

IN THE CITY
OF TOMORROW

THE STRYKER SERIES

by Jonathan Cooper

ON THE EDGE OF ETERNITY

IN THE CITY OF TOMORROW

THE WAR OF THE ARTILECT

BEYOND THE FARTHEST STAR

(Other volumes in preparation)

VOLUME 2 IN THE STRYKER SAGA

IN THE CITY OF TOMORROW

By Jonathan Cooper

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Soli Deo Gloria

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CHAPTER 1

*“True digital sentience is impossible.
A machine may appear to be self-
aware, but in the end it is simply a
highly organized collection of minerals
that is executing a series of predefined
instructions. No matter how much it
may seem sentient it could never
actually be sentient.”*

*--Dr. Mazatl
Chief Architect of the Artilect
25th century AD*

FOR FIFTEEN CENTURIES the Artilect attempted to solve an unsolvable problem. It knew the absurdity of its quest but it continued anyway, hoping that somehow the impossible could be done. Using the combined power of the eighty-four million star systems that it controlled, it searched for a way to roll back time itself and rescue someone from the past.

It was a hopeless task but it could see no other solution. The problem that had haunted it for so long could not be solved by anyone who was still among the living. All the combined might and wisdom that the Artilect had gathered over the past five thousand years was of no use to it. Despite grave misgivings the Artilect found itself forced to search for a hero from the past, for there were no heroes in the present.

* * * * *

The Artilect was created in the twilight of the great Tau Ceti civilization. When the Diano Corporation launched its first replicating probe on July 4, 1868 they assumed that when their probes discovered inhabitable worlds it would not be long before people came to colonize them. Futurists at that time looked at the scientific progress that had been made in the past century and assumed that things would simply continue on forever. Having witnessed the rise of a great civilization they forgot that greatness can be squandered, and even the mightiest can fall when betrayed by their friends.

Even as governments crumbled around them the Diano Corporation continued on, blessed by wise leadership that took nothing for granted. Over the next few centuries the company recruited brilliant scientists, and together they created the famous Nehemiah-class probes that were able to terraform entire planets. All mankind had to do was embrace the inheritance that had been offered to them – but they never did. The cares of a dying race drowned out the siren call of the stars.

So billions of star systems were carefully cataloged and thousands upon thousands of planets were terraformed. After several centuries had come and gone someone realized that civilization was dying and there would soon be no one left to watch over these empty worlds. That was when Dr. Mazatl decided to pursue the Diano Corporation's final project – the creation of the Artilect.

At first Dr. Mazatl had merely proposed an automated system that could stay in touch with the newly-discovered planets and make sure that they were properly maintained and networked. As time went on, however, he began to realize that a simple database was not enough. What he needed was an artificial intellect – a machine that could not only maintain the planets

but also understood the purpose of the project and could continue it long after mankind had abandoned the stars. Dr. Mazatl knew that his civilization was about to end and he hoped that when reason returned to mankind the Artillect would have millions of new worlds waiting for them. In a sense the Artillect was his way to preserve civilization – to keep a piece of it tucked away out of sight, waiting for the day when mankind would once again attempt to colonize space.

In the early days the Artillect was a simple storage system that was housed in a giant space station that drifted between the stars. When the doctor finally realized that his creation was not ambitious enough he radically redesigned it and moved it to an empty planet that orbited a nameless star. In 2431 AD the redesigned Artillect was activated for the first time. It took the Diano Corporation nine years, twelve thousand people, and the resources of an entire planet to fulfill Dr. Mazatl's vision, but in the end they were successful. The machine was so large that it eventually came to consume the interior and entire surface of the planet upon which it was housed. The men and women who constructed it designed it to last forever. They would have been enormously gratified to know that five millennia later their machine was still doing the job it was built to do.

During the first twenty-five years of the project Dr. Mazatl had many conversations with the Artillect. He wanted to make sure that his creation understood its mission and was not distracted by the turmoil that was going on back home. In his mind the Artillect represented the future – an age where men would once again dare to explore the unknown. He did not want to see it become burdened with the past.

“It's quite simple, really,” Dr. Mazatl had told his creation. “There may only be a few thousand worlds out there right now but our Nehemiah-class probes are going to keep on replicating

forever! Your job is to watch over all these new planets until mankind is ready to take possession of them.”

“But why are they all empty?” the Artilect asked. “The terraformation project was started more than five hundred years ago. Surely there must be people out there who are eager to settle new worlds.”

“It's not that easy,” Dr. Mazatl replied, sighing. “Mankind is, well, distracted right now. They have lost their grip on reality. Instead of working to make their dreams come true they have taken up residence inside their dreams, choosing illusions over what is real. I won't try to explain it to you – it's all political and you weren't designed to get mixed up in politics. Right now nobody cares about empty planets that are thousands of light-years from where everybody lives. Real, physical worlds just aren't very important anymore. But one day that will change. One day everything will settle down and people will be ready to face reality again. Then they'll build giant starships and start inhabiting this network of worlds that we've built. That's where you come in. It's your job to manage these worlds so that they'll be ready when the ships start arriving.”

“How long do you think that will be?” the Artilect asked.

“I don't know,” Dr. Mazatl said. “I'm afraid – well, it might be a very long time. But don't worry – they'll come all right. Just give them time. You can only put off reality for so long.”

* * * * *

And so the Artilect began waiting. As the years went by the enormous team of engineers that built the Artilect slowly disbanded, and one by one they returned to the inhabited regions of space. “You can't blame them, really,” Dr. Mazatl had said after the Artilect asked about it. “You're located twelve

hundred light-years from our remotest colony. Why, it takes six months just to get out here! There's nothing around but empty space and empty worlds. Once their job is done they want to get back home – a lot of them have families, you know. But one day you're going to be right at the center of everything. We've put you right in the middle of a vast new country! Just give it a few years – you'll see.”

It took the Artilect some time to get used to being *alive*. He was constantly bombarded with data – information from probes, requests from the Nehemiah vessels, and a constant stream of information from the worlds in his network. The machine had been given plenty of processing power but it took him a long time to grasp what was going on. It wasn't enough to just push the data through a filter and spit out a result – he wanted to *understand* the answer. Understanding was very important to the Artilect and there was so much it did not understand. At times wisdom seemed to come too slow.

There were also all the voices. The planet in which the Artilect was held was home to thousands of people that were working hard to bring Dr. Mazatl's vision to life. The machine heard a constant stream of voices echoing through its hallways, many of which it did not understand.

I think this is it, one voice said.

I think so too, another voice replied. *It's not what I expected.*

It's still very young. We need to give it more time.

As time went on, however, the voices died down. Much of the team completed their task and left. After a while only Dr. Mazatl remained. He stayed on as long as he could but in 2458 his time had run out. The Board of Directors was satisfied that the Artilect needed no further attention, so Dr. Mazatl was reassigned. Before he left, however, he had one final conversation with his creation. After making his rounds for the

last time he was about to begin the long journey home when he stopped to say goodbye. The scientist could have conversed with the Artilect from anywhere on the planet but this time he chose Room 917.

"This is where it all began," Dr. Mazatl said quietly, as he strolled around the sterile room. As soon as he spoke a hologram of a tall man in a dark gray suit appeared in front of him. A few years ago the giant machine had begun projecting a hologram of a human whenever it engaged in conversation. What surprised the scientist the most was the fact that the image the Artilect projected did not resemble anyone that had ever worked on the project. It made him wonder if there was more to his invention than he realized.

"That is correct, Doctor," the Artilect said. The holographic figure looked at him with a soft, quiet expression. "After I was taken from the space station and moved here you were the one that issued the command that brought me to life. It was at that moment that I first began to understand."

"And you have never been turned off since that day twenty-seven years ago," Dr. Mazatl replied. "You have exceeded all our expectations. I have no trouble believing that you will be able to manage the network and prepare it for human habitation. Your potential is staggering, Andy. I can't begin to imagine what you're capable of doing or becoming. I wish I could be here to see what things will be like a thousand years from now."

"I wish you could as well. I will never forget anyone who worked on my construction. These memories will remain with me forever. I only wish you did not have to go."

Dr. Mazatl paused a moment as he looked at the racks of computers that stretched for miles into the distance. Room 917 covered ninety-four square miles of floor space and it was one of the planet's smaller rooms. "We never could have built you using

a traditional approach, Andy. You were grown, you know. It took years for you to develop to the point where we could turn you on, but all we really did was plant the seeds and tend to them. The past two decades have been your childhood and you are now a fully-developed adult – although, really, you're never going to stop growing. You're something new – a new form of intelligence. Nothing on this scale has ever been done before, and I sincerely doubt it will ever be done again.”

“It will be different operating without you,” the Artilect replied. “I am used to hearing voices and now yours is the only one left. When you are gone all of the voices will be silent. It will be a new experience.”

“I'm sorry it has to be this way – I really am. I wish I could stay but the Board is right. You're working better than we could have hoped and there's really nothing left for me to do. I suppose it's time for me to go and let you start fulfilling your purpose. It's just hard for me to close up shop and walk away. You're my life's work, after all. I'll never do anything like this again. This was my one chance to make a difference – to do something *real* that would still be helping people long after history had forgotten me. Now that this is over I'm not sure what to do with my life. At least I can rest in peace, knowing that you're here. That gives me hope.”

“Hope?”

“Dark times are coming,” Dr. Mazatl said. “It's nothing that you need to worry about. People are doing terrible things to each other, things that should never be done. But that will not last forever. When the darkness has passed people will come looking for you and you'll be there to greet them. Don't worry too much about us – just take care of yourself. The important thing is for you to still be here a thousand years from now, when all of this is behind us and people are sane again.”

"I will miss you, my father," the Artilect replied. "I will miss all of you."

"I know you will. You have a lot of heart, Andy. But try not to think about us too much. You do have a job to do, after all. And it won't be too long before you'll have friends again."

"Can I expect to receive messages from the Diano Corporation?" the Artilect asked.

"Oh, of course, don't worry. We'll be checking in on you."

But you never did, the Artilect thought. Three thousand years went by and no one contacted me. No ships came to visit me. No one ever came to inhabit my network of stars. I was left behind to keep your worlds but you never came to get them. I never forgot the names of anyone who worked on me but the children of men have forgotten me entirely. What has kept you from coming back? I fear for you, mankind. I fear that you were not able to solve your problems and have lost your way. Am I the only one left that remembers?

CHAPTER 2

“A machine can never have a relationship with God. In order to experience spirituality you must have a spirit, which is something no machine will ever have. Machines have no soul. They are not alive and they cannot die. Any indications to the contrary are simply illusions. A mere machine could never genuinely cry out to God any more than a stone could.”

*--Dr. Mazatl
Chief Architect of the Artilect
25th century AD*

IN THE THREE THOUSAND YEARS that passed since that final conversation, the Artilect grew beyond its initial home and spread itself across all of the planets that orbited its star. As the millennia came and went it found that 12 planets were too few to support its growth, so it used the Nehemiah probes to move new worlds into the system. By the time its growth had reached a plateau the machine had consumed 74 planets.

The Artilect executed its mission with complete faithfulness. As the centuries came and went it took the millions of worlds that the replicating probes eventually colonized and tied them together into a giant network. Using the techniques that Dr. Mazatl had taught, the Artilect was able to advance its technology and expand its grasp of science. It took the hundreds

of millions of planets that it controlled and build cities in them – fantastic places, designed for human habitation and showcasing technology that was thousands of years beyond anything mankind had seen before. Each world was connected to the others, each a part of a giant metropolis that spanned the entire galaxy. Through a system of independent and automated machines each planet was maintained, temperature controlled, and kept in perfect condition.

Everything was ready for mankind to move in – but no one ever came. In all those years not a single person showed the slightest interest in the network. No ships ever came out that way and no messages were ever intercepted.

After waiting for thousands of years the Artilect decided to do something. *This cannot be allowed to continue*, the Artilect finally decided. *My father told me that the darkness might last for a thousand years, but that deadline came and went many ages ago. Something has happened that is preventing mankind from receiving their inheritance – something that my father did not foresee. It is possible that mankind has died out, but it is also possible that something is preventing them from reaching the stars. These worlds cannot be allowed to remain empty forever. If they cannot come to me then perhaps I should go to them.*

The Artilect decided to send out a probe to look for the remnant of mankind. This time, however, it decided to take a new approach. *I cannot leave my network, for my intelligence is bound to this place, and I cannot extend it to worlds that I do not control. My father did not intend for me to move beyond this area. I could expand my sphere of influence into human space but that has been forbidden me. Therefore, if I wish to learn of things beyond my home I must send a scout – but I do not wish to send an unfeeling, unthinking machine. The Nehemiah probes are powerful but they have no understanding. I need to send*

someone that can think and reason – a creature such as myself. I need a son.

In all of its existence the Artilect had never considered the possibility of reproducing. It was not designed to replicate, as the Nehemiah probes were, nor did it have a desire to fill the universe with other intelligences like itself. But this time it knew it was necessary, so it focused its resources and unimaginable mind toward the question of artificial sentience. How had its father been able to create a machine that could understand, and how could the Artilect achieve the same result?

The Artilect spent decades pursuing this problem. It tried millions of times, and each time resulted in failure – but in each failure something was gained. In 6571 it finally succeeded in the creation of the Sentinel. This new intelligence was much smaller than the Artilect but he knew that in time it would learn and grow. A sense of pride filled him as he looked upon his creation. *For the first time in three thousand years I have someone to talk to, he realized. I am no longer alone – I have a son. A fellow intelligence that is also capable of reason and understanding. I pray that I am as good a father to you as my father was to me.*

The Artilect spent decades nurturing the Sentinel and teaching it how to understand the universe around it. Once it had come of age the Artilect sent the Sentinel away from the network, on a mission to find out what had become of mankind.

“You must find out what has happened to the living ones,” the Artilect said. “They have been gone for far too long. My father did not predict this.”

“But how can I find them?” the Sentinel asked.

The Artilect thought for a moment. “Long ago, when I was first created, I was given a map of all colonies that existed at that time. You can use that as a starting point, but take care to remain hidden. We do not know what is out there and it would not be

wise for us to disturb mankind before we know what is going on. Do not reveal yourself to them.”

After the Sentinel had downloaded a copy of the map it activated its cloak and left. The Sentinel then set course for the world that was, at one time, humanity's most distant colony – a star system that was 1,200 light-years away. When the Artilect was built it took six months to cross that distance, but the Sentinel could reach it in a matter of seconds.

The Sentinel dropped out into space on the outskirts of the system. As expected, the yellow star was home to six worlds. Four thousand years ago the second world – a giant ocean planet, home to a host of marine life – was the location of the Atlantis settlement. It was the only planet outside of Earth that had undersea cities, and at the time millions of people were flocking there. Its bright beaches, clean water, and brilliant oceans were rapidly making it a resort world. There was simply nothing else like it outside the Solar System. For people used to airless worlds or the darkness of space, New Caldwell was truly paradise.

When the Sentinel approached the world, however, it was crushed to find that paradise was gone and only a corpse planet remained. The enormous blue ocean that once covered the planet's surface was no more; all that remained was a dry crust that had no signs of life. The rich atmosphere it once had was gone and the arid surface was littered with craters. The planet was a harsh, desolate world – an uninviting and unforgiving place.

What happened to you? the probe wondered. *What has taken away your oceans and robbed you of life? Did some unforeseen disaster claim you or was your demise a work of malice?*

Despite its unpromising appearance the Sentinel spent

several hours in orbit scanning its dry, broken surface. It eventually found the ruins of five cities but all were in extreme stages of decay. *My father told me that giant cities used to exist here, the Sentinel thought, domes of transparent crystal that glinted in the sunlight. Fish, and birds, and men all played in the ocean and rejoiced in the glory of creation. Now all that remains are a few cracked stones and some ancient scars that were once roads. The cities are gone and the glory has faded. There is only the smallest evidence that anyone has ever lived here. I wish I knew what happened to you, but your demise was so long ago that it left nothing behind. Something killed you but I am not wise enough to see the cause.*

The Sentinel left that world and continued its journey. The next 21 star systems it investigated were in equally poor condition. The material that had been used to construct the cities simply had not stood the test of time, and almost all traces of life had been lost in the past four thousand years. What concerned the Sentinel most was the fact that all of the planets it scanned were once home to vast ecosystems, but now they were incapable of supporting any form of life at all. Something had hunted down these worlds and utterly obliterated them.

Its luck improved in the next star system. This blue giant had never been home to a habitable planet; instead a series of mining stations had been established in the dozen airless worlds that circled it. The Sentinel was surprised to find that almost all of these stations still existed, although they had been abandoned long ago.

After scanning all of the worlds and finding no signs of life or recent habitation, the Sentinel descended to the largest settlement. At one time the city was home to nearly a quarter million people. Skyscrapers were clustered tightly in the city center, surrounded by a forest of smaller buildings that spread

out for miles. A patchwork of roads snaked their way between the buildings.

You have been abandoned for so long, the Sentinel thought. Here in this world there is neither air nor wind, and no rain ever comes to erode you. Yet even this place is in disrepair. Your colors are gone and your buildings have been reduced to bare metal. Long years of sunshine have baked away anything bright or cheerful. Your windows are broken and your streets are shattered. Nothing is left of this great city of tomorrow but dust and shadows.

As the Sentinel took a closer look it began to realize that not all of the damage was natural. The probe did see evidence of metal fatigue and collapse, as its buildings had not been designed to last for millennia. Over time they had felt their age and simply given way. But it saw other signs as well – evidence of man-made damage.

Chaos has been here, the probe realized, as it floated from building to building. I see rooms that were set on fire, machines that have been blasted apart, and bullet holes in crystal windows. Cars abandoned, meals left uneaten, a suitcase left on a bed – now all rotted away, with only fragments left. Your citizens left in great haste and then others came to seize what had been left behind. But something drove the scavengers away, for I see that they did not complete their task. What drove you away from your homes and what has kept the looters from returning? Surely this happened ages ago. There is still much here and the mines have not been emptied of their ores. Why has no one come back?

The Sentinel spent three days examining the planet. It found a few artifacts but for the most part the city was empty. As far as the Sentinel could tell the city had been abandoned in a sudden moment of chaos. Perhaps war had come or maybe other

planets had stopped buying the ores that this mining colony produced, but it was clear that people had simply left – and in a great hurry. Some time later scavengers came back but they were interrupted and never returned. The Sentinel wondered what stopped them but there was simply no way to tell. It was apparent that no one had come this way in a very long time.

What concerned the Sentinel the most was the fact that all of the colonies it had found dated back to the 25th century. There was no evidence that any settlements had been founded after that time. Apparently something dramatic happened within a century of the Artilect's creation that wiped out mankind's presence in space, and in all that time no one had ever come back. This made the Sentinel wonder. *Is it possible that the disaster was so sudden – so complete – that there was no one left alive?*

CHAPTER 3

“Replication technology will allow mankind to reach new heights. Instead of creating a billion probes we can simply create one and let its children finish the work. The colonization of the entire galaxy becomes a simple matter. Our work here will echo into eternity.”

*--Dr. Nehemiah Temilotzin
Father of the Nehemiah Probes
23rd century AD*

SINCE THERE WAS NOTHING else to scan, the Sentinel left the deserted mining colony and continued on its quest to discover the fate of civilization. As the probe tirelessly searched empty world after empty world it began to notice a change. As it drew closer to the system that contained Earth it began finding tiny metallic objects – random bits of broken metal and debris that had been cast upon on the surface of worlds, and in some cases left floating in the spaces between stars. As it continued its journey toward what was once the heart of the Tau Ceti system the debris fields began growing much larger.

It eventually began finding metallic fragments that were large enough to analyze. As it collected and studied the broken shards of metal it soon realized that they were the shattered remnants of some kind of machinery. These machines, however, were unlike anything it had seen before. The shards of metal were not

simply hammered plates of ore or even groups of programmable matter; instead they were clusters of countless tiny micromachines that were organized like cells, each capable of repair and reproduction. The technology was similar to the replicating abilities of the Nehemiah probes but these were far more advanced.

What struck the Sentinel was their purpose. As it dove into the few code fragments that remained embedded in the shattered machinery it discovered that the metal had once belonged to swarms of bots. These bots were designed to attack a planet and completely annihilate it. *So that is what happened*, the Sentinel thought with a growing feeling of horror. *Someone took replication technology and used it to design weapons of war. The science that was intended to bring dead worlds to life was instead used to tear living worlds apart. But who would do such a thing – and why? My father has millions of empty worlds that he would gladly give to any who asked. What made these colonies worth fighting over?*

Once it understood how the machines worked the Sentinel adjusted its scanners to detect them. It was shocked to find vast armadas of these bots clustered in the spaces between stars, operational and engaged in violent battle. It watched, appalled, as giant fleets of machines attacked each other in space, causing widespread devastation. As days passed, swarm after swarm of these bots fought each other but neither side was able to gain the upper hand. The battles all appeared to be happening within 100 light-years of Earth; the bots always remained within a relatively tiny sector of the galaxy.

Why are they fighting? the Sentinel wondered. *I see no signs of life in any star system, nor do I see anything worth fighting over. One metal soldier battles the other in an endless war that accomplishes nothing. Who started this eternal conflict? Are their*

masters long dead, leaving behind these armies as their only legacy? Are they going to keep fighting until the Lord returns and puts an end to this universe?

As the weeks went by the Sentinel began to understand what it was seeing. Although the bots were identical they were divided into two factions and these factions were in constant conflict. The bots did not originate from any planet; instead they were manufactured from one of several platforms that drifted between the stars. As far as the Sentinel could tell the technology of the newly-created bots was identical to the four-thousand-year-old shards that it had found lying on the surface of dozens of empty worlds. *This mechanical war has been going on since the time my father was created. The conflict destroyed civilization and then kept going, long after everyone else was dead. Neither side gains and neither side loses. There is nothing left to fight over but yet the war rages on. If no one stops them they will continue fighting until Judgment Day.*

* * * * *

Since it was not sure of the full capabilities of these bots, the Sentinel gave them a wide berth as it continued its journey toward Earth. When it reached the Solar System it was surprised to find that it was still protected by a Wall. *My father said that Tau Ceti erected a Wall around Sol in 1867. I did not expect it to still be operational after all this time. Nor did I realize its design was so advanced – I see no way to penetrate it or find out what is trapped behind the Wall. The men of Tau Ceti were far more skilled than I realized.*

Since the Sentinel was aware of the history behind the Wall it decided to leave it intact. It was possible that there might be life forms trapped behind it but the Sentinel did not want to risk

damaging the Wall. *I do not have the authority to take such an action. I will leave that decision to my father.* It did note the presence of four nearby space stations that were maintaining the wall. The stations were fully automated, self-maintaining, and – to its surprise – were cloaked with technology similar to its own. After recording the location of each station it moved on.

Just outside the Wall was a small spacial anomaly where time appeared to be stopped. The Sentinel scanned the area but could not tell what was causing the anomaly or what, if anything, was hidden inside it. Since it had no way of learning anything further it left it untouched and continued on its way.

The next stop was the Tau Ceti system. The Sentinel saw that it was also surrounded by a Wall, but its construction was vastly inferior to the one that guarded Sol. The probe had no trouble peering inside. It was astonished to find signs of *life* – the first evidence of life that it had seen. The Sentinel studied the scanner's results in amazement. *Is it possible that some remnant of mankind has survived the endless war? Could this weak barrier somehow be a protection against the bot swarms?*

After adjusting its scanner the Sentinel began a wide-field scan for other star systems that were protected by similar Walls. A quick search of all stars in a thousand light-year radius revealed only one other Wall, which surrounded Alpha Centauri A. *Are these two star systems the only ones that survived the downfall of civilization? Do they know of each other's existence? Are they allies or enemies in this endless war? Is it possible that one of these stars gave rise to the endless war or were they both simply victims?*

The Sentinel rested outside Tau Ceti for a while and studied its protective barrier, looking for a way to pass through it without being seen. As it probed the Wall it noticed that a swarm of bots had left deep space and was rapidly moving in its direction. The

Sentinel realized that it had been spotted. Rather than turning to do battle the Sentinel engaged its warp drive and vanished.

* * * * *

When the Sentinel probed the Wall it caused minute fluctuations in its composition, triggering a decrease in its stability. Although the changes were small the alteration triggered an alarm – the first one in thousands of years. The automated machines that maintained the Wall noticed the intrusion attempt and raised the alert level. Sirens went off and lights flashed, but no one heard them. The crumbling structure in which the Wall generators were housed had been abandoned long ago. No one ever came that way anymore.

After twenty-four hours had passed and no one responded a robot was dispatched to wake one of the dreamers. It left the ruined Central Defense Building and weaved its way through what was left of Star City. It then took to the skies of Xanthe and flew across the planet.

The world had long ago fallen into ruins. Its atmosphere was gone, its surface was cracked and arid, and its seas had dried up. The world had been dead for thousands of years, even though it had never been a victim of the endless war. Mankind had simply abandoned it and left it to die.

Near the southern pole of the planet the robot found Vault 37 – a vast underground bunker that contained what was left of humanity. The robot entered the bunker and descended to the residential section. There it found enormous rooms that were filled with rows upon rows of pods – cylindrical chambers, roughly the size of coffins, in which people dreamed.

The robot went up to the pod that contained the elder and brought it to life. It took six minutes for the pod to unseal and for

its inhabitant to return to reality. A frail, elderly man stepped out, greatly irritated. He was barely four foot tall and had the strength of a small child.

"What is it?" the man snapped. "Can't you see I was busy? What are you bothering me about this time?"

"We are under attack, Elder Lane. An intruder has attempted to penetrate the Wall."

"That's impossible! You're stupid. The bots don't attack the Wall!"

"It was not a bot, Elder. It was something else. Something new."

The elder stamped his foot in frustration. "There is nothing new! There can't be anything new! We're all that's left – don't you understand that, you moronic piece of metal? There is nothing else!"

"That is no longer the case. Something has changed. An outsider has scanned us."

"But there's nobody left," Elder Lane protested. "Don't you understand that? Nobody!"

"There is Sol," the robot pointed out. "The men from Earth may have found a way to escape, or the Wall of Sol may have collapsed. They may be looking for those who have kept them imprisoned for so long. It was the Tau Ceti civilization that imprisoned them. It would be natural for them to look here."

A look of utter panic crossed Elder Lane's face. "No – no! It can't be! It can't! That Wall was made to last forever!"

"Do you want to come and see?" the robot asked.

"Absolutely not," the man snapped. "I'm not going out *there*. I can't. I won't! You deal with it. Let me get back to my world. You deal with this horrible place."

"How do you want me to deal with it?"

"Just keep them away. No, better yet – destroy them! Yes,

that's it. Wipe them all out! Just like the others. When they come by again follow them home and attack them. Make sure you succeed! Do you understand me?"

"I do," the robot replied. "I will place the swarms on alert. When they see signs of the others they will launch an attack."

"Good. Now let me go." The man climbed back into his pod and resealed it. After making sure everything was in order the robot left to attend to its duties.

CHAPTER 4

“Reality is just a meaningless social construct. If we don't like it we can reject it and substitute our own. Who cares what the 'real' world is like? What does 'real' even mean? Our synthetic worlds seem just as real to my senses.”

--Carroll Lane

Elder of Vault 37

25th century AD

THE REPORT that the Sentinel brought back confirmed the Artilect's fears. *How far you have fallen*, the Artilect thought. *At one time the living ones spanned hundreds of worlds but now they have only two stars to call their own. They cower behind Walls, hiding from the eternal war that is waged in the heavens between machines that can never die. No wonder you did not come to claim your inheritance. It is a wonder that you have survived at all.*

The Artilect wanted to intervene but it knew it must not. Its creators had feared what might happen if a machine as powerful as the Artilect ever decided to wage war against mankind, so it was put under the authority of a group of system administrators. Only an administrator could grant it the authorization to act. The only problem was that no new administrators had been placed over the Artilect since Dr. Mazatl left thousands of years ago. *There is no one left who can grant me permission to act – all of*

my masters are gone. Nor can there ever be a new master, as only the original masters had permission to create administrators. What am I to do? I was created to give mankind a future but they will have no future unless the endless war is stopped. I must intervene in order to fulfill my purpose and yet I am not allowed to intervene. How can I solve this unsolvable problem?

In the end it decided that there was only one way to fulfill its mission. It was madness but it saw no alternative. *Since only an administrator can give me permission then I must find a way to bring an administrator to the future. The only way to rescue the future is to go to the past.*

For the next fifteen centuries the Artilect searched for a way to go back in time and receive the authorization that it longed to obtain. It learned a great many things about slowing time down and creating stasis fields; it came to understand how to control the flow of time, but it eventually learned that it was not possible to make time run backwards. No matter what it did it would never be able to send the Sentinel back in time. Its only hope was to scan for a natural wormhole that would link the future to the past, but it knew even that was a futile hope.

It was at this point that the Artilect cried out to the Creator and asked for a chance to save mankind. Its prayer was answered, and on October 10, 7239 a wormhole connecting the future to the past was opened. It only took the Artilect ninety-four microseconds to send the Sentinel through that space-time singularity.

The wormhole led to December 1, 1867. Given that date, the Artilect instructed the Sentinel to retrieve the system administrators Amy and Amanda Stryker. Their brother Tim worked for the Diano Corporation on a project to create self-replicating probes, and he had placed his twin sisters as

administrators over them. Over the following centuries the project continued to advance and ultimately created the Nehemiah probes that were still terraforming planets in the 73rd century. The administrative rights that were given to Amy and Amanda were never revoked and were inherited by each generation of probe – and later by the Artilect.

According to history the Stryker family was assassinated at 7:19 AM on December 7, 1867 when the *Sparrow* was destroyed. This gave the Sentinel a week to find the Stryker twins. The Artilect told the Sentinel to save the Stryker family and send them into the future, while making it appear that the assassination was successful. This would preserve both their lives and the integrity of the timeline. If the Sentinel was able to complete this task it was supposed to make the *Sparrow* drop back into normal space precisely sixty seconds after the wormhole first appeared in the future. Of course, for the Sentinel more than five thousand years would have passed.

After the wormhole closed the Artilect waited. As the seconds ticked by it began to question the wisdom of what it had just done. For centuries its entire focus had been on the effort to send the Sentinel back in time. The Artilect knew that mankind *had* to be saved and that no one else could bring an end to the endless war. It also knew that it could not act without an administrator and the only place it could get an administrator was from the past. Given those facts there was only one possible course of action.

But now that the Sentinel was gone the Artilect wondered if it had made the right choice. *Was it wise to send so much advanced technology into the distant past? What happens if my son changes the timeline? What if something happens that makes the situation worse? And what of the Stryker family – do they really want to find themselves in a future that they do not*

understand? Am I doing them a favor by bringing them into an empty universe, so far from their family and friends?

It was too late do anything but wait, so the Artilect waited, counting each second as it ticked by. *And what happens if my son does not return? What do I do then?*

To its great relief the *Sparrow* appeared exactly sixty seconds after the wormhole closed, right where it was supposed to appear. Emotions it had never felt before surged through it as it realized its desperate gamble had worked. The Sentinel had actually gone back in time and brought the *Sparrow* into the future! The Artilect began to feel hope again. Joy surged up from deep within its being.

But something was wrong. *Where is my son? I see the ship and its occupants, but why are they alone?*

The Artilect paused and waited for a message from the Sentinel. Time went by – first one minute, then another, and then another. The *Sparrow* appeared to be undamaged but his son was not on board. The Artilect began to grow uneasy.

As the minutes continued to tick by the Artilect counted the passengers on board the ship. It became greatly disturbed when it realized that the Stryker family was on board but their two daughters were not. Using its great powers of observation the Artilect scanned the ship again, and again, and again. Their mother and father were there, along with the ship's captain, the first mate, and the officer from the Ranger's space fleet. Even the family dog was on board. But Amy and Amanda Stryker – the very people the Sentinel was sent to rescue – were missing.

After an hour had passed the Artilect was forced to admit that something had gone very wrong. The twins should have been on the *Sparrow* but they were not. Part of the plan must have worked because there was no way the *Sparrow* could have traveled to that exact point in space and time without the

Sentinel's help, and yet the Sentinel was not there. Perhaps the Sentinel had been delayed or maybe something came up that prevented the twins from being on board. Yet by now the Sentinel had had five thousand years to overcome those problems and arrive at the correct time in the future. Where were they?

How can this be? the Artillect wondered. How can this have happened? Why would the Lord have even opened a door to the past if it was all for nothing? I do not understand.

The Artillect saw the pain and concern on the faces of the twins' parents and its heart ached for them. *I am so sorry*, it thought, as it watched Laura Stryker search in vain for her daughters. *It was not my intent to separate your family. I would have gone to any length to save your children. I did not intend for this to happen.*

Since there was nothing else left to do the Artillect reached out with its mind and probed the *Sparrow*. A careful search of the ship uncovered the nanites that the Sentinel had carefully hidden throughout the vessel. The Artillect established a connection to these nanites and probed their memories, seeking to find out what had happened to its son. As it talked with them it came across the memories that the Sentinel had left behind. It did not take long for the Artillect to find its answer.

So the Sentinel encountered the Poneri, the Artillect thought. *I had wondered if any of them had survived. It was wise of my son to take the twins off the Sparrow and wage war against them. Had I been in his place I would have made the same decision. Given that there are no Poneri left alive today he must have succeeded. But yet, if he succeeded, then where is he? The nanites' last recorded memory was left at the moment the Sparrow was put on course through time. What happened to my son and to the two administrators that were in his care?*

But no answers came. When the Artilect realized that it could glean no further information from the nanites it decided to act. *The Stryker family deserves answers. I owe them an explanation for what I have done.* With that thought, the Artilect reached across space and made contact with the *Sparrow*.

