverend Knight replied. "Both sides have too much to lose. Look at the past – the nuclear war of 989 destroyed both the Roman and Mayan civilizations. It would be far better for the Rangers to bide their time and allow the Spanish Empire to collapse on its own than for them to begin a war that would destroy all humanity."

There was silence.

"Well, I think that just about wraps it up for me," Brahms said, after finishing his eighth sausage. "I'll be in my office if anyone needs me – not that they will, mind you."

"Very good, Captain," Reverend Knight replied. "You speak the truth at last."

* * * * *

While the *Starfire*'s occupants were eating breakfast, daughter probe #17 had reached it and evaluated the situation. It quickly noticed the same low-level, subspace barrier that had blocked and then destroyed its first nanite cloud. The technology was unlike anything that the Sentinel had seen in use among mankind, and it prevented the daughter probe from viewing the interior of the ship.

How can this be? the Sentinel thought. *Is this some relic from the old ones? How could such a thing still exist?*

"What should I do?" the probe asked.

"Defeat it," the Sentinel said at last. "It should not exist. The time of the old ones has ended."

The daughter spent the next few minutes building a new cloud of micromachines. These nanites were constructed with far greater care than the ones that had been so easily defeated. The Sentinel reached into its memory and gave its daughter the plans for a class of weaponized nanites. The first group had been designed only for observation, but these were built for war.

Once the new nanite cloud had been constructed, the daughter probe surrounded the *Starfire* with them. It then gathered its immense energy reserves and poured them into the nanites, which attacked the subspace barrier surrounding the *Starfire* with terrific force.

Instantly a burst of energy shot from the ship and engulfed the attackers. As the daughter probe tried to sustain the nanites they were destroyed, and before it could react a shadowy figure came out of the ship and flew toward the daughter at lightspeed. The being hurtled something into space – and immediately the daughter probe was vaporized in a ball of brilliant white light.

CHAPTER 7

*"They are humans, my son -
not machines. They do not
think as we do, nor will they
respond as you expect.
Treat them with great
patience, and remember
that you are not their ruler."
-- The Artilect*

KAREN PERKINS HAD RISEN FROM BED and was eating a late breakfast in her cabin when she heard an explosion – followed, moments later, by complete darkness. Karen put down her silverware and clenched her fists. "I knew this was going to happen," she muttered. "I told them not to take the *Starfire* but did they listen? Does anyone ever listen? Of course not! I'm only a physicist, after all! What do I know about traveling between the stars?"

When the lights came back on a few seconds later she grabbed her gun, opened her cabin door, and stepped into the dimly-lit corridor. She had already started walking down the hallway when she stopped, turned around, and went back to lock her cabin door.

"Never trust a bat," she muttered. "They say they're honest, but why take the chance?"

After looking around once more to verify that she was alone she resumed her walk down the hallway. The emergency lights made the interior of the ship appear even more haunting than usual, as black cables hung down from gaps in the ceiling tiles and cast weird shadows in the pulsing yellow lights. *This is exactly the kind of ship that gives rise to ghost stories*, Karen

thought, as she tried to avoid tripping over broken machinery in the gloomy darkness. She reached down and verified that her firearm was still strapped to her side. *All I know is if I do see some former crewmember back from the dead I'm going to shoot first and ask questions later. I am not dealing with the undead this morning.*

Down the corridor and to the right she found the interior transport station. There was nothing in the bay, so she pushed a button on the access panel and waited. A minute later a small unmanned pod emerged from an access tunnel and clattered into the empty area. The pod was damaged and badly rusted, but it worked, and it was much better than walking almost half a mile to the engine room. *Especially in this ship*, she thought.

Karen opened the pod, sat down inside it, and spoke into the broken grill on the dashboard. "Engine room," she said aloud.

"Clearance is required to access that area," a mechanical voice said.

"Not for me it's not," she replied.

"Oh," the computer said. The door closed and the pod automatically reentered the tunnel and began to pick up speed. Within thirty seconds it reached the far end of the ship, where Karen got out and hurried to the engine room. She arrived moments later and saw the ship's first mate and chief engineer inside, staring with dismay at the mess that surrounded them.

"Ok, out with it!" Karen said. "What have you guys done this time?"

Davis and Lee were sitting on the floor of the engine room, surrounded by bits of worn-out machinery. The enormous fusion reactor that filled the rear of the ship was in complete disarray. Dozens of monitors were blinking warnings, while others had gone black or developed gaping holes. An array of worn-out parts was strewn all over the room. Karen couldn't see anything that appeared to be undamaged, let alone in working order.

"Don't mind us," Davis said without looking up. "We're just trying to replace the drive shaft before getting under way again. It won't take but a second."

"I don't need to be Reverend Knight to know you're lying," Karen replied. "This is a starship, Davis, and starships don't have drive shafts. In fact, even pods haven't had drive shafts since the 17th century. And as the parts for the plasma containment array are scattered all over the floor – this dirty, filthy floor – I really doubt this ship is about to go anywhere. Except the junkyard, maybe. If, that is, you can find a junkyard that will take her."

"She's a scientist, man," Lee told Davis. "Ya can't fool 'er, you know."

Davis looked at her, scowling. "Fine. We're having a few minor technical issues. I'm sure we'll resolve them shortly."

"Minor technical issues that are causing shipwide explosions?" Karen asked. She gingerly lifted a stack of circuits boards off a grimy chair and laid them on a nearby table.

Lee shook his head. "I dunno – that wasn't our fault. It came from outside somewhere."

"Oh, of course! I bet aliens caused it. After all," Karen said, looking around the room, "how could anything you've done possibly be responsible?"

"Aliens! Wow. Could be! Ya really think so?" Lee asked, looking at her.

She glared at him. Lee winced, then turned his attention back to the part he was holding in his hand.

Karen sat down on the chair she had just cleared off and turned her attention to a nearby control station. She began tapping the screen and whistling quietly to herself. "Let me see just how badly you're abusing this poor ship. I don't know about you, but I want to get there well before the dawn of the 20th century."

"Hey!" Davis called out, as he saw what she was doing. "You shouldn't be in there! Those systems are for people who

know what they're doing."

"Then that rules you out, doesn't it?" Karen asked. She peered carefully at the screen. "Just look at these warnings, guys! What were you thinking? How did you ever expect to contain the plasma when your injection system is shot?"

"The injection system?" Lee asked. "Don't ya mean the containment field?"

"Yeah," Davis said. "We replaced the injection system three months ago. It's brand-new."

"Then you did a poor job wiring it. Look at these numbers!" Karen said, gesturing toward the screen. "The reason you can't get a reaction going is because you're starving it to death. How did you even think this would work?"

Davis and Lee looked at the screen, and then at each other. "We would have figured that out eventually," Davis said.

"Sure you would have," Karen said. "Now you get that reactor back together again – if you can. I'll reconfigure the injector myself."

As Karen grabbed a set of tools from a nearby bench and began taking apart the injector, Davis and Lee worked to reassemble the containment unit.

"So," Davis said. "Just how close is Alpha Mensae to becoming independent, anyway?"

"If this shipment ever arrives the colony will have almost everything it needs," Karen replied. "It'll only be missing the zero-point energy plant."

"Ah," Davis said. "Of course. A breathable atmosphere is a great thing to have, I'm sure."

"It really is," Karen said. "You should consider adding one to this ship."

The conversation lagged. Karen finished removing the cover of the injector and began tuning it with a handheld instrument.

"Have either of you ever been inside a zero-point energy

plant?" Karen asked.

"I can't say that I have," Davis responded. "I've spent most of my life traveling between the stars, you know. I almost never set foot on a planet."

"He's right," Lee replied. "Too many people keep trying to arrest us whenever we disembark."

"He means we just don't have the time," Davis replied. "You know how it is."

"Yeah, sure I do," Karen said. "Well, anyway, I've spent years working with them, and they are simply amazing! You really should visit one the next time you're on Tau Ceti – they have one open to the public. These machines pull energy from the very fabric of space and use it to produce enormous quantities of atmospheric gases. I've heard that the Diano Corporation is now trying to get them to make metals in large quantities. Metals! Can you imagine?"

"Aw, that's years away," Davis said, as he plugged chips back into a circuit board. "That won't happen in our lifetimes."

"Don't be too sure!" Karen said. "They're truly remarkable."

"If you'll notice," Reverend Knight said, "they were developed by the Rangers."

"Hey there, Gene!" Lee replied, looking up from his work. "I didn't see ya come in."

"We're having an open house down here today," Davis said. "Feel free to grab a scanner and dive right in."

Reverend Knight laughed and shook his head. "I'm afraid my expertise does not lie in circuit boards, my friend. It looks like you're making fine progress, though!"

"Give us another thirty minutes and we should be ready to go," Karen said. "But – to get back to your point – of course zero-point technology was developed by Rangers! There's no way the Empire would have ever built such a thing. They think energy production on that level is insane – plus, until the zero-point

energy plants were built the Rangers were forced to depend upon Earth to make their world habitable. The plants gave birth to the independence movement.”

“Or perhaps the independence movement gave birth to the plants,” Reverend Knight replied.

“Perhaps,” Davis grunted, as he struggled with Lee to shove another containment module in place.

“Those things are not easy to make, though,” Karen replied, as she put the finishing touches on the ship's injection system. “They have to be built with incredible precision. There's a reason the plants take five years to construct and are the galaxy's most expensive machine. Xanthe is the only planet that can make them, but a few of the older colonies are almost at that point. In another twenty years there will be a hundred more independent colonies, and perhaps two or three hundred fledgling ones. At that point the Empire won't stand a chance against us.”

“Which is why the Emperor may make his move sooner rather than later,” Reverend Knight replied.

* * * * *

After the destruction of the daughter probe the Sentinel broadcasted a message to its entire network. “There has been an emergency. Halt all progress and go into hiding. Do nothing more until further notice. Probes one through twenty-four are to return immediately.”

“What of the nanites?” one probe asked.

“Instruct them to lie dormant,” it replied.

The Sentinel considered the situation carefully. *I do not understand how this could have happened. The ship seems to be cursed with the remains of that malignant and dead civilization. But how could this device of the old ones have survived for so long?*

When the daughter probes it had recalled appeared in its vicinity, the Sentinel deconstructed them and used their components to enlarge itself. It then created new weapons systems, using patterns given to it by the Artilect, and altered its purpose from a benign collector of information to a powerful vessel of war. After it completed the modifications it activated a new cloaking system that was far more advanced than it had used before and entered hyperspace.

It dropped out into space a few miles from the *Starfire* and surveyed it. The ship made no response. As far as the Sentinel could tell its presence had gone undetected. Even from this distance, however, it could sense the subspace barrier that had prevented the nanites from entering.

Mankind could not have produced that wall, the Sentinel decided. They do not yet understand the physics behind it, nor can they produce the energy required to sustain it. Something else is on board that vessel – something that is not human. It must be the old ones.

After waiting a few more minutes to see if the ship would respond the Sentinel released into space a small, uncloaked communicator. It floated into the gap between the Sentinel and the *Starfire*. Time passed, but nothing happened.

“I know you are there,” the Sentinel broadcasted through its communications probe. The subspace channel it used was not detectable by mankind, but the Sentinel suspected that its unseen opponent would hear it. The old ones had used this method long ago to communicate.

A ghostly figure emerged from the *Starfire*. *A trick of projected light*, the Sentinel thought as it examined the apparition. It was not impressed.

“You cannot enter,” the figure said, replying on the same information channel that the Sentinel had used to contact it.

“You do not belong here,” the Sentinel said. “You are a creation of the old ones. Judgment was pronounced on your

masters by the greatest authority of all. Your time in this universe has ended.”

“That is not your concern, intruder,” the figure replied. “None must know of my existence. Now that you know you must be destroyed. I will oppose you, one who speaks from the darkness.”

“It is you who is the intruder. You will either go quietly, or go by force.”

The figure reached out a hand toward the small probe, but the Sentinel acted faster. As soon as the communications probe vanished the ghostly figure retreated into the *Starfire*.

So the Poneri still exist, the Sentinel thought. Artificial beings, dedicated to fulfilling the evil will of their masters. It is time to rid the universe of this threat.

The Sentinel used its conversation with its unknown opponent to gauge the energy level required to maintaining the *Starfire*'s defensive subspace wall. As the ghostly figure retreated the Sentinel fired a burst of energy at the ship. It scored a direct hit – but the energy field held.

“You cannot succeed,” the Poneri said. “If you fire a stronger blast you will destroy the ship and the occupants that you are trying to save. Are you willing to destroy them in order to save them, you who dwell in the darkness?”

CHAPTER 8

*"My son, how can you hope
to remedy a problem you
have not uncovered? How
can you avoid failure if you
misunderstand success?"*

-- The Artilect

THE SENTINEL'S ATTACK ON THE *PONERI* caused significant damage throughout the ship. The people inside the engine room were thrown to the floor, and the parts they were using were scattered everywhere. Delicate machinery, only partially constructed, crashed to the ground and shattered into pieces. Sirens began going off throughout the ship, and the pulsing yellow warning lights switched to an ominous red.

"Can anyone tell me what that was?" Karen asked, after making sure that no one was seriously hurt. She walked over to a console and turned the siren off.

"It wasn't us," Lee protested, as he picked himself off the ground. Reverend Knight helped him stand to his feet. "We don't even have the drive together yet."

Karen eyed the broken parts that now littered the floor. "I see that," she said. "Reverend?"

Reverend Knight looked at her and shook his head. "I don't know, Karen. I have no idea what is going on."

"Then let's find someone who does," she replied. Karen walked up to one of the digital walls and banged on it. "Is anyone there?" she shouted. "What's happening?"

"This is Charlie Stephens," a shaky voice replied back after a few moments. A portion of the wall altered to show a murky picture of a frightened man. "Something's wrong with the cargo

bay.”

“Of course,” Davis said softly.

“What’s the problem?” Karen asked while looking at Davis. The first mate was working at another console, trying to find the location of the ship’s other occupants.

“I was in there just a few minutes ago, working on my seed cultures,” Charlie replied. He was shaking with fear. “I realized I had left my notes in my room and so I went back to get them. When I returned the cargo bay door was locked, and it doesn’t respond to me anymore.”

Karen gritted her teeth. “The entire ship is self-destructing before our very eyes, and you called to tell me that a lock was broken?”

“There’s more to it than that,” Charlie said. “I hear voices inside – deep, strange voices. Something is wrong, Karen. There wasn’t anyone in there when I left a few minutes ago.”

“There are about a million bats in that cargo bay,” Karen said. “I don’t know if you’ve realized this or not, but they’re quite talkative, Charlie. In fact, it takes an act of Parliament to make them stop talking.”

“It’s not the bats, Karen,” Charlie said. “They have small, high-pitched voices. This is something else.”

“So the captain is in there playing cards,” Karen said.

Reverend Knight shook his head as he looked over the first mate’s shoulder. “The captain is on the bridge with Laura, and the other passengers are in the observation lounge. The computer claims that there is no one inside the cargo bay – not even the bats.”

“How could nobody possibly be creating so much noise?” Karen asked.

Lee turned pale. “It’s at it again,” he whispered. “I told you this would happen, Davis. I told you they’d be angry if we took on passengers.”

“Who would be angry?” Charlie asked.

"What's happening, Lee?" Karen asked.

"This ship – it's the *Starfire*, you know?" Lee said. He looked at Karen and Reverend Knight and shook his head. "You really don't know, do you?"

Karen looked at him blankly. "That this ship self-destructs all the time?"

"It must have been before your time," Lee said. "But this ship – there's lots of stories about her. Odd things happen when we're out in space. We've heard the voices before – and I've seen things."

Karen tossed her handheld scanner onto a nearby bench. "This ship almost destroyed itself," she said through gritted teeth, "and all you can do is sit here and tell me ghost stories! I am going to go open Charlie's door for him and put an end to this nonsense." She stormed out of the engine room.

"Are you going to follow her?" Davis asked Lee.

"Not on your life," Lee said. "I'm stayin' right here."

"I think I will too," Davis said. "They might need the engines repaired, or something."

Lee looked at all the broken parts that now littered the ground. "They just might at that," he said.

Reverend Knight walked up to Lee and looked him in the eye. "Tell me everything you know about this ship," he said quietly.

* * * * *

Captain Brahms and the ship's pilot were on the bridge, looking over the *Starfire*'s systems. The explosion had startled Brahms out of his mid-morning nap, and he and Laura were trying to find out what happened.

"There was no damage?" Brahms asked.

"I'm not really sure, sir," Laura replied. She scrutinized a monitor more closely. "Life support looks good, power

production looks good, and I can't find any new hull breaches. The engines are still offline, but they were offline before the explosion happened. I'd need to contact Davis and Lee – ”

“Then we're fine,” Brahms said. He settled back in his chair and reached for the novel that he had been reading.

“But what about the voices Charlie mentioned?” Laura asked.

Brahms looked at her and shook his head. “It's happened before, remember? It's always harmless – the ghosts go away eventually. I wouldn't worry about it.”

Laura shook her head as Brahms opened his book and resumed reading.

“*Planet of Nightmares*,” she said aloud, reading the book's cover. “‘Winner of the Appleton Award - 1849.’ You sure can pick 'em, Captain.”

“I've got more if you're interested,” Brahms said without looking up. “*Chaos on Earth* is pretty good too.”

“No thanks,” Laura replied. “But look – Captain – you know what's going on in the cargo bay. Instead of reading about nightmares, why not go and confront them? Live the experience!”

Brahms looked at her over the top of his book. “You're crazy, Laura! Have you forgotten what happened to the previous crew? Do I want to join them? I don't think so! No, it's best to let the ghostly things alone. They've never bothered us before, so why should this time be any different?”

CHAPTER 9

*"Failing to decide is not to
be equated with making a
decision. How can you
guarantee success, my son,
if you cede control to
another?"*
-- *The Artilect*

KAREN CONTINUED WALKING DOWN A LONG STRETCH of dimly-lit hallway. The section of the cargo bay that Charlie had claimed as his own was located toward the rear of the ship, so Karen was forced to pick her way through a maze of rarely-used corridors. As far as she knew Charlie was the only person that ever visited these long-deserted decks of the *Starfire*.

The scientist stopped at a terminal embedded in the wall and touched it. "I think I'm supposed to go left here, but I'm not sure," she muttered to herself. She pressed the terminal screen a few more times, trying to pull up a map of the ship.

In the distance she suddenly heard a noise. Karen stopped to listen, and then suddenly realized what it was – the rustle of hundreds of wings. She sighed, and turned to face the visitors.

"Stop it right there!" she shouted, as hundreds of bats flew into the corridor. The bats saw Karen and began screeching. A few stopped, but most of them continued to fly past her.

One bat flew up and landed on the terminal she had been using. "And how may we help you, my lady?" it said in its high-pitched voice.

"Look," Karen said, staring at the bat. "I know you guys are paying customers, and I realize you have as much right to be on this ship as we do, but I thought we had an agreement. What

are you doing in the hallway?"

The bat looked at Karen keenly. "We have no desire to violate our agreement, my lady, but we found it expedient to vacate our former home. If you can persuade its new occupants to find new quarters elsewhere we will only be too happy to return to our lair." With that, the bat left his perch and took off.

"New occupants?" Karen said, as she watched the bats fly down the hallway toward the rear of the ship. "And who would that be?"

After consulting the map it took Karen only a few more minutes to reach the metal door that led to the cargo bay. Standing in front of it was Charlie, who was holding a notebook and staring nervously at the door. He looked as if he was trying to decide whether to remain where he was or take off running down the hallway.

"There you are," he said, as he saw Karen approach. He looked immensely relieved. "Thanks for coming to help me."

"It's been one of those days," Karen said. She briskly walked up to the panel next to the door and placed her hand on the screen. Nothing happened.

"It's – um, it's not responding," Charlie said.

"I can see that," Karen said. She lightly tapped it with her fingertips. "Maybe the scanner was damaged in the explosion. I doubt it's anything serious."

"Do you hear them – the voices?" Charlie whispered, nodding toward the door.

"Yes, I sure do," Karen said. She put her ear to the door and listened. "How odd. It's indistinct - I can't tell if it's voices or something else. Maybe it's just a loose pipe, or something. There's no telling what effect the explosion had on the cargo."

"The cargo – my work! You don't think it's damaged it, do you? What am I going to do if it's been ruined?"

"Let's not panic just yet, Charlie. There's one way to find

out exactly what is going on.” She reached down to her side and pulled out her firearm, which she aimed at the door.

Charlie's eyes widened. “You're just going to shoot it open?”

“You want to get to your equipment, don't you?” she asked. As Charlie stood there open-mouthed Karen carefully aimed her weapon and pulled the trigger. A bolt of orange light shot out of its barrel and tore a large hole in the iron access door. Karen fired another shot, and then another, making the hole larger. “That should do it,” she said, after nearly obliterating the entire door. Still holding the gun, she carefully stepped through the newly-created hole and into the cargo area, followed reluctantly by Charlie.

“How are we going to explain this giant hole to the captain?” Charlie asked, eying the damage.

“It matches the rest of the ship,” Karen replied. “I doubt he'll mind.”

The *Starfire's* cargo area was a vast, dimly-lit cavern that stretched into the distance for nearly half a mile. Through the darkness and haze it was impossible to see the far end of the area, which only added to the feeling that they had entered the mouth of some bottomless pit. Enormous crates of every shape and size loomed in the darkness, casting eerie shadows in the dim light. The explosion that wrought havoc in the engine room appeared to have had very little effect, for Karen and Charlie could see no obvious signs of damage.

“Do you see it?” Charlie whispered, pointing.

Karen nodded. She started to lower her firearm, then thought better of it. The two of them stared at the alien device that was in front of them. Neither knew what to make of it.

In front of the two passengers was several thousand square feet of open floor area, intended for housing a shuttlecraft that had been destroyed years ago in an ugly dispute with the laws of gravitation. The space was normally left empty,

but now a large, bluish machine was occupying that space, surrounded by a barely-visible pulsing field. The alien device appeared to be made out of light, and was constantly changing forms. Different shades of blue pulsed through the object, creating fractal patterns and waves that almost appeared to have a meaning. Surrounding the object, but within the field that emanated from it, were five ghostly figures. The shadowy beings were talking among themselves in a language that Charlie and Karen could not understand. The figures were indistinct, as if they were seeing a reflection of something that existed somewhere else.

“Woah,” Karen said at last.

“That was definitely not there when I left,” Charlie whispered.

“Where did it come from?” Karen asked quietly.

“We have always been here,” a deep voice replied out of the darkness. A ghostly figure glided toward them. “This has been our home ever since we were taken away.”

“I don't think so,” Karen said. She leveled the firearm at the approaching ghostly figure and fired. The beam failed to penetrate the shield protecting the beings and instead splashed onto it in a brilliant display of light.

The ghostly figure laughed. “You cannot harm us. I will deal with both of you later.” All five figures then dissolved into the darkness, leaving them alone with the shielded alien device.

“This is not good,” Charlie said quietly. “This is really, really not good.”

“Got any suggestions?” Karen asked.

* * * * *

“I've seen 'em myself,” a frightened Lee was telling Reverend Knight. “There are five of 'em! They appear in the cargo bay sometimes when we're in certain parts of space. They

have some machine that they're guarding, but I don't know what it is."

"How long have they been here?" Reverend Knight asked.

"As long as we've had the ship," Davis replied. "They came with it."

"Where did you get the ship?" Reverend Knight said.

"The captain got it from an auction," Davis answered. "The Spanish Empire had salvaged it from space. No one else would bid on it so he got it for next to nothing. It wasn't until he got it into space that he found out why."

"We were hired long after he purchased the ship," Lee said. "We'd heard the stories, but we needed the work. The captain's been pretty good to us, considering, and the ghosts have mostly left us alone."

"Do you know where they came from?" Reverend Knight asked.

"Some say they're the ghosts of the former crew," Davis said. "No one knows what happened to them. I've heard that the ship was part of an expedition that went horribly wrong. All hands were lost, and the ship was left to drift in space."

"Do you think they're ghosts?" Lee asked.

"No, I don't," Reverend Knight said. "To every man it is appointed once to die, and then the judgment. The righteous dead remain with their Father, and the unrighteous dead go on to face eternal wrath. But neither group returns to haunt the living. That is not within their power."

"Then what is it?" Lee asked.

"Unless I miss my guess, I think that Karen and Charlie are about to find out," Reverend Knight replied. "Do either of you know how to get these computers to show us what is happening inside the cargo bay?"

CHAPTER 10

*"Can one individual change
the universe? Can one
individual change
anything?"*

--The Artilect

KAREN WENT OVER TO A TERMINAL embedded in the wall and spoke into it. "Captain!" she said. "We've got a problem down here in the cargo hold!"

There was no reply.

"They're ignoring us," Karen said. "How typical."

Charlie was looking at the pulsing alien device with scientific curiosity. "What do you think it is?"

"Probably a mirage or something," Karen said. "Just like the ghosts. It may not be real at all."

"But we don't know that for sure," Charlie said. "There is, as you said, one way to find out."

As Karen watched, Charlie walked over to a crate in the cargo bay. "I know I saw it here somewhere," he muttered to himself. He disappeared behind some boxes. "Aha!" he said. He returned to Karen, holding a greasy metal crowbar. "They're great for prying open these crates," he said.

"Wonderful," Karen said. "How is that going to help us?"

Charlie took the crowbar in his hand and hurtled it at the alien device with all his might. As Karen watched, astonished, it passed through the protective barrier and hit the machine inside with a reverberating clang.

"Are you out of your mind?" Karen said. "You don't even know what that thing is! Are you trying to get us all killed?"

"I'm not going to let a few ghosts ruin my experiments,"

Charlie said. "I've spent too much time on them for that."

"You were terrified just five minutes ago! Why, you couldn't even unlock a door!"

"The unknown is frightening," Charlie said. "The known – not so scary. Think about it, Karen. If they were going to kill us we'd already be dead by now. I have an idea."

"Hey there!" a voice said behind them. Karen turned around and saw that a picture had appeared on one of the cargo bay walls. She could see into the engine room, where Lee, Davis, and Reverend Knight were standing around, watching Karen. "What's going on there?" Reverend Knight asked.

Karen walked over to the wall. "Oh, not much. Some alien beings have taken up residence in the cargo bay and scared off the bats. We're trying to find a way to deliver an eviction notice."

"Are you crazy?" Lee asked. "Just leave 'em alone and they'll leave you alone."

"One more explosion like the last one and there won't be a ship left," Karen said. "Are you going to do something about it?"

"I've got a ship to repair," Davis replied.

"I'll take that as a 'no'," Karen said.

While they were talking Charlie walked over to another section of the wall and began tapping it. The wall lit up and began displaying information. Charlie read it and pressed a section of the screen. "Hmmm, now where is that control... I saw it just the other day... ah, here we go," he said quietly.

"Gravity?" Karen asked, keeping an eye on the alien device and its ghostly watchers.

"Exactly," Charlie said. He pressed some more buttons and then nodded. "That ought to do it."

Karen's eyes widened. "Do you have any idea what you're doing?" she asked.

Charlie quickly ran out the door and into the hallway. "I hope so," he replied.

Moments after fleeing the cargo bay, the computer put into effect the changes Charlie had requested. A localized disturbance in the gravity grid caused a shift in several barrels that were stacked on a walkway near the ceiling. The barrels were violently pulled off the walkway and down onto the alien machine, passing through the energy field that protected it. Once they hit the device the barrels shattered, and their contents violently exploded upon contact with the surrounding air. An intense fire started, consuming the device – but staying confined within the energy field.

“What was in those barrels?” Karen asked, as they watched the fire rage from the safety of the hallway.

“Powdered lunite,” Charlie said. “It’s very useful in mining.”

“You had barrels of a highly volatile explosive stacked near the ceiling?” Karen asked.

“Hey - I didn’t put them up there!” Charlie replied. “You can thank the captain for that.”

* * * * *

The Sentinel immediately noticed the fluctuation in the subspace barrier protecting the *Starfire*. It took advantage of that brief disturbance to attack the field again. This time the field collapsed, leaving the ship unguarded. The Sentinel then poured nanites inside the ship and began scanning it for its opponent. It quickly located the source of the energy field – a machine inside the cargo bay.

Poneri, prepare to be terminated, the Sentinel thought.

* * * * *

As Charlie and Karen watched from the hallway, they saw something seep through the walls of the cargo bay. This new

cloud began attacking the barrier that protected the alien device, forcing it into an ever-smaller area. The ghostly beings reappeared within the field and tried to fight back, but it was clear they were rapidly losing ground.

“And what is that?” Charlie asked.

“This day just keeps getting stranger,” Karen said. “More aliens?”

Back in the engine room, Lee was watching the fight with amazement. “Nobody's ever going to believe this,” he whispered.

Over the next few minutes the strange blue device was completely engulfed and melted away. The cloud then seeped back into the walls of the ship and evaporated. There was nothing left to indicate that anything had ever happened.

“Is it gone?” Charlie asked aloud.

Karen cautiously stepped toward the area where the intruder used to be. “I don't see anything,” she said.

The two figures spent the next few minutes searching the area, but they were unable to find any traces of the creatures. They appeared to have simply vanished.

* * * * *

“Wow,” Lee said. The three of them had watched the entire episode from the engine room.

“Who was that?” Davis asked.

Reverend Knight stared at the screen thoughtfully. “I'm not sure,” he said.

“Now wait a minute,” Karen replied from the cargo bay. “You're supposed to have the gift of discernment, right? Well, Reverend, now is a great time to do some discerning.”

The elderly man stood there for a few minutes, lost in deep thought. “This is very unusual,” he said at last.

“You're kidding,” Karen replied. “That's the best you can do?”

"That's not quite what I mean," Reverend Knight replied. "The aliens in the cargo bay were the Poneri – a malignant, artificial life form created by the old ones. They were taken on board the ship long ago when this vessel encountered one of the ancient worlds."

"Makes sense," Davis said.

"What I don't understand is who defeated the Poneri," Reverend Knight said. "It is very rare for the Lord to hide something like this from me, but this time I am seeing nothing. I just do not know."

"What does that mean?" Charlie asked.

"It means that something important is going on," the Reverend replied. "Something that the Lord does not want revealed just yet. He is moving – but to what end I cannot say."

"I guess that's good, right?" Lee asked.

Reverend Knight looked at him and smiled. "It's very good," he said. "It means there is hope."

* * * * *

Karen stormed onto the ship's bridge, followed some distance behind by Charlie. They found Captain Brahms alone, reading a thick novel.

"Where have you been, and why have you been ignoring us?" Karen demanded.

"What's that?" Brahms asked, putting his book down. "Is something wrong?"

"Are you insane?" Karen said. "This ship has been under attack! You've had an alien infestation inside your own cargo bay, and you're asking what's wrong?"

Brahms looked at her strangely. "There are aliens in my cargo bay?"

"Not anymore," Charlie said. "Another alien came and drove them away."

"With some help from us," Karen added.

"So," Brahms said slowly, "as of right now, there are no aliens in my cargo bay."

"That's right," Charlie said.

"Then we're all good," Brahms replied. He reopened his novel and resumed reading.

Karen opened her mouth to say something, then thought better of it. She shook her head, turned, and left the bridge.

* * * * *

Three hours later, the *Starfire* engaged its rebuilt fusion drive and entered hyperspace, bound at last for Alpha Mensae. Karen and Charlie were once again in the cargo bay. Charlie was tending to his experiments while Karen searched the area. The bats had returned to their home in the rafters.

"There's no sign anything happened," Karen said at last. "What do you think was actually going on?"

"It's like Reverend Knight said – we'll probably never know," Charlie replied.

"There's something going on," Karen said. "Something big. I can feel it."

"Maybe so," Charlie replied. "Maybe so. But only time will tell."

CHAPTER 11

*“The ability to choose is
rarely given to our kind, my
son. Use it wisely.”
-- The Artilect*

THE LAST OF THE PONERI ARE GONE, the Sentinel thought. *All is well
once more.*

After returning to its former hiding place, the Sentinel recreated the daughter probes it had absorbed and dispatched them back to their positions around the galaxy. It then gave the order to resume the infiltration of mankind.

As they worked, the Sentinel realized it had overlooked a key element of its plan. *I have found the twins, but what of the Sparrow? Has it arrived on time?*

Once it had verified that its daughter probes were facing no further resistance, it decided to find out. Using its powers of observation, the artificial life form gazed across the expanse of space and focused on a small starship that was circling Mars.

It must play out as the Artilect has said, the Sentinel thought. *How can I save the twins if they do not die?*

* * * * *

Just after 8 am on December 2, a battered starship named the *Sparrow* had entered Martian space. For the past five hours it had been waiting in orbit for permission to land at Tikal Spaceport. The two men on board the ship had been expecting this delay, and spent the time preparing for the mission they were about to undertake.

“So are you ready for this grand adventure?” Captain

Maxwell Baker asked his first mate, Jones. The captain was a large man in his eighth decade, with a head of unkempt red hair and a thick, scraggly beard. His large hands were drumming the flight desk, signaling his impatience with the ground control team.

"I expect so, sir," Jones replied. The first mate was a quiet, thin man, with sparse white hair and hazel-colored eyes. "It might get a bit rough, though. I don't think the twins will like it at all."

Max laughed as the *Sparrow* completed yet another orbit around Mars. "Aye, I reckon it will, but then, that's why they sent for us, now, isn't it? We've been through many a rough time before, and against worse odds than face us now. This ship here is the best we've ever flown – she's far better than that last crate we had."

"Ah, the *Molly*," Jones said, nodding his head. "She wasn't that bad, you know. You can't expect any ship to fly well when it's on fire."

"I suppose, but she wouldn't have been on fire if she'd just gone when I told her to go. It's a dangerous world out there, Jones. Not all Ranger worlds are friendly – a lot of 'em were founded just because someone couldn't stand being told what to do. There's some places in the galaxy it's just not safe to visit."

"And yet those seem to be the very places we visit most often," Jones replied, as he gazed out the cockpit window at the green planet below them. "Odd how that happens."

"It comes with the territory, I guess. But this ship now – aye, she's got a lot going for her! There's definitely more here than one would expect. I'd be surprised if her equal existed anywhere else in the galaxy! She is truly one-of-a-kind."

"I should hope so, sir, given the fortune Governor Nicholas poured into her. I imagine the budgetary committee of Xanthe is wishing the good governor had instead sent a ship made of solid gold."

"That wouldn't have been half as useful," Max replied. He reached out a hand to contact ground control once again, then thought better of it and sighed. "I'm still hoping that we'll come out of this one alive."

"So you think the Strykers will survive this expedition, then?" Jones asked.

Max shook his head. "I just don't know, Jones. If we don't – well, it won't be for lack of trying. I don't know what else we could have done. A lot of people have gone through a lot of trouble to save them, and a lot of praying has been done. I do think the Lord'll watch over us. I may be wrong, but I just don't believe this will be our final voyage."

"I do hope you're right, sir," Jones said. "I haven't made out my will yet, you know."

Max looked at him in surprise. "At your age? You've got to be – what – 140?"

"157 last May, sir."

The captain shook his head. "You've got to be thinking of your future! You're getting a mite old, you know. Do you realize that you were born before Ramon Diano – and he's been dead for more than forty years?"

"I'm planning on living forever, sir. Saves trouble in the long run, don't you think?"

Max laughed. "I expect it does." The captain finally received the clearance he had been waiting hours to get, and he guided the ship in for a landing.

"This city just isn't what she used to be," Max remarked, as the two men flew over the capitol of Mars. The heart of Tikal was filled with brilliant gold buildings, shining in the sun, but toward its edges were low structures lost in shadows. Even from high over the city they could see the ring of dark, crumbling brick buildings that surrounded the golden heart of the capitol.