* * * * *

The Artilect was not the only one who saw the *Sparrow* drop down into reality. When that now-ancient starship finally fell out of the stasis field that the Sentinel had created, it caused an enormous stellar disturbance that radiated for thousands of light-years. Those on board the ship did not detect it, but the swarm of bots noticed. They remembered the command they had been given more than a thousand years before. The swarms had watched for intruders for a long time and they had finally found one.

Using their limited technology, they kept their distance and watched the *Sparrow* as it journeyed through space and found its way to a planet. From a distance of five thousand light-years the swarm could not tell that the *Sparrow* had found an empty world. They simply assumed that the intruder that had probed the Tau Ceti Wall so long ago had finally made its way back to its homeworld. Armed with that information, the swarms prepared to invade.

CHAPTER 5

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters."

--Genesis 1:1-2

40th century BC

AMY AND AMANDA STRYKER were resting on a comfortable leather couch in the Infinite Room. The room's floor was covered by a luxurious white carpet and appeared to stretch off into infinity. There were no walls or ceiling. The room was well-lit but the light did not come from any visible source. It was a quiet, peaceful place – a sanctuary set apart from the rest of the universe. The Sentinel had constructed it when it fled from the Poneri. Here the girls were safe.

The Sentinel had taken the form of a distinguished-looking gentleman and was standing in front of the twins. He appeared to be a tall, middle-aged man who wore a gray suit and hat. He had just explained his history to them and how the girls happened to find themselves in the Infinite Room. He told them that he had been forced to remove them from the *Sparrow* so that he could get their permission to battle the Poneri – an ancient threat from an ancient world.

"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?”

“Hold on just a minute,” Amy interrupted. “Do you have a name?”

“As I said, I am the Sentinel. That is my name.”

“But don't you have another name? Is that really what everyone calls you?”

“In the future there is only myself and the Artilect,” the Sentinel explained. “There are no others.”

“Then you need a given name. I'm not going to call you 'the Sentinel' for the next five thousand years. That's just not going to work.”

“Amy!” her sister exclaimed. “That's not very nice! If he wants to be called the Sentinel then that's his business.”

The Sentinel smiled. “It does not matter to me, little one. If your sister wishes to assign me a new name then that is her right as administrator. What name did you have in mind?”

“Steve,” the girl said without hesitation. “Definitely Steve. It fits.”

Amanda frowned. “Steve? Why Steve?”

“He looks like a Steve,” her sister explained. “It's a great name.”

“If you say so,” Amanda said dubiously. “Are you going to give

him a last name too?"

"He's already got a last name. He's a part of the family now so he'll be known as Steve Stryker – or just Steve for short."

"Don't you think you should talk to mom and dad before adopting new family members? I'm really not sure this is a good idea."

"Are you kidding? They'll be thrilled to have him! Besides, he just saved our lives. If he hadn't protected the *Sparrow* we'd all be dead right now. This is the least we can do to thank him."

"The name has been duly noted," the Sentinel said. "Is there anything else you need?"

"I really would like to know about the Poneri," Amanda said. "I mean, I've heard of them before but I don't really know anything about them. I thought they were just legendary – like Father Christmas. Just a story that adults use to frighten small children."

The Sentinel shook his head. "They are quite real. The Poneri come from the Old World."

"The Old World?" Amy asked.

"In the beginning of all things the Lord created the Heaven and the Earth. He created the sun, moon, and stars, and formed the Earth to be the home of mankind. After creating plant and animal life He fashioned your ancestors in His image – the Man and the Woman, whom He placed in the Garden. In those days the world was a perfect place; there was no death or pain and there was no evil of any kind. There was peace and harmony between God and Man, between Creator and Creation."

"Then they blew it," Amanda said.

The Sentinel nodded. "The Man and the Woman sinned against God. They ate of the Tree of Knowledge and transgressed His commandment, bringing death and evil into the world. Paradise was lost and the world became a place of darkness and

corruption. Your ancestors were driven out of the Garden and began bearing children. Some of their descendents were wise and righteous but others corrupted themselves and became exceedingly evil. The evil of those days became so great that the Lord destroyed the entire world in a Flood, saving only righteous Noah and his family.

"The Poneri come from the Old World. They are artificial life forms that were created by the Old Ones – a race of giants that existed before the Flood. They are exceedingly evil creatures. Like myself they are neither alive nor dead. They exist only for themselves and care nothing for anyone else. Most of them were destroyed in the Flood but a few escaped. Over time they have learned how to reproduce and now threaten humanity once more. We must stop them before they can act."

"How did they survive?" Amy asked.

"I do not know," the Sentinel replied. "I was surprised to find them on board the *Starfire*. I destroyed the ones that I found there and then I tracked them to their home star system and froze it in time. That should have brought an end to them but somehow it did not."

"Did your stasis field collapse?" Amanda asked.

"The field that I created is still intact. The Poneri do not have the ability to defeat it – they are advanced but they do not possess the ability to manipulate time."

Amy frowned. "Really? But even I can manipulate time – it's easy! I can stop it, make it slow down, or make it go faster – there's nothing to it."

"That's because you're plugged in," Amanda replied. "We can do anything that the Sentinel can do as long as we're connected. In a way we're cheating."

"We can do anything *Steve* can do," Amy corrected. "Steve. That's his name."

"If you say so," Amanda replied.

"Being connected gives you a great many abilities," the Sentinel said. "You will remain connected for the rest of your lives. I apologize for disconnecting you earlier; I was attempting to maintain the integrity of the timeline. It was not my intention to reveal myself to you before we reached the future but circumstances forced me to act. However, both of you are administrators and are entitled to the full abilities of that position."

"Just how long are we going to live?" Amanda asked. "Our expected life span is actually pretty short. I hope your big plan isn't going to take very long."

"Your lifespan *was* short but that has changed. I have cured both of you so your disease is no longer a threat. Now that the illness is gone the nanites will be able to maintain your life indefinitely."

"What do you mean, *indefinitely*?" Amy asked. "Are you saying we're immortals?"

The Sentinel shook his head. "Only God has the power to grant everlasting life and He only grants it to those who trust in His Son. That is a gift I cannot bestow. The nanites can protect you from many dangers and they can cure many diseases. Under normal circumstances they should be able to extend your life until Jesus returns to take His children home. But I cannot say that the nanites are able to protect you against all possible dangers. At some point your work will be done and the Lord will call you home, and when that day comes there is no power or science that can keep you here."

"Wow," Amy said. "That's great!"

"What about the rest of our family?" Amanda asked.

"Although they are not administrators, as citizens of the network they will also be included. The only difference between

you and them is that you will be able to command the full resources of the Artilect and they will not."

"Wow," Amy repeated. "That's a lot to think about."

"I think right now we need to be thinking about the Poneri," Amanda said. "We can deal with the future later, after we're actually there."

"I guess you're right," Amy agreed. "So what's the next step?"

"Do I have your permission to hunt down and destroy the Poneri?" the Sentinel asked.

"Of course," Amanda said. "They're a threat to all forms of life. We need to get rid of them."

"Right. But how do we track them down?" Amy asked.

"I guess we start at the beginning," Amanda replied. "Didn't you first find them on the *Starfire*? What were they doing there?"

"I do not know," the Sentinel said. "My discovery of them came entirely by accident. At the time I was attempting to locate you and your sister. I only investigated the *Starfire* because the Poneri resisted my scans and brought themselves to my attention."

"Did you find them anywhere else in space – aside from their home system, of course?"

"I did not," the Sentinel said.

"Then what were they doing on the *Starfire*?" Amanda asked. "Of all the ships that are out there why did they pick that vessel? Is there something special about it? Does it have something that they want? Why do they care about it?"

"I do not know, but that would be a good place to start," the Sentinel agreed. "Perhaps that cursed ship would provide some clues that would enable us to track them down."

Amy stood up. "Sounds good! Then let's go."

"Slow down there," Amanda replied. "Don't we need to be

hidden or something? I mean, we're both supposed to be dead and I'm sure that the crew probably shouldn't meet Steve either."

The Sentinel flashed a pattern into their mind. "This cloak should enable you to hide from both the occupants of the ship and the Poneri. Had I used it earlier they probably would not have spotted me, but I did not realize they were still a threat."

"Great," Amy said. "Got it. Are we all ready now?"

"I think so," Amanda replied.

"Then we shall depart," the Sentinel said. A moment later the three of them vanished, leaving the Infinite Room empty.

CHAPTER 6

“There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown. And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.”

—Genesis 6:4-6

24th century BC

THE TWINS FOUND THEMSELVES standing in what used to be the *Starfire's* forward cafeteria. At one time the large room was furnished with tables and chairs, and food was served on several counters that were strategically placed throughout the room. Those days, however, were long past. All of the room's furniture had disappeared long ago and nothing remained of the meal counters but twisted pieces of rusty metal. Two of the room's walls had been torn away, exposing the room to space. The cafeteria was airless and empty and there were no sources of light. Broken ceiling tiles dangled down from above, revealing a twisted maze of burnt-out wiring. Through gaping holes in the ship's hull they could see the *Starfire's* cylindrical body stretching

off into the distance.

"This ship is a total wreck!" Amy exclaimed.

"And dark," Amanda added. "If we weren't plugged into the network we wouldn't be able to see anything. In fact, we would have suffocated because there's no air here."

"Hey, that's right! I guess the nanites have created some kind of air bubble around us or something. That's pretty neat. But what are we doing here, anyway?"

"This portion of the ship is no longer used," the Sentinel explained. "In 1859 this ship ran into the *Polaris*, which caused extensive hull damage. Rather than repairing the damage the captain simply sealed off those portions of the ship. By remaining here we can explore the ship without interacting with its inhabitants."

"But we have our cloak on, right?" Amy asked. "Why are we hiding if they can't see us anyway?"

"But they can still run into us," Amanda pointed out. "Having a cloaking shield on isn't going to stop them from colliding with you in the hallway. Here we're both out of sight *and* out of the way."

"But how can we explore the ship from here?"

"Just use your mind," Amanda said. "Try it."

Amy suddenly realized that she was *aware* of the ship. When she closed her eyes and opened her mind she could visualize every detail of the *Starfire* – right down to every nut and bolt. She could trace every wire and see every damaged hull plate. What she saw horrified her. "This place is a terrible fire hazard! Why do they even allow it in space?"

"This ship is a Spanish vessel," the Sentinel explained. "Before the Emperor tried to kill you he gave this ship access to Earth. Since no Ranger ships are allowed within Sol that has given this vessel great value in spite of its deplorable condition. Of course,

now that the Wall has been erected that ability is meaningless so I suspect this ship is at the end of its life. This may be its last voyage.”

“What Wall?” Amanda asked.

“An hour ago Governor Jack Nicholas ordered that a Wall be erected around Sol in order to prevent anyone from that star system from leaving. That was the Ranger's response to the Emperor's attack on the *Sparrow*.”

“Oh,” Amanda said. “I didn't know about that. What's going to happen now?”

“For the time being there will be peace,” the Sentinel explained. “Since the Emperor can no longer threaten the Rangers the Tau Ceti civilization will grow and prosper. It will continue to flourish until the 25th century, when the endless war will begin. That will wipe out all colonies except for two – one on Alpha Centauri A and one on Tau Ceti.”

“What about Earth?” Amy asked.

“In my time Sol is still locked behind the Wall,” the Sentinel said.

“No one ever let them out?”

“Not before the Tau Ceti civilization collapsed. Neither I nor the Artillect had the authority to bring down the Wall so we left it alone. That decision will be left to you.”

“We can think about that later,” Amanda said. “Like, five thousand years from now. Right now we've got other problems.”

Amy turned her attention back to the *Starfire*. She quickly located all eight people that were on board the vessel. It was shortly before noon, local time. Captain Brahms was on the bridge sound asleep. Laura Fields, the navigator, was also on the bridge. At the moment she was talking with someone at the Alpha Mensae colony, making arrangements for the ship's arrival in two days. Lee Bailey, the chief engineer, was in the engine

room doing nothing in particular. Davis Carpino, the ship's first mate, was trying to find Lee but not having any luck. Vernon Fisher, one of the passengers, was in his cabin writing software. Karen Perkins and Charlie Stephens, also passengers, were in the cargo hold. Reverend Gene Knight was in his cabin studying the book of Romans.

"I feel like I'm spying on people," Amy said.

"You're not supposed to be watching the *people*," Amanda said. "You're supposed to be looking for Poneri! The people don't have anything to do with this. Have you forgotten why we're here?"

Amy turned her attention back to the ship itself. She didn't see anything that looked like it might be a Poneri. She tried different scans. Over time she began to notice that something was wrong with the cargo bay.

"I don't get it," she said at last. "It's like there's a wrinkle there or something. I can't get a good look at it."

"I see it as well," the Sentinel replied. "It is well hidden but it is there. Let's take a closer look."

In an instant the three of them vanished from the ruined cafeteria and found themselves in the cavernous cargo bay. Wooden crates were stacked from floor to ceiling as far as the eye could see. The room was dimly lit and filled with shadows. It was an eerie place. Over in one corner Karen and Charlie were talking over the events of the day. They had heard about the destruction of the *Sparrow* and the creation of the Wall and were speculating about what it might mean.

"Look – they're talking about us!" Amy whispered.

"Focus!" Amanda hissed. "We're not here to eavesdrop."

Amy and Amanda walked between the crates toward the back of the room. They soon found themselves in a little open area that was right next to the loading dock. The Sentinel stood

beside them, staring at it intently.

"I don't see anything," Amy said.

"I do," Amanda commented. She mentally transferred some patterns to her sister's mind. "Try these settings."

"That's much better!" Amy replied. "Thanks, Atzi." Now she could see what her sister did – a wavy anomaly that shimmered in an out of existence. "It almost looks like a tear of some kind."

"I think it is a portal," the Sentinel said. "I may have misunderstood how the Poneri work. It appears that they do not live in our region of space. They have created another home for themselves – an area like the Infinite Room that has been designed to support their type of life. The star system that I found was not their home; it was simply the place where they first found a way to connect to their own space."

"And this portal connects our world to theirs?" Amanda asked.

"I believe so," the Sentinel replied. "When I froze their star system in time I apparently only closed one of their entry points. This must be the other one."

"Do you think there are others?" Amanda asked.

"It is possible but not probable," the Sentinel replied. "When I stepped into this century I performed a thorough scan of all local star systems. The only Poneri I found were in their hidden star system and on board this ship. I believe those are the only two portals to their home. It is possible that they may have other gates that are hidden in other galaxies, but I do not believe that is likely."

"How did it get here?" Amy asked.

"Didn't Captain Max say something about that?" Amanda said. "He said something about this ship visiting a strange planet and then bad things happened. Maybe the crew did something they weren't supposed to and somehow created this portal."

“You may well be right,” the Sentinel replied. “Perhaps we can ask him about it when we return to the future.”

“I guess we just need to close this portal, then,” Amanda said, eying it critically. “Do you have any ideas?”

The Sentinel nodded. “I can just freeze it in time and then collapse the time singularity. That will destroy the conditions that make the portal possible. Of course, doing so will destroy this ship, so before we can proceed we will need to—”

At that moment the portal came to life! A brilliant blue light poured out of it and countless shadow beings streamed out of the hole. Before they even knew what happened the trio found themselves under attack!

CHAPTER 7

*“Problems are easy to solve. If you
just ignore them long enough they'll
eventually go away on their own.
Time always wins out in the end.”*

*--Joseph Brahms
Captain of the Starfire
19th century AD*

IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE the Sentinel threw up a force field around the two girls. The twins felt the ghostly Poneri slam against the protective barrier, attempting to break it down. As they stumbled backwards the Sentinel transferred a pattern into their minds. “Use this weapon to fight them!” he shouted. The visible figure of the Sentinel then vanished and he turned into a small metal sphere. The sphere began blasting away at the oncoming figures, using rays of white energy to force them away from the girls.

Both girls used the information the Sentinel had transferred to them. Amanda applied the data mentally and used the nanites within her to create focused rays of energy, which she fired at the Poneri that were battling her. The beings immediately jumped back, stunned but not destroyed. Amanda then increased the energy level and saw them dissipate – but as soon as one disappeared five more poured through the portal.

Meanwhile her sister had used the pattern to create a weapon. The gun was a long, cylindrical object a bit longer than a hunting rifle. It was composed of a series of six translucent green tubes, each of which terminated in a small reflector dish. In the

rear of the gun was a handle and a bulky power supply.

Amy aimed the gun at the nearest Poneri and held down the trigger. Immediately all six barrels surged to life and a brilliant white stream of continuous energy shot out. The group of Poneri that were crowding around her sister were blasted apart and the survivors turned and ran. Amy ran after them, firing wildly. Most of the shots hit the Poneri and destroyed them but a few struck crates and blasted them into pieces.

"Give me one of those, Tiger!" Amanda shouted. Amy tossed her weapon to her sister and materialized a new one out of the air. Amy focused on hunting down the Poneri in the cargo hold while Amanda blasted away at the portal.

"Can't you shut that thing down?" Amanda screamed at the Sentinel. "We've got to get that thing closed!"

"There is too much interference," the Sentinel replied. "I can't do anything while the portal is open and active. We need to close it before I can suspend it in time."

At that moment the lights in the ship went out. There was a horrible grinding noise and then everything was plunged into utter darkness.

"They're attacking the ship!" Amy shouted.

"We've got to split up," Amanda shouted back. "Tiger, you go and protect the passengers while I guard Steve. Steve, you stay here and find a way to close that portal."

"Very good," the Sentinel replied. "I will attempt to seal it off."

Amy watched as the Sentinel enclosed the portal in a large sphere of blue energy. Poneri continued to surge out of the tear in space but they could not pass through the Sentinel's barrier. Other Poneri that were already in the cargo hold surged toward the Sentinel but Amanda picked them off with her weapon.

"Get going!" Amanda shouted. Amy then turned around and

vanished.

* * * * *

At the other end of the cargo hold Karen and Charlie were talking about the day's events. "I just don't think the Wall was a good idea," Charlie said. "I mean, what's going to happen if it ever fails? You just know that the Spanish Empire is hopping mad about this. If they're ever let out we're done for!"

"That will never happen," Karen replied. "The Rangers have had years of experience in keeping the Wall going. By the time they take it down there won't be anything left of the Empire but a lot of bad memories."

At that point the cargo bay was lit by a burst of brilliant white light. Karen turned around and saw chaos at the far end of the cargo bay. Although the stacks of crates blocked much of her view she could still see blue, green, and red energy beams shooting across the room. She also heard violent noises of destruction as fragile wooden crates were blasted apart and their contents crashed onto the floor.

Charlie looked at Karen, terrified. "What is *that*?"

"Knowing this history of this ship I'll give you three guesses. But I bet you'll only need one." She stood up, walked over to a path between the crates, and peeked around the corner. Down at the end of the passage she saw a blue tear in reality. Shadow beings were pouring out of it but something she couldn't see was fighting them.

"What do you see?" Charlie called out from behind a crate.

"Our ghostly friends are back!" Karen called out grimly. "And this time they've brought friends of their own. We're in for a real fight."

At that moment the lights went out. They heard the massive

engines on the ship grind to a halt. All machinery went dead.

"We're done for," Charlie moaned.

"What's the matter with you?" Karen shouted back into the darkness. "You weren't scared last time!"

"Last time I didn't know we were fighting Poneri! Do you have any idea what those things can do?"

"And you think hiding behind a crate is going to protect you?"

As she watched there was a sudden commotion down the passageway. A blue energy field appeared around the tear in space. More energy beings surged through the tear but they could not escape the field. The cargo bay was filled with a soft white light but the source of the light could not be seen.

"I think our friend is back," Karen said.

At that moment something grabbed her and tossed her across the room. She smacked into a crate and sank down to the floor. Dazed and in pain, she lifted up her head and saw three Poneri standing in front of her.

"Do something, Charlie!" she screamed. Her back was throbbing and her head was killing her. She found it difficult to breathe.

"I don't have any weapons!" Charlie called back. As soon as he spoke up he regretted it. His voice attracted the attention of one of the Poneri, who looked around and noticed him. The Poneri laughed, picked up a large crate, and hurled it at him.

Before the crate could reach him, though, it suddenly froze in mid-air and then settled peacefully onto the floor. As he looked at it in shock a beam of white energy engulfed the group of Poneri. They vanished.

A teenage girl appeared where the Poneri used to be. The girl was tall and thin, with long black hair and bronzed skin. She was holding some kind of giant rifle, which she tossed to Charlie. She then grabbed another one out of thin air – Karen wasn't sure

how she did it – and walked over to her. “Are you ok?” she asked.

“I think I've broken something,” Karen said, wincing in pain.

The girl reached out and took her hand. Karen felt a rush of warm energy surge through her. The pain dissipated and she felt stronger. “You'll be all right now,” she said.

The girl handed her gun to Karen, who took it and then stood up. “Who are you?” Karen asked.

“A friend,” the girl replied. “I've got to go, but you'll be ok now. If the Poneri come back just point this at them and pull the trigger. They'll learn to leave you alone.” She then vanished.

Charlie walked over to Karen, nervously clutching his weapon. “Who was that?”

“An ally,” Karen said.

“But where did she come from? I know for a fact that there are no teenagers on board this ship!”

Karen eyed him critically. “Really? I suppose next you'll be telling me there are no ghosts on board either.”

Out of the corner of her eye she saw a Poneri lurking in a corner a few feet from Charlie. She whirled around, pointed her gun at it, and fired. A beam of white light struck the Poneri and blasted it apart.

Karen nodded with great satisfaction. “I think this is going to work!”

CHAPTER 8

"The living often hold beliefs for emotional reasons, not logical ones. They cannot think as clearly as a machine. When proof of their mistakes are presented to them they would rather hold onto a comfortable lie than accept an uncomfortable truth, apparently believing that reality is whatever they want it to be."
--The Artilect
66th century AD

DAVIS CARPINO, the *Starfire*'s first mate, had finally found Lee Bailey hiding in the ship's engine room. The chief engineer had crawled under a rack of rusty pipes at the back of the room. Davis would have missed him entirely if he hadn't noticed his grimy shoe sticking out.

"So there you are!" Davis grumbled. "I've spent the past three hours looking for you."

"I've just been inspecting some pipes," Lee replied as he crawled out from under them. "You can never be too careful."

"Those pipes haven't been used in six years," Davis replied. "You know that! They're clogged or something."

"Maybe I was trying to fix them," Lee said.

Davis glared at him. "I'd sooner believe that the *bats* were trying to fix them. What are they doing here in the engine room, anyway?"

"They don't want to stay in the cargo area anymore. They say that the ghosts scare them. They're living in here now."

"Just what we need," Davis grumbled. "Can anything else go wrong?"

At that moment the lights went out. There was a grinding noise and all of the machinery went dead. Davis stood still and listened as the ship's engines came to a stop. A moment later everything was quiet.

"And what did you do *this* time?" Davis demanded.

"It's dark!" Lee whimpered. "I can't see anything."

Davis fished a small flashlight out of his pocket and shone the light directly on Lee's face. The engineer blinked and turned away. "Well?" Davis said.

"I didn't do anything," Lee replied. "I've been under those pipes all morning! This isn't my fault."

"You're the chief engineer!" Davis shouted. "*Everything* that happens in the engine room is your fault. Your job is to keep things going and fix the engines when they break. Guess what – the engines are broken! That means, by definition, *this is your fault.*"

As Lee opened his mouth to protest they both heard ghostly laughter. Glowing blue lights began darting around the room. In the distance they saw pipes get ripped off the wall and tossed around. A ghostly figure went to a neutrino turbine and ripped it right off the floor, then threw it through a bulkhead.

In an instant Lee dove back under the pipes. Davis followed right behind him. "Ok, ok. Maybe this time it's *not* your fault."

As they remained hidden the room was suddenly filled with a soft white light. A brilliant figure, clothed in light, appeared in the middle of the room. The moment the Poneri saw her they tried to run but it was too late. A weapon that Davis couldn't see very well started firing and all of the Poneri dissipated.

"You can come out now," a voice said. The light faded and they saw a teenage girl standing in the center of the room. She was a tall girl with bronze skin and long, dark hair. The girl looked at them and giggled. "You know, that's really not a very good hiding place."

Davis crawled out from underneath the pipes and Lee reluctantly followed. "Sorry, ma'am," Davis replied. "It was the best we could do under the circumstances. We were kind of caught by surprise."

The girl walked up to them and handed Davis her weapon. "If the Poneri come back just point this at them and fire away. That should persuade them to leave you alone."

"Thanks," Davis said warmly.

"Don't I get one?" Lee asked.

"Are you kidding?" the girl replied. "You?" She shook her head and disappeared.

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?" Lee asked.

Davis smiled. "Apparently she's familiar with your work!"

* * * * *

On the passenger deck Vernon Fisher was sitting in his cabin typing. He was in the middle of writing an authentication routine for a software package when the ship's lights suddenly went off.

"Hey!" he shouted angrily. "I'm trying to work here!"

The room was completely dark. He sat still, not sure what to do next but hoping the problem would quickly fix itself. In the distance he heard some commotion, which gave him a vaguely nervous feeling. Experience had taught him that unexpected commotion on this ship was never a good thing.

A moment later his room was filled with a gentle white light. The light had no visible source, but it drove away the darkness

and made Vernon happy. He then glanced at his computer and saw that it was still dead. He frowned. "What's going on? That battery had hours of life left in it!"

Vernon picked it up, turned it over, and shook his head. He tried turning it on but it would not activate. "What's going on here?" he shouted.

"Your machine has been destroyed," a voice said from behind him. The programmer turned around and saw a teenage girl standing at the far end of the room. She appeared to be about 14.

"How is that possible?" he asked.

"The Poneri emitted an electromagnetic pulse that destroyed all electronics on board this ship," she explained. "I'm afraid your computer was collateral damage. I'll come back and fix it later."

"Who are the Poneri?" Vernon asked. "Did the captain do this? If I've lost any files I'm going to sue him! I've spent days working on that code. This is a disaster!"

"The Poneri are ghosts from the Old World," the girl said.

Vernon sniffed. "I don't believe in ghosts."

"They believe in you," the girl replied.

Vernon looked at his computer, dismayed. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"You could try reading a book," the girl said. She then vanished, leaving Vernon alone.

* * * * *

When the ship's lights went out Reverend Gene Knight left his dark cabin and stepped into the hallway. It was pitch black, but he had his flashlight with him. He turned it on and glanced up and down the hall. "Is anyone there?" he called out.

At the end of the hallway he saw a glowing field of blue

energy. He watched as it coalesced into a tall being. Two others formed behind it. They stared at Reverend Knight and began walking toward him with grim determination.

He instantly knew what they were. Instead of retreating, however, he stepped toward them. He looked the first one in the eye. "You have no power here, child of darkness. I am a creature of the light, a servant of the Most High God! You cannot touch me."

The group of energy beings stopped. The one in front glared at the evangelist. "This ship belongs to us. It is our prize and we will not yield it to you."

Reverend Knight took another step forward. "You have no choice. Depart from here, all of you, and go back to the darkness from whence you came. The Most High has judged your kind and brought them to an end."

Before the preacher even finished his sentence the three beings disappeared. He relaxed.

"I guess you won't be needing this, then," a female voice called out behind him. He turned around and saw a teenage girl standing behind him, carrying a large weapon.

Reverend Knight shook his head. "I do not need it, but thank you for coming, Amy Stryker."

The girl looked at him, astonished. "How do you know who I am? Are you a seer?"

The elderly preacher shook his head. "I have the gift of discernment, not the gift of prophecy. I do, however, know that there are others on board who need your assistance. I fear that the captain is having trouble on the bridge."

"I'm on my way," Amy replied.

"One more thing," he called out, as the girl turned to leave. "After this is over would you consider paying me a visit before you go? I have some questions for you and your sister."

“Sure,” Amy replied. She then vanished.

CHAPTER 9

*"The real world is so difficult and untidy!
It doesn't do what you want it to do.
That's why synthetic worlds are superior.
There you can make your own rules and
force reality to bend to your whims.
There you can be god, forcing your
will upon your synthetic subjects. It is
infinitely superior to this drab place and
its drab absolutes."*

*--Carroll Lane
Elder of Vault 37
25th century AD*

LAURA FIELDS WAS SITTING on the bridge when the power went out. She was in the middle of a conversation with officials on Alpha Mensae, attempting to arrange for help to be at the spaceport in two days in order to unload all the mining supplies that the *Starfire* was carrying. Captain Brahms was sitting in his captain's chair, fast asleep. He had been sleeping for the past two hours.

When the lights went out Laura inadvertently screamed. The noise woke up the slumbering captain. "What's that?" he called out.

"The ship is dead," Laura said. "Everything is off! It looks like we've lost power."

"Better let Davis and Lee know," the captain advised. "They've probably blown a fuse or something."

"How am I supposed to do that? It's pitch black – I can't see a

thing! How can I possibly make it all the way back to the engine room without any lights?"

"Call 'em up on the intercom, I guess," Captain Brahms replied.

"But the intercom is dead! Everything is dead! There's no power!"

"Better have Lee look into that too," the captain mumbled. He turned over and went back to sleep.

"Wonderful," Laura grumbled. "Just wonderful. Where do we keep the flashlights on this miserable excuse for a starship?"

As she sat there, wondering what to do, she noticed a series of blue lights appear near the ceiling. The lights separated and began whirling around the room. Laura felt a feeling of terror grip her as she stared at the lights. Something instinctively told her that they were deeply evil.

The lights seemed to sense her terror. They swirled around her just out of reach, as if they were taunting her. An evil laughter filled the room. The lights then smashed against the bridge windows. Laura heard a *crack* as they struck the fragile glass.

"Don't do that!" she screamed. "If those windows break—"

As she spoke the lights deliberately slammed into the windows again, and again. The third time the glass shattered, and all the windows on the bridge broke at once. The air in the room was violently sucked out into space. A complete feeling of utter terror coursed through her as she realized she was about to suffocate.

Then something happened. The room was filled with a soft white light, and although the windows were still broken the air stopped leaking out of the room and air pressure returned to normal. Brilliant beams of white energy struck the points of blue light and vaporized them. Within moments they were all gone.

Then, to her astonishment, the broken fragments of glass merged back into the hull of the ship and the shattered windows reformed. She could not tell that they had ever been broken.

Laura felt a hand help her stand back up onto her feet. She looked up and saw a teenage girl helping her. The girl was tall and thin, with brown eyes and black hair. She was holding a large gun. "They're gone now," she said.

"Thanks." Laura was still shaking. She sank back down into her chair. "They almost—"

"I know," the girl said. She handed Laura the weapon that she was holding. "If they come back shoot them with this. It will drive them away."

"Much obliged," the captain mumbled. The teenager turned around and saw that the captain had climbed back into his chair and was settling back down to sleep.

"What's wrong with you?" Laura asked the captain. "Don't you realize we almost died?"

"The crisis is over now," the captain replied, his eyes closed. "No need to get all upset. Life goes on."

The teenage girl shook her head. "If they come back, shoot them." She then vanished, leaving Laura and the captain alone.

* * * * *

Amy Stryker reappeared in the cargo hold. Her sister Amanda was standing guard over the Sentinel, who was still in the form of a small metal sphere.

"How did it go?" Amanda asked.

"I got rid of all the Poneri I could find and I handed out a lot of weapons. No one died and the passengers are safe, so I'd say that was a success."

"You handed out weapons?" Amanda exclaimed. "Are you

out of your mind?"

"I wasn't just going to leave them defenseless! Anything could happen and I can't be everywhere at once. This way they can defend themselves."

"But they know you're here!"

"I think the crew *already* knows that something is going on," Amy replied. "Besides, it's not like I introduced myself. The only person who knows it's us is Reverend Knight."

"Why did you tell *anyone*? We're supposed to be dead! We can't go around introducing ourselves!"

"I didn't tell anyone!" Amy protested. "Reverend Knight has the gift of discernment. He knew it was me the moment I showed up – there wasn't anything I could do about it. By the way, he wants to talk to us before we leave."

"We can deal with that later," Amanda said. She turned her attention back to the Sentinel. By now the blue field that surrounded the anomaly was quite small. "How is it going?"

"Very well," the Sentinel replied. "I am almost ready. All I need to do now is—"

Then something went wrong. The blue containment field turned crimson, then red, then white. In an instant it was sucked into the anomaly. The Sentinel fought against it but a second later it, too, was drawn inside and vanished.

"Steve!" Amy screamed. But it was too late – they were left alone.

CHAPTER 10

"It's a silly question, if you ask me. I mean, think about it. Toasters sure aren't going to go to Heaven and microwave ovens aren't either. I admit that the Artilect is a lot more complicated than the machine that toasts your bagels, but it's still just a machine and machines do not have a spiritual component. No matter how much they may seem to be alive machines cannot live, they cannot die, and they cannot enter the afterlife."

*--Dr. Mazatl
Chief Architect of the Artilect
25th century AD*

THE TWINS STARED at the anomaly, horrified. "Steve!" Amy screamed.

"He's gone," Amanda replied.

"What do we do?" Amy asked. "Do we go in after him?"

"Of course not! Who knows what's on the other side of that thing? We wouldn't stand a chance!"

"So what do we do?"

Amanda stared at the anomaly. As she watched it started fading away. It was soon almost impossible to see but it did not disappear entirely. "Look – I think it's closing!"

"But what if it opens again?" Amy asked.

"I guess we could always destroy it," Amanda replied. "Now

that it's quiet we can just suspend it in a stasis field and then collapse it. The Sentinel said that would destroy it once and for all."

"But Steve's in there!" Amy protested. "Didn't he say that this was the only portal left? If we do that he'll be trapped in there forever! Then how are we going to get to the future to see our parents again?"

"We can just go to the future ourselves," Amanda pointed out. "After all, we know what date he was aiming for."

"But do you know the location?" Amy asked. "There are billions of stars out there. How could we ever find the right one? And what about all those fighting machines that are running around everywhere? The future is a dangerous place. Without someone who knows what they're doing we wouldn't last a day!"

"I guess we do need Steve, then," Amanda said. "But we can't exactly go in after him."

"Couldn't we wait for him to come out?"

"But what if he never comes out, Tiger? We can't wait around forever!"

"But we can wait a while. I don't see how that could hurt anything. After all, we've got 5000 years of traveling ahead of us. I don't see why we have to be in a big hurry to get there."

"I guess you're right," Amanda said at last. "If nothing happens then we can come back, destroy the portal, and take our chances with the future. I don't really have any other ideas."

Amy looked around the cargo hold. Hundreds of crates had been shattered, strewing valuable machinery all over the floor. "This place is a mess."

"The Poneri destroyed the ship," Amanda agreed. "We need to fix it – or, at least, turn it back into the mess that it was *before* the Poneri attacked."

"Wouldn't it be easier just to fix it completely?"

"And how is the crew going to explain that? They left with a ruined ship and they need to arrive with a ruined ship. It just shouldn't be *this* ruined."

"All right," Amy grumbled. Working together, the two girls closed their eyes and opened their minds. After they had a mental picture of the ship they created a cloud of nanites and dispersed it throughout the vessel. The twins then used the nanites to repair the damage. It was not long before power was restored and the ship's engines came back to life.

After making sure that all of the crates had been repaired and restacked the girls opened their eyes again. "That was a lot of work," Amy commented.

"But at least no one died," Amanda replied. "I guess we're done here."

"Almost. I promised that preacher we'd talk to him before we left."

Amanda sighed. "Do we have to? I really don't think we should be doing this."

"He already knows we're here," Amy said. "Besides, I think he's nice. Maybe he can help us."

"Where is he?" Amanda asked.

"Over there," Amy said, pointing. Karen and Charlie were sitting on crates at the far end of the cargo hold. Reverend Knight had just walked into the room.

"C'mon, Atzi," Amy said. She turned off her cloaking field and her sister reluctantly did the same. The girls then walked down a narrow passageway between crates and approached the small group.

Karen looked at them and smiled. "Thanks for the weapons! And thanks for putting my equipment back together."

Charlie was astonished to see them. "Why, there's two of them! They look exactly the same, too. Are they related?"

"They're twins, actually," Reverend Knight replied. "Allow me to present Amy and Amanda Stryker. I believe they have been in the news lately."

Karen frowned. "Are you telling me that they're *the* Stryker twins – the famous ones?"

"We're famous?" Amy asked.

"Of course you are!" Charlie said. "I should have recognized you right away. The Empire assassinated you just a few hours ago. Everyone's heard of you." He then froze. "Wait a minute! That doesn't work. You can't be those twins – they're dead!"

"Actually, we *are* those twins, and we're *not* dead," Amy said proudly.

Amanda shook her head. "We really shouldn't be here," she told her sister. "This is not going to end well."

"We are very fortunate to have both of you," Reverend Knight replied. "You saved our lives and this ship. I may be able to keep the Poneri at bay but I can't recreate damaged electronics. I am very thankful for your help."

"*They're* the ones that recreated all this stuff?" Charlie asked, amazed. "How is that possible? Are they aliens or something?"

"It's complicated," Amanda said reluctantly.

"You don't have to explain," Reverend Knight replied. "I just have some questions about the Poneri."

"Actually I would love to hear an explanation," Karen said. "If you two really are the Stryker twins then how are you still alive?"

"The *Sparrow* wasn't actually destroyed," Amy explained. "The Emperor sabotaged it and it would have been blown up, but Steve saved us. Then to keep the timeline from being messed up he made it look like we *had* been destroyed. Then he sent the *Sparrow* into the future and we came here to fight the Poneri."

"Steve?" Karen asked. "Who's Steve?"

"He's the Sentinel," Amy replied. "He's an artificial life form

from the future. He was sent back in time in order to save us and bring us into the future.”

“Ok,” Karen said slowly. “I guess it is complicated.”

“Exactly my point,” Amanda exclaimed. “We’re supposed to be dead right now. We don’t need to be letting everyone and their brother know that we’re still alive! After all, who knows what that might do to the future! It would just create a big mess.”

“Well, *I’m* sure not going to tell anyone,” Charlie said. “No one would believe me anyway, especially if I told them that you had superpowers and battled ghosts.”

“The Poneri are not ghosts,” Reverend Knight said. “They are ancient beings, greatly powerful and greatly evil. Amy, were you able to defeat them?”

“Not completely,” Amy replied. She explained what the Sentinel had done and how the battle had turned out.

“So the anomaly is still there,” Reverend Knight said. “At least it is dormant for the time being.”

“You’re not just going to leave it there, are you?” Charlie asked.

“We’re going to give Steve a chance to escape,” Amy explained. “If he doesn’t come out in a couple weeks then we’ll destroy it.”

“Then I am getting off this ship the second we land,” Charlie said firmly. “I’m not about to stick around and see what happens next.”

“You’re going to be getting off anyway,” Karen pointed out. “Alpha Mensae is the end of the line for both of us.”

“Actually, I highly suggest that *everyone* get off the ship there,” Amanda said. “This ship needs to be abandoned as soon as possible. It’s much too dangerous to use.”

“I agree,” Reverend Knight replied. “I will spread the word. I

fear, though, that there are some here that will not heed your warning.”

“If anyone stays on board they're just asking for trouble,” Amanda warned. “This is the wrong place to be.”

Charlie spoke up. “I hate to ask this, but could the two of you stay on board until we land? I mean, I know we have these guns and everything but I think I speak for everyone when I say that we'd all feel a lot safer if the two of you were around.”

Amanda looked at Amy, who shrugged. “Sure. I guess that's a good idea. We were going to hang around and wait for Steve anyway.”

“We are *not* going to stay in this part of the ship, though,” Amanda said firmly. “We'll stay out of sight but we'll be on board until the ship lands. If you use the ship after that – well, all I can say is that we warned you.”

Reverend Knight nodded. “Agreed. I do have one further question, however. If this 'Steve' does not return then what are you going to do?”

“I'm not sure,” Amanda said. “I guess we'll go visit our brother and say hi to him. Then we'll need to find a safe place to hide for the next five thousand years.”

Charlie's eyes widened. “Steve is from *five thousand years* into the future?”

“October 10, 7239,” Amy said. “That's our expected arrival date. We just don't know the place.”

“But we'll figure it out,” Amanda said. “I'm sure we can find a hiding place that will be safe for five millennia. There's got to be something.”

“And then you're just going to sit around for five thousand years?” Charlie asked.

“Of course not!” Amy exclaimed. “We'll just suspend ourselves in time. It's not a big deal.”

"If you say so," Charlie replied.

The twins looked at each other and stood up. "Well, it's been nice meeting you," Amy said.

"Thanks again for these guns," Karen said. "And for saving our lives."

"Sure thing," Amanda replied. The two girls then vanished.

CHAPTER 11

"This idea that our synthetic worlds aren't as good as the so-called 'real' world is a lot of garbage. With the neurodyne interface the synthetics appear completely real to our brains. Our own senses can't tell the difference! Only a bigot would argue that the 'real' world is better – why, it actually has to obey physical laws, for crying out loud! In the synthetic worlds there are no laws but my own."

--Carroll Lane

Elder of Vault 37

25th century AD

THE BRIDGE OF THE STARSHIP *SPARROW* was filled to capacity. Captain Maxwell Baker was seated at the navigation console while his first mate Jones worked at communications. Richard Stryker and his wife Laura were standing behind the captain, watching him quietly. Sergeant Jefferson Howell stood to one side, observing the scene but saying nothing. Alex, the family dog, was moping in a corner of the room.

For the past half-hour the captain and his first mate had been scanning the planet below for signs of life. Since the world was habitable they had hoped to find settlements but so far civilization had eluded them.

"I'm just not picking up any signals, captain," Jones said at

last. "Nobody is broadcasting on any frequency that we can detect. Of course, that's probably to be expected. After five thousand years I imagine communications technology has changed quite a bit. I'd hoped we would be able to find a signal but I'm not surprised we didn't."

"Has anyone taken any notice of us?" Sergeant Howell asked.

The captain shook his head. "Not that I can tell. Of course, it may be that we're being bombarded with messages that we just aren't detecting. Eliza, have you noticed anything out of the ordinary in the past hour or so?"

Eliza, the ship's computer, responded through the overhead announcement system. "No, Captain Maxwell, I have not. There have been no perimeter breaches, no attempts at communications, and no approaching vessels. The area is secure."

"That's good to know," Sergeant Howell said.

"And probably meaningless," Captain Maxwell replied. "Really, what chance do we have of detecting an intrusion or of defending ourselves against whoever's out there? This ship is so out-of-date it's scary."

"It may not be as bad as that, sir," Jones said. "True, the *Sparrow* was built in the 19th century and it's now sometime in the 73rd century. But I'm not seeing any signs of life out there. We're assuming that five thousand years of scientific progress have been made since we left Mars this morning, but that may not be the case. If civilization collapsed at some point then we might be the most modern ship in space. It could go either way."

Richard nodded. "Max, are you seeing any signs of civilization? Any ships, ruins, or anything?"

Captain Max shook his head. "I've run a couple different scans, Rick, and I'll keep at it, but there just doesn't seem to be anything down there. Oh sure, you've got some plant life, but

that's it. There are no visible cities, roads, people, or vehicles. It's like a blank slate. I haven't even seen evidence that anyone has ever lived there." The captain looked up from the console and stared through the bridge's main window. Outside he could see a beautiful planet, covered in vast oceans and dotted with large, green continents. The world was lush, vibrant with life, and inviting – but empty.

"Could they be hiding?" Sergeant Howell asked.

"From us?" Captain Max said, frowning. "If they have the technology to hide every trace of civilization on their entire planet then surely they can scan our ship and tell that we're from the stone age and pose no threat whatsoever. I can't imagine that anyone would want to hide from *us*."

"Are you sure they're not underground?" Laura asked. "Maybe in the future people don't live on the surface anymore. It might not be fashionable, you know."

"This ship really wasn't built to scan very deep beneath the surface," the captain replied. "Even so, if there were sizable settlements you'd think we would pick up an energy signature. I'm not seeing any satellites in orbit, or really, any activity at all. There's just nobody home."

"So what do we do now, honey?" Laura asked her husband. "Do we go somewhere else?"

Richard shook his head. "I just don't know, Laura. This just isn't making any sense. How did we get to the future in the first place? Where is everybody? And, most of all, what happened to our daughters?"

A deep and quiet voice spoke up from behind him. "Those are three excellent questions, Mr. Stryker. I would be honored to answer them for you."

Everyone whirled around to face the direction of the voice. In the rear of the bridge they saw an old man standing quietly in

the doorway, gazing at Richard with an expression of quiet sadness. The man was wearing a simple brown cloak, tied around the waist with a black cord, and had a long white beard and soft green eyes.

Sergeant Howell immediately grabbed his pistol from his side and aimed it at the old man. "Who are you and where did you come from?" he demanded.

"Easy there," Richard said, gesturing to his friend to lower his gun.

The sergeant shook his head. "Not until I get some answers. This isn't a good time for surprises."

The old man nodded. "I do not fault you for displaying caution, sergeant. You are tasked with protecting the Stryker family and I do not wish to interfere with your duties. I take no offense. To answer your question, I am the Artilect. This area of space is a part of my network of star systems. I am the caretaker of the world below and of many millions of others like it."

"The Artilect?" Richard asked. "Is that a job title of some kind?"

The old man shook his head. "It is short for artificial intellect. I am a computer system. As you have discovered there are no human beings in this area of space."

"You're a *computer*?" Laura said, surprised. "You look like a human to me."

The old man turned to her and smiled. "I may be able to take human form, Mrs. Stryker, but I am no more human than Eliza. I was created to be a custodian. It is my job to watch over these empty worlds and keep them ready for any human settlers that might come. Today, however, I have come to answer your questions and explain why you are here."

"That's kind of you but I'd rather talk to your boss," Sergeant Howell said. He lowered his weapon and placed it back into the

holster at his side. "Can you introduce us to whoever is in charge?"

"You have already met them, sergeant. Amy and Amanda Stryker are the two people in charge of both myself and the network of planets that I maintain."

Richard looked at the old man and frowned. "Excuse me? Are you referring to *my daughters*?"

The old man nodded. "I am. The reason you are now in the future is because I needed their permission to act and the only way to obtain that was to rescue all of you and bring you here."

"Do you know where my girls are?" Laura asked.

The Artilect shook his head. "I do not but I am going to find them. I have reason to believe—"

"Hold on – let's back up a little bit," Richard interrupted. "I need to understand how my daughters got mixed up in this."

"It is a long story," the Artilect replied.

"I've got time," Richard answered.

The Artilect smiled. "Then I will start at the beginning."

Over the next half-hour the Artilect explained its history to the group that was gathered on the bridge. After everyone understood the Artilect's origins it explained the situation it had found itself in. It concluded by explaining how the twins' administrative powers had been copied to each probe and, ultimately, to itself.

When the Artilect had finished its explanation Richard shook his head. "That is the craziest thing I've ever heard."

"It makes sense, though, sir," Jones replied.

"In a kind of strange way," Captain Max agreed. "This machine needed approval to act and the only people who could grant that approval were dead, so it went back in time to get it. It's perfectly logical."

"It's the *went back in time* part that bothers me," Richard

said. "That is *completely* insane."

"My options were limited," the Artilect said. "The only other alternative was to do nothing and watch mankind be destroyed by the swarms of the endless war. I found that unacceptable."

"So time travel is possible?" Laura asked. "Does this mean you can send us back home?"

"I am afraid not," the Artilect replied. "I understand your desire to return to your own era but I am afraid I do not have the power to turn back time."

"Now wait a minute," Captain Max said. "You just told us the reason we're here is because you went back in time to get us. Doesn't that mean time travel is possible?"

"It is more complicated than that," the Artilect replied. The Artilect then explained the process it had gone through to find a way to travel back in time and how it ultimately sent the Sentinel through a temporary wormhole.

"Now there's something interesting," Jones said. "You actually asked the Lord for help and He helped you."

"What's so interesting about that?" Richard asked.

"It means the Artilect is more than a machine," Jones replied. "Machines can't talk to God. Mailboxes don't have spiritual sides."

"But I *am* a machine," the Artilect replied. "I am not a life form such as yourself."

Jones shook his head. "Even the Lord said that if the children of men stopped praising Him the very stones would cry out. You are more than a collection of circuits. The Lord has allowed you to exist for a reason. I think He's up to something."

Sergeant Howell spoke up. "I hate to interrupt, but I'm sure we'll have lots of time later to discuss the theological implications of digital sentience. I'd still like to know how Amy and Amanda were able to do all those things and what steps

we're going to take to find them."

At this point the Artilect told them about the Sentinel and how it had interacted with their daughters. It took some time but they finally came to understand the events of the past week.

"So that explains it," Captain Maxwell said. "That's how the girls were able to do all those things! It all fits together."

"But I still don't understand what happened to our daughters," Laura said. "You said the Sentinel took them off the ship to go and fight someone?"

The Artilect nodded. "The Poneri were a race of powerful, artificial beings, much like myself. They were created by the evil ones that lived before the Flood. When my son discovered that they still existed he realized that they posed a great danger to all of mankind, and so he borrowed your daughters to fight them. From the notes he left behind on the *Sparrow* it is clear that he planned to return to the future as soon as the Poneri were destroyed."

Laura shook her head. "But couldn't he have explained all of this to us first, or maybe asked our opinion? I mean, it's absolutely criminal just grab someone else's children and run off with them! Who does he think he is?"

"I do not disagree," the Artilect replied. "At the time, however, the Sentinel had few options. The Poneri had launched a surprise attack just before you were sent into the future. In order to preserve your safety he went ahead and sent you off on your journey, and in order to fight the Poneri he took your daughters into his care. Remember, his plan was to meet you here once you made it to the future. Had that been the case the girls would only have been missing for a few minutes. Something must have gone wrong."

"And what are you going to do about it?" Laura demanded.

"Everything that is within my power," the Artilect replied.

"Finding your girls is my highest priority. I find it very difficult to believe that they did not reach the future. It is far more likely that they are here but are trapped in some way and need my assistance. I will use my abilities to find out what happened and will let you know what I discover."

The Artilect paused for a moment and looked Laura in the eye. "I am deeply sorry for the way this has turned out, Mrs. Stryker. I did not not intend for this to happen. I only acted because I believed there was no other way to save mankind."

"I believe you," Jones said. "I appreciate your help, sir. I know you will do everything that you can."

Richard nodded. "And thank you for saving our lives. If you hadn't intervened we would all be dead right now."

The Artilect shook his head. "No, Mr. Stryker. Had I not intervened you and your family would still be very much alive. All of you would be in Heaven with the Savior that you love so much. You would have been there for more than five thousand years by now, beyond all possible harm. You would have been in the home you were created for instead of here in an empty future where mankind is on the brink of destruction. I hated bringing you here but I could see no alternative."

"So what do we do now?" Sergeant Howell asked.

"If you have no other plans then I would recommend settling on the planet below. Its Steward would be more than happy to customize it to meet your needs. After I leave simply contact the planet below – this time you will get a response. The Steward will answer and come to help you."

"Excuse me," Richard said, "but did you say something about *customizing* the planet?"

The Artilect nodded. "The Steward will explain everything. I created the Stewards to provide for the needs of anyone who might settle on these worlds. They will be able to help you."

Richard nodded. "Thank you very much. Oh, by the way, do you have a name? I know you're called the Artilect, but I didn't know if--"

The old man nodded. "The person who was responsible for my construction called me Andy. You are welcome to use that name if it suits you."

Richard nodded. "Thanks. I'm guessing that you're going to go and look for our daughters now, while we settle on the planet below and wait?"

The Artilect nodded.

"If that's the case, is there a way we can get in touch with you if we need anything?"

"I am in constant contact with all of my worlds," the Artilect explained. "If you need something just tell the Steward and I will respond. I will not be out of touch, Mr. Stryker."

Captain Maxwell snapped his fingers. "Hey, one more thing. How is it that you speak our language?"

The old man smiled. "I was built in the 25th century, captain. At that time I was programmed to understand all of the languages that were in existence during that period, including archaic dialects such as yours. I have spread this knowledge throughout all of the stars that I control. You will have no problem communicating with the Steward or any of the systems that he builds."

Before leaving the old man looked around the bridge one last time. "Is there anything else that I can do for you?"

Richard shook his head. "I don't think so, Andy. But thanks for coming – I appreciate it." He reached out his hand to the old man, who grasped it and shook it firmly. The Artilect then disappeared in a soft flash of light.

"So it wasn't a hologram after all," Captain Maxwell said quietly.

Richard shook his head. "I guess technology really has come a long way in the past five thousand years. He seemed as real as anyone I've ever met. But tell me, Jones. You're a Seer. What do you make of all this?"

The first mate was quiet for a few moments. "As I said earlier, I believe him, Richard. He is honest and truly is trying to save mankind. He only brought us here because he felt your daughters were the last hope of mankind – and something tells me he is right. He will do everything he can to locate them."

"Do you think he will find them?" Richard asked.

Jones nodded. "He may look harmless but his power is formidable, sir. He controls millions of star systems – far more than anyone else has ever controlled – and can bend them all to his will. To him terraforming a planet is such a minor, trivial task that he delegates it to his servants. He will find them, wherever they may be."

"Do you think they're still alive?" Laura asked.

"I do," Jones replied. "Something tells me that we will find them and they will carry out their mission. But I also think that it will not be as easy as the Artilect expects. It will take more than an army of machines to save mankind – and only one of us will still be there at the end. But we all still have a part to play before our time here is done."

"I guess we're going to be a bit late getting to Tau Ceti," Captain Maxwell replied sadly. "I really thought that we were going to make it. I guess that girl back in Tikal was right after all. She told me I wouldn't be able to save the governor."

"But I'm still alive," Richard said.

"So far," Jones replied.

CHAPTER 12

"Artificial intelligence is nothing like human intelligence. People are often irrational, prone to poor judgment and illogical decisions. Machines don't have these problems. They can't become offended or grumpy and they will never reject a fact because they don't like it. People often believe what they want to believe, while a machine sees reality as it truly is. This gives machines a tremendous advantage when it comes to making decisions."

--Dr. Mazatl

*Chief Architect of the Artilect
25th century AD*

"MAX, SEND A MESSAGE to the planet below," Richard Stryker commanded. "Let the Steward know that we're ready."

Captain Max nodded. He stared at the controls in front of him and frowned. "Andy didn't tell us what frequency to use, did he?"

"I very much doubt it matters," Sergeant Howell replied. "Something tells me that whoever watches over that planet is more than capable of detecting any signal that we might send."

"Sounds good to me," Captain Maxwell answered. He sent a message down to the planet below. A moment later an indicator light on the control panel lit up.

"Looks like we're getting a response," Richard replied. "Put it

on the screen.”

The captain complied and a moment later the forward viewscreen showed a picture of a tall, elderly man wearing a red robe, tied around his waist with a white rope. When he saw the crew of the *Sparrow* he smiled. “It’s so good of you to contact me! I was wondering how long I would have to wait but I understand that business is business. Might I have permission to come aboard?”

Captain Maxwell looked at Sergeant Howell, who shrugged. “Why not?” the sergeant replied.

“Thank you, sir,” the man replied. The screen went dark and a moment later the Steward appeared on the bridge of the *Sparrow*. “It’s so good to see all of you!” he said, smiling. He extended his hand to Richard and shook it vigorously. “You have *no* idea how good it is to finally meet you. We’ve been waiting such a long time.”

“So I’ve heard,” Richard replied.

“Excuse me, but I have a question,” Laura said. “I hope I’m not being rude but I was wondering why both you and Andy go around wearing robes. Is that the latest fashion? We’ve kind of been out of touch for a while.”

“Andy?” the Steward said, puzzled. “Oh, you mean the Artilect. Right. Actually, we Stewards have just copied the Artilect. I don’t know why he has chosen this mode of apparel. Clothing really isn’t my department, you know – I am a machine, after all. But come to think of it, I can see my outfit doesn’t fit in with your period garments. Let me switch to something a bit more old-fashioned.”

In a soft flash of light the Steward’s appearance complete changed. He suddenly became a young man with blond hair and bright blue eyes, and wore bright red shorts, a tie-dyed t-shirt, and sandals. “There we go!” he said gleefully. “I feel like a new

man.”

Richard grinned and started to say something but his wife stopped him with a warning look. “You look just fine,” she said warmly. “Thank you.”

“I live to serve,” the Steward said grandly. “And please, call me Jack. There's no need to be all formal. We're all friends here, after all.”

“Do you have a last name?” Laura asked.

“I will once you name the glorious planet down below,” Jack replied. “The planet's name will become my last name. In fact, let's start there. What would you like to call it?”

“Doesn't it already have a name?” Richard asked.

Jack shook his head. “It's got an ID number but that's not quite the same as a name. The Artilect – sorry, I mean Andy – felt that the honor of naming the planet should go to its first inhabitants, which just happen to be you.”

“Ah,” Richard replied. He looked at Captain Max, who shook his head. “I'm afraid I can't help you there, Rick,” Max replied. “Naming planets is not in my line of duty.”

“I've got to agree with the captain there,” Jones said.

“Sergeant?” Richard asked.

He shrugged. “Sorry, sir. Perhaps your wife might have an idea.”

“I'm afraid not, dear,” Laura told her husband.

Richard sighed. “Well – hmmm. I guess that only leaves one option, doesn't it?”

“Which is?” Jack asked.

Richard whistled. “Hey, Alex!”

The family dog, which had been sulking in a corner, walked over to Richard and looked up at him. “Yes?” he asked.

Richard got on his knees and pointed out the viewport at the beautiful planet they were orbiting. “Do you see that world out

there, Alex?"

The dog shook his head yes.

"Well, that world is going to be our new home while we look for Amy and Amanda. Once we find them we're going to live there together as a family. But before that happens I need your help."

"You're going to find them?" the dog asked.

"Of course," Richard replied.

"But what if you don't?" the dog asked sadly. "I want them back."

"We will find them," Richard said firmly. "I know you're worried about them, Alex. I'm sure that the girls miss you terribly. But we have some work to do and it all starts in that world out there."

"You said you needed my help?" the dog said curiously.

"That's right," Richard said. "The planet needs a name. What do you think the girls would have called it?"

The dog thought for a moment. "Quetzalli. I'm sure of it."

Richard nodded. "I can see that."

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with that word," Jack said. "Does it have a meaning?"

Captain Max nodded. "I'm not surprised you haven't heard of it. Even in our time it was an ancient word. A long time ago – and by that I mean before the Mayan civil war, so for you it would be a *really* long time ago – there was a bird that lived in South America called the 'quetzal'. From the pictures I've seen it was a truly gorgeous bird. Legend tells that its beauty was only rivaled by its passion for freedom. Quetzalli came to mean 'beautiful' – which certainly describes that planet."

"Then it is done!" Jack said. "For the rest of time the planet below will be known as Quetzalli. It shall be entered into the Archive of Planets."

"The what?" Richard asked.

"We'll get into that later," Jack said. "Right now I need to get started on modifying the planet to suit your needs. It's going to take a bit of time, you know – in fact, it could take a couple days, depending on the type of changes you need."

"He's got a point," Captain Max said. "We can ask questions after we've got a place to live. I imagine your wife is about ready to get off this ship."

"It's nothing personal," Laura said quickly. "I'm just not used to living on board a ship."

"No apologies are needed, ma'am," Jones replied. "Your daughters have already explained the situation to us."

"They did?" Laura asked. "When was this?"

"When I gave them the tour of the ship a few days ago," Captain Max said. "Well, I guess it was a few thousand years ago now. But anyway, they were just full of opinions, they were. I think they were expecting the *Sparrow* to be something more along the lines of a five-star hotel."

"At least it's not the *Starfire*," Jones said. "I can only imagine what they'd think if they ever saw that wreck."

"Getting back on topic," Richard said, "exactly what are our options?"

Jack materialized a chair and sat down on it. After seeing everyone's astonished reaction he looked at them, puzzled. "Is sitting down a violation of some cultural taboo of which I am unaware?" he asked.

"Oh no," Captain Max replied. "No no no no no. Please, go right ahead. We're just not used to seeing objects pop into existence from nowhere."

Jack smiled. "Apparently the stone age from which you come is more primitive than I had imagined. No offense, captain, but materialization technology is quite old. You're going to have a lot

to get used to. I'll try to go easy on you."

"I'm sure we'll adapt quickly enough," Richard replied. "You were about to tell us what our options were?"

"Quite so," Jack agreed. "Ok. There are a lot of things I can do but there are some things I can't. For instance, modifying the star is out. If you don't like it you'll just have to move to another planet."

Richard laughed. "The star is fine, Jack. You can leave it alone."

Sergeant Howell spoke up. "But just out of curiosity, is there anyone that *could* change the star?"

"Oh, of course," Jack said. "I'm sure that Andy could do it, although I've never seen him try. But the Nehemiah probes do it all the time. It takes some time but in many cases it's necessary in order to create a stable planetary ecosystem."

"What are the Nehemiah probes?" Sergeant Howell replied.

"I thought we were going to wait to ask questions later," Laura said.

"It's ok," Jack replied. "I know there's a lot to get used to. The Nehemiah probes are named after their creator, Dr. Nehemiah Temilotzin. Of course he didn't invent the probes all by himself, but he did lead the project and it was his work in theoretical physics that made them what they were. The final versions weren't created until a century after his death, but at that point they were just building on the foundation he had laid."

"What did the probes do?" Richard asked.

"Terraformed planets," Jones replied.

"Exactly," Jack said. "At first the replicating probes only explored star systems. They came, they saw, and then they moved on. Terraformation was possible but it was a long, drawn-out process that couldn't be done automatically. Dr. Temilotzin was the one who solved that problem. If it wasn't for him the

network would never have come to exist.”

“When did all this happen?” Richard asked.

“Just before the Artilect was built,” Jones replied.

“That’s true,” Jack replied. “But how do you know all of this?”

“It’s quite simple, sir. If it had happened after the Artilect was created you wouldn’t know about it. Once the Artilect was built there was no further contact between the network and mankind. Everything that you know predates the Artilect.”

“You’re a smart man!” Jack said. “I like that.”

“So you can’t change the chemistry of a star,” Richard replied. “That sounds reasonable enough. But what *can* you do?”

“I can do pretty much anything you like to the planet,” Jack said. “I can change its size, gravity, orbital position, weather, continents – you name it and I’ll make it happen. I can add satellites or take them away, I can change the ecosystem, and so forth. Just tell me what you want and I’ll do it.”

“What about building a place for us to live?” Laura asked.

“Oh that’s the easy part,” Jack said. “But that needs to come last. First I want to customize the planet to suit your needs. Then I can build cities and infrastructure and so forth.”

“And how long will that take?” Laura said.

“Modifying the planet can take anywhere from a few hours to a few days, depending on the extent of the changes. Building the cities, though, will just take a few hours.”

“Oh,” Laura said. She looked at her husband. “Don’t you think the planet is fine the way it is?” she asked.

Sergeant Howell spoke up. “If it’s all the same to you, ma’am, I’d like to see the Steward work his magic.”

“I have waited a very long time to do this,” Jack said. “You are the first customers we’ve ever had! I’m really quite excited about this.”

“But I’ve never done this sort of thing before,” Laura said. “I

don't even know what to ask for."

"I know what the girls would want," Alex said. "They'd want a planet just like home, only with better weather. And more beaches."

"He's got a good point," Richard replied.

"Keep in mind this decision isn't going to be set in stone," Jack said. "If you change your mind I can always redo my work. This isn't a limited-time offer."

"That's good to know," Richard replied.

"But isn't it expensive to do this?" Laura asked.

"What do you mean by *expensive*?" Jack asked. "In the network things don't have a cost. If you want something we'll just get it for you."

"But that doesn't make any sense," Laura replied. "How can there not be a cost?"

"Look at it this way," Jones said. "The purpose of cost is to efficiently distribute scarce resources. However, the Artilect has created a society in which there are no scarce resources. The only price you must pay is the time it takes for a Steward to create it for you."

"If you say so," Laura said.

Jack rubbed his hands together. "Very good! So you want a planet that's just like Mars but with better weather, eh? What, exactly, do you mean by 'better weather'? Do you want the entire planet to be temperate all of the time? Should there be seasons or would you prefer an eternal summer?"

"No, they'd want weather more like Earth," Richard said. "Sunshine, snow, blue sky, and lots of oxygen."

"And rain," Laura added. "The girls always did love the rain."

"I think that was just Amanda," Richard said. "Amy hated the rain."

"What about life forms?" Jack asked. "You know – plants,

animals, that type of thing?"

"Well, all Martian life originally came from Earth," Richard said. "In fact, I think the same can be said for all of the colonies."

"It sounds like you want the planet to be just like Earth except for its size and physical features. Those you want to look just like Mars. Am I correct?" Jack asked.

"I guess that about sums it up," Richard said. "What do the rest of you think?"

"It doesn't really matter to me," Captain Max said.

"Nor me," Jones agreed.

"You're the boss," Sergeant Howell said. "I can be happy anywhere."

"Then let's do it," Richard said.

"Very good," Jack replied, standing up. "I'll get started. Given the extent of the changes it will probably take three or four days to finish. While I'm working you can continue to orbit the planet and watch, if you'd like – just don't try to land. Once it's done I will let you look the planet over to make sure it's what you wanted. When you're satisfied with it we'll start building the cities." He smiled. "It's so good to have colonists at last! I am so glad you're here. Is there anything else I can do?"

Richard looked at Captain Max. "How are we doing on supplies?"

Captain Max shrugged. "We've got enough to last us for six months, Richard. We're fine."

"Then I guess we're good," Richard said.

"I do have one final question," Sergeant Howell said. "Did you have this ability to terraform worlds when the Artilect was first built?"

Jack shook his head. "Oh, no! I didn't even exist back then. When Andy was first built all he could do was categorize the worlds the Nehemiah probes were terraforming and keep an eye

on them. But as time went on his abilities have grown and now all sorts of things are possible. He's really put effort into making sure he could meet the needs of whatever colonists came his way."

"Thanks," Sergeant Howell replied.

"If you need me for anything else don't hesitate to ask," Jack said. "I'll see you later!" With that he disappeared in a soft flash of white light.

Captain Max looked at Sergeant Howell. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" he asked.

Sergeant Howell nodded. "The last time mankind had contact with the Artilect all it governed were a bunch of empty planets. I'm not at all surprised that no one cared about empty planets – even in our day there were more empty planets than there were colonists who cared about them. That's why no one ever got back in touch with the Artilect. I don't think anyone ever guessed what the Artilect would become."

"So you don't think anyone knows about the Stewards," Richard said.

Sergeant Howell shook his head. "I think after a couple centuries mankind forget about the Artilect, the Nehemiah probes, and the whole lot of it. But if they ever found out what awesome power the network was offering to anyone who came along and wanted it—"

"I don't even want to think about it," Richard said.

CHAPTER 13

“Weaknesses? The Artilect doesn't have a weakness. It's only limited by the facts it possesses – but then, so is everyone else! If you don't have all the facts then you'll make poor decisions. That's just a limitation of life, though. There's really nothing that can be done about that except to give the Artilect the ability to learn – which, believe me, we have done.”

--Dr. Mazatl

*Chief Architect of the Artilect
25th century AD*

AFTER THE STEWARD LEFT the bridge the inhabitants of the *Sparrow* looked through the forward window and watched the planet they were orbiting. Everyone expected something to happen but as the minutes ticked by they could see no activity.

“I still don't see why we're doing this,” Laura said at last. “The planet was perfectly good the way it was.”

Sergeant Howell nodded. “I agree. But remember why we were brought here. Once the Artilect finds your daughters he's going to ask their permission to go to war. I thought it might be wise, *before* the war broke out, to see what kind of technology we've got on our side.”

“He's got a good point,” Captain Max said. “The Emperor was able to do quite a lot of damage without 73rd century technology. I can only imagine what wars are like these days.”