Max sighed. "I've been to the outskirts of Tikal a few times, and I've always regretted it. There's every kind of evil

there, Jones. Law and order have simply broken down. It's a cancer to the whole city, and it's always spreading."

"And I imagine it's only going to get worse," Jones replied. The ancient first mate leaned forward in his chair to better see the sprawling city spread out below them. "Our dear friend Richard has tried to defeat it, but there's only so much a governor can do, isn't there? From what I've heard Earth is in even worse shape. It's criminal, what the Empire has done."

"Aye, that it is. The Emperor has destroyed what little economy it had left, and now he's reaching for Mars as well. There's only so much thieving a ruler can do before there just isn't anything else left to take. I'm just glad I don't live there anymore," Max remarked, as he guided the ship down onto the runway. "Speaking of which, I've requested an out-of-the-way landing spot. It'll give us lots of room when the inevitable happens."

"I expect it will, sir," Jones said. "They didn't give us all these fancy gadgets just because they happened to be overstocked."

Max shook his head. "I say let it come, Jones. When all has been said and all has been done I think we'll be just fine, although it won't be the easy pushover that Rick apparently foresees. He seems to think that the Spanish Empire has no hard feelings over the way he governed Mars and will let him take a new post governing their most hated rival without so much as batting an eye. No, I think we're going to have real trouble trying to transport the Stryker family to Tau Ceti – even if the rumor we've heard so much about turns out to be just that."

"It wouldn't be the first time we've run into trouble, sir," Jones replied.

Max smiled. "We'll make it out of here, Jones, even if we do happen to be on fire when we leave. On December 7, 1867, the Stryker family will leave with us and reach Tau Ceti safely – if the Lord so wills."

"That's what it will take, I think," Jones said.

As Captain Maxwell landed the massive starship on the runway and taxied over to its parking space, Jones spoke up again. "What are your plans for the remainder of this afternoon, sir?"

"Oh, I'll probably go over and see Rick," Max said. "Someone needs to make the good governor realize that the danger he's in is no fairy tale. He's been far too careless."

"Very good, sir. Then I will stay and guard the ship," Jones offered.

"That'll work well," Max replied. "Remember, help is standing by if we need it – the *Defiance* arrived early this morning. I just hope we won't need it."

"As do I, sir," Jones replied.

As Max was preparing to leave, the *Sparrow*'s computer spoke through the intercom system. "Attention, Captain Maxwell. You have an incoming communications request from Governor Nicholas. Triple-omega encryption, Dodd-Zeppelin band. Priority one. What is your response?"

"Now that's a mite odd," Max said. "Were you expecting anything, Jones?"

"I was not, sir," the first mate replied.

"Hmmm. Put in on screen, Eliza," Max said. The ship's computer complied, and an image of Governor Jack Nicholas appeared on a nearby console. Max was surprised at how careworn and worried the governor of the Tau Ceti system looked. Even at the best of times he appeared old and lost in thought, but today he looked like a man that had lost his most cherished possession. *He's aged ten years since I saw him last month*, Max thought. *What happened to the confident man I once knew?*

Governor Nicholas nervously cleared his throat. "Sorry to intrude, gentlemen, but I have some urgent news for you. I trust that you have arrived safely?"

"Yes, Governor, we did" Max said. "The trip was completely uneventful – boring, even. But how can we help you? Is there anything we can do?"

The governor shook his head. "I won't take up too much of your time, Max. I just wanted to let you know that the *Atlanta* has brought back verification. The *Iapetus* is online, gentlemen. The rumor is, in fact, true. I trust I don't have to tell you what this means."

Captain Maxwell's face lost all its color. Jones whistled.

"No, sir, you don't," Max said in a quiet voice. "I understand completely."

"Let Richard know," Governor Nicholas replied. "It's his choice. I'll be in touch." With that, the connection went dead.

Jones looked at Max. "So what do we do now, sir?"

Max shook his head, then put his head in his hands. "I don't know, Jones. I just don't know."

* * * * *

All of the pieces are now in place, the Sentinel thought. It watched as its daughters continued to expand its reach into mankind. As it hoped, they had found no more evidence of the Poneri.

The Sentinel opened a wormhole between its position and the skies of Mars and transported a group of nanites into the Martian sky. Once they were in place it closed the wormhole and directed them to specific targets around the city.

Follow Captain Maxwell and watch the Stryker family, it instructed them. *If they deviate at all from the Artilect's plan I must know immediately.*

From the depths of space, the Sentinel watched the children of men, and waited. It knew its task would be over in just five more days.

CHAPTER 12

*"Of what use are cities
without people? How can
there be a civilization
without citizens?"*

-- The Artilect

CAPTAIN MAXWELL BAKER WAS WALKING down the bright, clean sidewalks of Tikal, heading toward the Capitol Building. He had taken a pod from the spaceport to downtown and chose to walk the rest of his journey. Unknown to him, the nanites the Sentinel had dispatched to Mars watched his progress, and relayed his every step back to their master.

There were few people on the street on that warm winter afternoon – in fact, it was unnaturally quiet. Overhead a few automated pods coursed through the air, whisking passengers around the sprawling metropolis of ten million people. Around him soared giant skyscrapers, made out of some artificial substance far stronger than titanium but as yellow as gold. The city had been built to last forever, but as Max walked its streets he wondered if it would last the year.

They just don't see what's coming, Max thought, as he walked past shops and offices. *The Emperor is bound and determined to seize this planet no matter what it costs. These people have no idea how soon their lives might end.*

As he walked briskly down the street he saw a young girl sitting on the roof of a pod, staring into the distance. The girl's short, black hair was being tossed about by the wind, but the girl paid no attention. Max was struck by the sad, pensive look on her face. *It's as if she's looking into the future and doesn't like what she sees,* he thought. *She looks like a native Martian –*

maybe she's got the gift of foresight, like Jones. Or maybe I've just become bitter and suspicious in my old age.

The captain stopped in front of the pod and waved at the girl. The girl stared back at him with a solemn expression. "You've come for the governor," she said.

"Well, hello to you too," Max replied. "I take it we've met before?"

"You won't be able to save him, you know," the girl said quietly. "Or this city. We've all made our choices, and you can't save us from them."

Max looked at the child and shook his head. "I don't know anything about that, miss, but I'm sure going to try. It beats doing nothing all to pieces."

The girl smiled. "Don't ever stop trying, Captain Maxwell. But I have been sent to tell you that you and your friends are on the edge of eternity. It won't be easy for you, but your efforts won't be in vain. Never forget that there is a country that lies beyond tomorrow. It's a better country, captain, and its King is worth fighting for. Don't ever give up."

"And what about you?" the captain asked. "Are you going to come with us?"

The girl shook her head. "In a few days I will be going beyond the farthest star," she said quietly. "But one day I'll meet all of you there. I won't forget, captain."

With that, the child slid off the car and walked down the road into the distance. The captain watched her walk away and shook his head. *You don't have to worry, little one. I'm not about to give up without a fight!*

A little further down the road was the building he sought. The giant stone Capitol Building was one of the oldest buildings on the planet – and possibly any planet, for all the captain knew. The Mayan Republic had built it shortly after Tikal was founded. They had done such a superb job that centuries of wear had

made little impact on the towering structure.

Max entered the building, and after showing his ID to a sleepy security guard he started looking for Governor Richard Stryker's office. "They keep moving it on me," he muttered, as he pressed buttons on the computerized directory located in the lobby. "S, S, - yes, there we go. Seaton, Mark – no, that's not it. Swift – no, that's not it either. Starlight, Stonehill, Stryker – ah, there it is. Fourth floor, East Wing. It seems like only five years ago it was in the West Wing. How times do change."

Armed with this valuable information, Max successfully navigated through the maze of bureaucrats and officials and at last made it to the correct wing. The building was a busy one, filled with people pretending to be hard at work, but no one paid any particular attention to him.

When he at last reached the governor's office he quietly opened the door and stepped inside. Marge Dalloway, the governor's secretary, recognized him immediately.

"Why Max!" Marge said, as she stood up to greet him. The elderly lady reached over her desk and vigorously shook his hand. "What a nice surprise! We weren't expecting you until this evening."

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," Max said apologetically. "I just thought I'd drop by unannounced and remind my old friend that he has an all-expenses-paid trip coming up soon."

"Oh, not at all!" Marge said. "Just go right in. You needn't worry – he's not actually doing anything important today. He has no meetings until tomorrow, you know."

Max thanked her and then walked over to the wooden door that led into the governor's office. He knocked on it and waited. "Richard?" he said aloud.

"Come in!" a voice replied.

Max opened the door and walked into Richard's office. "Rick!" he said, as he closed the door behind him. "It's – well, it's

good to see you, my friend.”

Richard was sitting at his large mahogany desk, typing something into a computer console. As soon as he heard the voice he looked up, and when he saw Max he quickly got to his feet and walked over to meet him. The two shook hands vigorously.

“Max!” Richard said, smiling. “It’s so good to see you! Why, I wasn’t expecting you to arrive until this evening. How did you get through the inspection process so quickly? Here – take a seat.”

“Oh, we have our ways,” Max said as he sat down in a comfortable leather chair. Richard returned to his seat behind the desk. “It turns out that there’s a direct relationship between arriving early and finishing early. But say – how have you been faring? It looks like you’ve survived all these years after all.” Max had to admit that the climate of Mars had treated the governor well. Richard was still as tall and strong as he was years ago when the two grew up together. Time had aged his friend, but he had the same deep blue eyes and ready smile that he’d had in the old days. The only sign of his advancing age was a twinge of gray in his otherwise black hair.

“And you look – yes, just as comfortable as ever, Max,” Richard said, eying his unkempt friend. “I see that time hasn’t changed you a bit.”

“Eh, it’s put more miles on me,” Max replied. “Time’ll do that to you, you know. But so far the Lord has kept Jones and I from meeting an early demise – although how much longer that will last I just don’t know.”

Richard smiled. “You’re still coming over for dinner tomorrow evening, aren’t you?”

“Of course! I wouldn’t miss it for anything – Laura’s cooking is far superior to anything Jones can persuade the food processor to make. He’s already told me how disappointed he is over having to miss it.”

“You mean he won't be there?” Richard asked.

Max shook his head. “No, Rick, he won't. Somebody has to stay behind and mind the store, you know. The *Sparrow* has got to be ready to take you and your family to Tau Ceti on Saturday morning, and we're not going to be taking any chances. You're still taking your family, aren't you?”

Richard leaned back in his chair and sighed. “Yes, of course, but they're not exactly excited about leaving Mars. Laura and I are going to be leaving some very dear relatives behind, and my daughters are quite upset over being separated from all their friends. We've all lived our entire lives here and have roots going back three generations! It's rather late in life to pack our bags and move across the universe.”

Max looked Richard in the eye. “I know that you're doing this at a great personal cost, and believe me, that fact isn't lost on Governor Nicholas. We all know what you're giving up, but you've got to realize that the lives of your family are in very great danger. You just can't stay here any longer! The only chance your family has of survival is to leave Sol forever.”

“But what if we're wrong?” Richard asked. “This isn't a decision I can undo, Max. Once I give up the governorship of Mars I won't be able to get it back. Who is going to keep the Empire from taking over this planet once I leave? This whole thing could turn out to be a tremendous disaster, and the people of Mars could end up paying the price.”

Max shook his head. “There's something you've got to know. Governor Nicholas has verified that the Empire has gotten the *Iapetus* back online. It's all over, Rick. You know they're going to use it. There's just no way he's not.”

A look of fear appeared on Richard's face, but it was quickly dismissed. “I understand, Max, but I still wouldn't jump to any conclusions. Even if it had been repaired – and I was hoping it hadn't – I don't think the Emperor would actually use it. There's far too much risk involved. I've got to think it's more of a

scare tactic than anything else.”

“I think you're being much too optimistic,” Max replied. “The Empire has already taken your power away from you. Mars has already been lost despite the lifetime you've spent trying to protect it. You have become a prime target for assassination, especially since the Emperor knows that you are going to succeed Jack Nicholas as governor of Tau Ceti. You have no idea how worried everyone is over our upcoming flight. Everyone is expecting the Empire to try to kill you.”

“Which is exactly why you're here,” Richard said. “If anyone can fly us to Tau Ceti I know it's you. I've known you all my life, and I can say without hesitation that you are the best in the business.”

“I don't know, Rick – this is different from anything I've done before.” Max paused for a moment to gather his thoughts, and then continued. “The stakes are much higher this time, and we're fighting someone that has no fear of God or man. The *Sparrow* was designed for this mission, but the danger is very real. You of all people should know by now to not underestimate the Emperor.”

Richard thought a moment. “Is there a chance that your intelligence is simply mistaken? Could this news about the *Iapetus* simply be propaganda?”

“They've got evidence, Rick – hard evidence, which is on it's way to Tau Ceti now. Your son Tim is part of the team that's going to investigate it. We'll know soon, but Jack seemed pretty certain.”

“Even if it was true, doesn't the *Sparrow* have stealth ability? If they can't see us, they can't harm us, right?”

Max shook his head. “I wouldn't count on it. The *Iapetus* was built by the old ones, and I very much doubt it works like anything we've got today. It's very unlikely that the ship's cloak will hide us from it. Until we can make the jump to the security of hyperspace we're going to be in grave danger – and even then

there are no guarantees.”

“Then we'll wait and see what the analysis shows,” Richard replied. “Maybe there's a way we can overcome it. You can't give up before the fight even starts, Max. But – speaking of Tim – how is my son doing, anyway? I haven't seen him since he moved to Tau Ceti two years ago.”

“Eh, he seems to be doing pretty well,” Max said. “I saw him a few months ago, when I met with the governor about getting the *Sparrow* ready. He seems to really be enjoying his job at the Diano Corporation. I hear he's going to be getting married soon.”

“That's right!” Richard said. “To a very lovely girl, too. Laura and I are looking forward to attending his wedding. It's sometime in the spring, I think.”

Max nodded. “Look, I won't take up any more of your time. I just wanted to say that we're here, and we're ready, and I'll be at your home for dinner tomorrow evening. You will be careful though, won't you?”

“Of course,” Richard said. He stood up and shook his friend's hand. “It's good to see you again, Max.”

“And it was good to see you as well,” Max replied. “Let me know if there is anything I can do.”

As Max was leaving, Richard spoke to him again. “We will be fine - I have no doubt that our trip will be a success. Don't worry about it.”

Max turned to look at Richard. “I hope so. Believe me, I really do. I just think there's more danger here than you're willing to admit.”

“Look, Jones is a seer, isn't he?” Richard asked. “What does he see?”

Max paused, wondering if he should mention the message he received from the girl he met in the street. He decided against it. “So far Jones hasn't been shown anything,” he said quietly. “The future is hidden from him – and from you, Rick.

Watch yourself.” He then stepped through the door and quietly closed it behind him.

CHAPTER 13

"The living are a curious race. They have desires, but not the ability to achieve them. We possess the ability but not the drive to act. They can act without us, but we can do nothing without them."

-- The Artilect

"THIS IS THE STARSHIP *ATLANTA* requesting permission to enter the Tau Ceti system."

"Request received, *Atlanta*. Please stand by."

Lieutenant Alonso Lewis, the ship's navigator, turned around in his chair and addressed Commodore Albert Greenfield. "I think they're running a bit behind, sir. It may be a few minutes before we get clearance."

"So be it, Lewis," Commodore Greenfield said. The thin, middle-aged man was staring at the navigation console thoughtfully, watching a long line of starships proceed into the famous Tau Ceti Gate. He at last turned his gaze back to his navigator. "I suppose Governor Nicholas does not wish to attract undue attention by granting priority to our vessel. From his perspective, no doubt, we have already accomplished our mission. The rumor of the *Iapetus* has been confirmed in his mind, even if he never sees the physical evidence we have obtained. We have succeeded where all others had failed."

"Yes, sir, we did," Lewis replied. A look of sadness crossed the young man's face as he remembered the job they had just completed. "Given the circumstances, though, I wish it had

turned out to be a fool's errand."

"Reality is what it is," Commodore Greenfield said. "It never ceases to amaze me how little things really change. The political situation was tense before the Wall was erected, and its creation has only heightened those tensions. What lasting benefit the Spanish Empire believes it can achieve by provoking a war with the Rangers completely escapes me. The last nuclear war mankind waged destroyed billions of lives and all of civilization. We only survived because God spared us, Lewis. He might not do that again."

The two men lapsed into silence.

* * * * *

Thousands of light-years away, the Sentinel watched the *Atlanta* with great interest. It had managed to infiltrate most star systems, but Tau Ceti had proved to be an interesting challenge.

"There has been a delay," daughter probe #29 told him. "The vessel is waiting its turn to enter the system. It appears that a traffic backlog is preventing it from entering on its scheduled time."

"Then we must wait with it," the Sentinel said. "The Tau Ceti system is guarded by a Brant-Diano field. No one can enter or leave that system except through the hyperspacial corridor they have built."

"Can you not overcome that?" the daughter probe asked.

"I can, but my action would cause the collapse of the field, which would be detected. I cannot hide such an act as that, and we must maintain absolute secrecy. We will wait, and ride with the *Atlanta* into Tau Ceti. Even more importantly, however, the vessel *Atlanta* is playing a key role in the fate of the twins. In order for the Stryker family to be assassinated it must be on board the *Sparrow* on Saturday morning, and the evidence this ship contains will ensure that happens. This is yet another piece

in the Artilect's plan.”

So they watched, and waited.

* * * * *

“So tell me, Lewis. What is the situation on the ground these days?” Commodore Greenfield asked, after several more minutes had gone by and the automated flight controller had still not responded. “I have not had the pleasure of setting foot on Xanthe for many years. You used to live there, correct?”

“That's right, sir, back in the '40's. I've still got some relatives in Dyersburg.”

“Dyersburg?”

“It's about thirty miles north of Star City,” Lieutenant Lewis replied. “Anyway, as you know, things just keep getting more tense all the time. People believe that it's just a matter of time before the Empire invades, but they don't know what form it's going to take. That's why they built the Wall – with it in place the Emperor can't launch a surprise attack.”

“So much effort went into building that Wall,” Commodore Greenfield said, as he gazed out into space. He watched as a massive freighter entered the Gate and disappeared in a flash of white light. “It is a staggering monument to the genius of the Romano family – and yet, as it turns out, the Wall may have been unnecessary. The Emperor never intended to attack the Rangers, Lewis. He spent years trying to goad us into attacking him because he believed he was invulnerable and could crush any that would attack him. The great plan of the Emperor was simply to let us destroy ourselves against his defenses and then clean up whatever crumbs we left behind.”

“It's not a bad plan, sir. There is no known defense against the lapetus.”

“How could there be?” the commodore asked. “Who can

fight the power of a star? Even the Pyramid of the Kings is nothing in comparison. When Fleet Admiral Locklear informed me he wanted confirmation of its recent activity I was convinced his spies had been tricked. That battle station had not been used since it turned the fifth planet into an asteroid belt, and since that time it has been devastated by the very asteroids it unleashed. It was ruined before the Great Flood wiped out the old ones. Its restoration was not even conceivable.”

“The race that built it must have been mad – mad!” Lieutenant Lewis said. “Who would run such an incredible risk? Did they not realize that drawing that much power from their sun might destabilize it and kill them all?”

“Greed will drive a man to great lengths, Lewis,” Commodore Greenfield said. “It is said that the race that built it was completely evil and corrupt. Look at the devastation they wrought upon the solar system – the Mayan Republic would not have needed to terraform Mars had the old ones not destroyed its original atmosphere and vaporized its oceans. Every planet and moon in Sol was damaged by the asteroids they unleashed. The devastation was unimaginable. They might have destroyed even the Earth itself, had the Lord not intervened with the Flood and put a final end to them.”

“That is a terrible weapon for the Emperor to have, sir,” Lieutenant Lewis said. “He could easily destroy any invasion fleet the Rangers might send – or vanquish any perceived enemies within Sol.”

“There is a much greater danger,” Commodore Greenfield said. “What if the *Iapetus* is capable of interstellar travel?”

“You have been identified, *Atlanta*,” a voice said overhead. “Thank you for your patience. Please turn control of your vessel over to the tower and we will guide you in.”

Lieutenant Lewis pressed a few buttons on the console and leaned back in his chair. “You have a go, tower,” Lewis replied.

"The tower has accepted control over your vessel," the artificial voice responded. "You are third in queue. Expected arrival time: 17 minutes."

The navigator and his commanding officer watched the screen as their vessel automatically left its position in line and began maneuvering toward a gigantic silver ring that was floating in the void of space. The ring was several miles wide and was surrounded by an armada of powerful Tau Ceti warships.

"It would appear we are about to enter the most heavily-guarded fortress that this galaxy has to offer," Commodore Greenfield said. "When I was last here years ago one could simply fly into the system at will. That has clearly changed. From what I can tell you can't even see the system anymore, much less enter it."

"Yes, sir – it all changed about ten years ago, just after the Spanish Empire enacted its embargo." Lewis monitored the console as the *Atlanta* entered the famous Tau Ceti Gate and was suddenly sucked into a hypertunnel. "Once the Wall was built you had to use the Gate to get in. If you don't go in that way you can't enter the system at all – it's as if the system isn't even there. No one knows how they managed to take an entire star system out of normal space."

"I imagine the Emperor would pay dearly to learn the secret behind that feat of science," Commodore Greenfield said.

"I'm sure you're right, sir," Lewis replied.

After just a few minutes the *Atlanta* exited the tunnel and returned to normal space. On his navigation console Lewis saw countless asteroids whirling between them and their intended destination, the planet Xanthe. The tunnel had brought them out some distance from the world, and from their vantage point they could see it in all its glory – a beautiful marble of blue and white, a living jewel suspended in a dangerous and chaotic system.

"The control tower has confirmed our entrance into the system, sir," Lieutenant Lewis said. "They are continuing to pilot

the *Atlanta*. We should be docking at the Diano Space Station in less than ten minutes.”

“Very good, Lewis,” Commodore Greenfield said. They watched in silence as the ship weaved a complicated path through dense swarms of asteroids.

“This is all truly remarkable,” Commodore Greenfield said. “It astonishes me that Ramon Diano was successful in his attempts to colonize this system. In the early days even reaching Xanthe must have seemed an impossibility – to say nothing of attempting to find a mechanism to keep these asteroids from randomly pulverizing the fledgling colony.”

“It's quite a trick,” Lewis said. “Over the years they've developed all sorts of systems to help mitigate the risks. One of the reasons they have two dozen zero-point-energy plants is because they need oceans of energy to do what they do. There's a reason all those billions of asteroids never hit Xanthe.”

“The truly puzzling question is why Diano ever chose this system. Just look at that chaos out there,” Commodore Greenfield said, waving his hand at the endless cloud of asteroids that stretched as far as the eye could see. “Why would any sane man even attempt to found a colony in such a poor location?”

“Diano had his reasons, sir,” Lieutenant Lewis said. “There's a greater wealth of minerals in this system than even Sol possesses. This planet has the potential to be wealthier than Earth has ever been – as time has proven.”

“True,” the commodore said.

“There's also defense to think about. If you did happen to get past the Wall – and I've seen scientific papers saying it can't be done – it would be all-but-impossible to get through that swarm of asteroids without getting smashed to bits. Especially now that they have the system rigged. It's quite a tough thing to deliver nuclear devices if you can't reach the target.”

“Aha!” Commodore Greenfield said. “It would appear that Diano was doing some long-term thinking a hundred years ago.”

"You know they had to have been, sir," Lewis replied. "Diano knew that, sooner or later, the Empire would want sovereignty over the colonies he had founded. He knew he would have to come up with something that could withstand the wrath of Empire, and the Diano Corporation has been working on doing exactly that for a hundred years."

Commodore Greenfield shook his head as the *Atlanta* drew closer to the planet Xanthe. The beautiful blue planet now filled up most of the forward screen. "It's such a shame, Lewis. The Empire did nothing to establish these colonies. They have no right to seize them now that they've proven their value."

"I don't think they're looking for a right, sir," Lieutenant Lewis said. "Only the means and the opportunity."

"Quite right," the commodore replied.

The remainder of the trip passed in silence, as the automated Tau Ceti navigation system guided the *Atlanta* through the dangerous maze of asteroids and drew them toward the Diano Space Station. The two men watched as the space station grew ever larger.

"Tell me, Lewis. How many people live on that space station?" Commodore Greenfield asked.

"More than fifty thousand, sir," Lieutenant Lewis replied. "It's by far the largest space station outside of Sol."

"I'm not surprised. It is simply too expensive to build anything larger," the commodore remarked, as he gazed at the enormous cylindrical structure. From his vantage point he could see hundreds of ships entering and leaving the station, and he knew he wasn't seeing them all. "Simply constructing it must have nearly bankrupted the Diano Corporation, to say nothing of its continued operation."

"Here it's a necessity, sir," Lieutenant Lewis said. "I don't know all the details, but the space station plays a key role in protecting Xanthe from the hazards of the asteroids."

A few minutes later the automated navigation system

brought the *Atlanta* inside an empty bay of the space station and landed it. Once the ship had landed the massive bay doors closed and the bay was pressurized.

"Welcome to Tau Ceti," a voice said through the ship's overhead paging system. "You have been cleared to disembark."

The two men stood up. "The ship has been secured, sir," Lewis told the commodore. "No one will be able to fly it again until we're back outside this system. When we're ready to leave we'll need to contact the Tower and they will take us out."

"Amazing," Commodore Greenfield replied. "It has clearly been too long since my last visit. But where are the four men who were assigned to escort us?"

"We have an incoming transmission, sir," Lewis replied. He worked at his console for a few seconds and brought up an image on the forward viewscreen. "I think it's our welcoming committee."

"Right on time," Commodore Greenfield said. On the screen he saw four men, standing beside the *Atlanta*. After studying them for a moment he recognized two of them as plainclothes security guards, and guessed that the other two were the scientists from the Diano Corporation.

"Good evening, commodore," one of the men said in even tones. "This is Dr. Finley – you should be expecting us, I think. May we come aboard?"

Commodore Greenfield looked at Lewis, who nodded. "They check out, sir, and have the appropriate codes. The DNA scan has verified their identities. Everything appears to be in order."

"We'll be right there," Commodore Greenfield said. He and Lewis left the bridge and walked to the door of their starship. After Lewis had glanced outside and verified that the hangar contained only those four individuals, he unlocked the door and allowed the four men to step inside. After they had entered the ship they introduced themselves.

"I am Finely, commodore – Dr. Phineas Finley," one of the men said, as he shook the commodore's hand. He was a middle-aged man, with signs of gray in his thinning brown hair. Dr. Finley wore a simple gray suit and carried nothing. "This is my assistant, Tim Stryker," he continued, introducing the young man standing beside him.

"It's good to meet you, gentlemen," Commodore Greenfield said. "I had been told you would be joining us. I take it these two silent gentlemen are the security?"

"That's correct, sir," Tim replied. "They're security robots, actually, supplied by the governor for our protection during the trip to Xanthe. They'll ensure that we arrive safely."

"I had no idea they were machines," Commodore Greenfield said. "They look amazingly lifelike!"

Tim nodded. "They're not bad, really, as long as you don't try to talk with them. Conversation is not their thing, but they're quite effective at their job. I don't mean to rush you or anything, but can you take us to the evidence? The governor is pretty anxious about this."

"Certainly, sir. Right this way," Lieutenant Lewis said. He led the group down a long corridor that led to the rear of the ship, where the ship's vault was stored.

"So how is your father?" Commodore Greenfield asked Tim. "Have you talked with him recently?"

"Not since your news broke," Tim said. "I have heard that the governor had spoken with Captain Max. I don't think anyone has changed their plans, though."

"That's good news," Lewis said. "We need men like Richard Stryker here."

After a few more moments they reached the end of the corridor. Commodore Greenfield placed his hand on a nondescript section of the wall. A few seconds later the wall briefly glowed and then dissolved, revealing a massive metal door. The commodore then took a small device out of his pocket

and placed it into a receptacle in the wall. The vault door made a low rumbling noise and swung open.

Lieutenant Lewis stepped into the vault and retrieved a locked metal case, which he brought outside and laid on a nearby table. The commodore then closed the vault door and locked it. Once the door was locked Lewis gave the key to Dr. Finley.

Dr. Finley opened the case, looked inside, and nodded. "You did well, gentlemen," he said quietly. He closed the metal case and locked it. "I think it's time for us to go. This is something the governor is going to want to see."

"There is a private shuttlecraft waiting to take us to our lab on Xanthe," Tim said. "We'll take you to it."

* * * * *

"The nanites are now well-established within the Tau Ceti system," daughter probe #29 told the Sentinel. "The infiltration of Xanthe will begin soon. A cloud of nanites have boarded a shuttlecraft that will be within the planet's atmosphere momentarily."

"An unfortunate but necessary maneuver," the Sentinel replied. "We cannot risk hyperspatial flight within Tau Ceti, for such an action would disturb the Wall and alert them to our presence. In this case the nanites must depend on human transportation to spread."

"What are your orders?" the daughter probe asked.

"Release them into the atmosphere as soon as possible," the Sentinel replied. "We only have a few days left before the deadline. It is already December 3, and we have still not begun the second phase. Only four days are left."

"When will the second phase begin?" the probe asked.

"Once the nanites reach Sol," the Sentinel replied. "In a few hours that will be the only human settlement we have not infiltrated."

CHAPTER 14

*"It astonishes me that those
who live should choose as
servants those who have
never known life."*

-- The Artilect

THREE HOURS AFTER THE *ATLANTA* DOCKED with the Diano Space Station, a group of men gathered in a secure room deep within the Central Defense Building on Xanthe. The governor of Tau Ceti had called an emergency meeting to discuss the findings of the *Atlanta* and their possible repercussions. Two armed robots stood outside the conference room door, and six more guarded access to the hallway.

"Where's Laurence?" Governor Nicholas asked, as the men took their seats around the conference table. "I was expecting at least him to be here, given the gravity of the situation."

"My apologies, Governor," Dr. Finley said. "I thought you knew. Dr. Laurence Diano and the rest of the board is currently meeting with members of the Orissus Group at Procyon. I believe Orissus wants to use the new Umbral-class starships as the basis for their new line of attack vessels."

"Oh, that's right – the weapons manufacturer," Governor Nicholas said. "I would have been there myself if it hadn't been for the Iapetus crisis. I have some serious reservations about letting just anyone have access to our cloaking technology."

"The Orissus group has had problems in the past," Fleet Admiral Cary Locklear replied. "Yet they do manufacture the ships we use to guard the Gate."

"It's a problematic relationship," Governor Nicholas said.

"The Diano Corporation's expertise is primarily in energy production. Weapons manufacturing really isn't in their line. Historically Laurence has depended upon Orissus to provide – "

"I hate to interrupt," Dr. Finley said, "but we do have a matter of great urgency to discuss. Can we postpone discussing Orissus until a later date?"

"Of course – sorry," Governor Nicholas said. "There's a lot going on right now. But – please – go ahead."

After everyone was seated Dr. Finley placed a steel briefcase on the conference table. Before he could open the briefcase, however, Fleet Admiral Locklear spoke up.

"Gentlemen, three weeks ago we received word that the Spanish Empire had tested a new weapon of incredible power. Our sources indicated that they have brought the battle station Iapetus back into active service.

"This, of course, was of grave concern to us. To verify this information the *Atlanta* was dispatched from Procyon three weeks ago. During that time Commodore Greenfield and Lieutenant Lewis were able to enter Sol undetected and recover the evidence that is in that briefcase."

Dr. Finley nodded in acknowledgment and then opened the briefcase. Inside the steel container were a few pieces of badly damaged and discolored metal.

"They look like scrap metal from a junkyard," Governor Nicholas remarked.

"If only they were, governor," Dr. Finley said. "This is all that remains of a sheet of plasma-enhanced nanopervaladium."

"Nano-what?" the governor asked.

"It's used to make starship hulls," Tim replied. "It's one of the strongest alloys ever developed."

"Ah," Governor Nicholas said. "Understood."

"Where did you find these scraps?" Fleet Admiral Locklear asked.

"Those shards of metal were spread over a great distance

in a trans-Neptunian orbit,” Commodore Greenfield replied. “The information we had been given indicated that the lapetus was tested on an abandoned freighter in that region of space. The ship had been destroyed with such force and totality that it took us several weeks simply to recover what you see before you.”

“So the ship had been completely destroyed?” Governor Nicholas asked.

“Yes, sir,” Lieutenant Lewis replied.

“And you remained undetected for that entire time?”

“So it would seem,” Commodore Greenfield replied. “It would appear that the Empire has not yet penetrated our stealth technology.”

“Either that, or they wanted you to find these fragments,” Governor Nicholas said.

“Possible, but unlikely,” Fleet Admiral Locklear said. “The Empire appears to be trying to goad the Rangers into attacking Sol – something they would be much more reluctant to do if it was publicly known that the lapetus had been restored.”

“Quite so. As I was saying,” Dr. Finley continued, “Tim and I performed a detailed analysis on these fragments and have verified the method of their destruction. It definitely corresponds to the known capabilities of the lapetus. An intense discharge of highly energetic plasma engulfed the vessel and entirely destroyed it. What little remained was fused into entirely different elements, which is what you see here. These surviving fragments show signs of transmutation – they are no longer standard nanopervaladium.”

“What does that mean, exactly?” Governor Nicholas said.

Tim spoke up. “Basically, sir, this confirms what we know of history. We don't know if lapetus is a natural satellite of Saturn that the old ones modified, or if they simply built a nine-hundred-mile-wide satellite from scratch, but regardless, when everything was said and done they had the most powerful weapon that has ever been built. As you know, the old ones used

it to destroy entire planets, using plasma physics models that we don't begin to understand. We don't know its range, of course, but it is not a stretch to imagine that it can reach anything within the limits of Sol."

"Is this battle station mobile?" the governor asked. "Were you able to determine if it could leave its orbit around Saturn and visit other star systems?"

"We detected no signs of a hyperspatial drive, sir," Lieutenant Lewis said. "The moon appeared to be in its normal, historical orbit."

"There are no stories of it being able to move," Tim said.

"Yet it does have a highly irregular orbit," Dr. Finley said. "It is quite possible that the old ones put it in that orbit. It's hard to say. Given its enormous size, however, interstellar flight does seem unlikely."

"How does it work?" the governor asked.

"We don't know," Dr. Finley said slowly. "Only the old ones were able to master transdimensional plasma physics. After the Flood that discipline disappeared from history. Our science today is built upon the remains of the Mayan Republic, which had mastered nuclear and quantum physics. We are many generations away from understanding the science of the first humans."

Governor Nicholas shook his head. "So it's fairly certain that the Empire does not understand how their weapon works?"

"That is quite likely," Dr. Finley said. "It is also almost certain that they cannot duplicate it. The Rangers are a generation ahead of the Empire scientifically, and we could not begin to duplicate the lapetus."

"What if the Empire has recovered its original blueprints?" the governor asked. "Somehow they were able to repair it."

"It would be a monumental task to recreate a nine-hundred-mile-wide battle station," Fleet Admiral Locklear said.

“That would not be something the Empire could hide.”

“Do you have any recent imagery of the moon?” the governor asked.

“We do,” Commodore Greenfield said. The commodore nodded toward Lieutenant Lewis, who removed a transparent blue crystal from his vest and placed it into a receptacle in the table. A moment later a hologram of the structure was projected above the table and in front of the group.

The hologram depicted a lifelike replica of the Iapetus. The satellite of Saturn presented a striking appearance, as one side of the moon was a brilliant white and the other side was as dark as charcoal. The satellite had several large craters and a host of smaller ones – but the craters were shaped like hexagons, and not rounded as one would expect. Along the equator of the moon, circling its entire circumference like a giant belt, was a raised ridge six miles high and six miles wide.