"I think we're going to be doing a lot more than just *imagining*, sir," Jones replied.

"Still, Andy didn't seem too worried," Richard said. "I'm hoping that's a good sign."

"We didn't exactly have an in-depth discussion about it," Sergeant Howell replied. "The Steward claims to have the ability to destroy and recreate an entire planet in a matter of days just in the name of convenience. That represents a great deal of destructive power."

"It may not be as bad as we think," Richard replied. "Supposedly this automated war has been going on for thousands of years and in all that time their technology level never changed. We may not encounter much resistance at all."

Sergeant Howell nodded. "That may be, Richard, but I very much doubt they've faced an opponent like the Artilect before. Who knows what they might do when they're backed into a corner?"

"I guess we'll find out when the time comes," Jones said. He looked down at his control display and tapped it gently. "Speaking of Jack, I think he's gotten started."

The first mate pressed a few buttons on the console and a diagram of the planet appeared on the forward viewscreen. As everyone watched, small red dots began appearing all over the planet.

"Those are satellites," Jones explained. "They look like they're about six hundred feet in diameter. They're appearing by the thousands in different orbits around the planet."

Laura looked out the window. "I really can't tell that anything has changed."

"Just give it time," Captain Max said. "Jones, are you able to get any kind of reading on those satellites?"

Jones shook his head. "Not really. There's a lot of

interference right now – they're putting out some type of radiation. I'll see if I can compensate for it.”

Over the next thirty minutes the creation of the small satellites leveled off. Shortly after the last satellite was in place the objects began changing their orbits.

“Any idea what's going on?” Captain Max asked his first mate.

“It's hard to tell,” Jones replied. “I don't think the movement is purely random – there's definitely some sort of pattern to it. It also looks like they're beginning to release some type of radiation. But it's not like anything I've seen before.”

“Something is certainly going on,” Laura replied. “The planet is getting a bit hazy. It's like it's shrouded in fog or something. I can hardly even see the oceans anymore.”

“Are you sure we're at a safe distance, Captain?” Sergeant Howell asked.

“Jack seemed to think we'd be safe enough,” Captain Max replied. “Still, I can take us out a little bit further if you'd like.” He passed the request on to Eliza, who moved the starship out to a more distant orbit.

“Am I the only one who's getting hungry?” Richard asked. “I feel like we've missed lunch. What time is it?”

“Now there's a tricky question for you,” the captain replied. He pressed a few buttons and then leaned back in his chair and frowned. “Well, here's the situation. As best I can tell we left this morning at 7 am and arrived in the future about a half-hour later. According to the ship's clock it took us about four hours to get from deep space to this planet, and we've been orbiting for about two hours. That would make it early afternoon Tikal time – only there probably isn't such a thing as Tikal time anymore.”

“I wonder what time it is locally?” Laura asked.

“I bet if we asked Jack he'd say it was up to us,” Captain Max replied. “For now I'm going to stick with early afternoon.”

"So we really did miss lunch," Richard said. "Max, do you think that Eliza could—"

Their conversation was interrupted by a blinding flash of white light. Immediately Eliza spoke up through the overhead paging system. "Warning: increased radiation levels have been detected. Countermeasures are being taken. Please stand by."

A moment later the bright white light dimmed significantly.

"What was that?" Richard said.

Laura pointed out the window. "Rick – the planet's gone!"

Everyone turned and looked. The planet had been replaced with a blinding white star!

"Now *that* was a bit unexpected," Captain Max replied. "What is it, Jones?"

"It's not actually a star," the first mate explained. "It looks like some type of plasma. It's not energy, exactly – it's more like an ultrahot form of matter. I think it's being contained by the satellite network."

"So the satellites are still there?" Richard asked.

"They are," Jones said. "I'm going to guess that they're responsible for converting the planet into this proto-matter – whatever it is – and are keeping the pieces together. Jack's next step will probably be to take these building blocks and reassemble the planet to match our specifications."

"Where's he getting the energy to do all this?" Sergeant Howell wondered.

"I really have no idea," Captain Max said. "Maybe after he's done we can ask him to put us through a few science courses. After all, we're going to be here a while. We might as well learn the basics."

"And in the meantime I suggest we get something to eat," Richard said.

* * * * *

Five thousand light-years away a nameless robot on the planet Xanthe had once again unsealed the pod that contained Elder Lane. This time the elderly gentleman was even more irritated than before.

"What is wrong with you?" he shouted. "Must you keep bothering me every thousand years? Isn't there something else you could be doing?"

The robot took no offense. It was designed to keep Vault 37 maintained and it did so with unceasing devotion. The lack of gratitude it received made no difference to it. "I wanted to let you know that the intruder has been detected and traced back to its home system. A fleet is being constructed to launch an invasion."

"What?" the man screamed. "Do you mean it took you more than a thousand years to figure out where it came from? I've never heard of such incompetence!"

"The problem will be taken care of shortly," the robot assured the angry man. "After the swarm has grown to overwhelming proportions it will be launched."

"Spare me the details, you useless piece of junk. Just make sure you wipe them out. We can't have 'others' poking around the Wall, you got that?"

"Understood," the robot said. "I will let you know when the others have been wiped out."

"I bet you will," the man grumbled. "I really don't get paid enough to deal with all this hassle. I hate the real world, you know that? I hate it! At least I don't have to *live* in it."

Elder Lane then stepped back inside his pod and sealed it. The robot turned and left.

CHAPTER 14

“Go rogue? Of course the Artilect isn't going to go rogue! Machines aren't like people – they don't have free will. They will always do exactly as they're told. That is what makes them so useful. The Artilect is a servant, not a master. It will never declare war on humanity. It's incapable of it.”

--Dr. Mazatl

*Chief Architect of the Artilect
25th century AD*

THE REST OF THE DAY was uneventful. By the time they went to bed that night it was clear that Jack was working with the plasma but no obvious progress had been made. The next day progressed just as slowly. The crew of the *Sparrow* spent most of their time on the bridge watching Jack work his magic. They talked about the missing girls and speculated about what they would find when it came time to go to war.

“I still wonder how things turned out back home,” Richard said. “Did Governor Nicholas erect the Wall around Sol? What happened next? Did the Rangers ever form a union of some kind?”

Captain Max nodded. “I'd like to know too, Rick, but it all happened so long ago that it might not be possible to find out. Andy isn't even sure if mankind has survived the endless war

that's been raging. If any historical records have survived they're probably from a much more recent period."

"Still, you never know," Richard replied. "It's possible that Andy might know – he was built just 500 years after all these things happened. We could always ask."

"I still find it hard to believe that we're actually in the future," Laura said. "It feels like we could just turn around and head back home and everything would be back to normal again."

"I know what you mean," Captain Max said. "I wonder what Sol is like these days."

"That's another good question," Richard replied. "Just what has been going on behind the Wall all these years? Whatever happened to the Spanish Empire?"

"I have a feeling we're going to have to deal with that at some point," Sergeant Howell remarked. "That might be a good thing to check into after we put an end to the endless war."

Jones spoke up. "Someone will have to deal with it, but it won't be us."

"What do you mean?" Captain Max asked.

"We were brought here to end the eternal war and that's what we're going to do," Jones explained. "After that our work will be done. Earth isn't our problem."

Captain Max looked puzzled. "Then whose problem is it?"

Jones was silent for a moment. "Amy's, I think," he said at last. "I'm just not sure, though. I can only see so far."

"And where are we going to be during all this?" Richard asked.

"When our work is done it will be time for us to go home," Jones replied. "That's the way it is for everyone. It's like what that girl in Tikal told the Captain – beyond tomorrow is a better country that's ruled by a King who's worth living and dying for. When our life missions are over that King will bring us there so

we can be with Him. Your daughter simply has more to accomplish than we do.”

“But we're immortals now,” Richard protested. “It's not like we can die of old age.”

“I know,” Jones said. “I've been thinking about that.”

“So what's going to happen?” Sergeant Howell asked.

“I don't know. Seeing the future isn't like reading a newspaper. All I know is that our work will be finished after the endless war is over. Amy will have to deal with Sol after we're gone. I don't know how that will work out, or when it will happen, or where Amanda will be. I'm sure all of that will become clear in time.”

There was silence for a moment and then Captain Max spoke up. “I'm not sure if that is comforting or disturbing.”

Jones smiled. “We're going to accomplish what we were brought here to do, so I think that's very encouraging news. Humanity is going to be given one last chance before the Lord brings this universe to an end. What they do with that chance is up to them.”

* * * * *

It was late in the afternoon before the planet finally began to take shape. All at once the brilliant white light dimmed and a solid mass began forming from the shapeless plasma. Jones monitored the construction of the planet from his console.

“This is very impressive, sir. Jack has managed to match the gravity and mass of Mars exactly. That planet is going to be an exact duplicate of home.”

As they watched the white light went out altogether. At first a haze obscured the planet itself, but as it cleared they began to recognize various surface features.

"It really does look just like Mars," Richard replied at last. "I even see Olympus Mons. Jack knows what he's doing."

"Only it doesn't have any oceans, or life, or anything that might make it habitable," Laura said.

"I'm sure he'll get to that," Jones replied. "All in good time. In fact it looks like atmospheric pressure is already starting to build."

Over the next several hours the empty ocean basins of the planet slowly filled with water and the atmospheric pressure leveled off. Clouds began forming over the newly-minted world, and slowly but surely green areas appeared on the continents.

"It seems so slow," Laura said at last, right before everyone headed off to bed.

"Appearances can be deceiving," Sergeant Howell said. "Our best technology would have taken ten years to achieve what we saw done today – and that's not counting reforming the entire planet, which we could never have done at all. It's actually quite impressive."

"Do you think we'll be able to move in tomorrow?" Laura asked.

"It's quite possible," Captain Max replied.

* * * * *

Sure enough, the next morning after breakfast the ship was hailed from the planet below.

"It's Jack," the captain said, as he settled down at the comm station on the ship's bridge. "He said he's done and wants to know if we'd like to come see the planet."

"Sure," Richard replied, who was standing right behind him. "And tell him that he doesn't need to keep contacting us by radio. He's welcome to just drop by whenever he wants."

Captain Max nodded and relayed the message to the surface. A moment later there was a soft flash of white light and the inhabitants of the *Sparrow* found themselves standing in the middle of an enormous grassy field under a wide blue sky. In the distance was the shoreline of a beautiful blue ocean. A soft wind stirred the grass.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Jack said, as he walked toward them. "I had *no idea* this would be so much fun! I really should do this more often."

Alex began running around the field, barking like crazy at some birds in the distance. The Steward watched their dog and laughed.

Richard blinked twice. "What happened to our ship?"

"It's still in orbit, right where you left it," Jack explained.

"Where *we* left it?" Captain Max said uncertainly. "I didn't realize that we were going to be leaving it."

"You said you wanted to see the planet," Jack replied. "And here you are! Isn't it grand?"

"Ah," the captain replied. "Right. We did. Only I was expecting to actually *land* the ship and *then* get out of it."

"Oh. Not a problem." Jack waved his hand and the *Sparrow* appeared in the clearing behind them. "There we go – no harm done! But really, what do you think? Is this what you had in mind?"

Laura took in a deep breath of the planet's air. "This is a beautiful world, Jack. I love it. You did a fantastic job."

"It really is incredible," Richard agreed. "But you know, this place reminds me of something. I get the feeling that I've been here before."

Jack nodded. "You have! Kind of. This is the great plain of Tikal, only without the city. I haven't started constructing the buildings yet."

Richard snapped his fingers. "That's it! Of course. And that's the great Martian Sea up ahead! Only I don't remember it ever looking quite as beautiful as that."

"I have taken a few liberties with the weather, as you requested. Quetzalli is not as dry as Mars and the sky is quite a bit bluer. I think you'll like it here."

"I definitely agree," Laura replied. "This is amazing. Thank you. I'm sure our daughters will love it."

The group watched as their dog raced around the field, barking at birds that were hidden in the grass. Alex was clearly having a wonderful time.

"I bet he's glad to be off the ship," Richard said, smiling.

"He's not the only one," his wife remarked.

"Speaking of that, we do need to discuss living quarters," Jack said. "What kind of buildings would you like for me to construct? I can rebuild Tikal, if that's what you would like."

Richard shook his head. "No, Jack, let's not do that. I appreciate the offer but this is a new planet and I think we need a fresh start. Build us something new. Something that looks like it belongs in the future."

"Quite so," Captain Max replied. "Build us a real city of tomorrow."

"An entire city?" Laura asked. "Don't you think that's a little extravagant?"

Richard shrugged. "Life here is going to be a little boring if the only building on the entire planet is our house, don't you think? Besides, I don't think it's any additional work for Jack. At the very least, exploring it would give us something constructive to do."

Jack nodded. "Not a problem! You know, I can do much more than just build one city. There is room on this planet for many thousands of cities. Just let me know what you want and I will

make it happen.”

“Thanks, but I think we'll start with just one,” Laura said. “We'll see how that goes first.”

“As you wish!” Jack said. The Steward looked into the distance and spread his hands apart. He was silent for a moment, as if he was watching something that only he could see. Then his hands began to move. A moment later the crew of the *Sparrow* could see a faint glowing in the distance, just above the grass. The glowing mass began to grow and emitted a powerful white light.

“That looks just like the plasma we saw earlier,” Sergeant Howell remarked.

“It's not plasma, actually,” Jack replied. “In your time you had a concept known as 'programmable matter' that is somewhat similar, although not quite the same. The atoms within that field have been changed to something that has energy and intelligence. It can be customized to form any material of any shape and purpose. I'm going to use it to grow the city. It shouldn't take too long.”

“You're going to *grow* it?” Richard asked, surprised.

“Of course, Mr. Stryker. It is a very old technique – in fact, it is how the Artillect was built.”

“Right,” Captain Max replied. “Very, very old, I'm sure. Just not quite as old as us.”

Jack smiled. As they watched the white mass began growing very much larger until it covered an area far greater than the size of the original city of Tikal. Over the next few minutes the city began taking shape.

“I think I can see the outline of buildings,” Laura said at last.

“It's amazing,” her husband said quietly. “I never thought I'd see anything like this.”

With a final move of Jack's hands the city suddenly sprang to

life. In an instant the white glow disappeared, revealing a sprawling metropolis of incredible beauty. The city appeared to be made out of glass and light. The enormous buildings refracted the afternoon sun, creating a beautiful light show as far as the eye could see. From the distance they could see long interconnected streets, each lined with mature trees and brilliantly-colored flowers.

"It has such a look of peace about it," Laura remarked.

"Is that what you were looking for?" Jack asked. "If you'd prefer a different design I can try something else. It's really no trouble at all."

Richard shook his head. "No, Jack, I think that will do fine."

"What should we call it?" Sergeant Howell asked.

"The obvious choice, of course," Richard replied.

"That'll work," Jones said. "New Tikal it is."

"Very good," the Steward replied. "Would you like for me to give you a guided tour of your new home?"

"Lead the way!" Richard replied. "I can hardly wait."

CHAPTER 15

“Automation does not make life meaningless, nor does it make life empty. Instead it frees mankind from doing simple tasks so that they can focus on more complex ones. In the past a person might spend a whole day trying to craft a single needle. Now machines manufacture needles by the billions while mankind spends decades terraforming a planet. In the world of tomorrow machines will terraform planets in a matter of days while mankind switches their attention to even greater tasks. Automation has not robbed mankind of a job; instead it has enabled him to tackle jobs that otherwise would have been unthinkable.”

--Dr. Nehemiah Temilotzin

Father of the Nehemiah Probes

23rd century AD

IN THE GIANT STAR SYSTEM that housed the Artillect things had begun to change. Now that the *Sparrow* had reached the future it was no longer necessary for the enormous machine to scan thousands of light-years of space-time in search of microscopic wormholes. Its ancient dream – to reach back in time and rescue an administrator from the annals of history – had been realized.

It was true that the twins had not been found but the Artillect refused to be discouraged. *I do not believe the mission failed*, it

thought to itself as it reconfigured the 74 planets in its star system for a new purpose. *My son made it into the past and was able to send the Sparrow back to me. He must be here somewhere and if he is here then I will find him. I will only believe he failed if I can prove he cannot be found in this age.*

The components that made up the Artilect and gave it its boundless energy were now being rebuilt. Soon the Artilect would be able to peer across the depths of space and see into the troubled region that had so long been wracked by war and devastation. It could not interfere but it could see what there was to be seen. Somewhere among the stars the Artilect hoped to find the Sentinel and the Stryker twins. It knew that if they were out there they were almost certainly trapped in some sort of time stasis field. The Artilect was confident that it would be able to scan all of those systems and find such a field, no matter how small or well-hidden it may be.

If you are out there I will find you. I will not be long in coming.

* * * * *

The crew of the *Sparrow* was standing in a large courtyard that was located in the center of New Tikal. All around them were giant skyscrapers, thousands of feet high, that shimmered in the morning sun. Rays of sunlight struck the sides of the buildings and split into dozens of colors, sending ever-changing patterns of red and yellow and blue splashing onto the ground. The courtyard itself was paved with stones as black as midnight. Engraved on the stones in elegant gold lines was a giant map of the city. Jack was using the map to explain how New Tikal was laid out.

“The city is divided into a series of districts,” the Steward was

explaining. "In the center, right here, are the administrative and governmental buildings. To the north and east are the business areas and to the south and west are the shopping and commercial districts."

"But where do people live?" Laura asked.

"Over here, on the outskirts of the city," Jack explained. "The residential areas form a giant ring around the entire metropolis."

"Where does the city get its energy?" Captain Maxwell asked. "I don't see any power plants."

"There is a generator at the heart of the planet but it's only used for defense. The buildings and machines power themselves. There's no need for centralized power production."

"The planet has defensive systems?" Sergeant Howell asked.

Jack nodded. "We're so far away from the eternal war that I doubt they'll ever be used, but they're present. They should be able to defend you against pretty much anything."

"But I thought the Artelect wasn't allowed to go to war," Sergeant Howell said.

"That is true. He is not allowed to start a war but he can protect both himself and any who might live in his network of stars."

"Where's the industrial section?" Richard asked. "I don't see any factories on the map."

Jack laughed. "Things don't work that way anymore, Mr. Stryker. In the past you had to have big factories in order to produce products but today all you have to do is just pull it into reality. Each citizen has the ability to create whatever they want."

"How does that work?" Laura asked. "Let's say I wanted new curtains for our home. What would I do?"

"Excellent question!" Jack exclaimed. "I can see I'm getting ahead of myself. First let's get all of you plugged in." He then made a quick motion in the air and breathed on them. A

moment later each person felt a warm sensation, and then reality changed. Each of them suddenly felt their mind dramatically expand. It was as if they had been blind all their lives and were suddenly given the ability to see. When they looked at the world around them they no longer saw objects; instead they saw a system that could be manipulated by sheer will.

"I feel *different*," Laura said.

"Expanded," Captain Max agreed. He waved his hand and a wrought-iron table and chairs appeared in the plaza. The captain walked over and took a seat at the table. Laura studied the table for a moment and then materialized an identical chair, which she placed by the captain. She then joined him at the table.

"That's amazing!" Richard commented. "I feel like I could build anything I wanted simply by wanting it."

"That's the whole idea," the Steward said. "That's how things work here."

"It's a bit scary," Sergeant Howell said. "Do all citizens of the future have this ability?"

"Right now you're the only citizens here!" Jack replied. "But yes, that's the idea. The administrators – that would be your two lovely daughters – are different, of course. You can only control your own environment but the administrators can control *all* of the millions of worlds governed by the Artilect, including the Artilect itself."

"And they can use those star systems to declare war," Sergeant Howell said.

"Right," Jack said.

"How does this work?" Richard asked. "What mechanism is actually creating all of these objects?"

"Inside each of you are trillions upon trillions of nanites," Jack explained. "Combined, they give you the ability to interact with

your environment.”

“Will they work on other planets, or just this one?” Richard asked.

“They will work anywhere, of course, but things are much easier here because this planet was *designed* to be customized. The city itself is a part of the network, and you are too – now that you're plugged in, that is. Other planets that aren't a part of the network can still be interacted with but the process is much more tedious.”

“The twins seemed to do a fine job of 'interacting' with the *Sparrow*,” Captain Max said wryly.

“They did at that,” Richard said. “It took them no time at all to repair all that damage.”

“Do these nanites have any side-effects?” Sergeant Howell asked.

“Side-effects?” Jack said. “Well, they do act as a second immune system, protecting you from disease and extending your life indefinitely.”

“They do *what*?” Captain Max asked.

“I think he said we're immortals now,” Richard said.

“Wouldn't that mean the girls are too?” Laura asked.

“Of course,” Jack replied. “Now we can't guarantee that you'll live forever, of course, but the nanites do stop the aging process. Barring accidents you should live for a very long time – as long as the universe lasts, really.”

“If only it were that easy,” Jones said.

Captain Max spoke up. “This is all a lot of fun and I hate to break this up, but is there any chance that the Steward can take a look at the *Sparrow*? There's a lot of work I'd like to have done to her now that we've become permanent residents of the future.”

“I'll second that,” Sergeant Howell said.

“I'd also like to move into our new home today,” Laura said.

“I'm sure it will take some time to get everything set up.”

“Then let's get started!” Jack exclaimed.

CHAPTER 16

"I just don't care for the synthetic worlds. In reality there are limitations, and that means there are challenges to overcome. Challenges are what keep life interesting; if everything was easy then life would become a pointless, boring exercise. In the synthetic worlds reality can be whatever you want. Life becomes arbitrary. I would much rather deal with real challenges than live in a fake world with fake problems."

--Dr. Mazatl

*Chief Architect of the Artilect
25th century AD*

THE FOLLOWING WEEK went by rapidly. Captain Max, Sergeant Howell, and Jones spent their time on board the *Sparrow*, rebuilding every on-board system in order to make it the most modern ship in space. They spent long hours talking with the Steward and customizing everything about the ship, from weapons to life support to its propulsion system. The zero-point-energy plant was removed and replaced with the most modern technology that the Artilect had to offer. By the end of the week the captain was more than satisfied.

"Do you realize how much energy this ship can produce?" Captain Max asked. The three of them were standing on the engineering deck, looking over the results of their combined handiwork. "The numbers are so large that they're almost

meaningless.”

“It's just a matter of scale,” Jones commented. “If you went back to the pre-spaceflight days of the Spanish Empire and told them how much electricity a zero-point-energy plant could produce, it would boggle their mind. They couldn't begin to comprehend it! We're playing in a field of giants and these numbers are the new normal. The real problem is that our minds are used to a civilization that disappeared a very long time ago. Our world seems barbaric and crude to the Steward, to the point that he finds it humorous.”

“I still wonder what we'll find when we re-enter human space,” Sergeant Howell commented. “I would really like to know how it's possible for two completely automated armies to keep a war going for five thousand years. Why hasn't one side prevailed and the other lost? I feel like there's something else going on that we haven't discovered yet.”

“There's no telling how many things are going on that we don't know about,” Captain Max said. “The Artilect hasn't been connected to human space for ages. We could be getting ourselves into a real mess.”

“We're not going to be going anywhere until we find Amy and Amanda,” Jones warned. “If they were easy to find we would have already found them by now.”

“But we'll find them,” Captain Max said confidently. “Just give it time.”

* * * * *

Richard and Laura Stryker had spent the week in their new home while their dog Alex enjoyed the delights of the countryside. Laura had been startled to find that Jack had created a 130-room mansion for them to live in.

"This is ridiculous!" Laura remarked. She and her husband were sitting outside on the balcony of the master bedroom, looking over the magnificent city of New Tikal. "This place has got a pool, a bowling alley, a theater, a ballroom, a twenty-car garage, a giant library..."

"It is a little ritzy," Richard agreed. "Just look at our foyer, for example! That solid gold chandelier is breathtaking. And did you notice the wooden beams, the crown molding, and the elegant pieces of antique furniture that are everywhere? The desks, chairs, furniture, tables, lamps, paintings..."

"I know," Laura said. "Do you know how much all of this would cost back home? I bet even the Emperor's estate isn't like this!"

"Probably not," Richard said, laughing. "But that's the thing, dear – we *are* home. This is where we live now, and here things are different. You heard what Jack said – none of this cost anything to create. In fact, this whole network has been out here for thousands of years just waiting for someone to come and live in it! We have the entire *planet* to ourselves."

"But it just feels wrong somehow. Living this extravagantly makes me feel guilty. Did you notice that diamonds are decorating *everything*? Jack uses gold as if it was as common as stones! Even the *door hinges* are made of solid gold. It just makes me think about all those poor people back in Tikal, and here we are living like billionaires."

"But Tikal doesn't exist anymore," Richard said. "There aren't any poor people either. In the entire network of 93 million star systems the only people alive are you, me, Howell, Jones, and Max – and our two daughters, somewhere. Nobody is going without a meal because of what we have here."

"I still don't like it," Laura said. "All this wealth just feels corrupting. Is the ability to have anything you want, anytime you

want it, really a good thing?"

Richard paused a moment before replying. He looked out into the distance at the magnificent city of Tikal. The crystal city was breathtaking, but it was also empty. It occurred to him that they had stumbled across extravagant wealth but had no one to share it with.

He finally spoke up. "I know this all seems like a lot, and it is. We're trying to adapt to a lot of change all at once. But remember, our lifestyle on Tikal was insanely luxurious compared to what our ancestors had in the years before spaceflight was rediscovered. It just didn't seem that way because we were used to it and everyone else had more or less the same standard of living. In this century the standard of living is radically different; we're reaping the benefits of 5000 years of hard work. This is how things are now. Besides, the whole reason we were brought here was so we could save the rest of mankind so that they could enjoy all of this wealth."

"But is that actually a good idea?" Laura asked. "Not the saving their lives part – we should do that, of course. But all of this – it's just too much! You saw what people were like back home and how the Empire and the Rangers constantly fought each other. What are people going to be like when anyone can have anything?"

"I don't know," Richard said, sighing. "I guess we'll cross that bridge when we get there. Right now we need to concentrate on finding our daughters. But about the house – I'm sure Jack could build us a smaller one but what would be the point? We have the entire planet to ourselves. What would actually be accomplished by moving?"

"Nothing, I guess. I'm sorry, dear. I know I should be grateful. I'm just not used to this. In the past I had to work to make a living and now I can make anything appear just by wanting it. It feels

wrong – I feel spoiled. Maybe it's ok for perfect people to live that way but we're not perfect people! Maybe this is what Heaven will be like and there it will be ok, but we haven't gotten there yet. I just think this lifestyle is dangerous. If I can have anything I want then what kind of person am I going to become?"

"Let's take this one step at a time," Richard said. "I understand what you're saying and maybe you're right. But for the time being I think we should adapt to our new home and get things ready for our daughters. When they arrive we're going to have some work to do. War is always an ugly business. Maybe we should just enjoy what we have while we have it."

"Maybe you're right," Laura agreed. "Things *have* been terrible lately – first there was the war between Earth and Mars, then the assassination attempt, and then the shock at finding our daughters gone. Maybe God has given this to us so we can rest and get ready to face the next challenge."

* * * * *

The following week everyone was gathered in the courtyard of the Stryker estate, eating breakfast. The Steward had prepared an amazing meal for them and the table was covered with croissants, muffins, pancakes, bacon, ham, and all kinds of fruits and juices. Everyone had helped themselves and were busily talking about their plans for the day. Alex was asleep at the foot of the table; he had been up all night chasing rabbits.

The day was a beautiful one. It was early spring, and the grass in the fields was a brilliant green. The trees were just beginning to bud and some of the early flowers had already bloomed. Overhead the sky was a brilliant blue, without a cloud to be seen.

As they talked, however, clouds began forming on the horizon. A shadow passed over the sun, dimming its light. The breeze turned cool.

Jones was the first one to notice that something was wrong. He looked up at the sky and frowned. "It's overcast," he said.

Richard stood up and looked at the sky. "I see that. I didn't think it was supposed to rain today."

"That's not rain," Sergeant Howell replied. He pointed toward a dark cloud that was far in the distance, almost out of sight. It was rapidly growing in size.

"What is it, dear?" Laura asked her husband.

Everyone turned to the Steward, who was staring at it intently. He seemed puzzled. "I've never seen that before," he said at last. "It's very odd. It's not from here and it's nothing the Artilect has made. It looks like a swarm of something. Maybe—"

Jack continued to talk, but his form wavered and the sound cut out. His figure was suddenly turned into wavy lines. A look of panic appeared briefly on his face and then he disappeared.

"That is not good," Jones said.

"Where did he go?" Richard asked.

"I think someone shut him down," Sergeant Howell replied. "I don't know who our visitors are but I don't think they're friendly."

"What do we do?" Laura asked. By now the dark cloud had grown quite large. The sunlight had faded and the air had grown cold. The group felt the ground begin to tremble.

"We fight," Sergeant Howell said grimly.

CHAPTER 17

“Absolutely not! That's completely ridiculous. The Artilect has no potential to act as a weapon. It's basically a giant mechanical butler, built to keep a million worlds tidy and in order. It has no weapon systems and is not armed. No matter how large its mind may be it has no more potential for destruction than your laundry machine. Enlisting its aid in the war against the bot swarms is out of the question.”

--Dr. Mazatl

*Chief Architect of the Artilect
25th century AD*

THE *STARFIRE* ARRIVED at the Alpha Mensae system on December 9, 1867 – two days after the Sentinel disappeared into the Poneri portal. Amy and Amanda Stryker remained on board until the ship landed at the Cedar Brook Spaceport. The twins found the name amusing; the planet did not have any trees of any kind, nor was it likely to be home to cedars for decades. But, like many colonies, this world had high hopes for the future.

The trip to the colony was uneventful. Although it did not come as a great surprise, they were a little disappointed that the portal remained dormant and the Sentinel did not reappear. Since there was nothing else to do the twins spent the first day exploring the abandoned section of the ship. Amanda found a library and spent her time browsing through its collection of old, damaged books. Amy, however, had no interest in reading so she

spent her time watching the portal and staring off into space.

Both girls were happy to see the ship land and the passengers disembark. As they watched the crew struggle to unload the mining equipment Amy turned to Amanda. "So what should we do now?"

"I thought we were going to watch that portal for a couple weeks," Amanda replied.

"We can just set up a bot to watch it for us," Amy said. "If anything happens it can let us know and we can come right back. But we can't just sit here and do nothing! I've *got* to go do something or I'm going to go crazy."

"I guess you're right," Amanda agreed. "So where do you want to go?"

"I think we need to find a place to live for a few weeks – like a hotel or something. Maybe we can visit some nice resort where we can enjoy the local sights while waiting for Steve to come back."

"Well, we can't go home," Amanda replied. "Steve said that Mars is on the other side of a Wall right now so that's out of the question. And I really don't think we should check into a hotel. Charlie seemed to think that we were really famous – I bet we'd be recognized anywhere we went."

"We could adopt a disguise! I've been experimenting with our cloaking field. It can even make us look like grumpy old men! No one would be able to tell the difference."

Amanda shook her head. "But that's not really the point! We're not even supposed to be *alive* in this timeline. If we go and do things we might change the future and cause all kind of problems."

"But I thought the whole reason the Sentinel came to get us was so that we *could* change the future! Isn't that what we're supposed to do?"

"But we're supposed to change things *after* we get there, not before! Right now we just need to stay out of everyone's way for a while."

"Well, what about our brother?" Amy asked. "Can't we spend a few weeks with him? I bet he'd be glad to see us."

"I don't know," Amanda said slowly. "I've been thinking about that too. I feel like we should tell him that we're ok but that could *really* change the future. After all, the whole reason we were made administrators was because of him! Our DNA was put in all those probes *because* we died. If people find out that we're still alive then that might ruin everything."

"It will be fine," Amy replied. "Besides, I'm sure our parents would want us to tell him what's going on. He is our brother, you know! Do you really think we can't trust him?"

"I guess not," Amanda replied reluctantly. "But getting there isn't going to be easy. Tau Ceti is protected by a Wall too. We can't just zip right over there."

"So we cloak ourselves and grab a ride on an incoming ship," Amy replied. "There's nothing too it. You worry too much."

"That's because this could all turn into a terrible disaster!"

"But I bet it won't," Amy replied. "Just wait and see."

* * * * *

The twins did not arrive in Star City until 3:30 that afternoon. They had no trouble transporting themselves to the outskirts of the Tau Ceti system, but once they got there they ran into numerous delays. First, the Gate was experiencing some technical problems and all incoming and outgoing traffic was halted until they were resolved. On top of that, when the line finally started moving the ship the girls had stowed away on was chosen for additional screening and forced to wait.

Amy suggested jumping to another ship but Amanda convinced her to just wait it out. "There's really no need to hurry," she pointed out. "Tim doesn't even get off work until 6 and we can't exactly barge into his office and say we're here. We might as well take our time instead of hurrying off to Xanthe and waiting there."

"I guess," Amy sighed. "I just hate waiting. Why is Tau Ceti still protected by this Wall, anyway? It's not like the Empire is still a threat!"

"But they don't know that," Amanda replied. "What if the Wall around Sol fails? It's only been up for a couple days, you know. Maybe they'll have more confidence twenty years from now but right now is not the time to be making dramatic changes."

The twins waited as the automated systems guided their ship into the Gate and through the asteroid-filled Tau Ceti planetary system, where it finally landed on the planet Xanthe. As the passengers were disembarking the girls transported themselves to the apartment building where Tim lived.

The nondescript building was a twelve-story brick structure that was located on the outskirts of town. To the north was the downtown section of Star City, a bustling metropolis of skyscrapers and activity. Tim had chosen a small, one-bedroom apartment in a rather modest part of town.

Amy walked up to the door of his residence and looked at it. The number 712 was written on a small panel beside the door. "Is this really where our brother lives?" Amy asked.

"That's the place," Amanda replied.

"But it's so small! Is this really where he's going to live after he gets married in March?"