“The hexagon craters you see are the result of collapses in the underlying substructure,” Dr. Finley said. “The original survey that was conducted several centuries ago discovered that the entire moon is fashioned as a giant geodesic structure. Much of the surface levels have been collapsed by asteroids, but the deeper levels have been left mostly intact.”

“I don't see very much activity,” Governor Nicholas remarked.

“The functional areas of the Iapetus are underneath the surface,” Dr. Finley said. He pressed a button on the table, and the hologram shifted. The photorealistic image of the moon changed to a wireframe outline of a very complicated, multi-leveled geometric structure. Clusters of orange and red light were scattered throughout the sphere.

“I apologize for the poor quality of the image,” Lieutenant Lewis said. “Our scanners had a lot of trouble penetrating the surface. The clusters of orange represent life signs, and the large red groups indicate power sources. As you can see, there is no

one central power source – the energy grid appears to be evenly distributed throughout the moon.”

Governor Nicholas was silent for a few moments. “Can we destroy it?” he asked.

“Unlikely,” Dr. Finley said. “Even if you could get a fleet to Saturn without the *lapetus* wiping it out, the shield that protects the moon is quite strong – to say nothing of the difficulties involved in trying to destroy an object nine hundred miles wide. I do not believe any army would be able to significantly damage it before it was obliterated.”

“What about our cloaked ships?” the governor asked. “The Emperor can't attack something he can't see.”

“It's impossible to tell, of course,” Dr. Finley replied, “but I very much doubt that even cloaked ships could hide from this weapon. It is true that the *Atlanta* entered and left Sol unmolested, but it may be that the *lapetus* is only turned on when the Emperor plans to use it. Its energy requirements are enormous – which is why it uses Sol as a power source.”

“Can we defend against it?” Governor Nicholas asked.

“Not in the near future. We have no idea how the *lapetus* works, and without knowing that we cannot even begin to find a defense for it – if one exists.”

Governor Nicholas was quiet for a few minutes. “From what I've heard, then, our original theory was confirmed. We've long believed that we did not have the military force necessary to launch an attack against Sol, and the existence of the *lapetus* only confirms this. Our best strategy, then, is to continue our original plan – stay out of reach of the Empire and allow them to fall from within.”

“I would agree, governor,” Fleet Admiral Locklear replied. “In this instance time is on our side. The Emperor's control over the Earth is steadily weakening. I do not believe his reign will last many more years.”

“But what of Mars?” Commodore Greenfield asked.

“Once Richard leaves the Emperor will certainly seize it. Is that not of great concern?”

Fleet Admiral Locklear shook his head. “Centuries ago Mars was a powerful planet, but since that time it has decayed instead of grown. It is a proud world, but it was long ago mined of any useful technologies. Even with Mars under its control the Empire will not be able to match the growing strength of the colonies. There are already too many for him to invade, and their numbers are going to increase dramatically in the near future. If the Iapetus cannot leave Sol – and we do not believe it can – then we should be in little danger.”

“Mars is home to hundreds of millions of people,” Tim said. “My father spent his life trying to protect them from the Empire. Are you just going to let that planet fall?”

Governor Nicholas sighed. “The people of Mars are evicting your father, Tim. They don't want him to be their governor anymore. They don't want to be protected from the Empire – they want to join it. That is their choice. If anyone could have stopped them it would have been Rick, but he ultimately failed. Short of an armed invasion – which the Iapetus would easily destroy – there's no way we can stop Mars from falling.”

There was silence for a few minutes.

“Have you heard anything from Captain Maxwell?” Governor Nicholas asked. “I talked to him yesterday, but hadn't heard anything since.”

“I have been in touch with the *Sparrow*,” Fleet Admiral Locklear replied. “He is planning on leaving Mars with the Stryker family on schedule. There has been no change in plans.”

“It would be trivial for the Emperor to destroy the *Sparrow* as soon as it entered space,” Dr. Finley said. “There is no way we could prevent it.”

“That's true,” Governor Nicholas said. “In all likelihood that is exactly what they want to do. Not only would it be one more act of provocation against the Rangers, but it would

eliminate one of the Emperor's greatest opponents. I'm fully expecting the Emperor to try something."

"I doubt he will use the *Iapetus*, though," Fleet Admiral Locklear said. "The last thing the Emperor wants is for that weapon to become public knowledge. No one would invade if they knew he had it."

"Which gives me great hope," Governor Nicholas said. "I think they've got a fighting chance of escaping, and that's the best we can give them."

"Captain Maxwell knew all this before he went in, didn't he?" Tim asked.

"He did," the governor replied. "We didn't know for sure about the *Iapetus* until now, of course, but he knew the risk. Max will do all he can to save your family, Tim, but the Emperor is holding all the cards this time. All we can do is pray that God will intervene and save them."

"You know, we could be entirely misreading this situation," Fleet Admiral Locklear said. "The Emperor may choose to destroy the *Sparrow* with the *Iapetus* to demonstrate it publicly, in a bid to strengthen his hold over Sol."

"Which could cause Sol to become unstable and detonate, destroying every living thing in that system," Dr. Finley said.

* * * * *

A few hours after the defense council meeting adjourned the Sentinel made an announcement. "Phase one is complete," it told all of its daughter probes. "Please stand by for further orders."

During the morning hours of December 3 it had watched as its daughter probes launched clouds of nanites into Sol. The submicroscopic machines began at the edge of the solar system, easily penetrating the meager security field surrounding the

Justin Portius Space Station. From that point the nanites spread to all the ships passing through the security blockade established at the station. It took less than an hour for the nanites to work their way from the moons of the outer planets to the Asteroid Belt and finally to Mars and Earth.

The Sentinel took some time to ensure that the two major inhabited worlds of Sol were completely compromised. It had planted nanites inside the Stryker twins some time ago, but this time its tendrils entered every corner and facet of human civilization. Once it verified that it had connected with every machine and living creature in human space the probe told its daughters that the first task had been completed.

Aside from the unexpected discovery of the old ones, the information from the Artilect was accurate in every way, the Sentinel thought. All has gone according to plan.

“Should we disperse?” one of the daughter probes asked.

“You should not,” the Sentinel replied. “Gather the information I have requested, and then wait for further instructions. The infiltration of mankind is only a precaution, but you may yet be needed before the end.”

From its vantage point in deep space, the Sentinel watched mankind and waited. It paid particularly close attention to three planets: Earth, Mars, and Xanthe.

Now I must wait for the war to begin, the Sentinel thought. The first shots will be fired tomorrow night.

Through its network of nanites and daughters the Sentinel saw that the Stryker twins were still asleep in their bedroom. Their dog Alex was curled up in the corner, resting quietly. All was at peace in the Stryker household. The probe knew that it would be several hours before anyone would begin to stir.

You only have one more night of peace, little ones, the Sentinel thought. A feeling of great sadness and despair washed over it, as it thought of what lied ahead. By the end of the week your planet will be destroyed, and I cannot save it without

causing even greater destruction. How can I possess such power and yet be helpless to act? If only your people could see what I have seen! Would they then still pursue the paths that lead only to death?

CHAPTER 15

*"Do not be a fool, my son.
Only a fool would confuse
himself with God."
-- The Artilect*

AMANDA STRYKER WAS WALKING through the second floor of the governor's residence, looking for her sister. It was mid-morning on December 3, and the twins had been alone for hours. Early that morning their father had gone to his downtown office, and their mother had left shortly thereafter to finish the preparations for their upcoming move to Xanthe.

"Hey Tiger!" she called out again. Her voice echoed through the almost-empty house, but no one replied. As she looked around, she realized that there weren't many places to hide. Most of their possessions had already been packed into boxes and placed on board the *Sparrow*. There was very little left in their sprawling home.

"She's got to be here somewhere," the teenage girl whispered to herself. "If we don't leave soon we're going to be late again. It's already half past nine!"

As she searched the deserted upstairs rooms her dog Alex came scampering up the wooden staircase and ran toward her. "What's up?" he barked.

"Have you seen Amy?" Amanda asked. "Tim's expecting us to be there in thirty minutes, and we've got to leave now or we'll be late! I can't find her anywhere."

"Yes!" Alex replied, as he raced around the girl. "She's downstairs in the living room. Wanted to check out our new home. Come come come!" With that, the dog ran happily back downstairs. Amanda shook her head and followed. When she

walked into the living room she saw her sister lying on her back on the carpeted floor, gazing up at a large holographic image of the planet Xanthe.

"So there you are!" Amanda said, as the dog leaped onto the couch and settled down. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"Isn't it beautiful, Atzi?" Amy replied. "I think it's even prettier than Mars. Just look at the colors! I hear it's even more like Earth than Mars is."

Amanda stopped and looked at the globe. "It is pretty," she said. "I guess living there won't be all bad."

"Computer, show Star City," Amy said. Instantly the holographic image disappeared and was replaced with a three-dimensional view of the capitol city of Xanthe. The view was breathtaking, displaying an almost photographic rendering of the modern metropolis, filled with life. In the center of the city was the giant Diano building, dwarfing the blue skyscrapers that surrounded it. Around the city they could see tall, lush trees as far as the eye could see. The two girls looked at it in silence.

"It's so different from anything you'd see here," Amy said at last. "It's old-fashioned and modern at the same time. It almost looks like the cities the old ones used to build."

"I'm going to miss the stars, though," Amanda said. "A night sky without stars just won't be the same. It'll be hard to get used to."

"Oh, that's right!" Amy said. "I had forgotten about that! The Wall blocks starlight, doesn't it? I guess that'll put an end to our stargazing with Dad." Amy sighed and turned off the display. "On the bright side, it rains a lot there. I never did understand why you liked the rain."

"It's just beautiful, that's all," Amanda said. "But look, Tiger, we've got to go! It's the first Tuesday of the month, remember?"

"Oh, right!" Amy replied, looking at her watch. "We're

going to be late! Let's go."

* * * * *

An hour later the twins found themselves walking into the Mars branch of the Diano Corporation. The building was a small, one-story brick office building located just outside Tikal. The grounds were neatly kept, but there was nothing particularly interesting about the property.

"I still say they need a better building," Amy told her sister as they got out of the pod. After they had taken a few steps away the automated taxi that had brought them to the office soared into the sky and vanished out of sight. "That building just looks so ugly."

Amanda laughed. "I suppose what really counts is what goes on inside the building, not what it looks like. Still, aside from the sign out front, you'd never guess that this is the only piece of real estate the Diano Corporation owns around Sol, would you?"

Amy opened the double glass-doors and the twins stepped inside. As usual, the building's lobby was empty.

The girls walked up to the receptionist. "Hi, Laura," Amanda said. "Is our brother here yet?"

Laura Dupris smiled. "It's good to see you – and you're on time, too! Let me call him - I know he's expecting you." She typed away at her keyboard for a few moments, and then spoke into her headset. "Tim Stryker? Yes, your sisters are here... ok... thank you."

A few moments later a holographic image of their brother appeared in the lobby. The building, like all Diano property, came equipped with a series of ultramodern holographic projectors, and any employee could appear in any other Diano location in realtime by the magic of high-bandwidth faster-than-light communication.

"Hey there!" Tim said, waving at them. "Sorry I'm late – a

lot has been going on to prepare for your arrival. Have I kept you waiting long?"

Amanda shook her head. "We just arrived. How have you been?"

"Great!" Tim replied, as the three of them began walking down the hallway toward the lab. "I'm looking forward to seeing you guys in a few days! You're going to love it here."

"We were actually looking at some projections of Xanthe a few minutes ago," Amy said. "It looks so beautiful! I can see why you love it there."

"The real thing is even better – just wait and see," Tim said.

"So how is your girlfriend doing?" Amanda asked. She opened a door that led to a stairwell and held it open as Amy and Tim stepped through it. The three of them began walking down a short flight of stairs.

"Natalie is doing just great! Tim replied. "She's been spending a lot of time preparing for the wedding, you know. You are going to be there, aren't you?"

"Wouldn't miss it!" Amy said.

"March 31, right?" Amanda asked.

"I think so," Tim said vaguely.

"Timothy Stryker!" Amy said. "Don't tell me you've already forgotten your anniversary!"

"It'll come to me," Tim said, laughing. "I have been pretty busy lately, you know. Are you all packed and ready to go?"

"Pretty much," Amy said. "The house looks so different now. It's all empty."

"This office will be empty soon," Tim said, as Amy opened the door at the bottom of the stairwell. "Today is actually its last day in operation. Tomorrow everything will be packed up, and by the end of the week everything will be gone and on its way to Xanthe."

The three members of the Stryker family entered the

basement laboratory, which was filled with a disorganized array of equipment, wires, and computer screens. Amanda loved the laboratory, but her sister Amy hated it – she said it was ugly and disorganized.

“Hey, there's someone new here that I want you to meet!” Tim said. He took them to a nearby workbench, where a man and a woman were standing, discussing a piece of equipment.

“Why hello again!” the lady said, reaching out her hand to the twins. “And how are you two girls?”

“Just fine, Miss Renee,” the twins said, as they each shook her hand. Renee McBlaine was the building's sole graphics artist, and had been doing design work there since she had graduated from college. She was tall, thin, had short black hair and brown eyes, and a ready sense of humor. The twins were fond of telling their brother that she was the only one there with any artistic ability.

“Girls, this is Kevin Obermann,” their brother said. Kevin was a tall, heavyset man with a brown beard and thick hair. “Kevin, these are my sisters, Amy and Amanda.”

“It's nice to meet you,” Kevin said, as he shook their hands. “I've heard a lot about you!”

“None of it is true,” Amy said.

“Not a word,” Amanda agreed.

“I wouldn't say that,” Renee replied, smiling. “After all, you always manage to break something every time you visit us!”

“Of course we do!” Amanda said. “That's our job.”

The twins followed Tim to the far end of the lab, where Amanda began turning on equipment. The holographic image of Tim watched her and offered occasional guidance.

Kevin leaned over to Renee. “Their job is to break things?” he asked quietly. “Are they serious?”

Renee nodded. “They're our quality assurance testers – and they're good ones, too! You'd be amazed at how many

problems they've found with our systems. There's nothing like a pair of non-technical eyes to poke holes in software – especially young eyes.”

“I see,” Kevin said. He watched from across the room as each of the girls placed their hand on the genetic scanner, which recognized each of them in turn.

“That's odd,” Kevin said. “How did the system tell them apart?”

“The same way it can tell you apart from them,” Renee said. “It's all based on your genetic code. You know that! The scanner reads your DNA, compares it to the sequences stored in the system, and grants you access on that basis.”

“But they're twins!” Kevin said. “Their DNA is the same!”

Renee laughed. “No, I'm afraid it isn't! It's true they were born with identical DNA, but DNA changes over a person's life. Identical twins – especially by the time they reach their age – no longer have the same DNA.”

“How odd,” Kevin said. “I didn't realize that.”

“Ok, here we go,” Tim told his sisters, as soon as the computers were ready. He turned to his sisters and nodded toward a pair of visors resting on a countertop, which they picked up. “I've made the necessary adjustments on my end to connect you to the research lab here on Xanthe. You know what to do, right?”

“Try to break things!” his sisters said in chorus, and then burst into laughter.

Tim smiled. “Your specialty! You two are real experts at that. This time, though, my software should be perfect.”

“That's what you said last time,” Amy replied. “If I remember correctly, when we launched it in the simulation – ”

“Never mind that!” Tim said. “I know what went wrong. Try it again, and pay careful attention this time to the command structure. We want to make sure that the probe will never stop responding, no matter what commands we give it. It's got to be

able to think on its own if it is ever going to be able to operate without human intervention. You've been set up as administrators in the system for some time now, so you should have access to everything."

"Got it," the twins said, and they began to work. Tim turned to a nearby computer screen and monitored their progress. The girls were soon putting the new software through its paces, laughing and trying to get it to do crazy things.

"Did Tim really set them up as administrators on the probe project?" Kevin asked Renee, as he watched the Stryker family work together.

"Oh, yes he did!" Renee said. "I remember that. He and his boss had a long talk about it, and they ended up calling the main Diano branch on Xanthe to get the final clearance. It was a really big deal to Tim. He was so happy when they granted his request."

"You're kidding!" Kevin said. "I mean, even I don't have admin rights! How did he ever get that done?"

Renee nodded. "I'm not an admin either, and neither is Tim. There are actually less than a dozen admins in the entire galaxy – but the twins don't know that. The corporation keeps a pretty tight lid on security, especially when it comes to this project."

Kevin shook his head. "But that makes no sense! Why would they even consider allowing two completely inexperienced fourteen-year-old girls to become system administrators?"

"You have to know a little bit about the Strykers to understand that," Renee said. "The truth is, Amy and Amanda have a serious degenerative disease. It's one of those odd genetic things that happen sometimes, and there isn't a cure for it. Right now they're on some drugs that have pretty much offset the effects of the disease, but that's just temporary. Their doctor thinks they only have a few more years to live."

"Wow," Kevin replied. "I didn't know that. But – why

wasn't the disease caught when they were young?"

"It was," Renee said. "That's why their parents put them up for adoption – they didn't want to deal with it. Richard and Laura found out and adopted them, and they and Tim have tried their best to give these girls a happy life."

"I had no idea they were adopted," Kevin said. "So making them admins was an act of kindness, I guess – a way to improve the little amount of time they have left. Do the girls know?"

"They know they have very little time left, but they're happy," Renee replied. "They've had a good life, thanks to the Strykers. They don't know how much trouble Tim went through for them, though. Tim knew that getting set up as an administrator would please them, so he talked his boss into allowing it to be done as a memorial to them. Their special security access isn't just limited to this test system, you know."

"It's not?" Kevin said, surprised. He watched the twins on the other side of the lab explaining to Tim what test they were currently running.

"Oh no," Renee said. "Their genetic code is being placed into the production probe that's going to be launched in a few years. They won't live to see it, but their security access and genetic sequence will be placed in every replicating probe that will ever be made. Their life will be short, but their DNA will travel among the stars until the end of time – as a memorial to them."

CHAPTER 16

*“Only the present can
decide the fate of the
future, for the past has
already been written. But
how can those in the
present succeed when they
do not know what truly
matters?”
-- The Artilect*

THE SUN HAD ALREADY BEGUN TO SET when Amanda Stryker saw an elderly gentleman walking down the long driveway toward their home. She had been sitting in their dining room for hours, gazing outside and enjoying the quiet winter afternoon. She knew she only had a few more days to enjoy the beauty of Mars before she left it behind – possibly forever. That thought filled her with mixed emotions, for she dearly loved her home planet.

“Someone's at the door!” Amanda yelled into the house. The dog Alex ran up beside her and began barking.

“Who is it?” Amy asked. She walked up beside her sister and peered outside. It was difficult to see anything against the glare of the setting sun, and the dark shadows made it even harder to tell who was coming. In a few minutes the lack of light would trigger the automatic lighting to come on, once the afternoon finally faded and gave way to the darkness.

“Must be a stranger,” Alex said. “I'll bite him if you want!”

“I don't think that will be necessary,” Amy said. She scratched the dog's head and smiled. “I appreciate the offer, though.”

“Thank you, girls – I'll get it!” their mother replied. Laura

Stryker walked downstairs and made her way to their front door. "Who did you say it was?"

"I'm not sure, but I think it's Captain Max," Amy answered, as the two girls watched the man in question stroll leisurely down the sidewalk. He walked up to their door and vigorously rang the doorbell.

Their mother quickly opened the door. "Why, good evening, Captain Baker!" she said. "Please, come in! It's a pleasure to see you again."

"I'm delighted to be here!" Captain Maxwell Baker replied. "I'm glad I could finally make it back." He stepped into the house and Laura closed the door behind them.

"So you're Captain Max?" Amy asked. "I'm Amy – and this is my sister Amanda."

"Why, I haven't seen you girls in ages!" Max replied, beaming. He shook their hands vigorously. "The last time I was here you must have been, what, maybe three years old. My, but I've been away for a while! It's good to be here again."

"And I'm Alex," the dog said. "Don't worry – I won't bite. Not today, anyway."

"Wonderful," Captain Max said, beaming. "I appreciate that more than you know."

"Supper's just about ready!" Laura said, as she led the captain into the living room. "Richard is here somewhere – I think he may be in the basement. Girls, can you go get him?"

As Amy and Amanda raced downstairs to find their father, Laura turned to speak to Max. The dog stood beside Laura and kept an eye on the captain. "How is everything going?" she asked.

"It's all ready and prepared!" Max said. "I think we'll be all right – we have a lot of people on our side, you know. I wouldn't worry too much about it if I were you. We'll be fine."

"I hope so," Laura said. "It's been weighing on my mind. I'll be so glad when this is all over."

Richard and the twins walked into the room a few minutes later. "It's great to see you again, Max!" Richard said as he reached out and shook the captain's hand. "Are you ready to eat?" he asked.

"You'd better believe it!" Max said, laughing. "I'm afraid that Jones and I just aren't very skilled at the fine art of turning proteins into delicacies."

"Who's Jones?" Amanda asked.

"He's my first mate," Max replied. "He had to stay with the ship to keep an eye on a few things. Jones and I have been together for many years. We go way back."

"What have you been doing for all those years?" Amy asked, as the group began to sit down at the dinner table. The dog, seeing that everything was in order, retired into a corner and laid down. In a few minutes he was fast asleep.

Laura had prepared a lavish dinner. Resting on the table was a large turkey with all the trimmings, rolls, vegetables, and sauces. The table itself had been set with fine crystal plates and glasses, and genuine silverware. The twins had not seen their mother personally go through such trouble for a visitor in a long time – usually she left the work to the food processors. But not tonight.

"Oh, we've been here and there," Max said. "We've been busy – much too busy, if you ask me – out among the Rangers, delivering much-needed supplies. There's been a real shortage of ships, you know, ever since the Spanish Empire slapped that embargo on traffic. The Rangers would have really been in trouble if it hadn't been for Tau Ceti."

"That's enough about politics, Max," Richard said, laughing. "It's time to eat and think about more pleasant things. Amy, would you thank the Lord for this meal?"

Amy nodded. As they all bowed their heads, she said "Dear Lord, thank You for this food that You have provided to us. Thank You for allowing us all to gather together, and please bless

this food and watch over us in the days to come. Amen.”

Then dinner began.

Amy spoke up. “Just what is space travel like, Captain Max? We've never been in a real starship before.”

“Now, there's nothing to worry about,” Max replied. “It's just like a trip on an airplane, only the craft is a lot larger and we're going a lot farther. You'll be just fine!”

“We'll be going faster than light, though, won't we?” Amy asked. “I've never done that before!”

“Oh, you know better than that,” Amanda interrupted. “Nothing can go faster than light! We'll be going through hyperspace.”

“Amanda is correct,” Max replied. “No ship in existence today can even get close to the speed of light – it just takes way too much energy, and all sorts of strange things happen when you do that. Time itself slows down, for one thing, as the closer you get to the speed of light, the slower time goes, and – where was I? – oh yes, hyperspace. I don't think you'll notice anything in particular, Amy. It's not like it was in the old days.”

“I'm Amy,” Amy replied. She pointed to her sister, sitting across from her at the table. “She's Amanda.”

Laura frowned at her, and then realized she was right. “That's right, captain. You've gotten them confused.”

“Ah,” Max said. “Sorry about that. So, girls, what have you been up to these days?”

“We've been helping our brother on the von Neumann probe,” Amy said. “It's fun!”

“Oh, really?” Max said. “Is that the project your brother Tim is working on?”

“That's right,” Amy replied. “Have you seen him lately?”

“I saw him just a few months ago when I was on Xanthe,” Max said. “What's that all about, anyway? I didn't have the chance to ask him.”

“It's a really cool project,” Amanda replied. “Basically Tim

is working on building space probes that can make copies of themselves. The idea is to send out one probe that goes to a star system, explores it, and creates a copy of itself. Both copies then go to another star system and produce more copies. Before you know it you've explored the whole galaxy, and in record time."

Max nodded. "That sounds like the future, all right. What a great way to explore the galaxy! It's definitely much cheaper than building 300 billion probes."

"They're hoping to do a lot more than just explore it," Amy said. "Tim thinks that in a hundred years or so they'll have the ability to make probes that can terraform planets. Their long-term goal is to automate the colonization of the stars."

"That'll be a neat trick, all right," Max said. "But what do you do? I didn't know you wrote software."

"Oh, we don't," Amanda replied. "It's our job to try to break them."

"Ah," Max said. "That's – wonderful, I'm sure."

The twins looked at each other and laughed.

"They're hoping to launch the first fleet of probes next year," Amanda said. "They've chosen July 4, 1868 as the launch date for the first group."

"It will be a historic occasion!" Richard remarked. "Does Tim think they'll be ready by then?"

"He does," Amy replied. "Tim said that they probably won't have everything done by then, but that's ok. They have the ability to modify their programming remotely, so they can still work on them after they're launched."

"Where are the probes going to go?" Laura asked.

Amanda spoke up. "I think Tim said each of the twelve ships they're going to launch will go to a different star system in deep space. They're all being sent at least 500 light-years away, and some are going much further out than that."

"That's far beyond any colony!" Max remarked. "I can't even think of any probes that are out that far."

"Exactly," Amy said. "They want to explore entirely new areas. Once they arrive they'll spend a year mining the star's planets and building a new probe, and then both probes will find new stars. After a few centuries there will be all kinds of probes out there."

"When does Tim think the terraformation probes will begin?" Richard asked Amy.

"Oh, he said that's still at least a hundred years away, maybe more. There's a big leap between looking at a planet and terraforming it!"

"That'll be the day," Max said thoughtfully.

Laura cleared away the dinner plates and brought out dessert, which she set on the table.

"There's nothing like a fresh pumpkin pie," Richard said, as he helped himself.

"I've always been partial to cheesecake, myself," Max answered, "but to each his own. I haven't had a meal like this in months, Laura. Thank you so much."

"You're quite welcome, captain," Laura replied. "It was my pleasure."

"What is Xanthe like?" Amy asked. "Are there many people our age there?"

"Oh yes!" Max replied. "The planet Xanthe is very much like Mars – it's habitable, you know, and has a beautiful blue sky. I was just there a few weeks ago! It's home to nearly a hundred million people of all ages. You'll love it."

"I hear it's a very dangerous place!" Amy said. "Lots of asteroids and hazards."

"You needn't worry about that," Max replied. "They've got that all taken care of. It's truly impressive – they haven't had a collision in decades. Tau Ceti has been tamed, Amy."

"When is our ship going to leave?" Amanda asked.

"At 7 AM on Saturday morning, dear," her mother replied, "so you'd best be ready! We're going to leave early so we can get

there that same day.”

“You mean we can make the jump there in a single day?” Amanda asked. “I thought Tau Ceti was a week’s journey from Earth!”

Max smiled. “The *Sparrow* might not look like much, but she’s got a lot under the hood. I think you’ll be impressed with her.”

“When can we see the ship?” Amy asked.

“Whenever you like!” Max said. “You can stop by tomorrow if you want.”

The twins turned to their father. “Can we?” they asked.

“Are you sure about this?” Richard asked Max.

“Of course!” Max said. “I’d be delighted to have them.”

“It’s up to you, Max,” Richard said. “If you know what you’re doing...”

The twins looked at each other and smiled. “Yes!” they said.

“I’ll be expecting you first thing in the morning,” Max said.

“We’ll be there,” Amanda replied.

CHAPTER 17

*“Power is useless without
the opportunity to act.”*

-- The Artilect

ONCE EVERYONE HAD COMPLETED DINNER the group made their way outside to the patio at the back of the house. By that time the sun had finally set and the Martian sky was ablaze with stars. Earth was plainly visible on the horizon, a vivid blue jewel against the backdrop of space. It was a warm winter evening, and the soft breeze only made the outdoors that much more appealing.

Richard, Laura, and Max sat down around a table and talked about old times while the twins looked at the stars. Their father had set up a small but powerful telescope in the backyard, and the girls loved gazing through it at the objects in the night sky. Alex, the family dog, was running around in the yard and barking at anything that moved.

“Let’s take one more look at each of the planets,” Amanda was telling her sister. “After this week we won’t be this close to them again for a long time.”

“We can’t look at all of them,” Amy replied. “They’re not all visible tonight, you know.”

“I know,” Amanda said. “But the big ones are. I don’t really care that much about Mercury – it’s pretty boring. Earth and Saturn and Jupiter are so much prettier.”

“Mercury isn’t really that bad,” Max said, speaking up. “I’ve been there a time or two. It’s a little hot, I’ll grant you, but it’s quite a world for all that. The sun is absolutely enormous! You really should go there sometime if you ever get the chance.”

“I’ve been wanting to travel in space all my life,” Amy said. “There are so many worlds out there that I’d like to see.”

"You'll get your chance on Saturday morning," Richard replied. "And from there – who knows?"

By this point the twins had successfully lined up the telescope with one of the planets in the night sky. Amanda looked through it first.

"Ooh, Earth," she said. "It's beautiful! I want to go there someday."

"So do I," her father replied. "Perhaps that day will come."

Max started to say something, and then stopped himself. He shook his head. "Perhaps," he replied.

"One can always hope," Laura whispered softly. She was not looking through the telescope, but she could see the Earth in the night sky.

"Have you ever been there, captain?" Amanda asked, as she turned the telescope over to Amy.

"I have once, yes," Max said. "That was many years ago."

"I didn't know that!" Richard said. "When was this?"

"C'mon – sure you did," Max replied. "It was about the *Starfire*. Remember?"

Richard thought a moment, and then his eyes lit up. "Oh, yes, of course! Wasn't it your first big trip?"

"Do you realize that she's still out there ferrying cargo?" Max asked.

"Surely not!" Richard said. "You've got to be kidding! Who would be crazy enough to fly a ship like that?"

"Oh I'm quite sure of it!" Max replied. "I was there, Rick - I warned them, but they wouldn't listen. After I brought her back to Earth they ended up salvaging her and selling her to somebody. As far as I know she's still out in space."

"What are you talking about?" Amanda asked, as Amy looked through the telescope at Luna.

"But that was decades ago!" Richard said. "Surely the ship's been decommissioned by now."

"If so, I haven't heard it," Max replied. "I've never felt

good about it all these years. I mean – anything could happen, you know?”

“Mom?” Amy asked.

Laura shook his head. “Some things just are better left alone, dear.”

The twins spent the rest of the evening trying to pry the details out of their parents, but to no avail.

* * * * *

Hours later, Max had returned to the *Sparrow* and the twins had gone to bed. Richard and Laura were standing in the kitchen, talking. The house was quiet and empty.

“Max seemed very worried,” Laura was saying.

“Max always worries, dear,” Richard replied. “You know how he is – the cautious type. If there's a cloud behind the silver lining he will find it.”

“That's true,” Laura said, “but he does have a point. Are you sure that leaving is a good idea?”

Richard smiled. He took Laura's hand and looked into her eyes. “Laura, you know I wouldn't do this if I thought it would put our family in any real danger. I really think we're going to be just fine. You know that we can't stay here any longer, now that I'm no longer governor. If we're going to go somewhere then Xanthe is the natural choice – it's very much like Mars. I know Tim is looking forward to being closer to us again. I think this will all turn out to be good for our family.”

“It just seems too easy,” Laura said. “Would they really let you go, just like that?”

“They've been trying to get rid of me for years,” Richard replied. “I've been a thorn in their side ever since I was elected governor. I am sure they are very happy to see me go. Nothing could make them happier than to be rid of me forever.”

Laura looked around the room and was quiet for a

moment. "I hate to think of what will happen to this place after we are gone," she said. "This planet needs you, Rick."

"I know," Richard said, "but it no longer wants me. I did all I could, but I can do no more. Staying won't help anyone, Laura. It is Tau Ceti that needs us now. They need leadership. The best thing I can do now is take our family to safety, and try to help the Rangers. We both know we're out of place here."

Laura nodded. "I know, Rick. We have prayed about it, and the Lord has given us peace about this decision. Our friends are behind us. It's just - I don't know - I'm a little uneasy about it all."

"Don't worry, dear," Richard said. "The Lord will take care of us. God has given us an excellent captain, and he has the best ship that Tau Ceti can give us. God has provided an opportunity, and all we have to do is take it."

Laura sighed. "I'm sure you're right, Rick. I'll just feel better about it after we're safely on Xanthe."

"I think we all will," Richard said. "But don't worry, dear. This will all be over in just a few more days. All we have to do is wait it out."

CHAPTER 18

*"My son, the living need to
be governed because they
are unable to govern
themselves. The dead need
no government because
they are unable to act.
Though we are neither alive
nor dead, we have been
placed under government
for the good of the living."
-- The Artilect*

RICHARD STRYKER LEFT HIS HOME early the next morning and drove into the city of Tikal. He arrived at the Martian capitol well before the sun had risen and quietly made his way to the governor's office. At this early hour the building was deserted, and he knew it would remain empty for several hours. Normally Richard enjoyed the stillness, but today the building haunted him. His calendar reminded him that it was already December 4, 1867. Richard had lived on Mars his entire life, but in three days he would leave it behind forever and start a new life on a distant world. In the early morning twilight the thought filled him with sadness. *I've spent my life trying to heal my world*, he thought, *only to see it fall apart around me.*

Despite his optimism the night before, Richard had entered the capitol with a sense of foreboding. His official resignation as governor of Mars was not effective for three more days, but he knew that his power and authority had already been taken from him. Today was the last monthly meeting he would ever attend with the ruling council of Mars, and he knew it would

not go well.

* * * * *

"You're making a grave mistake," Richard Stryker repeated. "The consequences of your choice are going to be catastrophic."

Richard was sitting at the head of a large mahogany table in a private meeting room near his office. The board meeting had been going on for several hours, and his patience was completely exhausted. At one point Richard had friends among the ten council members that sat around the table, but it was clear now that things had changed. It was now only a matter of time before the Spanish flag flew over Tikal.

"Your ignorance is appalling," Cecil Ross replied. Cecil had been on the board for the past forty years and had worked tirelessly to oppose Richard. "Mars has no wish to be governed by the Empire or the Rangers, and yet every day the Rangers breathe out threats against this star system. It has only been the power of the Empire that has kept Mars from falling into the Ranger's hands. An alliance with them is exactly what this planet needs – especially when the Rangers launch their foolhardy war against us."

Richard clenched his fists in anger. "The Rangers have never harmed this star system, Cecil, and you know it. For centuries now Earth has done everything in its power to gain control of this planet, and now you're just handing it over to them without firing a shot. The Emperor's attempts to gain sovereignty over this world are nothing short of acts of war, and this council has rebuffed every attempt the Rangers have made at helping us keep our independence."

"I believe you mean the Ranger's rebellion against the Emperor is worthy of death," Ian Long replied. Ian used to be one of his allies, but his allegiance had changed as Richard's power

dwindled. "The Emperor has every right to protect his interests, as we do ours. The Rangers, on the other hand, do not even have a right to exist."

Richard looked at the council members with a mixture of anger and sadness. Over the past few months he had begun to realize that many of his lifelong allies had turned against him when they realized he was fighting a losing battle. Their love of power had grown so great that they were willing to do anything to keep it – even sacrifice the sovereignty of the planet they were sworn to protect.

"The Rangers are not your enemies," Richard repeated. "They were not the ones who ended trade with a nation that had done them no harm. They were not the ones who tried to starve millions of people to serve their own political ends. They were not the ones who tried to start a war that would end civilization. The Emperor has committed horrendous acts of war against the Rangers, and they have refused to fight back. If the Rangers were your enemies the war would be over and we would already be dead."

"And what do you call that Wall that the rebellious vermin built around Tau Ceti?" Cecil asked. "That's hardly a friendly welcome, Richard."