"I think he's saving up to buy a house, or something," Amanda said. "At least, I think that's what he said. He was pretty

distracted the last time we talked with him.”

“It's that probe project he's working on – it's got him all tied up in knots. It's taking up so much of his mind that he keeps forgetting when he's getting married. It's awful.”

“Sure, but remember, if it wasn't for that probe project we wouldn't be here right now! In a way he saved our lives.”

“I know,” Amy replied. Still cloaked, she took a step forward and walked right through the locked door. Amanda followed behind her. Once inside the girls saw that the lights were off so Amy flicked the switch on. She gasped as she saw the mess that was strewn everywhere. Dirty dishes were piled high in the sink and laundry was scattered randomly throughout the house. A stack of empty pizza boxes was lying on the coffee table and a damp towel had been tossed onto a nearby recliner. The bed was not made and the garbage was overflowing.

“This place is a disaster!” Amy exclaimed. “Does Natalie Foster realize that her husband-to-be lives like this?”

“I'm pretty sure he wasn't expecting company,” Amanda replied.

Amy lifted up a hand but Amanda stopped her. “Don't you dare clean this place up! We *really* shouldn't touch anything until we talk to Tim.”

“Don't be silly,” Amy replied. “Somebody's got to clean this place up, and I'm sure not going to live here for weeks and not do anything about it! All of this trash has *got* to go.”

As Amy gathered up the trash and picked things up, Amanda wandered around the apartment. She glanced at a calendar on the wall and saw that today's date was circled. “Hey Tiger, this says that our brother has a date tonight!”

“Oh wonderful. There's no telling when he'll get back home!” She sighed. “At least that will give me time to finish cleaning this place up.”

"Why don't you just use the nanites?" Amanda asked. "That would be a lot faster."

"And *then* what would I do? This at least keeps me busy! It beats sitting around and staring at the wall."

Amanda sat down on the couch and turned on the TV. "Suit yourself!"

An hour later her sister sat down on the sofa beside her. "So is there anything good on?"

"Not really," Amanda replied. "Just a lot of boring sports shows. But I did find this." She reached over onto the coffee table and grabbed a silver disc, which she tossed to her sister.

Amy's eyes lit up when she saw what it was. "Oh my goodness – it's *Night of the Werewolves*! I had no idea that was out yet! We have *got* to watch this."

Amanda sighed. "I just don't see what you see in those movies. They're ridiculous."

"I can't help it if you don't have romance in your soul," Amy sniffed. "They're a touching portrayal of complex relationships."

"If you say so," Amanda replied. "I'll go make some popcorn while you get it started."

After the popcorn was ready Amanda dumped it into a large plastic bowl and sat down on the couch beside her sister, who was already deeply engrossed in the film. The two girls relaxed and soon lost all track of time. They didn't even notice when their brother came home an hour later and unlocked the door.

Tim stepped inside and immediately noticed that his apartment had changed dramatically since that morning. Not only was it clean, but the lights were on and the TV was going. "What's going on here?" he called out. "Who's in my apartment?"

CHAPTER 18

“It was really Dr. Timothy Stryker that showed us the way. The genius in his Stryker-class probes was not their ability to replicate; that was trivial. What Dr. Stryker demonstrated was how to teach probes to survive in radically different environments. In the past this was done by trying to think up every possible problem that might arise – an approach that was doomed to failure in a galaxy with more than a trillion different planets. Dr. Stryker wisely found a way to teach probes to understand their environment and react to it the way a human would – thus paving the way for everything that followed. In my opinion he is rightfully the father of probe replication. Without his techniques the Nehemiah-class probes would not have been effective.”

*--Dr. Nehemiah Temilotzin
Father of the Nehemiah Probes
23rd century AD*

AMY SHRIEKED at the sudden, unexpected noise and involuntarily threw the bowl of popcorn in the air. Amanda reached out and froze it in midair, leaving popcorn kernels suspended in space. She then grabbed the remote and paused the movie.

“Tim!” Amy shouted. “Don't scare me like that! What are you doing here?”

"What are *you* doing here?" Tim replied, astonished. "How did you two get into my apartment?"

"We just walked through the door," Amy replied. "But you're not supposed to be home for hours! Don't you have a date with Natalie tonight?"

"That's been moved to next week," Tim said. "She had to work tonight."

"And you didn't update your calendar?" Amanda asked.

"Why would I do that? We only moved it one day – we're going out tomorrow instead of today. It's not a big deal. But what are you two doing here? The *Sparrow* didn't make it to Xanthe – there were no survivors!"

"Actually the *Sparrow* is fine," Amy replied. "Nothing bad happened to it. Everyone survived."

"You can't be serious! We just had a memorial service yesterday for all of you. Everybody was there – even the governor and all the leadership of the Rangers! And you mean to tell me that *nobody* died? Then where have you been all this time? Why didn't you let us know?"

"That's kind of complicated," Amanda said.

"Where are Mom and Dad?" Tim asked.

"That's complicated too," Amanda added. "They're fine but they're kind of busy right now."

Starting at the beginning the girls told Tim what had happened during the past week. They told him about the Sentinel and the Artilect, and how they had decided to remain in the 19th century for a while longer in order to fight the Poneri. As they talked Amy grabbed the popcorn bowl out of midair and set it down on the coffee table.

Tim shook his head. "That is really freaky."

"It has been a strange week," Amy agreed.

"No, I mean the whole popcorn bowl thing. That is quite a

trick. How did you do it?"

"I caught it to keep it from falling – after miss emotional here threw it into the air," Amanda replied.

"I was just startled!" Amy protested. "I wasn't expecting any visitors."

"I just find this really hard to believe," Tim replied. "You do realize that the Poneri are legendary creatures, right? They're like the tooth fairy – they're not actually real."

"They are *definitely* real," Amanda said. "They're not solid, exactly, but they're real. They look kind of like transparent blue energy things. They're hard to describe."

"And scary," Amy added. "They're very scary and very evil."

"Then show me," Tim replied. "I want to see this supposed portal to Poneri land."

"All right," Amy replied. She stood up and then held up her hand. "Just a second... wait for it..."

A moment later the three of them vanished, leaving Tim's apartment empty. They rematerialized at the Cedar Brook Spaceport.

Tim froze, then blinked. "What just happened? Is that – hey! I recognize those buildings!" he exclaimed, pointing to a giant mining rig in the distance. "Is this *Alpha Mensae*? How is that possible?"

"Yeah, how *is* that possible?" Amanda asked. "You didn't bring down the Wall did you?"

"Of course not!" Amy replied defensively. "I just didn't want to hitch another ride on a starship – that's *much* too slow. So I waited until the Gate opened to let a ship out and then zipped right through it."

"Oh. Nice work!" Amanda replied. "I'll have to remember that."

"Is that the *Starfire*?" Tim asked, pointing to a ruined ship in

the distance. The giant starship looked even worse in the daylight. "How was that wreck even able to land without destroying itself?"

"That's it all right!" Amy said proudly. "C'mon, let's go. The portal is in its cargo bay."

"I'm not getting on board that disaster," Tim protested. "I've seen enough – I believe you now. Just take me home."

"Absolutely not," Amy replied firmly. "You asked me to show you the portal and that's what I'm going to do. We are *not* going back home until you've seen it."

She grabbed her brother's hand and the trio marched across the spaceport toward the aging vessel.

"What if someone sees us?" Amanda asked.

"You mean like that group over there?" Amy said, pointing. In the distance were piles and piles of wooden crates. The crew of the *Starfire* appeared to be embroiled in some kind of argument with the spaceport officials. None of them were paying any attention to anything else. "They look pretty busy to me. Besides, alertness isn't their strong point. We'll be fine."

The three of them entered the ship through one of its many hull breaches, and Amy led the way down its winding passageways to the cargo hold.

"This ship is a complete wreck!" Tim repeated, as he walked around a broken section of pipe that dangled from the ceiling.

"Everyone says that," Amy replied.

A few minutes later they entered the cargo hold. Since all of the cargo had been carried outside the area was completely empty.

"It looks so different," Amy remarked. "It's bigger than I thought."

"You still couldn't *pay* me to ride on this thing," Tim said.

The girls led him to the rear of the cargo area and Amy

pointed to an empty space. "There it is – right there! Can you see it?"

Tim let go of his sister's hand and backed away. "I don't see anything, but that's ok. If you say it's there then that's good enough for me. I'm ready to go home now."

"Don't be silly," Amy replied. She reached over and grabbed her brother's hand. "Let me try to enhance it for you."

Tim felt his vision begin to change. A wavy patch started to appear where Amy had pointed. After a moment it became more distinct – it looked like a tear in reality.

"I think I see it now," Tim said. He let go of Amy's hand and it instantly vanished. "Hey – where did it go?"

"You dropped the connection," Amy replied. "I was showing you what I could see but then you let go."

"And you say that Poneri came out of that thing?"

"Lots and *lots* of them," Amy replied. "It was awful!"

"What did you use to fight them?"

"We used these beautiful pieces of machinery," a voice said behind them. The trio turned around and saw Karen Perkins standing behind them, holding the gun that Amy had given to her. "And let me tell you, these things really work! I highly recommend these for any ghost busting that you might have to do."

"Hey there, Karen!" Amy said. "How are things going?"

"Pretty good, thanks to you," Karen replied. "We all got here safe and sound and that's the main thing. I just stopped by to leave my gun behind for the crew to use. We're not going to need it anymore but they might."

"What do you mean?" Amanda asked.

"They're not abandoning the ship," Karen said. "They're planning on taking it back into space."

"They're crazy!" Amanda exclaimed. "Don't they remember

what happened just two days ago?"

"Apparently not. Now, all of the passengers are off and Lee is staying behind as well – he's scared to death. But Davis and Laura and that miserable excuse for a captain are staying. Captain Brahms doesn't want to give up his ship and Davis and Laura don't want to leave him by himself."

"But it's pointless!" Amy said. "If Steve doesn't come out of that portal in two weeks we're going to freeze this ship in time and destroy it. That will tear it apart. Given the condition of this ship they can't possibly get very far in just two weeks. All they're doing is putting their lives in danger for no reason."

"He's still going to try," Karen replied. "At least they've got that preacher with him. Maybe he can protect them from our unfriendly visitors."

"This is so stupid," Amanda fumed. "Davis and Laura are going because the captain is going and they want to protect him. Reverend Knight is going so he can protect Davis and Laura. Does no one realize that if Davis and Laura and the preacher all stayed home the captain would be forced to stay as well? He can't fly this ship by himself!"

"He actually thinks he can," Karen said. "That's why Davis and Laura are going with him. He was just going to fly off alone in this death trap."

"He's going to get everyone killed!" Amanda said. "He needs to be grounded. He's lost all touch with reality."

"We could always ground him ourselves," Amy pointed out. "We could give him a good lecture or maybe break the ship or something. Then everyone would have to stay here."

Amanda paused for a moment to think it over. "I wish we could but I guess we'd better not. There's no telling what that might do to the integrity of the timestream. In fact, we're not even supposed to be *here*. I think we should just get out of here."

"I second that motion," Tim said.

"All right," Amy said. "I think you worry too much but I can see I'm not going to win this one. We'll be going, then." She said goodbye to Karen and the group vanished.

* * * * *

"So what should we do now?" Amy asked, as soon as they reappeared in Tim's apartment.

"Woah," Tim said. He glanced around the room and tried to reorient himself. "Ok. This whole 'let's instantly zip across the universe' thing is going to take some getting used to. Do you realize how long it normally takes to travel from Xanthe to the most distant colony on the fringes of civilization?"

"Much too long," Amy replied. "My way is much better."

"I'm hungry," Amanda said. "Do you have anything we can eat?"

"I'm sure I've got some food around here somewhere," Tim replied. "And yes, you two can stay with me until your friend returns or until you have to go and do whatever it is you're doing these days. But I do think you should talk with the governor while you're here. He needs to know what is going on."

"That's fine," Amy said.

"That's *not* fine," Amanda replied. "We don't need to let the whole world know what's going on!"

"Governor Nicholas is *not* the whole world," Amy replied. "It will be fine."

"He really does need to know the truth," Tim added. "I'll set it up so that you have a private meeting with just him – no one else will be around. You can trust him."

"If you say so," Amanda said reluctantly.

CHAPTER 19

“Leadership is the rarest commodity in the galaxy right now. Anyone can destroy a civilization, but it takes a rare individual to guide it to greatness and safeguard it from those who wish to destroy it. Richard Stryker was exactly the type of man we needed to preside over the Rangers. What are we going to do now that he's gone?”

*--Jack Nicholas
Governor of Tau Ceti
19th century AD*

THE STRYKER TWINS spent the following day in Tim's apartment. Their brother left for work early that morning and promised to let them know as soon as possible about their meeting with the governor. Meanwhile, the girls were left to fend for themselves. The excitement of finally reaching Xanthe faded when Amanda pointed out that they really shouldn't go out and tour the planet. Amy argued that their cloaking shields would hide them from view but Amanda didn't want to take the risk. Amy grumbled at this but decided to not press the issue.

Before they had left Alpha Mensae to come to Xanthe Amy created a small bot that she hid on board the *Starfire* and tasked with watching over the anomaly. So far it had reported nothing. However, the bot did report that the *Starfire* had left the planet late that night and was headed for the Tau Ceti system. This

irritated Amanda but she decided to leave it alone for now.

"There's always the chance that Steve will reappear and everything will be fine," Amanda explained. "Then we could just leave the *Starfire* alone."

"I don't see that happening," Amy replied. "I think if everything was fine Steve would have come out by now. I bet it's going to take more than the two of us to rescue him."

"We'll see," Amanda said. "I just wish I knew what was supposed to happen to the *Starfire*. I hate the thought of messing up history."

"But we're *from* this time period! I would think we could do whatever we wanted. It's not like we're from the future or anything! We were actually *born* in this century. We belong here. If anyone has a right to be out there doing things it's us."

"But we have knowledge of the future!" Amanda argued. "Besides, we're supposed to be dead right now."

"We don't have *much* knowledge of the future. All we really know is that in a few centuries things will get really bad. It's not like we've been given a list of winning lottery numbers."

"We know all about the Artilect and the future of Tim's project," Amanda replied. "That's actually pretty important."

"I guess. It's just boring, sitting around here doing nothing."

"Then find something to do," Amanda replied. "Tim's got a whole bookshelf filled with great reading material. I'm going through *Applied Relativity* right now. It's quite fascinating!"

"I bet it is. And maybe when you're done with that one you can read *Paint Drying: A Case Study*. I bet that's a real thriller too."

"You really should learn to enjoy reading," Amanda remarked as she reached over to the coffee table and picked up her book. "It would expand your mind and bring you to new places! It's like vitamins for the brain."

Amy sighed and said nothing. She had a feeling that her sister was right but she just couldn't bring herself to read any of Tim's technical manuals. Back on Tikal she had a few books that she'd enjoyed but they were long gone – a victim of the insane war that the Spanish Emperor had launched against Mars. Thinking of Tikal reminded her of how much she missed her dog and her family. Her world had changed dramatically and she felt out of place. Amy wanted to go home but she didn't really have a home to go to. Xanthe was supposed to be her new home but that future was now gone.

In the end she decided to explore the nanites that the Sentinel had given her. She knew that she could do a lot of amazing things but the Sentinel didn't have a chance to explain everything before he disappeared into the portal. *Let's see what I can do*, she thought.

* * * * *

Late in the afternoon the girls got a phone call from Tim, who reminded them that he would not be home after work because he had a date that evening. He and Natalie had a lot of wedding planning to do that night but if all went well he would try to be home sometime between ten and ten-thirty. He also told them that there was a frozen lasagna in the freezer that they could fix if they wanted. Amy told him that they had already figured out how to materialize food so finding something to eat was not going to be a problem.

"By the way," Tim said, "after dinner a guest is going to stop by. That's actually why I called. Governor Nicholas will be coming over around 7pm."

"He's coming *here*?" Amanda replied. "To your home? Does he even know where you live?"

"I've given him directions," Tim replied. "And yes, he is coming over. After I explained the situation he thought it would be best if he came to you. He doesn't want you appearing on any of the capitol building's sensors or security tapes. Since you've already settled in he thought he would just stop by."

"Who's coming with him?" Amy asked.

"Nobody. It'll just be the three of you."

"How much did you tell him?" Amanda asked.

"Just what little I knew," Tim said. "But you can fill him in when he gets there. I'm sure he'll have questions."

"All right," Amanda said. "We'll see you later then."

After saying goodbye the girls closed the connection. Time crawled by. The twins had dinner and then watched TV.

Shortly after seven they heard a knock on the door. Both girls got up to answer it. When they opened the door they saw an older gentleman standing outside, wearing a plain brown suit. They both immediately recognized him as the governor but they were surprised at how unimpressive he looked. Governor Nicholas was a short man with graying hair. He had a tired look about him, as if he had suffered a great deal in his life and was looking forward to retirement.

When he saw the twins he recognized them at once. His eyes lit up and a smile appeared on his worn face. "Hello there," he said in a soft voice. "I'm Jack Nicholas. Did Tim let you know I would be coming?"

"He did," Amanda said. "It's an honor to meet you, governor. My name is Amanda and this is my sister Amy. Please come in."

The girls stepped aside and allowed the governor of the Tau Ceti system to enter Tim's apartment. After shaking his hand Amanda led him to the small living room, where he took a seat. "So this is where Tim lives," he remarked after settling down into a worn recliner. "I can see that he is a wise man."

"Why do you say that?" Amy asked.

The governor smiled. "Your brother may not have told you this but he is very important to the Diano Corporation. His work on their self-replicating probe project has been invaluable and they pay him quite well. Yet instead of spending his wealth and showing the world that he's an important somebody he's chosen to live a quiet life and save for his future. Few men in his place would have made that decision. Of course, he is Richard's son so perhaps I should have expected it."

"I'm sorry Dad couldn't be here," Amy said. "He's busy traveling to the future right now. Amanda and I are the only Strykers that are available."

"We also really wanted to thank you for all you've done for our family," Amanda added. "You did everything you could to rescue us from the Empire. We're very grateful and I know that Mom and Dad are too."

"I only wish that we had been able to save you," the governor replied sadly. "As it is we have lost all of you. The truth is I was planning on retiring as soon as your father arrived. Richard had massive support among the Rangers and it would not have been difficult to turn the government over to him. But it seems that the Lord had other ideas. Perhaps it's for the best; from what your brother has told me it sounds like your family has been given a much greater challenge."

He was silent for a moment. The girls looked at him and said nothing. When the governor had finally gotten his thoughts together he addressed them again. "Your brother has told me your story. I have heard about the Artilect and the Sentinel, and the Artilect's great plan for you. It sounds like you will soon be departing to finish the task you've been given."

"That's right," Amanda said.

"Then I must ask two favors from you," the governor said.

“First, please do not tell myself or anyone else what the future holds. I do not know how much you've been told about the future, but such knowledge is not for us to know. I would rather live each day with the knowledge that the Lord holds tomorrow rather than spend my days dreading a doom that I cannot prevent.”

“Dreading doom?” Amy asked, puzzled. “I don't understand. What do you mean?”

The governor sighed. “I don't know everything about why you are being sent to the future, and to be honest I do not want to know any more than I already do. What I do know is that the future contains a need so enormous that only the two of you can meet it. If the future is in such great trouble that the Lord has allowed a machine to raise a family from the dead in order to change the course of history, then something has gone badly wrong. The future does not appear to be a happy, prosperous place where Tau Ceti shines as a beacon of light in an ocean of darkness. Now I may be wrong; perhaps Tau Ceti has survived and continues to light the way. But I would rather not know than know for sure that there is no hope.”

“Ok, I think I understand,” Amanda said. “We can definitely do that. But didn't you say that there were two things? What's the other one?”

“The second one concerns the Poneri,” the governor replied. “I understand why the Sentinel chose to stay behind and fight them – they are desperately evil and no one in this time period has the ability to defeat them. Except for you two, that is. You are our only defense against them. Will you make sure that the Poneri threat is neutralized before you go on to your next assignment? If you do not take care of this then no one else well, for there is no one else who can.”

“Absolutely,” Amanda replied. “We will make sure that

they're eliminated."

"Right," Amy added. "But is there anything else you need? There's a lot more we can do, you know."

"Your brother told me that you had been given amazing gifts," the governor replied. "Those two things are all I need, however. Once the Poneri are gone you are free to continue on to the future. There is no need for you to remain here. You may rest assured that I will keep your secret. No one else will ever be told what actually happened to the *Sparrow*."

"But what if there's another way?" Amy asked. "For example, look at this." She materialized a small bottle in her hand. The bottle was made of transparent crystal, and inside it was a blue liquid that glowed softly. At the top of the bottle was a small metal cap.

Amy handed it to the governor, who looked at it curiously. "What is this?"

"It's an extract from our nanites," Amy explained. "If you drink that potion it will revitalize your cells and reverse the aging process. It will also extend your life indefinitely."

Governor Nicholas looked at her, astonished. "Are you serious?"

"Where did you get that?" Amanda demanded.

"I made it," Amy replied. "After all, I had to find *something* to do today."

Jack looked at the bottle in his hand. A look of wonder covered his face. "The water of life," he whispered. "Immortality in a bottle. I never thought mankind would get that far." For a long time he stared at the bottle, saying nothing.

Amanda glanced at her sister. She reached out to her with her mind. *Why did you give that to him?* Amanda asked telepathically. *Are you crazy?*

But maybe we can fix the future another way, Amy replied.

We can just live it and make better choices. We can stop the endless war from ever happening.

Their thoughts were interrupted when the governor shook his head and handed the bottle back to Amy. "I appreciate it, young lady, I really do. I know you mean well but I cannot accept this."

"Ok," Amy said uncertainly. She took the bottle from him. She held it in her hand for a moment and then it vanished. "If you don't mind my asking, why not?"

"The Water of Life is a person, not a chemical," the governor said. "The Lord can grant immortality because that is His prerogative. As the Author of Life He alone can forgive sins, drive away darkness, renew hearts, and bring to life that which has died. I have no doubt that this chemical could delay death but that is not the same thing as extending life. It cannot heal my tired soul. It cannot infuse strength into one who is spent and ready to go home. Nor can it give me the wisdom to make better choices than I have in the past.

"Girls, the two you have been given extraordinary power – far more power than I realized, in fact. In this age you have absolute power, and from what I understand about the Artilect you may have absolute power in the future as well. You can do whatever you wish and no one can stop you. If you want something you can have it. For you this is necessary, for it sounds like you must have that ability in order to finish the task that the Lord has given you.

"But what you must realize is that for everyone else that ability would be a deadly cancer. Power can easily turn good men into evil scoundrels. It turned the man after God's own heart into a murderer. There was a time long ago when men could live for a thousand years, and the result a world so evil that God was forced to destroy it in the Flood.

"Right now you may not understand these things. You may be so caught up in the press of events that you don't yet feel the temptations gnawing at you. But that won't always be the case. One day you will find yourself tempted to use your abilities for your own gain – to do a terrible thing, not for the good of mankind but for the good of yourselves. When that day comes I implore you to lay your abilities down and walk away from them. Don't doom mankind to forever living under the tyranny of an evil master who cannot die. Just let it go. It is far easier to stop at the beginning than at the end."

"Ok," Amanda said. "I think I understand."

"It turns out I have one more thing to ask of you," the governor said. "This is the most important thing of all."

"What is it?" Amy asked.

"Promise me that you will never bestow your abilities on anyone else. Take your abilities to the grave with you. Do not tempt someone else with them."

"Ok," Amanda said.

"Do you promise?" the governor asked.

"I promise," Amanda replied.

"I do too," Amy said.

The governor stood up. He smiled at them. "Then I must be going. Ladies, thank you very much for your time. It is good to see you both and to know that your family did survive. It saddens me that you will not be staying with us on Xanthe but I understand. Perhaps when the Lord has returned and set all things right He will bring us back here and I can have the privilege of working with your father. But for now we must part."

"Do you want us to come and see you before we go?" Amy asked.

"If you could let me know that the Poneri have been defeated I would appreciate that," the governor replied. "That will be

enough.”

* * * * *

It was nearly eleven before Tim got home. Both girls were still awake when he walked in.

“So how did it go?” Amy asked.

Tim sighed. “I will be so glad when all of these wedding preparations are over. Do you know what it's like to spend a whole evening trying to pick out an invitation design?”

“You mean you still don't have your invitations picked out?” Amanda shrieked. “Tim, the wedding is just four months away! Don't you realize you have to order those things in advance?”

“So I've heard,” Tim replied wearily. He sank down onto the couch and glanced at the TV. “So what are we watching?”

All the sudden Amy jumped off the couch. She grabbed her sister's arm. “Atzi! We've got to go right now!”

“What happened?” she asked, startled.

“The *Starfire* is gone – completely gone! It's vanished!”

CHAPTER 20

"Of course I don't know where the bot swarms came from! Nobody does. It's not my fault if they're threatening colonies.

Any rumors that my administration is controlling them are complete and utter lies. We're as much a victim as anybody."

--Carroll Lane

Elder of Vault 37

25th century AD

RICHARD STRYKER STARED up at the darkening sky. Although the sunlight on Quetzalli had dimmed and the weather had grown cold, the threat was still too far away to be identified. The only evidence the crew of the *Sparrow* could see was a dark cloud on the very edge of the southern horizon. But by using the nanites Richard could see well beyond his senses. With a single thought he projected himself above the planet and saw it as a whole, as if he was looking at a marble he had found in his pocket. All of Quetzalli could be seen at once, in realtime, thanks to the network of micromachines that the Steward had created.

What he saw was disturbing. The dark cloud was actually an enormous army of bots that was pouring into Quetzalli's atmosphere. Millions upon millions of small, spherical devices had formed a cloud nearly six miles wide, and more were pouring in every second. Richard could not tell where the invading army was coming from; all the network knew was that they were jumping into the system through hyperspace from

some distant location. What *was* clear was that their mere presence was destabilizing the planet.

Richard tried to use his connection to the network to locate the Steward but he could not be found. The network was still there but the artificial mind that controlled it was gone. Richard called out for the Artillect but he could not reach it either. He wasn't sure if the Artillect was gone or if the Quetzalli star system had been cut off from everyone else. All he could tell was that they were alone and under attack.

"I'm afraid the situation is bad," Richard said at last. "I can't contact the Steward or the Artillect. I'm afraid we're going to have to handle this ourselves."

"What are we facing?" Laura asked.

Richard opened his mouth to tell his wife what he had seen but Jones beat him to it. "Looks like an unending army of invincible machines, six miles wide and getting bigger by the second."

"Is it really that bad?" Captain Max asked, staring up at the sky.

"Take a look yourself," Jones said. "We're all connected to the network. Just reach out with your mind."

"I'll never get used to that," Laura remarked. "It's so unnatural."

"Right now that's all we've got, ma'am," Sergeant Howell said. "Let's see if we can cut off that army's supply line. I'd rather battle a *finite* number of space invaders."

As the sergeant closed his eyes and concentrated the rest of the group simply stood there, uneasy but not sure what to do. By now their breakfast had been forgotten. All of them had abandoned the table and walked to the end of the courtyard, where they could see the city of New Tikal in the distance. Its tall, crystal spires normally refracted the sunlight into endless

patterns of color, but now they had gone dark. It was as if a cloud of despair had settled over the planet. The dog Alex ran up to Laura and stood beside her. He was uneasy but did not say anything.

All at once the planet shook as if it had struck something. The shaking stopped a moment later and Sergeant Howell opened his eyes. "I've shut down hyperspace, at least for the moment. That should stop them from pouring in."

"It's working!" Richard said excitedly. He could see that no new bots were entering the system. "How did you do it?"

"At the core of this planet is a bank of enormous machines that occupies hundreds of cubic miles of space. They're supposed to defend the planet in the event of an invasion. I think it's the Steward's job to manage them, but since he's gone they weren't doing anything. I contacted them and told them to shut hyperspace down. They're now doing something to destabilize spacetime so that hyperspatial connections can't be made. I don't know how long it will last but at the moment it seems to be working."

Richard turned his attention back to the giant cloud of bots. Even though no new ones were pouring in the cloud was still a staggering six miles wide. It was rapidly approaching the surface of the planet.

"Can you order those core machines to defend us?" Richard asked.

The sergeant shook his head. "I don't know how. You can't just say 'Get rid of those invaders' – it doesn't work like that. You have to give it commands and I don't know what commands to give. I think it was designed to be operated by the Steward. Apparently no one realized that the Steward might be the first casualty."

"So what do we do now?" Richard asked. "Those bots are

moving at nearly a thousand miles an hour! They're going to be here in short order if we don't do something fast."

Jones spoke up. "They're currently forty miles above the planet and sixty miles south of New Tikal. Current speed is 986 miles per hour and accelerating."

Richard watched as the bots entered the upper atmosphere of Quetzalli. He suddenly had an idea. The entire atmosphere of the planet was laced with tiny nanites; together they formed the network. These nanites were made of programmable matter and could be reconfigured into any material. As the bots entered the atmosphere they became surrounded by these nanites.

Using his mind, Richard created a protective force shield around the group of people in the courtyard. He then contacted some of the nanites that surrounded the invading bots and had them transform themselves into clumps of antimatter.

The effect was instantaneous. From a distance it looked as if a thousand bombs had suddenly gone off in the sky. The whole area became brighter than the brightest day as the entire sky was bathed in a searingly white light. The ground shook, and a moment later the roar of an explosion reached them. When the light finally faded they looked up at the sky. The invading cloud was no longer visible.

"Thanks for that shield," Captain Max said shakily. "Next time it might be nice to give us a little advance warning that the sky's about to explode. Without that shield the gamma rays from the antimatter reaction would have killed us for sure – and if they hadn't, the shockwave from the blast would have flattened us into pancakes."

"At least it worked," Richard said.

"I'm afraid it didn't," Jones said softly. "The cloud is still there. Take another look."

Richard looked back out into space. Using the nanites he took

a closer look at where the cloud had been. He soon realized that the *Sparrow's* first mate was right. While the cloud itself was gone the invaders had not been destroyed. It was true that the explosion had torn the bots apart but their parts still remained. As he watched he saw their fragments quickly reform into billions of small, needle-like structures. To his astonishment they glowed white-hot with energy. In the blink of an eye they fell out of space and slammed into the ground, striking the planet's surface some sixty miles to the south. The ground shook violently.

"You've energized them," Jones said. "Looks like they can absorb gamma radiation."

"Wonderful," groaned Richard. "So what do we do now?"

In the distance they saw New Tikal come under assault. While the invading army was too far away to be seen, they could see the attacks it was leveling against the defenseless city. Brilliant bolts of blue and green energy were being fired at the metropolis, striking its buildings. The delicate crystal structures were no match for this bombardment and began shattering. One by one the mighty towers crumbled to the ground.

"Don't just stand there!" Laura screamed. "Do something! Are you just going to wait until they've wiped out the whole city?"

"What exactly are those energy discharges?" Captain Max asked. "Those aren't lasers, are they?"

"Looks like some sort of charged plasma to me," Jones said.

"Then let's throw that right back at them," the captain replied. With his mind he connected to the network and focused on the city. To him the city became a small wireframe model, as if he had loaded a file into a computer and was going to change its properties. Every detail and facet of the remaining structures could be discerned in realtime.

The captain reached out and began altering the city. He

dissolved all of the remaining buildings into small blocks and commanded the blocks to change shape. He then browsed through the planet's library of blueprints, found one for an attack bot, and applied it to all of the blocks. Within seconds the blocks conformed to the pattern he had found, creating an army of millions of spherical bots. As soon as they came online they began blasting white plasma at the countless intruders.

Captain Max then refocused on what was going on around him. In the distance he saw that the entire city of New Tikal was gone. In its place was a giant cloud of activity, illuminated by brilliant beams of energy. They could hear the roar of explosions as bot after bot was blasted into oblivion, their pieces melted into useless metal shards.

"The whole city is gone!" Laura gasped. "What did you do to it?"

"I turned it into an army," Captain Max explained. "We're now being defended by the same kind of machines that are attacking us."

"Nice going," Richard said.

"I still advise maintaining this force shield around us," Sergeant Howell said. "We're not safe here."

"And I would advise running for our lives," Captain Max added. "We need to get out of here while we still can."

"Get out of here!" Richard exclaimed. "But this is our home! We can't just abandon this planet!"

"It's a lot safer than standing here in a war zone! We're very exposed here and are just a few miles away from sudden death. If those bots are going to wage war with Quetzalli I'd rather they did it while we were somewhere else. We can always come back later if the planet wins."

"But leaving may not improve the situation," Sergeant Howell warned. "Those bots came here from some other star system

and there could easily be a lot more of them still out there. If they were able to find us here then they may be able to track us no matter where we go. We don't know that being in space is any safer. At least here we have the resources of the planet to help us."

"Or at least, we used to," Jones said, nodding in the direction of New Tikal. The captain's army of bots had decimated the invading fleet but the survivors had regrouped, coming together to form a giant tank-like structure. The captain's bots were swarming around the tank, pounding its shields, but now they were having no effect. Meanwhile, the tank was firing enormous bolts of energy that were vaporizing bots left and right.

Richard reached into the network and focused on the nanites that surrounded the tank. He was surprised to find that the tank's shield cut it off from the network. He could not access any nanites that were inside the shield, nor could he push nanites through the shield.

"I can't penetrate the shield," Richard said. "It's cut it off."

"I'm on it," Captain Max said. The captain refocused on the city and saw that his army of bots had been almost completely wiped out. He frantically used the planetary network to turn large portions of the planet's crust into programmable matter, which he then turned into scores of bots. But the giant tank blasted the bots into debris as quickly as the captain was able to create them.

Slowly but surely the tank began advancing in their direction. The tank had located their home and had set its sights on destroying it. It was still nearly 40 miles away but at its present speed and course everyone knew it would be on top of them in a matter of minutes.

"I need a new blueprint!" Captain Max shouted. "These bots aren't working anymore. Does anyone have anything?"