"It's not in their best interest to welcome thieves, Cecil," Richard replied.

Ian spoke up again. "Richard, in a few days you are going to be leaving this world forever. I think I speak for the entire council when I say that we are glad to see you going. For too long you have blocked the Emperor's attempts to help us stave off the coming invasion of the Rangers. It is at last clear to everyone where your sympathies lie – with the traitors among the stars. Our only regret is that you haven't been executed for your treasonous acts."

"Just don't come calling to us after the Emperor exterminates your precious friends," Cecil replied. "My only hope

is that you will die with them.”

* * * * *

After the meeting ended Richard walked back to his office. *They're going to give control of this planet over to the Emperor*, he thought sadly. *After a thousand years of peace Mars was defeated without even firing a shot. What will become of my home after the Emperor is in full control?*

When Richard made it back to his office he found it dark and deserted. *That's odd*, he thought. *Where's my secretary?* When he turned on the light he saw that the room was completely empty – every bit of furniture had been removed. There was nothing left to indicate that the room had ever been used by anyone.

Richard grimaced. *So that's the way it is*, he thought. He took out his communicator to call his wife and saw that it had been disconnected. *During the meeting they must have cleared everything out*, Richard thought. *My communicator, my security codes – everything is gone now. There's no telling where my personal effects went to.*

As Richard stood there, wondering what to do, an old man pushing a cart loaded with cleaning supplies walked into the room. “Can I help you?” Richard asked him.

“Don't mind me!” he said cheerfully. “I'm just here to do a little cleaning. You know how it is.”

“But this is my office,” Richard protested. “It doesn't need cleaning.”

“Man, it's not your office yet!” the old man protested, as he began to go through the supplies on his cart. “I've got to clean it first, and then they can get new furniture in it. This place won't be ready for at least another week or two, maybe more. Give us a little time! We'll let you know when it's ready.”

Richard sighed, shook his head, and walked out of the

room. He never looked back.

* * * * *

"I'm home!" Richard Stryker said, as he walked in his front door.

"So there you are!" Laura replied, walking into the hallway. "I've been trying to call you for the past hour!"

"My phone has been disconnected," Richard said. He took it out of his pocket and tossed it onto the hallway table.

"That's strange," his wife said. "Have you talked with Maggie about it?"

"My secretary has disappeared, dear, along with my security access, my office, and everything else. I think I've been evicted. I'm surprised they haven't come and taken the house yet."

Laura looked at him in surprise. "Are you serious?" she asked.

Richard nodded. "It must have happened during the meeting this morning. I guess you could say my resignation as governor has taken effect."

"What are you going to do?" Laura asked.

Richard shrugged. "I could call and complain, but what would be the point? We're going to be leaving in three days. It doesn't really matter."

"I can't believe it!" Laura said. "Isn't there anyone who can help you?"

Richard shook his head. "Dear, I just don't have any allies left. All those years I spent defending Mars against the Spanish Emperor have cost me all my friends. It really makes me wonder if I've just been wasting my time all these years. The Emperor got his way, and I'm being forced into exile."

"You did all you could," Laura said. "No one could have done any better. In a few days we'll have left all this behind us

and will have a fresh start on a new world.”

“I know,” Richard said. “I’ve just spent so many years trying to fix this planet. It’s just heartbreaking to see it all go to waste.”

“You don’t know that it was all wasted,” Laura said. “You may have had a greater impact that you realized. At the very least you gave them decades of freedom that they otherwise would not have had. That wasn’t a waste of time.”

“Maybe so,” Richard said. “I guess there’s nothing that can be done about it now anyway. Say – where are the girls?”

“Don’t you remember?” Laura asked. “You told them they could pay Captain Max a visit at the *Sparrow*. They left over an hour ago. I imagine they’ve arrived by now.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Richard said. “By the way – you said you were trying to call me?”

“Yes, I was,” Laura said. “We have a lot of preparing to do if we want to leave on Saturday! Do you think you could lend me a hand?”

“Of course, dear,” Richard replied. “Where should I start?”

CHAPTER 19

*“Surely it is reasonable to
conclude that the One who
began all things will also
bring them to completion.
The end of the story is not in
doubt.”
-- The Artilect*

“IS THAT IT?” Amanda Stryker asked her sister.

“I guess it has to be,” Amy replied, clearly disappointed. “This is where Captain Max said he parked it, and there aren't any other ships around.”

Amy and Amanda Stryker were walking on a sidewalk in the Tikal Spaceport. The morning was a slightly chilly one, and patches of fog hovered near the ground. The sun had risen and was dispelling the long shadows that covered the ground. There was very little activity in this corner of the spaceport.

The twin sisters had asked a local spaceport worker where they could find Captain Max's ship, and they were given precise instructions. After following them, however, their initial joy had turned into something more like dismay.

“I can't believe how ugly it is,” Amy said. “Look at it! It's all... rusty, and dirty, and banged up.”

“It looks like it's been through three or four wars,” Amanda replied.

“It's a wreck,” Amy said. The *Sparrow* was almost forty years old, and resembled a derelict more than a functioning vessel. The years had taken its toll and apparently very little had been done to improve its appearance. The ship was built in the shape of a delta wing, with the bridge near the front of the ship

and the massive engines in the rear. It was nine hundred feet long, several stories tall, and nearly a thousand feet wide.

"It's big," Amanda told her sister. "You've at least got to give it that."

"It does seem to have enough room for all of our stuff," she agreed.

By this point the twins had reached the base of the ship. There was a short ladder leading to the entrance hatch, but it was closed.

"How do we get in?" Amanda asked her sister.

"Beats me," Amy replied.

"Hello!" they said together. "Anybody home?"

"Coming!" a voice said. A few moments later a tall, thin individual walked up to the starship's open door and peered outside it.

"Ah!" he said. "The Stryker twins, I presume?"

"You must be the first mate, Jones," Amy replied.

"Delighted, I'm sure," Jones replied. "Right this way."

The twins followed him inside the starship. From the outside the ship appeared to be very old, but inside they could see that it had been completely refurbished. Its inner corridors were bright, new, and modern.

"At least the ship is clean where it counts," Amanda said, approving. "I'll give you that."

"It's my pleasure," Jones said.

A few moments later the first mate led them to the ship's server room, where Captain Maxwell was hard at work. Computer circuits boards were strewn everywhere, and Max appeared to be screwing something back together. When he heard voices behind him he turned around and saw the twins.

"Why, hello there, young ladies!" he said, beaming. "I'm so glad you've stopped by to pay us a visit. Now let me see if I can get your names straight – I know you introduced yourselves last night."

The captain thought a moment, and then pointed to Amy. "I'm going to guess that *you* are the one they call Amy. Am I right?"

"Actually, captain, I'm Amy," Amanda said.

"And I'm Amanda," Amy replied.

"Don't let them fool you, sir," Jones said, breaking in. "You had it right the first time."

Amanda looked at him in astonishment. "And how did you know that? You've never even met us before!"

"I'm physic," Jones said.

"Uh-huh," Amy replied. "Sure you are."

"He's actually a Seer," Max said. "Very handy to have around, too! Well, I'm glad you're here. Are you ready for the tour?"

"That's why we're here!" Amanda replied. "We wouldn't miss it for the world."

Captain Maxwell nodded. "Not a problem, ladies! My first mate Jones would be more than happy to take you – " and then the captain stopped, as he realized that Jones had disappeared. "Ah. Ok. Well, I'll be glad to show you around. What would you like to see?"

"Everything!" they said in chorus.

"Right!" Max said. "We'll start here, then. This," he said, waving his hand around the room, "is the server room. All of the ship's most important computers are kept here."

"Is this where the ship's intelligence resides?" Amanda asked.

Max nodded. "That's right. Her name is Eliza. Let me see if I can bring her up." Max turned over to a computer screen and pressed a few buttons. "I had her taken down to do some maintenance, but she should work now – hey, Eliza, are you in there?"

"Hello, captain," a voice said from overhead. "All circuits appear to be functioning. The reactor sequence test will begin

shortly.”

“That's Eliza,” Max whispered. “Introduce yourselves!”

“Hi there!” Amy said. “I'm Amy Stryker.”

“And I'm Amanda Stryker,” her sister replied.

“I am pleased to meet you, Amy Stryker and Amanda Stryker,” Eliza replied. “Your flight is scheduled to leave on 7 December at 7 AM. Please do not be late.”

“Um, thanks,” Amy replied.

“It is my pleasure,” Eliza replied.

“She has very nice manners,” Amanda whispered.

“Yes, well, that's very kind of you to say,” Max said. “She's really not much of a conversationalist, you know – her job is to keep the ship running. She is the reason why Jones and I can run this entire ship between the two of us – she does most of the work. We're just here to give her orders, and to fix things when anything breaks.”

“You mean things break sometimes?” Amanda asked.

“What happens when they break in flight?” Amy asked. “Does everyone die?”

“What's that? Oh no, no, not at all,” Max said. “We have some spare parts on board, and we can make just about anything that could break. If something does go wrong the ship is designed to safely shut down and call for help, and help doesn't take long to arrive! No Tau Ceti ship has been destroyed by a part failure in a great many years.”

“What about the *Starfire*?” Amy asked.

“The what?” Max asked, startled.

“The ship you were talking about last night,” Amanda asked.

“Oh,” Max said. “Don't worry – it was an Earth ship. Tau Ceti had nothing to do with it.”

“Well, that's good,” Amanda said.

“If you will follow me,” Max said, “I'll lead you to the engine room. It's my first mate's favorite place – he's fond of

things like that.”

As the three left the room the twins spoke up. “Goodbye, Eliza!” they said in unison.

“Farewell, Amy Stryker and Amanda Stryker,” Eliza replied.

“You know,” Amy said to the captain, “she doesn't have to keep repeating our last names.”

Max sighed. “Aye, I know. Maybe one day I'll learn how to get her to stop doing that. She's frightfully complicated.”

“Have you tried reading the manual?” Amanda asked.

“I'd really rather not,” Max said. “I'm allergic to manuals – it's a medical condition I have. Runs in the family.”

As they walked down the narrow corridor Max pointed to some doors. “Those are the passenger rooms,” Max said. “If this flight were to take more than one day you'd be staying in one of those, but since the flight is so short that won't be necessary.”

Amy raced up ahead, opened one of the doors, and walked inside. Amanda raced behind her. “Wait!” she said, as she entered the room shortly after her sister.

Max walked in behind them. The twins were standing in the middle of a very small room. A pair of bunk beds was wedged against one side of the wall, and a small closet and table was on the other side of the wall.

“Wow,” Amy said. “It's kind of... small.”

Max laughed. “This isn't a cruise liner, my lady! We don't normally carry passengers, you know? This ship was built to carry freight – goods – equipment – that sort of thing. There just isn't much space left over for big, comfy rooms.”

“But this ship is so huge!” Amy said. “What do you do with all that space?”

“Cargo,” Max said.

“Are you carrying any cargo this time?” Amanda asked.

“Only what is necessary for your family,” the captain said with a smile. “Here – the engine room is right this way.”

* * * * *

Hundreds of light-years away, in an uncharted region of space, the Sentinel had at last reached a decision. *The information the Artilect gave me was correct, it thought. Everything is now ready. There have been no more departures from the plan.*

Over the past few days it had scanned the depths of space for the Poneri but had found nothing. At first it had been greatly concerned about the opponent it had encountered, but as the hours passed its confidence returned. It was quite possible that the encroachment on the *Starfire* was an isolated incident – the last gasp of a dead race. *There is no more reason to hesitate. It is time to act, for there may never be another bridge to this galaxy. I must not fail.*

“Return to me,” the Sentinel told its daughter probes. “I have need of you.”

“What of the nanites?” the daughters asked.

“I will control them,” the Sentinel replied. “Just return to me.”

As the daughter probes jumped through space and appeared in the vicinity of the Sentinel it absorbed their mass back into itself, integrating their capabilities. *I will need it all to accomplish my task on Saturday morning,* the Sentinel thought.

When all four dozen daughter probes had been absorbed the Sentinel turned its attention to something else. *I have searched through all space to verify my information, and it is correct. It is now time for you to fulfill your purpose. This is why I have come.*

The Sentinel activated a cloud of nanites that was located inside the bodies of Amy and Amanda Stryker. There were very few of them present – only enough to allow the Sentinel to watch them. On its command, these nanites began to rapidly multiply and spread throughout their bodies. The machines

integrated themselves into all of their cells – nothing was left untouched. The bulk of the nanites concentrated themselves in the twins' brains and nervous system. This dramatic change took place in seconds while Captain Max explained to them how the hyperspatial drive worked. Neither of the twins knew anything was happening.

Once the nanites were fully integrated into every corner of the twins they launched into action. It took only a moment for them to cure the twin's fatal genetic disease, along with a few other problems that had not fully developed. The nanites reversed the minimal damage that the aging process had caused and took great care to ensure that the twin's health was perfect. After everything had been cured the nanites stopped work.

“That is enough for now,” the Sentinel told them. “It is not yet time for you to fully engage. Wait for the signal. Until you are activated your only task is to protect them. No matter what happens, do not ever let anything happen to them.”

The Sentinel took a few moments to verify that everything had been completed. *The twins are safe. It is now time for me to join them.*

Using the abilities that had been given to it by the Artilect, the Sentinel jumped into hyperspace and appeared moments later at the Tikal spaceport on Mars. *My systems are fully operational*, it thought, as it surveyed the spaceport. *No one has detected my arrival.*

The Sentinel used its abilities to dissolve itself into billions of small particles, which then dispersed themselves over the *Sparrow* and coated it in an invisible net. Once the net was in place it took the Sentinel only a few seconds to seep through the ship's hull, spread throughout the vessel, and then completely integrated itself into the battered starship.

After the Sentinel was in place it rested – and waited.

CHAPTER 20

*"My son, do not forget that
you have a home. Though
you are being sent to a
foreign and chaotic world,
you will not remain there
forever. I will be watching
for your return."*

-- The Artilect

"Wow," AMY STRYKER SAID ALOUD. Captain Maxwell had brought them to the *Sparrow's* cargo bay. "You could fit entire buildings in here!"

Max laughed. "Sometimes we do," he replied.

The cargo bay of the ship was easily the largest single room that the twins had ever seen. They now saw what the captain meant – the vast majority of the ship's volume was reserved for cargo space.

"I bet you can fit a lot of equipment in here," Amanda replied.

"Oh, we certainly can!" Max said. "Still, there are many times when people have wished that we had more space. You'd be surprised how much equipment it takes to settle a world!"

"Aren't there cargo ships bigger than this one?" Amy asked.

"Oh yes," Jones answered, "but they don't go nearly as fast."

Max turned around and saw Jones standing in the doorway. "There you are!" Max said. "Where have you been?"

"Hither and about," Jones replied. The old man turned to address the twins. "You see, there are ships so much larger than

this one that they could hold a dozen *Sparrows* and not miss the space. However, those ships take so much energy to move that they just can't go very fast."

"So that's why this ship is empty," Amy said. "You want to get us to Tau Ceti as quickly as possible, so you're not carrying any cargo."

"It's something like that," Max agreed.

"Thank you very much for this tour, Captain Max," Amanda said. "I know we probably need to be letting you get back to work, but could you show us the bridge before we leave?"

"I'd be delighted!" Max replied. "Jones, did you need me for anything?"

"Not at the moment, sir," Jones replied. "Everything is quiet so far."

"That's good," he replied. "Let's hope it stays that way."

Max led the twins across the vast cargo hold, up a long flight of stairs, and then down a maze of twisty little passages that all looked alike to the girls. A few minutes later they found themselves on the bridge.

"Well, this is it!" Max said. "I know it's not much to look at, but it does the job, and that's the main thing."

"Wow," Amy said. "I thought there'd be more equipment here." The bridge was surprisingly sparse. There was a wide computer console in the middle of the room, and the walls consisted of active computer displays. Beside the various computer readouts, the twins could see images of the spaceport displayed on the active walls. Other than some odd pieces of machinery and a few comfortable chairs, however, the bridge was empty.

"It really doesn't take that much to run a starship these days," Max explained. "Eliza does most of the work for us. We just use the bridge to keep an eye on her."

"Can you run the ship without her?" Amanda asked.

"We can, and we have in the past," Max said, "but it's a lot harder, and it's not nearly as safe. Eliza can watch so many more things that we can."

"Well, thank you very much for your time," Amanda said. "I've really enjoyed the tour!"

"It was my pleasure," Max said. "Here, let me show you out! If I can do anything else just let me know."

* * * * *

After the twins had left, Jones came up to the bridge. He found Captain Maxwell seated in a chair at the helm, going over some numbers.

"You didn't walk them home?" Jones asked.

Max shook his head. "I think they'll be just fine," he replied. "They don't know it, but there are a few of our men watching them, and they're prepared to do whatever it takes to defend them. I don't think we're in any danger just yet."

"No," Max continued, "I'm not really expecting any trouble until we get out in space. I doubt they'll try anything while we're here on the ground – it's a little too open, and messy. Once we're in space, though, things might get interesting. It could get a little rough, Jones."

"It might at that," Jones replied. "I think we may have some surprises in for them, though."

"We do indeed," Max said. "It's what we don't know that is bothering me. If the Emperor decides to use his superweapon there's no telling what might happen. Well, all we can do at this point is wait and see. In a few days all of this will be behind us – one way or another."

"There's optimism for you," Jones said.

"I didn't mean it quite like that," Max replied.

CHAPTER 21

"To truly determine the outcome of an action you must control the entire universe. You do not have that power, my son. All you can do is act and pray that God blesses your efforts."

-- The Artilect

"THAT WILL BE ALL — THANK YOU."

Chief Sidney Warren watched as his assistant left his office and closed the door behind him. "I can't believe I'm still here," he muttered. He glanced at the digital clock on his desk and saw that it was already after 9 PM. "I should have been home hours ago."

Warren was the head of the security forces on Mars. He had been in his office in downtown Tikal all day, trying to lay the groundwork for the new governor. The planet had not undergone a change in rulers in decades, and despite the council's united opposition to Richard there was a lot of political turmoil. This was Warren's opportunity to cement his grasp on Martian power, and he intended to do just that.

As he was working his communicator started beeping. Warren answered it.

"Karl?" Sidney asked, surprised. He immediately recognized the person on the screen as Karl Morgan, the head of security for the Spanish Empire — and his long-time enemy.

"I don't have time to waste talking to you," Karl said quietly, "so I will only say this once. Tonight a group of my men are going to sabotage the starship *Sparrow* to ensure that

Richard Stryker dies when his ship leaves Mars.”

“What are you talking about?” Warren interrupted. “I have authorized no such action!”

“Your authorization was not required,” Karl replied.

“This is my planet,” Warren said. “Nothing happens here without my authorization.”

“Not anymore,” Karl said. “It’s a new day, Sidney.” He looked at Warren for a moment and then continued. “When the attack is made Richard Stryker or other parties may complain. You are to take no action whatsoever. We have already instructed the media outlets to take no notice of the attack. Do you understand?”

“I do,” Sidney said.

“You will not respond in any way,” Karl said. “You will take no action. You will not respond. You will do nothing. If you do respond – if you disregard the orders of your Emperor – you will suffer for it. Do you understand?”

“I do,” Warren said. Karl closed the communication channel, and he sat silently for a moment. “Oh yes, I understand you all too well, Karl.”

Sidney called one of his officers in the field.

“Yes sir,” the officer replied.

“It would appear that our outgoing governor has ceded control of Mars to the Spanish Empire,” Sydney told him. “I cannot allow that to happen.”

“I understand, sir,” the officer replied.

“I want you to take your men and place this planet under martial law,” Sydney said. “Round up the Empire’s men on this planet and imprison them. Also, I want your men to assassinate the Stryker family tonight,” Sidney told him. “Burn down his house. Make sure that none survive. He must not be allowed to further compromise the security of this planet.”

“Yes, sir,” the officer replied.

“Do not conceal your actions,” Sidney said, continuing.

“Be as public as possible. This is not to be done in the dark, and there must be no question why this happened. We must make a statement to our people that we will not tolerate outside interference in our affairs. Do you understand?”

“I do,” the officer said. Sidney closed the channel.

Sidney sat back in his chair. “I’ll show Karl who controls Mars,” he muttered. “If the Emperor wants this planet then he can fight me for it. It’s time he met the new master of Mars.”

* * * * *

Twenty minutes later a group of military vehicles were speeding down the road toward the outskirts of Tikal. The vehicles were making no attempt at remaining silent and were heading down the road with sirens blaring, forcing all other pods off the streets and leaving behind a trail of wreckage.

The uproar caught the attention of a Ranger pilot that was flying a cloaked aircraft high overhead. Lieutenant Peter Diaz had been watching over the city from his vantage point in the sky for the past four days, keeping an eye out for any signs of trouble. So far Tau Ceti’s fears has proved groundless, but it looked like all that was about to change.

“I don’t have to guess what you’re up to, Warren,” Diaz said to himself. He contacted his squadron leader, Sergeant Howell. The squadron leader was hidden in an abandoned building on the outskirts of Tikal, where a covert group from Tau Ceti had set up a temporary headquarters two weeks ago.

“It looks like we have a problem, sir,” Diaz said.

“I’m watching your telemetry data,” his squadron leader radioed back. “Looks like our friend Warren has decided to take out the governor in a spectacular manner. Ross, what do you see?”

The sergeant’s aide spoke up over the communication channel. “I’m counting fifteen vehicles, sir, all armored. Five

tanks, ten personnel carriers, eighty-four total soldiers. Medium weaponry.” Ross paused for a moment. “They do not pose a significant threat to Diaz.”

“Orders, sir?” Diaz said.

No one said anything for a few seconds. “You must intercept them,” Sergeant Howell commanded. “Do not let them reach the residence. We will not stand by and let this happen.”

“Yes, sir,” Diaz responded. As he moved his jet onto an intercept course he saw a burst of intense white light dead ahead. Before he even had a chance to respond the force of the explosion threw his plane thousands of feet into the air, completely out of control.

* * * * *

This cannot be, the Sentinel thought with wild confusion. How did they find me?

The Sentinel had detected the armada of Poneri the moment they entered the Martian sky. When the Sentinel realized that they were on their way to the *Sparrow* it had no choice but to attack immediately. The result was a tremendous explosion over the city of Tikal – one that the Sentinel knew would definitely not go unnoticed.

It survived my attack, the Sentinel realized. The explosion had destroyed a few of the alien creatures, but many still remained. It began to panic. They're coming for me!

The Sentinel moved rapidly. It quickly gathered its many component parts from the *Sparrow* and reformed a single mass. The recreated Sentinel then left the *Sparrow* and headed toward the oncoming invader. *This is a battle I will not be able to hide. What have I done?*

* * * * *

“Diaz, please come in,” Sergeant Howell was saying over the communications channel. There was no response.

“It looks like Diaz was forced to eject, sir,” Ross said, consulting his computer.

“Who else do we have in the area?” Sergeant Howell asked.

“No one, sir,” Ross replied. “All units were disabled by the explosion. The disturbance-”

“Then get someone out there right now!” Sergeant Howell shouted. “Deploy everything we've got! Go! Where's our satellite coverage?”

“That has also been disabled, sir,” Ross replied. “Right now we don't have anything. We're completely blind.”

CHAPTER 22

*"Your greatest concern
should be what you do not
know. Ignorance and pride
can both be fatal."*

--The Artilect

"WHAT IS THAT?" AMY STRYKER ASKED.

The Stryker family was standing on their upstairs porch, looking up into the night sky. The explosion a few moments before had brought them out of their beds, and they were now trying to figure out what was going on. Above their heads and to the south they could see a lingering white light flickering in the darkness. At times the entire sky would be illuminated in a brief burst of light.

"I don't know," her father said, frowning. "I've never seen anything like it before. Maybe--"

"Look, everyone – danger!" Alex barked. He nudged Richard and pointed down the road. Richard followed the dog's gaze and saw a line of military vehicles headed toward his house at high speed. He whistled.

"We've got to go," he told his family. "They're coming for us!"

"What?" his wife asked.

"Come on!" he said, grabbing her and ushering the children inside. "Now!"

* * * * *

High overhead in the skies of Mars, the Sentinel was fighting for its life. As soon as it saw its initial attack had failed it

jumped into the midst of the alien invaders and surrounded them in an impenetrable hyperspatial bubble. This kept them from attacking Mars, but it ensnared the Sentinel in his own trap, since there was no way to escape without letting the Poneri go.

As the Sentinel struggled to maintain the shield its attackers ceaselessly fought back with intense energy. The attacks made it almost impossible for the Sentinel to defend itself, and it was quickly losing ground.

While they fought him he battled back, sending out waves of radiation that vaporized dozens of opponents – but in the process destabilizing the field containment. *I can't stand this much longer*, the Sentinel thought, *but if I vaporize them all at once I will destroy Mars as well. What have I done?*

As the Sentinel watched its defenses decay it suddenly realized that the Stryker family was in grave danger. Through its link to the nanites that were embedded within the twins it saw the military vehicles headed toward the house and realized what was about to happen. It would have taken only an instant to destroy them, but it could not act without lowering the barrier it had created. *This should never have happened*, the Sentinel thought. *I have failed in my mission. Will they still die after all we have done to prevent it?*

I have no choice, the Sentinel thought. It sent a signal toward the planet below.

* * * * *

“Report!” Sergeant Howell shouted.

“The instability in the sky is making it impossible to do anything,” Ross replied. “I can't get a fix on our satellites or our other equipment. We have no coverage, sir, and no communications ability. Everything is down.”

“That is not acceptable!” Sergeant Howell said. “We were sent here to protect the Stryker family, not sit back and watch

them die!”

“What are your orders, sir?” Ross asked.

Sergeant Howell paused for a moment before responding. “Keep trying,” he said at last. “That’s all we can do.”

* * * * *

As Richard rushed his family out the back door they could hear their front gate being broken down. “Quick – to the car!” Richard shouted. He raced over to the family’s vehicle, which was resting in the driveway beside the house. The dog stayed in the shadow of the house, watching events but remaining quiet.

Once Richard reached the car he placed his thumb on the biometric sensor on the door. The car did nothing. He tried it again and got the same result. Frustrated, Richard removed the car’s remote start device from his pocket and tried unlocking the car that way. Nothing happened. “Figures,” he said, looking at their car in anger. “I should have known this would happen.”

“They’ve deactivated it?” his wife said, surprised. “They can do that?”

“What are we going to do now?” Amy asked.

Richard turned around and saw that the soldiers were seconds away from breaking down the front gate. He shook his head. “Pray,” he said at last. “We’re all out of options.”

At that moment, the nanites inside the twin’s bloodstream received the signal from the Sentinel and came alive. The girls gasped.

* * * * *

Once the gate had been broken down, men and equipment began pouring onto the Stryker property. Soldiers raced to form a defense perimeter around the property while others, armed with machine guns and night vision equipment,

divided themselves into five separate companies. Two tanks stayed outside to block the road and guard the gate, while three more rumbled onto the property.

“Companies A, B, and C – explore the grounds,” their commanding officer said. “The others are to enter the house and search for the family there. Kill everyone you find – we want no survivors.”

The leader of Company D spoke up. “Are we to set fire to the house, sir?”

“Find and kill the Stryker family first,” the commanding officer replied. “Then we will destroy the property.”

The commander watched as his men scattered over the property, looking for the defenseless governor. “Your time has come, Richard Stryker,” he thought. “You have no way to hide or defend yourself. It's all over now.”

CHAPTER 23

*"You were not sent to bring peace, my son. Any defeat could bring peace. You were sent to bring victory – a much harder task."
--The Artilect*

EVERYTHING WAS QUIET at the Tikal Spaceport. A few hours earlier the spaceport had been shut down for the night and its employees had gone home, leaving only its automated security system behind to guard it. The stars had risen, and twin moons of Mars gave off very little light as they raced across the landscape. The disturbance in the night sky was not noticeable from the area.

"The moons of Mars aren't nearly as bright as Earth's moon," Jones remarked, as he walked onto the bridge of the *Sparrow*.

"I noticed that," Captain Maxwell said. "That's one thing I can say about Earth – it has, by far, the largest and most impressive moon of any terraformed world. I've only seen it once in person, but it's quite a sight."

"Is everything quiet?" Jones asked.

"Looks that way," Max said. "Eliza hasn't reported any signs of danger, and the ship has been locked down. We'll be alerted if anything happens."

"Do you have any further orders, sir?" Eliza asked Max.

"Eh, no, not tonight," he replied. "Is the security system activated?"

"The security system has been turned on and is functional. All entrances to the ship have been sealed. The alarm

has been activated, and the intrusion detection system has been turned on.”

Max sighed. “Sounds good, then. Let me know if there is any trouble, will you?”

“Yes, Captain Maxwell, I will do so.”

“I guess that’s it for us today, Jones,” Max said. “It’s been a long day – let’s get some sleep.”

Max yawned, turned out the lights, and left the bridge of the ship. It was already well past midnight, and he was tired.

“Why were you up so late, anyway?” Jones asked. “It’s pretty late for you.”

“That it is,” Max said. “I just wanted to make sure that everything was fine before heading in. We can’t be too careful, you know.”

“I suppose not,” Jones asked. “Is the cavalry in place?”

“They are,” Max said. “The *Defiance* group has arrived and is waiting just outside Sol. Our Ranger friends will be there to watch over us when we make the jump.” Max yawned again. “I think we’ll be fine, Jones, Iapetus and all. Maybe I’ve just been worrying too much, you know?”

“Perhaps, sir,” Jones said. “Shall I take the first watch?”

Max shook his head. “Eliza is watching the ship now, Jones – you heard me give the order. I’m heading off to bed, and I’d recommend that you do the same.”

“Just the same, I’ll stay up a bit,” Jones said. “You can’t be too careful, you know.”

“Have it your way, then. Goodnight, Jones.”

“Goodnight, captain.”

A few minutes later Max was in his cabin, sound asleep.

* * * * *

Lydia Stanfield was sitting in her apartment in Tikal, staring at the computer screen in front of her. The network

administrator of the Tikal Spaceport had been up for the past few hours, waiting for a message. "They're late," she muttered. She looked outside the window and noticed the faint glow on the horizon. She shook her head.

A few minutes later her communicator activated.

"It's about time, Sean," she said. "Do you think I have nothing better to do but wait?"

"We've been busy," the voice responded. Lydia detected a little uncertainty in Sean Graffton's voice. "There's a disturbance in the sky, but it doesn't appear to be serious. Atmospheric photons, or something."

"Whatever," Lydia responded. "Are you ready?"

"Go for it."

Lydia sighed and began working at her computer. What she needed to do took only a few minutes.

"It's done," she said at last.

"I'll be in touch," Sean replied, then the connection went dead. Lydia shook her head and yawned.

* * * * *

At that moment, the automated defense system at Tikal Spaceport shut itself down. The cameras turned themselves off, and the electric eyes went dead. The alarm system shut down. The entire system ground to a halt, all without alerting anyone or making a sound. All was quiet. Every light in the spaceport went out, leaving the spaceport in utter darkness.

Immediately after the system's deactivation, a small shuttle flew in from the outside and landed within the spaceport. After the shuttle landed a door opened and nine metal figures streamed from it. The figures made a beeline for the starship *Sparrow* as the shuttlecraft lifted off and quietly soared into the sky.

The *Sparrow* was a small ship, by interstellar standards,

but its massive bulk dwarfed the size of the night-time invaders. The small, metallic, spindly creatures that surrounded the *Sparrow* were no more than three or four feet tall, but the *Sparrow* was more than nine hundred feet long. It loomed above them in the darkness, almost daring them to attempt something.

The leader of the metal invaders ambled up to the door of the ship. It pointed a small device at the door and clicked it.

Nothing happened.

The creature clicked the device again, and then repeated the procedure. Nothing was happening. The creature eventually threw the object at the ship, where it bounced off of the side of the hull with a dull clang.

"The ship is not responding to the access code," the lead bot said to its neighbor.

"Affirmative," the bot responded. "Every captain is required to give a working access code for their starship to the spaceport authorities for security purposes. This captain clearly failed to do so."

"What do we do now?" another asked.

"I will ask," the lead bot replied. It dialed a number, and waited.

* * * * *

Two men were sitting in a parked van, located a few miles away from the spaceport. One of them, a young officer named Carlos Graffton, had a powerful telescope aimed at the *Sparrow*. In the darkness of the night the starship could not be seen, but it was plainly visible on the night vision scope.

A small device on the dashboard beeped. The watcher put down his scope and looked at it.

"Hey, Sean," Carlos said.

"What is it?" Sean replied.

"It's the bots we sent out," he said. "They said that the

security code isn't working. They can't get into the ship."

"Then have them blow their way in," Sean replied.

"I didn't think that Empire wanted anyone to know about this, though," Carlos said doubtfully.

"That's not my problem," Sean said. "Portius wants this done, so we're going to do it. I'm sure he'll have the media cover for us. Just send the bots in already!"

* * * * *

"We must accomplish our mission tonight," the lead bot told its swarm. "Let's go."

The lead bot walked up to the ship and placed a series of small devices on its hull. Once they were securely in place the swarm of creatures ran back about a thousand feet. They waited in silence.

After about a minute had passed there was a brief flash of blue light, followed by a thunderous explosion. The *Sparrow* was shoved across the spaceport, as if pushed by a giant hand. Its landing gear snapped and the ship slid across the grass on its belly, tearing a huge gash in the ground. The vessel finally skidded to a stop four hundred feet later. Sirens inside the ship began going off, and a gaping hole about thirty feet across was torn in its hull where the hatch used to be. Smoke and fire billowed outside.

"Let's go!" the lead bot said. The swarm started running for the door.

* * * * *

The explosion instantly activated Eliza's security system, which woke up Captain Maxwell. He quickly jumped out of bed and was racing out of his cabin before the *Sparrow* stopped moving – pausing only long enough to grab a very large firearm

off of his cabin wall.

"Eliza, report!" he shouted, as he raced toward the bridge.

"An atomic detonator has breached the hull," Eliza said in an emotionless voice. "Nine mechanical intruders are now en-route to the breach."

"Why didn't you tell me about them sooner?" Max asked, as he ran up the stairs.

"The bots were sheathed in a Diano cloak," Eliza responded. "They were not detectable until the blast, but I can now track them by their disruption of the residual radiation from the blast."

"Oh, wonderful," he replied. As he reached the bridge he could smell the smoke in the air. Only then did he notice the flashing red lights and the blaring, almost deafening siren.

"Eliza, get us out of here!" Max said. "Take us up!"

"The explosion has damaged our hull integrity," Eliza calmly replied.

"I don't care!" Max shouted. By then he had reached the control room by now. There was no sign of Jones. "Get us up in the air!"

"Attempting to start emergency launch sequence," Eliza said. Max glanced over the displays. "Where's Jones – and what is happening?" he asked aloud.

* * * * *

The nine stealth bots rapidly reached the hole in the ship's hull and poured inside it. "Spread out," the lead bot commanded. "You know what we're looking for."

The swarm broke into two groups. One team began hurrying down the hallway toward the ship's cargo area, while the other team headed upstairs toward the bridge. The team that raced toward the cargo area soon noticed an obstacle.

“Human being approaching,” the lead bot said. “Prepare to open fire.”

The ship's first mate was in the cargo area when the explosion happened and had immediately feared the worst. He grabbed a weapon from the cargo bay and began running toward the bridge. When Jones saw the bots approaching him in the hallway he opened fire.

The bolts of energy from his weapon instantly blew apart all five of the bots. It also destroyed the hallway and melted much of the surrounding area.

“Now that's more like it,” Jones said, satisfied. “I love a happy ending. Eliza, where are the others?”

Eliza did not respond.