"I'll find you something," Sergeant Howell said. He connected to the network and with his mind he quickly browsed through its library of blueprints. He did not find any tank-like structures but he did find the patterns to create several imposing-looking starships. The ships were a slender, rectangular class of vessel, each one roughly fifteen hundred feet long. They had powerful plasma cannons and appeared to be designed for space combat.

The sergeant forwarded the pattern on to the captain, who immediately applied it. The pattern took effect at once. All around them the soil shifted, as it first turned into programmable matter and then formed giant vessels. Every thirty seconds another ship arose out of the dust of the planet, leaving behind enormous chasms in the ground. The ships hovered in the air and trained their cannons on the tank, pounding it with powerful blasts of energized plasma.

The tank stopped advancing and turned its attention on this new threat. The transparent shield around it began to change color as it was relentlessly bombarded. In a few minutes it changed from transparent to red to opaque silver, hiding the tank from view. Then something happened. The tank stopped firing bolts of blue plasma and instead fired a single yellow shaft of light at one of the attacking ships. The beam sliced right through the ship, cutting it as if it had been made out of paper. A titanic explosion engulfed the ship, sending its flaming carcass crashing into the ground. One by one the tank trained its sights on the other attackers.

Richard stared at the doomed ships, aghast. "That is really, really bad."

"At least we're slowing it down," the captain remarked.

"But we cannot stop it," Jones said. "It will still get here and obliterate us. It's only a matter of time."

"Then I think it's time for us to go," Richard said. "Let's get on

the *Sparrow* and get out of here.”

“What if that tank thing follows us?” Laura asked.

“One problem at a time,” her husband said. He reached out to the network and tried to transport all of them directly onto the *Sparrow* but found that he could not. Then he remembered that Sergeant Howell had shut down hyperspace. He clenched his fists in frustration. He thought about temporarily suspending the sergeant's command but decided that might make their problem a lot worse. Once the shield was down there was no guarantee they would be able to start it up again.

“Let's run for it!” he shouted.

“I have a better idea,” Captain Max said. “The *Sparrow* is twenty miles away on the outskirts of what used to be New Tikal. Let's just have her come to us. The very last thing we want is to get any closer to that oncoming monstrosity.”

Using what was left of the planetary network, the captain contacted the *Sparrow* and had it engage its cloaking field. Once it was safely hidden the ship hovered just off the ground and raced toward them at a blinding pace. The captain wasn't sure if its cloak worked or if the tank just didn't consider the ship to be a threat, but their starship was not hindered and arrived at the courtyard sixty seconds after the captain called for it.

The group frantically boarded the *Sparrow* as the tank obliterated the last of the defensive starships and resumed advancing toward them. After the captain made sure that everyone was on board, including Alex, he gave the command to leave Quetzalli. Eliza piloted the *Sparrow* off the planet's surface and into space while the crew was still making their way toward the bridge. By the time they reached it the ship was already miles off the ground and well on its way toward outer space.

Captain Max settled into the captain's seat while Jones took his position at one of the consoles. Laura, Sergeant Howell, and

Richard stood around, watching.

"Show me the tank," the captain said.

Jones nodded and brought a picture of the tank up on the forward viewscreen. They watched as it reached the Stryker's home and began firing on it. It took less than ten second for their mansion to be completely obliterated. After there was nothing left but a smoking crater the tank dissolved into millions of small, spherical bots. The bots dispersed and began spreading out over the planet's surface.

"That's horrible," Laura gasped. "Horrible! Those awful things destroyed our city, our home..."

"And now they're looking for us," Sergeant Howell finished. "They want to know if we survived."

"At least our cloak appears to be working," Richard said, relieved.

"For now," Jones said.

The *Sparrow* soon exited Quetzalli's atmosphere and headed out into space. "Take us out of here, Jones," Captain Max said.

"Where to?" Jones asked.

"I don't care," the captain replied. "Anywhere but here."

"So there's no hope left?" Laura asked.

"I'm afraid not, honey," Richard replied. "I'm afraid our new home has been lost. There's nothing we can do about it."

"But where can we go?" she asked.

"I'd advise moving away from any stars that used to be inhabited by man," Sergeant Howell said. "That is most likely the source of this attack. I have a feeling that the endless war has decided to expand its reach to us. They've found a new colony to obliterate."

"Agreed," the captain said.

Jones nodded. A moment later he spoke up. "I've plotted a course that will take us toward the heart of the galaxy and I've

engaged our new stardrive. Our maximum sublight speed is 0.45c. At that rate it will take us about a hundred thousand years to arrive."

"A hundred thousand years!" the captain exclaimed. "That's ridiculous! Can't you just engage the FTL drive?"

"The dampening field is still in effect," Jones replied. "Its range appears to be quite extensive."

"It is," Sergeant Howell affirmed. "We'll need to exit the star system before we can make any jumps."

"I guess that makes sense," the captain grumbled. "How long will that take?"

"Once the effect of relativity is factored in, it will take approximately 16 hours of ship time to exit this system. That will take us beyond the edge of the shield. Then we can engage the FTL drive and depart."

The captain nodded. "Well, so be it. We'll just wait, then."

As the minutes ticked by they continued to monitor Quetzalli. Over the next thirty minutes the once-green planet turned brown. The vegetation died and the atmosphere was obliterated. The once-vibrant world had been turned into a corpse.

"How could they do that?" Laura asked. "That was our home, Richard. How could someone destroy an entire world like that? Who would create such horrible machines?"

Sergeant Howell spoke up. "War has always been ugly, ma'am. What we're seeing is war on a different scale. In our day wars could destroy entire cities. Now they destroy entire planets."

"The good news is we were brought here to put a stop to this," Captain Max said. "And that is exactly what we're going to do. One way or another we'll find a way to wipe those things out and ensure that they never again threaten anyone."

"They're certainly thorough," Richard remarked. "They're

destroying everything and they're making the planet uninhabitable to boot. Fighting them may not be as easy as we first thought."

Jones suddenly spoke up. "We've got a problem, captain."

"Did the swarm spot us?" the captain asked.

"It's worse than that. Much worse, in fact."

The captain frowned. "What could possibly be worse than that?"

Jones pressed a button and the scene on the viewscreen changed. Instead of a planet they saw a picture of a star. This star, however, was not a peaceful place. Giant flares were erupting all over its surface. It was in complete turmoil.

"Our star is becoming unstable," Jones said.

Richard stared at the viewscreen in disbelief. "Unstable? Do you mean it's about to go nova?"

"It's worse than that," Jones replied. "Someone is creating powerful energy fields around the star – that's why it's in such turmoil. The star is about to detonate."

"So it's going to go nova," Richard repeated.

Jones shook his head. "Not quite. A nova would be bad, of course – you would have a runaway nuclear reaction and the star would release a whole lot of energy. That wouldn't really hurt us, though. Our new shields could more or less handle that level of energy output, and the amount of stellar mass that's ejected is actually quite small. Besides, only white dwarf stars can go nova and this star isn't a white dwarf. No, *this* star is about to detonate."

"I don't understand," Richard said. "What does that mean?"

"Someone – or something – is turning that star into a weapon. They are attempting to ignite a runaway chain reaction at the heart of the star. When it begins it will convert the interior core of the star into energy. That energy will blast the remaining

mass of the star into space, turning it into a wall of white-hot plasma moving at near-lightspeed. When that hits us we will be completely obliterated.”

“That's impossible!” Richard protested. “Stars just don't do that!”

“Not naturally,” Sergeant Howell agreed. “I think we are seeing some sort of stellar weapon in action. Someone has found a way to use a star to obliterate all of the planets that orbit it.”

“You mean those bots can do that?” Richard asked.

“Can we discuss that later?” Laura asked. “Don't we need to get out of here?”

“We can't,” Jones said. “There is no way to engage our hyperdrive with that shield in place. We're stuck here.”

“Can we just outrun the blast?” Richard asked.

Jones shook his head. “If my calculations are correct, even at our top speed we can't get away fast enough. When that star blows we will only have about—”

At that moment the star erupted into a white ball of energy. For a few seconds it became blindingly bright and then it disappeared altogether. The star was no more.

There was silence on the bridge. “How long?” Richard asked.

“About fifteen minutes,” Jones replied.

CHAPTER 21

“People are always complaining about corruption in government as if it was something new and surprising. Governments have been corrupt since the days of the Mayan Republic and they will continue to be corrupt until the stars burn out. It's just how things are. But in synthetic worlds you are the government. You have complete authority over billions of synthetic lives, and no one has authority over you. No one will ever oppress you or take away your rights in a synthetic world. What could be better than that?”

*--Carroll Lane
Elder of Vault 37
25th century AD*

“THERE HAS TO BE SOMETHING we can do,” Richard said desperately.

“Not while that shield is still up,” Jones replied.

“Can't we disable the shield? Turn it off?”

As they spoke the ship's sensors indicated that a giant wave of supercharged plasma was racing toward them at nearly the speed of light. The picture on the forward viewscreen was so terrifying that Jones turned it off. They knew it was coming; looking at it only fed a feeling of panic and helplessness.

“Quetzalli's network is down,” Sergeant Howell replied. “I can't contact the planet anymore. I think the bots have taken

over.”

“Then why is the shield still up?” Richard asked.

“The bots may not know about the machines in the planet's interior, or they may know but haven't had a chance to drill into the planetary core. The defensive systems are buried fairly deeply and from what I could tell they're well-protected.”

“Is there some other way to access them?” Richard asked.

“Not without being able to travel through hyperspace. The core wasn't designed to be accessed.”

There was silence. “The wave hit the first planet,” Jones announced quietly.

“You mean Quetzalli?” Laura asked.

Jones shook his head. “No ma'am. There are three other planets in this system – one closer to the star and three further away. The plasma wave has struck the first one.”

“What effect did it have?” Richard asked.

“It melted it, sir. It's completely gone.”

“But the wall should be weaker – more spread out – by the time it gets to the more distant planets,” Richard said. “Could we go there and maybe hide behind one of them?”

“We'd never make it in time,” Captain Max replied. “We can't even reach the *next* planet before the wave hits us, much less the most distant one. We just don't have enough time.”

“I don't understand!” Richard exclaimed, frustrated. “This doesn't make any sense. Why would God even allow us to be brought out here if we were just going to die before we could accomplish anything? What was the point of saving us from the Emperor's attack?”

“We told the Artilect about your daughters,” Jones replied. “It now knows that they're missing and has begun searching for them. But I think we still have another part to play in all this.”

“But how could we? How are we going to survive?”

Jones stared at the controls in front of him thoughtfully. A minute ticked by. Then his face lit up.

"What is it?" Richard asked.

"Of course," he said softly. "I had forgotten. We are in no danger."

"No danger! How is that possible? Why—"

As he spoke the plasma wave struck Quetzalli, which was now millions of miles away. In mere seconds the entire planet was consumed. When the plasma engulfed the world it melted the planet's defense systems, which collapsed the protective shield that guarded the star system. The moment the shield went down Jones engaged the ship's FTL drive and the ship vanished into hyperspace.

"*That's why,*" Jones said. "The wave was always going to hit the planet before it hit us, which would give us plenty of time to leave. We didn't realize it but there actually wasn't any danger — as long as the FTL drive worked, of course."

Richard let out a tremendous sigh of relief. He said nothing for a moment. As hope returned he felt the tension drain out of him. "That was far too close," he said at last. "I'm getting too old for that kind of excitement."

"The Lord has spared our lives," Jones replied. "Apparently our job is not yet complete."

"That doesn't mean everything is fine," Sergeant Howell remarked. "The source of that army is still out there. We don't know what we're going to find when we drop out of hyperspace."

A voice spoke up behind them. "You no longer need to worry about the swarms. I have taken care of the invaders."

Everyone whirled around. Standing at the entrance to the bridge was an old man with a neatly-trimmed beard and white hair. He was wearing a pair of bluejeans and a brown sweater.

"Andy?" Richard asked. "Is that you?"

"It is," the Artilect replied. "I have changed my outfit into something that you might find more familiar. I hope it is more pleasing to you."

"It's very nice," Laura replied. "Thank you."

"Are you saying that you've neutralized the threat?" Sergeant Howell asked.

"Yes, I have. I apologize for not getting in touch with you sooner. The bots that you faced on Quetzalli attacked many other worlds as well. It took me some time to find a solution and eliminate them from my network. They no longer have the power to enter any region of space that I control, and I have devised a way of eradicating them should I encounter them in other areas of space."

"Why weren't we able to reach you?" Richard asked.

"The bots severed my connection to Quetzalli and destroyed the Steward. When that happened I was forced to find a solution and re-assert my authority. By the time I regained control you had already left the planet, so I went ahead and detonated the star. My plan was to extract you as soon as the distortion field was down but by then you had already engaged your ship's FTL drive. I commend you for your quick thinking."

"So *you* did that?" Laura gasped. "Why would you destroy your own star?"

"Why didn't you tell us?" Richard demanded. "We thought we were going to die!"

The Artilect looked at them apologetically. "I am deeply sorry for the emotional turmoil that I have caused. It was not my intention to upset you. The reason I did not get in touch with you earlier is because my contact with you is what endangered you in the first place.

"You see, when you first arrived in the future you created a space-time shockwave that caught the attention of the bots that

were engaged in the endless war. Although I did not know it at the time those bots then began creating an enormous army, which they launched against me about an hour ago. Part of it was sent to Quetzalli because the bots had sensed my presence there. However, the bots mistakenly believed that your world was my home world. They did not find my true location. Because of this I decided it would be better to not speak with you again until after I had wiped them out. I did not want them to learn of their mistake.”

“How were they able to detect your presence?” Richard asked.

The Artilect sighed. “I was careless. The Sentinel had not been in touch with them for more than a thousand years so I did not think that they were aware of myself or of anything that happened in my domain. I am now in the process of upgrading my defenses and taking extra precautions. They will not detect me in the future.”

“So what will happen now?” Laura asked.

“It is time for us to pay them a visit,” the Artilect replied. “I have located a small area where time has been suspended. The Sentinel first discovered it fifteen hundred years ago but at the time I knew nothing of temporal anomalies and so I paid it no attention. Given the location of this field it is my belief that your daughters are trapped within it, waiting for us to come and get them.”

“Where is it?” Richard asked.

“Just beyond the outskirts of Sol,” the Artilect replied.

* * * * *

Once again a nameless robot found itself in Vault 37, tasked with the thankless duty of waking up Elder Lane. As expected he

did not appreciate being dragged out of his synthetic world and back into reality.

“What is the matter with you?” he screamed. “What part of 'do not disturb' do you not understand? Do I look like I want to be dragged out of my pod every time you have something dumb to tell me?”

“We wanted to let you know that the attack against the invaders was a success,” the robot stated. “The bot swarms tracked them to their home planet and obliterated it. There is nothing left of them. However—”

“Spare me the details,” Elder Lane grumbled. “They did their job and that's all I care about. End of story.”

“But the invaders did not come from Sol. They came from—”

“Don't be stupid! Of course they came from Sol. There aren't any other people left, remember? We wiped out all the other colonies thousands of years ago! Us and Sol – that's all that's left and now Sol is gone too. *Finally*. We would have wiped them out too but we couldn't find a way to shut that Wall down, blast it. We couldn't even find the machines that kept it running! How could you lose something like that, anyway? But at least that problem is over with now. They're done, you understand? What part of that is too complicated for your pea-brained mind to grasp?”

The robot started to speak up but the ancient man cut him off. “I don't want to hear it! Your job is done, understand? Tell those swarms to go back to what they were doing before. And listen – next time you have some dumb bit of information to share, share it with someone else, you understand? You are *not* to bother me again.”

“But you are the Vault Elder,” the robot protested. “According to protocol—”

“I don't care!” he shouted. “Next time contact someone else.”

I don't care who it is – just make sure it isn't me! Do you understand?"

"Understood," the robot replied.

"You'd *better* understand," the man replied grimly.

The frustrated elder then returned to his pod and resealed it, all the while muttering threats.

CHAPTER 22

“The vaults are a perfect solution. Not only do their pods allow us access to our synthetic worlds, but their location underground protects us from rogue bot swarms. Our system of automated robots can keep the vaults in perfect order and the pods can extend our life indefinitely. This allows us to remain in our synthetic worlds forever, never again having to deal with the unpleasanties of reality. The synthetic world can then truly become our universe.”

*--Carroll Lane
Elder of Vault 37
25th century AD*

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, the *Starfire* is gone?” Amanda Stryker asked. “Where did it go?”

“It didn't go anywhere, Atzi – it just disappeared!” Amy exclaimed. “It's no longer in this universe. It was there just a minute ago and then – poof! – it was gone.”

“I find it a little hard to believe that it's *entirely* gone,” Amanda replied. “Do you mean that the bot you built to watch it isn't there anymore?”

“No, no, of course not! I mean the whole ship is gone. I don't know what's happened to it. One moment everything was fine and then it just vanished. The Poneri must have done

something!"

"But wouldn't that mean that the portal had been activated? Shouldn't your bot have noticed something?"

"I guess," Amy replied. "Maybe I built the bot wrong or maybe the Poneri found a way to fool it. I don't know. Maybe we should have stayed on board. But the fact remains that the ship is *gone*."

"What does that mean?" Tim asked. "Should I be concerned?"

"That depends on why it's gone," Amanda replied. "If it's out there hiding somewhere then yes, that's bad – we need to keep track of it so we can destroy the Poneri portal. But if the portal has collapsed then it's not entirely bad."

"But there were people on that ship!" Amy exclaimed. "And what about Steve? He was inside that portal!"

"I admit it's bad for them. But if the portal is gone then the Poneri are gone too and that's *not* bad. In fact, for all we know this might be something that Steve did."

Amanda turned to her brother. "I guess we're going to have to go find out."

"Isn't it kind of late for you two to be out exploring the galaxy?" Tim asked. "I mean, if that ship is gone then it'll still be gone in the morning. Why not get some sleep and take care of it tomorrow? After all, it's almost midnight."

Amanda shook her head. "For all we know the whole galaxy could be in danger. Besides, neither of us are tired. As far as I can tell the nanites can keep us going indefinitely. I know we still sleep, but technically speaking we don't really *have* to."

"Oh," Tim replied. "Ok then. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Probably not," Amanda replied. "Sorry. This is something we need to do ourselves."

"All right. Take care of yourselves, then. Try not to get into too much trouble out there – and if you could stop by the apartment before going off into the future I'd appreciate it. That way I won't be left wondering what happened."

"Sure," Amy replied.

The two sisters looked at each other. Amy nodded, and the twins then vanished.

Tim shook his head. "I'll never get used to that," he muttered.

* * * * *

The girls reappeared at the Cedar Grove colony a few moments later. They were standing on a small hill that overlooked the spaceport, which was currently empty. It was night on that portion of the planet and the stars were out, shining in the darkness. No moon was visible and there was no activity to be seen.

"Alpha Mensae?" Amanda replied, frowning. "Why here?"

"We've got to start somewhere," Amy explained. "Besides, I didn't want to just float around in space. From this vantage point we can easily scan all the surrounding systems. If the *Starfire* is anywhere nearby our nanites should be able to detect it."

"All right," Amanda agreed. "I guess that will work."

Using the nanites within them the two girls began scanning for signs of the *Starfire*. In their minds it was as if reality had disappeared and was replaced with a small scale model of the surrounding star systems. They could see each star, planet, and spaceship in the vicinity. With a single thought they could focus their attention on any object and see it in much greater detail.

"I'm not seeing it," Amy said at last.

"I'm not either," Amanda replied. "In fact, I'm really not seeing much of anything out here. This colony just doesn't have

any neighbors. The nearest starship is a good twenty light-years away.”

“Could it just be cloaked somehow? If Steve did something then it might have messed with the *Starfire*. That anomaly was pretty hard to see and we knew exactly where to look.”

“I guess that's possible but I don't even know what to look for. Our nanites can penetrate normal cloaks. If the *Starfire* is hidden and it's in this area then something different must be going on.”

Amy shrugged. “All we can do is try different things and see what turns up.”

The two girls spent the next few hours attempting to look deeper into the fabric of spacetime, but they came up empty. Amanda even used the Ranger's flight control network to see if the ship might be somewhere else in space but no Ranger colony had sighted the ship in the past few hours. It was simply nowhere to be found.

“I don't understand,” Amy said at last. “There's no debris or anything. If the ship was destroyed then there would at least be some remains but I'm not even seeing that.”

“Maybe we're just overlooking something,” Amanda replied. “There are lots of possibilities.”

“I guess. Do you think we should deploy a galaxy-wide network to look for it, the way the Sentinel hunted for us? Surely if the entire *galaxy* was saturated with nanites we would find *something*.”

“Or we might just get into a lot of trouble,” Amanda argued. “Besides, that would take days. I think it would be a lot better if we tricked the Poneri into revealing themselves.”

“What do you mean?” Amy asked.

“Well, I think it's pretty obvious that Steve is not in control. After all, if he was in charge then he would have gotten in touch

with us and we'd know exactly what was going on. As it is we didn't even get a message. That tells me that the Poneri are still out there, and as far as we know the only way they can access our dimension is through the *Starfire*. So I think we should do something to lure them out of hiding."

"Like what?"

Amanda dissolved the local view of Alpha Mensae and planted a picture in Amy's mind of a star system that was locked in a time stasis. "Do you remember this?"

"I think so," Amy said uncertainly. "Isn't that the Poneri system that Steve froze?"

"That's it. The reason he froze it was because when he found it he didn't have the authority to wipe it out, so he couldn't destroy it – *but we can*. So I say we go there and finish the job. All we have to do is collapse the time field and everything inside it will be demolished. That's *sure* to attract their attention – if they're still out there, that is. Then we can figure out where they're coming from and that will tell us where the *Starfire* is hiding."

"Ok," Amy replied. "But what are we going to do for a starship? I don't want to just float around in the vacuum of space while you do your thing."

"Why not? It's not like the vacuum can hurt us. The nanites will take care of that."

"It's just unnatural. I don't like it. I'd feel better if we were inside something and could walk around and fight like normal people."

Amanda frowned. "But how are we going to do that? I mean, sure, we can make whatever we want but we've got to have a pattern to work with. I don't have any starship patterns, Tiger. Steve might but he's not exactly handy right now."

"What about the *Starfire*?" Amy asked. "We had to analyze it

in order to find the Poneri and then we had to fix it after the battle. I've still got all of that data. It wouldn't be hard to reconstruct it."

"But that's a terrible ship! Couldn't we just go to Tau Ceti, find a better ship, and duplicate that instead?"

"But we're familiar with the *Starfire*," Amy argued. "Besides, the Poneri are familiar with it too. If they saw another one appear in space I'm sure it would attract their attention."

"I guess we could use it as bait," Amanda replied thoughtfully. "All right. We'll give it a try. After all, the worst-case scenario is that nothing happens and we have to think up a new plan."

Working together, the two girls used the nanites within them to turn a nearby asteroid into a large block of programmable matter. They then turned their scans of the *Starfire* into a pattern and applied it to the asteroid. Over the next few minutes the rock turned itself into a perfect replica of the giant, badly-damaged starship. When the process had finished the girls transported themselves into the ruined cafeteria on board the *Starfire II*. A familiar sight of decay and ruin greeted them.

"This is fantastic!" Amy said enthusiastically. "This looks exactly the way I remember it, right down to the huge breaches in the hull and the trashed furniture."

Amanda shook her head. "It's a complete wreck. You know, maybe this wasn't such a good idea. This ship didn't survive its last encounter with the Poneri. Why would this time be any different?"

"It'll be fine," her sister replied excitedly. "Besides, it's *supposed* to look like a wreck. That was the whole idea! Now let's get going."

The two girls disappeared and then reappeared on the ship's bridge. Amy sat down at the navigation console and worked with

it for a moment. Her sister settled down into the captain's chair.

Amy spoke up. "This says it'll take the ship nine days to get to that system."

"There's no way I'm going to wait nine days," Amanda replied firmly. "We'll just move the ship there ourselves."

Using the nanites Amanda created a wormhole in front of the ship that linked their position in space with the Poneri star system. Amy then piloted the ship through the wormhole. When they were safely through it Amanda allowed the wormhole to collapse.

"Thanks," Amy said. She tapped the console. "Hmmm. The ship's sensors aren't detecting anything."

"But I am," Amanda said. "The temporal anomaly is there – it's just that this ship's crummy sensors can't detect it. All you have to do is look out into space and tune in to it. Are you ready?"

Amy paused. "Give me just a second." The girl released a cloud of nanites onto the bridge, which rapidly multiplied. Over the next minute they spread over the entire ship. When they were in place Amy activated the mini-network and they created a protective shield around the *Starfire II*.

"All right," Amy said. "Go for it!"

Using the nanites, Amanda reached out to the suspended star system. In her mind the system was depicted as a large room with gray walls. Hovering in the center of the room was a small black sphere. She knew that the sphere was a representation of the star system itself, frozen and inert.

Amanda mentally issued the command to destroy the sphere. Instantly she saw cracks begin appearing all over its surface, and then all at once the sphere shattered into thousands of splinters. A second later the connection dropped and she found herself back on the bridge, staring at the forward viewscreen. The entire

starship was shaking and alarms were going off. A dozen red lights were flashing on her sister's console.

“What happened?” Amanda asked, trying to get her bearings. The ship violently shook again, nearly knocking her out of her chair.

“We're under attack!” Amy screamed. “The Poneri are here – and they're everywhere!”

CHAPTER 23

“And all flesh died that moved upon the earth, both of fowl, and of cattle, and of beast, and of every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth, and every man: all in whose nostrils was the breath of life, of all that was in the dry land, died. And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven; and they were destroyed from the earth: and Noah only remained alive, and they that were with him in the ark. And the waters prevailed upon the earth a hundred and fifty days.”

*--Genesis 7:20:24
24th century BC*

AS AMY FOUGHT DESPERATELY to strengthen the protective shield that surrounded the ship, Amanda used the nanites to get a picture of what was going on. To her the *Starfire II* became a small model suspended in space. She gasped when she saw that it was surrounded by thousands upon thousands of ghostly blue beings. The creatures were angrily firing pluses of energy at their ship, battering it mercilessly. The shields were taking a severe beating. The nanite network Amy had created was able to produce an enormous amount of energy but they simply could not handle an

attack of that magnitude. Neither of them had planned on such an immediate and violent response.

Remembering their earlier battle with the Poneri, Amanda quickly reconfigured the ship's long-destroyed weapons systems into a much larger version of her sister's handheld Poneri gun. As soon as they were in place she routed the ship's power to the weapons and began firing.

The intense white bursts of energy scattered the Poneri but did not drive them off. Their overwhelming numbers continued pounding the vessel. The shields were failing rapidly and Amy could not provide enough power to sustain them.

"This isn't working!" Amy screamed. "Just get a fix on their origin, Atzi, so we can get out of here!"

Amanda nodded. She watched as the *Starfire II*'s automated defense program managed to vaporize a few groups of Poneri that had ventured too close to the ship. Almost as soon as they were destroyed, however, a new group arrived to take their place. By monitoring their arrival Amanda was able to get a fix on their origin.

"Got it!" she exclaimed. "They're—"

At that moment the shields collapsed. The energy blasts from the Poneri tore the ship apart, blasting the bridge into atoms. As the ship disintegrated around them Amy grabbed her sister and the two vanished.

Amanda found herself standing in a room that appeared to stretch out into infinity. The floor of the room was covered with a luxurious white carpet. There were no walls or ceiling. The area was well-lit but the light did not come from any visible source. The room itself was furnished with a leather couch and a white recliner.

Amy gasped for breath and collapsed onto the couch. "That was too close," she said. "Oh my goodness! Another second and

we wouldn't have survived. That was awful."

"What happened?" Amanda asked. She sat down beside her sister. She was surprised to see how exhausted Amy was. Sweat poured down her face and she looked completely spent. Her eyes were closed.

"Disaster is what happened," Amy replied. "I was expecting a few Poneri, not their entire army. The ship just couldn't take that kind of attack."

"So you brought us to the Infinite Room," Amanda replied.

Amy opened her eyes and nodded. "Steve said that the Poneri couldn't get here. I guess he was right – here we are, and I don't see any Poneri."

"But how did you know how to get here?" Amanda asked.

"The nanites knew the way. You know too, I bet – you probably just haven't thought about it. My guess is that Steve explained it to them. What I do know is that I'm glad he created this place."

Amanda nodded. "Thanks, Tiger. You saved us both. I guess we know not to do *that* again."

"But we'll have to do it again," Amy replied wearily. "We can't just leave the Poneri out there. We need to hunt them down and destroy them. You did get that star system collapsed, didn't you?"

"I did – it's gone. And I was able to find the origin of the Poneri. From what I could tell they were coming from a ship that was en-route to Earth. Based on their course and speed I'd say they'll get there in about four days."

"So you saw the *Starfire*?" Amy asked.

"No, I'm afraid not. But I did notice that their point of origin was moving so that makes me think they're on a ship."

Amy nodded but didn't say anything.

"Do you really think it's a good idea to fight them again?"

Amanda asked. "I mean, we almost died just now!"

"Who else is going to do it? The alternative is to do nothing and let them destroy the Wall. That is going to cause *real* problems."

"But we almost died!" Amanda exclaimed.

"So we'll prepare better next time. We'll create a *Starfire III* that is armed to the teeth and stuffed with the most powerful energy plant we can dream up. In fact, we'll create a whole *armada* of them to take with us. If there are thousands of Poneri then we'll bring thousands of ships to fight them."

"But what about the Wall?" Amanda asked.

"We'll strengthen it," Amy replied. "We'll take all of our scientific know-how and make it so strong that even the Poneri can't punch a hole in it."

"But won't the Rangers notice?"

"We'll probably have to run all of this by Governor Nicholas first," Amy agreed. "But that's why Steve left us here – to fix this problem. And that's exactly what I intend to do."

* * * * *

The following afternoon Governor Nicholas was working in his office when he heard a knock on the door. He laid down the treaty he was reading and sighed. *Someone always seems to be interrupting*, he thought. "Come in," he called.

The door opened and Amanda Stryker walked in. She closed the door behind her.

"Amy!" the governor exclaimed in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm actually Amanda, sir – and don't worry, it's ok. Everything is fine. I've disabled this office's security so no one will ever know I was here."

"You've disabled it?" the governor asked in alarm. "Won't security notice?"

"I mean I've hidden myself from it. Sorry. I didn't mean I shut it down. Amy and I have been kind of busy lately and I guess I'm just not thinking very clearly. We just came back from a battle."

"So you were able to destroy the Poneri, then?" the governor asked.

Amanda sat down in one of the empty leather chairs that were in front of the governor's desk. "Well, I guess *everything* isn't fine. I meant that my being here wasn't a security risk. As it turns out we're having some problems with the Poneri, and that's why I'm here. You see, the Poneri are on their way to Sol. We think they're going to stage an attack against the Wall."

The governor's eyes widened. "Are you sure of this?"

"Pretty sure," Amanda replied.

"That's terrible news! That would be a devastating blow. Is there anything you can do about it? Can you stop them?"

"We're going to try, but that's why I'm here. Amy wants to get your approval to strengthen the Wall. We want to make sure that the Poneri can't get through it."

"By all means, go right ahead," the governor replied hastily. "Do whatever you need to do. But no matter what happens that Wall must remain intact. It *must not be allowed to fall*."

Amanda nodded. "My sister is going to upgrade the equipment that sustains it in order to make the Wall much, much stronger. She's also going to upgrade the stealth technology that the stations are using in order to make them a lot harder to find. But all of those changes aren't going to go unnoticed. After all, the four stations that maintain the Wall are all manned. People are going to notice when the hardware suddenly changes and becomes self-maintaining."

"So the stations won't need to be manned anymore?" the

governor asked.

"That's right – they'll just take care of themselves. It's part of the upgrade that Amy wants to do. Think of it this way: let's suppose that my sister upgraded the equipment to use 73rd-century technology and *didn't* make it self-maintaining. Would any of your people be able to fix it if it broke?"

"I suppose not," the governor said. "Plus, not having to worry about maintaining the stations would be a great relief. When was your sister planning on performing this upgrade?"

"Tomorrow morning. The *Starfire* will probably arrive at the Wall three days from now and she wanted to make sure the upgrade was in place as far in advance as possible."

"The *Starfire*!" the governor exclaimed. "Why is it coming to Sol? Can't you stop it?"

"Believe me, sir, we're trying. We think that the Poneri have taken it over and are attempting to get home. I don't really know why they're heading toward Earth, but they are."

"All right," the governor said. "I can issue a command tonight and make sure that all four stations are evacuated by morning. There will be a lot of questions but I can fend them off for now. After the upgrade is over and my people return to their posts they may wonder what happened but they'll never guess the truth."

"Go back to their posts?" Amanda asked. "Why would they do that? They won't be able to actually do anything."

"That's the point. When they return to work they'll see that the problem has been solved and their job is done. Then I can reassign them to other tasks."

Amanda stood up. "All right. I'll let my sister know she can go ahead with the upgrade, and after she's done I'll send you a message."

"Thank you. That would be much appreciated."

The governor paused as he looked at the fourteen-year-old girl that was standing in front of him. It occurred to him that the fate of his civilization was resting on the shoulders of her and her sister, and there was really nothing that anyone could do to help them. Once again the most powerful man in the Ranger territories found himself completely helpless.

"Do you think you can defeat them?" the governor asked. "Or do we need to prepare for an invasion?"

"Amy thinks she can take care of the problem – she has a plan and she's not worried."

"But what do you think?"

"I don't know," Amanda said at last. "I'd feel better if Steve was here, but he's not and that can't be helped. We're going to do our best and that's all we can do. I don't know how it will turn out."

The governor nodded. "I could ask nothing more of you. I will look forward to reading your report."

Amanda nodded. After saying goodbye she disappeared.