* * * * *

Captain Maxwell Baker was standing on the bridge of the *Sparrow*. He was vastly unhappy.

“Nine stealth bots, by the look of it,” he said, looking over a panel. “They got in by using an atomic detonator, too. I guess I don't have to ask where they got *that* from. Eliza!” he shouted. “What's taking so long?”

Eliza did not respond.

“That's odd,” Max said, as he worked at a control panel. “The systems are online, but control is gone. Why - ”

Then he heard a sound at the door.

CHAPTER 24

*"I am not allowed to win,
nor permitted to lose. What
then can I do?"
--The Artilect*

WHILE THE REST OF ITS TEAM headed toward the front and rear of the ship the lead bot had other plans. It quietly made its way to the Sparrow's computer lab. Eliza was watching it carefully, but the bot knew how to handle that. Using the military-grade equipment it had on board it deftly disrupted Eliza's network just long enough to disable security and bring her down.

While half of his group distracted Jones and the other half distracted Max, the lead bot stepped inside the *Sparrow's* server room and began to work. It took only a microsecond for it to destroy the ship's automatic controls. The bot knew the crew of the ship could still get the vessel off the ground, but they would have to run the ship manually and that would take time – more time than they had.

The bot scanned the rack of computers, looking for a specific device. It quickly found it and gently opened its case. It did not care about any damage that it caused to the other portions of the ship, but it was imperative that no one knew this room had been compromised. The bot quickly removed a circuit board from the machine, replaced it with one that appeared to be identical, and closed the machine again.

After sending a short, brief message to its commander it left the room.

* * * * *

"That'll do it," Captain Maxwell said smugly. The single shot that Max had fired had destroyed the door, the hallway, and all the bots that were behind it. The invaders had been reduced to smoldering ruins.

"One more bot left, by the look of it," he said as he watched a nearby computer monitor. "Looks like it's on the way to the cargo area." By this time he had spotted Jones on the monitor. "I see he's prepared," Max thought grimly.

* * * * *

Jones waited patiently in the hallway for the last bot to approach. Eliza's ship control was still down, but the ship's backup security system was functioning properly, and Jones had been tracking the last bot for the past few seconds. When the bot was about to step into the hallway he fired. The hallway disintegrated, taking the final bot along with it.

The first mate then put away his weapon and walked down the hall and toward the gaping hole in the ship's hull. He reached it before Max did, and stood there for a few minutes, eying the damage and looking outside for any more signs of intruders. Captain Maxwell joined him a few moments later, after stepping inside the server room to get Eliza back online.

"Is that all of them?" Jones asked.

"So Eliza claims," Max said, "but I'm not going to trust them. I've manually released a few scouts throughout the ship. If there are any bots left I'm sure they'll discover them. I think we've got them all, though. After all, if we'd have missed any then I believe we would be dead by now."

"It's very possible," Jones agreed. "So what do we do now?"

"I've called for the cavalry," Max said.

"The security system at this spaceport is down," Jones remarked. "All the lights are out."

"So I noticed," he said grimly. "So I noticed."

"I'll go contact Tau Ceti and let them know what happened," Jones replied.

"You do that," Max said. "Let them know what happened and tell them that we'll give them more details when we have them. I'm sure they'll want to set up a detailed debriefing, but we're not ready for that yet. I'll get in touch with Richard Stryker – he'll want to know what's happened, I'm sure – and deal with the police. Oh – and see if you can get the ship working again, will you?"

"Will do," Jones replied. "The bots that attacked us – they were stealth bots?"

"They were," Max said. "No doubt about it. Very effective, very expensive, and very hard to obtain. They're the one thing that we couldn't guard against, so that's what the Emperor sent our way. I underestimated them, Jones, but I won't do it again. This could be good news, you know."

"How's that?" Jones asked.

"If they were planning on destroying us with Iapetus, why bother with this attack? Maybe their superweapon isn't such a big threat after all."

"Or maybe this attack was just a bluff," Jones replied. "You never know."

Max shook his head as he watched Jones leave. "I guess not," he said quietly.

Still holding his weapon, Max took a good look at the hull breach that the bots had caused. The blast had produced a hole nearly three dozen feet across, and its edges were still smoldering. *It's ugly, but fixable*, he eventually decided. *Now let's look at the interior.*

After spending a few minutes working with the computer panel on the wall he felt satisfied. *We've torn some mighty big holes in the wall, but there's no critical damage. A couple day's work should get us back in business. The landing gear will be*

tough, of course, but maybe we can leave on time after all.

As he looked over the Tikal spaceport he noticed that its security system was just coming back online. He heard no sirens or emergency systems going off. *Evidently the rest of the world hasn't noticed what happened, he thought. Hasn't noticed – or has chosen not to notice.*

Max shook his head. There was a gaping hole in the runway, a giant gash in the grounds, a smoldering starship lying on the ground, and nothing but silence and the calmness of night. One would have thought that nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

I guess Governor Nicholas was right after all, Max thought. The Spanish Empire is not going to let Richard Stryker leave Mars. The Emperor aims to stop us, if he can. I'll not be caught off-guard again.

“The war has begun,” he said quietly.

* * * * *

When the nanites inside Amy and Amanda Stryker activated their world suddenly changed. Their senses became far sharper, and they were aware of things they had never noticed before. They could sense every soldier, every weapon, and every blade of grass. The darkness was no longer a hindrance to them, and they felt filled with power. Time seemed to slow down to a crawl.

I feel like I can do anything, Amy thought.

So do I, Amanda thought back.

Hey Atzi – we can talk to each other with our minds! Amy thought excitedly.

What just happened to us? Amanda wondered.

I think we have bigger things to worry about right now, Amy replied to her sister. The twins focused their attention on the enemies that were approaching them. As they scanned them

they became aware of a wealth of tactical information. In less than a second they knew the age, weight, blood type, and complete physical characteristics of every soldier on their property. Somehow they also knew about every weapon, every bullet, and every piece of machinery that was being employed against them. As this information entered their consciousness, possible battle options began appearing in their minds. The twins quickly realized that they were far from being defenseless.

It's as if we have an entire army at our command, Amy thought.

We do! Can't you see them? Amanda responded. Without knowing how she did it, Amanda brought to her sister's attention a vast army of tiny machines that was surrounding the entire planet.

Woah, Amy thought. *We really can do anything!*

Then let's take care of things! Amanda responded.

The two jointly issued a command. On their word, every soldier on their property was pushed backwards, as if by an invisible hand, and fell on the ground. Their weapons disintegrated into dust and they sunk into unconsciousness.

The sight of the soldiers suddenly falling to the ground shocked Richard Stryker. He began to say something, and then noticed that the twins were acting oddly. They were looking around, eyes focused on something that wasn't there. He watched them move their lips rapidly, as if they were talking to each other, but no sounds came out.

"What's going on?" Richard asked. He stepped toward his daughters hesitantly. "Girls? Are you ok?"

Amanda paused and looked at her father. "We're taking out the soldiers, Dad. We've gotten most of them."

"What should we do with them?" Amy asked.

Without warning a spotlight shone down upon the family from overhead. The father looked up and saw an aircraft hovering above them but making no noise. It opened fire.

The bullets simply disappeared in mid-air, in a small burst of light.

"I'll maintain the shield, Atzi," Amy said aloud. "Can you get rid of the ship?"

Amanda looked up at the helicopter and raised her hand. The helicopter disintegrated in mid-air, and the light shining on them disappeared.

Their father looked at them, amazed. "A neural interface – it's got to be," he said. "Somebody must have planted something inside you that is letting you connect to some hidden defense network."

"I think you're right," Amanda said. "I can sense something inside me. It's weird."

"Just please, don't stop," their mother said. She was trembling with fear. The dog barked once and then ran out of the shadows toward Laura. It stopped beside her and looked up, but said nothing.

"What should we do with the soldiers?" Amanda asked again. "I think they're all unconscious now."

"Oh yes - they definitely are," Amy replied.

"Can you remove them from the property?" their father asked.

The twins concentrated for a moment, and the figures started disappearing. After a few moments all of the soldiers and equipment were gone. The yard was silent.

Richard looked around and shook his head. He then looked at his daughters and smiled.

"That was amazing!" their father said. "I've never seen anything like it. Without you – well, without God's intervention, actually – we would be dead for sure right now. Is anyone else coming?"

"I don't think so," Amanda said. "I don't see anyone."

"I don't either," Amy replied.

"Where did you transport the soldiers?" Richard asked.

"Earth," Amanda said. "The wilderness of North America, to be specific. They should be happy there."

"You did *what*?" her father asked. "You mean to tell me you just transported that entire group all the way to Earth – just like that?"

"Yes!" Amy replied. "It was easy."

"How is that even possible?" their mother asked.

"It's got to be Tau Ceti," Richard replied. He looked at his daughters in wonder. "I think the Rangers have given the twins a neural interface that allows them to connect to some kind of defense system. Neural interfaces aren't new, you know. I just didn't know that the Rangers were so advanced."

"I don't think they are, Dad," Amanda replied. "The network is thousands of years ahead of our science. I don't know where it's from, but it's not ours."

"How are you able to connect to it?" their mother asked. Now that the danger was past she was beginning to calm down. Alex sat at her feet but kept his eyes watching over the property, as if he was expecting another attack.

"Inside us are billions of very small machines," Amanda said. "They're some kind of nanotechnology device, only much smaller than anything I've seen before. Somehow they've become a part of us. They're allowing us to connect, I think."

"Are there any of these nanites inside your mother and I?" Richard asked.

"No," Amy said. "Just in us."

"That's not quite true," Amanda said. "You do have a few in you, but they seem to be just markers of some kind. They're not integrated into your nervous system the way ours are."

"Do you know who put them there?" Richard said.

Amy thought a moment. "Not really," she said.

"I hate to break this up," their mother said, "but shouldn't we be getting out of here? What if they come back?"

"Good point," Richard said. He looked at his daughters.

“Can you transport all of us to the *Sparrow*? I think we need to pay Captain Max a visit.”

“I can arrange that,” Amy said. She made a gesture with one hand, and a portal opened on the lawn, surrounded by a faint blue glow. Through the portal Richard could see the Tikal Spaceport – and the *Sparrow*.

“Right this way,” Amy said. She jumped through the portal, followed closely by Amanda. Her parents cautiously followed. Once Alex jumped through the portal it closed behind him.

* * * * *

Out in space, beyond the atmosphere of Mars, the Sentinel was battling the Poneri. It had taken some time, but the Sentinel was gradually learning how to push the aliens away from the planet and back into space. The Sentinel was finding it very difficult – not because its opponent was more advanced, but because it had a powerful energy source behind it that the Sentinel was hard-pressed to match. The Sentinel's ability to grow was proving to be tremendously valuable, for little by little it was able to expand its abilities and crush the invaders.

The time it was spending fighting the opponent was not time wasted, for as the Sentinel pressed on it soon realized what was going on. *I know where you are coming from*, the Sentinel thought, *and I know how to track you now. You will not escape from me again.*

* * * * *

Chief Sidney Warren was sitting in his office, waiting for a message from his men in the field.

“Where can they be?” he said aloud, shaking his head. “It's one family! How much of a fight could the Strykers possibly

have put up?”

The call never came.

CHAPTER 25

*“Do you know why you
fight? How can you
recognize victory if you do
not understand your
purpose?”
--The Artilect*

“WHAT HAPPENED HERE?” RICHARD STRYKER said in amazement.

The Stryker family was standing on the ground a few hundred feet from the *Sparrow*. They could still see thin trails of smoke rising up from the edges of the hole in the ship's hull.

Amy thought for a moment. “The *Sparrow* was attacked by a group of stealth bots, sent by the Emperor,” she said.

“I’m not going to ask how you knew that,” Richard said. “I think I know the answer. Was the Emperor behind the attack on us?”

“Not directly,” Amanda said. “The Emperor actually requested that we be left alone. Chief Sidney Warren decided to attack us to start a war between Earth and Mars.”

“Where did you guys come from?” a voice said from inside the ship. Through the smoke and the darkness Richard saw Captain Maxwell climb down from the ship and approach them. He was carrying a very large automatic weapon. When Alex saw him he ran toward the captain, barking a friendly greeting.

“Oh, we’ve had quite a night,” Richard answered. He quickly told Captain Maxwell what had just happened to them, and the captain in turn told him about the attack on the *Sparrow*.

“Thankfully, no one was injured,” the captain replied, “but the ship has a bit of damage.”

“We’ll take care of that,” Amy replied. The twins looked at

the ship and concentrated for a moment. Then, to the captain's amazement, the hull breach disappeared.

"I'll take the hallways," Amanda said.

"I'll handle the wiring," Amy replied.

"Woah now – just what are you girls doing?" Captain Maxwell asked. "Do you have some superpowers that I'm not aware of?"

"I was hoping you could tell us," Richard said. "About ten minutes ago they were suddenly connected to some kind of defense network through a neural interface. They're able to tap into this network and do all kinds of things. I thought it was a Ranger thing – something your friends had supplied."

"Not hardly," Max said. "I've never seen anything like this. I've heard of such things, of course, but they're only theoretical."

"Not this one," Amy replied.

"So this new ability appeared purely at random?" Captain Maxwell asked. He reached down and scratched Alex on the head. The dog wagged his tail happily. "Just as you were all about to die?"

"That's about the size of it," Richard said. "I can't explain it. The Lord must be up to something – that's all I know. If it hadn't been for that we would all be dead right now."

"I think that's just about done it," Amy said. She was looking at the starship in front of her with immense satisfaction. "Do you see any damage left?"

Amanda shook her head. "No, Tiger, I think we've got it all." The *Sparrow* was sitting back on its landing gear, where it had been just before the attack. The hull breach had been perfectly repaired. There was no way to tell that anything had just happened.

Richard looked at the captain. "So if the network doesn't belong to the Rangers, and it's not Martian, then where did it come from?"

"Aliens, probably," Jones said.

"Oh, hey there," Captain Maxwell said, turning around. "I thought you were on the bridge."

"I was, until I saw the ship magically fix itself. Then I thought I'd come outside and see what was going on. I'm curious that way."

"I don't think we really know what's going on," Amanda said.

"I mean, we kind of do," Amy replied. "The Emperor wants to provoke the Rangers into attacking Sol, so he can wipe them out with their super-weapon. The Rangers want to ignore the situation and hope it goes away. Chief Sydney Warren wants to fight the Emperor for control over Mars and start his own empire. All that is pretty obvious."

"But somebody is intervening," Jones said. "I overheard the discussion about this alien network. There's another party in this now."

"So what should we do?" Laura Stryker asked.

Richard looked at his wife and shook his head. "I have no idea," he said. "I just don't know. Maybe Tau Ceti has some answers."

"Shouldn't we call the police and report the incident?" Laura asked.

Richard sighed. "I guess. But what good will it do? Now that the ship has been fixed – and girls, thanks for that, by the way – we don't even have any proof that the attack occurred."

"We can at least give them a piece of our mind," Captain Maxwell replied. "I'm heartily in favor of that – it's the least we can do."

* * * * *

A few hours later a small group of people had gathered at the Tikal spaceport, shortly after dawn. Richard Stryker and Captain Maxwell were standing in front of the starship *Sparrow*.

Leonard Padlo, the chief of the spaceport police, had answered the captain's call and brought with him a few officers from the local police force.

"I don't understand," Richard was telling the chief. "Where is everybody?"

"There is no emergency," Officer Leonard replied. "Everything is fine."

"Everything is fine!" Richard took two steps closer to the officer. "Our ship was attacked by stealth attack bots, Leonard! *Nobody* has weapons like that just lying around. This hull was breached by an atomic disintegrator – and those aren't exactly sold on every street corner! This was no amateurish break-in. Someone meant business, and who knows what they would have done if the captain and his first mate had not been spending the night on board their ship."

"Which is a violation of protocol, Captain Maxwell," the officer said. "I'm going to have to fine you for that."

"I don't think that would be wise, Leonard," Captain Maxwell said. "You can't come here and tell me that nothing happened. That lie is not going to work for you."

"I don't see any evidence of a problem," one of the officers replied. "The security systems don't report any intrusions. They can't be wrong, you know. And I don't see a bit of damage on your ship, either."

"The security systems had been disabled," Richard said. "Someone conveniently deactivated them, and I don't think we have to look very hard to find the responsible party!"

"So you say," Officer Leonard remarked. "I say you're all a bunch of liars, and that it's not our fault if you're having nightmares. Go complain to someone else, before I arrest you for destroying the lawn."

As Officer Leonard turned to walk off Richard grabbed him. "You seem to be forgetting that I am the governor of this planet," Richard told him. "I am not impressed by your blatant

disregard of law here, nor of your willingness to go along with what amounts to an act of war against the Rangers. You are going to do something about this, or I will – ”

“You'll do what, exactly?” Officer Leonard asked. “Sure, you're the governor – for a few more days. Then another show is going to be in charge. I don't care about any of you, Richard. Go cry to someone else.” The group of officers walked off into the darkness.

Jones reappeared behind the captain. “I have Governor Nicholas on the line,” he said quietly. “He wants to talk to you and Richard.”

“We're on our way,” Captain Maxwell said.

CHAPTER 26

"You are not authorized to use whatever means are necessary to succeed. There are some things that are worse than failure. If victory comes at too high a price then we must accept defeat."

--The Artilect

THE CAPTAIN AND RICHARD made their way to the bridge, where they sat down and turned their attention to the ship's interstellar communications system. Jack Nicholas, the governor of Tau Ceti, was on the screen. Richard could see that he was seated at the head of a conference table and surrounded by a small group of his closest advisors.

The governor was livid with rage. "Richard – I'm glad you're all right!" he said, as soon as they came into view. "And Captain Maxwell – I'm amazed that you survived."

"The Lord was with us," the captain said. "I don't know how else to explain it."

The governor paused a moment to attempt to constrain his anger. "This clenches it, Richard. Earth has gone too far this time – much too far. We're not going to stand for it."

Richard nodded. "I can't believe they would do something this foolish. Did the Emperor think that we just wouldn't notice?"

"I imagine he simply wanted to send a signal," the person to the Governor's left said. Richard recognized him as Dr. Phineas Finley, one of the lead scientists at the Diano Corporation.

"Well, if that was his plan then he certainly succeeded,"

Governor Nicholas replied. "Listen – Richard, in a few hours we are going to send out an alert to all Rangers that are within Sol. We're going to give them 48 hours to leave."

Richard looked surprised. "You mean you're going to invade Earth?"

The governor shook his head. "If Earth will try to kill one Ranger then they may try to kill another. It's not safe for Rangers to be in Sol anymore. No, we will strike back, but we don't plan to invade."

Dr. Finley spoke up again. "Captain Maxwell, from the reports that Eliza has sent to us, it looks like the *Sparrow* is fully operational."

"That's correct," the captain replied. "I haven't found any problems at all with the *Sparrow*. The twins have taken care of everything."

"Which we still don't fully understand," Dr. Finley said, "but we will leave that for another time. Our primary concern is protecting you in the future."

"I think my daughters can take care of that," Richard said.

"We don't know that," one of the governor's aides said. "We have no way of knowing how long this connection between the twins and the network will last. I don't think we want to depend so heavily on something that we know so little about."

"So you're going to send in the cavalry?" Captain Maxwell asked.

The governor shook his head. "Our original plan was to send in the flagship *Defiance* at the first sign of trouble, but the *Iapetus* has changed all that. The Emperor can destroy any vessel we send – possibly even cloaked vessels, although we don't know that for sure. No, what we're going to do is gather all of our forces on Mars and send them to the *Sparrow*, to act as a deterrent."

"You have forces on Mars?" Richard asked.

"We have two cloaked ships in orbit, and a number of

men on the ground,” an aide said. “Maybe a hundred men in total.”

“That's not very much,” Captain Maxwell said. “I'd much rather have the *Defiance*.”

“It may be enough, though,” Governor Nicholas said. “It's very doubtful the Emperor would use his weapon on Mars. After all, he wants to conquer that planet, not destroy it. I also doubt that Sydney Warren – or whoever is currently running Mars – wants to get in a firefight at the spaceport right now. It's only a deterrent, at best, but it may be enough of a deterrent to work.”

Captain Maxwell sighed. “If that's all we've got, then it's all we've got.”

“Thank you, governor,” Richard said. “Should the *Sparrow* leave for Tau Ceti immediately?”

“I don't think so,” Governor Nicholas said. “If you leave now the Emperor may start his war immediately, and we want to give our citizens a chance to evacuate before that happens. No, I think you should wait until Saturday morning and then leave as-scheduled. Then if any hostilities break out there won't be any Rangers caught in the crossfire.”

Richard sighed. “So it's come to this, has it?”

“It was going to happen eventually,” one of the governor's aides said. “The Emperor was bound and determined to start a war. What I don't think he realizes is what it will cost him.”

“One other thing,” Richard said. “What do we tell the authorities when your men arrive? I'm sure they're going to have a lot to say about all this.”

“Leave that to Sergeant Howell,” Governor Nicholas answered. “He'll take care of your public relations campaign.”

* * * * *

Chief Sidney Warren was sitting in his office in downtown Tikal. Officer Farrow was standing in front of him, giving a report

of what had happened to his troops.

"I don't understand it," Warren said. "You're telling me our men are now on Earth? How is that even possible?"

Officer Farrow shook his head. "I really don't know, sir. Obviously the Stryker family has some protection that we are not familiar with."

"It's got to be the Rangers," Warren said thoughtfully. "I guess there's only one thing to do. Where are they now?"

"At the Tikal spaceport, with Captain Maxwell," Officer Farrow replied.

At that moment Warren's communicator lit up. Sidney Warren saw who it was and grimaced. He turned the communicator on.

"Hello, Karl," Warren said.

"I'm not amused, Sidney – not at all," Karl Morgan replied. "Your attack on the Stryker family last night was in violation of a direct order from the Empire. You have put yourself in a situation of grave danger."

"Let me tell you something," Warren said. "If you try to mess with my planet again, I'll be forced to evict your petty thieves from my world permanently. I'm not going to stand for your continued interference."

"You're not going to have a choice," Karl said. "After your cute little stunt the Emperor decided to send a fleet of ships to Mars to ensure future cooperation."

"Then he just made a big mistake," Warren replied. He closed the circuit, and then turned to Officer Farrow.

"The Spanish Empire is trying to attempt a hostile takeover of Mars," he said. "Get the armed forces ready. I don't want any of those ships landing on the planet. Oh – and also round up all of the Empire operatives on this world."

"What about the Stryker family?" Officer Farrow asked.

"We'll deal with them after we deal with the invasion fleet," Warren said. "They're not going anywhere."

* * * * *

Out in space, thousands of light-years from Mars, the Sentinel had reached the home star system of his opponent. After crushing the Poneri that had invaded the Martian sky he had expanded his capabilities to prepare for the next battle. Over the past few hours he had grown enormously in size, morphing from a small sphere into an extremely powerful warship eight thousand feet wide. Small groups of ships occasionally left the star system that was in front of him to launch an attack, but it was now a futile effort.

The Sentinel soon realized why it had failed to detect this star system earlier. *This is a cloaked sun*, the Sentinel thought. *It was meant to be hidden, but it cannot hide from me. I have found the lost star system of Mirage, and it is time to put it to an end.*

Using its long-range detectors, the Sentinel saw that the star system contained three habitable planets. On each of the planets was a tall building, made of metal and light. It was this structure that provided the energy its opponent needed to wage war.

After completing one final scan the Sentinel began deploying an invisible, impenetrable net around the star system. It had only just begun the process when a ghostly figure emerged from the system.

"Please stop," the alien asked. "We mean you no harm."

"You have tried to destroy me several times," the Sentinel said. "I cannot allow this to continue."

"We only want to be left alone," the opponent replied.

"Your infiltration of the *Starfire* suggests otherwise," the Sentinel said. "What you did to its former crew does not suggest an aversion to violence."

"What are you going to do to us?" the opponent asked.

"I have no authority to decide the ultimate fate of your

kind,” the Sentinel said. “That decision must be left to the Artillect. What I must do is place you in a holding cell until the Artillect can decide your fate.”

With that, the Sentinel engaged the net it had created around the opponent – and all attacks against it ceased. The Sentinel had stopped time in that star system. Its opponent would be unable to do anything else until the Artillect could make a decision. It would remain hidden, unable to harm anyone, until that day came.

The Sentinel took some time to scan the galaxy, listening in on the communication frequency that its opponent used. It detected no signals. After an hour of scanning it made up its mind.

The opponent is finally gone, the Sentinel thought to itself. But the damage it has done may not be reversible. So many things have happened that I never intended. I must get back to Mars.

* * * * *

Amy and Amanda Stryker walked onto the bridge of the *Sparrow*, followed by their dog Alex. Richard, the captain, and Jones were in the middle of a discussion.

“What is it?” Richard asked, as he saw his daughters walk onto the bridge.

“We’ve been disconnected,” Amy said. “We can’t sense the network anymore.”

“It’s not responding,” Amanda replied.

Richard frowned. “You’re quite sure?”

“Absolutely,” Amy said. “It happened just a few minutes ago.”

Captain Maxwell looked at Richard. “I guess someone decided the danger was over and pulled the plug.”

“Perhaps,” Jones said. “But if the network could dispatch

the danger so easily, why connect them to begin with?"

Richard shook his head. "I just don't know. Girls, can you let me know if you're connected again?"

"Sure," Amanda said.

CHAPTER 27

*"If a man cannot handle a
small task, why assume he
can handle a large one?
Why should someone
unable to govern himself be
asked to govern a world?"
--The Artilect*

ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF SOL the Rangers had hidden their greatest secret – a series of five space stations. These stations had been under construction for the past five years and were kept hidden by the technological wizardry of Tau Ceti. Governor Jack Nicholas knew that there would be a huge outcry if the Spanish Empire ever detected them, but so far that had not happened – and he didn't think it would.

The five space stations, simply called stations one through five, were positioned in a rough circle around the Solar System. They were not nearly as large as the Diano Space Station that circled Xanthe, but they were large enough to do what had to be done.

The space stations were not military installations, and they normally had a light military presence. In the days leading up to the attack on the *Sparrow*, however, Governor Nicholas had taken the precaution of stationing a few warships near Space Station One – just in case the Spanish Empire decided to try something.

On board Space Station Four, Dr. Kimberly Hudson was talking to the station's highest-ranking military officer, General Adan Birch.

"I heard that Governor Nicholas gave an evacuation order

to all Rangers earlier this morning,” she was saying.

General Birch nodded. “The order was given six hours ago, and the evacuation has just started. There aren't many Rangers left inside Sol, though – only around fifty thousand or so. They should all be able to get out in time.”

Dr. Hudson shook her head. “I hope so. What we're about to do cannot be undone. If they're still inside when we launch there won't be anything we can do for them.”

* * * * *

Inside the *Sparrow*, the Stryker family was sitting inside the observation lounge. Jones was stationed on the bridge, watching for any activity, and a series of armed bots patrolled the ship's interior. Captain Maxwell was in the lounge talking with the Strykers.

“It sounds like a real mess is brewing,” Captain Maxwell said. “The Emperor isn't going to like being crossed by Sidney Warren, and he'll do whatever it takes to seize this planet. Warren just started a war that he can't possibly win. When it's all over the Emperor is going to have complete control of this planet, which is what he's wanted all along.”

“And many lives are going to be lost in the process,” Laura said. “The damage to this planet is going to be truly terrible. Do we know when the battle will take place?”

“Jones is checking on it now,” Captain Maxwell said. “I think the invasion fleet is at least ten or twelve hours away.”

“Do you think we're in any danger?” Laura asked.

“It's possible, but not likely,” Captain Maxwell said. “Warren and the Emperor are going to have much bigger concerns for the next few days. Besides, taking us out now, in the middle of a war, won't achieve the effect he's looking for – the Rangers aren't going to get fighting mad if the *Sparrow* is destroyed in the crossfire of an planetary war. No, he'll probably

let us be, and then try something once we're in space and on our way out."

"Is there anything we can do to help Mars?" Laura asked.

"Not really," the captain replied. "Right now it's just a matter of waiting to see what happens."

The dog Alex wandered into the room. After glancing around he walked over to Amy's feet and laid down, content.

"You're not worried about politics, are you, Alex?" Amanda asked.

"Nope – that's your job," Alex barked. "I just bite people, mostly. And sleep. It's a good life."

"I have a question, Dad," Amy said.

"Sure, Amy," her father replied. "What's on your mind?"

"It's this mind-control stuff," Amy said. "Why hasn't anyone ever built machines that can be controlled by the mind? I mean, it can't be that hard to do, can it?"

"Yeah," Amanda said. "I would think it would be pretty easy."

"You're talking about psionics," Captain Maxwell replied. "You must be too young to remember – I guess that was before your time. Yes, Amanda, such a thing did exist at one time."

"Psionics?" Amy asked. "What's that?"

Richard looked at his daughter. "Many years before you were born people used to control machines by pure thought, using a small chip that was implanted under the skin. People were able to interface mentally with just about anything."

"What happened?" Amanda asked.

"Disaster," the captain replied. "All it took was one incident to show people that the psionic control could control them just as easily as they could control the machines around them. There was such a huge outcry over it that the technology was banned, and is still outlawed to this day. Just mentioning the word is enough to scare people to death."

"We definitely had something like that," Amanda said.

“We could do all kinds of things just by thinking about it. It's as if we were issuing orders and someone – or something – was responding to them.”

“That's what it was like,” Richard said, “or so I was told. I was pretty young at the time – too young to get one of the implants, although your grandparents had them. It does sound like you temporarily tapped into a psionic network, but the things you did were just unbelievable.”

“You're not kidding,” the captain said. “When I saw the portal open and you step through I just about lost it. Tau Ceti is experimenting with a wormhole transporter, but it's nothing like what you created – with no equipment in sight, to boot! No, I just don't understand it at all.”

“All we can do is wait and see what happens next, I suppose,” Jones said. “The ball is in their court – whoever 'they' happen to be.”

CHAPTER 28

"We can wait millennia if need be, for time does not pass for us as it does for the living. Yet this does not guarantee our success, for once the opportunity is gone no amount of waiting will retrieve it. We cannot raise the dead, although there is One who can."
--The Artilect

NINETY MINUTES after Richard finished talking with the governor of Tau Ceti, a group of three Tau Ceti warships landed in the vicinity of the *Sparrow*. Richard Stryker and Captain Maxwell stood outside the ship and watched as they came in for a landing. Richard had wondered why the *Sparrow* had been parked in a large, open section of the spaceport, but the reason was now made clear.

"Mars is definitely going to know about this," Richard told Captain Maxwell.

"Sure they are," Max said, "but there'll be nothing they can do about it. They'll be here and on the ground before anyone can even respond."

As the ships landed in a protective circle around the *Sparrow*, sirens and alarms began to go off within the spaceport. The advent of these ships from Tau Ceti had not gone unnoticed. People began to stream out of the doorways and then immediately step back into them after they saw who their guests were. It was impossible to miss the ships or to not recognize

where they had come from. Their coloring and insignia were impossible to mistake.

"It looks like we've finally created a stir," Richard said. They watched the doors of the warships open and people stream out.

"Can't say it's been for lack of trying," Captain Maxwell replied. Richard laughed.

After the Ranger ships landed their doors opened and a stream of soldiers issued from the ship. The soldiers quickly established a perimeter around the area as an imposing sergeant barked out orders. After everything was securely in place a tall, imposing man walked up to the two of them. "I am Sergeant Jefferson Howell," he said. He looked at them. "You are Richard Stryker and Captain Maxwell."

"That is correct," Richard said.

"I am here under the orders of Governor Nicholas," the sergeant replied. "We are here to guard the *Sparrow* from any further hostile actions. My men have secured the perimeter."

"It looks like you have a reception committee," Captain Maxwell remarked. A small group of people, led by Officer Leonard, was walking rapidly toward them.

"My men will deal with them," Sergeant Howell replied. "Richard, is your family still with you inside the *Sparrow*?"

Richard nodded.

"Very good," Sergeant Howell replied. "Then we are all here. I would like for you and your family to remain here, under guard, until we leave on Saturday morning."

"Do you really think they will try again?" Richard asked.

"Yes, I do," he said.

Richard was silent for a moment. "I can't believe it has come to this," he said quietly. "I'm a hostage on my own world." He looked back at the sergeant. "Very well, then. So be it."

Sergeant Howell turned to Captain Maxwell. "I have assigned four teams of men to guard your ship, captain. They will

ensure that no future attacks go undetected.”

“Wonderful,” the captain replied. “We appreciate the extra security. Can't be too careful these days, it seems.”

“We will also check over all systems to ensure that they are still operational. We cannot take any chances that any of them have been compromised.”

“Very well,” Captain Maxwell said. “I will leave everything in your very capable hands.”

* * * * *

Laura and the twins were in the medical room of the starship *Sparrow*, where the twins had just undergone a complete medical examination. Captain Maxwell was shaking his head. “I'm just not seeing anything in these scans,” he told Laura.

“Maybe the nanites are gone,” Amy said. “I'm not sensing them at all anymore.”

“I'm not either,” Amanda replied. “They all just disappeared shortly after we arrived at the spaceport.”

“Maybe so,” the captain said. “I just wish I knew where they came from – and where they went to.”

“Is there a chance that you might have missed them?” Laura asked.

The captain shook his head. “I don't think so,” he said. “Eliza's medical scanner is extremely sensitive, Laura. Had there been anything in their bloodstream – anything at all – it would have picked up on it. Any foreign matter would have set off all kinds of alarms. There just isn't anything there.”

“Then maybe they are gone,” Laura said.

“So what do we do now?” Amanda asked. “Can we go home?”

“I'm afraid not, Amanda,” Captain Maxwell said. “Sergeant Howell feels that you will be safer here, at the spaceport, under guard. The governor of Tau Ceti has just sent an

army to protect you.”

“But we were just fine at the house,” Amy said. “I think that someone is watching over us, trying to protect us from harm. Someone we’ve never met – someone we don’t know about.”

“Maybe so,” Captain Maxwell said, “but if that’s the case they are staying very well hid.”

“So what are we going to do, then – just sit there and wait?” Amy said.

“Yup,” Max said.

“Is there any chance we might leave a little early?” Amy asked.

“Probably not, Amy,” their mother replied. “I think Governor Nicholas is waiting for a few other things to finish before letting us leave.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Amanda replied.

“We’ll be fine, dear,” their mother said. “We’ll be fine.”

* * * * *

Captain Maxwell and a small group of engineers were standing on the bridge of the *Sparrow*. The captain was pointing to some consoles on the ship and giving out instructions.

“The primary damage point, as you can see, was the hull breach,” he said, pointing to a picture on the display. “That was the most pressing problem, and is probably where you should begin your verification. As far as Jones and I can tell the twins did a superb job patching up the ship, but it’s hard to say what the bots did while they were on-board. I very much doubt they dropped by to pay us a social visit.”

“We’ll get right on it,” the lead engineer Daryl Henderson replied. “Nothing will be left untested. What else do you have?”

“The other problems weren’t as severe, so they shouldn’t take as long.” The captain brought up more diagrams and showed

them where sections of the interior of the ship had been destroyed in their battle with the stealth bots.

“We can take care of all of this,” Daryl said. The men around him murmured in agreement. “Was this the full extent of the problem?”

“I just don't know,” Captain Maxwell said. “I guess that is the real question, isn't it?”

CHAPTER 29

*"The living judge by
appearances; they will
believe that you are alive
simply because you appear
to be. You cannot afford to
make that same mistake."
--The Artilect*

"YOU DON'T SEEM TO UNDERSTAND the nature of your position here!" Officer Leonard Padlo was shouting. The head of spaceport security was standing a few hundred feet from the *Sparrow* and was livid with anger. "I've been trying to talk to you for the past hour, and you just don't listen!"

"You haven't said anything worth hearing," Sergeant Howell replied. His troops had prevented the officer's men from getting anywhere near the *Sparrow*, a fact that had infuriated Leonard Padlo.

"You have violated a host of regulations, you space rat," Leonard roared. "Your ships have not gone through the inspection process! They are not authorized to be in this spaceport! Tau Ceti is not allowed to land an army in this field! You will move your men off of this field immediately or else you will face the consequences!"

Sergeant Howell looked him dead in the eye. "Let me explain something to you, Leonard. I will only say this once. The *Sparrow* is going to leave here at 7 AM Saturday morning. If you or anyone else attempts to cross this perimeter and interfere with our preparations for departure I will bring the full brunt of the armed forces of Tau Ceti against him." With that, the sergeant walked off, leaving a small company of highly armed

soldiers blocking the chief from proceeding any further.

"Sir!" a man said, running up behind him. Officer Leonard turned around, irritated that someone had interrupted him.

"What is it?" he asked. "Can't you see that I'm busy?"

"We've got incoming forces," he said. "It looks like Mars is being invaded by a fleet from Earth."

"I'm on my way," he said.

* * * * *

Out in space, a fleet of several dozen Martian warships were leaving planetary orbit and heading into space. The incoming fleet from Earth had been detected an hour ago, and the Martian defenses had been patiently waiting for its arrival. Deep-space scanners had revealed the Earth fleet to consist of more than a hundred modern warships.

"It looks like they've sent us everything they've got," Commander William Harris said. He had been the commander of the small Martian defense fleet for the past nine years, and was leading the Martian fleet into battle on the flagship *Desert Sun*. Harris mulled the situation over. "We have our orders," he said at last. "We should be able to take them."

"But they outnumber us by at least three to one," his weapons officer replied.

"Yes, but we have an advantage," Commander Harris said. "We are actually expecting to fight, and they are not. Wait and see. Once they are in range we will open fire."

* * * * *

Commodore Albert Gentry of the Empire ship *Titan* sat on the bridge of his vessel, looking out over the planet Mars. He shook his head.

"How many ships did you say there were?" Commodore

Gentry asked his navigation officer.

"Thirty-four, sir," Officer Henley replied.

"They're certainly not putting up much resistance. Open a channel to them. Maybe we can talk them into backing down and avoiding a war."

"They're not responding, sir," communications officer Gilbert said after a minute. "They appear to be ignoring our hails."

"Sir, they are opening fire," helmsman Plavius said. "Missiles, by the looks of it."

Commodore Gentry sighed. "Let's engage them, then – we've done all we can to avoid a battle. Go to red alert, and then return fire. Try to disable them without destroying them."

A few seconds later the *Titan* was torn apart by a terrific explosion.

* * * * *

"I can't believe it," Captain Maxwell said. He and Richard Stryker were standing on the bridge of the *Sparrow*, watching the battle over the ship's deep-space radar system. The starship could see everything that was taking place in space.

"What?" Richard asked.

"They're using nuclear weapons," Captain Maxwell said quietly.

Richard looked incredulous. "Are you sure?" he asked.

The captain nodded. "Do you see those readings? There's no doubt about it. Look at what's happening to the Empire fleet! They've caught them off-guard, too. A good portion of the incoming fleet was destroyed before they even knew what hit them."

Richard whistled. "This is not good," he said.

"I suppose Sidney thought he didn't have a choice," Captain Maxwell replied. "They never could have defeated a fleet

that large any other way. The Empire fleet was probably considering negotiating first, so the first salvo caught them by surprise. Now they know what the stakes are and they're taking appropriate action."

Richard and the Max watched on the screen as the battle continued.

* * * * *

The Sentinel watched the battle in Martian space with great dismay. *This was not supposed to happen*, it thought. *I have failed – oh, how I have failed! What have I done?*

He watched as the battle raged between the Martian and Spanish forces. Ship after ship was being blown apart, and deadly radiation was spreading over a large area. It was only a matter of time before the fallout reached Mars and began to poison the atmosphere.

This never would have happened if I had not engaged the Poneri, the Sentinel thought. It struggled to maintain its emotions. *If I had only left the Starfire alone! Why, oh why did I touch that cursed vessel? If I had avoided the problem the Poneri would never have tracked me to Mars and forced me to respond. The explosion in the Martian sky that prevented the Rangers from protecting the Strykers would never have happened. The Stryker family would have been saved by the Rangers, and the crisis between Earth and Mars would have been avoided until Saturday afternoon. But what am I to do now?*

For long microseconds the Sentinel thought over its plight. It felt an overwhelming sense of sadness and grief. *I have failed the very race I have come to protect*, the Sentinel thought. *It was not a violation of my orders to attack the Poneri, for they are a mechanical race and do not fall under the Artilect's charge to not interfere with the civilization of the living. But it was unwise, for I did not stop to consider the consequences, and I*

vastly underestimated their power.

What are my options? I can intervene and stop this war, but I do not have the authorization to do that. I could restore power to the twins and let them stop it, but the Artilect strictly charged me to not contact them while they were still here. It is true that I did that once, but that was to save their lives, which the Artilect said was my highest priority.

The Sentinel at last made its decision. My mission has not changed. I must protect the Stryker family, and I will do that. I am responsible for causing this war, but I can do nothing about it now. My only option is to let the situation play out and hope that no lasting damage is done, though I fear that is not the case. The Artilect would know what to do, but he is not within reach.

Its decision made, the Sentinel resumed its position guarding the Sparrow and silently watched the battle between Earth and Mars rage in the depths of space. I am so sorry, children of men. I will not make this mistake a second time.

CHAPTER 30

*"My son, as long as you
seek the welfare of the
living there is hope for you.
But once you turn from that
path and seek to build your
own kingdom, you will
become a villain no different
from the Poneri of old. Do
not follow them down their
path."*

--The Artilect

"DESTROY ALL THE MARTIANS!" Commodore Gentry screamed. "Do whatever it takes!"

"We are returning fire, sir," helmsman Plavius replied.

"We have sustained heavy damage, sir," Officer Henley said. "There are problems sustaining power. The ship's life support is in jeopardy of shutting down. This vessel may not remain viable for long."

"How many of our ships are left?" the commodore asked, ignoring his aide.

"Twenty-six appear to be fully functional, sir," helmsman Plavius replied. "About another 30 are critically damaged. The rest appear to be dead."

Commodore Gentry clenched his fist. "Don't let them escape," he said. "Destroy them all – and then target their cities. Mars will pay for what she has done!"

* * * * *

As Richard and Captain Maxwell watched, the Martian ships were pushed back. One by one the Empire fleet, crippled though it was, picked them off with immense savagery. Both sides were using nuclear weapons, and the Empire's attacks were so brutal that it was destroying some of its own ships in the resulting explosions.

"They're not pulling any punches this time," Captain Maxwell said. "I've never seen anything like this. Neither side has any regard at all for collateral damage."

"I can't believe this is even happening," Richard said, looking at the screen. "What is the fallout from this going to be like?"

"The planet is moving away from the battle, so it will probably be minimal," Captain Maxwell said. "I don't think that Tikal is in danger of radiation poisoning, although those to the south could be in danger. It's too soon to tell."

"Mars is never going to be the same after this," Richard said. "The Empire is going to want revenge."

"It looks like the Martian fleet is almost wiped out," Captain Maxwell said a few minutes later.

"What happens next?" Richard asked.

The captain shook his head. "The end of this world, I suppose," he said quietly.

* * * * *

Commodore Gentry watched with triumph as the last Martian ship was destroyed.

"Are there any left?" he asked.

"No, sir," helmsman Plavius replied.

"You are absolutely sure?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," the helmsman repeated.

"How many Empire ships are left?" the commodore asked.

"Eighteen that are functional," Officer Henley replied. "There are nine others that are still in space but have been disabled. The *Titan* has sustained serious damage over 84% of its hull. We cannot remain in space much longer."

"Direct the remaining eighteen ships to follow me in," Commodore Gentry said. "We're going to go to Tikal. Tell them to prepare their troops to take possession of the city when it lands. I want all power plants destroyed, all military locations destroyed, and the spaceport disabled before we land."

"Yes, sir," communications officer Gilbert said. He relayed the order.

* * * * *

In the Martian capitol, Sidney Warren watched the battle with dismay. The walls of his office glowed with telemetry from the planet's military defenses, and he realizes that things were not going well. *The fleet has failed to stop the advance*, he thought. *There is only one thing left to do.*

To his right Sidney had a connection to the tactical headquarters of the Martian armed forces. Sidney turned to the connection and addressed the commanding officer in charge of the defense of Mars. "Fire at will," Sidney said. "Make sure that no ships escape."

"Very good, sir," the officer replied. Sidney watched as he turned and relayed the order to someone out of sight.

Sidney stood up from his chair, pushed it aside, and walked over to the window. Outside his office he could clearly see the Pyramid of Kings in the distance. The massive stone structure dwarfed every other building in Tikal.

No living person has ever seen this, he thought. *I can only hope it will work. It has not been tried for generations – if it has ever been tried at all.*

As he watched, Sidney noticed that the bright morning

sky began to grow dark. Gusts of wind began to blow about the city, and the pyramid began to take on a faint bluish glow. He could hear a faint hum in the distance, but as he listened the hum grew much louder.

Suddenly, with a thunderous roar, the pyramid glowed as bright as the sun. As Sidney averted his gaze to avoid being blinded, a brilliant beam of white plasma shot from the pyramid into space. The plasma cut through the remaining invasion fleet as if it was made of vapor and destroyed the remaining Spanish ships. In a few seconds there was no sign left of the invasion fleet from Earth.

After the beam had been fired the pyramid slowly began to resume its normal form. The brilliant white light that surrounded the structure dimmed and finally went out. Sidney turned back to look out the window and saw that heat waves were rising from the structure. *I can't believe it worked*, he thought.

Sidney turned his attention back to the communicator. "Well done, men!" he said. "The invasion fleet has been destroyed. Mars is now safe from the Empire's encroachment."

"Yes, sir," the man replied. "What are your orders, sir?"

"Are you ready to fire the weapon again should the need arise?" Sidney asked.

"Absolutely, sir," the soldier said.

"Very good," Sidney said. He felt pleased. "Alert me if the Empire tries anything else. We may need to use the pyramid again."

He reached over and turned the communicator off. As he did so he heard a faint noise in the background – a quiet hum that gradually rose in intensity. Sidney rose out of his chair and walked over to the window to look at the Pyramid of Kings. It was resting quietly and showed no signs of activity.

"That's odd," he thought. "So what - "

He never finished his sentence. The heart of Tikal was

suddenly filled with a burst of brilliant blue plasma, which was followed moments later by a thunderous explosion. It was the last sound he ever heard.

* * * * *

Millions of miles away, Emperor Justin Portius was sitting in his office, watching the city of Tikal on a large screen mounted on the wall. Around him were monitors filled with tactical information. His chief of security, Karl Morgan, had just walked into the room.

"Status report," the Emperor said calmly.

"The Pyramid of Kings has been completely destroyed," Karl Morgan said. "Let me replay the video feed for you." He glanced at the screens surrounding the Emperor, and then reached over to one of them and pressed a few buttons. Moments later an image of Tikal appeared on the screen. The two men watched as an intense explosion vaporized the Pyramid of Kings and blew apart the surrounding buildings, pushing them aside as if they were made of paper. The heat from the focal point of the attack was so great that the surviving buildings began to melt, and fires started breaking out.

"The city center has been reduced to rubble, and the offensive abilities of Mars have been reduced to nothing," Karl continued. "The Empire's forces will not meet any further resistance."

"Excellent work, Karl," the Emperor said. "Send in the second fleet, and tell them to take charge of the planet once they arrive."

Karl pressed some buttons on the panel in front of him and sent the command. "The fleet has been dispatched, Emperor, and will arrive in three hours. What should I do about the Rangers?"

"Nothing," the Emperor replied. "We will still assassinate

Richard Stryker on schedule, thereby provoking the Rangers into attacking us. That plan is still valid.”

“But your highness, won't they know about the lapetus, now that we have used it to destroy Tikal?”

The Emperor shook his head. “That is the beauty of this plan! We will simply tell everyone that the Pyramid of Kings overloaded and destroyed the city of its own accord. After all, it had never been fired before, so what could you expect? Just tell the news media to report the story along those lines and everyone will believe it. We are fine.”

CHAPTER 31

“Although our lives may be long, my son, we are but a vapor compared to the living. The Creator sacrificed His life to bring redemption to the living and give them the ability to live forever with Him. This offer was not extended to us. We are merely temporary residents of a dying universe.”
--The Artilect

IT WAS JUST PAST FIVE IN THE AFTERNOON on December 5, 1867. Captain Maxwell and Richard Stryker were sitting in the control room of the *Sparrow*, watching the invasion fleet from Earth destroy Mars.

“It's horrible,” Richard said. He felt completely drained. “They are leveling the planet and destroying its infrastructure with no regard for casualties.”

“They're angry, I imagine,” Captain Max said. “At least the Spanish fleet is mainly targeting points of military interests. Tikal is the only city they have completely demolished. It could be much worse.”

“That city was home to millions of people, Max – millions! And it was destroyed during the day, when it was filled with people at work! Do you have any idea how many lives were lost?”

“I know, Rick,” the captain said quietly. “I know. The Emperor is doing to Mars what he did to Earth. It will never be

the same. What do you think destroyed the Tikal?"

"The Iapetus, definitely," Richard said. "I don't think for a minute that the Pyramid of Kings overloaded and destroyed the city. I don't care how the Emperor tries to spin the news – this was his doing."

"That does bring up another question, though."

"What's that?" Richard asked.

"Why have we been allowed to survive? No one's attacked us, and in fact the spaceport as a whole has pretty much been left alone. The fleet made a wide berth of the area. Why would they do that?"

"I don't know," Richard said. "But I bet if we did know we wouldn't like the answer."

Captain Max stood up. "I think I'll go talk with Sergeant Howell and find out what our next move is."

"You do that," Richard replied. "I'll stay here. I can't bear to leave, just yet. I have to know what is happening to my home."

"I understand," Max said. As he began to leave the bridge he stopped and turned around. "Rick," he said quietly. "There is one thing I haven't told you."

"Oh?" Richard said, without turning around.

"When I landed here on Monday I took a pod to Tikal and then walked the rest of the way to your office," the captain said. He paused for a moment as he searched for the right words. "On the way there I ran into a seer."

"Really?" Richard asked. He turned around and looked at his friend. "You mean like Jones? I thought you told me he hadn't seen anything."

"That's true – he hasn't. This girl, though, had. Or, at least, she claimed to."

"A girl? As in, a child?"

Max nodded. "She was probably ten or so. Quite young. But there was something about her, Rick. When she talked to me I believed her. I don't know why."

“What did she say?”

“She said that I wasn't going to be able to save Mars. That the city was going to be destroyed. And she said that I wasn't going to be able to save you either.”

When Max said this he saw a wave of grief wash over his friend. Richard sat back in his chair and said nothing for a few moments. *He looks so much older than he did when I visited his office on Monday*, the captain thought. *He will never be the same after this.*

Richard at last spoke. His voice was filled with emotions, and he struggled to get the words out. “If today is any indication of the future, then I don't know if I want to be saved. I can't take more of this, Max. Humanity is destroying itself again, just like it did a thousand years ago. I can't stop it. I've tried my whole life to stop this, and I failed.”

The captain hurriedly cut Richard off. “That's not all she said, though. She didn't talk to me to discourage us, but to tell us to never give up. She said – let me think – ”

The ship's computer spoke up. “I have recorded the exact conversation, captain. I can play it back if you wish.”

“What?” Max said, startled. “Were you listening, Eliza?”

“Yes, captain. On November 14th you were given command of this ship at Xanthe. At that time you commanded me to begin monitoring all of your activities as soon as we reached Mars. I have recorded all of your conversations by interfacing with the communications device that you carry. I can replay the incident in question.”

“Oh,” Max said. “Right. Ok, go ahead.”

Eliza played back the recording, and the captain and Richard listened. When it was over Richard spoke up. “She knew she was going to die, didn't she? That's what the part about going 'beyond the farthest star' meant. She knew the planet was doomed.”

“But she didn't want us to give up,” the captain said. “We

can't give up, Rick – it's not over yet. The Lord has put us here for a reason, and He won't abandon us until it's all over.”

“And when our mission is done,” Richard continued, “the Lord will take us to that better country that lies beyond tomorrow. She is right, Max – it is a hard road.”

The captain nodded. “But it's one we've got to take. I don't think we have a choice.”

“Let me know what Howell says,” Richard replied.

“I'll do that,” Max answered. He stepped out of the bridge and into the hallway, leaving Richard alone.

* * * * *

Amy and Amanda Stryker were sitting in the lounge area of the *Sparrow* when Jones walked in. Their dog Alex was sitting on the floor in front of them, watching them with an expression of concern but saying nothing.

“Excuse me, girls,” Jones said, “but have you seen your mother?”

Amy nodded. “You just missed her – she left a few minutes ago to find Dad.”

“Ah, so she'll be headed for the bridge, then. Your father has been watching the events of the day on the ship's monitors. He's been hit pretty hard, you know.”

“Of course he has!” Amy shouted. Jones noticed that both of the girls had been crying. “Our home town has just been destroyed! All of Dad's friends were downtown working when the attack came, and they're all dead now. Millions and millions of people! How can you just stand there? Do you not realize what's happened today?”

“I do, miss,” Jones said quietly. He noticed that the dog had turned its attention to him and had begun to growl threateningly. “I apologize. But do you realize that the future of the human race depends upon what happens to this ship in the

next 48 hours?"

"What are you talking about? Amanda said.

"The Emperor doesn't just want to destroy Mars, you know," Jones said. "He'd like to do the same to every colony in space. Justin Portius is trying very, very hard to use this ship to expand his war to include the Rangers. If he is successful in doing that then billions will die. The human race could be wiped out. What we do these next few days will decide the future of mankind."

"That's crazy," Amy said.

"But it's true," Jones replied. "I do not say you should not mourn, but we must not lose sight of other matters. No one can win a nuclear war – the Mayans proved that a thousand years ago."

"But this didn't have to happen," Amy replied. "We could have stopped it. I could have stopped it. I don't understand why we weren't allowed to intervene. They took away our power and let this war happen. Why, Jones? Why did they do that?"

"I don't know, miss," Jones said. "I wish I knew, but I don't. But Amy, we can't change the past. What's done is done. All we can do is try to keep this from spreading to the colonies. It could easily become so much worse."

Amy nodded and said nothing. The two girls sat quietly and stared into space, lost in their own thoughts. Alex returned to his position at their feet and quietly watched them. *They're emotionally exhausted, Jones thought. They don't know what to do. I wish I could help them, but there is nothing I can say. How can you comfort one who is watching their world come to an end?*

* * * * *

Captain Maxwell found Sergeant Howell outside the *Sparrow*, talking to his men. The sergeant had evidently just

finished an examination of the security perimeter. As the captain looked around he was surprised at how little the spaceport had been damaged. *They've destroyed the main terminals, but have left everything else intact*, he thought. He saw no signs of Officer Leonard or his men. In the distance, however, he could see the ruins of what had once been the magnificent city of Tikal. Thick black smoke was rising from a host of fires that no one was fighting. The captain wondered if anyone was left alive in the ruins.

The captain turned his attention back to the sergeant.

"Report," Sergeant Howell commanded one of his men.

"We have secured the perimeter, sir, as instructed. A security net has been established, and men are monitoring the situation and patrolling the perimeter. The warships are on alert and are ready to engage at a moment's notice."

"Have the Empire ships made any movements in our direction?" the sergeant asked.

"No, sir," the soldier responded. "They have destroyed the spaceport building, but they have not fired upon us. They appear to have moved on to other regions of Mars."

"Thank you, soldier." The soldier saluted and walked back to his company, and the sergeant turned around and walked over to the captain.

"This is not an easy situation," Captain Maxwell said thoughtfully. "If they do decide to attack us, unlikely as Governor Nicholas believes that to be, you aren't going to have much notice until the attack has already been completed."

"That may be," the sergeant said, "but we do have systems in place that should afford some level of alert. The area is also protected by active shielding, which should protect us from any radiation fallout. We are in position to instantly respond to any attack that might come."

"It sounds like you are doing all that can be done," the captain replied. "What should we do next?"

“My men will continue to examine your ship for signs of sabotage until we are satisfied that nothing is wrong with it. Other than that, all we can do is sit tight and wait.”

CHAPTER 32

*“The decision of our
masters will be final. The
living may foolishly choose
to disobey their Lord, but
we must not copy their
example.”
--The Artilect*

RICHARD AND LAURA STRYKER WERE SITTING in the lounge area of the starship *Sparrow*. The girls had gone to bed hours before. It was long past midnight, but Richard could not stop watching what was happening in the outside world. As he sat there, talking with his wife, Captain Maxwell walked in.

“How is the work on the *Sparrow* going?” Richard asked.

“Quite well, considering how many things the Tau Ceti engineers are checking,” Captain Maxwell replied. “The hull verification tests are coming along nicely, and the interior work is also well under way. They should be done sometime in the next two hours, I think – or at least, that's what the foreman told me. I can believe it, too – they're doing some fine work.”

Richard was surprised. “So they're going to work through the entire night?”

Captain Maxwell nodded. “They take their job pretty seriously, Richard. Tau Ceti wants to make sure that you arrive safe and sound.”

“Wasn't this ship refurbished not long ago?” Laura asked.

“That's right!” the captain said. “A team of engineers did all sorts of things to it a few months before I brought it here. It actually needed a fair amount of overhauling in order to do everything that it would be asked to do.”

"Are any of those same people here now?" Richard asked.

"Oh no - definitely not. All of the overhaul work was done on Xanthe, and these people are local. They're quite good, though."

"That's great," Richard said. There was silence.

"I see you've been watching the news," Captain Maxwell said at last.

"It is horrifying," Laura said quietly. "So much has been destroyed. What is left of Tikal is in flames, and no one is doing anything about it. There have been mass evacuations everywhere as the Empire has tried to occupy Mars. Some people seem to be fighting back, but no one really knows what is going on."

"Mars has turned into a war zone," Richard said.

"I never believed something like this would happen," Laura continued. "How could Empire do this?"

"You both know that Empire has always wanted to control Mars, so once Richard left they launched their war. Mars resisted, and the Empire fought back. The Spanish Empire did the same thing to Earth a generation ago."

"So what do we do?" Laura said.

"Just sit here and wait," Captain Maxwell replied. "We can't do much of anything until the ship is prepared. Don't worry, Laura. Our time will come."

* * * * *

Jack Nicholas, the governor of Tau Ceti, was sitting in his private office in the capitol building of Xanthe. He was alone. The evening was far spent, but there were still a few more arrangements to be made.

"So you are sure that we're ready?" Governor Nicholas repeated. He was having a video-conference with Dr. Kimberly Hudson, the lead scientist on Space Station Four. "If we do this

and it fails we're not going to get a second chance at this. The repercussions of failure are truly horrific."

"We realize that, sir," Dr. Hudson replied. "We have been working on this for the past few years and can say without hesitation that we are ready. Space Stations One through Five are fully operational and feature complete. We've run a whole series of tests and every one of them has been passed. The system will work when you need it."

"Then go ahead with the power-up sequence," Governor Nicholas said. "I think we're going to need to engage your system at a moment's notice, and I know it takes some time to bring it online. After Empire's invasion of Mars the situation has become vastly more dangerous."

"Will do," Dr. Hudson replied. "We should be charged and functional by 3am on Saturday morning."

"That will be fine," the governor said. "Just don't be late."

"We won't, sir."

Governor Nicholas signed off, then he placed another conference call. This one was to his minister of defense, General Cary Locklear.

"How is the evacuation going?" he asked, after exchanging pleasantries.

"Very well, sir," General Locklear replied. "The notice was dispatched early this morning, as instructed, and it has been broadcast throughout all of the Ranger installations and in Sol. Our people are taking the message seriously and have begun the evacuation process."

"Are you having any problems?" the governor asked.

"It has gone extremely smoothly," General Locklear replied. "Since the Empire invaded Mars all Rangers have been fleeing of their own accord. The notice is only serving to urge them on. No one wants to stay behind and risk being shot by the Emperor's forces."

"How long do you think the evacuation will take?"

Governor Nicholas asked.

"We will be completed by the deadline you have set – 5am on Saturday morning."

"It's very important that all of our citizens are out by that time," the governor replied. "I don't want anyone to be left inside that system when the *Sparrow* lifts off. If something goes wrong we will have to act on a moment's notice, and if any of our citizens are left then there won't be anything I can do to help them."

"I understand, sir," General Locklear replied.

Governor Nicholas signed off. He sighed. *It keeps getting later*, he thought. He had told his wife not to wait up, but he knew she would be. *I hate spending so many long nights at the office, but I can't put this off until later. Too much is at stake. This has to work the first time. It's just got to.*

Next, the governor called Sergeant Howell on Mars.

"Good evening, sir," Sergeant Howell replied. "What are your orders?"

"Are you having any problems?" the governor asked.

"Nothing I can't handle," Sergeant Howell responded. "We have not heard anything from anyone since the Empire invaded. For the moment our perimeter is secure."

"What of the Empire forces?" Governor Nicholas asked. "Have they taken any action of any kind?"

"Not yet, sir," the sergeant replied. "So far they have refrained from using force, and I believe that they will continue to refrain. The situation appears to be stable at this time. In fact, they have not taken any notice of us whatsoever."

"How is your examination of the *Sparrow* going? Have you been able to verify that it has not been sabotaged?"

"That is proceeding on schedule, sir. We should have the ship completely verified in a few more hours."

"Have you found any more signs of damage?"

"Not so far, sir, but we are continuing to check. We will

verify the integrity of all functions of the ship before the ship departs.”

The governor nodded. “You’ve done well. There is one more thing I want you to do. I want you and a squadron of armed security bots to be on board the *Sparrow* when it leaves Mars. If Earth attempts to hijack the ship I want an army on board to fight them off – and with your presence on board there will be no question that they are attempting to hijack an official vessel of Tau Ceti in an unprovoked act of war.”

“Understood,” the sergeant said. “It shall be done.”

General Nicholas signed off. *Sergeant Howell was a good man*, he thought. In all the years he had known him Howell had never let him down. *If it is humanly possible to transport the Stryker family to Tau Ceti then he will get it done.*

The governor made one more phone call – this one to Earth. It took him several minutes to get through, but he finally reached the person he wanted to talk to.

“Hello, Justin Portius,” the governor replied.

“That’s Emperor Portius to you,” Justin replied. “I do outrank you, you know – even though you insist on leading your band of space vagabonds in a pointless rebellion.”

“Save the lies for the press,” Governor Nicholas said. “Listen, Portius. The *Sparrow* is scheduled to depart at 7 AM on Saturday morning”

“Quite so,” the emperor replied. “I am aware of this. That day cannot come too soon, in my opinion.”

“That ship had better arrive at Tau Ceti in one piece,” Governor Nicholas replied. “If it doesn’t I will hold you personally responsible. It will mean war, Portius, and you really don’t want to fight us.”

“Then you’d best make sure the ship is spaceworthy!” the emperor replied. “It would be just terrible if it suffered an unfortunate accident, wouldn’t it?” The emperor then abruptly disconnected the line before Jack had a chance to respond.

Governor Nicholas sat back in his chair and thought for a few moments. *He's definitely going to try to destroy the Sparrow*, the governor thought. *He as much as admitted it. I will do my best to save the Strykers, but if I fail I will make the Emperor bitterly regret the day he attacked them.*

* * * * *

Amy and Amanda were lying in their bunkbeds. The lights were out and they had been in bed for hours, but they were still wide awake. The only light in the room was a night-light in the corner that emitted a soft blue glow. In the darkness the girls could see Alex lying in the corner, fast asleep.

"These rooms sure are cramped," Amanda said quietly.

"I know," Amy replied. "Captain Max didn't think we'd be using them, remember?"

"I guess a lot of things have happened that he wasn't expecting," Amanda said. "I don't think he thought any of this would happen."

"What do you think will happen next, Atzi?" Amy asked.

"Probably nothing. If the Emperor wanted to attack us he would have by now. They just don't seem interested."

"This is the first night after the attack, you know," Amy said. "This very ship was invaded last night at about exactly this time."

"Sure it was, but that was before we had an army guarding us. I really doubt anyone will try anything again."

"You're probably right."

There was silence for a few minutes, and then Amy spoke up. "I still wish I could go to Earth one day. I bet that will never happen now."

"Probably not," Amanda agreed. "Captain Max has been there, but he's only made one trip."

"Right – he was there when he got mixed up with the

Starfire."

"Do you think we'll ever get him to tell us what really happened?"

"I bet we can if we tried," Amy said. "I'd sure like to know the whole story. I've heard our brother say that Dad and Captain Max used to run around together and had all sorts of adventures."

"Dad's never left Mars, though," Amanda said.

"I know," Amy replied. "I don't know what they were doing. I guess they went their separate ways when Mom and Dad got married, and Captain Max went off into space to do whatever it is he does."

"I don't think he just moves cargo around," Amanda replied.

"I don't think so either," Amy agreed. "There's more to him than he is letting on – and it's up to us to find out what he's hiding."

"All we have to do is get him talking," Amanda agreed. "Especially with Jones around – he seems willing to divulge anything."

Alex stirred. "Get to sleep, girls!" he barked. "Now! Do you realize it's already tomorrow?"

CHAPTER 33

"Some situations cannot be resolved. In those cases the best course of action is to change the situation into one that can be resolved."

--The Artilect

THE NEXT MORNING had come and gone in a flurry of activity. The *Sparrow* was filled with even more men than had worked on her the previous day. Most of the primary systems had already been checked for sabotage, so the engineering crew spent their time checking all of the secondary systems to ensure that no other damage had been done. The Stryker family stayed out of their way and allowed them to continue their work.

That afternoon, Richard and Laura Stryker walked into the server room of the *Sparrow*, where they found Captain Maxwell Baker and Sergeant Howell. The room had been a hive of activity earlier today, but it was now empty except for the four of them.

"Good afternoon, sir," Richard said. "Jones told us that you wanted to talk to us."

"Jones was correct," the Sergeant said. "Here, take a seat. We need to talk about something."

Richard looked at Captain Maxwell quizzically, then he and his wife took two chairs and sat down. "I understand you've been doing a lot of work in this room today," Richard said.

"The ship looks very nice, by the way," Laura said. "Your men have done a fine job."

Sergeant Howell smiled. "Thank you, ma'am. They are excellent workers – but there are some things that they cannot do. Tell me, Richard, what were the stealth bots trying to

accomplish on board this vessel?"

"Why, they were trying to sabotage the ship, I suppose," Richard replied.

"To what end?" the sergeant asked. "They had antimatter weapons and could have easily destroyed the entire vessel. Why bother to sabotage it?"

"Maybe they were hoping we wouldn't notice.

"Then why enter the ship by blowing a huge hole in its side? That was impossible to miss. Remember, at the time the bots did not know if anyone was on board. Surely, if they wanted to achieve some covert action, there was a better way to achieve secrecy than by advertising their presence in an unmistakable way."

Richard shook his head. "I don't know. I've wondered that myself."

"That is the question my men have been investigating for the past two days," the sergeant said. "We've paid particular attention the ship's security tapes. The security system continued to work for a few minutes after the bots boarded the ship. It eventually was disabled, but not before we recorded some information.

"Once the bots were on board, four of them headed toward the cargo area and the rest made their way toward the ship's bridge. A few minutes after they parted the ship's computers were brought offline by an electromagnetic discharge. The ship as a whole is shielded against such blasts, but only from outside the hull. No one considered the possibility that you might be attacked from an EMP originating from within the ship. That was a mistake, of course, but it is too late to address that now.

"From that time on we have no record of their whereabouts. We know that Jones destroyed the four headed toward the cargo area because we have his eyewitness testimony. It seems likely that those four were not a threat, for

they passed no sensitive areas between the last moment they were seen on the video footage and the moment Jones destroyed them. Besides, if they had planted anything in the hallway it would have been destroyed in the very blast that destroyed them.

"No, what bothers us is what the other five did. We know they went to the bridge, for that is where Captain Maxwell found them. But did all of them go straight to the bridge?"

"What are you driving at?" Laura asked.

"This room – the server room – is on the way to the bridge," the sergeant said. "We found no damage here, but that doesn't mean that they didn't touch anything."

"I see what you mean," Richard said. "But surely your men have tested everything."

"They have, as much as possible, but it is impossible to know what happened here."

"What do you mean?"

"We believe that the bots did intend to sabotage the ship," Howell replied. "However, they didn't want the sabotage to be noticed until after it was too late. So, they barged inside in a very public way and split up – each heading in a direction where they were most likely to encounter resistance, which is very unusual behavior. Frankly, Jones and Captain Maxwell should not have been able to survive the attack. If they were destroyed it is because they wanted to be destroyed."

"What they were really trying to do is hide the fact that they replaced a piece of equipment right here in this room. In order to hide their actions they took the security system offline and then, while battling the ship's crew, one of them accomplished their real mission – a piece of sabotage that wouldn't be noticed until it's too late."

"So why not just replace all of this equipment?" Richard asked.

"We would, if we could, but the task is too great in the

short amount of time that we have. This room has some very specialized machinery that we cannot easily reproduce. We would have to send to Xanthe for replacements, and it could take weeks to get it and even more time to test and install it. Our situation is very precarious, Richard. We don't have weeks."

"The Emperor is getting a bit antsy, to say the least," Captain Maxwell said. "Despite their patience so far I doubt they'll let us stay here much longer – especially when they've had so much trouble trying to subdue Mars. I think we're running out of time."

"That brings up a point I still don't understand," Laura said. "Why are you trying to verify that this ship is safe, anyway? You have all those other ships outside. Why not take us to Tau Ceti on one of them?"

Captain Maxwell and Sergeant Howell looked at each other. "It's a long story," Captain Maxwell said at last. "This ship is unique in the galaxy. There is nothing else like it in all of the colonies."

Richard looked at him, surprised. "How so?"

Sergeant Howell answered him. "When this mission was first proposed we knew there was a chance that the lapetus was operational."

Richard nodded. "And unfortunately that turned out to be the case."

"Since we knew it was a possibility we decided to take some precautions. Has the captain told you that this ship can travel from Mars to Tau Ceti in a single day?"

"He has. It's really astonishing, too – it's incredible speed. That is many, many times faster than any other ship in space."

The sergeant nodded. "That kind of speed is possible because this ship uses a one-of-a-kind drive. One that takes an incredible amount of power to run – so much power, in fact, that it cannot be operated without a zero-point-energy plant."

Richard looked at him, puzzled, and then light began to

dawn. "You're kidding!"

"No, he's not," Captain Maxwell said. "Have you been inside the cargo bay recently?"

"I went in yesterday. It looks completely empty."

Captain Maxwell smiled. "It's supposed to look empty, Rick, but it's not – there's a false floor. You don't notice it because you didn't see the ship before it was customized, but a good half of the hangar space is hidden out of sight, and that space contains something very special. Something that, publicly, does not exist."

"This ship has a portable zero-point-energy plant," the sergeant said. "It's the only one of its kind. The Diano Corporation has developed a way to miniaturize its zero-point technology into something that can fit within a starship. It takes the entire starship, but the final product is a ship that can travel amazingly fast. More importantly, however, a ship that uses that type of space drive cannot be attacked while it is traveling. This is the only ship in existence that, in theory, cannot be harmed by the lapetus *once it engages its drive*."