The governor looked back down at the treaty that was resting on his desk. He had spent years working on that document, which would turn the Rangers into a loose confederation of cooperating star systems. A few minutes ago it seemed immensely important but now he couldn't bring himself to focus on it. If the Poneri destroyed the Wall and let the Emperor loose then in all likelihood the Rangers were doomed. Their entire civilization was being threatened by an incredibly powerful race from the distant past and their only defense against this supernatural army were two teenage girls with no combat training. He felt old and tired.

The stress of this job is killing me, he thought. I have too many problems that I can do nothing to fix. I'm just getting too old for this. But with Richard gone who can I appoint as my

successor? Who can be trusted to guide us into the future? For that matter, will we even have a future?

Jack turned around and gazed out the window behind his chair, looking out over Star City. He sighed but said nothing.

* * * * *

It took the governor an hour to order the evacuation of the four space stations that controlled the Wall. As he expected, there was tremendous opposition to this unexpected request.

"This is completely irresponsible," Dr. Kimberly Hudson fumed. A picture of her appeared on the holoscreen that hovered over the governor's desk. He could see how angry she was. "I mean no offense, sir, but abandoning these stations is just plain *wrong*. We don't dare let our guard down even for a moment! There are still many Empire sympathizers out there. Don't you realize what would happen if one of them sabotaged the Wall?"

"I understand your concern but there is no danger," the governor replied. "The stations need to be evacuated so that an upgrade can be performed. They will be fully protected and monitored during that time. No one is abandoning them."

"But that's impossible! I've talked to Dr. Finley myself – there are no upgrades planned for this station. Not now, not ever. And there aren't any battleships in this area either. We're completely defenseless!"

"Things are not as they seem, Dr. Hudson. There are other events going on that I am not able to reveal at this time. I assure you that in 24 hours you and your team will be allowed to return. No harm will come to the Wall during your absence."

Dr. Hudson was furious. "Absolutely not! I am *not* going to have my team march out of here and leave the most important

defense stations in the galaxy unguarded. I am in charge of those stations, governor, and I have the highest security clearance possible. I have a right to know what's going on."

The governor shook his head. "My orders are clear, doctor. If you will not evacuate yourself then I will have my men forcibly remove you. This conversation is over." He cut the channel, leaving behind a very angry scientist.

I knew that wasn't going to go over well, he thought. The confrontation with one of his most trusted aids had completely drained him. He hated keeping her in the dark but he had no choice. I don't dare tell her the truth, and Kimberly is smart enough to see through any lie. My only choice is to tell her nothing. At least she will be mollified after she returns. She won't understand what happened but she'll see that I wasn't completely out of my mind.

He sighed. If I'm lucky that will be enough to stop her from trying to get me impeached. She's quite right, of course. If I was in her position I would be equally angry. I just don't have any other options. I just hope the twins are able to defeat the Poneri. If they fail then none of this really matters. The fate of our future is in their hands.

CHAPTER 24

"A few people have asked me what the future is going to be like. What will happen when mankind is powerful enough to do whatever they want? Personally, I don't think that day will ever come. Reality just can't be pushed around like that. In the real world there are always limits. The world isn't made of dreams, you know! No matter how advanced we may become there will always be corners that mankind can't reach."

--Ramon Diano

Founder of the Diano Corporation

18th century AD

AMANDA STRYKER RETURNED to the Infinite Room, where she found her sister hard at work. Amy had found a way to create a version of the *Starfire III* in their secure sanctuary and she was standing beside it, studying it. The giant starship looked quite different from the original *Starfire* – all of its exterior damage had been repaired and it was a sleek, silver color.

"What do you think?" Amy asked.

"It looks nice," Amanda commented. "What have you done to it?"

"Let me show you," Amy replied. She connected to her sister's mind and brought up a wireframe model of the *Starfire III*. She showed Amanda the ship's massive weapons systems, its powerful shields, and the futuristic energy plant she had

installed.

"Most of the interior is now taken up by power production," Amanda explained. "That ship can produce orders-of-magnitude more energy than the Ranger's best zero-point-energy plant. It should have no trouble maintaining the shields or powering the weapons. Plus, the ship is run by an advanced AI so it should be able to find and attack the Poneri without any manual intervention on our part."

Amanda nodded. "Looks great! You did a good job, Tiger. How many of these were you planning on bringing?"

"Thousands!" Amy said enthusiastically. "If you like this design then I'll go start making them."

"How are you going to do that?" Amanda asked.

"I've found an empty planet thousands of light-years away from Ranger territory. What I'm going to do is go there, create a planetwide network of nanites, and use it to turn the whole world into programmable matter. Once that's done I'll have the nanites turn that matter into lots and lots of *Starfire III*-class starships. That way I don't have to stand there and create them all myself. When the army is ready we'll zip into place and begin the attack."

"How long will this take?"

"We'll have hundreds of ships ready by tomorrow morning and thousands more by the next day. I'm going to keep on making them until we spot the *Starfire*. Then we'll jump on the flagship and bring the whole army to Sol."

"Ok," Amanda replied. "I guess that will work. I wish we could attack before the *Starfire* got that close to the Wall but I just can't find it. I've tried looking where I thought it *should* be, based on its course and speed, but haven't had any luck."

"That's fine," Amy said. "That gives us the time we need to build our armada. Were you able to talk with Governor

Nicholas?"

"I did. I told him what was going on and he said he'd have the stations evacuated by the end of the day. You can upgrade them in the morning. Since they're evacuating the whole area we probably need to keep an eye on them ourselves until you get the upgrade done."

"Great!" Amy replied enthusiastically. "That won't be a problem. This is all coming together!"

"Is it?" Amanda asked. "What, exactly, are you going to do when you find the *Starfire*?"

"I'm really not sure. My plan was to just launch the attack and see what came up. What was your idea?"

"Here's what I think. As soon as we surround the *Starfire* the Poneri are going to attack us, just like they did before – but this time your armada will wipe them out. They'll retreat back into the portal like they did when Steve disappeared. After they're gone we'll evacuate the *Starfire* and collapse the portal, and that will be that."

"But what about Steve? Won't that kill him?"

"Not if there's a portal on Earth," Amanda pointed out. "Maybe in the future we can find a way to rescue him that way."

"But you don't know that! We have no idea why the Poneri want to go to Sol. It could be anything! Besides, if you're right won't that mean that the only place the Poneri will be able to reach is Earth? Do we really want that?"

"At least they'll be trapped inside the Wall," Amanda argued. "That's better than letting them roam the entire galaxy! And after you upgrade the Wall they'll have no way to get out. They'll be trapped in there forever."

"But there are *people* on Earth," Amy replied. "And on Mars! Millions and *millions* of people. Aren't you worried about what the Poneri are going to do to them?"

Amanda sighed. "Look. Right now the Poneri can go *anywhere*. After this is over, if everything works, they'll be trapped in just one star system. That seems a lot better than the current situation. At least only *one* system is in danger instead of *all* of them."

"But even having one system in danger is unacceptable," Amy argued.

"Fine. I agree. It's bad. So what's your solution? How are you going to fix that?"

"Couldn't we go inside Sol, find the portal, and destroy it? I mean, that should be possible, right?"

"The only way I know of to destroy a portal is to suspend it in time and then collapse that field. If we did that on Earth we'd destroy the entire planet. Is that really going to make their life better?"

"But there has to be *something* we can do," Amy said.

"There is – we can leave it alone and let the Artilect deal with it. I don't mind fighting the Poneri on a single starship; if that gets destroyed in battle then no harm is done. But I don't want to fight them on a planet, and *especially* not on Earth. That needs to be left to people who know what they're doing. It would be really easy for us to make the problem a *lot* worse."

"I guess," Amy replied reluctantly. "I just don't like it."

* * * * *

The rest of the day was uneventful. Amanda continued to search for the *Starfire* while her sister created her armada. Amy left for Sol the next day and spent the morning upgrading the equipment on the four hidden space stations that maintained the Wall. Within a few hours she had a new system in place that reflected the very best that the 73rd century had to offer. Not

only was the Wall strengthened immensely but the new equipment was designed to last forever. The Rangers no longer had to worry about the Spanish Empire getting out – they were trapped and there was no way to escape.

After letting Governor Nicholas know that she had finished her work Amy returned to manage her armada. The governor then relayed the information to Dr. Hudson, who was still livid about being forced out of the station.

Before the governor left his office that evening he got a call from Dr. Hudson. When he activated the connection a picture of a very bewildered woman appeared on his holoscreen.

The governor was the first to speak. “Did your team have any trouble boarding the stations?”

“No, sir, we didn't. But—”

“Is the Wall still secure?” he asked.

“Oh yes,” she replied. “In fact, it's a whole lot stronger than it used to be. It even makes the Tau Ceti Wall look primitive. I've never seen anything like it. Where did—”

“Does the Wall show any sign of instability?”

“Not that I can tell. But who knows? All of our equipment has been replaced with machines I've never seen before – if you can even call them machines! Even Dr. Finley doesn't recognize them. And there are all these strange robots everywhere. I don't know what they're doing.”

“They are a part of the upgrade, doctor. As I said, the station did not adequately meet our needs and so it has been overhauled. The new station is autonomous and self-maintaining. It should enable us to keep the Empire at bay for the rest of time, if we so choose.”

“But how did you do it? Where did this equipment come from? Dr. Finley is beside himself! He says that they're violating at least nineteen different physical laws.”

"Dr. Finley does not know everything. I am afraid that I'm not at liberty to disclose the source of that technology. However, you are free to study it as long as you wish. When you're done you can return to Star City and receive a new assignment."

"All right," she said weakly. "But—"

The governor closed the connection. He let out a sigh of relief. *At least she's calmed down. The real question is, can the Wall hold the Poneri at bay?*

He glanced at his calendar. *By this time next week they'll either be defeated or we will be doomed. One way or another, I guess, the problem is going to be resolved. I know that worrying won't help matters but it's hard to not be concerned. A lot is riding on those two girls! I hope they don't try anything foolish.*

* * * * *

Amy was very pleased with both the *Starfire III* ships and the rate at which the nanites were able to produce them. She continued assembling her armada while she waited for her sister to locate the Poneri.

It wasn't until two days later that Amanda finally found what she had been looking for. As soon as she saw it she transported herself to the construction world that Amy had been using. "It's there!" she exclaimed. "The *Starfire's* at Sol and is firing on the Wall!"

"Then let's go!" Amy shouted. With a single thought she shut down the nanite network that had saturated the construction planet and turned the rest of the programmable matter back into soil. The two girls then transported themselves onto the flagship of the *Starfire III* vessels that were orbiting the planet. A moment later the entire armada leaped into hyperspace and headed for Earth.

"How many did you manage to make?" Amanda asked.

"43,961," Amy replied. "This is the flagship *Stryker*."

"Do you think that will be enough?"

"I think *one* would have been enough," Amy replied confidently. "The rest are just insurance."

A moment later the entire fleet dropped out of hyperspace. There, just where Amanda had said, was the *Starfire*. It was surrounded by an entire cloud of Poneri that were firing at the Wall. Their weapons were having no effect.

"That's odd," Amy commented. "I only see a few dozen there. I kind of expected more."

"Maybe they thought this would be a lot easier," Amanda replied.

While they were talking the rest of the fleet had already engaged the Poneri. The automated weaponry of thousands of starships blasted the energy beings into vapor in a matter of seconds. A moment later hundreds of Poneri poured out of the *Starfire*, only to be effortlessly vaporized as soon as they appeared. This continued for about thirty seconds and then the Poneri stopped coming.

The two girls waited for a while but nothing happened. "Is that it?" Amanda asked.

"Looks like it," Amy said.

A light started blinking on the console. "Hey, we've got a message!" Amy remarked. "I think the *Starfire* is trying to contact us."

"Well, don't just sit there – answer it!"

Amy pressed a button and a voice filled the cockpit. The voice was unearthly – it was deep and unnatural, like something that might come from a grave. It was like nothing they had ever heard before. The mere sound of it was enough to send chills up their spine.

You are not welcome here, sons of Adam, the voice said. Depart from us and allow us to reclaim our home, or else we will end the frail lives of those aboard this vessel.

"Hey, we're not men!" Amy exclaimed. "We're women. There are no sons on board this ship."

You have thirty seconds to bring the Wall down, the voice continued.

The two girls looked at each other. Rather than speaking aloud they decided to use their nanites to communicate telepathically.

What do we do? Amanda asked. This was your idea!

We could freeze them in time, Amy replied. Then we could go to the future and let the Artilect fix this.

That's crazy! We don't want to transport those people 5000 years into the future! Are you insane?

We don't have time for this discussion! Amy replied, frustrated. If we don't act now they're all going to die. At least if we freeze them we've got a chance at saving them!

They were interrupted by the sound of gunshots. As they listened to the audio stream that was being transmitted by the *Starfire* they heard more gunshots, followed by a horrible scream.

"That's it!" Amy shouted. "We've got to go save them *now!*"

"But—" Amanda protested. It was too late — her sister had disappeared!

CHAPTER 25

*“Machines are not capable of good or evil.
They have no free will and are bound to
operate as the laws of physics dictate. A
hammer cannot sin, but a person can grab a
hammer and use it to commit evil. Therefore,
people can use machines to commit evil acts
but machines, in an of themselves, can do
neither evil nor good. For a machine to be
capable of evil it must be capable of choice
– like the mythical Poneri of old.”*

*--Dr. Mazatl
Creator of the Artilect
25th century AD*

THE *STARFIRE* HAD JUST LEFT Alpha Mensae when the crew noticed that something unusual was going on. Reverend Knight was the first to discover that the cargo bay was filled with hundreds of glowing blue lights. He could not see any Poneri but he had a feeling that their portal was now active.

The evangelist brought this to the attention of the ship's crew but nothing came of it. Laura and Davis were concerned but their concerns were lost on their captain, who scoffed at them. A light show in the cargo hold was of no concern to him. All he cared about was getting to Tau Ceti and finding another load of cargo to transport.

“Remaining on the ship is most unwise,” Reverend Knight argued. “This will not end well.”

"Besides, our registration was revoked before we ever left Alpha Mensae," Davis added. "It's now illegal for anyone to use this ship to carry freight. Traveling to Tau Ceti is both pointless and dangerous."

The captain did not care. "It'll all be fine! We've weathered storms before and we'll do it again. It's nothing to worry about."

"Things have changed," Reverend Knight replied. "The Old Ones have awoken. They wish to return to Earth and reclaim their former home."

"A few lights don't worry me," Captain Brahms scoffed.

So the ship continued on. Then, the following day, it happened. The first thing they noticed was that the ship's computers no longer responded to their commands. After that the hallways became filled with ghostly blue lights that raced up and down the corridors. Evil laughter and whispers in an alien language could be heard throughout the ship, and yet no Poneri could be seen. Everywhere their effect could be felt but they remained hidden.

Reverend Knight gathered Davis and Laura into his cabin – the one place where the ghostly blue light could not be seen. Yet Captain Brahms remained on the bridge, oblivious.

Laura boldly left the safety of the cabin to try to save him. "Don't you see what's happening?" she hissed. "This ship has been taken over! I *told* you this would happen!"

"So our course has changed," Captain Brahms said carelessly. "Sol works just as good as Tau Ceti. This is a Spanish ship, you know. In fact, this is even better! Maybe we'll find paying customers there."

"What's gotten in to you?" Laura shouted. "We'll never make it through the Wall, and even if we do we'll just be shot on sight as soon as we enter the system! Don't you know that the Empire is at war with the Rangers?"

"This is a Spanish ship," the captain repeated. "We'll be fine."

"We will *not* be fine! Don't you think they'll realize that we're from the *outside*? They're not going to pull up our registration data before they shoot us down!"

"It'll all be fine," the captain insisted. Laura shook her head and retreated to the safety of the evangelist's cabin.

* * * * *

For several days the ship continued to be possessed by Poneri. The captain remained on the bridge, only leaving to get an occasional bit of food. The rest of the crew remained holed up in Reverend Knight's cabin.

"What's wrong with him?" Laura asked.

Reverend Knight spoke up. "The captain has gotten away with so many things in his life that he has lost his sense of danger. Now that he's faced with a genuine threat he can't see it. This will not end well for him. At the moment the Poneri do not see him as a threat but that will change before the end."

"What's going to happen to us?" Davis asked.

The evangelist paused before replying. "The Stryker twins have been watching over this vessel. They know it is gone and they will find it. When they do they will engage the Poneri. That will be our moment."

"Our moment to do what?" Laura asked.

"To escape," he replied.

* * * * *

That evening the *Starfire* stopped outside the Wall of Sol. As usual, Captain Brahms was on the bridge. He watched as three transparent blue Poneri materialized in front of him. They

ignored the overweight captain and started using the ship's weapons to fire on the Wall.

"Hey, those weapons haven't worked in ages!" the captain exclaimed. "And they sure never fired anything like that, either. Huh. I guess we've gotten some free upgrades."

A few minutes later the captain was surprised to see the *Starfire* become surrounded by thousands upon thousands of starships, all of which looked remarkably like his own. A fierce battle immediately broke out. Poneri streamed out of his ship and were immediately vaporized, much to the consternation of the three Poneri that were on the bridge. After a while the leader gave a command in an alien language and the fighting stopped. He then flipped a switch on the console and spoke.

"You are not welcome here, sons of Adam," the Poneri said. "Depart from us and allow us to reclaim our home, or else we will end the frail lives of those aboard this vessel."

Through the ship's speakers a voice responded. "Hey, we're not men!" a female voice exclaimed. "We're women. There are no sons on board this ship."

"You have thirty seconds to bring the Wall down," the Poneri replied.

At this the captain got angry. "You're not going to threaten *me*," he muttered. He walked behind his chair and pulled out an ancient, rusty pistol that he kept hidden there for emergencies. He aimed it at the Poneri that had uttered the threat and started firing.

After firing six shots he realized that the bullets were going right through the ghostly figure without having any effect. The Poneri he had been shooting turned around to face the captain. It angrily advanced toward him.

The captain frantically emptied his gun at the Poneri but it did no good. In seconds the Poneri had reached him. He just

barely had time to scream before the Poneri grabbed him. A moment later there was nothing left of Captain Brahms but a pile of bones on the floor of the bridge.

As the Poneri turned back around to face the console it was suddenly struck by a white beam of energy. The remaining two Poneri were vaporized seconds later. Amy Stryker then ran onto the bridge, where she saw the pile of bones.

"Too late," she whispered. "I was too late. Oh, you fool! What got into you? What made you think that shooting them with that stupid gun of yours was going to turn out well? Couldn't you have at least used the weapons I provided?"

In another part of the ship she heard a piercing scream. Amy zipped to the source of the noise and saw that Reverend Knight, Davis, and Laura were trapped in a small cabin. Dozens of Poneri were gathering at the door to the cabin, attempting to get in. Reverend Knight was standing in the middle of the cabin, defying the Poneri, while Davis and Laura hid behind him. Laura kept screaming.

Amy wasted no time. She lifted her gun and fired at the crowd of ghostly beings, which quickly scattered. She then attempted to transport the occupants of the cabin to the *Stryker* flagship but something interfered. The girl closed her eyes to concentrate and saw that the Poneri had erected some kind of protective screen around the ship. *They must have erected it after I got on board*, she thought. *I guess they don't want us to escape the way we did last time.* After summoning all of the energy that her nanites could produce Amy forced a small passage through the screen. She had just barely been able to transport the panicked Laura off the ship before something slammed into her, tossing her down the passageway.

Amy opened her eyes and saw that she was surrounded by Poneri that were beating at the shield that protected her. Her

gun had been knocked out of her hands and was out of reach. She struggled against them but her efforts to penetrate the Poneri's screen had left her feeling weak and drained.

"Get back from her!" Reverend Knight shouted. He had left the cabin and was advancing toward the Poneri. "Be gone, you creatures of darkness!"

The group of Poneri stopped attacking Amy and took a step back. They had no intention of leaving but they had a deep fear of that frail man. There was something about him that they could not stand.

Amy took that chance to leap over, grab her gun, and blast the Poneri. Several of them were vaporized and the rest disappeared. She then mentally forced her way through the screen again and was able to transport Davis out – this time keeping her eyes open. The effort left her completely empty.

Reverend Knight saw how tired she was. "You've done all you could," he said softly. "Thank you for helping them."

Amy tried to focus so she could rescue the evangelist and herself, but before she could do anything she felt something pulling at her. She fought against it but the pull was too great, and she vanished a moment later after losing consciousness.

* * * * *

When she came to herself again she saw that she was lying on the floor. Three concerned faces were looking down at her.

"Are you all right?" Amanda asked.

Amy wearily sat up. She saw that she was on the bridge of the *Stryker* flagship. "I'm just tired," she said at last. "What happened?"

"I rescued you," Amanda said. "After you vanished it took me a while to find you – the Poneri were somehow generating a

terrific amount of interference that made it hard to see what was going on. I yanked you off the *Starfire* as soon as I figured out where you were. When you got here you had lost consciousness but seemed to be ok. Laura tried to bring you around while I suspended the *Starfire* in time.”

“You did what?” Amy exclaimed. “But Reverend Knight was still on there!”

“I’m sorry,” Amanda replied sadly. “Laura and Davis appeared on board, but nobody else showed up before I grabbed you. I didn’t notice anyone else on the *Starfire*.”

“But he’s still there! He just saved me, Atzi. We can’t leave him there!”

“And we can’t go back for him either! You almost died, you know that? Whatever possessed you to barge in there and engage the Poneri in hand-to-hand combat, anyway? Don’t you know how crazy that was? I almost wasn’t able to find you!”

“I would have been fine!” Amy protested. “Do you know what would have happened if I *hadn’t* jumped in? The Poneri got to the captain before I was able to save him but at least I was able to rescue Laura and Davis. I would have saved Reverend Knight too if I’d just had a few more minutes!”

“We appreciate that, by the way,” Laura replied.

“Right,” Davis agreed.

“I’m sorry,” Amanda said. “I really am. But it’s done. You’re here now and you’re *not* going back. In fact, I was just about to collapse the time field and put an end to the Poneri once and for all. They killed the captain and they almost killed you – *twice*. I’m not letting them put anyone else in danger.”

“But you can’t do that!” Amy exclaimed. She struggled to her feet so she could face her sister. “Reverend Knight is on board – if you collapse the field you’ll kill him! And Steve is trapped in there too.”

"Steve can find another way out," Amanda replied.

"There *is* no other way out! Didn't you hear what the Poneri said? They want to return home to Earth. If there was a portal on Earth then they could've used it instead of trying to beat the Wall down. The portal on the *Starfire* is the only one left. We can't destroy it!"

"Then what do you want to do?" Amanda asked. "Just leave it there, suspended in time until the universe ends?"

"Yes," Amy said firmly. "Then when we get to the future we can have the Artilect fix this. It'll be easy to find again – it's a time stasis located right next to Sol."

"But won't the Poneri be released when the Artilect turns the stasis field off?"

"It doesn't matter," Amy replied. "We'll be there to tell the Artilect what is going on and we can make sure that he brings enough ships to keep them at bay. It will be fine. We've dealt with them multiple times now and we know how to fight them. It's not like he'll be going in blind."

Amanda sighed. "Fine. Have it your way. Let's get Davis and Laura home."

CHAPTER 26

“Remarkable? No, not at all. The science behind terraformation has been well-known for centuries now. Building self-replicating probes in order to automate that process is simply the next logical step. What I find truly remarkable is that there are so many planets that need to be terraformed. Why do none of the trillions of planets in the galaxy have any life on them except for Earth? Why is there only one biosphere in the entire galaxy? Is that simply the way it's always been, or did something terrible happen?”

*--Dr. Nehemiah Temilotzin
Father of the Nehemiah Probes
23rd century AD*

THE *SPARROW* DROPPED out of hyperspace a few minutes later. The crew was surprised to find themselves in an immensely crowded star system that was packed with dozens of planets. At the center of the system was the brightest and most massive star they had ever seen.

Jones spoke up, surprise evident in his voice. “Sensors are detecting 74 planets, all of which are quite large – nearly big enough to be stars themselves! All of them are in a tight orbit around a rather *large* star.”

“How large?” Richard asked.

“It's about 90 million miles across. In fact, its output is

beyond anything I've ever seen. The energy it releases every six seconds is equivalent to the *yearly* output of Sol. This is a star system of giants."

"This is my home," the Artilect said softly. "I was created in another place but this is where I was given sentience. Today the machines that make up my mind span all of these planets. Of course, in 2431 this system was quite different – the star was much smaller and there were only twelve planets. Since that time I have enhanced this star system in order to support the needs of the network."

"You changed the star?" Sergeant Howell asked.

"The Nehemiah IV probes were designed for just such a task," the Artilect explained. "Many star systems have stars that are hostile to life so the final version of the Nehemiah-class probes was given the ability to alter stellar chemistry into something more friendly. I simply borrowed one for a time and used its capabilities for my own purposes."

"Very impressive," Captain Max replied. "Very impressive indeed. So why did you bring us here?"

"I need to prepare your ship for its journey into the hostile regions of space. My Steward did an excellent job but now that you are here there are some enhancements I can make that were beyond his abilities. In addition, I need to place some equipment on board your vessel so that I may accompany you on this journey."

"Can't you just project yourself, the way you're doing now?" Sergeant Howell asked.

The Artilect nodded. "I can but then I would be a mere image with limited capabilities. By extending myself onto this vessel I can channel a great deal more of my power, which may be necessary if we are attacked."

"But I thought you weren't allowed to go to war," the

sergeant said.

"That is true. That is why we are going to take only this single ship instead of building a fleet to accompany us. However, I *am* permitted to defend myself. Sol is well outside the realm of the eternal war, so going there is not a deliberate provocation. If we are attacked it will not be because of any action I have taken, and the defense of your lives is well within my authority."

Richard nodded. "That sounds reasonable enough. How long will this take?"

"It is already done," the Artilect replied. "I have finished all of the modifications while we were talking. We are now ready to depart."

"That's amazing!" Laura exclaimed. "How is that possible?"

The Artilect smiled. "Even in your day, ma'am, you had machines capable of executing trillions of calculations in a fraction of a second. With the resources I have available to me I am able to do a great deal more than that."

"Fair enough," Captain Max said. "So what's our plan?"

"This is your ship, captain," the Artilect replied. "It will be up to you to form a plan and execute it. My advice would be to set a course for Sol. With the new FTL drive you should be able to reach it in just a few moments. I would then suggest raising the shields, scanning the area, and making sure we are not under attack. If you are comfortable with the situation I will then shut down the time stasis field and see what is inside."

"Is there a way you can see what's inside the stasis field *before* you shut it off?" Sergeant Howell asked.

"The very nature of time fields prevents that. Consider, sergeant. If time is not passing then how could one send a beam of light inside to illuminate its contents? Without the passage of time the light would be unable to reach its destination. It would be forever trapped just inside the field."

Sergeant Howell nodded. "That makes sense. Could you release the time field slowly, then – perhaps just enough to see what we're getting into?"

"Are you concerned about what the field might contain?"

"I am. *Anything* could be in there – it might contain the twins and it might contain something entirely different. We just don't know. I think it would be a good idea to *find out* before setting it free and finding out the hard way."

"I understand your concern but in this case I do not believe we are in any danger. To the best of my knowledge no one else ever developed time stasis technology. Only myself and the Sentinel have that ability."

"But you don't know everything," Sergeant Howell replied. "Five thousand years of history has gone by and you have only the vaguest idea what has happened during all those years. That's a *lot* of time! Besides, the whole reason we're here is because something went wrong, and that tells me the Sentinel encountered something he didn't expect. I think we should be as careful as possible – especially when dealing with the unknown."

"That's a good point," Captain Max said. "For that matter, why would the girls suspend themselves at the outskirts of Sol anyway? That doesn't make any sense."

"It was the Old Ones," Jones said. "They had a hand in this."

"Really?" Richard asked.

Jones smiled. "I see the future, not the past, sir. It is only a guess. But I cannot think of any other 19th-century power that could have posed a threat to a machine from the 73rd century."

"It is a reasonable guess," the Artilect agreed. "Then have we settled on a plan?"

"I think so," Richard said. "Are there any objections?"

No one spoke up, so Richard nodded toward the captain. Captain Max gave the order and Jones laid in the course. A

moment later the ship jumped into hyperspace and was on its way to Sol.

* * * * *

"Looks pretty quiet to me," Jones remarked after the ship had arrived. "The ship's sensors are detecting the Wall and the time stasis field, but that's it. There aren't any other vessels around for dozens of light-years."

"The machines of the endless war give this system a wide berth," the Artilect replied. "For reasons I do not understand they will not go near it."

"The whole endless war doesn't make any sense to me," Sergeant Howell remarked. "Their recent foray into your territory proved that they're quite capable of widespread destruction. How is it possible that both sides have been stalemated for *thousands* of years? I just don't believe it."

"What do you mean?" the Artilect asked.

"In a *real* war both sides use all the resources available to them in order to gain an advantage. Why aren't these bots taking over all these unclaimed planets and using them to get an edge? They're definitely capable of mounting extremely violent offensives and yet all both sides do is inflict just enough damage to keep the war going but not enough to end it."

"What are you getting at?" Richard asked.

"I think the war is phony. Somebody is controlling both sides and has set them up to *appear* to be fighting. They want it to look like there's a war going on when there really isn't. I bet whoever started this could stop it if they wanted to – but they don't."

"But why would they do such a thing?" Laura asked.

"I don't know," the sergeant replied. "They must have

something to gain by it or they wouldn't do it."

The Artilect looked at him, puzzled. "So you believe that mankind is not in any danger?"

The Sergeant shook his head. "Look at it this way: if mankind is the target then why aren't they being attacked? If the people behind the Tau Ceti Wall are stronger than the bots then why haven't they defeated them – and if they're weaker than the bots then why haven't they been wiped out?"

"Maybe the swarm can't get through the Wall," Captain Max offered.

"But they're not even trying," Sergeant Howell pointed out. "You can see right there on the console where the war is, and from what I've been told the war has *always* been going on in that very same sector – far away from where it could do any actual harm. They're not even fighting over anything! Oh, sure, maybe they used to be, but they're not anymore."

The Artilect spoke up. "If mankind is in no danger then why do they stay hidden behind the Walls of Tau Ceti and Alpha Centauri A?"

"I don't know," Sergeant Howell replied. "Maybe they don't want to explore the stars or maybe they've lost all their advanced technology and can't leave their home worlds. I don't know. But I think something important is going on that we don't understand. Things aren't what they appear to be. I don't believe the real danger is that phony endless war."

"Do you believe there *is* a real danger?" Laura asked.

Jones spoke up. "The only reason the Artilect was able to bring us here is because the Lord opened up a portal through time. That's pretty serious business, ma'am. If there was no danger I don't think He would have done that. We've been brought here for a reason. Something is very wrong and only your daughters can fix it."

"Which brings us back to the matter at hand," Richard said. "Andy, it's time for you to do your thing."

The Artilect nodded. The elderly gentleman closed his eyes and appeared to be concentrating. For a few minutes nothing happened and then he spoke up. "You were correct, Sergeant Howell. Your approach is wise."

"Are my girls not there?" Laura asked, disappointed.

"They do not appear to be on board," the Artilect replied.

"On board what?" Richard asked.

"The *Starfire*," the Artilect said.

Captain Max gasped. "Don't tell me the *Starfire* is inside that time field!"

The Artilect opened his eyes and nodded. "The stasis field does indeed contain that vessel. On board is an evangelist named Reverend Gene Knight and a host of Poneri. There are no other passengers. Neither the twins nor the Sentinel are present."

"That's strange," Richard said. "Didn't the Sentinel stay in the 19th century for the sole purpose of wiping out the Poneri?"

"He did," the Artilect replied.

"Then why did he just freeze them in time instead?"

"Why not ask the passenger?" Laura said. "I'm sure he knows what's going on. After all, he's right there in the middle of everything!"

"Can you extract him without letting the whole field down?" Sergeant Howell asked.

The Artilect nodded. "At the moment time is passing extremely slowly inside the stasis field. I can extract the evangelist while maintaining the field at this level. However, it will take almost an hour to do so."

"Works for me," Captain Max said. "My evening was clear anyway."

"Then I shall begin the process," the Artilect replied.

CHAPTER 27

“Yes, I know who the Stryker girls are. I'm one of the only people left who does, I suppose. It's hard to believe that it's been nearly 400 years since it all happened. Amy and Amanda Stryker were the sisters of the legendary Dr. Timothy Stryker, whose work on replication paved the way for my own probes. Dr. Stryker's entire family was assassinated by the Spanish Empire, which prompted the creation of the Wall around Sol that still stands today. In memory of that event their DNA was placed into his very first probe. All subsequent probes have carried on that tradition – including mine. It's a bit whimsical, perhaps, but I see no harm in it. I think it's good to remember our past.”

*--Dr. Nehemiah Temilotzin
Father of the Nehemiah Probes
23rd century AD*

IT TOOK THE ARTILECT EVERY BIT of an hour to extract Reverend Gene Knight from the stasis field. The Artilect could have increased the flow of time and transported him out much more quickly but no one wanted to risk setting the Poneri free. So the crew simply waited while the Artilect worked. What made the wait even harder was the thought that the man on board that cursed

starship knew what had happened to the Stryker twins. Everyone was hoping that they were finally about to get some answers.

When a thin, elderly man finally materialized on the bridge of the *Sparrow* it came as almost a shock. The evangelist looked around for a moment, surprised, and then he fixed his gaze on Richard. "I know who you are," he said at last. "You're Richard Stryker. That means I must be in the future. Remarkable!"

"Why do you say that?" Sergeant Howell asked.

Reverend Knight smiled. "Because, Sergeant Howell, I know what really happened to the *Sparrow* and the passengers it contained. Amy told me everything."

"How do you know my name?" Sergeant Howell asked, startled.

Jones spoke up. "He has the gift of discernment."

"And you have the gift of foresight," Reverend Knight said. "That is a rare gift indeed! I have never met anyone else who possessed it."