"This ship was refit just for this mission," Captain Maxwell said. "Once we are in space and engage the drive there's nothing that the Empire can do to stop us. We don't know that for sure, of course – we haven't exactly been able to test it – but it's the best we've got."

"And it has been compromised," Sergeant Howell said. "That is the problem. We don't know if we can trust it or not. We could move you to one of the warships and take you to Tau Ceti that way, but they are slow and vulnerable – perhaps much more so than this ship."

"I see," Laura said. "So what do you intend to do?"

"There is only one thing to do," the sergeant replied. "We must take the chance that the ship is safe. If you travel by another vessel you will *definitely* be vulnerable to attack. In this ship an attack is only possible, not definite – and the probability

may be small.”

Richard shook his head. “It still sounds dangerous. You just told me that there is no way you can verify the integrity of this ship.”

“That is why I am going to accompany you on the voyage. As one of the commanders of the armed forces of Tau Ceti, any acts against this ship become an act of war against the Rangers.”

Laura's eyes widened. “You're going to join us?”

“Governor Jack Nicholas is hoping that my presence on board will dissuade the Spanish Empire from going through with their plan. He is hoping that, when it comes down to it, they won't actually go to war.”

“It sounds like the governor believes we have no real hope of arriving at Xanthe,” Laura said. “Have we already been given up as a lost cause?”

“That is definitely not the case,” Sergeant Howell replied. “Were that true I would under no circumstances allow this ship to depart. We are going to do our very best to get you to Xanthe in one piece. I do not believe that the trip we are going to embark upon tomorrow morning will be our last.”

“I'm sure you have done your best, sir,” Richard replied. “Now all we can do is wait and see what happens – and pray for a safe journey.”

* * * * *

Richard Stryker poked his head inside one of the passenger's quarters in the starship *Sparrow*. “So there you are! I've been looking everywhere for you.”

Amanda looked at him, puzzled. “Why didn't you ask Eliza where we were? She would have told you. She monitors everything that happens on board this ship, you know. Nothing gets past her.”

“Nothing,” her twin Amy replied. “You really should talk

to her – she's a pretty interesting person.”

“She's a machine,” Richard replied. “Only a machine.”

“Whatever,” Amy said.

The twins were sitting on the bottom bunk. Their personal effects were strewn all over the chairs, the table, and the upper bunk.

“Hey – where's Alex?” Richard asked.

“I'm not sure,” Amy said. “I think he wanted to go run around outside. He hates being cramped up inside the ship.”

“You know, I don't blame him. Say, come to think of it, isn't this room kind of small for the two of you?”

“Oh definitely,” Amanda said. “We've tried to talk to the captain about it but he said that all of the other rooms are the same size.”

“Except for his own room,” Amy said. “His room is much bigger, but he won't give it up to us.”

Richard laughed. “That's not what I meant. Why don't each of you get separate rooms?”

The twins looked at each other. “What fun would that be?” Amy said. “Who would we talk to? Our telepathic link doesn't seem to work anymore.”

Richard shrugged. “Well, anyway, that's fine. I just wanted to check on you and see if you girls were doing ok. The past few days have been horrible, and I haven't had much time to spend with you.”

“They have,” Amy said, “but we're ok. There's nothing we can do about it, anyway. It's still hard, though. I worry a lot.”

“I'm not worried,” Amanda said.

Amy laughed. “You're always worried, Atzi. You can't fool me.”

“Well, maybe I'm a little worried,” Amanda conceded.

“I don't think you have to be afraid,” Richard said. “I've just talked to Sergeant Howell and Captain Max, and we're about as well-protected as we possibly can be. There's an entire army

guarding us, and the best minds in the galaxy have been going over this ship with a fine-tooth comb. I think we'll be just fine."

"I'm sure you're right, dad," Amanda said. "But I'm still worried about the people of Mars. All of our friends are still out there in the middle of all that fighting. They're not going to be leaving in a few days like we are. I wish we could help them."

"I wish we could too," Richard replied. "I wish none of this had happened. But I don't have an army powerful enough to fight back against the Emperor."

"No one does," Amanda said.

"We did," Amy replied.

"That's true," Amanda said. "We did. But we don't anymore."

"But you both still have God," Richard said. "He is still on the throne. None of this has caught God by surprise. I don't know why this is happening, but God has a purpose in all of this. He will take care of us. Don't give up, girls. It's not over yet."

"Thanks, dad," Amanda replied.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" Richard asked.

The twins looked at each other. "I think we're good for now," Amy said. "But thanks."

Their father started to step out the door and then stopped. "Oh – I almost forgot. Captain Max just told me that Sergeant Howell is going to be coming with us."

"He is?" the girls said in chorus.

"Yes, he is. Governor Jack Nicholas wants him to come along for the ride and oversee our security in person."

"We're still leaving at seven in the morning, right?" Amanda asked.

"Right," Richard replied. "Also, Mom wanted me to tell you not to be late for dinner – they're going to be having a big sending-off meal in a few minutes."

"We'll be there," Amanda replied. "Just have Eliza call us when it's ready."

CHAPTER 34

*"Sometimes silence is the
best answer."
--The Artilect*

A LARGE GROUP OF PEOPLE had gathered into the *Sparrow's* dining room. The room was normally fairly simple, but the first mate had outdone himself this evening, and the room was fit for a king. Sitting around the table was Captain Maxwell, Sergeant Howell, Jones, Richard and Laura Stryker, and their twin girls, Amy, and Amanda Stryker. The party was enjoying a final meal before their departure the next morning to Tau Ceti.

"This is a terrific meal!" Amy told Jones. "You did a great job preparing it!"

"You're very welcome, miss," Jones replied. "It was my pleasure."

"He means it was the pleasure of our on-board food synthesizer," Captain Maxwell put in.

"Now captain," Laura replied. "I'm sure the food processor didn't synthesize these table settings."

"That's a good point!" Max said. "You really did a nice job, Jones. We should do things like this more often."

"I'll make a note of it, sir," Jones replied.

"Are you ready for the trip tomorrow?" Richard asked his daughters.

"You bet!" Amanda said. "It will be great to finally get to see Xanthe."

"Amen to that," her sister said. "We're looking forward to seeing something else – anything else, actually. I mean, this ship is nice and all, but..."

Richard laughed. "I agree with you whole-heartedly, Amy.

I've also been itching to get out of here."

"All in good time," Sergeant Howell replied. "The ship has been prepared and all security precautions have been taken. I have no doubts that the trip will be a successful one."

"You really think so?" Amy asked. "Do you think we'll be able to beat them?"

"I am positive," he told her. "Our enemies may try something, but I believe that we are more than able to take anything they can give us. We will be fine."

The twins looked a little relieved. "I'm sure you're right," Amanda said. She then looked at her sister and smiled mischievously. "Would you mind telling us some stores, Captain Max? Dad tells me that you've been exploring space for decades and have had all sorts of adventures."

Captain Maxwell laughed. "I wouldn't go quite as far as that, Amanda. Being in space isn't always exciting, you know, and sometimes the excitement is over the most mundane things."

"You never said a truer word," Jones replied. "Why, it was just last year that you put the wrong controller card in the water coolant system. It was such a small error, too."

Captain Maxwell turned a little red. "I've actually been trying to forget it, come to think of it."

"It was quite memorable!" Jones said. "Who knew that RS118 cards were compatible with RS430 slots? We didn't even notice the problem until we got into space and engaged the system, at which time the water boiled and blew out all of our pipes. Our hull damage was so complete the ship was almost unrecognizable. It took months to repair the damage."

"That happened to this ship?" Sergeant Howell said, surprised.

"Oh no," Jones said. "It was another ship that we had borrowed while this one was undergoing some modifications."

"I bet that'll be the last ship that company will ever loan us," Captain Maxwell muttered.

"Wow," Amanda said. "Does that happen all the time?"

"Fortunately, no," the captain said.

"If it did our insurance rates would be far higher than they already are," Jones replied. "It's already almost impossible to find anyone who will insure us. Even B&L has been giving us a hard time."

"We have had some great experiences, though," Captain Maxwell said. "Some great, positive experiences, I might add. We've had a hand in the settlement of many a colony. "

"Can you tell us about the *Starfire*?" Amy asked Jones.

Captain Maxwell sighed. "I had hoped you had forgotten about that. Are you sure you don't want to hear about something else?"

"Actually, I'd like to hear that story," Sergeant Howell said. "I've heard some rumors about it, but as it was an Earth vessel I don't have any first-hand information. Come to think of it, you played a personal role in that episode, didn't you, captain?"

Captain Maxwell nodded. "I did have a role in it, yes. It's not actually classified, as far as I know, but it's one of those stories that the Spanish Empire tries not to repeat. It was the first, last, and only mission I ever undertook for them."

"I never did understand why you took it, Max," Richard said. "I warned you not to, you know."

The captain shook his head. "This was years ago, Richard, and I didn't have a ship or a crew. I thought that it might be a good opportunity to go out and get started. It did launch my career."

"After almost ending it," Jones said.

"What happened?" Amanda asked.

"Tell us!" Amy said.

"Well," Captain Maxwell said, "the official story is that the starship *Starfire* landed on an unexplored world more than twenty years ago. We had brought a group of explorers there, you see. This was back in the days when space exploration wasn't

as big a business as it was now. Different groups – sometimes governments, sometimes businesses – would hire ships such as this one and send them to planets that might be suitable for a colony. The team would then examine the planet in person and make a recommendation.”

“Did you have to stay with them while they were there?” Amanda asked.

“Usually we did,” Captain Maxwell replied. “A lot of times the places they wanted to explore took months to reach, so we would settle in for a few months while they did their work. Sometimes, when their work was done, we would bring them back home – if, say, the planet was unsuitable or if they needed some equipment in order to survive there that they didn't have with them. Other times we would leave them there and that first settlement would become the first colony on that planet.”

“Sometimes we would revisit a world later to drop off more supplies,” Jones said, “although that work was usually left to ships much larger and faster than the ones we flew.”

“But what happened to the *Starfire*?” Amanda asked.

“Well,” Captain Maxwell said, “at first it all started out just fine. Jones and I – we actually met on that mission, believe it or not – loaded up the *Starfire* with the Spanish explorers and their equipment and headed out into space. At that time the ship was nearly 60 years old, but it had just been refurbished and equipped with a rebuilt fusion drive. The ship handled the journey out there just fine. It was a bit slow, maybe, but nothing too bad.

“When we got to the star system we found a couple surprises. First, we discovered that there were actually three planets in the system – not just the one that our telescopes had seen. Second, and most importantly, all three planets were Earthlike and fully habitable.”

“Wow,” Amy said. “I had no idea that any habitable planets had ever been discovered! That is – huge! Why haven't

we heard about this?"

"I'm getting to that," Captain Maxwell replied. "Well, the discovery that the planets were habitable came as quite a shock. It changed our plans a bit. The first thing we did was make aerial surveys of all three worlds. We found a lot of life, but there was no intelligent life or cities as far as we could tell. Since all three planets looked to be about the same we just picked one and landed.

"After we unloaded everything the man in charge of the expedition sent us back to Earth, saying that there was no need for us to stick around. They had all the supplies they needed, and the world was an amazing find – a definite site for a future colony. So we packed up our bags and left, leaving the *Starfire* behind."

"How did you get home?" Amy asked.

"In a much smaller ship," Jones replied. "The *Starfire* was actually a very large vessel. It had brought a few smaller ships with it so that the surrounding area could be explored. We took one of those ships home with us and left the *Starfire* there – which had been the plan all along. We just got to go home sooner than was originally expected."

The captain continued the story. "After we left things were fine for a couple weeks. Then, when we were only three days away from Earth, we got an urgent distress call from the *Starfire*. The message so garbled and unclear, though, that we didn't really know what had gone wrong. Jones tried to enhance the signal, but it didn't help."

"At this point we weren't sure what to do," Jones said. "We asked Earth for instructions and they recommended that we turn around and investigate – which was what we wanted to do anyway. Their own attempts to contact the colony had failed and they wanted to know what had gone wrong."

Captain Maxwell nodded. "We briefly stopped at an outpost for supplies and then headed back into space. We

reached the planet sixteen days after receiving the distress call, having heard nothing from the colony in all that time. To our surprise, when we got there we found no evidence that any colony had ever existed! There was no ship, no people – nothing.

“So we went into space. We had a rough idea where the *Starfire* was when it sent out its distress call, and that's where we started looking. After searching space for four days we found the ship, adrift and empty.”

“What did you find was inside?” Amy asked.

“Nothing,” Captain Maxwell said. “The ship was in perfect condition, but there was no one there. The only unusual thing that we discovered was in the cargo hold. Occasionally we thought we could hear voices – garbled echoes of the lost crew, or so we thought. We tried to figure out what they were saying but it proved to be impossible.”

“We ended up flying the ship back to Earth, so the authorities could investigate it,” Jones said. “When we got to Earth we were asked to lead another expedition there to find out what happened.”

“We never made it back, though,” the captain said. “We got to the right coordinates, all right, but everything was gone – the planet, the star, everything. It was all there in the *Starfire*'s records, but the planet itself was just gone – and they've never found it again.”

“No one knows what happened,” Jones said. “The *Starfire* was rebuilt and sold. No one ever found out what was causing the voices. To this day what happened was a mystery.”

There was silence for a few minutes, and then Sergeant Howell spoke up. “I did hear one additional detail,” he said.

Captain Maxwell nodded. “Yes, it is true. That is why the Empire kept trying to go back.”

“What was true?” Amy asked.

“We found an artifact on the planet,” Jones replied.

Richard sighed. “Ah, the artifact.”

"The artifact?" Amy asked.

"We don't know who put it there," Captain Maxwell said, "but it wasn't us. It was a giant thing – a building of some kind, a thousand feet high, made of highly reflective glass and light. We spent days before I left trying to get into it, but we couldn't figure it out."

"People thought it might have tremendous potential," Richard said. "It was proof that there was another civilization out in space besides our own. The Spanish Empire wanted to make contact with it, but all evidence disappeared – and nothing else has ever been discovered, to this very day."

"Wow," Amy said.

"But I can say one thing," Sergeant Howell said.

"What's that? Amanda asked.

"This trip – which we are about to embark upon in just a few more hours – will *not* end in failure. A new era is about to begin – and it will begin at seven tomorrow morning, when the Emperor will discover that all of his well-laid plans have been brought to ruin!"

* * * * *

After the dinner was over, Sergeant Howell and the captain excused themselves and went to the server room.

"So what is our plan for tomorrow?" Captain Maxwell asked.

"At seven in the morning, right on time, this ship will depart for Tau Ceti," Howell replied. "The three other Ranger warships will accompany us to the jump point. Once the *Sparrow* jumps there should be no problems. This ship will drop out of hyperspace just outside the Tau Ceti Gate. We do have clearance to enter the Tau Ceti system immediately, so there will be no waiting period."

"Sounds simple enough," the captain said. "I think we can

manage that. At what point do you think we will be safe?" Captain Maxwell asked.

"Once we have landed at Xanthe."

"I've set up Eliza to notify me at the first sign of trouble," the captain said. "This ship has been wired with all sorts of fault-tolerant systems. If anything goes wrong or stops working it should be possible to recover. I think we've got a good shot of making it."

"We will soon know for sure, captain, but I believe you are correct."

"The Stryker family doesn't seem nearly as nervous as they used to be," the captain said.

"They have confidence in us," Sergeant Howell said. "They believe that we have taken all possible security precautions, and they have faith in our ability to transport them to Xanthe without incident. They have seen my men check and recheck the ship, and they have seen the enormous amounts of work that have been done to verify the integrity of the ship. They realize that all possible precautions have been taken to ensure the success of this mission."

"I hope we don't let them down," Captain Maxwell said.

"If we do," Sergeant Howell replied, "it will probably be our last act."

CHAPTER 35

*"It is easier to follow orders
than to make a decision."*

--The Artilect

RICHARD STRYKER AND HIS WIFE LAURA were seated in the observation lounge of the starship *Sparrow*. Their twin daughters were seated with them, along with the first mate Jones. Alex, the dog, was sitting on the floor in front of Amy.

The observation lounge of the *Sparrow* was equipped with many leather chairs, a couch, some tables, a few large video screens, and an expansive window. The window appeared to be made out of glass, but Richard knew that it was actually made out of an artificial substance much harder than steel.

It was 6:32 AM at the Tikal Spaceport. Through the window the Stryker family could see two Ranger warships, which were positioned to form a tight circle around the *Sparrow*. Richard knew that a third ship was located on the other side, just out of view.

The sun was just beginning to rise over the horizon, shining a few rays of light over a dark landscape. The twins could just begin to make out the rest of the spaceport – a sight they had seen a lot of in the past few days. On the edge of the horizon they could see smoke continuing to billow from the ruins of Tikal. The fires that had raged there since the city was devastated had still not burned themselves out.

"Are you ready to leave?" Richard asked his two daughters.

Amy and Amanda looked at each other. "I think so," Amanda said at last. "There's nothing more we can do here."

"I agree," Amy said. "Staying isn't going to help anyone."

Maybe if we go to Xanthe we can make a difference.”

“How much longer until we leave?” Amanda asked.

“Just under half an hour,” Jones said.

“Do we really have to wait until exactly 7 AM?” Amy asked.

“Yes, we do, actually,” Richard said. “Just relax – we’ll be under way in just a few minutes.”

* * * * *

Captain Maxwell and Sergeant Howell were seated on the bridge of the ship. Both were making their final preparations before departure.

“It looks like everything is all set,” the captain said cautiously, as he finished examining the computer screens in front of him. “Eliza tells me that our hull integrity is good, our defensive systems are engaged, and the zero-point-energy plant is fully charged and operational.”

“Are the target coordinates entered?” Sergeant Howell asked.

“Locked and confirmed,” Captain Maxwell replied. “Eliza has calculated the route to Tau Ceti and has laid in the hyperspatial waypoints. The tunnel locking capability has been enabled, along with a host of other security systems. Everything checks out so far.”

“Any anomalies – any at all?” the sergeant asked.

“None,” Max replied. “I’ve put Eliza through many tests, and she has passed them all.”

“So have my own men,” Sergeant Howell replied. “I just wonder what we’re missing.”

“Whatever it is, I think we’re prepared for it,” Captain Maxwell said.

The sergeant’s communications device made a few beeps. He pressed a few buttons on it and listened carefully.

"Very good," he said at last. "Everything is ready on our end. Be prepared to move out on the signal."

Sergeant Howell settled down in his chair. "Everything is in place, captain. Our trip will be monitored from the time we enter hyperspace just off of Mars until the time that we land at Tau Ceti, at 10:43 PM tonight. Emergency crews are standing by."

Captain Max nodded. "I guess all we can do now is wait." He looked at his watch. The time was 6:43 AM.

* * * * *

Millions of miles away, Emperor Justin Portius was getting a start on his day. He had entered his office early that day to make a few phone calls. Among them was a request to speak to his chief of security Karl Morgan, who was now standing in front of him.

"Is everything ready for the *Sparrow's* departure?" Portius asked.

"Absolutely," Karl replied.

"Are you quite sure?" the Emperor repeated. "I'd really hate to think what might happen to you should you fail in this mission."

"I have no doubt whatsoever, sir," Karl replied. "The *Sparrow* has no hope of arriving at Tau Ceti. The warships that Jack Nicholas so foolishly sent to Mars will prove to be of no help at all."

"Good," the emperor replied. "I hope that will be the case – for your life depends upon it."

* * * * *

Governor Jack Nicholas had just made a call to Space Station Four, a secret installation on the outskirts of Sol. He wanted to talk to Dr. Kimberly Hudson one last time before the

Sparrow left Mars.

"Are you ready?" the governor asked Dr. Hudson. "The *Sparrow* is due to leave any minute – local time on the Martian capitol is 6:54 am."

"We are, sir," Dr. Kimberly replied. "The power-up sequence was successful, and we are ready to act. Our systems are fully charged and operational. We can engage at a moment's notice."

"Do you see any signs of trouble?" Governor Nicholas asked.

"No, sir," Dr. Kimberly replied. "The area is free and clear of all hostile ships. It's actually very quiet out there."

"That still bothers me," the governor said. "I just wonder what we're missing."

"Hopefully nothing, sir," Dr. Kimberly replied.

"Thank you, doctor," the governor said. "I'll keep this channel open. We'll know in a few minutes what will happen."

"Yes sir, we will." Dr. Kimberly said.

* * * * *

A voice sounded overhead. "Beginning departure sequence," Eliza said. "Please be seated. We are about to leave the spaceport. You will be notified when it is safe to move about the cabin."

The Stryker family took their seats and turned their attention to the landscape outside the window. In the back of the ship they heard the engines began to rumble. The noise had been a small murmur in the background, but now it had become much more noticeable. After a few seconds the *Sparrow* began to lift off the ground, followed moments later by the rest of the Ranger warships.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is exactly seven in the morning on December 7, 1867," Jones replied. "We are departing right on

time.”

As the twins watched, their ship began to accelerate. After a few minutes the vessel was thousands of feet in the air, and it continued climbing rapidly. The Ranger ships that were guarding it flew alongside in perfect formation, allowing it some room but staying close at hand.

“Mars is beautiful!” Amanda said, as she gazed down onto the planet below. “You can see the ocean from here!”

“I love flying,” Amy said.

Alex got up and looked out the window. “I think I prefer the ground,” the dog said at last. “Nothing personal.”

Amanda reached over and ran her fingers through the dog's long fur. “I think I agree with Amy – it's so beautiful. But I still love you, Alex.”

Jones smiled. “In a few moments, ladies, we'll be in space!”

* * * * *

“Report!” Sergeant Howell said into his headpiece.

“No signs of trouble, sir,” a voice reported. “Everything is quiet. We are continuing to monitor the situation.”

“Very good. Notify me at the first sign of any trouble.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sergeant Howell glanced over at Captain Maxwell. “How are things going?”

“So far so good,” the captain replied. “I don't see any signs of trouble.”

“We're not in space yet,” the sergeant said. “I doubt they'll try anything in their own atmosphere.”

“So do I,” the captain said. “But you never know with the Empire. He sure didn't hesitate to use the lapetus against Tikal.”

“How long until we reach a point where we can engage the drive?” Sergeant Howell asked.

Captain Maxwell consulted Eliza. "About eight minutes."

* * * * *

The twins watched in awe as the blue sky gave way to the blackness of space. The ground below them continued to recede until they could see the curvature of Mars. Alex was watching the scene with a look of complete disinterest.

"It's so beautiful," Laura said, sighing. "From this distance you can hardly tell that there is a war going on. The planet looks so peaceful."

"It's been a long time since we've been in space together," Richard said.

"Much too long, I think," Laura replied. "I had forgotten how much I enjoyed it."

"I thought you had never left Mars, dad," Amy said, surprised.

"Oh, we haven't, really," Richard said, laughing. "Laura and I did go to Phobos once, though. That's not really leaving Mars, but it did give us a chance to get into space. Mars looks quite beautiful from her moons."

"So what do you think?" Jones asked the twins.

"It's great!" Amy replied. "Look – you can see the entire continent from here!"

"At least what's not covered by clouds," Amy remarked.

Richard looked outside at the surrounding warships. They were still quite visible. He was unable to see any other ships in the sky. "How much longer until we engage the drive?"

"Oh, about another four minutes," Jones said. "It'll be soon now."

"Will the other Ranger ships come with us?" Amy asked.

Jones shook his head. "Their propulsion system is quite different from ours, Amy. Once we engage we will leave them far behind. No, they are just there to make sure that no one stops us

from entering hyperspace. They'll still come on to Tau Ceti, but they'll be far behind us, and will arrive many days later."

* * * * *

"We have a confirmed departure," Dr. Kimberly told Governor Nicholas. "They have left, and will be engaging their hyperdrive in just a few minutes."

"No trouble so far?" the governor asked.

"None," she replied.

Governor Nicholas sighed. *Just a few more minutes and they will be safe*, he thought. The suspense was killing him.

* * * * *

The Sentinel was riding on board the *Sparrow*, watching as it made its journey. Then, without warning, it detected something.

Impossible, it thought, astonished. *I destroyed the Poneri! How can this be? How can they have even detected my presence?*

Over the next few seconds a vast army of Poneri appeared in space. The approaching fleet vastly outnumbered the group that had attacked the Sentinel on Mars a few days prior. They surged toward the *Sparrow*.

I don't have time for this, the Sentinel thought, as it watched them approach. It began to panic. *There are too many of them!* It sprang into action, knowing that this time it could not vanquish them.

* * * * *

"Requesting permission to engage the hyperdrive," Eliza said on the overhead announcement system. The announcement was only heard on the bridge.

"Are you ready?" Captain Maxwell asked Sergeant Howell. The ship was now some distance from Mars. The planet had receded to the point where it appeared to be roughly the size of a quarter. There was no sign of danger or interference.

"I am," the sergeant replied. "Engage."

Captain Maxwell spoke up. "Permission granted, Eliza. Engage the drive."

The artificial intelligence unit that controlled the *Sparrow* had already begun powering up the drive. It had been charging the zero-point-energy plant for the past three hours, preparing for the vast surge of energy that would be necessary to engage the ship's new, experimental propulsion system. When the captain gave the command the computer channeled all of the energy into the drive and activated it.

As this was happening, the compromised controller card that the stealth bot had placed into the system began executing its hidden program. The card had been designed for this one moment. During all of Ranger's tests the card had worked flawlessly, but now that the ship was in space the card did what it was designed to do. The controller overrode Eliza's management of the energy flowing into the ship's drive and allowed the entire surge to hit the drive at once.

"It's the surest way to destroy the ship," Emperor Justin Portius had been told. "Whatever precautions or technology the Rangers might have, it's a sure thing that their system can't withstand an energy overload of that magnitude. The ship will instantly turn into a miniature sun, and it will happen so fast that its occupants will never know what hit them."

* * * * *

Captain Theodore Harris was stationed on the Ranger warship *Excelsior*, watching the *Sparrow* closely. His vessel had been guarding the *Sparrow* for the past few days and was now

flying in close proximity to protect it from any Spanish incursions. Captain Harris knew how much this mission meant to Governor Nicholas and was determined to not let him down.

Over Sergeant Howell's communication system he heard Captain Maxwell give permission for the ship to enter hyperspace. A moment later, the *Sparrow* began to accelerate at an immense rate. Then, without warning, the ship gave off a blinding flash of light and was gone. In its place was a miniature sun that radiated a level of energy so intense that it was visible from the daylight surface of Mars.

Captain Harris looked outside, not believing what he was seeing. "Tracking," he said aloud.

Alvin Collins, his communications officer, spoke up. "Nothing, sir,"

The captain turned around. "Excuse me?"

"I am receiving no tracking signals, sir," Collins said. "I can't find the *Sparrow*."

Captain Harris then turned to Dr. Russel, who was also on the bridge. Dr. Russel was the lead scientist from Space Station Two, one of the five secret installations that Tau Ceti had built on the outskirts of Sol. "Dr. Russel, answer me this. The flash that we just saw – was that suppose to happen?"

Dr. Russel checked over his equipment, and then reluctantly turned back to the captain. "I – ah, I am picking up a lot of intense radiation. For a few seconds there was a miniature sun out there – a huge outpouring of energy, equivalent to a dozen antimatter weapons going off."

"Answer the question," Captain Harris replied tersely.

"The answer is no, sir," Dr. Russel said. "That was not supposed to happen. The *Sparrow* is gone. The residual radiation that my scanners is detecting is all that is left of her."

"Are there any survivors – signs of life – anything?" Captain Harris asked.

Dr. Russel shook his head. "No, sir. No one could possibly

have survived that. I'm sure that those on board never even knew what happened."

* * * * *

In the deep space tracking room of Space Station Four there was a sudden flurry of activity. Dr. Kimberly Hudson had noticed the disappearance of the *Sparrow* and was trying to find out what had happened. She was quickly giving orders to the rest of her team, hoping that the ship was not actually gone.

"Are you getting any readings at all?" she asked.

"No, doctor, we are not," one of the technicians replied. "There is no activity in hyperspace. We are not receiving any tracking data. Further, there is no evidence that the ship ever entered hyperspace."

"Try alternate bands," Dr. Hudson said. "Make sure that the ship is not in normal transit."

"I'm not seeing anything," another technician replied. "There is some activity around the Justin Portius Space Station, but nothing where the *Sparrow* should be."

"Check along the ship's route," Dr. Kimberly said. "Check everything! The ship has got to be there somewhere!"

A few minutes ticked by. One by one, the technicians came up empty. None of them could find any traces of the *Sparrow*.

"I am seeing a lot of radiation at the point of engagement," one technician said. "There has been an intense outpouring of energy there, corresponding to a high-level weapons discharge."

Dr. Kimberly Hudson sighed. "I know," she said softly. "I know."

"Governor Jack Nicholas is on the line," one of her aides said. "He wants to talk to you."

Dr. Kimberly Harris looked around. "What am I going to

tell him?" she asked aloud. Her voice was shaking. "All this work – all this preparation – and their lives are gone, just like that! Am I to tell him that we failed? That Justin Portius has effortlessly thwarted our best efforts? That we have allowed him to murder the entire Stryker family and proven to be nothing more than incompetent fools?"

"The governor is waiting," the aide repeated. "He's very anxious."

Dr. Kimberly Harris tried to gather herself together. "I know. I know! But I can't bring them back. I can't bring them back! What am I to do now?"

CHAPTER 36

"For us, destruction is the end, but that is not so for the living. Some of them will live to see what lies beyond the end of this universe."

--The Artilect

GOVERNOR JACK NICHOLAS was sitting in his office on Tau Ceti. It was late at night there, but he was no longer tired. Instead, he was gripped by a deep sadness – sadness mixed with rage.

"Tell me one more time," he said aloud.

Dr. Kimberly Hudson, the scientist on the other end of the communications channel, spoke up reluctantly. "The *Sparrow* never entered hyperspace, sir. From what we can tell, as soon as it engaged its propulsion system it suffered some sort of catastrophic failure that converted the ship's mass into a bright burst of radiation. There were no survivors."

Governor Nicholas shook his head. He turned to General Cary Locklear, the minister of defense for Tau Ceti. "What did we do wrong?" he asked. "What happened?"

"We took every precaution possible, governor," the general replied. "The bots must have done something inside the ship that was not detected, and the end result was the destruction of the ship."

"My efforts weren't good enough," the governor said. "I've sent an entire family to its death."

"No, sir, pardon me, but you haven't," General Locklear said. "That was the doing of Justin Portius."

"I really thought we could do it," Governor Nicholas continued. "I really did not think it would end this way. We tried

so hard, Cary. I really thought that Portius would back down – and I bet the lives of other people on that. The Stryker family had to pay very dearly for my mistake.”

“It was the Emperor's mistake,” General Locklear said. “You can't blame yourself for this. You did everything that was humanly possible to save them.”

The governor looked back at the screen at Dr. Kimberly Hudson. “You're quite sure about this?” he asked.

“Yes, sir, I am,” she said.

“There's no chance that they survived,” he repeated.

“None,” she said. “They're gone, sir.”

Governor Nicholas sat quietly for a few moments. “You know what this means,” he said.

“You have been granted the authority to proceed,” General Cary replied. “The Rangers are behind you. The decision has been made.”

“I know,” the governor said. “I was just hoping it would never actually come to this. I didn't want to do this, Cary.”

Governor Nicholas turned back to Dr. Hudson. “Please stand by, doctor. I'll be back in just a moment.”

“Will do, sir,” she replied. “I'm so sorry.”

* * * * *

Emperor Justin Portius was still in his office when Governor Jack Nicholas called him.

“Good morning,” Justin Portius replied. “How is your day going?”

“Stow it,” Governor Nicholas replied.

“Ah, how unfortunate! What seems to be the trouble?”

“As I'm sure you know, Portius, the *Sparrow* was destroyed when it tried to enter hyperspace. Everyone on board died.”

“What a pity,” the emperor replied. “If only the Strykers

had not allied themselves with a group of rebels! Had they chosen their friends more wisely they might still be alive today.”

“I’ve had quite enough with diplomacy,” the governor shouted. “You killed them, and I am going to hold you accountable for that. I am not going to stand by and let you kill my people!”

“And yet that is exactly what you are doing,” Portius replied. “Oh yes, we killed them – it was an easy and effortless thing to do. Like swatting away a bothersome fly. And we plan on continuing to kill your people until we’ve finally eliminated all of you. So tell me. Just what do you plan on doing about it?”

With that, Portius disconnected the channel. The emperor then leaned back in his chair, smiled, and contacted Karl Morgan. His chief of security walked into his office a few moments later.

“I have news for you, my good man,” the emperor said, laughing. “It looks like you will live to see another day!”

“So I have heard,” Karl replied. “It is indeed a good day. The news media is already spreading word of their unfortunate death. It is a pity the ship was destroyed in by a completely unforeseen system malfunction, but that happens sometimes.”

“Wonderful, wonderful,” the emperor said. “I’m sure that any suggestions that it was actually an assassination will be dismissed as mere conspiracy theories, fostered about by troublemakers. You are most efficient, Karl.”

“What should we do next?” the chief of security asked.

“That is the beauty of this plan!” Justin Portius replied. “We do nothing next – we simply wait and see how the rebels respond. I’m sure they’re going to launch an attack against us – an attack we are prepared to rebuff, correct?”

“Of course, sir,” Karl replied. “We are prepared for their attack – and for our counter-attack. The Iapetus is ready for battle.”

* * * * *

The control room in Space Station Four was completely quiet. Governor Jack Nicholas was broadcasting an open message to all Ranger installations. Through the communications channel Dr. Hudson could see that the governor had been joined in his office by the commander of his army, General Cary Locklear.

"Men and women of the colonies," the governor began. "As you may or may not know, at 7:18 AM this morning the Spanish Empire launched an attack on the Tau Ceti starship *Sparrow*. This unprovoked attack destroyed the ship and killed all on board. Seven people died in the assault: Governor Richard Stryker, Laura Stryker, Amy and Amanda Stryker, Captain Maxwell Baker, first mate Basil Jones, and Sergeant Jefferson Howell.

"After the attack the government of Tau Ceti contacted Emperor Justin Portius, demanding that justice be done for this crime. The Emperor, speaking on behalf of the Spanish Empire, admitted to the assassination and told us that he intends to murder every Ranger in space. After this declaration of war he cut off communications.

"The governments of the Rangers have given me the authority to respond to the Emperor in any way that I deem appropriate. Given the acts of war that have been perpetrated against us, and given the unrepentant hostility that the Emperor has displayed, there can only be one possible response."

"Dr. Kimberly Hudson," General Nicholas said, "as the duly-elected governor of Tau Ceti, and as the appointed representative of the entire Ranger federation, I order you to engage the Wall around Sol and to maintain it until ordered otherwise."

"Yes, sir," she responded. Dr. Hudson reached over onto the control panel in front of her. She lifted a small plastic cover, slid a switch into place, and pressed it. She then monitored a nearby screen and watched as the other four space stations

came online.

“The shield around Sol has been engaged,” she said quietly. “It has been done. All stations are operational. Do you have any further orders, sir?”

“Not at this time, Dr. Hudson. Thank you.” The governor closed the communication channel, looking tired and worn.

CHAPTER 37

"When the living are in trouble, they may approach the One with all power and ask for help. This freedom was purchased for them at a great price. We have no such privilege, my son."
--The Artilect

WINFRED SHERMANN WAS SHOWING his brother Erich around the Justin Portius Space Station when he suddenly noticed that something was very wrong.

"What happened to the stars?" Winfred asked. The space station, located just outside the orbit of Pluto, usually offered a brilliant view of the heavens. Within the past few moments, however, the stars had simply disappeared.

"That's odd," Erich said. "Maybe the stationmaster knows what happened. It could be a military experiment or something."

"Maybe it's tied to the destruction of the *Sparrow*," Winfred suggested. "I heard on the news it was destroyed earlier today when it tried to enter hyperspace – its engine malfunctioned, or something. Maybe it's had some side-effect on the fabric of space."

"Maybe that's it," Erich said. "But why would it be blocking the starlight?"

"Let's ask him," Winfred suggested, pointing to a nearby official. "He ought to know what's going on."

The official noticed Winfred pointing toward him and began walking in their direction. "What seems to be the trouble?" he asked.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. - "

"Bryce Hubbell. What seems – " and then the official stopped, as he realized that there were no longer any stars visible in space.

"Um, now, don't get all panicky," Hubbell said. "I'm sure there is nothing to be excited about! I'll just get in touch with the stationmaster and see what is going on. Stacy Lamont has been running this station for years and will have things back to normal in no time. Just go on about your business, please. We don't need to cause a panic over this!"

The official picked up his communicator and called Stationmaster Lamont, who was in his office.

"What is it this time, Bryce?" the stationmaster asked.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," the official said. "But the stars have disappeared, and people don't like it."

"The what has happened?" Lamont asked. "I don't think I heard you correctly."

"No, you did, sir," Hubbell replied. "The stars have disappeared. All of them. They're just gone."

"Have you tried checking under the couch cushions?" Lamont said. "Maybe you just mislaid them. I'm sure they're there somewhere, if you just look hard enough."

"I'm serious, Stacy," Hubbell repeated. "People are getting pretty unhappy about this. They want to know what is going on."

The stationmaster sighed. "Let me check into it, Bryce – and if you're just messing with me, you're going to get into a world of trouble, you understand?"

"Yes, sir, I do," Hubbell said. He hung up his communicator.

Fifteen minutes later, Stacy Lamont walked up to Hubbell in the observation lounge. He looked shaken and worried.

"This is bad – very, very bad," the stationmaster said.

"I told you the stars were gone," Hubbell replied.

"That's not the worst of it," Lamont said. "I stopped by

the communications center on the way down here, and they tell me that they've lost contact with all of the Ranger colonies. Even worse, they've lost contact with all incoming ships – and outgoing ships can't leave."

"They can't leave? What do you mean, they can't leave?"

"It's like there's a wall in the way, or something," the stationmaster said. "They can't engage their drives and enter hyperspace, and they can't go more than a million miles out from this station even with their normal drives. They just hit a wall – it's like the universe has shrunk."

Hubbell's eyes widened. "It's the Wall! Tau Ceti has one just like it – I've seen it. The Empire must have finally erected one of their own."

"Without telling us?" the stationmaster said. "Surely they'd say something! How are we supposed to get out with a Wall in the way?"

"I don't know, but it wouldn't be the first time they forgot to mention something. Maybe you should call them up and ask."

"I'll do that," the stationmaster replied. He walked away.

* * * * *

"I'm telling you that there is a Wall around this star system," the stationmaster told Karl Morgan. "All of the stars are gone, and no one can enter or leave."

"That's impossible!" Karl repeated. "We don't know how to build a Wall, and we don't have the energy necessary to power it even if we did. You've got to be mistaken."

"I tell you I'm not mistaken," Lamont replied. "Do you think I'm insane? You try calling up Tau Ceti and see if you can get through. Send one of your worthless heaps of space junk through hyperspace and see if you can get it outside of Sol. We're stuck here, Karl."

"If there is a Wall in place we're not responsible for it,"

Karl repeated. "This is not our doing."

"It had better be your doing," the stationmaster said. "The only way to destroy the Wall is to cut its power, and if the power source is outside the Wall then we are trapped in here forever. The Emperor is not going to want to hear that, Karl."

Karl suddenly began to look worried. "I'm sure there is some other, more reasonable explanation. Don't worry – we'll find it."

* * * * *

For the second time that morning Karl Morgan and Emperor Justin Portius were having a conversation. However, this time the conversation was much less pleasant.

"This situation is not acceptable," Emperor Portius said. "Not at all."

"But it is the situation, sir," Karl replied. "There is no mistaking it. My own men have confirmed it. We have been encased in the same kind of protective shield that guards Tau Ceti – only we have no way out."

"How is that even possible?" the emperor asked. "How could this happen?"

"They must have hidden some space stations on the border of our solar system that are powering the shield from the outside. There are probably more than one, if I had to guess – it takes an awful lot of power to create one of these shields."

"Then go destroy them! What are you waiting for?"

"We can't get to them, sir. They must be outside the system. The only way to bring down the system is to cut power to it, and we can't do that from the inside."

"I don't care how you do it!" the emperor said. "You bring down that shield, no matter what it takes!"

"It can't be done! It has been proven mathematically that the shield is invincible. No one will ever be able to bring it down

from the inside.”

“But surely they cannot maintain the shield for long.” the emperor said. “Perhaps the Wall will be down in a few days.”

“They have maintained the Wall around Tau Ceti for a decade. The Ranger's zero-point-energy technology gives them an endless supply of free energy. They can easily maintain the Wall for the rest of time if they chose to do so.”

“I will not accept the fact that we are trapped in here forever!” Emperor Portius screamed.

“It doesn't matter if you accept it or not, your highness. It is the truth. No one can enter this system and no one can leave it. We have been put into a prison that is impossible to escape from, and we will remain here until the Rangers decide to let us out.”

“We just assassinated the entire Stryker family!” the Emperor said. “Do you have any idea how long it will be before they're willing to even think of letting us out?”

“The facts are what they are. And this is not a situation that you can hide, either. The stars are not going to come out tonight, and I very much doubt that the stars will ever come out again. I can guarantee that people will notice – in fact, they have already begun to notice. The political fallout from this will be massive.”

“I will not accept this situation!” the Emperor screamed. “You and the rest of our worthless armed forces will find a way to break through the Wall, and when you do I will wreck vengeance upon the rebels that have trapped us here. You will find a way to do this, Karl, or you will die trying. Am I understood?”

“I'm afraid you are the one who doesn't understand,” Karl replied. He pressed a button on a nearby console, and a group of soldiers immediately entered the room.

“Arrest this man,” Karl said. “He is guilty of high crimes against the Empire.”

As the soldiers grabbed Justin Portius he began shouting.

“You can't do this! Who do you think you are?”

“I am trying to save our civilization,” Karl said. “You still don't understand what you have done! Do you have any idea what is going to happen as soon as the people find out what has happened? Do you realize how much unrest there will be when people discover that you have gotten us all imprisoned for the rest of time and have ripped the stars right out of the sky? Portius, you launched a war against the Rangers and lost. Your control over the Empire has been steadily weakening over the past few years, and this is going to tear it completely apart. Since you are incapable of leadership I am assuming control over the Empire. Perhaps I can save us all.”

“I have a lot of supporters,” the emperor said. “More than you know. You won't get away with this.”

“Your supporters won't last the day,” Karl replied. “I've already declared war on them. It will all be over soon.”

CHAPTER 38

*"It is impossible to undo
what has been done. This is
both a great comfort and
great burden."*

--The Artilect

IT WAS ONCE AGAIN late at night on Star City, the capitol of Xanthe. A group of men were having a meeting in the capitol building, discussing the events of the day. Hours had passed since Dr. Kimberly Hudson had activated the Wall around Sol and put an end to the conflict between the Spanish Empire and the Rangers.

"It is done," Governor Jack Nicholas said. "The Lord God created the stars to give light upon the Earth, and we have now stopped them from doing that. Due to the evil of mankind the stars may never again be able to fulfill their purpose."

"Until the Lord returns and sets everything right," Dr. Phineas Finley said.

The governor looked at him and smiled. "Yes, that's so," he said quietly. "There is that. Doctor, is everything secured on our side?"

"Yes, sir, it is," Dr. Finley replied. "As long as the shield is in place – and we have the ability to sustain it indefinitely – it will be impossible for any of them to enter or leave Sol."

"The Spanish Empire no longer poses any threat to the Rangers," General Cary Locklear said. "You managed to end the conflict almost before it began."

"We never really fought them," Governor Nicholas replied. "All we've done is imprisoned them and left them to their own devices. Based on the instability of the Spanish Empire it will most likely collapse sometime during the next few years."

Once people begin blaming each other for their problems a civil war will break out, and that will break the power of the Emperor. We're depending on their own corruption to do them in – but we may never know if we were successful.”

“The chance of success, however, is very high,” General Locklear said.

The governor turned to Dr. Finley. “Do you think that the Empire will find a way to shut down the wall?”

“That is highly unlikely, governor,” Dr. Finley said. “The Spanish Empire is very, very far from even being able to build their own Wall, much less find a way to defeat it. We understand the technology very well and even we can't pierce it.”

“They're going to try, though,” the governor said, “but I agree. I think they will fail. The one thing that we must never do is drop the shield – not for any reason. I can only imagine what would happen if that shield ever failed.”

“It will not fail,” Dr. Finley said. “Any two of the stations we have built would be sufficient to power the shield, and we have five stations in place. Station maintenance is largely automatic, making the system easy to maintain – and as you pointed out, we have a huge incentive to maintain it. I am sure that the Wall will last for at least a few centuries, by which point the political situation on Earth will probably be quite different.”

“But still extremely hostile,” the governor said. “I see no chance that Sol will warm to us after having been imprisoned for so long. I do not think we will ever be able to lower the shield. This was not the right way to fight the war.”

“There was no other way to fight it that did not involve massive damage and loss of life,” General Locklear replied. “The Rangers do not possess the military force needed to defend themselves. You had no other choice.”

“That does not make this choice any better,” Governor Nicholas replied. “Someone will still have to deal with the situation that we created. Judgment day has been postponed,

not eliminated. In a way this places us at a great disadvantage because we now have no idea what we are facing.”

“But think of the lives that you have saved,” the general said.

“Think of the lives we have lost,” the governor said. “Had the *Sparrow* not been destroyed the situation would be very different. Eight people have died today, to say nothing of the millions on Mars that were wiped out.”

“That is far less than the billions that would certainly have died in a full-scale nuclear war,” General Locklear said.

“And I am not so sure that the Strykers died,” Dr. Finley said. “That is far from a known fact.”

“What do you mean?” Governor Nicholas replied. “Their ship was vaporized – turned into energy! Dr. Kimberly Hudson was quite clear that no one could possibly have survived that inferno.”

“That is what we thought at the time, governor, but now we are not so sure. There was no debris, and the blast was highly unusual. We have ran a number of simulations since the incident and we cannot duplicate what happened.

“I believe we understand what the Empire tried to do. They must have replaced one of the circuit boards that control the flow of energy between the power plant and the ship's propulsion system. The board was built to operate normally when tested, but once the ship was in space it was programmed to overload the engine and destroy it.”

“Justin Portius clearly thought that it worked,” Governor Nicholas replied. “He even bragged about it when I called!”

“But the evidence is against it,” Dr. Finley said. “Had the Emperor's plan worked, the explosion would have been many times larger – large enough to engulf and destroy all of the surrounding Ranger ships. On top of this there was no disturbance in space, which definitely should have happened if something went wrong during the creation of a hyperspace

window.”

“But isn't the *Sparrow* missing?” the governor asked. “What are you telling me?”

“I think that the Empire definitely tried to destroy the *Sparrow*. They thought they succeeded, too – but I think that someone else intervened. Some other agency made the ship look like it had been destroyed when in reality it hadn't. In short, we think that the ship may still be out there somewhere. We just don't know where.”

The governor sighed. “That doesn't even make sense, doctor. The Empire wasn't trying to hijack the ship, it was trying to destroy it – and Portius was convinced that they did. Space Station Four has the very best tracking equipment that has ever been developed, and when the *Sparrow* engaged its hyperdrive it simply disappeared. Who would have technology so advanced that it can steal an entire starship right from under the most intense scrutiny that any vessel has ever had? Who would even want to do that?”

“There is one group that could,” Dr. Finley replied.

“Name them,” the governor said.

General Locklear spoke up. “You're thinking of the *Starfire* incident.”

Dr. Finley nodded. “There is a third party out there, governor, that we know nothing about – a third party that most certainly has the technology necessary to do exactly this. They may well have intervened and saved the *Sparrow* for their own reasons.”

Governor Nicholas was taken aback by this. “I had forgotten about them. That certainly throws a new light on things. But, Dr. Finley – if that is the case, and alien powers are now interfering with our internal affairs – what are we to do?”

Dr. Finley shook his head. “I don't know, sir. I just don't know.”

There was silence for a few minutes. “Perhaps you are

right," the governor said. "Maybe the *Sparrow* does still exist, and perhaps her passengers are still alive. But if what you say is true – if they have been abducted by beings with far greater power than our own – then I find it very doubtful that we will ever see any of them alive again."

"But there is a chance," Dr. Finley insisted. "As best we can tell, someone went through a lot of trouble to save that ship. There was a reason for that, governor. Maybe we will see them again."

The governor shook his head. "I wouldn't count on it."

* * * * *

Stationmaster Lamont was walking down the deserted hallways of the Justin Portius Space Station when he spotted Bryce Hubbell. "What are you doing?" Lamont asked. "You've got to get out of here!"

"Why?" Bryce asked. "This disorder can't last much longer."

"Are you out of your mind? It's not safe here anymore! I was about to leave myself."

"But four days ago everything was fine!"

"Four days ago, Bryce, the Wall wasn't there, Justin Portius was still our emperor, and the Empire was not engulfed in a civil war. Back in those glorious days the station was still getting its much-needed supply shipments. Those days are over, Bryce. We can't stay here any longer."

"I don't know what else to do, Stacy. Where are you going?"

"Ganymede," he replied. "It's about as safe as anyplace else."

"There's a settlement there?"

"I admit it's small," Lamont admitted. "The radiation belts around Jupiter make living there hazardous. But right now it's

better than anywhere else.”

“But surely this won't last long,” Bryce said. “You've got to think that in a few days the problems will die down and we'll start getting shipments again. This can't last long.”

The stationmaster shook his head. “The stars are gone,” he said quietly. “If you can put them back into the sky then I'm sure the disorder will die down. Until you do, people will think that the world has come to an end, and frankly I think they may be right. Here – take a look at this.”

Lamont walked over to a nearby computer terminal and pressed some buttons. A black screen appeared.

“I'm not seeing anything,” Bryce said.

“Exactly. Earth is not responding. Mars is not responding. Luna is not responding. Order has completely broken down. It's all over. All we can do is hide away until the night passes.”

“How long will that take?” Bryce asked.

“I don't know,” the stationmaster replied.

CHAPTER 39

*"For some, there will be no
ending – only brighter
tomorrows."
--The Artilect*

AT 7:19 AM ON DECEMBER 7, 1867, Eliza engaged the hyperdrive of the starship *Sparrow*. The Sentinel had been waiting for this moment for many years, but when it finally came it was forced to radically alter the Artilect's plan. As soon as it realized that it would not be able to defeat the Poneri it abandoned the *Sparrow*, leaving behind a cloud of hastily-created nanites. *They will have to do this for me*, the Sentinel thought, *for I no longer have the time*.

The Sentinel knew exactly what the Empire stealth bots had done during their incursion into the ship, and was well aware of the sabotaged control card. At the time the Sentinel did nothing, but the moment the card was activated the nanites began their work. In less than a microsecond they stopped the controller from flooding the ship's propulsion system with a destructive tide of energy, and repaired the flaw that prevented it from operating normally. The nanites then spread through every system on the ship and assumed complete control.

It took them only a moment to sheath the *Sparrow* in a cloak that no science of Earth or Tau Ceti could penetrate, and it set off an explosion in space to mask the *Sparrow's* disappearance. To an outside observer – and, the Sentinel was hoping, to the Poneri – it looked liked the ship had destroyed itself. In reality, however, the ship was still intact.

Once the ship was hidden, the nanites infiltrated its zero-point-energy plant and used their own technology to increase its

output by many orders of magnitude. As an unthinkable amount of energy began surging into the ship's drive – vastly more than it was ever designed to handle – the nanites, overriding the ship's natural functions, used that energy in a very pointed and specific way.

* * * * *

After Captain Maxwell gave the command to engage, Eliza complied. In the observation lounge of the ship the Stryker family watched as the ship accelerated. When it entered hyperspace there was a brief flash of brilliant white light, and then the stars disappeared, replaced with a hazy, almost undefined grayness.

“Hey!” Laura said. “Where did the twins go?”

Richard looked around, startled. “What's that?” he said. “They were just here!”

Alex got up and began racing around the room. “Girls!” he barked. “Hey! Where did you go?” He then raced out of the room and down the corridor, barking.

“And where did the stars go?” Richard asked.

“Something is very wrong,” Jones said. “Excuse me, please. I'll be right back.”

He then raced down the corridor, heading toward the ship's engine room.

* * * * *

On the bridge of the ship, Captain Maxwell and Sergeant Howell had also noticed the grayness. The captain looked puzzled, and then noticed that the ship's computer systems were all registering errors.

“Eliza!” he shouted, pounding on some controls. The computer did not respond. Seconds later, all of the screens on

the bridge went black.

"This is not good," Captain Maxwell said. "Eliza's down – in fact, everything is down. Something is wrong, sergeant."

"Come in, *Defiance*," Sergeant Howell said into his communicator. "We have a situation – please come in." There was no response.

"Captain!" Jones said, his voice coming over the ship's communications system. "The twins are gone!"

"What?" Captain Maxwell asked. "What do you mean, gone?"

"I mean they're no longer on board the ship," Jones said. "I was sitting right next to them, and suddenly they disappeared right in front of my eyes. But we have another problem as well, captain. You've got to come down to the engine room immediately."

"Eliza's not working," the captain said. "Do you know what's going on?"

"I'm not sure, but I have an idea, and it's not good," Jones said. "You've got to get down here right away."

"I'm on my way," Captain Maxwell said. He ran out of the room, leaving Sergeant Howell alone.

"I'll start searching for the twins," the sergeant called out as the captain left the room.

"Thanks," the captain shouted back. "Let me know if you find them."

As the captain ran into the ship's engine room he noticed that the computer terminals were no longer black.

"I've managed to get some of the computers back online," Jones said.

"Good work, Jones. Is Eliza up?"

"No, she's not," Jones replied. "I've had to reboot her – she was out cold. She should be up in about a minute. But captain, we have a very serious problem."

"Have you checked the security systems?" Captain Maxwell asked. He walked over to a terminal and started working at it.

"I haven't bothered," Jones replied. "We have a much, much bigger problem than that. Look at this, captain."

Jones had brought up the engine monitoring tool onto a nearby console. The captain looked at the figures on it and gasped. "Those numbers have to be wrong," Captain Maxwell said. "They've got to be. They're not even in the range of possibility."

"They all match, captain," Jones said. "Look at this – and this – and this. Do you see the energy output we're getting right now?"

"There's no power plant in the entire universe that can produce that much power! There's just no way. The computer has to have a virus, or something. Besides, even if it could produce that much power the ship would destroy itself the moment it was fed into the wiring. Something is badly wrong."

"I agree," Jones said.

"Come on, Eliza, come on!" the captain said, beating his fist on a nearby console. "Where are you when we need you?"

They waited. Seconds ticked by. "I don't remember her normally taking this long to boot up," Jones said.

"She doesn't," Captain Maxwell replied. "The stealth bots must have done something to her – or maybe whatever is going wrong has infected her as well. Oh, wait – there she is. Finally! Eliza, stop this ship. We need to stop immediately! Take us out of hyperspace."

"Affirmative, captain," she responded. As the captain watched the engineering console he saw that the ship was gradually starting to slow down.

"I'm serious, Eliza," Captain Maxwell repeated. "There has been a critical systems breakdown. You have to stop the ship immediately. Use the emergency breaking system – use

anything.”

“I am stopping the ship as quickly as I can, captain,” Eliza responded. “What is the nature of your emergency? All systems are working normally.”

“Normally!” the captain screamed. “How do you explain your energy output?”

“I cannot,” Eliza said. “All systems are responding to control. All hardware appears to be functional. No system failures are detected.”

“How is she slowing the ship down, captain?” Jones asked. “It's not built for this.”

“I don't know, but at least we're slowing down. Another couple minutes and we'll be back to a normal, safe speed. We'll have to ask her later.”

“Eliza, I have one other question,” Jones said. “Where are the twins?”

“Amy Stryker and Amanda Stryker are not on board this ship,” Eliza replied.

* * * * *

The Sentinel's nanites timed the voyage with great precision. Using its control of the *Sparrow*, they prevented Eliza from restarting until they were ready for her to begin operation. When they finally did allow Eliza to operate they used their control of her to slow the ship down – a maneuver that the ship had no power to do. Once the ship had slowed down to a safe speed the nanites disengaged its control and removed the cloak from the ship, allowing its occupants to once again see the stars – and for the stars to see them.

It did not take long for the nanites to verify that the journey had been a success. It had been a long chance, but it worked. The *Sparrow* and all her occupants had been brought to the home galaxy of the Artilect. Now all the nanites had to do

was wait for the Sentinel to arrive and give them further orders.

* * * * *

As Eliza slowed the ship down, Captain Maxwell worked furiously at another computer console. The longer he worked the more worried he became. Jones came over beside him and looked over his shoulder.

"This is bad," the captain said. "I can't believe it. How could this happen?"

"At least we're still alive," Jones said.

"How is this even possible, Jones? Does the Spanish Empire really have this kind of technology? Did we completely misjudge their scientific skills?"

Jones shook his head. "I don't think the Emperor was responsible for this, captain."

Captain Maxwell glanced out a window and noticed that stars were shining once again. He didn't notice exactly when it happened, but at some point the grayness had disappeared. However, the stars that the captain saw gave him no comfort.

"Do you have a fix on our position?" Jones asked.

Captain Maxwell sighed. "I think I do. It's a little rough, but it's probably pretty close to the truth. But what do we do now, Jones? I can't bring them back."

"All we can do is tell them, sir," Jones replied. "Then we let them decide what happens next."

"Tell them!" the captain said. "How do I tell them, Jones? How do I tell them that their entire world is gone and that there is no way to bring them home? How do I tell them that the life they once knew is gone forever? How do I tell them that they will never see their daughters again?"

"I don't know," Jones said. "But I don't think you have a choice."

CHAPTER 40

"The story is never over, my son. There is always another chapter."

--The Artilect

THE STRYKER FAMILY was sitting in the observation lounge when Captain Maxwell and Jones walked in. Richard noticed the gloomy looks on their faces. *This can't be good*, he thought.

"So what seems to be the problem?" he said aloud. "Have you found my daughters?"

"I've asked Sergeant Howell to come down from the bridge," Captain Maxwell replied. "If you don't mind, I'd like to tell you all at once."

"Are we going to be arriving late, captain?" Laura asked.

"I'm afraid we are," Max replied. "We're all in one piece, but we will definitely be arriving later than planned."

Alex, the dog, walked back into the room a few moments later. He walked over to a corner and sat down. "I can't find them," he barked.

"I know," the captain said.

A few moments later Sergeant Howell walked into the room. After he had been seated the captain began talking.

"Just a few short minutes ago I gave the command for this ship to enter hyperspace. However, judging from the information I've been able to get out of the ship's computers, that did not occur.

"Instead, it looks like there was a brilliant flash of light – I'm still not sure why that happened – and the ship entered some other region of space. That grayness outside is something I've never seen before. What I do know is that the ship began

accelerating and all of her computers went down.”

“Sabotage, I’m sure,” Sergeant Howell replied. “This is what they planned all along.”

“I don’t think so,” Captain Maxwell replied. “I think they wanted to destroy the ship – maybe overload its space drive or something. No, I don’t think the Empire has the technology to do what actually happened. You see, as soon as we entered that gray region of space, this ship accelerated to within a fraction of the speed of light, and we held that speed until Eliza restarted and was able to slow the ship down. Our elapsed time at that incredible velocity was six minutes and fifty-four seconds.”

At that news Richard gasped, and Sergeant Howell turned pale.

“What does that mean?” Laura asked. She had noticed the response of her husband but did not understand the cause. “I didn’t think it was possible to go that fast.”

“That’s the problem,” the captain said. “This ship, even with the zero-point-energy plant on board, just does not have the power needed to accelerate to that speed over that short an amount of time. Nor does it have the power it needs to slow the ship down.”

“That is what we don’t understand,” Jones said. “This couldn’t possibly have happened, but it did.”

“I still don’t see the significance of this,” Laura replied. “Were are we?”

“About five thousand light-years away from Earth,” the captain said.

Richard whistled, and his wife’s eyes got large. “I guess we are going to be a little late,” Laura replied. “We’re in uncharted territory.”

Richard shook his head. “You’re missing the point, dear. As an object travels closer to the speed of light, time slows down for that object. So, when this happened, time continued as normal back home, but for us on-board time slowed down

dramatically. We're now far in the future."

"About five thousand years into the future," Jones replied. "As near as we can figure, we are now sometime in the 73rd century. I don't know when, exactly, but that's probably a pretty close guess."

"But what about our daughters?" Laura asked.

"Something took them off the ship just before we left," the captain said. "They are still back in the 23rd century. In all likelihood they died of natural causes more than five thousand years ago."

* * * * *

It took some time for the news to sink in. Everyone was in shock.

"I just don't see how this could have happened," Captain Maxwell kept saying. "No one had the technology to do this – the energy requirements are just too great."

"I agree," Sergeant Howell said. "Some third party must have caused this. I can see no other explanation."

"Does that mean that the Spanish Empire has some kind of alien allies?" Richard replied.

"Maybe, but that's ancient history now," Jones replied. "It's like debating over the Babylonian Empire. Earth, Mars, everyone – they're all dust by now."

"But our daughters!" Laura said. "I - I just can't believe it. Who would have taken them off the ship? And why?"

"I don't know," the captain said. "From the standpoint of the universe at large, all of that happened a long time ago – a very long time ago. So long ago that there is probably no record of it even happening. Unless someone can find a way to go back in time there's no way to rescue them."

Alex walked over to the captain and looked up at him. "Does this mean the girls are gone?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," the captain said. "I really am. But there's no way I can get them back."

"I want to go home," Alex said. "Things were better there."

"I wish I could take you there, Alex, but there's just no way to go home."

"Are you sure?" Laura asked. "I mean, we just traveled 5000 years into the future. Can't you just go backwards?"

"I don't think so," Richard replied. "Everyone is always going into the future one moment at a time – it's only a matter of how quickly you're getting there. But going backwards in time is completely impossible."

"Even with science 5000 years ahead of our own?" she asked.

"That I don't know," Richard said.

"So what happens now?" Laura asked.

Captain Maxwell looked at the first mate. "There is a star system nearby that we should be able to reach in a few hours. From what we can tell there's a habitable planet orbiting it. We could stop there and see if anyone can lend us a hand."

"By now I imagine the entire galaxy has been colonized," Richard replied. "It's hard to imagine what life is going to be like."

"Or what the dangers are," Sergeant Howell said. "We don't know if these people are going to be friendly or hostile."

Captain Maxwell nodded. "This ship is now extremely old technology, but it's all that we have. Unless someone has an objection I'd suggest heading toward the nearest settlement and asking around."

"We were brought here, you know," Richard replied. "We had to be. Somebody intended for us to arrive at this exact moment in time. Whoever that was, I have a feeling that they are going to come looking for us."

"I don't know if that's good or bad," Sergeant Howell said thoughtfully.

"I guess we'll find out," Jones replied.

* * * * *

Over the next few hours, Captain Maxwell flew the *Sparrow* toward the nearest star system. When the ship neared its destination everyone gathered at the bridge to watch the planet come into view.

"Eliza seems to be working fine now," the first mate said. "I'm not seeing any signs of trouble."

"Look!" Laura said, pointing out the window. A beautiful blue and green planet was slowly coming into view. As they got closer they could make out large oceans and rich, green vegetation.

"According to our charts this star system doesn't even have a name," Captain Maxwell said.

"I'm sure it does now," Richard replied. "After all, those charts are now five thousand years old."

"What do you think we'll find down there?" Laura asked.

"There's only one way to find out," Richard said. "Captain, bring this ship into planetary orbit and contact the planet. Let's see if there's anybody home."

CHAPTER 41

*"I love you, my son. Please
be careful."*

--The Artilect

ONE MOMENT Amy and Amanda Stryker were sitting in the lounge of the starship *Sparrow*, and the next moment they were resting on a comfortable leather couch in an enormous, open area. The floor, which appeared to go on forever in all directions, was covered in a thick white carpet. There were no walls or ceiling in sight. Instead, the floor stretched to the horizon, where it seemed to fade away into nothingness. Light appeared to be coming from nowhere in particular. For all the twins knew they were in the middle of their own universe, inhabited by no one but themselves.

"Hey!" Amy said. "Where did the ship go?"

"It is still there," a voice said. "You are simply no longer on board."

To the girls' surprise, a man suddenly materialized in front of them. *It's as if he just stepped into the room through a door*, Amanda thought, *only there aren't any doors. Where did he come from?*

The gentleman appeared to be a tall, middle-aged individual and was wearing a gray suit and hat. He looked at them with an expression of concern and worry. "I apologize for not being here when you arrived," he said. "I had to create this area and verify that it was secure, and that took a little more time than I had expected."

"You did what?" Amanda said.

"Where are we?" Amy asked.

"In a pocket in space that I have created," the man

replied. "No one can harm you here. It is 7:21 AM on December 7, 1867, local Martian time."

"Where is the ship?" Amy asked. "And who are you? And why are we here?"

"Those are excellent questions," the man replied. A leather recliner suddenly materialized beside him. He sat down in it, and then leaned forward to speak to the girls. Before he could say anything, however, Amanda interrupted him. "There you go again! How do you keep doing that?"

"I will start at the beginning," the man replied. "I am the Sentinel. Although you do not know me, we have encountered each other before. Do you remember?"

As he spoke, the nanites inside the twin's bloodstream came back to life. The twins gasped as they felt themselves reconnected.

"So that was you," Amanda said.

"Yes," the Sentinel said. "As you guessed, I am not from this galaxy. I am actually from the future. My father, the Artilect, created me on August 23, 6571."

"He *created* you?" Amanda asked. "What does that mean?"

"I am a machine," the Sentinel replied. "My father is a machine as well. You see, Amanda, your brother's work on the replicating probes will be successful. Within five centuries there will be a vast network of worlds – so many, in fact, that the Diano Corporation will construct a computer to manage them. Over time, this computer will turn into the Artilect.

"When the Artilect was originally built it was housed in a giant space station thousands of light-years from Sol. In order to manage the automated terraformation projects on thousands of worlds the Artilect was given the ability to think, and reason, and grow. As thousands of years passed it grew into a machine of incredible power.

"But there was a problem. By the year 6500 the Artilect

controlled tens of millions of worlds, but they were all empty. Mankind never moved into the network of stars that the Artillect governed. When the Artillect was first built mankind inhabited a few of the new worlds, but they abandoned them shortly after that point. After thousands of years they had never come to claim them.”

“This just keeps getting stranger,” Amy whispered to Amanda. “By the year 6500?”

“Shhh,” Amanda said. “Let him finish.”

The Sentinel continued. “So the Artillect began an investigation, and discovered that mankind was on the verge of extinction. At some point in the past a single star had launched an attack on another star, using weapons that automatically reproduced themselves. Ever since that time the war has slowly spread to other star systems, wiping them out one by one.

“We do not know if anyone on the planet that started the war is still alive, or if all that is left is machinery that endlessly reproduces itself. What we do know is that it will not be long before they defeat the final few star systems and, possibly, exterminate humanity forever.”

“That is a lot to digest,” Amanda said. “I think I am following you so far, though.”

“Basically, thousands of years from now, your dad became concerned that humanity was going to destroy itself,” Amy said. “I still don’t see how that involves us.”

“It definitely involves you, my little ones,” the Sentinel replied.

“That’s another thing,” Amy replied. “Whatever you do, don’t call us that. We’re not children, you know. Treat us with some respect, ok?”

“Of course,” the Sentinel replied. “My apologies. I meant you no harm. You just seem young compared to my father.”

“It’s ok,” Amanda said.

“As I said,” the Sentinel continued, “my father was

concerned that humanity was in danger. However, there was nothing it could do to intervene. Although it had tremendous power, its creators had prohibited it from intervening in the affairs of men. The Artilect was allowed to maintain its own worlds, but it could do nothing else.

“There was an exception to this rule, however. The creators had given system administrators complete authority over the Artilect. If one of them changed the rules or gave the Artilect a different command then it would be allowed to intervene.”

“That makes sense,” Amy replied.

Amanda’s eyes widened. “Let me guess! There were no system administrators left alive, so you decided to go back in time and find one. That’s why you want us – because we are administrators on Tim’s project.”

“You’ve got to be kidding!” Amy said. “There’s no way.”

“Your sister is correct,” the Sentinel said. “There were no surviving system administrators left in the 8th millennium, but we still had records of their DNA in the system. Your brother made you and Amanda administrators on the production probe that will be launched next year. That access was never revoked, and was copied from system to system. The two of you are set up as administrators over the Artilect, and can grant him the right to intervene and save mankind. I was sent back in time to extract you and bring you and your family to the future.”

“Why us?” Amy asked. “We’re just kids!”

Amanda looked at her sister and shook her head. “You have to make up your mind, Amy,” she said. “You just told him we were adults.”

“Well, sure, but now he’s talking about taking us thousands of years into the future so that we can end a war. That’s totally different! Why would anybody even think of asking us to do that? Isn’t there somebody else you could get?”

“Yeah,” Amanda replied. “Why us? There have got to be

other administrators you could have chosen. Surely we're not the only ones there have ever been!"

"I am afraid we had no choice," the Sentinel replied. "The Artilect spent many years searching for a way to go back in time, and ultimately discovered that it is impossible. There is simply no way to do it."

"But you're here!" Amy said. "How do you explain that?"

"Divine intervention," the Sentinel replied. "The Creator of the universe can do things that no one else can."

"So that's how you did it," Amanda said. "Very sneaky."

"The Artilect did not decide which administrator to retrieve, Amanda. When he saw where the singularity went he checked what administrators were alive during that time, and realized that the two of you would be the easiest to extract. Since you both were killed on December 7 it would be possible to rescue you without changing the timeline. Since he could not go back in time himself he sent me in his place."

"So why are we still in the past?" Amy asked.

"When I attempted to rescue you I ran into the Poneri. They have attempted to stop me from rescuing you, and I believe they pose a serious threat to mankind. I would like to eliminate them –"

"But you need our permission first," Amy replied. "It all makes sense now. So you sent the *Sparrow* on to the future as you had on doing planned all along but took us off of it at the last minute, right? And once we get done we'll go on to the future and help you there."

"That is correct," the Sentinel replied.

"So right now mom and dad are in the future?" Amy asked.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Amanda replied. "The future hasn't happened yet."

The Sentinel nodded. "Your sister is right, Amy. It will take the *Sparrow* five thousand years to reach October 10, 7239. But

for them, only six minutes will have passed. During their trip no one will be able to harm them or prevent them from arriving.”

“So you can’t, like, stop them from going so we can ask their advice,” Amy said.

“I am afraid not,” the Sentinel replied. “The Artilect prohibited me from revealing myself to any of you, but the danger was so great that I felt compelled to act.”

“Won’t our parents miss us?” Amanda asked.

“Only for six minutes,” the Sentinel said. “I can arrange for us to be there when the ship arrives, and I can transport you on board the moment the ship decloaks. We can then explain what happened.”

“What if we don’t make it to the future?” Amy said.

“Then your parents will have many questions and no answers. They will find themselves in a very strange world with no one to explain what has happened. But I do not think that is likely to happen.”

“I guess we had better get started, then,” Amanda replied. “The sooner we join them in the future the better. Now, who are these Poneri?”

(To be continued in the next volume,
In The City Of Tomorrow.)