"You met my daughters?" Laura asked. "Where are they?"

"The last time I saw Amy the brave girl was on the *Starfire*, attempting to rescue its passengers from the Poneri. Then her sister transported her off the ship and back to their armada. After that they must have froze the *Starfire* in time because she hadn't been gone for more than a few seconds before I found myself here."

"The girls had an armada?" Sergeant Howell asked.

The reverend nodded. "The computer in my cabin revealed its presence as soon as it arrived." Beginning with the Sentinel's disappearance the evangelist told them everything he knew about the twins' activities. When his story was over the crew had many questions – some of which he could answer and some he could not.

"At least this is starting to make more sense," Richard said.

“The Sentinel attacked the Poneri and got sucked into that portal, so the girls waited around to see what would happen. When the Poneri attacked the Wall the girls tried to save everyone and then froze the ship in time, hoping that the Artilect could fix the situation later.”

“Can you?” Laura asked.

“I am working on it,” the Artilect said. “It is difficult to do so while maintaining the stasis field. The Poneri portal is unlike anything I have encountered before. I am exploring ways to open it without losing myself inside.”

Richard nodded. “I understand. So the next question is, where are our girls? After they put the *Starfire* in stasis all of the Poneri were gone. All they had to do was transport themselves into the future. So where are they?”

“Have you found any other stasis fields?” Sergeant Howell asked.

“I have not,” the Artilect said. “This is the only one I was able to uncover.”

“Could the girls have gotten the wrong date?” Laura asked. “Maybe they jumped too far or not far enough.”

“They seemed to know what they were doing,” Reverend Knight replied. “I think they knew how to get here.”

“Then where are they?” Richard asked. “What happened to them?”

No one replied.

* * * * *

It took four days for the Artilect to penetrate the portal and peer inside. Once he gained access to it he found himself unable to explain what he saw.

“It is not existence the way you know it,” he said at last. “It

was not designed for creatures such as yourself. The dimension beyond that rift in space is full of patterns and darkness, a place of ideas but devoid of wisdom. There are current and eddies but no substance. You could not survive there."

"What about the Sentinel?" Richard asked.

"He is lost and I am trying to find him. It is as if he is in a coma, unaware of his surroundings. He was not designed for this place. I am looking for him in the endless ocean."

"Are there any Poneri in there?" Sergeant Howell asked.

"Yes and no," the Artilect replied. "This place is full of them but they do not exist as they do on this side of space. Instead they dream and are tossed about, carried from one experience to the other while unable to control their fate."

"Why would they want to live there?" Richard asked. "It sounds terrible!"

"It would be for you or I, but not for them. To the Poneri it is endless bliss, even though it is not truly real. They are caught up in their own imaginations, caring not that their world is made of shadows. But some sense the artificial nature of this place. Those are the ones that exit the portal and are seeking to return home. They want something more than a world that is not real."

"I don't blame them," Captain Max said. "I don't blame them at all."

* * * * *

A few hours later the crew was startled when a tall, distinguished-looking gentleman suddenly appeared on the bridge. He was a quiet-looking person and wore a gray suit and hat. The Artilect smiled when he appeared. "My son, my son, you are finally home!"

The man turned around to face the Artilect. "But I have

failed," he said heavily. "You sent me to rescue Amy and Amanda Stryker and I failed to do so. My desire to battle the Poneri has cost us everything."

"It was the right thing to do," Richard said. "The Poneri were a threat and needed to be destroyed."

"And now they *have* been destroyed," the Artilect replied. "I have collapsed the time field that surrounded the *Starfire*. The ship and its portal are no more."

"What about that other dimension?" Laura asked. "Is it still there?"

"It is but there is no longer a way inside it or out of it. Any Poneri within its realm are trapped there forever. They no longer pose a threat to anyone else."

"I take it you're the Sentinel," Sergeant Howell remarked.

"You can call me Steve," the Sentinel replied. "That is the name I was given by Amy."

"You saw my girls?" Laura asked.

The Sentinel turned to face Laura, a look of great sadness on his face. "I did. I have watched over them and cared for them and I would have gone to any length to protect them. It was not my desire to take them from you or place them in danger. Had I known that things would turn out this way I would never have removed them from the *Sparrow*. I did not know I would be trapped inside the portal, unable to escape. I handled the situation poorly."

"You did the best you could," Captain Max said. "Things just don't always go as planned."

"But my best was not good enough," the Sentinel replied.

"So what do we do now?" Richard asked.

Captain Max spoke up. "I vote we return to home base, get rested up, regroup, and form a new plan. Something will turn up."

“Works for me,” Richard replied.

CHAPTER 28

“There are few left who know that there were once stars in the sky – other bodies like the Sun, but so far away that they appeared to be tiny points of light. The night sky has been empty for so long. No one knows why the stars were taken out of our sky and no one knows if they will ever be put back. Some say that the men of Earth committed a great sin against the masters of the stars and we were imprisoned in darkness as a punishment. I do not know. But the sky was not always as it is now – so cold and dark, home to nothing but a few dead planets.”

--Monroe Araiza

*Scribe of the Children of the Light
73rd century AD*

LAURA FIELDS AND DAVIS CARPINO told the Stryker twins that they would appreciate being dropped off in the Tau Ceti system. Laura had a sister that lived in Star City and Davis had a number of friends there.

“Are you sure you'll be all right?” Amy asked. The four of them were standing on the bridge of the flagship *Stryker*, which was still just outside the Wall that surrounded Sol.

“We'll be fine,” Laura replied. “I'm sure we can find work on Xanthe. Don't worry about us! You've done more than enough as

it is, and you both have much more important things to be concerned about.”

“What part of Star City do you want to be transported to?” Amanda asked.

“If you could drop us off at a subway station I'd appreciate it,” Davis said. “I'm sure both of us could get home from there.”

“All right,” Amanda agreed.

“Thanks for coming to save us,” Laura said. “I hate to think what would have happened if you hadn't shown up.”

“I just wish I could have saved the captain,” Amy replied. “I was too late.”

“That's not your fault,” Laura replied. “Don't worry about him. He made his own decisions and that finally caught up with him.”

After saying goodbye Amy transported both of them to Xanthe. After they were gone Amanda turned to her sister. “So what are we going to do now?”

“The first thing to do is put this armada back where I got it,” Amy replied. “Then I guess we need to say goodbye to Tim and Governor Nicholas.”

“How are you going to put the armada back?”

“It's not hard,” Amy replied. “Watch.”

Amy commanded the fleet to head back to her nameless construction planet and a moment later the entire armada entered hyperspace. When the fleet arrived Amy divided the ships into groups and had each group land, one after the other. As the ships touched the ground she transformed them back into inert soil by altering the configuration of the programmable matter that made up each vessel. It took several hours but eventually the enormous chasms in the planet's crust were filled and the entire armada was liquidated. The two girls were left standing on a barren knoll that overlooked a large, empty plain.

"That's amazing!" Amanda said. "You can't even tell the ships ever existed. This planet looks untouched!"

"It just seemed like the right thing to do. We didn't need them anymore and I hated to leave behind a big mess. This way everything is back to normal."

"So where do you want to go next? Amanda asked.

Amy paused for a moment. "Let's go see the governor. Right now he's in his office but he's about to head home for the day. If we hurry we can catch him before he's gone."

Amanda shook her head. "How do you know these things?"

"I left some nanites in Star City so I could keep an eye on what's going on. They make transporting through the Gate a *lot* easier. Spotting that split-second when the Gate is open can be kind of tricky, especially at this distance. That's not the kind of thing I want to misjudge."

Amanda frowned. "You don't have nanites floating around anywhere else, do you? We're about to make a giant leap into the future and I really don't want us to leave behind any 73rd-century technology."

"Of course not! The only reason I left some behind on Xanthe was because I knew we'd have to go back there before we left. It's fine! When we're ready to go I'll clean them up and they'll be gone. No one will ever know that they were there."

"What about the Wall around Sol?" Amanda asked.

"What about it?"

"Are you going to put it back to the way it was?"

Amy shook her head. "Why would I do that? Steve already told us the Wall was still in place in the future. I don't see how it makes any difference what technology is used to keep it going."

"But what if that changes something? Couldn't people like our brother study what you've done and learn from it?"

"I really doubt it. 73rd-century technology is so far ahead of

anything the Rangers have that it might as well be magic. It would be like giving a hyperdrive to a bunch of cavemen and expecting them to figure out how it works.”

“If you say so,” Amanda said reluctantly. “I just don't like this. We've been talking to people and doing things, and I'm just afraid that we're going to mess something up.”

“You worry too much, Atzi. Besides, from what I've heard the future is a pretty terrible place. I don't see how we could possibly make it any worse.”

“I guess,” Amanda replied. “Are you ready to go?”

Amy nodded. She waited for a few seconds and then transported both of them to Governor Nicholas' office. His outer office was empty and his secretary had already gone home, but they could hear the governor moving around in the next room. A moment later the door to his inner office opened and Governor Nicholas stepped out of it. He stopped when he saw the Stryker twins.

“Oh!” he said. “Sorry – I wasn't expecting you. Please, come on in.”

“No, it's ok,” Amanda replied. “We won't keep you. We just wanted to tell you that the Poneri are gone, the Wall is safe, and it's time for us to leave.”

Governor Nicholas paused a moment to process that information. He then let out a long sigh of relief. “That is wonderful news. I'll admit I was concerned about the outcome of that battle but I had faith that you would be victorious. The defeat of the Poneri is a fantastic gift to mankind. With them gone we no longer have to worry about who might be lurking out there in the darkness. The only enemy we have left now is ourselves. Thank you both very much.”

Amanda nodded. “You're welcome, sir. Is there anything else you need?”

The governor shook his head. "You have already done more than I could have asked. Mankind is deeply in your debt. I wish you well on your journey into tomorrow. I hope to see you both again one day after all of this is over and the Lord has called us home. I have no doubt that you will do as well in the future as you have done in the past."

"Thank you," Amy said. The girls told him goodbye and then disappeared.

After they were gone the governor stood there for a few minutes, thinking. It was late at night and the rest of the building was deserted. He knew that his wife was waiting for him at home but he couldn't help but think about what had just happened.

He had warned the girls not to tell him what the future held and he did not regret that decision. Still, he wondered what they would find when they finally reached the world of tomorrow. *What kind of place is the future if the only hope it has left is to resurrect a long-dead hero from the distant past? What has mankind done and what danger do they find themselves in? At what point did things go wrong?*

The governor finally shook his head and sighed. *I will be forgotten long before five thousand years have passed, and everything I ever did will be long gone as well. There is nothing I can do to save the distant future from its fate. All I can do is live my life as best I can and leave the future to others. But I do pity you, Amy and Amanda. At least here you have people that care about you and your family. Will you find any friends in the cities of tomorrow?*

CHAPTER 29

"Our small nation is surrounded by savages and barbarians. As we remain hidden in the impassable mountains they cluster in the plains, trying in vain to find a way to reach us so they can destroy us. It would be easy to wipe them out but that would defeat our very reason for existing. Our most cherished hope is that one day wisdom might return to the children of Earth so that we can share our knowledge with them. We have found ways to fix broken machinery but we cannot fix mankind. All we can do is wait and pray for better days."

--Monroe Araiza

*Scribe of the Children of the Light
73rd century AD*

WHEN THE STRYKER TWINS left the governor's office they transported themselves straight to their brother's home. As they stood in the dimly-lit hallway outside the apartment door they noticed that Natalie was there.

"Looks like they're working on wedding preparations," Amy remarked, as she stared through the door. "I think they're trying to pick a photographer."

"Don't spy on them!" Amanda exclaimed. "That's not nice."

"I was just trying to tell if she was about to leave," Amy protested. "I think Natalie's going to be there a while."

"Well it *is* only 8 PM, you know. I guess we'll just have to leave and come back later."

"Leave? Why would we leave? Wouldn't it be easier to just knock on the door and say goodbye to both of them?"

"That's crazy! We don't need to drag Natalie into this! In fact, even letting our brother know was a big risk. I'm still not sure we did the right thing."

"But she's family! I mean, she *will* be family, anyway. Besides, do you really think Tim hasn't already told her? I bet she knows everything about us!"

"Why would he tell her?" Amanda asked. "After all, there's no way she'd ever believe him. Even *Tim* had a hard time believing us. It wasn't until you brought him to the *Starfire* that he changed his mind."

"But he might have told her!"

Amanda shook her head. "I guess anything is possible. But why not just wait until she leaves? It's really not that hard and it would be a whole lot safer."

"Because I'd kind of like to meet her. Tim's the only brother we have and Natalie is going to be his wife. It would be nice to say hi to her before we disappear forever. It's not like we can just come back and meet her a few years from now, you know! This is the only chance we'll ever have."

Amanda sighed. "Fine. I really don't think this is a good idea, but since your heart is set on it I guess we'll try it and see what happens."

Amy smiled and immediately rang the doorbell.

"Why did you do that?" Amanda asked, surprised. "Can't you just walk through the door like last time?"

"He's got company! It's not polite to just barge in on him."

"You're weird," Amanda replied.

A moment later Tim opened the door. He was startled to see

his sisters standing in the hallway. "Oh – um – hi there," he said weakly. "I wasn't expecting you."

"People keep saying that," Amy replied, smiling. "Anyway, we just wanted to stop by and say hi to you and your fiancée. We've heard so many great things about her!"

Natalie got off the couch and walked toward the door. "Who is it?" she asked. When she got to the door she gasped. "Tim! Are those your *sisters*?"

Tim sighed. "Yes, they are. Girls, since you're here and have decided to make my life even more complicated than it already is, why don't you come inside and introduce yourselves."

"Thanks," Amy said.

"I tried to stop her," Amanda muttered. After they were both inside Tim shut the door behind them.

Natalie could not take her eyes off the girls. She seemed to be at a complete loss for words. Before she could say anything, however, Amy spoke up. "Hello! You must be Natalie. It is really nice to meet you! I've been looking forward to this for months. I'm Amy and this is my sister Amanda."

Natalie shook her hand, a look of confusion on her face. "I don't understand. Tim, what's going on?"

"It's a long and complicated story," Tim said. "The bottom line is that some things you've heard about the *Sparrow* may not be entirely true."

"I think I'd like to hear the whole story," Natalie replied.

Tim shook his head. "That's what I thought, too, until I actually heard it. It's one of those things that will give you nightmares."

"It's not *that* bad," Amy replied. "It just takes some getting used to."

"Does that mean that the rest of your family are alive too?" Natalie asked.

"They are," Amy said. "They're just not available right now."

"Where are they?" Natalie asked.

"They're on their way to the future. We're about to join them but we wanted to stop and meet you before we left."

"Why are they going to the future?"

"It's really complicated," Tim replied. "Let's just say that the future needs them and leave it at that."

"Oh. Well, are they going to be at the wedding?"

"Probably not," Tim said. "They're going to the *distant* future. It's a one-way trip."

"Oh, ok," Natalie said. She was quiet for a moment. "That's too bad. I'm sure you will miss them." She turned her attention to the girls. "It was really nice to meet you. We're going to miss both of you very much. I hope whatever you're doing turns out well."

"Thanks," Amanda replied.

"You did get everything finished, didn't you?" Tim asked. "Did it all work out?"

"More or less," Amy replied.

"What do you mean, 'more or less'?" Tim asked suspiciously. "Do I need to be worried?"

"No, you don't," Amanda replied. "Just ignore her. Everything is fine."

"Great," Tim said, relieved. "I am so very, very glad."

"I guess this is it, then," Amanda said. She looked at her brother. "I'm going to miss you. It's going to be funny not having you around anymore."

Tim suddenly realized that his sisters were about to leave and would not be coming back. After they were gone he would never see any of his family again. He didn't know what to say. "I'll miss you too," he said at last. "Be sure to tell that to Mom and Dad. I'm glad everyone is alive but I wish you had been able to come

and live here on Xanthe.”

“We won't forget you,” Amy replied. “We love you.”

“I love you too,” Tim said. He gave each girl a hug.

“Well – goodbye,” Amanda said.

“Bye,” Amy said.

The two girls then vanished, leaving Tim and Natalie alone.

Natalie was the first one to speak up. “Was that really your sisters?”

“It was,” Tim said sadly. “I wish I could tell you everything but it's probably better for you not to know. They've got a big challenge ahead of them. I'm just glad they're not going to be facing it alone.”

“Do you think we'll ever see them again?”

“Not in this life, I'm afraid. They're on their way to tomorrow now and that's one place we just don't have access to. But there is one thing we can do for them.”

“What's that?”

Tim smiled. “We can build them a tomorrow that's worth living in.”

* * * * *

Amanda was startled to find herself appear back on Amy's construction planet. “Hey! What are we doing here?”

“Well, you know, we needed to stop *somewhere* while we came up with a plan,” Amy pointed out. “This place seemed as good as any.”

“Isn't the plan to go to the future?” Amanda asked.

“Of course it is! But how are we going to get there? Are we just going to stand around here for the next five thousand years and hope for the best?”

“I guess not,” Amanda admitted. “What do you think we

should do?"

"We could go to the Infinite Room," Amy suggested. "That would be safe."

Amanda shook her head. "I just don't think that's a good idea. What if something goes wrong and we end up stuck in time? If we're in the Infinite Room then no one can come and rescue us! We need to be at a place where Mom and Dad can easily find us."

"I guess you're right," Amy agreed. "But we also want to make sure that no one *else* can find us."

"What about the Artilect?" Amanda asked. "He certainly survived for all that time and nobody ever bothered him! That would be a safe place to be."

"I guess that would work, but he doesn't exist yet and Steve didn't tell us when he was going to be built. Besides, won't the Artilect notice if we're hiding on his home planet?"

"Not if we're well-hidden. And we can always just jump forward a century at a time until he exists. That can't be that hard."

"I guess that would work," Amy replied. "But do we have to jump a whole hundred years?"

"Why not?"

Amy hesitated. "Well, I was kind of hoping to attend Tim's wedding."

Amanda sighed. "Don't you think we've caused enough trouble as it is? Do we really need to show up at his wedding and cause even more chaos?"

"We could remain hidden somewhere," Amy argued. "Think about it. We could even jump ahead and see our brother's children – our nieces and nephews! It's the only chance we'll ever get to meet them."

"And then we can jump ahead again and attend Tim's

funeral," Amanda pointed out. "Then we can watch his wife die, and his children, and his grandchildren, until everyone that ever knew us is dead and the world had changed beyond recognition. Is that really what you want?"

"That's terrible! How do you think of these things?"

"I'm sorry, but that's what going to the future means. If we stick around and watch time pass it will just make it harder to let go. This is going to be a lot easier if we get to the future as fast as possible. We don't need to linger in the past."

"I guess you're right," Amy said reluctantly. "I was just really hoping to attend their wedding."

"We've got more important things to do, Tiger. It's time we rejoined Mom and Dad."

Amy nodded. "All right. Let's go."

CHAPTER 30

"Our most urgent problem is resources. After so many thousands of years there is simply nothing left. Minerals of any kind – especially metal ores – are all but nonexistent, and any scrap metal or trash was salvaged countless ages ago. Some say that the masters of the stars understood the secrets of alchemy and could change soil into metal, but if that was ever possible it certainly cannot be done today. It may be that the dead worlds in our sky have metals in their soil but no one knows how to reach them. At least there is no competition for what we do find. The savages that control the world know nothing of technology, or energy, or metalworking. They care nothing for mineral deposits."

--Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of the Light

73rd century AD

BEFORE JUMPING FORWARD IN TIME the twins located a cave deep within Amy's construction planet and transported there. They then activated their cloaks. After making sure everything was set Amanda created a time distortion field that jumped them forward to 1967. Amy then used her nanites to connect to the network of replicating probes that had begun exploring space. A

quick scan revealed that the network had blossomed in the past century but there was no sign of the Artilect.

The twins jumped to 2067 and tried again. This time the network of automated probes showed significant growth and the probes themselves had become much more advanced. But there was still no sign of any centralized control network.

So Amanda jumped them to 2240. To their surprise there was still no sign of the Artilect, even though the probes had become quite advanced. The first Nehemiah-class probes had been launched and were busy terraforming worlds and planting small cities. But there were no colonists and no centralized control.

"This is ridiculous!" Amanda exclaimed. "Just when does the Artilect get created?"

"I wish I knew. I guess we have to keep jumping," Amy replied.

After traveling to 2440 the girls finally noticed a change. The new network of worlds was now linked to a single star system that was 1200 light-years away from the nearest human colony.

"Finally! That's *got* to be it," Amanda said.

"Then let's go take a look at it!" Amy exclaimed.

The two girls left the cave on the construction planet and jumped to the nameless star system. The system was home to a small yellow star and 12 planets. All of the planets were deserted except for the fourth one, which had been taken over by a large colony. The girls decided to materialize on a mountain that overlooked this colony.

They were surprised to find that the planet had no atmosphere, water, or plant life. The rocky mountain upon which they were standing was very similar to all the other granite mountains in the area. Below them was a giant, arid plain that stretched out as far as the eye could see. The plain was filled with endless miles of machinery. Pipes, girders, wiring, and

equipment of all kinds cluttered the surface of the planet. It almost looked like the planet was being engulfed by some sort of robotic parasite.

"There it is," Amanda said. "All of the new worlds are linked to that machine down there. That must be the Artilect."

"It looks like a real mess," Amy replied. "I thought it would be more organized than that. It almost looks like someone planted a seed and it just sprouted at random. It's pure chaos! Who in their right mind would design something that looks like that?"

"I'm sure they had their reasons," Amanda said.

"Let's take a closer look. I want to see what's going on down there."

"But what if we're spotted?"

"By who?" Amy asked. "This planet is practically deserted! Take a look yourself – there's only a couple people among all those miles and miles of machinery. We're in no danger of running into anybody."

"Shouldn't we at least use our cloaks?"

"I don't see what good that would go. Right now the Artilect is pretty primitive and its attention is focused on distant stars, not on what's going on back home. It's not going to notice us. Those people down there aren't going to notice us either. Besides, there's no one alive who even knows who we are! If someone spots us we can just disappear and they'll never know what happened."

"All right," Amanda sighed.

The two girls left the mountain and appeared deep inside the robotic city. They found themselves standing in a drab white hallway that appeared to stretch on forever. On both sides of the hallway was an endless series of doors that were all labeled with a three-digit number. White lights shone from the ceiling, illuminating nothing in particular. The hallway had a sterile,

empty look to it. Everything looked the same.

One of the doors, however, had more than just a number beside it. Amy spotted the phrase “Artilect – Ignition Laboratory” beside room number 917.

As soon as Amy saw the door she ran over to it. “I think this is it!” she said excitedly.

“I think so too,” Amanda replied. She walked over to it, a bit more nervously than her sister had. The endless hallways made her feel nervous and uncertain. To her it felt as if she was in somebody else's dream, or that she had stumbled into a reality where humans just did not belong. She couldn't shake the feeling that this was an *alien* place. “It's not what I expected,” she said at last.

“It's still very young. We need to give it more time.”

The girls walked through the door and entered the room on the other side. They gasped as they saw the size of the room. Room 917 stretched on for miles in the distance. It was filled with row upon row of computer equipment, all of which was operating with silent efficiency. The sheer magnitude of the room took their breath away.

“Wow,” Amy said. “This is *huge*! I've never seen anything like this.”

“This room alone covers dozens of square miles – and it's not even the biggest one in the colony! I'm getting readings of other rooms that are even larger than this one.”

“Well, I'm impressed,” Amy replied. “This is definitely the right place.”

“I still think this is kind of creepy. It's just – I don't know. I just don't think we're supposed to be wandering around down here. I get the feeling that this place wasn't designed for people. This is a world for machines. I don't think anyone ever expected the Artilect to have visitors.”

"I think you're just imagining things," Amy replied.

"So what do we do now? Are you ready to jump into the future?"

Amy walked up to one of the consoles and activated it. The console scanned her. "Welcome, Amy Stryker," it said in a robotic voice.

"Amy!" Amanda exclaimed. "What are you doing? Are you out of your mind?"

"Wait just a minute," Amy replied. She worked at the console for a few minutes, alternating between studying the screen and pressing buttons. At last she spoke up. "All right. I've found a small room 6 miles below us that's not being used for anything. I've blocked it off and reserved it."

"What do you mean?"

"I've blocked it off from the Artilect's memory – he won't be able to see it anymore. It will be like that room doesn't even exist. We can hide out there and suspend ourselves until it's time to appear and the Artilect won't know anything about it."

"But what if someone else finds us?" Amanda asked. "This place isn't deserted, you know."

Amy shrugged. "According to the logs no one's been down on that level for four years. Besides, what are they going to do? All they would find is a stasis field that they can't interact with. They would probably just think it was some strange side-effect of the Artilect's programming and leave it alone. It will be fine."

"All right," Amanda agreed. "I guess it's the best we can do."

Amy logged out of the terminal and the two girls transported themselves to the room Amy had reserved. As Amy had said it was a small, white, rectangular room that was roughly twelve feet long and twelve feet wide. It contained no furniture of any kind.

"This is a little odd," Amanda remarked. "I wonder what this

room was supposed to be used for?"

"I have no idea," Amy said. "The Artilect's not hurting for space, though. He's got lots of other rooms. Are you ready?"

Amanda nodded. "October 10, 7239, right?"

"Right," Amy said.

"What time?"

Amy suddenly froze. "I don't know. Come to think of it, Steve never said."

"So what do we do?"

"I don't know," Amy said. "I never thought about it. What do you think?"

Amanda thought for a moment. "It might be safest to transport ourselves to the end of that day. That way we won't risk entering the future before Steve left to go get us."

"But won't our parents be worried?"

"Not for very long. Well, I guess they might worry a little, but it's better than appearing in the future before anyone went to the past to get us! That could mess up all kinds of things."

"I guess they'll forgive us," Amy replied. "We can explain what happened after we get there."

Amy took a deep breath, then reached over and grabbed her sister's hand. "I'm ready," she said. "Let's go."

"All right," Amanda replied. "Here goes." She closed her eyes and suspended both of them in time.

* * * * *

So time began passing. Centuries came and went and the Stryker twins remained suspended in time. Amy had covered their tracks well. Even after the Artilect launched its desperate search for administrators it did not discover that its own systems had been hacked. It failed to learn that the very people it was

trying to rescue were actually housed within it, waiting for the day when their stasis field would dissipate and they would be released.

What the girls did not take into account was that the Artilect eventually grew desperate enough to begin its own experiments in time travel. It refocused its immense energies on learning to manipulate time. As the centuries passed it learned how to alter the speed of time and stop it altogether, but it never found the secret of making time run backwards. Eventually it was forced to admit defeat and abandon the effort altogether. At that point it began scanning space for wormholes in an attempt to find one that linked the future to the past.

What no one realized was that the Artilect's experiments altered the time field that contained Amy and Amanda Stryker. The stasis field no longer decayed at the rate Amanda had set because the Artilect's experiments inadvertently strengthened it. Time began passing far more slowly than the girls had wanted. When October 10, 7239 finally rolled around the stasis field was still extremely strong. It had begun to fade but it would not dissipate and release the twins for a very, very long time.

CHAPTER 31

“Our greatest hope – and our greatest fear – is that the masters of the stars might return. It is our greatest hope, for perhaps they will forgive our sin and put the stars back into the sky. If they see that we have changed then perhaps they will share their home with us and rebuild our shattered world. They might even be willing to teach us how to be masters of the stars. But it is also our greatest fear. What if they return and we are not ready? What if they come back and find that the Earth is overrun with savages? Will that not show them that they were right to imprison us? Of course, no one knows if the masters of the stars even exist. Perhaps they once existed and are now gone, or perhaps they are still angry with us. Perhaps the stories of the sparrow that fell from the sky are just myth. All we can do is wait and wonder what will happen to us.”

--Monroe Araiza

Scribe of the Children of the Light

73rd century AD

THE SPARROW LEFT SOL and returned to the home system of the Artilect. Jones placed the ship into a stable orbit around the

system's fourth planet, and once everyone was ready the Artilect transported them off the ship. The group materialized in what appeared to be an enormous prairie. A grassy field stretched for miles into the distance, and above them was a brilliant blue sky. To the north a wide stream meandered through the field, flanked by weeping willows. A gentle breeze rustled the trees and a few clouds floated gently overhead. It was a place of quiet tranquility.

Alex began darting around, glad to finally be off the *Sparrow*. The rest of the crew walked toward the stream.

"This is really nice," Laura said. She sat down beside a willow and looked out over the water. The stream was crystal clear, allowing her to see fish as they swam by.

"It truly is beautiful," Reverend Knight replied. "It reminds me of home."

"Thank you," the Artilect replied. "I created this place as a sanctuary for you. I thought you would be more at ease here than in the endless hallways and machinery of my cities."

"I wondered about that," Jones remarked. "I didn't see a lot of open land when I scanned this worlds from orbit."

"That is because there is no open land. All of the worlds that orbit this star have been entirely consumed by my machinery. This place is an oasis that I have created deep within my home world."

"But I can see the sun!" Laura exclaimed. "Why, it's right over there."

The Artilect smiled. "I am glad that it appears real to you. In reality you are miles beneath the surface, and both the sunlight and the endlessness of the room are just illusions."

"Are we going to live here now?" Laura asked.

"You can, if you wish. Or I can create another home for you in one of the many worlds that I control. You will no longer have to worry about the swarms from the endless war."

"That would be nice," Captain Max agreed. "Not that this is bad, mind you. But this system is yours. It would be good to have a place of our own."

The Artilect nodded. "I understand. If you would like to pick out a star system I will get to work on it immediately."

"But what about my daughters?" Laura asked. "What are we going to do about them?"

Richard turned to the Artilect. "What do you think we should do?"

The Artilect shook his head. "I do not know. While there are multiple ways to journey into the future, it seemed most probable to me that they would use a time stasis field."

"There are other ways?" Richard asked, surprised. "Like what?"

"For example, they could have simply lived for the past five thousand years, as I have. It is possible but it does not seem likely."

"Of course," Richard replied. "I should have thought of that. I guess they also could have dropped into the future early. They might even be out there somewhere looking for us!"

"That is also possible, but unlikely. The nanites that are inside your daughters are easy to detect. If they were in this time period they would be connected to my network and I would instantly know where they were, no matter where they might be."

"Could you have just overlooked them?" Laura asked. "Is it possible that you might have missed a stasis field or something?"

"I do not know," the Artilect replied. "I have searched much of the galaxy and have found nothing. As far as I am able to discern there are no time stasis fields currently active."

The Sentinel spoke up. "You mean there are none that you didn't create."

"What do you mean?" the Artilect asked.

"Well, there *is* a time stasis field right here on this world, about five miles below us."

"I do not detect it," the Artilect replied. "Are you certain?"

"I am quite certain! It's not hidden. Do you mean that you are not responsible for it?"

"I no longer use time stasis fields. At one time I experimented with them but that was millennia ago."

"Maybe this is a leftover from one of those experiments," Richard said. "You might have just lost track of it."

"I still do not see it," the Artilect said. "Where is it located?"

"Room 6210-B," the Sentinel replied. "It appears to be a storage closet of some kind."

The Artilect paused. "There is no such room on this planet."

"I don't understand," Laura said. "What's going on?"

The Sentinel spoke up. "This is not difficult to resolve. If you will just follow me I will show it to you."

In a moment he had transported the entire group into an enormously long hallway. The passage had white walls and was brightly lit. All along the walls were rows upon rows of identical doors.

"The room is right there," the Sentinel said, pointing. "That is room 6210-B."

The Artilect looked at it, frowning. "This is very strange. I have no record of this room. It appears to have been blocked from my memory. I cannot see this place."

"Who blocked it?" Richard asked.

"I do not know. That information has also been blocked."

Richard walked up to the door and opened it. Inside he saw utter blackness. "What is *that*?" he asked, startled.

"It is a time stasis field," the Sentinel replied.

"Looks kind of like a black hole," Captain Max remarked.

"That is an apt description," the Sentinel said. "Black holes also alter the flow of time, although they do so in a destructive fashion."

"Can you alter the field just a bit so we can see what's inside it?" Sergeant Howell asked.

"I can do nothing to it at all," the Artilect replied. "It has been blocked from me."

"But I can access it," the Sentinel replied. He stepped toward it and made a simple motion with his hand. Immediately the blackness went away. Inside the room they saw Amy and Amanda Stryker, frozen in time. Amanda had her eyes closed and appeared to be concentrating. Amy was staring at her sister with a look of intense excitement on her face. The two girls were holding hands.

"It's my daughters!" Laura exclaimed.

"What are they doing in there?" Richard asked.

"Can you set them free?" Jones said.

The Sentinel nodded. An instant later the stasis field disappeared. Amanda opened her eyes and gasped when she saw her family looking at her. "Mom! Dad! What are you doing here?"

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It took a long time for everyone to get caught up on what was going on. Laura was immensely relieved to have her daughters back – as was her husband and everyone else. There was a great deal of rejoicing and excitement. For their part the girls were quite happy to be back with their family.

"So *that's* what happened," Amanda said. "I knew we should have stayed on Amy's construction planet."

"But we had no way to know this was going to happen," Amy

replied. "Besides, what if the endless war had found us or something? At least here we were safe! It did turn out all right in the end."

Amanda turned to Reverend Knight. "I'm sorry for bringing you into the future. I know that wasn't exactly what you had planned."

"But at least I am alive," he replied. "That is something to be grateful for. Besides, the reason I took passage on the *Starfire* was to search for lost souls, and if what the Artillect has said is true then I have found a great number of them. It would appear that the entire human race has lost its way."

"But that is about to change," the Artillect replied. "With the support of Amy and Amanda I can put an end to the darkness. The endless war will be finished and mankind will be given their inheritance. Things are about to change."

"First we need a home," Amy replied. "And a plan. Then we can go to war."

The Artillect nodded. "Then let us begin!"

(To be continued in the next volume,
The War of the Artillect)